

Preface

MODERN GIRLS IN A GLOBAL WORLD

Carol A. Stabile

She's picked for her beauty from many a belle,
And placed near the window, Havanas to sell
For well her employer's aware that her face is
An advertisement certain to empty his cases.

—Daniel Stashower, 2006

In 1841, storeowner John Anderson hired pretty young Mary Cecilia Rogers, who had recently arrived in New York City with her widowed mother, to play the role of “butter-fly catcher” in his tobacco shop at 319 Broadway. Although the practice of using young girls to sell products to men had become more commonplace in Europe, in New York City, hiring a young woman to sell cigars in a public shop was unusual, to say the least. When Rogers’s body was found in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1842, at a popular tourist destination ironically known as Elysian Fields, her transgression of the boundaries of what was then deemed appropriate female behavior was taken by the city’s mass circulation dailies to have directly caused her unfortunate demise.

During a period in which internal migrations from agricultural regions to cities and incipient processes of industrialization were causing massive social and cultural changes, girls like Mary Rogers became cautionary tales about the dangers of modernity—canaries in the coal mines of these economic, cultural,

and political shifts. As vehicles for moral panics about normative gender roles, these modern girls were represented through a narrow lens that viewed their presence as workers and avid consumers of new forms of leisure and entertainment as dangerous symptoms of the ills associated with wide-scale cultural change. Critics of such changes represented young women as incipient or actual victims deprived of agency and entirely at the mercy of industrialization, patriarchy, consumerism, or capitalism.

But as the chapters in *Modern Girls on the Go* demonstrate, to focus on victimhood is to understand one part of the picture, and a part that dovetails far too neatly with broader sexist understandings of girls' and young women's lives and cultures. In these pages, the contributors are attentive to the narrow interpretive frameworks through which girls' lives and cultures have been historically understood, either as the debased and devalued consumers of mass culture or as the victims of a system over which they had no control. One central strength of *Modern Girls on the Go* lies in its authors' analyses of modern girls' labor, lives, and loves within contexts richly attentive to agency. The girls and women who populate this book are subjects in motion, girls and women attempting to take advantage of the cracks and fissures modernity created in dominant narratives of gender norms and not simply powerless pawns taken advantage of by systems beyond their control. Here we delve into the experiences of "shop girls" who moved out of homes and into public spaces, and others who traveled much farther, as young Japanese women who came to the United States to pursue educational opportunities in the years before World War II. In their own ways, each of these experiences offered both opportunities and new constraints for working women. Throughout, this book consistently draws our attention to the complexities of lives lived on the move in transformative times.

The "new woman" discourses associated with modernity figure girls themselves as standing outside of history and historical processes. As repositories for anxieties about modernity, girls are treated as figures without a history—synchronous entities thrown up by a contemporary moment. Much writing on "girl culture" in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century thus abstracts girl culture and related terms like "girl power," constituting them as entirely new, modern, and historically unprecedented. *Modern Girls on the Go* resists this impulse and offers an important historical corrective. The contributors to this volume insist on the necessary historicity of the girls that are the subject of their essays, recognizing the presence of "premodern" girls, as well as the historical and economic contexts that gave birth to the girls of moder-

nity. The dancehall girls profiled here, who belong to 1920s and 1930s Japanese culture, are manifestations themselves of the transnational circuits of culture that brought dancehalls—and the conditions of possibility for dancehall girls—from cities in the United States and Europe to Japan and Shanghai.

Modern Girls on the Go also reminds readers of the historical and cultural contingency of what we consider to be “modern,” underscoring the processual, uneven, and incomplete nature of modernity and modernization. Rather than understanding the modernity of these women in motion as a periodizing concept, the volume helps us see how resistant patriarchal structures are to change and how modernity itself needs to be understood as an expansive, long-term global project. Elevator girls may have been going up, but their movement was historically constrained within a framework that sought to eroticize and domesticate their movements. Similarly, bus girls have performed the emotional labor of facilitating the movements of other travelers. Even now, the caring role of their predecessors, the commuter bus conductors whose job of taking tickets and ensuring safety on the bus no longer exists, lingers in the tape-recorded female voices used by bus companies. Modern girls like these—and Mary Rogers for that matter—do not fit into a neat historical schema—their presence and representations illustrate that the public/private divide conjured into existence by industrialization continues to exercise a narrative hold over how gendered lives in dynamic contexts get represented.

Modern Girls on the Go also insists on the importance of culture and context. Changes in modes of economic and cultural production may engender a familiar set of overarching narratives about gender and social change, but the very flexibility and dynamism of these processes means that they must be highly adaptive. When secretary Xi Shangzhen hanged herself in her workplace in Shanghai in 1912, for instance, her death became the vehicle for exploring what historian Bryna Goodman describes as “the fragile and contradictory nature of Shanghai’s new economic formations, new cultural aspirations to gender equality, and political aspirations for popular democratic governance, a dynamic public sphere, and legal sovereignty” (Goodman 2011). However consistent narratives about girls’ and women’s lives in new cities and new economic formations may seem, these narratives need to be understood within their specific historical and cultural contexts. Like Mary Rogers, Xi Shangzhen symbolized the fears and hopes that accrued to social, cultural, and economic changes, but she did so in a context that shaped her life along different lines—a context that also imbued her story with dramatically different cultural meanings.

Girls and young women remain the favored laboring subjects of rapidly industrializing economies, as Leslie T. Chang points out in *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* (2008). Studies that enhance our understanding of the similarities and differences in how they are represented, disciplined, and utilized as conductors of meaning across still ongoing processes of “modernization” make invaluable contributions to feminist scholarship in an international frame. *Modern Girls on the Go* importantly helps to internationalize our understanding of girls and girl culture, bringing perspectives and analyses overlooked by Anglophone studies of girls and girl culture that focus mainly on Britain or the United States.

As a feminist scholar who is keenly aware of the limits of her own U.S.-centric perspective, I was helped by this volume to think about girls and girl culture broadly construed in unanticipated and often surprising ways. In their own ways, each chapter in this volume reminds us that we have not escaped the strictures of the modern with which this volume critically engages. *Modern Girls on the Go* takes an interdisciplinary approach to its subjects, with contributions from scholars in anthropology, history, literature, and visual studies. Perhaps more than anything else, this book whets our appetites for accounts of girls in motion throughout the twentieth century and for similarly rich comparative accounts of how these girls marched—and continue to march—across the twenty-first century.