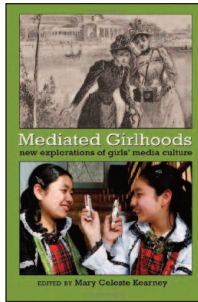
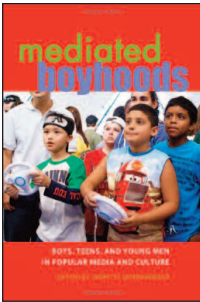


## Review Essay

# Separate Playgrounds: Surveying the Fields of Girls' Media Studies and Boyhood Studies

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**Mediated Boyhoods: Boys, Teens, and Young Men in Popular Media and Culture.** Edited by Annette Wannamaker. New York, NY: Peter Lang, (2011). 267 pp. ISBN 9781433105401 (pbk).

**Mediated Girlhoods: New Exploration of Girls' Media Culture.** Edited by Mary Celeste Kearney. New York, NY: Peter Lang, (2011). 310 pp. ISBN 9781433105616 (pbk).

I live across the street from an elementary school. During the day, the school is always bustling with activity, young children laughing and yelling as they climb the monkey bars or race across the schoolyard. When I look closer at the children playing, what always surprises me is how this play is separated by gender. The girls dominate the play structure in small tight groups, while the boys chase each other around the sports field. Girls in one area and boys in another, together yet separated.

This image of separate playgrounds is refracted in the academic texts I read while I sit in my office, gazing out at the schoolyard. Scholarship on girls is declared to be girls' studies, while research on boys is deemed to be boyhood studies; separate playgrounds, indeed. In 2011, publisher Peter Lang continued this academic segmentation by publishing two engaging anthologies: Annette Wannamaker's (2011) *Mediated Boyhoods: Boys, teens and young men in popular media and culture*, and Mary Celeste Kearney's (2011) *Mediated Girlhoods: New explorations of girls' media culture*. Both of these collections are published in Peter Lang's topical new series, *Mediated Youth*, edited by Sharon Mazzarella. The anthologies are compelling and timely and offer fresh perspectives on the discipline of media studies, edited by key scholars in the fields of boyhood studies and girls' studies.

The two texts are rich collections of work that encapsulate a diverse array of content, critical viewpoints, and research methodologies. Each anthology takes

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the reader on a mesmerizing journey through the multiple experiences of young people by building on a wide range of perspectives. Along the way, the books explore the interconnections between the everyday lives of boys and girls and their mediated environments by asking critical questions of how young people are represented in media texts, the ways in which young people use and understand media texts, and the means by which young people participate in media production. At the core of both of these books is an attempt to upset the myths of girlhood and boyhood as universal, totalizing, homogenous experiences by depicting girlhoods and boyhoods as multiple and intersectional.

Since the two volumes were designed as companion pieces, reviewing them together presents a unique opportunity to contrast the field of boyhood studies to the field of girls' studies<sup>1</sup> (more specifically girls' media studies), and to assess the trajectories of scholarship within these two paradigms. As a starting point of comparison, the names of the two fields, boyhood studies and girls' studies do not simply mirror each other (i.e., boys' media studies and girls' media studies or conversely boyhood studies and girlhood studies). The distinction between the two reveals that each is located in different scholarly disciplines, with divergent scholarly agendas.

The first book, *Mediated Boyhoods*, edited by Annette Wannamaker, begins with the premise that while there has been much attempt to denaturalize constructions of gender for young people, the media texts of young people and their interactions with them are seen as trivial and "often escape our careful analysis" (2011, p. 2). Wannamaker also laments that much of the research done on this has focused primarily on the construction of femininities, while the construction of masculinities appears almost as an afterthought. Any attention boys have received in the field of media studies has pathologized their media use and presented it as a problem.

Wannamaker's anthology is a thoughtful collection of scholarship that works to counter both the oversight of media studies in the field of boyhood studies and the pathologization of boys' media use. Wannamaker's introductory chapter explores the small range of scholarship available on boys' media and suggests that the "relationship between boys, young men and the media is far more complicated and ambiguous than it may initially seem" (2011 p. 5). The collection of essays in *Mediated Boyhoods* begins to overcome these narrow interpretations by exploring the complexity of boys' media use and challenging our assumptions on the naturalness of masculinity.

Wannamaker's book contains three sections. The first, "Constructing Masculinities," problematizes boys and boyhood as a cultural construct. This section consists of three chapters, which cover topics such as the naturalization of boys' sexuality as aggressive and cold in magazines produced for girls, the representation of adolescent boys as the victims of female aggressors, and the performance of "bois" by women. The second section, "Depicting Boyhood(s) in the Media," explores the reframing and reproduction of definitions boyhood. This section includes chapters on hip hop's re-appropriation of masculine scripts, as well as the

construction of masculinity in public spaces by Turkish Cypriot young men. The final section, “Boys and Young Men Consuming and Creating Media,” includes chapters that explore boys’ media use in their bedrooms and the perpetual infantilization of the male refugees of Sudan as the “Lost Boys.” Overall, the chapters in *Mediated Boyhood* appreciate the experiences of a wide range of boyhoods and assess a diverse array of media forms, including girls’ magazines, YouTube videos, video games, queer novels, the WWE, and teen films.

The chapters in this volume flow cleanly from one to the next and work to counter the assumption that media by, for, and about boys is inherently negative. This volume represents a significant new shift in understanding the complexity of the interconnections between boys, boyhoods, and the media. In time, I am confident that this book will prove to be a seminal work that comes to shape boyhood studies, as it is the first anthology that approaches boys’ media studies as a topic of inquiry.

The companion piece to *Mediated Boyhoods* is *Mediated Girlhoods* (2011), edited by Mary Celeste Kearney. In the opening line of the book, Kearney “welcomes” the reader to the “second generation” of scholarship on girls’ media culture (p. 1). Kearney suggests that the first generation is represented by the pioneering works of such scholars as Angela McRobbie, Susan Douglas, and Dawn Currie. *Mediated Girlhoods* builds from this premise of being the second generation, and Kearney is acutely aware of the location of her anthology within the burgeoning field of girls’ studies. The premise of *Mediated Girlhoods*, according to Kearney, is to “rais[e] public awareness and critical thinking about girls’ media culture as well as girls and girlhood” and to “publicize and support research that examines girls’ media culture from new perspectives, thus expand[ing] girls’ media studies in novel and provocative ways” (p. 4). While time will tell if Kearney’s book is able to raise public awareness, *Mediated Girlhoods* does meet the second objective as it clearly expands the field of girls’ media studies, particularly because, as Kearney notes, there has been no anthology or journal devoted to girls’ media studies since it became a legitimate area of inquiry at the turn of the twenty-first century (p. 1).

The chapters in *Mediated Girlhoods* assess the representation, consumption, and production of girls’ media. Similar to *Mediated Boyhoods*, *Mediated Girlhoods* also contains three sections based on similar themes. The first section, “Representation and Identity,” contemplates the multiple images of girls and girlhood in media culture. This section contains chapters on such topics as the discursive construction of Disney Mouseketeer Annette Funicello as an ethnicized persona, the engagement of girl readers with feminist discourses in girls’ magazines during the 1970s, and the commercial exploitation of the Latina character as a bridge between hegemonic whiteness and racial difference. The second section, “Reception and Use,” explores how girls have responded to, and negotiated with, media culture. This section includes a chapter on girls’ use of the media culture produced for them in the 1940s and 1950s, and another on girls’ exploration of identity, sexuality, and morality as they collectively peruse entertainment websites. The final section, “Production and Technology,” includes scholarship on media made by

girls themselves, as well as the use of technology by girls. The chapters in this section consider such topics as the cultural work produced by American schoolgirls during the early twentieth century, and a thoughtful critique of the limits placed on girls' agency as cultural producers by commercial sites such as YouTube.

The chapters in *Mediation Girlhood* incorporate a wide range of girlhoods spanning from early twentieth century Japanese girls, to rural Australian girls in the 1970s, to Somali Bantu girls living in the United States. Similar to *Mediated Boyhoods*, *Mediated Girlhoods* considers a diverse cross-section of media forms that includes mobile phones, the High School Musical franchise, Seventeen magazine, and tomboy films from the 1970s and 1980s.

Not surprisingly both *Mediated Boyhoods* and *Mediated Girlhoods* privilege gender, alongside age, as a central feature of young people's lives. The two books acknowledge gender as "one of the most potent features to not only organize our lives but also to determine our individual and collective identity" (Wannamaker, 2011 p. 1). While gender is privileged, the two texts do not ignore other subjectivities. Each of the chapters in the two books are underpinned by the acknowledgment that gender is never a complete totality of identity. Gender is privileged as central to subjectivity for youth, but their identity is always intersectional as "a complex composite of multiple, interdependent and unisolatable modes of being" (Kearney, 2011, p. 3).

In privileging gender as a central framing of young people's lives, the two texts ask the reader to critically assess the supposed "naturalness" of gender. Following the traditions of poststructuralist feminism, the two books position gender as socially constructed by a complex interweaving of dynamic forces, with one of these forces being media culture. Unfortunately, such a perspective is fraught with pitfalls. Appreciating media culture as a dynamic force could potentially slip into an argument that the media "does" something to boys and girls. Thankfully, these two texts skillfully navigate this pitfall by countering such arguments. Instead of suggesting that the media "does" something to young people, the books first ask what young people "do with" media, second, how young people critically assess and actively rework media culture that is produced for them, and finally, how their experiences with media culture get taken up in their everyday practices.

The two books are informed by the field of sociology of childhood, which sees young people as agents of change.<sup>2</sup> Building on this tradition, the anthologies suggest that young people do not simply respond to gender narratives provided by media culture, but instead actively participate in the construction of gender subjectivities and gender practices.

The view of young people as agents of change has been made possible by a shift in the ways young people have been researched. Both of the books and their respective fields, that is, girls' media studies and boyhood studies, grew out of a response to research that objectified young people as objects of study instead of appreciating them as active participants in media culture. Until the late 1990s and early 2000s, much of the research on young people marginalized them as passive consumers of media. Studies on girls and media culture often focused on

content analysis of sexist and stereotypical representations of the girl (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007), while studies on boys concentrated on the media practices that kept young boys behind (Drummond, 2009). Much of the research on young people, particularly children, has been about them, as opposed to being conducted with them.

Both *Mediated Boyhoods* and *Mediated Girlhoods* move to overcome the narrow confines of this type of scholarship, as the two are committed to methodologies that place young people at the centre of research by privileging the views and experiences of young girls and boys themselves in the scholarship. In doing so, the voices of young people move from the periphery to the centre of such scholarship. Some of the more engaging pieces to do this are the chapters in each volume written by Sandra Grady. Grady is the only author whose work appears in both of the anthologies. Grady's "Role Models and Drama Queens: African Films and the Formation of Good Women" appears in *Mediated Girlhoods*, while "Consuming the WWE: Professional Wrestling as a Surrogate Initiation Ritual among Somali Bantu Teenagers" appears in *Mediated Boyhoods*. Both of these articles are based on a two-year ethnography with a group of Somali Bantu teenagers who have resettled to the urban United States.

Another example of voice centred research is Catherine Driscoll's chapter which is a rich auto-ethnography of being a girl in rural Australia in the 1970s. In exploring the experience of rural girls engaging with girls' media culture in the 1970s, Driscoll illustrates how auto-ethnography can be used as a valuable tool in checking against the simplification of categories of girlhood, such as the rural/urban binary.

One of the most provocative points of comparison between both *Mediated Boyhoods* and *Mediated Girlhoods* and their receptive fields of boyhood studies and girls' studies is their relationship to third wave feminism. I have already indicated how the two books are influenced by poststructuralist feminist epistemologies that challenge the naturalness of gender. But the two fields have divergent relationships to feminism, particularly the type of third wave feminist politics that grew in response to the repositioning of the girl in the early 1990s by "Grrrl bands," such as Bikini Kill and their corporate (commodified) successor, the Spice Girls (see Wald, 1998). These bands challenged traditional stereotypes of the girl as innocent and pure, while declaring that girls had power. Feminists were forced to rethink their understanding of the girl as being passively influenced by the stereotypes of media culture (McRobbie, 2000; Greer, 1999; Lemish, 1998). This opened up an opportunity for a whole new wave of studies on girls' cultural artifacts (Pecora & Mazzarella, 2007). Feminist scholars, such as Dawn Currie (1999) and Catherine Driscoll (2002), began to look at other aspects of girls' culture, such as girls' magazines and popular culture, and, in doing so, began to carve out space for research specifically on girls, forging a new area of scholarship that came to be called girls' studies. This scholarship, similar to the research in *Mediated Girlhoods*, appreciated that girls "are powerful, agential beings," while still being mindful of some of the repressive texts that are produced for girls (Kearney, 2011, p. 3-4).

Given the origins of girls' studies, it is of no surprise that a number of articles in *Mediated Girlhood* question the influence of feminist politics on girls' media culture. For example, Kristen Pike's article "The New Activists: Girls and the Discourses of Citizenship, Liberation, and Femininity in Seventeen, 1968-1977" investigates how young teen girls in the 1970s engaged with the feminist discourse of *Seventeen* magazine, which packaged liberation as a form of consumer citizenship. Pike's article reminds us that the discursive refrains of "commodity feminism" (p. 70) existed prior to the Spice Girls.

Pike's article reveals how girls' media studies have easily forgotten the historical roots of girl power. Pike's chapter begins to compensate for what Kearney calls "presentism" in girls' media studies, meaning that the field is focused on girls in the current moment, or the "present," to the detriment of scholarship that historicizes girlhood. She states "that innovative research in girls' studies has a presentist approach that both dominates girls' studies and media studies" (p. 4). Kearney's insights are correct. While there are exceptions to this oversight—both Jacobson (2004) and Schrum (2004) come to mind—much of the work is still bogged down in the present, or at least in what Emile Zaslow (2009) calls the "girl power media culture" (p. 9) of the late 1990s and 2000s. Without historical research, it is difficult to contextualize contemporary girls' relationships with media culture. Furthermore, this oversight continues to alienate girls from feminism by reinforcing the assumption that prior to third wave feminist movements, girls were largely separate from the feminist politic.

Kearney delivers on her promise to offer new perspectives on the past. One of the best examples of this is Jane Greer's chapter "Remixing Educational History: Girls and Their Memory Album, 1913-1929," which analyzes the scrapbooks of American schoolgirls during the early twentieth century. These schoolgirls repurposed drawings, photos, and other memorabilia into commercially produced memory albums. Greer's chapter reminds us that the practices of remixing, reusing, and recreating media by young people occurred much earlier than digital media. Greer's work challenges us to reevaluate assumptions that participatory media culture is a new phenomenon originating with digital culture.

*Mediated Boyhoods*, on the other hand, does not attempt to be historical. None of the chapters in the anthology incorporates a historical analysis of boys' media culture, nor does there appear to be any pressure to do so. Arguably, this could be due to the fact that boys and boys' media culture have never really been invisible in the same way that girls and their media culture have been, since boys have been the assumed audience of most mainstream media products (print media excepted) up until the 1980s (Seiter, 1993). It could also be due to the fact that within boyhood studies there has been no agenda to situate boys within a historical trajectory of a political movement, such as feminism.

Boyhood studies have been distanced from feminism. As a field of inquiry, the field owes very little of its formation to third wave feminist scholarship, and within it, there is little reference to feminism.<sup>3</sup> This oversight extends to Wannamaker's book. Unlike Kearney's work, none of the chapters in *Mediated Boyhoods*



explore boys' experiences with feminist politics, particularly the feminist politic that appears in the late 1990s and 2000s. It is a shame that little work has been done on the response of boys to the rhetoric of girl power. I am left to guess whether the declarations of "girl power" by young girls in the mid-1990s had a significant impact on how boys navigated the gender politics of middle school, or whether the girl power movement actually had very little impact on boys' culture. Either way, the conclusions of such research would go far in providing a deeper understanding of boys' relationships to the politics of girl power. Without such insight, we fail to have an accurate account of the social, cultural, and political outcomes of the girl power movement.

Perhaps it is unfair to expect Wannamaker to include research that addresses this topic, as one can only cover so much in an anthology and Wannamaker's book is still a rich resource of information on boys' media cultures. But in a review such as this, which attempts to provide a direct comparison of significant two books on media culture published at the same time, oversights can reveal larger deficits in the two fields. This comment, therefore, is less a criticism of Wannamaker's book than a reflection on the deficits of scholarship in the two areas.

The oversight of feminism in boyhood studies is reflective of the fact that the field is located in a different scholarly trajectory than girls' studies. Instead of growing out of a response to girls' studies and the girl power movement, boyhood studies has developed in response to the growing research in the field of men's studies of the 1990s when scholars such as Robert Connell (1987) problematized masculinity as a critical object of study. While boys, like men, have been the focus of much scholarly work in the past, it has only been in the last decade that they have been studied as gendered beings. Much of the early research on boys grew out of the fields of developmental and psychological theory that began to recognize that while boys were main objects of study, they were rarely studied as boys. This awareness of boys needing to be studied as boys dovetailed with a growing public concern that began to appear in the late 1990s around the "failings" of boys as they were falling behind girls academically (Chu, 2009, p. 112).

At the same time, boys were being "discovered" by psychologists and scholars, the field of children's literature began to explore the discursive representations of boy characters in such literary texts as J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, or *The Boy Who Never Grew Up* (1904), Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894), and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Books, such as Kenneth Kidd's *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale* (2004), Lorinda B. Cohoon's *Serialized Citizenships: Periodicals, Books and American Boys 1840-1911* (2006), and Wannamaker's own book, *Boys in Children's Literature and Popular Culture* (2008), explore the discursive framings of boys and boyhood in literary texts and suggest that boy characters often make visible the ways in which masculinity functions. Together, scholarly works such as these began to legitimize boyhood studies as a distinct area of scholarship.

The different scholarly trajectories of girls' studies and boyhood studies are further revealed in the academic backgrounds of the contributors to the books.

While both books have scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including cultural sociology, women's and gender studies, visual studies, folklore studies, and film and television studies, a large contingent of the authors in *Mediated Girlhood* work in communication studies or media studies departments (at least eight of the 20 contributors), and only one works in an English department. In *Mediated Boyhoods*, of the 15 contributors in the book at least six authors come from English literature or Children's literature backgrounds and only three from communication/media studies departments.

Comparing the backgrounds of the authors in the two collections is not meant to be a criticism of the two texts, as both books incorporate a diverse array of approaches and perspectives. Instead, the comparison reinforces the divergent scholarly trajectories of the two fields. Girls' studies, and particularly girls' media studies, owe their genesis to media studies and women's studies since much of the field grew out of a response to girls' media culture in the mid 1990s. While boyhood studies are lodged in developmental psychology, it also owes much of its legacy to the study of children's literature. Given this, it makes perfect sense that *Mediated Girlhoods* is dominated by scholars from the fields of communication and media studies, while *Mediated Boyhoods* has a much stronger presence of scholars from the field of literature.

Earlier, I critiqued Wannamaker and boyhood studies for ignoring boys' responses to girl power. Kearney, or girls' media studies, does not get off the proverbial hook for an oversight either. The weakness of both *Mediated Girlhoods* and girls' media studies is the tendency to treat girls in isolated silos, separate from boys. In essence, girls' studies explore girls using girl media<sup>4</sup> in the performance of their femininity and feminist politics. There is very little scholarship on girls using boys' media, or on girls performing masculine subjectivities. Almost all of the chapters in Kearney's book, with the exception of Kristen Hatch's piece "Little Butches: Tomboys in Hollywood Film," explore girls' uses of girls' media (or at least media that is ambiguous). This is radically different from Wannamaker's anthology in which the underlying theme of the opening three chapters upset this gender binary and, in doing so, unhinged the performance of gender from the body. The first chapter in Wannamaker's anthology, written by Michelle Ann Abate, is entitled "When Girls will Be Bois: Female Masculinity, Gender-queer Identity and Millennial LGBTQ Culture." Abate reconsiders the notion of boyhood as a biological category by exploring the subculture of young urban lesbians who perform post-pubescent boyhood. Matthew Prickett's article, "Who is the Victim Again?: Female Abuse of Adolescent Boys in Contemporary Culture," turns a critical eye to a narrative of sexual abuse of boys by women that appears in the news media, films, and young adult movies. Prickett argues that these narratives reinforce preconceived stereotypes of females as victims and males as sexual predators in ways that discourage young men from seeing themselves as victims of abuse. These two chapters are followed by a third chapter, "'How to Hook a Hot-tie': Teenage Boys, Hegemonic Masculinity and CosmoGirl! Magazine," by Suzanne Enck-Wanzer and Scott Murray. This chapter is an insightful piece on



the discursive constructions of hegemonic masculinity among teenage boys in girls' media. Overall, each of these chapters reconsiders the notion of boyhood as a biological category.

Wannamaker's book throws a challenge to girls' studies to be more inclusive of boys and boys' media culture in the analysis of girls' media. Boys, masculinity, and boys' media cannot be completely ignored by girls' media studies since girls are both represented in and engaged with boys' media. Clearly girls' media studies and boyhood studies need to be more inclusive and intertwined in order to further our appreciation of the gendered experiences of young people. Applying the same lines of inquiry to girls' cultures that Abate, Prickett, and Enck-Wanzer and Murray ask of boys' cultures offers lessons to girls' studies on how to move beyond treating girls' media in an isolated silo. The questions then become: how do boys (or men) perform girlhood? how do stereotypes of femininity impact boys' understandings of themselves? and, how are girls (or feminism) portrayed in boys' media?

Overall, I found both of these anthologies wonderfully rich, engaging texts that offer fresh new perspectives on the mediated experiences of young people. I highly recommend both for scholars and students in the field of media studies, communication, and gender studies.

The two books would also be an excellent resource for activists and educators who work with young people since the texts resist pathologizing media use and offer more dynamic means to conceptualize the complexity of young people's relationship with media culture. Peter Lang's decision to publish these two books as companion pieces opens up opportunities to assess the trajectories and oversights of the two fields. Hopefully, it will also push both fields to ask new questions that will ultimately expand our understanding of young people and the media they consume, produce, and negotiate. With any luck the scholarly playgrounds won't be so separate anymore; the elementary school playground, on the other hand, is a different story.

## Notes

1. The terms "boyhood studies" and "girls' studies" are used frequently in each book. These are the labels that are accepted in each of the fields (see Chu et al. (2009) for boyhood studies, and see Mazzarella and Pecora (2007) for girls' studies. While the term "girls' media studies" is accepted as a subfield of girls' studies, at the time of writing this review, I cannot find examples of the term "boys' media studies" being used consistently to delineate it as a legitimate subfield of boyhood studies. This maybe due to the fact that the field of boyhood studies is younger than that of girls' studies and has not had time to isolate boys' media studies as a specific subfield of scholarship. Alternatively, it could also be due to the fact that boyhood studies has not grown out of a response to shifts in media culture in the same way that girls' studies has.

2. There are many examples, most notably James, Jenks, & Prout (1998).

3. The exceptions to this are texts such as Michael Gurian's (1996) book *The Wonder of Boys: What Parents, Mentors and Educators Can Do to Shape Boys into Exceptional Men*. Gurian argues that boys are in peril because feminism demands too much of them and makes them feel guilty about being male.

4. While the terms “girl’s media” and “boy’s media” are clearly problematic and worthy of greater exploration, for the purposes of proving this point, it is fair to assume that there are a large portion of media that are created for either boy or girl audiences.

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