

# Occupying Anonymous: Juvenile Arbitration Girls Perform Disidentities

Courtne Wolfgang  
Virginia Commonwealth University

Olga Ivashkevich<sup>1</sup>  
University of South Carolina

## ABSTRACT

In this article, we discuss a video project, *Occupying Anonymous*, conducted with a group of adolescent girls in an arts-based arbitration program for first-time juvenile offenders. By law, the program requires all adolescent participants to conceal their faces and other physical identity markers in their artwork to protect their public image. Through *Occupying Anonymous*, we aspired to address the tension between our participants' public visibility and anonymous art making by embracing anonymity as a performative strategy. The girls transformed their physical identities by creating alternate personas using wigs, makeup, costumes, and props to perform their poems or prose about significant issues in their lives. We employ productive intersections between theoretical frameworks of Muñoz's (1999) theory of disidentification, Deleuze's and Guattari's (1987) concept of becoming, and Butler's (1990, 1993) notion of performativity to reframe gendered identity and self as supple, fluid, and open to multiple possibilities.

Keywords: At-risk youth; media making; media; community arts; gender; performance

As art educators, we have been involved in an interdisciplinary community-based Women's Well-Being Initiative in congress with our university's Women's and Gender Studies program for several years<sup>2</sup>. It holds a number of local community projects for at-risk women and girls, and has a long-standing partnership with a local county juvenile

arbitration preventive program for first-time adolescent female law offenders<sup>3</sup>. These girls' offenses range from drug possession, to shoplifting, to battery and assault. Apart from a rather overwhelming tour of the juvenile detention center that demonstrates to the first time offenders what they might expect upon their second law violation, the county juvenile arbitration program offers a few educational and community service workshops aimed to educate and prevent girls' further criminal activity, with our issues-based art and new media sessions among them (Ivashkevich, 2013a, 2013b). When designing our curriculum, we had to consider the overarching goals of the juvenile arbitration program to develop girls' positive sense of self, build supportive community, and make sound decisions about their futures. Successful completion of this workshop along with a series of other sanctions expunges the offense from the participants' permanent records.

In summer of 2012, we embarked on a video project with ten African-American, Latina, and Caucasian teenage girls from low-income backgrounds enrolled in the juvenile arbitration program. This was our first collaboration as community art educators and scholars, which shaped our approach to the workshop curriculum and its conceptual theme, *Occupying Anonymous*. Olga, who previously conducted animation and video-based workshops for this population of girls in 2010 and 2011, has been searching for ways to overcome a significant expressive barrier in girls' work presented by an institutional demand for the participants in juvenile arbitration to remain unidentified, or anonymous, in all images and films they produce while in the arbitration program (Ivashkevich, 2013b). In these previous projects, girls animated dolls to tell their stories via stop-motion films or performed their narratives on camera by hiding or obscuring their faces and other physical identity markers that can be recognizable to the public. While their voices were fully and

---

1 Authors' name order does not follow the 1st/2nd author rule. Both authors equally contributed to planning and conducting the project and writing the manuscript. Courtne Wolfgang may be contacted at [courtne.wolfgang@gmail.com](mailto:courtne.wolfgang@gmail.com); Olga Ivashkevich's contact is [olga@sc.edu](mailto:olga@sc.edu)

2 The primary goal of Women's Well-Being Initiative is to improve the lives of women and girls in low-income communities of Lexington County, SC. This is a collaborative effort of diverse faculty in psychology, health, social work, English, and art at the University of South Carolina.

---

3 The concept of law offenders, similarly to other terms such as "bad," "gone wild," and "in trouble," functions as a negative discursive construction that labels and marginalizes particular subject positions. We employ these terms throughout this article in order to disrupt them.

powerfully present, their bodied identities had to be intentionally concealed, which remained an unresolved tension in their film production for both participants and program facilitators. Giving full visibility to these girls' bodied selves, however, seems utterly important because it is their immediate experiences that hold much of the stigma in their lives. Their actual bodies are overwhelmed with events that evoke shame, pain, anger, and fear: police arrest, multiple visits to juvenile arbitration, court hearings, and a juvenile prison tour. These tangible experiences are further complicated by the "bad girl" and "juvenile offender" stereotypes, feeding off of the plethora of media and public representations and discourses (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008).

Courtne's interest in Deleuzian scholarship (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) on identity and difference and Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender as performance was vital in shaping our Occupying Anonymous video-based curriculum. Through the curriculum, we aspired to overcome the tension between our participants' public visibility and anonymity by embracing anonymity and becoming as performative strategies. During the course of four three-hour sessions of the Occupying Anonymous project, we asked girls to write poems or prose about the issues and roadblocks in their lives, perform them on camera in small groups, and edit their own short films. To be able to appear and speak directly into the video camera, the girls transformed their physical identities by creating fictional characters using wigs, makeup, costumes, and props. These masqueraded performances provided them with a liminal expressive space of occupying their demanded anonymity. Within this liminal space, they performed an identity without being "identified," a fluid identity in-between, or a disidentity.

## **On Identity, Performance, and Disidentification: Theoretical Intersections**

Our collaboration on Occupying Anonymous created a dialogic space that brought our diverse knowledges together and led us to explore the productive intersections between different theoretical frameworks that challenge a modernist notion of identity as singular, stable, and fixed. Although theory informed our initial approach to the curriculum, interacting with the participants both further complicated and advanced our understandings. We see this process as constantly unfolding, passing back and forth between theory and practice. José Muñoz's (1999) metaphor of disidentification, Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of becoming, and the poststructuralist feminist notion of gender performativity (Butler, 1993) all offer views that reframe identity and self as supple, fluid, and open to multiple possibilities. Although admittedly different epistemologically, these theoretical approaches work to uncover dominant ideologies and discourses behind the normative identity representations and markers of what is presupposed by being "x." For girls in the juvenile arbitration program those markers can include offender, drug user, aggressor, abuser, abused, bad girl, girl in trouble, and other stigma-ridden institutional and societal labels. These markers/labels function as ideological devices to demarcate, pin down, and fixate the girls' assumed social positions while masking and obscuring their actual and utterly more complex lived experiences and stories.

Looking into the artistic performances of non-heterosexual people of color, queer theorist José Muñoz (1999) taps into the issue of ideological visibility of marginalized communities to locate a space of agency where the actual subjects can contest and rework the way they are represented within institutional and cultural discourses. Muñoz's metaphor of disidentification has been particularly helpful in shaping our approach to constructing a performative space of visibility for girls who are in trouble with the law. Muñoz claims that within the existing politics of representation, marginalized subjects cannot access their identity (that is, identify) because it requires a "[g]ood [s]ubject" choosing "the path of identification with discursive and ideological

forms” (p. 11). “Bad [s]ubjects,” on the other hand, are those who “resist and attempt to reject the images... offered by dominant ideology and proceed . . . to ‘counteridentify’ and turn against this symbolic system” (p. 11).

Because the rhetoric surrounding girls in juvenile arbitration is one of “bad” subjects who rebel against the normalizing discourses and systems, further enactment of these counter-identities is dangerous as it can lead to imprisonment. Enacting a “good” subject position, on the other hand, is often difficult for them due to their prior history of stigmatization by the law enforcement institutions. Another strategy of what Muñoz calls disidentification seems to offer the only accessible and safe path of performing identity that helps to negotiate their contested social positions. As he explains, “Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure, nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (p. 11). By using the dominant narratives and representations in their artistic performances, yet at the same time altering, remixing, and reworking them to produce different logic and meaning, marginalized subject can create an alternative space of visibility and complicate existing public discourses. Thus, when asking our female participants to occupy their own anonymity in their video project, we hoped to give them an opportunity to access and remake their subject positions that go beyond the dominant representations. By dressing as fictional selves to perform their autobiographic narratives on camera, their “bad subject” position escaped into a liminal space of “me” and “not me,” and their stigma was challenged and reworked through this performance of disidentity. Although we did not use language of Muñoz’s “disidentity” in our conversations with the participants, we encouraged them to explore their identity/self as complex, fluid, and not bound by their offense or the stigma associated with that offense. We emphasized what they are yet to become, rather than what they have done to get in trouble.

Similar to Muñoz’s theory, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1987) challenge static systems of thought in search of creative lines of flight and increased potential of human existence, that we posit can be achieved through the participants’ liminal artistic performances. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming,” which they counter to being, has been particularly important for our project: being is static, while becoming represents a state of constant proceeding and of immanent flows. It is in the becoming that we inhabit in-between spaces, the imperceptible. This is especially significant when renegotiating the terrain of a perceived «bad girl.» What is lost when marking a girl as an «offender» and what are the moves toward a positive reimagining of character once these identity markers are placed?

Furthermore, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the ambiguous performances of becoming hold an immanent potential of becoming “minor,” of deterritorializing and reterritorializing daily acts that mark one’s stable subject/identity. These minoritarian acts resist and subvert dominant ideologies that limit difference and understanding of difference, and embrace marginalized discourses. As a minoritarian performance, our video project *Occupying Anonymous* attempted to map the liminal spaces of «bad girl» and “offender.” By engaging in the participant-driven dialogue about concerns relevant to their lives and articulating those concerns through creative writing and video production, the girls mapped terrains of experience which extended beyond their offense. Although there are inevitable socio-cultural forces that fix identity through repetition and refrain, the gaps and fissures within such refrains make possible the refrain’s destabilization and a potentially productive “crisis” of identity. The passing back and forth through these gaps and openings in hegemonic identification produces a certain namelessness, or what Muñoz called a disidentification. As long as one continues moving, an identity pin is harder to place. Put another way, we stressed to our participants the complexities of one’s identity—especially in regard to girlhood—and the importance of resisting limiting sociocultural expectations. What this means for the

girls in juvenile arbitration is an opportunity (although admittedly a risky one) to perform in-between, or perhaps even outside of the pervasive institutional and societal labels and the essentialist claims of what these kinds of bodies inevitably do.

Poststructuralist feminist theory was instrumental in framing our curriculum. This theory examines the dominant discourses that inscribe the hierarchy of identity and “identity politics,” while reimagining identity as a performance and tracing the avenues for its disruption (Butler, 1990, 1993; hooks, 1990; Phelan, 1993). As Judith Butler remarks, identity performance tends to exist within a hierarchy of identification which reflects the dominant heterosexual, White, middle class ideologies. “By claiming that some identifications are more primary than others, the complexity of the latter set of identifications is effectively assimilated into the primary one, and the ‘unity’ of the identifications is preserved” (p. 253). This process, according to Butler, is what maintains a unifying narrative by which we identify ourselves and recognize the other. We mask difference in order to create a more stable identity, or what Sue-Ellen Case (1989/2003) calls the masquerade. We perform a set of refrains and socio-cultural codes—the identity “do-over.”

An institutional and sociocultural marking of our participants as «bad girls» or «offenders» is a product of the repetitive regulatory practices, which gives way to the spectacle and marketability of «girls gone wild» (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008). These regulatory practices “produce the bodies [they] govern” (Butler, 1993, p. 235) and create a zone of uninhabitability. “This zone of uninhabitability, according to Butler, will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain” (p. 237). Operating within a domain reifies the regulatory practices that determine one’s identity performance, or being. But if one agrees with Butler, identity is not natural or given, which means one performs identity within a symbolic hierarchy of socio-cultural codes. Ironically, the tendency to push back against stereotypes or identity claims that we ourselves do not claim can also relegate us to this same hierarchy: “oh, you think I’m acting like a brat? I’ll show

you what a brat acts like!” However, this also means that one has the power to perform productive crises of identity around and through symbolic hierarchies. One can inhabit the uninhabitable deliberately by renegotiating an over-coded terrain of «identity» through new refrains by becoming different.

The productive intersections between theories of disidentification, becoming, performance, and creative reimagining of a body make more transparent the terrain of subjectification, and suggest potential to “smooth” striated spaces (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) that bind and limit different interpretations of what the identity performances might do. In our video project with the juvenile arbitration girls, we sought to explore this interstitial space of identity and disidentification, knowing and not knowing, and masked and unmasked as a site of productivity and potential. Is the process of becoming anonymous a process of escaping «identity» as a set of predetermined codes? Or is it a discrete identity or, rather, an alterity (immanent otherness—outsider without an outside)? How much does one have to mask and how much does one have to reveal? Or, how much does one feel one must give up in order to better navigate coded terrains? What is a process of becoming anonymous within a fixed binary of adolescence, of girlhood, of “offender,” of «bad girl»? What can anonymity DO?

### **Occupying Anonymous: Girls Performing Disidentities**

Our timeline for the project was limited: we only had 12 hours from our first encounters with the girls to the screenings of their collaborative films on the last day of the workshop. Therefore, establishing trust and the framework for the projects was critical. An essential component to our pedagogy in this space was to let the girls determine the issues through which they would create their video responses and to let the work truly be participant constructed. We asked them to map their roadblocks by creating rhizomatic word clusters around the issues they identify as relevant to their lives, which included substance abuse, peer pressure, family, relationships, sexuality, pregnancy, death, and body image. In addition to issues

mapping, we introduced concepts of identity and performativity through artwork by feminist photographers Cindy Sherman and Nikki S. Lee, and popular singer Lady Gaga. We also provided Flip video cameras, laptops, and video editing software and asked each participant to select an issue that she wished to explore through her writing and video performance. The girls wrote their personal narratives; they selected dresses, wigs, and other accessories to create their anonymous characters; they made the choices about where and what to point the cameras at; they edited their video footage and added music. The ten girls participating worked in three collaborative groups. The work discussed next represents one of these small group collaborations



Figure 1. Video frame of a title. Used with permission of subject

The video opens with a black title screen

LIFE

depression / dad / drama

love / loss

followed by the audience's first introduction to the girls: Linda, in head to toe magenta, reaching down to grasp at a flowering weed; Yami, mustachioed, in a straw cowgirl hat, and walking slowly between the pillars of a covered walkway; Jasmine, glamorous in a silver evening gown and long pink and black

wig, clutching at the hem of her skirt and swaying—almost childlike—back and forth. The noise of the street traffic and birds interrupts otherwise quiet moments. Brian Eno's *An Ascent* fades in and out as the performances continue.



Figure 2. Video frames of initial appearances of Linda, Yami, and Jasmine. Used with permission of subject.

Jasmine begins,<sup>4</sup>

Why does daddy ignore me?

Does he even want me?

Daddy treats me different from his other children.

Why won't daddy say "I love you"?

Has he lost faith in me because of my past mistakes?

Jasmine delivers each line of her poem walking toward the camera down an empty hallway. Only occasionally does she break eye contact with the lens in order to glance down at her poem. Punctuating each line, the camera cuts to a shot of Jasmine's legs and feet, her shadow revealing the slow-motion sway of her arms and hem of her long silver dress. Each time the camera cuts back to the hallway, Jasmine gets closer and closer to the viewer. This deliberate and direct engagement suggests strength and an intention that dissolves into a particular sweetness and passivity with the cut. After speaking the last line, so close to the camera that the top of her head is cropped by the shot, the clip cuts back to an extended shot of Jasmine, head to toe, swaying on the sidewalk as if in a trance.

<sup>4</sup> Participants granted permission to use their first names through an artwork release form.



Figure 3. Video frames of Jasmine's performance. Used with permission of subject

The shot fades, and we see Linda in her pink wig and matching pink satin dress walking down the sidewalk before kneeling next to a cluster of yellow flowers.

Gradually coming closer to each other we came to know we had so much in common. We both had been hurt in the past by being cheated on, used and abused. Then we knew we were meant for each other. But as time passed by, his ex-girlfriends found me on Facebook and were harassing me and saying things that were not true about my boyfriend. And it was making me mad. But after a while of talking with them I was, like, "Okay, this is immature. And I won him and he is mine. I love him and he loves me." So now we let go of the past and proceed into the future.

Linda reads her narrative almost like a testimonial. She uses the stair rail as a podium while she is positioned on the landing. For the first portion, she wanted the camera above her on the stairs, her body below the viewer. But when the narrative takes a turn, when she acknowledges her transition from anger ("it was making me mad") to reconciliation ("I love him and he loves me"), the shot cuts to a new camera angle where Linda's body is above the viewer. She continues to deliver prose very formally but with a decisive change of camera/viewer perspective, which she hoped would communicate her own changed perspective of self-identity. The final scene cuts to Linda, once again outside, walking away from the camera only to stop and turn at the last minute with the toes of her bare feet peeking from under the hem of her long pink gown.



Figure 4. Video frames of Linda's performance. Used with permission of subject

After another fade we see Yami again, walking slowly across the screen.

She was my best friend: sweet, funny, crazy. But it's been too long. We don't talk. We don't speak. It's been more than two months. No, I still haven't seen her.

One afternoon, it's been a long day. "Ready to move?" One phone call changed everything. My daddy called. "Come home. Soon." As my mom and my brother talk, I wondered what was going on. We are back home. Still, don't know what's going on. My mom said to me, "Don't get out of the car. It will be fast." But as I'm in the car with my brother, I see my mom crying. I don't know what's going on, and I really want to know. My mom opens the car door and says, "We need to go now." I feel something, but I still don't know what it is. I'm scared. I'm terrified. I kind of feel pain. We go to my friend's house. She's gone. That's all I hear. She's gone. No one to talk to. No one to speak. Gone.

So that night I closed my eyes and still wondered why.

Four years passed and still no answer. I know she's here with me somewhere. But from now on, she's just gone.

Scene.

As the first lines of Yami's story are read, the camera steadily moves across the floor and up the stairs. At the top, we see Yami: one leg outstretched in front of her and the other tucked up close to her body. Her small frame is dominated by long, black hair and an oversized western straw hat. She never looks at the camera, but slowly and softly tells her story about the death of a childhood friend. There are no cuts, no transitions from one shot to another. The only effect

applied to the scene is a darkened vignette around the edges of the screen. During filming, we suggested to the girls that they say “scene” to indicate to the other participants when to cut the shot. Yami elected to include that as part of her performance. As you hear her say “scene,” the shot transitions back outside again, with Yami walking away from the camera along a covered sidewalk.



Figure 5. Video frames of Yami’s performance. Used with permission of subject.

The video ends similarly to how it began: we see short clips of each girl outside, walking, gazing past the camera, standing alone on the sidewalk. The music pans, cars drive by in the background, and the screen fades back to black with just one word this time: LIFE.

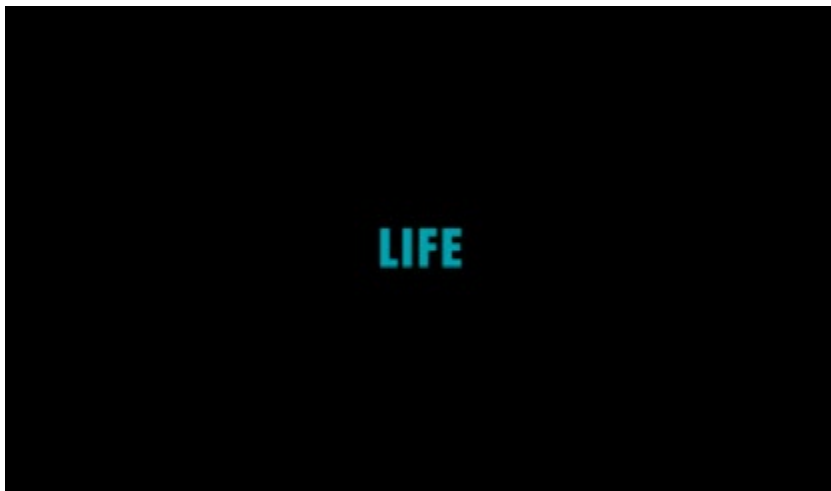


Figure 6. Video frames of final appearances of Yami, Linda, and Jasmine and a concluding slide. Used with permission of subject.

Occupying Anonymous (2012)

<https://vimeo.com/100518663>

We understand the performances of these three participants to be deliberately honest, open, and vulnerable. Given the challenges of working with girls participating in a series of juvenile arbitration workshops—including time constraints, resistance, distrust, and sometimes anger—we posit that the performative spaces of disidentity, becoming, and occupying anonymity allowed the girls strength that is not always easy to come by as adolescents.

### Considerations for Art Education

Working with this population of girls has been challenging while, simultaneously, expanding our intellectual scope and capacity for care as art educators. We had to continuously search for and negotiate a delicate balance between our participants’ marginalized positions and public image, the anonymity concerns, and expressive avenues of art production that can provide a fuller visibility to their voices and bodies. We laughed, cried, and relived traumatic events with them during our sessions. At times, we faced fierce resistance that we had to give into and allow for some girls to choose a different juvenile arbitration sanction (which usually implies substituting our art class with 12 community service hours). Other times we operated less as teachers than as older siblings, who were also once teenagers with adolescent experiences that made us feel small, angry, and terrified. We never began our sessions knowing exactly what to expect, and were often surprised when a girl, first reluctant to write, would create a sublimely powerful poem, or a girl who was painfully shy would face the camera with a bold determination to tell her story. As art educators, we cherished these moments because it makes more transparent the realm of possibilities for what participants, teachers, and the field of Art Education might be.

Our female participants’ obligatory anonymity was riddled with ethical considerations that required concealing their physical identity markers as a measure of public protection; yet these same markers carried a public stigma of bad girl and law offender. By allowing girls to be visible in their video performances, we tapped into both an

institutional taboo and issues of dignity and safety. As we explored the productive intersections of theories on fluid identities and experimented with avenues of video and performance, we discovered a secure liminal space in which our participants' fixed identity as a juvenile offender, girl in trouble, or bad girl vanished as they reinvented themselves as different yet nameless. In doing so, they escaped the oppressive labels via this act of disidentification. In this space, their anonymity functioned as a condition of the performance, but also as its catalyst. A deliberate masquerading and transforming (rather than avoiding and hiding) of their bodied identity markers created an immanent field of self-reconstruction, safety, and renegotiation. It is on this field that our participants navigated bravely and honestly through the critical issues that limit and bind emotional and intellectual growth and life opportunities.

The Occupying Anonymous project also opened up new uncharted territories for the girls' public visibility, otherwise an institutional taboo. As we screened this film (and others) at juvenile arbitration events, community board meetings, professional teacher conferences, and a local university museum, our participants' anonymous performances challenged the pervasive discourses of girls gone wild, and reinvented their public image as powerful writers and capable actors, directors, and editors. In this process, our project functioned as a form of public pedagogy that invited various audiences to reconsider limiting socio-cultural codes, labels, and representations of at-risk youth. Occupying Anonymous formed a liminal space of public visibility, a place of abundant opportunity, a new LIFE.

## References

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. New York: Routledge.
- Case, S. (1989/2003). Toward a butch-femme aesthetic. In A. Jones (Ed.), *The feminism and visual culture reader* (pp. 402-413). New York: Routledge.
- Chesney-Lind, M., & Irwin, K. (2008). *Beyond bad girls: Gender, violence and hype*. New York: Routledge.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- hooks, b. (1990). *Yearnings: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston: South End Press.
- Ivashkevich, O. (2013a). Beyond bad girls: Evoking change with (post)critical pedagogy. In K. Tavin & C. Ballengee-Morris (Eds.), *Stand(ing) up, for a change: Voices of arts educators* (pp. 169-173). Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Ivashkevich, O. (2013b). Performing disidentifications: Girls "in trouble" experiment with digital narratives to remake self-representations. *Studies in Art Education*, 54(4), 321-334.
- Muñoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. New York: Routledge.