Introduction

Finding Alternative Girlhoods

As the 21st century picks up speed and settles into place, childhood has become a spectacle—a site of accumulation and commodification—in whose name much is done.
—Cindi Katz, “Childhood as Spectacle”

All girls are spectacular. I take this as a given. I consider it to be a feminist claim. Nevertheless, contemporary U.S. media tell us otherwise. Hence, I start with this assertion to remind myself and my readers that it is possible to believe this to be true. In media, some girls are fabulous, others are not; some girls’ stories are worth telling over and over again; others warrant telling only in passing or not at all. Girls who are large, differently abled, queer, of color, and/or poor; make “bad” or “dangerous” choices; feel depressed; or even just act silly (1) simply do not exist in media culture; or (2) appear in marginalized representations, on the periphery, with sidekick status; or (3) populate ubiquitous disparaging, disdainful, anxious, and/or protectionist depictions that shore up a narrow version of acceptable girlhood: the impossibly high-achieving heterosexual white girl who plays sports, loves science, is gorgeous but not hyper-sexual, is fit but not too thin, learns from her (minor) mistakes, and certainly will change the world someday.

This book is, in part, about the ways in which media produce some girls as spectacular while belittling others. Its primary investment, however, is in paying sustained analytical attention to the many girls who fall outside a narrow definition of conventional girlhood. Working as a feminist media scholar committed to fighting racism and affirming
queerness and LGBTQ identities, in this book I rethink what “spectacular” means and redefine which girls count in that context. Thus this book is about high-profile girls who may illustrate the media’s process of marginalization, but who also open up multiple, complex, multilayered, and/or contradictory versions of girlhood, right at the heart of media culture. These alternative girls, too, are spectacular.

Since approximately 1990, girls have appeared often and everywhere in U.S. media culture. Girl celebrities, characters, and products abound in film, television, print, sports, and music and on the Internet, appearing repeatedly in the mediascape. These girls and products include a dizzying number of examples: Selena Gomez, Raven-Symoné, Bratz, Amélie Mauresmo, Dominique Dawes, Whale Rider (2002), Kailan, Miley Cyrus, Hannah Montana, Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, Michelle Wie, Jackie Evancho, Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, Pretty Little Liars (2010–present), Bella, Dora, Lizzie McGuiire, Katniss, Tia and Tamera Mowry, Miranda Cosgrove, China Anne McClain, Buffy, Willow, Sabrina, Kim Possible, Brenda Song, Bristol Palin, Hermione, Teen Vogue, Lilo, “I Kissed a Girl,” Taylor Swift, and Gabby Douglas, to name a few. Concomitantly, media are fascinated with everyday girls, both girls who achieve temporary and “accidental” celebrity status (i.e., “fifteen minutes of fame”) and generic categories of girls. These many girls include Caylee Anthony, JonBenét Ramsey, Jessica Dubroff, Honey Boo Boo/Alana Thompson, mean girls, gamma girls, Ophelias, AMBER Alerts, Girls Gone Mild, teen moms, Lolitas, Nike “If You Let Me Play” girls, tween girls, Jamie Keiles of the Seventeen Magazine Project, Tavi Gevinson of TheStyleRookie.com, and Gaby Rodriguez of the Pregnancy Project (again, to name only a few).

Anita Harris argues two types of girls dominate in contemporary media and political culture: the can-do girl who is “confident, resilient, and empowered,” and the at-risk girl who “lack[s] self esteem” and/or engages in risky behavior. The can-do girl is a successful athlete. The at-risk girl is a pregnant teen. The can-do girl is independent and confident. The at-risk girl is depressed. The can-do girl is beautiful and fit. The at-risk girl is hyper-sexualized at too young an age. The can-do girl is smart. The at-risk girl uses drugs and has unprotected sex. The can-do girl has girl power. The at-risk girl lacks resources. The can-do girl reads The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants and The Hunger Games.
Figure I.1. Gabby Douglas appears on the cover of *Time* in celebration of the 2012 Summer Olympics, July 30, 2012.
The at-risk girl sexts. In short, the can-do girl has the world at her feet, while the at-risk girl “loses her voice.”

As Marinha Gonick argues, these two narratives circulate simultaneously in contemporary media culture, and in fact support each other. Specifically, the at-risk narrative “acts as a warning to all young women that failure is an ever-lurking possibility that must be staved off through sustained application.” The can-do girl must be vigilant, lest she become at-risk. Harris illustrates that this vigilance includes a neoliberal approach to work/career (emphasizing flexibility and personal responsibility), as well as an investment in consumer culture designed to incessantly groom the ideal can-do body and personality. When thinking about high-profile girl celebrities in the media, perhaps the best example of the interaction of the can-do and at-risk narratives is what others call the “trainwreck” female celebrity or the “celebrity meltdown,” and I call the “crash-and-burn” girl: the can-do girl who has it all, but who—through weakness and/or the inability to live with the pressure of celebrity during the process of growing up—makes a mistake and therefore faces a spectacular descent into at-risk status. Jennifer Capriati, Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, Keisha Castle-Hughes, Jamie Lynn Spears, and Demi Lovato come to mind. Both the can-do/at-risk dichotomy and the media obsession with the crash-and-burn girl celebrity illustrate a concomitant love and contempt for girls. These are representations I call ambivalent, following Homi Bhabha, because of their anxious repetition of both fetishistic desire and phobic derision.

This conjoined ambivalent can-do/at-risk narrative authorizes the surveillance and discipline not only of high-profile celebrities, but also of everyday girls. One form of surveillance is protectionist, coalescing in a moral panic about the threat to all girls of at-risk status, epitomized by Mary Pipher’s 1994 *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* and continuing to the present day in newspaper articles such as “Little Girls Are Made of Sugar—Not Spice: Parents Decry Marketers Who Push Sexuality”; the most recently released save-your-daughter-from-the-media mass-market books, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* and *Princess Recovery*; and the 2012 documentary *Sexy Baby*. As is typical of moral panics, this one—spread in large part through media—holds media themselves responsible for the threat to girls. Here, what I call the “Ophelia Thesis” (chapter 6) assumes that media depictions
of hyper-sexualized girls lead to decreased self-esteem and potentially poor choices to put one’s own body on display or engage in early sexual activity. Yet, in the process of “reporting” on and worrying about this, media further perpetuate the at-risk narrative, reproducing and reifying images of girls as hyper-sexualized and miserable. In short, media contribute to the creation of the at-risk narrative, produce a moral panic about the girl figure at the center of that narrative, and then—through the process of worrying—perpetuate the very depictions of girls about which they worry. Analogous to Michel Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis” about Victorian sexuality, the contemporary moral panic about the at-risk girl perpetuates—rather than helps to overcome—the discursive condition of her existence. As Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thonton put it, “Moral panics seem to have become a goal.”

While this moral panic about the at-risk girl is strong in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century media culture, celebration of the can-do girl is equally common. This version of girlhood is a fantasy promise that if girls work hard, not only can they avoid becoming at-risk, but they can achieve anything. Particularly in neoliberal consumer culture, this narrative promises unbelievable happiness and achievement—girl power—for the girl who embodies can-do status through career, fashion, and lifestyle choices. While the moral panic depictions of the at-risk girl are paradoxical (in that they contribute to the production of the very thing about which they worry), the girl power depictions of the can-do girl are more straightforward: they provide superhuman television heroes such as True Jackson (who is skilled enough as a teenager to help run a major fashion magazine) and Buffy (who slays vampires and eventually saves the world for the Buffy in every girl), and they market products by suggesting that girls can express and maintain their can-do status through consumer choices.

In this book, I argue that collectively these media depictions illustrate the spectacularization of girls in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century media culture. By this, I mean several things. First, media incessantly look at and invite us to look at girls. Girls are objects at which we gaze, whether we want to or not. They are everywhere in our mediascapes. As such, media turn girls into spectacles—visual objects on display. Second, some mediated girls are also spectacular, as in fabulous. The can-do girls’ achievements, athletic abilities, intelligence, and self-confidence dazzle. Third, some girls are spectacles, or scandals. Media wait with bated
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breath—paparazzi seek out and produce—the moment of a celebrity girl’s fall.” Politicians and pundits worry about teen pregnancy, sexting, and online pedophiles. Sociologists and psychologists identify problems supposedly particular to girls, such as eating disorders, lack of self-esteem, and mean girl behavior. Journalists and parents worry about the hyper-sexualization of girls in media depictions and fashion trends. All this is part of the spectacularization of girlhood in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century media culture: the discursive production and social regulation of the girl as a fabulous and/or scandalous object on display.

The spectacularization of girlhood, I argue, takes place within celebrity culture. Of course, the fact of celebrity is not new: scholars trace celebrity back not by decades but by centuries. Nevertheless, the recent growth of celebrity studies as a field, perhaps best illustrated by the new journal Celebrity Studies (2010–present), makes clear that “in the current environment where images and clips circulate freely, repetitively, and non-sequentially” there is an “intensification” of celebrity. As Graeme Turner argues, “It is the pervasiveness of celebrity culture that marks out the contemporary version.” Given that media’s fascination with celebrities and girls is intensifying simultaneously, and given that discourses of girlhood and celebrity are both about individualism and identity, it is crucial that we explore how celebrity and girlhood depend on and affect each other. If, as Su Holmes and Sean Redmond argue, celebrity “characterizes the dominant way in which people are made legible in the public sphere,” then it follows that media depictions of all girls (not just “actual” celebrities) are made legible through discourses of celebrity, including the spectacularization of identity. And, if as Turner argues, “in a highly convergent media environment, where cross-media and cross-platform content and promotion has become increasingly the norm, the manufacture of and trade in celebrity has become a commercial strategy for media organizations of all kinds,” it follows that the girl celebrity plays a key role in the marketing of, for example, magazines (chapter 2), films (chapter 3), sports (chapter 4), and Disney and Nickelodeon as both cable channels and brands (see below).

Despite the link I draw here between spectacular girls and celebrity culture, I do not use “spectacle” and “celebrity” as synonyms. Rather, I argue that spectacularization is a discursive and economic strategy of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century celebrity culture easily applied to girls.
To say that media spectacularize girls in celebrity culture is to emphasize the intense publicness of contemporary girlhood: the way in which girls are readily available to us, similar to the way every aspect of a celebrity’s life is fair game for discussion, evaluation, and consumption. In thinking about girls in relation to celebrity culture, then, I am interested not only in individual girl celebrities, but also in how analysis of the spectacularization of girls can help us better understand how both celebrity culture and public girlhoods function. I begin this discussion in chapter 1, where I argue girl stars can be understood to epitomize the sexualized scandal at the heart of the star/celebrity system, and I continue to address it in relation to celebrities on magazine covers (chapter 2), girl stars in prominent films about girls (chapter 3), girl sports celebrities (chapter 4), the tragedy of a girl made famous by her death (chapter 5), and the complex perspective some everyday girls take on Selena Gomez as an ethnically ambiguous Disney girl celebrity (chapter 6). Each chapter, then, is in part a case study through which to explore the relationship between girls and celebrity, and the book as a whole illustrates how central girls are to celebrity culture.

While I argue that all girls are spectacularized within the context of celebrity culture, a central goal of this book is to insist that not all girls are spectacularized in the same way. Specifically, throughout the book I emphasize the varying racializations, genderings, and sexualities of spectacular girlhood. As many scholars have shown, the can-do girl is usually white, while the African American or Latina girl is usually at-risk. The everyday gamma girl is generally white, but the pregnant teen is almost always Latina or African American. Exceptions prove the rule or imply “race-blindness”: for example, Amy’s status as a special white pregnant girl and then teen mom in The Secret Life of the American Teenager (2008–2013). And narratives in which can-do celebrity girls of color do appear rarely address racial specificity or racialization; thus they offer a color-blind ideology in children’s culture that, as Sarah Turner argues, can reinscribe and reify whiteness: for example, China Anne McClain in A.N.T. Farm (2011–present). Additionally, regardless of whether they are can-do or at-risk, the majority of girls in media culture simply are white. The celebrities who crash and burn are white. The central characters in most films and television shows about girls are white. As I explore in chapter 2, the girls who appear most often on the
cover of mass-market magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *People* are white. Girl gymnasts and figure skaters are white (the few girls of color—e.g., Michelle Kwan and Gabby Douglas—again, either prove the rule, promise race-blindness, or both). The “lost girl”—kidnapped or dead before her time—over whom media culture incessantly worries, is white. As the African American girls whom Lisa Duke interviewed for her study of girls’ use of teen magazines succinctly articulate, media offer a “blonde world.” Richard Dyer famously has written that whiteness is “everything and nothing”: its “representational power” comes from its capacity to be everywhere but always remain unnamed. Certainly, this property of whiteness operates in and through representations of girls in contemporary U.S. media culture. Just as certainly, though, girls of color do appear. A central project of this book, then, is to take seriously the complexity of their representation, to ask, as Rebecca Wanzo does about African American women, “Can this privileging of whiteness be circumvented? Under what conditions can a body of color become iconographic” or spectacular?

Gender and sexuality, too, operate in and through representations of girls in media culture. Femininity and heteronormativity pervade the moral panic about girls sexualized too soon, just as they do many of the products marketed to the can-do girl in pursuit of both personal success and romance. Yet queer girls are present. Kathryn Stockton claims, “If you scratch a child, you will find a queer, in the sense of someone ‘gay’ or just plain strange.” For Stockton, the child is always queer because it is “‘not-yet-straight,’ since it . . . is not allowed to be sexual.” In other words, if the child is not straight, it is queer. Drawing on Stockton, then, I would argue for the importance of “includ[ing] the ‘normative’ child” (or, for my purposes, the normative girl) as one of many possible “queer companions” of the more literal “gay child”/gay girl. Hence I discuss explicit queer girlhood articulated through girls’ own voices and/or actions, such as Amélie Mauresmo’s (chapter 4) and Sakia Gunn’s (chapter 5) self-presentation as LGBTQ; but I also address girls who emerge as queer through interpretive analytical practice. From this perspective, I read “mean girls” as queer because by definition they include an implicit critique of heteronormativity (chapter 3), and I read seven-year-old pilot Jessica Dubroff as queer (chapter 2). Appearing on the cover of both *Time* and *People* in a bomber jacket and baseball
cap, Dubroff reads as what Judith Halberstam calls a “rogue tomboy,” a
tomboy who is not just (or even particularly) interested in being active
(“like boys”) and remaining a child just a little bit longer by resisting
adulthood, but who more forcefully turns away from femininity and in
fact toward an adult masculine persona: here, that of the pilot.\(^{34}\)

In short, working as a feminist media scholar, I acknowledge the
dominance of whiteness, femininity, heteronormativity, and their rela-
tionship to the can-do/at-risk dichotomy, but like Wanzo and Stock-
ton I am uninterested in centering these girlhoods. Rather, this book
spends the most time with girls who fall outside of or alter (sometimes
ever so slightly) this dichotomy and/or who do not read as white and/
or heteronormative.\(^{35}\) These girls include Tatum O’Neal, the least dis-
cussed but arguably queerest mega girl star from the 1970s (chapter 1);
girls of color and queer girls who appear on the cover of mass maga-
zines not as frequently as, but nevertheless alongside, the many can-do/
at-risk heteronormative white girls that populate these covers (chapter
2); the girl characters and stars from girl films of the last decade that led
to sustained public debate over girls, including debate about the relation-
ship between girls and feminism (\textit{Mean Girls}/Lindsay Lohan, \textit{Little
Miss Sunshine}/Abigail Breslin, \textit{Juno}/Ellen Page, and \textit{Precious}/Gabourey
Sidibe) (chapter 3); Venus Williams as a key teen tennis queen of the
late 1990s who helped shift the meaning of “girl athlete” in racialized
and politicized ways (chapter 4); Sakia Gunn, an African American
lesbian/AG (aggressive) from Newark who was killed in a bias crime
highly publicized not by the mainstream national press but by the local
and alternative press (chapter 5); and, finally, ordinary and yet highly
analytical third-grade girl media critics who were kind enough to work
with me on a media project (chapter 6).

In each chapter, I engage various feminist media studies methodolo-
gies to seek out girls who do not simply perpetuate a can-do/at-risk dia-
lectic. Whether I call these girls alternative, nonnormative, or—as other
scholars have—“the body that was not [of concern],”\(^{36}\) the “BBFF [black
best friend forever],”\(^{37}\) or “unloveable subjects,”\(^{38}\) these girls are part of the
contemporary mediascape of girlhood. To identify a dominant represen-
tation and then focus all one’s analytical attention there—as much girls’
media studies scholarship does\(^{39}\)—is, at least in part, to reify that domi-
nance. Instead, in this book I use my analysis and choice of topics and
texts to refuse a monolithic definition of “dominant” or “mainstream.” By paying attention to the variety of girlhoods available across many contemporary U.S. media forms, and by (as I call it in chapter 3) pushing back against the texts, I offer an optic that makes alternative versions of girlhood visible—when we choose to look for and toward them. Many scholars working in queer and/or Asian American media studies engage related methodologies. These scholars find resistant and pleasurable meanings in what they often acknowledge might otherwise be defined as racist and sexist texts by focusing on stars (e.g., Nancy Kwan, Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, Keanu Reeves), or by “constructing an entirely separate narrative from scavenged bits and pieces of a film,” or by refusing what Dyer calls the “climb-down [narrative] resolutions” that deny the complexity and possibilities in the middle of the story. These are the kinds of reading practices Alexander Doty famously called “making things perfectly queer” and Christine Geraghty recently argued can produce an “oh!” response when one pursues the “internally heterogeneous” nature of a text. Sharing these scholars’ critical investment in the politicized complexity of meaning making in and through media texts, in this book I use feminist analysis to shift the terrain, to rewrite who counts as spectacular in the mediascape of girlhood.

This book asks: What are the girlhoods in contemporary U.S. media culture that do not oscillate between can-do and at-risk, between cultural adoration and disdain? What other ways of understanding girlhood are possible in and through turn-of-the-twenty-first-century U.S. media culture? How can we use antiracist, queer, feminist girls’ media criticism to upend—rather than to reify—the white heteronormativity that undergirds the can-do/at-risk dichotomy? And how can we use criticism to broaden and multiply the versions of girlhood visible in media culture? While I have already included many examples of queer girls and/or girls of color in this introduction, I know these are not necessarily the names that appear most frequently in public discussions of girls. For example, I know some of my readers may not recognize the name Brenda Song, may not think of Raven-Symoné as a key girl celebrity, and may not think of Willow along with Buffy as a version of girlhood offered by Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997–2003). Yet I also assume (and hope) that some of my readers will have already noticed and appreciated that I include girls of color and/or queer girls in my
initial overview of girls in contemporary media culture. By including these diverse girls in the very first pages of this book I mean to draw attention to and take seriously the presence of alternative girls within the center, to write the field of girlhood in a way that sees their presence. In short, this book offers a critical girls’ media studies perspective and methodology in pursuit of alternative girls.

The Ubiquity of Girls, 1990–Present

Arguably, there are at least two reasons for the dramatic increase in U.S. media depictions of girls since the early 1990s. First, the mediated girl was already present and therefore easily available to address contemporary issues. As many scholars have shown, girls have appeared in U.S. media culture repeatedly over the past two centuries in ways that work through cultural anxieties about any number of social issues. For example, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, black children, both girls and boys, appeared as “stereotypical . . . pickaninnies” in advertisements that worked to “portray blacks as happy and nonthreatening,” and thereby helped to maintain racism as an institution and segregation as a system of enforced inequality.50 In the early part of the twentieth century, public debates about age-of-consent laws and girls’ sexual delinquency articulated anxiety about immigration and girls’ and women’s roles in the public sphere.51 And in the 1950s the figure of the teenage bobby-soxer—a girl who wrought havoc at home yet strove toward heteronormative romance—appeared as incomprehensible, yet nevertheless fascinating, to adults. In particular, her engagement with consumer culture and the way she refigured the gendered structure of the family helped transform the postwar citizen–subject.52

Now, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the convenient figure of the girl—already adept at standing in for various social concerns—surfaces once again to work through contemporary social issues, such as, I would argue, neoliberalism and postfeminism.53 Harris argues that the contemporary girl functions as an idealized citizen for the neoliberal global economy: a flexible, adaptable, pliant, enthusiastic, intelligent, and energetic participant in commodity consumption, personal responsibility, and mobile work. Hence, we can understand the current attention to girls as one way that media culture comes to terms with
neoliberalism. And, as I have argued elsewhere, contemporary spectacular girls are part of the evolution of postfeminism. As the literal and figurative daughter of postfeminists, the current girl inherits the desire to “have it all,” while embracing (unlike her mother, with no angst) both girl power independence and persistent commodity consumption that puts her sexualized body and her self on display. Hence the current fascination with the girl both produces a moderate transformation of hugely successful postfeminist discourse and is a cultural tool to make sense of contemporary gendered and neoliberal politics.

Hannah Montana or Wizards of Waverly Place or listen to Miley Cyrus’s or Selena Gomez’s music, they still know who these girls are.

Television, of course, was not the only media industry going through rapid change in the late twentieth century. The mass magazine industry shifted more and more toward market segmentation during this time, producing a number of magazines aimed at teen girls, including Sassy (1988–1996), Cosmo Girl (1999–2009), Elle Girl (2001–2006), and Teen Vogue (2003–present). And, as the Internet grew, many websites linked to the television shows and magazines I list here emerged, along with innumerable other sites that market products and/or empowerment to girls. In short, developments in technology, related shifts in industry structure and targeted marketing, and the proliferation of media platforms drew on and contributed to a growing cultural obsession with girls. Representations of girls, then, can be seen as playing a key role in cultural, social, economic, technological, and industrial shifts taking place at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Feminist Girls’ Media Studies

Spectacular Girls fits within an area of thought at the intersection of feminist studies and media studies, what I call “feminist girls’ media studies”: feminist scholarship (however the author defines her/his feminism) that focuses on the relationship between girls and media. This research has been steadily increasing over the last two decades, so much so that beginning in 2007 overview essays within media studies began to appear in which authors define and tell the history of “girls’ studies.” Since 2007, at least ten of these overview essays have been published. While each overview makes a unique contribution, here I briefly summarize the collective historical narrative they tell.

Most of these essays mention two 1970s/early-1980s foremothers of the field of girls’ studies: Carol Gilligan and Angela McRobbie. Gilligan, working in the context of psychology and philosophy, gives us two central ideas: (1) girls have a “different voice,” based in relationality rather than individuality, and (2) that voice faces the threat of loss as girls enter adulthood and are socialized as women. This is an argument contemporary moral panic books often “misconstrue[e]” in order to build a case for the surveillance and protection of girls. McRobbie, working
in the context of both cultural studies and youth studies, challenges her fields for their lack of attention to girls and initiates a study of girls’ complex relationships to media. Combining critical analysis of media representations with a nuanced understanding of girls’ negotiations with media culture, McRobbie insists that girls and girl cultures matter; and she provides a model of scholarship that maintains a feminist investment in social justice and criticism of media industry structures, while also taking girls, their activities, and their pleasures seriously.

Despite the influence of both Gilligan and McRobbie, the overview essays argue that in the 1980s feminist studies ignored girls, focusing instead on “equality” and explicitly distancing women from girls by criticizing the infantilization of women as girls. By the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, however, work on girls increased exponentially, including multiple books, innumerable articles, special issues of journals, the new Journal of Girlhood Studies (2008–present), one-time conferences, professional associations, and university certificates and minors. There is now even a textbook. This work comes out of many disciplines, including psychology, sociology, education, criminology, literary studies, history, communication, and media studies.

The overview essays argue that this increased scholarly attention to girls responds to the cultural moment of the early 1990s in which—as I spell out above—girls became a constant topic for discussion. In particular, the overviews mention anxiety texts that articulate at-risk girlhoods, such as Pipher’s Reviving Ophelia and Roselind Wiseman’s 2002 Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and the New Realities of the Girl World, as well as the rise in girl power figures, such as Rory of Gilmore Girls (2000–2007). The essays claim girls’ studies scholars working in psychology and sociology tend to follow Gilligan and emphasize the “girls in crisis” version of girlhood, producing reports such as the American Association of University Women’s “How Schools Shortchange Girls” and the “Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls.” Scholars working in communication, cultural, and media studies more often follow McRobbie and emphasize the girl power version of girlhood by (1) focusing on media representations of powerful girls (arguments either for resistant potential or against co-optation), (2) listening to girls’ voices (audience ethnographies), or (3) defining girls as producers of culture (e.g., zines, video).
After telling this girls’ studies history, most of the overview essays make calls for future research: more listening to girls’ voices, a greater attention to race and sexual diversity, an increased focus on political/economic/educational issues, less focus on “girls as victims,” and more attention to “everyday girls.” In other words, as I do here in this introduction, they call for a shift away from a focus on media culture’s simultaneous adoration of and disdain for girls. Yet there is already a large body of work that goes beyond the can-do/at-risk dichotomy. In particular, there are two types of scholarship I include in my definition of feminist girls’ media studies and draw on in this book, but which these overviews tend not to mention: ethnographies and public and social policy scholarship. Perhaps not coincidentally, this work also tends to center race and/or queer issues.

Ethnographies and work on everyday girls that address, at least in part, the role media play in girls’ everyday lives (as opposed to girls’ media production—an area well covered by the overviews), include Not Our Kind of Girl: Unraveling the Myths of Black Teenage Motherhood, in which Elaine Bell Kaplan addresses teen mothers’ difficulties with the educational system and fraught relationships with men, made more difficult by media representations of teenage mothers as irresponsible and isolated from men and sexuality altogether. And Meenakshi Gigi Durham complicates our understanding of “girls’ media” by asking how Indian American girls use mainstream, Indian, and diaspora media in different ways, and by paying attention to how the girls she interviews define the differences among their own, their parents’, and their non-Indian friends’ understandings of ideas about girls, gender, and sexuality in media. This kind of ethnographic scholarship takes seriously the complex and varied roles media play in girls’ everyday lives.

Girls’ studies work on public and social policy can contribute to (re)definitions of girls and media as well. For example, in Beyond Bad Girls: Gender, Violence, and Hype, feminist criminologists Meda Chesney-Lind and Katherine Irwin look carefully at the interrelationship between (1) media images of violent girls (which tend to be “gang” girls of color in the late 1980s/early-1990s) and mean girls (which tend to be white middle-class girls in the late 1990s/early-2000s), and (2) the racial demographics in a recent increase in the criminalization and incarceration of girls. Through this comparison of media representations and criminal
statistics, they find that the ideas of violent girls and mean girls, as well as highly publicized individual instances of school violence (e.g., Columbine), led to new school programs (e.g., “zero tolerance”) that have the effect of regulating and punishing girls rather than supporting and protecting them—and, further, that these policies have a disproportional impact on girls of color. In Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy, Ruth Nicole Brown discusses her work to build a very specific and local space for black girls: SOLHOT (Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths). In her book, Brown challenges the meaning of “girl” by pointing out that institutions, policies, after-school programs, and media culture all have narratives about the “black girl” that conflict with—but also deeply influence—black girls’ everyday lived realities. For example, she points out that empowerment programs designed to give black girls “voice” contribute to (as much as respond to) media representations of black girls as endangered because the emphasis on empowerment means that the multiple ways in which black girls already speak (and the multiple things they already say) are defined as “loud” and “hyper-visible,” but not as worth listening to, meaningful, or knowledgeable. SOLHOT and the theory Brown offers work against this representation of black girlhood by imagining a different space that centers girls, not as adults imagine they “should” be, but as they are.

By discussing this work in ethnography and public and social policy, my goal is to broaden the definition of feminist girls’ media studies and to challenge the hegemony of moral panic/cultural obsession both in media culture and in some girls’ studies work within media studies. My explicit method here is much like Angharad N. Valdivia’s when she, in a few short pages, cites a great deal of recent scholarship on Latina girls and thereby illustrates the myopia of some girls’ studies scholarship. Citing work by Ruby Tapia, Rosa Linda Fregoso, Mary Beltrán, Cynthia Bejarano, and Vicki Mayer on teen pregnancy campaigns, representations of Latinas in gangs, the central Latina character in Girlfight (2000), and Latina girl audiences, respectively—while also including her own analyses of America Ferrera, the Cheetah Girls, and Miranda (Lizzie McGuire’s Latina best friend/sidekick)—Valdivia illustrates that, while many of these representations are fraught and problematic, not only are Latina girls very present in U.S. media culture, but a significant body of scholarship exists on the subject. Similarly, in Queer Girls and Popular Culture:
Reading, Resisting, and Creating Media, Susan Driver addresses the complexity and nuance of both media representations of queer girls and the ways in which queer girls interact with media. By taking queer girls as its subject, the book challenges media studies to think seriously about queer representations—not as ephemeral, marginal, or displaced (which Driver identifies as one typical critique of the representation of LGBTQ issues in popular media), but as an entire world with which queer girls engage on a regular, ongoing, and complex basis. In short, like Valdivia and Driver, in this book I argue that various alternative girls—often girls of color and/or queer girls—are right there, right in front of us in the vast mediascape. The version of feminist girls' media studies on which I draw and to which I hope to contribute recognizes and grapples with this diverse, complex, and often contradictory field of representations of girls.

Overall, my definition of feminist girls' media studies centers work that addresses and engages much of the following: (1) complex, multiple, and multilayered media representations (not just dominant images and dominant media); (2) an intersectional perspective (especially in terms of race and sexuality); (3) historical specificity; (4) industry structure (including advertising, which incorporates niche marketing and the commodification of multiculturalism, postfeminism, and girl power); (5) public policy and activist work with girls; and (6) interdisciplinary ethnography. This kind of scholarship considers multiple approaches simultaneously and takes seriously a commitment to what Ella Shohat calls polycentric, multicultural feminism—looking at multiple and diverse representations from many perspectives—regardless (or because) of the dominance of white, middle-class, heterosexual girls in the foreground of the cultural landscape. In this way, I hope not only to produce the kind of work the overviews of feminist girls’ media studies call for, but also to see beyond or around the “mean girls” and the “Taylor Swifts” as we look at and for the many other girls who populate the contemporary mediascape.

A Note on Defining “Girl”

As I discuss in more detail in chapter 1, meanings of particular social categories—such as “child” and “girl”—vary considerably over time and across place, and thus it is necessary for me to articulate explicitly how
I define “girl” in the context of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century U.S. media culture. In his influential book *Centuries of Childhood*, Philippe Ariès argues that prior to the sixteenth century younger people were understood as small adults, and that the concept of the child did not emerge until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although other scholars have identified some evidence of earlier “stages of childhood.” Similarly, scholars have addressed the emergence of the concept of the “teenager” in the twentieth-century United States, some arguing that the term came to fruition after World War II, particularly as “a marketing term used by advertisers and manufacturers”; and some focusing on the earlier emergence of a girls’ youth culture understood as “teenage” in the 1920s. Perhaps the most recent shift in the definition of “girl” in the United States is the emergence in the early 1990s of the term “tween.” At first “tween” was a marketing tool used in audience and consumer segmentation that was occurring in conjunction with technological changes and the simultaneous deregulation of the media and telecommunication industries. Today, the term describes an actual life stage: the time between “child” and “teen” when children—or, as figure 2 makes clear, most often specifically girls—are approximately eight to twelve years old. Policy is written about the tween. Psychologists and sociologists research tween behavior. New stores emerge to produce and cater to tween tastes (e.g., Justice and American Girl Place). And, of course, advertisers try to reach tween dollars, while journalists and

Figure 1.2. Toys"R"Us gendered marketing. The “Tween” sign is pink; the “True Heroes” sign is blue. Photo by the author.
pundits worry over tween behavior. Yet, twenty or so years ago, tweens did not exist, although of course there were people between the ages of eight and twelve.

In short, the very existence of human beings we understand to be “children,” “teens,” or “tweens” is discursively produced and historically and socially specific. Because of this, if the categories are to continue to exist, public discourse must return to the concepts again and again, producing, maintaining, and sometimes transforming them in the process. As Judith Butler argues, it is through “repetition” that discourse constitutes identities. Like the meanings of “child,” “teen,” and “tween,” the meaning of “girl” is discursively determined through repetition, yet also transformed through representational shifts in particular historical moments, including the turn of the twenty-first century, the focus of this book.

Scholars who focus on this time frame define girls in varying ways, implicitly drawing attention to the discursive versatility of “girl.” Some girls’ studies scholars define “girl” to include “young women” (usually college age). Other girls’ studies scholars are concerned with any cultural discussion of “girls,” including, for example, middle-aged women who call themselves or are called “girls.” Relatedly, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker have pointed out that postfeminism depends on a consumerist “girling” of grown women. And some African American scholars argue that because black girls are often denied girlhood, it is an important political move to claim girlhood for all black women. While I draw on all of this work, for the purposes of this study I generally define a “girl” as someone under the age of eighteen. I choose this age both because it is a current legal category (the age of majority) and because it approximates a current common life-stage change—the time at which many girls leave formal schooling and/or their parents’/caregivers’ home.

Most important, however, by defining eighteen as an admittedly arbitrary and historically specific dividing line between girl and woman, I make space to address the specificity of girls as teens, tweens, and children. This specificity includes not only these categories but also the ways in which many girls under the age of eighteen are not granted “girlhood status,” particularly girls of color and girls who engage in public and/or queer sexuality, all of whom media and law often treat as adults. Alternatively, adult women who first rise to media visibility as children, tweens, or teens are rarely able to shake their status as girls, even when they are
well into adulthood. Hence, in this book on girls and U.S. media culture, I insist on defining Venus Williams, Amélie Mauresmo, Sakia Gunn, and Precious as girls, I acknowledge that girlhood clings to now-adult celebrities such as Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, and Ellen Page, and—both to make space for these many girls and to resist postfeminist media culture’s infantilization of women—I refuse to write about adults who are often called girls, such as Monica Lewinsky, Mia Hamm, the Spice Girls, Carrie and the Sex and the City gang, Lady Gaga, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, and Lena Dunham’s Girls.

Chapters

Chapter 1 establishes two key concerns of the book: (1) the need to understand current representations of girls in relation to the past, and (2) how to theorize the girl star/celebrity. The chapter challenges contemporary “everything is new” and “it’s worse than ever before” arguments about girls and the media by emphasizing continuities between the past and present. Specifically, I develop a girl-focused history of the Hollywood star system—ending with a close analysis of Tatum O’Neal’s emergence as a star in the 1970s following the release of Paper Moon (1973)—to illustrate that girls have been important figures in media since at least the early twentieth century. In addition, the chapter argues that the girl has been more central to the formation and continued existence of the star and celebrity system than previous scholarship has acknowledged. The girl star in fact epitomizes the star system through both her hyper-whiteness and her status as, by definition, a scandal: an innocent and pure child paradoxically caught in the incessant and potentially corrupting sexualized gaze of celebrity culture. Hence, I argue anxious adoration of the girl star is about the scandal of putting the child on display.

Building on the star theory introduced in chapter 1, the second chapter covers the entire time frame of this book: 1990 to the present. Focusing on Time, Newsweek, and People magazine covers as one way to track the current ubiquity of girls in celebrity culture, I identify the dominance of both whiteness and the can-do/at-risk dichotomy. Having established this field of representation, however, the bulk of the chapter asks what other versions of girlhood can be found on these covers. Turning my attention to girls of color and/or girls who fall outside the
can-do/at-risk dichotomy, I identify several alternative representations of girls, some only slightly challenging the dominance of the can-do white girl and others more transformative. Overall, the chapter argues that while all alternative girlhoods in U.S. media culture are not necessarily ideal from a feminist perspective, it is nevertheless crucial to use criticism to identify and pause over these girlhoods in order both to mark their existence and to pursue as much resistant potential as possible in their depictions.

Chapter 3 continues chapter 2’s overview of contemporary representations of girls, focusing on the first decade of the twenty-first century and turning to a second media form/genre: girl films. The chapter identifies the four girl films from the last decade that elicited the most public discussion about girls in the national press, on national television/radio, and/or in the alternative/left press: Mean Girls (2004), Little Miss Sunshine (2006), Juno (2007), and Precious (2009). Once again, adoration/disdain and anxiety about the girl and the girl star appear; however, some of the debates about the films extend to discussions of their “feminism” and pedagogical usefulness for girls negotiating media culture. After examining these central themes, the chapter draws on a feminist media studies methodology in pursuit of optimistic antiracist queer readings. I argue Mean Girls offers an implicit critique of heteronormativity, Little Miss Sunshine embraces girls’ autoeroticism, Juno provides a character who incessantly makes her own choices and thereby drives the narrative, and Precious defines African American girlhood as both valuable and vibrant. The chapter does not offer these readings as “better” or “more accurate” than others; rather it insists that by understanding the films in multiple and even sometimes contradictory ways feminist media criticism can intervene in and broaden the public discussion of girlhood.

The fourth chapter is the first of two focused case studies of girls in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century media culture. Here, I examine tennis, a professional sport in which girl athletes often participate. In the late 1990s no fewer than fourteen high-profile teens were playing professional tennis, and first Venus Williams, Martina Hingis, and Anna Kournikova and then Amélie Mauresmo and Serena Williams, in particular, repeatedly made headlines in both the tennis world and non-sports media. I focus on Venus Williams in this context, engaging two
methods of analysis: (1) comparison between coverage of Venus and of other girl players, and (2) a focus on live/near-live television coverage of her matches. Throughout, I both emphasize the specific racialization of her persona and draw attention to several instances in which I read Venus as challenging racism in both the media coverage and the tennis world. Thus, both in problematically racialized ways and in potentially resistant antiracist ways, depictions of Venus produce a specifically African American girlhood that brings change to the whiteness of tennis and by extension to the whiteness of contemporary definitions of girls.

Chapter 5 shifts media type again, centering local and alternative coverage of Sakia Gunn, a fifteen-year-old African American lesbian/AG who was murdered in Newark, New Jersey, in a 2003 bias crime. Gunn both is and is not a high-profile mediated girl like the girls I discuss in the previous chapters. She made the cover of newspapers; her death led to sustained and continuing (as of this writing) public discussion in multiple media; her murder sparked public debate and scandal; and she was posthumously adored, mourned, and celebrated. Yet none of this attention happened in a sustained way in mass-market mainstream media sources. Thus she is a spectacular girl, but in alternative locations. As an explicitly queer African American girl, she is relatively atypical in the media, yet the argument of this chapter is that she is a spectacular girl nevertheless, that one can find and see her if one looks to media texts other than grocery store magazines, girl films and girl celebrities, and world-class athletes.

In the last chapter, I bring media analysis into a third-grade public school classroom. Moral panic discourse tells us that media damage girls; media literacy scholarship tells us that girls and boys need skills to make sense of and resist media; and after-school and empowerment programs tell us that producing media is good for girls. All of these assumptions at least in part subscribe to the Ophelia Thesis assumption that girls are vulnerable, that media exploit that vulnerability, and that we must therefore build protective structures around girls. In this chapter, I turn away from the Ophelia Thesis and toward the thinking girl, asking what analytical approaches girls take toward media. By working with a group of children over several weeks in their classroom, I identify four key ways in which girls (and boys) engage with media analytically: they focus on minute details; they ask endless questions; they reflect
on media structures through creative production; and they pay a great deal of attention to the cultural production of gender. While they do not do all of these things all of the time, while they do struggle at times to separate themselves from the Ophelia Thesis, and while they do not have as developed an understanding of the cultural production of race and class as they do of the cultural production of gender, nevertheless they are quite analytical of media. In short, by defining girls as media critics this final chapter takes one more step away from dominant white can-do/at-risk representations of girls and one more step toward taking seriously the presence of alternative girls in U.S. media culture and social life: the two central goals of this book.