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Past Issues

□ Nayak, Anoop & Mary Jane Kehily

*Gender, Youth and Culture: Young Masculinities and Femininities.*

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## A Review by Stuart Borthwick

Perhaps the theoretical originality of this text is what it does not contain, rather than what it does. In previous theoretical epochs, discourses concerning youth culture focussed on age and generation as they related to class, economics, gender, discourse (in the Foucaultian sense) and more recently, globalisation. Where this text differs is that its focus on gender and gendering is all encompassing, and unlike previous books on youth culture, Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily rarely explore the notion of youth.

Whilst the authors mobilise a multitude of theoretical positions in support of their arguments, methodologically they continue the long tradition of ethnographic fieldwork within youth culture studies, peppering the conclusions of this fieldwork with both textual and contextual analyses. Of particular delight to the reader is the manner in which the authors' fieldwork is mobilised at the service of an impressive array of theoretical constructs, taking in semiotic, materialist, poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory, as well drawing on sociology, anthropology, and gender studies. When new theoretical terrains are explored, Nayak and Kehily avoid the tendency of earlier researchers to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater', or as the authors put it, they do not "emphasise fissures with the past at the expense of continuities" (73).

In combining a range of theoretical discourses, and mobilising data from a number of different ethnographic research projects, these two authors show themselves to be as multiskilled as the young people that are the objects of their analysis. In authoring this useful text, these two young writers have shown themselves to be transdisciplinary, self-reflexive, and sensitive to the needs of collaboration. They are ethnographers, intellectual collaborators, and historians, both of their own disciplines and of society in general. Chiefly they are *interpreters*, and this is no mean feat when so much of what they research is "unspoken", "internal" and "absenting" (47). These hidden elements include many of the connections between gender, ethnicity, identity and class.

In discussing "young masculinities in crisis" the authors suggest that there is a discourse in which "boys become men" in a post-industrial world filled with "humdrum service sector employment" (39), and girls "are the flexible beneficiaries of a neo-liberal agenda" (37). Within these uneasy narratives, neither masculine nor feminine subjects are portrayed as being particularly fulfilled or contented. The authors' male and female respondents seem to be suffering from a modern malaise, brought on by the ravages of new-right

governments and globalisation. In some senses, modern academic researchers can be compared to these unfortunates. Cut adrift from traditional notions of tenure, and pressured by RAE deadlines, academics are as stymied by the same neo-liberal economics, individualism, short-termism, flux and mutability as their ethnographic respondents. Academia is certainly now a “footloose industry [with] expectations of mobility”, and these two modern researchers, like their youthful respondents, find themselves in a “new moment” that “cannot fully escape the shadow of the past, but grows out of it” (59).

Nayak and Kehily suggest that their youthful respondents are forced to address some fundamental questions about their place in society, especially “What to do? How to act? Who to be?” (Giddens, 1991, 70). Equally, the authors cite Zygmund Bauman, suggesting that young people live lives “full of doubts and fears of error” (Bauman, 1988, 62). The same is true of scholars. Whilst the authors present an impressive amount of ethnographic data, and analyse it with wit and skill, they are certainly not exempt from misinterpretation and error. For example, the reader is pulled up short when the world of banking, and the worlds of teenage boys, are described as “testosterone-fuelled” in the case of the former (100) and “fuelled by testosterone” (114) in the case of the latter. Surely the authors do not mean to suggest that hormones somehow explain the production of gender within the City of London and the production of masculine subjectivities in school? This rupture, an unwelcome return to biological determinism, sits uneasily in a book that emphasises the centrality of discourse, culture and identity, and where gender is seen as belonging to the world of the symbolic.

There are other passages that whilst being theoretically and perhaps technically unimpeachable, are somewhat celebratory in their tone, even when there is little to celebrate. So it is suggested that the “thriving sex tourism” of Thailand represents “gender and sexual subversion”, peopled by “exotic” transgender brides whose identities can be contrasted with the “bland lifestyles of white middle-aged men” (65). The authors do not explore the less progressive aspects of sex tourism in South-east Asia. Equally, British television programmes such as *Teachers* and *Little Britain* are mutely celebrated, and are not subject to the same kind of probing critical analysis as afforded to films such as *Fight Club* (38), *Falling Down* (45-9), or, following McRobbie (2004), *Sex in the City* (69-70).

In general, it is the continual search for transgression and “malleable” gender identities that leads to an inappropriate celebratory tone. In a review of Murray Healy’s *Gay Skins: Class Masculinity and Queer Appropriation*, the authors celebrate the life of a gay male skinhead who meets “a long-haired young man whose head he shaved before fucking him” (84). Were the ‘fucked’ person to have been a woman, this language would most likely not have been used, but it is deemed appropriate to describe “exciting forays into gay subculture” (84) in which “gender norms are resisted and overturned” (85). Perhaps the authors need to remind themselves of their statement that “new gender practices [...] do not necessarily lead to the end of gender regimes” (100). Whereas the authors

generally critique pernicious paternalism, on occasions they neglect to do so, so when the skinhead cited above is whisked away by a “wealthy philanderer”, this results in a “cultural education in Europe”, where the respondent “developed new tastes, read literature [...], and came to terms with his sexuality” (85). Again, perhaps this is a little too celebratory.

A more substantive criticism might be the extent to which the production, distribution and exchange of gender identities is analysed at the expense of an equally desirable analysis of the production of the discursive and empirical categories of age and generation. Whilst the authors attempt to situate their work within the space between youth cultural studies and ‘youth transitions’ approaches (12), the focus on gendering in the bulk of the book belies this, despite the title promising a study of “gender, youth and culture”.

Whilst the authors and the reader continually return to gender as being contingent, “forever in the making” (97), the social/discursive categories of youth are not subject to quite as much attention. For example, schools are seen by the authors as “important public sites where young people [...] are further disciplined into becoming modern-gendered subjects” and are a “space in which young people produce their own gender identities” (97). The authors also state that alongside the process of gendering, schools are also sites where sexuality, class and ethnicity are at work (110). However, generation and youth are noticeably absent from the authors’ list of discourses. Whilst the study of gender and ethnicity within schooling is a must, it could be suggested that schools are equally focussed upon the production and reproduction of identities of childhood and ‘teenagerdom’, where discourses of youth are continually worked and reworked. This is a particularly pertinent issue when considering the near universal structural organisation of childhood education into age groups.

Equally, when young people leave compulsory education, the streets also become zones in which discourses of youthfulness and generation are played out. Again, the authors cite published work in this area, but their primary research focus is concerned with the performance and embodiment of ethnicity and gender. The performance and embodiment of youthfulness is noticeably absent from their analyses. For example, in their analysis of street-corner gangs, the racialised demarcation of young Asian masculinities is emphasised, at the expense of an analysis of what the seminal tome *Resistance Through Rituals* referred to as “structures, cultures and biographies” (Chambers, 1975). Nayak and Kehily are right to analyse ‘street-corner society’, for it is the subject of much moral panic, but generally it is the *youthfulness* of the gang, and not its ethnic make up, that is of primary concern. Music and dancing are also sites of social angst, and rich sources of ethnographic data concerning the relationships between gender, ethnicity, age and generation. However, respondents’ participation in dancehall music culture is cast in terms of race and gender rather than age (107-8).

A lack of focus on youth sits uneasily with the authors’ discussion of “the insights achieved through biographical methods” (103), particularly when such methods are so useful when analysing discourses of youth. Earlier ethnographers of schooling were

criticised (although not by Nayak and Kehily) for the alleged lack of attention that they paid to issues of gender, but perhaps now the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction, and notions of youthfulness are uncritically accepted, in both society and academia.

The authors state that “for youth the performance of gender and its imaginary attachment to ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are different to those of the adults and the aged” (175). This quotation is transcribed with its original punctuation. Implicit in the use of ‘scare’ marks in this sentence is the suggestion that masculinity and femininity are what Butler calls “illusions of substance” (Butler 1990, 146), identities that are lived largely in the imagination. These unstable discursive and semantic categories only exist through their relationship to each other within a binary opposition, a concept that the authors explore through Derridian analysis (170). However, the social categories of “youth”, “adults” and “the aged” are left untouched by peripheral punctuation, with the implication that they stand as stable, real, empirical categories, unlike masculinity and femininity. The opposite is the case. Discursive notions of age are as prone to reside in the imagination as those of gender.

In exploring the discursive nature of ethnicity and gender, the authors suggest that “there is no semantic reason why blacks cannot ‘be’ white or girls cannot ‘be’ boys” (165). The authors acknowledge that many theorists and activists might stop short of this “disturbing challenge”, but don’t ask why. With this silent question ringing in our ears, we can note that few baulk at the notion that middle-aged baby-boomers can continue to be “young” right the way through to old age. Perhaps then, an examination of discursive notions of age and youthfulness can help scholars of ethnicity and gender to understand the complexity of these discourses.

When the social and discursive categories of youth are discussed, the reader is often left gasping for more. For example, descriptions of the authors’ ethnographic research in a school in the West Midlands is all too brief (102), and an analysis of recent changes in the working and studying patterns of school-leavers is crammed into a single paragraph (101). Opening up a chapter focussing upon consumption, the authors sketch out the rise of the teenager in the post-war period, providing connections to concurrent economic changes. The authors admit that “in the globalized economy youth can be seen as the exemplar of a market segment” (126). This is a rare example of the authors placing age alongside ethnicity and gender, but the primacy of analyses of gender and ethnicity is quickly reaffirmed through reference to Skeggs’ work (Skeggs, 2004) concerning “class and gender as embodied cultural characteristics” (129). This is despite the authors’ reading of Skeggs as a writer who “develops a rich framework for applying economic delineations to the realm of the cultural” (131), and despite the aim of the chapter being a discussion of the many ways in which “practices of consumption form an integral part of young people’s cultural worlds” (156).

Despite a lack of focus on age and generation, this book is one of the most stimulating publications within youth cultural studies in recent years. The reader cannot fail to be

impressed by the theoretical grasp demonstrated by the authors, who deftly move between previously antithetical theoretical paradigms. Few writers are able to combine the semiotic with the performative, the ethnographic with the psychoanalytic, and the textual with the contextual in quite such a readable manner. Despite (or perhaps because of) this theoretical heterogeneity, the book is firmly situated within the interdisciplinary field of media or cultural studies, dominated as this field is by the study of power as it works in and through symbolic forms. Power is certainly at the centre of this book. The authors avoid the error that they (perhaps ungenerously) ascribe to Bauman, Giddens and Ulrich Beck, and have refused to produce a tome that is “abstract and cut-off from the everyday lives in real contexts”, even if the language they use could hardly be described as non-technical. Perhaps, in this instance, it is the closeness between ethnographers and respondents that has led to this. The authors are certainly deeply concerned about the futures of their respondents, and are dedicated to providing tools with which we, and perhaps they, can understand the role of gender and ethnicity within youth culture.

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