



Eve Weinbaum, Priti Ramamurthy Lynn M. Thomas, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong, Tani E. Barlow. *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. 435 S. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-4305-9.



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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Eagerly anticipated among scholars of gender and consumer culture, this volume stands as a staggeringly significant achievement of scholarly research and collaboration. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, consisting of faculty working in various disciplines at the University of Washington, has labored over the past several years to document and analyze the worldwide emergence of the Modern Girl in the 1920s and 1930s. Along with other scholars whose work appears in this collection, they have assembled an outstanding set of interrelated essays that are certain to inspire further research for years to come.

The Modern Girl was a product of the turbulent decades between the world wars. She existed as both cultural representation and social reality. She was instantly recognizable by her bobbed hair, cosmetically tinged face, and erotically charged wardrobe, as well as by her "unladylike" proclivities for smoking, drinking, and active sexuality. To contemporaries, she stood as the archetypal symbol of modernity, especially its alleged dangers—loss of national distinctiveness, plum-

meting rates of reproduction, and blurred gender boundaries that threatened prevailing patriarchal norms. While she has been most studied via popular ideology and imagery as a culturally constructed projection of male anxieties, clearly many women did assume the dress and demeanor of the Modern Girl in a deliberate declaration of opposition to and liberation from traditional social strictures. In doing so, such women indicated that they "were aware of wanting to make cultural and social revolution" (p. 356).

Using a method that the editors have designated "connective comparison," the book's foremost contribution is its demonstration that the Modern Girl came to life in various parts of the globe simultaneously in the years following the First World War. This assertion undermines the traditional conception that modernity simply emanated outward from the United States and Europe, to be mimicked and adopted by the rest of the world. Instead, the Modern Girl's global presence signals that the process was far more complex. One geographical location did not serve as

"the" model from which all other images elsewhere were copied. Referring to what they call "multi-directional citation," the editors explore the ways in which visual depictions of the Modern Girl across the globe included locally specific elements along with those incorporated from other locales.

The central essay in the book is a collaborative effort by the members of the group entitled "The Modern Girl Around the World: Cosmetics Advertising and the Politics of Race and Style." In this piece, the editors provide a clear demonstration of the Modern Girl as global phenomenon. Moreover, the essay establishes several motifs that recur throughout the volume, such as the Modern Girl's connections to class, nation, and especially racial considerations. The editors do an excellent job avoiding the trap of equivalency, taking care to note the different meanings attached to issues of skin color, whiteness, and even tanning depending on specific geographical context. Of particular interest is a mode of depiction that the editors describe--cautiously, they emphasize--as "Asianization." For instance, imagery from several different countries portrayed the Modern Girl with "caricatured, elongated, often slanted eyes" (p. 32), and the editors explore the possible meanings and significance of such visual characterizations. Most striking, however, are the essay's illustrations: advertisements that exploited images of the Modern Girl in marketing. Like most of the volume's essays, this one incorporates ads as important source material. The Modern Girl was inextricably linked to consumer culture, and indeed print advertising helped to create and disseminate her style and appearance. The basic visual indication of the Modern Girl as a global presence is utterly inescapable. As the reader moves from page to page, it is impossible not to notice the fact that advertisements from places as diverse as China, Germany, India, South Africa, and the United States contained startlingly similar images of her, replete with, as the editors note in the book's opening essay, "bobbed hair, painted lips,

provocative clothing, elongated body, and open, easy smile" (p. 2).

While every essay in the book is of considerable value and quality, the one of greatest immediate interest to specialists on Germany may well be Uta G. Poiger's "Fantasies of Universality? *Neue Frauen*, Race, and Nation in Weimar and Nazi Germany." Here, Poiger explores changing representations of the Modern Girl in interwar Germany, and examines how depictions in cosmetics ads, articles, the illustrated press, and graphic design journals were intertwined with issues such as race, colonialism, and international relations. Poiger shows that in the 1920s, advertising images of the Modern Girl sometimes included racialized images of people of color in ways that could suggest domination over African and Asian peoples, or even the possibility of interracial sexual intimacy. With the rise of what Poiger calls a "cosmopolitan aesthetic," depictions of "ethnically ambiguous" women became more frequent (including the type of "Asianization" noted earlier). This information supports Poiger's notion of fantasies of universality, as distinctly German modes seemed to be giving way to more internationalized styles, and export-oriented businesses eyed a more global marketplace. Such indications of universality diminished, according to Poiger, after the onset of the Great Depression and the National Socialist seizure of power. In the 1930s, cosmetics advertisements stopped depicting ethnically ambiguous or non-white figures, focusing instead on establishing a distinctly German modern woman. While the Modern Girl would no longer remain the central character in fantasies of universality, as had been the case prior to the 1930s, under the Nazis she did continue to appear in popular imagery--even in antisemitic propaganda--in ways that resonated with Weimar-era portrayals in Germany as well as concurrent images in other parts of the world.

On the whole, the essays in the book are readable enough that any or all of them could be use-

fully incorporated into the classroom in upper-level undergraduate courses. However, graduate students and faculty will be the most avid readers of the text; *The Modern Girl around the World* is certain to become an indispensable tool for researchers. At various points, the editors pay tribute to the late Miriam Silverberg, whose examination of the Modern Girl in Japan "opened discussion of the Modern Girl phenomenon and influenced a generation of research" (p. 407). The essays collected in this volume offer a valuable continuation of that discussion, and just as Silverberg's work has inspired research for the past twenty years, this volume is likely to do the same for the next twenty.

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