

ALL ABOUT THE *Girl*

CULTURE, POWER, AND IDENTITY

EDITED BY

ANITA HARRIS

WITH A FOREWORD BY MICHELLE FINE

ROUTLEDGE  
NEW YORK AND LONDON

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# Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Foreword	xi
MICHELLE FINE	
Introduction	xvii
ANITA HARRIS	
<b>PART 1</b> Constructing Girlhoods in the Twenty-First Century	
1 Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime	3
ANGELA McROBBIE	
2 Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connection: A Critical Review of American Girls' Studies	15
JANIE VICTORIA WARD AND BETH COOPER BENJAMIN	
3 Good Girls, Bad Girls: Anglocentrism and Diversity in the Constitution of Contemporary Girlhood	29
CHRISTINE GRIFFIN	
4 From Badness to Meanness: Popular Constructions of Contemporary Girlhood	45
MEDA CHESNEY-LIND AND KATHERINE IRWIN	
<b>PART 2</b> Feminism for Girls	
5 Feminism and Femininity: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong	59
JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER AND AMY RICHARDS	

6	Girl Power Politics: Pop-Culture Barriers and Organizational Resistance JESSICA K. TAFT	69
7	Mythic Figures and Lived Identities: Locating the “Girl” in Feminist Discourse JENNIFER EISENHAUER	79
8	“I Don’t See Feminists as You See Feminists”: Young Women Negotiating Feminism in Contemporary Britain MADELEINE JOWETT	91
<b>PART 3</b> Sexuality		
9	Pretty in Pink: Young Women Presenting Mature Sexual Identities KATE GLEESON AND HANNAH FRITH	103
10	Talking Sexuality Through an Insider’s Lens: The Samoan Experience ANNE-MARIE TUPUOLA	115
11	Shifting Desires: Discourses of Accountability in Abstinence-only Education in the United States APRIL BURNS AND MARÍA ELENA TORRE	127
<b>PART 4</b> Popular and Virtual Cultures		
12	Where My Girls At? Black Girls and the Construction of the Sexual DEBBIE WEEKES	141
13	Spicy Strategies: Pop Feminist and Other Empowerments in Girl Culture BETTINA FRITZSCHE	155
14	Jamming Girl Culture: Young Women and Consumer Citizenship ANITA HARRIS	163
15	Girls’ Web Sites: A Virtual “Room of One’s Own”? JACQUELINE REID-WALSH AND CLAUDIA MITCHELL	173
<b>PART 5</b> Schooling		
16	Pleasures Within Reason: Teaching Feminism and Education NANCY LESKO AND ANTOINETTE QUARSHIE	185

17	Girls, Schooling, and the Discourse of Self-Change: Negotiating Meanings of the High School Prom AMY L. BEST	195
18	Gender and Sexuality: Continuities and Change for Girls in School MARY JANE KEHILY	205
<b>PART 6 Research With and By Young Women</b>		
19	Colluding in “Compulsory Heterosexuality”? Doing Research with Young Women at School KATHRYN MORRIS-ROBERTS	219
20	Speaking Back: Voices of Young Urban Womyn of Color Using Participatory Action Research to Challenge and Complicate Representations of Young Women CAITLIN CAHILL, ERICA ARENAS, JENNIFER CONTRERAS, JIANG NA, INDRA RIOS-MOORE, AND TIFFANY THREATTS	231
21	Beneath the Surface of Voice and Silence: Researching the Home Front ADREANNE ORMOND	243
22	Possible Selves and Pasteles: How a Group of Mothers and Daughters Took a London Conference by Storm LORI LOBENSTINE, YASMIN PEREIRA, JENNY WHITLEY, JESSICA ROBLES, YARALIZ SOTO, JEANETTE SERGEANT, DAISY JIMENEZ, EMILY JIMENEZ, JESSENIA ORTIZ, AND SASHA CIRINO	255
	Contributor Biographies	265
	Index	271



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# Foreword

**Michelle Fine**

## **All About the Girl**

### *A thank-you note*

In the spirit of the post-Foucaultian confessional, I must admit that I love women's bathrooms. The neoliberal global economy renders women's bathrooms a shared fate with juries, libraries, and highways—all remainder public spaces. Spaces where we confront the "between," where we can still meet ourselves and each other. Women's public bathrooms open spaces not already hyper-commidified, Gap-ed, privatized, and colonized. Nestled inside this space for labia only swells a profoundly gendered world in which we can produce, consume, critique, engage, witness, eavesdrop, separate, and join. The long arm of the global market is barely visible, held off at the door by a collective of women who usually just need to pee. And yet there are always leaks....

Need condoms?  
Tampax?  
Diapers?  
Cards?  
Mouthwash?  
Horoscope?

## **Wanna Weigh Yourself?**

Rare are the spaces in which girls and women gather as girls and women. It's hard to find spots where self-consciously gendered (not necessarily feminist or postfeminist but gendered) politics can pollinate among strangers,

unencumbered by the suffocating grasp of commodification—although it’s always in the air freshener.

In this heterotopia of girls’/women’s privacy and intimacy, *we* can be seen, heard, watched, and smelled, and still act *as if* no one is watching. Crouching in liminality between full exposure and existential solitary, we are at once with and alone. We can “do” the politics of intimate daily life among a group of relative strangers, joined by a thin reed of biology. Like Web sites, zines, chain letters, soap operas, protests, and rallies, all (a)part, for a moment, we create a world. I smile, ironically, as I invent this segregated space with radical possibility, although really I long for the physical, ratty, mildew-couched, poster-filled “My best friend is a man, but would you want your sister to marry one?” women’s centers that decorated my late teens and young adulthood. In today’s new gender regime, you must qualify with a badge of (dis)honor to enter a space explicitly for girls and women: battered, teen and pregnant, or anorexic.

So I felt as if I were coming home to a virtual, transnational women’s center when reading *All About the Girl*. The volume hosts a textual pajama party for girls, and girl wannabes, across the globe. Immersed in a semifictional community of *us*, theory, methods, ethics, lipstick, rape, consumerism, and politics get an airing. The essays cast a wide net, historically and internationally, to catch, and constitute, an *us*.

In bathrooms, *we* brush our teeth, stare at our butts, check out our swollen wombs, help baby boys urinate, teach children not to stare or laugh, kiss a lover, write on walls. We are fully embodied; at once raw and performing. And if we’re really lucky, we can enjoy years and generations of scribbling on the bathroom stalls. We can read decade-old conversations among girls and women about loving Tommy, hating bitches, sucking cock, caressing Connie’s breasts, heartbreaks and heart throbs. In the textual commode, you may consume (read) and produce (write). Or you can just listen, as mothers and children negotiate, “Are you done yet?” Friends giggle about boys, girls, bodies, clothes, and performances. Older women lower themselves onto the seat. Just the generation who believes they have to put paper down or squat is the one least physically capable of doing either. You may wander past a woman with her life in a paper bag in the corner, not begging, willing to accept. Sleeping, a smile, her eyes betray a life. You’ll act as if you don’t smell.

There is no neutral space in the women’s bathroom. The net is wide, and you can’t opt out.

With praise and delight, *All About the Girl* delivers the best of women’s bathrooms. Conversations, sounds, smells, memories, bodies, histories and futures, production and consumption, scars and pleasures, etched in stories of girls and feminisms past and future, near and far. This book weaves an *us* with differences marked and theorized: lipstick scorned and adorned; cleavage buried and blossoming; a black eye, don’t ask but nod knowingly. In this volume we delight in the radical possibilities of (re)theorizing girl,

reframing the waves feminism, troubling the Anglocentric and white laminations of postfeminist theory, combing through the knotted hairs (what Angela McRobbie calls the “double entanglements”) of global capital and the production of gender, “race,” and age, and exploding what constitutes method, evidence, consciousness, and activism.

With the clever analytic eyes of editor Anita Harris and the collective of authors, *All About the Girl* advances, as it establishes, a critical space for girls’ studies. With great insight about how history, political economy, and the media shape representations and embodiments of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and age, the chapters also reveal the ways in which “waves” of feminism alter the ideological fashions designed for girls. As a collective, the chapters theorize gender and girls in global relation to capital and consumption, and in localized relation to place and politics. Deeply rooted in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Samoa, and New Zealand, the chapters both interrogate local shapings of gender and connect the global ribs that sculpt bodies through gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, and geography. Perhaps most stunning, these chapters articulate a critical theory of feminist method, troubling what constitutes evidence, epistemology, and activist research. The chapters elevate gossip, zines, girls’ magazines, teen quizzes, comics, television, popular culture, proms, Web sites, stereotype stickers, and the nail-polished trivia of everyday life as empirical archives of social reproduction and struggle. This volume marks a cross-disciplinary turning point by establishing the field, insisting on globally analytic and locally deep work, and radically reimagining feminist methods for girls’ studies.

So, if this were a bathroom wall, I would scribble on about three of my favorite, thick, messy struggles in the book.

**irony:** The title of the book forecasts the ironies that season the volume: *All About the Girl*. While *All* signifies a blasphemous slip/slap toward totalizing knowledge, *the Girl* performs unapologetically as singular and multiple, representational and idiosyncratic, blond, Samoan, pink, queer, goth, performing slut, enacting academic success, coherent and fractured, assured and ambivalent, resisting and reproducing. The category “girl” is at once presented and it vibrates throughout the volume, in good critical intellectual tradition.

**struggle:** Between chapters, important, contentious struggles surface about the “waves”—their wisdom and hegemony—between girls and women. More precisely, a vibrant and provocative set of tensions emerges about the relation of second- and third-wave feminisms, the metaphor of waves, the familial roots of the word *generation*, and the sense of loss between women and girls. While these debates are much needed, much appreciated, and profoundly unresolved, the arguments echo but also resist the wisdom of Lillian Hellman’s book title *Pentimento*.

As I read across the manuscript, I conjured a thick, wet canvas upon which our many feminisms have been painted. I relived the luscious spaces

I've enjoyed between girls and women. And yet, in the never coincidental slip of the fingers, I typed *vicious* as I thought *luscious*. Fingers speak.

The volume elicits reflexive, unsettling vibrations, tinged with nostalgia, resistance and wonder at the declaration that we are decidedly “post” feminist. While the dangling hairs of prior feminisms can be found ambivalently in the “third wave” there is a theoretical demarcation at the post feminism that troubled me. I found myself more comfortable with the language of *a new gender regime* than a demarcation of *post*, yearning for more generous border guards of “herstory,” willing to snorkel for material passing through the leaky and porous membranes separating the waves.

The relation between the waves is critical to analyze for *partial continuities*, not simply distinctions. We must wonder—on the canvas, in the waves, in the bodies, and through the collective body of girls and women, in the “post”—where live the outrage, analysis, knowledge, critique shouted and stuffed back into our bodies; protested and commodified? What carries forward over time? What is displaced, obliterated, destabilized, and what survives transgressively? Perhaps we need to excavate those bathroom walls, diaries burned, tears on pillows, scratchings on the walls of mental institutions to learn what girls/women knew then and have drowned since, for each generation to discover anew. Maybe we need to invent traditions of passing down oral histories, secrets, whispers, and screams of girls/women—before, within, and across homes, communities, cultures, and nation-states.

**freedom in pink—girls at the global cash register:** Across chapters a(nother) critical conversation percolates over the political economy of girls as citizens, consumers, producers, and simply as exploited bodies. These chapters theorize the neoliberal discursive shifts, from constraint to “choice,” from liberation to (neo)liberal.

Reading the manuscript, I flashed to a conversation I had recently with a friend who described her visit to a “baby farm” in Texas. A forty-something, Jewish, lesbian-hoping-to-be-mother, an artist, eager to adopt, she flew to Texas, to a well-known and frequented ranch where pregnant teens who want to relinquish their babies go to be well fed, educated, and nurtured through the pregnancy. Prospective adoptive parents pay \$25,000 for the *opportunity to be interviewed*, submit portfolios of what they will deliver if they are granted the right to adopt. They listen to panels of post-birth mothers reflecting on how they selected the “perfect” family for their child, hearing, most typically:

I was looking for a family with young parents, like in their early twenties, with a stay-at-home mom, good Christians, a dog, and the family I chose for my baby gave me a car after Tommy was adopted.

You can imagine how well my friend fared.

Subverting class domination for a magical moment, wealthy adoptive parents sit pretty and morph into commodities, while poor and working-

class (white) birth mothers don a glass slipper as agents of “choice.” In drag as powerful decision makers, for a split second the cumulative constraints on their lives masquerade as freedom and autonomy. Such well-crafted moments of “both/and/between,” hazy and vivid ambivalence, domination and resistance, seduction and loss, vivify this book and force us to retheorize “choice” within conditions of enormous constraint glamorized with neoliberal commodification.

*All About the Girl* overflows with the polyglossia of women’s bathrooms. Exposing the scars of global politics as they cut through the fabric of girls’ daily lives, we also witness the (dis)comforting joys and transgressions girls today engage in language and bodies. This collection of essays helps us to analyze the juicy and dangerous, hilarious and disturbing intersections of the global political economy, social movements of resistance, and thong underwear; helps us conceptualize the youth patois, embroidered with the words of subversion and offense: “re-vulva-lution,” “bitch,” or “fed-up honey.”

*All About the Girl* stands as a textual museum of girls’ lives, representations, and politics; indeed, a transnational conversation “between.” And, better than bathroom walls, this conversation you can take to bed.



# Introduction

**Anita Harris**

Good girls, bad girls, schoolgirls, Ophelias, third wavers, no wavers, B girls, riot grrrls, cybergURLs, queen bees, tweenies, Girlies: young women suddenly seem to be everywhere. They are the new heroes of popular culture, the dominant faces on college campuses and the spokespeople of public education campaigns. They are wooed by advertisers and recruitment companies alike. Feminism has furnished young women with choices about sexuality, chances for education and employment, and new ways of asserting autonomy and rights. These changes in possibilities and expectations for young women are reflected everywhere, from the sassy icons of the culture industries to the proliferation of government-funded girl power programs. At the same time, rising rates of arrest, incarceration, un- and under-employment among young women are a troubling counterpoint to images of over-achieving, consumer-oriented girlpower. While some privileged young women are indeed reaping the benefits of new opportunities, those without economic or social capital are slipping through the ever-widening holes in what remains of our social safety nets. Education, employment, health and safety are precarious experiences for many girls who bear the full impact of economic rationalism, new security concerns and the dismantling of welfare. Young women appear to have it all, and yet many constitute those hardest hit by the effects of the new global political economy on jobs, resources and community. How do they survive and flourish in a world of greater choices and opportunities, but fewer structures of support?

Contemporary analytical frameworks for interpreting girls' lives are complicated by the intersections of constraint, autonomy and selective freedoms that they embody. Western girls' studies today must begin the encounter with young women who are standing at the corner of feminism

and neoliberalism.<sup>1</sup> This book embarks on this project by bringing together work by scholars, researchers and activists from a wide range of disciplines and international backgrounds to explore issues concerning young women as we move into the new century. It includes research about, with and by young women in North America, the U.K., Europe and the Pacific, and reflects on the ways that class, culture, ethnicity and sexuality are shaped by and shape experiences of girlhood in these contexts. Among the questions it addresses are: How are young women positioned and how do they position themselves in the changing postindustrial and postmodern Western world? How has girlhood itself taken on new meanings as we enter the twenty-first century? Who speaks for young women and girls? What is the future of feminist inquiry into the lives of young women? In this regard, girls' studies must move forward into an unknown and somewhat unexpected landscape, and at the same time must draw on its long tradition in feminist interdisciplinary work.

Girls' studies have a strong transnational and cross-disciplinary history, even if the nomenclature itself is more recent. The field was borne out of the commonplace disregard for issues of gender within youth studies and age within women's studies. The circumstances and experiences of young women had been systematically overlooked in research and policy until the feminist interventions of the late 1970s and early 1980s. These interventions occurred in a number of different countries, out of many different disciplines, but coalesced into a loose thematic focus that can be characterized as "girls' studies." The nature of this earlier work yielded an important legacy. In the U.S. context, the work of Michelle Fine was among the first to account for the discursive possibilities as well as safe spaces in the lives of young women that make self-expression and autonomy imaginable. Her famous essay on "the missing discourse of desire" and her research on the importance of understanding intersectionality in young women's identities ushered in a new area of critical investigation. Also in the U.S., the groundbreaking work of feminist psychologists introduced the idea that conventions of adolescent development theory missed valuable information about young women's experiences. The Harvard research on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development, which includes the work of Carol Gilligan, Lyn Mikel Brown and Jill MacLean Taylor among others, researched the now popular idea that girls lose their resistant and authentic voices when they engage with cultural requirements to shape their identities in line with dominant femininities.<sup>2</sup> Prior to this, in the U.K. girls' studies first emerged out of the Marxist analyses of cultural life that developed at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the late 1970s. Christine Griffin's *Typical Girls?* and Angela McRobbie's *Feminism and Youth Culture* were important works that linked young women's

<sup>1</sup> See Aapola, Gonick and Harris, forthcoming 2004.

<sup>2</sup> This framework has been popularized more recently by the bestseller *Reviving Ophelia*, and currently informs many programs and policies for girls.

choices and material circumstances with popular images and expectations of young femininity.

Although there was a considerable Atlantic divide in terms of disciplinary traditions and conceptual frameworks regarding feminist work about girls, a shared body of knowledge and a political research agenda were developed across these differences which became the basis of the broad field of girls' studies. For example, the construction of girls' identities at the intersection of class, race, and gender has remained an important conceptual frame for more recent work, such as Heidi Safia Mirza's *Young, Female and Black*, and *Growing Up Girl* by Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey, and June Melody. Cultural studies approaches, which were first popularized by this earlier work on the construction of young femininity such as Leslie Roman and Linda Christian-Smith's edited book *Becoming Feminine*, have also been central to shaping contemporary girls' studies. There has been a recent explosion of texts in this field, including Susan Hopkins' *Girl Heroes* and Catherine Driscoll's *Girls*. Edited U.S. collections as diverse as *Urban Girls; Delinquents and Debutantes; Girl Power*, and *A Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World* offer interdisciplinary perspectives on diverse groups of girls, often centering their own voices. Internationally, the discipline of education has also been integral to the development of the girls' studies agenda. The examination of schools as sites where femininities are constructed through hegemonic discourses of nation, gender, sexuality and culture, and resisted by girls themselves, is a key plank of feminist education studies. This body of work includes Australian and New Zealand/Aotearoa texts such as Jane Kenway and Sue Willis's edited book *Hearts and Minds*; Pam Gilbert and Sandra Taylor's *Fashioning the Feminine*; Lesley Johnson's *The Modern Girl*, and Alison Jones' "At School I've Got A Chance." More recent work in this tradition includes *The Company She Keeps* by Valerie Hey; Mary Jane Kehily's *Sexuality, Gender and Schooling*; and North American books like Amira Proweller's *Constructing Female Identities* and Marnina Gonick's *Between Femininities*.

These key texts establish the terrain of feminist work about and with young women through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.<sup>3</sup> This tradition has established some fundamental issues for girls' studies: the relationship between popular cultures, material conditions and gendered identities; the role of social institutions such as school and the media in shaping femininities, and the places and voices young women utilize to express themselves. However, girls' studies is now at a turning point, and this book marks the beginning of a new focus on the meanings of girlhood and opportunities for young women in the context of three major changes for the field. First, whereas a "first wave" of girls' studies aimed to expose

<sup>3</sup>This overview is, of course, partial. Most notably, there has also been considerable work on the relationship between young women and feminism, and a whole body of literature about third wave feminism itself. This is interrogated closely in Part 2 of this book.