

## *Girlhood (It's complicated)*

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### An Exhibition Exploring the Politics of Girlhood

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**ABSTRACT:** *Girlhood (It's complicated)* is an exhibition at the National Museum of American History (NMAH), part of the Smithsonian Institution, which opened in October of 2020. Created with federal funding as part of the American Women's History Initiative (AWHI), the exhibition commemorates the centennial of women's suffrage. To put a fresh spin on this anniversary and draw attention to larger, intertwining issues of gender and politics in the United States, the exhibition team chose to explore the history of girlhood and girls as political actors as the focus of the show. Drawing on the rich, interdisciplinary literature of girlhood studies and inspired by zines as a form of identity creation and political self-expression, the show aims to create a public history of girlhood that unveils the public lives of girls in the past and showcases the many ways in which they, even without the vote or formal political power, have had a political voice in American history. The exhibition is open at the NMAH from October 2020 to January 2023, and will travel with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service through 2026.

**KEY WORDS:** girlhood, girlhood studies, Black girlhood studies, women's history, suffrage, third-wave feminism, zines

#### Introduction

What do you think of when you hear the word girlhood? Do you think of girls on the front lines of political change? Do you think of girls troubling the idea of girlhood? As our exhibition team at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (NMAH) considered the history of girlhood, we thought of girls, such as Ruby Bridges or Minnijean Brown, who helped change the landscape of American life. That's not what girlhood conjures up for everyone. In discussing the topic with folks both inside and outside the museum, we often heard that historically girls were nonpublic figures—consumers but not activists—even though girls have recently claimed center stage in social movements. To many, girlhood seems fixed, naturalized, and apolitical. This report charts our exploration of the topic with the goal of giving girls and girlhood a more complicated public history.

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**THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN**, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 138–163 (February 2021). ISSN: 0272–3433, electronic ISSN 1533–8576. © 2021 by The Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/tp.2021.43.1.138>.

*Girlhood (It's complicated)* grew out of a charge to address the one-hundredth anniversary of women's suffrage in 2020 at the Smithsonian Institution and the NMAH. For the NMAH it is a medium-sized exhibition that was designed not only to be displayed in the gallery space in Washington, DC, for several years, but also to travel the nation as part of Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES). The larger team included project directors and collections managers from both the NMAH and SITES. The deadline of the anniversary meant that we developed the exhibition on a faster timeline than normal, and the accelerated schedule meant truncated research on a topic that was new to many of us.

These hurdles, though, paled in comparison to those created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite being created in a pre-pandemic world, the show was delayed by and then opened amid the public health crisis. The team had to figure out how we would shift to make the physical exhibition safe and at the same time also create a virtual version to reach those who could not visit the museum. Although facing new challenges associated with working during the pandemic, we were energized by the voices of girls in the Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020. We wanted the exhibit to provide context for their actions and amplify their leadership.

At the NMAH and the Smithsonian, we can offer a national stage to explore the history of girlhood and to challenge the notion that girls have not historically been changemakers. By giving girlhood a public history, the exhibition had intellectual work to do in connecting with the vibrant historiography on girlhood and girls, and to use it to give contemporary movements historical grounding. We didn't want to replace a predictable exhibition on suffrage with one on girl power. Instead, we wanted to investigate what it has meant to grow up female in the United States over time. We also wanted to signal to girls today (and those who experienced or witnessed girlhoods in the past) that the museum acknowledges the substantial obstacles they face or have faced while also celebrating their creative responses to these obstacles. Our project confronted a number of hurdles in defining girlhood and getting some to take it seriously. Yet we have been gratified by the outcomes: an exhibition filled with the historical voices of girls; an accounting of how girlhood is made, remade, and reworked over time; and support from every corner of the Smithsonian Institution in defending some of the disruptive stories in the exhibition.

This report recounts the origins and development of the exhibition and explores the intellectual challenges of creating a public history of girlhood.<sup>1</sup> Being mindful

<sup>1</sup> We regard exhibitions as publicly engaged scholarship. "Redefining Historical Scholarship": A Report of the American Historical Association Ad Hoc Committee on Redefining Scholarly Work," American Historical Association, December 1993, <https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/redefining-historical-scholarship>. See also Elizabeth A. Novara and Vincent J. Novara, "Exhibits as Scholarship: Strategies for Acceptance, Documentation, and Evaluation in Academic Libraries," *The American Archivist* 18, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2017): 355–372.

not to divorce exhibition text from design, this report summarizes the organization and design of the show to better understand interpretive decisions and techniques. This report was written before the in-person opening and therefore does not address the question of audience reception. Rather, it focuses on the process of creating the exhibition, a process that started months before we had a team in place and long before we settled on the topic of girlhood. This report describes how we arrived at the topic, dips into the historiography of girlhood and the challenges of exhibiting it, and provides some examples from the exhibition to flesh out how and why *Girlhood (It's complicated)* became a tent-pole exhibition for the American Women's History Initiative and NMAH. On the anniversary year of the Nineteenth Amendment, the exhibition makes the case that we, as a nation, should consider what it has meant to grow up female in the United States and how girls have walked the front lines of change in American history.

## Background

The team did not set out to create an exhibit on girlhood. We started with the goal of engaging with the field of women's history and with the history of women's suffrage. In summer of 2017, the NMAH received funding to create an exhibition commemorating the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment. Thanks to the work of the American Women's History Congressional Commission, Congress appropriated money to the Smithsonian specifically for the interpretation of women's history.<sup>2</sup> In response, Smithsonian leadership formed the American Women's History Initiative (AWHI), a public-private partnership between the Smithsonian, Congress, and private and corporate donors, to determine how to best use these funds.<sup>3</sup> The AWHI provided funding for an exhibition on women's history at the NMAH.

In the earliest weeks of the project, the then-head of curatorial affairs, Katie Eagleton, assembled the team and gave us free rein to develop a unique approach to the topic. The only stipulation was that the exhibition had to be about women's history. The first step was to convene a two-day charrette that brought together historians, curators, collections managers, educators, and designers. Museum staff

<sup>2</sup> For the full charge, see the "Executive Summary" of "Final Report," American Women's History Congressional Commission, November 16, 2016, <http://amwh.us/report/>, 12. The Commission recommended building a new and separate museum within the Smithsonian Institution dedicated to women's history. The Executive Summary and Final Report lays out a three-phase plan for the creation of the American Women's History Initiative and Museum that would be a public-private partnership. The First Phase–Action Plan includes "detailed planning, fundraising, initial traveling exhibits and public events aiming to bring this decision forward in the context of the upcoming national celebration of the Centennial of Women's Suffrage in 2019–2020." It also came with "an annual \$2-million-line item in new federal funding to go toward the creation and ongoing work of the Initiative." As the plan progresses and money is raised, the focus shifts to building the museum and a permanent collection and staff and phases out the Initiative activities.

<sup>3</sup> See American Women's History Initiative website, <https://womenshistory.si.edu/about>, August 17, 2020.

had been meeting on a regular basis to discuss women's history and how to meet the goals of the AWHI. But the charrette, led by senior staff in audience engagement and exhibition design, was a concrete step toward opening an exhibition by the spring of 2020.

This charrette brought together women's historians, an expert in storytelling, and museum staff, including curators, collections managers, project managers, educators, and representatives from SITES (the traveling exhibition service). Workshopping was important for developing a relevant exhibition. Design and audience considerations were part of the discussions from the outset. In developing a "big idea," we talked about histories, design, and objects.<sup>4</sup> We used the IPOP theory of visitor preferences (ideas, people, objects, and physical experience) to explore how those ideas and topics might translate into a three-dimensional experience in the gallery.<sup>5</sup>

Although structured processes can help seed creativity, people are the source of ideas. By the second day we had settled on girlhood as our theme. We were inspired by historian Marcia Chatelain's first book, *Southside Girls*, and her public history work with the Girl Scouts. As part of our workshopping groups, she prompted us to consider social and cultural constructions of girlhood and pushed us to incorporate the lived experiences of girls into the exhibition. Her recounting of vibrant conversations with young Girl Scouts made us think of ways we could reach younger audiences.<sup>6</sup> Chatelain's writing is part of a new wave of scholarship in women's history that has turned in recent years to younger subjects.<sup>7</sup> It is also part of a movement to create field of Black Girls' Studies.<sup>8</sup> Chatelain, along with Sarah Haley, Erin Chapman, Kate Haulman,

4 Beverley Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 1996), 1–8.

5 Andrew J. Pekarik, James B. Schreiber, Nadine Hanemann, Kelly Richmond, and Barbara Mogel, "IPOP: A Theory of Experience Preference," *Curator: The Museum Journal*, January 21, 2014, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cura.12048>. Much of what Pekarik, Schreiber, and Hanemann found complements and builds on the longer studies by John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking. Falk and Dierking argue in their germinal work on the contexts for the visitor experience that "Whatever the visitor does . . . is filtered through the personal context, mediated by the social context, and embedded within the physical context." John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington, DC: Whaleback Books, 1992), 4–5. On the idea of designing exhibitions that allow visitors to exercise their sense of "choice and control," in order to help them retain information or create memories, see John H. Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009), 142–50.

6 For some of the conversations Chatelain had with scouts, see the prologue to Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

7 Chatelain, *South Side Girls*, 4–5.

8 For a recent overview of Black Girls' Studies, see Crystal Lynn Webster, "The History of Black Girls and the Field of Black Girlhood Studies: At the Forefront of Academic Scholarship," *The American Historian*, March 2020, 35–39. In the same volume, see the historiographical essay by Miriam Forman-Brunell, "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Girls' History and the U.S. History Curriculum," *The American Historian*, March 2020, 27–34. Also useful for anyone developing a public history project is Corinne T. Field, Tammy-Charelle Owens, Marcia Chatelain, LaKisha Simmons, Abosede George, and Rhian Keyse, "The History of Black Girlhood: Recent Innovations and Future Directions," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 9, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 383–401.

Sarah Leavitt, Adrea Lawrence, Monica Martinez, Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, and a larger group of historians who served as advisors pushed us to think about the intersections of race and gender. As a result, we focused our interpretation of girlhood on girls of color in order to think more critically about the category. In discussions with the advisory committee, we saw girlhood as a way to commemorate not just women's political activism but also a way to acknowledge that girls, in their own right, have walked the front lines of social and political change. We wanted to explore girls as changemakers.

Our team was inspired by another commemorative exhibition, *A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the US Constitution*, which marked the two-hundredth anniversary of the Constitution in 1987. *A More Perfect Union* challenged viewers to think more deeply about the underpinnings of civil society in the United States.<sup>9</sup> The exhibition considered the Constitution from the perspective of Japanese American internees who fought for their rights. By exploring the incarceration of American citizens during World War II, the exhibition made the Constitution a living document.<sup>10</sup> Inspired by this approach, we wanted to ask questions that brought women's history to life in new ways. By 2017, other commemorative exhibitions were well underway across the country, and we did not want to duplicate this good work. For example, we left the many compelling objects related to the National American Woman's Suffrage Association housed at the museum to the creative hands of other curators. Over the last two years, our colleagues have produced suffrage-related exhibitions including *Creating Icons: How We Remember Women's Suffrage* at the NMAH and *Votes for Women: A Portrait of Persistence* at the National Portrait Gallery.

With girlhood as our topic, we dove into the substantial literature on the history of girls. We are grateful to a generation of cultural historians and gender studies scholars who broke ground on Girls' Studies and thought about girlhood as a distinct category of historical experience. Susan Douglas, Joan Brumberg, and Crista Deluzio, along with Miriam Forman-Brunell and Leslie Paris among others helped us understand girlhood as a category of analysis and frame girls' lived experience as historically specific.<sup>11</sup> As Forman-Brunell and Paris note in their introductions to

9 For Freeman Tilden's well-known exhortation to public historians that "the chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but provocation," see Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 9. See also David Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2003), 37, 39. For a brief discussion of *A More Perfect Union* and the museum's response to the short-lived controversy, see Mary Battiat, "Smithsonian's Constitution Controversy," *The Washington Post*, March 16, 1987.

10 See former Smithsonian Secretary Roger Kennedy's forceful claim that, as a nation, "we've got to keep working awfully hard [on our Constitutional rights] by admitting our errors," in Battiat, "Smithsonian's Constitution Controversy." In other words, history isn't fixed and America isn't perfect. To make it the nation we want, we have to be actively thinking about how to make it better and history is a useful tool for understanding the present.

11 Some of the earliest cultural and intellectual histories on girlhood include: Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with Mass Media* (New York: Random House, 1994); Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997); and Crista Deluzio's *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought, 1980–1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

the two-volume *Girls' History and Culture Reader*, girlhood has been more than a “biological stage”; it has served as a training ground on which many social and cultural forces—from legal definitions to popular culture—worked to turn young people into women. Girlhood, therefore, is an ideal entry point for unpacking gender identity to the broadest possible public and centering how political consciousness has been formed, produced, maintained, and altered over time. Useful to our team was the idea that girlhood is a time during which Americans teach and train young girls how to be women, and this has long been true. As Forman-Brunell and Paris note, nineteenth-century girls were “the focus of significant public attention. Parents worked to socialize their daughters toward their future roles as good wives, mothers, and workers.” The authors assert that girls lived in complex realities that were intended to shape them into a social and cultural ideal of womanhood; they “were at once protected and exploited, restrained and adventurous, relatively unseen and highly exposed.”<sup>12</sup> Notions of girlhood shifted significantly over the nineteenth century from the idea of “girl” as “a female of inferior age and status” to an ideal of semi-autonomous adolescents who were one step from womanhood.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, the social and cultural ideal of womanhood varied greatly across class, race, ethnicity, and region. Not all women could achieve the cultural ideal nor were they imagined to be included in that ideal. The rich body of scholarship generated by Black Girlhood Studies and the Black Girlhood Studies Network in particular guided our thinking here. As Crystal Lynn Webster writes, “African American girls continually face disbarment from ideas of childhood and girlhood.” As historians, sociologists, and legal scholars report, black girls have long been viewed as less innocent than white girls and have been held to adult standards.<sup>14</sup> In essence, throughout US history Black girls have been denied an entry into “girlhood.” Digging deep into the history of Black girls and other girls similarly discounted, we worked to recover and represent what girlhood meant to them.<sup>15</sup> This quickly created a kaleidoscope of girlhoods refracting different visions of

12 Miriam Forman-Brunell and Leslie Paris, *The Girls' History and Culture Reader: Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 2–3. Also see Forman-Brunell and Paris, *The Girls' History and Culture Reader: Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

13 Forman-Brunell and Paris, *The Girls' History and Culture Reader: Nineteenth Century*, 4.

14 Crystal Lynn Webster, “The History of Black Girls and the Field of Black Girlhood Studies at the Forefront of Academic Scholarship,” *The American Historian*, March 2020, 38.

15 Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); LaKisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2015); Chatelain, *South Side Girls*; Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Renée M. Sentilles, “Arrived: The History of Black Girls and Girlhood,” *Journal of Women's History* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 169–77; Connie Wun, “Against Captivity: Black Girls and School Discipline Policies in the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Educational Policy* 30, no. 1 (January 2016): 171–96. See also memoirs, such as Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000); Susie King Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs: Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops, Late 1st South Carolina Volunteers* (New York: M. Wiener Pub.: Distributed by the Talman Co., 1988); Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dial Press, 1968).

womanhood and American belonging. A common thread running throughout Girls' Studies is that girls generally have been erased from history albeit for quite different reasons and in different ways.

Girlhood, we discovered, is complicated. As the project took shape, we also debated age. Should we focus on children or on adolescents? We finally settled on a wide range of age but centered on adolescents, teens, and young adults as our subjects because this is the age at which many people face critical questions of identity and also are able to enter into public life. On one hand, the idea of girls being "one step from womanhood" has held them back. Their youth and the belief that they have been excluded from public life has prevented women's activists and scholars alike from taking them seriously. Gender and media studies scholar Mary Celeste Kearney argues in her essay, "The Development of Girls' Studies," that in the early twentieth century, "while some women activists . . . considered adolescent girls to be modern heroines and used them to construct a vision of feminist subjectivity, the larger women's movement developed an increasingly adult-centered perspective and thus an uneasy relation to female youth as it narrowed its focus to gaining women the right to vote." For many in the suffrage movement the "ideal feminist was a mature adult woman."<sup>16</sup> This adult-centrism, the assumption that girls did not lead public lives, and a perceived scarcity of evidence carried over into second-wave feminism and to a generation of women's historians who "inadvertently left girls out" of the picture just as they overlooked the contributions of women of color to women's political movements.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, a newer generation of poststructuralist feminists, cultural historians, and interdisciplinary scholars have a "more progressive approach to identity" and have redefined what counts in terms of women's history and gender studies to be not only more capacious but also intersectional.<sup>18</sup> The history of girlhood lays bare the complex intertwining of multiple themes including gender and political consciousness, race and gender, and sexuality and gender.

To account for girlhoods across time, place, and experience, the exhibit focuses on material culture and personal histories that trace how girls carried these expectations on their person. As a set of histories, the stories span time beginning in the late eighteenth century but focus mostly on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with some contemporary examples. We explore the social forces that actively conspired to shape gender, sexuality, and Americanness, and place them in conversation with identifiable young women who negotiated their relationships to age, gender, race, sexuality, and political power. Our talking points note that "like the women who fought for the vote, girls have long exercised their political voices

16 Mary Celeste Kearney, "Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies," *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 9–10, 11. For an early reckoning with the idea of Girls' Studies as a sub-field, see Mary Celeste Kearney, "Producing Girls: Rethinking the Study of Female Youth Culture," in *Delinquents & Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 285–310.

17 Kearney, "Coalescing," 12.

18 Kearney, "Coalescing," 13. See also Cornelia H. Dayton and Lisa Levenstein, "The Big Tent of U.S. Women's and Gender History: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 3 (December 2012): 793–817.



Testing ideas and text with audiences, summer of 2017. (Credit: Megan Smith)

and political influence.” Although the exhibition starts with suffrage and formal politics, we explore politics on many levels: from intersectional identities to girls’ activism, to the political nature of our collective expectations for girls, to how girls carry the aspirations of communities and even the nation on their shoulders, and equally important, how girls have talked back. Thus, the exhibition sets up the history of girlhood as a dialog in which girls have actively participated.

With the leadership of our audience specialist, Megan Smith, we listened to audiences from the start of the process. Megan organized various ways to engage with audiences, including an early whiteboard activity and card sort that gave visitors a chance to choose objects that intrigued them and suggest topics. Additionally, we tested all of the exhibition text on the floor of the museum over a couple of weeks near the end of scripting.<sup>19</sup> We also talked to family, neighbors, other curators, educators, and colleagues across the Smithsonian including stakeholders, interns, fellows, object donors, financial donors, board members, and the

<sup>19</sup> Most of us do this as part of our practice as public historians, whether informally or formally as part of co-production with audiences. But for a longer think piece that ties this to the philosophical writings of David Carr, see the article by Beverly Sheppard, Marsha Semmel, and Carol Bossert, “Think with Me’: David Carr’s Enduring Invitation,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 59, no. 2 (April 2016): 113–19.



Smithsonian Regents. What emerged were some pretty durable imaginings of girlhood as, historically, apolitical. Some conflated media representations of girlhood with its history. Others saw girls as stars in a girl power universe, but not necessarily as facing systemic discrimination, being denied a girlhood, or opting out of prescribed notions of what it meant to be a girl. In these interpretations, girlhood seemed to be an untroubled and transitory state that girls passed through on their way to maturing into women when they would then take on social, cultural, or political work in earnest. But we were motivated to counter this idea with stories from history and our contemporary moment that reconfigured girlhood as something that girls have called into question. Not every girl had the ideal girlhood; some didn't have a girlhood at all. Finally, we wanted to argue that, for a long time, girls have been part of national conversations about social, cultural, and political change.

Various titles for the exhibition, emerging from a titling workshop and tested on audiences, charted our developing ideas about girlhood. An early title, *Becoming Women*, replicated the idea that girlhood was just a transient state in which adult women were formed, and implicitly erased girls' autonomy and power. A second title, *Girl Trouble*, took a cue from third-wave feminist Judith Butler's work *Gender Trouble* and resonated strongly with the curators who hoped to trouble the category of girlhood, raising questions about intersectionality of gender, race, and sexuality.<sup>20</sup> We wanted to think of girls as facing trouble and making trouble and our exhibition project as troubling American history through the experiences of girls. This tested well with some audiences but not with others. Some in the museum and the larger institution saw negative overtones to girls causing trouble and after further review, we decided against it. The team debated a dozen other possible titles, finally landing on *Girlhood (It's complicated)*. We liked it because it is straightforward and it captured the reality of girls' experiences. We also adopted cheeky subtitles for each section of the exhibition. For example, Education (Being schooled) and Work (Hey, where's my girlhood?).

Zines, small-circulation, self-published magazines known for forthright language, scrappy graphics, and poaching of consumer culture, inspired much of the design and writing in the exhibition. Zines grew up alongside third-wave feminism and the riot grrrl movement in the late 1980s and 1990s, often linked to punk bands and fanzines but also appropriated and made by diverse range of teens as a way to create community and voice discontent in a pre-internet world. Zines have a vibrant history and have morphed into more digital forms recently. The curators wanted a design that captured the messiness and complicatedness of being a girl, one that showed girls talking back, and that demonstrated how simply being female can make one political.

Zines captured what we learned from scholars: that girlhood is not fixed; rather it is a set of identities that may be "assembled, experienced, and perceived differently based on how markers of identity such as gender, race, sexuality, nationality,

<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).



Mood board with a sampling of zines. (Credit: H+R Design)

ethnicity, class, religion, age, and disability intersect.”<sup>21</sup> But it was really the look, feel, and powerful—often angry—voice of zines that expressed how we felt about girlhood and what we wanted to say in the exhibition. Zines turn our cultural imagination of girlhood on its head; they materialize the fact that girlhood is unfixed. Zine-makers chop up and reassemble all aspects of their identities to make “girlhood” fit their experiences. In the process they expose how popular notions of girlhood privilege some girlhoods while erasing others. In zines, we see and hear the voices of girls as political entities. Gender studies scholar Alison Piepmeier argues that zines have been sites of “insubordinate creativity,” of girls appropriating from the existing materials around them. In their heyday in 1980s and 1990s, zines “allowed girls and women to say things that weren’t being said elsewhere, often because they were considered too trivial, too personal, or too controversial.”<sup>22</sup> Participatory, chaotic,

21 Jennifer Dawn Whiney, “Roll Out, Roll Out!: Applying Historical Research and Critical Theory to Roller Skating’s Ethos of ‘Girl Power,’” *The American Historian*, March 2020, 22.

22 Alison Piepmeier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 41. Also on zines, see Mary Celeste Kearney, “Riot Grrrl: It’s Not Just Music, It’s Not Just Punk,” in Forman-Brunell and Paris, *The Girls’ History and Culture Reader: Twentieth Century*, 300–317, especially 309. On riot grrrl as a social movement that produced zines, music, and feminist thought, see Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010). For a different perspective, one that takes into account race and also the relationships between riot grrrl and second wave feminists and their publications, see Kristen Schilt, “‘The Punk White Privilege Scene’: Riot Grrrl, White Privilege, and Zines,” in *Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women’s Movement*, ed. Jo Reger (London: Routledge, 2005), 39–55.

and ironic, zines of this era helped build girl-based communities outside institutional or capitalist structures and embodied the vernacular politics of third-wave feminism. Centered on popular culture, intersectional and sometimes contradictory, the voices of girls and women who created these zines called out inequalities. As Piepmeier says of one early zine, *Jigsaw*, created by one of the founding members of the feminist punk band Bikini Kill, zines “offer idiosyncratic, surprising, yet savvy and complex responses to the late-twentieth-century incarnations of sexism, racism, and homophobia.”<sup>23</sup> Fractured, messy, pointed, and remixing the cultural materials available to girls, zines seemed to us to be the most honest depiction of girlhood.

The exhibition designers, Howard + Revis, embraced the vision of using zines as the basis for exhibition design. We ordered piles of examples from Etsy and searched for newer work around the country. We pinned them up on the conference room walls where we began to build design, stories, and experiences. H+R divided the shoebox-shaped, 5,000 square-foot gallery into individual spaces laid out like the pages of zines with large areas of white space, like paper, stretching across the floor and up on to the walls. Like zines, these galleries are organized around big topics, such as education, work, wellness, and fashion. Objects also inspired us to select these topics as we built on the museum’s rich holdings in labor, health and medicine, education, and costume. Within those topic areas are “A Girl’s Life” cases featuring short, often biographical stories that illuminate larger, shared experiences such as coming of age rituals. H+R also used slanted lines, object cases that cut through walls, and most importantly, original art work to answer our directive to put visitors face-to-face with girls and their words.

Zines rely on art as well as words to tell stories. Hiring an artist to create zine covers for each section of the exhibition transformed the show from a standard pairing of objects, images, and labels to story-telling. Artist Krystal Quiles took historic photos from the museum’s collection and turned them into colorful covers or billboards for each section of our three-dimensional zine. Each cover carries the “big idea” for that section along with a cheeky parenthetical title. Getting the graphic covers and the architecture of the show working together to communicate the central messages took the better part of the eighteen months, but now visitors can walk into the gallery, see all the sections, read all the big ideas, and, most importantly, come eye-to-eye with dozens of girls.

The zine idea worked in another, practical way as well: it made the exhibition portable. Howard + Revis faced a double challenge in designing this show, because it has to travel and the budget did not allow for the design to create two separate exhibitions, one in place at the NMAH and a separate version that could be loaded on to several semi-trucks and sent around the country. So, drawing on the fractured nature of zines, we could also build a show that delved into discrete stories and could be broken apart for travel.

<sup>23</sup> Piepmeier, “Introduction,” *Girl Zines*.



Entrance to exhibition. (Credit: Jaclyn Nash)

### Exhibition Summary: Girlhood in Five Zines

The exhibition has five topical sections, each laid out like a three-dimensional zine: News & Politics, Education (Being schooled), Work (Hey, where's my girlhood), Wellness (Body talk), and Fashion (Remix). In the spirit of the makers of zines, our team unapologetically poached big topics from *Teen Vogue*, which in 2018 was making a splash by giving girls a voice as writers. On the other hand, in the spirit of cultural critique, we added playful, sometimes ironic subtitles that signal the underlying themes of each topic. In addition to seeing the subtitles that are rendered three dimensionally on a turned up “page” in front of each sub-gallery, visitors see a front cover illustrated with Quiles’s interpretation of an historic photo and a handwritten statement about the big idea for the section.

The first section, News and Politics (Girls on the frontlines of change), acts as a meaty second introduction for the exhibition, teasing out the central concept of the personal as political. Against the backdrop of Quiles’s illustrated cover depicting a crowd of young people gathered for the March for Our Lives rally on the National Mall in 2018, visitors meet the eleven-year-old activist Naomi Wadler. Quoting from Toni Morrison, Wadler told marchers, “If there’s a book that you want to read but it hasn’t been written yet, you must be the one to write it.” Nearby an opening label asserts that “Girls make history. Now, and in the past, girls show us that politics runs much deeper than being a Democrat or Republican. It’s political to speak up, to support a cause, or to use social media to turn heads or change minds. Some girls grab headlines. Others don’t. But that doesn’t mean they don’t make history. Just being a girl makes a person political.” Our intention here was to make some bold statements and leave room for readers to make their own meanings. They can agree and find examples from their own experience, or they can disagree; both demonstrate engagement.

Labels are short and leave a lot of room for interpretation, which is a good thing, but here we elaborated on the point of the gender politics of everyday life in an

animated film. The four-minute film explains these ideas further with dozens of personal stories of girls questioning what it means to grow up female over a long stretch of American history, from Phillis Wheatley and Helen Keller to Naomi Wadler. In this way, we invite visitors to think about how they imagine girlhood and how their own concept of girlhood compares to how they experienced it. Then we ask them to take one more step and think about how every challenge or change to the idea of girlhood is a political act. There's a lot at stake in girlhood—society's expectations of gender roles, future pay scales, who's giving birth, and what ideals are being upheld and by whom. The animation helps raise big questions in a way that sparks conversation.<sup>24</sup>

In the subsequent section, Education (Being schooled), visitors encounter several story-telling devices—graphic, film, and material culture—that signal the formative and constrictive nature of schooling but also how girls past and present have talked back and made change. Education seemed like the right place to explore the tension between what society expects from girls based on class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and region and how girls react to an imposition of categories that don't seem to fit. We explore this in five stories: Schooled for Work; Schooled for Citizenship; Schooling Bodies; Schooling Brains, and Unschooled to clearly emphasize that “girl” is not a one-size-fits-all identity in our educational system or in the lives of girls.

The opening cover of Education, a long, bright yellow wall with girls in classrooms and hallways, has a handwritten big idea statement that notes that in school “girls imagine their futures and where they fit in.” See-through glass cases pierce this wall and hold the material culture of discipline and conformity. These cases feature a mix of nineteenth and early twentieth century merit awards that rewarded girls (and also boys) for certain socially sanctioned behaviors: punctuality, scholarship, self-discipline. Patent models for school desks sit next to and among the merit awards. Small remnants of American inventors' efforts to materialize a belief in training young bodies to sit up straight and keep eyes forward in the classroom, the school desks speak to generations of kids who struggled to find a comfortable position rather than conform completely to the demands of rigid rows of desks. Counter to the messages embodied in these objects, the wall tells folks that in school, girls “like anyone being ‘schooled’ talk back.” This is supported by images of girls passing notes and chatting among themselves in the halls.

When visitors walk around the corner into the gallery, they meet Minnijean Brown, whose story embodies the themes of being schooled, facing trouble, and ultimately walking the front lines of political and social change. Visitors see Brown and the Little Rock Nine entering Central High School surrounded by an angry

<sup>24</sup> For the film, please see <https://americanhistory.si.edu/girlhood/news-and-politics>. We're grateful for the fruitful collaboration with animators Baker & Hill and SI Digital Studios to create this film.

crowd and the National Guard in 1957. And they are met with an object pairing: Brown's suspension notice that she got for defending herself, and her diaphanous, white graduation dress from 1959.<sup>25</sup> After being hit with a purse and talking back, Brown was suspended from Central High and left to finish her education at New Lincoln High School in New York. Brown-Trickey went on to be a leader in the long and on-going effort for civil rights. She's also a champion of younger counterparts today who face many of the same hurdles Brown-Trickey did. We pair these stories to bring women and girls together to highlight political movements and the stubborn persistence of structural inequalities.<sup>26</sup> Although their girlhoods are decades apart, Brown-Trickey joined Naomi Wadler in the exhibition, another influential girl who campaigned to stop gun violence in schools.

Personal stories of girlhood like Brown's make political action intimate and knowable to visitors. In *Education*, visitors can explore a wall-sized yearbook with blank spaces where there should be photos of graduating girls and consider who got to go to school and stay in school, and who was denied that right. Under a swirling sculpture of monarch butterflies in the center of the gallery, visitors can learn about girls in Freedom Schools and girl leaders in the quest for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and the dream of having a good education.<sup>27</sup> They can also learn about vocational training specifically for girls that tried to shape their career choices long after they left school and the changes over time in what academic subjects were seen as

25 For the description of Central High, see Elizabeth Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son: Little Rock, The Crisis That Shocked the Nation* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 214. For more on the young women who were part of the Little Rock Nine, see Carlotta Walls Lanier and Lisa Frazier Page, *A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School* (New York: Penguin/Random House, 2010); Melba Pattillo Beals, *March Forward, Girl: From Young Warrior to Little Rock Nine* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2018); Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry: The Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock High* (New York: Simon Pulse, 1994).

26 Black girlhood studies, civil rights scholarship, and studies on African American education provided a rich body of work on Black girls' education. Here is a small sample of that scholarship: Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*; Adam Fairclough, *A Class of their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Rachel Devlin, *A Girl Stands at the Door: The Generation of Young Women Who Desegregated America's Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 2018); Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009); James D. Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

27 For selected sources on DACA and Dreamers, see Walter Nicholls, *The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Roberto G. Gonzalez, *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Joaquina Weber-Shirk, "Deviant Citizenship: DREAMer Activism in the United States and Transnational Belonging," *Social Sciences* 4, no. 3 (August 2015): 582–97; Kent Wong and Janna Shadduck-Hernández, Fabiola Inzunza, Julie Monroe, Victor Narro, and Abel Valenzuela Jr., eds., *Undocumented and Unafraid: Tam Tran, Cinthya Felix and the Immigrant Youth Movement* (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, 2012); Tom K. Wong and Carolina Valdivia, *In Their Own Words: A Nationwide Survey of Undocumented Millennials* (University of California, San Diego, Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, 2014).





Dress code wall. (Credit: Jaclyn Nash)

suitable for girls.<sup>28</sup> For example, in the nineteenth century natural science was seen as appropriate for girls, but as the sciences became professionalized in the twentieth century, dreams of working in a lab often eluded girls in school and women in their work choices.<sup>29</sup>

One of the most popular sections in this gallery has been the photo mural of dress code violations. Who knew dress codes had such a long history and ability to speak to intergenerational family groups? Lined up in chronological order, life-sized girls flouting dress codes stare willfully and cheerfully back at onlookers. There are un-corseted Gibson girls, flappers with rolled stockings that exposed their knees, madcap bobby-soxers, a girl from the early 1970s wearing pants to school, and a 2017 DC public school student who was one of several co-authors of

<sup>28</sup> For the history of girls' education in the United States see Margaret A. Nash, *Women's Education in the United States, 1780–1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). References to girls learning domestic work is replete throughout the literature and oral histories of Indian boarding schools. See, for example, Kevin Whalen, *Native Students at Work: American Indian Labor and Sherman Institute's Outing Program, 1900–1945* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> On the claim that in the nineteenth century, science was a subject for girls, see Kimberly Tolley, *The Science Education of American Girls: A Historical Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

the National Women's Law Project's report *Dress Coded*. These girls call out the unequal enforcement of dress codes on girls of color, whose bodies are identified as causing trouble. We jumped at the opportunity to interview these young women and add their outfits to our collection.<sup>30</sup>

The section titled Work asks on behalf of child laborers: "Hey, where's my girlhood?" This bold question forces visitors to think about who gets to have a prolonged girlhood free from the demands of labor and who does not. The cover for this gallery shows girls bent over picking carrots in the 1940s. It sets the tone for the section by proclaiming "Girls built America" and quoting California State Senator Maria Elena Durazo remembering her work as a child: "We started as soon as we were able to help out. I was carrying water around to my family in the fields when I was five years old."<sup>31</sup>

Relying on documentary and studio photography of girls at work and their own reflections on that work, the gallery resembles a set of photo albums. In its use of words and images to shine a light on child labor across time, the gallery harkens back to Progressive Era projects that used photography to expose social injustice. Here the photographs help make the case that "Girls' labor gave other women leisure time, they made industries more profitable, their cheap labor sparked a consumer revolution and their activism reshaped labor laws." The four albums in the gallery cover different moments in time: domestic labor in the nineteenth century, factory labor in textile mills and radium watch factories in the early twentieth century, and agricultural labor from the 1940s to the 2010s. Girls as Domestic Workers pairs a wall of studio photographs in which young African American girls in the nineteenth and twentieth century pose with their young charges (in some cases, owners) with a cradle and iron. One of the challenges here was in asking visitors to see the labor—the weight of the children, the heat of the iron. The wall label notes that these girls were indeed workers, not members of the family, and curatorial notes with arrows help visitors adopt nineteenth-century modes of viewing and ask questions.<sup>32</sup> The label says that "These pictures were popular because the inclusion of the little girl [worker] showed a family's wealth." And "which children in these pictures had a childhood? How would you feel if you cared for an infant who gets a childhood when you don't?" Also, on the wall are quotes from girls who performed such labor, some of them now well-known historical figures, such as abolitionist and author Harriet Jacobs, who wrote in 1861 of the family that enslaved her, "I was . . . the property of their little daughter."<sup>33</sup> Pernella Ross remembered her childhood in early twentieth century North Carolina: "From the time a girl can stand—she's made to work. Girls are

30 On dress codes, see National Women's Law Center, ed., *Dress Coded: Black Girls, Bodies, and Bias in D.C. Schools* (Washington, DC: National Women's Law Center, 2017), <https://nwlc.org/resources/dresscoded/>.

31 Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 4.

32 We acknowledge that twenty-first century audiences will see these photos differently than their nineteenth-century counterparts would have.

33 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 11.



started early with work—no play ever for a girl. That’s just how they was on girls. Work, work, work.”<sup>34</sup> Because the photos intentionally mislead the viewer, inviting them to see these girls as well-dressed, at rest, and silent, pairing them with laboring girls’ own words gives them a voice and raises questions about the disjuncture between the image and the words.

In this section visitors also encounter more familiar images of Lewis Hine and other early twentieth-century photojournalists and reformers. These include girls in southern textile mills and in radium watch factories in New Jersey. Although viewers may be familiar with these images, we included them because the NMAH owns much of the industrial machinery and products associated with these tragic histories. At the NMAH’s forbearer, the US National Museum, curators worked closely with industry to document technological change and new “advances” such as radium. The museum also acquired objects from the American Textile History Museum in Lowell just as the work on this exhibition began. These early objects, including a throstle twister from the 1840s and a tiny apron worn by Emma Porter, a drawing girl in a Rhode Island tile mill in the 1920s, allowed us to show the scale of the machinery set against the small stature of child workers. The size of the apron is a powerful reminder that the wearer was a young girl.

The compelling stories of “radium girls” sit at the center of this gallery on an oversized watch-shaped table with a luminous glow. Although seen as a miracle substance in the early twentieth century, radium was deadly. Young women hired for their cheap, expendable labor painted glow-in-the-dark numbers on watch faces, often licking the tips of the brushes to make finer points and sharper results. As historian Kate More demonstrates in her recent book, they became horrifying casualties of radium poisoning.<sup>35</sup> Although manufacturers ignored the poisonings, the young women themselves spoke out, sharing their stories with newspapers, taking companies to court, and working to establish health and safety laws. We relate the drama of the girls’ stories through quotes and images. But unlike the young drawing girl’s apron, the museum’s holdings, which included watches and a manufacturer’s exhibit board with a vial of radium, only tell the manufacturer’s side of the story. (Unfortunately, a high reading on the Geiger counter meant that even after almost a century, the object was too hot to display.)

Lastly, Work zeroes in on girls engaged in agricultural labor, a practice that has a long history in the United States.<sup>36</sup> These photographs make the invisible work of

34 Quoted in Rita G. Koman, “Servitude to Service: African-American Women as Wage Earners,” *OAH Magazine of History* (Winter 1997), 42–49. On African American girls working as domestic laborers, see Elizabeth Clark Lewis, *Living in, Living Out: African American Domesticity in Washington, D.C., 1910–1940* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 42; Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, rev ed., 1997), 9.

35 Kate More, *The Radium Girls: The Dark Story of America’s Shining Women* (Chicago: Sourcebooks, 2018).

36 Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 32. See also Maria Elena Durazo, “Maria

young agricultural workers visible. Few Americans know that farms and farming enjoy critical exemptions from child labor laws.<sup>37</sup> Contemporary photographs by David Bacon provide a backdrop and, again, a sense of scale for objects worn by young Latina pickers and their words. These objects, collected for the exhibition, are poignant icons of what girls experience in these working conditions. For instance, Monica Camacho's objects, a dark blue hoodie printed with El Camino Junior High School logo, a "75 Years of Excellence" baseball hat, and some cotton bandanas, were all the gear she had to protect herself from the sun, pesticides, and the threat of sexual assault on the farms where she worked. These objects beg recognition of girls' labor and the dangers that they still face while working. Although young women joined labor movements in the early twentieth century to eradicate child labor, those movements failed to protect agricultural workers and therefore address the problems of children who worked instead of going to school or enjoying a sheltered childhood.

The next gallery also takes on thorny issues regarding health and wellness. The section titled Wellness explores "Body talk" or the discourses that shape not just the behaviors but also the bodies of girls. Here we claim that girls' bodies are "community property" and subject to a range of community aspirations, advice, criticism, and even experimentation that doesn't happen with boys. From pageants to menstrual periods, these are stories about the pressures girls face in defining their own gender and sexual identities. We borrowed the idea of community property from *New York Times* advice columnist Philip Galanes. On Father's Day 2018 he answered a letter from a teenage girl whose fashion choices were regularly criticized by her father and brother. Galanes took the opportunity to not just reply but to comment more generally on the plight of girls, writing, "I often hear from girls that their parents and schools obsess over what they wear and how they look. Whether this is positioned as minimizing the temptation for boys to behave badly (a.k.a. victim blaming) or just commenting nonstop like your dad does, the message is the same—and all wrong: Women's bodies are community property."<sup>38</sup> Several short vignettes grow out of this idea in the gallery.

The first of these focused on beauty pageants. The museum's collection of Miss America artifacts provided a deep pool of research to dive into as well as some blingy objects to draw folks to this gallery. The young women we profiled often

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Elena Durazo: Labor Leader," in *Chasing the Harvest: Migrant Workers in California Agriculture*, ed. Gabriel Thompson (New York: Verso, 2017), Kindle Edition, 2747; "Teens of the Tobacco fields: Child Labor in the United States Tobacco Farming," Human Rights Watch website, December 9, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/09/teens-tobacco-fields/child-labor-united-states-tobacco-farming#>.

<sup>37</sup> For the US Department of Labor Fair Labor Standards Act exemptions, see: <https://webapps.dol.gov/elaws/whd/flsa/cl/exemptions.asp>. See also Marsha Mercer, "Children as Young as 10 Can Do Farm Work in Some States," Marcia Mercer blog, August 30, 2013, <http://www.marshamercer.com/2013/08/statelinecom-aug-30-2013-children-work.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Philip Galanes, "I Know It's Almost Father's Day. But, Dad, Can You Not?" *New York Times*, June 14, 2018.

chaffed at the expectations placed on them but also had complex feelings about the pageants. Some, such as Yolanda Betbeze Fox, Miss America 1954, used the platform to critique Miss America's focus on the female body and its promotion of the male gaze. Fox had entered the competition to win a scholarship and to possibly get a break as a professional singer; after winning the crown she refused to don Jansen swimsuits in photos that highlighted her body rather than her talent. On the other hand, Joyce Warner used her involvement in the 1971 Miss Black America pageant to challenge assumptions about beauty and race. Warner underscored the importance for "[a girl to] believe in herself and to know that the mere fact that her skin tones are different do not make her ugly. She is beautiful and needs to know and feel that."<sup>39</sup> Yet, one year later Warner would accuse pageant organizers of "exploiting black girls."<sup>40</sup> In a complicated fashion, Pamela Fong found the Miss Chinatown pageant made her "become Chinese," giving her a sense of belonging and greater appreciation of her community and heritage.<sup>41</sup>

From the mid-nineteenth century to the present, a growing class of professionals in medicine, psychology, and public health, among other fields, have produced a voluminous amount of instruction about girls' bodies and prescriptions for their social well-being.<sup>42</sup> To represent this literature, we created a three-dimensional tornado of advice at the center of the gallery. The eight-foot-high sculpture consists of a large spiraling form carrying fluttering advice books across the landscape of girlhood. A table anchors the sculpture and provides a hub for visitors to comment and share their reflections and advice. Scrapbooks on the table explain some of the historical context and show change over time in guidance about menstruation, hygiene, dating, and marriage. Audiences can annotate the pages or add their experiences to a blank book. Drawings of girls sitting on the floor shrugging their shoulders and plugging their ears decorate the bottom of the table.

This sculpture helps contextualize the history of puberty and menstruation.<sup>43</sup> The exhibit displays an array of menstrual products in a case giving visitors a sense of the products that were created and marketed to girls to control odors and other naturally occurring bodily functions. This case is accompanied by a flipbook revealing changes in menstrual product advertising, along with short excerpts from different films to illustrate how the media has talked about girls' bodies. In order to counter the shame and embarrassment that often surrounds public discussions

39 Mary Ann Foster, "Joyce Speaks Out: The Young Need a Leader," *Tallahassee Democrat*, September 19, 1971.

40 "Miss Black America 'Exploited,'" *The Pensacola Journal*, August 23, 1972.

41 Lacey Fosburgh, "Miss Chinatown to Become Chinese," *The Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 1974.

42 On the body as historical evidence, see Brumberg, *The Body Project*, xvii-xxiii.

43 On marketing of menstrual products, Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 29-55 and Lara Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period: Menstruation in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2009). Brumberg discusses the trend toward openness about periods, *The Body Project*, 45-52, but also helpful is Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity* (New York: Arcade, 2017).

of menstruation and female reproduction, a panel highlights the euphemisms and slang people have used to refer to periods.

This section invites visitors to think about the history of sex education, starting in the early 1900s.<sup>44</sup> A portrait of nurse and birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, from the National Portrait Gallery, hangs over a larger-than-life page from the February 9, 1913 *New York Call*. The page ran only the sentence “What Every Girl Should Know—NOTHING!” Sanger had written a series of articles on reproduction and health that Postmaster General Anthony Comstock had deemed obscene for addressing such subjects as syphilis. She later published the articles in 1916 in a book titled *What Every Girl Should Know*.<sup>45</sup> Sanger’s portrait is accompanied by a public health poster on young women as carriers of syphilis and adjacent to three discussions about reproductive rights and birth control. The exhibit acknowledges that Sanger embraced eugenics even as she championed women’s self-determination and increased girls’ and women’s knowledge about their bodies. The section includes public health films from the silent era to the 1960s; discusses birth control vs. abstinence in historical context; and presents the lesser-known history of testing a new generation of birth control technology on brown and Black girls and women.

This section also asked visitors to think about the history and lived experience of the gendered binaries that girlhood naturalizes. As public historians we offer personal stories to foster greater understanding, and hopefully, empathy. We were lucky that a fellow public historian, Ryan, co-curated this section with us. Ryan, who was born intersex, raised a girl, but transitioned to male, offered his story, family photos, diaries, and objects. He also gave us the title for the case “Not Checking the Boxes.” His seventh-grade diary, high school letter jacket, and umpire’s mask anchor the case. An avid baseball player and umpire, Ryan shares with readers the significance of his umpire’s mask, saying, “For so many years I lived and hid behind my mask . . . You need your mask to protect you from harm, but if you don’t remove it (or leave it on too long) it obstructs your view and prevents you from seeing.” The exhibition team hopes that encountering Ryan’s objects and story will help anyone visiting this exhibition see that girlhood is a construct; it has the power to shape people, but people can push

44 On the topic of sex education in the United States in the early twentieth century, see Alexandra M. Lord, *Condom Nation: The U.S. Government’s Sex Education Campaign from World War I to the Internet* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) and Alexandra M. Lord, “‘Naturally Clean and Wholesome’: Women, Sex Education, and the United States Public Health Service, 1918–1928,” *Social History of Medicine* 17, no. 3 (December 2004): 423–41. On American’s worry over and definitions of female delinquency, see Michael A. Rembis, *Defining Deviance: Sex, Science, and Delinquent Girls, 1890–1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885–1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

45 Margaret Sanger, *What Every Girl Should Know* (New York, NY: Max N. Maisel, 1916) and Margaret Sanger, *What Every Girl Should Know* (Springfield, IL: United Sales Co., 1920).

back, fashion their own identities, and reshape notions of what it means to be a girl, a boy, or a human being.

The last gallery, Fashion (Remix) explores how girls remade style from the bottom up and used their clothing to speak. This section looks like a fashion spread from a scrapbook; clothing is displayed along three long walls papered with cutouts of fashion inspirations. These include sewing patterns, magazines, newspapers, paper dolls, images of movie and music celebrities, and photos of girls who adopted edgy, subversive styles. Disruptions are the main theme here, rather than mainstream culture. We wanted to show how girls use fashion to shape their public selves, raise the hackles of adults, challenge cultural norms, and support a cause.<sup>46</sup> Sometimes this has meant pushing the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable, and sometimes it meant using clothing and make-up as a political statement.

The fashion scrapbook is the only section of the exhibition organized chronologically, moving from the 1890s to 2010s. The team pulled the timeline back to the early nineteenth century by placing an 1810s dressing table at the center of the gallery and discussing the use of make-up over time. The exhibit highlights how girls have used cosmetics to claim maturity and declare who they are and what they believe, sometimes in accord with their families and sometimes in contrast to them. Our interpretation also makes clear that girls' agency in making up has often been shaped by social and commercial forces.<sup>47</sup> For instance, cosmetics have historically served to whiten or lighten skin, and so generations of girls expressed themselves through make-up largely within the confines of traditional racial hierarchies. The display emphasizes how make-up connects girls to the politics of race, gender, and

46 On creating a public self from fashion see Vicky Ruiz, "Star Struck': Acculturation, Adolescence, and the Mexican American Woman, 1920–1940," in *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America*, ed. Elliot West and Paula Petrick (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 61–80 and Vicky Ruiz, "The Flapper and the Chaperone: Cultural Constructions of Identity and Heterosexual Politics among Adolescent Mexican American Women, 1920–1950," in Inniss, *Delinquents & Debutantes*, 199–225. Also on the 1920s, see Linda Simon, *Lost Girls: The Invention of the Flapper* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), 138, 202. On teen culture in the postwar period and the remaking of fashion aimed specifically at teen girls, see Kelly Schrum, "Teena Means Business': Teenage Girls' Culture and Seventeen Magazine, 1944–1950," in *Delinquents & Debutantes*, 134–63. On the 1950s to 1970s, see Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style and The Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017). Her *Dressed in Dreams* was published after we had written the script; Tanisha C. Ford, *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to the Power of Fashion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019).

47 See Jennifer Van Horn, *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 214–72 and Jane Adlin, *Vanities: Art of the Dressing Table* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013). On the history of make-up, particularly the ideal of whiteness, see Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 25–28, 32, 34, 40–43; and with regard to whiteness in early America, see Van Horn, *Power of Objects*, 273–341; Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 173–180.

Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 63–65.

Catherine Gourley, *Gibson Girls and Suffragists: Perceptions of Women 1900–1918* (Minneapolis, MN: Twentieth First Century Books, 2008), 47.

self-fashioning during adolescence. We communicate these ideas by discussing the concealed compartments of early 1800s dressing tables that hid whitening agents, by presenting the limited range of early commercial cosmetics that also focused on skin lightening a century later, and by centering girls of color who reveal in our interpretive video how racism and colorism continues to shape the cosmetics industry and girls' use of cosmetics.

The larger-than-life fashion spread that surrounds the dressing table extends these themes. The museum's collections helped us give form to various clothing styles, from the elaborate hats of the 1910s, to oversized zoot suits worn by young Chicanas in the 1940s, to circle skirts designed and sewn by girls in the 1950s. For the 1960s and 1970s, we drew on Tanisha Ford's *Liberated Threads*, and mined the collections to find a dashiki and platform shoes to pair with a Pop Art poster of political activist and style icon Angela Davis. The 1980s and 1990s enabled us to connect the feminist voices of girls in zines to the confrontational, disruptive fashion and lyrics of punk musicians such as Michelle Gonzales and Karen Allman.<sup>48</sup>

The collections, however, did not cover all the stories we hoped to include, as they tended to focus on stories of dominant white cultures. This was true, for example, for material related to proms. Inspired by *Teen Vogue*'s recent inclusive coverage of proms, we sought to complicate the usual interpretation of them. The magazine, although continuing to use prom to leverage readership and advertising sales, showcases diverse groups of teen writers and how they have co-opted, revised, and remixed prom to be more inclusive. Of course, this is calculated to pull an even larger group of potential buyers into the consumer practice of the annual spring spectacle. But our team was taken by how teens have used prom as a platform for political speech through their clothing. If one is going to take the stage, why not also have a voice?

We devoted a prominent case to the cultural politics of prom at the entrance to the fashion gallery. The exhibition opened with a dress worn by Isabella Aiukli Cornell. The red satin dress with wool bodice was designed by Della BigHair-Stump, a member of the Apsáalooke (Crow) tribe who created her own line of designer clothing. Cornell, a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, worked with BigHair-Stump to create a red dress that increased awareness of the movement around Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIW). Cornell, her mother, and their network of women from various tribal communities in Oklahoma allowed the museum to collect and display the dress as another way to underscore this important effort to end violence against Native women and girls.<sup>49</sup>

48 See Michelle Gonzales, *The Spitboy Rule: Tales of a Xicana in a Female Punk Band* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016). On the mostly white riot grrrl scene, see Marcus, *Girls to the Front*.

49 For more on Bella Aiukli Cornell and the prom dress, see Amira Rasool, "These Native Teens Are Representing Designers Through Their Prom Looks," *Teen Vogue*, April 23, 2018. Cornell became an activist in her teens. See Tara Houska, "14-year-old Girl Testifying Against Native American Mascots Says Crowd Shouted 'Git Off the Stage Squaw,'" *HuffPost*, December 6, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/get-off-the-stage-squaw-s\\_b\\_8901086](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/get-off-the-stage-squaw-s_b_8901086).

In the exhibition, while curators provide some historical context on prom, Cornell interprets the dress in her own words. The dress is now part of NMAH's permanent collection.

Similar to the prom installation, a set of free-standing cases pairs individual young women's stories with timely topics. We know from visitors and museum scholarship that biographies can help make history relevant.<sup>50</sup> *Girlhood* uses five biographies that float outside the larger, themed galleries. Titled "A Girl's Life," each case plumbs one girl's story as a window on the following topics: Title IX, coming-of-age rituals, girls' organizations, women's rights, and transgender experiences. Most draw on existing collections. For instance, a case on organizations draws on a long-term collecting project around Girl Scouts and Camp Fire Girls. Other topics, such as coming of age and transgender experiences, led to new collecting. Now the museum has objects from a bat mitzvah in Wisconsin, a cotillion in Chicago, and a quinceañera that spanned the Mexico-Texas border. Along with the objects, we collected supporting materials such as scrapbooks, but also asked the donors to explain why these objects and events are important to them.

#### Talk Back: Audiences Have Their Say

The team also created opportunities for audiences to talk back in the exhibition and online. The audiences we imagined were not necessarily girls alone, although we know that people under the age of eighteen make up about 50 percent of the museum's in-person audience. Rather we wanted to spark conversation among intergenerational audiences about growing up female. So, we imagined grandmothers, aunts, mothers, sisters, as well as fathers, brothers and sons talking about the complications of girlhood. The "Girl's Life" cases all include space for visitors to share their ideas and memories around the topics.

To return to the question that opened this essay and framed the exhibition: What do you imagine when you think of the word girlhood? Some staff worried that only girls or women could answer this question. The team was asked repeatedly if this exhibition would appeal to boys. Because girlhood is relational and brothers, fathers, uncles, boys, and men participate in shaping girlhood, it should speak to everyone. We included telling examples of advice about and for girls written by men. But even more fundamentally, our hope is that all audiences will understand and discuss how gender is something we make and remake. Another answer is that NMAH has a fair number of exhibitions that may not appeal to boys—such as the First Ladies' gowns or Julia Child's kitchen—but that doesn't prevent us from considering the role of First Ladies or the influence of the French Chef. Further, if we had created a more traditional history exhibit on women's

50 For the use biography in museums see Kate Hill, "Introduction: Museums and Biographies—Telling Stories about People, Things and Relationships," and Anne Whitelaw, "Women, Museums and the Problem of Biography," both in Hill, ed., *Museums and Biographies: Stories, Objects, Identities* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 1–10 and 75–86.



Fashion wall. (Credit: Jaclyn Nash)

suffrage, it is doubtful that we would face same concern about attracting the interest of boys. The question seems to imply, then, that girls and exhibitions about girlhood specifically need to appeal to boys.

Before exiting the exhibition, visitors can leave their reflections on postcards. The postcards have prompts based on the big questions in the exhibition: Has someone else ever made a decision that affected your body? What did you learn in school about how to be a girl? What do you tell the world through your clothes? Did you or anyone in your family work as a child? And, most timely: What do politicians need to know about girls today? The intention is to create a living exhibition where audiences share their stories and move the discussion forward. This space may become even more dynamic as the exhibition travels to localities that can host regionally specific programs and invite people to share in the space. One can imagine the exhibition in agricultural regions where girls are picking produce and programming that opens a dialogue on what it is like to work in those conditions. We will archive cards and responses at the NMAH for future research on girlhood.

Other programming is in the works but has been slowed by the pandemic. But interested parties can look forward to a robust website that will include not only the full text for the exhibition and the media pieces, but materials for PK-12 teaching, blogs, and an 3D exploration of the clothing displayed throughout the exhibition. Working with the Digital Program Office of the Smithsonian, we digitized most of





Design drawing of talk back wall with postcards. (Credit: H+R Design)

the costumes, adding annotations that reveal the object's design, history, and conservation. In addition, the American Women's History Initiative is helping to expand the digital assets, which will include an interactive Learning Lab where visitors can create their own zines using materials and art inspired by the exhibition.

## Reflections

Writing this report has allowed us to reflect on this exhibition process and interpretation. Our team argued that girls, despite barriers of age, gender, or race, have lived public lives and had public voices. Instead of characterizing them as the leaders of tomorrow, suggesting that they can make an impact once they've grown up, we cast them as leaders of the present. Although the exhibition is focused on girls in the past, as public historians we hope to touch contemporary conversations, particularly those led by girls. Can this exhibition serve as a platform for understanding the past and help rethink what we imagine girlhood to be and what girls can do? Can we make this exhibition a setting for what David Carr calls "the formative cultural meditation that is the practical work of civil society"?<sup>51</sup> We hope so. We hope this exhibit provides greater historical context for the ways in which girlhood has been created and maintained, and how girls have worked to change it over time in the United States. We hope this is a human portrayal of girlhood led by the voices and lived experiences of girls—girls who walked varied historical paths and who left their mark. We hope it is honest and as authentic as we could make it, not shying away from difficult or controversial topics. And we hope it does not leave history in the past but makes it useful for the present.

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<sup>51</sup> Carr, *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*, 39.

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