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'SHE'S KICKIN' ASS, THAT'S WHAT SHE'S DOING!'

Deconstructing Childhood 'Innocence' in Media Representations

Kerry H. Robinson and Cristyn Davies

Introduction

In this discussion, we provide a critical reading of the discourses of childhood 'innocence' and the way that it is conceptualised and represented within two different texts: *Painted Babies* (1995) and *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006). We have selected these texts to emphasise contradictory discourses that constitute understandings of childhood 'innocence'. *Painted Babies* presents its audience with an in-depth view of the world of the beauty pageant, leaving the viewer to ponder the sexualisation and commodification of young girls and childhood innocence. Directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, *Little Miss Sunshine* cleverly deploys competing discourses of childhood innocence in order to critique adult constructions of childhood. We use these texts as a pivot to consider hegemonic discourses around childhood and sexuality, adult-child relationships, and constructions of 'difficult knowledge'.

Within hegemonic discourses of childhood, innocence is viewed as natural, and moral panic is often associated with a perceived risk of the child's innocence being compromised. Within these discourses, stemming from philosophy and developmental psychology (Piaget 1929; Rousseau 1762), childhood is perceived as a universal natural state of human development, epitomised by angelic purity and innocence.¹ Adulthood and childhood become mutually exclusive polarised worlds with the child becoming the powerless 'other' in the world of adults, a world in which adults become the 'gate-keepers' of knowledge and experience in an effort to preserve the perceived essence of childhood; that is, 'innocence'. Adults often have a nostalgic longing for childhood, reminiscing that it is a time of carefree fantasy that is too quickly lost. Within this constructed dichotomy, certain kinds of knowledge become the exclusive rights of adulthood. Politics, sex and death, for instance, become adult knowledge from which children are excluded (Silin 1995). The moral panic around the potential loss of childhood innocence, or more specifically childhood itself, reaches its extremities when considered within the realm of sexuality (Robinson 2008). Sexuality is an area of identity that is often represented as 'adults only', one from which children are perceived to be in need of protection (Robinson 2005a). We argue that childhood innocence is complex, constructed and contradictory, a concept that is manufactured by adults for adults (Gittins 1998) and consequently has critical impacts on children's agency in their lives (Robinson and Davies 2007).

In addition, we draw on the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault to critically examine relations between gender, sexuality, power and agency in children's lives. Judith

Butler's concept of the performativity of gender provides an understanding of the ways in which children take up and negotiate gendered identities (Butler 1990, 1993a, 1993b, 1997, 2004). Further, Foucault's and Butler's theorisation of subjection allows for an understanding of children as subjects with agency (Foucault 1978; Butler 1997). To be recognisable as a subject one must undergo subjection to a social or political norm or regulation under the law, but *also*, this subjection brings with it the potential for agency (Butler 1997). Foucault's (1972, 1980) theorisation of knowledge and power allows for an understanding of the way in which 'childhood' has been constituted, defined, organised and spoken into the 'natural order of things' within the scientific paradigm of human development. Within this paradigm, certain perceptions and knowledge about childhood are universalised and are given the stamp of scientific 'truth', constituting and limiting possibilities of thought about child development and childhood and determining how it is spoken into existence. The power of this discursive formation of knowledge is in the way that it produces the objects of which it speaks, in this case childhood and what it means to be a child. These 'truths' about childhood are taken up by institutions and individuals and perpetuated through everyday relations of power.

Deconstructing Childhood and Childhood 'Innocence'

The new sociology of childhood field highlights how childhood is discursively and socially constructed and critiques modernist, universal, biologically fixed understandings of childhood, primarily perpetuated within developmental psychology. Within social construction perspectives, the notion of childhood is viewed as culturally inscribed on the physical bodies of children. That is, what it means to be a child differs across social, cultural, political, economic and historical contexts and that it is important to view child development across these differences (James and Prout 1990; Gittins 1998; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998). The more traditional explanations of childhood, those perpetuating white, Western, middle-class values, fail to recognise the instability, multiplicity and fluidity of childhood across a broad range of socio-cultural, gendered, sexualised, classed, racialised and historical contexts.

Hegemonic discourses of childhood artificially construct mutually exclusive worlds—the world of the adult and the world of the child—in which adult–child relationships are defined and binarised, signifying hierarchical relations of power (James and Prout 1990; Cannella 1997; Gittins 1998; Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 1999; Robinson 2002). In this binary, children are socially constructed as innocent, immature, dependent, and the powerless 'other' in relation to the independent, mature, powerful, critically thinking and 'knowing' adult (Robinson 2002). This relationship is perpetuated through what are generally upheld as logical and natural differences between adults and children and operates to exclude children from the 'adult's world' (Gittins 1998). Berry Mayall, a theorist of the sociology of childhood, points out that children's 'lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adult understandings of childhood and what children are and should be' (1996, 1). We argue that what adults consider appropriate knowledge for children—what children *should* know—often in the name of protecting childhood innocence, is a critical component of this construction.

Within hegemonic discourses of childhood, 'innocence' is a deeply entrenched value considered inherent in the child. However, as we have argued for the recognition of childhood as a discursive and material socio-cultural construction, we also view childhood

innocence as a similar construction. James Kincaid (1992) in his critique of childhood innocence argues that innocence is not a characteristic that pre-exists in the child, but rather is a cultural myth that is 'inculcated' and 'enforced' upon children and generally viewed by adults as in need of protection. We argue that childhood 'innocence' is a part of the construction of childhood more broadly, and is a critical political site at which the adult-child power relationship, and the mutually exclusive 'world of adults' and the 'world of the child' is maintained. Consequently, certain knowledge becomes adults' knowledge from which children are excluded. Such knowledge, Robinson (2005a) argues, can be viewed as difficult knowledge (Britzman 1998) sites in which many adults experience great discomfort in dealing with their own understandings, values, prejudices and fears; they are points at which the discursive locations of subjects can become challenged and troubled. The discomfort often associated with these locations is intensified when considered in the context of children, their perceived inherent innocence and their learning, influencing what becomes constituted as appropriate knowledge to communicate with children (Robinson 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Silin 1995).

Henry Jenkins points out that 'childhood innocence presumes that children exist in a space beyond, above, outside the political; we imagine them to be noncombatants whom we protect from the harsh realities of the adult world' (1998, 2). Drawing on the work of Carey Bazalgette and David Buckingham (1995), Jenkins highlights the way in which children are viewed as 'asocial or perhaps, pre-social', resulting in an emphasis on their 'inadequacies', 'immaturity', and 'irrationality' (1998, 2). Jenkins goes on to point out that because 'developmental psychology focuses on defining and encouraging "normative" development, it does not provide us with the tools for critiquing the cultural power invested in childhood innocence' (1998, 2). This is a critical point because developmental psychology is foundational to the hegemonic discourse of childhood, constituting possibilities of thinking about the child, thus preventing different readings. 'Cultural power' in childhood innocence operates to maintain adult-child power relations, distinctions in what is constituted adult knowledge and appropriate children's knowledge, but it also acts as a convenient excuse for adults not to address difficult knowledge with children.

Constituting and Negotiating Girlhood

Within the social construction of childhood, the gendered experience of being a girl, or of girlhood, has been extensively theorised by feminist scholars (Aapola, Gonik, and Harris 2005; Driscoll 2002; Johnson 1993; McRobbie 1991; Reay 2001; Walkerdine 1990). Feminist poststructuralists have highlighted how girls can take up different subject positions within competing discourses of gender that are available to them (Walkerdine 1997; Davies 1993). Girls' location in discourses of gender can depend on a range of issues such as one's age, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and peer group influences (Driscoll 2002; Reay 2001). Anita Harris argues that "'girlpower' has become a catch phrase for young women's new style of neo-liberal feminist display; a self-styled, sexy, brash and individualized expression of power' (2003, 40). Further, Harris points out that 'girlpower' is a representation 'of power through and control over one's identity invention and re-invention . . . about individual self-making rather than collective identification' (2003, 40). Angela McRobbie, however, argues that 'Girls, including their bodies, their labour power and their social behaviour are now subject to governmentality to an unprecedented

degree' (quoted in Harris 2003, 40). This regulation can be seen in both *Painted Babies* and *Little Miss Sunshine* in the way that young girls are encouraged to focus on their body image, including beauty regimes, diet, and gender performativity.

In an effort to examine how the different meanings of being a girl are produced, Catherine Driscoll's *genealogy of feminine adolescence* (2002) examines the dominant discourses of popular culture (and cultural theory) from late modernity. Of particular interest to the focus of this paper is the relationship between girls' subjectivity, body culture and body image, or performances of the self-produced subject. As Driscoll argues: 'Late modern girls are mass consumers and producers of fashion who record and thus materialize fashionable identities' (2002, 244). Linking fashion to the new psychologies of her time, Elizabeth Hurlock, a developmental psychologist in the late 1920's, discussed modern fashion as a sex function or, following Havelock Ellis, a secondary sexual characteristic (Hurlock, 1929). In the process of taking up particular performances of fashion manufactured through society magazines, girls of certain ages, according to Hurlock are 'apt to look more like a caricature than like a copy of an original fashion plate' (cited in Driscoll 2002, 244). This comment reflects the images represented in girl beauty pageants, which we discuss later in this paper. Magazines targeting girls offer a range of fashion and body images that promise, if taken up by girls, a coherent performance of feminine adolescence that they are suppose to achieve (Driscoll 2002). As Driscoll aptly points out, however, girls often resist and reject the fashion images dictated by the mainstream fashion industries, taking up 'anti-fashion fashion' that is acknowledged and recognised through the alternative standardised fashions of girls' groups, such as punks, riot grrls, or skater girls. Driscoll also argues that the visual images of girls in magazines can be discussed as 'the festishization of body parts and the externalization of fantasy' (2002, 247). Anxieties are produced around difference between girls and girls' bodies, which manifest in body, body image, health, and beauty problem segments within magazines. Similarly, Walkerdine (1990, 90) also highlights the critical influence that fiction stories, including girls' comics, have on girls' locations within gendered discourses. These stories are incredibly powerful, she argues, as they tap into girls' desires, offering them guidance on how to prepare to be good enough to "'win" the glittering prizes: the man, the home, the adventure, and so forth' (1990, 90). In the following discussion of *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Painted Babies*, young girls' desires and fantasies are constituted and negotiated through complex family relations, the institution of the beauty pageant, and the ways in which young girls and women are positioned in popular culture more broadly.

'Painted Babies'

Painted Babies (1995) is a documentary directed and produced by Jane Treays. It follows two five-year-old girls, Asia and Brooke, and their working-class families, who compete against each other in a series of beauty pageants across America. A number of issues are portrayed throughout the documentary that relate to adults' constructions of childhood, highlighting contradictions around childhood innocence. Firstly, it portrays the way that some parents, in any competitive environment, project their own desires on the body of the child. Family is a critical discursive field that plays a primary role in the constitution of children's subjectivities (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2005; Davies 1993; Driscoll 2002). Secondly, the hypersexualisation of the female child in the beauty pageant is not dissimilar to the drag show. Using Butler's theory of gender performativity, we argue

that by mapping adult female performances of gender and sexuality onto the female child, the artificiality and construction of gender becomes clear. Thirdly, the documentary portrays the way in which the child beauty pageant disrupts the adult-child relationship. It achieves this by showing how the girls must behave as adult females while on-stage but, once off-stage, are expected to become children once again. In this way, the child is expected to move unproblematically across the supposedly mutually exclusive worlds of the adult and the child. Of particular interest are the ways in which the child takes up what are often considered to be adult discourses around certain kinds of knowledge.

Within both these working-class families, who were from the American South, the parents', particularly mothers' and grandmothers', desires were lived out through the children's lives. For example, Asia's father Boo observes that his wife Kim, an ex-model, 'loves pageants. Kim was a model and would love to see Asia do this. There is a special bond between them' (*Painted Babies* 1995). Both families are highly invested in the economic returns offered by the beauty pageant and these financial desires are instilled in their children. When interviewed, five-year-old Asia comments: 'we like to go where the money and the cars are. I really like to win the money and the cars. We want money and cars because my grandma really wants a car. We want money, money, money, money, money' (*Painted Babies* 1995). Asia has been doing the beauty pageant circuit since she was nine months old and during this time has won US\$10,000. Participating in the pageants has become a full-time job for Asia and her mother, with Asia having competed in five pageants in six months. Asia's father comments that the whole family has become addicted to Asia participating in the pageants and indicates that they select the pageants that have the most lucrative prizes. Similarly, Brooke is considered a veteran, having competed in 75 pageants before the age of four. In *Painted Babies*, Brooke wins the prestigious national competition, Miss Southern Charm, and throughout her career has won more than US\$10,000, a bedroom suite, a car and a holiday. Every two weeks Brooke and her mother travel a 500 mile round trip to Nashville for Brooke's singing lessons. Brooke rehearses three times a day in front of a custom-built stage in her bedroom that includes full-length mirrors. Despite suggestions of demanding too much from their children, parents of these girls conflate practices associated with work and school life, claiming that 'we all have to do things that we don't want to do' (*Painted Babies* 1995) such as attending work and school. Reproducing what is usually considered an adult discourse of economic security, Asia and Brooke have learnt about the importance of money and other material possessions. In the context of the beauty pageant, Asia and Brooke become the vehicles through which the family's income is subsidised. The children take on some responsibility for the financial success of the family unit, which is usually the role of the adult.

Asia and Brooke can be viewed as having some sense of agency in their families and within the beauty pageant culture (McNay 2000; Mahmood 2001; Ortner 2001; Sonnet 1999). Although Asia's and Brooke's desires to participate in the beauty pageant can be seen as collusion with the 'instruments of their oppression' that perpetuate the objectification of the female body, the reinforcement of hegemonic discourses of feminine adolescence, and the reproduction of subordinate gendered relationships, it can simultaneously be read as a site through which they both become self-conscious agentic subjects. Asia and Brooke gain recognition from others and a degree of personal and financial success through their involvement in the culture of the beauty pageant. This paradox, known as subjection (Butler 1997), acknowledges that the 'very processes and

conditions that secure a subject's subordination' are also the means by which the subject 'becomes a self-conscious identity and agent' (Mahmood 2001, 210). Through the conceptualisation of power and subject formation in this process, we are encouraged to consider 'agency not simply as synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable' (2001, 210).

Bourdieu (1991) points out that habitus, such as that operating in the family home, is critical in contributing to individuals' abilities to tap into cultural, social, and economic capital valued in other fields. Habitus refers to the dispositions, perceptions, and attitudes generated throughout an individual's cultural history that can enable or prohibit effective exchange or accumulation of one's capital (Robinson and Jones Diaz 2006). Within Asia's family, for example, the practices associated with the beauty pageant—such as making her rehearse in the back seat of the car whilst travelling, or when cooking dinner in the kitchen, priming and preening the child, and designing and ordering custom-made outfits—are all tied to the financial success of the family unit. Further, Foucault's notion of 'games of truth' is important to the constitution of subjectivity, 'discursively positioning us to see the truth about ourselves, or desires and our experiences' (Danaher, Schirato, and Webb 2000, 40). Foucault defines 'games of truth' as a set of rules by which truth is produced (Foucault 1997). The rules of these games are constituted within different locations such as the family. As a discursive field, the family takes on its own games of truth that constitute the subjectivities of individual members. Within the families in *Painted Babies*, the young girls are constructed through prevailing 'games of truth', including those codes and regulations of the beauty pageant that each family has chosen to adopt as part of their 'truth'.

In *Painted Babies*, the hypersexualisation of the female child in the beauty pageant is not dissimilar to the drag show. Indeed, as Butler points out in relation to drag performers, beauty pageant participants can similarly be seen 'to live in communities' and to form 'strong ritual bonds' (2004, 216). For example, both families are constantly involved in watching videos of the other child's performances. This process is undertaken so as to produce a critique of the other child's performance, cite the other's moves, and also to improve their own future performances. The continual involvement of these families in the pageants means that judges, other contestants, and contestants' families, intimately know these children's bodies, movements, costumes and talents.

Butler's theory of gender performativity, that 'gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is *performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express' (1993b, 314), operates not only at the level of the beauty pageant but also in the way in which hegemonic femininity is mapped across generations from mother to child in these families. For example, Brooke looks like a visual clone of her mother and grandmother, all of whom are white, blonde and blue-eyed. Brooke's mother comments that she was pleased that her daughter looked like a little Barbie Doll. In this way, femininity is knowledge that is learnt within the family structure and continues to be visually cited across generations. In her analysis, Butler is careful to distinguish performativity from performance, suggesting that gender is not subject to voluntarism, but rather it is a carefully regulated corporeal style (Davies 2004, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). In *Painted Babies*, the performativity of gender operates not only on-stage for the child contestant but also off-stage for the child, mothers, grandmothers and the judges, all of whom dress for the occasion so that their own femininity is also on display. Highlighting the transferability of the attribute of femininity from the adult female body to the child's

body (not unlike the process of more traditional understandings of drag) not only demonstrates the artificiality of the adult–child embodiment of gender and sexuality but can also act to parody this dualism. Within the beauty pageant, the body of the child makes transparent processes of hegemonic narratives of gender, that is, the trappings of femininity, that we have become accustomed to seeing on the adult female body. This oxymoronic construction is alluded to in the title of Treays' documentary.

In the process of this hegemonic gendering, these young girls are constructed as sexual subjects. Their appearance is sexualised through the clothing that they wear, their movements, gestures, facial expressions, the application of make-up, and their representation of self through the music and dance styles that are chosen for them. The pageant stages contradictory discourses about childhood innocence and the construction of the child. For example, in one scene Asia's Western outfit is criticised by Brooke's mother as being too sexual and revealing because it features diamond cut-outs down the side of each leg: 'well, it's a no-no. You never go to a pageant with cut-outs. That is something you would see at a nudie joint or something. I mean, they had cut-outs on her bottom' (*Painted Babies* 1995). Yet Brooke's one-piece Western miniskirt is far more 'sexy' and revealing than Asia's pants with cut-outs, top and cloak. Further, in the swimwear section of the pageant, Brooke's costume with cut-outs across the stomach goes unnoticed. As Butler points out, gender is inextricably constituted within and normalised through the process of heterosexualisation (Butler 1990). The construction of children's gendered identities cannot be fully understood without acknowledging how the dominant discourses of femininity and masculinity are heteronormalised in children's everyday lives. That is, through the processes of gendering, children are constructed as heterosexual beings (Epstein 1995; Robinson 2005c).

In a discussion amongst the pageant judges, the issue of maintaining childhood innocence is raised in relation to what should be expected of young girls' appearances. In contrast to the actual reality of the young girls' appearances in the pageant, one judge comments: 'you still don't want anything that hints of sensuality. The only thing we want is that nothing looks indecent', and another judge suggests: 'I'm very prejudiced against too much make-up ... I think they should look fairly natural. Again, they're going to wear make-up, but they're eyelashes should not be caked together' (*Painted Babies* 1995). Her comment is made while she looks at another judge, both of whom act as role models for the young contestants, whose own eyelashes are caked together, and whose outfit also features diamond cut-outs across her chest. The heteronormativity operating in this beauty pageant is further emphasised during the 'Dream-girl' section of the pageant in which Tim, the male host, serenades each girl in turn. Brooke's mother comments, 'I'm just extremely excited when I see Tim. It makes the pageant more classy' (*Painted Babies* 1995).

The heterosexualisation of children as gendered subjects is tied intricately to the pageants' nationalism. Throughout the pageant, nationalistic songs that promote the American dream and ideals operate at the forefront of regulatory constructions of the young girls. In this way, the beauty pageant can be seen as part of what Lauren Berlant terms 'the national culture industry' (2004, 59), in which young girls are produced as the ultimate heterosexual, gendered, citizen subjects. 'The political fantasy of the infantile citizen', Lauren Berlant argues, 'is an image of extremist and hypersexualised citizens recently generated in the public struggle over what will count as the core national culture' (2004, 59). The infantile citizen refers to the ways in which the nation models itself on the institution of the family in which the government and other regulatory bodies operate as parent to its subjects. In

beauty pageants, the child's body becomes representative of the social body; that is, an attractive, white, blonde haired and blue-eyed citizen, who unquestioningly conforms to institutional and regulatory cultural codes and practices.

'Little Miss Sunshine'

Little Miss Sunshine (2006) takes up and critiques many of the issues highlighted in *Painted Babies*. This film begins with the concept of the winner and the quitter, the point at which *Painted Babies* finishes. At the end of *Painted Babies*, Brooke's mother comments: 'Hold on to your dreams. Don't be a quitter. Quitters never win' (2005). In *Little Miss Sunshine*, this discourse is espoused by Richard Hoover, whose daughter, Olive, becomes a beauty pageant contestant. Following the relationships between a seemingly dysfunctional American family, *Little Miss Sunshine* stages a set of contradictory discourses that address issues such as sexuality, suicide, relationship breakdowns, drug use, death and pornography. All these issues can be seen as representing potential sites of difficult knowledge in adults' perceptions and constructions of children's worlds. Discussing this kind of knowledge with children frequently disrupts adults' positioning of children within hegemonic discourses of childhood innocence. The film is particularly poignant because it depicts a range of differing attitudes within the family to matters such as how communication can best take place, and what knowledge is appropriate to reveal to other members. It also shows the practices the family use to regulate the kinds of information to which Olive, the seven-year-old protagonist, is privy.

Like Bruhm and Hurley, we agree that how a story is conveyed—that is, 'who is rendered visible, what language they use, the narrative or cinematic biases that frame them' and 'the fate of their sexual innocence or dissidence—carries the moral weight of creating the statistically "normal child"' (2004, x). While the representative world of the child has expanded in the last 30 years (Bruhm and Hurley 2004), the proliferation of representations and the circulation of narratives about childhood have also generated new regimes for controlling and regulating the stories we tell about children, and the stories that children tell about themselves, as gendered and sexual beings (Foucault 1978; Bruhm and Hurley 2004). This film is both powerful and effective because it positions the child protagonist as a critical subject who learns to effectively negotiate 'difficult knowledge' because some of the film's adult characters guide, support, and teach her to ethically respond to issues of diversity and difference, enabling Olive to operate as a competent and informed citizen.

If, as Pierre Bourdieu suggests, communication is a cultural practice that requires various forms of cultural literacy (Bourdieu 1990, 1991; Schirato and Yell 2000), then *Little Miss Sunshine* presents us with the character of Olive through which to view these processes. She is intuitive and thoughtful, developing abilities to negotiate the film's competing discourses about difficult issues, and can teach us much about our own ethical capacities. Olive, and an audience, is offered a variety of communicative practices deployed by various family members to understand ways in which systems of meaning are negotiated (Schirato and Yell 2000) by individuals. She also helps reveal how cultural literacy—'knowledge of meaning systems and an ability to negotiate those systems within different cultural contexts' (Schirato and Yell 2000, 1)—equips a subject with the competencies required to move through life. The representation of family is critical in highlighting the precariousness of adult-child relations and the ways in which knowledge

is communicated between family members. For example, while the family's father, Richard (Greg Kinnear), exhorts self-help platitudes that he believes lead directly to success, the family's adolescent son, Dwayne (Paul Danno) refuses to speak at all, scribbling all his communication with others down on paper until he succeeds in reaching his goal to become an air force pilot. The family's mother, Sheryl (Toni Collette), mobilises the discourse of family under trying circumstances, and as the narrative progresses, 'her words sound pathetic, rote, and hollow' (Dolan 2006). The family's grandfather (Alan Arkin) is a porn addict and recovering drug taker, who is always to the point and dismissive of politically correct language, while remaining steadfast in his loyalty to and support of others in the family unit. Sheryl's recently suicidal homosexual brother, Frank (Steve Carell), continually reminds himself that he used to be the top Proust scholar in academia until his recent fall from grace. He is loyal, thoughtful, and attentive to the fragility of others, and his failed suicide attempt operates as a stark reminder of the possible consequences of what it might mean to stop trying to communicate with others. Olive—the family's seven-year-old daughter and the film's protagonist—is the most intuitive character, and is in the process of imbibing knowledge and learning the skills of communication from other family members so that she may effectively move through the world around her. 'Olive might be younger', Jill Dolan comments, 'but she intuitively feels her own confusion and incipient despair at the choices that land in our laps, whether or not we want them there, at the vagaries of a life over which we have so little control, biologically or politically' (2006).

One scene early in the film depicts the contradictory information that Olive receives from the adults around her concerning what she should know and how she should go about discovering knowledge that interests her. The Hoover family (another interesting construction that might refer to the brand name for the domestic vacuum cleaner in all-American households) sits around the dinner table. Sheryl serves fried chicken from a takeaway tub, accompanied by takeaway salad and Sprite. Class relations are subtly conveyed here, not only through the meal that Sheryl serves and the grandfather's protestations about eating 'fucking chicken again' but also through ex-Proust scholar Frank's glance at the McDonalds inscribed glass from which he is about to be served Sprite. The following excerpt of dialogue from the film demonstrates the competing discourses about the ways in which 'difficult knowledge' might be communicated to an inquisitive seven-year-old child:

Olive: Hi uncle Frank.

Frank: [Kisses and hugs uncle Frank] Oh hi Olive. Wow, you're getting big . . . almost like a real person.

Olive: What happened to your arms? [Olive gasps looking at Frank's bandaged wrists]

Sheryl: Olive!

Frank: Oh, that's alright. I had a little accident. I'm okay now.

Richard: [Cuts in]. How's the, err, routine coming along honey.

Olive: It's good.

Richard: Yeah? When will you show it to us?

Olive: I don't know. It's up to grandpa.

Grandpa: Coupla days. It still needs work.

[Other conversation takes place in which Grandpa complains about the takeaway chicken meal].

Olive: How did it happen?

Frank: How did what happen?

Olive: Your accident.

Sheryl: Honey, here [directs Olive to eat her food].

Frank: [To his sister Sheryl] Oh no. It's okay, unless you object?

Sheryl: Hmmn, no. I'm, I'm pro-honesty here. I just think. You know. It's up to you.

Frank: Be my guest.

Sheryl: Olive, um, [clears throat]. Uncle Frank didn't really have an accident.

[Richard gives Sheryl a surprised and horrified stare]. What happened was he . . . tried to kill himself.

Olive: You did. Why?

Richard: [Cuts in] Err, oh, I'm sorry. I don't think this is an appropriate conversation. Honey, let's let Uncle Frank finish his dinner, okay, shhhh.

Olive: Why did you want to kill yourself?

Richard: No, don't answer the question Frank. Don't answer it.

Sheryl: [Cuts in] Richard!

Richard: Don't answer the question Frank. He's not going to answer the question.

Frank: [Cuts in] I wanted to kill myself because I was very unhappy.

Richard: Don't listen. He's a sick man. He's a sick in the head man.

Sheryl: Richard!

Richard: [Shouts] I'm sorry. I don't think it's an appropriate conversation for a seven year old.

Sheryl: Well, she's going to find out anyway!

Richard: [Throws hands in air] Oh okay!

Interestingly, given hegemonic discourses of motherhood in which the mother protects and regulates the knowledge to which her child has access, Olive's mother, Sheryl, is the one who provides the adult knowledge about her brother's suicide attempt. Although Sheryl tries to phrase this information to make it *appropriate* for a child, she speaks plainly, remaining true to her desire to be 'pro-honesty'. Horrified, Olive's father, Richard, makes every attempt to regulate the kind of information he feels is suitable for his seven-year-old daughter. Olive remains steadfast in her desire to know, and responds to the news of her uncle's attempted suicide more sensitively, logically and thoughtfully than other members of the family. For example, earlier in this scene, Richard greets Frank, and then finds himself alone at the dinner table with him. Unable to pursue a conversation with Frank because he does not know what to say—and because he has clearly formed a moral judgment about his brother-in-law's attempted suicide—Richard designs an excuse to leave the table until the *whole* family is able to eat dinner together. Olive's desire to know more about her uncle's 'accident' disrupts the silencing effect and regulatory force that Richard had hoped the discursive force of 'family' would carry. Richard is calling upon hegemonic discourses that regulate how a family should behave and the appropriateness of what a family should talk about in general, and not just 'in front of the children'. He wants to regulate the kinds of performances of motherhood and fatherhood he believes are appropriate for other adults in the family.

Throughout the film's narrative, the Hoover family learns how to communicate with each other more effectively, often stepping outside hegemonic discourses of 'family' and expected roles of how each member should behave, so as to ethically respond to the needs of others. This is, in part, facilitated by the genre of the road movie that emerged as

a distinct form towards the end of the 1960s and is typically associated with a critical distance from conformity and with socio-cultural rebellion. The Hoover family 'happily if rather haplessly flout the authority' of 'many pompous gatekeepers who would try to enforce social norms against their desires', Dolan comments, suggesting that the 'morality' that outsiders try and impose on this family often 'proves bankrupt' (2006). Situated within the tradition of the road movie, *Little Miss Sunshine* incorporates mobility, not just by depicting the difficulties encountered in driving an old VW van from New Mexico to Los Angeles to meet a deadline, but also demonstrating the possibilities offered by dynamic and fluid familial relations. It is only by moving beyond hegemonic discourses of family, those that promote fixed roles and rigid expectations of individuals' behaviour, that the Hoover family is allowed to discern the contradictory discourses of childhood, particularly childhood innocence, operating at the Little Miss Sunshine pageant.

The ultimate clash of these contradictory discourses about constructions of childhood innocence takes place during Olive's climactic performance at the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant. Before Olive takes her place on the stage, the viewer has watched mothers and stylists moulding young female children in the style of adult women from a set repertoire of specified generic requirements that include modelling sportswear and evening attire, as well as demonstrating dance, singing, and other talents. The family's growing recognition of the event's intrinsic potential for the pornographic becomes clear as they watch young girls being judged according to their appearance (as potentially sexualised adult women), physical capability, poise, perfection and confidence. 'Olive's competitors are little girls with come-hither poses, their tiny bodies dressed and painted to look sexy', Dolan argues, suggesting the hypocrisy of the audience's horror 'when Olive performs a routine choreographed by her grandfather that—without the rest of the family's knowledge—turns out to be a striptease' (2006). Olive dances with enthusiasm and joy, unaware that her moves borrow from a sexual vocabulary that signifies the sexual commodification and availability of women, particularly, for a male gaze. As some feminists have pointed out, various performance artists and erotic performers have deliberately repositioned similar kinds of sexual repertoire for their own pleasure and to gain a sense of agency (Sonnet 1999; Mahmood 2001; Ortner 2001; Davies 2008b). It is unclear, however, to what extent Olive is aware that her performance is hypersexualised within hegemonic discourses of the erotic.

Olive's performance is an excellent example of Butler's suggestion that 'gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part without one's knowing and without one's willing', and that 'it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical' but is instead 'a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint' (2004, 1). In this context, Olive's citation, through dance moves, of the striptease carries heavily gendered meanings of which she is not the author, but for which she is held responsible. The scene of constraint is the beauty pageant, which has strictly codified and gendered understandings of the kinds of dance moves and visual representations available and deemed *acceptable* for its young contestants. Not unlike her earlier disruption of her father's desire to regulate conversation between family members about her uncle's 'accident', Olive's dance (understood as a striptease in culture at large) creates a rupture in the highly regulated and strictly codified Little Miss Sunshine pageant. Ironically, the pageant is an event that teaches other young contestants how to adhere to supposedly *acceptable* gendered performances that represent women's sexualised embodiment. Like the Hoover family's new ability to step outside of the hegemonic discourses that constitute 'family', Olive's

dance is a stepping outside of the hegemonic discourses of the beauty pageant, resulting in a flurry of objections and exasperations of horror from the pageant organisers, other contestants and their families. This horror moves throughout much of the audience as spectators' lower their eyes, giving sideward glances, and surveying the reactions of others which carries with it, affective contagion. American psychologist Silvan Tomkins points out that shame is characterised by 'the lowering of the head and eyes' so as to reduce further exploration or self-exposure' (1995, 135). Negative affect (fear and disgust) circulates amongst the audience who experience the sexual shame that Olive refuses to take on because of her unawareness that her moves carry sexual signification. Some audience members attempt to communicate this shame to Olive by calling out to her while she dances on stage, and by walking out of the auditorium while she performs.

Olive's ability to distance and detach herself from the audience's negative affect, curiously known as self-possession in psychoanalytic parlance, is testimony to the way her family support Olive's agency to continue dancing. The Hoover family's positive affect demonstrated through their participation in Olive's performance, overwhelms much of the audiences' negative affect, so that Olive not only receives positive affirmation, but is both witness to, and participant in, her family working effectively together. Olive's agency at this point is reflected in her father's comment to the head judge of the pageant who asks, 'What's your daughter doing?' to which he responds: 'she's kickin' ass, that's what she's doing!' Olive demonstrates her agency by choosing to go on stage and perform, despite the opportunity offered by her family to withdraw, after they become aware that going through with the performance might have a negative impact on her. It is obvious that Olive is aware of her own difference with regard to her body image and performance of gender in comparison to the other contestants, but she chooses to perform in memory of her grandfather, for her family, and, most importantly, for her own enjoyment. Ironically, Olive's dance performance and appearance is perceived by the audience as far more sexualised than that taken up by the other contestants because she performed a striptease routine, which is viewed as morally abhorrent by most of the audience. This is a perspective that is not directed towards the performances of the other young girls, whose sexualised routines are rendered invisible through the normalising practices of the beauty pageant. One is left pondering on this highly visible contradiction and irony around representations of childhood innocence.

Conclusion

As argued throughout this discussion, childhood and childhood innocence are highly contested and contradictory discourses. In providing critical readings of the media texts *Painted Babies* and *Little Miss Sunshine*, we highlight the ways in which childhood 'innocence' and girlhood are discursively and materially constructed. We point out that childhood innocence is constituted within hegemonic gendered and sexualised discourses in which young girls are positioned to carry symbolic meanings that we usually attach to adult women. The beauty pageant is one major context in which this process is emphasised. Utilising Butler's theory of gender performativity, we argue that the beauty pageant demonstrates the precariousness of childhood innocence and adult-child relationships. Through the citation of gendered and sexual visual and linguistic vocabularies on the body of the child, not only is gender revealed as constructed and artificial but also children's knowledge of these gendered and sexualised performances is

problematised. The cultural power of childhood innocence is constituted and mobilised by adults for adults in order to maintain critical power relationships. Childhood innocence is often perpetuated through adult gate-keeping of difficult knowledge.

Hegemonic discourses of childhood position the child within institutionalised normative and regulatory practices that fix and universalise experiences of childhood, neglecting the fluidity and multiplicity of children's realities. Of particular importance, this discourse, based primarily on the paradigm of developmental psychology, constrains perceptions of children's agency and what they are capable of doing and knowing in their lives in order to become ethical and competent citizens in their own right. We uphold that in order to make visible the many different ways in which young girls' agency is manifested, it is critical to deconstruct the cultural power invested in the notion of childhood innocence, which operates to fix understandings and perceptions of childhood and girlhood. *Painted Babies* and *Little Miss Sunshine* demonstrate that young girls' agency is manifested in multiple and contradictory ways through the different performances of gender that they take up. Some of these gendered performances can be read, at first, as colluding with practices that reinforce their own gender subordination and objectification. When viewed in terms of young girls' desires, however, the paradox of the process of subjection becomes obvious, highlighting the productive and agentic nature of their choices and practices. Thus, through this process the complexity of girlpower is emphasised.

NOTE

1. In recent years such understandings of childhood have been challenged by new discourses that see childhood as not fixed but a multiple, dynamic and culturally constructed experience (Gittins 1998; Robinson 2002, 2005a, 2005b; James and Prout 1990; Kincaid 1992, 2004).

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