

## Editorial: Girlhood and Sexuality at Intersections of Performance, Relations, and Representations

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From Margaret Mead's (1928) classic study of girlhood in Samoa to the more contemporary *She's Mad Real* by Oneka LaBennett (2011), *Shapeshifters* by Aimee Meredith Cox (2015), and *The Violence of Care* by Sameena Mulla (2014), anthropologists have long taken the world of girls as serious points of inquiry into power and resistance as well as pleasure and imagination. While girlhood varies across time and place, living amid multiple axes of power means that the world is often a complicated place for girls and young women as they navigate their gender identities, roles, and performances.

An analysis of girlhood through a crip studies lens is offered by Anastasia Todd in the commentary "Crippling Visibility: Re-presenting Disabled Girls and Girlhoods." Drawing from observations of the hypervisibility of disabled girls in new media spaces, Todd asks critical questions about the connections between disability, *youngness*, and girlhood in the proliferation of these images. Todd also calls for more theorization of disabled girlhood from a structural perspective that is both critical of "cis-heteronormative discourses of ideal girlhood, normative affects, and able-nationalist logics" and considerate of "what stories...disabled girls, themselves, have to tell." Todd shows that feminist and crip studies together can help to theorize girlhood and facilitate the telling of these girls' stories in more meaningful ways.

Performances of girlhood are also explored in the research article "Performative Disembedding: Amid and Between Potential and Professionalism in Ethiopian Girls' Running" by Hannah Borenstein. Borenstein identifies and explores the conundrum Ethiopian girl runners face as they enter the world stage of running competitions. In order to compete, they are expected to oscillate their performances of youth and adulthood, engaging in what Borenstein calls "a multi-directional performative process of disembedding." According to Borenstein, these young women are sometimes supposed to act as girls with innocence and coachability, while at other times they are expected to act as adults with maturity and professionalism. These performances work, according to Borenstein, to "make themselves legible in a system that is structurally built on profiting off of global inequalities of race, gender, and age."

Together, Todd's commentary and Borenstein's article reflect how particular performances of girlhood are acceptable when they fit expectations of who constitutes a girl and what their behaviors and bodies should reflect. At the same time, both of these authors ask critical

questions about how the inclusion of some girls can lead to other exclusions due to heightened pressures to fit particular desires among consumer economies and audiences.

Sexuality further brings girls and young women into contact with acts of violence, processes of consent, and receiving (or being denied) care. The dynamism of sexuality across time and place is central to the commentary “Girlhood, Sexualities, and Generational Modernity” by Ida Fadzillah Leggett. Reflecting upon earlier research conducted in Northern Thailand, Leggett is keen to consider girls’ place not only in the social orders of gender and sexuality, but also in terms of generational positioning among older women. For Leggett, girls and women are often expected to be the bearers of morality as “good” female subjects in patriarchal structures. This makes the ways in which girls embody, resist, or play with their gender performance and sexualities all the more important to explore in order to understand the consequences of judgement and condemnation as well as newfound expressions of sex, romance, and relationships despite conventional expectations.

Moving readers to a very different site of exploration and imagination, Tate Johaneck provides us with the research article “More Than Just Friends?: Unpacking Queer AFAB Sexuality Within the Sleepover Environment.” Johaneck considers the Western cultural practice of sleepovers as potential spaces of queer exploration. While sleepovers can, at times, reiterate heteronormative practices, there are other possibilities, as Johaneck learned through talking with study participants; it is in the quiet, private, and intimate spaces of sleepovers that young people might play “with normative gendered and sexual aspects such as femininity or heterosexuality and, indirectly, non-normative modes of queerness.” Thus, Johaneck shows us how conventional girlhood practices can also subvert heterosexual norms through the intimate, liminal spaces that can catalyze sexual exploration.

Leggett and Johaneck reveal the omnipresent and insidious nature of normative conventions surrounding gender and sexuality in a variety of cultural contexts. They also illuminate how young people are cognizant of these expectations and work to play with and even reimagine their own gender identities, performances, and sexualities. In seeking new forms of pleasure through such explorations, these young people engage in queering spaces — of generation or childhood sleepovers — to not be delimited by constrictive norms.

Another set of contributions in this issue offer exploration of the body, personhood, and identity and the ways in which others recognize or deny the experience of pain and dis-ease of girls and young women. A commentary by Alexea Howard and an article by Estel Malgosa and Bruna Alvarez both explore assumptions regarding the bodily experiences of girls and young women, with a focus on the internalization and refusal of assumptions from others. Estel Malgosa and Bruna Alvarez explore assumptions of everyday pain embodied by girls and women. In focus groups with 9 and 10 year-olds, Malgosa and Alvarez found that many young people assumed pain and discomfort were inherent in the feminine experience, particularly around menstruation, sexual intercourse, and childbirth. However, they note that some girls have more positive or neutral perspectives of femininity, seemingly influenced by conversations with adults. Harmful and inaccurate assumptions flourish in silence. Malgosa and Alvarez conclude

that talking with children about their bodies and ensuring they have access to accurate information may help them “resist hegemonic representations of femininity.”

Alexea Howard’s commentary illustrates the way in which medical systems and providers treat the “disease” rather than the person when young women seek care for eating disorders. Howard’s participants described receiving medicalized treatment devoid of care for their personhood. When participants tried to voice their experiences, medical providers insisted, “it’s the disease talking.” In response to the epistemic violence experienced in supposed systems of care, girls and young women connect with online communities where they find the care that is lacking in professional systems.

These contributions bring to mind a piece from Billy-Ray Belcourt’s (2020) memoir, *A History of My Brief Body*. In telling the story of dismissal from the medical system as he proactively sought prevention and treatment for possible STIs, Belcourt (Driftpile Cree Nation) draws on Jill Stauffer’s concept of ethical loneliness to name the denial of personhood and experience by those people and systems who have the power to direct, or at the very least influence, one’s life. Belcourt says, “It’s during moments when the self is negotiated with others—in sex, in medicine and public health—that one is prone to being pulled off course and thrown into a crisis of ontological proportions” (84). The relational nature of bodily experiences is central. Our understanding of our bodily experiences is shaped by the responses we receive from others.

In particular, these contributions encourage us to consider what it means to associate the female body with pain, and, further, what it is to be a body in pain or discomfort that is not recognized, or perhaps even denied, by others. Howard’s commentary presents a call to action for providers in medical and public health systems to refuse the medical model that focuses solely on implementation of treatment targeted at a specific issue and instead embrace the social model that supports recognition of the person in the body and cultivation of care for the whole person.

While this issue of *NEOS* is relatively brief, the contributions span a range of concerns as they are presented, experienced, and lived by girls. For readers immersed in girlhood studies, we hope the commentaries and research articles push for more intersections between girlhood, crip studies, and queer studies. For readers who are new to girlhood studies, we hope the range of pieces introduces some key ideas about girlhood, gender performance, and sexuality. An author interview by Chloe Bozak with Parul Malik (2022), featured in the Constellations section, offers insight into the challenge and hopes that emerge when examining such difficult topics with young people. For educators, Chloe Bozak and Hannah Valihora worked with authors Estel Malgosa and Bruna Alvarez to construct a teaching tool that may assist with bringing discussions of pain and femininity to the classroom. In the words of Parul Malik (this issue), we hope that the few yet fulsome contributions to this issue of *NEOS* show in various ways how “nurturing their agency enables girls to understand themselves and their worlds better. For instance, how their body functions, what laws protect them, how patriarchal roles can be challenged, or what equitable relationships look like.”

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