

# Schizoid subjectivities?

## Re-theorizing teen girls' sexual cultures in an era of 'sexualization'



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### Abstract

Drawing on three case studies from two UK ethnographic research projects in urban and rural working-class communities, this article explores young teen girls' negotiation of increasingly sex-saturated societies and cultures. Our analysis complicates contemporary debates around the 'sexualization' moral panic by troubling developmental and classed accounts of age-appropriate (hetero)sexuality. We explore how girls are regulated by, yet rework and resist expectations to perform as agentic sexual subjects across a range of spaces (e.g. streets, schools, homes, cyberspace). To conceptualize the blurring of generational and sexual binaries present in our data, we develop Deleuzian notions of 'becomings', 'assemblages' and 'schizoid subjectivities'. These concepts help us to map the anti-linear transitions and contradictory performances of young femininity as always in-movement; where girls negotiate discourses of sexual knowingness and innocence, often simultaneously, yet always within a wider context of socio-cultural gendered/classed regulations.

**Keywords:** Deleuze, femininity, girls, sexualization, subjectivity

### Introduction: 'becoming woman' and the (re)sexualization of the girl child

A girl never becomes a woman in any univocal or unidirectional sense. Feminine adolescence is not a transition from one state to another but a contingent and in some senses reversible movement. (Driscoll, 2002: 198)

Societal and cultural anxieties over girls' transition to sexual womanhood have resurfaced recently via international governmental and media moral

panics over the commodification of the ‘prematurely’ sexualized girl (Albury and Lumby, 2010) and a contemporary culture in which a ‘porno-aesthetic’ has become mainstream (Atwood, 2009; Gill, 2009; Paasonen et al., 2007). From documentaries such as UK Channel 4’s ‘Stop Pimping Our Kids’ and ‘The Sex Education Show vs Pornography’, girls’ presumed sexual knowing, agency and desire are represented as ‘no longer missing’ but ‘loudly’ and ‘cariacaturely displayed everywhere’ (Fine and McClelland, 2006: 300). Using contested concepts of ‘sexualization’ (see Atwood, 2009) and ‘corporate paedophilia’ (see Bray, 2008) the assumed impact of ‘sexualization’ has become the subject of high-profile reports and inquiries by government and non-governmental bodies (APA, 2007; Bailey, 2011; Buckingham et al., 2009; Papadopoulos, 2010; Rush and La Nauze, 2006). Ironically, the accompanying stream of often sensationalist popular texts bemoaning the commodification of the ‘the Lolita Effect’ (Durham, 2008) has itself emerged as a growth market, offering a sneak-peak into the eroticization of girls and their presumed sexual innocence (e.g. Levin and Kilbourne, 2008; Oppliger, 2008; Ornstein, 2011; Tankard Reist, 2010). While many of the books, reports and documentaries draw attention to the problematic corporate practices that sexualize girlhood, they do so in ways that enable commentators to draw moral boundaries around (hetero)normative and age-appropriate notions of girlhood sexuality, isolating and regulating what is acceptable and unacceptable desire and practice.

Public and private anxieties over the sexualization of girls and the adult-centric ‘hurried erotics’ (Janssen, 2002) discourse embedded in age-appropriate sexualities are not, however, a new phenomenon (Egan and Hawkes, 2010; Faulkner, 2010; Renold, 2005; Thorne, 1993; Walkerdine, 1997). They have a long and contested history, steeped in gendered, classed and raced developmental discourse in ways that continue to be exploited and commodified. Nevertheless, we are perhaps seeing an intensification of what Rosi Braidotti (2006) calls the global incorporation of Otherness, which in the context of this article is perhaps a more mainstreamed paedophilic gaze – that is, the highly lucrative market of the eroticized girl child (Bray, 2008). We might also be seeing the mainstreaming of blurred generational transitions and spatial boundaries (predominantly the virtual), in which innocence and sexuality are inextricably connected (we consider the symbol of the playboy bunny below). A new proto-sexual girl child (predicted by Walkerdine in 1999) thus may indeed have come of age, but in ways that normalize the non-linear, reversible transition from girl to woman/woman to girl (Driscoll, 2002).

There have been some powerful critiques that have deconstructed the tensions, assumptions and effects of the sexualization of girls (SoG) discourse (Albury and Lumby, 2010; Atwood and Smith, 2011; Egan and Hawkes, 2008, 2010; Gill, 2011; Gill et al., 2009; Lerum and Dworkin, 2009; Phoenix, 2011). While we cannot offer a comprehensive overview

here, we have distilled the following key points to help contextualize the analysis that follows. In brief, critics have argued that some of the effects of the sexualization discourse are that it:

- operates as an ‘elastic discourse’ (Albury and Lumby, 2010) that interprets any sexual expression (e.g. sexual desire) and related concerns (e.g. body image, sexual violence, etc.) as an effect and thus evidence of ‘sexualization’;
- focuses on the harmful effects of media exposure with little analysis of how girls themselves negotiate the media in their everyday lives (see Bragg et al. 2011);
- produces a ‘scary futurology’ (Smith, 2010), with its overemphasis on protectionism, victimization and objectification;
- neglects girls’ sexual agency, rights and pleasure (including how desire can play a role in girls’ self-sexual objectification);
- activates a renewed binary of active, predatory male sexuality versus passive, non-agentic female sexuality (where girls’ sexuality is always risky/at risk);
- encourages either/or binary position-taking among stakeholders between sexual empowerment and pleasure versus sexual danger and protectionism;
- legitimizes a linear developmental trajectory of female sexuality, with an in-built neoliberal achievement ethic of ‘healthy’ *heterosexuality*;
- operates as a white middle-class moral panic over the desire for and loss of a highly raced and classed sexual innocence, and thus works to reproduce the othering of working-class/racialized hyper-sexuality.

This article is thus in part a response to some of the problematic effects outlined above, in particular the presumed/wished for linear developmental transition between girl to woman in relation to post-feminist discourses and moral panics over girls, sexuality and sexualization. Central for us is subjecting the sexualization discourse to a critical sociological gaze; to scrutinize how it over-simplifies and obfuscates related concerns around girls, bodies, sex and sexuality in ways that flatten out social and cultural difference (see Duschinsky, 2010; Walkerdine, 1999). Indeed, despite extensive debate on the need for qualitative social research on girls, sexuality and sexualization (see Holland and Thomson, 2010; Thompson, 2010) there is a very little analysis which situates the relationship of ‘sexualization’ and girls’ own sexual cultures in the wider post-feminist context of ‘growing up girl’ in late capitalist societies (for exceptions, see for example, Charles, 2010; Currie et al., 2009; Duits, 2008; Jackson and Westrupp, 2010; Kehily, 2008; Maxwell and Aggleton, 2010; Ringrose, 2011a, forthcoming; Vares et al., in press). Moreover, as we have outlined above, contemporary debates tend to fix girls as either objectified, innocent passive victims (Coy, 2009) or agentic, knowledgeable, savvy navigators (Lemur and Dworkin,

2009) of a contemporary 'toxic' sexual culture, thus obscuring the messy realities of lived sexual subjectivities and how girls may be positioned in these ways simultaneously.

To respond to the dual problematic of both contextualizing and interpreting the complexity of girls' sexual cultures, and their multiple transitions into and out of 'older' sexualities, this article draws on three case studies from two ethnographic research projects with teen girls in urban and rural working-class communities across England and Wales. The article is divided into four sections: first we outline our theoretical orientations drawing upon the work of Deleuze and Guatarri and Braidotti. Here we develop the concept of 'schizoid subjectivities' to explore the multiple pushes and pulls of, for example, sexual innocence versus sexual knowingness. We also outline the concept of 'becoming' to foreground the transitional space of young femininity as always in-movement, where transitions are experienced as multiple, liminal and reversible, rather than one progressive state to another. The concept of assemblage is also pivotal in helping us map the social-cultural-material connections through which bodies/sexual subjectivities are experienced. Two final concepts, 'molar' and 'molecular', are drawn upon to explore how girls are regulated by, yet also subvert (in micro movements), hegemonic codes of gender/class/race/sex/uality. The second section details our methodology and introduces the three case studies while the third section provides in-depth analysis and puts these concepts to work in our ethnographic data with teen girls. Here we illustrate how schizoid subjectivities are experienced and negotiated by girls as a complex process of 'anti-linear becoming'. We explore their relationship to themselves, each other and popular culture as 'assemblages' through an analysis of the connectivity between individual social networking profiles, porno-scripts and corporate girl marketing, as well as relations between bodies dancing in a living room to a globally popular rap video. In the concluding section we evaluate the usefulness of our theoretical framework for mapping and understanding how girls are regulated by, yet rework and resist expectations to perform as knowing, desiring and innocent sexual subjects across new (virtual) and old (street, school, lounge) spaces of performativity.

## **Schizoid subjectivities and (anti-linear) becomings**

Marnina Gonick (2003: 19) notes how ambivalence and contradiction, 'has always shaped experiences of femininity'. Alongside Gonick and others, we have been searching for new ways of theorizing how gender and sexuality are taking on new, slippery and contradictory meanings in allegedly post-feminist neoliberal, increasingly sex-saturated societies (Gill, 2009). To help us in theorizing these contradictions we have turned to the writings of Rosi

Braidotti. She explores how gender and sexual norms are difficult to read in late capitalist societies and introduces a Deleuzian-inspired concept of what she calls a 'schizoid double-pull'. This concept is used to articulate how gender and sexual norms can be simultaneously displaced (what Deleuze and Guattari would call 'deterritorialized') *and* refixed ('re-territorialized'). When discussing Western post-feminist neoliberal individualism, Braidotti argues that gender and sexual diversity can be celebrated without troubling old and established norms or discriminatory practices (e.g. sexism, racism, homophobia). She further argues that diversity and difference in globalized cultural economies can become valuable, marketable commodities (e.g. how Other desires are re-appropriated for economic profit). The re-appropriated Other, in the context of this article, is the mainstreaming and commodification of previously abject paedophilic desire (see Bray, 2008). Specific examples could include commodities for young children where innocence is eroticized (e.g. a girls' babygrow with 'big flirt' branded across the front)<sup>1</sup> or representations of the sexualized infantilized adult women (e.g. celebrity female models posing as young girls, hugging over-sized teddy-bears in a playboy centre-fold).<sup>2</sup> This is where we see sexiness and innocence cohere in a schizoid formation that troubles distinct linear developmental lines and blurs inter-generational categories.

Theorists like Braidotti are suggesting that these kinds of schizoid pushes and pulls operate as one of the new normative conditions which subjects have to navigate (see also Renold and Epstein, 2010). Deleuzian scholar, Kemp (2009: 154), also argues that the, 'high levels of complexity found in modern life necessitate an understanding of the subject as always already fractured, or what they [Deleuze and Guattari] call schizzo'.<sup>3</sup> We use the notion of schizoid subjectivity to signal this trend. We illustrate this contemporary schizoid dynamic and how it operates in non-linear ways to inscribe girls' bodies as they live out their sexual subjectivities. To assist us in this mapping we outline our conceptualization of subjectivity (as always already social, relational and rhizomatic), which draws on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'becoming'.

Following post-structural conceptualizations of the subject, Deleuze and Guattari theorize subjectivity not as lone bounded self, but as a non-unitary multiplicitous entity that is constituted in constant relation to other bodies and things (i.e. social, material and semiotic). They conceptualize these networked relations as 'assemblages' where, as Elizabeth Grosz argues:

The body as the realm of affectivity, is the site or sites of multiple struggles, ambiguously positioned in the reproduction of social habits, requirements and regulations and in all sorts of production of unexpected and unpredictable linkages. (1994: 181)

So, in relation to our schizoid double-pull, we can see how the body is 'ambiguously positioned in the reproduction of social habits, requirements

and regulations' (e.g. through girls' often contradictory sexual regulations of themselves, of one another and by others). We can also see how the body is a site of production 'in all sorts of unexpected and unpredictable linkages' where girls might knowingly or unknowingly subvert sexual regulations within particular social and cultural 'affective assemblages' (Ringrose, 2011b), where schizoid dynamics operate at multiple levels. Indeed, further Deleuzian concepts that help us theorize the relationship between the social and the subjective is the notion of 'becomings' (to foreground movement) and the 'molar' and 'molecular' (to foreground the stratification of society and the potential rupturings at the interface of the molecular and the molar).

'Becoming' is a key concept from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of immanence. It tries to capture the movement and doing of subjectivity (in a similar way to Judith Butler's notion of 'performativity') as always in process, and specifically operates against the idea of a teleological moving forward developmental subject. The movement is thus rhizomatic and energies and affects can split off in multiple directions, thus rupturing any linear transition or trajectory (e.g. of the innocent girl child to the sexual woman). This is important for us because it allows the mapping of the capacity for bodies to affect and be affected within contemporary socio-cultural assemblages (Coleman, 2009). Indeed, a central methodological question that Deleuze and Guattari ask in relation to 'becoming' is 'what can a body do'? We take up this question to examine the ethico-political dimension of 'becoming' in how bodies affect one another in ways that can be what Deleuze and Guattari would call life-destroying (e.g. punishing) and life-affirming (e.g. freeing); for example, mapping the complexities of girls' experiences of sexual pleasure *and* danger (Vance, 1984). However, any such mapping must include an analysis of both micro and macro power relations in the social. Deleuze and Guattari conceive of the macro and micro as the molar and molecular. Molar lines are those hard and sedimented structures which work to constrain and bind subjects in social space (e.g. gender, race, class identities) and the molecular are those micro process and tiny movements in everyday relations which make visible (if seen) the fragility and malleability of the molar (see Renold and Ringrose, 2008). In the data sections that follow, we look at the molecular processes of becoming as girls re- and de-territorialize their space. We map when the molar and molecular meet, where the molecular is about that moment or 'becoming' when, however fleetingly, the normative molar segments are ruptured.

## **The case studies: expanding our methodological imagination**

The data sources for this article draw upon two qualitative data sets in our respective narrative and ethnographic research with teenagers in the UK. The first is from a study funded by NOSEB (the Norwegian Centre for

Child Research), and explored 12 girls' and 11 boys' uses of the social networking site (SNS) Bebo (a younger version of Facebook), the most popular SNS with UK teens in 2008, at the time the research was conducted. The data included school-based individual and focus group interviews in two school communities in suburban London and rural Suffolk and a virtual ethnography of Bebo sites. An explicit aim of the project was to bridge an often found separation in thinking about young people's online activities with their offline lives and experiences (Livingstone and Brake, 2010). The second data set is from an ESRC-funded (Economic and Social Research Council, UK) longitudinal participatory research project conducted in a city in South Wales exploring eight children's and young people's everyday lives, identities and relationship cultures in public care.<sup>4</sup> It used a range of creative multi-media research activities to capture the affective and multi-sensory dimensions of 'being in the world'.<sup>5</sup> As in previous work, we have brought together data from diverse studies to explore the everyday lives of girls' and boys' sexual subjectivities across different geographical and socio-cultural contexts in the UK (see also Renold and Ringrose, 2008; Ringrose and Renold, 2011). Combining our data has been an important methodological interpretive process. However, the nature of our research and analysis is not to generalize but to point to connections and analytic flows across our respective data in order to develop 'praxis of collective, critical interrogation' (McClelland and Fine, 2008: 243).

For the purposes of this article, we draw on three case studies. We have selected each case study specifically in order to focus on what McClelland and Fine (2008: 243) call, 'methodological release points'; that is, data analysis that allows us to expand our methodological imaginations beyond oversimplified 'telling it like it is' accounts and thus open up our interpretations in ways that 'help us think through how we might take a young women's words at face value *and* analyze what she may or may not necessarily be able or willing to see, feel, speak, know or reveal'. From the first study we explore Natalia's (age 14) and Tori's (age 16) online profiles and narrative interviews. From the second study we explore some of the visual (home movie) and audio data (car conversation) generated with Casey (age 13). All three young women are 'white' and 'working class' and they were each struggling to achieve academically, with Tori and Casey also managing 'risk' identities within a pathologizing educational discourse as both bullies and bullied. We focus on the sexualized styling of body, heterosexualized competition and everyday sexualized violence in the girls' local peer culture as part of a normative working-class assemblage of femininity (Keddie, 2009). We explore some complex social-semiotic-material assemblages made available to girls through a range of different performative spaces (in the street, in a sitting room, online and at school). We analyse each case study, drawing on our theoretical framework outlined above, in ways which complicate and contextualize the discursive moralizing that can surround data like these.



## Natalia

To set the scene for the normative ‘sexualized’ discourses girls are navigating in digital media cultures, we look briefly at Natalia (age 14). She attended a mixed socio-economic school in a gentrifying village and was part of a popular friendship group who called themselves the ‘Mini-Plastics’ (a younger version of the school’s older girl group ‘Plastics’ after the *Mean Girl* movie). Natalia described herself in interviews as a ‘ditzzy blonde’ who was ‘bad at maths’, and was following a ‘working-class’ trajectory into the beauty industry as a make-up artist. While Natalia’s Bebo profile was at the extreme end of sexually explicit content from our data, the sexualized discourses she uses were entirely normalized within the SNS Bebo, which is heavily populated by global commercial celebrity culture, branding and sexual commodification (see Ringrose, 2011a, 2011b). Her Bebo user name and tagline was: ‘Slut <Na- Na- Nataliaaaa>’; and her tagline was: ‘A4444CCCC ..♥ ‘Hi Im Natalia And ii Like It UpThe Bum... Just Like Your Mum! And I Suck Dick for £5’. This profile identity connects to a wider Bebo affective assemblage where over 25,000 users had reference to ‘slut’ in the user name or tagline at the time of the research.

To take a Deleuzian approach that understands bodies and connections in terms of machinic parts, Natalia seems to be constituted as a series of holes via heterosexualized/sexist discourses and as part of a wider cultural porno-informed assemblage. Natalia’s body is coded as something ‘to be looked at’ (Walkerline, 1991) and to which things are to be done – while her sexualized doing or becoming is to ‘like it’, take it ‘up’ her body and ‘suck’ the phallus. However, Natalia and her best friend Bridget, whose user name was ‘whore’, also in some ways resist these sexual categories. For instance, Natalia suggested that older girls had called her slut and that was part of why her and Bridget took on the slut and whore taglines. They also de-territorialized or queered (Butler, 2004) these molar identities by referring to themselves as each other’s whore and slut: ‘She’s my whore and I’m her slut’ (for a fuller and contextualized analysis of young queer disruptions to heteronormative peer cultures see Ringrose, 2011a).

What was also striking on Natalia’s Bebo page was a blog poem written by her friendship group about a girl going out with an older guy. The blog poem appeared to contradict her identity as sexually knowing ‘slut’, as it describes how ‘an already adult boyfriend’ had caused their girlfriend to ‘lose your childhood friends’ and ‘miss out on your childhood’. They beseech her to ‘come back to them’, to ‘have good times’ and ‘do childish things like the children that we are’:

Without << HIM >> Checking Up On You; Ruining Your Life; Taking You Away; Taking Your Childhood Away; Taking The People Who Care The Bloody Most About You Away.



The poem explicitly draws on a discourse of nostalgic, care-free childhood, mourning a sense of girlish innocence and loss – that the girl child is ‘gone’. In its entirety, the blog note mentions childhood six times, reiterating its force and disrupting the priority of the heterosexual union. We see the liminality they are occupying in that transitional relational space between childhood, tween, teen and adulthood; between the girl-love of ‘childish friends’ and the possessive dominance of the ‘adult’ male. The explicit use of childhood innocence, sits in complex tension with Natalia’s explicit ‘adulthood’ sexual content, which complicates normative teleological understandings of girls’ sexual transitions as ‘uni-directional’ (Driscoll, 2002). The Bebo page illustrates how girls’ doings of young contemporary femininity are multiplicitous and at points contradictory, unstable and reversible becomings. The daily performance of these is the condition of schizoid subjectivity that we are foregrounding, and continue to explore in more detail below.

### **Tori**

Our second case study of Tori (16), explores the playboy bunny ‘skin’ on her Bebo profile within the context of peer-to-peer girl relational aggression online as well as physical violence in school and outside school. Tori straddled contradictory identities as both bullied and bully, particularly in relation to sexualized name-calling (e.g. Tori was both subject to and subjected others to abject labels such as ‘lesbian’ and ‘fat slag’ in a complicated affective terrain of homosocial friendship-conflicts). Close analysis of her Bebo profile and interactions illustrate Tori negotiating her physical vulnerability and heterosexual ambivalence. We aim in this analysis to stretch the idea of a bounded humanist body to foreground an extended body with intersecting parts plugging into various ‘real’ and virtual assemblages. Her user name was ‘Tori L’ and Tagline: <xlilxmissxTorix> ‘lil miss Tori ere aka ratface lol’. Here ‘lil miss’ sits alongside ‘ratface’; the cute, small and desirable besides the invocation of ugly and undesirable. Tori’s attachments to being ‘lil’ (smallness) also emerged strongly in her interviews, and can be understood within the wider assemblage of normalized cultures of fighting and attacks, and her failures to physically protect herself or fight back. However, as we show, smallness and innocence are also drawn upon as resources in Tori’s attempts to negotiate a (hetero)-sexy subjectivity online.

Tori’s ambivalence towards the figure of hypersexualized young teen female bodies and her own body as desirable was an enduring theme in interviews. For example, Tori expressed a moral concern about a high-profile clique of girls at her school posting holiday photos of themselves in ‘bras, knickers and bikinis’, saying ‘its out of order’, ‘putting yourself down’, ‘making everyone think oh she’s a slag’, ‘makes the boys think you’ll do anything’ and ‘making yourself look desperate’. Perhaps in part to navigate the ‘sexualized’ online Bebo and school assemblages, Tori used

a Playboy background Bebo 'skin' – a pink backdrop with a large black playboy bunny with bow tie symbol, as well as the words 'Playboy Bunny' in elegant script. The playboy bunny features as a mobile symbol in the Bebo assemblage taken up in many user profiles, primarily through the background skin (Ringrose, 2011b). In addition to the playboy bunny skin, Tori pasted a photo of herself in fluffy bunny ears prominently on her site, which she had turned into a 'cartoonized' image through a Bebo application.

The playboy bunny has become a contested symbol of feminist critique against the commodification of women's/girls bodies (Tankard Reist, 2010). Given the success of marketing the bunny for women and younger and younger girls, it was important to explore Tori's own interpretation of the bunny. She explained that she had a virtual folder with 'loads of pictures' of the Playboy bunny, including the skin that she picked, and that her mum had bought her and her 12-year-old sister the bunny ears and two Playboy bunny tops:

- J: What does it mean to you, the symbol?  
 T: To most people it means like the Playboy mansion and all the girls and that but with girls it's just the bunny and like girls like rabbits.  
 J: So are you thinking that about, you know, the Playboy bunny mansion or anything like that?  
 T: No, it's just a good cartoon.  
 [...]
 J: Ok, so you know other people might think of it as like the Playboy mansion?  
 T: Yeah [...] It's other people's opinion, it's completely up to them. I just like it because of the picture.

Tori explicitly draws upon discourses of childhood innocence here claiming to 'most people' the symbol might mean 'the Playboy mansion' but to girls it's just a 'bunny'. Indeed, it is possible to see that the symbol of the playboy bunny is itself a schizoid sign that contains specific versions of masculinity and femininity within it. Historically it emerged as a sign of the male Playboy and its binary opposition the sexualized female in bunny ears and revealing costume. But now this sexualized binary has been imported into childhood consumer culture through advertising campaigns that have shifted this popular brand onto young girls (though not boys), illustrating the re-encroachment of eroticized innocence on girlhood. The success of the transmutation of Playboy into the girl child world of consumption and play appears to work by capitalizing on the ambiguity inhering in the bunny symbol (cute but naughty, bunny but not). This dynamic has been discussed as one where girl childishness is eroticized while adult woman are infantilized (Coy, 2009). Through a Deleuze and Guattari lens we can under-

stand this as condensing the symbolization of 'sexy' femininity in the bunny markers. These are 'axiomitized' (Hickey-Moody and Malins, 2006) so that the markers can move and attach to differently aged bodies via the parts of the bunny ears or tail to evoke the associative chains of lingerie (*bustière*), and more sexually developed female bodies even if these are not immediately present.

By asking again what the body can do, however, we can see how the bunny operates in schizoid ways in Tori's own individual deployment of the sign. In the specific heterosexualized and often violent peer affective assemblage she is navigating, the bunny operates to do a lot of signalling work to sexualize Tori, but also to maintain ambiguity and distance. Tori's cartoonized image has her in a very bulky sweater with the ears, so her body is shielded from the gaze. She could be using the symbolism and the ears almost as a form of drag or disguise, to manoeuvre what Angela McRobbie (2008) has conceptualized as the 'postfeminist masquerade' (see also Renold and Ringrose, 2008) in ways that work to locate her in a sexy-assemblage of associations and interconnections aligning her with Playboy-bunny subjectivity. Perhaps it allows her to signal sex without posing in a bikini. Perhaps it also protects her from the mounting glare of sexualized looking at female bodies as a series of sexualized parts and holes that form idealized formations of femininity in the globalized popular cultural assemblage we have been exploring.

### Casey

The third case study focuses on Casey and the private and domestic space of the lounge. Self-proclaimed 'no girlie girl', Casey invests in multiplicity and contradiction, describing herself in one of her video diaries as 'a bit chav, bit moshier, bit emo, bit tomboy'. Central to our analysis of what a body can do is the way Casey negotiates the in between space of tween femininity as a self identified tomboy hanging out with boy-only groups in a range of public spaces (street, parks, by the river) and simultaneously exploring the world of boyfriends and beautification (e.g. Casey took over 200 photos of herself in various poses with different hairstyles and make-up, as part of her identity project). Casey thus moves in and out of what could be conceptualized as a schizoid space through which young tomboy teens are simultaneously and ambivalently constituted within a highly striated 'heterosexual matrix' as both 'one of the boys', rupturing the heteronormativity of the 'becoming woman', and 'for the boys', as desired sexual object and desiring sexual subject (see Renold, 2008). This tension was most starkly reflected upon by Casey when she related an episode of heterosexualized harassment from her male friends 'touching me and everything, in places I don't really want to be touched' (see Ringrose and Renold, 2011). From long and persistent narratives over a period of a year,

in which Casey recounted numerous physical fights with boys in her school, in this context and peer group dynamic her attempts to 'fight back' and 'get [her friends] to stop' were futile. Like many other girls' experiences of routine heterosexual harassment, she normalized their behaviour as 'just mucking around' (Blackmore, 1995). It is against this backdrop that we wish to explore the lounge, which, free from parental surveillance, operated as a hybrid and potentially sexually subversive girl's own space, reminiscent of the literature on girls' use of bedroom culture (see for example, Bloustien, 2003).

Like many of Casey's home videos produced for the research,<sup>6</sup> this video also represented part of her everyday life; being with and hanging out with her friends beyond the school gates. This short two-minute video offered a rare glimpse into the becoming-women of the girl child and Casey and her friends' relationship to popular culture and entry into 'older' sexualized discourses and practices – in this case, their love of R&B and contemporary dance in which the (hetero)sexualized female body is hyper-visible.<sup>7</sup> While 'dirty dancing' and the desire for sexual knowledge and performance has long been recognized as a feature of young girlhood (Walkerline, 1997), we have little understanding of how young women are negotiating the intensification of highly raced/classed pornified representations and sexualized sexist lyrics (see Smith, 2010; Ward, 2003). Central to the focus of our analysis here is the molecular assemblage of the music, the lyrics and video of the Ja Rule hit 'Caught Up' (2005), the girls' sexualized dancing and appropriation of Ja Rule's lyrics, and the ways the girls are able to direct the movement of the boy in the scene.

Context: It is daylight. The girls are drinking and smoking. Bottles of fluorescent 'alco-pops' are lined up on the windowsill. The girls drink out of the bottles, the boy drinks out of a plastic beaker. Ja Rule's 'Caught Up' is playing loudly on the stereo.

The video begins with one of the girls filming Casey snaking up and down the door frame in pole-dancing fashion, followed by Casey filming her two friends, Jordan and Katie, as they step up onto the armchair, one leg on each arm, rocking their hips to the beat of the music.

Katie and Jordan dance and Katie sings the lyrics 'I'm feeling you' to Jordan, facing each other. The boy takes a long swig of his beaker cup then dances along the floor underneath the two chairs and approaches Jordan. He attempts to jump up onto the arm of Jordan's chair but she forcefully pushes him down so that he falls off the chair and loses his balance. Katie reaches over and pushes down his head and nearly topples off her chair, but Jordan steadies her, offering her hand which she takes. Casey approaches the boy and says 'you hold it' and then he takes it in turn to film each girl dancing.

The video that visually represents the music and lyrics of black US R&B star Ja Rule's track 'Caught Up'<sup>8</sup> exemplifies what sexualities scholars are conceptualizing as the pornification of popular culture (Paasonen et al.,

2007).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it is these kinds of visual and discursive representations that have incited the sexualization moral panic (e.g. Coy, 2009), nostalgically calling for a return to the repressed sexual subjectivity of girls' presumed sexual innocence, and a more regulated time-space continuum when TV watersheds and age-appropriate restrictions could be enforced. But how do we now make sense of the collective shared pleasure in which the girls here seem to be both held by (as sexual objects) and hold (as sexual subjects) the sexual male gaze in the ways they appropriate the lyrics, in their 'becoming Ja Rule' and in their appropriation of sexualized dancing for each other and for the boy?

The girls videoing each others' sexualized dancing on the chairs and dancing up against the door edge could be interpreted unambiguously as mimicry of the performative sexualized dancing on the Ja Rule video. Moreover, the blurring of generational and sexual discourses through the binary signification of the alco (adult)/pop (child) and the potential phallic signifier of both the bottle and the cigarette (Albright, 2005) provides an assemblage that could illustrate girls' deviation from the time-line of gender/sexual/age-appropriate activities – where objects and movements provide a direct conduit to the video/lyrics. However, rather than position the girls within this assemblage as locked into a hetero-oedipal logic of desire in ways that either polarize them as cultural dupes/passive sexual subjects in their identifications with (hetero)sexualized femininity *or* as post-feminist agentic subjects expressing and/or commodifying their new sexual freedoms, we might consider a more critical approach to mimesis (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1987: 12).

For example, through 'becoming Ja Rule' via the historical legacy of the domestic space as 'their realm' (Young, 2001), the girls could be defying the subjectivity of the hyper-sexualized, accessory feminine subject/object in the video/lyrics; consider the ways they occupy centre stage and dance and sing 'I'm feeling you' to and for each other. They might also be denying the boyfriend the possibility of joining their dance performance space and rejecting his advances to be involved in their performance/fantasy of 'sexy'. They could also be positioning themselves symbolically and physically as ascendant in the gendered sexual hierarchy of boy-girl through standing on the chairs, legs wide and strong, literally pushing down the boy's head, then directing the gendered assemblage of boy-camera (phallus/male gaze), ordering him to hold and film them, which he does, democratically (spending equal time on filming each girl). Butler (2004: 201), like Deleuze and Guatarri, argues for a critical mimesis to suggest that the working and re-working of norms (in this case, sexualized dancing), and the performing of norms by different bodies (three girlfriends 'becoming Ja Rule') may well appear to 'echo the master discourse' (in this case the sexual objectification of the female body and the appropriation of the sexualized lyrics). However, these movements are perhaps no straightforward copy and need

to be seen in the broader assemblage of ambiguous and conflictual boy–girl relations; the heterosexualized harassment within her peer friendship group outlined above; Casey’s experimentation of gender identity more widely; and her educational trajectory from ‘successful’ student to ‘failing’ and ‘excluded’ student in the space of two years (see Renold, 2010).<sup>10</sup>

## **Beyond the binaries, beyond moral panics**

McClelland and Fine (2008: 100) insist that feminist researchers must find new ways of researching and imagining young women’s sexualities and sexual desire, which ‘on release’ are not ‘eaten up by commercials, predators and shame, but could loiter a bit, in talk and body’. It is through talk, text and the body, that our analysis of Natalia, Tori and Casey at a micro molecular level, has enabled us to see the multiple becomings and the extension of femininity and sexuality through objects, space, movement and time. As we have shown, these multiple becomings are experienced in ways that complicate the binary logic of sexual victim/sexual empowerment and sexual innocence/sexual excess. This way of seeing perhaps offers an alternative analysis of girls navigating the wider schizoid tensions of gendered sexual innocence and (hetero)sexual subject/objectification. They allow us to connect up girls’ feelings of pleasure and power in the becoming-sexual-woman with their experiences of virtual and embodied networks colonized with real and symbolic (hetero)sexualized violence in their everyday lives.

We are, however, mindful that across the data, while the molecular might offer complex representations of lived lives in ways that illustrate the rupture and, in some cases, queering of age/gender/sexual norms, we have to couch the analysis of micro-movement within an awareness of the molar fixities of living feminine sexuality as working-class girls. We need to map specific (UK and regional) territories of raced/classed erotic capitals and the ongoing pathologization of the white working-class, feminine body as marked by sexual excess (Skeggs, 1997; Tyler, 2008; Walkerdine, 1999). This awareness must be retained, so analysis does not tip over into ‘current theory’s emphases on fluidity and multiplicity [which] frequently fail[s] to consider ... the grinding stability and exploitative continuity ... of class and material conditions’ (Blackman et al., 2008: 19). This is an enduring problematic for post-structural research on youth cultures and identities (Nayak and Kehily, 2007) and we consider this fraught relationality of the molar and molecular in our conclusions below. We also discuss the implications of our theoretical framework for feminist research and intervention into the pleasures and dangers of young female sexualities.

## **Conclusion**

The media-fuelled sexualization moral panic has thrived on theories of girls’ sexual excess, making hyper-visible the figure of the over- and/or

inappropriately sexualized girl, set against a middle-class norm of developmentally appropriate (hetero)sexuality. It is within this socio-cultural context of surveillance that we take up the theoretical challenges posed by McClelland and Fine (2008: 233) on finding sufficiently complex approaches to investigate girls' sexual desires which are simultaneously 'buried, forming and yet emergent'. This article has thus shed light on the complexity of youth transitions and identity formation by examining the specific contradictions informing contemporary sexual discourses of young femininity (like being sexually knowledgeable or innocent, being a victim, sexual harasser or pleasure seeker).

We have developed a theory of what we see as schizoid pushes and pulls in teen girls' sexual cultures and new schizoid formations of subjectivity, drawing upon feminist appropriations of Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis. We found the notions of 'becoming' and 'assemblages' particularly useful for directing our attention to the immanence of feminine subjectivities and to the relationships within and between bodies which are over-coded with 'chaotic multiplicities' characteristic of capitalist schizophrenic cultures (Hickey-Moody and Malins, 2006). We mapped embodied, physical manifestations of girls' engagement with sexually saturated media (via SNS semiology or popular music). Our examples included a friendship pair who 'reclaim' and queer the identifications of 'slut' and 'whore' amidst a blog poem celebrating the qualities of childhood innocence on their social networking sites; a girl navigating the innocent/sexy motif of a playboy bunny identity online and offline; and a group of girls performing as rap kings in the private space of the lounge. Each case illustrated disruptions of any predictable developmental linear transition of girl–teen–woman (e.g. the slut-child and girl-playboy bunny) and instances of rhizomatic non-determinability (e.g. the rap-king-girl-woman). We conceptualized these anti-linear and sometimes queer becomings as a way of living out what is possibly a *normative* schizoid subjectivity (where contradictions must be managed). We found this an important conceptual space for thinking about both sedimented molar formations of young sexual identity (e.g. white-working-class slut), and girls' more porous molecular movements which permeate and trouble molar lines (e.g. slut as site to resist sexual regulation).<sup>11</sup>

In concluding, we are reminded of Grosz's (1994: 173) argument that we need to be cautious when theorizing the political effects of how molecular becomings can disrupt and expose the vulnerabilities of the molar, macro power relations. She notes this can be 'politically dangerous ground to walk on'. However, she continues:

'If we do not walk in dangerous places and different types of terrain, nothing new will be found, no explorations are possible, and things remain the same' (Grosz, 1994: 173).

For us, as for Grosz, the risk is worth taking. Indeed it is a necessary risk, as feminist academic researchers, to move beyond the static, binary



positions that locate girls as either savvy sexual agents or objectified sexualized victims, to see instead the complexity and difficulty in navigating and performing schizoid sexual subjectivities and female desire in our contemporary moment. Our article is thus the development of a politicized theoretical framework that helps us to see and map the proliferation of competing and contradictory sexual assemblages, the molar lines girls are 'caught up' in, yet 'feeling' their way through, and sometimes disrupting through new molecular becomings in their everyday lives.

## Notes

- 1 See: <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/tag/gender-childrenyouth/page/23/> (accessed August 2011).
- 2 See <http://www.popcrunch.com/nude-lily-cole-playboy-magazine-france-cover-photo-october-2008/> (accessed 5/5/11).
- 3 Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the schizzo refuses the usual pathologization of the schizophrenic. They turn away from a reading of insanity within the psychological subject to how the contradictory practices of capitalism create a social insanity.
- 4 Children in public care are under state care. This can include children in foster care, residential care or children living at home under care orders. For the purposes of anonymity and confidentiality we have not disclosed Casey's care background.
- 5 This project was funded to explicitly and critically explore methodological challenges in researching the everyday lives of young people through participatory ethnographic methods.
- 6 Casey produced a range of videos which portrayed different aspects of her 'everyday life' (the focus of the project). We have permission from Casey to describe and analyse the content of her videos in academic journals. For a full discussion of issues of consent and confidentiality as an iterative and collaborative process, see Renold et al. (2008).
- 7 However, R&B was only one of Casey's favourite musical genres. She also liked Disney classics (especially tracks from *The Lion King*), romantic ballads (e.g. Maria Carey) and more alternative music, such as My Chemical Romance.
- 8 For the full lyrics of Ja Rule's 'Caught Up', see <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jarule/caughtup.html>.
- 9 The video shows the viewer scene after scene of Ja Rule surrounded by a veritable harem of glamour-model styled, light-skinned black women in bikinis, either draped over him like accessories, or dancing, lounging or floating in a swimming pool in the sidelines. From Playboy mansion to yacht he is flanked by women in every shot, 'caught up' in a chain of age old sexual stereotypes in which he is the (sexual) king and the women are his sexual subjects and objects. Well worn tropes of sexual objectification pepper the lyrics, from sexual ownership ('she's wearing my name already, so you know she's fucking me'), sexual acts ('fucking', 'giving head') and representations of women's 'dangerous' and 'crazy' sexuality. More schizoid representations include the fusion of romance with the pathologization of femininity ('I've fallen in love with this bitch').
- 10 It is significant that the recording of this dancing video parallels Casey's educational transition into receiving an alternative curriculum at an alternative venue (not school). With limited educational capital now to draw upon (Casey had

wanted to become a vet), this micro moment perhaps also connects to the ways in which she is investing in her body's erotic capital.

- 11 For other examples of how 'slut' is being re-appropriated as a site of resistance to sexual regulation, see activist community campaigning against 'slut shaming' in US states, Canada and the UK via a series of locally organized 'slutwalks' (see <http://www.slutwalktoronto.com/>, accessed 5/5/2011).

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