

Dangerous Books for Girls **By Lyn Mikel Brown, Ed.D**

Nearly fifteen years ago Anthropologist Signithia Fordham delineated the collision Black girls experience between culture and school. The girls in her study who rejected the usual binary—either the linguistic patterns, interactions styles, and body image of conventional white femininity or the privileged speech, voice, and writing styles of conventional male achievers—for a “strikingly visible” classroom presence and connection to the Black community, paid a high educational price. With voices intact, “those loud Black girls” walked a fine line, “refusing to conform to standards of good behavior, without actually entering the realm of bad behavior”. Improvising a place in a system designed without them in mind, they were tagged “low-achievers” and trouble-makers.

Edward Morris re-visits Fordham’s research in his recent article “Ladies” or “Loudies”?: Perceptions and Experiences of Black Girls in Classrooms. Initially interested in the experiences of White students who attend “Matthews”, a predominantly Black and Latino middle school in Texas, Morris’s two year ethnography revealed a surprising finding: teachers focused a specific kind and degree of disciplinary action on Black girls who didn’t conform to “lady-like” behaviors, such as passivity, deference, and bodily control. These were girls who performed well academically and the surveillance came at the expense of their curiosity, outspokenness, and assertiveness—the very student qualities any good teacher dreams about.

Perhaps it’s sign of positive change that Morris’s findings were picked up by the press and circulated widely through organizations like GenderPAC and even featured on NPR. If so, we all owe much to the very public protests of misogynist rap artists orchestrated by students at Spellman College, the Rutgers basketball team’s vocal indignation in the aftermath of the Imus debacle, 17-year-old filmmaker Kiri Davis’s heart-wrenching “A Girl Like Me”, a replication of Kenneth Clark’s 1940s black and white doll experiments, and of course to Oprah, who has given a platform to all of these young Black women and the complex issues they raise.

Yet clearly this outrage about the sexist and racist treatment of Black girls hasn’t reached down to their schools. For many teachers at Matthews, the “loud and confrontational behavior” of the Black girls in their classes was “viewed as a defect that compromised their very femininity” and so they doled out discipline, admonitions, and instructions designed “to mold them into exhibiting more ‘acceptable’, stereotypical qualities of femininity such as being quieter and more passive.” And more modest. Because loudness wasn’t the only trouble teachers had with these girls. They were also perceived as “sexually mature” and lectured about “proper” attire that emphasized “traditional femininity.”

Enter two popular books, Wendy Shalit’s *Girls Gone Mild* and Louann Brizendine’s *The Female Brain*, to tell us just what proper means and why we should accept, even celebrate it. Shalit champions a purported new girl movement away from sexy and toward “traditional family values”, while Brizendine tries to establish a causal link between brain and gender differences. While they appear to have little in common, these books share a similar set of assumptions about the intrinsic worth and the salvation of conventional femininity. Shalit’s version of culture never hints at the interlocking privileges and oppressions Fordham and Morris explore, and in her astute *Psychology of Women Quarterly* review of *The Female Brain*, Nicole Else-Quest notes the “surprising” omission of any attention to ethnicity or socioeconomic factors and says, “it is difficult to see the work as anything other than reductionist biological determinism that serves to promote sex-role stereotypes.” From their positions on opposite ends of the nurture-nature binary, Shalit and Brizendine define and determine the kind of “proper” that wreaks havoc with real girls’ lives.

Feminist psychologists have amassed ample evidence that conventional femininity is bad for girls—all girls. Using their Feminine Ideology Scale, for example, Deborah Tolman and her colleagues find that internalizing conventional femininity ideologies of the very passive and disembodied “nature” that the Matthews teachers’, with all good intentions, desire and instruct is

associated with poor mental health for early adolescent girls. Girls who uncritically internalize these messages are more likely to be depressed and to have lower self-esteem.

Some loud voices are voices of powerful critique. Girls' voices that carry the pleasure and burden of such are unwelcome in the world Shalit and Brizendine take great pains to justify. The danger to girls is the reality that more teachers at Matthews Junior High will probably read these profitable polemics than the thoughtful research of academic feminists.

Feminists can raise our voices to critique these books, and we have. Like the girls at Matthews Middle School, we risk being disciplined, alienated, and treated as outsiders for doing so. But sometimes we treat ourselves as outsiders. We can learn a few things from young women like Kiri Davis, who circulated her powerful film on the internet and then set up her own site to promote her work and educational guides to accompany the film. We need to befriend mainstream media, news outlets, the internet, and those places that can bring our ideas to the girls (and their teachers) who need to hear them. Now more than ever, we need to figure out ways to present the counter-arguments publicly and plainly so that the girls at Matthews know we're out here cheering their loud voices and working on their behalf.

Brizendine, L. 2006. *The Female Brain*. New York: Morgan Road Books.

Davis, K. 2007. *A Girl Like Me*. <http://www.reelworks.org>; <http://www.kiridavis.com>

Else-Quest, N. 2007. Biological determinism and the never-ending quest for gender differences. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 31(3): 322-323.

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Morris, E. 2007. "Ladies" or "Loudies"? Perceptions and experiences of Black girls in classrooms. *Youth & Society*. 38(4): 490-515.

Shalit, W. 2007. *Girls Gone Mild*. New York: Random House.