

# Way to Go

## *The Significance of Place for Girls and Girlhood Studies*

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### BOOK REVIEW

Claudia Mitchell, and Carrie Rentschler. 2016. *Girlhood and the Politics of Place*. New York: Berghahn Books.

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“You Go, Girl!”—the writing on the wall depicted on the front cover of *Girlhood and the Politics of Place*, edited by Claudia Mitchell and Carrie Rentschler, is paradigmatic for this book on the relevance of place and geography for the lived experiences of girls all over the world. Like an epigraph, it serves as a point of departure for this volume that focuses on the real and virtual spaces girls occupy across various nationalities, racialized identities, and ethnicities. In 18 chapters, the authors give readers insights into how the girls and young women in their studies make sense of their role in heteropatriarchal societies from rural South Africa to urban centers in North America, as well as into the various practices by means of which they carve out spaces for supportive communities and political activism. As emphasized in both the introduction and the epilogue provided by the editors, *Girlhood and the Politics of Place* is also a space for self-reflection. “You Go, Girl” can therefore be understood as a signpost for the direction girlhood studies could and should take in the future, as the epilogue suggests.

Despite the modesty with which the editors acknowledge that “there is still more to be explored, and theorized, in relation to the spaces and places in which girls live and learn” (333), this volume offers a comprehensive study of the specific meaning of place and space for youths who identify as girls. Understanding place as “a stage and practice of power” that, at the same time, holds the potential for “great pleasures and possibilities for girls” (1), *Girlhood and the Politics of Place* foregrounds the place-making practices of girls and young women, as well as the limitations they meet through institutional power structures. In the first section, “Girls in Latitude and Longitude,” which is a title derived from the video installation “Voices in



Longitude and Latitude” coproduced by Marnina Gonick and featured in her chapter in this section, the contributors explore the specific conceptualization of place and the “relationship between physical and historical location and identity construction for girls” (7). In the second section, “Situated Knowledge, Self-Reflexive Practice,” the focus is on how girlhood studies scholars make use of different self-reflexive practices in their research, which is, as the editors point out, one of the “defining features of feminist research” (8). Research that engages with media, media analysis, and media production is the focus of the third section, “Girls and Media Spaces.” The fourth section, entitled “Studying the Spaces of Girls’ Activism,” includes chapters that explore “the spaces in which girls take action” (11) such as “community organizations, policy making bodies, schools, and girls’ autonomous activism” (7).

The volume also serves as a meeting place where scholars across disciplines and nationalities have congregated to investigate how “girlhood is positioned in relation to interdisciplinary and transnational research methodologies, media environments, geographic locations, and historical and social spaces” (3). Especially in the light of how girls and young women tend to be sensationalized and victimized by (mainstream) media reports, the authors of these chapters carefully and insightfully parse the intersecting frameworks of interpersonal and structural forms of violence, and seek out research constructions that avoid the recolonization of girls and young women. In this regard, Lena Palacios, in her contribution on sexual and carceral violence against girls, advocates for noninstitutionalized forms of activism in which girls and young women “engage in intersectional, inter-movement praxis in their organizational contexts” (280). Sandrina de Finney’s work with Indigenous girls in British Columbia, Canada, explores how “girlhood is produced, lived [and resisted] in the context of a colonial state” (19).

Other research methodologies used by the authors of *Girlhood and the Politics of Place* include tools and strategies that foreground girls’ voices, their own perspectives and lived experiences. For example, Lysanne Rivard uses photovoice with Rwandan schoolgirls to explore “the significance of physical education” (3) and sport in their lives as secondary school students, while Katie McEntee uses digital storytelling to investigate the effectiveness of HIV prevention discourses in rural South Africa.

Practices of critical self-reflection are integral to the programmatic vision of *Girlhood and the Politics of Place* and one of the biggest strengths of this outstanding book. The willingness of the authors to position themselves in

relation to their research methods and methodologies runs like a connective thread throughout the book and unifies the diverse approaches to girlhood studies that combine ethnographic works with, for example, chapters on literary theory. Catherine Driscoll argues in her contribution on the Australian country girl that “habitus makes readily available tense stories of origin and ideology” (55), and complicates how we approach girls’ meaning making practices. Marnina Gonick argues in “Girlhood at the Intersection of Art and Ethnography” that “new epistemologies for making sense of girls’ experiences” are needed (39). To explore what this might look like, she co-created a video installation that “invites routes through embodied multi-sensory ways of knowing that may create new openings for how girls and girlhood are conceived” (38). Intriguingly, in the video, landscape is conceptualized as “an active actor in the creation of girlhoods” (43). Practices of self-reflexivity are also fundamental to feminist epistemologies, as Caroline Caron emphasizes in her contribution on girlhood scholars, ethics, and social change. For her, “a feminist ethics of accountability” ensures both responsibility and accountability in researchers for the “knowledge they produce as well as for the expected and unintended consequences of their research” (125).

Personal narratives and auto/biographical accounts inform and are woven into the scholarly investigations of many chapters. Teresa Strong-Wilson’s contribution on memory work in mother-daughter narratives takes Jessica Benjamin’s notion of intersubjectivity as a point of departure for her argument that “coming of age is first and foremost an imagined relation, and more precisely, a matter (indeed, a project) of reimagining the past through the present and future” (138). Claudia Mitchell uses autoethnography to “chart” (87) the state and future of girlhood studies as a field of study. Revisiting some of the early texts, films, and questions shaping the field, she points out that we now “have a much wider range of approaches from which to draw” (99). This impetus is echoed in the contribution of Tatiana Fraser, Nisha Sajani, Alyssa Louw, and Stephanie Austin in their reflection on the two organizations, Girls Action Foundation and Girls Action Network. They underline the need for more research on the “practical realities of diversity in social change movement-building” (169) as well as a common understanding of “safety/safe space” (168).

Jessalynn Keller raises the question of what kinds of spaces young feminist activists use in her chapter on girls’ blogs. Keller understands blogs as an alternative political space to the more standard places of activism such as the street, the voting booth, or the town hall. Blogs, according to Keller, are mediated spaces in which girls participate in contemporary feminist activism

(261). How girls navigate online spaces is also the topic of Connie Morrison's chapter. She argues that while girls "believed that they could construct an accurate cartoon self-image" what they came to understand, instead, was just "how contrived, socially constructed, and commercially influenced versions of girlhood are" (255).

Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold's chapter takes up questions related to girls, feminism, and school spaces. They draw on Sara Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy to explore how girls discover that "engaging with feminism can be at the same time a radically pleasurable *and* painful set of experiences and processes of identification, contestation, and potential transformation" (117). The "experiences of academic success" at school is the focus of Rebecca Raby and Shauna Pomerantz's study on smart girls and school culture in Ontario, Canada. They show how self-identified academically successful girls have to negotiate a "complex, multifaceted subject position that is fraught with sexist interactions, stress management, and elaborate interplays between and among girls, peers, teachers, and the school." They ask whether some schools allow "smart girls to thrive" (68–69). Loren Lerner is interested in making the university art history classroom a site that "connects anthropological interpretations of place to feminist pedagogy and art historical ways of seeing" (175). Her goal is to "encourage our daughters to criticize pictures that celebrate a paradigm of girlhood that is false" (192) in favor of those that "[affirm] instead the ambiguous, tenuous nature of female identity" (190).

Jaqueline Reid-Walsh, in "Modding as Making," takes a historical analytical approach to the study of flap books made by girls and about girlhood itself. In her chapter on religious flap books modified by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-American girls, Reid-Walsh explores the interesting relationship between the girls' "modification of commercial texts" and "domestic cultural production and entertainments (195). In so doing, she gives us a "glimpse into practices of an earlier, girl-centered domestic culture" (208). Susan Cahill, in "Where Are the Irish Girls?" provides a counter reading of nineteenth-century woman writer L. T. Meade, "beloved by girls and a popularizer of girls' cultures" but "disapproved of by the adult generation" (212). Cahill understands Meade's "articulations of girlhood [and] nationality" as "complex, varied, and often contradictory" (217). Finally, in her analysis of girls' exploration of "their developing sense of gendered self, including their engagement with popular music as consumers and, for some, as creators," Geraldine Bloustein argues that "DJing has increasingly enabled girls to negotiate a variety of previously problematic spaces successfully"

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(229). In becoming producers—creators and consumers of music—girls are “gaining the confidence and opportunities to take a greater role in creating, managing, and controlling” (239) public space.

More than merely studying the lived experiences of girls and young women in a specific geographical place, *Girlhood and the Politics of Place* investigates the various ways in which girlhood is constructed by places and spaces. But the authors also explore how girls and young women shape the places in which they are situated and the processes with which they come to an understanding of their experiences. Throughout the volume, the sincere concern for the young women and girls the researchers encountered guides their research methods and methodologies. *Girlhood and the Politics of Place* effectively bridges social activism with scholarly work and offers an indispensable signpost for future research in girlhood studies.



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