GIRLHOOD
Redefining The Limits

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Contents

Preface

The inspiration for this anthology comes from numerous sources. One is our recognition of the still-burgeoning field of girlhood studies as a viable and valuable realm for innovative and much-needed work. "Girls" often have been spoken for and about as a homogenized group without agency and often without acknowledgement of the complex power relations that weave through their diverse experiences. Second is the obligation for work on girls and girlhoods to be intersectional and interlocking: describing and critiquing the interconnectedness of gender, race, sexuality, age and class in both framing identities and analyzing power relations. Finally, the dearth of compilations on the subject of girls and girlhoods within our very particular national context provided the immediacy and necessity of a book such as this. For this project, we sought to highlight the voices and experiences of girls in the predominantly Canadian context and to locate them within the broader scope of girlhood studies.

Many of the authors in this volume begin with an interest in and concern for girls at the level of everyday lived realities and subsequently expand their analyses to address the ways in which those realities have been influenced by larger social-structural forces. In so doing, they balance multiple dimensions of girls—as both mediators and mediated—from interdisciplinary approaches and in vastly variant domains. As a result, we have learned much from these contributors and their multiple sites of girlhood, as well as from their diverse educational, political, methodological and experiential approaches to their written work. We thank them for their multi-faceted contributions to this still-growing body of literature.

Some of the chapters here originated as presentations at the first International Conference on Girlhood, Agency and Power, entitled *Transforming Spaces*, that was held at Concordia University in Montréal on 21-23 November, 2003. The conference was a collaborative effort between POWER Camp National/Filles d'Action, Concordia University, McGill University and the Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence Against Women and was supported by GirlSpoken: Creative Voices for Change, Laurentian University, and dozens of generous volunteers. It brought together over two hundred girls and women from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Uganda, South Africa, Pakistan and Russia. The event created a space where girls and those working with them could raise and address fundamental issues in their lives and imagine possibilities for change. Dedicated to dialogue, collaboration, reflection, and

Chapter Thirteen

Pretty In Panties:
Moving Beyond The Innocent Child Paradigm In Reading Preteen Modeling Websites

Sophie Wertheimer

"Vicky" faces the camera. She kneels down, legs slightly parted, head tilted to the side.[1] Wearing a red polka dot bikini and clutching a teddy bear in her left hand, her painted lips part to reveal the faint shadow of a smile. Her heavily lined blue eyes staring directly into the lens, and in turn, at her viewer, she seems oblivious to the modeling set—a floor and wall painted of white—that surrounds her. Instead, she appears absorbed in the moment, posing for the camera with a demeanour and look of appealing nonchalance, one not so distant from that of the fashion models who inhabit the pages of *Vogue*. She is preserved on virtual celluloid, and for a monthly membership fee of $19.95 (in American funds), you can see hundreds of additional pictures of her, wearing colourful outfits, practicing yoga, lying down on her stomach or her back, but always posing, always looking straight into the camera.

"Vicky" is ten years old and she is but one of the countless North American girls (predominantly white and between the ages of seven and twelve) who have found their way onto the internet as part of the phenomenon of preteen modeling websites. Making their first appearance in the late 1990s, media coverage on the topic credits Webe Web, a Florida based corporation also specializing in adult pornographic sites, with their initial creation. As a spokesperson for the company reports,

> [T]he child modeling sites were inspired by a birthday party thrown for a friend's nine-year-old daughter. Pictures of the Spice Girls-themed party were posted on the Internet, and within a week they were getting 20, 000 page views a day...The company started charging for the site, which morphed into Jessithekid.com (Scheeres, 2001).

"Jessi the Kid" garnered a high degree of popularity and success, making it obvious that there was a substantial market for these images, and new websites soon began making their appearance. Less than a decade later, the internet now houses hundreds if not thousands of them.[2] While many of these websites continue to be owned and operated by private entrepreneurs, a number of them are also run by the girls and their family members or guardians themselves.[3]

Furthermore, "Jessi the Kid" seems to have created the template for all subsequent preteen websites, such that very little diversity is to be found amidst the pages. All have a similar "feel," brightly coloured and reminiscent of the pin-up girl. All have similar content as well. Though certain images feature the models with friends or in larger groups, each girl usually poses alone on her own individual website. While preview pages are accessible free of cost, offering a dozen or so pictures of the model in various outfits and poses, the remainder of the site is accessible to paying members only. In exchange for fees, members are granted access to new images (updated monthly or more often) and archived photos, hundreds of images of the model posing in various outfits—from bikinis, leotards, to shorts and halter-tops. Members are also granted access to videos, chat rooms, and wish lists from which they can select gifts to send to the girls.

Heralded by their makers as "portfolios" for the girls to advertise their modeling services, these websites have garnered some controversy since their appearance in cyberspace. Though the models are always "fully" clothed (or at least have their genitals and breasts covered), news media have been quick to criticize, and have accused preteen modeling websites of promoting child pornography and pedophilia.[4] Not without reason. As a *Daily News* article remarks, they "are set up just like porn sites, with all but a few pictures hidden in a members-only area accessed by credit card for twenty to thirty dollars a month. Billing, viewers are assured, will be discreet" ("Parents Exposing Kids on Soft-Porn Web Sites," 2002). Beyond their design, these websites feature images of little girls made up and looking lasciviously to the camera, making it difficult to read "Lil' Miss Amber," "SammiJo" and "Jessi the Kid," without seeing sexual connotations.

I first heard about preteen modeling websites in the summer of 2003, while watching an episode of *Oprah* (Oprah, 2003). My curiosity immediately aroused, I quickly jumped online to try and locate these websites for myself. They were surprisingly easy to find: a simple google of the term "preteen model" linked to hundreds of individual home pages. As I clicked away, taking free tours and seeing the images of these petite preteen bunnies I found myself feeling simultaneously repulsed and fascinated by them. Reading in these sites what to me were clear sexual overtones, I could not help but feel appalled, angered even, by the sheer existence of them; not to mention how easy they were to find. Paradoxically, as I clicked away, I also felt drawn to them, wanting to see more, wanting to know more.

Intrigued by the sites and my strong visceral reaction to them, I began reading about the preteen modeling phenomenon in newspapers and on the internet, while also discussing matters with friends and colleagues. It became increasingly apparent that I was not alone in experiencing such a strong response to them. More often than not they seemed to trigger reactions very similar to my own: an avalanche of emo-

tions in both degree and range. I began to wonder why we (as individuals and members of a wider North American culture) were reacting so very strongly to these images. What exactly was it that managed to stir up so many contradictory feelings and emotions, and to such a strong level? Was it the medium? Or the message?

My fascination launched me into a research inquiry that would lead me to explore academic literature surrounding childhood, girlhood, sexuality and culture within the North American context. The more I read, the more I realized that the preteen modeling website phenomenon was not an isolated occurrence, but rather came to be positioned in a much broader social, cultural and discursive framework; one shaped by very specific understandings of childhood.

This chapter begins by tracing the North American construction of the child, one I argue is fraught with contradictions whereby the child is perceived as embodying asexual innocence while simultaneously finding herself eroticized in countless cultural texts. Situating the preteen modeling websites in relation to the myth of the innocent child, I investigate why they manage to elicit such strong reactions. Reading these websites within the paradigm of childhood innocence, I argue that the girls who model for them are rendered passive objects as opposed to active meaning-makers and agents in their own right. In the second section I attempt to move beyond the child as innocence paradigm, offering ways to read these websites and girls' participation in them as providing the models with forms of empowerment and pleasure, albeit problematically.[5]

Mapping The Murky Terrain Of North American Childhood

It is difficult to remain unaffected by the image of a prepubescent girl in a bikini; lips painted into a pulpous red pout, and legs stretched open towards the camera lens. It is almost impossible to remain unaffected because it seems to work in direct opposition to our understanding of the girl-child. Indeed, as Lea Redfern (1997) notes, in the North American context, "children are constructed as, above all else, innocent. Innocence is understood as a freedom from, or an absence of, guilt and sin; it conveys ignorance, artlessness and naivety" (52).

In fact, the equation of the child with innocence seems to have become so prevalent and ingrained in our culture that many authors have even ascribed to it the status of myth. This is one of the key tenets in Henry Giroux's work on children and culture, in that he posits that the myth of the innocent child is "constructed around the notion that both childhood and innocence reflect aspects of a natural state, one that is beyond the dictates of history, society and politics" (Giroux, 2000: 265). Such a perspective has come to dominate most discursive accounts and constructions of childhood in Western culture.[6]

However, children have not always been so innocent. The origins of this conflation can be traced back (with debate) to the nineteenth century, when changing social conditions allowed children to be moved from the factories and streets into schools and other social institutions (Jenkins, 2004: 23). Progressively segregated from the world of adults, children increasingly came to be regarded as separate and distinct entities. Childhood, as Giroux notes, was rendered a world "untainted, magical, and utterly protected from the harshness of adult life" (1999: 265).

One of the realms where the 'child as innocence' paradigm has manifested itself particularly strong is in relation to sexuality. Although earlier twentieth century thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Benjamin Spock advocated for understanding children as possessing their own inherent sexuality, one not so distant from that of adults, it seems that society has been reluctant to include this attribute in its understanding of the child (Jenkins, 1999: 209-230).

According to Laurence O'Toole, this may in part be due to the "uncivilized character" of children's sexuality, "which appears to be without barriers, failing to observe the distinctions between the masculine and the feminine, the oral and the anal" (1998: 235). Presenting an affront to the heteronormative model of sexuality so valued in North American society, O'Toole argues that it is necessary for the child's polymorphous sexuality to be denied or repressed, because it also challenges the assumed "normality" of heterosexuality.

Furthermore, in a society where sexuality is viewed as what Walkerdine calls an "adult notion," (1996: 325) and largely premised on underlying Christian, and in turn, Victorian equations of sexuality with guilt and sin, "a child's knowledge of the sexual [becomes] antithetical to their innocence" (Redfern, 1997: 52).[7] Any demonstration of sexuality on the part of the child, any remote association between the two, becomes highly taboo. For the myth of childhood innocence to be preserved, the child must be rendered—and kept—asexual at all costs.

Though the myth of the innocent asexual child persists as the dominant paradigm in understanding and representing childhood within the North American context, this is not tantamount to saying that other representations or constructions of childhood have remained non-existent. For instance, recent years have also witnessed an increase in discourses and representations related to deviance in children, for example with concerns surrounding violent crimes perpetrated by young children (Woodson, 1999). Labelled by Woodson as *the monstrous child*, alternative discourses of childhood come to simultaneously strengthen and threaten the myth of the innocent child, exemplifying what children ought not to be and not to do. Furthermore, often depicted as belonging to a category of otherness, whether in relation to race, class, psychological or physical health, these alternative discourses also come to reify an assumption intrinsic to the myth of the innocent child, namely that she is most often white, middle class, physically attractive and female. As Giroux (1998) notes,

In short, the discourse of innocence suggests a concern for all children but often ignores or disparages the conditions under which many children are forced to live, especially children marginalized by class or race who, in effect, are generally excluded from the privileging and protective invocation of childhood (32).

As our own childhoods (or at least my own!) have taught us, there is excitement to be found in what is taboo or prohibited. Paradoxically, while much has been invested towards building and preserving the notion of the innocent, asexual child, Western culture has also rendered the child an object of desire.[8] As Walkerdine (1996) contends, the erotically appealing prepubescent girl is a leitmotif within Western culture and one that is not particularly new. For instance, Nabokov first published his influential novel *Lolita*, about a middle-aged man and his attraction to a girl on the brink of puberty, in 1955. Before this time, the 1930s were marked by the immense popularity of Shirley Temple. One of the critics of this young starlet, Graham Greene, once described her as "a fancy little piece, wearing trousers with the mature suggestiveness of a Dietrich: her neat and well-developed rump twisted in a tap-dance: her eyes had a sidelong searching coquetry" (153).

The eroticization of the girl-child has not subsided. Quite the contrary: the image of the innocent but alluring (white, middle-class, female) child only seems to have multiplied. Examine, for instance, Coppertone suntan lotion, where a cute little blond-haired girl laughs as her underwear is pulled down by a dog. Or turn on the television or flip through a magazine. "Popular images of little girls as alluring and seductive, at once innocent and highly erotic, are contained in the most respectable and mundane of locations: broadsheet newspapers, women's magazines, television adverts" (Walkerdine, 1996: 326). Indeed, as Anne Higonnet (1998) notes,

> The sexualization of childhood is not a fringe phenomenon inflicted by perverts in a protesting society, but a fundamental change furthered by legitimate industries and millions of satisfied consumers. By the 1990s, the image of the child has become perhaps the most powerfully contradictory image in Western consumer culture, promising the future but also turned nostalgically to the past, trading on innocence but implying sexuality, simultaneously denying and arousing desire (153).

The appeal of the eroticized child has not only permeated visual culture, but has also made its way into countless other cultural texts, endlessly reproduced and rewritten. In his (1998) book *Erotic Innocence*, James Kincaid traces the many sites—from advertisements, to jokes about notorious child-lover Michael Jackson—where discourses and images of sexualized children are circulated. He suggests that

> ...our culture has enthusiastically sexualized the child while denying just as enthusiastically that it was doing any such thing. We have become so en-

gaged with tales of childhood eroticism (molestation, abduction, and pornography) that we have come to take for granted the irrepressible allure of children (13).

Kincaid also pinpoints a pattern that seems to have occurred in tandem with the increased eroticization of children: the rise in concerns surrounding the issue of child abuse. Though "discovered" and institutionalized in the 1960s, the fear of child abuse, and more specifically child sexual abuse, has become so pervasive that many authors have positioned it within the framework of the moral panic (Wilkins, 1997). "Characterized by a wave of public concern, anxiety, and fervour about something, usually perceived as a threat to society," Wilkins advances that moral panics often manifest a "level of interest totally out of proportion to the real importance of the subject" (Wilkins, 1997).

Of course, within North American society children certainly have been and continue to be victims of abuse. But the fear and obsession with this issue has become so omnipresent that it has even changed the way children are raised and educated. For example, many American schools have instituted "no-touch" policies, which include "forbidding male teachers from changing diapers or being alone with children and prohibiting caregivers, both male and female, from holding children in their laps while reading, or even hugging a child who has fallen off a tricycle" (Levine, 2002:182).

However, as Scheper-Hughes and Stein (1999) note, "the 'choice' of child abuse as a master social problem of our times also includes a strong 'choice' for only certain forms of child abuse—battering and sexual abuse—and a *selective inattention* to other forms—specifically, poverty-related neglect" (190). Pervasive as they may be, discourses surrounding child abuse, rather than providing a comprehensive image of the various forms of abuse that affect children, tend to focus on cases of sexual abuse, and more particularly sexual abuse by strangers. This process of sélective inattention allows for the production of the ultimate Big Bad Wolf, the fundamental threat to the child: the pedophile. He is the grown man who loiters in public parks and schools, waiting to lure children away with candy, to use and discard them as he pleases. He has been vilified and dehumanized, as is well reflected in the following statement made by a lawyer specializing in defending children: "The predatory pedophile is as dangerous as cancer. He works quietly, and his presence becomes known only by the horrendous damage he leaves" (qtd. in Levine, 2002: 23).

Though child abuse in the form of pedophilic "stranger-danger" has and continues to affect children, the focus on this particular manifestation of abuse obscures the reality that most cases of abuse against children occur within the home. This finds itself well illustrated in Canadian statistics about child sexual abuse: A 2003 report indicates that "only 10% of the victims under the age of 6 and about 10% of victims aged 6 to 13 were sexually assaulted by a stranger while this was the case for almost one-fifth of victims

aged 14 to 17" (Statistics Canada, 2003). In this sense, the moral panic diverts our attention "from the intense emotional fabric of the isolated nuclear family in which the overwhelming majority of abusive situations originate" (Silin, 1997: 222-3).

Beyond this, many authors suggest that the preoccupation, if not obsession, with this particular type of abuse also serves

> to displace other collective unconscious anxieties and contradictions in American society…[and] masks the (American society's) complicity (and collective responsibility) in the implementation of local, national and international policies that are placing our nation's, and indeed the world's children at great risk (Levine, 180).

The pedophile can therefore be understood as a scapegoat upon which society projects its fears in relation to childhood, perceived as increasingly under threat in a world of incessant newness and uncertainty, where risk seems to have become the modus operandi.[9] And within this framework, where the innocent child has also become the child-at-risk, the new medium of the internet, (attractive but greatly unknown) has come to be understood and discussed.

Indeed, this new and mostly unknown medium has come to be positioned as presenting yet another threat to the sanctity of childhood. While discussions surrounding children and the internet have certainly praised the value and opportunities offered by this medium in enhancing children's access to information and knowledge, they have also tended to center around its negative implications, real or imagined, in the lives of children.[10] As Holloway and Valentine (2003) note,

> some commentators argue that the relatively unregulated nature of cyberspace means that sexually explicit discussions, soft and hard core pornography, racial and ethnic hatred, Neo-Nazi groups and paedophiles [sic] can all be found in the space dubbed by some on the moral right an 'electronic Sodom' (74).

Because there seems to be an almost automatic assumption that where there is a threat to children, there is also a child abuser lurking not far behind, discourses of pedophilia and the internet have taken on monumental proportions—to the extent that Oprah Winfrey has called the web "open season for pedophiles" (Oprah, 2003). Through its largely unregulated nature, the internet has come to be understood as an ideal site for the circulation of child pornography, the luring of children into the production of pornography and other types of sexual abuse. While there have been reported cases of pedophilic web-rings, and although the internet certainly harbours child pornography and virtual communities of individuals that consume it, actual occurrences seem to have been blown out of proportion. As Lumby (1997) contends, it is possible to apply the framework of moral panic to concerns surrounding sexual pred-

ators and access to pornographic material on the web. Rather than reflecting the actual extent of the threat that the internet presents, these discourses mobilize around middle-class concerns surrounding parenting and the family, pointing to "broad cultural anxieties about the way the labile world of the internet and the possibilities of virtual life are changing traditional social hierarchies, including the boundaries between adults, adolescents and children" (45).

From this brief and by no means comprehensive account of the prevalent paradigms and discourses that inform our understandings and perceptions of "the child," it becomes rather obvious that childhood as a discursive construct is an extremely murky terrain, one fraught with myths, expectations, projections and contradictions. Seen in this light, the complex and contradictory responses to images of prepubescent girls in bikinis perhaps are not so surprising after all.

Indeed, the images on these websites present a direct affront to the myth of the innocent child, in that they explicitly project a highly eroticized image of her. In challenging the innocence of the child, these images become read as reflecting the child-at-risk, and inevitably conjure up the spectre of abuse and, by extension, that of the pedophile. This certainly seems to be the principal leitmotif in media coverage of this phenomenon, as the images are constantly referred to as forms of child pornography (without the nudity), and assumed to "have a primary audience of pedophiles" (*Daily News*, 2002).

Furthermore, while the images on these websites may represent another level on the erotic-child continuum—constructed, circulated and consumed in many other of our cultural texts—they seem to strike us as much more "real" than the Coppertone baby or the picture of the pretty little girl eating ice cream in a car commercial. As Higonnet (1998) notes, "knowing a child is professional helps," creating an "awareness that a role is being played, a role that does not affect the 'real' child" (147). The images on these websites are not of 'professional' models, produced and circulated in a context of assumed regulation and protection to render unrelated products and services more enticing. Rather, with their "amateur" aesthetic, these are images of the "little girl next door," that could "just as well have been from a backyard birthday party" (Brunker). They are not printed in a magazine or billboard, but are circulated on the internet; a world largely defined by its unregulated nature.

Finally, the intent behind these images is not to sell a product or service, but rather to sell the images themselves. "These Web sites don't sell products, they don't sell services—all they serve are young children on a platter for America's most depraved" (Brunker). However, as Higonnet remarks, "a child marketed as a public spectacle is intended to provoke some kind of desire, perhaps ultimately for a product or service, a cosmetic or an athletic ideal, but inevitably for himself or herself along the way" (1998: 147). This begs the question as to why these websites elicit such strong

reactions while the Coppertone baby has yet to be dislodged from bottles, advertisements and billboards throughout North America (and perhaps even the world).[11]

Higonnet describes Western culture's bad habit of equating image with reality; one that even informs the legislation surrounding child pornography (1998: 162-3). The act of looking at the image of the child in an erotic manner therefore automatically indicates or results in an actual act of abuse. Similarly, extrapolating from anti-pornogra- phy feminists' claim that "pornography is the theory, rape is the practice," Jenkins (2001) offers the corollary: "child pornography is the theory, molestation is the practice" (4).

Of course, the association between erotic images of children and actual acts of pedophilia is not unfounded. As the Brunker points out, "David Westerfield, charged in San Diego with murdering [seven]-year-old neighbor Danielle Van Dam, had 64,000 pictures of children on his computer." This is not an isolated case, in that many child sexual abusers have been found to "collect" pornographic or erotic images of children. However, as Rettinger (2000) illustrates, for the most part, it appears that just as few molesters actually consume erotic images of children, consuming such images rarely results in the sexual molestation of children. "A simple, direct causal link between pornography and sexual offending is not supported by the literature" (18), a point echoed in Higonnet's claim that "there is simply no consistent or reliable evidence that looking at an image all by itself can make a person commit an action, even the action represented in the image" (177).

Despite the data, this profoundly rooted articulation affects the way in which we view preteen modeling websites. The models may be clothed, but we read the images as erotic and thus assume that this desire will be acted upon and that the models will become victims of sexual abuse. "These sites are like an amusement park for pedophiles…and sooner or later, they will want to go for a ride" (Thompson). However, considering their magnate popularity, some of these sites garnering "thousands of hits per day," (Daily News) "Lil Amber's' fan club at one time [having] more than 9,000 members," (Brunker) it seems improbable that all these "fans" are molesting children in reality. Sometimes, a fantasy is arousing precisely because it is just that; because it is unreal while simultaneously transgressing very real taboos. Neil Levy (2002) even argues that "a case can be made for the opposite view: that allowing virtual porn will reduce the amount of harm to actual children, by providing an acceptable outlet for dangerous desires" (320).

Dangerous desires that are apparently shared by many. The immense popularity of these websites resonates with Higonnet's claim that "the sexualization of childhood is not a fringe phenomenon inflicted by perverts in a protesting society" (153). Indeed, not only do these websites offer images that we as a society have grown accustomed to seeing, but ones that we have come to find extremely appealing. According to Silin,

"the pedophile, who we demonize even as we construct, marginalize as we normalize, distance as we bring closer, has become a primary vehicle for expressing/repressing our own erotic interests in children" (1997224-25). Beyond troubling us because they present a direct affront to the innocent child paradigm, one that "can only end in abuse," these websites touch a nerve because they offer us images we like to see, and hate ourselves for liking. Whether or not we are erotically titillated by the images, we read sexuality and eroticism into them. Because ascribing any form of sexuality to children is so taboo, we cannot help but experience extremely strong emotions and reactions as a result.

I must emphasize that in no way do I wish to negate the reality of child abuse —sexual, physical, verbal and even institutional—in vilifying these sites or the predatory pedophiles we assume to be lurking behind them. However, we avoid questioning the wider structures that have rendered the child erotically appealing in the first place. Perhaps it would prove more productive to turn a critical eye on the social parameters that create such a big market for these websites and renders participation in them attractive to both the girls and their parents. In the process, we might also gain a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of the social, cultural, institutional and familial issues that continue to make children victims of physical, psychological and sexual violence; moving away from a pattern whereby the "surveillance of images substitutes for the care of real children" (Higonnet: 189).

Granted, these websites force us "to the realization that the cultural geography of childhood can no longer be envisioned as a happily-ever-after, never-never land of innocence and light" (Woodson: 42). Rather than clinging desperately to our antiquated and problematic discourses, paradigms and reactions, perhaps in this moment of realization we can find ways to move in different directions.

Moving Beyond The Child As Innocence: Play, Empowerment and Pleasure As Possible Paradigms

In the conclusion to his book *Erotic Innocence*, Kincaid (1998) reminds us that

> We have been so busy reinventing the child as being at risk sexually that we have allowed the happy child to wander out of our range. We have made the child we are protecting from sexual horrors into a being defined exclusively by sexual images and terms: the child is defined as sexual lure, the one in danger, the one capable of attracting nothing but sexual thoughts. The laughing child has been replaced in our cultural iconography by the anxious, fretting child—really, a grotesquely sexy little adult (283).

Within this framework, where the child is "marked as innately pure and passive, children are ascribed the right to protection but are, at the same time, denied a sense of

agency and autonomy" (Giroux, 2002: 2). Lacking the power to make their own voices heard, they remain condemned to being viewed as passive victims in need of constant protection from adults.

Though I may be critical of these childhood paradigms and how they construe and constrict children, I understand that the very same accusations could be directed against my own work. In the process of situating preteen modeling websites and reactions to them within the paradigm of childhood innocence, I too have continued to construct her as an object of inquiry as opposed to an active subject in her own right. In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to move beyond the paradigm that views these girls as passive objects in need of protection to one where preteen models become active subjects invested with agency and intention. Operating under the assumption that children are meaning-makers in their own right who actively seek power for themselves, I offer speculations as to how participation in these websites may be viewed as both empowering and pleasurable to their models, albeit not unproblematically given the context in which they occur.

While my discussion of childhood is premised on the assumption that notions and experiences of childhood are culturally constructed and historically specific, one aspect of childhood does prove to be universal: most children eventually grow up and become adults. In order to become "adjusted" citizens, children must learn and practice the rules and norms accepted and promoted by their society. "Children ultimately must be integrated into the more broadly conceived sense of order and generality that comprises adult society" (Jenks qtd. in Woodson: 33). Within families, schools, social environments, and their exposure to the media, children are progressively socialized, taught what it means to be a boy or a girl, and how one is expected to act accordingly. "Childhood is [therefore] a time when children are to be developed, stretched and educated into their future adult roles, clearly through the institution of schooling but also through the family and wider social and civic life" (Holloway and Valentine, 2002: 2).

Beyond the family, school and media, another one of the sites where this process of socialization occurs is in the act of playing. For example, Gary Cross (1997) traces the history of Western toys and how they are positioned within a wider social and ideological framework. Turning his attention to dolls, Cross posits that these have adorned the environments of young girls for centuries, allowing them to learn "their expected gender roles by making their dolls into protagonists of the domestic dramas of modern caregiving, conviviality, and consumption. They rehearsed the worlds of the caring mother, dear friends, and modern shoppers" (67). Although Cross mostly alludes to the porcelain lady doll, with delicate hair and lace dress, I believe this proposition also holds true of their modern counterparts (like the plastically voluptuous *Barbie* or the scantily clad *Bratz*). Indeed, doll play remains a key tool in helping girls learn the gendered roles and expectations of their cultures and societies.

Furthermore, as Chris Richards (1995) notes, play not only allows the child to learn and negotiate the conventions and assumptions that circulate in her environment, it also provides a flexible space to begin experimenting with present and future identities. In his case study, he observes his daughter's dancing to Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. Richards (1995) suggests that "young children constantly engage with and, in the mode of play, enact identifications associated with the sexuality of adolescence and early childhood" (142). He posits that dancing to "adult" popular music, with all its sexual under- and overtones, allows young girls to play at "being someone older, more sexual, more accomplished, more knowing, and briefly, trying out the rules of the game in which they appear to act" (147).

This point is echoed by Gerard Jones (2002), who emphasizes the importance of fantasy play in children's development. Responding to concerns regarding the often violent nature of children's games, he posits that these forms of play are in fact important and necessary. Play provides children with a sense of power and control, also enabling them "to pretend to be just what they know they'll never be. Exploring, in a safe and controlled context, what is impossible or too dangerous or forbidden to them is a crucial tool in accepting the limits of reality" (11).

Considering that North American culture is "so overloaded with sometimes contradictory messages about how one is to be, what one should believe, what is right and wrong, how one should look" (Ganetz, 1995: 78)—and this especially in relation to girls—play thus offers a key site to begin negotiating certain of the fears and tensions intrinsic to one's cultural and social environment. "It is one of the fundamental ways in which all of us deal with uncertainty" (Bloustien, 2003: 2–3). This belief seems to have been the driving force behind the *Barbie* doll, as recounted by her creator Ruth Handler who noted that:

> …watching her daughter play convinced her that girls were inevitably curious and worried about female adulthood and its obvious signifiers and that they craved ways to help them play through their feelings. "I realized that experimenting with the future from a safe distance through pretend play was very important part of growing up," she said." I believed it was important to a little girl's self-esteem to play with a doll that has breasts. (qtd. in Jones, 2002: 94)

Handler's quote also directs our attention to the importance of play in relation to the body. While play is often a highly embodied and physical activity, it can allow the child to develop her corporeality and sense of identity. Echoing Richards' observations and emphasizing the need to "respect the power that girls feel when they thrust and jump and sing," Jones posits that emulating Britney Spears can serve as a potent locale to explore and "be" in one's own body (Jones, 2002: 93). Through dance or other forms of embodied play like dress-up, children learn the limits and possibilities of their

own physicality, also coming to use their body as a tool for the creation of the present and future self. The body becomes a site for expression, autonomy and intention, as well as "a source for their own personal pleasure in their strength and suppleness" (Richards, 1995: 78).

Allowing children to learn and negotiate social rules and expectations while also offering a site for the embodied development of identity, play can therefore be defined as a highly strategic activity. Gerry Bloustien (2003) draws from her ethnographic research with young Australian girls to illustrate this point. Having provided them with cameras to record their lives and thoughts, she defines her informants' process of video-diary making as a form of "strategized play," one that is

> closely tied to identity, notions of the self and ways of dealing with uncertainty. It is a concept of embodied play that equates with pleasure but not triviality. This type of play has taken a very particular form since the advent of the camera, the phonograph and now the complexities of even more elaborate technologies of mechanical reproduction (Bloustien, 1999: 19).

Clothing could also be appended to this list of technologies. Indeed, as Hillevi Ganetz (1995) remarks, fashion has come to play an increasingly central role in the lives and play of girls. She notes that "clothes provide women with possibilities to transform themselves, to be mobile, to experiment with themselves and the female role which the androcentric model has ascribed to them" (73).

Strategized play thus offers a space where the body becomes a central locale for expression and experimentation with different selves and subjectivities, through the help of technologies such as clothing, toys and cameras. A number of parallels can be drawn between these definitions of play and the preteen models' activities. While adults read eroticism into these websites and assume sexually abusive situations, a child has not yet assimilated all these social scripts and may view things from a different perspective. It is possible to speculate that in dressing up and posing, the models engage in a form of strategized play, "trying out various forms of identity and the relations to the body that they might entail" (Richards, 1995: 147). Just as they do when they dance to Britney Spears or The Little Mermaid, these girls are finding a space to begin enacting and negotiating certain tensions and contradictions inherent to their society's construction of girlhood, adulthood and sexuality, and how they wish to take them up in their own lives.

In the process, they also learn "that to be female is hard work and that it requires constant self-surveillance of the body to meet a ubiquitous female ideal" (Bloustien, 2003: 78). Indeed, within North America, girls are brought up in a society where looks matter. Ours is a culture that has made beauty, especially women's beauty, a cult, complete with accompanying myths, rituals, and iconography. The beautiful woman is prized and revered, adorning every magazine cover, every fairytale fantasy. She is

also objectified, commodified, and sexualized in the process. As Jones (2002) points out, though adults may "tell them that looks, popularity, trendiness, pleasing boys don't matter—but the real life of children's society shows them that they do matter" (95). As Angela McRobbie (1984) notes,

> It is indeed a great irony of the female labour market that those fields which are held out as promising of the greatest rewards socially and financially [modeling, acting and dance], have consistently depended on the exploitation of the most traditional sexual qualities. In each of them the body is sharply in focus and with it appropriate gestures and appropriate presentation. What is more, it is in these fields that girls are, quite unrealistically, given the most encouragement to succeed (148).

While this particular text precedes my own by two decades, McRobbie's claim continues to resonate quite strongly. Just as many girls dream of becoming models, pop stars or Hollywood actresses, physical appearance continues to play an important role in one's professional success and advancement. Of course, the emphasis on beauty and self-sexualization can certainly be read as a sign of oppression, creating a pattern whereby "girls look at the world through concepts of male sexuality so that even when they are not looking at male sexuality as such, they are looking at the world within its frame of reference" (Van Roosmalen, 2000: 223).

However, there is always more than one side to any story. There is both pleasure and power to be found in rendering oneself desirable, and little girls are certainly not oblivious to this dynamic. For instance, in her ethnographic examination of tween girls' readings of Britney Spears, Melanie Lowe (2003) notes that "while the girls feel offended and angry when women's bodies are objectified in media, many of them are surprisingly empowered by the idea that women themselves might choose to use their own bodies for personal or—in the case of Britney Spears—professional gain" (123).

Similarly, Walkerdine (1996) contends that the script of the eroticized girl is one of the only alternatives girls can find to the hegemonic innocent child paradigm. She states that,

> The popular cultural place which admits the possibility that little girls can be sexual little women provides a place where adult projections meet the possibility for little girls of being Other than the rational child or the nurturant quasi-mother, where they can be bad. It can then be a space of immense power for little girls and certainly a space in which they can be exploited, but it is not abuse (331).

Girls participating in preteen modeling websites also appear to take pleasure in the process of dressing up, looking "pretty" and being photographed. In fact, as one preteen model photographer contends, "it's not like we're having to kidnap these girls

and drag them in front of the camera...they send emails and put up notices on the Web, begging to be photographed" (Thompson). While they may not understand the ramifications of their participation in the same way adults do, the models know that their images are being circulated, "they know that there are people out there looking at the pictures" ("Thorny Legal Issues Raised by Effort to Ban Child Modeling Sites"). Within a context where "the aestheticization of the body is, in our culture, the very core of being a woman," (Ganetz: 92) the girls come to understand that there is a certain degree of power and pleasure to be drawn from rendering the public self desirable. Though these might not be the forms of empowerment that we most want to bestow on young girls, they remain one of the few options where girls can gain a sense of power and control.

Indeed, as Woodson (1999) reminds us, "children have no voice in government or laws affecting their well-being. They have no vote in school curricula or testing, or in the reconfiguration of welfare. Fundamentally, children exercise no control over their bodies or their environments" (41). As Jones (2002) echoes, "of all the challenges children face, one of the biggest is their own powerlessness" (65). Yet children actively seek power and agency, finding it where they can. Of course, this occurs in everyday activities, in the music and television programs they consume, in their choices of friends and games, in their interaction with figures of authority. But the areas where girls can make their voices heard remain quite limited, and the websites provide one outlet.

Whether or not their participation in these websites yields fame, it can certainly prove to be very lucrative. The owners of Webe Web boast that "their web sites each make at least $1,000 a month for the girls" (Sherman). Money that—according to most parents—goes toward "fattening their college funds" although significant portions of the earnings probably benefit parents and web companies as well (*Daily News*). Still, it remains that preteen modeling offers the prospect of significant financial gain. Of course, this proves to be problematic in that these earnings are made within a paradigm of commodification, whereby both the child and the image of the child are increasingly located in a capitalist framework of consumption. Just as children of this age range excite "marketing executives, who lust after the increasingly generous allowances of the twenty-seven million tweens in America" (Cross, 2004: 11), so too have recent years witnessed young girls' sexuality becoming "commodified —in advertisements, magazines, music, television and movies, in the economic lures of the sex trade, and in the simple day-to-day affirmation of the value males place on females as sexual beings" (Van Roosmalen, 2000: 203). Still, it remains that these girls are earning considerable amounts of money (more than other options such as babysitting or selling lemonade ever could); something that can certainly provide a sense of power and agency within a capitalist milieu.

Finally, this framework allows us to move beyond seeing the girls as either passively consumed (by their audience) or as active consumers (of the clothes they wear and the gifts they are sent), to viewing them as actual *producers* of culture in their own right. As Kearney (1998: 119) notes, "the lengthy association of femininity and females with the practices of consumption and consumerism, an association which has served to further reinforce the notion of production as a masculine and male activity also informs the girls' representations as cultural producers" (291). Drawing from her ethnographic examination of girls' zine production, Anita Harris (2004) quotes one of her respondents who states: "to be able to produce something was very exciting...I felt electrified." She comments further that "participating in their own cultures is an active engagement rather than simply making another consumer choice. These young women break down barriers between consumption and production" (Harris: 173-4).

Granted, participation in these websites can be read as feeding into the hegemonic cultural paradigms of patriarchy and capitalism that create a market for and valorize images of sexualized girls. But as George Lipsitz notes, "[t]oday's youth culture proceeds from a different premise. Instead of standing outside society, it tries to work through it, exploiting and exacerbating its contradictions to create unpredictable possibilities for the future" (Lipsitz qtd. in Kearney: 198). While contributing to a dominant paradigm whereby girls' sexuality becomes objectified and commodified, it remains that in participating in these websites, girls move from being mere consumers to actual producers of culture. This process not only subverts traditional associations, but it can prove to be a source of both power and pleasure for preteen models.

Returning To The Initial Gut Reaction

Having traveled through this deconstruction and intellectualization of preteen modeling websites and the different ways in which they can be read, I feel it is important to return to my initial gut reaction, and trace what has become of it in the process of thinking about, researching, and writing about it here. What do I think about these websites now? What feelings do they incite?

I would like to say that I have made my peace with preteen modeling websites; that they no longer stir in me contradictory emotions of anger, revulsion and attraction. Alas, this is not the case. Though I can now view them from a more critical and informed perspective, I remain highly conflicted and troubled by the images of these petite preteen bunnies.

At the heart of this persistent dis-ease lies many unanswered questions. While this chapter hopefully provides an examination of the preteen modeling phenomenon and the different readings one could have of them, it also makes its extreme complexity glaringly apparent. Preteen modeling websites are situated at a fraught intersection where girlhood, sexuality, innocence, power, adulthood, society, culture, and so

much more coalesce. It is a site ripe with potential for endless inquiry. For instance, interviews and ethnographic work with the girls, parents, and all others involved in preteen modeling might yield some insight into what renders participation in these websites appealing. Similarly, additional research into how these websites are distributed and consumed also strikes me as another important area of inquiry.

While my discussion has attempted to re-place a modicum of agency into the models' hands, I remain uneasy with these websites and girls' participation in them. They remain located within a patriarchal framework, one whereby images of girls and women are commodified and sexualized. Additionally, these texts further reify the standards of ideal beauty dominant to North American society. Though there certainly is room within this framework for young girls to find and employ empowerment and agency, it remains—perhaps irrevocably—problematic, limited, and certainly not ideal.

Indeed, in the process of researching these websites, I have often wondered how I would react should my own hypothetical daughter want to participate in them. Would I allow her to become a preteen model? Pending a discussion of these issues throughout her modeling career, and an insistence that I remain actively involved in the production of her website at all stages of the process, I might eventually acquiesce. However, I would admittedly much prefer to see my daughter becoming involved in activities like zine production, or theatre acting. Of course, a critical eye could be turned on these activities as well. Yet from my perspective as an feminist-inflected adult, I deem them preferable in terms of the forms of empowerment they may provide, in that they are not so obviously linked to a patriarchal and capitalist models of commodification and sexualization.

I have argued that these websites should not be automatically read as signalling or creating sexually abusive situations, but they nonetheless conjure up the spectre of abuse. While no public accounts of abuse have been reported in relation to preteen modeling websites, I still see the reflection of this "reality" in their image. They render obvious the difficult position that children have come to be located in North American society, as individuals devoid of their own sexuality, yet simultaneously infused with adult fantasies of power and domination. These websites continue to trouble me, because they cannot help but remind me of the realities of child abuse: a reality that countless girls continue to experience on a daily basis.

While it is important to acknowledge the many forms of violence that children are exposed to, it is also paramount that we move beyond the paradigm of childhood innocence that continues to construe children as passive and vulnerable victims who can do very little for themselves. In fact, it is important to do so for the very welfare of children, in that we may actually be causing them more harm than good. As Silin (1997) notes,

In our overzealous attempts to protect children, we deny their sexuality and their agency…Kitzinger notes that we would be more effective advocates for children if we empowered them to come to their own defense, to realize their own strategies and skills of protection—if we saw them as strong rather than as weak, sexual rather than without desire (225).

Similarly, Ost (2002) argues that in insisting on children's innocence, not only do we further reinforce their association as "objects of innocence, the one aspect of childhood that may be of the greatest attraction to the child sexual abuser," but we also create a climate where shame is cast onto the child's body (457-8). As Higonnet notes, "When every photograph of a child's body becomes criminally suspect, how are we going to avoid children feeling guilt about any image of their bodies?" (1998:180).

The time has come for the formulation of new childhood myths. Whether labelled Kincaid's *laughing child* or Higonnet's *knowing children*, these myths acknowledge children as having "bodies and passions of their own" (Higonnet, 1998: 207). These are paradigms that move beyond the constraining lens of idealized innocence and asexuality, giving flesh to the child. Flesh that can be certainly be damaged—sexually, physically, psychically—not only by pedophiles, but by the institutions, ideologies and social and cultural constructs that continue to define, constrain and determine what children are and what they can do. But also flesh that experiences joy, pleasure, power, pain, desire, and this in manners and to degrees not so distant from those of adults. Moving beyond our initial gut reactions of outrage and anger, we need to orient ourselves towards a more accountable and comprehensive understanding of the child, as well as society's and our own roles in shaping and constraining her. We need to create new myths wherein hopefully adults, but especially children, can find more room to operate, understand, change and affect themselves and the world around them.

Notes

1. I use the name "Vicky" as a pseudonym, but not in reference to any preteen model in particular.

2. Though it is impossible to provide an exact quantity of preteen modeling websites, at the time of writing this chapter I had seen more than two hundred different sites. Furthermore these sites link to others and seemingly incessant linkages would suggest that that many more hundreds also exist.

3. As I write this, I have yet to encounter an academic article that examines preteen modeling websites.

4. This finds itself well reflected in the titles given to articles and special reports about these websites: "Selling Innocence," (Deborah Sherman. NBC 6 News); "Parents Exposing Kids on Soft-Porn Web Sites," (*Daily News*); "Underage and Selling their Sexuality on the Web" (Doug Thompson, *Capitol Hill Blue*).

5. I feel it important to make a few clarifications about the terms I will be using throughout: Though "childhood" is a vast term, I use the term in reference to later childhood, from the age of seven approximately to the onslaught of puberty. I also use this term in reference to girls more particularly, in that very often discourses about the child (as innocence, eroticized, and threatened) are premised on an underlying assumption of child as feminized. The term "girl-hood" (and "girl") appears in the second section when I use literature more specifically from the area of girl studies, and because I am talking about but rather the experiences of the preteen models themselves. Though my study is focused on the experiences of girl children more particularly, I make this distinction in order to emulate the terms employed in the literature from which I draw, while assuming there to be much overlap between the two. Like "childhood" and "girlhood," definitions of the term "preteen" vary depending on the source. I use preteen only in reference to the websites, referring to young girls between the ages of seven and twelve. The term preteen is most probably used by the websites in an erotically charged manner (like "barely legal" and similar internet-porn lingo), and so I prefer to keep my own use of the term to a minimum, preferring childhood or girlhood instead.

6. For additional discussions of the mythology of the child as innocence, see the work of Higonnet (1998) and Kincaid (1998).

7. The influences of Christian and Victorian ideologies and mores on the development of current Western paradigms of childhood are traced in the work of Jenkins (2001) and Holloway and Valentine (2000).

8. For a discussion of the eroticization of the child, and particularly the girl-child, see Higonnet (1998), Walkerdine (1996) and Kincaid (1998, 1999).

9. For a discussion of the 'at-risk' child, see Best, 1990. The first chapter of Harris' (2004b) *Future Girl* addresses the 'girl-at-risk.'

10. For a discussion of the debates surrounding children and the internet and their polarization into "nightmares and utopias," see Buckingham, 2000.

11. Many inquiries concerning child molesters have found that instead of using explicit child pornography, they often "report using "non-pornographic pornography" as a source of fantasy. These materials included advertisements, mail order catalogues, children's movies...and television programs" (Howitt qtd. by Jill Rettinger, 2000).

Chapter Fourteen

I Am (A) Canadien(Ne): Canadian Girls And Television Culture

Michele Byers

The first part of this title reflects the difficulty of injecting gender identity into discussions of Anglo-Canadian youth culture. The bracketed use of French is an attempt to locate the gendered subject who often disappears in discussions of nation and national concerns.[1] My aim in what follows is to reinsert girls into the national imaginary, as well as to insert Canadian programming into discussions of television representations of youth culture. The focus of this chapter is an examination of the way girls are represented in three fictional Canadian television series: *Degrassi Classic* (made up of *Degrassi Junior* High and *Degrassi High*) *Degrassi: The Next Generation* and *Renegadepress.com*. These texts provide alternatives to the more hegemonic and highly gendered brands of national identity offered by Canadian television productions and provide moments of disruption to the equally highly gendered logic of many popular American teen series.

Much work on television to date has focused on texts that are produced in the United States. These televisual images circulate most widely, and have the highest global currency, but they are produced within a particular national context. Mainstream American representations of girls convey a limited range of American girlhoods, and do not offer space for the articulation of what Grant and Wood (2004) describe as "a distinctly Canadian voice" (16), even though they circulate widely in Canada. This national context is central to the type of content American television series contain, the characters they feature, the issues they tackle, and how these issues are dealt with. This became apparent, for example, when *Degrassi, The Next Generation* included a story arc about a character deciding to have an abortion in their 2003 season. The N, the American cable network which houses *The Next Generation*, decided not to air the episodes, which caused little stir when aired on CTV, the series home network in Canada. American TV producers, who discussed the issue of abortion in Kate Aurthur's (2004) article for the *New York Times*, demonstrate that the type of story arc produced on *The Next Generation* would not likely have been made in the U.S. This was also true almost two decades ago when a *Degrassi Classic* episode about abortion aired on the CBC, but was edited before being broadcast on PBS in the United States.