

ANITA HARRIS



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FUTURE GIRL

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YOUNG WOMEN IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

ANITA HARRIS

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This book is for Gill,
Kevin, Michael,
Racia, and Scottie.

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INTRODUCTION

This book explores the idea that in a time of dramatic social, cultural, and political transition, young women¹ are being constructed as a vanguard of new subjectivity. They are supposed to offer clues about the best way to cope with these changes. Power, opportunities, and success are all modeled by the “future girl”—a kind of young woman celebrated for her “desire, determination and confidence”² to take charge of her life, seize chances, and achieve her goals. The abundance of books about girls’ voices, webpages for their issues, and goods and services geared to a girl market indicates how young women are made visible in more and more places to exemplify this new way of being. Such a proliferation of sites to see and hear young women suggests that we are very interested in applauding but also scrutinizing their lives and that we have created more ways for this to happen. I suggest that this new interest in looking at and hearing from girls is not just celebratory, but is, in part, regulatory as well. There is a process of creation and control at work in the act of regarding young women as the winners in a new world. In holding them up as the exemplars of new possibility, we also actively construct them to perform this role.

What does it mean to say that young women and girlhood itself are constructed or regulated to demonstrate how we all might prevail today? In *Act Your Age!*, her brilliant study of the cultural construction of adolescence at the end of the nineteenth century, education scholar Nancy Lesko argues that

adolescence became a social space in which to talk about the characteristics of people in modernity, to worry about the possibilities of...social changes, and to establish policies and programs that would help create the modern social order and citizenry.³

Lesko suggests that a new modern political and civic order was being created in the United States and the United Kingdom at the time, one that was preoccupied with nationalism, “civilization,” and racial progress. The behavior, attitudes, and development of adolescents were all monitored closely in the interests of producing rational, patriotic, and productive citizens for a modern nation-state. In the late nineteenth century, therefore, the state, scientists, and the community paid

considerable attention to young people's social and moral development because they were meant to embody the ideals of national progress. If educators "got it right" with youth, then nations themselves would have their futures secured. Young people were expected to personify modern civic values, such as responsibility, strength, and sacrifice, and model the new style of nation-defending citizenship.

I suggest here that this kind of attention to and construction of youth as integral to the successful transition to a new social order has reemerged in important ways. However, it is young women, rather than youth in general, who are now the subjects of this scrutiny and regulation. Displaying, tolling, and inquiring into young women and girlhood, rather than adolescence, serves many of the same purposes in a contemporary context. Young women today stand in for possibilities and anxieties about new identities more generally. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the creation of the contemporary social order and citizenship is achieved in part within the space of girlhood. That is, the appropriate ways to embrace and manage the political, economic, and social conditions of contemporary societies are demonstrated in the example of young women, through the ideal of the future girl. She is imagined, and sometimes imagines herself, as best able to handle today's socioeconomic order.

The focus on adolescents at the *fin de siècle* and the attention paid to young women today thus serve similar interests. Girlhood operates now as adolescence functioned then, as a space for "worries about unknown futures, about ability to succeed and dominate in changing circumstances, about maintenance of...hierarchy in changing social and cultural landscapes."⁴ While these anxieties also confront contemporary social orders, what is different today is the kind of state/civil society relation that is constructed in this space. In the modern period of the late nineteenth century, youth were disciplined directly by the state and its agents so that they would develop slowly, under close supervision, to serve a unified and progressive nation. Late modern times, however, are characterized by dislocation, flux, and globalization, and demand citizens who are flexible and self-realizing. As we shall see, direct intervention and guidance by institutions have been replaced by self-governance; power has devolved onto individuals to regulate themselves through the right choices. The social and economic logic of late modernity compels people to become self-inventing and responsible citizens who can manage their own development and adapt to change without relying on the state. To understand this shift and its implications for youth in general and young women in particular, we need to explore the socioeconomic features of late modernity more closely. First, I want to provide some description and definitions of *late modernity*, focusing especially on the concepts of risk and individualization, as they are central to understanding the world in which future girls live. Although there are many national and cultural differences, I want to make some general claims about what late modernity means for young women across a range of Western nations.

Late Modernity

Before exploring how young women and girlhood in contemporary Western societies are represented as the future, it is important to understand the circumstances and characteristics of late modernity that have given rise to anxieties about the direction of social and economic life. Only then can we interpret the significance of investments in young women as both carriers of and defenders against social change. Put briefly, as youth sociologists Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel argue in their book *Young People and Social Change*, “Young people today are growing up in a different world to that experienced by previous generations—changes which are significant enough to merit a re-conceptualization of youth transitions and processes of social reproduction.”⁵ This “different world” is marked by both social and economic characteristics that have forced a fundamental reassessment of the material with which young people are able to craft their identities and forge their livelihoods. Put simply, the late modern era is distinguished by its economic and social break with industrial modernity. This previous era was characterized by a system of industrial capitalism built around manufacturing; strong centralized government; enduring social ties based on shared identifications with community, class, and place; and, in the post-war era, the development of both liberal welfare states and robust social justice movements.

By contrast, late modernity is defined by complex, global capitalist economies and a shift from state support and welfare to the private provision of services. The key feature of late modern economies is deindustrialization—the contraction of large-scale manufacturing and the expansion of global communications, technology, and service industries. Across these and other industries, full-time ongoing employment has been replaced by part-time, casual, temporary, and short-term contract work. Markets, corporations, and production are increasingly globalized, a process fueled by the information revolution, the capacity to move capital and information around the world instantaneously, and changes in national regulations about trade, ownership, movement of capital, and offshore production. Along with this trend nation-states have retreated from industrial regulation of both transnationals and small businesses, and public policy often employs the language of individual responsibility and enterprise bargaining to fill the gap left by deregulation. The economic impact of these conditions has been an increase in family and child poverty, and greater polarization between rich and poor, both within states and between North and South.⁶

The new focus on enterprise, economic rationalism, and individualization has social as well as economic effects. These include a sense of change, insecurity, fragmentation, and discontinuity within communities and nations, as well as a new emphasis on the responsibilities of individuals. Economic rationalism has been accompanied by a shift to a new brand of competitive individualism, whereby people are expected to create their own chances and make the best of their lives. The social theorists Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens suggest that the idea of

predictability that was a feature of modern times has been replaced by a new sense of danger and contingency. Late modernity has been defined by Beck in his groundbreaking book *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* as generating the foundational conditions of what he describes as “risk society” wherein global insecurities and economic unpredictability are combined with weakening collective ties and identities. This feeling of risk, and a sense of the loss of what was known and enduring, are generated by real or perceived broader global trends towards a world sped up and in flux. Mass movements of migrants and refugees; the visibility of civil, religious, and ethnic conflicts; worldwide health threats; economies whose fortunes appear dependent on arbitrary and foreign forces; and global human security concerns all contribute to a real sense of living in a risk society. Alongside these experiences late modern individuals may also feel they have lost significant connections with others, for example, through the diversification of the family unit, the transience of neighborhood populations, and the fragmentation of social movements.

With the falling away of collective ties and longstanding social relationships that helped us know our place and identity, risks must be negotiated on an individual level. This means that people are required to make choices and create life trajectories for themselves without traditional patterns or support structures to guide them. They must develop individual strategies and take personal responsibility for their success, happiness, and livelihood by making the right choices in an uncertain and changeable environment. From one perspective this process of individualization creates opportunities for forming oneself independently of the traditional ties that have previously been so instrumental in structuring life trajectories. It carries with it the promise of choice, freedom, and real autonomy. However, apparent opportunities for self-invention and individual effort exist within circumstances that remain highly constrained for the majority of people. Sociologist Steven Miles suggests that the image of subjectivity generated by risk society is

one of increased independence, self-determination and self-realization. But as discussions of risk illustrate, the conditions within which these apparently positive developments are occurring are actually taking place in a world which in some respects is quite possibly less secure than it has ever been.⁷

This insecurity is manifested in unpredictable chances for employment and other avenues for livelihood, the shift from production to consumption as a framework for making meaning and identity (which in turn depends on the capacity to generate income), the rollback of nation-states’ accountability for the social rights of their citizens, and the replacement of strong social bonds with momentary identifications. Furthermore, whereas once obstacles to maximizing one’s life chances could be understood through analyses of structured social inequality and addressed through

political collectivities, the collapse of these collectivities means that today these can only be remedied through more strenuous self-invention and self-transformation.

These conditions and the requirement of individuals to now “make themselves” in order to survive and perhaps even flourish have generated considerable anxiety about the future of youth, who are imagined as the inheritors of this somewhat frightening world. It is young people who must try to forge their futures by mastering the anxieties, uncertainties, and insecurities conjured up by unpredictable times. As youth studies theorist Peter Kelly argues, “Processes of individualisation...visit new forms of responsibility on young people and their families to prudently manage individual ‘reflexive biographical projects’ in increasingly uncertain settings.”⁸ In other words, young people are newly obliged to make good choices for themselves and set themselves on a path toward success with little support or security outside the private sphere. In a risk society their circumstances and opportunities seem more precarious than ever. However, as the future-girl phenomenon suggests, youth are also imagined as those who may be best able to prevail, having grown up with unpredictability as their only reality. After all, young people are taking up the opportunities of late modernity, particularly in technology and communications, in ways that many of an older generation find admirable.

In the late nineteenth century youth were constructed as highly dependent and were expected to take guidance from experts to become citizens in the development of a larger social plan for national homogeneity and progress. The features of the ideal young person were clearly prescribed. Today, they are supposed to become unique, successful individuals, making their own choices and plans to accomplish autonomy. The benchmark for achieving a successful identity is no longer adherence to a set of normative characteristics, but instead a capacity for self-invention. This means that they are the focus of a different kind of attention from the state, service providers, educators, and advertisers. Young people in modern times were governed by experts who would overtly direct and then reward or punish appropriate behavior. The new watchfulness in youth research, policy, and popular culture seeks to shape conduct through perpetual everyday observation and to elicit self-monitoring in youth themselves. They are not only obliged to manage their own life trajectories, but are enticed to display this management for the scrutiny of experts and observers. The obligation for youth to become unique individuals is therefore constructed as a freedom, a freedom best expressed through the display of one’s choices and projects of the self. The current focus on placing young people in school, workplaces, and appropriate recreational centers, and in hearing from them, for example, in youth citizenship debates, can be understood as related to this trend toward exhibition of one’s biographical project.

Why Young Women?

Young women have taken on a special role in the production of the late modern social order and its values. They have become a focus for the construction of an ideal late modern subject who is self-making, resilient, and flexible. But why is it young women and not youth in general who have been invested in, symbolically and materially, in these ways? I answer this question in two ways. First, changed economic and work conditions bined with the goals achieved by feminism have created new possibilities for young women. Successful campaigns for the expansion of girls' education and employment have coincided with a restructured global economy and a class/gender system that now relies heavily on young women's labor. Second, new ideologies about individual responsibility and choices also dovetail with some broad feminist notions about opportunities for young women, making them the most likely candidates for performing a new kind of self-made subjectivity.

The transformations in women's status throughout the Western world have been strongly felt in the sectors of education and employment. Women's participation in both areas has increased significantly since the 1960s and 1970s. Changes in laws, policies, and social mores have all made this participation possible and desirable for women. State-sanctioned discrimination which once privileged men in education and at work has been largely eliminated, and the assumption that women do not need careers because they derive their livelihood from a man, as well as a complete identity from the heterosexual nuclear family, has been fundamentally challenged. Young women have been promised equal access to all educational programs and are encouraged by educators and others to pursue meaningful work that aligns with their interests and skills.

At the same time that feminism was ensuring these entitlements, the world of education and employment was changing dramatically for young people, and young women in particular. With the collapse of the full-time youth job market, the rise of the service and communications sectors, and the fragmentation of both workplaces and work trajectories, young people are now expected to stay in education longer to train for flexible, specialized work in a constantly changing labor market. There has been an enormous increase in part-time work for women in the flourishing industries,⁹ as well as a departure of men from some professional and managerial spheres in favor of better-paying options in the new finance or technology sectors of the global economy. These conditions create opportunities (although not always good ones) for young women's work participation. Thus, the feminist push to dismantle the barriers keeping women out of education and employment has coincided with a broader socioeconomic need for young women to take up places in the new economy. As education scholar Jill Blackmore argues, "The new global work order has offered girls the types of opportunities that feminism and their education have well prepared them for, giving them both the skills and desire to take up new subject positions."¹⁰

Further, education and employment have become increasingly important to the standing of young women in terms of the new class/gender structure of late modernity. This is particularly so for the middle classes. Whereas once a comfortable middle-class position was attained or sustained through marriage, today this process is much less assured. The family wage that was once paid to men on the assumption that they had a wife and children to support has largely disappeared. Regulations and protections around pay rates are no longer the norm, and men's incomes are less secure, particularly in the industries employing the lower and middle classes. In addition, the expansion of consumer capitalism and the connection between consumption and middle-class status mean that two incomes are required to sustain a family's appropriate class lifestyle. Finally, the changing nature of the labor market has seen an expansion of "women's work," such that there is sound economic logic for middle-class families to depend on women's wages. Middle-class young women can no longer rely on marriage to secure their economic status or social standing. These young women must become successful and income-generating in their own right, and this means doing well academically and professionally.

Along with changes to education and employment have come reforms to legislation and a shift in attitudes regarding relationships, marriage and divorce, reproduction and sexuality, harassment and sexual assault, and many other dimensions of what had previously been seen as the realm of the personal. Feminism has often been described as a program for change to allow women freedom of choice regarding their bodies, work, family, and relationships—and personal, autonomous responsibility for these choices. These changes have enabled the current generation of young women to see themselves, and to be seen, as enjoying new freedoms and opportunities. They are far more at liberty to make choices and pursue lifestyles independently of their families, the state, and men in general. Young women have been encouraged to believe that "girls can do anything" and "girls are powerful."

These ideas about choice and freedom are central to contemporary notions of individuality. In today's risk society individuals are expected to be flexible, adaptable, resilient, and ultimately responsible for their own ability to manage their lives successfully. One's own life becomes a personal project much like a do-it-yourself assemblage or what Ulrich Beck calls a "choice biography"¹¹ that can be crafted as one desires, rather than a fixed set of predictable stages and experiences. These are key ideas in differentiating late modern young people's identities from modern, late-nineteenth-century adolescence. As Peter Kelly argues, today, "youthful subjects are constructed as responsible for future life chances, choices and options within institutionally structured risk environments.... The subject is compelled to prudently manage...his or her own DIY [Do-It-Yourself]-project of the self."¹² These features of the late modern self pick up on key elements of some general feminist principles about young women's new opportunities for choice, individual empowerment, personal responsibility, and the ability to "be what you want to be." Young women are thus doubly constructed as ideal flexible subjects;

they are imagined as benefiting from feminist achievements and ideology, as well as from new conditions that favor their success by allowing them to put these into practice.

By interrogating the new visibility of young women and focusing specifically on the idea of girls' success as a publicly displayed, mainstream experience, we can see how "making it" in new times appears to be contingent on personal responsibility and effort, the kind of effort best illustrated by the way all girls are now apparently leading their lives. The popular story is that girls as a whole are performing brilliantly and are the great example and hope for the future. Educated, young, professional career women with glamorous consumer lifestyles appear to be everywhere. This scenario is a reality for a small number, but the image also functions as a powerful ideal that suggests that all young women are now enjoying these kinds of lives and that this is what it means to be successful.

There are, however, many young women who are not living in ways that match the image of success. Their situation results from the same conditions that produce the future girl, that is, a changed labor market, economic rationalization, and a devolving of responsibility—a "responsibilization"—onto individuals. In order for the popular story to prevail, however, the consequences of the sexual and economic exploitation of these young women are not confronted, and the socioeconomic benefits delivered by them are not acknowledged. Instead, their circumstances are labeled "failure," and this is attributed to poor choices, insufficient effort, irresponsible families, bad and lazy communities. In the move to cultivate young women as the new success story for our times, the struggles, disappointments, and barriers experienced by many young women are put to one side as the aberrant experiences of a minority of youth. Set in the context of the late modern Western world, this book therefore argues that there is another story behind the representation of young women as the winners in rapidly changing societies. I suggest that young women are living more complex lives than the dominant images of girls' freedom, power, and success suggest and that class and race inequalities continue to shape opportunities and outcomes. Because young women are supposed to embody the new flexible subjectivity, analyzing their experiences, practices, and political engagements can illustrate more broadly the dangers and opportunities of late modernity for its self-inventing subjects.

Organization of the Chapters

I build my argument by making connections between current representations of young women, the material conditions within which they live, and the new ways they are able to challenge both of these. The intense interest in young women as the vanguard of the late modern social order has resulted in an expansion of the places they are seen and heard. The problematic effect of this move has been an increase in the regulation of their lives through a proliferation of sites where their biographical

projects can be observed. Young women's roles in the class/race system of globalized capitalism are secured through this new kind of regulation. However, this public focus on young women has also generated new strategies for social critique. Many express resistance to their part in the production of the new socioeconomic order through an activism that works by evading surveillance. I argue that many young women respond to their visibility with skepticism; they seek new kinds of political engagement and communities to confront the seductive lure of unlimited self-making and to develop a critique of the future girl.

Chapter 1 demonstrates how and why young women have emerged as the central subjects of discourses about how to prevail in a late modern world. They have come in for particular kinds of attention through two new contrasting narratives, one about girls' power and the other about the difficulties they encounter. These discourses position young women as either "can-do" or "at-risk" girls. They show how success, personal effort, and selfinvention have become linked together in the project of surviving in a risk society. Through these discourses young women are disciplined into creating their own successful life trajectories and taking personal responsibility if they fail. I explore the can-do and at-risk positions in relation to young women as workers, consumers, and mothers. I demonstrate how a normative image of the girl for our times both relies on and shores up class and race stratifications that persist despite the discourse of meritocracy.

Chapter 2 looks more closely at the construction of young women as successful in education and employment. It examines the impact of the loss of the full-time youth labor market and the new emphasis on flexibility and skill development for young women. The chapter argues that young women are often perceived as beneficiaries of the new world of work and training but that this picture changes radically when a diverse range of young women's experiences is taken into account. I demonstrate the enormous expectations placed upon them to seize all the opportunities offered by deindustrialized and globalized labor markets, and how only a small minority of young women are structurally located in ways that make this possible. The economic shifts that characterize late modernity have had deeply divisive effects on young women, particularly in the world of work. This stratification has enormous benefits for the new economy, as it has enabled differently advantaged young women to take up positions that must be filled at opposite ends of the labor market. At the same time the accompanying narratives about choice, self-invention and, opportunity ensure that stratification and disadvantage become reconfigured as merely individual limitations of effort or vision, to be addressed through personal strategies alone.

Chapter 3 explores the ways in which young women are invested in as symbols of ideal citizenship at a time of profound change. I argue that as a consequence of globalization, new patterns of migration, the retreat of the state, the shift toward privatization and marketization, and a sense of uncertainty, notions of citizenship are increasingly in flux. Young women are constructed as the ideal new citizens to

manage these conditions when they are imagined as economically independent, as “ambassadors” for their nations, and as successful consumers. The neoliberal discourse that has accompanied deregulation and deindustrialization merges well with a version of girlpower that emphasizes self-invention and individual economic empowerment.

Chapter 4 explores some of the most significant spaces in the lives of young women. It suggests that even while they appear to be everywhere, the spaces they are expected to occupy have become more regulated. Schools, workplaces, and centers of leisure are all central to young people’s constitution of self in late modernity. In these sites new kinds of surveillance and vigilant attention are used to construct educational, professional, and consumer success as normal and possible for all young women and to manage and punish failure as individual inadequacy, through such means as at-risk programs and new policing regimes. In addition, I argue that another significant space for young women in late modernity is the overhauled welfare and justice systems that use new punitive measures to discipline them for “failure.”

Chapter 5 examines the idea that young women are not only perceived to be seen everywhere, but heard everywhere as well. I discuss the proliferation of research, texts, policies, and programs concerned with girls’ voices. I explore the possibility that this new emphasis on eliciting young women’s voices constitutes a kind of surveillance. I consider the ways in which young women’s private selves and their “authentic voices” are made subject to display and regulation through a renewed interest in enhancing youth participation and eliciting youth opinions. Young people are encouraged to speak up and be heard, but this process often fails to result in enduring political change. The chapter explores what French social theorist Michel Foucault describes as the “incitement to discourse”¹³ as it is played out in a confessional culture that encourages young women to speak out. The conventional approaches to young people’s participation and the strategies undertaken to encourage youth involvement are also analyzed from this perspective. I suggest that both youth voice and youth involvement have become strategies for the regulation of young women.

The overmanagement of the spaces of girls’ lives, the incitement to display their life projects, and the appropriation of their discourses have serious implications for young women’s capacity to enact alternative, more complex, and critical subject positions beyond success and failure. These increased regulatory practices surrounding young women have made it difficult for them to express political resistance in conventional ways. Chapter 6 explores young women’s new possibilities for making community, evading surveillance, and building activism. I explore how young women find new places and strategies for politics that undermine and challenge investments in and uses of girls. As we shall see, young women have complex and ambivalent relationships to the normative discourses and practices about their success and power. Shaping and legitimizing the future girl is a

constant struggle, the site of which is young women's subjectivities, and the outcome of which is far from guaranteed. What is thus partly at stake in this investment in and regulation of girls is the consent of young women who may be critical of the effects of economic rationalism and individualization on their lives, particularly in terms of the negative consequences for their labor market opportunities, family arrangements, and community and civic engagement. Their ability to find other ways and other places to develop such a critique, in spite of the compelling nature of the discursive space of success (and its flipside), is therefore also an important part of the story that this book has to tell.