

“I’M SELFISH BECAUSE I HAVE TO BE”¹: POSTFEMINIST VIBES AND GIRL POWER POLITICS IN *GIRLS STATE*²

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Abstract: This article examines the 2024 documentary *Girls State* which chronicles a week-long immersive political leadership program hosted by the American Legion Auxiliary for girls in Missouri. The film, directed by Amanda McBaine and Jesse Moss, captures girls’ experiences with creating their own governments and political parties, campaigning for elected office, and adjudicating legal disputes in mock simulations of the democratic process. It bears witness to their political development while bringing viewers face-to-face with the promises and failures of postfeminism to deliver authentic forms of empowerment. Drawing from girls’ commentary, I suggest *Girls State* elucidates the paradoxes of exceptionality for girl leaders today. I mobilize Harris and Dobson’s “casting of girls as ‘suffering actors’” to underscore the current political moment in American girls’ lives and to appreciate the shaping of girls’ political selves across postfeminist scripts of neoliberal girl power (154). The article concludes with alternative patterns for girls’ political recognition.

Keywords: girl empowerment; *Girls State*; neoliberal girl power; postfeminism; suffering actors; recognition

“SOY EGOÍSTA PORQUE TENGO QUE SERLO”: VIBRAS POSTFEMINISTAS Y LAS POLÍTICAS DEL *GIRL POWER* EN *GIRLS STATE*

¹ *Girls State*, 01:11:06-01:11:08.

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Resumen: Este artículo examina el documental *Girls State* (2024), que narra un programa inmersivo de liderazgo político de una semana de duración, organizado por la *American Legion Auxiliary* para niñas en Misuri. La película, dirigida por Amanda McBaine y Jesse Moss, captura las experiencias de las niñas y adolescentes en la creación de sus propios gobiernos y partidos políticos, la campaña para cargos electos y la resolución de disputas legales en simulacros del proceso democrático. Da testimonio de su desarrollo político a la vez que enfrenta al público a las promesas y los fracasos del posfeminismo para ofrecer formas auténticas de empoderamiento. A partir de los comentarios de las chicas, se sugiere que *Girls State* esclarece las paradojas de la excepcionalidad para las niñas líderes de hoy. Se utiliza presentación de las niñas y adolescentes como ‘actores sufrientes’ de Harris y Dobson para subrayar el momento político actual en la vida de las chicas estadounidenses y para apreciar la conformación de su identidad política a través de los guiones posfeministas del poder femenino neoliberal (154). El artículo concluye con una propuesta de patrones alternativos para la identificación política de las niñas.

Palabras clave: empoderamiento femenino; *Girls State*; poder neoliberal de las chicas; postfeminismo; actores sufrientes; identificación

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last fifteen years, girl leaders have circulated across cultural and political landscapes as empowered postfeminist heroes poised to save the world. Public celebrations of the girl, Jessica Taft writes, signal “changes in the political, social, and cultural landscape [that] have made girl activists both more legible and more desirable for media attention and public consumption” (“Hopeful” 2). Prominent girl activists from Malala Yousafzai to Greta Thunberg, X González, and Autumn Peltier appear in mainstream media as exceptional political actors who affirm the promise of girl empowerment (Bent, “This is not” 795; Sriskandarajah 159; Vanner and Dugal vii; Walters 23); indeed, senior reporter at the *Huffington Post* Emma Gray declares, “young women have always been our nation’s most powerful force for change.” Girls’ visibility as savvy changemakers relies upon neoliberal girl power scripts yoked to affirmations of personal choice and agency above collective, community-driven action. For girl leaders, this discursive positioning signals the boundaries

of their political success, making clear the legibility risks if they go off the girl power script (Duvall; Khoja-Moolji and Chacko 98; Switzer et al. 35).

Girlhood studies scholars have illustrated how the trope of exceptionality affixes to girl-led movements both bringing critical visibility to their political efforts but also managing their counter-cultural practices (Bent, “Reflections” 182; Brown 6; Duvall; Edell et al. 694; Taft, “Hopeful” 3-6). Whereas girl-power feminism affords political currency to Anita Harris’s “can-do-girls” who play the game of postfeminist success (13); girl leaders who resist neoliberal positioning invite public scrutiny and open-hostility to their politics (Duvall; Projansky 6). Taft maintains exceptional girl power stories engender feelings of hopeful heroism that “resolve public anxieties about the future” through the illusion that every girl can succeed irrespective of sociocultural, economic, and geopolitical positioning (“Hopeful” 1). I have similarly concluded that girl leaders learn “to sell the girl-power story [because] the more their activism is represented as special and in support of individual market capital, the more likely they are to appear favorably across different media sites” (Bent, “This is not” 798). Girl-power feminism marks some forms of girl empowerment as a neutral public good codified under the terms of neoliberal exceptionality whereas others become invisible, illegible, or otherwise undesirable subject positions.

Despite the compelling qualities of the girl as heroic changemaker, resistance to gender equality efforts in the United States, and around the globe, challenge what we might call feminist progress for girls. During the first term of the Trump administration, Catherine Rottenberg described feeling like “we have moved from an arguably postfeminist moment (back) to a feminist one – a moment in which feminism not only still seems necessary but also increasingly mainstream” (330). Feminist scholars have since re-examined the ambivalences across feminism’s increased visibility and celebrated effects with its political value and impact in girls and women’s lives (Banet-Weiser x; Crossley 4; Keller and Ryan 3; Rottenberg 330). Because public awareness of feminism does not always signal broad commitment to feminist principles, Sarah Banet-Weiser explains, “we are now in a new era of the gender wars, an era that is marked by a dramatic increase in the visible expression and acceptance of feminism, and by the similarly vast amount of public vitriol and violence directed toward women” and girls (5). Rhetorics of feminism and neoliberal girl power sit

beside those which reflect misogynist, white supremacist, homophobic, and transphobic ideologies with few solutions offered beyond identity-driven or marketplace-based politics (Calkin 22; Rottenberg 345). The recent clawing back of gender equality measures evidenced by the 2022 Dobbs decision reversing *Roe v. Wade*³, attacks on so-called “gender ideology”⁴ and reversals on diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in the United States illustrate the embodied limits of the postfeminist girl power ethos and other forms of popular feminism.

For American girls, I suggest surges in their public visibility collide with the realities of their gendered and intersectional embodiment as “suffering actors” with limited terms of recognition (Harris and Dobson 146; McDonald 11). *Girls State*, the 2024 documentary produced and directed by Amanda McBaine and Jesse Moss, captures how postfeminist scripts of neoliberal girl power inform the scope and articulation of girls’ political selves. The film offers viewers a nuanced “understanding of girls’ agency in a post-girlpower cultural landscape,” by tracing the experiences of teenage girls at a seven-day national democracy program also called “Girls State” (Harris and Dobson 154). Drawing from Harris and Dobson’s invitation to see girls’ agency “not only in and through actions deemed ‘resistant’ but in struggles for coherence, social acceptance and survival,” in this article, I grapple with the experiential paradoxes of empowerment illustrated throughout the film (153). Specifically, I consider what it means to imagine girl leaders as emergent, suffering political actors who labor under an increasingly antifeminist and postfeminist condition of gendered power. I suggest alternative readings of girls’ political subjectivity in *Girls State* to extend my analysis beyond the normative framework of feminist agency and/or resistance and to underscore the girl as a political subject who struggles to lead productively with the tools of postfeminist neoliberal girl power.

³ In 2024, the Guttmacher Institute documented the impact of the decision to revoke the constitutional right to abortion in the United States. The report notes decreased care facilities, abortion bans, worsening contraceptive access, declining maternal health, and an erosion of trust in reproductive medicine, among other concerns. See Guttmacher for full report.

⁴ On 20 January 2025, the White House released an executive order titled “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government.” The order coincides with others targeting girls and LGBTQ+ people through blocked funding for reproductive healthcare, prohibitions on transgender girls in school sports, omissions to gender-affirming care for those under 19 years of age, and requirements for U.S. passport holders to use assigned birth sex. See Human Rights Campaign and Corredor for discussion of the “gender ideology” countermovement.

2. OVERVIEW OF *GIRLS STATE*, THE PROGRAM AND THE FILM

Since the late 1930's and early 1940's, the American Legion Auxiliary (ALA) has delivered the Girls State program to American girls across the United States. According to the program's history, ALA sought to develop a preparation course for young high school-aged women which trained them in civics education while re-affirming "the values and advantages of America's democratic form of government and the freedoms democracy offers American's citizens" (ALA, "Empire State"). Girls State encourages girls to recognize "the positive processes of self-government and good citizenship as practiced in America's democratic society" (ALA, "Empire State"). Participants learn about different levels of local, state, and national government during an immersive one-week course held in all fifty U.S. states. Described as a non-partisan, apolitical educational effort to "teach and instill pride" in America's youth, Girls State instructs attendees on the formation of political parties, importance of voting, and the role of democratic leadership in a three-tiered governmental structure (ALA, "Empire State").

The Missouri Girls State (MGS) program featured in the self-titled documentary film has been offered to girls since 1940 with volunteer facilitators providing all workshops and training exercises (Worthmore). Program objectives include: "shaping confident and informed leaders who contribute meaningfully to their communities" and promoting a shared "sense of patriotism, military service appreciation, dedication to democratic principles, and a commitment to active participation in society" (ALA, "Missouri Girls State"). ALA delivers customized versions of the Girls State program to "a diverse group of young women with a shared desire to learn and lead" in American politics.

Distinct from ALA's Girls State program, the documentary film *Girls State* acts as a companion to McBaine and Moss's 2020 biopic *Boys State* which explores political polarization in the U.S. through the lens of four teenage boys attending the Texas Boys State program. New York Times contributor Natalia Winkelman brands *Boys State* with "the vibe... of a Young Republicans conference" while movie critic David Fear of Rolling Stone argues viewers "could feel both hopeful watching the film (these children are our future!) and cynical (these children are our future?)." For McBaine and Moss, the production of *Girls State* allowed them to continue exploring contemporary American politics with a focus on

seven teenage girls attending the 2022 MGS program. As the film follows Girls State participants Emily, Brooke, Nisha, Maddie, Tochi, Cecilia, and Faith viewers recognize how existing divisions across the American political landscape interface with gender disparities evident in the Girls and Boys State program delivery. MGS delegates provide salient assessments of the problematic ways gender scaffolds the Girls State initiative, drawing attention to the intersections of gender normative power and the political limits of postfeminist empowered girlhood.

It is perhaps because *Girls State* brings the paradoxes of girls' political visibility to the fore that audiences leave the film "feeling both tinges of empowerment and a palpable sense of deflation" (Fear). This sense of contradiction evinces what Harris and Dobson describe as the ways girls suffer because "young women are now in part constrained by the story of their enablement" as empowered actors (148). I suggest the film illustrates how postfeminist vibes and neoliberal girl power scripts contribute to girls' positioning as suffering actors. In the next section, I situate Girls State programming in context with other girl empowerment initiatives studied by feminist and girlhood scholars for the last two decades.

3. GIRLS, POLITICS, AND POWER: THE PROJECT OF EMPOWERED GIRLHOOD

The development of girlhood studies corresponds with rising socio-cultural, economic and geopolitical interest in girls' lives in the United States and around the globe. Feminist scholars engaged in this work, Mary Celeste Kearney observes, affirm their shared commitment to "make the world a more respectful place for female youth" (22). The practice of conducting research on, with, and for girls requires an appreciation for how girls and their girlhoods are entangled in present-day geopolitics. Catherine Vanner for example stresses how transnational theorizations of girlhood "expose the limitations that systems can place on girls' agency, particularly for girls of color... while recognizing girls' potential for resilience in global systems of patriarchy" (123). Transnational research on girls clarifies political, economic, historic, and socio-cultural forces which shape public celebrations of empowered and exceptional girls; it moreover evinces the asymmetrical circulation of postfeminist neoliberal girl power scripts in the lives of girls situated throughout the world. Girlhood, Taft

attests, “is not a singular category, so while many different girlhoods receive public acclaim for being ‘empowered,’ the shape and meaning given to empowerment varies by race, class, and national context” (“The Political Lives” 260). Studies about girls’ relationship to politics and power relatedly reveal emergent patterns in programmatic approaches to girls’ political development. In the following review, I offer a summary of methods used to scaffold girl empowerment and related intersectional and transnational implications of such practices on girls’ political selves.

Some of the earliest research on girls’ political lives sought to disentangle women’s experiences from girls. Pamela Bettis and Natalie Adams describe being “frustrated with the feminist researchers who took what were ‘women’s issues’ and transplanted them onto the lives of girls” (1). Adult-centered models of girl empowerment presume girls have similar needs and desires to women and that girls’ interests align with those adult women imagine for their former girlhood selves. This relational pattern leaves little space for what Claudia Mitchell identifies as “the ways in which adult women can be part of the problem in the lives of girls” too (95). Popular literatures produced by scholars over twenty-years ago often presented problematic versions of girls as either idealized future feminist subjects or failed victims in constant crisis (Gonick 1). Marnina Gonick suggests the public convergence of these discursive formations functioned “as a device for understanding girls, monitoring their development, and regulating their identities” in accordance with values and norms determined by adults in girls’ lives (18). To measure girl empowerment against adult feminist priorities is to relegate her to an indeterminate and largely subordinate subject positioning. The configuration of the girl as irrelevant to, a mirror or, and/or a problem for feminist futures continues to affect girl empowerment agendas today.

At the same time, girlhood studies began to shift conversation away from adult-centered perspectives and toward understanding how age and generation shape girls’ political lives. Too often, Yasmin Jiwani, Candis Steenbergen, and Claudia Mitchell write, “girls have been spoken for and about as a homogenized group without agency and often without acknowledgement of the complex power relations that weave through their diverse experiences” (vii). Feminist studies about girls as complicated political actors disrupt normative approaches, authoring more girl-centered, diverse, and transnational analyses of

how structures of power inform girls' political selves and experiences. In their analysis of global girlhood discourses, for example, Jackie Kirk, Claudia Mitchell, and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh identify three basic assumptions embedded in international policies via empowerment-focused programming. The first practice pathologizing girlhood is concentrated on girlhood in the Global South, presenting girls as "silent figures" who "suffer a series of interlocking oppressions and discriminations taking place at the family, school, community, and state levels" (21). Girls positioned in this discursive framework require the protection of others to shore up their presumed futures as mothers and caregivers. Moreover, the pathology marker means girl engagement revolves around humanitarian and global policymaking efforts instead of seeing girls as "individuals and citizens with a full set of rights and expectations right now" (21). The second practice labeled consuming girlhood aligns girls in the Global North with personal consumption practices and the market economy. Here, girls' political visibility is tied to their vulnerabilities in the neoliberal global economy, whereas in the third modality of girl power programming practitioners focus on selling branded assertions of self-empowerment above all else. The girl power approach codifies "discourses of Western 'girl power' and non-Western 'girl powerlessness'" as essential markers of girls' individual successes and failures (25). Taken together, Kirk et al.'s analysis of the girl as produced within discursive patterns of vulnerability, consumption, or girl power uncovers the normative boundaries of girl engagement programming and reveals the political subjectivities made available to girls in globalized contexts.

Taft investigates similarly the programmatic undercurrents in U.S. girls' organizations to distinguish between different methods of girl engagement in the public sphere. For Taft, girl empowerment programming models assume either normative or transformative approaches to girls' political selves. She writes "some organizations... see girls as needing protection from the wider world, while others encourage girls' public presence, visibility, and voice" ("Girlhood in Action" 26). Programming for girls under the normative model assumes individual girls must learn how to navigate societal barriers and systemic inequalities through the acquisition of skills whereas the transformative model imagines girls as critical actors with the capacity to "claim authority in public spaces" (25). The normative model centers protectionist ideologies of girlhood which ignore racial and class-based differences to promote universal understandings of girls' political lives (19).

While transformative programs contrastingly ground girls' experiences within sociocultural and intersectional explorations, offering girls the opportunity to "see their problems not merely as private troubles, but as socially constructed and... [therefore] not isolated from the community and social forces" (23). Programming for girl leaders from the transformative approach signals an appreciation for girls' political capacities, both positioning girls as political peers and disrupting normative approaches to their political subjectivities.

The studies offered by Kirk et al. and Taft articulate valuable strands of analysis for thinking about girls' political selves as public empowerment projects. Whereas Taft's work describes divergent approaches to thinking about how girls act in the public sphere, Kirk et al. reflect on the ways circulating ideas about girls' lives shape what is and is not possible for differently positioned girlhood subjects. Over the last ten years, scholars have woven these investigative elements together productively by bringing visibility to girls' diverse political selves and offering new intersectional considerations for girls' relationship to power. Shenila Khoja-Moolji revisits previous engagements with girl leaders in Pakistan to "read against the grain" of dominant human rights and global girl discourses and hear "what I had missed the first time" when guided only by stable, homogenous Western narratives of girl power rather than difference (754). Heather Switzer likewise shares insight on how Kenyan Maasai schoolgirls construct new identities which evade preeminent discourses about formal schooling and educational success (137). While Sandrina de Finney explores how the practice of "presencing" disrupts dominant narratives about Indigenous girlhood "teach[ing] us about coming together differently... to subvert exclusionary notions of girlhood and girlhood praxis" in everyday life (21). Additional research about girls' lives and diverse perspectives throughout the world point to the vibrant urgency with which girlhood scholars have responded to the call to see girls "as experts on their lives" (Brown, "Powered" 5).⁵ For me, this vast body of research affirms the invaluable role girls play in everyday life as complex subjects with experiences and insights worthy of exploration, and of girlhood scholars' desire to bring those perspectives to the academic community.

⁵ See for example Brown "Hear Our Truths"; Moeller; Ossai et al.; Rogers; Soto; and Sriskandarajah for thought-provoking analyses about girls' lives in Black America, Brazil, Nigeria, Cambodia, Mexico, and Indigenous Canada.

Thus, bolstered by girlhood studies literatures and drawing from an evolving political moment in the U.S., I ground the following textual analysis of *Girls State* in the “seepages and excesses” of girls’ experiences as suffering actors (Khoja-Moolji 745). I propose the film captures the limitations of postfeminist neoliberal girl power to deliver a reliable means of girl empowerment, and in doing so, bears witness to the ambivalences generated under normative models wedded to the girl-in-crisis framework. As I come to show, *Girls State* attends to several impactful moments with Emily, Brooke, Nisha, Maddie, Tochi, Cecilia, and Faith which illustrate how girls’ political desires and experiences extend far beyond the discursive paradigms of neoliberal girl power. *Girls State* offers audiences rather a critical window onto the precarious legibility of girls’ political subjectivity and suffering agency.

4. THEORIZING THE GIRL AS SUFFERING ACTOR

The concept of the suffering actor originates in Kevin McDonald’s sociological analysis of youth living in Melbourne, Australia who experience regular cultural and social transformations that have shaped their sense of self. In exploring youth gangs and graffiti artists as well as youth with eating disorders, and those marked by gender and racialized identities, McDonald describes “encounter[ing] social actors attempting to name powerful forms of social experience” without access to previous forms of socio-political stability characteristic of the modern industrial era (10). Neoliberal paradigms signal patterns of dissolving institutions, governmentality, and social forces of control whereby the individual subject is made responsible for and vulnerable to the production of the self. As McDonald writes, youth “is no longer organized in terms of the tension between generation or class, nor in terms of socializing institutions; it is increasingly shaped by imperatives of producing forms of subjectivity, of mobilizing self-esteem, of entering into communication with self and other, of participating in a social world of flow and movement” (6). The terms of neoliberal subjectivity require evolving technologies of the self as youth “struggle to be an actor” amid changing relationships between self and other, local and global, and public and private (11). McDonald further suggests youth experience neoliberal demands more intensely than others, and as a result, confront periods of regular experiential suffering in their struggle for recognition (11-12).

I scaffold McDonald's theorization of the suffering actor beside Harris and Dobson's invitation to imagine the girl as a particular kind of suffering actor to explore girls' political subjectivity as witnessed in *Girls State*. Specifically, I aim to respond to Harris and Dobson's desire for "a more nuanced – yet readily available – vocabulary for describing girls' locations within structure/agency binaries" that shape their lived experiences (146). I propose positing the girl as a suffering actor allows us to regard the evolution of postfeminist girl power in the present moment. McDonald speculates that "engag[ing] with the confusion of the present, its uncertainties and its possibilities" compels youth to act within and among the dimensions of their suffering (12). Thus, in reading *Girls State* as an illustration of girls' political suffering, the film uncovers the complexities of girl empowerment under postfeminist regimes of neoliberal girl power which I categorize as suffering in sisterhood and the fragility of girl empowerment.

4.1. "LESS FEMINISM, MORE FEMININITY"⁶: SUFFERING IN SISTERHOOD

The suffering actor desires a sense of stability and purpose to counter rising economic, sociocultural, and geopolitical uncertainties generated by neoliberal sensibilities (McDonald 6). Yet, because neoliberal conditions produce fractured instabilities, McDonald proposes young people learn to reclaim their selfhood by tapping into forms of identity from the past and not of the present or future (11-12). Neoliberal subjectivities in this way obligate girls' paradoxical suffering as they cannot imagine themselves as full subjects in the present or future and therefore look to female identities from a pre-determined past to inform their present. This process operates as a self-regulating practice whereby girls appear to labor out of step with the material and discursive realities of their lives. Indeed, the politics of self-(re)production based on a re-imagined sense of the past does not always map easily onto girls' present or future selves.

Girls State captures how girls "struggle to be an actor" within the boundaries of postfeminist neoliberal subjectivity and through performative iterations of a gender normative past, present, and future (McDonald 11). Throughout the documentary, program attendees comment on the differences between their experiences with *Girls State* activities

⁶ Alex Clark qtd. in Goldberg.

and that of their peers in Boys State. At the start of the film, viewers hear Girls State volunteers review behavioral guidelines and expectations for girl delegates, inclusive of monitoring their movement on campus through a buddy system, dressing in clothing that covers their bodies (especially their shoulders and backs), and avoiding interactions with Boys State delegates outside of coordinated and heavily supervised programs. Adult volunteers explain to girl attendees, “do not ever go by yourself anywhere. Ok? We are not alone on this campus, so we should never be alone” (*Girls State*, 00:08:53-00:09:01). These scenes make clear the gendered and heteronormative assumptions undergirding Girls State programming and positioning girl leaders as inherently vulnerable, at-risk subjects in need of adult protection. Volunteers further codify victim-blaming narratives about sexual violence in these moments, relying upon gendered expectations of the past rather than those of the present and/or future. Whereas girl attendees recognize adult concerns for their safety, the delegates nevertheless challenge their counselors to explain how mobility restrictions for girl delegates on campus demonstrates political respect and equity. One Girls State candidate for governor, Cecilia, for instance, capitalizes on delegate frustrations with adult facilitators who refuse to engage girls in productive debate about dress codes. Directors McBaine and Moss capture Cecilia’s narrative of emergent feminist discontent over the policing of girls’ bodies beside concurrent scenes with an adult volunteer who dismissively remarks to several girl delegates gathered “you can talk about Boys State now if you want to, or, maybe talk about government” (*Girls State*, 00:37:07-00:37:12). The juxtaposition of girl leaders’ demands for productive dialogue sits uncomfortably beside adults’ disregard for honest conversation with girls as full political actors. Viewers witness instead the ironies of the Girls State program which presumes to deliver girl empowerment but only on adult-defined, and seemingly gender regressive, terms.

Girls State programming reliance on traditional gender patterns also emerges across several spliced scenes from opening night at the university stadium and during orientation in a large auditorium. Whether visualized through clips of girls doing cartwheels on the stadium field or in hair braiding sessions, cupcake decorating, and friendship bracelet-making with patriotic beads of red, white, and blue, viewers recognize the grounding of Girls State programming in celebrations of apolitical American girlhood and heteronormative femininity. Collectively, these scenes offer another version of the girlhood experience, and

unlike previous concerns with dress codes or girls' safety on campus, viewers observe a form of girlhood which appears joyful and jovial as individual girls laugh, dance, and connect with one another. Girls State programming in some ways seems to suggest an immediate bond between girls because of their gendered experiences of the world. At the same time, girls' gender normative positioning in the film signals what Taft describes as girls' political harmlessness where the girl is marked as unserious in order to contain or erase any perceived resistance to normative power and control ("Hopeful" 8-11). To imagine girl leaders as harmless, Taft writes, "enables the public to continue to feel positively about the girl activist herself as a hopeful figure of possibility, and to skip over a serious engagement with her demands for collective action and major social change" ("Hopeful" 10). I suggest it is in these moments of girlhood celebration that the audience gains a sense of the girl as politically harmless, both silencing and depoliticizing girl delegates demands for robust political debate at Girls State and instead presenting them with cupcakes and bracelets.

Several other moments in *Girls State* bring viewers closer to girls' suffering as actors. For example, Girls State gubernatorial candidate Emily muses at Boys State, "I bet they're talking about things that are really important right now, like I bet they're talking about *Roe v. Wade*. I bet they're talking about second amendment. I don't think they are talking about crop tops" (*Girls State*, 00:37:33-11:37:44). Once again, the viewer recognizes how girl leaders become constrained and silenced under the neoliberal conditions of postfeminist celebratory girlhood as their legitimate concerns and critiques of the Girls State program are dismissed as unnecessary, ignorable, and seemingly harmless. But as the film progresses, Emily decides to draft an article for Missouri Girls State's newspaper about the obvious differences in the Girls State and Boys State programs. During her investigation, Emily discovers that Girls State funding is approximately \$400,000 less than Boys State with each receiving \$200,000 and \$600,000 respectively (Worthmore). She likewise identifies distinctions in delegate codes of conduct, formal political training, professional development, field trips and downtime during program delivery (Worthmore). Viewers in turn might recall scenes where Boys State members appear in active debate about critical issues, or participating in policy development workshops, and meeting with members of the Missouri political establishment. At one point, we witness Boys State governor-elect being 'sworn into

office' by Missouri Governor Mike Parson but there is no comparable moment for Girls State attendees.

The contrast between the programs is further illustrated by the film's documentation of Girls State orientation; during these scenes, girl delegates learn and perform the program's official song to culminate their time together. As girl delegates begin to learn choreography one attendee states under her breath, "if the boys don't have to do this, I am going to be pissed" (*Girls State*, 00:11:26-00:11:28). Like the Girls State delegates, viewers understand almost instinctively that the Boys State programming does not include choreographed musical numbers nor cupcake and bracelet-making stations as part of their political development training. Gender normative expectations for girls instead drive and limit programming parameters for Girls State even as the program portends to build essential political skills and leadership tools for girls' present and future selves. These paradoxical forces play out repeatedly, and in one scene candidate for Girls State Attorney General, Tochi asks, "when are we going to get to the feminism, and the connection, and all that?" (*Girls State*, 00:08:14-00:08:20). It is my position girl delegate encounters with this unserious version of their political selves frustrates their experiences of the Girls State program, reinforcing normative expectations of apolitical girlhoods and offering little to prepare them for political leadership today.

At the same time, for girls and viewers who have always known a postfeminist culture of neoliberal girl power, I contend *Girls State* invites new understandings of girls' political positioning as suffering actors who navigate previous struggles for gender equality in the context of the present. Scholars of girlhood remind us that postfeminist vibes of female solidarity and celebratory girlhood confine girls' political agency to normative models of empowerment which neglect their political capacities to build collective and sustainable change (Brown, "Powered"; Edell et al.; Taft "Girlhood in Action"). Normative programming for girl empowerment upholds their political status as harmless actors bound to celebrations of gender normative girl power; however, for girls who mean to act differently or in excess of the script, *Girls State* reveals how conflicting cultural messages of postfeminist girl power and empowered solidarity prove insufficient for girls' political

recognition. Emily's op-ed about the Girls State program, for instance, recenters girls' political desires in the language of female empowerment; she writes:

One goal that is repeatedly reaffirmed throughout the week by counselors, keynote speakers, program leaders, and the delegates themselves is women's empowerment. The delegates have been told to critically consider the world in which they live, as well as speak out for what they believe is right. It may be a long road to fiscal equity and a solution to certain social injustices that delegates feel exist, but by starting the conversation and bringing attention to the differences between programs, Girls State and Boys State can become one step closer to equality. (Worthmore)

In Emily's estimation, Girls State offers delegates an opportunity to capitalize on the presumed successes of the feminist movement and to build solidarity with other empowered girl subjects. She notes the potential for girl leadership in social justice movements throughout the world and appears hopeful about the future for Girls State participants, and for girls themselves. However, I also read elements of political suffering in her assessment of the Girls State experience; indeed, while she recalls the promises of female empowerment and girl-powered sisterhood, she speaks also to the ways in which these same ideals failed to empower her and others at Girls State. The paradoxical possibilities of empowered girlhood clash with the experiential realities of girls' lives; Emily struggles beside other Girls State delegates in her desire to act with purpose while simultaneously (re)negotiating the presumed harmlessness of her voice when identifying clear evidence of gender discrimination.

One powerful element of *Girls State* emerges in the film's capturing of an ever-evolving present where neoconservative calls for "less feminism, more femininity" sit beside feminist manifestos declaring the 'future is female' (Clark qtd. in Goldberg). During Girls State orientation, a girl delegate opens the session describing a scene from Disney's *Mary Poppins* where Mrs. Banks celebrates women's suffrage. She recollects, "as [Mrs. Banks] sings of the work she has done to secure votes for English women, she uses her soft, fluttery voice to produce a song that exudes strength. She does not need to shout. She is powerfully feminine and at Girls State, so are we" (*Girls State*, 00:00:49-00:01:08). She continues, "we, as women, are often taught that in order to have our voices heard, we must appear and speak and debate like men. We must be strong, overpowering, and demand attention. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is that femininity is powerful" (00:01:10-

00:01:32). In this example, Girls State endeavors to remake girls' political desires in alignment with neoliberal postfeminist girl power sensibilities that "privilege the individual, apolitical empowerment of girls and women, who are hailed as productive feminized workers, citizens and mothers" (Keller and Ryan 3). Drawing attention to girls' femininity as a pre-determined set of gender normative practices yokes their political empowerment to a postfeminist climate where individuals must reclaim gender normative patterns otherwise lost to an explicitly feminist politic. This material-discursive practice does not necessarily reject feminist histories or equality gains in American culture, nor does it suggest feminism is no longer needed to empower girls. Rather, it underscores how feminist sensibilities are "reworked to accommodate mainstream ideas" effectively re-aligning girl empowerment within traditional power structures (Keller and Ryan 4). I read the call to girls to (re)discover softer forms of female empowerment as evidence of how girl power paradoxes trigger girls' political suffering under postfeminist neoliberal conditions.

Excerpts from Girls State workshops and conversations among girl delegates further evince the reclaiming of femininity as essential to Girls State's girl empowerment project. Girls labor throughout the film to demonstrate self-empowerment through shared acts of friendship, kindness, female solidarity, and sisterhood. As one adult speaker explains, "we want you to be the women who straighten other women's crowns, not the women who point out that they are crooked" (*Girls State*, 00:20:22-00:20:30). Girls State delegates seem to take this lesson to heart as viewers encounter scene after scene with individual girls offering support to one another over the course of the week. Girl delegates serving as Girls State Supreme Court judges, for example, stand in a circle with their arms wrapped around each other, heads together, offering words of encouragement for one another. They recite affirmations together like, "I deserve to be here" (00:53:49-00:53:50), "we are all qualified" (00:53:55-00:53:56) and "we are all amazingly talented" (00:53:59-00:54:01), among several others. The scene validates the hopeful potential embedded in an emergent sisterhood where girls support each other irrespective of socio-cultural or geopolitical differences. As Taft reminds us, figurations of the girl as hopeful concurrently serve to demobilize political action because it "assuages public feelings of concern and returns us to a position of political comfort" ("Hopeful" 8). Marking girls as hopeful misaligns their empowerment with more acceptable, non-threatening demonstrations of political agency giving further consequence

to the girl as suffering actor. Here too the paradoxes of postfeminist empowerment leave girls struggling to act beyond the individual level. Brooke summarizes her experience on the Girls State Supreme Court, estimating, “I am sixteen. I can’t really go out there and pass legislation or rule on any kind of actual court, so... it felt empowering, but it also made me pretty sad” (*Girls State*, 01:02:04-01:02:58). It is in these reflective moments that Girls State delegates make apparent their experiential suffering as postfeminist girl power subjects without the political means to change the world.

4.2. THE FRAGILITY OF GIRL EMPOWERMENT

The push to realign girls’ political desires with an apolitical version of girl power feminism which elevates femininity as political agency reflects the deeper fragility of girl empowerment projects in the present moment. McDonald’s theorization of youth as suffering actors describes young people struggling to “produce a coherent experience ... with the confusion of the present” (12). For girls, “the struggle for embodied subjectivity” vis-à-vis political visibility remains increasingly fraught in an evolving media landscape obsessed with girl activist stories of heroic saviorism (McDonald 10; Taft, “Hopeful” 1-3). Feminist scholars who collaborate regularly with girl leaders have expressed deep frustration with media’s resistance to telling more complicated stories about intergenerational feminist and girl-led activism (Bent, “This is not” 812; Brown “Powered” 4; Edell et al. 699). Neoliberal ideals, Dana Edell, Lyn Mikel Brown, and Celeste Montano assert, demand “stories of individuals overcoming obstacles and succeeding on their own have power over stories of collective, coalition-building efforts. Nothing sells quite like a young, smart, “everygirl’ taking on... a company” or political system (699). While stories about girl leaders abound, girlhood scholars recall how the exceptional girl script circulates to depoliticize, soften, or otherwise curb girl-led resistance to normative forms of power (Bent “Reflections” 182; Edell et al. 694; Taft “Hopeful” 1). Girls’ capacities to act as changemakers, leaders, and political actors are lessened when narrowed to the tools of postfeminist neoliberal girl power. *Girls State* captures this dynamic through scenes that trace girls’ attempts to *act* as political leaders while alluding to the very real differences between living as an empowered girl at Girls State and in America today. During the Girls State gubernatorial speeches, Cecilia

generates immediate enthusiasm from the delegation as she recalls shared experiences of misogyny at Girls State and in everyday life. She proclaims:

I am supposed to come up here and tell you the most important, the most compelling part of myself, so I will. I am selfish. I am selfish because I have to be. We all have to be. Women in America aren't given respect. As a lifeguard, I have been told by middle-aged men, 'Cecilia, you should smile.' I have been told by 12-year-old boys that I have an attitude and even here, Girls State, a place that is meant to empower women, our bodies are policed. We are told that our shorts are too short, and our tops are too scandalous. We are shamed for having bodies with curves. And as your governor, I will not let this stand. I am proud that when I smile, it is because I am happy and not because a man told me to. I am proud that I do my job diligently and I am proud that my personality is not limited by a man's definition of what a woman should be. (*Girls State*, 01:10:59-01:11:56)

Drawing from girls shared experiences of sexism, Cecilia weaves an empowerment narrative informed by feminist politics to her leadership position. As she delivers this message, the crowd of girl delegates respond with cheers, rounds of applause, and standing ovations which mark Cecilia's delivery, and indeed Cecilia herself, as a performative spectacle of postfeminist girl power. When she concludes by declaring, "standing in front of this crowd today, this crowd of future leaders, I can say with certainty that the future is female. God can save the world; women, we will save America. So be prideful, be selfish, and vote Cecilia for your Girls State governor," Cecilia pulls together the threads of American patriotism, girl power, feminist solidarity, and postfeminist femininity to become a political actor (01:11:58-01:12:18). This complicated maneuvering proves successful when she is elected Missouri Girls State Governor; and in the next scene viewers hear from Faith, another gubernatorial candidate who ran on a platform focused on climate change and renewable resources, mental health counseling for veterans, ending gun violence in schools, and reproductive justice, who appears unphased by Cecilia's win. Faith explains:

I think as soon as Cecilia went up there and was about 20-seconds into her speech, I was, like, 'I think she's going to win.' Because it is an entire crowd of 500 women and when you are essentially giving a feminist manifesto up on stage, and you know, it gets the crowd going, I think Cecilia just really hit home on something that a lot of people cared about. And it's not that people didn't care about the things in my speech either, it was just immediate because they were experiencing it here. (01:15:16-01:15:44)

For Faith, Cecilia's election victory reflects the saliency of feminist politics in girls' experiences of the Girls State program and not necessarily their disinterest in other political issues. Reading this outcome as evidence of the girl as suffering actor, I suggest, further illustrates how girl power scripts concurrently "mobilize the self in a culture of performance" to authorize the normative erasure of politics from girl empowerment projects (McDonald 11). Girl powered subjects understand their political visibility is tethered to neoliberal economies of dissemination which require performances of political agency as postfeminist media spectacles (Bent, "This is not" 780; Duvall; Projansky 1). National Public Radio reporter Aisha Harris reflects on this dynamic in her synopsis of the nominee speeches; she concludes, "I think it's telling that the girl who does wind up winning governor, she's very charismatic, but also she doesn't have any policies in her speech at all... and I don't know if... bonding over misogyny is going to save the world per se" (qtd. in Holmes and Thompson). Celebratory iterations of postfeminist girl power encourage girls to use the language of feminism, sisterhood, and empowerment over narrations of political ideology or collective social action.

At the same time, marking Cecilia's speech as evidence of postfeminist girl power brings girls' political suffering to the fore when viewers later witness Girls State attendees learning about the leaked Dobbs decision during filming. For me, one of the most haunting elements of *Girls State* stems from filming in the days leading up to the U.S. Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. As viewers follow several delegates interested in serving on the Girls State Supreme Court, McBaine and Moss offer insight on the impact of Dobbs on girls' experiences at Girls State. Several attendees receive text messages and videos from friends at Boys State who report anti-choice guest speakers and male politician-led sessions with legislative agendas associated with rolling back women's reproductive rights. Brooke and Nisha, two candidates for the mock Supreme Court, build conversation with other girl delegates about reproductive rights; the group of girls reveal wide-ranging political views on abortion rights but conclude decisively that Boys State should not engage in conversations about girls and women's bodies irrespective of their politics. Birth control and abortion, they argue, is a female issue and should be treated as such. Later, at the mock Supreme Court trial, girl judges hear an appeal on whether required mental health counseling prior to abortion access violates a woman's right to privacy. The Girls State Supreme Court determines in a

vote of 5 to 2 that requirements for counseling breach individual privacy laws; Brooke concludes, “the case was definitely where it belonged in front of women. The constitution was written hundreds of years ago by a bunch of old white guys that don’t know what is happening today, so much has happened since then” (*Girls State*, 00:56:50-00:57:02). Faith resolves too:

I am really thankful to be in the current time period that I am living in cause there are a lot of opportunities for me by law, right? But there are still these like secret, sneaky, possibly misogynistic viewpoints maybe by parents, maybe by society as a whole, maybe by social media that will creep up and because it is not so blatant and so obvious, I think it is even harder to fight. (01:28:07-01:28:32)

But six days after the conclusion of Missouri Girls State the decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* became official, delivering a “gut-punch postscript” to girls’ political present and future selves (Horton). It is in this particular moment *Girls State* reveals the girl as a suffering actor most clearly for regardless of girls’ political ambitions and dreams of a future that is both female and feminist, the dismantling of their reproductive rights occurred without their consent. Reading *Girls State* with the conceptual vocabulary of girls as suffering actors, I contend, encourages us to grapple more honestly with the increasingly hostile, anti-feminist political conditions which undergird girls’ everyday lives. Indeed, as Cecilia reflects on her time with Girls State, she concludes, “I think every woman is leaving here feeling better about themselves, feeling more supported as a woman. But I don’t think we should use Girls State as a way to further condition women for sexism. I think the conversation should less be preparing us for sexism and more teaching us how to combat sexism” (*Girls State*, 01:28:39-01:28:59). Thus, rather than encourage girls to embrace the softer side of gendered empowerment or look for exceptional girl actors to rescue and inspire, we need to grapple with the impossibilities of the present in intentional and humbling ways. I maintain *Girls State* could serve as an essential catalyst for change, making clear and obvious girls’ political suffering today.

5. CONCLUSION: TAKING GIRLS’ POLITICAL REALITIES SERIOUSLY

Shortly after the 2024 U.S. Presidential election, *The New York Times* published an essay from 16-year-old Naomi Beinart titled “I’m 16. On Nov. 6 the Girls Cried, and the

Boys Played Minecraft.” In the essay, Beinart identifies divergent gendered experiences following Trump’s re-election where girls encountered “a blanket of despair” while “the boys, it seemed to me, just woke up on a Wednesday”. Marked by a new sisterhood of political suffering, Beinart describes being aware of all that she stood to lose under the new administration; she writes, “many of [the boys] didn’t seem to share our rage, our fear, our despair... I have never felt that disconnected from men. I have never felt more like a *girl*”. In this article, I have argued that it is time to move away from girls’ public circulation as heroic and hopeful changemakers to instead recognize how anti-feminist and neoconservative realities have steadily eroded the radical promises of empowered girlhood. I propose reading girls as suffering actors allows us to more completely attest to their lived realities, taking seriously the conditions of, and potential for, their present and future political subjectivities and agencies. Based on a close analysis of the documentary *Girls State*, I have described how the girls featured in the film become politically (il)legible subjects made to endure the material impasses of neoliberal girl power, postfeminism, and the commodification of feminist values and ideals. The film, like Beinart’s essay, challenges viewers to bear witness to girls’ political suffering with brutal honesty. Rather than recast girls’ political desires across normative patterns of empowered agency or vulnerability, documentaries like *Girls State* generate new considerations for understanding girls’ relationship to politics and power. I offer *Girls State* challenges us, as feminist scholars, activists, and allies to girls who dare to imagine something better in the world, to re-affirm our commitments to girls by making room for their political suffering.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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