



## Dispatch

### Feminist Friendship

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The call for dispatches from the field of feminist scholarship and advocacy reflecting on Jackie Kirk's legacy has given us the wonderful opportunity to think about her inspiration and impact on our individual lives as feminist scholars. It has also afforded us the rare opportunity to think in an intentional way about our friendship, which started 10 years ago when we were both graduate students. To tell our story and share our reflections, we've structured our dispatch as an intertwined monologue with our readers as our audience. As we wrote this piece we were at times overwhelmed with emotion, both from our enduring sadness at the loss of Jackie's brilliant mind, and out of gratitude that her work created such a rich, sustaining and nurturing feminist friendship for us.

#### Feminist Friendship at First Sight

**Kim:** Heather and I met in 2008 while I was a doctoral student in Comparative Education at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Katrina Daly Thompson, who was my Swahili professor at the time, emailed me explaining that Heather was from Virginia Tech and had just moved to the LA area upon her return to the United States from dissertation fieldwork in Kenya. She reached out to Katrina to make connections with others working on East Africa in the Los Angeles area. Katrina thought I would enjoy meeting her and put us in touch.

Heather and I clicked instantly, in no small part because of a shared interest in Kenya and a shared anxiety that comes with doctoral candidacy. The African studies community at UCLA was shrinking; I was grateful to meet a new friend and colleague who shared similar research interests.

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**Heather:** Meeting Kim was a godsend for me. After living all of my adult life in a small, rural university town in the mountains of Virginia and then moving to a relatively remote village of scattered-yet-connected Maasai homesteads in southern Kenya for my dissertation fieldwork, navigating the vast and maddening sea of humanity that is Los Angeles was, for me, disconcerting to say the least. Kim was welcoming and generous, and I looked forward to our Friday meetings at a coffee shop on the UCLA campus. Our burgeoning friendship was grounding for me personally as well as intellectually and professionally. Kim invited me to review manuscripts for the graduate student-run scholarly journal she co-edited, *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, and the sense of isolation I'd felt upon my return from Kenya was replaced with connection. This mooring of feminist friendship returned me to my research and galvanized my desire to make sense of the experiences and perceptions of over 100 Maasai primary schoolgirls I interviewed in Kenya along with some of their mothers and teachers. I eventually moved back to Virginia to be closer to my doctoral home (library, faculty advisors) and the familiarity of family, but my friendship with Kim endured despite the distance.

**Kim:** Around this time, I applied for an open short-term consultancy with the International Rescue Committee. The position was to finish writing a paper that analyzed issues of financing for gender equality in and through education in emergency, post-emergency and fragile contexts. As I learned during the interview, Jackie Kirk had been working on the paper, along with another IRC colleague, when she was killed in Afghanistan. A few months had passed, and the IRC team wanted to make sure the project was completed.

Once the work picked up, I realized I was in-over-my-head, not just in trying to fill Jackie's footsteps, even on this relatively minor project, but also because this was my first foray into the world of development consulting. Although comparative education is my home discipline, I was not aware of Jackie at the time. The further the project went along, the more I learned about her work as a feminist academic-practitioner.

As Heather mentioned, in our weekly meetups at UCLA we talked about our research and professional efforts, and we also talked about our lives. I told her about the project I was starting with IRC and my fear of completing a project in a way that would not honor Jackie's legacy, the weight of which I was starting to truly understand and appreciate.

**Heather:** It's rather amazing to reflect on now, after all these years, but I distinctly recall talking with Kim on the phone as she explained the IRC consultancy she'd started. We were both saddened and shocked to learn of Jackie's death and deeply moved by the realization that feminist scholar-practitioners lost their lives working for marginalized children and young people. Continuing the work Jackie and her colleagues had started quickly felt more poignant than professional. I was impressed with Kim's

wherewithal in the face of her first consultancy, particularly given the tragic circumstances surrounding the project, and gratified to know that she would gather her consummate care and skill to complete the job.

Like Kim, I learned about Jackie and her work for the first time when we talked about the consultancy. Moved to learn more, I stumbled upon the *Girlhood Studies Journal* call for papers commemorating her legacy (which resulted in Volume 3, Issue 1, Summer of 2010). I was delighted and amazed to learn of the vibrant scholarly, activist and advocacy community called girlhood studies, and more than slightly dismayed that in all my research on girls' education and development in preparation for my fieldwork in Kenya I had never come across this sub-field. To add to the intensity of this discovery, at that point in my graduate career I had never submitted a paper to a peer-reviewed journal, and yet it seemed critical that I take a risk and step through the threshold toward the bright light of possibility girlhood studies offered. After all, Jackie was only two years older than me when she was killed, yet she had built a career that, to me, represented the best of feminist scholar-activism. I was dumbstruck when my manuscript, adapted from a chapter in my dissertation, was accepted for publication and honored to be a part of the first commemorative issue.

### **Pathways of Possibility**

**Heather:** In the past ten years, I've been fortunate to become a tenured professor, return to Kenya a few more times for research with girls, write a book on Maasai "schoolgirlhood," develop and teach courses on girlhood and adolescence, develop the Girls and Girls' Studies caucus for the National Women's Studies Association, attend the inaugural International Girls' Studies Conference in the UK, join my esteemed colleagues Claudia Mitchell, Ann Smith, and Bodil Formark as co-editor for the new book series, *Transnational Girlhoods*, and generally find an intellectual home in girlhood studies. The winding path to this moment has had much to do with key elements of Jackie's work that have formed the bedrock of my own. Jackie Kirk and Stephanie Garrow's (2003) cogent analysis of girls' participation as policy presented insights that resonated deeply with my own sense that understanding girls' lives in the context of development required working across disciplinary boundaries. When they argued for bridges between education and psychology, sociology, and importantly for my work, cultural studies and feminist analysis of visual and textual representations, I felt a kinship I had struggled to feel with much of the more disciplinary-bound social science scholarship I had been reading in education and development literatures. Jackie and Stephanie were speaking my language; the seamless way Jackie and her colleagues brought together cultural studies of girlhood with empirical studies of girls' lives made the kind of work I wanted to do seem possible. Jackie's ability to move among and between academic and

advocacy frameworks and settings with grace and acumen is, for me, an aspirational horizon for feminist work.

Perhaps most provocatively and poignantly, Jackie's insistence on girls as experts on their own lives – without romanticizing or overdetermining the notion of “voice” – has been key to my work. Her insistence that “girls are not merely ‘women in waiting’ but members of our communities today... citizens with a full set of rights and expectations right now” (Kirk & Garrow, 2003, p. 6) remains a profound insight elemental to girlhood studies and vitally important for framing development interventions in girls' lives. In Jackie's work, focusing on the lived experience of education by centering girls as knowledge subjects reverses the image of the passive and silent girl-child and privileges a complex definition of girlhood. These presuppositions provide the conceptual and ethical foundation of my work on girls in development, particularly my recent book, *When the Light is Fire: Maasai Schoolgirls in Contemporary Kenya* (Switzer, 2018). Like poor racialized girls elsewhere, Maasai schoolgirls have conventionally been regarded as the objects of expert knowledge rather than the subjects of their own stories. In the book, I weave together an account of Maasai girls and shifting notions of Maasai girlhood that directly engages the victimized girl-child/empowered schoolgirl dichotomy and attempts to illuminate the complex, everyday dynamic experience of girls who go to school. As I hope I show, schoolgirls' aggressive faith in the promise of schooling troubles reductive notions of the abject Maasai girl struggling within an inherently oppressive culture. Their collective insistence on the possibilities of schooling to change key aspects of their lives likewise reveals the possibilities, and as I discuss, the paradoxes, of gendered social change in Maasai communities – as elsewhere. The emergence of the schoolgirl as a normative social category and what I call “schoolgirlhood” as an increasingly common cultural space, are effects of, as well as producers of, a new common sense about the crucial role school(ing) girls plays in development. Jackie was also deeply concerned about how visual and textual representations of girls' images and voices were easily instrumentalized, a concern I share and also attempt to address in the book as well as in my teaching and scholarship about girls' lives. Of all the important facets of her work that I could highlight, Jackie's insistence that we take girls seriously is perhaps her most enduring gift.

**Kim:** When hearing Heather talk about all she's accomplished in the years we've known each other, I'm so inspired and in awe of her. I admire the work she's done and continues to do, even as our professional paths have diverged. After completing the consultancy with IRC in 2008, I went on to finish my dissertation. My research included an analysis of Kenyan primary school textbooks accompanied by child interviews to explore the ways primary school students define gender relative to the international discourses around gender equality. Grounded in Harding's (2004) work on feminist standpoint theory and Smith's (2005) concept of institutional ethnography, I used

Jackie's *Looking at Textbooks from a Gender Perspective: A Framework for Analysis* (Kirk, n.d.) to collect textbook data. Gender analyses of textbooks typically focus on simply counting the number of girls, boys, women, and men named and pictured. Jackie, however, created a feminist tool that further explores the dynamics of the relationships of those named and pictured, providing a more nuanced analysis of gendered representation.

As I transitioned into post-doctoral professional pathways, I have strived to straddle the lines of academic-practitioner as a means of connecting the two worlds, as Jackie did. In the almost 10 years that have passed since I first encountered her work, I have served as an academic, and I have also worked as a development consultant with USAID, UNESCO, UNICEF, ministries of education and women's affairs, and international NGOs in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Pakistan, Uganda, and Yemen, focusing particularly on issues of gender and education in fragile settings.

Jackie's spirit as a feminist academic-practitioner isn't the only motivating factor that has carried me through these experiences; I have also continued to use and adapt Jackie's data collection framework. I used her framework in the classroom in a textbook methods course, during which students adapted it to analyze textbooks from 12 African countries. Students used the notion of analyzing gendered relationship dynamics as a jumping off point to further analyze intersecting power structures represented in textbooks, including issues around the politics of language, race, religious, ethnic, and national identity. I have also applied her methods as a development consultant focused on education in fragile settings, including a USAID consultancy analyzing Afghan textbooks published by the Ministry of Education. While the Ministry of Education felt that they had made strides in including more images of girls in primary school textbooks, when we looked at the textbooks through a gendered lens, findings showed that boys are represented as active, going to school and earning money, while girls are constructed as passive, not going to school, and rarely earning money or leaving the home.

These varied roads have led me to Sesame Workshop, the non-profit behind Sesame Street and its international co-productions. In overseeing research related to Sesame's international outreach projects, I bring Jackie with me. At Sesame, we carry out research at all stages of an intervention, inviting children to express their needs and wants so that they are the drivers of the process and their wishes are reflected in the outcome.

**Heather:** I am secretly envious of the paths down which Kim's interests and expertise have taken her, not only all over the world in the service of creating inclusive, generative, and life affirming educational experiences for all children and young people, but for the opportunities she has for transforming how knowledge is created for children globally. I don't consider myself an activist, yet as Jackie's work on women's teaching lives has made clear, my

activities as a professor and student advocate provide a way for me to embody the change I want to see in the world.

### With Gratitude

When we shared a bit of our story with Marni, Claudia and Vanessa (the guest editors of this special issue commemorating Jackie Kirk) and asked about submitting our reflection as a dispatch, Vanessa responded with delight by invoking international relations scholar Cynthia Enloe's notion of "feminist curiosity" – a particular intellectual force and audacious faith that takes all women and their experiences seriously, challenges taken for granted assumptions and normative expectations, and welcomes surprises. The energy created by feminist curiosity brought us together as friends in Los Angeles 10 years ago, and even though neither of us ever met Jackie, her work has serendipitously led us to new possibilities – possibilities that, before the moment of coming to know about Jackie, were simply unknown to us. In reflecting on the role of Jackie in our personal and professional lives, we are reminded of girlhood studies scholar Marnina Gonick's observation in the Acknowledgments of her first book, *Between Femininities: Ambivalence, Identity and the Education of Girls* (2003) in which she references anthropologist Paul Rabinow's insistence that friendship is a "primary site of thinking." Through trusted friendships we have the space to risk personal growth by putting ourselves into our work (as research scholars, as activists, and practitioners) without knowing in advance what we will find, see, encounter, or engage. As friends, feminists, and *confidantes*, we value Jackie's invaluable contribution to the foundation of our primary site of thinking and her role in stoking the flames of our own feminist curiosities.

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