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## More Than “Sluts” or “Prissy Girls”: Gender and Becoming in Senior Secondary Drama Classrooms

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### Abstract

This article examines the relationships between the embodiment of dramatic characters, gender, and identity. It draws on ethnographic data based on observations and interviews with 24 drama teachers and senior secondary drama students in Western Australia. We explore how student becomings in year 12 drama classrooms are mediated and constituted through socially overcoded gender binaries

in a dominant neoliberal culture of competitive performativity. We ask the questions: What constructions of femininity and masculinity are students embodying from popular dramatic texts in the drama classroom at a critical time in their social and emotional development? Are these constructions empowering? Or disempowering? What factors are influencing teachers' choices of texts for their predominantly female students? Our research shows that what is delimiting about this potentiality in a time of identity exploration and formation are the constraining gender-binary roles available to young women particularly, and the performative pressures teachers are experiencing.

### **Introduction**

As a dynamic and fluid space the drama classroom provides a place where identity can be considered and critiqued in embodied ways through processes that reflect the fluidity of contemporary times. Drawing on scholars whose research utilizes critical and poststructuralist paradigms including Butler (1990, 2004), Braidotti (2010, 2013) and Deleuze and Guattari (1968; 1992, 1994 [2012]; 1972 [2009], 1987 [2012]) first, to map how drama teachers and students negotiate issues of masculinity, femininity and becoming in the drama classroom; and secondly, how identity is mediated within the neoliberal performative culture of the secondary school.

The study draws on 24 qualitative, in-depth semi-structured interviews<sup>1</sup> conducted with drama teachers and students from four school contexts (single sex and coeducational schools in the Catholic, independent and government sectors) in Perth, Western Australia. It explores the intersection between gender, text and becoming in the drama classroom in order to consider what constructions of femininity and masculinity students embody as they are drawn from commonly used set (i.e. syllabus required) dramatic texts at a critical time in their social/cognitive and emotional development. More specifically, we consider the ways in which these constructions affirm or restrict students' becomings and why these drama teachers choose some texts over others. Furthermore, in order to consider how drama and the curriculum enables or constrains these explorations and choices we also turn our attention to the broader context in which these explorations occur critiquing, for example, the influence of neoliberalism on education in Australia. It is this context that is important in contemporary education as Locke (2015) explains: 'Through conditions of "performance" capitalism, education is to conform to a logic of performativity that ensures not only the efficient

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted in 2013 in quiet locations in Western Australian schools, universities, cafes and homes. All teachers were interviewed individually, whilst students were interviewed in small groups, pairs or individually.

operation of the state in the world market, but also the continuation of a global culture of performance (p. 247).

### **Gender, Embodiment and Text in the Drama Classroom**

In many countries across the world girls outnumber boys in high school drama classrooms (Hatton, 2003), and in Australia, girls are twice as likely as boys to participate in drama (ABS, 2011). In Western Australia—the site for this research—the ratio of girls to boys in senior secondary drama is approximately 70% to 30% (SCSA, 2013). Consistently across each of these school systems students as part of their final year of high school are asked to study plays from a set text list determined by a curriculum authority<sup>2</sup> (SCSA, 2016).

Unlike other Humanities subjects where students are asked to read and write about characters in a text, students in drama are asked to embody characters. This process of embodiment broadens the way that young people can engage with ideas and others, and is key to the different ways of knowing that are part of drama and arts education (Barbour, 2011; Wright, 2011). As Bresler (2004) notes, ‘The arts, unlike the traditional academic areas, are an arena in which the body is central to the process of inquiry and constitutes a mode of knowing’ (p. 93). More specifically, role and character are key elements of drama. Taking on a role or a specific character, for example, involves the ‘identification of a person’s values and attitudes, intentions and actions as imagined relationships, situations and ideas in dramatic action’ (ACARA, 2014, p. 46); it engages students with developing internally consistent, motivated roles and characters and conveying the subtext of social and psychological situations, relationships and status through action and re-action. As one student from our study explained, this process can be empowering:

Drama definitely helped with the ability to empathise with other people. Cos like it forces you to become them. There’s a lot more understanding about how emotions work, like you do exercises that really tap into emotions so you can bring them up again in plays and that ... but you get a bit more of how people work, their strengths and weaknesses and you kind of learn about yourself... like what makes you upset, what makes you angry, like how you deal with that.

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<sup>2</sup> The set texts are decided by the Drama Course Advisory Committee, which is made up of drama teachers from Government, Independent and Catholic schools systems and representatives from universities and the School Curriculum and Standards Authority. It is Authority policy that a new set text list is chosen every five years. The current set text list 2016-2020 for the ATAR (tertiary ranking) year 12 course consists of twelve Australian and twelve World drama texts (See Appendix for current list). The other senior secondary (Year 11 and 12) drama courses have recommended texts only and allow for school-based decisions on texts.

(Miranda, independent school student)

This identification and embodiment of roles and characters for senior secondary drama students occurs at a critical time in their physical, social and emotional development where adolescence is a key time of transition (UNICEF, 2011). Biologically, for example, adolescents are experiencing pubertal changes, changes in brain structure and sexual interest. Psychologically, adolescents move to more complex abstract thinking and develop autonomy and independent identity (Headspace, 2014).

Late adolescence is often seen as a move towards independence where ideals are developed and so role models become important (UNICEF, 2011). Consequently, the embodiment of roles and characters in the drama classroom where other roles and characters become available at this critical time in adolescent development can be potentially empowering, and conversely delimiting when these opportunities are constraining. What this means is that link between identity and drama is compelling and of interest to drama educators and students alike.

### **Potentia and Potestas – Affirmative and Restrictive Power in the Drama Classroom**

Studies have explored the connection between drama praxis and adolescent development and noted that drama can be a powerful tool to help students negotiate issues of identity (Armenta, 2005; Burton, 2002; Cahill, 2002; Gallagher, 1998, 2000; Hatton, 2003; Lambert, Wright, Currie, & Pascoe, 2015a, 2015b; Wright & Pascoe, 2014). Students both embody roles and characters they create themselves in improvised and devised drama, and others they choose from the characters made available to them in the set texts. These roles and characters can be affirmative (*potentia*) or restrictive (*potestas*) for adolescent girls (and boys) (Braidotti, 2002b). Braidotti (2002b) describes this potentiality in terms of the process of becoming and the social imaginary where embodied subjects both affect and are affected by social norms, power and desire:

The embodied subject is thus a process of intersecting forces (affects) and spatio-temporal variables (connections). This in turn affects the notion of the social imaginary. The process of becoming subject requires sets of cultural mediation; the subject has to deal with institutional sets of rules and regulations as well as the forms of cultural representation that sustains them. Power is negative (*potestas*) in that it prohibits and constrains. It is also positive (*potentia*) in that it empowers and enables. The constant negotiation between the two poles of power can also be formulated in political terms in the notion of subjectivity as power and desire. (2002, p. 21)

What these concepts reveal is that in terms of young people’s development, it is the way that the aesthetic is experienced—both social and affective—that are key. Also consistent across each of the four research sites participants highlighted that the embodiment of roles and characters in drama is *potentia* that is affirming and sometimes life-changing for them. As these two students revealed:

I’m naturally shy, whereas drama has really helped me with that. I think drama helps you develop as a person. To work on a character you have to look internally on yourself you know, social skills and confidence ... all of those skills that you need to be successful in the world are developed in a drama classroom. (Yana, government school student)

I guess in theatre you can be whomever you want. Our teacher said guys don’t play girls and girls don’t play guys purely because it’s very hard. I had to be a guy in a surrealist piece and it was very hard. But you can just explore it and get some clothes and a wig. It’s the same with identity; I can be the most opposite of me that I can be to explore and see where it goes. And you use yourself as a basis to build characters upon and that helps you explore your own identity. You can do anything you like in drama: there are no limitations. It’s as much as you can imagine as much as you can envision ... there’s no restrictions. (Cassie, independent school student)

As Yana and Cassie note the processes of drama can help students negotiate the complex terrain of becoming other in late adolescence, and this is consistent with the literature. As Coffey (2012) notes, ‘To study becoming is to study the micro-processes of change that occur through affect and relations. Bodies are thus understood in the context of the connections and relations that are formed and their potential for becoming’ (p. 7). The explanatory power of these concepts also lies in the way that *Potentia* in drama is key to understanding how ‘becoming other’ is more than the linear development from childhood to adulthood of a Kantian unitary subject (a rational, centred, internally consistent self that is not socially constructed).

For the decentred subject composed of diverse, socially constructed and context-dependent identities, becoming is a generative and embodied experience. In relation to drama, the notion of becoming is also active in nature. Becoming is a Deleuzian term that captures the multiple, generative and changing nature of identity. A becoming is a process of change, flight or movement where ‘assemblages’ (people, things, ideas, powers) interact with other assemblages to create something new – a new becoming. In the context of drama education, teachers and students interact with others, with texts and characters and with education

assemblages and are transformed. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of becoming (1972 [2009], 1987 [2012]), Hickey-Moody views the child as 'a generative force through figuring the child as a vector of affect: an activator of change' (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 273). In this sense affect incorporates change: 'the passage from one state to another' (G. Deleuze, 1988, p. 49) and its potentiality lies in what is not only embodied, but also embedded in both teachers and students as socially positioned, multilayered subjects. It is this positioning and the subjectivity that surrounds it that allows critique, and also something new to emerge. Deleuze and Guattari describe this process in terms of deterritorialisation where:

Nomadic waves or flows of deterritorialisation go from the central layer to the periphery, then from the new centre to the new periphery, falling back to the old centre and launching forth to the new ... Deterritorialisation must be thought of as a perfectly positive power. (G. Deleuze & Guattari, 1987 [2012], p. 60)

Deleuze and Guattari note that becoming is a process of 'deviation from the majority,' and that, 'in a becoming, one is deterritorialised' (1987, p. 321–2). *Territorialisation* in this conception depicts the acquiescence to hegemonic norms, *deterritorialisation* describes a process whereby the flow of energy escapes or momentarily moves outside the normative strata, and *reterritorialisation* describes the process of recuperation from those ruptures.

### **Subjectivity and Becoming in the Drama Classroom**

To map students' deterritorialisations in the drama classroom, we first sketch an understanding of subjectivity.

The starting point for poststructuralist feminist redefinitions of subjectivity is a 'new form of materialism that develops the notion of the corporeal by emphasizing the embodied' and sexually differentiated subject (Braidotti, 2011, p. 24). The embodied non-unitary subject in this sense comprises the symbolic, the physical and the sociological body as a collection of 'flows and energies, affects, desires and imaginings' (Braidotti, 2011, p. 25). And it is in the drama classroom that these 'flows and energies' are animated as the following interview extract from one drama teacher shows:

Emma: I've got a boy in drama and whenever he gets into my classroom he starts um ... this funny walk that ... he sort of does this prancing and this ballerina move ... and he just does it for a laugh ... the kids laugh. But it's not because he's wanting to be a ballerina... he's just exploring his body and exploring what he can do with his body and having that safe environment to do that and not to be told ... or labelled. You know to be given a stereotype ...

Deterritorialisation describes a process whereby the flow of energy escapes or momentarily

moves outside the normative strata, and for this student the drama classroom provided the safe environment for him to explore his body and move beyond normative stereotypes. Likewise, female students reported that drama gave them a safe space to move beyond molar (binary, socially overcoded) gender norms:

Well, like you can kind of get it all wrong in drama and try it all again, cos you're not ... there's this protection, the fact that you're not being yourself. You can let down the barriers that you have. You can be yourself in that process. It's sounds a bit weird, that in not being yourself you can be yourself. You can let more of yourself through. (Miranda, independent school student).

Key to understanding this process and what then restricts (reterritorialises) it is the questions of power and control. The research revealed, for example, a number of recapturing powers that were both disciplinary and immanent: such as the disciplinary power of the texts on the curriculum and the control of programming by administration, to more subtle immanent powers of 'enculturation,' such as a culture of surveillance, competition and performance. And in terms of education, and as Deleuze notes, *potestas* or restrictive power is both complex and 'dangerous' (1987 [2012], p. 97).

### **Set Texts and Cultural Learning**

The 'fine segmentations' of individual text choices made by drama teachers to the 'rigid segments with their overcoding' of the conservative neoliberal zeitgeist in which teachers and students reside underpin a number of normalising factors that are restrictive or limiting for adolescent becomings in the drama classroom. To better understand what limits and territorialise adolescent becomings in the drama classroom, we first examined the characters from the most 'desirable' (frequently chosen) plays from the drama curriculum in Western Australia, and asked teachers *why* they have invested in these choices. Second, we examined how the current culture of performative neoliberalism acts as a restraining power on teachers' and students' becomings.

Yiannakis (2014) research into English Literature curricula in Australia from 1945–2005 shows that year 12 set text lists signify more than just trends in literature, but rather, 'literary legitimacy, cultural capital, notions of nationhood, canon fluidity and classroom practice are being affected' (2014, p. 100). He concludes that despite the shifts and state variations it is clear that notwithstanding changes in methodology and theory influencing selection processes ... a core groups of writers remain popular across the six decades since the end of World War Two' and that 'many by Shakespeare still the central and dominant texts throughout this period' (p. 110). While it is the case that there is a wide variety of texts available for teachers and students on the current set texts lists in Western Australia (24 in total), including texts



from indigenous and feminist perspectives, teachers consistently chose the same few ‘literary canon’ texts for their mostly female cohorts. This choice, for example, sits in the context of girls comprising 70% of the drama students in Western Australia and so in terms of using drama’s affective power for all student’s growth and development, it is perplexing that the most popular texts chosen are *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 2004), *The Homecoming* (Pinter, 1991) and *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett, 2006) which have few or no female characters (SCSA, 2013). Not only do these classic drama texts lack women’s roles, the ones that are available such as Lady Macbeth and Ruth, were seen by teachers and students alike in this research to represent normative feminine gender stereotypes. It is also the case that even the most popular contemporary Australian play chosen by drama teachers (SCSA, 2013), *Ruby Moon* (Cameron, 2003) replicates negative and narrow interpretations of femininity. We now consider some of the implications of this lack of representation and diversity.

### **Prissy Girls and Sluts: The Madonna and the Whore Dichotomy**

Youdell (2010) asserts that normative hetero-feminine subjects are constituted and regulated in the school context through gender binaries like the whore/virgin binary where some girls are constituted as sluts/whores. Based on Freud’s ‘Madonna-whore complex’ (Freud, 1957), this literary trope divides women into two mutually exclusive binary categories: Madonnas and whores (Wolf, 1997). According to the trope, the virginal Madonna figure is everything that women should aspire to be. Conversely, women who fail to live up to the Madonna standard are whores driven exclusively by sexual desire and are thus lacking in morality (Welldon, 1988).

In considering the female characters in the most popular plays in the Western Australian drama set text list, the teachers and students interviewed easily made these distinctions—namely ‘pathetic’/‘prissy girls’ (Madonnas): Rose, Oriel in *Cloudstreet* (Monjo & Enright, 1999), Ruby, Dulcie and Dawn in *Ruby Moon* (Cameron, 2003); and ‘sluts’/‘prostitutes’ (whores): Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 2004), Dolly in *Cloudstreet*, Ruth in *The Homecoming* (Pinter, 1991) and Veronica in *Ruby Moon*. By way of example, while Lady Macbeth is arguably one of the most powerful female characters in Shakespeare’s corpus, and the most popular text amongst the teachers and students in this study, she represents to them hegemonic femininity constructed during the complex struggle for religious and political authority at the outset of King James’s English reign. As Hatton (2003) notes, in ‘classic’ plays, female voices are often rendered silent, and female characters are positioned as ‘maids in service’ to the dramatic action. In more contemporary times, as Ringrose (2013) highlights, ‘the long-standing signifier of sexual regulation used to discipline girls’ reputations at school is “slut”’ (p. 93), and it is this *potestas* (restrictive power) that limits girls’ options to two binary constructions of femininity. The paradox is, as Hatton goes on to note, that [girls] are often a silent majority as the drama curriculum and its products are largely fashioned through

the lens of masculinity and patriarchy unless the teacher is openly and ethically interventionary in their practice’ (2003, p. 140).

### **Female Roles in the Drama Set Text List**

Currently in Western Australia, the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) through the Drama Course Advisory Committee (CAC) is responsible for writing the senior secondary drama course. How this course is implemented in classrooms (and the texts chosen to study) is dependent on individual teachers. However, it has been argued by many that hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity restrict young people’s repertoires of behaviour (Butler, 2004; Keddie & Mills, 2009; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012; McDonald, 2007). This is particularly pertinent in the drama classroom where different constructions of gender are embodied through taking on roles and characters from dramatic texts. Coffey (2013a) notes, ‘Through body work practices, gender is continually reasserted and reconstituted’ (p. 39).

All of the female students we interviewed complained about the lack of acting roles for girls in the set texts, as Elizabeth and Marie, two 18 year-old students from an independent Christian school, illustrate:

Marie: In our class there were eight girls and four guys. The main characters were given to boys and the side characters were given to girls. I want a play with more girls, more women roles or more unisex roles. Every play we’ve done, there are more male roles; and there are more girls than guys in our classes.

Elizabeth: I’d love a play with more girls. But when they do a play with more women, it becomes very stereotypical.

Marie: That’s the way... like the four boys in our class had all the characters they wanted. Ours were like ‘mother’, ‘strong woman’ or like ‘in love’. That’s what it was like; there was so little choice.

While girls’ main criticism of the drama course was that there were not enough ‘women roles’ available for their mostly female class, there was also recognition that the female characters were ‘very stereotypical’ representations of femininity such as ‘mother’ and ‘in love’. Many drama teachers agreed about the lack of female characters; however, their criticisms focused on the restrictive quality (rather than the quantity) of those roles. For example, Ella, an experienced drama teacher from a government school discussed the Western Australian drama curriculum set text list and the female characters in them:

Ella: Um, so Australian texts first. *Cloudstreet*? Dolly is a fantastic part but she’s a horrible person. Um, *Man from Mukinupin*, well kill me now, really. What, you

play the prissy girl or the sister who's a slut. *Ruby Moon*? They're just so ... oh God.

Kirsten: Well let's look at the world texts before we go on to the male parts...

Ella: Oh my God I was looking at that in my head! Like Ruth from *The Homecoming*! Lady Macbeth is the most amazing part but she doesn't have much of a journey. She's really powerful and then she crumbles, because I'm sure we've missed out a scene, we've missed something. Like really? Amazing...but crumbles. I mean where was the journey? She's amazing to play though. I mean she's like the epitome of female roles. And she's the only real female role in that play. Now the dominance is definitely to males. *The Homecoming*: there's one female and all the rest are males but the male parts in that play are incredible to play; they're so juicy.

Ella's comments highlight the fact that the 'juicy' roles in the set texts are predominantly male, whereas the female roles lack a character 'journey' or conform to the normative 'prissy' vs. 'slut' binary. Claire, a drama teacher in a Catholic school, emphasised the restrictive options for girls in the texts she chose for her students from the set-text list in terms of both quantity and quality:

Claire: We are currently studying *Life of Galileo* by Bertolt Brecht, and semester two will be *Ruby Moon* by Matt Cameron...Well, there's very limited choice, keeping in mind we're a Catholic school and have an ethos that we have to protect. Some of the themes aren't entirely appropriate in other texts. *Last Cab to Darwin* – euthanasia. *Summer of the Aliens* – losing your virginity. *Cloudstreet*? On page three, 'Dolly sits on him, fucking him well' or something. Page three! I actually started that one a few years ago but I had a complaint ... To be entirely honest I was a bit hesitant about *Galileo* being that it talks about the fight with the Catholic church (laughs), however, looking at it, that's actually a piece of history and that happened so it's not a playwright's opinion.

And in response to a question about role availability?

Claire: Well *Ruby Moon*'s good, obviously that's one male one female. *Life of Galileo*: two females; both subordinate (laughs). So yeah, but that is the nature of the text though ... and the playwright (laughs).

But even like *Ruby Moon* ... [female roles are] all loopy. I mean you've got Veronica Vale, not only the seductress; but the husband stealer. Dulcie – the church loving spinster with the parrot. Sylvie who's so dependent and drug

induced and neurotic... Yeah. Your female roles in those two texts aren't something that you would hope that your female students could identify with.

Claire's remarks illustrate the 'very limited choice' available for a Catholic school drama teacher because of the *potestas* (restrictive power) of the Catholic education system. Moreover, of the texts she chose, the female roles are limiting. She notes that there are only two female roles in *Life of Galileo*, and they are both 'subordinate'. She described *Ruby Moon* as 'good' because of the even number of male and female roles; however, the characters themselves are not 'something that you would hope that your female students could identify with'.

At a time in adolescent development when young women are navigating complex issues of identity and role formation, are these female characters *potentas* or *potestas* for students? Di and Yana, 18-year-old university students discuss in conversation why having to play male roles was a *potestas* for them in their government high school drama classrooms:

Yana: What I get annoyed about the set text list is generally in a drama classroom it's usually heavily... girls. Yeah, and so a lot of the plays on the set text ...

Di: Are male weighted.

Yana: You know like it's so difficult to find things that you can actually...yeah we're actors but we're not men. And I'm a woman so you know I have boobs and it's just not going to happen as much as you try and you know be masculine. I think that's a shame. So that's my key issue really with the set text list. You do the scene over and over and over again — the one scene where you actually do have girls in it. I guess you've got *Twelve Angry Men* [on the set text list]. I think there's plenty of just guys plays.

Di: I think there's lots of plays with just men whereas female it's a bit harder. I think *The Homecoming* was year 11 actually cos we did *Waiting for Godot* in year 12. Yeah, all men. Whereas *Waiting for Godot* that was hard. That was really hard.

Popular contemporary plays offer students more female characters. However, in the most popular plays such as *Cloudstreet*, as with *Macbeth*, the female characters are often described by students using restrictive hegemonic signifiers such as: 'slut' (Dolly), 'bitch' (Oriol), 'pathetic' (Rose), and 'wife' (Lady Macbeth – above).

The female characters in *Cloudstreet* are pretty pathetic [laughs]. Dolly was a slut ... obviously. She would have problems and then just drink and then try and pretend that they're not there. And Oriol ... she is the family matriarch who

controls everything and everyone blindly obeys her even though she makes some quite stupid decisions and she's a bit of a bitch. I don't think any of the characters are particularly powerful to be honest. Which kind of makes it quite a frustrating play because they're all weak. And...Rose, [Dolly's anorexic daughter], in my opinion the way she was acted was pathetic but that's because she was a pathetic character. (Miranda, independent school student)

Miranda, from a Christian independent school, described Dolly as a 'slut' and Oriel as a 'bitch'. As Ringrose (2013) notes, 'Certain injurious terms like "bully", "fat:", "slut", "whore" and "slag" subjectivate teen girls' (p. 72). Moreover, 'Slut constitutes a discursive nodal point of fixation in the discourses of adolescent girlhood or what I have termed a sticky signifier that glues bad affects onto girls' bodies' (Ringrose 2013, p. 93). As Fjaer (2015) notes, even in liberal countries such as Norway, the 'slut' signifier is still a powerful boundary marker against 'other' women which contributes 'to the persistence of a sexual double standard among young people' (p. 960).

In constructing their identities, gender stereotypes in texts and the 'need to imitate' hegemonic images of femininity in the media push girls to 'relinquish power' to persuasive social ideals (Boal, 1985, cited in Armenta, 2005, p. 92). It has been argued that 'adolescent girls are attracted to drama because it offers them the skills, aesthetic space and forums to play with notions and representations of self, gender and culture' (Hatton, 2003, p. 139). Through performing different characters, girls 'put on' various constructions of femininity. The adjectives teachers and students in our research used to describe the female characters in the plays they studied include restrictive feminine signifiers such as: 'slut', 'bitch', 'crazy', 'pathetic', 'weak', 'anorexic', 'manipulative', 'controlling', 'drunk', 'seductress', 'husband-stealer', 'spinster' and 'neurotic'. Even when characters such as Ruth from *The Homecoming* make 'liberating' sexual choices, teachers recapture these deterritorialisations from normative gender boundaries by labelling the characters using restrictive feminine signifiers such as 'prostitute':

It was really interesting in the discussion in the class because the students looked into Pinter's reasons for his choices in *The Homecoming* and they could understand that in the context he was trying to liberate Ruth in making those choices. And that created a lot of discussion on how today that's not really... you shouldn't feel liberated by becoming a prostitute really [laughs]. (Emma, government school teacher)

As Butler (2004) notes,

We come into the world on the condition that the social world is already there, laying the groundwork for us. This implies that I cannot persist without norms of recognition that support my persistence: the sense of possibility pertaining to me must first be imagined from somewhere else before I can begin to imagine myself. My reflexivity is not only socially mediated, but socially constituted. I cannot be who I am without drawing up on the sociality of norms that precede and exceed me. (p. 32)

Significantly, all of the teachers in this study had more female students than male — except for one who taught in an all-boys school. This is troubling when one considers the limited representations of femininity available to female drama students in the characters they embody at such a critical time in their adolescence.

### Text Selection and Performative Pressure

As yet, there are no known studies that show *why* teachers choose texts over others for their predominantly female drama classes and how embodying characters, such as Lady Macbeth and the witches, shape adolescent becomings. What the teachers in our study revealed is that they chose particular texts over others for many reasons, including the availability of resources, a teacher’s familiarity with certain texts, and students’ cultural and social contexts. As one government teacher recounted:

We did *Cloudstreet* and we also did *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. I’ve been doing them for a long time and let’s be honest, it takes a long time for me to get to know them, to get to know the characters, how to teach it, how to explain it, how to collect all those materials. I am changing our world text this year for *Macbeth* just because I really love doing Shakespearean plays. (Ariel)

However, the overriding reason teachers chose ‘classic’ and popular texts such as those by Shakespeare, Beckett and Pinter, was because of the perceived performative pressure they felt they were under to get the best marks for their students. Even Ariel, who claimed she chose some plays because she has taught them for a long time and Macbeth ‘just because she I really love doing Shakespearean plays’ stated:

There’s a really *really* strong desire among the staff to devote extra time and energy to their work so the college does really well, so they get good results or they do well in competitions outside of school — like by comparison with private schools in our area.

Even though this choice impacted on students’ choices of roles and other wider cultural

considerations such as indigenous issues and the feminist project, these teachers' primary concern was the pressure on them to 'perform' – perform in this context meaning meeting expectations placed on them by administration and neoliberal education discourses – what Ball (2003) refers to as the “performative worker”. For example, one teacher participant noted how she was publicly shamed at the staff meeting when her students ‘underperformed’ in the ATAR<sup>4</sup> exams:

The history teacher and I were just sitting there. All that happens is that people don't meet your gaze. We got spoken to about those anomalies. We get asked to attend a meeting with the Department of Education people. They go over all of our results, our students' results. (Denise, teacher, government school)

### **The Zeitgeist: Neoliberalism**

Many argue that Australian teachers make choices about pedagogy in a zeitgeist of capitalist neoliberalism, which has had the effect of making education a commodity that can be bought and sold. Schools compete for students in a market where they are judged by published external exam scores (S. J. Ball, 2010; Beder, Varney, & Gosden, 2009; Keddie, Mills, & Pendergast, 2011). Are teachers leaning towards popular texts that fail to challenge the status quo simply in order to survive in a competitive culture of neoliberal performativity? Tom, a government school teacher, shed light on teachers' motivations in relation to the ‘massive’ pressure to get ‘good marks’?

Tom: Our school has even employed people to come out from the Department of Education to analyse our results for us and tell us how we can make them better...

So the pressure was on big time ... and I guess that's motivated me to choose the texts that I have because I want the kids to stand out in the marking process.

Kirsten: Right. So you are entirely judged on those exam scores...

Tom: Entirely.

Tom's experiences were not unique. Most of the teachers we interviewed felt under enormous pressure to get good grades (for their students) and to remain above published benchmarks. A number of researchers have applied the concept of performativity to education in an Australian context. Advocates of ‘education reform’ (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992, 1998; Chubb & Moe, 1990) suggest that public schooling is in ‘crisis’ and the best solution is to adopt a

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<sup>4</sup> The ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) is a number that students achieve between 0.00 and 99.95. It is a numerical measure of a student's overall academic achievement in relation to other students.

market-driven approach to ‘selling’ public schools to education ‘consumers’. However, many authors argue that this has had a detrimental impact on public schooling (Apple, 2005; S. Ball, 2003; Beder et al., 2009; Boxley, 2003; Connell, 2013; Giroux, 2008; Marginson, 1997; Thompson, 2010; Thompson & Cook, 2012, 2014; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). They argue that neo-liberal market ideologies have strengthened the relationship between education, economic productivity and a view of students as human capital, which has narrowed the view of what constitutes ‘good’ education as the measurement and comparison of student performance on quantifiable academic measures. This ‘fetish’ for standards and outcomes in schools leads to a focus on micro-management and a focus on basic literacy and numeracy skills over pedagogy and student learning (Beder et al., 2009; Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006; Keddie et al., 2011). Such market driven corporate performative discourses intensify homogeneity and generate, as well as reinscribe, particular forms of exclusionary phallogocentric, white and middle-class social capital or sociability (Apple, 2005; Giroux, 2004, 2008, 2013; Sloan, 2007). Teachers, such as Tom, whose pedagogy and selection of texts is heavily influenced by the exams, are restricted in how much they can assist students in their becoming by the disciplinary power of the neoliberal education assemblage. Deconstructing these power relations and showing how important the embodiment of powerful role models can be for adolescents is a crucial step in creating a world where young people are empowered to ‘find themselves’:

Kirsten: In an ideal world what would you like to change about teaching drama?

Claire: I would like to teach the kids how to act but we don’t have time. It’s just so rushed, it’s so rushed ... and we do everything for the assessments and the exam. You know, it’s ridiculous.

Kirsten: And what’s the best thing about teaching drama?

Claire: Well I think part of it is what I was saying about drama earlier ... some kids they find themselves. They find themselves. (Claire, Catholic school teacher)

### ***Potentia and Creative Reinterpretations of Texts***

Regardless of the narrow and limiting choices drama teachers appear to be making with regard to text selection, the research revealed that what some drama teachers do with those texts in the classroom tells a different story. The first unit in year 12 ATAR Drama course is ‘Reinterpretation of Drama for Contemporary Audiences’ (SCSA, 2016). The relative freedom of the drama space and the creative reinterpretations of traditional texts and characters, such as Lady Macbeth, can both be a generative and empowering force for students to collaborate and gain confidence in themselves and their sexuality as the following conversation between three independent school students shows.

Elizabeth: You become really close in the arts.



Marie: Yeah five people have come out to me and said they're gay.

Kirsten: So why would they come out in drama?

Grace: Because when you're working on a production you're working with the same group of people for a long time and...

Marie: I find it helpful when people tell me I'm like, straight face, "Oh really." Even if I'm like shocked. My face didn't show it.

Elizabeth: You can become more people focused. People think you're more open and they can talk to you. People who focus too much on numbers people aren't going to come out and tell them something personal whereas arts students...

Marie: Everyone works as a team.

Grace: Everyone's in the same place as you, everyone has to go through the same stuff.

Marie: I think it's just because the people who do drama are hard-working and trustworthy and know what it's like to work in a team and be freaking out backstage. So working on a production you bond and that brings out your trust and your caring and then they see you laughing and dancing around like a bunch of idiots at school and they think that person isn't going to judge me.

Elizabeth: When you do drama, you stop judging.

There was interpretive experimentation.

Kirsten: How did you interpret the witches in *Macbeth*, did you play them the traditional way?

Grace: Oh it definitely wasn't very traditional.

Marie: We did it...the people who weren't the witches spoke Shakespearean and the witches spoke contemporary English.

Grace: Changed a lot of the lines.

Marie: So it was the witches who had control over the Shakespearean world.

Grace: I was drawn to Lady Macbeth and the witches.

In their own scripted monologue performance work, as Elizabeth showed, in drama students found capacity to make choices.

Elizabeth: Yeah... Just having someone say, "You were like actually scary and powerful." I don't think I actually like shouted during the entire monologue. Just your presence there and playing a character who is like so different from myself is amazing.

Similarly, drama students were able to challenge conventions.

Kirsten: And do you think that playing those like dominant female characters when you’re not normally a dominant person, does that help you be more confident or stretch yourself?

Grace: Yeah, it does because you can turn it on. Like even if you’re not like that, you can put it on and pretend to be that person.

In this way teachers spoke back to the neoliberal assemblages by providing lines of flight (G. Deleuze & Guattari, 1987 [2012]) for students from normative gender binaries through providing safe spaces and allowing students to reinterpret traditional texts such as *Macbeth*. Although teachers are restricted by curriculum text lists, how the plays and the characters are interpreted and performed is up to them:

No I don’t think there are strong female characters. You take a text like *Macbeth*, which if you are to perform it traditionally, is performed by men. And if you are to reimagine it and make it something new and different. I mean lots of schools do it...set it in nightclubs and all over the shop...but there’s still only one female character who is the manipulator. And then you’ve got your witches. So from that female point of view it doesn’t really offer a huge scope for actresses. (Tom, government school teacher)

Even though Tom notes that there are no strong female characters in the popular plays, his comments about reimagining *Macbeth* raises an important point about the *potentia* teachers and students hold to re-signify injurious social norms.

Our research also acknowledges that it is not enough to examine the constructions of femininity in the characters in the most popular texts on the current Western Australian drama curriculum. A play, after all, is only a blueprint, a plan for building a performance. The final product is completely up to the director and the actors. Therefore, to ascertain the affects and flows of power at the intersection between the characters on the page and their embodiment, we examine how teachers interpreted texts in the classroom.

### **Embodiment, Gender and Neoliberalism**

If gender is performative, then it follows that the reality of gender is itself produced as an effect of the performance. Although there are norms that govern what will and will not be real, and what will and will not be intelligible, they are called into question and reiterated at the moment in which performativity begins its citational practice. One surely cites norms that already exist, but these norms can be *significantly deterritorialised* through the citation. (Butler, 2004, p. 218 emphasis added)

What the evidence in the study also reveals is the disruptive potential and empowering or affirmative *potentia* of embodying characters such as Lady Macbeth and the witches for late adolescent girls.

I guess the witches [in *Macbeth*]; they enjoyed playing them because we made them corporate women who were organising an event. So they were orchestrating the whole thing. So they were the only ones who ... so they came across as the, you know, career driven women. They were very direct. They knew what they wanted ... strong. Sort of like a ... the idea I gave them ... what's that movie, the one with Meryl Streep in it? *Devil Wears Prada*. That character, I wouldn't say she's evil but she's very cold. So they sort of based their characters on her. (Liz, independent school teacher)

A poststructural, cartographic approach that maps this multilayered data provides the theoretical tools to see the representation of women in *Macbeth* as both restrictive in terms of hegemonic gender binaries, and transformative in terms of embodied affect. Even though characters such as Lady Macbeth and Ruth are often seen by teachers and students to conform to the slut/prostitute stereotype, they can still be significantly deterritorialised when embodied as powerful characters. Braidotti (2002a) talks about the need in the new millennium to provide new 'figurations' – alternative representations or a 'living map' of transformative accounts of the decentred self:

Figurations are not figurative ways of thinking, but rather more materialistic mappings of situated, or embedded and embodied, positions. A cartography is a theoretically-based and politically-informed reading of the present. A cartographic approach fulfils the function of providing both exegetical tools and creative theoretical alternatives... A figuration is a living map, a transformative account of the self – it is no metaphor (Braidotti, 2002a, p. 2)

The cartographic approach requires that we think of power relations simultaneously as intimate or 'personal' desires and as 'external' collective social phenomena. As Braidotti notes: 'power is the process that flows incessantly in between the inner and the outer' (2011, p. 17). Even though teachers and students deterritorialise molar gender norms through reimagining texts, the flow of desire in capitalist regimes of production is often reterritorialised by being channelled into commodified versions of gendered subjectivity. One of the central concerns of this paper is the scale of representation that accompanies the structural transformations of subjectivity in the social, cultural and political spheres of late-capitalist neoliberal culture.

In western culture, girls and young women are represented as success stories of late

capitalism, where discourses of choice, freedom and autonomy exist alongside discourses of hypersexualised femininity (McRobbie, 2009; Renold & Ringrose, 2008; Ringrose, 2013). Feminist theorists assert that in our Western industrialised consumerist culture idealised feminine beauty, heteronormativity and societal pressure to attain and maintain the ‘perfect body’ perpetuate and reify hegemonic binary gender constructions (Coffey, 2013a, 2013b; David, Coffey, Connolly, Nayak, & Reay, 2006; Hickey-Moody & Rasmussen, 2006). Boys’ and girls’ normative gender identities are inextricably embedded and produced within hegemonic representations of heterosexuality (Blaise, 2005; DePalma & Atkinson, 2007; Renold, 2005, 2007; Robinson & Davies, 2007).

Whilst the set drama texts themselves may be seen as reflecting traditional hegemonic representations of gender binaries, teachers such as Liz post-modernise them according to post-feminist neoliberal norms. As Braidotti notes, ‘Post-feminist neoliberalism is pro-capitalist and hence it considers financial success in the world as the sole indicator of status of women’ (Braidotti, 2006, p. 45). In Deleuzian terms, the deterritorialisation of students and teachers making the witches and Lady Macbeth a source of power and independence for young women to embody, is recaptured or ‘reterritorialised’ by the powerful capitalist construction of heteronormative, neoliberal femininity. It is this rich potentiality that lies within the hands of interventionist and critically-aware teachers to speak back to these forces that is key.

### Conclusion

In this paper we examined student becomings in drama classrooms in Western Australia and the *potentia* the embodiment of a variety of characters and roles holds for identity exploration at a critical time in adolescent development for both boys and girls. We drew on ethnographic data based on interviews with drama teachers and senior secondary drama students in schools in Western Australia to examine the dramatic embodiment of characters from popular set texts and how these are mediated and constituted through hegemonic gender binaries and a dominant neoliberal culture of competitive performativity. What the research revealed was the how delimiting the choice of roles available to young women was, and in particular, that generative possibilities were constrained by stereotypes, and the broader context in which they sit. Teachers are restricted in how much they can assist students in their becomings by binary literary tropes and the disciplinary power of the education assemblage.

The process of becoming requires students to negotiate with institutional discourses as well as the forms of cultural representation that sustains them. However, the drama classroom can provide a positive (*potentia*) space in that it empowers and enables. Despite restrictive gender norms, under the direction of a critically-conscious teacher, students found characters such as Lady Macbeth and the witches to be empowering deterritorialising assemblages when

embodied in the safety of the drama classroom, even if they are somewhat reterritorialised by neoliberal constructions of femininity and the neoliberal agenda.

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## Appendix

Drama ATAR Year 12 Syllabus Set Text List from January 1, 2016. (SCSA, 2016)

Australian texts for Unit 3	World texts for Unit 3
Wesley Enoch: <i>The Story of Miracles at Cookie's Table</i>	Bertold Brecht: <i>The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui</i>
Louis Nowra: <i>Radiance</i>	Caryl Churchill: <i>Mad Forest</i>
Hannie Rayson: <i>Two Brothers</i>	Eugene Ionesco: <i>Rhinoceros</i>
Stephen Sewell: <i>Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi German and Contemporary America</i>	William Shakespeare: <i>As You Like It</i>
Alana Valentine: <i>Parramatta Girls</i>	Sophocles: <i>Antigone</i>
Zen Zen Zo: <i>The Tempest</i> (adaptation)	Thornton Wilder: <i>Our Town: A Play in Three Acts</i>

Australian texts for Unit 4	World texts for Unit 4
Andrew Bovell: <i>When the Rain Stops Falling</i>	Samuel Beckett: <i>Endgame</i>
Matt Cameron and Tim Finn: <i>Poor Boy</i>	Friedrich Durrenmatt: <i>The Visit: A tragic comedy</i>
Michael Fatcher and Helen Howard: <i>A Beautiful Life</i>	Bryony Lavery: <i>Beautiful Burnout</i>
Lally Katz: <i>Return to Earth</i>	Tracy Letts: <i>August: Osage County</i>
Jenny Kemp: <i>Kitten</i>	Yasmina Reza: <i>God of Carnage</i>
Kit Lazaroo: <i>Asylum</i>	Brian Yorkey (writer) and Tom Kitt (composer): <i>Next to Normal</i>

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