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INTRODUCTION

Texting girls: images, sounds, and words in neoliberal cultures of femininity

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This introductory essay provides an overview of the arguments and premises of this special issue, *Texting Girls: Images, Sounds, and Words in Neoliberal Cultures of Femininity*. Situated within the recent historical conjuncture in which “girls” (and all that is suggested by the term) have an unprecedented cultural visibility, the essay argues that the figure of the girl is coerced into performing forms of symbolic work within neoliberalism that displaces and contains the corrosive effects of capitalism unbound. Drawing from recent work in Girl Studies and Feminist Theory, the introduction demonstrates that this work relies upon a long-standing conflation of girls and commodification, which supports “girlphobic” constructions in both pro-capitalist stances and anti-capitalist critiques.

Keywords: girl as figure; neoliberalism; femininity; textuality; symbolic work; girlphobia

“[W]hat it means to prevail or lose out in these new times has become bound up with how we understand girlhood.” – Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*

I chose “texting girls” for the title of this special issue to evoke the image of girls sending texts to each other. But the phrase “texting girls” was also imagined as a poetic “call,” an apostrophic address to girls within the present historical conjuncture – a conjuncture in which girls have an unprecedented cultural visibility. Less visible, however, is the fact that the figure of the girl is made to perform various forms of symbolic work that for the most part goes unquestioned. Registering the crucial difference – often elided and difficult to see – between actual girls and the work the figure of the girl is expected to perform, the essays collected here explore the various ways girls are called upon to embody the figurations that are presumed to represent them. But readers of the essays that follow won’t find girls readily or easily answering these calls – that’s what makes them so interesting. And rather than demanding that girls make themselves present, the writers seek instead to follow the traces of ambivalence and resistance girls leave in the contemporary cultural productions upon which their figuration depends. The writers know and are inspired by the fact

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that the categories and concepts through which girls have become present, visible, and recognizable in the early decades of the twenty-first century are not adequate to the task of representing their full complexity.

Texting Girls is premised upon the argument that girls and the various ways they are figured cannot be understood outside of capitalism. The work is attentive to the fact that more often than not, the pairing of girls and capitalism can provoke anxiety, discomfort, or even fear, as the two terms become connected by ideas about girls' sexuality and the assumption it can be direly violated and exploited. At the same time, linking girls and capitalism provokes automated gestures of dismissal. These dismissals can be heard anywhere, but crystallize explicitly within anti-capitalist critiques. If you want to write a shrewd and compelling analysis of capitalist saturation, just point to a girl unreflectively participating in the terms of recognition the cultures of capitalism offer. There are plenty to pick from: girl pop stars who put their femininity on display are easy and quite satisfying targets. By making girls emblems of capitalism's superfluous damage, you can very effectively reinforce the idea that everything that matters – history, politics, and even value itself – has been dumbed down and diluted. This rhetorical move has a long and entrenched history. Except in feminist studies of media and mass culture (and sometimes not even there) what Heather Warren-Crow identifies as “girlphobic” confluences of the girl and commodification are hardly ever questioned. Rather than take into account all the ways girls have served as exchange objects, girlphobic critiques of capitalism underscore them (2014, 10–11). They also ignore the fact that for the last 25 years, empowerment has been heavily marketed to girls around the world, and this empowerment, even with all its proto-feminist suggestions, relies upon (and perhaps even reinforces) the girl's lower value, because of course transcending devaluation is exactly what is being sold, and will need to be sold again.

The malleability attributed to girls figures prominently in their link to capitalism and the anxieties and dismissals to which that link gives rise. If girls are imagined as malleable – as “impressionab[le],” “instabl[e],” and “open to commodification,” as Crow-Warren (2014, 11) puts it – they can be easily conflated with or absorbed into the forms the commodity takes or the circuits through which it moves. It is also because of this malleability that I chose “texting” for the title of this special issue. The “textuality” implied by texting – its layers of mediation, its dimensions that are not immediately disclosed – opens spaces between girls and the aspects of capitalism they are asked to embody. The essays in *Texting Girls* seek to undo (for brief pauses at least) the conflation of girls and capitalism by reading their images, sounds, and words as *texts* that bring layers of conflict, nuance, and density to the category of the girl.

Crucial for my understanding of textuality and its value for reading representations of girls is the essay “Playing with Dolls” (1990) by the artist and writer Silvia Kolbowski. Taking fashion photography as her point of entry, Kolbowski (1990, 140) argues that contemporary understandings of the relationships among women, femininity, and images flattens the girl with what she sees, rendering her a “passive, masochistic statistic who attains that status through an identification with images of fashion models in the service of market constructs.” Kolbowski's essay productively develops and complicates feminist critiques of visual culture – or, it is more accurate to say, their popular receptions – without dismissing them. It complicates the assumption that girls are wholly victimized by the images of

women they perceive – one crucial premise of the well-meaning documentary *Miss Representation* (2011) – which itself reinforces the idea of girls' malleability and doesn't account for the textuality of subjectivity.

To make the argument that girls actually do imaginatively play with dolls (and the images of women for which they figure) and do not instantly collapse into them, Kolbowski goes back through Luce Irigaray's (1985) extended analysis of Sigmund Freud's (1933) lecture "Femininity," which appears at the opening of *Speculum of the Other Woman*. For Irigaray, crucial to the problems of Freud's "Femininity" is the conflation of the daughter with the mother, which itself is the product of the assumption that all women are essentially the same. Indeed, Freud's portrayal of the girl's psychic life is premised upon the idea that the daughter's identification with the mother only moves one way and copies the poles of activity and passivity to which the mother is subjected with a rigid, unimaginative exactness. Basically, Irigaray demonstrates that Freud reduces the girl to a flat mirror, which cancels out the possibilities of variegated, unpredictable, and fluctuating relationships between girls and the objects with which they identify. This reduction is clearest in Freud's example of the girl playing with the doll. Freud makes this classic emblem of girlish femininity into an exact re-enactment of the girl's relationship to her mother and part of a necessary transition into the passivity bourgeois heterosexuality requires. In other words, the girl is all repetition, no difference; the variegated textures of play are not allowed. Countering this reading, which takes make-believe and imagination out of the picture, Irigaray (1985, 77) explains that "[o]ne could obviously point out that a game – even of dolls – is never simply active or passive but rather frustrates that opposition by the economy of repetition that it puts 'into play.'" For Kolbowski (1990, 141), Irigaray's argument highlights the fact that "the girl never *exclusively* assumes the part of her mother, or herself, or the doll in such a game." Which is to say that the girl's identification with the doll does not have to be viewed only as passive or active, but can be more productively understood through "metaphors of... layering, simultaneity, fluctuation, nonlinear density:" a textuality that accounts for the unpredictable singularities of subjectivity (141). Drawing upon a feminist conception of subjectivity established through a critical engagement with psychoanalysis, Kolbowski's emphasis on textuality also contributes to seeing the complicated imbrications of the categories of girl and woman: the fact that they cannot be conflated together, nor can they be completely unhinged. Needless to say, the economic forces undergirding the present historical moment makes seeing and rendering these forms of textuality a challenge.

Neoliberal girls

If you bring up neoliberalism in an academic context right now, you are likely to hear groans, or even an emphatic shout: "Not everything is about neoliberalism!" While neoliberalism could well be fading from its intellectual prominence, and should not serve as an all-encompassing banner that obscures its particular appearances within different histories and geographies, it is hard to deny that the economic and political forces the term "neoliberalism" names have radically altered the economic, cultural, and political landscapes in which we live – and not for the better.

Neoliberalism is often defined as an ideology of capitalism unbound. It prioritizes, above all else, profit unencumbered by regulatory forces. While these standard definitions are not wrong, they don't evoke the intimate depths neoliberalism allows capitalism to go. In her recently published study *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015), political theorist Wendy Brown offers the following definition (among many others) that evokes capitalism's reach. Neoliberalism is, as Brown (2015, 28) explains, "the conversion of every need or desire into a profitable enterprise". Brown follows Michel Foucault in analyzing neoliberalism as an "order of normative reason" that "disseminates," as she puts it, "the *model of the market* to all domains and activities" (30, 31). This "order of normative reason" is at work even when economic profit is not the most immediate outcome (30). Illustrating how the model of the market has become a pervasive value that extends beyond the accumulation of money, Brown turns to dating, which one might approach "as a mode of an entrepreneur or investor," and ambitious students who "undertake charitable services to enrich [their] college application profile[s]" (31).

These examples illustrate the dominant logic of human capital, in which every practice or activity is pursued for "enhancing the self's future value" (34). With social safety nets increasingly eroded and broken, those who cannot commit to the future-oriented project of investing in oneself are rendered disposable. There is, of course, that one "acceptable social harbor," the family, and Brown underscores the feminist argument that neoliberalism's deliberate undoing of public infrastructure deepens women's subordination, as women have been consistently interpellated by the responsibility to hold families together, producing forms of cohesion that compensate for "the lack of social stickiness in human capital itself" (37, 102). Brown composes a sharp picture of a consequential divide. Women either align themselves with human capital as the "order of normative reason," which would make the world, as she puts it, "uninhabitable," or, women will continue to become "the unavowed glue for a world whose governing principle cannot hold it together," propping up those who most benefit from aligning themselves with human capital, and, as Brown provocatively writes, "becoming the invisible infrastructure for ... developing and worn out human capital" (104–105).

Brown's reading of the gendering mechanisms that sustain neoliberalism provides important tools for thinking about the various ways in which girls become neoliberal subjects and serve its ends. Girls of the contemporary moment are clearly asked to align with the imperative to invest in themselves as human capital, but they are also just as clearly groomed to perform the reproductive and affective labor of holding families together. While the assignment to perform the affective and reproductive labor that would make them an invisible infrastructure is most obviously transmitted to girls within the domestic sphere, it is clear those imperatives extend far beyond the familial spaces of the home. A guiding premise of this special issue is that representations of girls emblemize – and therefore help displace, contain, and mollify – the anxious responses neoliberalism and its corrosive impacts provoke. These representations bridge the contemporary insistence that girls invest in themselves as sites of human capital and the more traditional insistence that girls become women who will serve as the "invisible infrastructure" for others.

I'm thinking of how the visual depiction of a girl serves, in Catherine Driscoll's (2002, 2) words, as the "publicly preeminent image of desirability." While displaying one's body as a desirable image is not the same as becoming an "invisible infrastructure" for "developing

and worn out human capital,” it isn’t hard to see that images of girls do highly visible yet often unnoticed – almost invisible – work assuaging the fears that are attached to becoming eroded by capitalist forces. Many feminist analyses of visual culture make or suggest this argument. Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s “The Other Side of Venus: The Visual Economy of Feminine Display” (1996) is an important case in point. Solomon-Godeau argues that within the frenzied explosion of mechanically produced images that signaled the onset of modernity, a “homology” appeared, which linked what she calls the “seductive, possessable feminine” and the “seductive, possessable commodity” (1996, 114). This “homology” is quite familiar, but Solomon-Godeau takes it one step further. She argues that images of sexually available women that align with the seduction of the commodity did the work of helping viewers ease into new eras of consumption. After claiming that “femininity” put on display is the linchpin between modernity and the desires consumer culture must produce, Solomon-Godeau argues that images of sexual availability could be “mobilized” to “sublimate, and psychologically ‘manage’ the conflicts and contradictions of industrial capitalism and their effects on psychic and social life” (117). The sexualized female body on display smoothed over harsh exchange equations and emblemized capitalism’s best, most efficient trick: asserting that the commodity is not only a commodity, *but so much more* – feelings, values, and experiences that cannot be reduced to the exchange equation. The woman’s body – sexualized, displayed, and feminized, often perceived and labeled a “girl” no matter what her age – is the vehicle for this affective surplus, but also represents what should not be commodified (sexuality) and therefore the threatening dangers and vulnerabilities sexual commodification represents.

Of course an image of a girl doesn’t have to be a pornographic pin-up to do the work of cushioning capitalism’s impact. The underlying assignment Solomon-Godeau’s analysis points to, which I identify as the affective labor of the image, manifests in multiple and often contradictory ways. Anita Harris’ oft-cited study *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (2004) provides a productive schema for understanding the various forms of work the figure of the girl is expected to perform. While children and adolescents have been sites for imagining moral crises and securing future class positions since the onset of the industrial revolution, Harris argues that the contemporary preoccupation with girlhood, which has been evident since the early 1990s, is a new phenomenon. This preoccupation is, to some degree, celebratory, and represents feminism’s diverse impacts, but it is also rife with regulation. Harris argues that we can see this regulation at work through the split but imbricated categories of “can-do” and “at-risk.”

“Can-do” girls epitomize the imperative to invest in oneself as human capital. Mirrored and buttressed by an array of girl-power products, “can-do” girls are “[i]ndependent, successful, and self-inventing” (Harris 2004, 16). They are encouraged from a young age to be invested in themselves as projects that are oriented toward future success. Focusing on the iterations of the “can-do” girl who is “sexy,” “brash,” “self-assured,” the young woman who designs an empowered life “lightly inflected but by no means driven by feminism,” Harris argues that can-do girls are in training to deploy and display a “glamour-worker mode of feminine subjectivity” (17–19). This mode of working, appearing, and consuming makes girls, as Angela McRobbie (2001, 362) puts it, “standard bearers for the new economy,” which, in Britain during the 1990s, was a meritocracy endorsed by the Labour Party and symptomatic of a “triumphalism of global neoliberalism.”

The can-do girl and her triumphant achievements are set against the “at-risk” girl, who is pitied and feared and sometimes despised. Perceived to be troubled and vulnerable, the “at-risk” girl embodies the failures the can-do girl works so diligently to avoid. If the “can-do” girl represents the capacity to “prevail” in an economic landscape undergirded by threats of precarity, the “at-risk” girl represents the risk of “los[ing] out” (Harris 2004, 14). While the “can-do” girl diligently plans her life and the forms of consumption that augment her path to success, the “at-risk” girl lacks “strategic effort,” and indulges in “disordered” forms of consumption that signal girl power gone wrong (26, 28). More often than not, the “can-do” girl, triumphant in her self-sufficiency, is linked to whiteness or the wherewithal to overcome racial oppression. While white girls can certainly be depicted as “at-risk” (accompanied by the assumption that they have the most to lose) the category is much more difficult for black and Latina girls to unstick themselves from and defend themselves against. “At-risk” girls become conflated with the inequalities racial difference represents; however, their purported failures are not often attributed to structural disadvantages, but poor individual choices (27).¹ The ideologically laden assumptions that cluster around the “at-risk” girl illustrate how effectively girlhood figures into neoliberalism’s work maintaining cultures of inequality and uneven development.

It won’t come as a surprise that the categories of “can-do” and “at-risk” appear within recognizable visual grammars that reinforce the attributes coalesced within these categories and naturalize girls’ embodiment of them. In her recent work, Sarah Projansky (2007, 47–48) takes up Harris’ categories in order to analyze representations of girls that have appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* since the 1990s. These cover images underscore how pertinent Harris’ categories are, as they represent girls “endangered by the world around them” or “able to take control of [a] new and rapidly changing environment and eschew unhealthy desires and impulses.”² The “at-risk” girl appears very young, and her youth signifies vulnerability. She is often plaintively gazing into the camera, and this gaze “seems to challenge the viewer to take her predicaments seriously,” without indicating that she has any agency of her own (51). Key to Projansky’s analysis of the “at-risk” category is the idea of “girl as X:” a form of representation that capitalizes on the malleability and vulnerability associated with girls and makes them “stand in” for “risks to society as a whole” (48). In such images, a girl’s face and body are arranged within the frame to direct the viewer elsewhere. Since she resists fixity, there is a wider range of visual grammars for representing the “can-do” girl. But the “girl as X” formula subtends her visibility as well, and she is made visually present to evoke feelings of assurance and transmit them to viewers. The gaze of the “can-do” girl is never a plea or a challenge, but can be “read to function as a promise that everything is going well” (58).

Thankfully, the cultural obsession with girls that emerged so forcefully in the 1990s was not limited to the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, but extended into contemporary art practices. Artwork by Anna Gaskell, Katy Grannan, Justine Kurland, Sue de Beer, Hellen van Meene, and Eija-Liisa Ahtila (to name just a few) trouble the fixed meanings of girls in visual culture and draw upon the malleability with which they are associated as an imaginative resource that resists capitalism’s homogenizing definitions.³ In her series *wonder* (1996–7) and *override* (1997), Anna Gaskell creates tableaux of contemporary Alice-in-Wonderland girls who wear light blue dresses, yellow pinafores, white stockings, and black Mary Jane flats. Though Gaskell highlights their artificiality, her sartorial allusions to the girl protagonist in Lewis Carroll’s 1865 novel are much more than costumes: they

give girlhood a historical trajectory without reducing it to a recognizable typology. Portraying the girls' entangled legs and floating bodies in erotically charged and otherworldly landscapes from dramatically oblique angles, the girls in Gaskell's photographs demonstrate capacities to create spaces of ambivalence that cannot be captured by the idealizations of "can do" or the denigrations of "at risk." Which is to say that the girlish femininity in Gaskell's photographs is not offered up to comfort the eyes of viewers. Enfolded and encrypted within Gaskell's frames, femininity reveals itself only to the extent that it becomes a text of desirous experimentation that imaginatively rejects and distorts the obligation that girls serve as clear visual containers for others' anxious speculations.

I think the intense focus on girls within the cultures of neoliberalism, and the fact that their representations are made to bear and contain its meanings, is haunted by the arguments that Gayle Rubin makes in her 1976 essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." While considered a central text in the archive of feminist theory, "The Traffic in Women" is not often deployed within contemporary feminist analyses. There are a lot of good reasons why this is the case: the necessity to expand feminist thought beyond the object woman, the moralistic pornotroping that so stubbornly accompanies the focus on sexual trafficking, and of course, the shift in Rubin's thinking represented by her subsequent and equally famous essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" (1982). However, by analyzing how the exchange of women is a means by which kinship structures cohere, Rubin's "Traffic in Women" offers a crucial ground for thinking about how representations of girls are made to serve as vehicles for culture and community. Rubin (1976, 44) argues that women have been made into "conduits" between men, and the categories of "can-do" girls and "at risk" girls can certainly be understood as "conduits" for ideologies that sustain the neoliberal present. This makes "can-do girls" and "at risk girls" contemporary versions of the roles and functions that women have become through exchange relations, somewhere between the "prostitutes" and "[d]ictaphones" on Rubin's list of women's mediating functions (34).

A significant (albeit submerged) part of what "The Traffic in Women" highlights is the fact that women are exchanged for a lot more than what can be quantified through the exchange relation. They embody and create affective surpluses that extend and reverberate beyond exchange, which often means they perform the important work of appeasing and justifying it. Rubin points to this affective surplus when she analyzes the "historical and moral element" of labor power in Marx's discussion of reproductive labor. It is this "historical and moral element" that, according to Rubin, makes a "wife" necessary among the laborer's "necessary wants" and creates a "cultural heritage of forms of masculinity and femininity" (38). The affective surpluses women provide can also be discerned in Rubin's discussion of Claude Lévi-Strauss' *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1968), in which he argues that of course women are more than words, signs, and objects of exchange. They are also forms of value; they bring "*affective richness, ardour, and mystery*" to human relationships, heterosexual "duets" in particular (quoted in Rubin 1976, 59, emphasis added by Rubin). Lévi-Strauss is endorsing and romanticizing women's assignment to perform affective labor, and Rubin's analysis puts that assignment in a feminist light. She accuses Lévi-Strauss of endorsing "one of the greatest rip-offs of all time" (59). Within cultures of neoliberalism, girls represent the possibility of sustaining this "affective richness," which means that they also emblemize its loss.

Tiqqun's empty girls

If the previous section analyzed how representations of girls are exchanged within capitalism's neoliberal iterations, Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (2012) demonstrates how girls function as convenient signs that can be exchanged across the terrain of anti-capitalist critiques. An important text for this special issue, *Theory of the Young-Girl* is a book-length manifesto composed by the neo-Situationist Franco-Italian collective Tiqqun. The name for this ultra-left group comes from the Jewish Messianic tradition; it means reparation and healing the world.⁴ The girl identified in their book's title isn't on the receiving end of Tiqqun's reparative efforts, however. With a quite ruthless candor, *Theory of the Young-Girl* relies upon girlphobic connections between girls and capitalism. A collage composed of aphorisms and quotations from writers, theorists, and fashion magazines, each page is a series of textual hookups that simultaneously draw upon and undercut what Tiqqun identifies as the Young-Girl's relentless self-valorization (18).

"[A] traveling handmaiden of capitalist oppression," as Heather Warren-Crow (2014, 73) calls her, the girl in Tiqqun's text is a cipher for the consumption that have become neoliberalism's normative reason. They take the malleability attributed to the girl and turn it into a dull and flat emptiness, making her into something akin to a model in a Vanessa Beecroft performance. By being so flat and empty, the Young-Girl becomes a "vision machine," a convenient tool for seeing and rendering the complexities of capitalist saturation that has become, according to Tiqqun, a "total war," in which "existence has become a battlefield" but "nobody has yet really grasped what is happening or what is at stake" because its surveillance infiltrates everything (14, 11). The Young-Girl provides a passageway for this infiltration. Her connection to reproduction, affect, and virginity has become the ground for capitalism's socialization. Her connection to masquerade, visibility, and triviality helps illustrate its deceptions and lures.

Though there are actually plenty of statements in *Theory of the Young-Girl* that could be used to refute this claim, Tiqqun declares that the "Young-Girl" doesn't have to do with gender. As if to pre-empt the skeptical responses their text seems composed to provoke, they write: "Listen: The Young-Girl is obviously *not* a gendered concept" (14). They argue that the "nearly-hundred-year-old wrong" that women's magazines illustrate – self-commodification – now targets, includes, and incorporates men (17). Hyperbolically, Tiqqun exclaims: "All the old figures of patriarchal authority, from statesmen to bosses and cops, have become Young-Girlified, every last one of them, even the Pope" (17). Replying directly to this statement, which is so off-the-chart ridiculous it's funny, Nina Power (2013, 33) writes: "And yet the book is precisely not called 'Theory of the Wizen-Pope.'"

Surprisingly – or not – Tiqqun's declaration about the Young-Girl's wide applicability has received a lot of endorsements. Tom McDonough (2011, 47) gives one: "The 'Young Girl' is by no means intended as a gender-specific term – it does not refer only to women, but is rather a cipher for a fungible post-Fordist subject constructed within a commodified and image-based late capitalist social order." Adam Morris (2012, 144) gives another: "But the text is not meant to be read literally as straightforward misogyny ... [the] 'Young-Girl' is a figurative term. 'She' is both an exponent of and metaphor for the commodification of social life under late capitalism into consumerist 'types.'" Of course there is some truth to

Tiqqun's claim. The malleability Post-Fordism demands is a form of feminization that isn't limited to specific bodies or identities. But the point is that there are long histories – histories that precede Post-Fordism – in which girls and women have been made to figure for “fungibility,” “commodification,” and the seductive and deceptive lures of an “image-based” capitalism. Which means that those with bodies designated to be “girls” are more proximate to the characteristics associated with the feminized post-Fordist subject. In other words, there is a big difference between those who are feminized through the latest iterations of capitalism's colonization and those who have been interpellated by the term “girl” and see themselves mirrored in the category the word identifies. In her smart responses to the writers who endorse Tiqqun's argument that the Young-Girl isn't a gendered concept, the poet Stephanie Young creates a picture of a woman's life – “her” life, but not really – shaped by economic and cultural forces that enforce the assumption of the woman's low value:

The thing about the Theory is that for a moment, it makes me want to put on everything at once – the lipstick heels thong, roll around in a fur coat and go around like that, smashing things. A second later it just feels terrible. I know my value is determined by any number of things over which I have no control, the wage I'm earning now the most I'll ever make, my ability to support myself in slow decline no amount of Deep Wrinkle Serum can stop. Poor dupe that I am, I'll probably buy another bottle. It's half the usual cost at Grocery Outlet because, like me, the expiration date's approaching but still a short while off. (Young 2012/2013, 9–10)

Young is performatively writing as a woman reflecting upon herself as almost “worn out human capital” (to return to Brown's phrase) and reluctantly attending to the image of her body as a way to hold on to the small value she has been granted as a girl.

This forthright scene from Young's review of Tiqqun's text draws attention to the fact that contemporary poetry can be an arena for hearing what it means for the “Young-Girl” to speak for herself. Indeed, it is the poet Ariana Reines who translated Tiqqun's text for semi-otexte's Intervention Series. In her written reflections on the challenges this translation project posed, Reines renders a quite visceral response. It lands somewhere between *The Exorcist* (another story about a transparent girl) and a bulimic's nightmare:

So I've already said that translating this book made me sick. I mean it gave me migraines, made me puke; I couldn't sleep at night, regressed into totally out-of-character sexual behavior. The way I've put it to my friends is that working on it was like being made to vomit up my first two books, eat the vomit, vomit again, etc., then pour the mess into ice trays and freeze it, and then pour liquor over the cubes ... (Reines 2012)

It is hard to imagine a more explicit rendering of the discomfort and disgust that accompanies what Reines (2012) calls “translation's strange and painful surrogacy.” It was perhaps even more strange and painful to translate Tiqqun's words – and allow them to “pass through” her – since she didn't agree with the assertion that the Young-Girl was not a gendered concept. She writes that despite Tiqqun's declarations to the contrary, the text “contains passages rife with heterosexist *ressentiment*” and is, actually, a book about women, “[w]ith everything biological and constructed the term *women* signifies. A book about us.” Reines' statement, and its address to other women, provides an important

feminist counterpoint to *Theory of the Young-Girl*. Young (2012/2013, 8) writes that though she hoped that as a translator Reines would render “the monstrous parts more so, the blunt hatred more blunt,” the translator’s note helped her feel less crazy. Reines’ reflections on the translation gave Young a glimpse of the book she wanted to see, which, for her, made the published version of *Theory of the Young-Girl*, the final product, “a timesheet splattered with droplets of bile, an artifact” (8).

No doubt all the regurgitated and repackaged vomit Reines refers to in her translator’s note connects to Tiquun’s focus on anorexia. In their penultimate chapter, Tiquun makes anorexia into a flat metaphor for the girl herself – a normalized perversion, an iteration of her investment in herself as human capital: “*anorexia could be seen as a tragic caricature of the disconnected, self-sufficient female, unable to affiliate and driven by an obsessive desire for power and mastery*” (2012, 124, original emphasis). Anorexia represents the Young-Girl’s demand for “total inexpressivity” and “ecstatic absence;” it represents her desire to become a “sign” that “circulate[s] without friction through the giant semiocratic capitalism” (126). Reines’ visceral response also suggests that there might be a connection between anorexia and the misogynist ideas the Young-Girl is forced to consume and internalize. The “force feeding” enacted through Tiquun’s text is buttressed by the expectation that the girl will silently and stupidly “eat up” the words they have collaged together to create the picture of the girl as an empty sign.

In the same paragraph where all the figurative vomiting and regurgitation takes place, Reines expresses a desire to become a proper medium for Tiquun’s words, a good and diligent worker in the service of their ideas:

I don’t know why I’ve been hesitant to say this publicly. Something about wanting to perform like a normal translator, to honor the laws of hospitality, to be a good steward to this thing I worked hard on, to be dignified in only the most ordinary way.

Reines’ hesitancy to disclose her physical reactions to the work of translating Tiquun’s text, along with her desire to be a “normal translator,” has everything to do with the emptiness attributed to the girl within *Theory of the Young-Girl*. An important part of the girl’s work, Reines therefore suggests, is making herself into a frozen and transparent vehicle for others’ words and desires. (This is work Reines’ own poetry eloquently struggles with and resists.)

Girl voices and sounds

The fact that Tiquun’s *Preliminary Material for a Theory of the Young Girl* is a text poets feel compelled to engage with points to the voice as another arena in which we can analyze the subtle forms of work girls are expected to perform emblemizing neoliberalism and its damaging effects. Near the conclusion of her review, “She’s just not that into you” (2013), Nina Power poses the following question: “What, ultimately, would it mean to let the Young-Girl speak for herself and not through the categories imposed upon her by a culture that heralds her as the metaphysical apex of civilization while simultaneously denigrating her?” This question is shadowed by the real possibility that the categories of idealization and denigration are imprinted upon the girl’s voice and that she may (inadvertently)

support this polarization when she speaks for herself. Here I want to focus upon three texts that make girls' voices central preoccupations, and point out the fact that by doing so, they offer compelling insights about how girls are made to embody the trivialization of capitalism's forces as well as the forms of victimization those forces inflict.

While it seems like everyone is encouraging girls to claim, possess, and assert their voices, there is still an expectation that those voices soothe and please. Indirectly, this expectation becomes evident through the intense irritation girls' voices can provoke, particularly when hyper-femininity is performed on their high-pitched surfaces, an excess that actually might touch upon modes of resistance. It would be too easy to posit girls' voices and sounds as sites that are free from the affective labor I've identified above, but I do think voice and sound possess greater capacities than vision and visuality to expand beyond the contained edges of the girl as the "publicly preeminent image of desirability" (to return to Driscoll's phrase). Voice and sound can be deployed in order to seek registers within and beyond visuality, which has such a strong tendency to consume and swallow differences. When unhinged from the visual coherence of the body, voices can redistribute affective resources girls are expected to give to cultural representations that depend on their denigration.

The first text is a recent essay by Joshua Clover (2013) published in *The Nation*, titled "Red Country: On Taylor Swift." For Clover, Swift's album *Red* emblemizes a new period of capitalist expansion, which he sets in contrast to an earlier economic bubble that expanded just a year before the fall of the Twin Towers. This prior moment witnessed the "five biggest debuts in the history of the business music cluster" – a "peak" that he describes as "gilded and precipitous" but dramatically undercut by the techbust, Napster, and the end of media mergers. Swift's album, however, signals an economic resurgence, selling 1.2 million copies in a week. At the time of the essay's composition – the piece was published in May 2013 – N Sync's *No Strings Attached* threatened to outsell *Red*, but Swift's hyper-feminine gamma-girl status just *feels right* for Clover's critique.

Not surprisingly, Clover focuses on Swift's image first. He stresses how easily the image of her displayed body allegorizes the enormous profit her album generates: "*Red* is a glittering skyscraper, much like Swift herself. She fronts every fashion glossy, globally massive Swift is blonde and white and this in a sense she fits the profile." This description of her image slides into the less than tangible affects and feelings her voice transmits: "She is life-affirming, stands for personal independence, and appeals achingly to the tween/teen spot." Pointing to where Swift's sound affectively connects, Clover launches into the heart of his economic critique. Playing off the "Red" of the title, he compares Swift's album to China, no longer a menace, but the "boom" the US economy precariously rides. He acknowledges the strangeness of this comparison, but stresses the "market magnitude" that is the empty center of Pop music, which Clover makes into a girl: a "vessel for that ineffable but ambient experience: a sort of empathy with the global economy, a world system affect."

Clover doesn't give too much attention to the music in *Red*. He takes just enough time to emphasize the banal hyper-produced flatness of Swift's sound, which allows it to move across recognizable musical categories: "For one bright and suspended moment," Clover writes, "she has no need of genre. She is bigger than country, bigger than all that. Her songs circulate across formats." Clover's portrayal of Swift relies upon an idea of the

girl as transparent; she is an outline of a shape through which the sounds of capitalism move and circulate. Clover makes Swift and her product very small – as in aesthetically insignificant – but by comparing her to China he also makes her sublimely big. This extreme oscillation works when depicting girls thickly protected by the privileges of cash and stardom – like Swift – but is also at play when depicting girls defined by poverty. In her recently published analysis of the figuration of the girl in economic development and corporate responsibility campaigns, Michelle Murphy (2012/2013) writes: “Her rates of return are so high precisely because her value begins so low.”

My analysis of Clover’s “Red Country” isn’t necessarily asking you to feel sorry for Swift. (I do, however, think of the girls who like this music, who feel an affinity with some of its girl-power sensibilities and are likely to come up against girlphobic dismissals.) Mostly I want to stress that Clover’s essay performs a familiar girlphobic logic that unconsciously relies upon a dismissive equation between girls and mass culture. Reading Clover’s essay – which is, without a doubt, clever, incisive, and deftly composed – I found myself thinking of “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other” (1986), an essay in which Andreas Huyssen traces how the figure of woman became conflated with mass culture at the onset of modernity to create a ground upon which modernist artistic experimentation built its cherished distinctions. We could link the modernist fantasy of detaching from the trivialized and feminized messiness of mass culture to the ease with which Clover posits Swift as a thoroughly commodified visual and sonic package that conveniently represents serious economic threats, which suddenly become more manageable and less anxiety producing for the pleasurable minutes of reading Clover’s prose.

The second textual/aural scenario comes from the radio show “Love Line,” hosted by Dr. Drew, an addiction doctor, and Adam Carolla, a comedian. “Love Line” was a radio show in which young people called in asking for advice about sex and relationships. (I’m focused on the iteration of the show that was on air from 1996–2000). As the show became popular, Drew and Carolla “discovered” what came to be called the “The Little Girl Voice,” a moniker for describing a young woman’s voice that seems incommensurate with her actual age. Shrill and silly with lilt, the young woman sounds like a much younger girl, and her voice becomes a leaky object that provokes pity, irritation, and disdain. Supposedly these vocal symptoms are caused by a traumatic event: more often than not, sexual abuse at the hands of a father or male caregiver. The girls who perform the “Little Girl Voice,” with its high pitches and child-like patterns, indirectly transmit a violation that has frozen the voice and made it resistant to the body’s temporality. While clearly girls are abused, and no doubt trauma manifests in the voice and the sounds it produces, I am more interested in drawing attention to the fact that two adult men, on the side of authority, got a lot of traction from pinning girls’ voices down with a perhaps accurate but decidedly blunt rubric for reading vocal symptoms. They weren’t ill intentioned, but often Drew and Carolla would insist that the girl caller had duped herself into denial. They took discernible pleasure pushing the girl to confront what she refused to see, but what her girly voice betrays. It is important to note that the overlapping acoustic technologies that constituted “Love Line” – the phone, the radio – works against seeing the bodies of the callers. But we could also say that the “Little Girl Voice” on “Love Line” serves as an oral punctum that opens on to imaginary images of girls’ bodies that are contained by recognizable scenes of sexual violation.

With different levels of girlphobia, “Red Country” and “Love Line” show that girls’ voices are objects for intensely public consumption, and, in Sarah Projansky’s words, “readily available to us” (2014, 7). Swift’s voice is a bland and homogenized vehicle for capitalist expansion, a “can-do” cover up of capitalist exploitation and impending doom. The young women who performed the Girly Voice on Love Line provided acoustic emblems of the victimized girl at risk. They’ve lost what we think of as their *real* “can-do” voices, those voices that serve as vehicles for girls to answer back, make themselves visible; insist that they matter, assert that they “can do.” Those voices are buried beneath sounds that are awkward and off-putting, regressive, and out-of-sync, and therefore are quite subtly testing the boundaries of proper girlhood femininity.

“Love Line’s” discovery of the “Little Girl Voice” is one instance of the preoccupation in the 1990s, not only with girls, but incest and sexual abuse. In *Everybody’s Family Romance: Reading Incest in Neoliberal America* (2009), Gillian Harkins argues that the 1990s was a decade of neoliberal transformation in which incest and the sexual abuse of children became objects of cultural obsession. This obsession, according to Harkins, was part of a sex panic that legitimized fear about public spaces and justified the neoliberal dismantling of the State. It is obviously *protection, exposure, and vulnerability* that links sexual abuse to neoliberalism, and Harkins’ analysis quite astutely helps us see that the withering of the State’s protective powers becomes displaced and condensed into scenes of girls’ betrayal and violation. Harkins argues that “the boom of interest in childhood sexual abuse ... provided a screen for the more structural social problems of the period” and describes incest and sexual abuse as “*resource[s]* for neoliberal transformation” (xvi, xvii, my emphasis). The Girly Voice and the scenes of abuse it evokes reaffirm the female body as the primary site for neoliberalism’s feminizing intrusions.

There are, of course, bodies of work that trouble and dissolve the “can-do/at-risk” dichotomy and disrupt the unarticulated expectation that girls provide neoliberalism with vocal resources. The poetry of Ariana Reines, which I alluded to above, is one, and Tracie Morris’ sound poetry is another. I am particularly interested in Morris’ (1999) poem “a little,” which is about a girl and the sounds she can make with her voice. Morris is an African-American poet and performance artist who made a name for herself in the slam poetry publics that emerged in the 1990s. “a little” is the first sound piece Morris composed: it consists of about 4 ½ minutes of sound produced by Morris playing with the words in the sentence “I am just a little girl.” The poem opens with a high and exaggerated pitch that makes the “smallness” attributed to the girl loud and big, but the intense effort Morris’ protagonist puts into this bigness makes the poem’s inaugural sounds distorted and almost silly. (Indeed, audience members have nervously laughed when Morris has performed “a little” live.) Dense with acoustic textures and highly wrought – almost baroque in its zigzagging pattern of various speeds and echoes – but also raw with screams and rhythms that hit notes in which fear collapses into desire, “a little” pulls and stretches the six words that make up the sentence “I am just a little girl” to the edges of their recognizable sense. Morris gets inside each word, finding and imaginatively mining its sonic depths and expanses. These qualities make “a little” strange and even off-putting; Morris’ voice refuses the flow of sympathetic identification. But it is easy to hear what the poem is about: “Little” means small in both size and value, and with “little” and “girl” almost becoming one word, the *insignificance* suggested by the first

word bouncing off and sinking into the *insignificance* implied by the latter. Adding to this sense is the important word “just,” which means barely, simply, or no more than, and underscores the poem’s theme of diminishment.

We know from Morris’ (2007, 211) own paratextual commentary on “a little” that it is about the sexual abuse of girls. “a little” is distinct, compelling, and worth listening to because it depicts the traces of painfully diminishing events in the supple, guttural depths of the voice and on its fragile, tinny surfaces and does not turn the voice into a transparent vehicle or an easily readable symptom. The sentence that constitutes the poem, as well as the sounds that emerge from and boomerang back to it, can be considered the girl’s resistant articulation of the cultural assumption about girls’ low value, which justifies and normalizes the disposability sexual abuse implies. Again, I am not inclined to think of either the voice or sound as the things that are more real than the purportedly Teflon superficialities of visuality, but the fact that “a little” is a sound poem, and therefore works against the privileging of sight, is crucial, since girlhood and sexual abuse are spectacularized in contemporary media cultures. Most often, this spectacularization reinforces the moralism of the “can-do/ at risk” split and obscures the affective resources girls give to the neoliberal economy. A poem such as Morris’ “a little” forestalls hearing girls through recognizable categories – and can be considered a call to listeners to attend to the *texts* that animate girls’ sounds and voices, texts that are not readily available to our understanding.

Reading the texts of girls

Moving across a wide and compelling range of cultural production, the six very different essays included in this special issue contribute significantly to the project of developing nuanced forms of attention the figuration of the girl requires. The authors arrive at this nuance by refusing to assume the standard and given meanings attributed to girls and by shrewdly guiding their analyses through complicated neoliberal terrains in which the distinctions between freedom and restraint are difficult to discern.

Texting Girls begins with Kimberly Hall’s analysis of the Youtube star “Bree,” otherwise known as “lonelygirl15” and played by Jessica Rose. Hall’s reading of Rose’s performance of girlish vulnerability, which moves deftly among intertwined narrative and discursive frames, demonstrates how the authenticity and vulnerability expected of a girl on screen becomes the crucial link between the amateur aesthetics of social media and the precarity of affective and communicative labor. Hall shows that there is a strong demand within cultures of neoliberalism for girls to be authentic victims and for that authenticity to be easily consumable. Focused on girls “sexting” images of themselves, Julian Gill-Peterson’s essay underscores this insight. Hinging on a legal case in which girls were returned to the protective arms of their parents so they would not be punished as pedophiles and pornographers, Gill-Peterson illuminates the ways in which sexting girls trouble the habitual impulses to place girls firmly on the sides of victimization or agency. This reading is accompanied by the imperative to interrupt the presumption that we can know what girls are actually doing when they sext, an interruption that allows Gill-Peterson to maintain a much-needed focus on the narrow and moral categories for perceiving girls’ sexualities and the emptiness upon which they are founded. The misogynist consequences of reading girls’ sexualities through moralizing poles become painfully evident in Alexandra

Kokoli's and Aaron Winter's essay on the figuration of the girl in neoliberal Britain. Kolkoli and Winter shrewdly demonstrate how "girls" – young women of reproductive age – function as convenient moral targets for justifying austerity measures. At the heart of "What a girl's gotta do" is the feminist imperative to identify neoliberalism's cruel and ironic turns around which girls easily pivot. Indeed, in the course of their analysis, Kolkoli and Winter show that reality television and breast augmentation, two highly visible practices by which young women invest in themselves as "human capital" and attempt to access economic security, becomes the ground for their condemnation and makes them into living symbols of wasteful excess.

If the first three essays scrupulously render the punitive forces that impede the possibility of reading representations of girls for all their textual richness and nuance, then the last three essays highlight the pleasures of reading texts and practices that actually realize those possibilities. Taking a far more balanced approach to Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials For a Theory of the Young-Girl* (2012) than I have here, Jen Kennedy provides a richly layered intellectual context for Tiqqun's manifesto and does so to compose a critical "détournement" of their controversial argument. Following Elizabeth Grosz's work redirecting the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari for feminist purposes, Kennedy suggests that when read as a dialectical image, the girl figured in Tiqqun's pages pushes beyond the frames established by her authors. She asks what this "cut and paste" girl might suggest for feminisms that are not invested in finding better representations of women within current and recognizable structures of power, but seek to "radically change the conditions of possibility for being and becoming." Like Kennedy, Yasmine Marie Jahanmir underscores the importance of seeing that representations of girls move in multiple directions. Jahanmir's focus is the Aqualillies: a contemporary group of synchronized swimmers that nostalgically cite the golden age of Esther Williams in all her bathing-beauty glory of the American 1940s and 1950s. This nostalgia enacted in the spectacle of the Aqualillies' performances isn't one that smoothes over and simplifies. Drawing upon Svetlana Boym's category of "reflective nostalgia," Jahanmir argues that the Aqualillies' performances move fluidly and reflectively back in time and thereby reveal the work that informs the visual productions of femininity. While Jahanmir follows the Aqualillies as their choreographed performances move productively into the past, Devon Randall Kehler's analysis of Tori Amos' 2007 album *American Doll Posse* gestures to the future. Against the background of a neoliberal feminism that emphasizes self-control and individualized management, Kehler passionately presents Amos' musical conceptualization of a "doll posse" – an assemblage of doll personae – to explore what it suggests about the potential relationships between femininity and feminism. The results are compelling. Kehler renders *American Doll Posse* as a moving and expanding set of layered voices and sounds in which "a crowded, noisy femininity becomes audible" and emergent forms of feminist collectivity become possible, which is precisely where I wanted *Texting Girls* to direct its call.

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Notes

1. These formulations about risk align with Randy Martin's arguments in *Financialization of Daily Life* (2002), particularly the chapter "Risking the World," in which he provides a gloss on the term "at-risk." As Martin explains, "at-risk" emerged in the 1980s "to designate those who are objects of structural inequalities. Instead of talking about economic exploitation, racial domination, or sexual oppression, the attribution of risk shifted the burdens of these exclusionary social effects to the groups themselves. Poverty and race could then become risk factors for failure" (108–109). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this connection.
2. I am drawing upon Projansky's (2007) "Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Post-feminist Girls and Postfeminist Daughters," instead of the revision of this essay in Projansky's chapter *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* (2014), because it draws upon Harris' categories of "at-risk" and "can-do" and uses them to read visual depictions of girls.
3. For an introduction to this artwork, see Waxman and Grant, *Girls! Girls! Girls! In Contemporary Art* (2011).
4. For more about Tiqqun, see Smith (2010) and Morris (2012).

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