



**Clare Bradford, Mavis Reimer, eds.** *Girls, Texts, Cultures*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015. vii + 331 pp. \$48.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-77112-020-3.



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The result of a symposium held at the Center for Research in Young People's Texts and Cultures at the University of Winnipeg in 2012, *Girls, Texts, Cultures* greatly adds to the blossoming field of girl studies. The anthology, edited by Clare Bradford and Mavis Reimer, builds upon the work of feminist cultural studies scholar Angela McRobbie, whose pioneering survey of girls' cultures spurred, in the late 1980s, the emergence of a research field focused specifically on tracing how females in their teens and early twenties experience, negotiate, and reappropriate popular culture in their everyday lives.[1] Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, a slew of media scholars, civic activists, educators, and social science researchers contributed to the visibility of girls' individual and collective responses to popular culture. Of note are the works of Joan J. Brumberg, Catherine Driscoll, Miriam Forman-Brunell, Marnina Gonick, Anita Harris, Mary Celeste Kearney, and Valerie Walkerdine, among many other feminist scholars who seminally married ethnographical and historical research with cultural theory and visual analysis of material artifacts as a means to push back against the image of adolescent girls as passive, defeated subjects—an understanding popularized in the 1990s by psychologist Mary Pipher's bestseller *Reviving Ophelia*.<sup>[2]</sup>

*Girls, Texts, Cultures* continues the groundwork laid down by these past studies, aiming to present girls as creative media producers and empowered cultural agents. One of the key ways in which this anthology succeeds in contributing to the academic study of girl culture is by offering a helpful working definition of an otherwise fluid field. In their introduction, the editors suggest that "girls' studies" should be seen "less as a [strict] discipline ... than a set of questions about the cultural functions of girls and girlhoods that are taken up by scholars trained in a variety of disciplines" (p. 4). Indeed the twelve articles included in *Girls, Texts, Cultures* are incredibly diverse in their methodologies, objects, and disciplinary lens. Scholarship is culled from literature, sociology, education, and gender studies. Participatory research coexists with "ethnographic studies of audiences," and it is framed by an in-depth investigation of nineteenth-century paper dolls (Jacqueline Reid-Walsh), turn-of-the-century novels (Michelle J. Smith and Kristine Moruz from the late 1800s; and Kerry Mallan and Elizabeth Bullen from the early 2000s), millennial television shows (Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby), and digital avatars (Stephanie Fisher, Jennifer Jenson, and Suzanne de Castell) (p. 7). Structurally, the book is divided in three sections, the first exploring "Contempo-

rary *Girlhoods and Subjectivities*, followed by *The Politics of Girlhood*, and a last part on *Settling and Unsettling Girlhoods*.

Peppered throughout these thematic sections, chapters focused on ethnographic and participatory research yield particularly rich results, surveying girls' responses from South Asia to South Africa, from Great Britain to North America. For example, through a series of interviews conducted with indigenous girls growing up in Canada, Sandrina de Finney and Johanne Saraceno's article brings into sharp relief the persistent prejudice underlining twenty-first-century depictions of indigenous girlhood circulated in North American societies. Privileging autobiographical responses, the piece lets girls speak out and examines the negative effect these racialized stereotypes still have on indigenous girls' self-worth and self-perception. Claudia Mitchell's examination of videos, photographs, and drawings crafted by girls living in Ethiopia, Canada, South Africa, and Rwanda also adds fresh insight to our knowledge of global girlhoods, offering a meaningful look at the ways in which girls can be both cultural producers ..., as well as interpreters of their own work through a process of participatory analysis (p. 141). In her study of unmarried, school-going Muslim girls living in two of Kolkata's *bustees* (slums), Kabita Chakraborty similarly uses participatory research methods to trace the ways popular Bollywood films help shape millennial girls' understanding of acceptable heterosexual courtship and gender-coded social behavior. A particularly insightful moment is found in the author's interpretation of an underprivileged Muslim girl's behavior when she is taken on a date to an Americanized indoor food court. The girl's decision to choose international food over regional food as a way to impress her male date evinces, according to Chakraborty, a deliberate decision to exhibit a modern middle-class identity, and thus perform a satisfying alternative identity gleaned from her favorite Bollywood productions (p. 201). The author proposes that this is an empowering spectatorial appropriation of Bollywood cinema, since the girl finds pleasure in performing a pleasurable identity that had not found expression in her everyday life.

The goal of working as a bridge between mass representation and first-person experience—that is, between texts for and about girls, and those who investigate contemporary girlhoods—is simultaneously the driving strength and the unfulfilled promise of this anthology (p. 1). Chapters such as Pamela Knights's mapping of the evolution of girl-oriented ballet narratives in twentieth-

century Anglo-American literature, and Smith's analysis of depictions of young Australian femininity in nineteenth-century British fiction insightfully historicize and contextualize the construction of female adolescence in modern Western ideology. Reid-Walsh's piece on the interactive and didactic usages of eighteenth-century conduct manuals and nineteenth-century flap books also provides an interesting meditation on the ways old media repeatedly resurfaces in new visual technologies, with the aim of constantly regulating and promoting proper girls' conduct (p. 223).

Contributions focused on tracing a history of girls' representation in popular culture are thus varied, but also too narrowly focused on literary documents: of twelve chapters, seven hinge on the analysis of literary texts, from advice books to comic books and young adult novels. This does not take away from the fact that the present anthology clearly intends to portray girlhood as a heterogeneous concept—it's many chapters broach girl subjects from various ethnicities, geographies, and social origins. Omissions are still noticeable though, particularly the absence of work on other Asian communities beyond India, young Latina/Chicana communities, and other indigenous girl communities than those located on Canadian soil. Bullen's analysis of millennial books targeting Anglo-American girl consumers mitigates this limitation by producing a complex reading of how commodities featured in young adult fiction are not simply class-coded, but morally loaded and regulative, influencing mass-produced representations of girls' sexual respectability, lifestyle aesthetics, and class distinctions (p. 71). Bullen's reading of the *chav* heroine—a young female figure popular in twenty-first-century British youth culture that unabashedly embraces her raunchy sexuality and low-class aesthetics—may be also especially illuminating for those conducting research on contemporary girl subcultures and its fraught relation with racial appropriation, material consumption, taste, and class distinctions.

Another minor shortcoming is the dearth of more detailed scholarship on girls' engagement with new media technologies. Pomerantz and Rady's piece on the postfeminist, neoliberal message underlining the *super smart* girl heroine of twenty-first-century American television programming does not include a study of audience reactions. This methodological choice restricts an actual gauging of the impact these teenaged characters have on girl viewers' perception of self and everyday life. Fisher, Jenson, and de Castell's participatory research on Canadian girls' *gameplay*—the singular chap-

ter tackling new media technology is fascinating, presenting a firsthand view of middle-school girls's subversion of the gendered stereotypes disseminated in popular video games targeting school-age audiences. Yet, in an age when the Internet and digital technologies so profoundly shape female development, peer socialization, and identity-formation processes, additional chapters analyzing girls and new media would have enhanced the overall contribution this anthology could make to the expanding study of millennial mediated girlhoods.

As a reader, a teacher, and a fellow girl studies researcher, my most poignant criticism of this anthology is its lack of a consistent definition of what is, after all, a girl—how is a girl different from a child, a tween, a female adult, or a young woman? Should we draw distinctions between these categories based on age? Marital status? Educational standard? Economical (in)dependence? A coherent working definition is not clearly established by the editors, nor consistently furthered by individual authors. Those conducting participatory research, such as Dawn H. Currie, Mitchell, and de Finney and Saraceno, straightforwardly delineate girls according to their age. Kristine Moruzi's reading of the ways British literature represented girls' work during the First World War, however, is much less specific, attributing girlhood simultaneously to unmarried heroines in their teens and to married protagonists in their mid-twenties. I understand that the editors sought to introduce girlhood as a plural construct, but for teachers, undergraduate students, and novices to the study of girl cultures the lack of a stable definition of what being a girl entails can be confusing and potentially alienating.

Nevertheless, *Girls, Texts, Cultures* has much to offer to a wide range of audiences. Its diverse breadth

of research methodologies, subject matters, and objects of study showcases well the current debates on youth media studies, and succeeds at presenting a compelling case of why girls' cultural production and popular representation matter and should be closely examined in academia. Lay readers will find the research published here thought-provoking and approachable. This anthology can also be easily adopted as a textbook in an introductory course to youth cultures or gender studies. Additionally, most of its chapters can be sampled individually as required readings in university-level classes and meaningfully contribute to discussions in the fields of sociology, education, cultural theory, children's literature, or media studies.

#### Notes

[1]. Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: from Jackie to Just Seventeen* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1991).

[2]. See Joan J. Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage, 1997); Catherine Driscoll, *Girls* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Miriam Forman-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris, eds. *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Valerie Walkerdine, *Daddy's Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Also see Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

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