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THE SPANISH HIJAB: SPACES OF POSSIBILITY AND MEANING WITHIN DOMINANT DISCOURSES OF GIRLHOOD

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the role of narrative in the development of identity. Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) concept of dialogised heteroglossia reveals that the social spaces we inhabit in any given time and situation are not fixed but are negotiable and emergent. Identity is shaped in dialogue with socially dominant voices. This paper—based on a study of girls in challenging circumstances—focuses on the narratives of a fifteen-year old, adopted, Hispanic-Canadian. As this young woman negotiates her identity, she converses with, accepts, and contests the dominant discourses of girlhood as she creates new spaces of possibility and meaning for herself.

BE A GIRL: A STUDY OF GIRLS' NARRATIVE PRACTICES

In a study of literacy practices with four girls in Grades 10 and 11, I caught glimpses of how adolescent girls shape their identity through narrative. In this paper, I focus on the narratives of one of the girls, Maria Cortez. Maria was born in South America, of Spanish and Aboriginal heritage. As a young child, she was adopted by a family of European-Canadian background who moved to Canada when she was two. In the following excerpt from an interview, Maria talks about how she experienced the research group.

Alright, I'll be honest about the research group. I like the one that was sitting across from me. She was really down to earth, and she was just nice, you know. She was talkative. But the other two kept to themselves. One of them seems really self-conscious (because of my Media Studies course, I notice these things now), but she kept putting her hair in her face, like she was trying to hide it, maybe, or hide herself. And the girl that I gave a ride to,
Participants in the study chose their own pseudonyms, which are used throughout. Other identifying information has been deleted or altered.

I just don't click with some people maybe, but she made me feel dumb. Just the way she talked, like it was so proper. And I was like, "Be a teenager—say 'like' and 'yeah' and stuff like that." I think she was kind of posing a bit. Or, maybe she was trying to fit in. I don't know. And I was very confused because she looks so different from her mom but she wouldn't tell us she was adopted. Some people don't like talking about their past, but I think she should be a little more talkative. It's not like we're going to judge her or anything. I think people with stories in their lives have much more to say than people with dull lives. My past is not something I'm ashamed of, so I don't mind telling people who I am.

Teenage selves are hybrid creations. Identity is shaped in an ongoing dialogue between narrated experiences (my past; I don't mind telling people who I am) and discourses from society and culture about what teenage girls are supposed to be (be a teenager say 'like' and 'yeah' and stuff like that).

The interview with Maria was part of a study that involved four girls age 14 and 15, all of whom faced challenging circumstances in their lives. Data were collected from individual interviews, personal narrative writing, reading, and group sessions for writing, reading and discussion. The reading and writing activities used a variety of literary formats, including hypertext writing, blogs, and Wiki writing, as well as traditional print media. At each session, I arranged a circle of comfortable chairs around a central table that held the digital recorder and snacks. The girls settled in, checked in with each other, and enjoyed the snacks. We then moved to a time of reading or creating with a particular literacy format. At each session, I introduced the process, helped the girls begin (if the format was unfamiliar), and gave verbal instructions for an open-ended task. For example, "Browse this site and read a hypertext story that appeals to you," or "Set up a personal blog on this site."

The girls were invited to read Gathering Blue youngadult dystopian novel (Lowry, 2000). I introduced e-literature by having the girls read short online pieces. I then introduced a longer
piece—Patchwork Girl (Jackson, 1995). The girls were invited to respond to the experience and to talk about the ideas that emerged.

In the group sessions, we alternated between working individually on tasks and gathering to discuss the experience and to hear what the girls had written. In one session, we moved from computer to computer as each participant showed and read aloud from a hypertext piece she had created.

We used a literary response process (Luce-Kapler, 2004) to respond to literacy pieces. This process included group discussion; online collective responses through Wiki writing (open software for web page creation); and individual writing in hypertext using blogs (online journals using the website LiveJournal) and Storyspace (the computer program in which Patchwork Girl is written).

In this paper, I focus on the narratives of one participant, fifteen-year-old Maria Cortez. Following is a composite narrative drawn from interviews with Maria and excerpts from her writing:

THE SPANISH HIJAB

My life probably started in a place called Concepción, in South America. I moved in with my adoptive parents when I was 18 months old and then later we came to Canada. I have been to a lot of places, but Canada is the place I identify with most. This just feels like my home. I've lived in this house since like, forever. I can move around my house with my eyes shut, without getting hurt that's how well I know it.

Because I'm adopted, I'm all over the place. I'm proud to be Canadian sometimes and sometimes not, because of that seal hunt thing, and Iraq. When I first came to Canada I was an immigrant. Then my parents told me I had Canadian citizenship. But I liked the other better; I think it was more who I am—an immigrant.
I have a lot of multicultural friends. To my friends, I am "the Spanish Hijab." When I converted to Islam I decided to wear the hijab.

I converted to Islam two years ago and I decided to wear the hijab. My friend who is Muslim, she doesn't wear it, but to me the hijab is important. I tell everyone this, like when people ask like, "Why did you convert?" I'd say just, "Because when you're adopted your life is like a puzzle and I felt like I was missing a really big piece." But I didn't feel like I wanted to be Catholic. It didn't click. And [Protestant] Christianity didn't really either, and then I looked at the other religions, like Hinduism, and I thought that was really cool because I really liked cows and it was nice but it was, it was too much. My mom really likes Buddhism, she's not Buddhist but like she has Buddha in the house holding up a window, which is probably really bad. So I kind of looked into that a little bit but it was not for me. It's very peaceful and it's a very nice religion, but then I looked into Islam and my friends could see that I was interested and they gave me books and then I met my boyfriend and then he gave me books too and he just like talked to me about it and then like that helped me too.

A lot of people think that I did it for my boyfriend but I didn't. Like we've broken up several times and I never once thought I'm going to un-convert or something because I did it for him. No. Like even if we weren't together I'd still stay Muslim, so I just felt like it was the right religion for me and I really wanted to pursue it, so I decided to convert.

And I'm still Spanish, even though I don't speak Spanish that well. Like, you can't take that away from me. When I work at Superfood, people are always blown away when I tell them I'm Spanish, because I wear the hijab. I guess they don't think there are South American Muslims, but there are. Not a lot, but several.

Everyone thinks I'm Lebanese and that really pisses me off. But I have no idea. That's what I hate! I want to say, "Oh yeah, my grandpa was from Lebanon, and my grandma was Mapuche."
I have an image in my head but I don't know if it's right. It was after that war. I might have seen somebody burned to death. I have cigarette burns on me, one under my armpit, but these others are chicken pox, I think. They said my birth mom was, like, a hooker. She gave me to her sister, my aunt. They say I was raped. They say probably, but I doubt it. See, that's the thing I don't like about being adopted you don't know.

My friends all say, "Why don't you go on Oprah?" Don't make me laugh. Do they even have Oprah in South America? Are they gonna' see that? No! But, it would be nice to know. Finally just know who you are. I don't want to see my mom. But I'd like to find a grandmother—I'd look for a grandmother.

School is... I'm allowed to swear? School is shitty. I struggle in school; my marks are very bad. I've never liked English. I think that it is kind of pointless. I have a 51 in Math, a 54 in English, a 64 in Media Studies, and 74 in Spanish, which is kind of disgraceful because I am Spanish, but I hate my teacher. I only passed two classes last year, I think. I try to not go to school; I try to prevent it as much as I can.

And math... argh. I have a game, SimCity, that I bought to build the houses. I didn't play with the families; I'd just kill them in the pool. I'd like to be an architect if there was a way to do it on the computer, without advanced math.

I hated my Media Studies course but I got a really good mark on my summative. Everybody else did essays, but I did a video against animal cruelty. I had my logo, which was STOP. S for suffering, T for torture, O for oppression, and P for pain. This is my main image. I love this picture. It's a monkey and he's holding on to a dog. They look like they're scared and, you know, like they're gonna take on the world together. Because the world is hard for them, I guess.
I am someone who likes money. I'm saving up for driving lessons and a car. My mom wants me to buy her a Mini. She thinks when I get rich and famous—which I doubt will happen, but, rich probably I will buy her a Mini. I will if I can, for sure. She's been asking since I started modeling: "So, what are you going to do with your money?" "I don't know, buy clothes?"

"No, you're buying me a Mini."

"Okay."

That was in Grade 9. But now I don't model. No one wants somebody that wears a hijab. Unless, I go to a hijab modeling agency, which I've never heard of. I could model different hijabs, but that's not quite the point. But it would be nice to see girls on TV with hijabs. It's all white people on TV, and a couple of black. But we're people too.

I'm a cashier. I used to work at Food Discount but I quit because I was tired of getting robbed.

This little girl came in, probably a pregnant teen. She went to the girl at the cash beside me and asked if she could hook her up with diapers. The other cashier said, 'No, but my friend can, and she was referring to me. I said, "What?"

So I was gonna' give her one free one. I expected them to pay for everything except for the diapers. So what happened is... Can I be arrested? Okay, so they bought a bunch of crap—chips, diapers, sodas, I don't
know, some other stuff, chocolate. Her total came up and she started to walk away.

I said, "Aren't you going to pay for anything?"
"Do I have to?" "Ah, yeah!"

I didn't notice that her friend had left with all the food. She threw three fives at me and left.

The second time was a quick-change artist. They said she came to me because I looked the most defenceless. New, nice, kinda like out of it, I don't know. She bought a bit of meat, gave me a bunch of bills, and asked me to do change. We're not supposed to do change for anything ten or higher, but I thought she was on drugs so I just wanted to get her away from me. I gave it to her, and she said, "Oh, wait, no, can you do this?" and then this, and this, and I got confused. Afterwards they made me count my till and I was off fifty bucks.

So my boss said that I'd probably be suspended. I thought, "Whatever. I don't want to be suspended, I'll just quit." So I wrote my letter of resignation: "Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work here, blah, blah..." Other people just write, "I'm quitting, thanks, bye," but I wrote a long page because I wanted to get good references.

I looked for a couple months for a job. I applied at Starbucks, but they told me I'd have to take out my nose ring. Second Cup will let you wear anything, but Starbucks is very Nazi-ish. My mom says Starbucks is a very White kind of place. At Superfood they told me I couldn't wear my nose ring but it kept getting infected when I took it out, so I said "screw it" and started wearing it [to work]. Anyway, it's not like it's one of those big honking things.

THE DIALOGICAL SELF

Bakhtin (1981, 1986) says that the human mind is inherently dialogical. This dialogism implies that each individual "self" is in continual conversation with the ideas, meanings, and expressions of others. Any thought, idea, or utterance is thus always in dialogic relation to the words of others and also to the worlds of meaning embedded in the words that we inherit. Thus,
in any utterance there are always many simultaneous voices. A speaker of a given language, at any given time, draws on a complex mixture of what Bakhtin calls dialects—for example, slang, jargon, technical or professional terms, or the language of ingroups, cultures and subcultures.

Bakhtin (1981) uses the term dialogized heteroglossia to refer to the tension between the socially dominant and the resistant discourses within language. Any language is not only stratified into dialects but into social-ideological languages. Bakhtin describes an intense, inner struggle as each person sorts out which ideological discourses to claim and which to resist.

Maria's identity is shaped by the discourses around her. To define herself as the Spanish Hijab she must use the language of several cultures and subcultures. As Bakhtin (1981, 1986) suggests, Maria's speech is infused with the voices of others—the in-talk of peers (don't make me laugh, hook her up), terminology of the workplace (putting things through, making change) or school (summatives), and popular culture (go on Oprah). We hear snippets of conversations with co-workers, parents, teachers, customers, friends, and with the researcher. We hear their subjunctive voices—their expectations (when I'm rich and famous), opinions (pretty disgraceful), and values (someone with good morals).

Important to Bakhtin's thought is the way in which the multiplicity of Maria's self-narrative reflects ideological struggle and contestations. The shaping of identity is fraught with difficulty and conflict. In assuming a distinctive identity Maria must draw on the discourses of culture that decree what is considered usual or normative. We see the struggle for ideological hegemony as Maria sorts out of who she is in relation to the dominant social discourses of race, gender, class, and ethnicity. Animal rights activists take up positions against proponents of the seal hunt; multicultural and young voices speak back to the White TV and Starbucks.

As theorists in girls' studies have noted, girls are not socialized into gender roles in a monolithic way they develop untidy and unruly selves, narrating themselves into existence by using the available discourses of their culture, while simultaneously moving outside of neat social categories (Gonick, 2003). Davies (2006) suggests that this entails a move away from seeing the self as a noun (an object stable and fixed, prior to
discourse) to seeing selfhood as a verb. Selves are always in process, taking shape through discursive possibilities. Gendered identity is always an accomplishment (Nayak & Kehily, 2008). This taking up a position—balancing and negotiating the conflicting positions of—demonstrates resilience and agency, especially for girls on the margins. When presented with dominant scripts, "the task becomes one of negotiating and navigating this terrain, its various cul-de-sacs and spaces of safety, and its hyphenated third spaces" (Jiwani, Steenbergen, & Mitchell, 2006, p. xiii).

As adolescent girls narrate their identities, they must use the language of their culture—its various dialects, but they must also respond to its ideological discourses. Theorists in the emerging field of girl studies delineate various competing discourses of girlhood in contemporary North America, notably the following: Girl Power—girls can do or be whatever they want; Reviving Ophelia—girls are in crisis as victims of a hostile culture; and Mean Girls/Bad Girls girls are dangerous, violent, mean or bad (Bettis & Adams, 2005; Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005).

The Girl Power phenomenon swept into mainstream culture in the mid-to-late 1990s. This is celebratory discourse of endless possibility for girls. It is conveyed in everything from media messages about girls' achievements to consumer products aimed at sassy, don't-mess-with-me, adolescent girls. It proclaims the equality that girls and women have supposedly now achieved. However, critics of Girl Power point out that, while this discourse embraces self-efficacy and independence, it mandates certain non-negotiables of femininity—a girl can be anything, as long as she is "also demure, attractive, soft spoken, fifteen pounds underweight, and deferential to men" (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 16). Furthermore, the opportunities that Girl Power proclaims are not available to all girls Girl Power's ideal girl is white, middle class, fit, intelligent, able, straight, and pretty.

An equally compelling but very different discourse is that of girls in crisis, popularized by Pipher's (1994) best-selling book, Reviving Ophelia. Pipher painted a disturbing picture of girls age 12 to 15 in what she calls the "girl-poisoning culture" of North America. Girls' problems are complicated and metaphorical depression, eating disorders, school phobias, self-inflicted injuries, a fragmented sense of self, and a radical silence. Girls' self-esteem
is in crisis because they are denied expression of their authentic selves during the critical period of adolescence. Pipher (1994) writes, "Studies show that girls' IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose their resiliency and their optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They become more deferential, selfcritical and depressed. They report great unhappiness with their own bodies" (p. 19).

Alongside the discourses of girls as powerful but pretty, and girls in crisis, is a third discourse that says girls may not be so nice after all. A slew of popular books and movies (e.g., Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002) characterize adolescent girls as Mean Girls or Bad Girls—cliquish, competitive, shallow, psychologically and physically aggressive. In the late 1990s the U.S. and Canadian media increasingly depicted images of dangerous adolescent girls—violent criminals; girls who fight alongside boys; girls who join gangs, carry weapons, and deal drugs; girls who kill. The media depictions of Bad Girls exaggerate and distort reality (Chesney-Lind and Irwin, 2004), but that does not prevent this from being a widespread and compelling image. These three discourses are the ones that teenage girls must converse with—adopt, reject, refute—as they narrate their identities.

NEW DISCOURSE SPACES

The dominant discourses of girlhood are part of the fabric of Maria's narrative. There are allusions to Girl Power (when I get rich and famous; since I started modelling). But she is no longer modelling and she is not rich. She does not fit Girl Power's image of ideal girlhood. She asserts her identity as something Other in her avoidance of Starbucks (too Nazi-ish, too White). By wearing a hijab, by identifying with multicultural friends, by seeing herself as an immigrant, she claims a different space.

In spite of its limitations, Girl Power opens up spaces for girls to assert identities that are strong and efficacious. Maria claims some of this new discursive space—in her working, saving for a car, planning to be rich, and dreaming of being an architect, she asserts power and agency. But she does not define herself within or primarily by the discourse of Girl Power. She is someone who is struggling, she says. She is not doing well at school, though she feels that she should be, and she sees herself as relatively powerless in her work (defenceless, new, kind of out of it). Her struggles to piece together an identity from her fragmented and
abusive past leave here with a sense of being "all over the place." In one interview she said that her life is "like a puzzle with some of the main pieces completely missing." Although her narrative has a don't-mess-with-me flavour (so I said "screw it, ") she is largely cut off from Girl Power's confident assurances of power and achievement.

Maria distinguishes herself from the Mean Girls/Bad girls discourse. She is not competing for social status and she is not mean, not a bully, not a bad girl. She distances herself from the "bad girls" she encounters (a pregnant teen; someone she thought was on drugs). Looking at herself through the eyes of her parents, she declares herself to be "someone with good morals."

I ponder the identity Maria assets: the Spanish hijab. The hijab, as Maria wears it, seems to be a symbol of her right to an identity of her own creation.

The word hijab originally meant curtain—literally a partition separating women's quarters from public places in ancient Arab domestic life. The hijab thus defined safe space for women and their dependent children. Later, the hijab became a way for women to carry that space with them into the public space—a kind of portable screen. Thus, the hijab is a powerful symbol of safe space. I believe that it is self-protective for Maria in that it shields her from male gaze and from hyper-sexualized images of femininity. Her narrating of herself as "the Spanish hijab" seems to me to be a very creative, powerful solution to the dilemma of a young, adopted, immigrant who has reason to feel vulnerable around issues of sexuality.

Perhaps the hijab functions as a kind of portable space for Maria—a safe place for her to do the important work of figuring out who she is and who she will be amid the dominant discourses of girlhood. School is not a place where she is able to do that work, and home is fraught with the complications of being an adopted child. Her identity work navigates and accommodates multiplicity and contradiction: Spanish and hijab, immigrant and at home, Canadian and not. Not a Bad girl, not a Girl Power girl, not poor drowning Ophelia, but something else. I have become convinced that the "Spanish hijab" allows Maria to create space apart from the competing but insufficient discourses of Girl Power, Ophelia, and Mean Girls/Bad Girls to begin to assert an identity that is resilient and strong.
IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

What Maria shows of herself to teachers at school has dimensions of the discourse of girls in crisis. She is silent, withdrawn, non-compliant, rebellious, disinterested, absent. Her marks are poor, but they belie the articulate, intelligent girl I interviewed.

Schools often characterize Maria and girls like her as "at risk" or in crisis. Maria described many punitive interventions from school. Often, she felt that kids were prejudged because of their background, with one notable exception.

One VP there was very good. Ms. K. was like outstanding, like everyone loved her, well all the immigrants and culture kids liked her, because she didn't just assume that they were wrong. Like if there was a fight or something she wouldn't just assume that they were at fault, she would look into it. But then there was another VP and he favoured the White kids, so that's why everyone went to Ms. K. and that's probably why she got promoted to Principal because she was good like that; she's fair.

Maria had a strong awareness of the intersections of race and class in schooling and the ways these marginalized her. She recalled incidents in which she felt that she and others like her were simply written off.

My school was a bad school if you're not enrichment[1]. It's like they don't care; it's biased is what it is. The kids that aren't enrichment get bad teachers. Once we had an English teacher and he was the best English teacher I've ever had. He was so into it and loved English, so he made

[1] Maria uses the word enrichment to refer to kids identified by the school board as "gifted." The school is an urban high school that had a program for in which students who had been identified as "gifted" from across the region took their English, Math, Sciences, and Social Science courses in classes only with other gifted students. Other students, about half the student body, took classes in what the school referred to as its "regular program."
you want to love it too. He even made this kid named Zubbe come to class. Zubbe was a big delinquent and he hated school and he just was there to go beat up people right, but he made him come to class, that's how good he was. Anyways we had him for a week I think and we were all really excited and then one day the school moved him over to teach the enrichment kids. They all like petitioned to have him and then they gave us some crackhead instead. So. Like those [enrichment] people, I don't know if it's like they pay or something more than we do or it's just they're higher up in society. There were probably was about five to seven White kids sprinkled in our group, but the rest were Asian, Arab, Spanish, like anywhere else in the world, and in the enrichment class there were probably three or four multicultural kids sprinkled into it.

It's fine that they're White but it also means that they might come from like a wealthier family, a well-todo family, and then these kids come from like second generation families that come from their country to escape violence and stuff. They might be like learning English and their parents don't speak it or something.

Schools often label girls like Maria as at risk or in crisis. These labels, and the interventions that often accompany them, suggest that these girls need to be rescued or fixed. Through therapy, empowerment, or self-esteem building, girls are encouraged to do work on themselves (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005). Solutions focus on helping girls fix individual problems, while ignoring structural issues such as the impacts of racism, economic injustice, gender or social location. Individual solutions are determined outside girls themselves, in practices that continue to strip them of agency by claiming to know better than they do what is good for them and by calling them to conform to idealized depictions of successful girls. One effect of the "incrisis" label is to situate power and responsibility with adults to name and explain girls. According to Lesko (1996), the result is that girls are "emptied out, made liminal, and then reconstituted by scientific descriptors and schooling practices" (p. 149).

Maria does not see herself as a victim, or in crisis. Her struggle is one of identity (my life 's a puzzle). Her narrative depicts an identity that is unruly in its resistance but also strong.
In the interviews she showed a side of herself that was anything but passive and withdrawn, for example, quitting her job with good references rather than waiting to be suspended; choosing to work in a setting that feels welcoming to her rather than a place that feels "too White."

In depicting girls like Maria as at risk, schools often underestimate their strength and resilience. Researchers such as Alden (2002) and Shaw (2003) challenge the idea that success in academic settings is a necessary characteristic of resilience. They suggest there are other important characteristics, such as resistance (although that is often in conflict with the compliance-based values of school), fortitude to survive amid danger, wisdom to create ways to survive, and hopefulness. Judged by these strength-based rather than performance-based criteria, Maria is remarkably resilient.

Maria's narrative raises many questions—questions far beyond the scope of this small study. Identity work is enormous task for Maria at this stage in her life. I wonder if school is such a difficult and painful place to be because it is oblivious to, or perhaps even impedes, the work that she is doing—work that is at the centre of her being, surviving, and becoming.

I wonder what, if anything, could transform schools into places of support for girls like Maria, places where there is room for her to narrate an identity, compose a story worth telling, a story about who she is and who she is becoming, rather than places of disenfranchisement and opposition (school is shitty, I try to prevent it as much as I can).

The act of storytelling may itself open up spaces of possibility and opportunity for Maria and other girls in situations of struggle or conflict. This connects with what narrative theorists have said about narrative and identity. Narrative is a way of thinking whereby humans connect their actions in the world to their plans; it shapes consciousness and gives us a functional conception of ourselves as agents with certain memories, plans, and commitments (Oatley, 2007). Narrative makes meaning out of life's contingencies and allows human subjects to navigate their way from intention to action (Bruner, 1990, 2004). Storytelling practices may be particularly significant for girls in challenging circumstances, girls for whom life options may be constrained or limited. In narrative spaces of indeterminacy, where options are not already foreclosed, something new can happen.
When we write literary texts such as fiction, poetry, autobiography, or memoir, we initiate performances of meaning that subjunctivize reality. Because the subjunctive traffics in human possibilities rather than settled certainties (Bruner, 1986), writing becomes a site of possibility, an "as if" that works in multiple ways with, through, and beyond the text. What such contingency does is broaden the possibilities for experiencing, acting, understanding, and creating. If there is no "solid" sense of self, but rather an ever evolving story of identity that is always in revision, then our stories about ourselves are fraught with possibility — the subjunctive possibility of writing (Luce-Kapler, 1999, p. 267).

As Luce-Kapler (1999) observes, narrative creates subjunctive spaces within which selves (and hence worlds) can be revised. When the girls tell their lives in story they do not merely reiterate past events, they attest that something new is already being created. Through her personal narrative, Maria picks up and weaves together the incomplete pieces of early childhood, her struggles with school, her religious identifications, her struggle to discover who she is. Her experience invites educators to see beyond a dichotomy that positions girls either as autonomous agents (girl power) or failures (victims, at-risk, bad). It is an invitation to see the complexity of girls' subjectivities and to appreciate the creativity with which they open discursive spaces. It is a caution to read carefully between the lines in their texts and their lives, to catch the subtleties and subtexts by which they resist dominant discourses. It is a challenge not to write them off too quickly. And it is a reminder of how important it is to provide girls on the margins with opportunities to move into the subjunctifying spaces of the narrative imagination.

I am presently involved in leading an after-school writing group for high school girls. Girls are invited to write creatively. They compose first-person narratives, listen to one another's writing, and read fiction and poetry together, in a supportive, small group. Although it is open to anyone, the group has attracted girls who would be considered on the margins because of culture, ethnicity, language, family circumstances, or economic situation. The group is not therapy and it does not make interventions in girls' lives. It is about telling the stories of one's life and having others listen.
In the six weeks since we began, the girls have already shared significant stories of their lives and experiences, including things they say they would not be able to talk about elsewhere. And teachers have commented on changes they have seen in some of the girls—increased confidence, greater class participation, and interest in taking more advanced level courses—changes that the teachers attribute to this group. The girls say it has been important and have begged me to continue the group beyond the six weeks for which we originally contracted. The time with this group makes me wonder about the impact of something as simple as the opportunity to tell ones' personal story and to be listened to with care, respect, and attention. It makes me wonder what other spaces of narrative creation and listening might be opened up for girls who are struggling to find a sense of who they are and their place in the world, girls for whom, like Maria, life is a puzzle.

I feel privileged to have heard a little of Maria's story. I wish that schools could hear and honour it too.

Maria's narrative identity is a work in process and not a finished tale. I think of her Media Studies project the image of the monkey and the dog (the world is hard for them, I guess; they're holding on; they're gonna take on the world together).

Sometimes it is hard, but Maria is holding on. Soon she will be ready to take on the world.

References


