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**“I don’t know why but I’m really good at a lot of things”: Ja’mie King as a public
pedagogy of young femininity**

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“I don’t know why but I’m really good at a lot of things”: Ja’mie King as a public pedagogy of young femininity

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In this paper I explore the popular Australian television character of Ja’mie King – a teenage private school girl created and performed by comedian Chris Lilley. I conceptualise King’s character as a public pedagogy of young femininity. My reading of King as pedagogy is situated within global feminist scholarship around young femininities and ‘girl power’.

Today’s young women are imagined to ‘have it all’. Feminist scholars have noted that confining, binary notions of femininity in which girls are positioned as either ‘sexy or brainy’ (Albury, 2002), or a ‘slag or drag’ (Gilbert & Taylor, 1991), have apparently been ‘kickboxed out of the picture’ (Gill, 2007) by girl icons in popular culture like the Spice Girls and Charlies’ Angels. Not only are young women thought to be free from restrictions, they are frequently presented as ideal subjects of a society that demands reflexivity, responsibility and self-determination (Gonick, 2006). These images of successful, feisty young women are thought to apply in particular to middle class and elite young women (Walkerdine & Ringrose, 2006), who are represented by the character of Ja’mie King.

Drawing on the television mockumentaries *We can be heroes* and *Summer Heights High* I examine the relationships, fashioned through the character of King, between ‘sexiness’ and intelligence, political awareness and active citizenship. I consider the extent to which King’s character teaches that young women can indeed ‘have it all’. I explore the extent to which her character teaches that they can be ‘beautiful’ and ‘brainy’, ‘self-determined’ and ‘sexy’ at the same time.

Introduction

Meet Ja’mie King, pronounced ‘jah-may’. Created and played by Australian actor Chris Lilley, Ja’mie is a 16 year-old private school girl, who has appeared in two mockumentary style television mini-series, both written by Lilley. First, King appeared in *We can be heroes*, a six-part series which screened on the ABC during 2005. Following this, she appeared in *Summer Heights High*, a second six-part series which screened on

the ABC during 2007. All organizations and institutions named in these series are fictional. In this paper I will focus on *We can be heroes* (Lilley, 2005). In this series, King is one of five Australians who have been nominated for the title of ‘Australian of the Year’, to be presented at Government House in Canberra, Australia’s capital city. The series follows the lives of the nominees in the weeks leading up to the presentation of this prestigious title. King attends the prestigious Hillford Girls’ Grammar, on Sydney’s North Shore. She has been nominated for the award by the Hillford school principal for her sponsorship of 85 Sudanese children through an organization called Global Vision.

In this paper I conceptualise television text as public pedagogy and I analyse Ja’mie’s character in terms of how the audience is invited to reflect on ways of doing and being a young female in contemporary Australian society. My analysis is informed by contemporary feminist scholarship into young femininities in Western contexts. Thus I aim to contribute to this broader scholarship, which explores the way young femininity is represented and regulated across a variety of cultural practices. I want to begin by sharing a few excerpts from papers and books I have read about young femininities in recent years.

The girl of today’s collective dreams is a heroic over-achiever – active, ambitious, sexy and strong. She emerges as an unstoppable hero, a savvy supermodel, a combative action chick, a media goddess, a popstar who wants to rule the world. Popular culture has never been so pervasively girl-powered (Hopkins, 2002, p. 1).

[T]he girl is now a social category understood primarily as being endowed with economic capacity (McRobbie, 2007, p. 722).

[I]t’s ubiquity [girl power] must also be explained by the way it resonates socially and culturally within a climate of “compulsory success” by providing an image of the ideal new feminine subject demanded by neoliberalism (Gonick, 2006, p. 11).

In many ways young women are afforded more opportunities to speak, enact and display sexual desire than ever before (Harris, 2005, p. 39).

Young women are frequently presented across diverse popular cultural forms in relation to possibility and ‘empowerment’, as these quotations suggest. The phrase ‘girl power’ has been mobilized within some feminist research (Hopkins, 2002; Harris, 2004; Aapola et al., 2005; Gonick, 2006) as an umbrella term for a series of notions of young femininity that gather around compulsory success, as well as sexual confidence. It is often used to refer to the image of a girl who can ‘have it all’; a girl who is presented as the ideal subject of a neoliberal society that requires self-invention and self-determination. This is a girl who can be sexy as well as brainy, and have the trappings of masculinity and femininity. In this way, she can transcend the old binary notions of femininity, frequently identified within feminist theory and research (Albury, 2002; Budgeon, 2003), in which girls can be either sexy or brainy, but not both at the same time.

Some key questions I consider in this paper are, can young women ‘have it all’? Can they be “subjects of excellence” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 257) who are sexy, savvy and self-determined? How does the television character of Ja’mie King invite us to respond to these questions? I will examine the extent to which King is constructed as a legitimate ‘subject of success’ or girl who ‘has it all’. I will explore how we are invited, through her character, to think about subjects of ‘girl power’.

In the first section of this paper I will explore how Ja’mie King’s character can be read as a rather straightforward example of a subject of ‘girl power’. I will draw on contemporary feminist scholarship around young femininities in this exploration. Then, in the second part of the paper, I will consider how this subject of girl power is perhaps constructed in ways that invite the audience to conclude that young women can’t really ‘have it all’ after all. I will explore how, through blurring the imagined boundaries that

exist between different elements of ‘girl power’ subjectivity, Lilley invites the audience to reflect in particular ways on the image of the subject of girl power.

In particular, I will explore how the presentation of the sexually desiring young girl power subject, who is invested in ‘hyperfemininity’ (Renold & Allan, 2006; Archer et al., 2007) works in the text to construct King as a conceited, self-centred and ignorant young woman, who is unable to occupy the subject position of caring, ethical global girl power citizen (Harris, 2004). Indeed, I will explore how the text can be understood to map old, familiar binary notions of femininity in which one can either be ‘sexy’ or ‘brainy’ onto new notions of ‘girl power’ femininity that are linked to a neoliberal project of responsibility and self-determination. Thus the paper contributes to feminist explorations of how ‘old’ familiar femininities in fact remain in tact within many contemporary popular cultural representations of girl power and ‘new’ femininities (Levy, 2005; Jackson, 2006; McRobbie, 2007).

Ja’mie King as a subject of girl power

In many ways, Ja’mie King can be read in terms of a young woman who is a subject of girl power par excellence. Her character can be read as a product of a culture of girl power in which young women are presented as self-determined and responsible for the wellbeing of others, as well as themselves. They are presented as “can-do” girls (Harris, 2004, p. 13) who combine “typical youth activities with a business practice, public “good deeds”, and self-motivated capitalist success” (p. 75). As the narrator suggests in episode two, “Sydney schoolgirl Ja’mie King sponsors 85 Sudanese children, does the 40 hour famine every week, and still finds time to be a normal 16 year-old girl”.

When the audience first meet Ja’mie King she is sitting on the lush Hillford lawns with her three friends. She speaks of herself in terms of the things she does, and has done. Even when her friends attempt to entice her to tell the interviewer about parties and her

social life, she says “I’m so not talking about that”, and proceeds to construct herself in terms of her accolades and achievements:

I’m sports captain this year, house captain last year, I’ve got swimming, netball, hockey colours, I just finished in the school play, I was Maria in *Westside Story*. I was a finalist for *Dolly* covergirl of the year. Going for school captain next year, probably going to get it, got dux last year, probably getting dux this year (episode 1).

Girl power is partly a response to neoliberal discourses of responsibility and self-determination. Anita Harris argues that young women are imagined as “best able to handle today’s socio-economic order” (2004, p. 2) and as the “most likely candidates for performing a new kind of self-made subjectivity” (p. 6) that is required by neoliberalism. This ideal neoliberal girl powered subject must be an entrepreneurial subject who can construct herself in relation to value. She must be able to, as O’Flynn and Petersen put it, “measure her life and future in terms of productivity” (2007, p. 465). In this way, the ideal girl power subject of neoliberalism will be one who is able to speak of herself in terms of ‘value adding’.

King is presented as the successful subject of entrepreneurial neoliberal discourse. She can talk about herself in terms of her value. Speaking about all her achievements and all the things she does, she speaks herself into this subject position. In addition to the list of achievements she tells the interviewer, the audience also see her participating in music classes and debating. As her friends say when we first meet her, “she’s basically good at everything” (episode 1). Ja’mie herself says “I don’t know why but I’m really good at a lot of things” (episode 1). In this way, King is presented as a subject of ‘girl power’, a young woman who has successfully constructed herself in relation to neoliberal discourse.

In addition to being an entrepreneurial subject, Ja’mie is presented as an ambassador for her country, and a role model for other young women. This revolves around her

sponsorship work with Global Vision. Harris suggests that, in addition to being self-determined and responsible for their own wellbeing, young women are imagined to be ideal ambassadors for their nations, ideal, ethical and caring subjects. She draws attention to the image of the girl who does 'good deeds', and who is indeed positioned as an "ambassadors" (2004, p. 79) for her nation. Harris argues that the girl is frequently constructed as a saviour and, "the ethical and caring future leader of a global citizenry" (p. 88). Thus 'responsibility' goes beyond self-determination in discourses of girl power. It also involves being able to take responsibility for representing the nation through global citizenship activities.

As Ja'mie's school principal says, "I think everybody in the school community would say we're so proud of her, proud of her achievements. She's a really compassionate girl, I mean, her work with Global Vision is testament to that. She's a really extraordinary person" (episode 1). King's friends say that she is "compassionate" and "a really good role model" (episode 2). King herself says that she likes to use regular sleepovers with her best friends as "a chance to educate the girls about the state of the third world, and what we as Australians can do, I'm really into world issues... As Australian of the year, that will be my role. I'll be like an educator for the youth" (episode 2). Thus she is depicted as a subject of girl power, who can take responsibility for global civic service. She is presented here as a role model, and ambassador for the country.

Subjects of girl power are self-determined and self-made. They must not rely on the state for support, and must demonstrate the ability to achieve individual economic empowerment. "For young women", writes Harris, "making oneself is also connected to making money for oneself" (2004, p. 74). At one important Hillford school assembly King is invited, by a representative from Global Vision, to be photographed for a poster ad campaign for Global Vision. She demonstrates her "business acumen" (Harris, 2004, p. 75) and ability to be self-made, by attempting to negotiate a payment from Global Vision on the basis that another student had been paid for an ad they did for fast food chain Red Rooster. King says to the Global Vision representative, "Can I just ask how much am I going to be paid for it? Because Courtney got like four grand from Red

Rooster” (episode 4). In this scene, King demonstrates that she is a successful entrepreneur, able to become self-made and economically empowered.

In addition to being able to demonstrate that she is a subject of ‘value’, a caring global citizen and a self-making entrepreneur, King is confident about her sexuality, and enjoys ‘objectifying’ men. Thus she represents the ‘new’ girl who has it all. If old notions of femininity were about being ‘objectified’ by men, girl power is about sitting in the “sexual driver’s seat” (Lumby, 1997, p. 85). It is about displaying sexual desire (Harris, 2005). This aspect of girl power is represented by pop music stars such as the Spice Girls, who were “unabashed sex objects” (Hopkins, 2002, p. 32), Britney Spears, and Christina Aguilera. Rosalind Gill suggests that we are witnessing “the construction of a new femininity (or, better, new femininities) organised around sexual confidence and autonomy...a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification in constructions of femininity in the media and popular culture (2003, p. 3). This ‘new’ sexually desiring aspect of girl subjectivity fits well with broader notions of ‘girl power’ that are associated with autonomy, empowerment and self-made success.

In the same school assembly, King performs a dance routine reminiscent of the film clip of Britney Spears’ song ‘Baby one more time’. She prances and pouts about the stage, complete with pink fluffy accessories and her school-dress unbuttoned to reveal a pink lacy singlet. In addition to this, she frequently talks about ‘hot’ guys in many scenes, and brazenly goes about attracting the attention of young men.

This combination of entrepreneurial self-making, global civic responsibility and sexual confidence, make Ja’mie King a quintessential subject of girl power. She is constructed as the kind of young woman who can successfully occupy the characteristics of the subject demanded by neoliberalism, as well as the characteristics of the savvy, sexy young woman who can return the ‘male gaze’ and objectify men.

‘Old’ femininities woven into ‘new’ femininities

I will now explore how, as an audience, we are invited to reflect upon this ideal subject of girl power. I consider how Lilley takes the various aspects of girl power I have explored above, and creates relationships between them that are inappropriate. The notion of striving toward individual ‘value adding’ - part of neoliberal girl power - is taken to an extreme, such that everything Ja’mie King does, including her acts of social service, are positioned as being motivated by entirely individualist goals. Social service and civic responsibility are part of girl power, as are being self-determined and self-made, but they are not supposed to feed off each other. Through blurring the imagined boundaries between these key aspects of ‘girl power’, Lilley creates a character who is hyper-individualistic and self-centred. This is most clearly demonstrated when King finds out that most of her sponsor children have died in a flood. She reacts by saying to her school principal “[t]his is bullshit! I’ve got the finals next week. Australian of the year. The girl from Adelaide is going to win, she’s got 50 kids. If I’ve got none I’m so not winning. What was the point? I might as well have not given them any money” (episode 5). The value-adding subject of neoliberal girl power, and the caring global girl power citizen are meant to sit alongside each other, and compliment each other. The text dramatizes the possible tension between these two requirements of ideal young femininity.

However, it does more than this. I will now explore the way the ‘sexually desiring’ aspect of girl power is positioned through the character of Ja’mie King, and how we, as audience, are perhaps invited to read her in terms of familiar binary notions of femininity. Within this text, the value adding discourse of neoliberalism is fused with the sexually desiring young ‘hyperfeminine’ girl power subject, who is invested in her appearance. This fusion works in the text to construct King as a conceited, self-centred and ignorant young woman, who is unable to occupy the subject position of caring, ethical global girl power citizen (Harris, 2004). I propose that we are thus invited to think about King in relation to ‘older’ binary notions of femininity. The text can be understood to map old, familiar binary notions of femininity in which one can either be ‘sexy’ or ‘brainy’ onto new notions of ‘girl power’ femininity that are linked to a neoliberal project of self-

invention and self-determination. Thus the paper contributes to feminist explorations of how 'old' familiar femininities in fact remain in tact within many contemporary popular cultural representations of girl power and 'new' femininities (Levy, 2005; Jackson, 2006; McRobbie, 2007).

When we first see King's bedroom she shows us photos of all 85 Sudanese sponsor children. She sits on her bed and shows us the tin she uses to collect sponsorship money at school. She explains how she does the 40-hour famine every week in order to collect sponsorship money. Standing in front of her full-length bedroom mirror admiring her figure, King says that "as well as doing something good for the Africans, two days a week without food keeps me looking really hot" (episode 1). Thus her social service is exposed as part of a quest toward fulfilling individualist goals. The subject of girl power is indeed supposed to be invested in her looks. As Susan Hopkins observes, "[i]ncreasingly, in this media age, appearance is power. In most cases there is a significant return for investment in beauty (2002, p. 105). The subject of girl power is likely to be invested in her looks, alongside, or in addition to, doing "public good deeds" (Harris, 2004, p. 75). She is, however, probably not supposed to be doing these good deeds as part of a self-motivated project to look 'hot'. There is an imagined boundary between these elements of girl power subjectivity that is subverted by the character of Ja'mie King. This works to make King appear self-interested and conceited, rather than a truly caring global citizen who is motivated to help others in need.

In addition to this, she is constructed as naïve and ignorant about the issues in which she claims to be interested. When she is speaking to the narrator, she constructs herself as a 'subject of success', stating "I'm really into world issues" (episode 2). In this scene she is hosting a sleepover with her friends. When she is not directly addressing the narrator she says to her friends "other countries are like so povvo, it's like, get some money" (episode 2). In addition to undertaking social service in order to meet individualist goals associated with 'hotness', King is presented as a naïve young woman, who really has no idea about "the state of the third world" (episode 2). A binary opposition is thus created between

‘sexiness’ and ‘braininess’. King is clearly positioned in relation to ‘sexiness’ within this binary framework.

In episode three, one of King’s sponsor children, Sonali, leaves Sudan and arrives in Australia to be housed at Sydney’s Villawood detention centre. Sonali requests that King visit her at Villawood. Even visiting Sonali in the detention centre is, for King, a ‘value adding’ activity. Going to the detention centre is linked with individualist goals, and she tells her friends that “Miss Whelam [principal] reckons it’ll be great exposure. If I take photos, she’s going to put them in the school magazine and like, we have to do a presentation at assembly” (episode 3). Once again, there is a blurring of the boundaries that are supposed to exist between civic good deeds and the self-motivated individualistic quest for success and notoriety. “The new hero”, writes Hopkins, “is a girl in pursuit of media visibility, public recognition and notoriety. She wants to be *somebody* and ‘live large’... fame is the ultimate girl fantasy. Girl power is inextricably linked to celebrity power” (2002, p. 4). Yet this quest for fame is perhaps not supposed to be so inextricably connected to one’s motivation to undertake citizenship action.

When her friend Brianna takes some photos of King with Sonali, King remarks “this is going to be so hot. I’m totally going to use this for my modelling portfolio” (episode 3). Rather than focusing on listening to Sonali, and supporting her, King uses the opportunity to add value to herself. This juxtaposition of the apparently caring global citizen with the value adding subject of neoliberalism makes King appear conceited, self-centred and out of touch with reality. The blurring of the boundaries that are supposed to exist between these two aspects of ‘girl power’ subjectivity construct King unfavourably. She is presented as being ‘sexy’ rather than ‘brainy’ here. These two aspects of ‘girl power’ subjectivity sit awkwardly next to each other and she is not permitted, in this text, to be both ‘sexy’ and ‘brainy’ at the same time. ‘Sexiness’, and ‘hotness’ is fused with conceit and self-centredness.

Whilst speaking with Sonali at Villawood King asks “are there any hotties in here? Any hot guys? What about that guy in your village that I’m sponsoring, that guy that looks

like Usher [American rap artist]. Do you know him? He is so hot. Get him over here in a boat and like, get with him” (episode 3). Once again, sexually desiring confidence is juxtaposed inappropriately with civic caring duties, and utter naivety. King demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of Sonali’s situation, both in her home village, and in the Villawood detention centre. She states as she is leaving Villawood that Sonali is “a bit negative, she kept going on about getting her parents out of the village and how it’s so bad over there, and was just going on and on. I said to her treat this thing like a holiday. Try and get a boyfriend or something” (episode 3). Sexiness is linked here with naivety, and ignorance. King is not permitted within the text to be ‘sexy’ and ‘brainy’ at the same time.

Following her visit to Villawood, King is invited to give a presentation at her school assembly, in front of a representative from Global Vision. Prior to approaching the lectern, she performs a dance routine with her friends in which they attach pink fluffy accessories to their school uniforms and partially unbutton their dresses. The dance routine is followed by a skit, which involves going to the beach and looking at “hot boys”. This juxtaposition of the sexually confident subject of girl power with the successful, global citizen subject of girl power once again works to create a binary distinction in which King is positioned as ‘sexy’ rather than ‘brainy’. The text does not permit her to ‘have it all’, as it subverts the imagined boundaries that exist between the subject of success and the sexually desiring ‘hyperfeminine’ girl who is invested in her appearance and in picking up boys. This fusion of key aspects of ‘girl power’ in the assembly scene makes it difficult to read King as both ‘sexy’ and ‘brainy’ at the same time. Her dance performance and skit on the assembly stage make her appear self-centred and ridiculous, rather than the intelligent, ethical global citizen she is supposed to be.

The new subject of ‘girl power’ is a girl who can ‘have it all’. She can be “both sexy and strong, tough and glamorous, masculine and feminine” (Hopkins, 2002, p. 214). In this way, she can be understood to transcend ‘older’ binary notions of femininity in which girls are constituted as either ‘sexy’ or ‘brainy’. In many ways the character of Ja’mie King is a quintessential girl power subject. She is able to construct herself as an ideal

subject of neoliberalism, who is self-made and enterprising. She is also a caring, compassionate global citizen. In addition to these things, she enjoys hyperfemininity and a confident sexuality. Yet the character of Ja'mie King can also be understood in relation to a 'sexy versus brainy' dichotomy associated with 'older' notions of femininity. The text blurs the boundaries between 'old' and 'new' notions of young femininity, by mapping the 'sexy versus brainy' dichotomy onto the new subject of girl power. Thus the text invites us as audience to read the character of King in relation to these older notions of young femininity. The new subject of girl power who 'has it all' is presented as a difficult, if not impossible, one to occupy in this text.

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