Introduction

Transforming Feminist Conversations? Girls, Blogging, and Feminist Politics in the Twenty-first Century

> *"Lacking editors (whose intolerance for insanity tends to sand off pointy edges), lacking balance (as any self-publishing platform tends to do), laced with humor and fury (emotions intensified by the web's spontaneity), the blogosphere has transformed feminist conversation, reviving in the process of an older style of activism among young women …"*
>
> *—Emily Nussbaum, "The Rebirth of the Feminist Manifesto"*

> *"Feminists still have a lot of work to do in terms of countering the negative stereotype of feminism in the media and the overarching idea that feminism is dead, but I think that teen girls today are completely ready and willing to take on that fight."*
>
> *—Julie Zeilinger, 19, feminist blogger, email interview*

The quote from journalist Emily Nussbaum is from an October 2011 article she penned for *New York Magazine* and is telling in its insistence that the Internet has fundamentally altered contemporary feminism. Whether or not Nussbaum is correct, her argument raises significant questions about the relationship between the Internet, specifically the blogosphere, and feminism – both past and future. Nussbaum goes on to describe a feminist blogosphere that is passionate and messy, yet unequivocally political. She writes,

> These sites inspired an even sharper cadre of commenters, who bonded and argued, sometimes didactically, sometimes cruelly, but just as often pushing one another to hone their ideas – all this from a generation of women written off in the media as uninterested in any form of gender analysis, let alone the label 'feminist' (n.p.).

Nussbaum's analysis is exciting to many of us invested in feminist politics and is indicative of a recent popular interest in feminist activism employing new media technologies and web 2.0 platforms. To wit: The global spread of Slutwalk in 2011, the digital circulation of the 2012 "I Need Feminism Because" university campus initiative, and the success of the #FBRape campaign in 2013 have all received attention from mainstream press in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, generating a resurgence

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of public debate about feminist politics that has been largely absent from mainstream public discourse since the start of the twenty-first century.

But despite this increasing recent public attention to feminist politics, postfeminism remains a hegemonic cultural discourse that continues to be influential in public perception of contemporary gender politics. The idea that feminism is no longer necessary, the grounding logic of postfeminism as I will later outline in detail, is most often discussed in relation to teenage girls' perceived lack of investment in feminism. Indeed, it is young women in their mid-late twenties and thirties that are most often characterized as participants in the feminist blogosphere and recent activist campaigns. The exclusion of *girls'* voices from many feminist organizations and from mainstream journalism's reporting on feminist activism inadvertently reinforces the dominant perception that younger girls are not feminist. Frequent stories, such as a November 2012 article on *CNN.com* asking, "Where are all the millennial feminists?" further advance the notion that few millennial feminists exist, and often forecast an uncertain future for feminism (Weinberger 2012).

However, Julie's comment that I cite hints at a very different reality – one where teenage girls are eager participants in contemporary feminism, committed to proud feminist identities, and striving to make progressive social change in their communities through activist initiatives. It is the often-unheard voices of Julie and her feminist peers who are active new media producers that I explore in this book, which asks several questions: How are teenage girls articulating a feminist politics and crafting their own identities as feminists and activists within this emergent feminist blogosphere celebrated by women like Emily Nussbaum? *Why* have online spaces become significant spaces with which to do so? And finally, *how* are teenage girls in fact negotiating and resisting these postfeminist and neoliberal discourses by acting as feminist digital media producers?

Girls' Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age is the first book-length study to investigate these questions by exploring how girls are engaging in feminist activism using new media platforms, including blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr. It aims to contextualize girls' blogging as part of a lengthy tradition of girls' media production and American feminism, mapping the continuities between blogging and feminist practices such as zine-making, consciousness-raising, and media production such as *Ms. Magazine*. The book then addresses contemporary concerns about girls' supposed lack of commitment to feminist politics (McRobbie 2009) and panics surrounding girls' risky uses of online technologies (Shade 2007, 2011; Ringrose and Eriksson-Barajas 2011; Cassell and Cramer 2008), complicating them by demonstrating how some girls are in fact savvy new media producers who are using digital media as political agents and specifically, feminist activists.

This book carves a unique space in the intersection of digital media studies, cultural studies and girls'/women's studies. It draws together current scholarly debates about the prevalence of postfeminist discourses and

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the new feminine technologies they produce within contemporary culture (McRobbie 2009), the potential power of new media technologies to be employed for purposes of social change and activism, and the agency of today's youth who have grown up amid cultural fragmentation marked by individualization, commercialization, and consumer citizenship (Harris 2008). This analytical space allows for the interrogation of multiple modes of power and resistance that are characteristic of our cultural moment, a necessary task for feminist media scholars interested in understanding the cultural implications of new media technologies. Thus, this book is an inherently political project that aims to acknowledge, document, and theorize girl bloggers' significant contributions to contemporary feminism, while focusing on their use of new media technologies and platforms to do so.

Positioning a 'Girl' Subjectivity

Given the topic of this book, it is necessary to outline what I mean by the subjectivity of girl. Who 'fits' into this subject position of girl? Who can claim girlhood? And finally, how can we understand the subjectivity of girl as offering a fresh perspective on feminisms and contemporary feminist activism? I understand the subjectivity of girl through a feminist poststructuralist position, which theorizes girlhood as discursively produced through historical, cultural, and social contexts, rather than a static and biological or age based category that is universally valid (Pomerantz 2009; Eisenhauer 2004; Driscoll 2002). Furthermore, the subjectivity of girl is complicated by intersecting identities, such as race, class, age, sexuality, and nationality, further problematizing the notion that a singular understanding of girlhood is possible or even desirable (Pomerantz 2009). Yet, for research purposes, I requested participants be aged twenty-one or younger at the start of the study and identify with the discursive construct of girl, the definition of which no doubt varies across participants. Consequently, this project aims to understand how girls situate themselves within girlhood and deploy a girl subjectivity within blog spaces and in relation to feminism.

Although the previous discussion points to the difficulties in employing the category of girl for research purposes, I focus on girls, rather than young women or women, for several reasons. Girls have been historically marginalized within feminist research, leading to a dearth of knowledge on girls' participation in feminist activism and the continued assumption that girls distance themselves from feminism. Jessica Taft (2011, 5) argues, "Girl activists' ideas, stories, and theoretical contributions thus remain largely hidden from view. They continue to appear in both the public and academic domain only as occasional images – as visual objects rather than as intelligent and intelligible political subjects." While recent work in the growing field of girlhood studies is beginning to complicate and challenge these assumptions, girls as historical and contemporary political subjects remain understudied.

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In her seminal book *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, Catherine Driscoll (2002) argues that girlhood must be a focus of analysis for feminist researchers not only because of its previous marginalization within the field, but because of the way girlhood can enable a reflection on feminist relations to dominant discourses. She writes,

> As soon as feminist theory – analytic or activist – begins to look only for its own repetition, as soon as it is certain of where it comes from and what its effects are, then it begins to expect merely its own repetition. It also thus ceases to be a vital force in political life, let alone in the daily lives of women and girls. A feminist focus on girls is thus desirable for pragmatic reasons, but it also draws attention to the model of subjection presumed by feminist theory and the ways the Woman-feminist subject is formed, deployed, or avoided within the experience of individuals (304).

Driscoll's insistence that the process of researching girls and girlhoods must move beyond merely talking about girls to "considering their interaction with discourses that name and constitute them" encourages an analytic mode that can be used to explore how girlhood is mobilized within larger cultural discourses of agency, citizenship, and authority (304). Thus, studying girls and girlhood helps us to understand the production and evaluation of gendered subjectivities and the ways in which major public discourses get folded into the highly visible construction of late modern girlhood (Driscoll 2002).

This point is particularly salient with regard to this project, as girls are highly visible and celebrated within both neoliberal and postfeminist discourses, as I'll describe later in this introduction. Girls themselves recognize this, and several of my study participants spoke specifically about how the word girl is often employed in media and commercial discourses to signify hegemonic femininity and/or a 'girl power' rhetoric that Emilie Zaslow (2009) describes as being informed by tenets of postfeminism. Several of the bloggers I discuss in this book echoed my concern about this problematic equation of girls and girlhood with such a narrow image of hegemonic femininity. Consequently, I employ girl in part as a political strategy to counter the limited images of girlhood that we often see in commercial popular culture, with the hopes of depicting alternative girlhood subjectivities being performed by adolescent girls today.

In this sense I take up Monica Swindle's (2011, para. 47) call to understand girl as an affect with political potential, whereby "the pleasurable power that girl now modulates has great ability to affect in the global affective economies of the twenty-first century, especially considering the possibilities for distribution through technologies and new media." According to Swindle, girl has a political traction that we as feminist scholars must pay more attention, something I aim to do in this book. Yet, I employ girl

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acknowledging that my participants have complex relationships with this identity; some enthusiastically embrace the label, while others expressed ambivalence toward a girl subjectivity. Consequently I employ girl not as an accurate descriptor of my participants, insomuch as an imperfect theoretical concept that allows me to explore the connections between identities such as gender and age and their intersection with feminism and digital media.

Why Feminism Now?

Within the past decade there has been an increasing scholarly interest in young women's identification with the label 'feminist' (Harris 2010). Much of this work, such as that by Shelley Budgeon (2001), Madeleine Jowett (2004), and Emilie Zaslow (2009), has focused on young women's attitudes toward feminism, concluding that while most girls do not identify as feminists, many support feminist ideals. It is this seeming contradiction that has perplexed many feminist scholars, who often discuss these findings in reference to the context of a postfeminist culture that celebrates choice and individual empowerment, while distancing itself from feminism as a political movement. While this work has no doubt been important in understanding girls' attitudes toward feminism and the more commercially inclined 'girl power,' it has not specifically addressed the actual activist practices of girls.

Anita Harris (2010, 475) argues that this focus on young women's attitudes toward feminism has overshadowed "a more productive investigation into contemporary young feminist practice, including its continuities with the past," suggesting that feminist researchers must ask different questions in order to get at the complexity of girls' feminist practices. Harris contends that the varied nature of contemporary feminist practices requires researchers to be open to the ways that "narratives of choice and individualization, conditions of decollectivization and globalization, a pervasive media culture and the emergence of new information and communication technologies" shape what young women do, rather than what they merely say about feminism. She concludes, "What is required, I think, is an openness in our ideas about what constitutes feminist politics today, especially a greater understanding of the function of micro-political acts and unconventional activism in this historical moment as well as recognition of links with past practice. Such an approach might enable us to yet move beyond generationalism to forge a new feminism we do not yet know" (481).

Harris' critique provides the starting point for my own research on girls' feminist activism, and the ways that girls' blogging and participation in the feminist blogosphere have the potential to be activism. Consequently, this book makes an important intervention into the research on girls, feminism, and postfeminism by positioning girls' media production as feminist activism. This idea builds off of the foundational work of Mary Celeste Kearney (2006), whose book *Girls Make Media* was the first feminist scholarship to comprehensively explore the varied practices of girl media producers and

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to take this cultural production seriously. In doing so, Kearney challenged hegemonic discourses that recognized girls as only cultural consumers and encouraged feminist media studies scholars to recognize the potential for resistance and agency within girls' media production practices.

My approach also asks new questions specifically about the relationship between girlhood and feminist activism, an area that has been unexplored in existing research, which often includes girls under the broader category of 'young women.' Whereas Taft (2011) provides a useful analysis of girlhood in relation to activist identities, she does not address how girlhood relates to the identity of a feminist activist. Thus, this book builds on Taft's important work by focusing on girls' performances of feminist and activist identities through blogging. These topics are the focus of the first and second chapters. I position these ideas alongside a discussion of the history of feminist media production and activism in order to draw out continuities and discontinuities, rather than maintaining a strict divide between second wave and third wave activist practices.[1]

Blogging as a Practice of Girlhood Media-Making

A 'blog' is an abbreviated term for 'weblog,' which refers to a website that is organized by reverse-chronological written entries (also called 'posts') usually focused on a particular topic or issue. Although writing is certainly an important part of a blog, Jill Walker Rettberg (2008) argues that a blog must be understood holistically as constituting writing as well as layout (including visuals), connections/links, and tempo. I do not believe it's useful to employ a narrow definition of what constitutes a blog and throughout this book I use the term flexibly, discussing girls' use of social media platforms such as Facebook as part of their blogging practice. There are, however, some defining features of blogs that are important to highlight: Blogs are frequently updated (and thus constantly changing), personal in nature (often written in the first person), and contain a social aspect via their embedded links to other websites and comment sections. Consequently, Rettberg describes blogs as a social genre that can facilitate conversations within a single blog or between multiple blogs. The connections between blogs addressing a particular topic are popularly referred to as a 'blogosphere,' a term that I will occasionally employ in this book. Indeed, I emphasize the social aspect of blogging here as it is of particular importance to my analysis of girls' feminist blogs, and I'll be returning to an in-depth discussion of it in chapters one and three.

The feminist blogosphere is certainly not the sole site with which girls are engaging in feminist activism. However, for several reasons I have chosen to use girls' feminist blogs as a productive site from which to ask questions about girls and feminism. First, blogging has been a practice that has been tremendously popular with middle-class North American teenage girls since the early incarnations of the Internet. According to a Pew Internet Research study from 2008, American teenage girls outnumber their male counterparts

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as bloggers, with 41 percent of girls ages 15–17 claiming to have a blog (Lenhardt, Arafeh, Smith, and Macgill 2008). The popularity of blogging among girls may be due to the connection between diary/journal writing, a longstanding part of girl culture. For example, one of the first free blogging platforms popular in the early 2000s was called LiveJournal, drawing an explicit connection between journaling and blogging.

Young women also tend to use social networking sites more than both their male peers and adult generations (Duggan and Brenner 2013).[2] The increasing popularity of social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, over the past five years has meant that girls will also often use these platforms to blog or circulate their blog posts via these platforms, as I discuss in chapter three with regards to girls' use of Tumblr. Despite these statistics, it is necessary to recognize that blogging is not an opportunity afforded to all girls equally, and that social inequalities continue to limit who has the leisure time, resources, and literacy skills to blog, an issue that I will return to throughout this book.

Second, writing has been a longstanding part of girls' culture, and writing practices, such as keeping a diary, having a pen pal, and writing fan letters, are dominant girlhood tropes with both historical and contemporary significance (Hunter 2002; Kearney 2006). Many of girls' writing practices, from the diaries kept by Victorian girls to the zines created by 1990s riot grrrls, have a liberatory effect on girls, allowing them a sense of freedom, a source of pleasure, and site of fantasy and identity exploration (Kearney 2006). Thus, I aim to position blogging within this lengthy history of girls' writing practices, and specifically analyze the importance of writing as a way for girls to foster feminist and activist identities.

Third, there has recently been considerable scholarly and mainstream interest in the use of blogs and social networking sites to facilitate social movements, such as the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movements, and SlutWalks. In fact, Nussbaum's (2011) article that I cite earlier in this chapter, begins by describing her experience at New York's Slutwalk, relating the physical march itself to its online representations. She writes,

> And Slutwalk is more public still: Even as we march, it is being tweeted and filmed and Tumblr'd, a way of alerting the press and a way of bypassing the press. I am surrounded by the same bloggers I've been reading for weeks. And though bystanders cheer us on (two gray-haired women dance topless in a window), this is very much a march for young women, that demographic that has been chastised throughout history for seeking attention – and ever more so in recent years, as if publicity itself were a venereal disease, one made more resistant by technology (n.p.).

Thus, the relationship between digital technology and social protest warrants serious scholarly attention and raises interesting questions about

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online networks and connections, publicness, and activism, topics I investigate in chapters two and five.

While blogs are my object of analysis in this book, this project is not merely about how girls use the Internet to engage with feminisms. Instead, I strive to draw connections between contemporary culture and feminism, parsing out the ways in which girls' online engagements with feminism are integrally related to their 'offline' daily experiences within a neoliberal cultural context. In this sense, I challenge two dominant, yet problematic, discourses that circulate in both academic and mainstream discussions regarding youth and their Internet practices: narratives of risk resulting from supposed effects of new media, and escapist discourses that position young people's online practices as unrelated to their offline lives. I will discuss these two discourses in turn.

While media scholars have long refuted technological determinism, it nonetheless continues to shape dominant discourses on new technologies, including the Internet. These effects-centered arguments privilege the presumed properties of the technology itself as producing direct effects on society, excluding the recognition of the social context that gives technologies meaning and the complexity with which individuals interact with technology (Williams 1974; Marvin 1990; Gray 2009). Consequently, we often hear reports in the mainstream media that the Internet has caused deviant youth behavior, such as cyberbullying or sexting. This discourse is often gendered, with girls often portrayed in media accounts as 'at risk' when online or using other new communication devices such as mobile phones, and are portrayed in media accounts as potential victims of online sexual predators, sexting scandals, or life-threatening cyberbullying from classmates (Shade 2007, 2011). For example, in a 2009 article in the Canadian national newspaper *The Globe and Mail*, Judith Timson writes, "The Internet has made girl-on-girl viciousness so much more virulent, with mass shunnings, false rumour-mongering and online slagging of each other."

Leslie Regan Shade (2011) notes that these discourses have led to a gendered 'protectionist' rhetoric that posits girls' online practices in need of adult surveillance and supervision, denying girls' autonomy and agency within online spaces. Additionally, I would also suggest that this protectionist discourse fails to address societal power structures by positioning technology as the problem girls face in online spaces rather than patriarchy, sexual harassment, and violence against women and girls. Most recently, we can see this discourse reproduced through public discussions of the Amanda Todd case, which resulted in Canadian government action to implement policy on cyberbullying rather than addressing the sexual harassment and misogyny experienced by Todd.[3] I will return to further discuss this protectionist discourse related to girls' Internet practices in chapter five.

It is worthwhile returning to Raymond Williams' (1974, 129) concern with the ahistorical nature of technological determinism: "Any cancellation of history, in the sense of real times and real places, is essentially a

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cancellation of the contemporary world, in which, within limits and under pressures, men (sic) act and react, struggle and concede, cooperate, conflict and compete." Williams advocates for analyzing technologies as cultural, recognizing the complex intersection of media as a practice, intentionally developed in relation to social needs and historical specificities. This approach complicates simplistic media effects arguments by privileging the complex relationship between culture and media. By situating my discussion within the competing cultural contours of neoliberalism, postfeminism and contemporary feminism, I draw on Williams' framework to make apparent the ways that cultural context frames and informs girls' blogging practices.

In this sense, a cultural studies theoretical framework informs this book, focusing on the interaction between text, production, reception, and sociohistorical context, and analyzing the ways that power is discursively produced and circulated throughout these sites (Kellner 1995; D'Acci 2005). While cultural studies has been the dominant approach in television studies, it has been used less widely within Internet studies, resulting in a lack of research that adequately positions Internet practices as part of a complex terrain of social, cultural, political, and economic processes. Critical Internet scholar Mary Gray (2009, xiv) highlights this absence, arguing that researchers must "decenter media as the object of analysis in new media research" by employing ethnographic research that will allow us to better understand the use and meaning of media within the "everyday lives of people." I take up Gray's call by adopting an ethnographic approach to my project in order to understand how digital media production functions in the everyday lives of feminist girls. I will return to a discussion of my methods later in this introduction.

The second, albeit related, assumption about the Internet practices of youth is based on an escapist discourse which posits that youth use the Internet to 'escape' their 'real lives,' creating online identities that are disconnected from their offline practices and experiences. In her ethnographic study of the media practices of rural queer youth, Gray (2009, 86) problematizes this escapist discourse by drawing on the work of Nancy Baym (2006), to argue that "[f]ocusing on new media as spaces that produce online worlds fails to respond to the call of critical cyberculture researchers to examine how 'offline contexts permeate and influence online situations, and online situations and experiences always feed back into offline experiences.'" Thus, I have chosen an ethnographic approach to my research in order to "contextualize media engagements as part of a broader social terrain of experience," disrupting the false boundary between online and offline worlds (Gray 2009, 14).

This discussion alludes to the importance of studying blogs as media that encompass significant ideas about contemporary girlhood, feminism, and new media technologies. Thus, I envision this book as a cultural interrogation rooted in the logic of cultural studies as opposed to merely an in-depth

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examination of a particular medium, understanding girls' feminist blogs as a 'hub' that centers and makes visible larger cultural narratives about girls' engagements with feminism today.

Neoliberalism, Postfeminism, and New Gendered Technologies

A significant goal of this book is to situate girls' blogging practices within the larger cultural context of neoliberalism. In *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Lisa Duggan (2003, 70) argues that neoliberalism is not a "unitary system" but a "complex, contradictory cultural, and political project created within specific institutions, with an agenda for reshaping the everyday life of contemporary global capitalism." Neoliberalism is characterized by privatization, deregulation, a celebration of individualism, and a rejection of the social welfare model of state governance popularized in the early twentieth century. David Harvey (2005) argues that since the 1980s neoliberalism has "become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (3). Harvey's insistence on understanding neoliberalism as a hegemonic discourse is particularly useful for this project, as I'll be discursively analyzing neoliberalism in relation to contemporary feminist discourses.

Duggan and Harvey contend that, contrary to popular logic, neoliberalism is not politically neutral, blind to identities, or solely about economics. Both scholars map how neoliberalism as a project continues to create power inequalities both between nations and among national citizens. Harvey argues that neoliberalism has not generated worldwide economic growth, but has merely redistributed wealth to favor already economically privileged individuals and nations, perpetuating a greater class disparity. He maintains, "It has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration of reconstitution of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally, but most particularly in the main financial centers of global capitalism" (119). Harvey's guiding argument that class power is restored via neoliberalism as an economic and cultural project is convincing, yet must be considered alongside the ways in which it relates to gender.

Lauren Berlant (1997), Angela McRobbie (2009), and most recently Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (2011) demonstrate that it is essential to understand neoliberalism as a gendered construct, producing specifically gendered subjects that reaffirm normative gender, race, class, and sexual identities. For example, McRobbie (2009) argues that femininity – particularly *youthful* femininity – is being reshaped to align with emerging neoliberal social and economic arrangements. She explains, "From being assumed to be headed toward marriage, motherhood and limited economic

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participation, the girl is now endowed with economic capacity … [expected to] perform as [an] economically active female citizen" both by working in paid employment and consuming commercial goods (58). Girls and young women then, are "weighted toward capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility, and participation" that dovetails with neoliberal discourses privileging individualism, freedom, choice, and consumer citizenship (McRobbie 2009, 57).

Media scholars such as Laurie Ouellette and Julie Wilson (2011) have examined the relationship between neoliberalism and gender specifically in relation to contemporary media, exploring how new media facilitates the production of gendered neoliberal subjects. Ouellette and Wilson analyze how media convergence – bolstered by new media platforms – often continues to rely on the unpaid domestic and affective labor of women, rather than provide the freedoms, creativity, and flexible interactivity that new media scholars such as Henry Jenkins (2006) have celebrated. They argue,

> Converging media technologies and platforms facilitate an expectation that women make enterprising use of books, television and the web as interconnected resources for self-work and successful family management. Women's 'active' participation in the evolving media landscape – including the mastery of new technologies such as the Web – does not liberate us from top-down cultural control or parallel the labor into women's media reception practices. The implications of this extension are not only limited to the sexual division of labor and the gendering of citizenship but also include the forms of leisure, fantasy, pleasure, and escape available to women in a 'can-do' enterprise culture (559).

This work highlights the importance of examining new media in relation to gendered neoliberal subjectivities, a connection I use as a guiding contextual framework throughout this book.

Alongside neoliberalism, I also characterize our contemporary moment as being marked by what Rosalind Gill (2007) calls a "postfeminist sensibility." Although postfeminism has been the subject of debate and multiple definitions within feminist scholarship, I find Gill's characterization of it as a cultural sensibility, rather than a theoretical position, a type of feminism after the women's liberation movement, or a regressive political stance, to be most useful for my own analysis. I understand postfeminism as a cultural sensibility promoted throughout contemporary popular media culture that takes feminism into account while simultaneously repudiating it as "harsh, punitive, and inauthentic, not articulating women's true desires" (Gill 2007, 162; McRobbie 2009). Postfeminism can be further characterized by several themes, including: femininity as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis on surveillance, monitoring, and self-discipline; a rhetoric of individualism, choice, and empowerment; a dominance of makeover paradigms; and a resurgence of

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ideas about natural sexual difference (Gill 2007). Although it is beyond the scope of this introduction to explore each of these themes, I will return to several of them throughout this book.

Gill and Scharff (2011) argue that postfeminism is ultimately related to neoliberalism in three ways. First, both discourses privilege individualism, regarding individuals as free agents that are unfettered by social, political, or economic restraints. Second, the autonomous, calculating, and self-regulating neoliberal subject is similar to the active, freely choosing, and self-reinventing postfeminist subject. And third, it is specifically women that are taken up by both neoliberalism and postfeminism and encouraged to "work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen" (7). Thus, it is necessary to understand postfeminism as not only a response to feminism, but also integrated within a larger neoliberal cultural climate that shapes the kinds of ideal subjectivities that are promoted to girls and women.

This is especially important to consider when studying girls' media practices. For example, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2011, 2012) analyzes how girls perform neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivities within new media platforms such as YouTube, demonstrating that girls are encouraged to brand themselves through visible displays of normative femininity, which can be circulated on the web. Building on the earlier work of Anita Harris (2004), Banet-Weiser argues that the ability for a girl to "put herself out there" signifies not only a successful performance of postfeminist femininity, but also an adoption of an idealized neoliberal subjectivity via the opportunity to generate income and to become an entrepreneur of the self. Although this is an important argument, it tells us little about girls' agency and those girls who, in fact, complicate neoliberal postfeminist girlhoods through their feminist identities and politics. This book aims to better understand these feminist girls and how they utilize digital platforms to perform alternative girlhood identities.

Doing Feminist Ethnography in Digital Spaces

In addition to the theoretical interventions this book makes, I also hope to begin to map a method for conducting feminist ethnography within online spaces – a practice that remains poorly articulated within existing digital and feminist media studies literature. This is despite the importance of ethnography as a feminist method, especially within girls' media and cultural studies. For example, several girls' studies scholars have recently published rich ethnographic studies that provide useful models from a cultural studies perspective for conducting ethnographic research with girls. Jessica Taft's (2011) *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism & Social Change Across the Americas*, Emilie Zaslow's (2009) *Feminism, Inc: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture*, and '*Girl Power' Girls Reinventing Girlhood* by Dawn Currie, Deirdre Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz (2009) all utilize

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ethnographic methods including focus groups, interviews, and participant observation to examine issues such as girls' activism, interaction with girl power media culture, and enactment of girlhood, femininity, and feminism, respectively. These studies inform my own ethnographic approach that takes girls' voices as a starting point for my research inquiry, and I have modeled my own project, specifically the use of open-ended interviews and focus groups, after them.

Whereas the previously mentioned studies are useful because of their focus on girls, none offer a sustained and focused discussion on the relationship between girls and new media. Here, Mary Gray's (2009) book *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* offers an excellent methodological model for thinking about the relationship between girls and new media. Gray's ethnography examines the ways in which rural queer youth navigate their identities through new media engagements, relationships, and their local cultural context, demonstrating her commitment to "ethnographic approaches that contextualize media engagements as part of a broader social terrain of experience" (14). This specific ethnographic approach – what Gray terms "in situ" – differs from the more common ethnographic approach to media reception by broadening the focus of study beyond the relationship between media text and audience. Gray explains,

> Instead of examining audiences' reactions to specific programs or websites, I attempt to map the relationship between rural young people's experiences of a cluster of media engagements and a milieu that is constitutive of its meaning. An in situ approach to media takes as the object of study the processes and understandings of new media among people within the context of their use … [and] focuses on how media engagements fit into a larger mosaic of collective identity work (127).

Whereas other scholars (McRobbie 1991; Drotner 1994) have advocated for similar approaches to media research, Gray's work has been particularly pertinent to shaping my approach to this book because of its focus on new media, specifically youth Internet practices. Thus, this "in situ" ethnographic approach allows me to better investigate questions of girls' media production practices and the cultural context that informs them, rather than solely their media reception. The questions that guide my ethnographic work will then be informed by this specific methodological standpoint.

I do not position this book as an ethnography per se, but instead a project that combines ethnographic methods with discursive and ideological textual analyses of girl-produced media and popular media commentary that focuses on girls, feminism, and/or new media technologies between 2009 and 2013. I conducted monthly in-depth, semi-structured Skype and email interviews with five self-identified girl feminist bloggers over a six-month period in 2012, as well as follow-up interviews with the bloggers in July 2014. Most interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were recorded

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and transcribed prior to data analysis. I also employed what I'm calling an 'online focus group blog' with a group of eight bloggers, which included the five bloggers who participated in the interview component. The focus group blog functioned as a secured online space where my study participants and I held regular conversations about blogging, feminism, and girlhood over the research period and generated over sixty printed pages of discussion, which I organized thematically using discursive and ideological textual analysis. This method allowed bloggers the opportunity to engage with one another, ask their own questions, and direct the project in ways that traditional interviews do not allow. In this sense, this book also contributes methodologically to new/digital media studies by outlining a model for ethnographic research in digital spaces that privileges collaboration, media production, and community-building as part of the research process.

I supplemented my ethnographic methods with a discursive and ideological textual analysis that focused on the eight blogs authored by my study participants, as well as *Rookie Magazine*, edited by teenage feminist blogger Tavi Gevinson who I discuss in chapter five. I primarily focused my analysis on the written text, including both the blog posts and comments. However, I also analyze images that are incorporated into blog posts, blog logos, color schemes, links, and other visual content when relevant to my discussion. I read the entirety of each blog up until the end of my data collection period (blogs ranged from being a few months old to over four years) and purposefully selected entries to analyze based upon their relevance to the themes I am addressing in this project. Whereas my sample size is no doubt small, I want to emphasize that I am not attempting to make generalizations about *all girls* or even *all feminist girls* in this project – a task that would be impossible. Instead, I employ a small group of participants and their blogs in order to do justice to their detailed stories and experiences as feminist bloggers in a way that wouldn't be possible with a large pool of participants.

Organization of Chapters

The chapters of this book are organized thematically around primary themes that emerged from conversations with my study participants throughout the course of the research. However, I also hope that the chapters speak to one another and together produce a coherent story that highlights the exciting contributions of girl bloggers to feminist activism today. Chapter one explores how blogs function as a discursive space for girls to perform feminist identities that may be unwelcome in school, home, or peer group environments. I analyze how these performances of feminist identities work affectively and politically as a strategy for girls to resist normative postfeminist femininities. The second chapter continues my discussion of identity but focuses on girl bloggers' activist identities, mapping how blogging functions as an accessible form of activism for girls. Chapter three addresses how feminist girl bloggers form communities through their use of new media

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technologies, connections that I analyze as 'networked counterpublics.' The chapter also considers issues of friendship and diversity within bloggers' networked counterpublics. The fourth chapter traces how feminist girls creatively engage with the history of feminism through their blogs, and in doing so, produce feminist history through their blogging. Finally, chapter five explores how feminist girl bloggers create a space within popular culture to perform feminism publically, a practice I analyze as a form of citizenship. In the Conclusion I position my analysis as an initial, necessary step in mapping a cultural history of girls' participation in feminism in the early twenty-first century. I draw on follow-up interviews with several of my participants and examples of recent feminist digital activism campaigns to reflect on what the current visibility of popular feminism might mean for both girls and feminist media studies scholars as we move through the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. See chapter four for a detailed discussion of feminist waves.
2. This recent study surveyed only those over the age of eighteen, and, therefore, this statistic refers to young women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, a slightly older demographic than my study participants.
3. Amanda Todd, a fifteen-year-old British Columbia high school student committed suicide on October 10, 2012 after being sexually harassed online. For three years an unknown man continuously circulated a topless photo of Todd to her family, classmates, and teachers. The photo led to Todd being harassed, threatened, and physically assaulted at school. A month before her suicide, Todd created and posted a video to YouTube explaining her situation through the use of flash cards, which quickly went viral upon news of her death. In response to Todd's suicide a motion was introduced in the Canadian House of Commons that proposed more funding for anti-bullying organizations and a study of bullying in Canada.

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