A Girl of a Certain Age

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A critical feature of girlhood studies is the recognition of age itself as an analytical tool, particularly in relation to the importance of going beyond formulations such as women-and-girls and girls-and-young-women, terms that could erase the very specifics of everyday experience. The emergence of tween studies at the beginning of this century represented a significant movement in its contribution to deepening an understanding of the time (and age) of pre-adolescence as a relatively understudied area, compared, for example, to the lives of girls over the age of 13. A new collection of articles on tween culture, then, and one linked to a range of educational, socio-cultural and geographic contexts—in this case, Canada, the UK, the US, and Spain—is long overdue. The guest editors, Natalie Coulter of York University in Canada and Melanie Kennedy of Leicester University in the UK bring to this work a contemporary perspective.

As the articles in this volume highlight, there is clearly no definitive formulation of what girlhood between the ages of 7 and 12 means, but asking questions that are framed by gender and sexuality, culture and commodification, and as represented in a range of literary and media texts about this time in a girl's life insists that we be more attentive to social and political constructions of age. This issue is central to Nancy Lesko's (2012) groundbreaking work in *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, a work that compelled us to rethink how we saw these dominant social constructions of adolescence.

The contributors to this issue add significantly to this work in locating age more centrally in girlhood discourses that intersect with geography, technology, class, race, sex, gender, and sexuality. They do so through a variety of methods and tools that include memory work in the exploration of intertextuality in online videos created by older girls and women looking back on their tween selves, and the investigation of cultural production that includes British television shows that embody a national discourse of ordi-

nariness in their presentations of tweens, and conversations about quite different American ones directed at tweens, along with the collection of qualitative data on the uses of media. The analysis of middle-grade novels about black girls and other fictional texts about gender nonconforming tweens as well as a work of adult fiction that centers on a tween girl offers us new ways of reading family, nation, and individual identity in works of fiction. The exploration of how tweens construct their own digital identities that challenge the stereotypical media portrayals of girlhood and the investigation of the relationship for tween girls between sexting and sexual agency expand on crucial areas in the study of tweenhood.

The community of scholars working in the broad area of girlhood studies has yet to fully explore the question, “Who is a girl anyway?” in relation to age, although this concern is posed typically in studies about the upper range of adolescence (in post-secondary education, for example), or in a variety of cultural contexts in which the age of marriage, the age of consent, and notions of responsibility and expectation in relation to age are contested. Indeed when is the term *girl* not its own problematic?

The articles here help to shed light on these questions by re-affirming the significance of studying a specific age range (one that is well established by media and marketing) as the time before adolescence, and by showing the complexity of the issues in any exploration of work with girls the experiences of whom make it less frequently into the study of girlhood. There may be many reasons for this absence and even obtaining approval from Institutional Review Boards to work with younger participants can be a deterrent when the research issues touch on those related to sexuality and agency. While tween studies is not necessarily seeking comparison with those concerned with adolescent culture, the rich body of work on girlhood and adolescence helps to inform this work and, in turn, tween studies can also inform scholarship in work related to other age groups. Authors such as Bronwyn Davies in *Listening to Children: Being and Becoming* (2014), Vivian Gussin Paley in *Boys and Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner* ([1984] 2014), and Barrie Thorne in her *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* (1993) and many others have helped to illuminate the gendered dynamics of pre-schools, daycares, and other early childhood settings. The importance of work that seeks to study tween girlhood in the context of what we might already know about earlier and later childhood culture is fundamental to girlhood studies and I thank the guest editors for their vision in shaping this issue of *Girlhood Studies*, and for giving greater prominence to the cultural context of age.

References

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