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Becoming Schoolgirls: the ambivalent project of subjectification

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ABSTRACT *In this article, the authors examine the concept and practices of subjectification; that is, the processes through which we are subjected, and actively take up as our own the terms of our subjection. They use Judith Butler's theorising of subjection both as a starting point for working with their own memories of being subjected in school settings, and as the theoretical basis of their analysis of subjectification. Their method of working, which they refer to as collective biography, is derived from Haug et al.'s methods developed in Female Sexualization. Their memories focus on aspects of the achievement of the individual, appropriate(d) schoolgirl subject who simultaneously constitutes herself and is constituted through discourse. They analyse the illusion of autonomy through which modern subjects are made possible, and the inevitable ambivalence that is experienced as schoolgirls take themselves up appropriately within the possibilities made available to them. Through re-membering their own pasts, and the embodied and emotional detail through which we became (and go on becoming) subjects, they open up for inspection the contradictory ground of the humanist subject, and in particular the feminine humanist subject, as it is achieved in educational settings.*

[Y]oung girls of primary school age are presented with, and inserted into, ideological and discursive positions by practices which locate them in meaning and in regimes of truth. (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 87)

This article is based on a collective biography undertaken as part of a postgraduate workshop on Magnetic Island, located in the dry tropics of Australia. For one week the seven authors gathered to talk about their research and to engage in producing the stories for this collective research project. Our agreed task was to examine more closely the processes of subjectification—and to do so through locating the meanings and the regimes of truth through which we became, and go on becoming, speaking subjects. What we have chosen to write about here is the ambivalence of the project of becoming

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schoolgirls. What our stories make visible is our passionate desire to be appropriate, recognisable, valued subjects, and at the same time how painful, and how tenuous our grasp was on being those subjects.

Walkerdine, in *Daddy's Girl* (1997), writes about 'fictions' that function as truths about what a schoolgirl is, and that are constitutive of what she becomes. Our memory work project takes us into the moments when we struggled to become as we 'should be', as schoolgirls. It lays bare the complex patterns of desire to become that schoolgirl. The stories we told, on that shady verandah in the tropical heat, made visible the (often silent) battles we fought as schoolgirls, and still are fighting as women, weaving ourselves into the fictional fabrics of 'proper' school and university practices. They show flashes of cautious pleasure, and even exhilaration, when correct positioning was achieved or gaps exploited. They recover the joy and the pain of our always provisional achievement of autonomy in school settings. They show how we worked conscientiously at our inscription as appropriate subjects within the social order of schools. They show, as well, the simultaneous struggle to submit to and to master the 'conditions of possibility' made available in that order. As Butler (1995a, pp. 45–46) says of the paradoxical simultaneity of mastery and submission:

The more a practice is mastered, the more fully subjection is achieved. Submission and mastery take place simultaneously, and it is this paradoxical simultaneity that constitutes the ambivalence of subjection. Where one might expect submission to consist in a yielding to an externally imposed dominant order, and to be marked by a loss of control and mastery, it is paradoxically marked by mastery itself ...; the lived simultaneity of submission as mastery, and mastery as submission, is the condition of possibility for the subject itself.

It is that paradoxical simultaneity of submission and mastery, and the related ambivalence, that we explore here, in this article. The dual nature of subjection is so readily (mis)understood in the binary structure of Western languages as necessarily *either* submission *or* mastery, but not both. Like Butler, we understand that they cannot so easily be separated, and that the conditions of possibility for the subject itself require both. And so it is to the necessity of that simultaneity that we give flesh in the analysis of our embodied stories.

What we have enacted in this project is a strategy for interweaving theory with embodied knowledge. We have used post-structuralist theory in a productive relationship with our own subjective embodied experiences, and at the same time have made our embodied experiences productive in relation to theory. Our use of 'experience' here is not in the sense of individuals *having* experiences, but about subjects who *constitute themselves and are constituted as experiencing subjects*: 'Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced' (Scott, 1992, pp. 25–26).

The Collective Biography Project

Our starting point for each day's topic of the collective biography work was a fragment from Judith Butler's extensive theoretical work on subjection (1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1997). Bronwyn had selected these fragments and posed, as an organisational strategy for

our daily programme, a topic for memory work connected to each of those theoretical fragments. These topics included first memories of:

- existing, of desiring existence, in a school setting, and of how that existence was conferred;
- mastery in a school setting and of an externally imposed dominant order;
- being an autonomous subject in a school setting and of being deprived of autonomy; and
- working with discursive possibilities in school, and of being worked by them.

We name our method of memory writing ‘collective biography’. It is ‘biographical’ in that it draws on memories of the lives of particular individuals. It is ‘collective’ in that the process through which the stories are told and written and analysed is one which reveals the ways in which we were (and are) collectively produced as (sometimes) coherent subjects, experiencing ourselves as ‘individual’ and ‘autonomous’. Through the processes of talking and listening, of writing and rewriting, the edges that mark off the texts of ourselves, one from the other, are blurred. The frames and borderlines through which we made (and make) our individual identities knowable and recognisable to ourselves and others are no longer sealed off from each other—they flow into one another, making visible the fictional referential frames through which the possibilities of being are drawn. In this process, the stories become not just our own collective biographical tales, but stories through which any reader can recognise themselves as constituted through the same or similar practices.

As we settled into the storying of our own subjectification, we invented the method of collective biography afresh, in ways that suited the topic, ourselves, and the time and space we found ourselves in. We did not follow a set of prescribed rules—rather, we acknowledged what Frigga Haug and her collaborators (1987, pp. 70–71) said about the need for heterogeneity of method: ‘there might well be no single, “true” method that is alone appropriate to this kind of work. What we need is imagination. We can, perhaps, say quite decisively that the very heterogeneity of everyday life demands similarly heterogeneous methods if it is to be understood.’

Each day, we began with informal talk as we ‘caught up’ with each other, and made cups of tea and coffee. An innovation we tried on this occasion was to use essential oils as an aid to memory, to awareness of the body and to receptivity (Jefferies, 1999). We then settled to describing and talking through particular memories sparked off for us by the topic for the day and by the associated provocative lines from Butler. We had usually arrived with at least one story we wanted to tell. As we listened to each other’s stories, and probed the detail with careful questioning aimed at enabling us to imagine the experience being described, old, forgotten stories leapt into consciousness, and long forgotten details came vividly to mind. After telling each other our stories, we separated off to write one or two of the stories we had told. Following this intense period of writing, we joined together again to read our stories aloud to the group. As we opened ourselves into the current of memory, and the space of writing, we discovered that in the writing, our memories gathered more details of the context, of the interactions, of our bodies located in time and space and discourse. We found, as others have found who are engaged in similar work (Haug, 1987; Crawford *et al.*, 1992; Davies, 1994, 2000a; Davies *et al.*, 1997), that the telling of stories, written and spoken, produces a web of experiences that are at once individual, interconnected, collective—and political.

The space we create for memory work is a place of speaking and also of writing where we are at once the script and the page. The work of finding the embodied memory, of

letting go of clichés and tired explanations, requires a particular attitude to writing in relation to the embodied self. As Hélène Cixous (in Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997, p. 41) says of the position of writing, ‘The initial position is a leaving oneself go, leaving oneself sink to the bottom of the now. This presupposes an unconscious belief in something, a force and materiality that will come, manifest itself, an ocean, a current that is always there, that will rise and carry me. It is very physical.’

As well, our storytelling made visible how talking and writing memories in a collective context, and teasing through them in detail, in critically reflective talk, enables the writers to move towards ‘a revelation of the social and discursive processes through which we become individuals’ (Davies, 1994, p. 83). Our stories are woven from/with/through the discourses and storylines which construct our particular historical/geographical/spatial/social selves-in-process.

The contexts of our subjectification as ‘individuals’ and as schoolgirls were differently located, culturally, historically, geographically, economically and philosophically. One of us is from Sweden and completed all her schooling in a Swedish public school. Another grew up and attended a privileged Catholic boarding school in England as a ‘charity student’ before migrating to Australia as a young adult. The rest of us were born in Australia, had variously experienced urban and rural living, poverty and privilege, and extreme and temperate climates. Our schooling experiences included both single-sex and co-educational schools, and both religious (Catholic and Anglican) and public schools. In the religious schools, many of the practices of schooling were related to religious observance and ritual. There was an age range of 20 years between us. While none of us had experienced physical violence on our own bodies in schools, some of the Australian stories told of acts of violence that were surprising and shocking to Swedish ears. The emphasis in our own memories was on achieving *self*-regulation—of our bodies, of our tongues, of particular school practices. The emphasis on self-regulation is stronger now than it was then in our childhoods. Self-regulation is generally understood now, as it was then, in terms of the contradictory humanist discourses of individuality, of choice and consequences, of autonomy and responsibility (Laws & Davies, 2000). Our own position differs from the humanist position, since we focus on the paradox that while self-regulation is the condition of possibility for the subject itself, the mastery of self-regulation is at the same time an act of submission.

Embodied Knowledge and Theory

It was not our intention to find a way of reading and writing that escapes subjectification, but rather, to recognise how bodies are subjected within available discourses and thus become the selves we take them to be. This process of subjectification both reduces us to clichéd binaries (such as mind/body) and at the same time gives us the power to deconstruct those same binaries:

Bodies learn to recognise themselves through clichés. Bodies learn to separate mind from body. Yet bodies can also learn to use the very powers they gain through being subjected, to turn their reflexive gaze on the discursive practices and the habituated ways of being those practices make possible, making them both visible and revisable, and opening up the possibility of developing new ways of knowing. (Davies, 2000a, p. 168)

One of our stories reveals an early dramatic splicing off of self from body—a body distanced as having ‘disgusting’ and unspeakable needs that should not interfere with the higher work of the mind:

As the afternoon wears on, she becomes aware of the need to go to the toilet, but she cannot find a way that she is happy with to ask for this. She knows she must put up her hand and ask, 'Please, Sister, can I leave the room?' but it seems disgusting to draw attention to herself in this way, as having this unmentionable bodily need. She wants to be a good girl, doing her schoolwork. She hopes if she ignores it, it will go away but eventually she feels the hot liquid release through her pants, soaking through the serge and then dripping from the wooden seat onto the stone floor. A puddle forms underneath her. She eyes it with some curiosity but admits no sense of responsibility. A change in the classroom activity allows her to move to another place but she can't escape so easily. The teacher notices the puddle. The child there now is indignant and dry and the teacher discovers her wet dress. The teacher is sympathetic, kind and smiling, but the girl still tries to ignore the wet heaviness of her pants and dress, feeling as though it didn't really happen to her ...

She wants to be a good girl. She knows the correct form for gaining permission to go to the toilet, but her desire is to leave her body to one side so she can fully concentrate her mind on the work the teacher wants her to do. But her body betrays her—attention to it cannot be abandoned completely, yet she persists in her desire to splice it off from herself in her effort to be good—and thus to come to learning.

In telling and writing our stories, we deliberately set out to make our storying an embodied process that would produce a site evocative of the unexpected, the forgotten and the foregone. We created a purposeful interactive space where the writer, as well as the listener and reader, might acknowledge her temperature rise, or her stomach cramp, with anger or embarrassment at a moment past, where she may feel exhilarated by her own daring or the daring of others, or might laugh as joy or pleasure flow from her, where her eyes may leak silently, her body flush or shudder, where she might experience grief, frustration or relief at the telling, or where she may feel her bladder surprisingly full and insistent as it did that day when she wet her pants in kindergarten. And in so doing, we wanted to (re)value and (re)view the experiences of bodies and emotions in the processes of subjectification.

We found that paying too much attention to theory in the phase of talking and writing led us easily into explanations that impeded the storying of memories as embodied. And in this way, we had to temporarily 'leave go' of our rational teacher/educator/researcher selves. In order to resist the discursive inclination of these selves to theorise our stories of school subjectification until after they had been written and read back to the group, we attended with vigilance to the ways stories were told and written and to our discussions of them. The theoretical excerpts from Butler were useful in provoking the memories in the first place, but they were sometimes in danger of hijacking the stories and overwhelming or obscuring their detail. As we found this happening, on occasion, we considered how such theorising was, for us, in this context of a research workshop, 'usual practice', that was both difficult but important to resist. That 'usual practice' we practised letting go of in order to produce our stories, and then we retrieved and refined it, in the writing of this article.

After the week together, working both on this and our own individual projects, and storying our previously unspeakable or unspoken biographical moments, we geographically separated and took it in turns to write successive drafts of the article. We began with a first draft written by Sue, then sent it by e-mail in succession to each member of the group. We have each written two drafts, with Bronwyn taking responsi-

bility for the final draft. Apart from the first draft, it has not been possible to tell who has written which sentences. This strategy for collective writing also called for a ‘leaving go’ of ourselves as individual writers, as authors of our own texts, as clever girls who will be lauded for our independent thinking and writing. This process has required us to abandon our precious and highly desired status in academia as individuals, whether PhD students and/or academics.

The Ambivalence of Subjection

We are all women who have been successful in ‘getting the goodies’ of formal schooling. We did learn to desire, and to be, the right sort of student to complete pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary studies to the point where we are all engaged in or have completed doctoral studies. We are/were subjected as successful students, desiring recognition through achievement, acknowledgement, status. This subject position is/was not achieved without vulnerability and resistance. One of the stories written on the first day tells of a moment of deep ambivalence at being positioned as a good student:

I am in the canteen, which is the basement of the church/school. There are two other girls here. They are going through all the things they might need to know for the scholarship exam. I am supposed to do this too—for the sheer joy of it even though I can’t sit for the exam. Means tested out—how can my family be rich? The windows are all frosted glass—I can’t even look out. It’s summer—hot and sticky but at least the basement is cooler than the classroom. That’s a relief. I am hotter than I should be—the anger sending my face red. If I can’t sit the exam why do I have to do this? Why can’t I do the other stuff the kids are doing like making Christmas decorations? I should be allowed to be a dummy if I want to be! These girls are really smart and they can prepare for the exam themselves. They ask me a question and I know the answer—something about the Nile. I tell them what I know. But I am so angered at the waste of my time and this is all consuming. I imagine saying ‘No’ to the teacher tomorrow—‘I don’t want to study for an exam that I’m not sitting for’. But I know I can’t do that and I’ll be here again. It’s supposed to be a privilege so I’ll keep on doing this.

Subjection exploits the desire for existence, where existence is always conferred from elsewhere; it marks a primary vulnerability to the Other in order to be. (Butler 1997, pp. 20–21)

In marked contrast to Butler’s position, humanist discourses, which are the dominant constitutive discourses in schools, locate existence ‘inside’ the individual. People are who they are either because they choose to be so, or because of their biological inheritance—or some combination of both. What is generally not visible to teachers who understand themselves and their students in terms of the humanist model is that choice stems not so much from the individual, but from the conditions of possibility—the discourses which prescribe not only what is desirable, but what is recognisable as an acceptable form of subjectivity (Laws & Davies, 2000). Modern forms of schooling are understood, in humanist terms, as not shaping through coercion, but through the subject taking up for herself the desire to be appropriate. What our stories show is the implicit coercion in this benign process of shaping schoolgirls. The girl child desires the teacher’s approving gaze, works hard to achieve it, and is always at risk in doing so. The ‘individual’, and by extension, individuality, is taken to be highly valued within humanist discourses, yet the girl student who innovates, and in so doing challenges established practice, may always be subject to immediate correction and control:

I copied the sums off the board, ruled two straight lines underneath for the answers. I worked out the answers and wrote them neatly and correctly between the two straight lines. I looked up, pleased with being in school where teachers actually noticed if you did things well. Everyone else was still working. I glanced in the new teacher's direction to see if she had noticed that I had finished. She had not. I looked back at the page, at my neat answers. I saw how I could make them even better. With ruler and pencil I joined up the two straight lines to make a box for the answers. Careful, laborious. I wondered what comment she would make about these interesting boxes. Finally, when we were all finished, she told us we could line up at her desk to have our work marked. Without a word, she put a cross beside each of my sums and told me to do them again. I stared with disbelief at my page. I went back to my desk, and checked the sums. They were still correct. Confused, I asked permission to come out again to her desk. Politely, I told her I couldn't find how they were wrong. She looked for some time at the page. Then pointing to the lines I had added, she said, 'I thought they were ones. Rub them out'. But they could not be mistaken for ones! She was lying! Silently, I went back to my desk, and rubbed out the lines. It looked messy. I hated her. I longed for my real teacher to come back—the one who knew who I was.

This schoolgirl dared to innovate, because she knew she had achieved the signifiers of good student: she was obedient, quick and her answers were both correct and neat. These signifiers of good student gave her room for movement with her regular teacher. The error of judgement that she made here was to assume that a new teacher would be able and willing to read these signifiers, and to accord her the space to engage in pleasurable deviation—a deviation that quietly and unobtrusively filled the space while everyone else finished. The failure of recognition on the part of the new teacher generated a longing for the teacher who did recognise her as correctly signifying 'good student' and who accorded her spaces for autonomy. Her longing for her regular teacher is accompanied by an emotional rejection of her present teacher's authority *at the same time as* she obeys her commands.

Both of these girls silently submitted to the (unreasonable) authority their teachers wielded. And they experienced strong and antagonistic emotions in the very same moment that they submitted to that authority.

For Love of the Teacher

At the same time as she is the subordinated Other in the male–female binary, the teacher is the One in whom power is invested in the discursively constituted teacher–student binary (Davies, 2000b). It is the teacher who, within the discourses of schooling-as-usual, is constituted as the one with authority, who determines what will be counted as 'reason', who has knowledge and the 'objective' capacity to recognise the 'nature' of the students. It is she who will confer the rewards of schooling—not only the ability to read, write and count—but also the possibility of being—in particular of being recognisably a 'good' subject, recognisably desirable in the conditions and enabling limits of the school setting. It is the teacher's power to recognise and to constitute as desirable, and it is also sometimes her youth, her beauty, and her benevolence, that makes the schoolgirl 'love her'. As Erica McWilliam (1996a, p. 374) observes, many of the conditions, contexts and practices of gender difference are held in place by the politics of desire:

an elating and elated teaching body is often the sight/site out of which future

scholars are propelled into an on-going love affair with their disciplines ... the body of the teacher is crucial inasmuch as it performs what it looks like to have a love affair with a body of knowledge and this performance is enacted and observed as erotic, a manifestation of desire which is necessarily ambiguous and duplicitous.

The schoolgirl's desire to occupy the ascendant subject position of good, desirable 'student' shapes her body and her perception into a conscious performance of conformity. The girl child with whom we began this article, who spliced herself off from her unspeakable body, concentrates her attention on the teacher, and the knowledge she offers, in an attitude of love:

Her black serge school uniform is hot and thick against her legs, solid and prickly, a harsh barrier between her soft bottom and the hard wooden seat. She gazes raptly at the teacher, a young nun, fresh face surrounded by a halo of black and white. She loves her and does not want to miss one word of what she says—this is more important than physical comfort. This is what she has been waiting for—to do reading, writing and counting. Her lips are pursed in concentration, her eyes and ears watchful and alert, a frown on her forehead.

The intensity of concentration achieves a separation of mind and body. She knows already that subordinating the body to the mind promises the possibility that she will not be positioned as the abject other, who does not or cannot control her body, that abject other from whom she must split herself off. She achieves this splitting at the same time as she comes to love the teacher, and to love what it is that she has to teach her.

The Tenuous Process of Achieving and Maintaining Appropriate(d) Subjecthood

On entering school, the child is already familiar with taboos controlling the body and its 'private' functions. The 'abject', according to Butler's (1990, p. 133) reading of Kristeva, is a 'structuralist notion of a boundary-constituting taboo for the purposes of constructing a discrete subject through exclusion'. To be not-abject is to have control of the body and its functions, but the *recognition* of abjection or non-abjection is regulated and authorised by the hierarchical discourses and practices of schooling. Within this relational state of play, the child's positioning of herself and her positioning of and by others is always tenuous and open to reinscription, as other and as abject.

The location of the schoolgirl's self as of lesser value in this relational hierarchy may not stem from acts or meanings over which she has any control. In one of our schools, the children were required to bid, on their first day at school, for symbols to place beside their coat hooks and on their belongings. Without any visible prompting by the teacher, the children treated these symbols as visible signs of their relative positions in the hierarchy of the classroom. Powerful children, it seemed, knew instantly which were the valuable symbols and bid for them. Absent children had no choice:

I am in pre-school. It is after circle-time and I am sent out to meet my friend. She is coming in late that day after having been sick for the first three days of pre-school. She is my friend from before we started school.

The day before, when my friend was absent, the teacher had let us choose from a pile of colourful stickers that she placed before us, the symbol that would mark our place in the classroom, that would signify our hanger in the cloakroom, our books and belongings. My friend was given the symbol that everyone else had avoided, that was left over after we had all tentatively or aggressively made our choice.

As I walk out in the hallway, my heart starts beating very hard. She comes through the door smiling happily. I greet her but there is no excitement in my voice and my body feels heavy as we walk the few steps to the wall where our hangers are. As I point to her hanger and the symbol she has been given the day before in her absence—a blue armchair, I instantly feel like covering up my own symbol, a white daisy, with the other hand so she will not see it. For an instant, I consider the possibility of saying: ‘You can have mine’, but I don’t.

She turns pale, and I can see her thinking: ‘Am I supposed to be that name—the blue ugly armchair?’ She begins to sob out loud.

The teacher comes out in the hall. I explain to her why my friend is crying. The teacher then signals to the other children to come out in the hall and comfortingly declares that these symbols are just a practical way for us to recognise our things. She says they do not mean anything, and there is no symbol that is better than the other. I look at the other children around me. Some of the faces are fearful and some proud, and it seems that the hierarchy amongst us is set.

Through her late entry, her absence and the allocation to her of a rejected, arbitrary symbol, the ‘innocent’ schoolgirl becomes the abject other, the excluded subject. Although the writer dreads being the bearer of the tragic news, it becomes starkly evident to her in this moment of emotional conflict that her own existence as non-abject, as occupying an acceptable position in the hierarchy of the class, is conferred by *and in part depends upon* the arrival and labelling of the abject other. The teacher, meanwhile, as faithful subject and conveyor of liberal humanist discourses of democracy, equality and freedom of choice, persists with established practice. She is apparently unaware of how the children’s positioning within the discourses of schooling-as-usual already makes visible to them the hierarchical meanings to be ascribed to the plastic stickers that signal ‘who they are’.

No matter how hard a schoolgirl works to achieve the signifiers that can be read as competence, her appropriation is tentative and vulnerable—the subject position of good student is always provisional. She may have no power in relation to her assignment to a low status category. She may work hard at achieving the right signifiers and yet always she is at risk of running up against definitions of correct practice that she does not know about:

Thursday afternoon we all filed in after lunch knowing it was time for ‘Composition’, wondering what the teacher would expect us to write about, glancing at the board to see if the title was already displayed there. We sat at our desks, backs straight, Composition books open at a new page, margin ruled with red biro on the left hand side of the page, date at the top on the right hand side, facing our teacher expectantly.

‘Today’, she says, ‘You can write about anything you like.’

Stunned silence. Children glancing at each other in trepidation, excitement, anticipation, disbelief, holding back the inclination to chatter, to express our wonder.

I could not believe my luck! To be granted this freedom the very day after having a friend over to play. I had something to write about. I took up my pen as I gathered my thoughts, checking my pen grip and the angle of the book across the desk. I wrote about the bus ride home, about what we’d had for afternoon tea, about having a hit of tennis, about feeling disappointed when it

was time for Meg to leave. My story flowed onto the page disguising my anxieties about neat handwriting, correct spelling, the teacher's judgement.

Soon we were being asked to put down our pens and pass our open books to the person on our right until all the books were in tidy piles at the end of each row of desks and someone was chosen to collect the piles and carry them to the teacher's desk for marking. I felt confident, sure the teacher would enjoy hearing about my afternoon with a friend and maybe even a little impressed with the description of my family home and our having a tennis court in the back yard. I looked forward to the next day when our books would be returned. Maybe this time my story would be noteworthy, maybe even 'the best'.

The schoolgirl reveals herself in her story as competent in, and observant of, all the ritualised practices of the classroom. She has mastery over her body and is quite confident that the content of her composition is worthy. She is not in confrontation with the imposed order of the school, but relishes its practices and the display of her own mastery within them. But ...

The teacher sat at her desk and called our names, handing our books back one by one. I took the book from her hand, outstretched beyond her expressionless face. I sat back at my desk and gazed at the page, at the blood red gash with which she had marked my story. Shame and disbelief rushed through my still, silent, obedient body. There was apparently something wrong with 'a hit of tennis'. She had crossed out 'hit' and written 'game' neatly above it. Everything had changed. My pride in my family, in my story, my hopes for success and acknowledgement were shattered and focused with the slash of her red appropriating pen.

Her downfall is a tiny slip-up, the word 'hit' used as a noun instead of a verb. Her use of a colloquial spoken form of Australian English is deemed inappropriate for a school composition. The teacher in this state school polices 'proper' usage of English, in conformity with the English teaching practices of the 1960s and with the cultural cringe of Australian intelligentsia of the time. For this student, despite her submission to and mastery of school practices, her insufficient mastery of the language of the 'masters' is enough to remove the 'possibility for the subject' herself to exist as a competent subject in that class(room). The language she has used is the language of her family, which now is marked as wrong, as inappropriate speech, as having lesser status in the social hierarchy. The child feels she has been positioned as of a lesser class, as someone with insufficient grasp of 'correct English'.

Insufficient mastery of language provided us with multiple possibilities for embarrassment, and for exposure as incompetent subjects. Our memories of slippages in mastery of language were deeply etched. What these stories reveal is that the struggles for mastery can never be complete—appropriate subjection is an ongoing project, and moments in which we are recognised as appropriately subjected give rise to deep ambivalence. There is a deep anger against the one who reveals that our mastery is incomplete, and an extreme vulnerability associated with the gaps in our knowledge of 'correct practice'. The power of the other (usually the teacher, but also often the other students) to rob us of our position of masterful subject makes our hold on subjecthood tenuous, and something we learn to continually struggle for.

Mastery of the Body

Walkerdine (1990, p. 88) argues, the willing acceptance of the conditions of possibility

come not from the girl but from the power of the practices themselves: 'That the girl appears willingly to accept the position to which she is classically fitted does not, I would argue, tell us something basic about the nature of the female body, nor the female mind, but rather tells us of the power of those practices through which a particular resolution to the struggle is produced'.

Bodily control is read by schoolgirls as one means of becoming a recognisably appropriate(d) and valued subject. Such control is not only of bodily functions and of emotions, but also of the fine motor control required for such skills as writing:

I lean forward in my seat, bracing my forearms on the desk, feet barely touching the floor. The lines on the page in front of me demand my attention. I must get my handwriting to fit the order prescribed by the heavy lines at top and bottom, the lighter ones inside them and the dotted line in the middle ...

The schoolgirl is ever conscious of the lines, literal and metaphoric, that she must not transgress within the conditions and practices of schooling-as-usual. One blot of ink is enough to indicate that mastery is incomplete. Mastery is incomplete because submission is insufficient—submission to the rules of the lines on the page, to the necessity of bodily control.

I dip the pen into the inkbottle, careful to wipe off excess ink. I can imagine the ugly blot if I let a drop spill on the page to spoil it—please don't let it happen—sometimes these things seem beyond my control. My hand aches from the effort of control, my whole body is tightly sprung. The capital 'A' starts at the top line, a smooth curve down, done with a heavy stroke, then it must start up again, a lighter stroke this time, and meet back where it started. I am good at this but there is no room for relaxation—the lines insist on being obeyed. Start down again, break away just exactly on the dotted line—ink stains my forefinger, my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth in concentration. 'A is for Actil sheets'. It's a long slow journey, laboriously making the correct marks on the paper, until I reach 'Z is for ...', but determination steels my muscles. I will win the award again.

Ultimately, when 'Z is for ...' is complete, the correct form of writing achieved and no blots mark the page, her 'lived simultaneity of submission as mastery' will be publicly rewarded. Existence as a subject is conferred again by the Other, by the teacher who is the One who controls/administers the external reward system. It is through being subject to the repetition and relations of power within schooling-as-usual that she comes to know she 'will win the award again'. With such concentrated effort and repetitious practice, and with the repeated receipt of awards, she will be established in relations of power in which failure to recognise her as appropriate(d) will become less and less likely.

In the following story, the schoolgirl again achieves her bodily self as competent in relations of power in which abject others interrupt the smooth flow of the day's beginning in boarding school. She struggles to behave appropriately, to submit herself beautifully to the institutional practices involved in the commencement of the day:

A room of my own, albeit small and cramped with a window and radiator. The bed was tucked into a corner with the door at the foot of the bed. In the mornings I would snuggle under my old gold eiderdown—warm and cosy with even my head encased—hearing vague noises as the nun worked her way down the corridor—knock, announce, response and step. Sometimes the student would be tardy and then it would be knock, announce, announce again, sleepy

response and step. My turn soon—I would prepare by swallowing and salivating in order to be able to voice the response, struggling up through the layers of sleep, savouring those seconds. My knock, gentle today, blur of black and white, I like to be able to identify the face, voice insisting ‘Bene dicamus domino’—pushing my head up and out and my clear response ‘Deo Gratius’—an awareness that I could respond clearly, loudly, while drifting in half-sleep. I knew how to sound alert like a good girl should yet knowing I would also grasp the possibilities of a few more minutes of warmth, sleepiness and encasement.

Although she is compliant in her submission to the ritualised performance, her memory presents this very submission as control, as mastery. She has learned the tricks of the trade—how to *sound* alert when she isn’t. She presents herself as a competent, self-regulating subject who knows how to recognise appropriate behaviour and how to choose, unlike others, to perform that behaviour. Although she presents the ritual as a ‘performance’ over which she has control, there is no other way to be recognised as appropriate(d) in that place.

The conditions of existence for the subject in the dormitory of the boarding school, and in the writing lesson, reveal that the perfect subjection of the schoolgirl’s body leads to a pleasurable sense of well-being, of secure knowledge that her appropriateness will not be called in question, and that she will be accorded the recognition of herself as having some value. At the same time, the abject other, who does not gain such a pleasurable sense of well-being, is always present, not only as other, but always, potentially, as herself.

The Illusion of Autonomy: reading against the grain of correct practice

Until now we have focused on the work the child does to constitute herself inside the conditions of possibility made available to her. At the same time, running *within and against* the grain of available/correct practice is the desire to be recognised as someone who is worthy of notice. In this section, we examine the ways in which running against the grain is fundamental to autonomy, which is also, paradoxically, fundamental to being recognisably an appropriate(d) humanist subject. In the first story here, the child is angry with her teacher for withholding important knowledge—the knowledge that guarantees access to correct answers. She discovers ‘for herself’ the secret knowledge, and understands herself in doing so to have passed a crucial test. At the same time, she judges herself negatively for taking so long to gather the secret knowledge:

Why hadn’t Miss Carver told her this secret? Because she is so mean. Maybe it is a test to see if it can be discovered. Will discovering it count or will just getting it right matter? Should she tell that she has discovered the secret? She decides that she shouldn’t tell the secret. It’s her turn. She gets it right and the fear is gone but she does not relax. Her body is still tense. It took too long for her to understand it—just getting it right doesn’t really count inside her.

The child theorises about the way the world works. She reads herself as having worked to make sense of it, and to locate herself in desirable spaces within it. At the same time, she does not thus find satisfaction in her positioning. She stands aside from herself and finds herself not yet adequate. She takes this judgement up as her own, quite independent of what the mean Miss Carver knows about her. In this way, she judges the gaze of the

Other as insufficient. In doing so, she opens herself to doubt as to her own appropriate(d)ness, and also, ironically, finds the source of a sense of autonomy—of the capacity to know herself differently, and for herself.

Autonomy was often read by us, in the stories we told, as moments of power. In these moments of power we present ourselves as individual subjects who choose to act independently, who differentiate ourselves from those others who are still rule-bound, or bound by the gaze of the Other. Our remembered selves somehow subvert the ‘natural order’ of the institutional practices of the school and get away with it. As Butler points out, the processes of exclusion and differentiation are covered over and concealed in the experience of autonomy. The schoolgirl subject comes to believe she is autonomous, as long as she can no longer see her dependence on the Other for her recognition and her recognisability:

In a sense, the subject is constituted through an exclusion and a differentiation, perhaps a repression, that is subsequently concealed, covered over, by the effect of autonomy. In this sense autonomy is the logical consequence of a disavowed dependency, which is to say that the autonomous subject can maintain the illusion of its autonomy insofar as it covers the break out of which it was constituted. This dependency and this break are already social relations, ones which precede and condition the formation of the subject. (Butler, 1995a, pp. 45–46)

The achievement of autonomy, then, is based on an illusion of separateness from a system from which she can never float free. She is dependent on the recognition of others, which may or may not be bestowed. The schoolgirl cannot willingly enter into a situation in which she knows she will be recognised as incompetent—as inappropriate(d). Yet, her dependence, combined with a moment of exclusion and differentiation, may well lead to a recognition of herself as autonomous, which blots out, for the moment, the relations of power in which and on which she is dependent.

It was the secondary school Scripture exam. Each student sat, separated from the others, at a small wooden desk. The wooden dividers between the classrooms had been pulled back to make one large hall. The headmistress sat on the stage, waiting for the clock to turn to 9.30 when she would begin to read out the questions. I was feeling confident and happy. Last year, in 6th grade, I had sat the secondary school spelling exam and while I had not come first, I had got a prize for doing so well in a test for secondary students. And now Scripture—I had listened to the Headmistress each morning in prayers, and I had reflected deeply on what she said. I had listened and debated with Archdeacon in Divinity lessons. I had imagined in minute detail what it felt like to be Job with his boils, and Abraham holding the knife over his son’s heart — (Isaac, my son, Isaac) — I had pondered the implications of all those stories since I was 6 years old.

She read out the first question: What are the first ten books in the Old Testament?

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy ... but what came next? I couldn’t think of it. The questions kept coming: what was the name of ... where did such and such a thing happen? These were not the details I attended to in listening to the lessons. It was the questions of moral existence that interested me. I knew none of the answers. I was on the verge of being

publicly humiliated—of becoming a noticeable failure, right in the Headmistress's gaze and in front of the entire secondary school, to which I was a newcomer. I took out the tissue from my pocket, and deliberately blew my nose as hard as I possibly could. My nightly nosebleeds would now have to come to my rescue—please God. My tissue filled with blood, pouring out of my nose, like a tap, into my cupped hand. I raised my other hand and asked to leave the room. I went to the toilets and kept my nose pouring with blood for the two long hours of the exam. Finally—sound of doors opening, girls' voices, hubbub of talk at the end of an exam. Relief. I was saved and I could now try to stop the flow of blood.

Next day, the Headmistress called me to her office. She must have noticed that I had written nothing even though I had been in the exam room for at least ten minutes before my nosebleed. I knocked on her door.

'Ah yes dear, you must be very disappointed to have missed the exam. Come to my office tomorrow morning at 10.30 and I will give you the exam questions here.'

'Thank you, but it's OK really, I don't mind. I don't want to put you to such trouble' (stay calm, stay calm).

She accepted my words!

I managed to stay home on the day of the Scripture exam every year after that.

The schoolgirl retained her position as the good/clever schoolgirl, avoided 'being publicly humiliated ... becoming a noticeable failure' by forcing her nose to haemorrhage. She exploited a weakness in her own body to save her from the humiliation of losing her positioning as good student. She was then able to use her positioning as 'good student' to save herself from the second possible act of humiliation. Not only did she twice escape an undesirable positioning—she also found a way to avoid the apparently inevitable, to stand apart from it without anyone noticing that she had done so.

In both these examples, the schoolgirl recognises herself as separate, as autonomous, as able to know differently from the teacher. One judges the teacher as mean and as withholding knowledge, and herself as clever enough to gain access to the withheld knowledge—yet still not safe, not yet secure in the knowledge of her own competence. The other sees the teacher as having asked unimportant questions (with elusive answers), and she too discovers knowledges with which to sustain herself as both competent and yet different. Both find their teachers lacking, and while their own position is still insecure and needs to be struggled over, they take an interesting first step in constituting themselves as autonomous subjects.

Conclusion

In this article, we take further the work of problematising the humanist subject begun in the ground-breaking work of Henriques *et al.* (1984). Using collective biography as a strategy for remembering moments of our own subjectification, and interpreting these in light of post-structuralist theorising such as that of Butler and Walkerdine, we have been able to put flesh on the bones of the concept of subjectification. We have been able to show the hard work of becoming appropriate(d)—both its necessity and its risky fragility. There is no guarantee that even the most conscientious schoolgirl will be able, repeatedly, to produce herself as that which she has come to desire for herself. Her

knowledge of herself as acceptable depends on both a tight disciplining of the body, and a capacity to disattend the body and its needs. It depends on a capacity to read what the teacher wants and to produce it, but more than that, to want it for herself. At the same time, it depends on a capacity to distance herself from the Others, on whose approving gaze she is dependent, and to know herself *in contrast* to them. She must, paradoxically, find these points of contrast at the same time as she takes herself up as recognisable through the very same discourses through which she and they are constituted.

We have shown through our own stories that subjectification is necessarily an ambivalent project. One must submit in extraordinary ways in order to gain mastery. Yet, mastery need not bind us to the very terms and conditions of our subjection. The idea and the ideal of autonomy, which our theorising recognises as fictional, is nevertheless the conceptual and practical lynchpin of the appropriate(d) subject. The subject submits to the fictions of the self and gains mastery through them. And that mastery—of language, of the body—provides the conditions of possibility for inventing something new, of seeing afresh, of creatively moving beyond the already known. Our elaboration, we hope, gives new life to Butler's (1997, p. 14) words when she writes:

Power acts on the subject in at least two ways: first, as what makes the subject possible, the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion, and second, as what is taken up and reiterated in the subject's 'own' acting. ... The notion of power at work in subjection thus appears in two incommensurable temporal modalities: first, as what is for the subject always prior, outside of itself, and operative from the start; second, as the willed effect of the subject. This second modality carries at least two sets of meanings: as the willed effect of the subject, subjection is a subordination that the subject brings on itself; yet if subjection produces a subject and a subject is the precondition of agency, the subjection is the account by which a subject becomes the guarantor of its resistance and opposition.

Subordination is thus the precondition for resistance and opposition. We submit in order to become masters of autonomy, to become schoolgirls who depend on teachers for recognition and at the same time and through the very acts of submission come to the possibility of seeing otherwise. And now, in the writing of this article, we use collective biography to come to know our own pasts differently—against the grain of humanist discourses, so prevalent in the explanation of what it is that happens in schools, that shapes desire, that makes life possible.

[C]oming to know differently, through your own remembered past and the past of others ... is also about transgression, about finding other ways to speak and write with the grain of bodies and landscape. It is an exploration of the power of language, not only as it seeps into bodies and shapes the very grain of them, but also as a powerful force that individuals and collectives can use to retell lives against the grain. (Davies, 2000a, p. 187)

This collaborative work, inspired as it is by our readings of both feminist and post-structuralist theories, 'stands both outside [of the Enlightenment project of emancipation and rational autonomy of the human subject] and deeply within its logics, trying to force a space for new questions about identity, humanity and agency' (Stronach & MacLure, 1997, p. 5).

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