Between “Girl Power” and “Reviving Ophelia”:
Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject

MARNINA GONICK

This article investigates two of the discourses currently organizing meanings of girls and girlhood. These are the multi-stranded “Girl Power” and “Reviving Ophelia,” which both emerged in the early 1990s. I argue that “Girl Power” and “Reviving Ophelia” set up an intriguing illustration of not only competing definitions of femininity but also how discourses may interpellate feminine/feminist subjects in a non-unitary way. At first glance, the two discourses seem to offer opposing significations of femininity. On the one hand, “Girl Power” represents a “new girl,” assertive, dynamic, and unbound from the constraints of femininity. On the other hand, “Reviving Ophelia” presents girls as vulnerable, passive, voiceless, and fragile. However, this article demonstrates that it is also possible to view the two discourses as other than opposing, competing, and contradictory. Rather, this article investigates how the two discourses position girls in varying ways in relation to the emerging configurations of subjectification demanded by shifting relations of production, globalizing economies, and redefined relationships between governments and citizens related to the rise of neoliberal policy and practice.

Keywords: girls / discourse analysis / popular culture / femininity / subjectivity

Since the early 1990s, the popular media, popular literature, television, films, academic conferences, and special issues of feminist journals have been participants in an incredible proliferation of images, texts, and discourses around girls and girlhood in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. From one perspective, this proliferation is an exciting corrective to the virtual absence of girls in each of these spheres. Not only have girls become a public presence and interest, but there also is an increasing range of representations of them, their lives, and concerns. However, a close examination of this amassing of images and discourses also raises some critical questions, opening up further perspectives on what they may mean about changing constructions of girlhood, shifting subjectivities for girls, and their relationship to modernity. In this article, I identify two of the discourses currently organizing this profusion of interest in girls. These are the multi-stranded “Girl Power” and “Reviving Ophelia,” named for the phenomenon made popular in the international best-selling book by U.S. psychologist Mary Pipher entitled, Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls. Girl Power and Reviving
Ophelia appear to set up an intriguing illustration of not only competing definitions of femininity but also how discourses may interpellate feminine/feminist subjects in a non-unitary way. Although much has been written about both of these discourses separately, few analysts have examined how they may be operating together and what their convergence entails for emerging definitions of girlhood.

On first glance, it seems the two discourses offer opposing significations of femininity. On the one hand, Girl Power represents a “new girl”: assertive, dynamic, and unbound from the constraints of passive femininity. On the other hand, Reviving Ophelia presents girls as vulnerable, voiceless, and fragile. My curiosity was piqued, however, as I realized that these two discourses emerged almost simultaneously in the early 1990s, albeit materializing from different sources and contexts. The 1990s also mark the moment when the concept of popular feminism found widespread expression [McRobbie 2004, 5]. I wondered about the relationship of these two discourses to popular feminism and what the coexistence of the two discourses might mean for girls’ subjectivities and how girls engage with the contradictory identificatory possibilities of the two discourses in negotiating their gendered, raced, classed, and sexed identities.

However, a closer examination of the two discourses suggests that it is also possible to view them as other than opposing, competing, and contradictory. I became interested in how they may function together to articulate a complex of fiction and fantasy, regulation and persuasion through which young women’s relationships to new forms of subjectivity are being forged. In this article I investigate how the two discourses position girls in varying ways in relation to the rise of neoliberal policy and practice. That is, I am interested in how emerging forms of femininity are linked to shifting cultural ideals of personhood, individuality, and agency and how these are, in turn, reflective of social, economic, and political changes. My argument is that both Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia participate in the production of the neoliberal girl subject with the former representing the idealized form of the self-determining individual and the latter personifying an anxiety about those who are unsuccessful in producing themselves in this way. Both participate in processes of individualization that, as we will see, direct attention from structural explanations for inequality toward explanations of personal circumstances and personality traits.

In outlining the subject positions these discourses make available, my interest here is not to explicate the veracity or falsity of the claims made under the rubric of one or both of these discourses. As St. Pierre outlines, as a method of analysis, discourse analysis is not about pointing out an error but about looking at how a structure has been constructed, what holds it together, and what it produces [2000, 482]. Thus, I investigate the contemporary conditions of possibility that enable Girl Power and the
rescue of Ophelia—two seemingly contradictory discourses—to circulate as powerful postmodern truths about girls and girlhood. I ask how these discourses are implicated in the formation of complex and non-unified subjectivities for girls. What are the political consequences for the forms of subjectivities made available to girls through these discourses? How are these discourses raced and classed? Who do they interpellate and in what ways? How are different girls positioned differently within them? And how are they implicated in the process by which modern notions of personhood and individuality began to be understood as forms of identification culturally available to and socially desirable for girls? I suggest that these discourses participate in the forging of a new relationship between femininity and discourses constituting the neoliberal subject. While new forms of gender and its meanings are created through the forces of this convergence, femininity is simultaneously being recoded and reworked along familiar tensions, contradictions, and ambivalences.

Underlying this inquiry on changing discourses of girlhood is a conceptualization of girls and women that understands them not as a universal, biological grounded condition of female experience but rather as produced within shifting sociohistorical, material, and discursive contexts. This distinction is a significant one. It disrupts the naturalism and essentialism grounding of much of the current popular texts about girls and girlhood, both those that celebrate them, like Girl Power, and those that issue dire warnings about the danger girls are in, like Reviving Ophelia. It is a conceptualization of gender that highlights how language does not simply point to preexisting things and ideas but rather helps to construct them and, by extension, the world as we know it (St. Pierre 2000, 482). Thus, the project of investigating the relationship between the emergence of the Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia discourses and neoliberalism is linked to a feminist agenda of rendering explicit the political relationships between language, power, identificatory practices, and gendered identities (Davies et al. 2001; Gonick 2003; Johnson 1993; Jones 1993; Lesko 1996; Walkerdine 1990).

The Emergence of the Girl Subject

A brief detour from the 1990s to the 1950s offers a useful starting place for an investigation into the relationships between shifting discourses of femininity and concepts of subjectivity. As Lesley Johnson (1993) suggests, the 1950s was a time when a critical shift in this relationship was produced and, which I argue, is an important antecedent to current transformations. It was during the 1950s that the historical constitution of an opposition between womanhood and personhood was disrupted and women were, for the first time, recognized as subjects within discourses of modernity.
Previously, the binaries defining the modern subject positioned woman as Other to man’s rationality, agency, and individuality. Women were located in the subordinate position of binaries such as passivity and activity, agent and victim, and subject and object and thus were constituted as outside prevailing definitions of full personhood. As many feminist youth researchers have noted, these same cultural definitions precluded young women from meeting the criteria of modern adolescence in the form of the individual en route to becoming the self-determining adult (Hudson 1984; Walkerdine 1990). Johnson acknowledges that women’s recognition as subjects was won as a result of the feminist agenda of the time. However, she also makes the case that this important shift was the result of women’s crucial role in the processes of modernization itself. Women’s involvement as both laborers and as consumers created new demand for unprecedented forms of technologies and novel forms of cultural goods.

However, the changing social world produced by modernity was met with a profound ambivalence. Both women and youth became the symbols for expressing this concern. The figure of “woman” was employed by cultural critics to express this unease by constantly drawing negative connections between mass culture and the feminine (Johnson 1993). This connection was an obvious one at the time because of the ways in which new social space and public visibility were created for women by the cultural products of modernity, such as the department store, advertising, and the cinema. Girls were also singled out for particular attention. For example, the repeated references in the writings of the Frankfurt School to girls as exemplary dupes of culture industries are contemporary with the new 1920s’ and 1930s’ “science” of market analysis, which often used girls as the model of mass cultural consumption (Driscoll 2002).

Youth have historically been represented in similar, though not identical ways, as a symbolic register for modernity and its claims to progress (Giroux 2005; Wyn and White 1997) and as a focal point for the expression of uncertainty and tension in times of rapidly changing social and cultural systems. According to Nancy Lesko (2001), at the turn of the last century, adolescence in the United States and in parts of Europe became a discursive space to worry about the widespread social changes taking place in domains such as technologies of cultural production, the organization of work, and the social relations of the modern city. Anxieties over racial progress, changing gender relations, and the character of the nation coalesced around the figure of the young, white, middle-class male. He represented both the potential and the problems of changing norms and expectations. Among these changes was the emergence of a new form of ideal subject, that of the self-determining, individualized, and reasoning citizen (Lesko 2001, 47).

I suggest that on many levels the Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia discourses represent a social and cultural fascination with girls that
also is an expression of the uncertainties, tensions, fears, and anxieties elicited by the rapid social, economic, and political changes taking place due to neoliberal policies. The incredible proliferation of images of girls in film, in media stories, and in education policy debates is at least partially related to the ways in which girls have come to represent, for the first time, one of the stakes upon which the future depends (McRobbie 2000). This development may be credited to the replacement of manual production with service work—a feminized sector—as the mainstay of the neoliberal economy. Relatedly, the shift in the economy from that of production to consumption privileges the feminine through women’s and girls’ long-standing association with consumption. Burman suggests that the proliferating psychological culture promoting emotional literacy [and therefore self-responsibility] also contributes to the feminization of neoliberal subjectivity (2005, 362).

Like the 1950s, the social and cultural transformations of the 1990s also have produced a new relationship between femininity and subjectivity. Also like the 1950s, this new coupling bears some relationship to shifts in feminist politics. While in the 1950s women were recognized as having the potential to exhibit the active agency characterizing the modern subject, subjectivity under the current conditions has been marked by an intensification of what Beck has called a “social surge of individualization” (1992, 87). Among other factors, this refers to the shift in relations between the state and its citizens from a focus on state-building (through the development of government programs in support of citizens during the postwar period) to concern for making the individual responsible. According to McRobbie (2004, 10), part of the move toward processes of individualization can be understood as stemming from feminist struggles of the 1960s and ‘70s for greater independence and access to the workplaces and salaries formerly closed to women. However, she also insists on the complexity of the relation between those changes in the gender regime that feminism helped to inaugurate and the processes of female individualism, a critical dynamic of reflexive modernization (2000, 11).

Among the visible changes this kind of policy shift has brought for youth in the United States is the end of almost a century-long belief in “child-saving” and the social programs supporting this belief that were replaced with zero tolerance policies and the Welfare Reform Bill of 1996, plunging thousands of children into poverty (Giroux 2005; Lesko 2001). The withdrawal of state services and support of youth come at a time of ongoing and significant disruptions to the circuit of production, reproduction, and consumption marking the traditional transition to adulthood (Dwyer and Wyn 1998; Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Griffin 1997; Wyn and White 1997). Changes in the economic order, the dismantling of postwar social structures, rising levels of youth unemployment, welfare and education cuts, and credential inflation, mean that young people have the difficult
task of reconciling the contradiction between the reality of the structural constraints shaping their specific circumstances and the “promises” of wealth and well-being offered by an increasingly global society. While upper- and middle-class families have the resources to fill the gap in providing their daughters with the support they may need to “make it,” daughters of those who are not positioned as dominant may have no such extra assistance. When girls encounter neoliberal discourse espousing a conviction that “anyone who works hard can get ahead” and “women have made great gains towards equality,” they are led to understand their own experience of successes and failures as a product of their individual effort. How they are positioned within the changing cultural, political, economic, and social climate insistent on a direct relationship between individualism and individual aspiration does not get factored in. As McRobbie summarizes this dynamic, “female achievement is predicated not on feminism, but on female individualism, on success which seems to be based on the invitation to young women by various governments that they might now consider themselves free to compete in education and in work as privileged subjects of the new meritocracy” (2004, 7).

Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia participate, in different ways, in the rearticulation of subjectivity and femininity through an engagement with individualizing processes. I will return to further discuss this relationship, but in order to understand more about their effects, I first outline in some detail each of the two discourses tracing their emergence and a number of sites of their dissemination.

**Girl Power**

Girl Power names a complex of cultural phenomenon and social positionings for young women that is neither coherent or fixed. Celebrated by some for creating more expansive forms of femininity and critiqued by others for the ways it transforms feminist ideals into crass consumerism, the meanings and implications of Girl Power continue to shift and change depending on the context and purpose of its articulation. What is clear about it is that Girl Power raises important questions about the relationships between feminism, femininity, consumerism, girls, individualism, and new subjectivities.

The use of the term “Girl Power” is usually traced back to the early 90s to a loosely formed movement of young, mainly white, and middle-class women, a large proportion of whom identified as queer, who gathered in Washington D.C. and Olympia, Washington in the United States and who called themselves Riot Grrrls. Like members of the civil rights movement who used Black Power as a motto to rearticulate the signification of blackness, the Riot Grrrls used Girl Power as a strategy of reclaiming
the word girl using it strategically to distance themselves from the adult patriarchal worlds of status, hierarchies, and standards (Hesford 1999, 45). With their roots in punk rock music and their motto “Grrls need guitars,” Girl Power celebrates the fierce and aggressive potential of girls as well as reconstitution of girl culture as a positive force embracing self-expression through fashion, attitude, and a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach to cultural production. Bands, such as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy, exemplify this combination with their mixing of a girlish aesthetic with all that is most threatening in a female adult: rage, bitterness, and political acuity. Many grrrls used their bodies to convey this ironic melding of style with political expression by, for example, the juxtaposition of gendered signs [e.g., “1950s dresses with combat boots, shaved hair with lipstick, studded belts with platform heels” (Klein 1997, 222)] and through writing politically loaded words such as “rape,” “shame,” and “slut” on their arms and stomachs (Japenga 1995, 30 as quoted in Jacques 2001, 49). By most accounts, the movement was a response to the sexism, elitism, and violence of local masculinist punk scenes where exclusionary practices meant that girls were considered less than full members of the scene. In contrast, the Girl Power of the Riot Grrrl encouraged young women to see themselves not as the passive consumers of culture, including that of the punk scene, but as producers and creators of knowledge, and as verbal and expressive dissenters. Their critiques address their own and others’ experiences as women as well as their experiences of race, sexuality, class, and other forms of embodiedness. As a result, Riot Grrrl is viewed by many who study U.S. girls’/young women’s cultures as exemplary of what’s being called “youth feminism” (Garrison 2000, 142).

In the wake of the Riot Grrrls, numerous all-girl rock bands were born, amongst them the enormously popular Spice Girls from Britain, and the slogan Girl Power began to be bandied about in new contexts. T-shirts with pro-girl sentiments like “Girls Rule” and “Girls Kick Ass” started to show up at malls. Jacques (2001, 49) argues that the messages on these shirts bear a direct relationship to the words the Riot Grrrls wrote on their bodies. However, she points out that while T-shirts have a long history as a conveyor of political slogans, it is important to remember that Riot Grrrl was deliberately anti-consumer culture. “Writing on oneself with a marker is not only a political, feminist action (first, in choosing to “deface” the feminine body which is ideally a flawless object; second, in drawing attention to issues of women’s oppression through the words), but displays the classic do-it-yourself ethic of punk” (2001, 50). Thus, in buying a trendy T-shirt, whether or not its slogan is meant to be ironic, any critique of capitalism is, by definition, lost in its (mass) production.

With the proliferation of the term, the meanings of Girl Power and what girls who embrace it could and should do with it did not remain static, nor did it get taken up with the same political and social intentions of Riot
Marnina Gonick

Grrrls by others who claimed it. Coverage of Riot Grrrls quickly appeared in American mainstream magazines such as Seventeen (1993), Newsweek (1993), Rolling Stone (1993; 1994), and Time (1998). For the Riot Grrrls, the coverage brought objectionable incursion. Not only was there a rush to categorize the movement whose members defied that there were strict definitions to be had, but also there was a permutating and rearticulation of the Girl Power message.

While the Riot Grrrls themselves clearly saw their movement as attached to a liberatory social and political agenda, the mainstream media opted to present a different message altogether. A Rolling Stone article concluded, for example: “Riot grrrls’ unifying principle is that being feminist is inherently confusing and contradictory and that women have to find a way to be sexy, angry and powerful at the same time” [France 1993]. Here, in a bizarre twist, it is feminism that is seen to complicate what is assumed would otherwise be an easy and straight-forward transition from girlhood to woman. Newsweek took a somewhat different stance to dismiss the serious-mindedness of the movement’s politics. In doing so, it draws on hegemonic discourses associating youth as a time when rebellion is expected, but is also expected to be in most respects temporary [Driscoll 2002, 205]. “There is no telling whether this enthusiasm or the Riot grrrls’ catchy passion for ‘revolution girl style’ will evaporate when it hits the adult real world. Most of the grrls are still in the shelters of home or college—a far cry from what they’ll face in the competitive job market or as they start to form their own families” [Chideya 1993].

Despite the objections of Riot Grrrls, certain aspects of the Girl Power phenomenon became ubiquitous, entering mainstream cultural arenas through an incredible range of products and services. In the music industry, for example, Girl Power has been called the new buzzword to connote the phenomenon of the emergence of young female stars whose popularity can compete with and surpass their male counterparts. Girl Power also fuels competition among box-office hits like that between the remake of the 1970s’ Charlie’s Angels and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. Newspaper reviews, at the time, outdid each other’s claims for each of these films as being the ultimate in Girl Power. While the Houston Chronicle called Charlie’s Angels the latest archetype of Girl Power, the Associated Press headline states: “Forget Charlie’s Angels the year’s ultimate ‘Girl Power’ movie is Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” [2001, 104]. Critic Gina Arnold notes an interesting aspect of Girl Power as trend when she says that while the West’s fascination with it is quite recent, in Asia, female cartoon heroines and martial arts movies featuring non-animated women action heroes are not a new phenomenon at all [Arnold 2001, 1]. Girl Power has spread to include products targeted at very young girls, for example, a Sesame Street musical production entitled “When I Grow Up.” The advertising copy reads: “Girl-power takes the stage.” The pamphlet goes on to
say, “if girls follow their dreams and work hard, they can do whatever they want” (n.d., n.p.). The success of television shows like *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, Xena: Warrior Princess*, and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, also can be attributed to their representation of powerful, beautiful, young women. “Western storytelling,” a writer for the popularized *Psychology Today* insists, “hasn’t seen their ilk since the legendary female fighters of the Celts” (Ventura 1998, 62). Beyond cultural products, Girl Power also has been used to name policy initiatives and education debates. For example, Girl Power was the name given to a 1997 U.S. Health and Human Services program for a public health initiative designed to help keep young females “healthy, smart, and strong.”

But, it is perhaps the British all-girl band the Spice Girls that is most (in)famously associated with the Girl Power motto. The band was enormously popular, reaching their peak in 1997 and disbanding soon after. Their first compact disc sold more than 50 million copies worldwide in one year (Lemish 1998, 165). In their lyrics, Emma (Baby Spice), Geri (Sexy Spice), Melanie B. (Scary Spice), Melanie C. (Sporty Spice), and Victoria (Posh Spice) call for equal rights and advocate that sisterhood is powerful. In contrast to the media’s response to the messages of the Riot Grrrls, the Spice Girls’ message was celebrated. *The Village Voice*, for example, waxed eloquent about how the Spice Girls “have done the seemingly impossible: they have made feminism, with all its implied threat, cuddly, sexy, safe, and most importantly, sellable” (Press and Nichols 1997, 10). But the hyper-sexualized and highly stylized marketing of the Girl Power of the Spice Girls raised cries of outrage from some feminists, producing a series of striking questions about the relationship between feminism, femininity, and commercialization. “Can anything feminist be so predominantly popular [even for a short time]? Can feminism be a mass-produced, globally distributed product? And can merchandised relations to girls be authentic?” (Driscoll 1999, 178).

The discussion of Girl Power in feminist circles is also far from unequivocally resolved. Some embrace the phenomenon for the mainstreaming effect it has had, bringing feminism into the lives of young women through music and film and television characters. For example, Debbie Stoller, former zine writer and current editor of *Bust* magazine, says of television characters Xena, Buffy, and Sabrina: “these characters all share a common strength: the ability to leap over sexist stereotypes in a single bound.” She argues that these shows “are hinting that there’s a wellspring of untapped ‘Girl Power’ out there, with the potential to change the world if it could only be released. You go, girls” (quoted in Projansky and Vande Berg 2000, 115). Others agree, suggesting that “the feminist underpinnings found in the ‘Girl Power’ pop culture icons are helpful, if not critical, for young girls as they negotiate and navigate toward womanhood” (Rohan n.d.).
However, other feminists claim the crass commercialism and commodification of Girl Power have voided it of any feminist content it might have once had. Jessica Taft, for example, argues strongly on the dangers of young women’s embracing of the concept. She suggests that because Girl Power is presented as the gentle, non-political, and non-threatening alternative to feminism, it functions as a way for girls to identify girl-positive feelings with a non-political discourse and to think about girlhood in cultural ways rather than as a space for social and political action (2001, 4). Moreover, Girl Power’s popularity is credited to its very lack of threat to the status quo for the ways in which it reflects the ideologies of white, middle-class individualism and personal responsibility over collective responses to social problems. The result is a redirecting of attention away from the “degradation and economic exploitation of women worldwide . . . and the commercial enterprises largely responsible for the continuing gendered and racialized exploitation of labourers globally” the very enterprises producing Girl Power products for Western consumption (Ono 2000, 165).

Catherine Driscoll (1999, 186), however, argues for an understanding of Girl Power that does not position it as “either it is or it isn’t” feminism. She suggests, instead that the mixed messages—“if you’re with my sexiness you’re with my politics”—of the Girl Power message expounded by pop icons like the Spice Girls might have interesting effects on the circulation of the label “feminism,” and even on dominant understandings of what girls want. She suggests that the Spice Girls generate dialogue about feminism in a massively popular field. They talk about how what they say and do may or may not be feminism and about the relations between politics and popular culture. Driscoll states that while the Spice Girls may not produce revolutionary change, groups like them do create a shift in the dominant paradigms of cultural production directed to girls. She notes that these shifts might be indebted to the impact of other girl culture forms [such as the Riot Grrrl] but that the embracing of popular rather than avant-garde cultural production inflects further possibilities. “Spice Girls’ fandom might demand less dramatic changes to girls’ positions within established political and social systems than does participation in the Riots and resistances of some other forms of girl culture. But, the Spice Girls do call for significantly changed relations to the lives of girls as they are” (1999, 188).

But, in a context where Girl Power is also equated with the emergence of teenage girls as a powerful economic force, the contest over its continuing proliferation of meanings guarantees only that it is a question whose answer is not at all obvious. Even the mainstream media have entered the fracas over the question of authentic Girl Power, when, for example, USA Today printed an article noting the launching of yet another teenage version of a woman’s magazine, in this particular case Teen Vogue,
accusing it of “hawking fake girl power” (Vanderkam 2003). And in the *Time* magazine issue of 29 June 1998 whose cover reads, “Is Feminism Dead?” Girl Power is evoked in a number of the articles inside, as a marker of both the successes of feminism and a sign of its demise. For example, a story written by Gina Bellafante suggests that, “‘Girl Power,’ that sassy, don’t-mess-with-me adolescent spirit that Madison Avenue carefully caters to,” is evidence that women’s struggles for liberation have indeed changed women’s lives for the better (1998, 58). And while indirectly critical of the marketing campaign targeting girls, another article by Nadya Labi in the same issue of *Time* mentions Buffy, the Spice Girls, Alanis Morrisette, and others as exemplars of the pervasive and lucrative dimensions of Girl Power commerce (1998, 60–2). What is not in question, therefore, is that Girl Power is a marketable concept that has been exploited for its commercial potential. However, its ubiquity must also be explained by the way it resonates socially and culturally within a climate of “compulsory success” (Burman 2005, 358) by providing an image of the ideal new feminine subject demanded by neoliberalism.

**Reviving Ophelia**

Ophelia discourses also date to the early 1990s; however, unlike Girl Power, the Reviving Ophelia discourse is quite homogenous in that it has not elicited competing stakes in its possible meanings or rival interests in the conditions of its circulation. It is Mary Pipher’s 1994 book *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* that furnishes the name for this discourse. The book’s multiple-month stint on the *New York Times* best-seller list not only launched public awareness of this discourse, its success also highlights an intensification of the cultural fascination with girls. Pipher adopts Shakespeare’s character Ophelia from *Hamlet* as the symbol of a crisis of girlhood. According to Pipher, in the story of *Hamlet*, Ophelia is the obedient daughter who kills herself, drowning in grief and sorrow when she cannot meet the competing demands of Hamlet and her father (1994, 20). However, Pipher is far from the first to avail herself of the character of Ophelia to represent moral and social concern about girls and girlhood. For example, in the nineteenth century, Ophelia was used to represent hysteria, which was at the time believed to be a real organic disease, transmitted genetically and associated with presumptive but unidentified changes in nervous tissue. Hysteria became a major focus of scientific study with girls and women as its major target. According to Georgianne Ziegler, during this time when photography became in vogue, young women in insane asylums were posed as Ophelia in photographic portraits (1997, 71). Her persona also exists in other forms. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century artists were obsessed with interpreting and
defining her character. Sometimes she is portrayed as an innocent, young girl, the Victorian stereotype of what it is be ladylike. Others portray Ophelia with strong sexuality. Still others portray her as some sort of magical being or saint. There are also several portraits of visibly neurotic Ophelias. Clearly, Reviving Ophelia engages a discourse that has a long tradition in Western societies and is thus able to tap into an echoing concern about the vulnerability of girls and the potential dangers they face growing up.

In her book, Pipher, a Ph.D. and practicing therapist, draws on her young, U.S. female clients’ experiences when she claims that “something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence” (1994, 22). Using language that mirrors the drama she claims girls live during this phase of their lives, Pipher draws on a series of metaphors to convey her sense of the vulnerability of young women. “Adolescent girls are like saplings in a hurricane. They are young and vulnerable trees that the winds blow with gale strength” (22). Elsewhere in the book, girls are compared to “planes and ships that disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle. Just as planes and ships, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They crash and burn in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle” (19).

The crux of Pipher’s argument is that due to pressure from U.S. culture, adolescent girls are coerced into putting aside their “authentic selves” splitting what was, in their younger days, a healthy and united individual, into true and false selves. This pressure to be someone they are not, Pipher claims, disorients and depresses most girls. At puberty “girls become ‘female impersonators’ who fit their whole selves into small, crowded spaces. Girls stop thinking, ‘Who am I? What do I want?’ and start thinking, ‘what must I do to please others?’” (1994, 27). Pipher lays a good portion of the blame for girls’ withering sense of self flatly at the feet of the media, calling to task a “girl hostile culture” and its ability to crush their self-esteem. “American culture has always smacked girls on the head in early-adolescence” (15).

In making use of the concept of an “authentic” self that is lost, Pipher is drawing on the very well-traveled territory of biology and developmental psychology, which uses the modern notion of a self that is stable and unified by the time one reaches adulthood. This sense of an unchanging and unchangeable self is, however, problematized by postmodernism, which disrupts the possibility of an authentic self by noting the sociohistorical contingency of subjectivity. That is, the meanings of identities and their markers are shifting and fluid. Rather than looking at the social institutions and discourses that girls negotiate within actively producing their identities, Pipher represents girls as unwitting victims. According to her, even their own bodies work against them. “Everything is changing—body shape, hormones, skin and hair. Calmness is replaced by anxiety. Their way of thinking is changing” (1994, 27). This equating of young women with their bodies, at the mercy of their hormones, signaling the loss of
rationality seems very closely related to the disease of hysteria which, as we have already seen, was also thought to befall young women at this time in their lives. The representation of adolescence as chaos, feeds into many of the demeaning cultural stereotypes about girls and young women. Girls’ behavior and emotions are presented as though they are beyond the bounds of comprehension. She says,

girls become fragmented, their selves split into mysterious contradictions. They are sensitive and tenderhearted, mean and competitive, superficial and idealistic. They are confident in the morning and overwhelmed with anxiety by nightfall. They rush through their days with wild energy and then collapse into lethargy. They try on new roles every week—this week the good student, next week the delinquent and the next, the artist. And they expect their families to keep up with these changes. (20)

As Baumgardner and Richards (2000) comment, what these kinds of statements make clear is that the book is about girls, but it is for adults, particularly the parents of adolescent girls. This leads them to raise the interesting question of whether Ophelia is a girl movement for adult women rather than for girls.

While Pipher’s book raised the profile of this emerging concern about girls, the foundation for rendering girls intelligible through this discourse was actually laid quite some time before. Approximately ten years earlier, in 1982, Carol Gilligan published In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development. In this highly influential and much-quoted book, Gilligan makes the claim that girls undergo a “crisis in self-esteem” in adolescence from which they never fully recover. Gilligan suggests that adolescence is an especially critical time in women’s development because to connect her life with history on a cultural scale, she must enter—and by entering disrupt—a tradition in which “human” has for the most part meant male (1982, 4). This poses a problem of connection for girls that is not easily resolved. Gilligan’s book sought to address this problem by accenting the positive value of girls’ moral reasoning. Her project was part of a broader movement on the part of feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s that raised troubling questions about the limits of the major “universal” theories of psychological development, based as they were on the experiences of white, middle-class males. Gilligan critiques the meta-narratives of psychology that assumes that there is a single mode of social experience and interpretation. In its place, Gilligan argues for the need to expand concepts of identity and moral development to include the experience of interconnection and an ethic of care. This kind of inclusion, argues Gilligan, is critical for creating the necessary social and cultural shifts to contain the crisis of young women’s self-esteem.

Gilligan’s study has been critiqued for the way in which it uses the experiences of primarily privileged white girls to claim a different voice
that positions all women in identical and essentialized ways. In concentrating on the differences of women’s moral reasoning from men’s, Gilligan elides the differences that may exist between women and the way in which these differences may be shaped by the social categories of race, class, sexuality, and ability. Beyond the limitations of this ground-breaking study, however, has also been the way in which the text has been taken up by others. Within the study of psychology, girls went from being invisible to being vulnerable (Baumgardner and Richards 2000). And the vulnerability discourse soon traversed disciplinary boundaries and spread in multiple directions.

Among the numerous studies and popular explorations of the theme of girls’ vulnerability that followed Gilligan’s book was the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (AAUW) report, How Schools Shortchange Girls, which has been very influential in setting feminist research agendas in the field of education in the United States. It was a scathing report on the ways in which the American education system continues to provide less than equal educational opportunities and outcomes for young women. The report revealed a dramatic gender gap in self-esteem. And it linked this self-esteem problem to the reduced participation of girls in math and science in high school, even for those girls who did well in these subjects in earlier grades. The survey does distinguish between girls of different backgrounds, noting that African American girls retain their self-esteem during their adolescent years more than white or Latina girls. And, according to the study, it is Latina girls who are the most likely to suffer from the self-esteem crisis (1992). This was followed by Failing at Fairness: How America’s Schools Cheat Girls (1994), a book written for a popular audience by academics Myra and David Sadker, which reported on the many forms of discriminatory practices against girls in schools, including the fact that teachers were more likely to respond when boys called out than when girls did. Journalist Peggy Orenstein’s School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap, was the New York Times notable book of the year for 1994. It documents the often demoralizing experience of schooling for white, African American, and Latina girls in two northern California middle schools. Excerpted in the New York Times Magazine and Glamour magazine, School Girls brought the central findings of the AAUW report to a wide public audience (Ward and Benjamin 2004).

The Ophelia movement has spawned what Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards call “a veritable cottage industry” out of the fertile soil of girls’ failing self-esteem [2000, 179]. Reviving Ophelia was followed by Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write about Their Search for Self, a compiled collection of original pieces contributed by girls of various races, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds between the ages of 12 and 18 and edited by Sara Shandler when she was a teenager herself. For parents of
adolescent women, there is *Surviving Ophelia*, by Cheryl Dellasega, and *Ophelia’s Mom* by Nina Shandler, Sara Shandler’s mother. This proliferation of publishing is matched by a number of programmatic responses in schools, communities, and religious organizations to address these newly defined needs of girls to overcome their vulnerability. A small sampling of these kinds of programs include The Ophelia Project, which started as a small grassroots volunteer organization in Erie, Pennsylvania, and is now spreading across the United States with paying members and a national team of volunteers. Local high school groups also have been created with this discourse acting as the catalyst and foundation for their existence. One such example is an Ophelia Club where girls can share experiences and how they overcame them.

All the media attention, publishing, and programming has certainly provided increased and sorely needed spaces for girls to both celebrate their girlhood and to understand and critique prevailing discourses that limit and constrain girls’ lives. More spaces for young women to critically and collectively examine changing discourses of femininity are clearly desirable (Gonick 2003). However, the Ophelia movement may, ironically, also be contributing to the proliferation of the girl-damaging media images through its own mass marketing and subsequent cultural references to the figure of Ophelia as a typical troubled contemporary girl (Projansky and Vande Berg 2000, 114). It is also important to ask what kind of girl and girlhood does the Ophelia movement produce? Which girlhoods does it recognize as worthy of celebrating? Of mourning?

Fragile and vulnerable, Ophelia is shadow twin to the idealized empowered girl. Without intervention she is at risk of failing to produce the required attributes of the neoliberal feminine subject. As such she is a sign of disordered development and a threat to the new social order. The solution to her problems are to be found in the market (products, self-help books, therapy)— individualized answers to resolve social inequalities.

### Girl Power, Reviving Ophelia, and the Individualized Subject

The coexistence of the two discourses raises some intriguing questions about the relationship between the forging of new subjectivities for girls and neoliberal processes of individualization. I suggest that these discourses organize both different and similar formulations of the cultural ideals of personhood, individuality, and agency and do so with different consequences for girls depending on how they are positioned in relation to the dominant social group. As I previously suggested, while Girl Power represents the idealized form of the new neoliberal subjectivities, Reviving Ophelia personifies an anxiety about those who may not be successful
in taking up these new forms of subjectification. However, it is too simplistic to suggest that the two discourses are directed at dominant and marginalized girls respectively. On the contrary, both discourses have as their primary addressee middle-class girls. As Walkerdine suggests, the neoliberal autonomous subject is made in the image of the middle class (2003, 239). The pervasiveness of these two discourses as a means for making sense of girls’ experience does, however, work to obscure some of the structural explanations for which girls are able to hurdle barriers to prevailing definitions of success and which are not.

The current period is characterized by the virtual elimination of resources once committed to education, health, and social welfare programs as a result of neoliberal government policies. The result has been a reshaping of modernity by the spreading of processes of individualization to ever-expanding areas of social, work, and personal life. Referring paradoxically to both individualism and the obligation “to standardize your own existence” in line with the imperatives of the labor market and governmental agencies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 7), individualization involves an increasing tendency to self-monitoring, so that “we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves” (Giddens 1991, 75). The articulation of identity as choice and self-determination is evident in young, British, middle-class women’s talk in a study conducted by Shelley Budgeon (1998) who makes the linkages between this articulation and processes of individualization. She finds that self-determination is a recurring theme in her interviews and is especially evident as an ideal to which the young women aspired. Inner strength, authenticity, and being true to oneself are also cited by the girls as important exemplary features to aim toward (1998, 122). As middle-class girls, the message: “Being a young woman means being whoever you want to be” offers girls, according to Budgeon, a powerful position from which to evaluate cultural representations of ideal femininity and to challenge and reject aspects of the available models of femininity that did not suit their own visions of themselves and their futures (1998, 124).

The valuing of self-determination and individuality is also evident in the London inner city girls studied by Reay (2001). However, as girls from less privileged backgrounds, the effects of making a claim to a Girl Power position were less obviously successful. According to Reay, some of the girls in the school had grouped themselves using the identifying names the “spice girls” and the “girlies.” What most clearly distinguished the two groups was that the “spice girls” interaction with the boys appeared to transgress prevailing gender regimes, while the “girlies” followed a more conformist behavior pattern. Reay theorizes that the “spice girls” adherence to “Girl Power” allowed them to make bids for social power not contemplated by the other girls. However, their “girls with attitude” stance—the “doing it for themselves” in ways that ran counter to
traditional forms of femininity—resulted in them being labeled at various times by teachers as “real bitches,” “a bad influence,” and “little cows” (2000, 160). Reay concludes that the espousal of Girl Power by the girls produced mixed effects. On the one hand, it garnered them power in both the male and female peer groups and provided spaces for them to escape gender subordination by the boys. On the other hand, the teachers’ responses exemplifies the limiting effects of such attempts to seek out empowering places within regimes alternatively committed to denying subordination or celebrating it.

For working-class girls, according to Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey, and June Melody (2001), the complications of integrating the new cultural ideals of femininity can create intense pain and anxiety. It is these girls, in particular, who must reconcile a Girl Power discourse that tells them they can be and do whatever they want in a labor market that cruelly sets limits on any ambition and an education system that classifies the majority of them as only fit for low-end, poorly paid work. Neoliberal discourse, stressing success as a feature of individual effort, leaves these girls few other explanations for their lack of success except for their own individual failings. The relentless calls to remake oneself primarily by purchasing products imbued with Girl Power and the right therapeutic services to shore up self-esteem also excludes these girls from comfortably inhabiting the idealized feminine position achieved by “consuming oneself into being” (Walkerdine 2003, 247). We can therefore see that girls live the effort to reshape their identities into the kinds of adults who can flexibly accommodate challenges to modern economic, intellectual, global, and familial arrangements and the new forms of relations between citizens and nation-states, very differently depending on how they are positioned within the dominant social order.

Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia participate in the designing of youthful feminine identities, and as such are not a completely new phenomenon. It is helpful to situate current efforts in relation to similar historical attempts. Nancy Lesko traces the project of socially designing identities for youth to the turn of the last century and the new fields of the social sciences and psychology that provided a discourse for rendering intelligible the idea of inner, personal qualities belonging to individuals. They also provided a means for making these qualities visible and helped identify those characteristics best suited for modern society (2001, 9). Programs such as Boy Scouts, extracurricular activities, and team sports, were organized as a means of producing the desired characteristics in maturing youth to enhance national and class interests.

In the current period, it has been teenage girls, rather than youth in general, who are the focus of the social concern. As I previously stated, girls as a category are positioned as a new social and economic force in ways that have previously been the reserve of boys. What we are seeing
currently in relation to girls bears some resemblance to what occurred in the 1950s in relation to the figure of “woman” in the 1950s. Both have been employed to articulate a profound ambivalence about those features of the contemporary social world said to be central to its modernity and to the shifts in the modernization project.

Whereas once youth was identified as the period in one’s life of “becoming,” under neoliberal social, political, and economic conditions, those who are to succeed, including adults, must be flexible, adaptive, and prepared to be in a state of continual “becoming.” The self, argue theorists Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991), has become a project to be continually produced. This project is supported by a discourse of limitless choice—of consumer products, life course decisions, and identities—that are the instruments of self-production. As Rose states, “however apparently external and implacable may be the constraints, obstacles and limitations that are encountered, each individual must render his or her life meaningful, as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in the furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization” (1991, 12). Rose also suggests that among the effects of neoliberal policy shifts and processes of individualization is a “new culture of the self” (91) that places an increased emphasis on the scrutinizing of relationships—those of and with other people, as well as the project of “relating” to oneself. A new kind of psychological subject is demanded, and it is through the psychological knowledges and techniques autonomous individuals know and govern themselves and others and mediate our social and personal experiences. I want to suggest that the Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia discourses are a form of “psychological knowledge” in that they disseminate new procedures for understanding oneself as a girl and acting upon oneself to overcome dissatisfactions, realize potential, gain happiness, and achieve autonomy. They function together as a technology for the production of certain kinds of persons. As such they are used by important others as well—parents, educators, psychologists, and youth workers—as a device for understanding girls, monitoring their development, and regulating their identities.

When read together, Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia contribute to the “psychological knowledge” constituting girlhood and can be seen to assist in the production of the new self-inventing, neoliberal girl subject at the same time as they express a pervasive ambivalence around these new forms of subjectification. Both Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia discourses emphasize young female subjectivities as projects that can be shaped by the individual rather than within a social collectivity. The discourses encourage young women to work on themselves, through the dual campaigns of the Do-It-Yourself self-invention and “girls can do anything” rhetoric of “Girl Power,” as well as the self-help books and programs that are available to remedy girls in crisis. In a time of uncertainty, the future
is thought to be securable only through creating and enhancing powerful identities acquirable by consuming the right products, having the right look, and resolving difficulties and problems by following the guidelines for self-improvement found in self-help books. Rather than fulfilling the promise of breaking down modernity’s gendered dichotomies between passivity and activity, agent and victim, and subject and object (Johnson 1993, 29), the new formations of neoliberal subjectivities represented by Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia create positions for girls on both sides of the dichotomy. Girls are simultaneously recognized as the potential idealized autonomous neoliberal subject even as they are also always already at risk of failing to secure the position. In rearticulating femininity as comprising both powerful ambitions for autonomy and vulnerability so extreme as to threaten extinction, Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia bespeak the two central and interrelated contradictions of the times. That is, that systemic contradictions require more than simply biographical solutions, even as these are increasingly the only solutions recognized as legitimate. And second, they suggest that the individual produced by means of such solutions is both a leverage for change as well as a closure on what it is possible to become.

**Marnina Gonick** is Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction/Women’s Studies at the Pennsylvania State University, University Park. Her research interests are in girl studies, gender and schooling, feminist post-structural theory, and feminist cultural studies. Send correspondence to mgonick@psu.edu.

**Notes**

1. For a more detailed discussion of the emergence and circulation of the two discourses see Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2004).

2. In poststructuralist analysis, the terms “subject” and “subjectivity” replace terms like “identity,” with its connotations of autonomy and unity. The term “subject” more fully captures the sense of subjectification; that is, the self’s fashioning by its insertion into an already articulated symbolic economy. In poststructural theory, the subject is never fully complete; it is always in process. As a result, this subject-in-process is always simultaneously a product and producer of the symbolic economy.

3. Neoliberalism is a term more frequently used in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia than in the United States, although its usage there is increasing. It references the dismantling of the welfare state, the cumulative effects of the globalization of capital, the changing nature of labor processes and local labor markets, new technologies, and the resulting changing family forms, the
feminization and racialization of poverty, and the decline of the trade union movement.

4. For an interesting study of how these processes are at work in education see Griffith and Smith’s *Mothering for Schooling* (1995).

References


Ono, Kent. 2000. “To be Vampire on Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Race and (“Other”) Socially Marginalizing Positions on Horror TV.” In *Fantasy Girls: Gender in


Copyright of NWSA Journal is the property of Indiana University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.