Editorial

Girlhood practices

This issue of *Girlhood Studies* focuses on particular girlhood practices—the everyday activities in which some girls engage as part of their ordinary lives. In this issue we look at these girls engaging in these practices, sometimes on their own and sometimes in small groups, how and when they engage in them and where they do so. These include the long-standing practice of girls engaging in child care as babysitters, playing with dolls (in the case of younger girls) or reading fashion magazines (in the case of older girls). These activities take place in different locations, some of which have been associated historically with girlhood, such as a girl's bedroom or a school classroom, and others which have been more recently appropriated by girls as congenial spaces, such as shopping malls, movie theaters and the internet.

Girls and subcultures—more than 30 years on

Cultural Studies research on girls and their daily practices, especially those concerning leisure, was initiated by Angela McRobbie in her groundbreaking work with Jenny Garber, in “Girls and Subcultures.” Originally published in 1978 as part of Stuart Hall's collection *Resistance Through Rituals*, this essay explores the invisibility and/or marginality of pre-teen girls in the then existing studies of youth subcultures. McRobbie and Garber pose a series of questions about whether girls are present but invisible in male dominated, spectacular subcultures. They go on to ask questions about what their roles are when girls are visible; about whether girls organize their “cultural life” as a subculture or whether they do so in a different way; and about whether girls' lives which are organized on their own terms form a type of subculture (1991). In their answers to the first question they evoke a Britain of the 1960s and 1970s that is now defunct—a world where girls played supporting roles as girl friends or hangers-on in an aggressive and heterosexualized male dominated subculture of teddy-boys and skinheads (1991). In relation to the question of whether girls have other ways of

organizing their cultural life they suggest ideas that, thirty years later still have considerable resonance and, furthermore, have directed a whole area of research. They discuss the role of commercial pop culture based around music, magazines and television, and how girls, because of parental concerns about their being out on the street, spend most of their leisure time at school or at home where in a girl's bedroom they may participate in an active fan culture located in the "safe space" of a female friendship group.

Taken as a whole the articles in this issue use, adapt, trouble and extend the questions raised and the answers suggested by McRobbie and Garber all those years ago across cultures, and across countries including Canada, the United States and South Africa. The articles span the 1930s to the present of today's socially networked virtual world of girls' cultural practices. In two of the articles in this issue—the lead article "Mean, Wild, and Alienated: Girls and the State of Feminism in Popular Culture" by Deidre Kelly and Shauna Pomerantz and "Alpha Girls and Cheerleading: Negotiating New Discourses with Old Practices" by Natalie Adams and Pamela Bettis—girls are depicted forming their own impressive subcultures which are often located in and around school—the hallways, lunchrooms, gym and sports field. The school, in this case the classroom, is also the location of "Reclaiming Feminism: A Qualitative Investigation of Language Usage by Girls in a High School Women's Studies Course" by Jennifer L. Martin. In other articles such as "Anxious Adults and Bad Babysitters: The Struggle over Girlhood in Interwar America" by Miriam Forman-Brunell and the photo-essay on girls' bedrooms, "Girl Photographers take us into their bedrooms" by Maureen St. John Ward, girls' activities are located within the domestic spaces of the home. Girls adorning their own bodies within the conflicting practices of fashion that are acceptable at home and at school is the focus of "Girls, Power and Style: Social and Emotional Experiences of the Clothed Body" by Emilie Zaslow. Sarah Rasmusson's review of Shauna Pomerantz's *Girls, Style & Identities: Dressing the Part* picks up on the ways in which "girls' identities shape, and are shaped by, style."

Other articles discuss girls' virtual cultural practices. "Femininity Out of Control on the Internet: A critical analysis of Media Representations of Gender, Youth, and MySpace.com in International News Discourses" by Shayla Thiel-Stern and "I Hate Hate Hate being single" and "why is getting a bf so hard for me?": Reproducing heteronormative

femininity on gURL.com” by Jacqueline Vickery, although concerned with the internet, show how many of the issues raised by McRobbie and Garber three decades ago, particularly those concerning female sexuality and heteronormativity, still resonate today.

This world of girls’ culture and cultural practices is very different and yet is still so similar to what McRobbie and Garber note in the white, class-based society they describe. These girls are no longer invisible on the street, they dominate certain types of mass media such as popular film and they are highly visible on the internet. At the same time, however, traditional ideas about girls’ roles, leisure play, behaviors and sexuality persist today with attendant religious, moral and safety concerns. A high level of moral and media panic still accompanies girls’ behavior, girls’ play and the high visibility of girls in contemporary culture.

The articles in this issue explore, in nuanced ways, how girls’ everyday practices, their artifacts and their spatial locations all form a vibrant girl-constructed culture of their own making.

Barbie turns 50

At the same time that we look back to the work of McRobbie and Garber, we also acknowledge in this issue the roots of commodified doll play with the dawning of the Barbie era in 1959. Indeed, it would be remiss of us to not take note, along with the popular culture of contemporary girlhood, the fact that Barbie turned 50 in March 2009, and we include two articles that specifically take up the issue of doll play. Discussions of activities associated with the commodified and cross-marketed culture of particular dolls such as Bratz and American Girl and their tie-ins form the basis of the articles “Living in a hybrid material world: Girls, ethnicity and mediated doll products” by Ang-harad Valdivia and “Consuming Girlhood: Young women, femininities and American Girl” by Elizabeth Marshall. Almost fifteen years ago we published an article that pays homage to the contribution of Barbie to feminist studies: “And I want to thank you Barbie” (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 1995). In that article we make the point that Barbie, as controversial as she has been over the years in relation to a variety of feminist issues ranging from body size and the sexualization of girlhood, to ex-

cessive consumerism and the globalization of American popular culture, stands as a cultural icon which still serves as an impetus for the interrogation of these important topics of girlhood. As we argue in that article, and in a follow up article on ‘liberating accounts of Barbie play’ (Reid-Walsh and Mitchell 2000), Barbie can be read as a text that speaks to the significance of refusing to relegate girlhood to a place of excessive domestic labor (represented in activities such as, for example, playing house, taking care of babies, and so on) but, instead, to a place of exploration of gender and identity through play.

Girlhood Studies can be defined in a variety of ways, but a critical feature of this work is that it places girls’ lives at the centre of the research agenda, whoever these girls may be. The field of Girlhood Studies seeks to locate, and advocate for, girls as the focus of research and action so that researchers and activists may engage in feminist work that is not simply about girls, but which is for, with, and by girls. Studying girls’ practices—those explored in this issue and the many others belonging to different cultural contexts—in their daily lives is one very important aspect of this research and activist program.

The editors

References

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