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CHAPTER 1

Girl Power: Representations of the ‘New’ Girl

Introduction

In the media, popular literature, television, movies, academic conferences and special issues of feminist journals, there has been an incredible proliferation of images, texts and discourses around girls and girlhood beginning in the early 1990s. The result has been a growing complexity in the ways in which young women are represented and their lives understood by both themselves and others. In the next two chapters, we try to make sense of this phenomenon by suggesting that it symbolizes both a certain kind of cultural fascination with girls and a contemporary anxiety about them. We suggest that two competing discourses are currently circulating, albeit in a range of different forms and expressions, across late modern Western societies, which organize and give shape to this dual conception of girls and girlhood. These are ‘girl power’ and what we are calling ‘reviving Ophelia’ after the popular text by American psychologist Mary Pipher (1994).

In identifying ‘girl power’ and ‘reviving Ophelia’ as dominant discourses we are not suggesting that these are the only existing ones or that they will remain in their current form and relationship to each other, unchanged and dominant forever. Rather, we are interested in them as a collection of statements and ideas that are currently producing influential networks of meanings about girls and girlhood. Studying these discourses, and others like them, enables us to think and ask questions about how certain meanings of girlhood become common sense and ‘authoritative’. Since discourse shapes how we come to think and produce new knowledge and facilitates shared understandings and engagements, knowing more about how ‘girl power’ and ‘reviving Ophelia’ operate,
allows us to attend to the relationship between the current cultural fascination with and anxiety about girls and how these meanings are lived by girls. However, even as discourse facilitates thought and actions it also works to constrain them, as it sets up the parameters, limits, and blind spots of thinking and acting. All discourse must be seen, therefore, as both enabling and constraining. As a result, we must also ask what the ‘girl power’ and ‘reviving Ophelia’ discourses leave out, marginalize or prohibit from being included in the issues and debates surrounding what it means to be a young woman in these times and places.

Our interest, then, is not to explicate the veracity or falsity of the claims made under the rubric of one or both of the ‘girl power’ or ‘reviving Ophelia’ discourses. Ours is a rather different kind of project. We want to investigate the contemporary ‘conditions of possibility’ that enable ‘girl power’ and the rescue of Ophelia – two seemingly contradictory discourses – to circulate as powerful post-modern truths about girls and girlhood. We want to ask how these discourses are involved in the formation of complex and non-unified subjectivities for girls. And further, how these discourses are circulated in the public sphere and how they are lived by girls of various racialized and classed backgrounds. Moreover, we pose certain questions about the political consequences for the forms of subjectivities made available to girls through these discourses.

We suggest that while these two discourses may be read as symptomatic of transformations of gender and its meanings, they also suggest something about the ways in which gender is being re-coded and re-worked along familiar binaries.

Girl Power and the Riot Grrrl Movement

‘Girl power’ is a complex, contradictory discourse used to name a range of cultural phenomena and social positionings for young women. Associated with a new take-charge dynamism, this discourse re-writes the passivity, voicelessness, vulnerability and sweet naturedness linked to some forms of raced and classed girlhoods (and as we will discuss in the next chapter, to the ‘Reviving Ophelia’ discourse). Celebrated by some for creating more expansive forms of femininity and critiqued by others for the way in which it is formulated around an individualism fraught with neoliberal ideals, the meanings and implications of girl power continue to shift and change depending on the context and purpose of its
articulation. What is clear about it, is that ‘girl power’ raises impor-
tant questions about the relationships between feminism, feminin-
ity, girls and new subjectivities.

At the time of this writing, ‘girl power’ has thoroughly entered
the English lexicon. The concept of ‘girl power’ has also become
widely used in non-English-speaking countries. Within the Nordic
countries, for example, ‘girl power’ has been used in a staggering
range of contexts. ‘Girl power’ has come to denote anything from
girls-only soccer or golf tournaments to theatre plays on young
women’s lives and to international educational exchange pro-
grammes for girls. The term has also been used by young
right-wing women politicians to promote their voting campaigns.
However, the origin of the term is usually traced back to the early
1990s, in the US to a loosely formed movement of young, mainly
white and middle-class women, a large proportion of whom
identified as queer, who gathered in Washington DC and Olympia
Washington in the United States and who called themselves ‘Riot
Grrrls’. With their roots in punk rock music and their motto ‘Grrrls
need guitars,’ the riot grrrls reclaimed the word girl, using it strate-
gically to distance themselves from the adult patriarchal worlds of
status, hierarchies and standards (Hesford, 1999, p. 45). Its usage
also marks a celebration of both the fierce and aggressive potential
of girls (the ‘grrr’ stood for growling) as well as reconstitution of
girl culture as a positive force embracing self-expression through
fashion, attitude and a Do It Yourself (DIY) approach to cultural
production.

Bands such as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy
exemplify this combination with their mixing of a girlish aesthetic
with all that is most threatening in a female adult: rage, bitterness
and political acuity. Many grrrls used their bodies to convey this
ironic melding of style with political expression by, for example the
juxtaposition of gendered signs (for example ‘1950s dresses with
combat boots, shaved hair with lipstick, studded belts with plat-
form heels’ (Klein, 1997, p. 222)) and through writing politically
loaded words such as ‘rape’, ‘shame’, and ‘slut’ on their arms and
stomachs (Japenga, 1995, p. 30 as in Jacques, 2001, p. 49). By most
accounts the movement was a response to the sexism, elitism and
violence of local masculinist punk scenes where exclusionary
practices meant that girls were considered less than full members
of the scene (see Chapter 6 on this topic). In contrast, the ‘girl
power’ of Riot Grrrl encouraged young women to see themselves,
not as the passive consumers of culture, including that of the punk
scene, but as producers and creators of knowledge, as verbal and expressive dissenters. Their critiques address their own and others’ experiences as women as well as their experiences of race, sexuality, class and other forms of embodiedness. As a result, Riot Grrrl is viewed by many who study young women’s cultures as exemplary of what is being called ‘youth feminism’ (Garrison, 2000, p. 142). The movement’s inauguration was in August 1991, during the week-long International Pop Underground Convention in Washington, DC, where ‘Girl Day’ opened the gathering.

Girl’s night will always be precious to me because, believe it or not, it was the first time I saw women stand on a stage as though they truly belonged there. The first time I had ever heard the voice of a sister proudly singing the rage so shamefully locked in my own heart. Until girls’ night, I never knew that punk rock was anything but a phallic extension of the white middle class male’s frustrations. (Rebecca B, quoted in Girl Germs 4 (1991).)

A year later, a three-day national Riot Grrrl Convention was held in DC comprising a number of educational workshops on topics such as violence against women, fat oppression and unlearning racism (Jacques, 2001, p. 47). Riot grrrl, or as it also became known, grrrlpower, quickly spread around different parts of the world, including to the UK, Europe and Australasia. Young feminist punks and young women involved in related music and DIY cultures developed transnational networks to forge their political and cultural agendas. This networking has been made possible through new kinds of media such as zines and the internet.

In addition to regular face to face meetings, gigs, workshops and conventions, the Riot Grrrls network through zines, which are self-written and designed photocopied publications they hand out and mail to other girls. The writings take up a full range of themes and styles: angry, supportive, advice-giving, on issues like relationships, harassment, mental, physical and verbal abuse, and rape. Cartoons, photographs, collage, and text which are often autobiographical are typical zine content. Zines, according to Green and Taormino (1997), ‘originate from a need for expression, a need girls have to discover the truth about themselves and their lives. Through zines, we can see young women uncensored and free to discuss their realities’ (Green & Taormino, 1997, p. xiii). Hesford (1999) suggests that zines are ‘paradoxical feminist writing spaces’ because of the way writers negotiate with and appropriate the
discourses of dominant culture and liberal feminism. She argues that these feminist autobiographical writings are critical sites for the construction of social identities, noting how they may be marked paradoxically by the interplay of dominant and counter-hegemonic discourses (Hesford, 1999, p. 45). Importantly, the purpose of these media has been to create an inexpensive, self-produced site for expression for those without access to or interest in mainstream forums. Zines are often attempts to forge new communities beyond their locales. The capacity to build a global grrr movement through these media is critical to many zine creators.

Girls are also turning to cyberspace and the creation of e-zines as an alternative site for self-expression. In comparison to print zines, online zines have the advantage of limited production and distribution expense after the initial investment of a computer, which is of course an expense out of the range of possibility for some. However, the material is accessible to anyone with a computer and modem and thus facilitates networking, community building and dialogue (Ferris, 2001, p. 55). The opportunity to post one’s website, without having to go through corporate, mainstream, commercial, official – and even – adult channels, makes a difference for shifting the locus of political activism, as well as who can produce politicized cultural-technological objects. However, despite the opportunities opened up by using what has been a male-dominant internet to communicate about feminist issues it is important to recognize that, ‘this expansion of discursive space does not necessarily, nor easily, translate into shifts in dominant public discourse’ (Hamilton, 1999, p. 131 as in Ferris, 2001, p. 55).

Washington D.C. Riot Grrl Manifesto

RIOT GRRRL IS . . .

BECAUSE we need to accept and support each other as girls; acknowledge our different approaches to life and accepting all of them as valid.

BECAUSE we seek to create revolution in our own lives every single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the status quo.

In the wake of the Riot Grrrls, numerous all-girl rock bands were born, amongst them the enormously popular Spice Girls from Britain, and the slogan ‘girl power’ began to be bandied about in forums beyond the Riot Grrrl milieux. T-shirts with pro-girl sentiments like ‘Girls Rule’ and ‘Girls Kick Ass’ started to show up at malls. Jacques (2001, p. 49) argues that the messages on these shirts
bear a direct relationship to the words the riot grrrls wrote on their bodies. However, she points out that while T-shirts have a long history as a conveyor of political slogans, it is important to remember that Riot Grrrl was deliberately anti-consumer culture. ‘Writing on oneself with a marker is not only a political, feminist action (first in choosing to “deface” the feminine body which is ideally a flawless object; second, in drawing attention to issues of women’s oppression through the words), but displays the classic do-it-yourself ethic of punk’ (Jacques, 2001, p. 50). Thus, in buying a trendy T-shirt, whether or not its slogan is meant to be ironic, any critique of capitalism is, by definition, lost in its (mass) production.

With the proliferation of the term, the meanings of ‘girl power’ and what girls who embrace it could and should do with it did not remain static, nor did it get taken up with the same political and social intentions of Riot Grrrls by others who claimed it. Coverage of Riot Grrrls quickly appeared in American mainstream magazines such as Seventeen (1993), The New Yorker (1992), Newsweek (1993), Rolling Stone (1993) and Time (1998). A similar trend occurred elsewhere, as the mass media attempted to grapple with this new, intriguing and saleable phenomenon. For the Riot Grrrls the coverage brought objectionable incursion. Not only was there a rush to categorize the movement whose members defied that there were strict definitions to be had, but, there was also a permutating and re-articulation of the girl power message.

The revolution starts inside you . . . Stop Girl Competition and Jealousy. You don’t have to take shit from anyone . . . Be who you want, say what you want . . . No, we are not paranoid. We are not manhaters. No we are not worrying too much. No we are not taking it too seriously . . . We are not a band, not about violence, not about man-hate, not a fashion statement, not some elite club. You don’t have to be a punk. You don’t need our permission. There are no rules. No leader. Everygirl is a Riot Girl. (DC Riot Girls, Winter 1993.)

While the riot grrrls themselves clearly saw their movement as attached to a liberatory social and political agenda, the mainstream media opted to present a different message altogether. A Rolling Stone article concluded, for example: ‘Riot grrrls’ unifying principle is that being feminist is inherently confusing and contradictory and that women have to find a way to be sexy, angry and powerful at the same time’ (France, 1993). Here in a bizarre twist, it is feminism that is seen to complicate what is assumed would
otherwise be an easy and straight-forward transition from girlhood to woman. *Newsweek* took a somewhat different stance to dismiss the serious-mindedness of the movements’ politics (Chideya, 1993). In doing so it draws on hegemonic discourses associating youth as a time when rebellion is expected, but is also expected to be in most respects temporary (Driscoll, 2002, p. 205). ‘There is no telling whether this enthusiasm or the Riot grrls catchy passion for “revolution girl style” will evaporate when it hits the adult real world. Most of the grrls are still in the shelters of home or college – a far cry from what they’ll face in the competitive job market or as they start to form their own families’ (Chideya, 1993).

As soon as the coverage began, a US-wide ‘press block’ was invoked in 1992–93 by some participants in order to prevent the possibility of colluding with ‘exploitation, misquoting, and such’ (Spirit, 1995). The block was also meant to preserve the original intent of the movement. According to Kathleen Hanna (Bikini Kill singer), ‘we weren’t doing what we did to gain fame, we were just trying to hook up with other freaks’ (quoted in Greenblatt, 1996, p. 25). The articles multiplied anyway, revealing more about their authors’ lust to ‘uncover’ a potential new trend than about the movement itself. The disruptive nature and threatening intent in the girls’ voices and actions were ignored, while attention focused on their clothing and their appearance (Godfrey, 1993). In the wake of this, the movement itself began to splinter over how to address the exposure. For example, debates ensued over ownership and defence of the ideology, terminology, websites and appropriate media, including a heated debate about the use of urls containing the word ‘grrl’ versus ‘grrrl’.

So much stuff has been said about what riot grrrl is, actually what some misinformed people have said. I’m sick to death of defending riot grrrl every time I turn around. I don’t even know why it should be defended. Riot Grrrl is NOT what Seventeen, Newsweek or the LA weekly make it out to be or any other media thing. The media attention has taken riot grrrl and twisted it and distorted the name to mean little if anything of importance. . . . Riot grrrl is about emotions, feelings, not fashion, or hating boys, it’s about us, grrrls. It’s real and a threat because it goes against the patriarchy as anything is a threat that goes against the patriarchy. (Dawn, 19, in her zine ‘Function’, Seattle, USA.)

The antagonistic relations with the media and subsequent black-out response from some Riot Grrrls raises larger questions about
the complicated relationships between subcultures and the politics of incorporation (Hebdige, 1979) on the one hand and the politics of commodification and representation on the other. As Jacques (2001) succinctly states, the dilemma the Riot Grrrl movement faced was one of reifying an opposition between preserving authenticity but risking elitism, or reaching a wider audience but ‘selling out’. She says, ‘for a political movement that wanted to reach alienated girls, the media black-out strategy closed Riot Grrrls off to girls in smaller centres and risked defining RG as an exclusive, insular movement’ (Jacques, 2001, p. 48). The contradiction of the situation was not lost on some Riot Grrrls: ‘The mainstream media – what seemed like the best medium for communication, the best way to spread “girl love” – had failed us.’ Yet the author also recognizes that this exposure inspired many more girls ‘to question, challenge, create, demand’ (Spirit, 1995). This opposition between ‘authentic subculture’ and ‘mainstream sell out’ continues to echo in different versions of the girl power debates.

Selling Girl Power, Selling Feminism?

Now I see Spice Girls and supermodels and sparkly slogan shirts – their version of lame ‘girl power’ is so far away from our original vision of ‘grrrl power’; co-opted, watered down, marketable, profitable – all style and not a fuck of a lot of content. I walk through the mall and I see a chain store clothes shop is selling me some ‘girl power’ in the form of furry winter jackets. (Kylie, in her zine ‘Her Heroes Aren’t Gone’, Australia.)

Despite the objections of Riot Grrrls, the lid was off the can and certain aspects of the ‘girl power’ phenomenon became ubiquitous, entering mainstream cultural arenas through an incredible range of products and services. In the media, the term ‘girl power’ was used to headline almost any newsworthy event or phenomenon that involved women, from career advancements and girls’ educational achievements to gendered crime rates. Community organizations and government departments also picked up on the terminology and aspects of the ideology; as Susan Hopkins notes (2002, p. 3): ‘“Girl power” has . . . been appropriated by liberal educators and bureaucrats as a ready-made empowerment plan for girls.’ For example, ‘Girl Power’ was the name given to a 1997 US Health and
Human Services Program for a public health initiative designed to help keep young females ‘healthy, smart, and strong’. ‘Girl-power takes the stage’, was the headline promoting an American Sesame Street musical production entitled, ‘When I grow up’. The trailer goes on to say, ‘if girls follow their dreams and work hard, they can do whatever they want’. In an all girl scene the mini-women sing about their larger than life dreams: to become an astronaut, a language teacher, a lion tamer, a train engineer, and a surgeon. A Swedish sports organization describes its activities in the year 2001 and announces: ‘This year the “Girl Power”-project has continued – the goal of the project is to get more young girls to become leaders or active in the organization. The most concrete activity has been the “Motion workshop” which has included gymnastics for children.’(Translation from Swedish by Sinikka Aapola) Thus, despite the popular slogan, this project has not extended much beyond the traditional understandings of young women and their involvement in sports as limited to the field of gymnastics. Another Swedish project, ‘Grrrl Tech’, is directed at 13–30 year old women. The goal of the project is to introduce girls to the male dominated sphere of computers and new media. Funding for the project comes from the regional government, the Swedish Savings Bank foundation as well as local Universities (www.grrltech.nu). Girl power positions young women as feisty, ambitious, motivated and independent. Inevitably, from the early days of the circulation of this discourse, it became not only a catchphrase for educational programmes, but a successful marketing tool for the culture industries.

The Hollywood blockbuster contenders of 1999 saw a fierce competition for recognition as the ultimate in girl power authority. The Houston Chronicle (Davis, 1999) called Charlie’s Angels the latest archetype of ‘girl power’, while the Associated Press headline (1999) states: Forget Charlie’s Angels the year’s ultimate girl power movie is ‘Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon’. Although critic Gina Arnold notes an interesting aspect of ‘girl power’ as trend, when she says that while the West’s fascination with it is quite recent, in Asia female cartoon heroines and martial arts movies featuring non-animated women action heros are not a new a phenomenon at all (Arnold, 2001, p. 1). Girl power was also hailed, in 1999 by WIN Magazine (Wilder, 1999) as the music industry’s new buzz word with an international array of performers heralded as title holders. Every female pop artist, from Madonna to Avril Lavigne, has been attributed with girl power.
G: One thing I think is a bit fucked up is that as soon a girl in Sweden chooses to rap, things are immediately turned into feminism.
C: – So . . . ? Isn’t that what you’d expect?
G: No, I mean that it looks more as just a strategic move. They don’t go out with it initially, so it looks more as some marketing team has been thinking ‘hmmm, she is a girl . . . ok, then it has to be Grrl Power, that will make some sales’.


And in television, shows like Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Xena: the Warrior Princess and Sabrina the Teenage Witch have also won popular attention for their representations of the ‘new girl’. ‘Western storytelling’, a writer for the popularized Psychology Today insists, ‘hasn’t seen their ilk since the legendary female fighters of the Celts’ (Ventura, 1998, p. 62). As Hopkins (2002, p. 1) argues, the ‘cute but powerful girl-woman’ has become a pop culture icon: she is an ‘heroic overachiever – active, ambitious, sexy and strong’.

But it is perhaps the British all-girl band the Spice Girls that is most (in)famously associated with the popularization of the girl power motto. The band was enormously successful, reaching their peak in 1997 and disbanding soon after. Their first compact disc sold over 50 million copies worldwide in one year (Lemish, 1998, p. 165). In their lyrics, Emma (Baby Spice), Geri (Ginger Spice), Melanie B. (Scary Spice), Melanie C. (Sporty Spice), and Victoria (Posh Spice) call for equal rights and advocate that sisterhood is powerful. In contrast to the media’s response to the messages of the Riot Grrrls, the Spice Girls’ message was celebrated. The Village Voice, for example, waxed eloquent about how the Spice Girls, ‘have done the seemingly impossible: they have made feminism, with all its implied threat, cuddly, sexy, safe, and most importantly, sellable’ (Press & Nichols, 1997, p. 10). But the hyper-sexualized and highly stylized marketing of the girl power of the Spice Girls raised cries of outrage from some feminists, producing a series of striking questions about the relationship between feminism, femininity and commercialization. ‘Can anything feminist be so predominantly popular (even for a short time?) Can feminism be a mass-produced, globally distributed product? And can merchandised relations to girls be authentic?’ (Driscoll, 1999, p. 178).

The Spice Girls’ ‘girl power’ does not involve knowing who you are on the inside, but whether your Wonderbra should be lace or leather.

(Ariel Federow, USA)

Interview:
Shelley: Do you think that kind of Spice Girls’ ‘girl power’ is real power?
Shayne: No. I don’t agree with it because it’s portraying them as thin, beautiful, talented. I mean everyone is talented but they are just portraying them in a way – well obviously not everyone is going to just disregard it and laugh it off. For some people, it will actually have a strong effect. I mean like with eating disorders and to what extent it encourages girls to attain that. I think it is very dangerous. (Shayne, Britain, quoted in Budgeon, 1998.)

The question ‘Is girl power feminist?’, posed by Driscoll (1999, p. 174) and many others, would have been absurd to the early Riot Grrrls. But, in a context where girl power is also equated with the emergence of teenage girls as a powerful economic force, the contest over its continuing proliferation of meanings guarantees only that it is a question whose answer is not at all obvious. Recently, the spending power of 12–17 year old British girls has been estimated at 1.3 billion pounds. In Australia, 11–17 year olds’ collective income is AUS $4.6 billion, and in the US, young women aged 8–18 are deemed to be worth US $67 billion (see Barwick, 2001 and Brown, 2000; Cuneo, 2002, and Nikas, 1998). Much of this discretionary income is guided towards girl power products. As trade journals tell advertisers, to capture the shopping power of Generation Y, they need to understand that ‘the new trend is about Girl Power – a celebration of femininity and individualism’ (Nikas, 1998, p. 20). Even the mainstream media have entered the fracas over the question of authentic girl power versus its commercial potential, when for example, the USA Today printed an article noting the launch of yet another teenage version of a woman’s magazine, in this particular case Teen Vogue, accusing it of ‘hawking fake girl power’ (Vanderkam, 2003). And in the Time magazine issue of July 1, 1998 whose cover reads, ‘Is Feminism Dead?’ girl power is evoked in a number of the articles as a marker of both the successes of feminism and a sign of its demise. For example, a story written by Ginia Bellafante (1998) suggests that, ‘“girl power”, that sassy, don’t-mess-with-me adolescent spirit that Madison Avenue carefully caters to’, is evidence that women’s struggles for liberation have indeed changed women’s lives for the better (Bellafante 1998, p. 58). And while indirectly critical of the marketing
campaign targeting girls, another article by Nadya Labi (1998) in the same issue of *Time* mentions Buffy, the Spice Girls, Alanis Morissette, and others as exemplars of the pervasive and lucrative dimensions of girl power commerce (Labi 1998, pp. 60–62). What is not in question, therefore, is that girl power is a marketable concept that many are anxious to tap into. The scheme of girl power and marketing was given a six page feature article in the December 8th 1997 *Fortune* magazine. The piece celebrates the conspicuous consumption of teenage girls with a very patronizing tone. ‘If you want to sell to the girl-power crowd you have to pretend that they’re running things, that they’re in charge’ (Munk, 1997, p. 136 as cited in Taft, 2001).

Want to know the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard of? Girl Power. If you haven’t heard, it’s this attempt to wrest feminism from muscly gay girls who don’t shave and to give it to cute models who have everything. Here’s actually an explanatory quote from the analytical text Girl Power, coauthored by Posh, Scary, Sporty, Baby and Ginger Spices: ‘Feminism means skipping a date and going out with your friends instead.’ Ah, I thought feminism was saying ‘I’m not asking you to find me desirable, because I’m smarter than you and could bench press your house, which coincidently is the size of my sauna’. (Emily Carmichael, 15, USA (Carmichael, 1999).)

The discussion of ‘girl power’ in feminist circles is also far from unequivocally resolved. Some embrace the phenomenon for the mainstreaming effect it has had, bringing feminism into the lives of young women through music and film and television characters. For example, Debbie Stoller, former zine writer, current editor of *Bust* magazine, says of television characters Xena, Buffy and Sabrina: ‘these characters all share a common strength: the ability to leap over sexist stereotypes in a single bound.’ She argues that these shows ‘are hinting that there’s a wellspring of untapped girl power out there, with the potential to change the world if it could only be released. You go, girls’ (quoted in Projansky and Vande Berg, 2000, p. 15). Others agree, suggesting that ‘the feminist underpinnings found in the Girl Power pop culture icons are helpful, if not critical, for young girls as they negotiate and navigate toward womanhood’ (http://www.rohan.sdu.edu/~hofmans/GirlPower.html).
However, other feminists claim the crass commercialism and commodification of girl power has voided it of any feminist content it might have once had. Jessica Taft, for example, argues strongly on the dangers of young women’s embracing of the concept. She suggests that because girl power is presented as the gentle, non-political and non-threatening alternative to feminism, it functions as a way for girls to identify girl positive feelings with a non-political discourse and to think about girlhood in cultural ways rather than as a space for social and political action (Taft, 2001, p. 4). Moreover, girl power’s popularity is credited to its very lack of threat to the status quo for the ways in which it reflects the ideologies of white-middle-class, individualism and personal responsibility over collective responses to social problems. The result is a redirecting of attention away from the ‘degradation and economic exploitation of women worldwide... and the commercial enterprises largely responsible for the continuing gendered and racialized exploitation of labourers globally – the very enterprises producing girl power products for western consumption’ (Ono, 2000, p. 165).

I personally don’t like the words ‘grrrl’ and ‘riot grrrl’... Why should we/I as a European girl tag myself with a word/movement that is over ten years old and happened in the States, I think we need to create our own new movements and terms that are well defined instead of using a term that is so old and has been fucked with in the media. (Riikka, high school student, Finnish-Italian-Swedish-Russian, manager of Ladybomb distro; www.grrrlzines.net/interviews/ladybomb.htm)

In a completely different context Sarah Projansky and Leah Vande Berg (2000) provide a very interesting analysis of the television show ‘Sabrina The Teenage Witch’. In a nuanced account of the program they show how it presents a girl power that is at once empowering through numerous references to gender equality, anti-homophobia and anti-discrimination. At the same time, they argue that its girl power is contained by narratives that centre whiteness and emphasize beauty, heterosexual male attention and a feminine responsibility for others (2000, p. 16). The show which premiered in the US in April 1996, centres around events in the life of sixteen year old Sabrina Spellman, who lives with her two aunts. They are all witches. Sabrina’s is a world in which an independent young woman is encouraged to ‘use her strength, self-confidence, and magical powers and where she is accepted and loved for who she
is, even when who she is takes her across binary gender and sexuality boundaries’ (Projansky & Vande Berg, 2000, p. 27). They also suggest, however, that like a typical sit-com the narrative structure of the show is one of problem-complication-confusion-resolution. In the series it is Sabrina herself who causes the problem and the escalation of the problem by using magic in questionable ways to fulfil her personal desires.

The narrative structure of the series thus provides a gloss that predominantly defines ‘Sabrina’s independence as problematic and responds to it by supplanting it with repetitive lessons about sublimating self and prioritizing responsibility to others’ (Projansky & Vande Berg, 2000, p. 32). If magic stands for girl power, then the series promotes a message that the appropriate use of girl power is it to maintain and enhance a normative femininity. Moreover, the series’ feminism is also rendered problematic by Projansky and Vande Berg for the way in which it celebrates consumer capitalism, co-opts cultural difference and leaves unquestioned the privilege Sabrina is granted by virtue of her magical special status (Projansky & Vande Berg, 2000, p. 33). Their very strong conclusion is that the popularized feminism promoted by girl power, maintains rather than undermines gender, race, and class hierarchies (Projansky & Vande Berg, 2000, p. 36).

Catherine Driscoll (1999, p. 186) however, argues for an understanding of girl power that does not position it as ‘either it is or it isn’t’ feminism. She suggests, instead that the mixed messages – ‘if you’re with my sexiness, you’re with my politics’ – of the girl power message expounded by pop icons like the Spice Girls, might have interesting effects on the circulation of the label ‘feminism’ and even on dominant understandings of what girls want. She suggests that the Spice Girls generate dialogue about feminism in a massively popular field. They talk about how what they say and do may or may not be feminism and about the relations between politics and popular culture. Driscoll (1999) states that while the Spice Girls may not produce revolutionary change, groups like them do create a shift in the dominant paradigms of cultural production directed to girls. She notes that these shifts might be indebted to the impact of other girl culture forms (such as the Riot Grrrl), but that the embracing of popular rather than avant-garde cultural production inflects further possibilities. ‘Spice Girls’ fandom might demand less dramatic changes to girls’ positions within established political and social systems than does participation in the Riots and resistances of some other
forms of girl culture. But, the Spice Girls do call for significantly changed relations to the lives of girls as they are’ (Driscoll, 1999, p. 188).

**Girl Power and Race**

Whichever perspective on the multiple forms of ‘girl power’ one takes, it seems the phenomenon clearly signals a shifting mode of youthful femininity. That is, the view of girl power as collective and individual empowerment and the one that sees girl power as commercialized exploitation that furthers a neo-liberal agenda both suggest a new articulation of girls and girlhood is being pronounced, as well as new forms for thinking about how girls’ lives might be lived. Angela McRobbie (1996) advises that in undertaking an investigation of changing forms of femininity that have emerged in cultural forms, it is necessary to ‘pay attention to the space of interracial, interactive experience and to exploring the processes of hostility, fascination and desire which penetrate and shape the nature of these encounters’ (McRobbie, 1996, p. 39). In the increasingly mixed-race British context of youth cultural media, where images of friendship and intimacy between girls from different ethnic backgrounds and mixed-race heterosexual couples are increasingly being used in advertising campaigns and other cultural products, McRobbie suggests that the effect is the production of ‘a new vocabulary of inter-racial desire which extends the notion of shared cultures of femininity’ (McRobbie, 1996, p. 41). Thus, while it may be clear that a new articulation of young femininity is evolving, it is also crucial to explore how it positions different girls in relation to the texts of girl power. Does girl power, for example, address all girls in the same way? What kinds of inclusions and exclusions does girl power engender? Is a shared culture of femininity produced by girl power? And/or does girl power reproduce existing social hierarchies and divisions? In this section of the chapter, we are particularly interested in the inter-discursive space created where the cultural forms of girl power meet and intersect with the discursive space of race.

One entry-point into this inquiry is to revisit the question of the origins of the ‘girl power’ concept. Although most of the discussion on origins, as we have already seen, starts with the Riot Grrrl movement, hints of a different lineage are suggested by others who trace girl power to other sources. For example, according to
Laurel Gilbert and Crystal Kile, the authors of *SurferGrrrls*, the grrrl in Riot Grrrl, is at least partially derived from young African American women’s phrase of encouragement to each other popular in the late 1980s ‘You go girl’ (Gilbert & Kile, 1996, p. 5). Relatedly, others suggest it is not the white punk music scene but rather Black hip hop music that spawned and supports the changing modes of femininity understood as girl power. One African American girl strongly asserts, ‘I remember growing up to the flavor and stylings of teenage female rappers like Salt ‘N Pepa, McLyte and Queen Latifah and seeing “girl power” served up constantly as a spicy dish of independence, pride and assertiveness throughout hip hop music. For me girl power is in no way a particularly nineties thing, and it certainly does not have a White girl’s face’ (Hues (1998), 8).

Starting from this point of departure, it seems ‘girl power’ is very much entangled with the question of inter-racial fascination and desire. The girl power phenomenon is not unique in its cultural appropriation and re-articulation of images and discourses of black women’s strength, power and agency to serve a mainly white middle-class young women. According to the British study by Simon Jones, ‘*Black Culture, White Youth*’ (Jones, 1988) there is a long history of relations between white subcultures and black culture and music. He claims that black expressive culture, in particular music, is a resource as well as a source of envy and admiration on the part of young whites. This is because of its strength of feelings, its cultural richness, its ability to offer and confirm to young black people a sense of their own identity.

Black youth have had to be incredibly resourceful in seeking out positive reflections of themselves in mainstream culture and in producing their own images to counter the mainly negative ones that exist. It is possible to see how young white women have encountered similar challenges. Looking for ways of disrupting limiting discourses of femininity and youthful subjectivities and replacing them with competing ones that offer newer more expansive opportunities for being young and female, it is possible to see how the powerful, agentic discourses of black femininity would be extraordinarily attractive. Moreover, McRobbie (1996) argues that through the strong identification with aspects of black culture, young white people may also dis-identify with racism. Using the example of the British film ‘The Commitments’ (1991), she argues that music, fashion and style make available a symbolic language for popular anti-racism (McRobbie, 1996, p. 43). This, certainly, seems to be the
case for the Riot Grrrls, where, as we have already seen, an anti-racist politics infuses their feminism.

The cultural politics of race may also be a feature of the media response to the Riot Grrrls. Alison Jacques (2001) advances a very provocative idea, when she connects the media’s fascination with Riot Grrrls to the fact that in late 1980s North America, rap music was gaining widespread popularity. She suggests that it is possible that young, angry white middle-class women were thought to be preferable to, and perhaps less threatening than, angry black men. All the sensational coverage of girl power resulted in a shifting of public attention. Simultaneously celebrated, dismissed as youthful rebellion, and fostered as a source of commercial interest through its marketization, girl power’s feminism and anti-racism was rendered more ambiguous in the process.

It is also important to consider how those popular media forms that took up the discourses of girl power represented the relationship of this changing mode of youthful femininity to race and anti-racist politics. In a detailed study of the television series ‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’, Kent Ono (2000) makes the case that despite the liberating images of girls in the Buffy text, debilitating images of and ideas about people of colour are conveyed in it through a re-establishment of neo-colonial power relations. With no person of colour playing a significant character in the series, Ono argues that marginalized characters serve a pedagogical function by affirming contemporary racial, gender, sexual, class and ability hierarchies. The media valorization and glorification of girl power ignores, de-centres and marginalizes people of colour. Moreover, the vampires that Buffy and the other slayers eliminate in every episode of the show are often depicted in racialized terms. For example, as the vampires descend into evil something about them becomes darker, their clothes, their faces and their surroundings. Thus, Buffy’s girl power may be seen to come through an associated villainization and demonization of people of colour (Ono, 2000, p. 164).

Ono (2000) argues that popular media discourse about girl power and Buffy forward a problematic understanding of power and liberation when race is taken into consideration. The idea of liberation and empowerment is linked to a certain kind of violent aggression deployed by white females. In order to promote this as a liberatory aggression, racial hierarchies of people of colour are relied upon: liberation and empowerment are gained through images of white women murdering people of colour. Ono (2000) concludes that the proliferation of discourses about feminism into
the popular, corporate domain comes with great risks and expenses. That is, the most socially marginalized within society become the scapegoats in the process of popular culture's championing of its version of white liberation (Ono, 2000, p. 180).

A somewhat different relationship between girl power, race and anti-racist politics is played out in the television series ‘Sabrina the Teenage Witch’, mentioned above. Like the Buffy series, all the central characters in Sabrina, are white. The one recurring non-white character is Quiz Master, played by an African American, and he is portrayed drawing on a long tradition of stereotypes of African Americans. For example, he wears outrageous costumes, has a clownish manner, and is completely incompetent as a Quiz Master. Despite, the lack of non-white characters, Projansky and Vande Berg (2000), argue that this does not mean that Sabrina and her aunts have no access to racialized cultures. On the contrary, they are constantly bringing them into their lives through the use of magic. In the process, whiteness is repeatedly re-centered and cultural references with specific meanings in particular social contexts are re-coded as objects of pleasure for Sabrina and her aunts. The magical crossing of national and race boundaries, can be seen as occurring in ways that articulate a tourist identity and neocolonial position for the family of witches (Projansky & Vande Berg, 2000, p. 33). Projansky and Vande Berg (2000) conclude that multiculturalism is represented in the series as a form of privileged consumption which Sabrina and her aunts access while completely oblivious to the class and race politics which makes this access possible for them. In this instance, girl power is the magical force that facilitates a willful ignorance, the result of which is the maintenance of gender, race, and class hierarchies.

**Living Girl Power**

In this last section, we close the chapter by considering girls' engagements with girl power and what it both enables and constrains in their lives.

Do something anything out of the norm for girls to show that you resist the stereotypical guidelines of what girls should do or be or act like . . . anything that ever was/is exclusive to boystown has had all previous rights removed. The world is yours. (DC Riot Girls, Winter 1993.)
If someone says in Finland there ain’t girl energy/
fuck it, soon they will need a kit of emergency/
they can fuck themselves/
‘cause here comes the girl who don’t care about anyone else/
She’s got a lot of girl power with her/
be careful, watch your back sir/
this time music ain’t Spice Girls’ bubblegum pop/
Just simple and rhymy Finnish hiphop/
I speak it loud and i speak it clear/
you other people have much to fear/
what is that in your eye, is it a tear/
I say what i know and feel/
I’m not faking, this is so fucking real/
everybody gets a part of my rhymes/
you can’t win, you can try a million times
(EmZii, 14, an aspiring rap-mc, Finland, in her web-page www.geocities.com/taivaansteppaaaja/omabiisi8.html) (Translation from Finnish by EmZii.)

We link these engagements with a series of questions about the relationships between girl power discourses and the coinciding rapid social, cultural and economic changes taking place in much of the Western world in this same time period. In particular, we are interested in further investigating girl power as an expression of what Ulrich Beck (1992, p. 87) has called a ‘social surge of individualization’ emerging within the context of the rise of neo-liberalism.

Neo-liberalism is a form of Western liberal government that reconstitutes the welfare state and relations with its citizens. Destabilizing the post-war focus on state-building (through the development of social programmes and a contract between employees and the State), neo-liberalism promotes a social world where the individual is fully self-responsible. ‘However apparently external and implacable may be the constraints, obstacles and limitations that are encountered, each individual must render his or her life meaningful, as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in the furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization’ (Rose, 1992, p. 12). Individualization thus involves an increasing tendency to self-monitoring, so that ‘we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 75). Under these conditions contemporary gender identities and relations become emblematic, representing in a kind of idealized form the possibilities of a self cut loose from tradition and required to make itself anew.
Clearly, some aspects of the girl power phenomenon can be read as assisting in the production of the new self-inventing, neo-liberal subject. For example, in Budgeon’s (1998) British study this linkage was a strong feature in the talk of the young white, middle-class women she interviewed. Self-determination was a recurring theme and especially evident as an ideal to which the young women aspired. Similarly, the young women often asserted the importance of inner strength, authenticity and being true to oneself (Budgeon, 1998, p. 122). As Budgeon suggests, these articulations of identity as choice and self-determination are linked in Britain to processes of individualization. In her reading of girls’ engagements with and construction of the message: ‘Being a young woman means being whoever you want to be’, Budgeon takes a very positive stance. She suggests that the value of self-determination and individuality offers girls a powerful position from which to evaluate cultural representations of ideal femininity and to challenge and reject aspects of the available models femininity that did not suit their own visions of themselves and their futures.

But what of working class girls, Valerie Walkerdine and her colleagues ask (Walkerdine et al., 2001)? What happens to these girls when the value of self-determination and individuality becomes the new cultural ideal of femininity? More specifically what happens to working-class girls who encounter a ‘girl power’ that tells them they can be what they want in a labour market that cruelly sets limits on any ambition, together with an education system that classifies them as fit for certain kinds of work depending on their academic capabilities? Walkerdine and her co-authors highlight the contradictions of the experiences of British working-class girls in a context where the future has been declared to be female. This declaration was made in response to the news that in the 1990s young women were outperforming their male cohorts at both the primary and the secondary levels of education. Young women were doing better than young men on standard achievement tests and they were also now more likely to enter higher education (Budgeon, 1998, p. 115). Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) show that even these successes should be scrutinized for their differing implications for working and middle-class girls.

Reay (2001) suggests that although prevailing dominant discourses identify girls as the ‘success story of the 1990s’, her study in an inner city London school shows that, particularly when the focus is on the construction of heterosexual femininities – it is premature to assume that girls are doing better than boys (Reay, 2001,
p. 156). In the school where her study takes place, some of the girls have grouped themselves using the identifying names of the ‘spice girls’ and the ‘girlies’. According to Reay, the ‘spice girls’ interaction with the boys appeared to transgress prevailing gender regimes, while the ‘girlies’ followed a more conformist behaviour pattern. Yet, the spice girls were, for much of the time, also active in constructing and maintaining traditional variants of heterosexuality. For example, Reay shows how their espousal of girl power did not exclude enthusiastic partaking of the boyfriend/girlfriend games. There was much flirting, letter writing, falling in and out of love and talk of broken hearts. However, they also operated beyond the boundaries of the ‘girlies’ more conformist behaviour in their interaction with boys. Rating the boys was their favourite playground activity. As one explained, ‘you follow the boys around and give them a mark out of ten for how attractive they are’ (Reay, 2001, p. 158).

Reay (2001) theorizes that the ‘spice girls’ adherence to so-called girl power allowed them to make bids for social power not contemplated by the other girls. However, their ‘girls with attitude’ stance – the ‘doing it for themselves’ in ways which ran counter to traditional forms of femininity resulted in them being labelled at various times by teachers in the staffroom as ‘real bitches’, ‘a bad influence’ and ‘little cows’ (Reay, 2001, p. 160). Reay (2001) concludes that the espousal of girl power by the girls in the group produces mixed effects. On the one hand, it garners them power in both the male and female peer group, and provide spaces for them to escape gender subordination by the boys. On the other, the teachers’ responses exemplify the limiting effects of such attempts to seek out empowering places within regimes alternatively committed to denying subordination or celebrating it.

This kind of contradictory effect may also be seen in a recent article featured in the New York Times Style Section. The article is entitled, ‘She’s got to be a macho girl’ (Kuczynski, 2003) and describes a ‘new’ trend of girls who pursue boys. These girls are said to call boys on the phone, ask them out and sometimes even initiate sex. The teens and experts that Kuczynski calls on for commentary all agree that girls now grow up encouraged by parents, teenagers and peers to strive for more power and achievements than girls of decades past – but each somehow makes that sound like a bad thing, when it comes to relationships and sex. One 18 year old comments, ‘I think with feminist thought being pushed upon girls from a young age, that some people put a premium on
girls’ dominating different areas of life.’ And a counsellor at a Tennessee mental-health centre opines that the sexual revolution has ‘bitten women in the butt’. It seems like girl power may be encountering something of a backlash, the effect of which is a repositioning of girls within familiar binaries of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ girls and their attendant meanings around sexuality, femininity, power and agency. However, while girl power girls are rendered socially problematic, other forms of femininity currently available for defining girls and girlhood are represented as equally undesirable. It is the discourse of the vulnerable girl that we shall discuss in the following chapter.

Conclusion

Girl power is a concept with various meanings and uses which shift depending on the context. Its pervasiveness as a discourse articulating emergent forms of femininity is perhaps due to the way it lends itself to multiple interpretations. It represents a feminist ideal of a new, robust, young woman with agency and a strong sense of self. At the same time as it has become a marketing slogan looking to attract the lucrative teen girl market. Its appeal to young women who have grown up as a matter of course with many of the social changes fought for by a previous generation of feminists is not hard to imagine. It offers them an image of young femininity which is about possibility, limitless potential and the promise of control over the future. Embedded in the concept is a sense that a life of success and happiness is within reach of girls who learn the skills and/or have the characteristics necessary for continual self-invention. The constraints of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability and ethnicity on this bright future is covered over by the suggestion that an individual can overcome all with the right attitude and drive.

The incredible attraction to girl power, on the part of the media, social institutions and girls themselves, must therefore be situated as an effect of the neo-liberal process of individualization. The concept resonants in today’s world in ways it never would have in previous times due to the neo-liberal fashioning of a new subject and the changing relations of subjectivity and femininity.
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