Daughtering: Girls, Their Feminism, and Their Mothers

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the everyday political lives of girls in the era of the spectacularized activist girl. It explores how girls negotiate and feel about their activism, their place within ongoing social movements, and their relationships with their mothers and communities. From September 2021 to April 2022, I conducted a series of semi-structured in-depth Zoom interviews with ten activist daughters (aged 11-20) residing in Canada, as well as their mothers and mother figures. The overarching goal of this project is to complicate popular images of girl activists as singular, heroic, and exceptional by centring everyday girls' activist efforts without isolating their political actions from their family and community contexts. I argue that mother-daughter relationships have been underexplored in girls' studies, and I interrogate how girls' roles as daughters inform their political worldviews to explore the connections between the personal and political in girls' lives. I analyzed the mother-daughter interviews through feminist affect theory and an adapted psychosocial model to gain a deeper understanding of not only what politicized girls and their mothers are doing, but also how their thoughts, feelings, and desires inform and resonate through these actions. The personal and political emerged as so intertwined that both mothers and daughters emphasized their early relationships with family members when narrating their stories of developing their activist and feminist consciousness. Whether these relationships served as positive or negative examples, they were still significant in shaping how the mothers and daughters situated their identities as feminists and activists. As the participants worked towards what they saw as an ideal (or at least possible) future, they had to negotiate what strategies, identities, relationships, and ideologies from their past and present that they wanted to reject and carry forward. Both mothers and daughters are in a constant state of becoming, where they never reach a finalized identity, political stance, or relationship dynamic. The mothers were no firmer in their beliefs than their daughters, and they were just as immersed in the process of figuring out how to navigate the world. This process of negotiation does not end with childhood and, in fact, girlhood persists.

Dedication

For my parents, especially my mum, who inspired this project.

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1. **Chapter 1: Introduction**

At the end of my year of fieldwork interviewing activist girls and their mothers and mother figures, I interviewed my mother, hoping to find the kind of insightful anecdote or exchange that might reveal something about my own feminist origin story. I interviewed my mother the same way I interviewed my other participants. Instead of going to see her, I conducted the interview over Zoom from the solitude of my apartment while she sat in her rectory office. I walked her through the usual ethics protocol and asked if I could record the interview. As always, I asked, "How would you like to introduce yourself today?" and this is where I realized that I would not be able to follow through with analyzing my own mother-daughter relationship along with the others. The very first line of her introduction was to say "Oh, I'll introduce myself as your very proud mother!" before stating her full name, introducing her husband and children, and then describing her role as an Anglican parish priest and archdeacon in very formal terms.

As much as this was a fairly standard introduction, I cannot describe the bizarre effect it produced. Until this final interview, I had never quite understood why participants would become confused when I asked them to introduce themselves or each other. They usually laughed or asked what exactly I wanted to know. I thought the question was straightforward enough, but when my mother answered, I realized that I was asking people to describe something so familiar that it doesn't usually need to be verbalized or even given much thought. There was something deeply strange about hearing this series of information, all of which I already knew, formalized into an interview answer by my mother. In the end, the interview proceeded as normal, and Mum was a good enough sport to play along and answer all of my usual questions about feminism and her relationship with her daughter. Still, I could barely transcribe the interview, and I never coded it as I had intended.

Perhaps this interaction felt off because I am a dutiful daughter, and I did not want to put my mother through some kind of exposé. I learned very early that my mum was under a level of scrutiny in her parishes that my dad, also a priest, did not have to endure. When my parents had separate churches, my brother and I mostly attended my mum's, so the parish could see that their first woman cleric was, first and foremost, a good mother. I know that this weighs on her, and she often asks me and my brother if we wish she had stayed home with us, or, disturbingly, if we

wish she had changed her last name to our father's. She can never seem to believe us when we assure her that we were content with our childhoods.

My role as a rectors' daughter is probably the underlying cause of this dissertation's research direction. As I've experienced it, being a daughter is both a private and public relationship. When I set out to research a rising tide of youth activism, I found I could not make sense of this new generation of activists without understanding their work as part of much longer, intergenerational struggles. Still, as much as I believe that the personal and political must be understood together, I remain split between knowing that daughtering warrants further feminist consideration and feeling that I should not ask other people to divulge something I am also uncomfortable exploring in the context of my own life. Even from the outset, I knew that the topic of mothers and daughters was both politically and personally overwhelming, and I knew it would demand a level of vulnerability that I was not prepared to give.

I have generally dreaded discussing my research with strangers because I am still rarely prepared for their response. Some people react with an accusatory interest and want to learn more about how, exactly, I will blame mothers for their daughters' maladjustments or add to the ledger of young feminists' inability to take up the cause. Other reactions are more positive, and more often than not, my work will be met with a startlingly revealing personal story from a stranger or colleague. I generally describe my research with a simple: "It's about activist girls and their mothers and mother figures," and this alone will prompt exasperated stories from mothers about their rejecting teenage daughters or horrified shudders from daughters long estranged from their parents. Once, on the occasion of our first meeting, someone I once worked with excitedly asked if I was studying the ways that "Boomer mothers had fucked up their Millennial daughters" and shared that her own mother, an alcoholic, had neglected her to the point that her neurodivergence went undiscovered until she was well into adulthood. I confessed that that was not quite my area of study.

Talking about my research also invites personal questions I do not want to answer. When asked: "So, are you an activist?" I respond with a flatly ashamed "no" before giving some facile generality about how the youth of today seem so much more politically engaged than my own generation. "Do you have children?" another nervous "no," as I admit just how unqualified I might be for taking on this kind of work. "What is your mother like?" A moment of panic as I calculate whether revealing the archdeacon's profession will ruin the tone of the interaction.

“Are you expecting?” This was just a rude thing someone said to me once because I was wearing a high-waisted skirt, but I still feel like my work invited the question somehow.

In her book *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011), Claire Hemmings outlines how feminists make sense of their current feminist subjectivity through ‘glosses’ of feminist history that try to reckon with these complicated legacies. These take the shape of ‘progress,’ ‘loss,’ and ‘return’ narratives where feminism is either improving, declining, or returning in some improved form. Previous cohorts of feminists pass down complicated legacies that newer cohorts are both grateful for and resent. As Sophie Lewis points out in *Enemy Feminisms* (2025), many forms of feminism have not been passively exclusionary or myopic, but actively collude with the fascist violence of colonization, white supremacy, and patriarchy. From Hemmings’ (2011) perspective, a generational approach cannot reckon with the kinds of enemy feminisms that Lewis describes because history is made into inevitable generational cycles with no room to think about feminism across time and space differently. Hemmings argues that feminist histories are often told in terms of generations, no matter the narrative's substance. She criticizes this approach to feminist history as linear, developmental, ageist, Western-centric, and generally antithetical to intergenerational feminist solidarity (149). She warns against using a mother-daughter, or any generational framework for feminist historiography, because it forecloses other ways of thinking about feminist history and feminist futures.

However, while this is a useful critique for feminist historiography, people have mothers, daughters, and other relatives who are inextricable from their political consciousness. When people tell their stories of becoming feminists or activists, and situate their current politics, these narratives often involve a return to childhood and early stories of family life. Even Hemmings cannot narrate her own feminist origin story without her mother and grandmother. In a 2024 interview about her life and work, Hemmings begins by crediting her mother and maternal grandmother as her first models, for both better and worse, of how women must fight for survival and liberation (Das 2024). Despite her criticism of mother-daughter stories as poor form for feminist historiography, Hemmings still cannot situate herself without them.

Mother-daughter stories emerge as a compelling approach to feminist history because they involve both a long-term political project and people’s familial relationships with their mothers and daughters. These are not distant questions of political theory, but implicate our close

relationships with the people who align with and transmit these varied feminisms. Despite my own discomfort with bringing mother-daughter relationships into this analysis, in this project, I embrace the moments where feminist and familial histories coalesce for activist girls, even when this reveals complicated and ambivalent inheritances.

In the late 2010s, media coverage of politically engaged children and youth, particularly heroic activist girls, proliferated widely. Young people like education activist Malala Yousafzai, water protector Autumn Peltier, and climate activist Greta Thunberg became household names worldwide. These girls were framed through discourses of extraordinary girlhood and tended to be positioned as singular and exceptional (Brown 2016; Raby and Raddon 2015; Raby and Sheppard 2021; Taft 2020; Taft and O'Kane 2023). Still, despite the spotlight on exceptional youngsters, there was a feeling that these activists were a sign of a global shift toward a new and progressively politicized generation. This was the context when I began my dissertation research. Though I was interested in what seemed to be girls' increasing political participation, I did not quite believe that this dramatic shift toward youth activist movements was as sudden or as isolated to young people as it appeared. I was curious to explore how the girls outside the spotlight came to their politics and made sense of their activist work as embedded community members with close and complex relationships with the people around them.

Though young people have a distinct worldview informed by how age shapes their social location, no one is born an activist. Intergenerational conversations are essential in helping young people contextualize their experiences and learn from more seasoned members of their communities (Allen and Jaramillo-Sierra 2015; Gordon and Taft 2011; Grealy et al. 2018; Hopkins and Pain 2007; Morris et al. 2022; Taft 2014). Emilie Zaslow (2018) describes how girls encounter "feminism at the dinner table" (99-100) when they start raising complaints about sexism at school with their parents at home. The young people Zaslow interviewed about their activist work began to feel like they could move from enduring sexist dress codes to confronting them because their parents actively encouraged them to see their experiences at school as part of a systemic social issue that they could collectively confront. Girls' political perspectives emerge from their unique social location at the intersection of their age and gender, and power systems like race, class, and ability further inform their political worldviews. It follows that if we should understand girls' politics as intersectional, we should also contextualize them as intergenerational.

To undertake this contextual and intergenerational approach to girls' activism, I interviewed politically engaged girls and involved their mothers and mother figures in the interview process. From September 2021 to May 2022, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews over Zoom with eleven activist daughters (aged 11-20) and eight of their mothers and mother figures. I combined one-on-one and paired interviews with daughters and mothers to explore the kinds of political thinking and affective landscapes that emerge when interviewing activist girls not only *about* their mothers but *with* their mothers.

I chose to centre my analysis on the relationships between activist girls and their mothers and mother figures because mother-daughter relationships are not well explored in the field of girls' studies. Girls inherit the social problems they seek to resolve with their activism, which means they inherit longstanding political struggles, in part, from their mothers. The mother-daughter relationship felt like an effective place to examine the connections between the personal and political in girls' lives and consider the complicated inheritances of gender, feminism, activism, and the expectations that surround the identities and practices of mothering and daughtering. By using daughterhood as the locus of connections between girls' political participation and family relationships, I look to centre girls as people inhabiting a unique social location at the intersection of their age and gender, but without isolating them and disconnecting their political activism from their family and community contexts.

Positioning politically active girls as daughters may feel like a disciplining intervention. Feminist scholars of girls and girlhood, including Angela McRobbie (1991), Anita Harris (2001; 2004), and Ruth Nicole Brown (2009), all point out that when girls try to take up public space, they are often pushed back by sexist harassment or assumptions about wayward sexuality. Emphasizing girls' status as daughters feels like a way to return them to the confines of the domestic sphere where they are tethered to supervising families instead of public actors with their own agency.

Feminists, who generally critique how the family positions women, have long pointed out that daughters are often regarded as a family's possession. In an article reflecting on her relationship with her father as a "Filipina, feminist/peminist, dutiful daughter," Celia T. Bardwell-Jones (2021) explains that her father abruptly disowned her when he realized she was published under her married name and not her maiden name, which was, of course, his name (384). In a project that explores girls' political participation, it can feel demeaning to frame their

activism through a role whose boundaries and obligations have been drawn by patriarchy. Girls have their own complex identities and experiences, but their importance is often reduced to their connection to the nearest relevant adult. Forgetting about daughtering may help to avoid the status quo, where we are only inclined to care about girls because they are someone's daughter, and that someone is the one who deserves our respect.

However, it is precisely because daughtering is at risk of conservative co-optation that it deserves serious feminist attention. Despite its many problems, I am not satisfied with the isolation of not being anyone's daughter because we always arrive late to a world that already exists. It is precisely because "daughter" evokes the fraught concepts of biology, patriarchal kinship, and linear time that it is well-suited to disrupt these very institutions and I refuse to cede the family as an institution with no liberatory queer or feminist potential.

Patriarchal family structures are neither natural nor eternal, and systems of domination like colonization enforce their confining gendered and sexual binaries. Sometimes, asserting that one is a daughter is a way to reclaim something that has been lost or assert a new kind of connection beyond patriarchal parameters. The first lesbian civil rights organization in the United States called themselves the Daughters of Bilitis as a nod to a work of fiction about Sappho and the Isle of Lesbos (Gallo 2007). Queer people, who are so often familiar with family rejection, still use the familiar language of family to not only describe present relationships but assert an enduring history–if not eternity–in a world that always accuses us of being new. Black feminist thought also takes the family seriously as a site of both oppression and resistance and examines the connections between mothers and daughters under a system of white supremacy that devalues and demonizes Black women in general and Black mothers in particular (Hill Collins 2000; Story 2014).

Indigenous feminists point out that decolonization offers a liberatory framework where intergenerational relationships do not have to exist in oppressive hierarchies or rely on biological essentialism. For example, Kari Dawn Wuttunee and Jennifer Altenberg (Wuttunee et al. 2019) described how they helped bring together a small group of Indigenous girls and women to make Ribbon Skirts to reclaim traditional teachings and reimagine a collective future without gender-based and colonial violence (63). Notably, Wuttunee and Altenberg et al. point out that this work is not just about building intergenerational solidarity but doing so in ways that intentionally reclaim the matrilineal ancestral and familial relationships that colonization has attacked and

devalued (74). Embracing matrilineal teachings and coming together as nieces, aunties, and grandmothers was essential to the group's decolonial work. However, this was not a conservative reclamation. Wuttunee et al. noted that the group also acknowledged that their practice should and could be adapted to reflect a diversity of gender roles and expressions (74).

My interest in the mother-daughter relationship as a site of connection between the personal and political does not mean that I endorse mothering and daughtering as a moral or political obligation to have children or honour one's parents. These are already the hegemonic obligations that degrade women as baby-makers and unpaid caretakers. Women's bodies and reproduction are treated like a public resource whose use can be dictated by society for some presumed greater good, and this perpetuates women's second-class status. I want to be clear that I am not attempting to put a feminist spin on the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the nuclear family by arguing that women should all act as self-sacrificing mothers and dutiful daughters to the feminist movement. My interest in the complexities and potentials in the practices of mothering and daughtering is not an attempt at apologetics to encourage women to reproduce or argue that motherhood is already a feminist institution. For many daughters, their families are places where they have endured discrimination, rejection, and violence. For some, rejecting daughtering is a way to assert a rejection of oppressive familial bonds. Like most queers, I do not have an idyllic view of the family as it currently exists under white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. I am deeply wary of the ways that discussions of mothering, daughtering, and even women's relationships in this context can slide into romantic notions of gender essentialism that are then weaponized against trans people and people of colour. I certainly have nothing to say about genetics or biology in this text, and neither did any of the people I interviewed. My point was not to isolate this relationship to make any insinuations about how every daughter needs a mother or how there's something inherently feminist or sacred about the mother-daughter relationship. I do not even necessarily believe that there is some kind of inherent bond, love, or even conflict between daughters and mothers that cannot be found in other kinds of relationships.

However, there is still something unique about this relationship. There are endless exceptions and potentials to be found among each configuration of mothering and daughtering. Still, even if there is no exact quality of the mother-daughter relationship that proves to be inherent or universal, it is still enduringly understood as a special kind of relationship. Even

when families are found wanting and are experienced as sites of rejection, violence, and exploitation, the language of family, mothering, and daughtering is still reconfigured into chosen families and other kinds of kinship networks. Daughtering remains an intriguing site of potential despite the weight of its current history and configurations. Questions surrounding what constitutes a family and who is recognized socially and legally as mothers, daughters, and other kinds of kin are embedded in histories of white supremacy, colonization, and eugenics that continue to resonate in even the most generous conceptions of what makes a family. The mother-daughter relationship is overwhelming in its history and meaning, and these layers of complexity defy simplistic resolutions to questions of what this relationship means, what material realities it involves, or what kinds of feminist potential it holds.

When I began theorizing what girlhood is and what it does to its inhabitants, I turned to Monica Swindle's (2011) notion of girl as affect. She/it describes girl not as an identity, gender, sex, or body, but instead as "affect that sticks to certain bodies mattering them by creating the surfaces, boundaries, and relations that seem to delimit them, the affect that animates girldom, and that is felt as girl, though not only by girls." (5). Though there are certain traits associated with normative girlhood, including whiteness, able-bodiedness, heterosexuality, and the physical characteristics we ascribe to cisgender female bodies, girlhood itself contains many generative possibilities. While they may each attach very different meanings to girlhood, girls of very different bodies, races, gender identities, or expressions may all claim "girl" as their identity.

This theory of girlhood that prioritizes ambiguity and flux is shared by girls' studies scholars such as Jessica Taft, who point out that because there is no such thing as a "completed" subjectivity where you reach a finalized static identity, we can understand youth as inhabiting the same ongoing process of becoming that occurs throughout the entire lifespan. In *Rebel Girls* (2011), Taft explores the ways that girls do not just make a linear transition from child to adult but instead inhabit multiple kinds of gender performance that are deployed in context-specific settings. This more fluid understanding not only helps to disrupt a linear understanding of girls where girlhood inevitably ends at a certain point and gives way to womanhood, but also helps to generate a more complex understanding of intergenerational relationships that recognizes how all subjectivities are continuously shifting.

The role of being a daughter and the practice of daughtering may change over a lifetime. Still, it is something that "sticks to certain bodies mattering them by creating the surfaces,

boundaries, and relations that seem to delimit them" (Swindle 2011, 5). Girls do daughtering, and there are possibilities for doing daughtering differently, even if past expectations still contour these possibilities in the present. Daughtering can be a way to describe how systems of knowledge and obligation pass between generations, and this does not have to be a strictly linear and hierarchical process. While knowledge may be said to pass "down" to daughters, this process is not unidirectional nor stops once daughters transfer knowledge to their parents and children. Someone may always be a daughter, but some moments and encounters bring this status to the surface. In everyday life, some moments feel more daughterly than others.

As I mentioned earlier, many adult feminists reflect on their lives and work from a "narrating daughter" standpoint, locating themselves as a single link in a much larger chain of action and events. These reflections from adult women often begin with the ways that they first learned feminism or some other form of political participation from their mothers at home (alt et al. 2016; Baker Kline and Baker 1996; deAnda and Geist-Martin 2018; Fouquier 2011; Rastogi and Wampler 1999; Torres 2011). It follows, then, that if girls are not just pre-women, then their mothers are not just post-girls. Significantly, memories of girlhood are integral to narratives of adult feminist consciousness, and it reminds us that adults are not simply post-girls. This return to girlhood, particularly girlhood as a daughter, indicates that girlhood persists into adulthood rather than clearly giving way to some adult form. The mothers in this study were often returned to their own girlhoods and girlhood feelings when they spoke about their daughters. As they described their daughters, they almost always returned to describing their own mothers and how they were and continue to be daughters to their mothers. Many of them had begun to politicize when they were teenagers, and learning new political discourses from their daughters created the same curiosities and challenges in adulthood that they had felt in their youth. In this respect, girlhood is something that girls and their mothers share rather than a point of separation.

This interplay between past and future, as well as existing attachments and new possibilities, drew me to affect theory to analyze how mothers and daughters maintain and reimagine their familial relationships. As Sara Ahmed (2014) points out, politics and emotions are always intertwined; emotions are crucial to the self and the social in ways that both constitute and blur the boundaries between the two (4). How people feel about their current roles and relationships informs their political imaginings, and though these attachments might not be rational, they are deeply felt and consequential. Attachments like "mother" and "daughter"

resonate as roles and identities, but also represent direct attachments to other people. These connections inform how people conceptualize the future and the kinds of possibilities it could contain. Though I am interested in mothering and especially daughtering as both familial roles and relationships, I consider their boundaries expansive and porous. In "Affective Economies" (2004), Sara Ahmed describes how the affects of the everyday resonate through channels of "present histories." There is probably no more evident example of how history always haunts the present than through what is expected of daughters.

Outline

This dissertation examines the contemporary quotidian political lives of girls in the era of the spectacularized activist girl. It explores how girls negotiate and feel about their activism, their place within ongoing social movements, and their relationships with their mothers and communities. When I began the project, I argued that mother-daughter relationships have been underexplored in girls' studies, and I interrogate how girls' roles as daughters inform their political worldviews to explore the connections between the personal and political in girls' lives. The overarching goal of this project is to complicate popular images of girl activists as singular, heroic, and exceptional by centring everyday girls' activist efforts without isolating their political actions from their family and community contexts. I analyzed the mother-daughter interviews through feminist affect theory and an adapted psychosocial model to gain a deeper understanding of not only what politicized girls and their mothers are doing, but also how their thoughts, feelings, and desires inform and resonate through these actions.

The findings from the participants did affirm that close relationships are significant to girls' politics. The process of contextualizing their activist commitments in their family relationships and wider cultural conversations around feminism and activism revealed that the daughter cohort thought deeply about how their actions impacted others and how they were perceived by others. In fact, I found that the personal and political were so intertwined that both mothers and daughters emphasized their early relationships with family members when narrating their stories of developing their activist and feminist consciousness. Whether these relationships served as positive or negative examples, they were still significant in shaping how the mothers and daughters situated their identities as feminists and activists. Any portrait of girls' activism would be incomplete without them.

A major theme was the ambivalent inheritances of daughterhood. As the participants worked towards what they saw as an ideal (or at least possible) future with their work, they had to negotiate what strategies, identities, relationships, and ideologies from their past and present that they wanted to reject and carry forward. Both mothers and daughters are in a constant state of becoming, where they never reach a finalized identity, political stance, or relationship dynamic. The mothers were no firmer in their beliefs than their daughters, and they were just as immersed in the process of figuring out how to navigate the world. The process of negotiation does not end with childhood and, in fact, girlhood persists. Memories and ongoing personal evolution continually bring it to the surface, at times even returning mothers to the feelings and perspectives of their own girlhood. Both cohorts reported that discussing activism, the news, and their encounters with new ways of thinking about the world with each other was a significant way to both develop and sustain the confidence and conviction to take public action. As I argue in the last analysis chapter, shifting notions of gender identity and expression emerged as a salient example of the affective negotiations that take place between mothers and daughters as they navigate a world where gender seems to be changing, and what that means for their politics and relationship.

These findings unfold over six chapters. The dissertation begins with Chapter Two, a literature review where I outline how girls' studies conceptualizes girls and how mothers appear, or rather fail to appear, throughout this scholarship. Chapter Three outlines the theoretical framework, methodology, and methods for the project. In Chapter Four, I outline the media's fixation on activist girls like Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai and explore how the girls I interviewed feel about these images. I found that while girls quickly identify the heroic activist girl archetype as unrealistic, they still internalize a sense of obligation to care for others and take individual responsibility for social problems. In Chapter Five, I explore how activism emerged as a pedagogical process for both mothers and daughters, and how the process of becoming an activist continues over a lifetime. Chapter Six examines how "feminist" emerged as an identity that girls easily embraced and did not come with the same kinds of debates and doubts that girls experienced when they took up the label "activist." However, feminism still proved to be an ambivalent inheritance as both daughters and mothers reckoned with the limitations of past feminist movements and what they felt was possible for a feminist future. These pasts and futures are understood through their own "glosses" (Hemmings 2011) of feminism and this

involved an intertwining of personal life history and wider feminist movement history. Much like how Astrid Henry (2004) describes herself as a dutiful daughter desiring to defend previous generations of feminists to make sense of her own feminism, daughters become defended subjects who make sense of their feminist selves by both protecting and disavowing the feminism (or lack thereof) of their mothers. The final analysis chapter, Chapter Seven, explores how combating transphobia appeared as a key concern among the participants and looks closely at the relationships between mothers and their trans daughters. As the pairs look toward the future, their hopes and anxieties are animated by their close relationships with trans loved ones and their own lived experiences as trans people as they desire feminist futures but struggle with the cruel optimism of striving for a future they may never reach. The dissertation concludes with Chapter Eight, where I offer my final thoughts on daughtering.

Participants

This dissertation involved interviews with eleven daughters and eight mothers/mother figures. Although this is a fairly small sample size, it is still a lot of individuals and relationships to keep organized. I try to reintroduce each participant as I quote them throughout the analysis, but this brief section will serve as a reference for each interviewee and their connection to their respective mother and daughter(s). The case studies are presented in chronological order of their interviews, and each lists the name of the daughter(s) and then their mother/mother figure. I did not conduct a demographic survey to accompany the interviews and instead waited for information about participants' identities, like class, race, or sexual orientation, to emerge in their narratives of their relationships and activist work. With the exception of the final entry, all of the following names are pseudonyms, and I have made other alterations to anonymize the interviewee's locations and other identifiable information.

Suzanna (daughter) and Janet (mother)

Suzanna and Janet, both white and living in the same household in a mid-sized city in Southwestern Ontario, were the first family I interviewed. Janet was in her forties at the time of our interview and had three children, aged 17, 12, and 4. 17-year-old Suzanna, whom her mother often referred to as Suzy, was a Grade 11 student, and most of her activist experiences were connected to her school. Suzanna identified as bisexual and was involved with her school's Gay-Straight-Alliance (GSA). She participated in many protests and walkouts for sex education and the Indigenous victims of residential schools. Mother and daughter also participated in politics

together, citing their annual attendance at the local Take Back the Night march as an important part of their relationship. I interviewed Janet and Suzanna over the course of a month, with each solo and then the pair interview being a week apart.

Amy (daughter) and Lizette (mother)

I reached out to Amy in November of 2021 after coming across a news article about her work advocating for more consent-focused sex education in Ontario and her growing TikTok following. Amy had begun her activist work in high school after taking a class on social justice and organized a large event to discuss sexual violence and sex education. Now 18, Amy was in her first year of university and living away from home in a university residence for the first time. Amy's mother, Lizette, was a retired Catholic School principal. Lizette was raised in a Catholic family in a small Ontario town, and though she agreed with feminism, she often worried about how her daughter's activism would put her at risk. I conducted all three interviews on the same day, beginning with Amy's solo interview, the pair interview, and then Lizette's solo interview.

Stea (daughter) and Claire (mother)

Claire and Stea live in Northern Ontario. When she was living in Vancouver, Claire was involved with a group that assisted gays and lesbians immigrating to Canada, and this is how she met her Finnish wife. At the time of their solo interview, Stea, who is nonbinary, was 18 years old, living at home, and had just been accepted to university. They had also long been involved with the local LGBTQ+ youth centre, where they mentored younger queer people, but they did not necessarily see this as political. They considered their real activist work to be their involvement with actions to get clean running water on the nearby reservation. I interviewed Claire and Stea over a few days in late November and December 2021. However, the audio from the first solo interview with Stea failed to record, and we ended up conducting a second solo interview a week after the initial interview.

Brett (daughter)

Brett was my first participant of the new year, and our interview took place in mid-January of 2022. Brett had been involved in student activism for sex education in Ontario, and we were connected through a mutual colleague when I wrote an article on the subject. At age 20, Brett was living on her own and working as a journalist. Somewhat burned out from her years as a student activist, Brett's feminist writing and cultural analysis were popular online, and she was

active across various platforms. Brett's mother was ill when I was conducting my fieldwork and was not available to be interviewed.

Alexis (daughter) and Kimberly (mother)

I interviewed Kimberly soon after interviewing Brett in mid-January 2022. Kim grew up as a white girl in Apartheid South Africa with a family that participated in anti-apartheid politics. The family moved to Alberta when she was a teenager, and she now lives with her husband and teenage children in British Columbia. Kim's daughter, Alexis, was an 18-year-old university student and an environmental activist who had participated in the anti-logging blockades at the Fairy Creek Watershed in Pacheedaht First Nation territory.

Daisy (daughter), Nicole (daughter), and Jessica (mother)

Nicole, age 13, and her younger sister Daisy, 11, were the youngest participants in the study. Their mother, Jessica, was an artist, a Black feminist community organizer, and a graduate student, and we were connected through mutual colleagues. The three lived in the same household in the GTA with the girls' two brothers and Jessica's mother. Nicole had many hobbies, including writing books, but she was primarily interested in athletics and dreamed of competing in the Olympics. Daisy, the youngest child in the family, aspired to be a veterinarian. I first met the family for the first time for their pair interview. I interviewed Jessica solo the same day, and Daisy and Nicole a few days later.

Ellie (daughter) and Elise (mother)

After a transgender student was attacked at her school, 17-year-old Ellie, who identified as straight and cis, devoted much of her time to organizing an anti-bullying pledge and a unity march in her community. She had attracted some media attention for her efforts, and I reached out to her directly in March of 2022. Elise, who lived in the same small town, was a school guidance counsellor and a family friend to Ellie, who had known her since she was in preschool.Ellie identified Elise as someone who provided the kind of care work in her life, both as a personal and political mentor and supporter, that made her an additional mother in her life. Though they were not related by law or biology, their level of support and care for each other constituted their own kind of mothering and daughtering. Interestingly, Elise had her own teenage daughters who also joined Ellie in her anti-bullying initiatives, and Ellie described her

own mother as very supportive of her work. Despite this, in the pair interview, they both expressed that it would simply be too awkward to participate in a study of relationships with their family members who lived in the same household.

Sam (daughter)

Samantha, who most often went by Sam, was a white first-year university student from Vancouver. Sam had written a book about gender expression for 4- to 8-year-olds, and I reached out to her after finding a news article about her book. When I talked to Sam, she was excited to talk about the book and wrote it because of her own experience as a gender-non-conforming child. However, she did not see her work through the same activist lens I had expected. I interviewed Sam in April 2022, and between her final exams and athletic commitments, she was not available to be interviewed with her mother and did not put me in touch with her.

Danielle (daughter) and Heather (mother)

Heather and Danielle lived together in an apartment in a mid-sized city in Southwestern Ontario. Heather expressed interest in the project in September 2021 but was unavailable to participate until the Spring. Heather was a graduate student and worked for the city, implementing accessibility policies. She was a single mother and had a long history of feminist and disability activism. Danielle, who often went by Dani, identified as a feminist and participated in many extracurricular activities, including some activist participation through school. Danielle had a close relationship with her father, but he worked as an ICU nurse, and she had spent the vast majority of the pandemic with her mother to avoid COVID. I conducted all three interviews with the pair in one afternoon in April 2022.

Buffy (daughter) and Eleanor (mother)

Buffy and Eleanor were the last pair to participate in the study, and I interviewed them in April of 2022. Buffy identified as transgender and a feminist and was interested in a variety of political causes. She attended an independent high school in a major city and was planning to start university in the fall. Eleanor was a university professor who lived with her husband and two daughters. She had a long history of activism, including organizing with ACT UP before attending graduate school.

Hannah (daughter) and Jane (mother)

Though I will situate myself as the researcher in more thorough ways throughout this dissertation, I thought it was only fair that I should introduce myself and my mother alongside the other participants. I, Hannah, conducted the fieldwork for this project during the fourth year of my Ph.D. Program, and it was my first time conducting research interviews. By the time I interviewed my mother in the Fall of 2022, she had been an Anglican priest for thirty years. Jane was ordained in 1992 and is now the rector of an Anglican church in Windsor, Ontario, and serves as the regional archdeacon. She lives with my dad, also a priest, and my brother in the church's rectory. Though it had some unusual quirks (most childhood chores probably don't involve arranging the altar flowers or digging graves), my rectory upbringing essentially adhered to that of an average white middle-class Canadian.

These participants generously shared their personal stories with this study, and their insights were invaluable for this work. As I will explain further in chapter three, they are the experts in their own experiences. My interpretation of their interviews is only a small and incomplete portrait of each of them, and these summaries are only a brief reference for their lives, work, and relationships. I want to acknowledge that my analysis will always be incomplete, but I have tried to contextualize their words as best as possible. Their voices are at the center of this project, and I have endeavoured to quote them at length where possible.

2. Chapter 2: Who's Afraid of Mary Pipher? Looking for the Mother-Daughter Relationship in the Girls' Studies Literature

Introduction

Girls' studies is a field where generational narratives are common, but mothers and mothering are rarely a point of focus. This constitutes a notable gap when scholars often stress the importance of intergenerational relationships, solidarity between girls and adults, and the need for community-focused approaches to girls' lives (Bent 2016; Brown 2016; 2009; de Finney 2014; Winstanley and Bernier 2022; Wuttunee et al. 2019). In fact, the adults who carry out girls' studies research generally avoid anything that could be perceived as replicating the inequality of a mother-daughter relationship between themselves and the girls with whom they work. Emily Bent, for examples, explains that when the youth delegates she was working with at the United Nations began to perceive that their adult mentors were not taking them seriously, they rebuked them with a letter that accused the adult women of being too maternal and "momsplaining" over them (Bent 2016, 114).

This long-standing reticence to centre mothering in girls' studies emerged from resistance to the dominance of mother-daughter thinking when the field was initially taking shape. Histories of girls' studies, like those found in *Difficult Dialogues* (2015) or Mary Celeste Kearney's *Coalescing the Development of Girls Studies* (2009), cite the 1990s as a crucial era of foundational research on girls in the West and note that girls' studies is often self-described as a third-wave intervention into feminist thought (see also: Cann et al. 2018; Lipkin 2009; Mitchell 2016).

Astrid Henry (2003) argues that the '90s were a decade where notions of feminist generations were the de facto way to describe differences among feminists, and these dyadic "matrophors" soon proved problematic (212). Henry cites Mary Russo (1999), who critiqued the reliance on mother-daughter metaphors as something that replicated power imbalances and limited the feminist imagination of what intergenerational relationships could be, writing: "I am deeply troubled by the prospect of a maternal symbolic that, in effect, normalizes relations between women by limiting or privileging the difference configured in the mother-daughter dyad. These differences include but are not limited to class, ethnicity, and sexuality." (24).

Girls' studies is also sensitive to these hierarchical differences between girls and adults, especially when this age-based hierarchy intersects with other systems of power like class,

ethnicity, and sexuality. However, adults still produce, or must at least be involved with, most girls' studies scholarship. The dynamics between parents and children are a dominant model for how adults and young people interact, and the familiar roles of mother and daughter seem more like a return to patriarchal models of obligatory motherhood and domesticity for women that do not seem to hold much liberatory potential. This foundational question about how adults can have solidarity with young people and their politics has had significant consequences for the field and how researchers position (or avoid) the influence of mothers on girls' lives, cultures, voice, and politics. This literature explores how girls' studies conceptualizes girls. I argue that girls' studies is its own defended subject where a persistent discomfort with mothering reveals anxieties about inequalities between girls and women in the research relationship.

What Is Girls' Studies?

There are many scholarly disciplines that study girls and many of them also engage with girls' family relationships and politics. There is, for example, a body of clinical literature that looks specifically at mother-daughter relationships (see Hendrika Halberstadt-Freud's *Electra vs Oedipus: the drama of the mother-daughter relationship* (2011) for an example). However, in this project, I am situating my work in a specific strain of feminist scholarship called girls' studies that coalesces around publications like the journal *Girlhood Studies*. Emerging at the intersection of gender studies and cultural studies, girls' studies is an interdisciplinary field that explores girls, girlhood, and girl cultures (Bimm 2022, 7). "Rethinking Agency and Resistance: What Comes After Girl Power?" (Gonick et al. 2009), notes that girls' studies scholarship often draws from the Gramscian tradition of cultural studies where culture is something people do, and human agency produces, reproduces, and transforms the structures of culture (4). To borrow April Mandrona's (2016) concise description:

> The field of girlhood studies is framed by theories that conceptualize girls and young women on the one hand as distinct, yet diverse, groups whose members have been systematically discriminated against but also, on the other, as capable social actors who influence and are influenced by the worlds in which they live. (3)

Girls' studies takes girls seriously as people embedded in these systems of cultural transformation, where they are both the products and producers of culture. This framework prioritizes girls' lived experiences and understandings of their surrounding world. Though musings on who and what girls *are* is certainly part of the process, these considerations are often secondary to a focus on daily life and what girls *do*.

Continuing from Mandrona's (2016) definition, because girls are a diverse group, there are varied perspectives within girls' studies that theorize girls differently based on social locations created by race, geography, or sexual orientation. For example, originating with Black feminist thought, Black Girlhood Studies has always intervened in the critical study of girls and girlhood by foregrounding the experiences of Black girls. Ruth Nicole Brown's (2009) work with Black girls through Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) is an especially critical example of how adult Black women and girls unite to forge girl-led solidarity. In the introduction to *The Black Girlhood Studies Reader* (2019), Aria S. Halliday cites bell hooks' 1996 call to understand the complexity of Black girlhood in all its diversity and variation as an inciting moment for her scholarship. For Halliday, hooks offers a succinct description of the kinds of space that Black women have tried to create for Black girlhoods in the academy (1).

Susan Driver's book, *Queer Girls and Popular Culture: Reading, Resisting, and Creating Media* (2007), offers another example of how marginalized girls might interface with mainstream girl culture differently. She explores how queer girls do not just passively accept that the mainstream media excluded their experiences and would create their own queer stories from existing media through creative practices like fanfiction. The oppression of homophobia and misogyny is still present, but the response to this oppression is where girls' agency and resilience can be observed and appreciated. Much like how theories of gender and childhood built around adult women or boys do not do justice to girls' particular lived experiences, theories of girlhood built uncritically around whiteness or heterosexuality do not do justice to the lived experiences of Black and queer girls.

In the introduction to their edited collection, *Difficult Dialogues About Twenty-First Century Girls* (2015), Johnson and Ginsberg outline the history of Girls' Studies in the Western world and some of the key concepts and interventions of the field. They note that one of the core motivations for creating a distinct field of study around girlhood was the fact that girls in the West were not reaping the supposed victories won by the Women's Movement of the mid-Twentieth Century. Despite this, most feminist thinking did not offer much distinction between adult women and girls, and scholarship interested in young people and their cultures was primarily (if not exclusively) interested in boys (Gonick 2024). As feminists, most girls' studies scholars do not just point out that girls exist in a unique position at the intersection of gender and age, but that a specific kind of marginalization structures this social location. Girls are socially

and politically disadvantaged in ways that resemble but do not directly mirror the experiences of boys and adult women, and the combination of ageism and sexism directed at girls requires its own liberation strategies. As minors, girls still experience considerable restrictions on their lives from parents and other authorities and are often explicitly barred from civic processes like voting. Though girls could perhaps *look forward* to more opportunities, these horizons were still far away and did not necessarily inform the daily life of a girl during her childhood and adolescence. Sociologist Angela McRobbie (1991) is often cited as an early scholar to make this observation. Her scholarship around girls' subcultures and media consumption in the 1970s critiqued the ways that sociological theories hastily applied theories based around boys or adult women to girls in ways that left them always represented as failed boys or failed women rather than a distinct group with distinct experiences.

While there are some generally agreed-upon moments, texts, and discourses that form girls' studies, there is no singular account of girls' studies that captures everything. There are distinct areas of girls' studies that look at the specific experiences of specific girls, particularly as their girlhood intersects with their race, religion, disabilities, or queerness, and each of these scholarly engagements with girls has its own histories and points of emphasis. In my own understanding of the field and its history, the scholarship I emphasize as representative or influential is all informed by my own positionality and the particular interests of this project. This is not an objective historiography, but one that exists in relation to numerous other legitimate accounts of the field that offer very different, and even contradictory interpretations of the same general arcs in girls' studies scholarship.

This chapter presents my history of the field and my interpretations of its development and its complex relationship with mothers. Other girls' studies scholars have offered their own histories of girls' studies, and I have moments of both convergence and divergence with these other scholars. Marnina Gonick (2024), for example, attributes the rising neoliberalism of 1990s 'girl power' as the inciting discourse of girls' studies. In contrast, I begin my own history with the reactions to "girls-in-crisis" literature like Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994). While we agree that these are both neoliberal systems of regulation that emerged simultaneously, I offer a greater emphasis on how the back-and-forth between these perceptions of girls as either empowered or victimized relegates mothers to the status of regulating figures who cannot

adequately combat either discourse, and are therefore excluded from the project of forging solidarity with girls.

As Hemmings (2011) would describe it, these are my own 'glosses' of the field. As I say in the conclusion to this chapter, as the inheritor of a field that was emerging just as I was born, I have my own affective relationship to its thinking and how my own work fits in relation to this existing scholarship. My own historical glosses here in this chapter may seem to overemphasize a struggle between the field's positioning of girls as either victimized or empowered subjects and the consequences of this tension for how the field engages (or rather avoids) mothers. However, this is not an attempt to define a dichotomy that does not exist, but rather to explore how the affective process of navigating a respectful relationship with girls as adult researchers is often ambivalent, given that typical relationships between adults and girls are ones in which adults supervise and regulate girls. As I will explore in the following chapters, my own work grapples with this very dynamic in exploring how mother-daughter relationships are spaces of potential feminist solidarity and sites where patriarchal regulation is reinscribed.

Returning to broader histories of the field, other chronologies of girls' studies, like Catherine Driscoll's "Girls Today: Girls, Girl Culture and Girl Studies" (2008), Elline Lipkin's *Girls Studies* (2009), Mary Celeste Kearney's "Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies" (2009), and the introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Girls' Studies*[1] (Mazzarella 2024) share *Difficult Dialogues*' (2015) story of girls' studies early years. These accounts also note that the 1990s were an era when there was a notable wave of studies about girls' self-esteem and self-expression in the West. The American Association of University Women's report "How Schools Shortchange Girls" (1992), Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan's *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (1992), Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1995), And Peggy Orenstein's *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* (1994) are often listed as the inciting texts of this interest in the particularities of girls' behaviours, feelings, and status. These works frequently expressed the broad concern that the adolescent girls of the 1990s, who were the daughters of second-wave feminists of the '60s and '70s, seemed unable to experience the social and political gains of

[1] This collection also includes Marnina Gonick's chapter "Girl Power and Its Afterlife: Neoliberalism and the Invention of Girlhood Studies" (2024) which offers its own rendering of the history of the field and some of the popular discourses around empowerment and vulnerability that existed at its inception.

feminism. Girls were continuing to struggle with sexual violence, eating disorders, and barriers to their education and careers.

Around the same time, and somewhat in response to these earlier texts on girls' experiences and psychology, there was another genre of "girls-in-crisis" literature that focused on girls' aggression, particularly their lateral relational aggression against other girls. Some of the popular books that focused on girls' aggression, particularly bullying, include *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (2002) by Rachel Simmons, and *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* (2002) by Rosalind Wiseman[2]. The mean girl was just as captivating as the struggling girl needing rescue. Western media was invested in the spectre of the delinquent girl throughout the '80s and '90s and stoked fears of increasing violence and deviance from girls (Lamb 2001, 209; Mazzarella 2020). Again, as I will explore in more detail later in this chapter, these differing perspectives on girls as either helpless or empowered have always coexisted, and girls' studies scholars have always engaged with both.

These works were important in establishing the need to engage with girlhood as a distinct life stage and put direct effort toward understanding and engaging with the problems girls face. However, by the time the first decade of the Twenty-First Century was coming to a close, there was an increasing critique of how these accounts of girls' struggles and secret lives—all written by adults for adults—were reinscribing girls' marginalization. Sharon Mazzarella and Norma Pecora describe this emerging critique in their article "Revisiting Girls' Studies: Girls Creating Sites for Connection and Action" (2007) and note how this began a shift toward emphasizing girls' agency and their critical perspectives on the world and pop culture. According to *Girl Power: Girls Reinventing Girlhood* (Currie et al. 2009), the girl-in-crisis era of the early '90s gave way to the girl-power era of the late '90s and early aughts. The focus on girl power was also part of an emerging "postfeminist" era where feminism was declared to be either victorious or no longer useful, and the aesthetics of feminism were co-opted into a consumer good rather than a collective political movement.[3] Though the successful and active girl of the girl-power (or

[2] Wiseman's book is the most well-remembered of this genre because it was adapted into Tina Fey's wildly popular film *Mean Girls.* (Waters et al. 2004)

[3] See Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (2009), Andi Zeisler's *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl* (2016), and Sarah Banet-Wiser's *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (2018).

perhaps grrrl-power) era seemed to be the more empowered subject, she still lived under a neoliberal regulatory system that scrutinized her inner world and attempted to sell feminism back to her as a commodity rather than a liberatory politic.

In her book *Future Girl* (2004), Anita Harris points out that the overwhelming burden of futurity placed on Twenty-First Century girls tends to be split into two categories: the can-do girl and the at-risk girl. The can-do girl is the girl who can have it all and reap the newfound benefits of gender equality to succeed at school, at work, and in her community. Her foil is the at-risk girl, who struggles under the changes that have made the can-do girl thrive. If the at-risk girl is not withering under the demands of unrealistic beauty standards, sexual pressures from boys, exploitation from adults, and the perils of teen pregnancy, then she is a threatening delinquent who disrupts the social order by embracing substance abuse, hookup culture, violence, and teen pregnancy.

However, while the at-risk and can-do girl are often one and the same, as both justify the same systems of regulation, there are broader systems that cultivate these archetypes as two distinct kinds of girls. The distinction between damsel and delinquent is almost always made along the lines of race, where a faltering white girl is a problem to be solved and a troubled Black, brown, or Indigenous girl is an inevitability to be punished.

Continuing with the discrepancies between white girls and girls of colour, many scholars have criticized how girls' studies continues to centre white girls as the normative girl subject (Gonick 2024). Within histories of feminist thought in general and girls' studies in particular, a narrative often begins with a critique of the field's whiteness and ends with a contemporary emphasis on intersectionality (Hemmings 2011; Schuster 2016). However, this narrative can obscure the fact that feminists of colour have always engaged with girlhoods of colour. It is not the case that non-disabled, white, middle-class, heterosexual girls were the first to attract feminist attention and girls in other social locations were not noticed by the field until later; even if the former receive more attention in general. This does not mean that different intersectional assemblages of girlhood have nothing in common, but that popular swells of concern or attention for girls have not been evenly distributed to all girls.

Additionally, dominant narratives about public anxiety over whether or not girls are succeeding only apply to girls who are *supposed* to be successful. The benefits and burdens of futurity are only applicable to those imagined to have lives worth living and cultures worth

continuing, and a white supremacist society does not extend these futures to everyone. The borders and expectations of girlhood are different for girls of colour, who are liable to be seen as already excessive, inconvenient, or threatening no matter what they do. For example, Lisa Weems (2009) notes that South Asian girls inhabit a very different set of contexts than their white peers, writing:

> In other words, 'girlhood' becomes a site that consolidates assumptions and practices regarding difference, colonial power, and economic relations between and among gendered subjects in transnational contexts. What is at stake in this cultural politics is the extent to which girls can create, inhabit, and transgress the discursive positions to which they are subject. (59)

As Weems points out, systems of power like colonization and economic relations actively maintain a racist divide between white girls and girls of colour. One clear expression of this inequality is that, though there are always exceptions, girls who inhabit the socioeconomic privileges typically associated with "good" and "normal" lives are often offered compassion and assistance to help them achieve this destiny. Girls who do not possess such privileges are usually understood as needing discipline and punishment when they experience the same struggles as their more advantaged counterparts.

Across much of her work, Sandrina de Finney (de Finney 2014; 2017; de Finney et al. 2019) has argued that colonization positions Indigenous girls very differently from their settler counterparts, and the settler colonial state creates a context of violence that positions Indigenous girls as disposable, insignificant, and inconvenient. She notes that "Indigenous girls and women have been treated very differently than boys and men by colonial institutions, in part because they were essential to the intergenerational transmission of culture and thus to First Peoples' sovereignty and continuity." (de Finney 2014, 16). Within this context of ongoing cultural genocide, Indigenous girls are often entirely excluded from normative ideas of "what it means to be adjusted, healthy, successful, beautiful, worthy and, even, girl itself" (22). Despite this, Indigenous girls enact an ongoing "presensing" of everyday hope, desire, and possibility, even if it goes unrecognized by the dominant narratives of girlhood (11). Visions of feminist futurity can still be (and often are) implicated in colonial futurity. When projects to empower girls are undertaken uncritically, they can produce an image of empowerment that embraces rather than rejects a colonial framework. Encouraging girls to take up future leadership in the corporate

world, for example, does not disrupt the extractive exploitations of capitalism that oppress Indigenous peoples and therefore offers little to Indigenous girls as a group.

This question of agency in the context of oppression comes with significant methodological consequences, as girls' agency and voices are obscured not only by society at large but sometimes even by researchers who study girls. In their chapter "It Means That I Am Knowledge" GirlPAR as an Emergent Methodology" (2015), Laura Boutwell and Faduma Guhad concisely describe the standard agency binary applied to girls and assert that "In GirlPAR [Girl Participatory Action Research], adults must eschew two limiting frames: one which sees girls as victims of oppression in need of protection and one in which girls agency is framed in simplistic and idealized terms" (84). It is neither accurate nor helpful to interpret girls as either victimized by our culture or already equipped to talk back and fend off the attitudes and messaging that demean girls.

Girls' Activism in Girls' Studies

Activism describes efforts to make some kind of desired change in society toward a perceived greater good. These efforts usually focus on a particular cause, like improving the conditions for a community or protecting the environment. Activism often takes the form of collective action like protests, sit-ins, or boycotts, but can encompass individual actions like making art or writing letters. There is often debate over what activism is, what counts as activism, and at what point activism diverges from advocacy or some other action. Jessica Taft and Claire O'Kane discuss these questions in the context of youth activism, specifically in their article, "Questioning children's activism: What is new or old in theory and practice?" (2023). They note that the meaning of children's activism, particularly as understood in human rights discourse and international institutions, is ever shifting, and there are advantages and disadvantages to every iteration of these meanings. Taft and O'Kane see an increasing shift toward labelling all children's civic participation as activism, and this practice does not leave much room to adequately appreciate and support the spectrum of civic actions that young people may take. They intervene to define activism as characterized by collectivity, challenging expectations, and transforming power (9).

Girls' studies scholars have long pointed out that girls possess an awareness of the power relations present in their lives and communities and subsequently develop a political consciousness even if they lack access to formal civic processes like elected office (Aapola et al.

2005; Harris 2004; 2001; McRobbie 1991). Because of these limitations and other barriers to formal political participation, different girls take on various modes of activism based on what is available to them. Girls' social locations, along with the kinds of activist histories that surround them, inform what is considered legible as activism and the types of activist strategies that are most available. For example, Andreana Clay (2012) and Ben Kirshner (2015) conducted ethnographies with Black and brown youth engaged in student activism in the San Francisco Bay Area. For these young activists, most of whom were in their teens, the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panthers loomed as the standard for "real" activism. The profound changes enacted by racial justice movements in the 1960s and '70s in the United States had directly affected the sociopolitical world that these young activists inhabited. While they were grateful to the past, it always came with heavy expectations of past victories and long-unfinished business.

Similarly, girls' activism and politics are interestingly situated because feminism has framed much of Western women's political participation. Taft and O'Kane (2023) point out that this is likely why girl-centred spaces have seemingly led the shift toward thinking of young people's civic participation broadly in terms of activism (3). In a political and pop cultural landscape where feminism is always declared both dead and excessive, girls are routinely compelled to have something to say about feminism and gender equality. Feminism is a notable context for intergenerational relationships because girls have shifting relationships with both actual older feminists and the concept of feminism as a political ideology. Jessalynn Keller (2015; 2012; Keller and Ryan 2018) studied girls' digital feminisms and found that girls often strongly admired feminists of the 1960s and '70s like Betty Friedan or Gloria Steinem, but this "great woman" approach to history left them feeling inadequate about their blog-based activism (Keller 2015, 132). At the same time, despite their admiration, girls also feared that an open interest in feminism would leave them vulnerable to stereotypes about strident man-hating lesbians. The girls' mix of admiration and anxiety was all the more interesting because they would structure their foray into feminism around these distant popular figures that predated them by decades and not feminists closer to home, like family members or teachers. These findings are similar to research by Kim & Ringrose (2018), who interviewed girls attending a school where peers and teachers were dismissive towards their feminism. After this alienation at school, girls

moved their feminist work and education online, where they remained interested in activism but did not seek out in-person relationships with more local feminists.

Because girls' politics are often met with rejection, it is not uncommon for young people to organize and develop their political consciousness in private spaces among peers. In "Revisiting bedroom culture: New spaces for young women's politics" (2001), Harris points out that sociologists have primarily focused on what young people do *not* do in terms of their civic participation and how they are politically alienated (131). In response, Harris advocates for looking to the private sphere, where young people may gather and enact less visible political organizing, instead of assuming they are simply not participating. In addition to things like zines and underground music scenes, a significant component of the "bedroom cultures" that Harris and others describe is the internet and how it functions as an accessible though inconspicuous public sphere for girls. Susan Driver (2007) points out that the Internet is especially integral for queer young people who may not have access to in-person queer communities or be able to openly express their identities at all in their homes, peer groups, or schools.

Both Harris and Driver conducted their analyses in the early days of ubiquitous internet access, and their work predates today's contemporary social media landscape. However, although the architecture and accessibility of the internet are continually changing, the notion that it is a significant space for youth cultures has remained true. In the 2010s, girls' studies scholars like Jessalyn Keller noted that girls were part of the growing culture of blogs (including microblogging sites like Tumblr) where they could create and share both long and short form writing about their organizing and political commitments (Keller 2015; 2012; Keller and Ryan 2018). Eli Erlick (2018), a transgender youth activist, argued that the internet was still vitally important for transgender young people who still do not have access to safe and affirming in-person spaces.

More recently, the online micro-video-sharing platform TikTok, which exploded in popularity during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, has become a popular and effective platform for social activism (Le Compte and Klug 2021; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2023; Hautea et al. 2021). However, even though contemporary activism usually demands some level of internet activity, and there is now extensive scholarship on online activism, many people still consider it a distraction or an ineffective method for achieving tangible results. As the title of Caldeira et al's article "How can you be a feminist if you're always online?" (2025) indicates,

online organizing, especially the kind conducted by women and girls, remains underestimated when it takes place in the private sphere.

Although people of all ages use the internet and cultivate communities there, the internet can also be a way for youth to not only connect with each other but also intentionally create distance between their communities and adults. Rather than just lacking the freedom to carry out activist work in person, some young people feel that adults have entirely rejected them from political participation and feel that relationships with older activists are not possible or worthwhile. Some online political spaces are inaccessible because their users fail to realize that not everyone has access to a computer or is digitally literate, but others are intentionally exclusionary.

Many young people avoid organizing with adults, not because they are ignored or dismissed, but because adults try to regulate their political participation. While adult supporters and comrades can benefit young people's political development, these relationships exist in an adultist hierarchy that can perpetuate the idea that adults are established beings who guide young people lacking or deficient in their political abilities. Winstanley and Bernier (2022) point out that even programs intended to empower girls operate under a neoliberal ethos where girls are understood to be victimized by society. Adults, therefore, must guide them through the best techniques to manage their problems individually rather than seek collective solutions with other girls. This sense that young people are inadequate or incomplete also appears in research on youth activism that focuses on the kind of adult a young person will eventually become, erasing youth from the research that studies them.

Even programs meant to empower girls often engage in a regulatory, if not carceral, approach to girls' development and citizenship. Though usually well-meaning, girl-focused programming run by adults often individualizes and responsibilizes girls for the systemic issues they face by emphasizing individual coping skills over organizing for wider change (Winstanley and Bernier 2022). Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) points out that programming by adult white women for Black girls often replicates racist assumptions about the risks of Black girlhood and recreates the misogynoir that marginalizes Black girls (10). In their own work with Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), Brown emphasizes the need for adult women to enter into solidarity with girls rather than just supervising them or attempting to rescue them from their assumed status as victims. Courtney Cook makes a similar critique in "Toward a Fairer Future:

An Activist Model of Black Girl Leadership" (2020), where she points out that the nonprofit sector has few Black women in leadership roles. Organizations with a mission to empower Black girls are employing a "can-do" approach that sells girls of colour a leadership dream that may never be realized (53). Like Brown (2009), Cook (2020) also emphasizes the need for Black women and girls to participate together in the activist project of dismantling exclusionary systems rather than just individually overcoming systemic barriers.

However, it is not just adults who frame young people's activism in diminutive terms. Much like the girls Keller (2015) interviewed, who would compare themselves to famous feminists and feel self-conscious about their political actions, Jessica Taft (Taft 2006; 2011; 2014; 2017) also found that political girls would decline to label themselves as activists, writing:

> A final narrative theme in many girls' stories about their entry into activism is the claim that they are still in the process of becoming activists. According to these girls, they had not yet arrived at an activist identity, but were still on a journey toward this identity. Girls' firm claim that they are 'not yet' activists and are still in the process of becoming activists, is perhaps the most distinctive feature of their narratives. (Taft 2017, 34)

Taft found that even girls who were clearly *doing* activism would not adopt the term as their *identity*, which they often felt they had not yet earned.

In her study with people engaged in menstrual activism, Chris Bobel (2007) points out that though "activist" is often understood as a collective identity that describes participating in a specific action, many of the people she spoke with considered an activist to be someone who not only acts on their political convictions but does so with ceaseless devotion. There was often a standard of perfection for activists that led many to discount their own actions if they did not feel they had met their own lofty standards of humility, courage, rigour, and commitment (152). In this context, it is unsurprising that girls, who are so often held to these exact standards in all areas of life, are so quick to refuse the label themselves before they are judged inadequate by someone else.

Girls' sense that they are still just "becoming activists" poses a paradox for how adults can best support young people's politics. On one hand, the idea that youth need adult mentorship to develop their political consciousness and enact social change reifies the idea that young people are just apprentices to an adult standard of activism. On the other hand, young people often *do* need and benefit from adult support, and an intergenerational approach to activism does not have

to leave young people in a position where they are without political insight or power. Though intergenerational solidarity is often considered the best approach, many adults also feel tensions about wanting to work alongside young people but not knowing how to discern when to offer guidance and when to step away. Returning to Ruth Nicole Brown's (2009) work, though SOLHOT was created to allow Black girls to express themselves freely, Brown points out that these ideals could lead to conditions that allowed the free expression of homophobia and misogyny from the girls (129). Young people do not have inherently progressive politics and may hold social views that are oppressive or otherwise misinformed. Adults often understand the need to correct these attitudes, but do not always know how to do this effectively.

While oppressive attitudes might offer a clear need for adult intervention, the day-to-day relationships of activist work are less certain. In her article "Making It Up: Intergenerational Activism and the Ethics of Empowering Girls" (2016), Emily Bent explored some of the ethical boundaries of intergenerational feminist activism for adults by drawing on her experiences working with girls at the United Nations. She recounts an incident where the girl delegates to the UN felt that they were relegated to being seen and not heard, and they drafted a letter outlining how they wanted to be treated. The letter, written to the adult women delegates supporting the girls, contained rebukes like "Your Ph.D., your job title, even your 50 years of experience working with girls mean nothing here," and "Don't momsplain. Don't put words into our mouths…I am not your daughter." (114). Though they had aspired to be in solidarity with the girls, the adult feminists were acting as (or at least being perceived as) maternal impediments to the girls' ability to conduct their political work as they saw fit. Rather than a site of solidarity and support, the roles of mother and daughter are not only seen as unhelpful but insulting. Bent notes that this example sharply revealed the reality that there were no clear guidelines as to how to balance guidance with allyship in the feminist and research relationships between adults and young people:

> The disruption of power, however, does not necessarily guarantee that an ethical or mutually beneficial research relationship is formed. The potential for research-based and intergenerational activist relationships to end with participants feeling misunderstood or betrayed may only become heightened when "the researched and the researcher become entwined" (Taylor 2011:9). The more involved I become in the political lives of girl-activists, the greater the risk of misinterpretation, manipulation, and exploitation as I gain intimate, immediate access to girls' experiences, "making objectivity incredibly difficult and leav[ing] little room for analytic distance" (Taylor 2011: 15). (116)

These relationships between women and girls are always complicated by the power differences between adults and young people, and girls' relationships with adult activists also raise this question about girls' agency and expression. Girls' activism is one part of girls' studies, which focuses on girls' agency and how girls experience, interpret, and act in the world. Returning to Taft's work (2017), it might be more useful to embrace the idea that both young people and adults, including mothers, are always in a state of being and becoming rather than understanding youth as either incomplete or exactly equivalent to adults (30).

What About Mothers?

Though mother-daughter relationships, both literally and metaphorically, are easily found across various kinds of scholarship, they tend to remain off to the side in girls' studies. Many feminists reflect on their lives and work from a "narrating daughter" standpoint, locating themselves as a single link in a much larger chain of action and events. These reflections from adult women often begin with the ways that they first learned feminism or some other form of political participation from their mothers at home (alt et al. 2016; Bechdel 2012; deAnda and Geist-Martin 2018; Fouquier 2011; Rastogi and Wampler 1999; Torres 2011). For example, the collection, *Mothers of Invention: How our Mothers Influenced us as Feminist Academics and Activists* (Reimer and Sahagian 2013), opens by describing the ways "…the many-varied ways that feminist and non-feminist mothers alike inspire feminist consciousness in their children simply by performing the necessity of motherwork, and to invent new feminist motherlines as an antidote to our culture's dominant discourses of matrophobia and mother-blame." (2).

Many works in girls' studies also begin this way, and the authors situate themselves as daughters and recall their mothers to frame their work with girls. It is significant that girlhood memories are considered integral to narratives of adult feminist consciousness, and it reminds us that adults are not simply post-girls. This return to girlhood, particularly girlhood as a daughter, indicates that girlhood persists into adulthood rather than clearly giving way to some adult form. However, these stories are adult reflections on girlhood written with the benefit of hindsight and adult insight. The adult narrators who so often reflect on their familial and feminist mothers tend to be the sole authors of these accounts and have not entrusted their personal lives to a third party. Adult daughters get to narrate their lives as and if they please, and they are also not obligated to involve their mothers in the process if they feel so inclined. Girls in their childhood

and adolescence do not have the same access to the means to tell their own stories in public without some kind of adult intervention or support. Between their parents and other authority figures, girls live with a significant amount of adult scrutiny and control. They cannot critique these figures as freely as their adult counterparts. These conditions have had consequences for the kinds of literature that exist about girls and their mothers.

Stories of feminist girlhood written during these earlier life stages are harder to find in girls' studies and mother-daughter literature. When researchers do focus on young feminists, especially children and teenagers, the ways that feminist politics shape girls' relationships with their mothers or how girls' relationships with their mothers shape their feminism may emerge, but mothers are background actors who provide context or inciting incidents for girls politics (Kim and Ringrose 2018; Stephenson-Abetz 2012; Taft 2011; 2017; Zaslow 2018). When girls' politics and activism are the research focus, home life is often pushed aside in favour of the activist communities girls build with their peers. How parents feel about girls' activism might be explored, as seen in some of Jessica Taft's work, but this is not a central focus of the research.

I contend that mothers are not excluded from the field merely as a matter of scope but because engaging with mothers and the practice of mothering is seen as difficult to reconcile with the project of centring girls. There are few scholarly spaces that focus explicitly and exclusively on girls, and the research gap around mothers is not an oversight so much as a response to how girls are continually pushed to the margins in research that does not directly focus on their experiences. It is also important to note that young people, particularly those who are queer, trans, disabled, or otherwise marginalized, are not always safe with their parents. Involving parents and children in research can lead to material harm if something is asked or revealed that causes one or both members of the pair to feel outed, betrayed, challenged, or embarrassed. This can be especially precarious when the children live at home or are otherwise dependent on their families.

Though I am critical of the dominant history of girls' studies, the legacy of mainstream anxiety around girls and internal debates about girls' voices and agency is part of the reason that mothers are so notably absent. There is a significant thread throughout this literature of positioning Mary Pipher's popular *Reviving Ophelia* (1995) as *the* example of how not to work with and write about girls. The kind of matronly concern for girls that Pipher is accused of is

blamed for creating moral panics that oppress rather than liberate girls, and girls' studies scholars have gone out of their way to distance themselves from this kind of motherly gaze.

Part of the critique of the early mainstream "girls-in-crisis" body of literature is that adults wrote these books for anxious mothers and not for girls. In a review of four girl-in-crisis books for *Feminist Formations*, Nancy Adams (2005) addresses the enduring fixation on adolescent girls as a puzzle of risk and suffering that adults must decode. Adams frames this assertion by blaming Mary Pipher for introducing this enduring image of girlhood:

> When Mary Pipher published *Reviving Ophelia* in 1994, she made public and immensely popular the image of the early adolescent girl as a girl in crisis. Besieged by accounts of girls as victims of a girl-poisoning culture, of depression, suicide, eating disorders, teacher neglect, poor parenting, and sexual violence, parents sat helplessly on the sidelines wondering what they could do to prevent the loss of their early adolescent daughters as "they crash and burn in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle" (19). Yet hope reared its head for a brief time in the mid- to late 1990s when a new era of Girl Power tantalized parents into thinking that the Girl in Crisis era was over. Strong, athletic, independent, confident, smart girls were touted as the new feminine ideal. However, in 2002, a series of books published in the popular press, including the four reviewed here, cautioned parents, particularly mothers, that the threat of the Bermuda Triangle still lurks, and Girl Power sports a darker side. (206)

Adams continues by arguing that the four books she is reviewing (Rachel Simmons' *Odd Girl Out*, Nancy Snyderman and Peg Streep's *Girl in the Mirror: Mothers and Daughters in the Years of Adolescence*, JoAnn Deak's *Girls Will Be Girls: Raising Confident and Courageous Daughters*, and Rosalind Wiseman's *Queen Bees & Wannabees*) do not present the crisis of girlhood as a waifish failure to thrive but an epidemic of meanness. Though they were earnest in their attempts to help girls and their mothers, the books that reached a broad mainstream audience hinge on the premise that you, the mother, do not know what is "really going on" with your daughter because she cannot or will not tell you directly. Despite your best efforts and the supposed gains of feminism, girls cannot engage in conflict directly. They cannot express themselves and their wants openly, so they must resort to the passive-aggressive tools of cliques, exclusion, and gossip. Whether girls were faltering victims or escalating aggressors, the outcome was the same: girls should be observed, scrutinized, and made to do better. Your daughter is either a victim or a bully, and that is women's fault in general and your fault in particular. As Adams (2005) points out, these books offered a bleak image of girlhood by selling the idea of imminent crisis to mothers.

Here, mothers, who were the target market of these revealing books about girls' unnoticed behaviours and uncovered feelings, become contentious in the feminist work of girls' studies because they become associated with the moral panics around girlhood that frame girls as a problem that needs fixing. In her book *Girls, Moral Panic, and News Media: Troublesome Bodies* (2020), Sharon Mazzarella devotes an entire chapter to these kinds of books, which she describes as part of a manufactured crisis that, beginning with Pipher in the early 1990s, cycles endlessly through various iterations of the same general anxieties about girls safety, sexualization, social aggression, and femininity (82-83). These books are decoding manuals that treat "girls-these-days" as an "ethnographic curiosity" to be demystified for parents by some knowledgeable adult woman, often a parent herself (91). In "The 'Girls' in Girls' Studies" (2008), an article reflecting on her own work and the ways that *Meeting at the Crossroads* (Brown and Gilligan 1992) was taken up, Lyn Mikel Brown asserts that they did not intend for the book pathologize girls and had instead set out to listen to girls and take them seriously (Brown 2008, 5). However, the listening guide that Brown and Gilligan created and published with *Crossroads* is still its own decoding guide, where adults cannot simply listen to girls but must try to interpret what girls are *really* saying. Brown's reflection, like the others, also notes that it was Pipher and the popular *Reviving Ophelia* that diverted the practice of listening to girls from politics to panic, even though Pipher's book and Brown's *Meeting at the Crossroads* do, in fact, share many of the same concerns about how girls would withdraw from candid self-expression upon reaching adolescence.

In "Between 'Girl Power' and 'Reviving Ophelia': Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject" (2006), Marnina Gonick explores how both the empowered girl power girl and the victimized Ophelia are regulatory discourses. Both coexist and ultimately serve the same purpose of enacting and encouraging the surveillance and regulation of girls toward individualized, rather than systemic approaches to navigating the world's inequalities. Again, while Gonick's critique of Pipher's work is substantive, and I ultimately agree with her accusation that "Rather than looking at the social institutions and discourses that girls negotiate within actively producing their identities, Pipher represents girls as unwitting victims." (12), it is still Pipher who is named as representative of this iteration of the broader neoliberal regulatory regime that Gonick critiques.

These texts, which were often written with genuine concern about real issues that girls faced, rarely set out to incite moral panics. Still, despite their unique contributions, when taken as a whole, the enduring popularity and often hyperbolic marketing of these books created a dominant discourse of girls as risky subjects in need of regulation that has been difficult to overcome.

Even books published during the 1990s and early 2000s that were actively critical of the "girl-in-crisis" style of publication and that tried to evade this framing of risk and harm still used a similar grammar of revealing girls' secrets to nervous parents. Sharon Lamb's book *The Secret Lives of Girls: What Good Girls Really Do: Sex Play, Aggression, and Their Guilt* (2001), for example, involved a close examination of girls' sexuality and aggression that saw these behaviours as part of normal development and understandable responses to the world around them. To make this argument, Lamb offers the following critique of Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*:

> Readers have come to know the rebellious lost teens of *Reviving Ophelia* as really and truly empathetic, caring girls who have lost their grounding connection with adults. Mary Pipher, who wrote *Reviving Ophelia*, is so like the good nurturant mother who has come to pluck out the treasured adolescent soul, preserve it, cherish its goodness for all time…The point is, we all would so much rather look like the lovely lost souls found by Mary Pipher than the bad girls we suspect we really are (5).

Lamb's book serves as a response to *Reviving Ophelia* and other books as a way to engage with female pleasure and aggression without returning to the constant reassurance that women don't *really* want to dominate others and that every girl is a good girl deep down. However, as much as Lamb seeks to reveal these stories to assuage the guilt that comes with them, the book is still about unpacking girls' "secret lives" to the relief of adult women readers, especially mothers. Though *Reviving Ophelia* and *The Secret Lives of Girls* have very different conceptions of girls and girlhood, they were still written for adults in general and parents in particular. Lamb even ends the two main sections of her book with a helpful summary addressed directly to the parents of young girls. Lamb is telling parents to relax and understand that childhood sexuality and aggression do not have to be cause for alarm, but she is telling on girls just the same.

The Secret Lives of Girls also gestures toward another reason that mothers are a complex subject for girls' studies. Rather than pathologizing sexual and aggressive behaviours, Lamb was

arguing for the opposite interpretation of these actions and thought that the guilt that comes with acts that transgress the typical image of the "good girl" was the real problem. Told through the stories of both girls and adult women recalling their childhoods, Lamb's book is full of mothers who scold the very sexual and aggressive impulses that she seeks to render normal. Mothers are often the first people to tell their children that their sexuality and aggression are wrong, and they are the first to introduce the "good girl" regime and its ensuing guilt to their daughters. Mothers are often the first regulators in a girl's life and the first to introduce and enforce patriarchy. Tattling on girls to their mothers does not feel like a liberatory politics because mothers are often the ones who sustain the kinds of regulations that marginalize girls. Empowerment projects for girls run by adults receive this criticism, and there is much tension between empowering young people and policing them. If non-hierarchical intergenerational solidarity is the ideal, then mothers are not welcome in either their literal or metaphorical form because there is always an inequality between mothers and daughters.

I do not offer my critique of the lack of mothering in the field as a way to defend the earlier girls-in-crisis books. They *do* offer a bleak image of girlhood and, as many of the criticisms rightfully point out, they offer a grating fixation on the struggles of white heterosexual girls that perpetuate white supremacy's anxiety about its own future (Mazzarella 2020, 84). Still, the backlash to these books has created an image of mothers as people who panic and police, which is also stark.

When I argue that girls' studies scholars are attempting to empower or cultivate solidarity with girls by keeping mothers and other parental figures out of view, I am not saying that they themselves are repeating the 'girl power' of a neoliberal iteration of individualized empowerment (Gonick 2006; Zeisler 2016). I do not think that mothers are avoided, so girls' studies can enact some kind of empowerment that mothers cannot offer. I am instead saying that the effort to *critique and evade* neoliberalism and its individualizing paradigms, the hierarchical yet intimate space of mother-daughter relationships is difficult to explore without returning to compulsions of positioning the relationship as either empowering or victimizing and appear to offer individualized parenting solutions to systemic misogyny. In an attempt to engage with girls without replicating a paradigm of neoliberal regulation (or even to avoid the individualized accusations of mother-blame), mothers have been kept away. I have focused on the criticism of Mary Pipher, not because *Reviving Ophelia* is actually some misunderstood radical text beyond

reproach, but because she is taken as representative of the pathologizing, handwringing, insufficiently political mother who gets in the way. The mother is both too broadly regulating in her social position and too individually unique in her actual existence to reckon with. There is a defensiveness about how newer works engage with girls that resonates with the familiar anxiety that we are turning into our mothers. Pipher is dispatched to quell this fear.

Scholars of the differences and conflicts between various generations of feminists often identify a process of differentiation where one cohort of feminists establishes its identity by asserting how they are not like the previous generation (Hemmings 2011; Henry 2004; Schuster 2016). The field of girls' studies enacts a similar differentiation and shows signs of a strained relationship with mothers because it has a strained relationship with its own mother texts and the perspectives on girlhood that came before. This generational tension aligns with Alice Pitt's description in "Mother Love's Education" (2006) of how her female students seemed disinterested in learning anything intellectual from a maternal figure (91). Despite her suspicions about mother love and feminist reclamations of the mother, Pitt elaborates on how women continue to struggle to establish an intellectual tradition where women's knowledge is seen as valuable enough to build on in subsequent generations. Pitt describes this fraught relationship with previous generations of women thinkers, where women express self-actualization through a matricidal fantasy where the originating figure, who is both loved and feared and both a barrier and source of approval, must be destroyed (88).

Endlessly citing *Reviving Ophelia* as both an originating text for inciting public interest in girls and a bad object of misrepresentation is enacting this matricidal fantasy. *Reviving Ophelia* is destroyed and possessed when it is claimed as the origin of a particular intellectual lineage that is revived to differentiate one's work from this starting point. When Lamb (2001) calls Pipher a "good nurturant mother" (5) who wants to see the inherent goodness in every girl, it is not a compliment and the nurturing maternal gaze is positioned as neither intellectual nor helpful. Every work of girls' studies published after the year 2000 feels the need to self-consciously disparage Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* in their introductions to the point that it is less a substantive critique of the book and its methods and more of an insider meme to quickly indicate that they are not one of *those* adults who look at girls like *that*.

Again, this is not to say that all mothers (whether people or books) are inherently worthy of respect. Getting mothers out of the way serves the field's stated goal of hearing girls on their

own terms and appreciating how they *do* behave beyond the constraints of how they *should* behave. Mother-daughter relationships are often the site of conflict, mistrust, and abuse, and I am not arguing that the field should engage more with mothers because mothers are an inherently positive part of girls' politics. However, I contend that keeping mothers away is a convenient way to keep girls' studies core paradox at a comfortable distance. The field exists in the tension of aspiring to uplift girls without too much adult interference, but by the very nature of its existence, girls' studies *is* adult interference.

Girls' studies' is itself a defended subject where the divide between girl and adult and the spectre of mother and daughter are defended against, even as they are enacted. Girlhood may never truly be left behind, but girls' studies researchers are usually adults (and often mothers), and their adultness is always present when researching with girls. They are always confronted by the delicate balance that exists between understanding that girls have their own worldview that develops away from the adults in their lives and understanding that all young people need adult support. Whether they are present or absent or a positive or negative force in a girl's life, mothers and mother figures are part of the greater context of what it means to be a girl and how girlhood is experienced. The performative matricide of Mary Pipher does not resolve this dynamic, and even if it is unconscious, mothering and daughtering are practices ubiquitous enough to structure how younger and older people interact in various settings.

Intersections of Motherhood Studies and Girlhood Studies

Despite this tendency to keep mothers at a safe distance, there have been direct interventions that try to bring girlhood studies and motherhood studies into the conversation, and there are some guiding texts that can help envision a girl-centred approach to mother-daughter relationships. Though I did not discover it until long after I had conducted my interviews, Melissa Swauger's "Do (Not) Follow in My Footsteps How Mothers Influence Working-Class Girls' Aspirations" (2010) is very similar to my own work. Swauger's study involved interviewing white and African American working-class girls, along with their mothers, to explore these girls' future career aspirations and life goals. In similar research about girls' futures, it is not uncommon for girls to discuss the values and expectations that their mothers impart to them. Swauger involves the girls' mothers directly in this conversation to stress the need to see the full context of the lives of working-class girls who are unfairly held to

individualistic middle-class standards. In the conclusion of the article, Swauger summarizes why she was intentional with this method, writing:

> Cultural discourses of successful girl arise out of upper-class and white communities and behaviors shaped by these discourses—independence, self-making, personal responsibility—are too often expected from working-class girls as ways of overcoming the barriers they face… Communal living, taking care of others, and family-orientation should be celebrated and rewarded, not considered barriers to one's success. For working-class girls to reach their goals, we must gain a better understanding of their mothers' influence. (65)

In "Teaching Black Girlhood Studies with Black Motherhood Studies: An Autoethnography" (2022), Renata Ferdinand describes how her students were deeply frustrated by stories of Black mothers who seemed to fail their children, and the class was resistant to understanding how and why these women could act the way they did. She came to realize that the course had not properly contextualized Black womanhood or motherhood because there was no mention of Black girlhood, writing: "If they had explored the experiences of Black girls before or in conjunction with what they were learning about Black mothers, they may have gotten a better sense of how and why these mothers behave as they do. They may have come to understand the fragility of both social positions."(62). Ferdinand's students, like Pitt's (2006), were not inclined to see mothers as people who had come from somewhere and been influenced by their social location. Women are rarely granted a sense of continuity, and motherhood and girlhood are often seen as separate, if not oppositional, experiences. Not all girls will become mothers, and not all mothers have girlhoods, but neither emerge from nowhere. As time and circumstances change, mothers and daughters may coexist with radically different origins and contexts. Mothers who were not assigned female at birth, not raised as girls, or who experienced a childhood where they were expected to take on adult responsibilities before their peers may have daughters with radically different life experiences. Despite the many exceptions and unique circumstances that shape individual lives, motherhood and girlhood remain social constructs whose borders and expectations are still closely intertwined. There is always a tangle of past experiences and future possibilities for both girls and adult women, and both Swauger and Ferdinand point out that motherhood and girlhood are contextual experiences that cannot be understood without the other.

Conclusion

There are intergenerational relationships between girls' studies scholars and tensions between maintaining the coherence of the field while questioning its forms and findings. Returning to the daughter metaphor, the other scholarship is like a parent to this project. The other works have laid a foundation and created their own generational traumas. Sometimes they are encouraging and other times they are scolding. All of this is imagined, but it is a daughterly kind of imagination where there is the desire to please, the fear of punishment, and the thrill of destroying what came before.

In her own dissertation, Morgan Bimm (2022) noted that emerging scholars writing in the 2020s are among the first generation to inherit girls' studies as an established interdisciplinary field. Crystalizing moments for girlhood studies in the West, such as the girl power era of Third Wave feminism in the nineties and anxiously scrutinized post-recession post-feminist girlhoods of the aughts, reflect my own early and adolescent girlhood. The intergenerational lens applies to me, and I am making a place for myself in this field as the daughters make their place in their respective social movements. These early girls of girls' studies, like myself, are now inheriting the field as adult scholars, and it is perhaps appropriate that, like most daughters, my work is a combination of stewardship and rebellion toward the field that forms the foundation of this dissertation.

3. Chapter 3: Theory, Methodology, and Method

Introduction

I always finished the pair interviews by asking the mothers and daughters what it was like to be interviewed together. Most participants responded the way Stea and their mother, Claire, did by realizing that they rarely had time to sit and unpack their relationships or political participation:

> **Hannah (daughter)** 50:53
>
> …what's it been like to be researched together?
>
> **Stea (daughter)** 51:00
>
> It's interesting. It's definitely like, in a way, it's like a third person, perspective of our lives. When in reality, whenever we've gone through, like us community, or, like, things we've participated in together, it's just been like, "oh okay, we're doing this." [laughs] Like, it's been enthusiastic and it's been, like, purposeful, but it's never been like, "well I'm doing this as activism and as community work." It's been like, "I'm going to do this because it sounds fun."
>
> **Claire (mother)** 51:33
>
> Yeah, it should always be fun. Yeah. I think it, to me a reflection, there's just very rarely do we have time in life to reflect and so any chance to actually, you know, take a moment and think, oh, yeah, let's reflect on this. And when I was much younger, my grandmother actually was interviewed by a student at Niagara College. And she was interviewed on whether or not she was a feminist in her 80s. And, and she said, she had never really thought about herself as a feminist. But if she had, she would be a feminist. You know, so but I can remember so clearly, that interview on videotape is, it was really a treasure to have that. (Claire Stea Pair Interview)

In an era when spectacularized girl activists seemed to be everywhere, pauses in quotidian life were difficult to come by when moving forward is always the priority. Despite these moments when a better horizon seems possible, activist struggles usually feel endless, and as Claire points out, there is something important about being able to pause and reflect on the conditions of past generations and leave a record of the current moment for the next.

Still, with so much work to be done, stopping to take stock of how it all feels can feel like a waste of time. In 1969, Carol Hirsch published a frustrated memo, now known as "The Personal is Political," in response to this very criticism of feminist consciousness-raising groups (Hanisch 1970). She resented the accusation that consciousness groups were just doing therapy

instead of political work because she saw women's personal struggles as fundamentally political. Without all this gathering and reflecting, women would continue trying to solve their problems individually instead of collectively. Hirsch's essay, which is older than many of the mothers who participated in this study, reminds us that women's personal relationships, struggles, and feelings are worth taking seriously because they are inextricable from their political conditions. Though Hemmings (2011) might warn against the collapse between family history and feminist history (149), the two do converge when people narrate their own relationship to feminism and broader political positions. Youth activists may be new to their work, but they inherit longstanding struggles from the generations before them. An assessment of their politics is incomplete without engaging with these intergenerational conditions, and I argue that this involves both wider social generations and familial generations.

Like Hirsch, I do not want to instrumentalize the words from the study participants to "produce for the movement" (5) as if measurable political outcomes are all that matter. Young people are already burdened by demands to right the future, and the assumption that the next generation will fix ongoing problems is often a barrier rather than an incitement to intergenerational solidarity (Felix 2023; Salter 2022). Instead, I agree that mothers and daughters are "really neat people" (Hanisch 1970, 5) whose complex feelings and inner lives are not problems to be solved or minor notes in feminist history. The layered feelings within these generational relationships are a salient way to contextualize girls' politics not as departures of a newly political generation, but a continuation of a much longer struggle. Girls' interior lives and domestic relationships are significant to their political outlooks, and this project serves as a moment to pause and undertake a close reading of how mothers and daughters feel their way through this tangle of personal and political.

Theoretical Framework: Affect Theory

From the outset, I knew this would be a project with a lot of feelings. Because of this, I thought that affect theory would be a good place to begin when conceptualizing how the cycles of meaning-making involved in activism, feminism, girlhood, mothering, and intergenerational relationships would emerge throughout this research. Affect theory is a body of scholarship that explores the subjective and embodied experiences of feelings. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg's "An Inventory of Shimmers," (2010), describes affect as "found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that

circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves." (1). Different scholars take up affect differently and are often concerned with the in-betweens, capacities, and potentials that exist within and beyond our bodies. Affects resonate through daily life, and they are a key part of our social reality, even if these moments of shared feelings are difficult to notice and name. Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2007) theorizes the ever-present though intangible affects of the everyday through disconnected vignettes and observations. Stewart explores how affects often go unnoticed but are still an integral part of the social world, writing: "A world of shared banalities can be a basis of sociality, or an exhausting undertow, or just something to do. It can pop up as a picture of staged perfection, as a momentary recognition, or as a sense of shock or relief at being "in" something with others." (27-28).

In *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), Ann Cvetkovich uses the term "feeling" to name the "undifferentiated stuff" that spans the distinctions between emotion and affect in intentionally imprecise ways (5). Activism, feminism, and daughter-mother relationships are all categories that carry certain culturally defined expectations, but when they are inhabited by real girls and women, they involve a porous flow between the social and the private that involve feelings like love, passion, anger, and desire as girls feel their way through their activism and relationships. Our emotions are not a private matter that move from the inside out, but are deeply social and relational (Ahmed 2004, 117). Women in general and girls, in particular, are often imagined as inferior because they are seen as emotional and this is a social perception that is used to not just marginalize women but push their emotions back out of the public sphere and into the realm of cognition (Ahmed 2014, 8).

I take feelings seriously as a site of knowledge production as girls feel their way through the world and their activism (12). When individuals have feelings, this experience is understood through socially constructed discursive frameworks. Because of this, engaging with daughters' and mothers' feelings is not a matter of finding or validating some kind of essential feminine intuition. Emotions and their affective resonances are highly contextual, and these social paradigms structure how people feel they should feel or should want to feel. As Sara Ahmed points out:

> In such affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to

> consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective. (2004, 119).

Within this reading of affect, emotions may be individually embodied, but they are inseparable from the social process of how people and communities form attachments and rejections. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Ahmed offers an approach to affect that, like Cvetkovich, keeps the affective and emotional connected. For Ahmed, the political and the emotional have always been intertwined and emotions are crucial to the self and the social in ways that constitute and blur the boundaries between the two (4). She writes: "…emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others" (10). Ahmed's perspective on these relational impressions is well-oriented for intergenerational relationships because she explores the ways our encounters and relationships with others always leave an indent that shapes our being.

Exploring activism and mother-daughter relationships involved the diffused hum of undefinable feelings and the directly stated emotions that mothers and daughters would name when describing their lives. For example, a particularly salient feeling that emerged across the interviews was desire as mothers and daughters hoped for a better future for themselves and each other. Activists are very explicitly wanting subjects who point out that something is lacking in our world and needs to change, and girls are constantly rendered through a matrix of errant desire, vulnerability, and risk that sees them as always inadequate and in need of adult rescue or correction. Relationships, whether they are between mothers and daughters or anyone else, are always implicated in both intimate kinds of wanting and broad social expectations around what is desired and what is missing. Wanting is a keenly felt, embodied, and nameable feeling, but it is also a potential and a horizon. Wanting describes the reach for something missing or desired, and this can be experienced as painful, exciting, or conflicting.

Wanting is not necessarily tied to any particular person, object, or circumstance, but it does tend to tie things together. For example, Ahmed talks about this in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) when she explains how people want happiness, but this is so tied to

heterosexuality that any happiness that exists beyond these boundaries is illegible. Wanting is not a problem to solve, but it often feels that way for daughters who are caught between what they want and what is wanted for them. Wanting to be a good daughter— to either a parent, a community, or a cause— is not only about social systems and obligations but is also bound up in the love that exists (or painfully fails to exist) between daughters and their origins. Rather than seeing wanting as something to control or correct, it can be a way to explore vulnerability and the ways that we both want and depend on the people around us in both sustaining and precarious ways.

The affect of a moment or interaction is felt before it is named. This makes analyzing and interpreting affect an imprecise process. Maintaining an intentionally fluid sense of these feelings in this project felt like the best way to engage with the work of interpreting affect without claiming definitive mastery over what daughters and mothers were feeling and why. In fact, feelings are a serious site of knowledge production and a source of expertise (Ahmed 2014, 12). In "Breaking up with Deleuze: desire and valuing the irreconcilable" (2010), Eve Tuck describes desire as a kind of intergenerationally transmitted feeling and site of knowledge:

> I am ready for a politics of desire that observes desire as enjoying some/a lot of self-determination, even as its lines of flight 'flee in every direction.' Desire, for my part, accumulates wisdom, picking up flashes of self-understanding and world-understanding along the way of a life. This wisdom is assembled not just across a lifetime, but across generations, so that my desire is linked, rhizomatically, to my past and my future. It is in the way I can tell my grandmother's stories with as much fullness as I tell my own, a practice among many first peoples. I believe that our desire has expertise. In fact, I believe desire constitutes our expertise. (645-646)

I align with this sense of desire as a living thing that is tended to and cultivated over a lifetime and across generations. McClelland and Fine (2008) describe girls as subjects with "thick desire" who "seek lives of pleasure and responsibility, strength of mind and body, alone and with community." (84). Girls feel deeply about the world and how they experience it, and yet this passionate desire to see change is often seen as excessive or a disruptive phase to be suffered before it is inevitably outgrown.

Sticky Affect

McClelland and Fine's attempt to reclaim desire as a site of expertise rather than volatility for girls speaks to the ways that affects tend to adhere to certain bodies in ways that maintain

unequal hierarchies and other systems of power. A recurring concept in affect theory that speaks to these pattens of affect is the notion of "sticky affect," first described by Ahmed in "Affective Economies" (2004):

> In particular, I will show how emotions work by sticking figures together (adherence), a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective (coherence)…My economic model of emotions suggests that while emotions do not positively reside in a subject or figure, they still work to bind subjects together. Indeed, to put it more strongly, the nonresidence of emotions is what makes them "binding." (119)

Scholars like Jessica Ringrose (Kofoed and Ringrose 2012; Renold and Ringrose 2008; 2011) engage with sticky affects surrounding girlhood specifically. Bodies and their meaning are always contextual and certain affects will stick to certain bodies more readily than others (Kofoed and Ringrose 2012, 9). This sticking quality draws attention to the ways that specific patterns of feeling and recognition tend to be repeated and recreated, even if those affects are not *inherently* stuck to those bodies.

While it is perhaps a literal application of the stickiness of sticky affect, relationships, particularly family relationships, are a terrain where subjects and affects are bound together. Daughtering and mothering are both social roles with certain gendered expectations that are continually reinscribed into hierarchies of expected behaviour for girls and women. This is where a sense of wrestling with the ways that commitments to feminism, activism, kin, or other relationships are more than just a matter of personal investment/divestment. Feelings of attachment or alienation might stick to certain roles and their inhabitants in ways that return people to familiar patterns. Even when people experience strife in their relationships. they may maintain them as they seek out the positive affects that are *supposed* to adhere there. Daughters may frame their mothers' harsh and belittling comments as 'tough love' because they want their mothers to be a source of love and support instead of dismissal. Conversely, a mother who enjoys her children can still feel constrained by the expectations of motherhood and resent how this identity can stick to her in ways that eclipse the other parts of her being.

Ahmed discusses sticky affect as indicating a present history (Ahmed 2004, 126) that remains alive in the present and continues to contour a given adhesive regime. Much like how I endeavoured to conceptualize girls in as broad and shifting terms as possible but was still returned to the usual borders of girlhood when it came to actually collecting data, defining mothers and daughters in inclusive terms that could be ready for anything was similarly

constrained. Even expansions to stepmothers, foster mothers, aunties, and other mother figures can critique, though not quite escape, the usual associations that structure who is recognized as and who recognizes themselves as a mother, daughter, or girl.

Here, again, intergenerational relationships are implicated in these literally living histories. Enduring histories and affects build out who is considered to be legitimately recognizable as kin, or even recognizable as human. Who is recognized as a mother or a daughter has ties to the nation-state, to colonization, and to their legacies of eugenics in ways that are not always obvious but are still impossible to ignore. The implications of these histories and what we do with them, particularly when exploring girls' politics in the context of their family relationships, are significant to how I have been thinking about girls in their role as daughters and the ways that daughtering can be read as a site of sticky affect.

Girl as Affect

Thinking beyond how research interviews and interpersonal relationships feel, affect theory draws attention to the ways that identities are themselves structured around certain resonances and feelings. 'Girl' is one of those affect-laden concepts we all recognize but struggle to define. There are always caveats and exceptions to what makes someone a girl or what kinds of experiences are quintessential. Girlhood is both a shared identity and a unique experience where specific repeating resonances tend to cluster together in similar ways, but also have room to be arranged in new and unexpected patterns. There is a flexible fixity to girlhood where it holds many possibilities but enough of a shared and recurring meaning to remain legible.

Monica Swindle (2011) describes 'girl' not as an identity, but as an affect and a site that contains many generative possibilities. While individual girls may each attach very different meanings to girlhood, girls of very different bodies, races, gender identities or expressions may all feel that 'girl' resonates with them as their identity. This theory of girlhood that prioritizes ambiguity and flux is shared by girls' studies scholars such as Jessica Taft, who point out that because there is no such thing as a "completed" subjectivity where you reach a finalized static identity, youth can be understood as inhabiting the same ongoing process of becoming that occurs throughout the entire lifespan. In *Rebel Girls* (2011), Taft explores the ways that girls do not just make a linear transition from child to adult, but instead inhabit multiple kinds of gender performance that are deployed in context-specific settings. This more fluid understanding not

only helps to disrupt a linear understanding of girls where girlhood inevitably ends at a certain point and gives way to womanhood but also helps to generate a more complex understanding of intergenerational relationships that recognizes the ways that all subjectivities are continuously shifting.

In recognizing that girls are not simply pre-women, it is important to note that their mothers are not necessarily post-girls. The mothers in this study were often returned to their own girlhoods and girlhood feelings when they spoke about their daughters. As they described their daughters, they almost always returned to describing their own mothers and how they were and continue to be daughters to their mothers. Many of them had begun to politicize when they were teenagers, and learning new political discourses from their daughters created the same curiosities and challenges in adulthood that they had felt in their youth. In this respect, girlhood is something that girls and their mothers share rather than a point of separation. The way girlhood resonates through these relationships, particularly the role and relationships of being a daughter, provides more dynamic insights into what girlhood is and does than a fixation on age or physiology.

Throughout this project, I refer to the younger participants as 'daughters' or the 'daughter cohort' and not just 'the girls' because one nonbinary participant, Stea, identified as a daughter but not a girl. The fluid orientation towards girlhood that affect theory offers opens up possibilities for untethering girlness from physical bodies. Still, despite this potential, 'girl' persisted as an unsatisfying category even as I locate this work in girls' studies. No matter how expansively, fluidly, or intersectionally the term may be rendered, I do not want to ensnare Stea or anyone else in an identity they do not want or would rather leave behind. What unites the daughter cohort of my study (or perhaps sticks them together) is not their shared attachment to the diverse yet shared identity of girlhood but as daughters who are always bound up in enduring connections to other people. Daughtering is a relational practice and emphasizes daughtering draws focus to the roles and connections that people enact rather than remaining stuck to individual identities. As I noted above, for the mother cohort of the study, the affective resonances of girlhood are tied to their sense of themselves as daughters. Daughter is something that "sticks to certain bodies mattering them by creating the surfaces, boundaries, and relations that seem to delimit them" (Swindle 2011, 5). The affect that animates daughterhood is not just

felt by daughters, and daughterly feelings of inheritance and obligation arise outside the family home.

Of course, using daughterhood as an umbrella term for the study's participants may not be any different from girlhood in a meaningful sense. Daughterhood also sticks people together in ways that are both welcome and unwelcome. Just as Stea considers themself a daughter and not a girl, it stands to reason that there are girls who do not identify as daughters. 'Daughter' is still a role that evokes the feminine, even if its inhabitants are not. It also aligns people to families that may have rejected them or whom they reject. 'Daughter' is not an uncomplicated category, and this complexity is not resolved in this project, but it at least serves to orient this analysis away from just identity and toward relationships and social systems.

Methodology[4]

Affect theory offers a way to conceptualize mothers and daughters as relationships with both a great deal of flexibility and potential while appreciating that this potential is contoured by the present history of hierarchical systems of domination. This is a useful theoretical orientation for thinking about mother-daughter relationships as a necessary site to engage with the connections between the personal and political, while appreciating how it can easily reinscribe this relationship as something heteropatriarchal, rather than a place with the potential for intergenerational solidarity. In my research, I looked to assemble a methodology that could explore the role of mother-daughter relationships in girls' politics in ways that engaged with this flexibility and the complex feelings that resonate through this relationship. I wanted to do this in a way that centred girls' everyday lives and politics, but also brought their mothers into focus in ways that the field of girls' studies had not previously explored.

As I explored in the literature review, Anita Harris (2004; 2001; 2008) has noted the ways that even when girls are celebrated as flexible, adaptable, and successful, this kind of visibility is ultimately a system of regulation where girls must live up to these increasingly rising standards while still performing the expected norms of femininity. In this context, girls not only face the policing of their behaviour and movement but are also expected to do the work of maintaining harmonious relationships with the people around them and may therefore decline to openly express their feelings and opinions in certain settings (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Johnson

[4] Portions of this section appear in "What Girls Want: An Affective Reading of Activist Girls and Their Relationships with Their Mothers and Mother Figures" (Maitland 2024)

and Ginsberg 2015). These pressures are only heightened for Indigenous girls and other girls of colour who already experience literal policing and overcriminalization and are often subject to much harsher state and social consequences for taking up space and expressing political opinions (Brown 2009; de Finney 2014; 2017; de Finney et al. 2019; Smooth and Richardson 2019).[5]

In response to these marginalizing dynamics, many girlhood studies scholars rightfully recommend that researchers engage with girls one-on-one or with their peer groups to empower girls to speak more freely about their lives. As a field, girlhood studies attempts to centre girls' voices and employ methods like participatory action research, photovoice and journaling to allow girls to express their perspectives without feeling like they must defend themselves, protect others, or otherwise please adults (Johnson and Ginsberg 2015; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2013). The adults who carry out this research should ideally enter into a research relationship with girl participants where they are speaking *with* rather than *for* girls. This emerges from a feminist political orientation towards girlhood that critiques how girls' unique experiences at the intersection of age and gender are often obscured and maligned when framed through discourses of young womanhood or inevitable future marriage, careers, or motherhood.

Methodological frameworks for researching with girls, or "girl method," as Claudia Mitchell and Jacquline Reid-Walsh (2013) describe it, emphasize the importance of the adult researchers' ability to listen to girl participants. An early and highly influential work of Girls' Studies is Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan's *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (1992). Brown and Gilligan's study involved interviews with over 100 girls between the ages of seven and eighteen at a private school in Ohio (5). Their research found that as girls age, they become less and less inclined to freely voice their opinions and engage in conflict with others. Instead, they learn to sublimate their voices to preserve their relationships with those around them. Silence becomes a learned strategy sometime during girlhood, and adolescent girls and adult women will silence themselves rather than risk open disagreements and the isolation and violence that may follow (3). Girls' studies explores these same tensions where many scholars are interested in intergenerational relationships and

[5] Also see Halle Singh's "Method-ological Mapping of *Girlhood Studies*," (2021)

solidarities between young people and adults, but this is difficult to mobilize in a research method where the usual dominance of adults over youth is reasserted.

For example, in a study of youth-led movements for Peruvian Working Children, Jessica Taft (2015) found that the workers' organizations aspired to be youth-led and put a tremendous amount of serious effort into creating equal relationships between adult "colaboradores" and child members (463). Despite this intentional attempt at equality and solidarity, the hierarchies between adults and children proved difficult to overcome, and the group would often slip back into a dynamic where adults led and children followed.

Girls have a strong awareness of and response to the power that adults hold in their lives, and this includes adult researchers. Girls in their childhood and adolescence can find ways to tell their own stories on their own terms, but they often have fewer options for telling personal narratives without some kind of adult intervention. Between their parents and other authority figures, girls live with a significant amount of adult scrutiny and control and may be unable to critique these figures as freely as their adult counterparts. Young people can also have close and loving relationships with these same authority figures. Girls may be reluctant to criticize these adults not out of fear, inequality, or a lack of control but out of love and protection. Children tend to be attached to their parents and express this care in how they speak about their family to others.

Even though these adult-child relationships are often unequal in ways that disadvantage young people, these are still significant and interdependent relationships in young people's lives. In his article arguing for more focus on adult-child relationships in work researching children's participation, Michael Wyness (2013) notes that children usually experience a tripartite relationship between themselves, their families, and the state (436). Adults can act as allies and the facilitators of young people's participation and, like Wyness, I do not believe that adults are inherently obstructive in political organizing with young people, and it, therefore, stands to reason that they are not an inherently obstructive presence in research with young people. Adults are part of young people's material lives, so a holistic approach to their political thinking and actions would make no sense without them.

A Psychosocial Approach

My sense of the interplay between the internal and external world in activist work and mother-daughter relationships, particularly in the context of the research interview, is significantly informed by Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson's adapted Psychosocial Framework as outlined in their book *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: A Psychosocial Approach* (2013). Within their framework, Hollway and Jefferson advocate for understanding research participants as discursive subjects who are always experiencing a socially constructed selfhood that cannot be detached from external systems of organized meaning. In order to account for the porous connection between the inner and outer worlds, participants' life narratives always have to be considered within their given context. This contextual and relational approach engages with the conscious and unconscious reasons for someone's investment in a particular discourse or understanding of themselves, their loved ones, and the world around them. They further summarize their theory of the psychosocial subject, writing: "…a psychosocial subject; that is, one theorized as constituted from a combination of unique biographical events (in which unconscious dynamics are crucial in determining a person's relation to external reality), and socially shared meanings, interactions, and situations." (96). The inner world of the psyche and the outer social world are not sharply divided and, instead, continually inform one another in ways that are co-constituting and nearly impossible to disentangle.

Holloway and Jefferson's methodology was created partially as a response to the ways that survey results are broken into demographic categories and generalized into findings that are far abstracted from the context of the respondents' lives. They particularly critique how data can become decontextualized through the kinds of "code and retrieve" methods popularized by data-management software (64). They instead draw from the principle of Gestalt, which is based on the "idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." (64). While coded analysis and comparison are still valuable tools for analysis, they should be applied in tandem with analyzing case studies as cohesive units, with their own actors and contexts. This emphasis on contextualizing participant interviews is one of the reasons I chose to interview girls along with their mothers rather than just asking about their relationships with their mothers in solo interviews or surveys. My analysis did apply coding and comparison between mother-daughter pairs (as aided by data-management software, no less), but as an intergenerational study, my

dissertation is similarly interested in mapping connections in their social and historical context to best understand participants' lives.

Though Hollway and Jefferson do not take up affect in their work in quite the same terms, their psychosocial sense of human subjectivity dialogues well with the ways that Ahmed (2014) describes emotion as an ongoing cycle of a simultaneously shared and individual process. The connective focus of affect theory has guided my own analysis, and as an intergenerational study, I have been attuned to moments where even the two-person relationship of daughter and mother is always crowded by past events, future aspirations, socially determined positions, and random happenstances that arrive to contour the central relationship. Hollway and Jefferson also emphasize the ways that the researcher's interpretation of the interviews with participants is never objective and always informed by moments of countertransference and other resonances that can be named as affect.

Similarly, though Hollway and Jefferson also do not explicitly take up intersectionality, their emphasis on contextualizing research participants in their social milieu is also amenable to an intersectional approach. Much of the contemporary feminist literature in the anglosphere, including girls' studies, has been informed by Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991; 2010) concept of intersectionality and the various strains of thought that take up her work (Hill Collins and Bilge 2020; May 2015; Nash 2013). Intersectionality provides an analytical framework that offers an understanding of how various systems of oppression and power, such as race, class, and gender, overlap to produce distinct social conditions for those located at the intersection where these systems are experienced simultaneously. Mothers and daughters often share very similar social locations, but there are still differences between them, and they do not inhabit the same exact intersection. Age is the obvious difference between the two, but the mothers and daughters who participated in this study often differed in race, sexual orientation, and gender expression, even when they had plenty of other identities in common. Intersectionality helps analyze how broad systems interact and is useful for understanding those systems that create the conditions of individuals' inner worlds and intimate relationships.

Acknowledging that certain topics may be challenging to discuss, Holloway and Jefferson (2013) further explore how the unconscious emerges in interviews in what they describe as the "defended subject." Whether intentionally or unintentionally, people may avoid certain events or realizations to preserve their sense of self (17–20). This can emerge through a

process they describe as "splitting," where the good and bad elements of a single event, person, or relationship are kept separate to preserve a coherent understanding of these external happening (55). Because the daughter-mother relationship is a site of complex intimacy, it is a particularly translucent point between the inner and outer world and the need to defend the self through particular representations of someone else.

In the context of a research interview, this is not only an internal process but part of reconciling events, people, and opinions within the norms of their social, political, and cultural contexts. Splitting is not deception or a challenge for the researcher to overcome during the interview but a way to appreciate the contradictions and complexities of lived experiences and relationships. This is another moment where an appreciation for feelings becomes important. Splitting is not just an attempt to be logically consistent, but resolve the dissonant and even painful affects. For example, the daughter cohort often understood that activism required facing systemic issues with collective work. However, they were often inexperienced organizers, and the struggle to maintain political momentum caused them to turn their energy inward toward personal solutions like working harder or learning more to resolve feelings of powerlessness or frustration with others' disinterest.

Interpretation

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) assert that interpretation is an art and not a science (3), which makes it well suited to affect theory and the often ambiguous sense of an encounter. However, interpretation is also a point of contention for Hollway and Jefferson and other psychoanalysis-informed approaches to qualitative research. Hollway and Jefferson's reliance on the defended subject has been critiqued for creating a foregone conclusion about participants as always existing in a moment of anxious defensiveness that goes unnoticed by all but the researcher (Frosh and Young 2017, 20). Much of Hollway and Jefferson's (2013) framework is drawn from studies on people's attitudes toward crime and their assertion that these feelings must be understood contextually rather than through survey data run through a "code-and-retrieve" approach to analysis (64). In this context, it makes sense that anxiety and defensiveness would become dominant themes that gesture toward a more foundational characteristic of the unconscious and the affective interplay between the inner and outer worlds.

I appreciate this warning against a deterministic sense of the defended subject and a pathologizing orientation toward how and why people "split" to protect a coherent sense of self– – I am not venturing to opine on my participants' emotions to the point of diagnosis. However, much like with crime, there are powerful social discourses that inform how the mother-daughter relationship is understood, and these social expectations have been created and levied by colonization, capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy to oppress. Mother-daughter relationships are routinely pathologized as codependent, competitive and stereotyped through the social "problems" of welfare queens and out-of-control pregnant teenagers— all of which are structured around racism and classism along with misogyny. In the opening to her book, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2019), Jacqueline Rose names mothers as the ultimate scapegoat for all social ills, writing:

> A simple argument guides this book: that motherhood is, in Western discourse, the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts, of what it means to be fully human. It is the ultimate scapegoat for our personal and political failings, for everything that is wrong with the world, which it becomes the task – unrealisable, of course – of mothers to repair (7)

With this as the social context that shapes mothering, it makes sense that mothers would be inclined to be defensive, and daughters be compelled to either defend their mothers or defend themselves from her. The idea that girls are defended subjects who self-censor to maintain harmonious relationships and maintain access to what little privileges and protections adhering to normative expectations can offer is somewhat taken for granted in girls' studies, even as this framing is critiqued. Because girls are anxiously regulated, even feminist efforts to engage with their innermost thoughts and feelings are still implicated in regulatory frameworks. Framing girls as always defensive carries the implication that they cannot really be trusted. Even when it is done in earnest, attempting to get at what girls are "really" trying to say feels like perpetuating the myth that women never say what they mean, and notions of splitting and defending subjects bring up thorny questions of authenticity when it comes to girlhood.

Even though girls' self-censorship can be detrimental to their lives, the goal of empowering girls has often ironically involved making them confess their private thinking for further dissection. Harris (2004) points out that when girls are invited to share their thoughts, they are often expected to adhere to a confessional style of address where they must offer up their whole self for assessment. Girls' words alone cannot be taken seriously at face value so

further details must be divulged so the girl herself can be judged as a credible speaker or not. Minoritization comes with the burden of always having to prove the expertise of lived experience, and this need to endlessly explain oneself is only compounded if girls are further marginalized at the intersection of disability, race, or class. Psychological perspectives on girlhood and girls' development, including Brown and Gilligan's (1992), have been critiqued for enacting this same incitement to discourse for girls even though they were undertaken with girls' liberation in mind. Part of the critique of Pipher's book (1995) is her reliance on a notion of splitting where girls have a hidden, authentic self and a protective false self that adheres to the normative expectations of femininity (Brown 2008). This psychologizing framework is criticized as a pathologizing view of girlhood that justifies the anxious prying into girls' inner worlds to try to figure out what girls really think and feel so adults can further intervene.

However, I do think that it is important to not only engage with a framework that scaffolds a process of researcher reflexivity that offers transparency to the process of interpretation and, returning to the notion that the personal is political, emphasize the ways that women and girls have rich inner lives that are worth engaging with alongside their politics. Research interviews like mine are haunted by clinical interviews and other efforts to demean girls' expertise about themselves by trying to assert that only professionals can know the truth of how they feel but that does not mean adults directly asking young people how they feel is an inherently oppressive method. Appreciating that someone's inner and outer worlds exist in complex interdependence does not have to rely on a binary understanding of a hidden authentic self beneath a protective facade. Defensiveness and desire do not have to be understood as problems in need of solving, nor do these defences have to be interpreted through an uncritical paradigm of resistance to the pressures of the patriarchal norms around mother-daughter relationships. Instead, defensiveness is part of being a social subject and not some unique pathology of girlhood.

Methods

With this theoretical and methodological orientation, I approached researching girl activists as intergenerational subjects with close and complex relationships with the people around them. I structured my project as a qualitative in-depth interview study of activist girls and their mothers and mother figures and conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews over Zoom

with ten activist daughters and their mothers and mother figures. After obtaining ethics approval from York University for human subject research in the summer of 2021, I began recruiting and interviewing girl activists and their mothers and mother figures. I applied a combination of one-on-one and paired interviews with daughters and mothers to explore what kinds of affective landscapes would emerge when interviewing girls not only *about* their mothers but *with* their mothers.

Recruitment

I began the project hoping to recruit ten mother-daughter dyads from across Canada. I was not looking to create a representative sample of mother-daughter relationships and aimed to gather a smaller collection of interviews so I could analyze them in more depth. Still, I did hope to capture some variety across participants to appreciate the diversity of girlhoods, activist work, and mother-daughter relationships. To recognize this spectrum of access to activist opportunities, I tried to avoid creating a hierarchy of what "counts" as activism and instead allowed participants to define what they consider activism and political engagement. I essentially left "activism" as an open concept and allowed any girl who identified as an activist between the ages of 13[6] and 20 to participate and explain what this term meant to them in their lives. I opted for this wide age range in order to capture this spectrum of participation. With this approach, I conceptualize youth activism as a broad category of political engagement where young people participate in direct and public initiatives to enact social change. Contemporary youth activism is creative, flexible, and multifaceted and engages with the political world beyond adherence to a singular political, national, or social identity. Girls' activism can take the form of "traditional" activism, such as marches and protests, might rely entirely on new internet technologies like blogging, or involve a combination of older and newer approaches (Keller 2012; Rapp et al. 2010; Schuster 2013; Taft 2006). Although this study explores girls' relationship to feminism, my research also engages with girls who call themselves feminists, even if they devote the majority of their activist attention to other movements such as climate justice or anti-racist action.

Another condition of the recruitment process is that many activists, particularly those involved in more radical organizing or who have already experienced arrest/other policing, have

[6] This age range was later modified to (11-20) when one mother suggested including both her 13-year-old and 11-year-old daughter in the interviews.

no incentive to talk to an unknown researcher. I was intentional about recruiting participants who were not in my immediate circle because I felt that some distance would make it easier to discuss mother-daughter relationships without creating a situation where a colleague felt obligated to participate for my sake or that I was prying into the private life of someone I would keep running into at protests. There are advantages to this distance, and sometimes, it is easier to talk about the tangle of personal and political life with a stranger. However, this method comes with consequences. Because I was not researching with young people or adults with whom I had an existing relationship, participants were not aware of my politics, did not know if I intended to interfere with their work or publicize sensitive organizing information, and had no way of knowing if I was inclined to report participants to the police. Even though the study promised anonymity, people who do not know me do not know if I can be trusted to keep such a promise. Activism encompasses a spectrum of activities, and some of those activities are dangerous or otherwise high-risk. This study employed a method that ultimately excluded participants engaged in this kind of activism because it did not allow time for me to develop a strong enough rapport with participants to hold the kinds of sensitive information that might come with halting a shipment of weapons or disabling logging equipment.

I also did not want to put strict parameters on the mother-daughter relationship either. Black and Indigenous feminist scholars like Ruth Nicole Brown (2009), Tracy Friedel (2015), and Brigette Krieg (2016) note the particular importance of aunties and other mothers in kinship networks and that way that we are all always situated in webs of relations that extend to history, ideas, the land, and the environment. There are systems of relationships that extend well beyond the notions of kinship that I most readily recognize. Though I am a daughter, as a researcher I cannot rely on my own assumptions about who mothers and daughters are and how they understand their relationship. Still, they may hold shared understandings about the social and cultural expectations that girls and women are expected to perform. In this way, the researcher is also part of this performance and enters into a relationship with the people they are interviewing rather than observing them at a safe distance.

With my own limitations in mind, it was important to proceed with a framework of understanding where those who joined me in conversations about their lives were already the experts in their own identities, connections, and experiences. As much as possible, I tried to frame my recruitment materials as an invitation to bring any conception of feminism, mothering,

daughtering, girling, and activism together. I chose to expand the call to include "mother figures" to encapsulate the relationships where the practice of mothering, including care work, emotional and material support, mentorship, and affection, is not bound by the law or biology. The use of "mother figures" in my recruitment materials felt like the most effective way to signal to participants that they were welcome to participate and offer what a mothering relationship meant to them, without feeling they had to meet some official threshold to legitimate their relationship. While "mother figure" is not necessarily the perfect term for this and may evoke more vague images of spiritual or cultural mothers, such as saints or celebrities, "aunties" felt both too broad and too culturally specific to serve this purpose.

My own research understands girlhood as an ongoing practice and process of becoming, where what it means to be a girl is never static, but this becoming is not a site of deficiency. However, while my theoretical framework prioritizes flowing and unfixed notions of time and identity, this study still takes place in a specific moment in time where daughter and mother are two distinct members of a pair from different generations, even if they always remain in flux. There are still practical constraints to this, and while the potentials of daughterhood and girlhood are infinite, this research is not. Because this is a study of contemporary girl activists that asks what roles girls are playing in their political movements and families at this particular moment, I still imposed an age limit on what it means to be a girl. My age range of 13-20 for the daughters in this daughter-mother study was a practical element of data collection, even as it reinforces a normative understanding of what it means to be a girl.

Once recruitment began, it was a long and involved process. Silence quickly emerged as a major theme of this research when I realized that very few people were willing to participate in this study. Part of this hesitation probably concerns expectations around who "counts" as an activist. Other scholars like Jessica Taft (2006; 2011; 2017) have found that politically active girls will decline to call themselves activists because they feel they haven't done or experienced enough to earn the title and are instead becoming activists or learning activism. However, I think the mother-daughter element is what made the study unappealing. Participation in this pair-interviewing method requires a positive enough relationship to facilitate discussing it together in front of a stranger, and this does not describe every mother-daughter relationship. Because this study required both the mother and daughter to not only participate but sit in the same physical/Zoom room together, this research has little insight into parents and children who are

estranged or experiencing significant conflict. There are real risks in creating disharmony with one's mother, and these are heightened for girls who are not financially independent. Most children depend on their parents for food, housing, access to education, and other material needs, which often extends into young adulthood. In some households, expressing disagreement with parents over political or religious beliefs, opinions about the relationship, or declaring a 2SLGBTQ+ identity can all lead to violence and rejection for the child. Even if physical removal from the household or community is not going to occur, emotional rejection is still a significant negative outcome for both parents and children.

In their chapter "R-Words: Refusing Research," Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2014) describe how academic research continues to extract knowledge from others, particularly Indigenous communities, in ways that sustain rather than challenge the status quo of settler colonialism. They critique the tendency among researchers to commodify the pain narratives of oppressed communities and challenge the assumption that research must seek to know everything at any cost. Silence is its own kind of knowledge, and refusing to participate is a way that individuals and communities resist the colonizing gaze of researchers. In their dialogue with Audra Simpson's (2007) work, they explain: "Refusal is not just a "no," but a redirection to ideas otherwise unacknowledged or unquestioned. Unlike a settler colonial configuration of knowledge that is petulantly exasperated and resentful of limits, a methodology of refusal regards limits on knowledge as productive, as indeed a good thing." (Tuck and Yang 2014, 20–21). As a white settler researcher, I am embedded in the historical legacies of social workers, public health officials, and missionaries who have often used their authority and presumed expertise to intervene in the private lives of families with destructive consequences. It makes sense that many people did not want to open themselves up to this kind of scrutiny. Though I am limited in my ability to base any accurate analysis on people who did not participate, the themes of silence and refusal and my responsibility toward their presence emerge throughout this study and are just as integral to the research as the content of the interviews.

To find participants, I reached out to student clubs and gender studies departments at Canadian colleges and universities, all the major PFLAG chapters in Canada, alternative schools in Toronto, youth climate justice organizations, femme-led anti-racist groups, and as many national women's organizations as I could find. There were phases where I sent emails, phases where I sent Facebook and Instagram direct messages (DMs), phases where I contacted

organizations, and phases where I contacted individuals. I tracked my recruitment messages, including social media posts, emails, DMs, and times I shared my poster at events. I personally sent 240 calls from September 2021 to April 2022, which does not account for messages sent on my behalf by friends and colleagues. I viewed my research as a youth-centred project, and I had initially set out to recruit girls directly by contacting youth-centred groups and organizations. However, as the year went on, I increasingly found that mothers were more likely to respond to posters and emails sent to larger organizations or other public forums. The open calls to organizations, clubs, various undergraduate departments, and social media posts attracted four families, but only mothers responded to these kinds of calls and then encouraged their daughters to participate. The most successful recruitment methods were direct referrals from colleagues and sending direct messages to young activists who had been featured in the media to invite them to participate in the study.

However, though this could be successful, many girls, especially those who share their political opinions publicly, encounter intense harassment and do not allow private messages or even comments on their social media profiles. I was aware of this harassment and, as someone who also does not accept messages from strangers on social media, was reticent to add to the barrage of annoying and harassing messages that many girls receive. I would only message potential participants once and would not pursue trying to set up interviews with participants who seemed vaguely interested at first and then stopped communicating.

In recognizing that not all mother-daughter relationships are supportive or safe for the mothers and daughters involved, my own unease about the power dynamics within this relationship for minors is why I did not offer financial remuneration for participating. Usually, I would prioritize monetary compensation to honour someone's time and respect their storytelling and expertise. However, because this study required recruiting one half of a pair through another, I wanted to be attentive to how one person might coerce their family member to participate. I worried that money, even a nominal sum, would increase the chances of this happening. Because young people (especially around the ages of 11 and 13) do not always have control over their finances or have unrestricted opportunities to use something like gift cards, I also did not want to create a situation where a parent was barring their child from accessing the honorarium intended for them. As this research was conducted during the pandemic at a time when my university would not sanction in-person research, this restricted my ability to offer some other kind of

material compensation or refreshments. Though I do not think these concerns were unreasonable, this was likely a barrier to recruitment, and I now believe this made my study more extractive than intended. In a future study, I would be more thorough in considering how reciprocity might work in this kind of setting.

Over nine months of fieldwork, I interviewed eleven daughters and eight mothers and mother figures. The daughter's activist commitments spanned various social issues, from sex education to the environment, and they worked at different scales. Suzanna, for example, tended to her school's GSA and attended the various walkouts and demonstrations in her community, while Alexis had joined the blockades at Fairy Creek to participate in direct action against the logging.

While each girl had a unique situation, the daughter cohort of participants shared some general demographic similarities. All of the daughters identified themselves as white, except for Danielle, who was white and Filipina; Daisy, who was Caribbean and Southeast Asian; and Daisy's sister Nicole, who identified as Black and Scottish/English. One girl, Buffy, identified as transgender, and the others either described themselves as cisgender or did not discuss their gender identity beyond identifying as a girl. Stea, who was non-binary, identified as a daughter but not a girl. All were born in Canada, and at the time of the interviews, most of the daughters were living in Ontario, while Alexis and Sam lived in British Columbia. With the exception of Brett, all of them were currently enrolled in some kind of primary, secondary, or postsecondary education. The mothers were similar to their daughters, with all currently residing in Canada and most were either working in education in some capacity or were enrolled as graduate students. All of the mothers identified as white, except Daisy and Nicole's mother Jessica who identified as Black.

Interviewing

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) open their book by pointing out that people are accustomed to interviews as a style of communication. Media is full of written and televised interviews that are used to convey the news and entertain. Because of this, participants have almost certainly seen an interview or participated in an interview and, therefore, have existing expectations about interviewing. Thinking again of risks and silences within this confessional paradigm of interviews, I was sensitive to the ways that this study might feel like daughters and mothers were

being asked to talk behind one another's backs. Interviews are also tools for investigations and exposés, and for some people, the idea of being interviewed would conjure up these hostile associations. To avoid this, I gave an interview outline in advance with the consent form so participants would be more informed about what, exactly, they were being asked to divulge (See Appendix I). This produced some interesting results as some people came to their interviews prepared with notes, which I had not expected. The interviews really began as soon as someone felt hailed by the recruitment materials.

The COVID-19 pandemic also had a significant impact on the research design. In Canada, measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, like online learning, remote work, 'social distancing,' and a general avoidance of public space and gathering with others, began in 2020 and persisted well into 2022. When COVID-19 lockdowns started in the spring of 2020, I was still reading girls' studies literature for my comprehensive exams. As I began to draft my research project, virtual fieldwork was the only available option, as York University assessed COVID-19 to be a significant risk, rendering in-person research unethical and therefore forbidden by the institution from 2020 to 2022.

Though participants had the option to be interviewed over the phone, all chose to be interviewed over Zoom. When I met with participants, we would begin by reviewing the consent forms. Because of the digital nature of the fieldwork, this often involved sending a new file type so participants could open and sign either their own consent form or the letter of assent on behalf of their child(ren). I would also go through the consent form verbally to ensure that participants understood the purpose of the research, their right to decline to answer questions or stop the interview altogether, their right to ask me questions at any time, including after the interview had concluded, and their right to withdraw their data from the study after the fact. I would also explain that I would be the only person to listen to the recorded interviews, and all analyses would be conducted using only anonymized versions of the written transcripts. I would then ask if the participants had any questions and if they were ready to record. Though I would usually chat with participants before the interview began, especially while waiting for a mother or daughter to join for a pair interview, I did not record or transcribe any audio until I formally asked permission to begin the recording.

I always started the interviews by asking, "How would you like to introduce yourself?" which is probably a taller order than I had envisioned. Hollway and Jefferson cautioned against

"why" questions because they can feel accusatory (32-33), and, being mindful of this, I thought my phrasing was gentler than just commanding people to introduce themselves or asking the more abrupt "Who are you?" People still tended to find this confusing or surprising and often laughed at the request. When I interviewed my own mother, this question produced such an unsettling feeling that it exposed the complete artificiality of the whole endeavour.

Despite my struggle with recruitment, I was able to conduct interviews with ten families and would generally recruit and interview one family per month. Sometimes, all three interviews would occur back-to-back in one day, and at other times, it could take up to a month to complete all the stages. The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour, meaning I spoke to each participant for ninety minutes to two hours in total. Knowing that three interviews would be a significant time commitment, I did not impose further constraints on the participants' availability, like requiring the solo interviews to come before the pair interviews or always speaking to daughters before mothers.

I also tried to allow the conversation to flow naturally, and though I would often employ the same questions (such as "Without thinking too hard, what first comes to mind when you think of 'feminism'?" "What do you think mother-daughter relationships would look like in a feminist future?" "If you had my job, what activists would you most want to speak with?" and "Do you think you and your daughter would be friends if you were the same age?") I did not follow a strict order of topics. Usually, and especially because I first connected with most participants through their activist work, which had attracted some media attention, I would begin with questions about activism, which felt like the most appropriate public topic of conversation. Participants did not have to answer any questions they did not want to and could end the interview at any time. If I felt a question might be difficult to answer or feel too personal, I would preface by reminding the interviewee that they did not have to answer.

During the interviews, I would take field notes by hand. This allowed me to keep track of what the participants were saying and ask follow-up questions. I also tried to capture the kinds of affects and emotions that might not emerge in the transcript like when a question made things feel tense or when a participant became animated while talking. Though I would direct the interview by asking questions, I would rarely interrupt participants as they spoke. If I felt that one participant was speaking more than the other during the pair interview, I would address the quieter speaker directly to share their thoughts on the question or ask them an individual question

directly. This approach was often helpful in building rapport and allowing the participants to lead the conversation; however, there were times when the topics became unbalanced and more of the conversation would be devoted to activism or their mother-daughter relationship or *vice versa*. For example, when talking to 19-year-old Alexis, who had participated in anti-logging blockades in Pacheedaht Territory at Fairy Creek, we spoke almost exclusively about her activist work. I was enthralled by her knowledge of old-growth forests and the various injunctions the British Columbia government had put forth to stop the blockades. She had a lot to say about her experiences at Fairy Creek, and I not only did not want to interrupt but was content to listen to her stories. Before I could ask her about their relationship, Alexis' mother, Kim, returned home and joined in the storytelling. The two excitedly narrated the story of how, after Alexis was arrested, the logging company pushed the family van into a ditch. Alexis could not return to the site after her arrest, or she would face much more serious trespassing charges, so Kim went to Fairy Creek to retrieve the van herself. Kim then spent the rest of the day driving Elders and protestors down the mountain to another part of the blockade.

I completely lost control of this interview, but allowing Alexis' solo interview to flow into the pair interview with Kim along the stream of this story was its own insight into their relationship. The way they dove into the story and finished each others' sentences suggested that this adventure had been described before, and it was a point of pride between them. The lack of control over the interview was also a condition of virtual interviews and speaking with people in their own homes. Interviewees were often joined by dogs or other pets or they would pause to acknowledge the family members, coworkers, or roommates who passed through the room. During both Kim and Jessica's interviews, a teenage son suddenly appeared to ask his mother a question. During the pair interview, Kim would occasionally get up to check on the dinner that was cooking in the oven. Despite the physical distance created by virtual interviewing, these conditions actually created more intimacy than might be expected in an in-person interview. Participants would often sit in their bedrooms, sometimes with laptops on their laps, and this is a level of closeness that would not usually be granted to a stranger. For my part, I always sat at my desk in my on-campus apartment with only my university-issued couch and bare white walls behind me.

Coding and Analysis

Each interview was transcribed using otter.ai, an automated transcription software program. I then reviewed and edited the transcripts for accuracy and to preserve textural elements of the interviews, like laughter, interruptions from children and coworkers, and wandering pets. These edited transcripts were then further edited to anonymize identifying information like the names of friends, schools, workplaces, and activist organizations. All participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms, though some preferred to have me choose one for them. Once transcribed and anonymized, the interview data was uploaded into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis program.

My method of data coding analysis was drawn from Adele Clarke's Situational Analysis, a form of grounded theory that prioritizes capturing the wider contexts and webs of relationships that emerge in participant interviews (Clarke 2005; Clarke et al. 2015). The coding process included "in vivo coding," where I used the participant's own words to develop codes using the NVivo software. As common topics began to appear across the interviews, I also began to create my own codes to index recurring topics and themes and gather codes together under parent categories like "ideals around the mother-daughter relationship," "activism," "education," or "COVID-19." For example, codes around participants describing feminist futures, their first encounters with feminism, and trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) were all gathered into a parent code called "feminism." Once all the participant interviews were coded, I would export a parent category from all the daughter, mother, or pair interviews and read the coded sections for common themes. I would compare the similarities and differences that emerged between the mother and daughter cohorts around a given theme like feminism, activism, or the expectations that exist for the mother-daughter relationship.

Conclusion

I began this project with a desire to return mothers to girls' studies and anxieties about how a pair-interviewing approach might leave people too defensive to provide much insight into the relationship. Though I was critical of how mothers have been pushed to the edges of girls' studies, I still absorbed the idea that what I was doing was a bad idea. I operated under the assumption that talking about mother-daughter relationships is risky and I was anxious that I was another adult researcher prying into girls' private lives. I was caught in a daughterly kind of desire where I both wanted to bring things together and maintain a cohesive relationship between

mothering and girls' studies while also asserting my own insights through this research. Despite the richness of these interviews, I am left with more questions than answers about what my research says about girls and mother-daughter relationships. Mothering, daughtering, and feminism are all structured around a series of overlapping expectations and wants—What do these family members want from each other? From the world? From feminism?—and there were too many emotions, too much to think about, and too many of my own feelings to consider alongside the complexities of the interviewees' politics and perspectives. The following chapters explore the interview findings and engage with some of these questions and others that emerge at the intersection of mother-daughter relationships and activism.

4. Chapter 4: Images of Activism

Introduction

When I began this project, images of inspiringly exceptional activist girls taking on major political issues like climate change and gun violence were becoming commonplace in the mainstream media (Gonick 2024; Raby and Raddon 2015; Raby and Sheppard 2021; Taft 2020; Taft and O'Kane 2023). 20-year-old Brett seemed like one of these quintessential inspiring activist girls. I first learned about her work when researching media responses to sex education in Ontario. When the Ford government abruptly repealed the 2015 Provincial Health and Physical Education curriculum and planned Indigenous-centred curricula in 2018, Brett was among the many students who protested the repeal. She helped organize mass student walkouts, which received high-profile media attention from major outlets. As a politically active urbanite headed to university, she seemed like many other heroic teenage girls who led the charge against regressive government policies and represented a new generation of politically engaged youth who would lead the world to better things.

By the time I interviewed Brett, she was no longer a teenager and had pulled away from public-facing activist work. She had been an inspiring activist girl, and she felt this had done more harm than good:

> **Brett (daughter)** 08:09
> …It's a very complicated experience that I sort of am still working through to this day, I guess. I felt sort of, I guess, commodified at the time. I mean, just because of a convergence of factors. Because of like the, the time that it was like, it was like 2018, or 2019, like right after the Parkland kids had just started to like, become these huge stars and Greta Thunberg, had just sort of become a thing. And the Canadian media I felt was kind of like looking for like someone to sell papers or whatever. (Brett Solo Interview)

Brett noted that she had since stepped back from leadership roles in her political life. She no longer wanted the pressures of being the face of a movement and preferred doing less visible support work. In this instance, the visibility of high-profile activist girls like Greta Thunberg did not create more space for other activist girls to exist; instead, it formed a crystalized mould that all other youth activists had to fit. Brett was celebrated insofar as she could be commodified and sold as a symbol of the nation whose government she protested. This mainstream encouragement was also not as widespread as it initially appeared, and Brett's transformation into a famous girl

activist not only left her feeling patronized and coopted but also exposed her to extensive ongoing harassment because of her heightened visibility.

Girls have always participated in activism and other efforts to shape the world around them and determine their own futures. This participation has always occurred, even if we might not recognize it as such in the current day. For example, though girls' studies scholars like Angela McRobbie (1991) have often pointed to girls' media production and subcultures as unfairly overlooked examples of political participation, girls engage with the wider world in even more subtle ways. For example, much of girls' studies scholar Kristine Moruzi's work on colonial and Victorian girlhoods explores how these girls interacted with periodicals. Their actions and motivations might not be legible as explicitly political, and their participation in imperialism should not be celebrated, but they are expressing agency through their interactions with these publications despite otherwise constraining conditions (Moruzi and Smith 2014; Moruzi 2012; 2024).

Still, the cultural recognition of the late 2010s and early 2020s seemed new and was certainly a departure from how I had witnessed how youth activism was depicted. Between 2016 and 2022, media coverage of politically engaged young people was not hard to come by. Popular teen-focused publications like *Teen Vogue* not only embraced activist and social-justice-oriented content but received much scholarly attention for doing so (Coulter and Moruzi 2022; Crookston and Klonowski 2021; Keller 2020). Many twenty-first-century scholars of youth politics and activism have argued against the pervasive idea that young people are politically apathetic and disengaged from their communities (Clay 2012; Keller 2015; Kim and Ringrose 2018; Kirshner 2015; O'Toole et al. 2003; Pason et al. 2010; Schuster 2013; Taft 2011). These studies often argue that many young people are politically engaged and do believe that social change is possible but go about this work in ways that go unrecognized because they do not exactly replicate the kinds of student activism witnessed in the 1960s and 70s. The internet is also often cited as a space where young people's political work takes on new forms and, therefore, goes unrecognized as a legitimate form of civic engagement (Harris 2001; 2008; Keller and Ryan 2018).

If you were relying on mainstream media accounts of youth activism, in the late 2010s and early 2020s, it started to look like recognition had finally arrived. Major media outlets no longer ignored youth as they did in the 2000s; they were now looked to as a generation

possessing the social awareness and technological acumen that would lead the way and tackle daunting world issues like climate catastrophe. Youth activism began to capture public attention, and young people like climate activist Greta Thunberg, Parkland School shooting survivors David Hogg and X Gonzalez, education activist Malala Yousefzai, and Water Protector Autumn Peltier became household names (Benigno 2021, 38; Bent 2020, 202; Raby and Sheppard 2021, 383). In a 2020 article titled "Hopeful, Harmless, and Heroic: Figuring the Girl Activist as Global Savior," Jessica Taft noted that when she began researching activist girls, they were nearly invisible in media and public discourse (2020, 1). By 2020, however, this trend had reversed, and political girls were hypervisible as public figures (2). Though youth were broadly positioned as part of a heroic generation of activists, girls were particularly expected to be the world's future saviours (11).

However, these celebratory accounts were not as positive as they appeared. Other scholars have also pointed out that framing girls as heroic and uniquely responsible for securing a better future has depoliticizing rather than mobilizing effects. Lyn Mikel Brown (2016) points out that the exceptional activist girl is a figure who enforces rather than dispels the idea that young people are politically disengaged because only a handful of individuals are recognized for their activist work. In the "economy of the special girl," as Bent calls it, these girls are considered exceptional, and their complicated contextual relationships go unrecognized because they are considered less important than the uniqueness of the rare girl who pursues activist work (17-18). This expectation of exceptionalism even impacts smaller-scale organizations that work to empower girls. Winstanley and Bernier (2022), for example, argue that intergenerational solidarity and collective action are still sorely needed in a context where girls are encouraged to develop individualistic coping skills to endure rather than resolve the oppressive conditions they live under.

In her 2020 analysis, Taft goes on to argue that discourses about girls' heroism are coupled with rhetorical strategies that return girls to their familiar role of harmless and hopeful figures. Even though young activists often have precise, actionable demands, when mainstream media engages with these girls, they are either used to inspire or dismissed as naively trying to change an immovable status quo, with neither framing challenging to the audience. For example, Raby and Raddon (2015) analyzed how online commenters and the press responded to a video of grade six student Victoria Grant agitating for banking reform in Canada. They found commenters

framed Grant as both commendably politically involved and too young to understand something as complicated as banking. As Brett explained, girls are highlighted in the press to sell papers and pacify a hopeful audience by assuring them that someone's doing something, rather than have their demands heard. Girls are left responsible for everyone's future, with little actual support beyond laudatory storytelling. As Taft (2020) summarizes:

> Having moved through a rhetorical chain from girls can do anything to girls can save the world, we seem now to have arrived at girls *must* save the world. The responsibility for social change thus shifts away from governments and other powerful actors, as well as away from broader public engagement and political activism. [Original emphasis] (11)

As soon as the image of extraordinary youth activists appeared, young people began to report feeling pressured and obliged to take on activist work. Though the critique of unrealistic activist expectations emerged early, if these expectations did not exist, girls would not have written that they felt so exhausted by them. For example, *Teen Vogue*, one of the very publications that began highlighting exceptional young activists, began to simultaneously publish articles where high-profile activist girls reported feeling overwhelmed, unprepared, and resentful of the burden of these activist expectations (Nixon 2021; Samuel 2020; Stauffer 2021). As Black Lives Matter protests surged across the world after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, Black girls felt called to join political protests against police brutality. However, they felt that onlookers only ever viewed in the context of violence and struggle, and this perception left little room for the other parts of their lives. Beyond being ignored or seen as disruptive, these girls found that people saw them *only* as activists because of their race. These girls still wanted to fight for a better world for themselves and their communities but felt that the extraordinary girl coverage they were now receiving from the media was erasing them as whole people with a range of desires, feelings, and interests.

Although the term "activism" was applied liberally among the participants in this study, this did not represent an overconfidence in the daughter cohort's perceived political efficacy. These girls were not calling themselves activists out of the belief that they were enacting revolutionary change, and they would routinely emphasize their limitations and how much support they needed from the people around them. The abundance of the term activist initially appeared to be a reversal of what Jessica Taft found in *Rebel Girls* (2011), where even highly

involved girls would reject the label "activist" and preferred to say that they were just participating or were still learning or becoming activists. However, by the time I was conducting my fieldwork, "activist" was the ascendant word for the normative expectation that girls take up feminized care labour. The function of the activist label is to maintain an existing system where girls are unfairly responsible for the world around them, often with little support beyond those closest to them.

The girls in this study were often encouraged to be activists by their schools, mothers, or, more indirectly, by the increasing media depictions of youth activism. Though critical of the idea that individuals could accomplish much social change without accompanying collective action, the daughter cohort in this study were still concerned with taking personal responsibility for the world around them. Whether taking on activism from a more secure, privileged position or doing so out of immediate personal or community survival, they all felt responsible for the well-being of society, the environment, the future, and, most significantly, the people closest to them. They were able to take pride in their accomplishments and participation, but this always came with caveats that they needed to do more, learn more, and engage more with other people.

A significant point of tension for several of the daughter participants was how they, as white and otherwise privileged young people, should be going about joining anti-racist movements or other struggles that did not directly impact them. They felt compelled to try to help others but were often profoundly self-conscious about how they would be taken up in popular discourses of heroic activists and have their voices amplified over the voices of the people most impacted by the struggles they wanted to resolve. The dynamic that Taft (2020) described, where girls are made uniquely responsible for social change, is not just a distant policy decision to shift social responsibility to individuals but something that girls are taking on as an expectation. They were becoming activists, and this involved beginning to think of themselves as activists and understanding that they were being *perceived* as activists whether they wanted this or not.

Everything is Activism

Some girls' studies scholars have offered a critique of how youth-centred organizations increasingly read girls' participation as activism in recent years. In their article, "Questioning children's activism: What is new or old in theory and practice?" (2023) Taft and O'Kane argue that there is an increasing shift toward labelling all children's civic participation as activism, and this practice does not leave much room to adequately appreciate and support the spectrum of

civic actions that young people may take (9). Adults, particularly those leading non-profits and non-governmental organizations that support young people, flatten youth participation into a single category. All youth civic participation, even when it does not challenge the existing status quo, is flattened into activism, and it is more and more difficult to parse what actions are actually challenging enough to create change and which are safely depoliticized as inspiring or simply good citizenship.

Because girls are normatively positioned as caring, self-sacrificial subjects, they are ideally situated within neoliberal frameworks where they individually take on social responsibility. The idea that girls will care for others also creates the impression that they can (and should) take care of themselves. This overabundance of activism may appear to be an empowering recognition that girls are not just obligatory carers, but active political agents. However, in a neoliberal framework, this kind of empowerment is not liberatory; instead, it turns politics inward and makes the self the site of reform instead of society. (Benigno 2021; Gonick 2006; 2024; McRobbie 2009; Raby and Sheppard 2021; Rottenberg 2017; Schuster 2016; Zeisler 2016). Gonick (2024) describes this emerging "turn to girls" paradigm in international development as just the latest iteration of the 'girl power' phenomenon of the 1990s where girls are encouraged to be self-regulating subjects under the guise of liberation. These messages can be used to depoliticize girls' activism or sell it back to girls as a consumer identity (Vanner and Dugal 2020).

In *Future Girl* (2004), Anita Harris argued that girls are increasingly framed as ideal neoliberal citizens who can secure social rights without relying on the state, whose achievements indicate a nation's progress, and who have access to enough capital to make them excellent consumers (63). As Harris goes on to explain: "One of the most powerful messages of neoliberal ideology has been that of choice, which has devolved regulation onto individuals themselves through 'responsibilization' and served to conceal the socioeconomic structures that shape people's possibilities." (151). Girls are venerated for choosing to take up activist work as if this choice is entirely up to them. There are existing gendered expectations that push girls toward taking on the work of holding family networks and other social systems together, and there are material consequences for divesting from these obligations. Girls often feel that no matter their actions, they are not personally doing enough and are solely responsible for doing more (Benigno 2021; Taft 2017).

While conducting focus groups with teenage girls in Toronto, Tina Benigno (2021) found that the girls she interviewed did not feel they could effectively participate in activist work. Benigno's interviewees had far greater access to support and resources. These middle-class and predominantly white youth are the kinds of young people who are expected to inherit the future and could effectively influence policy change by calling on adults to support and protect them. Still, they felt that collective action was impossible and confined themselves to modifying their behaviour. Despite their pessimism about their activist abilities, they were highly politically aware and often took on individualistic political acts like educating themselves or trying to reduce their impact on the environment (42-43). In summary, these girls did not feel they could act on the world, but they did feel that they could act on themselves.

While all girls are expected to take on a kind of self-regulated care labour because care is a feminized responsibility, race and other axes of girls' social locations influence how girls' care and activism are perceived. Even as all youth civic participation becomes framed as activism, not everyone ends up positioned as an activist. Instead of being seen as inspiring or harmless, Black, Indigenous and other girls of colour are often ignored altogether or framed as dangerous and disruptive when they take up activist work (Hasan 2024; Morris and Perry 2017; Raby and Sheppard 2021). In a particularly stark example of how Black activists are ignored, in 2020, the Associated Press cropped Ugandan environmental activist Vanessa Nakate out of a group photo with white climate activists (Barnes 2024; McFadden 2020; Woodyatt 2020). The original photo was taken at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2020, where several prominent climate activists, including Greta Thunberg, had gathered (Hasan 2024, 255). Climate activists and other members of the public widely condemned the alteration, and Nakate responded on Twitter, saying, "You didn't just erase a photo. You erased a continent. But I am stronger than ever." (Quoted in Woodyatt 2020).

Western media and activists routinely excise Black activists, particularly those from the Global South, from reports on activist movements in a process that Mehedi Hasan (2024) refers to as "symbolic annihilation." Even when marginalized communities actively participate in political movements or social justice actions, they are ignored by the press. This imposed silence leaves the community either completely unacknowledged or only understood through stereotypes of passivity or an inability to resolve community issues (261-262). As Nakate rightly points out,

erasing her from the 2020 climate summit is a symbolic declaration that neither Africa nor its people matter to Western policy decisions around climate change.

When they are not ignored outright, Black girls are particularly "adultified" as subjects who do not need the same kinds of care, support, and protection as their white peers because they are disproportionately viewed as already grown up (Morris and Perry 2017; Smith 2019). In this process of adultification, even seemingly celebratory stereotypes that Black girls are strong, confident, and resilient push them out of the category of child and deny them access to the norms that frame children as worthy of protection and care. When white activists organize around threats to their existence, like school shootings or climate change, their fear and anxiety are at least acknowledged as part of their motivation for taking organized public action and demanding that adults intervene. Unlike their white counterparts, whose failure to thrive is often viewed as a problem to be solved, Black girls' struggles are treated as an inevitability to be punished. Instead of deserving help from the adults who should be moved to protect them, Black children in general and girls in particular are positioned as already grown up and, therefore, obligated to take on the personal responsibility of helping themselves.

Indigenous girls also face systemic silencing, where ongoing colonial violence pushes girls out of the normative settler definition of girlhood – including the role of inspiring young activists. Though a few Indigenous girls like Quannah Chasinghorse and Autumn Peltier have achieved mainstream attention for their activist work, these are rare examples in a media and sociopolitical context where the media and settler society either ignore Indigenous girls entirely or only invoke them as objects of struggle and suffering. Sandrina de Finney (de Finney 2014; 2017; de Finney et al. 2019) argues that Indigenous girls persist in 'presencing' in a colonial context that sees them as inconvenient and disposable.

In "Under the Shadow of Empire" de Finney begins with a series of quotes from young Indigenous girls who express their frustration at how Indigenous women are either ignored entirely or only depicted as sex workers. If their bodies do not appear as another exploitable resource, then they do not appear at all in settler media. This is a significant exclusion when Indigenous people in general, including children, often have no choice but to take public action to protect their land and cultures from the encroachments of climate change and settler states.

Even when Indigenous youth are recognized as activists, like in a New York Times Magazine feature by Saul Elbein (2017) on the movement at Standing Rock in 2016, it is not

through the same lens as other inspiring young activists. Though Standing Rock did receive significant media attention at the time, including from outlets like *Teen Vogue,* which highlighted Standing Rock as a movement where women and young people were significant participants (Nast, n.d.; Bogado 2017; Ward 2018), the Lakota Sioux and other Indigenous youth who led the movement were not elevated to the same celebrity status as someone like Greta Thunberg. The girls and other young people from Cheyenne River who helped establish the first prayer camp, which sparked protests against the Keystone XL and Dakota Access oil pipelines, such as twin sisters Jasilyn and Jasilea Charger, were not recognized individually as inspiring or exceptional figures. Instead, they remained part of an undifferentiated monolith of Indigenous people that most media were not curious about humanizing.

It is also notable, as Indigenous scholars like de Finney point out, that when Indigenous girls are recognized, it is often paradoxically in the context of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). Though white activists like Thunberg, or the daughters in this study like Stea and Alexis are often earnest in their desire to combat climate change in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, settler media and researchers mobilize their images to confirm the unworthiness of others. These white activists are highlighted, and their easily recognized presence is a stark contrast to the hundreds of Indigenous girls who are literally missing, and whose futures have been literally disappeared along with them. Despite this, Indigenous girls continue in their relationships with the land, each other, and the struggle for self-determination and sovereignty, whether settler conceptions of political participation recognize them or not.

Girls' Relationship With Media Images of Activism

The girls in this study already knew that the inspiring activist girl archetype did not reflect real life, and the media was a limited resource for understanding what activist work looked like. During the interviews, it was rare for the daughter cohort to actually invoke famous activists. When they did, it was usually to contrast the media depiction of activism with the real-life collective work needed to create real social change. For example, 18-year-old Stea pointed to Greta Thunberg as someone who, though undoubtedly influential, was positioned as a figurehead in ways that eclipsed the importance of collective action. When I asked Stea if they felt that social media and other reporting reinforced an individualistic idea of activism, they responded with:

> **Stea (daughter)** 15:40
> Yeah, I think it does… I think social media, like has dialed that up like 1,000,000% this, we didn't talk about this at all in the last interview, but social media has like the way that social media both expects you to act as an individual and also do the work of like a million different people. unsustainable, not great. Not a huge fan of it, causes a lot of burnout [laughs]. Like it just it doesn't make sense in the long run. And it's promoted by like the idea of like, being a hero and like, one person can make a huge change. But that's not really realistic, even if it seemed that way. And even if somebody like Greta Thunberg can make so much change. It wasn't just her, she became a figurehead, but it was it was these, it started out as just her for sure. She's done a lot of work in environmentalism. But starting out as just her and then becoming these giant marches. And these giant communities surrounding environmentalism and surrounding, surrounding environmentalism and kids specifically, is what I'd say made more of a change… (Stea Solo Interview)

In Stea's view, the image of the singular heroic activist was unrealistic and unsustainable because creating social change requires mass participation. Famous activists might attract short-term attention that could help focus a cause, but they would inevitably burn out in the long run, and this destruction is not conducive to the long-term work that the activist struggle requires. The hyper-surveillance of social media did not just expose these activists to the scrutiny of their work, but also their character, meaning they must navigate their politics tirelessly and flawlessly. To the daughter cohort, someone like Thunberg, through no real fault of her own, had set an archetype that seemed detached from their work confronting social issues. These interviewees' critiques align with the findings of other scholars who have long found girls to refute individualistic images of activism to emphasize the necessity of collective work instead (Benigno 2021; Bent 2013; Clay 2012; Cook 2020; Gordon and Taft 2011; Nunn 2018; Zaslow 2018).

Being positioned as the figurehead of a movement was not only a misrepresentation of the sustained collective work activism requires but was a stressful burden on whoever was unlucky enough to become the face of a movement. When the media highlights girls as spectacles, they are often positioned as entertainment in ways that pose little challenge to current systems of power (Bent 2020; Brown 2016). In her analysis of media depictions of March for Our Lives organizer and survivor of the 2018 Stoneman Douglas High School shooting X González, Emily Bent (2020) argued that the media did not just sensationalize González as a heroic young activist but also positioned them as a cautionary tale about what happens when

girls transgress the bounds of normative girlhood.[7] The fixation on González individually, particularly their shaved head, "invites neoconservative regulation of girls' political selves, often to the occlusion of their political resistance." (87).

In the end, González experienced precisely the kind of burnout that Stea argued made celebrity activism antithetical to the long-term work activism requires. After the intense pressure and visibility of March for Our Lives, and their minor victories in securing improved gun control legislation, a now adult González has stepped back from much of their activist work. In an article they wrote in 2023 for *The Cut* they stated: "I'm still trying to figure out what type of activism I want to engage in, since I don't want to be passive for the rest of my life but I cannot exist in the way that I used to. I don't know how I'm alive after all that." (2023). The intense spotlight did not help González process the trauma of experiencing a school shooting. They want to remain politically involved but feel too personally depleted to continue in any kind of leadership position effectively. This model of celebrity activism isolates one person as an exceptional hero in ways that suggest that only certain types of people do activism when it is really community work. This is not just depoliticizing rhetoric but the material depoliticization of taking someone doing a lot of the work and then wringing them out.

Perception and Positionality

Even though participants easily critiqued these media images of singular inspiring activists, they still had an impact. The young activists receiving little to no media attention still felt that they were being watched somehow or that they had to rise to the expectation that they should take on activist work. They were cognizant of how their actions were impacting others and being perceived, and they would try to anticipate this external analysis of their work with their internal reflection. Even though they were doing activist work, one of the key reasons they thought of themselves as activists was because other people thought of them that way.

For some, their activism stood out because it put them at odds with their peers. Both Alexis and Ellie noted that pointing out sexism could still get you called a "feminazi" or some

[7] González now goes by X, uses they/them pronouns, and no longer identifies as a girl. They announced their change of name and pronouns in 2021, saying "My name is Emma González, but I've decided to go by 'X' now because I really don't want people who don't know me assuming that they do know me because of the national narrative, or international narrative, that exists about me…and I don't want people thinking that they're my friends just because they know my name." (Perkins 2021)

other derogatory term – a far cry from being considered an inspiration. Those who had received some media coverage, like Amy and Brett, were routinely harassed online. Their heightened visibility made them the focused targets of misogyny and backlash against progressive movements. Ellie, who had organized anti-bullying initiatives and a unity march in response to an attack against a transgender student at her school in what she described as a "conservative white farm town" was targeted by a cruel Instagram account for her efforts. The page, which apparently existed to mock various students at Ellie's school, accused Ellie of being a bad person who was merely using social justice work for her own gain:

> **Ellie (daughter)** 26:06
> Um, at first, I laughed. I was like, this is funny like that someone wants to tear me down like this. It's totally immature. But then it started to like sink in that I was like, yeah. I thought to myself, "Do I really want to be perceived like this and am I really okay with this many people not liking me?" (Ellie solo interview)

As Ellie explained, the defamatory things posted on the page were untrue and likely extended from a personal falling out with a friend. However, she was still disturbed that others readily believed them. Ellie's peers were watching for signs that her activism was just a façade, and she had to reckon with the idea that this negative perception would stick. Even though Ellie organized her anti-bullying initiatives around unity and other care discourses that are normative for girls to take on, onlookers read her attempts at civic care work as disingenuous and suspicious. Whether this was because Ellie was attempting to care for the "wrong" kinds of people by combating transphobia or because her work was visible to people who already disliked her, trying to take responsibility for the social climate at her school was regarded as unwelcome.

When the public recognizes young people's activism with positive attention, it is often the adults in their lives who facilitate it. In a chapter about the #IAMMORETHANADISTRACTION movement by girls against sexist school dress codes, Emilie Zaslow (2018) found that the participating girls' parents were integral in helping publicize their children's actions. Conducting fieldwork in an affluent, racially diverse area, Zaslow found that the parents of these politically conscious young people were not only politically progressive but had the connections and resources to actively assist in organizing and connecting their children with the media to attract more public attention (103). While the young people were driving the movement to end the sexist dress codes they felt impinged on their

education, it was their parents who identified this work as activism and elevated it into the realm of inspiring media headlines.

In my fieldwork, I found that mothers were also instrumental in cultivating a sense of activist (and particularly feminist) identity in their daughters. Many young activists like Buffy, Stea, Nicole, Daisy, and Dani were the daughters of politically active mothers who actively encouraged their children to get involved in social justice. As I mentioned in the methods chapter, just as popular images of inspiring youth activists shaped how girls related to their activism, the conditions of this study also shaped how girls described their activist work. Sometimes, they took on the activist label because their mother gave it to them when they saw the call for this study. Mothers were often the first to respond to the call for participants and positioned their daughters as activists.

Sam, who published a book about gender identity for young children and did not generally consider herself an activist, noted that her mother had encouraged her to turn her school project into a proper book:

> **Hannah (daughter)** 04:51
> who was it that kind of encouraged you to get it published?
>
> **Sam (daughter)** 04:56
> Um, it was my teachers and my mom and my friends…when I presented the project, I'd had to present it in front of a few teachers and in front of my mom and in front of a couple of peers and after the presentation, and also like, my mom helped me with the book the whole time. And she was like, "Well, you know, you could try and get this published" and I was like, "no," like, I just wanted to like get it out to a couple of like classrooms locally or something. I wanted to share it with people, but I didn't think it would get shared to people. (Sam solo interview)

Sam thought her topic was important enough to write about, but the adults in her life, particularly her mother, had to be the ones to push her to see that her book was worth publishing and give her the confidence to pursue that process.

Stea, who did identify as an activist, considered their work for clean water on the reservation to be their real activism and did not see their earlier political participation as something worth noting. However, their mothers had encouraged their participation early and remembered even small actions like briefly speaking at a small rally as an essential step in developing their feminism:

> **Stea (daughter)** 48:47
> …my parents had definitely emphasized things in their mind, that I find quite embarrassing. For example, I, it's like, they consider it like a fairly big thing in my life, but I was like, 13, and I mentioned this once in the, in the parent interview. There was a march for feminism, Women's March, it was the the ones that were arranged after Trump was elected in 2016… It was literally like 30 people standing in a little group and listening to people talk. But they invited up guest speakers and speakers from the crowd and I spoke and I like, I find it very embarrassing that I spoke [laughs]. But my parents were like, "No, we were really proud of you! Um, it was a really big deal. And it was like one of your first steps to feminism" and I'm like, I've buried that memory so far out of my head, because I find it incredibly embarrassing to think about, um, but it was like, I can see how it would be a pretty big deal. And they find it very important in my life, even though I don't really consider it a core facet of my activism. (Stea Solo Interview)

Stea found the image of their younger self giving an impromptu speech at a rally embarrassing, but their parents celebrated this early step as part of a longer activist trajectory.

Intergenerational relationships can transmit best practices for effective activist strategy, help build young people's confidence, and protect youth as they navigate activist work. This adult mentorship is beneficial in a context where girls are especially prone to downplaying the importance and effectiveness of their political work. However, another condition of this (notably small) study was that white people were primarily drawn to participating. Even as they can remain critical of the ways that white people's activism is overemphasized, white participants still identify themselves and their children as activists and feel hailed by the call for activists.

Most of the daughter cohort in my study were consciously navigating the impact of their activist work as people who, despite being marginalized by their age and gender, still held a lot of social power because of their race and class. When these young activists organized against oppressive structures, they worked to combat the same structures that sustained them. When they fought against environmental degradation, colonial violence, and outdated school policies, they did so as the daughters of oil drillers and school administrators. The daughters who participated were often aware that the privileged facets of their identity and experience–their whiteness, access to education, their location in the Global North, etc–positioned them differently than other activists. Girls are not just isolated individuals who exist outside of systems of power, but they are often left to individually navigate those systems as they embark on their activist work. The self-consciousness expressed by the daughters I interviewed is not solely self-esteem issues or a

lack of confidence that can be resolved with adult encouragement. They were thinking about the kinds of impact their actions would have and how their work would be perceived when organizing across differences.

In “Intersectional expectations: Young feminists' perceived failure at dealing with differences and their retreat to individualism,” Julia Schuster (2016) found that young, and mainly white and otherwise privileged feminist women desired but struggled to resolve feminism’s persistent difficulty in reckoning with the vastness of women’s differences. In response to what Schuster calls “intersectional expectations” these young feminists were anxious about how to articulate their politics in acceptably inclusive ways. In response to this difficult task, they tended to withdraw into puzzling over their own identities and positionality (3).

My participant's journey to political consciousness usually began with a similar emphasis on identity. All the daughters had personally experienced and witnessed sexism, and their understanding of the relationship between systemic disadvantage and their own lived experiences tended to begin with their gender. The youngest participants, Dani (age 14), Nicole (age 13), and Daisy (age 11), did not do much activist organizing, but their emerging political consciousness began with their racial identity. These three girls were all racialized and already understood that this facet of their identity put them in a social location where they would have to work twice as hard and face different barriers than their white peers. However, these younger members of the daughter cohort were not (or perhaps not yet) anxious about what their identity meant for their ability to organize with others.

Returning to Schuster (2016), she found that the result of this personal reflexivity among more privileged feminists was not more coalitions across differences, but more emphasis on one’s specific and individual feminist location (6). Schuster argued that while this reflexivity had its benefits, it was occurring in a neoliberal context where intersectionality had been fetishized to the extent that young feminists individualize because they are too afraid to get things wrong when they organize collectively (6). As a result, individual transformation seems to be the only possible political intervention. Though my participants were able to get to the point of participating in activism with other people, they still experienced the anxiety and desire to perform an awareness of their position that Schuster describes. This ranged from including a caveat about privilege after sharing a success to deeper worries about failing the people they were trying to help.

For example, 18-year-old Amy, who used social media to campaign for more consent-based sex ed, fight sexual violence, and convene with fellow sexual assault survivors, was among the few participants who had been featured in the media and found it to be an overall positive experience. As an attractive white girl using the then excitingly new TikTok, she was a good candidate for an inspiring activist profile. A major newspaper approached Amy after one of her TikToks became popular and she assumed she would only be a small part of a broader story since other activists do the same work as her. Still, she accepted the exciting opportunity to promote her cause and was later surprised to find herself so prominently featured in the final story:

> **Amy (daughter)** 20:23
> Um, [the newspaper] found me after. I'm gonna say around the time I had, I posted one video that got, like, almost almost 700k views. It was it was, if you looked at my TikTok page, it was the one with all the girls holding up the sign that said, "not all men, but all women" it was, it was around the time when like the whole 97% statistic came out, which was really, really powerful for my campaign because that was like on TikTok and Twitter and everywhere…So yeah, they reached out a little bit after that. Yeah, and it was, it was so funny, because she messaged me, and she's just like, "Oh, I'm doing this article, because I was wondering if you wanted to be in it." And I told my parents like, "Oh, this is gonna be awesome. I mean, you're probably only going to have like, a little paragraph, it's probably about like, a totally different topic. And they're just gonna, like use like one quote from you." And then like, the article came out, it was like, a huge page. I was like, "Oh, my God, I was not expecting this!"
>
> **Hannah (daughter)** 21:31
> Yeah, so you weren't told how much of a profile it would be on your work?
>
> **Amy (daughter)** 21:35
> No, no.
>
> **Hannah (daughter)** 21:38
> And what was the response like from people in your life, when they saw it?
>
> **Amy (daughter)** 21:41
> Uh a lot of people were very excited for me. Most people at that point had known about my campaign, I was very open about it. And all [unintelligible] obviously, I asked all of them for their support. So pretty much all of them had signed the petitions, and I actively talked about it. Because I'm really excited for it to be the start. I didn't tell too many people because I also didn't want to like jinx it, in case like it never got published or anything. But when it did came out, I was super excited. My parents told all their friends. So it was awesome. (Amy Solo Interview)

Amy was happy with the press interview and was confident that it brought positive attention to her work. She appreciated having a way to share her cause through the validating medium of a prominent newspaper and share this coverage with her supporters as a sign that their petition was getting attention. However, she also noted that many people do anti-sexual violence work and the people the media recognizes for their activist work are noticed because of the kind of person they are, not just on the merit of their work. In her solo interview, Amy noted that she understood that though her work was important, she received a disproportionate level of attention because of her privileged position:

> **Amy (daughter)** 19:29
> And I feel like I also like take into account that I have very like I am very privileged in the way that I get to deliver my information. And the fact that I am white, and I grew up in a middle class family and I was cisgendered and bla bla bla. So I also do take that into account and I understand that if, if there was another face doing the same thing I was doing them, it might not have gotten the attention that I'm getting. (Amy Solo Interview)

Returning to Stea's activist work at the time of the interviews, though they had never experienced the kind of public attention that Brett or Amy received, they were sensitive to how their activist actions supporting an Indigenous community fighting for clean water impacted the community they worked with. They were also concerned with how this relationship was perceived by outside onlookers, particularly on social media. As a white settler working with Indigenous people, Stea understood that other settlers could perceive them as having more expertise about getting reliable, clean water into the community than the people who actually lived on the reservation. They had thought a lot about how to navigate the balance of using their voice to speak about the blatant human rights violation occurring right next to them while making sure they were not taking on a white saviour role or otherwise overshadowing the people most impacted by the issue:

> **Stea (daughter)** 14:01
> …my first post, it was a very tiny introduction post about this is who I am, because, like, kind of the basic thing you need in a series of social media is introducing yourself and telling people why they should be interested. And in doing that, I had to say who I was, even though it was like, I really didn't want to connect myself to this, um, and not in like, like, "Oh, I'm embarrassed to have done this," but in like, in like the way that I've been talking about, like, it could have been anybody and it

> should have been the Indigenous people. But since it was me, I introduced myself and I made it clear that while I'm doing this, I'm not going to be voicing my own opinions on this. It says, the posts, the project was essentially opinionated because it was in the opinion that Indigenous communities should have fresh water and clean water. But that's not really like an intense political stance…it's kind of like a basic right…I was making it clear that I wasn't going to be consistently sharing…I was like, this is how I did it. This isn't how it has to be done. This isn't how it necessarily should be done. This is what the Indigenous people who I've talked to, and who I've researched have said about this. (Stea Solo Interview)

One could read their detailed considerations about framing their work online as a youthful lack of confidence or anxiety that internet onlookers will overemphasize their voice or question their intentions. However, Stea's reflexivity is still important. Age is not the sole difference between young people and the other members of collective struggles, and there are times when certain young people may inhabit more hegemonic positions than their organizing peers. Within matrixes of inequality where multiple systems of domination operate simultaneously, young people can be sidelined by their age while also maintaining power over others because of their race, gender, or nationality. Alexis, also a white settler who had joined the Pacheedaht First Nation's efforts to protect their land at Fairy Creek, recognized that her whiteness protected her from the harsher consequences of this action:

> **Alexis (daughter)** 36:31
> Eventually the injunction was, it expired, so people were able to stay there. And that seemed like a really huge win. Because it was mainly because the judge wouldn't renew it because of the police brutality that they had. So many people had endured, mostly Indigenous women or queer people, or people of colour. Like due to the RCMP the way that they were treated. There's so much proof of it that the court and the RCMP wasn't wearing their badges like they weren't identifying themselves or doing they were acting very illegally, like it felt very unsafe. Like it was really scary around them not really for me as like a white woman, and the way that I was treated by the police, and the, versus the way that my friends were treated, that were Indigenous, was worlds different, or like experiencing that. (Alexis Solo Interview)

Like Alexis here, Stea also correctly identified a real power imbalance between them and the Indigenous community they worked with. They know that their recent connection to this issue does not give them a license to lead the work or set the community's priorities. They know that despite their best intentions, they might get in the way more than provide useful assistance, especially if they become mired in online discourse.

The role of social media is also essential to Stea's analysis of their positionality in this activist work. While the dynamics of online activism are vast (Erlick 2018; Li et al. 2018; Madison and Klang 2020; Tanksley and Hunter 2024; Velasquez and LaRose 2014), social media is a space where whiteness is both reinscribed and confronted in activist movements. Petray and Collin (2017) point out that social media allows people to collaborate with or confront people from very different circumstances with whom they would otherwise never interact. While this may offer new venues for challenging racism and highlighting the voices of people of colour, social media platforms are not separate from society and often reproduce inequalities like prioritizing content from white users, censoring people of colour, moderating content to appease advertisers, and allowing disinformation about minoritized groups to spread and proliferate. However, although these platforms do not necessarily present a substantive threat to power and the people who already have it, many still fear the interpersonal consequences of being called out for failing to enact and navigate political solidarity properly.

For example, not long before my interview with Stea, the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in 2016 raised many questions about the role of white settler allies both on the ground and in other organizing efforts. At Standing Rock, white settlers were putting themselves in charge, failing to respect tribal protocols, taking resources without reciprocity, playing the guitar at inappropriate times, and engaging in other embarrassingly unhelpful activities (Cram 2016; O'Connor 2016). In 2020, people openly criticized actions like posting a black square on Instagram or putting "Black Lives Matter" on personal social media accounts as examples of actions that did nothing to support Black people materially and only served the image of the person (or corporation) posting (Alexander 2025; Jackson and Eaton 2024; Myeni, n.d.; Wellman 2022).

These actions, especially when taken by people not previously known to be interested in social justice work were often derided as "performative activism," a term philosopher A. Freya Thimsen (2022) defines as "describing shallow, ineffective, or insincere attempts to jump on the antiracist bandwagon mainly to self-promote and build one's own personal or corporate progressive credibility" (83). Corporate appeals to social justice are often cynical (Thimsen 2022; Wellman 2022), but individuals may be trying to find the right way to express their solidarity from afar. In their work on the connections between online and in-person feminist participation. Caldeira, Jorge, and Kubrusly (2025) noted that though they considered online

activity like liking and sharing posts to be a form of participation, even the people who take these actions are critical of their impact. There was a persistent tension for the feminists they surveyed between seeing the internet as a valuable organizing tool, and something that just made them angry, overwhelmed, and wasted their time. Trying to say the right words, take up the right amount of space, and post the right posts can feel like the only way to do anything helpful when the internet is hostile and the real world seems immovable.

However, despite these good intentions, people of colour who had spent years devoted to anti-colonial and anti-racist activist work were drowned out by newly radicalized white allies whose demands for education and reassurance were more obstructive than mobilizing (Alexander 2025; Wellman 2022). Highly visible moments of anti-colonial and anti-racist action like Standing Rock and the 2020 Black Lives Matter Protests provide a rare opportunity for racialized activists to be heard when they openly confront white supremacy.

As the conversation grows, it can quickly shift away from the central message and toward questions of white allies' roles, responsibilities, and feelings, which re-centre the dominant perspective as the one that matters. These critiques of performative activism indicate how activists from hegemonic groups can become preoccupied with caring about how they express themselves and how they are perceived. Worrying about others' opinions is unavoidable in relational work like activism, but it raises questions about when this can get in the way of effective organizing. Society expects girls to care about others more than themselves, and while this is an unfair gender expectation, there are other power dynamics at play. Anxiety about being perceived as the wrong kind of ally can indicate that a dominant position is being unsettled. While young people like Ellie, Alexis, and Stea wanted to act as good allies to the communities they organized with, they were entering into activist work when these questions about solidarity and allyship across differences were being publicly and often intensely debated. They exist in a context where how they are perceived can have significant consequences for the effectiveness of their work and their relationships with others, and they were concerned about this. These concerns were not deterring them from activism, but this anxiety was an ever-present part of their political work.

Misrepresentations

For most members of the daughter cohort, social media was the extent of their visibility. While posts on online platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter (X) can gain tremendous

attention, this is not guaranteed. Most of the young activists I interviewed were reckoning with their public role as activists within interpersonal and local contexts. However, a few had either received direct media attention or belonged to movements that received significant attention from mainstream journalism. Alexis, for example, had not been individually highlighted by the press, but the blockades at Fairy Creek were international news. Alexis experienced the contrast between what she knew to be the goals and actions of the blockade and the press depiction of these efforts:

> **Alexis (daughter)** 36:31
> …But a lot of the media attention was, the media too, that was another [laughs] thing that I just didn't really ever consider to be so corrupt. Like, I thought what was going on? The news is just like, what is news, and that's just the truth, like, people just want to share the truth. But there would be the magazines and papers we would see coming out. It was like "anti-logging protest, protesters do this. And this and this are like anti-logging," where it's like, we're not ever anti-logging. No one's ever said that. But it kind of just, it made people not want to support us, I guess, because of the ways that the media was portraying the situation or during the injunction…So they take pictures of like all the gear and everything there that they had destroyed and be like, "Look at all this garbage. Protesters are leaving in the forest, like this is just a big hoax, basically, like they don't actually care." Like, they just kind of did like everything. It was like the media. The government and the police were just doing everything they could to skewer this movement, but it was just make it seem like it was not what it actually was. So it was very overwhelming and very frustrating, like being there in person and like seeing what it was and seeing what was happening. And then having people like tell me, like, "oh, no, like they like don't you know, like the government. There's 25% left of old growth." Like what are you guys talking about? Like, this isn't? Like you guys don't know what you're talking about it. (Alexis Solo Interview)

For 19-year-old Alexis, this reporting shattered her impression of the news. As I noted earlier, Alexis also argued that the scale of policing and government intervention at Fairy Creek were overt examples of anti-Indigenous racism. The media spotlight on the blockades did not stop these blatant injustices but actively facilitated them. This media misrepresentation was actively undermining their movement with the same hostility as the police, the government, and the encroaching logging company. Alexis felt betrayed by this, and she was further frustrated that onlookers trusted the press more than her and her fellow activists.

Though the white activists tended to understand that their position as white people situated them differently than their Black, brown, and Indigenous peers, this did not mean that

they knew how to mobilize this position effectively or stop narratives of heroic exceptionalism from sticking to them. Brett felt that the media portrayal of the student walkouts was beyond the activists' control when she caught the media's attention. She felt that she was being swept up into an unfair hierarchy over her fellow organizers but was powerless to intervene in how the press was positioning her work:

> **Brett (daughter)** 08:09
> …I sort of became that person that the media just kind of like latched on to. And that was pretty negative for me in a lot of ways actually, I felt sort of, I was very young, and I felt sort of out of control. And I didn't, I don't feel like I had, I don't feel like I had the capacity to have like a full grasp on the ethics of like me as a young, privileged white woman getting like complete attention for the relatively milquetoast activism that I was doing at the time. And that's something that I definitely like reckoned with, personally, and, and maybe like, to a certain extent interpersonally for the time after that. (Bret Solo Interview)

As I mentioned earlier, Brett felt that her work was celebrated only insofar as the press could use her image to sell papers. The 2018 student protestors for sex education always included reinstating the scrapped Indigenous curriculum as one of their demands, but the repealed sex education curriculum almost always overshadowed this. Brett later understood that she was being used to whitewash the movement but could not fully grasp this at the time, let alone try to intervene. Again, there is a tension here about how much responsibility young activists hold when they straddle both hegemonic and marginalized positions while they undertake their work. Brett evidently and materially held more social capital than her co-organizers because of her whiteness and other attributes that allowed her to fit the mould of the heroic young activist. At the same time, she was one teenager without the experience that would enable her to recognize and push back against this unequal attention.

As an adult, she was unsure what to do about this. During her interview, Brett described how some of her fellow student organizers had sabotaged interviews, locked other organizers out of social media accounts, and made racist and Islamophobic remarks about the opponents to sex education. When I asked if she ever felt that she wanted to tell these stories publicly, she answered:

> **Brett (daughter)** 28:35
> Um, I always felt like, expressing any of that stuff publicly would diminish from the cause. And also maybe reinforce people's beliefs about youth organizers in a way that I don't think would actually be productive to any sort of, you know, youth organizers already don't get respect, like for the wrong reasons. So when there are

> organizers that actually don't deserve respect, usually, it's better to just like, not talk about it, because it will just fuck up all the people who are actually really good people and really good organizers. (Brett Solo Interview)

Brett found it hard to criticize youth activism openly because she felt that activists were getting enough criticism as it was. She felt that returning to her high school organizing to unpack the various problems with the movement would only further detract from the cause and make it harder for good student organizers to do their work. The perception from the daughter cohort of this study is that positive attention for activism in general, and youth activism in particular, is fragile. If activist girls do the kinds of work or are the kinds of people who seriously threaten the status quo, mainstream media encouragement either never arrives or vanishes as quickly as it appears.

After her experience at Fairy Creek, Alexis felt that powerful institutions like the media or the government are not genuinely interested in supporting efforts to combat climate change:

> **Alexis (daughter)** 36:31
> …They actually, it kind of realized too it almost feels like they don't want because the whole a lot of it was like "Power to the People" like we can't like if there's enough of us like they can't do this basically. And it kind of the eventually the the amount of money that they spent on enforcing this injunction, it's now way higher I think it's maybe triple the amount of money that the logs are, that the wood in that forest is even worth. Like they've done the numbers they've spent almost $4 million enforcing and trying to remove people and if they could have just spent that money on like I don't know making better climate like positive solutions and like it just like that the fact that they care more about like not letting people win I guess, this like win this thing because like I think they don't want people to believe they have power. (Alexis Solo Interview)

She pointed out that efforts to police and dismantle the blockade were significantly more expensive than the trees' commercial value. She believed the government could have spent this money on enacting more climate-positive solutions. Alexis ultimately felt crushing the collective dissent the blockade represented was the fundamental goal of all this money and violence. Young people may be encouraged to be active community members and good citizens, but this encouragement sharply ends when it looks like actual systemic change is coming.

Conclusion

When I conducted these interviews in 2021 and 2022, girl activists were still, as Taft (2020) puts it, "hopeful, harmless, and heroic." The mainstream media, non-profits, and NGOs tended to

frame these political young people as inspiring or at least found them easy to ignore. At the time of writing, (between 2023 and 2025), however, this moment has ended. Though discourses that frame activist girls as hopeful or inspiring still exist, they are much rarer among mainstream outlets.

Between 2021 and 2023, several outlets began to publish criticisms of the cultural obsession with youth activism. Many, like journalist Eleanor Salter's "Children aren't the future: Where have all the young climate activists gone?" (2022) argued that all this media adulation was not cultivating actual solidarity with young activists. Instead, the press attention was unfairly burdening young people with the weight of humanity's future and exposing them to extensive harassment for their visibility (Walters 2022). According to a report issued by the Canadian branch of Plan International in 2023, 63% of Canadian girls engage in activism for various causes. However, they continue to face significant barriers to this participation, including harassment, fears for personal safety, and a rising cost of living that orients their time toward paid work (angus reid group and Plan International Canada 2023, 3).

Many young activists were also tired of this state of affairs. They felt that the focus on their position as "leaders of tomorrow" not only obscured their present work but prevented adults from taking immediate action (Felix 2023; Salter 2022). As I noted earlier, some, like X González (2023), began to reflect on the negative impacts of all this pressure and media attention at a young age. While it is possible that some journalists now think better of shining the spotlight on individual up-and-coming activists, and that young activists may now be more intentional about diverting attention away from individuals and toward their movement's core messaging, this shift seems to represent a declining tolerance for young people's political participation.

Young people are as political as ever, but recent youth and student organizing waves, particularly around Black Lives Matter and Palestine, are perceived very differently. Scholars and activists have long noted that discourses of girl empowerment and heroic activism have never welcomed girls of colour beyond a few tokenistic accounts. In 2020, when mass protests against police brutality erupted after the murder of George Flyod, a few young people emerged as noteworthy heroes to encourage their fellow youth to join this moment of racial reckoning. However, this kind of positive attention did not last, and movements for racial justice, particularly interventions like defunding the police, were quickly framed as dangerous and futile.

While Alexis is correct in her assessment that the province wanted to make a general example out of the Fairy Creek blockade to prevent further climate dissent, the colonial dimension of the blockade cannot be ignored. When protests led by Indigenous people, like the actions like the blockades and encampments in Pacheedaht First Nation or Standing Rock Sioux Tribal territory, begin to receive attention and support the entire settler colonial order comes into view. The camps at Standing Rock in 2018, also heralded at the time as a youth movement that promised a brighter future, were forcibly dismantled by the military in one more act of extractive violence in the unbroken chain of colonization (Wong 2017).

In 2024, many student organizers turned their attention to Pro-Palestine organizing and demanding a ceasefire to Israel's assault on Gaza. One tactic was for students to set up encampments on university campuses to demand these institutions disclose and divest from investments in weapon manufacturers. Student encampments at colleges and universities across the United States (Leblanc and Perry 2024) and Canada (Ceric 2024) soon followed the encampments first erected at Columbia University. Many of these encampments, including the ones at Columbia (Aminy 2024; Banerjee 2024; Forand 2024; Offenhartz 2024), the University of Calgary (Sengupta et al. 2024) and York University (Ceric 2024), were violently cleared by police. The student activists at the encampments were part of intergenerational activist networks. The students had many supportive allies but were not resoundingly celebrated as a sign of the youth's rising civic engagement because they posed a significant challenge to capitalist imperialism. Many of these encampment protestors were young women (Forand 2024), but they have not (at least not as of yet) been configured as hopeful and heroic examples of women's political action.

Having been celebrated as the activist generation primed to right the future, the young people who ventured to do things like organize unions, criticize policing, protect their ancestral land, or demand their universities divest from the weapons of war used to genocide Palestinians have been framed as disruptive, threatening, or even bigoted by the mainstream press (Aminy 2024; Offenhartz 2024; Sengupta et al. 2024). It appears that the critical mass of activist participation, particularly from racialized communities, became too threatening to the status quo of capitalism, imperialism, and racial inequality to be safely co-opted into feel-good stories of inspiring individuals. The interviews in this study predate these student encampments and the recent swell of pro-Palestine actions. However, the pattern of institutions like universities and

other schools celebrating activism until they are the activism targets is still a salient example of what my participants were experiencing. Even in the more positive media landscape around girl activists a few years ago, activist girls still understood that their activist efforts were not likely to be appreciated by the people in power or even accurately depicted if they received press attention.

While this mainstream media landscape and political momentum of the late 2010s certainly impacted how the daughter cohort of this study thought about their activist work, it was never an accurate reflection of what youth activism looks like away from the spotlight. Activism was a slow and uneven process for the girls in this study – even if it was occasionally punctuated by glowing press attention. Aside from their close peers and parents, support for their work was tepid and most daughters did not believe their generation was blessed with a commitment to progressive politics. Success was limited and when they compared their work to their mother's often lifelong political struggles, they saw more continuity than change. Mainstream support for activist work is fickle and success is rare. As the political landscape shifts, it becomes necessary to remember the everyday actions and sustaining relationships that carry on the work when the injunctions arrive, and the op-eds change their tone.

5. Chapter 5: Talking Activism/Becoming Activists

Introduction

14-year-old Dani was one of the younger participants in the study, and she did not get to participate in much direct action. However, despite her limited participation, she was deeply interested in social justice and the world around her. Upon introducing herself in her solo interview, Dani immediately made the connection between how people (mis)interpret her mixed racial identity and her interest in fighting for others to be understood:

> **Danielle (daughter)** 06:22
> …I definitely don't want that to keep going on with generations and generations to go on. I can't like, and I know that it will, but it's just like, you can see it clearly now like you like, now that I'm, my mother's had conversations with me about this stuff and I'm like, oh, that was that was a bit sexist, or that was a bit racist. Like, it's kind of like, um, and you just those things kind of slip by you if your parent doesn't, like, tell you these things, or like, talk to you about these things. And like, yeah, so it's just like, that definitely sparked my interest of like, like, getting involved more and like the community and everything around me, because of like, everything that's ever happened to me. I got to talk to people who actually had it happened to them, too. So it was, and they were like, my age, and it's like, different (Danielle Solo Interview)

Throughout her solo interview, she explained that she loved having important conversations with others and craved more opportunities for adults to take her seriously enough to have these discussions. Much of her desire to speak with and understand others was the fact that people often misunderstood her. Dani is white and Filipina, and her mixed-race identity is important to her. She did not fit neatly into a racial category, and rather than accept that she is both, some of the people around her—including complete strangers—often asked her to explain who and what she was. This is something that most mixed-race people encounter, and, like Dani, many theorize about how race operates as a significant organizing principle in social life by drawing on these early experiences of misrecognition (see: Bettez 2010; Bolatagici 2004; Jolivétte 2014; Mahtani 2014a; O'Hearn 1998). Dani's frustrations with these prying encounters further expose the persistent inequalities hidden under Canada's supposed ideals of multiculturalism (Mahtani 2014b; Paragg 2014). Dani was developing her political consciousness by encountering and talking to peers who experienced the same things.

In the last chapter, I critiqued the ways that activism has become a troublesome term that is simultaneously so broad as to encompass any kind of civic participation yet is stubbornly

associated with just a handful of spectacular activists. Although one of the research goals of this project is to complicate the image of the exceptional activist girl, a question remains about whether to extend the category of the everyday activist to include internal, non-public processes of politicization. While I have been interested in the external actions that challenge the status quo, I have also tried to avoid creating an exclusionary hierarchy of what "counts" as activism in order to appreciate a range of girls' participation and explore the process rather than the outcomes of activism.

In the last chapter, I explained that my interest lies in how girls engage with this moment of highly public and scrutinized activism when they undertake their own public attempts to influence and shape the society around them. Unlike my own adolescence, which seemed dominated by conversations about post-feminist and otherwise politically disengaged youth, I was curious about a cohort of young people who seemed compelled to discuss politics openly, identified themselves as activists, feminists, or were at least interested in politics, and felt they had both the motivation and confidence to take action to change the status quo of world around them through actions like large organized marches and social media campaigns.

Activism may encompass a broad range of participation, but it still must include some kind of external expression, and it was this move to public action that piqued my interest. However, while I generally prioritized external actions, such as protests, blockades, and other direct appeals to people in power at the outset, I came to realize that these external actions cannot take place without internal contemplation. Even for girls who have no choice but to participate in political action to meet their and their community's basic needs, this is not just an instinctual action that takes place without any theorizing or reflection.

This chapter explores the internal sense of politicization as the mother and daughter cohorts began to develop the kind of political consciousness that would motivate them to take on public and collective actions. I especially look to the ambivalent tension where the process of discussing activism and discerning a political position can operate as both the first step in taking action and a stalling point, where action is elided in favour of a withdrawal into transforming the self.

As I found across the interviews, learning and conversing were significant to the girls' activist work. It was a space where they could direct their political energy when they felt unsure or unable to fully engage in the traditional modes of activism that often require public actions.

When faced with the overwhelming scale of social problems and the often-inescapable social media coverage accompanying them, participants were driven to learn more, even if acting on an issue did not seem possible. Learning more about social justice was a key theme across the interviews with both mothers and daughters. Regardless of how experienced or committed the girls' activism was, educating themselves on the issues they cared about became a critical relational practice that entered them into informational dialogue with a broader activist community. Like Dani, many indicated that they started to become politicized as they connected personal experiences of discrimination or mistreatment to broader systemic issues.

Other scholars have noted that as young people connect their lived experiences to the wider world and begin to explore their politics, they develop political consciousness by talking to other people (Erlick 2018; Harris 2008; Lewis et al. 2018; Sheridan-Rabideau 2008; Velasquez and LaRose 2014). While researchers often discuss political participation in the context of young people's development and identity formation, the idea that relationships and group discussions are integral to political action is also part of feminist consciousness-raising traditions (Butterwick 1987; Freedman 2014; Norman 2006; Sowards and Renegar 2004). As feminist Debra Michals (2001) puts it, "The line drawn by [consciousness raising] was from self-discovery to social discovery, from self-actualization to social change." (44).

Researchers point out that peer networks are integral to young people's politicization because they allow them to more openly discuss their opinions and challenge the status quo than they can in their hierarchical relationships with adults. This is why the internet, a space where young people can create spaces where they are the majority demographic, has also been described as an essential place for young people to form political communities away from adult control and criticism (Harris 2001; Jackson 2018; Kim and Ringrose 2018; Schuster 2013). At the same time, intergenerational conversations are also essential in helping young people contextualize their experiences and learn from more seasoned members of their communities (Allen and Jaramillo-Sierra 2015; alt et al. 2016; Gordon and Taft 2011; Grealy et al. 2018; Hopkins and Pain 2007; Morris et al. 2022; Taft 2014).

For example, Kari Dawn Wuttunee and Jennifer Altenberg (Wuttunee et al. 2019) describe how they helped unite a small group of Indigenous girls and women to make ribbon skirts to reclaim traditional teachings and re-imagine a collective future without gender-based and colonial violence (63). This shared creation and discussion of what kinds of Indigenous

futures are possible was mutually sustaining for both the youth and adult participants. They explain that this this mutual support and joy refuted a "damage-centred" (Tuck 2009) understanding of Indigenous girls that sees them as tragic, hopeless, and in need of rescue (Wuttunee et al. 2019, 64). Notably, Wuttunee points out that this work is not just about building intergenerational solidarity but doing so in ways that intentionally reclaim the matrilineal ancestral and familial relationships that colonization has attacked and devalued (74). Embracing matrilineal teachings and coming together as nieces, aunties, and grandmothers was essential to the group's decolonial work.

While Wuttunee and Altenberg describe the simultaneous learning of adults and young people, Emilie Zaslow (2018) describes a more vertical process of how girls encounter "feminism at the dinner table" (99-100) when they start raising complaints about sexism at school with their parents at home. The young people Zaslow interviewed about their activist work began to feel like they could move from enduring sexist dress codes to confronting them because their parents actively encouraged them to see their experiences at school as part of a systemic social issue that they could collectively confront. Benigno (2021) makes a similar intervention by noting that though many of the girls she interviewed held the cynical belief that political action was useless, they did not completely disengage. Instead, they continued to learn and care about social issues that they often processed in conversations with their parents (43).

As Benigno learned, this focus on education can be a retreat into the self that inhibits rather than motivates action. Displaying that one is listening and learning about a social or political issue can be a form of performative activism that never extends to any material action (Alexander 2025; Myeni, n.d.). However, this interior political life is still a site of engagement with the world where the desire for something better persists even when change does not seem possible. Rather than representing disengagement, this interior political life—characterized by learning, reflection, and conversation with others—was part of the process of politicization. Actions like learning and conversing with peers served as a bridge between personal frustration and collective action.

When I spoke to individual girls about their activism, the conversation always encompassed everything from learning about politics to sharing information online, discussing with friends and parents, participating in actions organized by others and leading direct action. While they did not claim that these were activism *per se*, their spectrums of civic action were

challenging to tease apart. As much as doing activism was important, learning and talking about doing activism and their motivations to solve the issues they cared about was an integral part of the process for both mothers and daughters.

This course of politicization took place as the participants became and acted as activists. It was neither a discrete process that ended once someone "graduated" to taking direct action nor something that only the daughters experienced on their way to adulthood. This process of becoming never stops, and people shift in their thinking and actions as their personal and political contexts change. The mothers were also engaged in the process of becoming activists or re-entering activism after periods of inactivity. Many of the mothers noted that, though their daughters were experiencing the same fundamental issues of sexism, racism, and queerphobia that they had encountered in their youth, they had more language and more accessible venues to discuss these problems. The mothers were not new to the issues, but they were learning about these new words and mediums from their daughters just as much as the daughters were learning about political participation from their mothers.

As I noted in the methods chapter, education united the participants in this study. Most of the mothers and daughters were either students or working in education in some capacity. They all had access to and an affinity for education, and while they would criticize educational institutions, this belief in education was a fundamental part of their politics. Many believed that oppression, discrimination, and other social ills were borne from ignorance, and more education and conversation were a key way to intervene so these issues would not "keep going on with generations and generations." Mothers and daughters alike expressed exasperation and disbelief that others could encounter the same information without being animated by the same empathy. They tended to believe, or at least desired to believe, that if others knew what they knew and felt what they felt, they would also be compelled to act.

Becoming Activists

As I have previously discussed, activism can take many forms and encompasses a broad range of activities, including education. However, as Taft and O'Kane (2023) point out, there has been a recent tendency among scholars, policymakers, and adult supporters of young activists to frame all youth civic engagement as activism to the point of obscuring the differences between these varied actions. Part of the reason for this broadening of activism is an attempt to appreciate political actions that have historically been dismissed as pre-activism or not-quite-activism when

enacted by young people. Many girls' studies scholars have criticized how young people in general and girls, in particular, are positioned as "just" becoming activists when they take up political action (Benigno 2021; Clay 2012; Raby and Raddon 2015; Raby and Sheppard 2021; Taft 2017). As Raby and Sheppard (2021) argue in their analysis of media discourses around young climate activists:

> In these examples, the discourse of becoming—specifically becoming educated—positions children as not yet competent to speak out while adults, in contrast, are understood to be legitimate speakers (see also Raby & Raddon, 2015). This tactic undermines the viewpoints of young climate activists, but also those of children in general, reinforcing age-based hierarchy…The Star Editorial Board suggests that rallies themselves are valuable sites for learning. In this case, the young person is still in the process of being educated, with participation about becoming something in the future rather than having knowledge and concerns in the present. As well as de-legitimising young activists, these emphases on becoming educated may also prevent young people from seeing themselves as legitimate activists. (386)

Even when young people are unambiguously *doing* activism, onlookers consider these actions less sophisticated because they imagine young people as inevitably naive, inexperienced, and less competent than adults. In this dynamic, the age-based hierarchy is maintained in such a way that young people are considered inspiring (Taft 2020), but adults do not have to obey the political demands of children. This framing presumes that young people can (even should) learn about social and political issues but either do not experience them firsthand or cannot yet connect the personal and political. This framing also implies that young people who attend these climate rallies are not learning from each other but from knowledgeable adults. Adults understand learning as a diminutive political action where young people should focus their energy while adults do the "real" work. Calling young people too uninformed and naive to have legitimate social and political contributions is an efficient way to dismiss their concerns before they have a chance to challenge the status quo.

Scholarly representations of young activists can also use this educational framework to passively dismiss young people's politics. Many scholars who study youth activism adopt a developmental perspective, pointing out that young people benefit from positive and supportive adult role models in political spaces (Clay 2012; Keller 2015; Kim and Ringrose 2018; Kirshner 2007; Taft 2011; 2017). While this reflects an everyday reality of how young people enter into and can benefit from activist work, scholars have critiqued this perspective for actively or tacitly

framing adults as established beings who guide politically deficient young people (Kim and Ringrose 2018). Again, this is a linear and unidirectional perspective on youth, where young people follow adults until adulthood, and adults do not look back and follow young people. Sometimes, this developmental perspective seriously obscures young people's present concerns and political strategies in favour of their predicted adult outcomes. For example, in their article exploring girls' future career attainment, Colaner & Rittenour (2015) talk about girls' early exposure to feminism in the context of their adult career aspirations. What it means to be a young person interacting with feminism and applying it to the particularities of their young lives is lost when adult outcomes are the priority.

That being said, while it is reasonable to criticize how representing girls and their politics as incomplete and naive diminishes them, no one is born an activist. Young people do have to learn how to enact their politics and often learn from adults. The preceding criticisms are all centred on how adults represent young people in research or the media and how some of these representations actively attempt to undermine young people's political goals. In a long-form research interview, young people have the space to reflect on their inner thoughts and broader feelings about their work.

Scholars of colour, such as Ruth Nicole Brown (2009), Tracy Friedel (2015), Brigette Krieg (2016), Kari Dawn Wuttunee and Jennifer Altenberg (2019), and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) point out that adults and young people often have to collaborate in struggles for racial justice and community survival. Black and Indigenous feminists also stress the importance of understanding mothering beyond singular birth mothers and their children because they recognize that for many families, activism and familial intergenerational relationships are often the same (2016). Though activism might be discouraged for some girls because it requires a level of expression and public action that is seen as dangerous, for other girls, political action may be part of her community's everyday survival practices.

Activism is often positioned as something exceptional for girls, but if it is continually practiced, it might feel less relevant as activism and resonate as something else. For example, as I will explore in the final chapter, some of the queer and gender non-conforming daughters like Stea and Sam, did not see their queerness or their involvement in the queer community as political. Existing among queer people and carving out space for these communities to thrive was so normalized that it did not necessarily register as activism.

Many girls who attract media attention, like Brett, who critiqued her own activist fame in the last chapter, are the kinds of young people who are poised to inherit a favourable (or at least survivable) place in the existing status quo because they are white, able-bodied, heterosexual, and belong to middle-class or more affluent families. This both makes them more credible to the dominant culture and makes their activism appear more voluntary, as they may have access to other avenues for protection or recourse.

For more precariously situated girls, making public demands for social change or finding ways to access resources outside normative civic or social channels can be more of a daily chore than a departure from regular life. They may not have the same access to a cloistered private sphere or assurances that institutions like schools will protect them or take their needs into account. For some, the whole family may have to engage in this form of survival because they are marginalized by their race, class, or religion. Rather than an action distinct from home and family life, activism might be part of a congruent web of community and family expectations. When faced with the destructive threats of colonization and systemic racism, politicized community bonds can be integral for survival. Family relationships, like the connection between mother and daughter, are a site of political teaching and support where lessons can flow from mother to daughter and daughter to mother (Allen and Jaramillo-Sierra 2015; alt et al. 2016; Fouquier 2011; Miller and Parker 2009).

However, even if political participation is a banal activity, everyday actions still have to be learned. Understanding activism as something that regularly happens does not make it less socially significant, and focusing on young people's process of becoming activists does not have to be a discrediting account of their politics. Instead, it can be a way to engage with young people's political worldviews more holistically and appreciate the matrix of their thoughts, feelings, relationships, and actions. Even when young people are not yet ready to take public action and are instead just beginning to notice the actions of those around them or seek out more information, this is still a valuable part of the political process. When young people have no choice but to take political action, they still reflect on and consider the consequences of their actions. Processes like learning more, reflecting on existing beliefs, and venturing into new ways of taking action occur throughout life and are undertaken by people of all social locations, further evidencing the constancy of "becoming."

As Paulo Freire (2002) puts it in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*— as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality." (35). Friere describes a kind of education where the recipients are not deficient but engaged in a dialogic relationship with the world where both reflection and action are indispensable (69). Though scholars have been critical of how girls are made to confess their innermost thoughts and then have them publicly scrutinized (Harris 2004), it is still important to engage with those thoughts seriously. Learning is not a passive process where individuals are completed to face a static world but have the agency to both transform and be transformed by the world (Freire 2002, 70). Girls’ care and curiosity about social issues is a dialogic relationship with the world, sustained through their dialogue with their mothers.

Affective Learning

Across the interviews, learning more about activism and social issues emerged as not just an intellectual process but a profoundly emotional process. Becoming an activist is emotional, and certain affective conditions shape how girls and their mothers engage in a relational process of ongoing political action and education. As Sara Ahmed (2014) points out, affects run over, between, and through bodies and shape their surfaces like stones in a stream. These subtle currents change and are changed by what they encounter. For Ahmed, politics and emotions have always been intertwined, and emotions are crucial to the self and the social in ways that constitute and blur the boundaries between the two (4). She writes:

> …emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others” (10)

Emotions are personal and collective, and these shared and shaping responses to the world leave and create recurring impressions through the generations of a family or community. What we accept as accurate or actionable is tied to the material, but emotions always impact the learning process. Learning is also a relational practice where shared information and commitments to a cause involve feelings that sustain bonds and attachments. Gathering knowledge is a cyclical process where information and relationships orient feelings in particular directions, and relationships and emotions influence the kinds of information we are inclined to take in.

These affective conditions significantly impact girls' politics. Society already positions girls to modify themselves for the sake of others' feelings. Teachers and parents teach girls to be quiet, courteous, and mindful of how they make others feel (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Coulter 2018). When girls transgress these expectations, there are often negative social and institutional consequences. This is also not just an external process but something that girls internalize into their self-perception. Jessalyn Keller (2015), for example, interviewed teenage girls about the feminist communities they were building at school and online and found they would compare themselves to famous feminists and feel self-conscious about their own political actions. Jessica Taft (2017) also found that political girls would decline to label themselves as activists, writing:

> A final narrative theme in many girls' stories about their entry into activism is the claim that they are still in the process of becoming activists. According to these girls, they had not yet arrived at an activist identity, but were still on a journey toward this identity. Girls' firm claim that they are 'not yet' activists and are still in the process of becoming activists, is perhaps the most distinctive feature of their narratives. (34)

Taft found that even girls who were clearly *doing* activism would still not take on the term as their *identity*, which they often felt they had not yet earned. Others found a different dynamic, where girls may or may not identify as activists but are concerned with being perceived as activists, especially feminists, because they feel others will think they are "too much." McClelland and Fine (2008) describe girls as subjects with "thick desire" who "seek lives of pleasure and responsibility, strength of mind and body, alone and with community." (84). Their framework of thick desire (which could perhaps be understood as deep, diverse, or robust desire) argues that girls are entitled to a wide range desires for meaningful intellectual, political, social, and sexual freedom and engagement (Fine and McClelland 2006, 300) This is opposed to what McClelland and Fine imply are the thin desires (or perhaps shallow desires) that girls are offered by consumer culture or the media, who do not perceive girls as serious social actors beyond their place as a consumer demographic. Girls feel deeply about the world and how they experience it. Yet, this passionate desire to see change is often seen as excessive or a disruptive phase to be suffered before it is inevitably outgrown. Girls who take up feminist activism are particularly accused of excess, divisiveness, and improper sexuality. Many of the girls interviewed by Keller (2015) and Kim and Ringrose (2018) expressed a strong belief in feminist principles but did not want to be perceived through stereotypes of feminists as strident, unattractive and man-hating lesbians.

Young activists are broadly discredited for being uninformed and ruled by emotion. Accusations of hysteria tend to stick to girls with a particular tenacity. Women, in general, and girls, in particular, are often considered inferior because they are seen as emotional (Ahmed 2014, 8). Queer and BIPOC young people, who are positioned further outside the bounds of hegemonic political discourse, are particularly accused of reaching for political action as a way of "acting out," or attention-seeking (Morris and Perry 2017). These conditions of emotionality and what feelings are considered insightful, sound, and worth taking seriously shape how girls go about and perform their political education and what they desire to know more about.

Returning to this project's interviewees, learning together was described in affective terms by both mothers and daughters. Learning from each other was an emotional exchange in the more intimate space of the mother-daughter relationship. Both mothers and daughters used openness to learning new things and willingness to take on political commitments to describe each other and explain the ongoing closeness of their relationship. When I asked Buffy what she and her mother, Eleanor, learned from each other, she described what these exchanges felt like and how she would use her feelings to frame concepts that her mother initially disagreed with:

> **Buffy (daughter)** 24:20
> … I feel like I learned a lot from my mom. I think my mom learned some things from me…like my experience as a trans person. And which I, you know, she's always like; it's very sweet. She's always so happy when I do talk to her about that stuff. And she, you know, and we have, little, like, disagreements about something sometimes where she's, where she'll, you know, say something and I'm like, "but this is how I feel." And, and then she'll like, take that away, and, you know, think about it, and then talk about it later…she's, like, gotten even better at sort of like, you know, accepting my thoughts and ideas and my feelings and, like, taking them into consideration always. (Buffy Solo Interview)

Buffy notes that the back and forth between her and her mother was not just an intellectual exchange but something always laden with feelings. Buffy minimizes her disagreements with Eleanor but alludes to the fact that her feelings make the most significant impact when they have conflict. It is when she says, "but this is how I feel," that Eleanor goes to think more about her argument and begins to shift her perspective. Her relationship with her daughter and the corresponding responsiveness toward her feelings allow Eleanor's learning to take place. Only when the emotional resonances of learning about others' struggles are grounded in relationships

with others can create praxis (Freire 2002, 107). Reflexivity and education are not just personally transformative but can cultivate the kind of empathy that leads to responsibility toward others.

Learning As Daughtering

Daughters are expected to learn from their mothers. The passing of information from parent to child does not interrupt the notion that young people receive knowledge and instruction from adults until they reach adulthood. The daughter participants in this study expressed that their mothers were their first feminist teachers and role models, and this dynamic aligns with decades of feminist experience. However, this is a nuanced process, not a unidirectional information flow. They were students of their mothers and the world, and these two things did not always align. The members of the daughter cohort often described how they would use what they learned from their mothers to confront the inequalities that their schools tried to normalize and bring new information home to their mothers.

As young people and adults, daughters and mothers often inhabited very different political spaces. The daughters usually learn to enact their activism with peers at school or online, while mothers would connect with other women of their own age, particularly other mothers. However, one point of coalescence was their time at home when they would talk about the news or personal experiences of inequality. For many daughters, their conversations with their mothers gave them the awareness to begin pursuing activism outside their homes. Their mothers were their first insight into the basics of what sexism and racism are and how they function.

Ellie, for example, would often hear her mother talk about the sexism she was experiencing at work. Her mother named her experiences as sexist and encouraged Ellie to recognize things she was encountering at school as sexist. This included encouraging her daughter to refuse to participate in games at school if she felt they were sexist or unfair:

> **Ellie (daughter)** 31:13
> Yeah, she, like I said, she works at a big company. She's a pretty like, high-up person in the company. And so she's dealt with a lot of sexism in her day just with being talked down to or like just little acts that build up over time. And so she always expressed these struggles to me and how they were wrong. And like I said, she encouraged me to sit out of that game because it is sexist. (Ellie Solo Interview)

For Ellie, these ongoing conversations about the sexism her mother experienced at work made it possible for her to describe the sexism she was encountering at school. Her mother's line of communication and support enabled her to begin refusing to go along with things at school that she felt were discriminatory or unequal. 13-year-old Nicole had a similar experience where her mother, Jessica, had always prepared her to encounter sexist and racist attitudes at school. Nicole had many of the same experiences as Dani, and her peers would routinely ask about her racial and ethnic identity. Her mother situated her in that identity and explained how she would be perceived because of it:

> **Nicole (daughter)** 22:08
> …And then [people at school are] like, they'll say, "oh, which one are you from, like, the Caribbean or Africa?" And then [my mother will] discuss that with me, she told me that I was of part African descent too, and like, we'll talk about like, Black lives. Like, how as kids, we have to do better in school, like, be encouraged to learn and get good grades. Because we're Black, so the teachers are gonna, like, expect less from us. So we have to show them that we're better. She'll talk about this stuff with us at home, too. (Nicole Solo Interview)

In both accounts, Nicole and Ellie were learning things from their mother that contrasted with what they encountered at school. Encounters like games, leisure time, inquisitive peers, and teacher attitudes at school still reflect sexist and racist attitudes. Ellie and Nicole's teachers and peers were, both directly and indirectly, sending the message that being Black or a girl was something outside of, and therefore lesser than, the norm. At the same time, though participants readily identified school as a place that readily reproduced sexism, racism, transphobia, and other inequalities, mothers encouraged their daughters to persist in these spaces. Jessica, Daisy and Nicole's mother explained that she experienced the tension between sending her daughters to schools where they could receive the best education, even if they conflicted with her political values. The schools that could provide the best reading support and smaller class sizes were Christian academies, and this meant she was often working to explain to her children that her household did not share the schools' homophobic and other restrictive sexual values.

Except for Brett, all of the daughters were students at the time of the interviews. They were also, overwhelmingly the daughters of educated mothers. The mothers had almost all attended or were attending university, and most also worked in education in some capacity. The daughters of these educated women were also generally doing well in school and either attended

or aspired to attend higher education. This research attracted individuals who felt comfortable participating in a somewhat invasive study because they were familiar with and comfortable in school settings. Because they were almost all students, it was easy to see the connections between the ways daughters learned from their mothers at home and the ways that, as young people, their primary social position is as students.

Several of the daughters, like Amy, Stea, and Sam, started their activist work as school projects, and their teachers helped guide them from an interest in a topic to tangible action. Even the youngest daughters, Dani, Nicole, and Daisy, attended grade schools where their teachers would take the time to address current events like Black Lives Matter protests or other current political events. The mother cohort often cited their college and university days as the first time they participated in activism or took an interest in politics. However, schools are still normalizing institutions that orient students toward the existing status quo. An emphasis on activism as a dimension of good citizenship might be encouraged, but not to the point of radical action. As I noted earlier, treating student political action as pedagogical exercises is often depoliticizing (Raby and Sheppard 2021; Raby and Raddon 2015). When the media or other onlookers cannot safely depoliticize students, they are rendered threatening. Not all students are empowered to solve problems because they are treated as the problem, and this distinction is usually made along the lines of race and class. Conversely, school may give young people some tools to confront social issues, but for some of the daughters, school was the very problem they were trying to confront. When they redirected their sense of responsibility and feelings of agency back to the school itself, recognizing it as a place that needed to be changed, the school punished them for their efforts.

For example, in her pair interview with her mother, Lizette, Amy noted that she attended a school that offered classes with a focus on social justice, and she was encouraged to not only pursue anti-sexual violence work but also take aim at reforming school-based sex education to include more information about consent. However, when she and some of her peers organized a walkout to protest Ontario Premier Doug Ford's repeal of the sex education curriculum, school administrators told them that if they enacted this plan, anyone with a student leadership role would be removed from their position. Another daughter participant, Ellie, was trying to combat the rampant and violent transphobia at her school and was summarily alienated from her peers.

Still, the daughter cohort managed to find space for solidarity and the kinds of sustaining relationships that would allow them to continue the types of political learning and action their schools might discourage. Beyond the specifics of classroom instruction, the school provides a key place for young people to be in constant contact with other young people. For most children and teenagers, school is their primary public sphere, and if they do something collectively, this is where they will gather. This was especially true for the grade school girls like Daisy, Nicole, and Dani, who rarely went anywhere without some kind of adult supervision and could only find time away from adults in same-age peer groups during unstructured time at school. Older daughters also described school as a central part of their social and, therefore, political lives. Grade 12 student Stea, for example, talked about how they and their peers could strategize or at least vent about having to confront their parents about their politics. When they wanted to attend a Black Lives Matter march in 2020, this group of friends used their time at school to plan how to initiate these conversations with their parents and use this reassurance from their friends to gain the confidence to do something that might create a significant rift between them and their parents:

> **Stea (daughter)** 35:33
> …it was definitely a conversation I personally brought home and I was like, "this is something that I'm just learning about. And I'm really interested in it. And I'd really like to commit to learning more about it, because something I didn't know at all." And it was one of the things that led me to activism surrounding Indigenous people and clean water…We had to, yeah, had to learn about how to apply that to Canada, and my parents helped with that a lot. Um, and specifically the education aspect of that. That was very important for me, but I know that not all my friends were able to do that. (Stea Solo Interview)

Stea described this conversation as a success, and the way their mothers demonstrated their support for Stea's newfound commitment was to help them learn more. Their act of solidarity was education, and this led Stea to take action with the communities around them. Of course, not all parents are so eager to join their children in their newfound politics. Stea notes that not all of their friends could have these conversations with their parents. Part of the endless work of political becoming is reckoning with the competing messages from parents, children, schools, and everywhere else.

Sometimes, these conflicts resulted in children feeling disappointed in their parents. Stea's story also reveals how, as daughters matured and learned more outside their homes, they

sometimes felt betrayed by the things their parents did not teach them. Though Stea felt they and their peers did not have actively racist parents, they had passively allowed racism to go uninterrogated in their homes:

> **Stea (daughter) 33:39**
> …And we're able to discuss them because we're independent from our families in a way that, independent from our families views in a way that wasn't apparent before. Um, so even if I wouldn't call any of our families actively racist, this was definitely a conversation we didn't have with them. (Stea Solo Interview)

Despite Stea's parents' eagerness to support Stea's commitment to antiracism, Stea still understood that this conversation came far later than it should have. By identifying this silence as not *actively* racist, Stea tries to navigate the tension of not wanting to accuse their parents of being racist and recognizing that passivity about racism is still racism. In fact, several of the white girls felt their parents had let them down by allowing them to ignore or at least overlook racism:

> **Alexis (daughter)** 21:53
> …I kind of realized that my, mostly my mom wasn't really aware of it that much either. Like just how bad it was. My mom would kind of, she used to anyway, say it's better not to know sometimes when you can't really do something about it. Like it's better to just not know. I hated that. But I was younger, and she's my mom, so I was like, okay, yeah, maybe that makes sense. When I started to bring these issues forward to her, she would care obviously about them as well. She just wasn't going out of her way to like, educate herself or learn about it…I was more just angry at the whole situation and a little bit myself, because I was like, I feel like I should know about this. Like, how did I not know about all of these things happening?...I mean, there's no point and just like being upset that I didn't know before, like I know now, so I can just do everything I can do, it just what felt like a I felt a lot of responsibility at that point. Once I knew I was like I don't want to not. I can't unknow and I don't want to either. Yeah, I wasn't mad at my family about it. I just kind of assumed that they had no idea either. (Alexis Solo Interview)

As a white settler, Alexis had grown up on Indigenous land in proximity to Indigenous people but in a system that kept her ignorant of this reality. Alexis tries to give her mother, Kim, the benefit of the doubt by assuming she is also ignorant of racism, but criticizes her willful refusal to engage with complex issues. Notably, Kim was born in Apartheid South Africa to white parents who opposed Apartheid. In her solo interview, she described growing up with a strong sense of racial justice and was often in conflict with racist white peers once her family moved to

Calgary. Despite these early experiences, her daughter Alexis understood her mother to be someone who was not only uninformed about sociopolitical issues but also actively avoided them. Like Stea, Alexis splits between trying to not be mad at her parents while still expressing the poignant betrayal of "But I was younger, and she's my mom, so I was like, okay, yeah, maybe that makes sense."

When I asked the mother cohort about their earliest memories of activism and feminism, they returned to stories of their own mothers. Learning about activism not only carried a cyclical affect, where the interviews returned participants to their pasts, but a girling affect that illuminated the mothers' process of becoming. For example, one of the daughter participants, 17-year-old Suzanna, described her mother's kindness and openness as influential to her own politics:

> **Suzanna (daughter)** 19:39
> My mom is very open and welcoming to people. Especially as my friends that come over or even speak to her for like the smallest time. Um, she's always, she's always been an amazing influence in my life. She's always been the one who informed me and I have to thank her about, like, really involving myself in activism as well. Because if she didn't tell me any of this, I know for a fact that I wouldn't really be, like involved in, in researching and informing myself. (Suzanna Solo Interview)

Suzanna directly credits her mother with cultivating her interest in researching social issues and keeping herself informed. Even though Suzanna did most of her political learning and actions at school and online with her peers, she positions these actions as extensions of her mother's early guidance. Suzanna's mother, Janet, described her own mother in the same glowing terms:

> **Janet (mother)** 02:08
> …my mom is very, she's very down to earth. She's sort of like, I've always referred to her as the New Age hippie, she always taught me everything about love and kindness and, and treating people as people, don't treat them for any other reason, you take into account who they are as individuals, and you know, you don't base your judgments on their skin colour, or their beliefs or anything of that nature. She taught me just to, to love and accept and that there are obviously people who make bad choices in life. And there's always good with the bad yin- yang, right? But to try to look on the positive side of everything. (Janet Solo Interview)

Like Suzanna, Janet also describes her mother as imparting a certain open disposition to her daughter. This willingness to generously engage with other people encouraged her later interest in getting more involved with her community. Janet and Suzanna exemplify a continuity that

occurred across many of the interviews. Participants would describe hailing from long lines of strong women and inheriting their interest in politics from their families.

Girls' studies scholars such as Jessica Taft share this theory of girlhood that prioritizes ambiguity and flux. They point out that because there is no such thing as a "completed" subjectivity where you reach a finalized static identity, we can understand youth as inhabiting the same ongoing process of becoming that occurs throughout the entire lifespan. In *Rebel Girls* (2011), Taft explores the ways that girls do not just make a linear transition from child to adult but instead inhabit multiple kinds of gender performance that they deploy in context-specific settings. This more fluid understanding not only helps to disrupt a linear understanding of girls where girlhood inevitably ends at a certain point and gives way to womanhood, but also helps to generate a more complex understanding of intergenerational relationships that recognizes how all subjectivities are continuously shifting.

It follows, then, that if girls are not just pre-women, then their mothers are not just post-girls. The role of being a daughter and the practice of daughtering may change over a lifetime. Someone may always *be* a daughter, but some moments and encounters bring this status to the surface. Some moments feel more daughterly than others, and for the mother cohort of the study, learning about their daughter's activist work led them to reminisce about their own and recall the early days of their political becomings. While these recollections are significant and demonstrate the importance of girlhood as a time of emergent political awareness, this is not the extent of the girling affects and their effects on the mother cohort. Beyond just recalling their own girlhoods, when daughters come home with new issues and new language, this learning process brings their mothers into girlhood with them.

For example, in the earlier quote, Buffy uses the diminutive "sweet" to describe her mother's earnestness and interest in her trans perspectives. At this moment, her mother, Eleanor, a professor, takes on the role of student. Buffy brings something new, and Eleanor allows herself to be changed. Again, this return to girlhood is not a diminished state but a moment of possibility. New information is absorbed along the same familial lines as earlier political inheritances. Mothers look to their daughters to guide them through unfamiliar social and political territory the same way their daughters look to them.

Returning to Janet and her daughter, Suzanna, the two of them started attending protests and other political demonstrations together, encouraged by their roommate when they moved to a

new city. Janet expressed that she felt the issues addressed by Take Back the Night were essential and had long desired to get more involved. However, Janet did not have any activist experience, unlike many of the other mother participants. She worried about the risks of attending these kinds of events and whether they could be dangerous or uncomfortable for her daughter, Suzanna:

> **Janet (mother)** 18:07
> I was nervous. I was nervous…I was in a protest when I was a kid. But it was the first time since, since growing up, I guess, dipping my feet and doing something instead of just saying I support it wanting to show my support…I have a bit of social anxiety. So I wasn't sure how much people were going to be there. But I wanted, I wanted to experience it. And I wanted to bring her and I was nervous about that too. Because I wasn't sure how she was going to understand it all. I mean, because the age that she was she was old enough to understand but still she was new to learning about what sexual assault and rape and all that was and I was afraid that she was going to read something or see something that might scar her or be like, "Oh, I don't know what that is" or like if anti protesters or whatever came out and started yelling horrible, obscene things at woman or whatever. Um, so I was nervous, but once I got there it was very different. The energy was just beautiful. Like everybody was there for a purpose. And then she kind of blended right in right away and I think she was more brave to be there than I was. (Janet and Suzanna Pair Interview)

Janet approached Take Back the Night with trepidation, especially since she was new to the city. She was unsure if there would be counter-protestors or other hostile encounters. Elsewhere in her interviews, Janet noted that she often felt that political spaces and conversations, especially online, felt negative, and this negativity was alienating for her. Despite these fears, Janet wanted to be there and openly show her support for something she cared about, and she especially wanted Suzanna to experience the march. Suzanna would have been around ten years old when they first attended Take Back the Night. Janet described Suzanna as "more brave to be there than I was" and noted that she often took Suzanna's lead when it came to political participation. As the eldest daughter, Suzanna had frequently been the one to support and reassure her mother when the family faced hardships like custody battles and precarious housing. Though Janet wanted Suzanna to learn that women can collectively confront sexual violence, she did not want this learning experience to be frightening for either Suzanna or herself.

Generational Differences and Other Challenges

Continuing with Janet and Suzanna, like most of the pairs interviewed, they described their relationship as close and supportive. During their pair interview, Suzanna explained that she learned a lot from her mother, and Janet responded by saying that she felt the same way:

> **Janet (mother)** 12:31
>
> But you have your own mind too. Sometimes she comes back with stuff that I've never even heard about, or you know, the things that her and her friends, it helps me it helps give me an insight to what the younger people are thinking and helps me understand her better. (Suzanna Janet Pair Interview)

Most of the mothers described learning from their daughters the way Janet described learning from Suzanna. They respected that their children would grow to have differing perspectives from them and appreciated having a kind of intergenerational insight through their daughters. For Janet, listening to her daughter's political insights and hearing about her activist work was also a way to understand her. Remaining open to new ideas was integral to her relationship with Suzanna and was, therefore, an essential part of her mothering.

The mother cohort valued learning, and they, like Janet, enjoyed learning new things from their daughters and valued having the kind of relationship with their children where this open exchange was possible. Most of the mothers were not just educated themselves but now worked in education in some capacity. Heather and Jessica were graduate students, Lizette, a retiring Catholic school principal, Elise, a high school guidance counsellor, Eleanor, a university professor, and Claire, an instructor at a forest school for young children. They all encouraged their daughters to seek educational opportunities and modelled this.

While many of the mothers had activist experience, others noted that their daughters had inspired them to venture into activism for the first time. Kim, for example, explained that she began to become actively involved in environmental causes because of her daughter, Alexis.

> **Kimberly (mother)** 09:26
>
> …No, I don't even know if I honestly really thought about it much. I mean, Calgary was very, very redneck growing up. It was very little activism. You know, like, at the time when we were growing up in the '80s and '90s. I I don't remember much activism at all. I don't even remember hearing the word to be quite honest. It was definitely not a part of my life prior, prior to, really prior to having prior to Alexis opening my eyes to it. (Kimberly Solo Interview)

Later in the interview, Kim clarified that this was not a change in political values so much as the impetus for being outspoken about those values:

> **Kimberly (mother)** 15:10
> Yes, well, she didn't really change my thinking about it. I think she just opened my eyes to being more outspoken about, you know, not just thinking about social equality, actually doing something about it. And that's, that's the difference in what Alexis has done for me. (Kimberly Solo Interview)

This all paints a harmonious view of mothers eager to follow their daughters into the progressive politics of a new generation. However, while I believed that this is how Kim felt, I wondered if there might be a more complex or contentious process going on here that might be smoothed over in retrospect for a researcher. There might be a split here where, in order to preserve a positive relationship or sense of oneself as progressive and open-minded, moments of conflict, refusals to shift in positions, or actions that run against stated values are kept out of the conversation. Participants considered this dynamic of easy knowledge transfer to be part of a naturalized knowledge cycle where girls learn early political consciousness from their mothers, refine it to meet contemporary issues and bring home these new techniques and a renewed sense of urgency to their mothers. Mothers need to support their daughters, and this openness to learning from one another is evidently beneficial, but this is still a challenging and nuanced process.

Buffy's mother, Eleanor, for example, held the same general opinion that learning from daughters was good. Still, her rendering of this dynamic admits that taking on a new perspective can mean having to reevaluate one's self-concept:

> **Eleanor (mother)** 52:02
> …There's always barriers, right? And so you can get so kind of overly invested or connected to your own understanding of like, what something is, like what lesbian identity is, or what feminist politics are, that it's hard to let go of. And, and then there's, there's then there becomes like, a real restriction, both and like the possibility of like expanding your thinking, and of learning new ways of thinking, right? And so, and that's always hard to have to sort of check the thing that you thought you knew for sure was the case. (Eleanor Solo Interview)

I quoted Buffy earlier when she described how she and her mother do sometimes disagree, but when she emphasizes how much she cares about something and the ways that her trans

perspective differs from her mother's, Eleanor was willing to allow her daughter's perspective to change her. Eleanor was very sensitive to the fact that she felt restricted by her parents' expectations and did not want to impose them on her daughters:

> **Eleanor (mother)** 46:56
> my parents had nothing but expectations [laughs], you know, and I'm sure like I've gotten if I was really, like, if I was in therapy, right now, we'd maybe be able to get to the bottom of like, the fact that I also have expectations [laughs], but like, I try not to have certain kinds of expectations, I would say, you know, instead I just have hopes, and primarily that's a hope for their happiness. (Eleanor Solo Interview)

Now on the other side of this parent-child relationship, Eleanor did not want to repeat the pressures of her own childhood. She repeats the expected refrain that she only wants her children to be happy. Other mothers also feared that over-instructing their daughters would alienate them. I asked one of the mothers, Heather, if she ever feared that she and her daughter Dani would reach an impassable political divide in their feminisms:

> **Heather (mother)** 32:18
> Yeah, definitely. I mean, I sometimes wonder, is it just that, that she's a teen and so she's snapping at me? Or is it like, oh, no, are we getting up to the point where I'm going to go, "What?" It's interesting… I also talked to her a lot about history, right? This wasn't that long ago, kiddo, where you had to, you know, have three doctors sign off to get an abortion or you couldn't get birth control without your parent's permission, or you know, it just wasn't so long ago that we can say it's done deal. So hopefully, she'll hear a little bit of that. But yeah, it definitely scares me. (Heather Solo Interview)

Heather's description was similar to Eleanor's account of how daughters will inevitably challenge their mother's particular investments in their understanding of the world and their identities. However, Heather also openly expresses that she fears this will harm her relationship with Dani. The two already have disagreements, and when Heather holds fast to her feminist perspectives, she is not invested in being right so much as she recognizes that Dani will develop a feminist worldview as strong as hers. There is the simmering fear that Dani might never come to see or understand what it was like for her generation growing up or her context as a mother and instead just see her as a representation of a fading era that should be left behind. Unlike the passing teenage phase of snapping at your mother, Heather worries that a political divide could

be a more permanent rift. She also recognizes that Dani's generation is not the only one to face the future, and everyone of all ages must fight for reproductive justice.

Mothering and Educating

As I noted in the previous chapter, despite an apparent zeitgeist of widespread youth activism, the daughter cohort often reported feeling isolated and lonely in their activist work. They relied on a handful of peers and their parents to support them and they usually felt heard by few people but their mothers. As others have already found, supportive relationships with parents are important to young people beyond just political efficacy. At the same time, I hesitate to romanticize the specialness of the open-learning mother as if this implies that good, feminist mothering requires the uncomplicated task of following your daughter's new and improved politics. In a cisheteropatriarchal system that devalues women's knowledge, mothers are expected to educate their young daughters, but their insights are only appreciated until a point. This is the transition that Alice Pitt noticed in her classrooms that led her to write "Mother Love's Education" (2006). Pitt's female undergraduate students, many of whom where in their emerging adulthood, were disinterested in learning anything intellectual from a maternal figure in the serious setting of their university education (91). In fact, sometimes mothers are identified as problematic *mis*educators.

Sharon Lamb's *The Secret Lives of Girls* (2001) provides an example of how mothers are positioned in relation to their daughters, and the things girls learn about themselves and the world. In her book, rather than pathologizing sexual and aggressive behaviours, Lamb argued for the opposite interpretation of these actions and thought that the guilt that comes with acts that transgress the typical image of the "good girl" was the real problem. Lamb's book is told through the stories of both girls and adult women recalling their childhoods, and it is full of mothers who scold the very sexual and aggressive impulses that she seeks to render normal. Mothers are often the first people to tell their children that their sexuality and aggression are wrong, and they are the first to introduce the "good girl" regime and its ensuing guilt to their daughters. Mothers are often the first regulators in a girl's life and the first to introduce and enforce patriarchy.

While Lamb's assessment of how mothers contribute to guilt and shame in their children is not wrong, she is also not very sympathetic toward mothers. Lamb thoroughly explores how the shame around childhood sexuality persists into adulthood, and yet she never ventures to offer a substantive investigation of why mothers perpetuate this cycle and anxiously monitor their

daughters' sexual and aggressive behaviour. It is left implied that these mothers are repeating their own shame and anxiety that they have also absorbed from their surrounding culture when they scold and discourage their children. Beyond her lack of interest in familial mothers in the book, Lamb is also critical of the ways researchers can hold a maternal and, therefore, sentimental view of children in general and girls in particular. When Lamb calls Mary Pipher, her contemporary and the author of *Reviving Ophelia* (1995), a "good nurturant mother" (Lamb 2001, 5) who wants to see the inherent goodness in every girl, it is not a compliment. She positions the nurturing maternal gaze as neither intellectual nor helpful.

In contrast, in "Teaching Black Girlhood Studies with Black Motherhood Studies: An Autoethnography" (2022), Renata Ferdinand offers further perspective on this dynamic. She does not leave mothers on the margins as people who restrict and police their children or fail to live up to ideal motherhood. Her interest in contextualizing mothers and their motivations was sparked when she noticed how uncharitable her students were towards mothers, especially mothers facing difficult systemic circumstances. She describes how her students were deeply frustrated by stories of Black mothers who seemed to fail their children, and the class was resistant to understanding how and why these women could act the way they did. She came to realize that the course had not properly contextualized Black womanhood or motherhood because there was no mention of Black girlhood, writing: "If they had explored the experiences of Black girls before or in conjunction with what they were learning about Black mothers, they might have gotten a better sense of how and why these mothers behave as they do. They may have come to understand the fragility of both social positions."(62). Ferdinand's students were not inclined to see mothers as people who had come from somewhere and been influenced by their social location. Women are rarely granted a sense of continuity, and motherhood and girlhood are often seen as separate, if not oppositional, experiences.

Learning from younger generations is evidently beneficial, but I do not want to simply report that mothers should follow their daughters' lead as if this has no connection to the patriarchal expectation that mothers have their personhood subsumed by their children. Adrienne Rich (1995) makes this criticism in *Of Woman Born* when she writes:

> [t]ypically, under patriarchy, the mother's life is exchanged for the child; her autonomy as a separate being seems fated to conflict with the infant she will bear. The self-denying, self-annihilative role of the Good Mother . . . will spell the "death"

> of the woman or girl who once had hopes, expectations, fantasies for herself– especially when those hopes and fantasies have never been acted-on. (166)

Society does not expect mothers to have their own political convictions, but instead either remain static[8] or follow others. Rich (1995) and Ferdinand (2022) point out that mothers were once girls and are not even truly post-girls, but their role as mothers obscures these other identities. The sense of futurity, potential, and growth that is ascribed to girls is erased once they become mothers who must now abnegate their own convictions and aspirations to prioritize their daughters.

Conclusion

Across the interviews, the mother-daughter relationship emerged as a site of early political consciousness where the connection between personal and political became apparent. Learning is also a relational practice where shared information and commitments to a cause involve feelings that sustain bonds and attachments. Gathering knowledge is a cyclical process where information and relationships orient feelings in particular directions, and relationships and feelings influence the kinds of information we are inclined to take in. This course of politicization took place as the participants became and acted as activists. It was neither a discrete process that ended once someone "graduated" to taking direct action nor something that only the daughters experienced on their way to adulthood. This process of becoming never stops, and people shift in their thinking and actions as their personal and political contexts change. Daughters learned some of their earliest insights about inequality from their mothers and brought new political conversations back home. While this was described as a positive experience, patriarchal social conditions still contoured how this knowledge was received.

This research is also part of this political cycle of knowledge sharing. Many of the mothers and daughters saw participating in the study and sharing their work with a researcher as part of their activism. As much as the daughters enjoyed and valued learning, they also felt there was a lot the world could learn from them.

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[8] In Greta Gerwig's blockbuster film *Barbie* (2023), the creator of Barbie dolls, Ruth Handler (Rhea Perlman), is portrayed as a mother figure to the protagonist Barbie doll (Margot Robbie). When this Barbie expresses her fear about living in the real world as a human, Handler reassures her by saying, "We mothers stand still so our daughters can look back to see how far they have come." Though this has been interpreted as a sweet line (the audience certainly seemed to think so when I saw the film in theatres), it suggests that part of motherhood, perhaps even the ideal of motherhood, is to stop moving so daughters can progress. The implication is that mothers and daughters cannot move forward together and look back on how far they have *both* come.

6. Chapter 6: An Ambivalent Inheritance: Narratives of Generational Feminisms

Introduction

Danielle's mother, Heather, was a fellow graduate student in a gender studies program at another Canadian university. Toward the end of her solo interview, we began to talk about our respective programs. As our interview neared its end, I asked Heather what it was like to be the research participant in a study that aligned with her own work:

> **Heather (mother)** 47:32
> …This is such an interesting topic, because it's making me think about all the ways that I sort of ended up. I was like, "huh am I a feminist parent?" but I've really had to interrogate what that means lately. So I think it's very interesting to be on the other side of the interviews and to think critically about, like, is feminism changing? Is it gonna be something that I recognize? When Danielle is my age, is it gonna be a bad word? I mean, it's already, I think we're already going back, it used to be something cool. We used to put it on the T-shirts, and now it's like, oof, you know, we don't put it in our program. (Heather Solo Interview)

Heather was in her early 40s at the time of our 2022 interview and had lived through several ebbs and flows of the feminist movement, as well as the changes in people's willingness to openly claim a feminist identity. Like other members of the mother cohort, she vividly remembered the École Polytechnique Massacre and recalled her parents warning her that being an outspoken feminist could be dangerous (Heather Solo Interview 5:15). By the time she entered university, she was annoyed that her roommate wanted to chat about women's studies courses, reacting with "Ugh I don't want to do this course. I mean, I'm a woman, what do I have to learn about?" (Heather Solo Interview 7:14). By the following year, however, she was taking women's studies courses herself and has been a committed feminist ever since.

Now that she was watching her own daughter explore her feminist politics and identity, Heather was reflecting on whether this was another moment when feminism was moving from something popular enough to put on a T-shirt to something too alienating (or imperilled) to name a university department. In the case of her daughter Dani, she did not just worry about the broader feminist movement but also about the ways that political tensions could create a rift in her close relationship with her daughter.

Beyond just her relationship, these questions Heather raises about the relative popularity of the word 'feminist' are not just about words, because a backlash against the term 'feminist' means a backlash against women and the material conditions that daughters like Dani would inherit. Only two months after I interviewed Heather and Danielle, *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark US Supreme Court case that established the right to an abortion, was overturned. This loss was the final blow of an anti-choice movement that had been steadily making gains since 1973 and persisted whether 'feminist' could be printed on a T-shirt or not (Keating 2022). Still, though there is always a simultaneous mix of both oppression and resistance, there is a persistent *feeling* of rising and falling feminist tides. By the time I conducted my interviews, there was an emerging feeling, both among the participants and broader public discourse, that the brief resurgence of broadly popular feminist activity with the #MeToo movement, the Women's March, and ever-present images of heroic activist girls was not the sign of a newly progressive and politically effective generation, but one more phase in a longer, and seemingly endless cycle of struggle and backlash.

In her book, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011), Clare Hemmings offers a framework for engaging with the kinds of stories feminists tell about the past to make sense of their current feminist subjectivity and their sense of the feminist future. She sorts these into progress narratives where the narrow focus on patriarchy and presumed essentialism, whiteness, and heterosexism of second wave feminism is overcome and replaced by more sophisticated notions of difference; loss narratives where an era of praxis and action has given way to capitalist co-optation and detached academic theories; and return narratives, where action, praxis, and the body are embraced, but with a more intersectional sensibility.

Though Hemmings renders these narratives in more detail, they are still the "glosses" that feminists use to situate themselves in the present. Hemmings asserts that in all three cases, these are not just narratives of the feminist historical record, but stories that people tell to make sense of their feminist subjectivity. Throughout the book, she asks what it might take to tell these stories differently. In the final chapter, "Affective Subjects" (193), Hemmings turns to the feelings that resonate through these stories, engaging with how affect is mobilized through each. She advocates allowing space for affects, including supposedly negative ones like horror, to support genuine intersubjectivity in ways that decenter the subject of Western feminist narratives and offer more expansive ways of thinking about the feminist present and futures.

Interestingly, Hemmings strongly opposes generational approaches to feminist history. In the fourth chapter of *Why Stories Matter*, Hemmings writes with visceral contempt, enumerating the ways that framing Western feminism in terms of mothers and daughters is ageist, heterosexist, progressivist, linear, universalizing, and developmental. All of this makes it *impossible* (Hemmings' word) to grasp feminist friendship, desire, or the shifting and variegated histories that feminists might draw from once the matrophor is deployed (149). There is little room for flexibility in Hemmings' notion of mother-daughter feminist historiography, where daughters are made judgmental disappointments and mothers fade away as either inspirations or embarrassments.

And yet, though Hemmings disparages this framework for feminist historiography, in a recent interview about her work, she narrates her personal feminist consciousness with the following classic form:

> The women on my maternal side have been important for me: my mother and my grandmother. They are or have been strong, assertive women who moved across class boundaries. It's never simple with family though, is it? Those women have also reproduced deep investments in men and foregrounded 'bargaining' over liberation in ways I both admire but have been frustrated by. (Das 2024, 2)

When Hemmings narrates her own feminist history, she is drawn immediately to her mother and her mother's mother. She has inherited some of her feminism from these women, whom she identifies in the persistent duality of inspiration and embarrassment. As she admits, it *is* never simple with family, and Hemmings, like many of the mothers and daughters in this study, seems caught in the split between feeling that this familial history is both personally and politically significant, yet remaining unable to articulate what it means exactly.

It is probably unfair that I am citing a casual interview with Hemmings about her personal life to point out that she seems to contradict the book on wider feminist historiography she published nearly fifteen years before. For both Hemmings and others, there is clearly something different between a metaphor of feminist generations and their literal intergenerational relationships with their parents and grandparents. However, though we can parse the differences between the two, they always seem to come together. When feminists are asked about their origins this inevitable collapse between personal life history and feminist movement history reoccurs and it seems like an impulse that she be interrogated rather than

abandoned. Representing one's family requires the same glosses as recalling any history, and the same splits and defences take place. Much like how Astrid Henry (2004) describes herself as a dutiful daughter desiring to defend previous generations of feminists to make sense of her own feminism, daughters become defended subjects who make sense of their feminist selves by both protecting and disavowing the feminism (or lack thereof) of their mothers.

This fraught relationship between literal mothers and feminist matrophors draws my attention to ambivalence as a means of holding these tensions together. Coccia et al (2024), argue that ambivalence can offer a feminist approach for analyzing a complex world, writing: "We propose that ambivalence—when paired with the feminist imperative to consider that which has been devalued—offers a set of strategies for feminist scholars to study the complicated workings of systems of privilege and oppression." (780). Ambivalence counters an "either/or" approach. It offers a way to see affectively rich tensions and contradictions between people without having to categorize these relationships in a utilitarian way, as either feminist or unfeminist (786). While they note that taking a critical approach to binaries and dualities is a central feminist project, I find their emphasis on ambivalence to be especially useful for engaging with the competing attachments and dissatisfactions that exist between generations of feminists and mothers and daughters.

Ambivalence is not always generative, and sometimes insisting on ambivalence creates more apathy than insight (800). There are times when mothers have caused unambiguous harm to their daughters, and there are feminist ideologies that offer oppression instead of liberation. These are instances where clarity, including to the point of outright rejection, is more urgent than stopping to consider a fine overview of every complexity (See Kiernan Healy's "Fuck Nuance" (2017) for a breakdown of how demands for complexity and nuance become fetishized to the extent that they inhibit rather than advance usable sociological theory). However, my point is not to argue that mother-daughter relationships are too complex to make any kind of argument about their connections to feminism or narratives of feminist consciousness. Instead, ambivalence is a way to illuminate these connections in a way that engages with the lineages of familial and feminist history without having to discard or prioritize one over the other.

There is always a negotiation between past failures and future possibilities, and these abstract feelings are made legible in our relationships with others. When Heather narrates her feminist loss story, where the movement has moved from something eagerly embraced to barely

speakable, she is repeating one of these glosses where feminism moves in linear waves from active to dormant and back again. However, in Heather's case, this generational feminist story is both a matrophor, with all the anxieties and limitations that Hemmings critiques, and a literal generational dynamic between her and her daughter. What makes these narrations of family feminism interesting is not that they prove some causal relationship where feminist mothers raise feminist daughters. Instead, the ambivalences and tensions between identifying both with and against their mothers' feminisms are what make these narratives compelling.

Some Recent Stories

In light of the generational differences at home and in the broader public, I offer my own gloss on some of the dominant narratives about feminism that were circulating as the daughter cohort of this study began to develop their feminist politics. As Hemmings (2011) points out, the concept of "waves" of feminist action has long been critiqued for its white- and Western-centrism, as well as the tendency to imply that there have been prolonged periods of feminist inactivity. Due to these limitations, many feminists advise against this approach to conceptualizing feminist history. In her own history of the radical women's movement, Whittier (1995) prefers the language of localized "micro-cohorts" to describe these generational differences and conflicts, rather than the more linear image of major waves. In the preface to *Black Girlhood Celebration,* Ruth Nicole Brown points out that a wave understanding of history particularly marginalizes Black feminist history in ways that doubly marginalize Black girls (2009, ix). However, other scholars like Chamberlin and Evans (2015) have noted that people invoke the wave metaphor so commonly that it's better always to consider additional approaches and feminist histories from Black, Indigenous, queer, and other feminist communities rather than discard the wave approach entirely and seek out a new universalizing metaphor (396). In her history of Hip-Hop Feminism, Whitney Peoples (2008) uses the terms "second-wave" and "third-wave" to describe generational differences between Black American women but further nuances these distinctions by integrating relationships between different "themes" of Black feminist focus, such as Hip-Hop Feminism. While some kind of feminist is always enacting some kind of feminism at a given point, this notion of waves remains powerful, and there is a persistent sense that political moments ebb and flow.

Young people's activist and feminist participation is also rendered through the same "glosses" that Hemmings (2011) describes, where adults imagine young people as apathetic, a heroic new generation, or returning to the activist energy and tactics of previous generations. In mainstream media throughout the 2010s and early 2020s, these glosses about the emerging generation of activists were especially prominent. As I noted in Chapter Four, many Western scholars of youth activism spent the early 2000s arguing against the stereotype that young people in regions like North America and Europe were politically disengaged and apathetic (Keller 2015; O'Toole et al. 2003; Schuster 2013; Kim and Ringrose 2018; Kirshner 2015; Clay 2012; Taft 2011; Pason et al. 2010). A common theme in these scholars' work was the assertion that young people were politically involved but developing their thinking and communities in spaces like the internet that were out of reach for many adults (Harris 2001; 2008; Keller and Ryan 2018). Contemporary youth politics were not being taken seriously because they were deploying new technologies and not perfectly replicating the politics of past generations. Within this milieu, concurrent conversations took place about young people's feminisms specifically and whether young people had moved away from feminism or were enacting it in some new form.

Many girls' studies scholars at the time turned their attention toward 'postfeminism' and the gendered conditions for the girls and young women of the Twenty-First Century in the West who inherited both feminist successes and persistent patriarchal inequality. These girls belonged to a generation that was uncertain about the excessiveness of insisting on feminism after their mothers' generation had achieved significant gains, often responding to instances of sexism with "I'm not a feminist, but…" (Baumgardner et al. 2015; Gilbert 2025; Valenti 2014). Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) argues that capitalist co-optation has diluted feminism into a consumer identity and repackaged traditionally gendered and subordinate behaviours, such as getting married or leaving the workforce to raise children, as empowered personal choices with no connection to longstanding systems of power. Anita Harris offers a similar analysis in *Future Girl* (2004), noting that girls, in particular, are positioned as ideal neoliberal subjects. Employers, advertisers, and even entities like the United States military use feminist language of choice and empowerment to celebrate girls' newfound economic opportunities while still making unequal demands of their labour, reproductive decisions, and appearance. Others, like Catherine Rottenberg (2017), and Emily Bent (2013), also argued that the "invest in girls" climate adopted by NGOs use the language of uplifting girls in the Global

South but instead "...functions to constrain girls' political subjectivity and agency – prompting girls in the Global North to maintain colonialist power structures and divides, and to advocate for other girls' rights and concerns, as different from their own." (Bent 2013, 4–5).

In *Backlash* (1992), Susan Faludi notes that this is an ongoing cycle where gains for women's status and autonomy encounter swift opposition. Women are either subtly or violently coerced into 'choosing' to retreat from feminist legal and cultural victories, and this can include the dynamics that Harris (2004) describes, where employers frame precarious, underpaid labour as feminist empowerment. In fact, Faludi notes that even when feminism seems to have significant momentum, there are always simultaneous declarations that feminism is victorious, dead, or excessive as a way to undermine its popularity or depoliticize its aims. In this way, postfeminism is not just a passive decline in feminism's appeal, but an insidious form of antifeminism.

In the 2010s, feminism appeared to be regaining mainstream popularity as celebrity figures like Beyoncé and Emma Watson openly adopted the label (Bent 2020; Keller and Ringrose 2015; Rottenberg 2017). Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist* (2014), a collection of essays about being a feminist while enjoying life's many unfeminist pleasures, served as a kind of relatable reintroduction to feminism for people who felt the movement offered more constraining rules than liberation (Baumgardner et al. 2015). Girls' studies scholars argued that girls had always participated as "hidden feminists," enacting "micro-feminisms" in their bedrooms and online communities, and they were beginning to attract more notice as the internet became more ubiquitous (Harris 2001; Keller 2015; 2012; Keller and Ryan 2018).

Catherine Rottenberg (2017) argues that the decade of the 2010s represented a moment where "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). Emily Bent (2020) expands on Rottenberg's point directly by arguing that the election of Donald Trump sparked a resurgence of feminism not just as a personal brand identity, but a collective movement that should be revisited and reinvigorated (796). The 2010s marked an era when several feminist scholars noted that youth-focused outlets, such as *Teen Vogue,* were increasingly highlighting social justice topics and featuring young feminist activists and influencers (Coulter and Moruzi 2022; Crookston and Klonowski 2021; Keller 2020).

The #MeToo movement against sexual harassment and assault also began to gain significant momentum around 2017. It seemed to signal that the internet could be an effective tool for collective feminist organizing. Though the phrase was initially created by activist Tarana Burke on MySpace in 2006, the hashtag began to spread internationally in 2017 when several high-profile celebrity women disclosed that they were survivors of sexual assault (Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019). This encouraged other women to share their own experiences to not only demonstrate how widespread sexual harassment and assault are but also try to seek justice for instances of sexual violence that are rarely taken seriously by formal legal systems (Chu 2019; Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019). After going viral, the movement did result in some high-profile sexual harassers and abusers facing both social and legal consequences for their actions.

However, even though feminism was seemingly back to mainstream popularity, neoliberal iterations of feminism (often disparaged as the corporate careerism of "girlbossing") were not so easily dispensed with. Andi Zeisler continued many of McRobbie's (2009) arguments about feminist loss and co-optation in *We Were Feminists Once* (2016), where she laments how thoroughly capitalism has embraced a feminist aesthetic to sell consumer products and position women's liberation as a commodity for individuals to purchase and not a collective movement to transform society. As Zeisler argues, just because feminism is trendy, a moment of widespread acceptance does not challenge the status quo. Instead, it aims to depoliticize the movement into something that can safely coexist with inequality.

The kinds of feminisms that reach mainstream popularity are not just aligned with capitalism, but also with white supremacy. Books like Ruby Hamad's *White tears brown scars: how white feminism betrays women of color* (2020), Mikki Kendall's *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot* (2021), Koa Beck's *White Feminism* (2021), and Rafia Zakaria's *Against white feminism* (2021), emerged around the time of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and many became New York Times Bestsellers. These books point out how white feminism's central, and ostensibly essentialist, emphasis on gendered oppression obscures how white women mobilize their whiteness and, in places like North America, their status as settlers, to uphold white supremacy and oppress women of colour. These recent texts draw on longstanding criticisms offered by feminists of colour, such as Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) and the members of the Combahee River Collective (1986). Still, these popular books represent

the most recent criticisms of white feminism in an era when terms like intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; 2010) and misogynoir (Bailey 2021) have entered mainstream use.

Again, while criticisms of feminism have always existed and are rarely new to the mother cohort, critiques of feminism's limitations, particularly around race and transness, emerged as more immediate to the daughters in this study. These criticisms speak to a specific context of urgently addressing anti-Blackness and other forms of racism in wider social justice movements. Many of the daughters cited the 2020 murder of George Floyd and ensuing Black Lives Matter protests as a radicalizing moment for them and their first experience witnessing a mass mobilization of people for racial justice. My point in re-litigating the popular feminist discourses of the 2010s and 20s is to show that the daughter cohort of this study, thanks in large part to the internet and their place in the midst of yet another rise and backlash against feminism is that they are inundated with the constant and contradicting messages that when it comes to women's social, economic, and cultural positions. They have witnessed a world where feminism is the problem, the solution, and the problematic solution. It needs to be both returned to some original form and restarted as something new and improved. These contradicting histories and affects create an ambivalent relationship to feminism, where it is something that should be embraced but remains stubbornly inadequate.

Girls' Feminisms and Feminist Identity

With this persistent cycle, I was unsure of what kind of feminist moment I was entering when I began my fieldwork. Though I put out a call for feminist young people, I knew that feminism means very different things to different people, and feminists often clash over the right way to be a feminist or enact feminism, so I was cautious about how to bring up feminism in the interviews. "What is feminism?" and "What do feminists want?" are the kinds of impossible questions that feel more like traps or tests than good-faith topics of conversation. I worried that asking "what is feminism?" or "are you a feminist?" too abruptly or too early in an interview would be interpreted as me testing the participants' eligibility for the study or judging their response. Because these demands to explain feminism often feel accusatory, I attempted to bring feminism into the interviews by asking what I felt was a low-stakes question about what the term itself evoked. I would usually use some variation of the following: "Without really thinking too

hard, if I just say 'feminism' or 'feminist,' what are some of the first things that pop into your head?"

Though this is a vague question that inevitably yielded vague answers, the immediate affective associations, where feminism evoked not just goals, but also certain subjects, still proved insightful. For example, Amy, a university student, Nicole, a grade schooler, and Suzanna, a high school senior, all gave similar answers despite their varied ages:

> **Amy (daughter)** 13:13
> A lot of very strong, independent women. A lot of people fighting for equal rights.
> (Amy Solo Interview)

> **Nicole (daughter)** 12:52
> Well, women's rights and like, equality, and I guess like, like, what's it called? Protesting, like, in different ways, like, you can use social media or art or poetry. So like different ways of protesting for feminism, like equality or women's rights
> (Nicole Solo Interview)

> **Suzanna (daughter)** 22:39
> I'm gonna use this word a lot, but power? Um, power is such a strong word for it.
> (Suzanna Solo Interview)

These three immediately associated feminism with strength, power, and fighting for rights. They conjure an image of strong women as feminist subjects who combine their individual strengths to fight for their rights. The image of what or who these women are fighting against does not immediately appear, but feminism is still strongly associated with fighting.

For the daughter cohort, being a feminist was a positive quality, and they all readily identified as feminists and with the feminist movement. However, despite these initial positive associations with strength and equal rights, the daughter cohort I interviewed still lived in a contradictory context where feminism spoke to their lived experiences and excluded them, was encouraged by the adults in their lives, but was a source of parental worry or disagreement, and could be both easily discussed with friends and something that could leave you ostracized from your peers. 20-year-old Brett, who was thrust into the spotlight for her sex education activism around age sixteen, pointed out that only a few years earlier, being a feminist was not going to win you any friends, let alone celebratory news stories:

> **Brett (daughter)** 04:03
> …When I was like, starting in high school as a teenager, this sort of attitude around activism or like feminism was very different than it is now even in just like, a couple years. It's weird how it can change, but I was definitely very unpopular, I guess, because I mean, part of it was probably because I was weird [laughs]. I also don't want to discount that. But it was definitely not cool to be a feminist. When I was like, 14, and people were really mean to me about it. (Brett Solo Interview)

Alexis and Ellie, who are only a couple of years younger than Brett, both noted that they had been called 'feminazis' and grew up regularly hearing the term thrown at anyone who would point out misogyny. Girls feel that the sexism they encounter is wrong, and feminism affirms this feeling and presents the possibility of a world where this inequality no longer exists. However, they continue to experience wildly different reactions to feminism, not just from other people, but in fleeting, constantly cycling eras where feminism rises and falls in popularity. As Brett puts it, this inconsistency feels weird.

This weird and inconsistent reaction to feminism often confused and frustrated the daughters because sexism and misogyny were remarkably consistent in their lives. They all noted that they had experienced and witnessed sexism and understood it as a persistent problem that needed to be solved. When I asked about gendered issues, they brought up equal pay, access to menstrual products, sex–and particularly consent–education, and workplace harassment. Many of the daughters disclosed that they often received unwelcome comments about their appearance, felt that others made assumptions about them based on how they dressed, and felt exasperated by the continual pressure to adhere to unattainable beauty standards. While the daughter cohort did not always identify these particular issues as their top political or activist priorities, they were part of the general exhaustion of navigating the world as a girl.

The daughter cohort was especially quick to identify their schools and the internet as places where they regularly encountered sexism, if not outright harassment and even stalking. Almost all of the daughters mentioned gendered violence, whether it was homophobia, transphobia, or sexual assault, as a significant social issue that caused them considerable concern. In their solo interviews, Sam, Amy, Alexis, and Ellie all noted that sexual violence was a persistent issue in their schools that already felt tiring to combat. They felt that things had probably improved from the experiences of previous generations, and were able to express some optimism about a more

enlightened future with less sexual violence. Still, they did not have high hopes for their immediate conditions.

For the daughter cohort, patriarchy is not a problem that has no name, but it is a problem that will not go away. In their lifetimes, feminism existed in a perpetual tension of being both the obvious solution to an obvious problem and something that other people did not (or would not) take seriously. The daughters interviewed in this study did not feel that feminism had failed, but saw a lot of unfinished business in their path. They were not ready to give up on feminism or gender liberation as possibilities, but they were already exhausted by the struggle. For example, when I asked Heather's daughter Danielle what it felt like to be a feminist in 2022, she gave a fairly bleak reply:

> **Danielle (daughter)** 12:44
> It feels tiring, tiring. I'm gonna like say like a metaphor: It feels like you're going up stairs but you're going to nowhere. It's sad to say that, but now, the abortion laws have been taken back and we're going so far back. And it's like, you're going up the stairs, you can see where you end, but you just keep going in circles and circles and circles…You feel powerful at the beginning. But then after all this stuff, you just feel tired and you don't know what to do anymore. (Danielle solo Interview)

Dani's vision of feminist work offers a harrowing sense of eternal struggle for a 14-year-old. She describes coming to consciousness as something that initially feels powerful, but dwindles as the same struggles repeat and, as is the case with *Roe v Wade*, feminists lose ground. Dani has only been on this staircase for a little more than a decade, and yet she already feels the endless spiral of progress and loss. Dani's sense of exhaustion does not just indicate the material burdens of facing oppressive systems. As she often remarked in her interview, she was not just tired for her own sake but for women in general who had been fighting against inequality for generations. Something like the repeal of *Roe v Wade* is a blow against both her future and her past by dismantling the work of the people who came before her. The persistent affect of exhaustion was not just felt by the daughters because of their own experiences, but because of the weight of the history they inherited.

Inheriting Feminism

In previous chapters, I noted that the daughters were often sensitive to the limitations of their position when they organized with people outside their immediate communities. They did not want to speak over people who are more marginalized than they are, or position themselves

as leaders in struggles that they did not directly experience. However, because most of them identified as girls and experienced sexism directly, they felt that they could authoritatively understand misogyny and work to combat it. They did not think that feminism was an identity to be earned, or a movement outside their lived experience that they could not come to understand, but a readily available framework they could embrace.

This enthusiastic adoption of a feminist identity is what Henry (2003; 2004) articulates in her work on intergenerational relationships between feminists when she describes later generations as taking a "birthright" approach to feminism. The young people Henry describes (who are now closer in age to the mothers in this study than the daughters) grew up during or soon after the height of Second Wave feminism and had never known a world without feminism or feminists. While this did not make feminism easy to enact, past precedents did create conditions in which feminism can be perceived as something that is continued rather than begun anew.

While the daughter cohort was facing oppression directly, and it often came in unprecedented forms like online harassment, or the particularities of COVID-19 pandemic conditions, they were well aware that deeper systemic issues like racism and misogyny are not new. While there were generational differences between the mothers and daughters in this study, the girls who took up feminist activism were entering into the long-standing feminist struggle for gender equality. They experienced many of the same oppressive systems as their mothers, and their leadership was supported by intergenerational solidarity from their mothers and mother figures.

However, it is also worth noting, as I mentioned earlier, that some of the white participants like Stea and Alexis, had only recently been radicalized to anti-racism. Though they had been raised to understand that racism was wrong, it was not until the Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020 that that were truly able to grasp the severity and tenacity of anti-Black racism. This is very different from their understanding of sexism which was both noticed and directly explained to them early in their lives. Unlike their whiteness which allowed them to move through the world without an intimate understanding of racial domination, the did not have the same cache of gender privilege in a patriarchal system.

Developing feminist consciousness requires recognizing deep and interconnected systems of inequality and involves affective inheritances that come with the emotional negotiation

between the unfinished work of the past and an uncertain future. As Ahmed (2004) points out, our emotions are not a private matter but deeply social and relational (117). Emotions are inherited along with the work of combating sexism, and the affective resonance of something like feminism indicates a present history (126) that remains alive in the present. Dani engages with these present histories directly when she describes an endless staircase that not only stretches beyond the horizon but that her predecessors had already built by the time she arrived.

While Ahmed's conceptualization of present histories as an affective resonance that can move through any space or body is still helpful for understanding the affective inheritances of feminism, Eve Tuck offers something a little more concrete in "Breaking up with Deleuze" (2010). Tuck describes how a feeling like desire is not just an inherited emotion, but part of a chain of knowledge transmission:

> This wisdom is assembled not just across a lifetime, but across generations, so that my desire is linked, rhizomatically, to my past and my future. It is in the way I can tell my grandmother's stories with as much fullness as I tell my own, a practice among many first peoples. I believe that our desire has expertise. In fact, I believe desire constitutes our expertise. (645-646)

Tuck is describing a materialist approach to understanding ongoing colonial violence, and this is not a perfect analogue for the transmission and inheritance of feminism in general, particularly among those who have not experienced the same kinds of generational violence as Indigenous peoples. However, she still offers a sense of transmission where familial links form a vital chain of citation for understanding and enacting resistance. These are broader lessons passed down through history, but they become legible through relationships with family members, which is why narratives of personal feminist consciousness are inextricably linked to narratives of family.

The topic of this research almost certainly primed participants to think about their feminist origins in familial terms. One of the mothers, Eleanor, gestured toward this in her solo interview, answering my 'first encounters with feminism' question with "I mean, sort of speaking about like mothers and daughters. So, I encountered feminism the first time through my own mother and my aunt." (Eleanor solo interview 15:14). The interviewees already knew that this study was exploring the connections between activist participation and mother daughter relationships and were therefore primed to fit things into this theme. Still, both the mother and daughter cohort narrated their stories of their first exposure to feminism by referencing their mothers whether I asked them directly or not.

I argued in the last chapter that mothers and daughters discuss politics together, and that memories of girlhood are integral to narratives of adult feminist consciousness. These present memories remind us that adults have not just left childhood behind; just as the girl activist leaders of today do not emerge from nowhere, the girls of yesterday do not simply give up their political participation once they become adults. The mothers in this study often returned to their own girlhoods and girlhood feelings when they spoke about their daughters. As they described their daughters, they almost always returned to describing their own mothers and how they were and continue to be daughters to their mothers. Both cohorts described how their mothers, for better or for worse, influenced their feminist politics and identity. When I asked them about their first exposure to feminism, their mothers appeared so consistently that it was difficult to find significant differences between the ways that each cohort told their feminist origin stories.

For example, two of the daughters, Buffy and Brett, describe their mothers, and in Buffy's case, both her parents, as feminists:

> **Brett (daughter)** 05:17
> Yeah, that was at home. My mother is a militant feminist. I'm trying to remember the first time I like encountered feminism. Um, I don't know, like, my whole life. I think I, there's never a time when I wasn't encountering feminism. (Brett Solo Interview)

> **Buffy (daughter)** 20:08
> …my mom's really amazing. Both my parents have done a lot to shape, just the way I view people in general. And, you know, both of my parents like their upbringings, my mom more so than my dad, but where they were, you know, very different, like, politically. But they still got here and my parents are both feminists. And it feels like there is some hope there [laughs] at least I think so (Buffy Solo Interview)

Both grew up in a context where feminism was readily available, and both offer a flattering account of growing up in feminist families. Neither had known a life without feminist role models, and they had both embraced feminist identities and politics. Buffy even notes that her parents had very different political upbringings but came together as feminist parents, and this gives her hope for the future.

The mother cohort offered similar stories, and while some, like Claire, have different cultural touchpoints than their daughters, they still sound remarkably like them when they describe their own feminist mothers:

Claire (mother) 22:42
I guess 1975 was a big event in Toronto, and "Why Not?" was the slogan for the UN International Women's Year of 1975. And I very clearly remember all the buttons and posters and the parade that my mom took me to. So I don't think I would have thought of that before. I would have been like 11 in 1975. But my mom had books like *The Lace Ghetto*, like around the house, so she would have had books and like *Our Bodies Ourselves* that had those words in them that I would have seen already. That I might not have really thought about that so much. (Claire solo interview)

Elise (mother) 09:52
…I grew up in a family where my mum was a social worker and worked for mental health, worked for health promotion, addictions and mental health. So this actually relates to your study and was in and would identify herself as a feminist so then I do think that I always grew up with that. And so that's where my interest in mental health came about. And also personal and family experience with it just lived experience and knowing family members. So that's where my passion for that has come about. (Elise solo interview)

Despite growing up decades earlier, like Buffy and Brett, Claire and Elise describe upbringings where feminism was a foregone conclusion. They also learned feminism at home from their mothers, and this is a cycle they continued with their own daughters. Claire notes that her mother was directly involved in the women's movement, and she often tagged along when her mother went to meetings or rallies. Elise offers a slightly different account, and one that was more common among the mother cohort. Elise did not describe her mother as directly involved in political activities, but notes that she identified as a feminist. Her work as a social worker exemplified this feminist perspective, where she devoted her life to helping people. This blend of feminist identity and service is what Elise came to adopt for herself.

Where the mothers and daughters tended to deviate in their familial narratives was the mother cohorts' tendency to emphasize their mothers and other female family members as strong women. While the daughters were more inclined to frame their mothers as feminists and, therefore, explicitly political, the mother cohort was more inclined to naturalize feminism as an extension of their mothers' strength and integrity. For them, feminism was not radical, but instead nearly innate to women who had to navigate difficult circumstances, such as motherhood. Their mothers and other female family members were feminist insofar as they modelled personal resilience for their younger family members.

Even those who did not explicitly discuss their mothers as feminists still emphasized their mothers and other female family members as strong women. Lizette, a retired Catholic school principal, was not particularly interested in discussing feminism with me and did not seem to have a strong attachment to the term for herself. However, at the end of her solo interview, when I asked if there was anything else she wanted to add, Lizette wanted to emphasize the strong women in her family:

> **Lizette (mother)** 46:28
> No, no, I think I'm just, I think it's helpful to come from a family of strong women. And I and I think that sort of runs in her blood, her feeling that her, her mom and her grandparents, all certainly professionally, but even personally, we're not afraid to stand up for what we believe in, and what our expectations are, and, you know, set a goal and, and, and, you know, work towards it. So that's, that's something that I'm, I feel like has influenced her to be able to be the, you know, the strong person that she is. (Lizette Solo Interview)

The qualities Lizette describes in her mother and grandmother, like standing up for what they believe, could indeed be described as feminist. Still, Lizette prefers to position them as something innate rather than a political philosophy. The "her" Lizette refers to is her daughter Amy, and her use of "runs in her blood" offers the most explicitly generational (in fact, genealogical) reading of her activist daughter than the other mothers provide. Lizette positions herself as both the recipient and conduit of this strength, and she understands this literal family inheritance as more natural than political: This is just what women are and do.

Another mother, Janet, was more inclined to call herself a feminist, but also positioned this as a natural quality more than a political movement. In both her solo and pair interviews, Janet noted that she had only recently gained the confidence to take more public political actions, such as attending protests and marches, due to her eldest daughter, Suzanna. Janet has previously associated such things with anxiety-inducing affects like anger and hostility, and this made her timid to participate. As a result, she tended to elide the negative associations she had around politics by emphasizing how pro-social personal qualities like standing up for equality and caring for others should be encouraged without the polarizing interference of labels:

> **Janet (mother)** 44:10
> I don't, I wouldn't, I wouldn't even put a label to it. I just think that as human beings, that's what we should do. That's I was raised around strong parents, especially strong women because it was mostly women who did those things for each other…I think that's what we're supposed to be doing as human beings. I don't think it should be ever be labelled. I think that it should just be natural. (Janet Solo Interview)

Janet does not quite want to embrace the radical expectations and affects of feminism, and even downplays any gendered specificity. Women might be doing more of the care work that Janet values, but this is something all human beings should be encouraged to do.

This naturalization process, where feminism is just another word for a strong woman, is the kind of essentialism that Hemmings (2011) directly critiques. The notion that feminism is passively inherited or exists as a survival strategy for the status quo feels antithetical to liberatory collective action, even though interviewees tell these stories of strong women with great affection. It is here that ambivalence becomes a helpful way to engage with the ways participants both accepted and repeated the notion that feminism is something they inherited, as well as their critiques and dissatisfaction with the tools previous generations had to offer.

Who Gets to Inherit Feminism? (And Who Doesn't Want Their Inheritance?)

Returning to ambivalence, though the daughters and mothers almost uniformly *started* their narratives of feminist consciousness with admiring stories of their mothers and other female family members, their narratives did not stop there. Their stories of grateful inheritances and easily accessible feminism were soon followed by more complex narratives about the difficulties that came with trying to live as feminist mothers and daughters. Earlier, I quoted Brett as she described how she had never known a life without feminism or her mother's feminist influence. Though she both begins and ends her description of her early feminist exposure by crediting her mother as a positive influence, there is still a moment where she asserts that her feminism is different from her mother's:

> **Brett (daughter)** 05:17
> Yeah, that was at home. My mother is a militant feminist. She, I'm trying to remember the first time I like encountered feminism. Um, I don't know, like, my whole life. I think I, there's never a time when I wasn't encountering feminism. And like, as I as I grew up my, like, perspectives on feminism and, and sort of the way that I engaged with it definitely, like, clashed with my mother's a little, you know, like,

> just like generationally and, and stuff like that. But I've always been extremely a feminist. And I've always been familiar with it. (Brett Solo Interview)

Brett easily moves past this vague clash with her mother's feminism, but it still emerges to disrupt any notion of a seamless feminist inheritance. Both mothers and daughters wanted some distinction between themselves and the other side of their dyad. They did not want to come across as completely enmeshed with their feminist family members. This process of distinction required discerning where they would continue the feminist work of previous generations and where they needed to do something different. Not all feminism is worth inheriting, and many mothers and daughters explained that, despite their feminist identities and respect for some of their feminist predecessors, there were still dynamics that they did not want to repeat or felt they could not practically actualize.

For example, both Heather (Heather Solo Interview 22:35) and Jessica (Jessica, Daisy, Nicole Family Interview 41:19) expressed their struggles with the tensions of feminist parenting. Both wanted their daughters to experience the confidence and independence to go where they pleased, do as they wished, and wear whatever they wanted. However, both knew that such a liberated approach is not safe for young girls. Heather wanted Danielle to be able to ride her bike around the city and do things without her mother's constant supervision, but she understood that this kind of freedom was simply unsafe for a young teenage girl.

Jessica and her daughter Daisy offered an especially striking example of this. Jessica admitted that as her daughters approached puberty, she was experiencing serious feminist tensions between wanting her daughters to have the freedom to go and do as they please and enjoy their bodies and feeling a deep fear for their safety. As she explained her struggle to reconcile liberty and safety for her children, her daughter Daisy chimed in to recall that her mother had oncw bought her a pair of shorts and then later destroyed them:

> **Jessica (mother)** 41:19
> …I remember when Daisy started to develop, and it literally happened overnight, where she had this huge growth spurt, she started getting a bit fuller, and just like changing her body. And she wanted to wear like, you know, these little crop tops and little shorts…and I started to like, think about that relationship, especially in the Caribbean culture, where it used to be or I don't know if it still is, but there's this idea that once a girl reaches the age of puberty, it's like, the relationship that she has, with everyone just changes. Her mother doesn't look at her as she's just a child, she loses

that status completely. And now her body is like a battleground. I felt like but I can't let her go out like this, because- she's like patting me telling me to stop [laughs]. I can't let her go out like this because of other people, right? Because of, so it's like this, I feel like even in terms of feminism for Black girls in particular. It's complex. It's not a straightforward, "oh wear whatever you want and do whatever you want" because of how Black girls are seen and Indigenous girls as well, of how their sexualized so early. But–

Daisy (daughter) 43:27
I remember once, I was on the steps, and my laundry, came in and I had my, my jean shorts,

Jessica (mother) 43:35
[laughs]

Daisy (daughter) 43:35
and you took them and you cut them [laughs] right in the middle.

Jessica (mother) 43:43
I found the, the zipper that I saved, from, from that…It was the end of the shorts [laughs] because it was like a really, I bought them and that's the thing. I think girls should be able to dress like that and wear little shorts..it's fostering this love of their body and appreciation and also noticing and being connected to their body, because I think some girls go through life where they disconnect from the body as a way to protect themselves. So I went through that. There's the whole cognitive dissonance [laughs] where it's like, I know this to be true, I believe this, but when it comes down to actually what I do, it's sometimes very counter to that. So I don't, I don't know [laughs]. (Jessica, Daisy, Nicole Family Interview)

In this exchange, Jessica directly articulates the splits she experiences between her feminist beliefs and her responsibilities as a mother, describing this as 'cognitive dissonance.' She does not want her daughters to withdraw and disconnect from their bodies out of fear or shame, so she buys Daisy the shorts she wants in an attempt to prevent this self-policing. Then, when she is handling the shorts later, she realizes that this desire for her daughters' self-image is not practical in an unsafe world. In that moment, she realizes that she cannot resolve the dangers threatening her daughter, so she acts against her feminist ideals to prioritize Daisy's immediate safety.

Jessica describes how Black girls' bodies become "battle grounds" where they are not just preyed on by men, but are alienated from their mothers, who begin to see them as competition. She does not just fear men's violence, but understands that as her daughters age, the

patriarchal dynamics that encourage women to be hostile and oppressive with one another will not spare her and her daughters just because they are mother and daughters. When Jessica responds to the violence of misogynoir with her own violence against the shorts, this battleground imagery is made literal through a physical act of destruction.

Jessica ends the story of the shorts on an ambivalent note when, after giving a very astute analysis of how the world mistreats girls of colour and the ironic consequences that come from encouraging them to dress and act for their safety, she concludes with "I don't know." Despite her detailed understanding of all systems and dynamics that confine her and her daughters, she is still left without any real action that she can take. Later, Jessica described how she had torn out some explicit pages from one of her teenage son's graphic novels (Jessica, Daisy, Nicole Family Interview 1:03:55). The book, like the shorts, was another object that could be changed or defeated, unlike the seemingly immovable world.

While Jessica clearly expresses her anxious feelings, the full affective meaning of this event for Daisy is not clear from just one interview. Daisy interjects to tell the story as a funny anecdote, and she only brought up the shorts because she understood that their destruction was an example of the fear her mother feels about a world where girls of colour are sexualized. At the same time, Daisy patted her mother's leg during this discussion to get her to stop. It is unclear whether this was because Daisy had heard all this before and found it boring, was annoyed that her mother would restrict her clothing choices despite her interest in fashion, or felt embarrassed that her body and its place in the world were being analyzed in front of a stranger. Daisy seems to understand why her mother would want to protect her, but it is impossible to predict if this memory will come to represent her mother's love for her or leave her feeling resentful that her mother would ruin her things in an attempt to protect her.

As the mothers and daughters discussed their mothers' feminism further, more ambivalence emerged, despite their initially admiring stories. Complex stories like the one between Daisy and Jessica reveal these tensions around what is inherited and what we should choose to pass on. As the mothers and daughters grappled with the question of what they should take away from their feminist family members, they often confronted the issue of who actually embodies feminist ideals. While many of the daughters and mothers pointed to familial examples of female strength to explain their feminist consciousness, expecting women to be strong is a patriarchal demand. These narratives might lend to what Hemmings critiques about mother-

daughter feminism as something that evokes essentialist images of self-sacrificing mothers who live for their children and not themselves. There was often a tension between admiring the resilience of the strong women in their families while recognizing that feminist liberation would alleviate the expectations that women should always be strong, self-sacrificing, and always labouring. While the white participants tended to leave the strength imperative as an unquestioned positive, Jessica felt very different about this lineage of strong women.

Black feminists have long critiqued the archetypes of the "Black Superwoman" or "Strong Black Woman" as stereotypes that expect Black women to be innately strong, self-sacrificing, savvy, and emotionally invulnerable (Wallace 1999). Though these assumptions about Black women's resilience might seem positive, even valorizing, Black women argue that these expectations create immense pressure on them to endure stress and trauma on their own without seeking support. Instead of receiving systemic solutions to the problems of racism, misogyny, and class inequality that require Black women to be strong to survive, their survival is turned into a matter of individual resilience. Others might perceive these demands for strength as inspiring, but they leave Black women with increased rates of stress-related health disparities (Bentley-Edwards and Adams 2024; Erving et al. 2025).

After the death of her husband, Jessica put intense pressure on herself to not only work to provide for her four children, but also be an involved parent who home-cooked every meal and attended every extracurricular. This demanding lifestyle continued until Jessica's doctor told her that all this over-extending was literally killing her, and she would not be able to continue with this constant labour both inside and outside her home. In the wake of this realization, Jessica organized a group of Black women, many of whom were the mothers of young children, with the direct aim of resisting the pressure on Black women to be 'superwomen' who are obligated to do it all.

When Jessica described her work with the group, she discussed her mother, who, despite sounding much like the inspiring women the other participants describe, Jessica described as unfairly exhausted:

> **Jessica (mother)** 16:51
> …I think that's where I'm at with the women in the group is like, trying to bring women into the group who I know need it. But they're still attached to this productivity mentality. Like my mom, for example, was supposed to be retired a year ago. And she's like, "Well, what am I going to do?" like, she just has an attachment to labour. She's constantly working, or cleaning, or like, she's never just chilling, she'll only chill,

> if I go downstairs, and I sit with her, and then we chat. If I'm not doing that with her, she's working. So it's very hard for women, for Black women to really embody that, because we feel like the way we earn our place in society is by being the worker bees, actually not the worker bees. It's by being the, the mules, right? (Jessica Solo Interview)

Jessica recognizes that her mother's strength is not an inspiring characteristic, but rather a survival mechanism that prevents her from resting and taking care of herself. Black women are expected to be strong, so other people can exploit their labour and their needs can go unmet. This exploitation is why Jessica makes a pointed shift in her example from collectivist worker bees who labour as equals to mules who are driven to serve someone else. All women are expected to do uncompensated labour under patriarchy, but this particular context of racial exploitation is likely why Jessica comes to a critique of women's inspiring strength that her white contemporaries do not venture to explore.

Jessica appreciates that her mother works hard, but recognizes that her attachment to labour is harmful and has lived that harm herself. Because of this, she did not want her daughters to have to be strong and very actively tried to instill the importance of rest and self-care in Daisy and Nicole:

> **Jessica (mother)** 21:04
> Oh, yeah [laughs]. More so my mom, my daughters know how to access a life of ease [laughs]. They are, like, they're experts at it, because their society, their upbringing is different. And they're, they're raised in a very different environment and community. (Jessica Solo Interview)

Her daughters had a different life from her and her mother because she had created an environment where a different life was possible. In fact, her daughters live a life so different from her mother's that she can't help but laugh. This successful change in values for her daughters' lives is again an interesting ambivalence for Jessica. Though she often felt powerless to prevent harm from coming to her children and had to prioritize their safety, she was still successful in transmitting many of her feminist messages to them. Her Black feminist commitments provided her with both insight and action when it came to organizing with other Black women to prioritize rest, and she had effectively cultivated this with her daughters. Although she found it difficult to impart the same idea to her mother, the slow work of convincing her to rest did not carry the same anxiety as it did when trying to balance keeping her

daughters safe and allowing them to express themselves. Some transformations were possible while others seemed to remain out of reach.

Complex feminist inheritances, where some things were out of reach or unable to fit, did not just resonate with Jessica. Notably, as some other participants point out, finding a place within feminism is also complicated for trans and nonbinary people. Stea, the only daughter who did not identify as a girl, was also the only daughter to express an uneasy relationship with feminism.

As I noted earlier, the other daughters took up feminism easily and felt that their gender gave them an inherent right to feminism when a label like activist felt like it took more to earn. The close association, if not collapse, between feminism and strong women for the majority of participants indicates that feminism has not only become understood as an identity but an identity *for women*. In fact, feminism was often so thoroughly understood to be women's work that several participants felt that men had been overlooked and excluded to such an extent that now was the time to invite them into the movement. This idea that feminism was something all women are entitled to take up both created a low barrier to entry for the girl participants and proved problematic for Stea who felt they didn't really fit in as a non-binary person.

Stea saw the value of feminism and considered themselves to be a feminist who believed in the goals of gender equality and gender justice. However, as a non-binary person, they felt not only alienated by the contingent of feminists who devote their politics to bitter transphobia but also uncomfortable with the personal identity implications that seem to come with calling oneself a feminist. For Stea, feminism was so tied to a particular embodied experience of gender discrimination that it was tantamount to identifying as a woman:

> **Stea (daughter)** 26:12
> …feminism was very much an entry point for me, for activism. And I continue to support and research and advocate within feminism and for feminism with specifically LGBTQ people, or people who don't necessarily identify as women, but still are affected by misogyny and sexism. Um, but it's still kind of like, identifying as a feminist is iffy with me, because it's associated with negative things at this point, which is very unfortunate, and not actually because of feminism, but because of people in positions of privilege who misuse it. And so, um, well I identify myself as a feminist and I do things that feminists do. It's a term that I assume is associated with me anyway [laughs]. (Stea Solo Interview)

Stea identified feminism as their entry point into wider political participation, but this was now an uneasy relationship. They continued to support feminism, but now described it as a movement they were outside. Even though they identify this exclusionary kind of feminism as a *misuse* of a movement that should be able to embrace and centre trans people, this contingent of feminists has still pushed Stea to an outer edge of feminism where they feel more like an ally than someone who can be or would want to be a feminist.

Stea went on to say that they were often disappointed to find a feminist whose work they admired, only to then discover that they were transphobic or otherwise exclusionary:

> **Stea (daughter)** 27:37
> ..it can be very hard to follow somebody where I'm like, "Oh, cool. I like the activism they're doing and feminism, I want to find out more what they're doing." And then I find that in actuality, they're doing feminism, but only for a very specific type of feminist and only for a very specific type of woman. And I am not a woman, and I don't fit into what they identify as a woman, and I'm okay with that. But I'm still impacted by what they're fighting. They're still fighting for things that I need…And I can talk to specifically me being non-binary, but it also impacts people who are people of colour and people from marginalized communities. (Stea Solo Interview)

While it may be true that not every line of feminist thought should be expected to speak to Stea's particular experience, they seem to have come to the conclusion that they just have to tolerate the existence of transphobic feminism and do the individual work of personally avoiding it. They feel the tension between not sharing an identity with women, but sharing many of their social conditions in a patriarchal system where anyone who is not a cisgender man is in a precarious place in the gender hierarchy. Stea also recognizes that feminism that excludes or antagonizes trans people rarely stops there and will also harm racialized and other marginalized communities. Stea is unsure of how to relate to a movement that mostly aligns with their politics but still comes with a vocal contingent of feminists who have dedicated their energy to excluding trans people from both feminism and public life in general.

Their ambivalent relationship with feminism was something they shared with their trans and non-binary peers. Between the local LGBTQ+ youth centre where they volunteered and school, Stea had a fairly robust group of trans and nonbinary friends and they often participated in activism and discussed social issues together. As Stea described it, they all experienced a similar

tension of wanting to analyze and confront gender oppression, but not feeling like they could or should do this work as feminists:

> **Stea (daughter)** 32:34
> Not necessarily feminism. Um not necessarily feminism. Activism surrounding non-binary and trans individuals. Yes, um places where feminism and LGBTQIA issues are direct, yes, but not specifically feminism. If something happens, like recently, in Texas, where there was a lot of reproductive rights removed, we'll often discuss that. And it'll be like, "Wow, that really sucks," obviously. And that's a feminist issue. But we won't discuss it as specifically targeted towards women, we'll discuss it as a base of reproductive issues, because a lot of us need those rights, but we don't identify as women. And so if we talked about it, like, yeah, no, this is definitely a feminist issue, it would link back to the problems I had earlier of feminism, specifically dealing with women, even though none of us are women and still being impacted by this women issue. (Stea Solo Interview)

While Stea and their fellow trans friends were politically aligned with feminism, the term has become so strongly understood as not just an identity, but an identity for women that they were not quite sure where they fit into the project of gender equality. They were also caught in the duality of recognizing feminism as a political ideology to enact social change for everyone, and a movement that demanded society recognize that different bodies subject to different oppressions based on their physicality. Something like reproductive justice demands a sexed analysis that Stea's peers both could not ignore and yet excluded them despite their bodies requiring access to the same kinds of healthcare. They felt that they could not join into this discussion from a feminist angle as non-women so they preferred to engage with matters of gender and reproductive justice as primarily LGBTQ+ issues.

Though Stea was vague about the kinds of feminists that were alienating them and their friends, our discussion eventually turned to the specific disappointment of encountering TERFs. Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) are feminists who argue that the root of women's oppression is their biology. TERFs often describe their position as protecting 'sex-based rights' and assert that because women are oppressed on the basis of their biology (meaning their reproduction and vulnerability to men's sexual violence), the few protections won for women like sex-segregated spaces and maternity leave must be maintained on the basis of biology. In a worldview where women are biologically oppressed and men are biologically oppressive, sex segregation is the only viable route for women's liberation. From this perspective, anyone assigned male at birth will be male forever and cannot be trusted among women.

TERFs essentially embrace the idea that biology is destiny and therefore describe themselves not as TERFs but as 'gender-critical' or 'sex-realists' (Serano 2024). This ideology does not cultivate a passive exclusion or disinterest in transness, but an antagonistic relationship towards to trans people. TERFs specifically and intentionally exclude transgender women from women's spaces and movements and accuse trans people in general and trans women in particular of undermining the fight for women's rights based on immutable sex-based oppression.

Many feminists rightfully point out that reducing women to their biology, particularly their reproductive potential, is extremely limiting and offers little liberatory potential. Trans and trans-inclusive feminists see transphobia as a kind of patriarchal violence that helps maintain rigid social hierarchies around not just gender but also race, ethnicity, and ability. Lewis (2025) begins her chapter on TERFs in *Enemy Feminisms* by examining how those opposed to transition in general and transgender women in particular are tethered to other restrictive ideas about the body like opposing abortions or casual sex (203). She also points out that the fixation that transphobic feminists have on trans people often leads them to ally with explicitly anti-feminist groups like religious conservatives because of their shared transphobia.

While a thorough analysis of TERFs and their politics is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will argue that trans-acceptance and visibility within feminism have also moved through the kinds of cyclical glosses that Hemmings describes, and the mother and daughter cohort both tended to see trans acceptance as a new feature of feminist thinking and action. From this perspective, feminisms that overlook or exclude trans people are out of date and rely on an unexamined gender binary that younger generations are able to critique. In *Why Stories Matter* (2011) Hemmings argues that in progress narratives the decade of the 1970s or the Second Wave of feminism is often charged with being essentialist and essentialist is a polite euphemism for racist (44). While Hemmings does not substantively extend this argument to suggest that accusations of essentialism carry that charge that the second wave was intrinsically transphobic, Lewis (2025) does explore and debunk this image of mid-century feminists in the West (209).

Lewis notes that trans feminists have always participated in feminist movements and so have their allies and detractors. This has not been a generationally confined conflict among feminists but instead an ongoing tension that consistently reasserts itself with each cohort. Transphobia, like all systems of inequality enmeshed with misogyny, racism, and classism, is an

entrenched prejudice that many benefit from upholding. It is not a matter of an uninformed generation failing to learn something new, but a hierarchy that people will fight to maintain if it means they retain some level of power and status over others. Positioning this conflict as something solely generational can obscure how the norms and ideologies of gender are intertwined with other systems of power and can become more rigid rather than more expansive over time.

Interestingly, despite frequently discussing LGBTQ+ issues with their peers are witnessing the clawing back of transgender rights in real time, Stea did think that there was a generational component to feminist conflicts over trans acceptance. When I asked Stea if they felt that TERF-style feminism was a generational dynamic, the expressed that they felt that older feminists become entrenched in a particular gendered worldview while younger feminists are more able to challenge and revise their beliefs:

> **Stea (daughter)** 31:01
> I think that, um, I think that you're, it very much was a generational type of thing. It's, you can still see it among older feminists, like JK Rowling…Because unlike, unlike older generations of feminists who stay within their communities and who are like, "I grew up with this, I'm going to stick with this community just because that's kind of how we are" younger feminists still have room to grow and still have room to learn about themselves and about other younger feminists who aren't like that, because they grew up in a different environment. There's not only one type of feminism, and as you continue to get older, you can discover these other types of feminism and being younger, you're probably more likely to interact with these other types of feminism, and you're probably more likely to interact with these other people who are saying that, "yeah, this type of feminism was great. It did a lot for us back in the day, but right now, they're not focusing on what we actually need. And they're being actively harmful to the communities that need this type of advocacy in this type of activism." (Stea Solo Interview)

Stea does not dismiss previous iterations of the feminist movement, but does feel that many previously effective techniques are now not only outdated but actively harmful. In their view, people persist with these now harmful beliefs because they have not interrogated their feminist ideology since an earlier or perhaps the initial time they developed their feminist consciousness. They have a sense that younger generations are more diverse, or at least more open to diversity, despite not extending this generosity to older generations. Instead, they generale older feminists

as white, middle-class, cisgender women like JK Rowling who have the privilege to dismiss the struggles of people more marginalized than them.

Though I will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter, Stea's sense of a generational difference in feminists' ability to accept trans people comes into greater focus when we look to their relationship with their mother Claire. Stea and Claire both identify as lesbians and were politically aligned in many ways. Claire and her partner were very encouraging of Stea's activism and proud of their work. However, Claire still struggled to accept Stea's gender transition. While she did not forbid Stea from expressing themselves how they wished, Claire was resistant to adopting they/them pronouns for Stea and perceived their transition as a retreat into androgyny to avoid misogyny that they would eventually outgrow. Stea's broad generational perspective on feminism mirrored what they lived at home and at school: Their parents seemed unable to digest what their peers readily embraced.

Aside from the limitations of their individual vantage point, Stea was also processing an affective negotiation to understand why the people around them acted the way they did. If older people, including feminists, just struggle to learn new things in general then this might make their parents reticence to embrace their gender transition more bearable. In this generational dynamic Stea's parents are merely slow and with gradual exposure their hesitation could be resolved. Stea splits here in order to protect their parents as people who are just in the process of catching up and protect their peers as people who will have affirming trans politics as they age. The idea that some people just get frozen in time is a more comfortable perspective than a reality where people can grow less tolerant across their lifetimes and embrace violence toward people more vulnerable than them–including their own loved ones.

Conclusion

An ambivalent perspective, like the one Coccia et al (2024) outline, offers a way to hold these contradictions together rather than try to neatly come to a conclusion about their exact affect, meaning, or usefulness. Ultimately, what makes these accounts ambivalent is that they are never resolved. When generational political divides are made legible in our relationships with others they become invested with the same contradictory emotions. The positive and supportive relationships between mothers and daughters still coexists with anxiety and unease with each

others' politics. Feminism is something thy share, but they never quite come to perfect alignment.

In the introduction to their collection of feminist mother and daughter essays, Baker Kline and Baker (1996) write: "Mothers have, at least partially, established their identities before a daughter is born, whereas a daughter, in discussing her experiences, is reflecting on a relationship with a powerful figure against whom she has measured herself for her entire life. At the same time, daughters have enormous power in the relationship – the power of judging." (xviii). For Baker Kline and Baker (who are themselves mother and daughter) mothers and daughters exist in an odd tension where they are at once expected to love and understand each other, but are also assumed to feel a perpetual sense of competition with one another about who will have the final word in a story that extends long before and after they arrive.

In this study, which involved both mothers and daughters in the same interview, the judgements and misalignments were usually smoothed over as participants balanced a desire to protect their relationship without seeming indistinguishable from each other. In writing where only one person is offering their uninterrupted account of their history, this paradigm of attachment/rejection and progress/loss can come across more clearly.

For example, when reflecting on her time as a young transgender activist Eli Erlick (2018), offers an image of shifting generations of trans activism that comes with the following withering critique of older trans activists:

> Younger people, more regularly mobilized on online communities, frequently take intersectional approaches against institutionalized violence. These organizing methodologies are often a much more radical, liberation- focused take on transgender justice as opposed to the methodologies utilized by many older trans advocates offline, which regularly have an assimilatory foundation adhering to for- profit business models. Older activists tend to be more engaged with organizations that are financially sustainable— those operating inside the nonprofit- industrial complex— indicating activism that does not fundamentally end transphobia or state violence but simply shifts the violence onto those who are more vulnerable. However, this is not to ignore the legacies of adult organizers working alongside radical groups that have physical spaces, such as INCITE! or Sylvia Rivera Law Project. (78-9)

Here, Elrick is not just explaining how older trans activists offer an example of what not to do, but also creates a distinct and generalizable hierarchy where young activists have radical ambitions and older activists just want to assimilate. Erick also seems to be engaging in an

interesting rendering of activist generations where older activ*ists* are ineffective careerists, but older activ*ism* is radical and exciting. There is an implicit assumption here that young people have ambitious ideas and a desire to help others, and older people simply look out for themselves.

Despite this frustration toward the activist peers she feels failed to secure actual liberation, Erlick is still a transgender activist and she part of these networks of people she both admires and admonishes. Though she began her activist work in her early teens, Erlick was in her twenties when she wrote the article I am quoting and beginning to age out of this divide where she is part of the new generation of young people judging and overturning the limitations of adult activists. She is making sense of herself by rejecting some of her foremothers while embracing others. Liberation vs assimilation is not just an abstract matter of opposing strategies, but is animated through real figures when Sylvia Rivera is contrasted with unnamed but undoubtably real nonprofit assimilationists that Erlick finds frustrating.

One of the daughter participants, Amy, offers a similar portrait of her mother Lizette and how her own feminism deviates from the other women in her family:

> **Amy (daughter)** 42:17
> Um, I think my mom's type of feminist is the fact that like, she grew up in a small town. And she was a girl. So she wasn't expected to like, do very big things. She was expected to shrink herself to fit into a room and she never did that. Whereas I'm someone who she I think, the way I would put my mom's feminism is she fights for herself. And I fight for other people. ...Their feminism is typically more passive, like, they believe in the same things we believe. But it's always so interesting to have people like my grandma, or my aunt, or my mom, talk to me and be like, like, "I'm so impressed that, like, you're, you're doing this." And I also think that I did grow up in a new generation that allowed for that, you know, and, you know, social media makes that a lot more accessible. Whereas all of the like, the strong women in my life are strong, because they fought for themselves and stood up for themselves, and made sure that the world like made room for them, versus I think now we're in a place in time where we can make sure there's room for everyone, not just ourselves. (Amy Solo Interview)

Amy is describing her mother, but still offers the same kind of progress narrative that Erlick writes about her activist peers. She belongs to a new generation that can achieve more than the ones that came before and this expanded horizon both connects her to her mother and grandmother and separates them because they inhabit such different contexts. Much like Jessica, she recognizes that personal strength is not enough. Amy also sounds remarkably like Hemmings

(Das 2024) as she straddles both admiration for the strong women in her family and a need to criticize and separate herself from the limitations of this strength. These questions of what should be overcome and what should be maintained or reestablished are influenced by the wider cycling of feminist thought and action. Amy looks forward to a feminist future where privileged women like her are able to uplift others, but later this might be interpreted with the same criticisms she has for her mother and grandmother.

The criticism that often emerges in daughters' narratives of their feminist mothers is both a vague sort of affective sense of a promised future that has gone unfulfilled and very literal personal feelings of being underestimated, hurt, or betrayed. For many daughters, their mothers were their first feminists and their first patriarchs, and this contradiction is never really resolved. Daughters do not just reject or adopt their mothers' feminism and mothers are neither immediately swayed nor rejecting toward their daughters' new approaches. They are defended subjects who make sense of themselves by both defending and disavowing the feminism of the generation before them. They split in their perception of their mothers as both archetypal representations of the feminism they must leave behind and exceptions who overcome the shortcomings of their generations. Their strength is as inspiring as it is burdensome.

The personal and political are always intertwined in these stories and the way that daughters and mothers narrate their lives and relationships is the way they narrate the movement. These personal stories are not just private anecdotes, but a site where participants extrapolate a broader sense of feminist movement history. In turn, they also analyze their relationships and the feelings, actions, and motivations of their family members through their experience of a shifting feminist movement.

7. Chapter 7: “I am daughterhood but I’m non-binary”: Trans Daughters and Affective Negotiations

Introduction

Grade 12 student Stea was one of my first interviewees. Stea is nonbinary and enjoys a community of other trans and nonbinary peers at school and the local 2SLGBTQ+ youth centre. They lived at home with their two mothers and brother and had just been admitted to university before their solo interview took place. Though they felt generally supported by their parents, their mothers often struggled to grasp their transness. As Stea held their identity and various relationships together, they came to their own theory of daughterhood:

> **Stea (daughter) 47:12**
> Yeah, it's definitely a unique thing. Like how I said, like, I'm okay with the concept of daughterhood, because that is tied to who I am. And my experience as a person. If, another person, a stranger said, "Oh, you are a daughter," I'd be like, "No, I'm not really okay with you saying that about me without knowing the context of who I am, and about knowing that I'm also a non-binary person." Um, it's fine in this study, because it's daughterhood, but also, I am daughterhood, but I'm non-binary. But yeah [laughs], (Stea Solo Interview)

Stea takes pride in their status as an eldest daughter, something they feel encompasses a sense of duty and responsibility that extends not only beyond the home but also beyond any singular gender identity. No other term seemed to accurately reflect their familial relationships, and, as they went on to elaborate, Stea felt no attraction to the term “son,” found “offspring” unpleasant, and felt that “child,” while gender-neutral, was simply too childlike.

I was intrigued by Stea’s reasoning and felt that it captured a broader theme of how the interviewees reckoned with the ways gender has both changed and remained the same over time. There was something gendered about being a daughter, but not in the same way that it had been previously. It represented a connection to a history and familial lineage that felt almost anachronistic in an individualistic culture with ever-expanding identity labels, but it could not quite be abandoned. To me, Stea’s nonbinary daughtering felt like both a defiant queer insistence to hold on to a term and role that many queer people are denied, and a reluctant compromise with reluctant parents who would not quite embrace their child’s transness.

Though Stea’s perspective on daughtering has been particularly influential in this work, they were not the only participant with a lived experience and political outlook that involved

questioning how gender situated them in the world and their relationships. Many were reflecting on what gender meant both personally and politically, and how binary notions of gender might not suffice for achieving gender equality. As I've explained, in my broad call for participants, I was not explicitly recruiting people who identified as trans or who were active in trans activism. However, both transgender and cisgender participants frequently discussed the importance of including trans perspectives, the now-common practice of using gender-neutral pronouns, and the need to actively combat transphobia. Across all nineteen total participants, two daughters identified themselves as transgender, four of the mothers/mother figures had a trans or questioning child, two daughters had a trans or questioning sibling, and five daughters had one or more close trans friends.

Throughout these interviews, evolving notions of gender identity and the need for trans-inclusive feminist action emerged as key sites of concern where mothers wanted their daughters to enlighten them about the new norms of gender expression, and daughters would openly correct their mothers when their reasoning or language felt exclusionary. Like most matters discussed between the study's mothers and daughters in their harmonious relationships, the two cohorts tended to agree that trans people should enjoy the same rights, recognition, safety, and self-determination as everyone else. However, despite this stated shared belief, there were still moments where this ideal came up against the anxiety that a changing world would demand a changing sense of self, the past, the future, and their relationships with others. These splits ranged from a subtle tension to a more significant clash, but what they all shared was the feeling that the increased visibility of trans people represented some kind of horizon.

In this chapter, I specifically examine these moments where transness arose in the interviews, even when it was only mentioned in brief references and asides. I examine some of the affective negotiations that take place between mothers and daughters as they navigate a world where gender seems to be changing, and what that means for their politics and relationship. As they look toward the future, these hopes and anxieties are animated by their close relationships with trans loved ones and their own lived experiences as trans people as they desire feminist futures but struggle with the cruel optimism (Berlant 2011; Chu 2019) of striving for a future they may never reach.

The Transgender Tipping Point and Other Contexts

When I was conducting interviews in 2021 and 2022, the topic of trans children was still contentious but had not yet reached the fever pitch of 2025. In June, the United States Supreme Court's ruling in *U.S. v. Skrmetti* upheld Tennessee's ban on providing medical transition care to minors (Wiggins 2025). This decision is significant, but it is only one more blow among many against trans people's right to recognition and bodily autonomy. Transgender children have been at the centre of a rising moral panic with enough momentum to become a significant election issue in both the United States and Canada. As Andrea Long Chu (2024) summarized:

> Last year — the worst so far — Republicans introduced hundreds of bills that would ban gender-affirming health care for minors, restrict the participation of trans kids in sports, and force schools to out students to their parents…The New York Times regularly runs stories playing up the perils of youth gender medicine; the author of Harry Potter is anxiously projecting her fears of sexual assault onto them from across the sea. The public increasingly believes that what the kids call gender is really just *trouble*: depression, anxiety, autism, family dysfunction, peer pressure, or social media, any of which — not to mention the universal awkwardness of puberty itself — are better explanations for why a child might question their identity.

Long Chu captures the expansive efforts to push trans children out of public life by disparaging them as misled, sick (in both unusual and banal ways), dangerous, unfairly advantaged in sports, and above all else, intolerably disobedient to their parents and society. A whole host of anxieties about societal decline and uncertainty is now placed on this tiny minority of young people in ways that now inescapably shape the political landscape at every end of its spectrum. In a moment where trans people in general and trans children in particular are targeted as scapegoats in a rancorous culture war, it feels difficult to contextualize how quickly the public perception of trans people has declined in only a decade.

The young people I interviewed were living in an era of unprecedented trans visibility. When younger participants like Daisy and Nicole would have only just started school, *Time Magazine* declared 2015 the "transgender tipping point" and highlighted openly trans stars like Laverne Cox of the hit series *Orange is the New Black* (Malatino 2016). At the time, media representations of fictional transgender and particularly transfeminine people were expanding beyond the confines of villains, punch lines, and dead sex workers (Malatino 2016). There were increasingly sympathetic and authentic stories of transgender life, often authored by transgender

people, that were readily available to broad audiences. This was not just an era when openly trans adults were telling their own stories on platforms reaching wide audiences. Trans children and young people were also highly visible, and some, like Jazz Jennings, opened up their private lives to reality television and took on activist work to advocate for their trans peers (Johnston 2018).

Many trans people of all ages have documented their transitions online and formed trans-centric communities that transcend geographical boundaries. As many of my interviewees explained, whether someone supported trans people or not, everyone now knows about the existence of trans people and concepts like gender-neutral pronouns. These 2010s fictional depictions were not perfect, and the people documenting their real-life transitions often encountered serious harassment and abuse. Still, it did seem as if society was progressing toward a world where trans people were socially and legally recognized and would be increasingly included in normative institutions.

However, this heightened visibility came with immediate and vitriolic backlash. As my interviews concluded in 2022, the world Long Chu (2024) describes was beginning to emerge. My interviewees described transphobia in their schools and communities, and some were aware of the growing book bans in the United States and restrictive pronoun policies in Canadian schools. This strained social and political context of trans people also coexisted with the fact that trans people were part of their everyday life as their friends, peers, and children. This contrast between the ordinariness of being trans and growing societal transphobia shaped their political outlooks and what they hoped for in the future.

Theorizing the Future

As I noted in the previous chapter, feminism is often historized in waves or progress/loss stories (Hemmings 2011) that chart the relative popularity of feminist movements at different times. These glosses are generalizations that tend to overlook the complexities of feminist movements and obscure the work of more marginalized feminists who work across different social, geographical, cultural, class, and racial contexts. However, this *feeling* of waves or ebbs and flows continues, and perceptions of the past shape how contemporary feminists approach the future. Despite Hemming's (2011) warning about the deterministic shape of mother-daughter relationships and their unsuitability as a model for feminist history, in the interviews for this study, an understanding of gender identity, and particularly the existence of an accessible

vocabulary for articulating non-cis gender identities and expressions, was described in clearly generational terms. Even though this assumption of trans-newness is not historically accurate, and, as I will later note, is often a harmful assumption, I cannot avoid the fact that the participants experience their encounters with transness in these terms and feel that it is a generation-defining concept. Because participants positioned transness as something new or emerging, trans acceptance and/or more expansive notions of gender identity were understood as a generational divide, where mothers felt behind or unsure, and felt their daughters and young people in general were more equipped to engage. The daughter cohort agreed and mirrored the mother cohort's sense that older generations are not quite able to wrap their heads around expansive and non-essentialist notions of gender.

Though social issues like racism, class inequality, sexual harassment, oppressive beauty standards, and even climate change emerged as long-standing struggles where mothers and daughters both felt the weight of how long these fights were taking, trans acceptance felt like a recent issue, or at least a recent iteration of some of these existing struggles. Transgender people are certainly not new, and neither are their liberation movements. Still, the recent widespread awareness and visibility of trans people has created a feeling that transness represents a kind of futurity that presents both exciting possibilities and unsettling changes.

For José Estaban Muñoz (2009), queerness is a way of drawing from the past to imagine, feel, and strive for a future world where we never arrive but which lies "always on the horizon." (11) This striving is not escapist or wishful, but an enactment of potentiality based on an awareness of collective historical struggle. This is what Duggan and Muñoz (2009) refer to as "educated hope" (3). Hope, like fear, is an anticipatory feeling concerned with a possibility that is present yet does not yet exist and may never exist. Lauren Berlant (2011) describes this dynamic as "cruel optimism," where your desires, or the channels you expect to fulfill your desires, act as an obstacle to your flourishing. In "The Impossibility of Feminism," Long Chu (2019) extends this idea, asserting that disappointment is the governing affect of feminism. The disappointment is not the failure to achieve feminism but the painful repeated encounters with your own desires and optimism for something that may never arrive.

Cruel optimism also feels like an apt framework for working through the tensions that exist between the non-normativity of queer and transness and a normalizing institution like the family. It often feels like queerness and families cannot co-exist, and the continued existence of

one must demand the change or even destruction of the other. The idea that families must be radically transformed or abolished is not unique to queer thinkers. As feminists have long argued, families are frequently significant sites of violence against women and girls regardless of sexuality or gender identity (Tudor 2023, 293). In *The Promise of Happiness* and *All About Love,* Sara Ahmed (2010) and bell hooks (2001), respectively, point out that it is precisely because the patriarchal family is supposed to be the site of love, happiness, and sustaining relationships that its inequalities remain violently enforced. More often than not, people are expected to bend to conform to the kinds of normative happiness that families are supposed to provide rather than allowing the family to bend in its structure. Children, particularly girls, are often mistreated as familial property (Bardwell-Jones 2021; Woodrow 2023). This ownership dynamic is antithetical to the kind of love that hooks argues is necessary for liberation (hooks 2001, 87, 221).

Transphobic rhetoric specifically often invokes the tropes of protecting families, women, and girls (Butler 2024; Serano 2018; 2023; Stryker and Chaudhry 2022; Tudor 2023). The growing conservative "parents' rights" movement in the United States and Canada exemplifies this as it positions transgender identity as uniquely threatening and destabilizing to young people (Benchetrit 2023b; 2023a; Gambino 2023; Woodrow 2023). As Julia Serano (2023) explains, parents seeking information about their trans children are increasingly encountering online communities that radicalize them to see their child's transness as a sickness or threat. In a recent report by *Trans Safety Network*, with the especially stark title, "'My parents very clearly do not love me': Children of Bayswater Speak Out," (Baker and Rocca 2025), the children of parents in these online groups explain how profoundly damaging they are to their relationships with their parents and how their parents are too consumed by transphobia to have loving relationships with their children.

Trans people, particularly trans children, are often imagined as a new sort of problem or possibility that is always imminent, but, as Muñoz (2009) puts it, is still a horizon that never arrives. Transness is positioned as either a sign of progress or a threat by cisgender people, even though trans people and trans feminism are neither new nor theoretical (Bhatt 2025; Gill-Peterson 2018; Lewis 2025; Stryker and Chaudhry 2022). In *Enemy Feminisms*, Lewis (2025) argues against the contemporary assumption that "transphobia was intrinsic to women's liberation movement" (209). Instead, she points out that transgender women have always

participated in feminist movements and feminist transmisogyny has always both existed and been contested (212).

Harper Keenan (2022) notes that education scholars often entrench notions of trans newness in ways that erase the histories of trans cultures and their resilience. He notes that perpetually framing trans people as a new social phenomenon maintains a status quo where ignorant hostility toward trans communities is excusable. Furthermore, the constant framing of trans people as a political or social crisis often serves to erase the everyday lives and relationships that trans people already have.

However, the current social and political conditions for trans people are not ideal, and this led my participants to turn their attention to aspirational futures where the systems that perpetuate transphobia have been transformed, and their conditions are improved. This is the kind of aspiration that Ahmed (2010) describes, where the struggle for a bearable life means queer people need space to breathe now and making life bearable in the present makes it possible in the future (120). As I noted earlier, the participants' investments in activism in general and combating transphobia in particular emerged from their own experiences and the experiences of their loved ones. These are not distant politics, and this closeness came with vivid emotional investment. They negotiated the emotional labour of navigating the present, holding onto hopeful futures, and encountering the repeated frustrations, compromises, and ambivalences of both.

Generational Horizons

While many of the mothers admitted that they did not always feel well-informed about how their daughters' generation conceptualized and expressed gender identity, they tended to position this as a bemusing but ultimately normal generational difference. I often asked the mothers if they felt society had changed since they were their daughters' age. They would explain that many social issues like racism, homophobia, sexual harassment, and sexist workplaces were just as significant as ever. Still, their daughters had much more language at their disposal to express and confront these issues. Participants often cited pronouns and gender identity labels as the most significant examples of this change, noting that they exemplified young people's enhanced ability to articulate variations that had always existed.

Daughters used openness to gender-neutral language and new pronouns as an example of their mothers' general progressiveness and willingness to learn from them. 17-year-old Suzanna helped run her school's Gay-Straight Alliance and took pride in the way she could bring her

queer and trans friends over to her house, knowing that her mother would always accept and keep up with new names and pronouns. Anti-sexual violence activist Amy, for example, reassuringly noted that despite their more conservative upbringings, her parents were receptive to learning more about gender expression, stating:

> **Amy** 48:00
> …my parents are both very open to like, understanding and like learning. Um, some things they don't understand right away. Because it's not what they grew up with. Like different pronouns for them. Well, at first when I was explaining that they didn't really get it. But they're like very, like open and receptive to understanding, (Amy Lizette Pair Interview)

To this, Amy's mother, Lizette, a retired Catholic school principal, replied:

> **Lizette (mother)** 48:15
> I'm still struggling with "they" because it's plural. I would be so much happier if it was a different word and you know how they did "Miss" and "Mrs" and then they created which was "Ms." So I still struggle with "they." (Amy Lizette Pair Interview)

This comparison between "they" pronouns and the emergence of "Ms." actually came up a few times from mothers to express how gendered language had shifted across their lifetimes. Among the cisgender participants, pronouns emerged as a form of tactile signifier that could convey the broader concept of a world where gendered boundaries are more permeable, but this was often the extent of their engagement with trans-inclusivity.

In an essay exploring the benefits and limitations of inclusive language, Alexander Pershai (2006) makes a similar connection between the shared goals of trans and feminist thinkers who deploy non-sexist language. However, Pershai also points out that a fixation on language can be a way to avoid, rather than meaningfully engage with, the issue of inequality. To put it simplistically, modifying words feels more actionable than altering material conditions. Jules Gill-Peterson makes a similar point in *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (2024), where she notes that "There is no perfect language to be discovered, or invented, to solve the problem of trans misogyny by labelling its proper perpetrator and victim." (6). Gill-Peterson moves beyond just avoidance to argue that the search for perfect language is often a cover for litigating transphobia, and particularly transmisogyny, in ways that burden trans people with having to perfectly articulate their experiences and identities in order to receive any kind of support or acceptance.

Pershai's critique highlights how using inclusive language can have less to do with actual trans people and more to do with performing their political position. This performance is neither inherently negative nor dishonest, but as Pershai points out, it can become a sticking point where using the right words supersedes actual action. In a recent BlueSky thread, Evan Urquhart, a trans journalist and founder of *Assigned Media*, made a similar critique, writing: "pronoun circles and similar things, adopted ostensibly for trans people's benefit, became divorced from the conditions of trans people, instead functioning as a way cis people of a certain social class signaled group membership." (Urquhart 2025).

Some participants had a similar sense that while inclusive gender language is positive, it can also be mobilized as a kind of litmus test for assessing people's politics. One of the older daughters, Brett, described her mother as a lifelong feminist and her trans sibling's biggest supporter. Brett initially positioned her mother as unusually progressive for a middle-aged white woman, but then wavered in this generalization:

> **Brett** 41:54
> Good, good question. I mean, I find that at least from like a perception point, I don't talk to that many 50-year-old women, unfortunately. And the ones that I do are like, the very few people who have like, devoted their entire lives to community organizing, which is not maybe like a super representative sample of the population…But I think maybe older white women are a little bit less aware of, sort of a racial implications of white feminism…But, and there is, you know, unfortunately, a lot of TERFism in that generation, at least publicly, and again, in every generation, but I think that there's just like a natural thing to be like to feel like trans issues and like online sex work issues, and all of this stuff that those are like completely new things. That I feel like maybe some of that generation doesn't know exactly how, how to deal with it, maybe. But I also don't really know if that's fair. (Brett Solo Interview)

While Brett felt that older women, particularly older white women, belonged to a generation that was either unaware of the exclusionary nature of their feminism or outright hostile toward trans people and sex workers, she also understands that this, like all generational discourse, is a sweeping generalization that cannot really be accurate across all members of an age group. She splits between a feeling that there are meaningful generational political differences but increasingly adds caveats about this being an issue of whiteness or class more than just age.

Brett also briefly mentions that she does not know many women in their 50s and feels that this is unfortunate, even as she critiques the feminism of their generation. While most

daughters were quick to identify their mothers as exceptionally progressive despite their age, only Brett gestured toward the idea that it would be good to have a wider intergenerational community of older women. Age is not an insurmountable political divide, and Brett feels that it is unfortunate to lack opportunities to build relationships with and learn from older generations. Mothers also worried that their daughters might leave them behind if they assumed that they could not keep up with their conceptualization of gender. As I've explored earlier, Heather worried that her daughter, Dani, would develop different feminist politics from her own, and this would cause a rift in their relationship. The example Heather uses to illustrate this is an interaction where she used the wrong pronouns to refer to one of Dani's friends, and the two disagreed about whether or not "guys" is gender-neutral.

> **Heather (mother)** 32:18
> …She's very conscious and thinking as they are, right? They're much more conscious even than I was about gender identity. I picked up a friend of hers from school or the park or something, and the kids got in the car, and I said, "How was your day girls?" And Dani kind of shot me a look. And I said–because that her friend identifies they/them–"How was your day kids?" And she said, "Mom, it's okay to use guys. It's not okay to use girls." [laughs] and I was like, "No, no, it's not. Because guys isn't gender neutral, kiddo." And it wasn't appropriate for me to refer to her as a girl, or them as a girl, there I go again, but it's also not okay to use guys. So we have those, type of moments where like, they're much more, this group is just so much; the language when I grew up in 80s, and early 90s, when I would have been her age in '93, we wouldn't have had the language to talk about gender identity in the way that these kids are very confidently talking about it, which is so wonderful. But then there's those conversations, right? which is like, "actually!" [laughs] (Heather Solo Interview)

Heather complicates the notion that best practices for gender inclusivity always flow from daughter to mother. She locates current conversations about gender-neutral language in longer feminist debates about non-sexist language. She tries to correct the revived assumption that a masculine word like "guys" can act as a neutral default term to refer to everyone. However, Heather also seems caught between feeling excited that her daughter's generation can confidently talk about gender inclusivity in ways that were not available to her at the same age, and the sense that these new developments might create a rift between her and her daughter. There was a sense that Heather felt Dani might perceive her and her feminism as outdated or even harmful, and her ability to use the "right" gender neutral language was a test of her ability to keep up.

This is not to say that Heather should not learn new approaches to gendered language or that it is acceptable for older generations to remain ignorant about topics and communities they did not happen to encounter in their youth. Instead, Heather's anxiety reveals that gender is a significant social system and doing the work to make a hospitable society for trans people does require the wider rethinking of what gender is and means. Much like with the other social issues the young activists of this study confront, simply waiting for one generation to fade away while a new generation with new ideas ascends is not an effective strategy for trans or any other kind of social acceptance.

In fact, Dani noted that though many of her classmates had transitioned and/or begun to explore new pronouns during the pandemic, a significant number of her peers were hostile toward trans students. Her generation was not imbued with an innate appreciation for gender diversity. Even in supportive spaces where gender diversity was welcomed, these new norms came with new expectations that still required work to navigate. Sometimes, openness to diversity creates the expectation that everyone not only knows how to categorize themselves appropriately but is also willing to openly share this information with everyone else. As Dani describes it:

> **Dani** 32:51
> Like, it's one thing to tell someone your name and your pronouns, and it's another to like, tell them your race, your pronouns, who you love, like all this stuff. And it's like, it's just that it's not necessary for someone to just live their life that way. Yeah, that's sort of like there's a pressure to tell everyone everything about you, and there's a pressure to know, (Dani Heather Pair Interview)

Because nothing could be assumed, everything had to be explained, and sometimes this felt less like gaining freedom of expression than losing privacy. This tension indicated that neither generation had a perfect approach to gender expression. Even positive changes come with the challenges of navigating a new societal norm. Older and younger generations should be able to learn from each other, rather than discard each other as inherently unable to adapt to a changing gendered landscape.

Political Negotiations

One response to some of the tensions of the changing social norms around gender was the persistent question about whether or not it was even helpful to politicize transness. Both

participants who identified as transgender, Stea and Buffy, were the daughters of queer mothers and experienced a family life where queerness was not a new consideration but something they inherited. Many of the young people I interviewed had never known a life without openly trans friends and family. As much as these close relationships could motivate political action, they also made participants either consider gender identity a personal matter they had not regarded as political or wary of dignifying the transphobic assertion that people's personal gender identity is up for public debate.

For example, Sam, a first-year university student, wrote a book about gender expression for 4- to 8-year-olds, and I interpreted this as a political thing to do. When I spoke with Sam, she was excited to discuss the book and had written it because of her own experiences as a gender-nonconforming child. However, she did not see her work through the same activist lens as I did. For Sam, educating other people, especially young children, about the diversity of gender expression was an everyday activity. She considered the topic important but did not consider her writing to be activist work. When I asked about this, she replied:

> **Sam (daughter)** 13:43
> Um, well, I haven't thought of it in that way before. So I'm not really sure. But I don't really know what else I would call it. So yeah, it is definitely something that I would stand up for, like, in any circumstance, really, if it, if it like, if it presented itself in that way, and it's like something that's really important to me that I think that should be like, advocated for. (Sam Solo Interview)

At the time of our interview, Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill was coming into effect, and various LGBTQ+ book bans were in the news (CBC 2022). Between these recent events and the general tendency to launder open transphobia through concern for children, I assumed that Sam was engaging in these conflicts directly with her book. Instead, she saw this political context as distant from her own lived reality. Educating young children about gender identity is just one more thing that people should know more about to feel comfortable with themselves and others.

One participant actively resisted politicizing transness through her activism as a strategic framing. Seventeen-year-old Elizabeth, who often went by Ellie, identified as straight and cis but was deeply involved with trying to combat transphobia in her local community. She conflicted with her conservative small town, where trans identity was at the centre of a political conflict so rancorous that students physically attacked a trans peer at her school. Rather than simply not noticing or experiencing queerness as political, Ellie had witnessed the adverse effects of what

happens when queerness becomes politicized. Ellie was actively trying to frame her activism as non-political as a way to confront and de-escalate the recent violence against trans people in her school and community. She had reasoned that trying to depoliticize transness and transphobia into matters of inclusion and kindness would be the more effective strategy. If politicizing something makes it a problem, then *d*epoliticizing it must be the solution.

> **Ellie (daughter) 15:36**
> …when I created the pledge, I created it to be something that wasn't political. So I wanted it to be that regardless of the political party you supported, you could commit to being kind and inclusive so I could include many people. But I didn't expect people to still take it as like, a very left-leaning cause and be almost like taken back by it. Because in my mind kindness and inclusion isn't political and it's just basic human rights. But other people took it in kind of like a "Why do I have to like, I'm not signing that like I, I don't want to be perceived, as the as this like snowflake, libtard" um [laughs], for lack of better words. (Ellie Solo Interview)

Ellie was frustrated by her community's interpretation of her work as partisan political action, rather than her basic desire to ensure everyone has safety and dignity. Unlike other participants, who believed in a naturally growing tolerance of more diverse gender expressions, Ellie was witnessing peers who refused to accept this kind of tolerance out of fear that it would reflect poorly on how others perceived their own gender and political alignments.

I often asked mothers and daughters how they envisioned a feminist future. I usually prefaced this question by saying they did not need to be practical and could be free to speculate wildly about their best possible scenario. Ellie replied to this question by saying that she would like to see "less hate crimes." She did not say *no* hate crimes and indeed did not venture to allow herself to imagine a world where gender liberation had been achieved. Even when just speculating about the best possible future, Ellie struggled to see anything beyond a reduction in the familiar violence. Even though Ellie was actively involved in trying to improve conditions for her trans peers in ways that required a hopeful belief in a better horizon for her community, she would not allow herself to fully embrace a hope that was so often frustrated.

The cruel optimism emerges here as she tempers her expectations for her work to avoid the painful possibility that her friends will never be truly safe despite their best efforts to secure a better future. This is both a matter of being practical with her hopes for social change and an emotional negotiation with how much she desires a kind of future that feels impossible. Ellie's resistance to politicizing transness reveals this affective negotiation. Suppose the intense and

unyielding emotions of bipartisan political conflicts could be removed. In that case, the desire to remove transness from political struggle and violence altogether is a hopeful but ultimately cruel attachment—one that imagines safety could be achieved by retreating from the very political arena where rights are contested and won. This fantasy of depoliticization maintains the attachment to a world where trans existence could be normalized without confrontation. Still, this very desire for withdrawal from politics prevents the sustained engagement necessary to transform the conditions that make trans lives precarious in the first place.

Family Life

Of course, even if transness could be successfully relegated to the private sphere, this would not make it any less complicated. While some participants feel that transness is a personal matter that should not be a controversial public issue, this withdrawal to individual rights and freedoms does little to actually engage with conditions for trans people within their families. The two trans daughters, Stea and Buffy, were not experiencing outright familial rejection or deprived material conditions at the time of their interviews. However, both still had to navigate the ways that their personal identities and the broader political conditions for trans people impacted their relationships with their mothers.

During their solo interview, Stea noted that they had not considered their participation in the queer community to be activist work or even especially political. They saw working with an Indigenous community fighting for clean water as actual activism, whereas volunteering at Out Loud, the local queer youth centre, was more of a mentoring role. It is not that Stea had no concept of the idea that queerness was political or that queer people had to struggle for their rights. In fact, their parents only met because one of her mothers, Claire, was involved in an organization that supported queer people immigrating to Canada. However, despite this generational queerness, Stea's parents still struggled to grasp their gender identity.

It was not until her solo interview drew to a close that Stea's mother, Claire, admitted that Stea's pronouns were difficult for her. Notably, she could adopt other people's new or gender-neutral pronouns, but seemed unable to do so for Stea.

> **Claire (mother)** 51:21
> …we have a hard time developing that language, it's like, okay, let's just talk Finnish. And I'll just call you, you know, I'll just speak to you in Finnish and we don't have to worry about it…So that's, you know, a way of me kind of sidestepping the

> commitment to actually using "they" instead of "she," whereas I do it for her friends who are "they." And at work I do it for the child, I actually have to teach, I adopted "she" pronouns immediately. (Claire Solo Interview)

Claire also used language, though in a more stark way than other participants, as a signifier of a more profound discomfort with her child's gender expression. Her wife and children all spoke Finnish, and the language's lack of gendered pronouns offered a reprieve from what Claire admitted was her commitment to using "they" instead of "she," as Stea preferred. Claire did not consider herself unsupportive of Stea and did not actively forbid them from expressing themselves as they pleased. Still, she held on to the idea that there was something uniquely temporary about Stea's identity and that one day, they would return to their assigned gender.

Part of Claire's reasoning came from the notion that Stea's gender identity, and perhaps the transness of all trans people assigned female at birth, was a reaction to misogyny. When Stea wanted to wear a binder around age 13, Claire hesitated to accept this and reasoned that this desire was both a reaction to a misogynistic culture and something that posed too much of a risk to one's movement to be a healthy practice. As she described it in her solo interview:

> **Claire (mother)** 47:34
> …So we live in a society that's misogynistic. It's not surprising to me that a girl child might want to hold on to an identity that isn't feminine. Because it doesn't come with a lot of advantages. That, you know, so, so that conflict was, you know, the most interesting one, the generational divide between how I see, you know, non-binary gender expression in my child and how she sees it and experiences it. But of course, I also know that, there's, to me, it's the sort of the most exciting movement at the moment, is this questioning of how do you define people, and whether or not they have the freedom to make those choices? I just don't think it should necessarily come along with having to take drugs and wear things that restrict your ability to be free in your movement. (Claire Solo Interview)

Claire was actively negotiating a split between seeing transness as an exciting social possibility for personal freedom and an anxious reaction to what that freedom would literally and physically entail for transitioning bodies, particularly the body of her own child. Again, Claire did not ultimately prohibit Stea from using they/them pronouns for themselves, identifying as nonbinary, or even having a binder. And yet, she continually rebuffs the notion that Stea is in fact trans or that she is uncomfortable with Stea *being trans* and not this constellation of adjacent concerns about movement or drugs.

Much like some of the other mothers, Claire reasons that Stea's transness is incomprehensible because of a generational divide that she has decided she cannot quite overcome. And yet, in the very next sentence, this generational divide is an exciting horizon where a younger generation seems poised to enjoy an unprecedented amount of personal freedom. The personal and political are in tension for Claire, who seems to recognize that gender is the public, social, and political terrain where young queer activists now enact the kinds of activism she participated in when she was Stea's age and yet conceptualizes Stea as separate from all this. In fact, Stea and the rest of Claire's household are kept at such a distance from the gender changes of the outside world that the domestic sphere requires its own language, Finnish, to maintain this separation. All children change as they grow, but Claire could not seem to let go of the trajectory she had imagined for Stea and could not imagine them as part of the tides of social change taking place outside their home.

Stea was also navigating the divide between the separate worlds of their home and family life, and the wider outside world. Even though Stea retained pride and affinity towards their role as an eldest daughter and had made an exception about their pronouns for their parents, this was clearly still frustrating for them:

> **Stea (daughter)** 39:02
> …it can be very frustrating at times. Constantly advocating for myself as a non-binary person is fantastic, and I love doing it. But then it's just like you tell someone, and you're like, "Hey, can you use they/them pronouns for me," and they learn, but then they still don't use those pronouns for you. It can get very frustrating, and this isn't talking specifically about my parents, because I'm fine with them not using they/them pronouns. It's a little bit annoying, but it's something I've accepted. (Stea Solo Interview)

Like Claire, Stea navigated the tension of making private exceptions they would not allow in public. This required a great deal of emotional negotiation, where they were left to sort through contradictory emotions, such as feeling exhausted from constantly having to explain themselves, yet also loving the opportunity to embrace their role as an expert on their experience and share it with others. This also extended to their relationship with their parents, where they both wanted to preserve a positive relationship with them, but felt this required "accepting" misgendering and imperfect parents. This is not just a practical matter of maintaining peace, but an emotional process that requires sustained effort. Wanting their parents to use they/them pronouns all the time was perhaps its own cruel optimism. They had come to reconcile this thwarted hope by

positioning daughtering as an exceptional kind of role that did not have to align with how they expected people outside their family to treat them.

The other dyad with a cis mother and trans daughter had a different family dynamic from Claire and Stea. Eleanor, a university professor, and her seventeen-year-old daughter Buffy were among the last mother-daughter pairs I interviewed. They both identified as queer feminists and were both involved in various kinds of activist work. Buffy transitioned in her early teens, and in both her solo and pair interviews, she expressed that she always felt that her mother trusted her to make her own decisions. As we discussed the possibilities for a feminist future, Buffy said that she and her mother already had the kind of relationship that could be the model for a feminist future:

> **Hannah (daughter) 18:42**
> If we're thinking about that, a dismantling of gender and of capitalism, what do you think mother-daughter relationships would look like in that world?
>
> **Eleanor (mother) 18:57**
> That's interesting.
>
> **Buffy (daughter) 18:58**
> That is interesting. I mean, honestly, hopefully, similar to ours [laughs].
>
> **…Buffy (daughter) 19:04**
> I think not a lot of mothers and daughters have, like, the same relationship as us where my mom is really, supportive and always, on board with me and my decisions. Whether she understands or agrees with them, she's always just like, "Do what you want to do," which is what mother-daughter and gender relationship would look like in like, the perfect like, feminist world, And I think in a world where with years of progress and feminism I think mother-daughter relationships look like, you know, both of you are always trying to like grow and change, which is what I think we have. Whereas I know some people, like especially in parent- or parental roles, where it's easy to think like you are, you know, the rightest. (Buffy Eleanor Pair Interview)

In contrast, though Buffy self-assuredly discussed gender and the possibilities for a feminist future, her mother, Eleanor, consistently subtly rebuffed the premise of my questions. She tended to reject the idea that gender was significant or that it would persist in an ideal world. Eleanor also rescheduled both the pair interview and her solo interview several times, giving me the impression that she was wary of me and the kinds of gendered implications I was trying to convey with my research. As I noted earlier, the mother-daughter relationship is haunted by

gender essentialism and, like other family relationships, often mobilized to reassert conservative social values. In what I believe were efforts to protect and affirm her daughter, Eleanor always rejected the idea that gender would impact her relationships with her children. After Buffy explained why she thought their relationship was uniquely positive, Eleanor responded by critiquing the idea that mother-daughter relationships would even exist in an ideal feminist future:

> **Eleanor (mother) 20:55**
> Yeah, and it speaks to the kind of way that feminism seems to need women. But I would argue that feminism doesn't need women. It needs humans, and it needs a future without gender oppression. So a mother-daughter relationship in this future might not even exist, because it would just be a human relationship, it would be a parent-child relationship, you know, rather than this kind of special gendered kind of logic that's sometimes attributed to like mothers and daughters, because some mothers, maybe were, you know, were assigned male at birth and they're mothers… (Buffy Eleanor Pair Interview)

I agree with Eleanor's assertion that in a liberated feminist future, gender would be less significant and have far more porous boundaries. However, she seemed attached to this notion of needing to protect her daughter from the confines of gendered roles, relationships, and expectations to the point that she struggled to share in the moments of gendered connection that her daughter, Buffy, was happy to embrace. In the pair interview, these arguments made for an interesting contrast with Buffy, who was considerably less anxious about the idea that a close mother-daughter bond was not open to her as a trans girl. Buffy was politically aligned with much of her mother's thinking, but was also attached to the idea that there *was* something special about their shared identity as women:

> **Eleanor (mother)** 26:29
> …Yeah. And we each identify as women, you know, so we do identify as women, but I just don't know that, you know, I would say that's the key to our relationship.
>
> **Buffy (daughter)** 26:39
> No, I think, well it's interesting because I think me, like transitioning, in some ways did bring me closer to my mom. I think with the expectation of being closer to her, I grew closer to her, which is a good thing, but I think I still feel like, you know, sort of my strings being pulled slightly by societal norms. (Buffy Eleanor Pair Interview)

Though Eleanor quickly dismissed the notion that gender was, or had to be, significant to her relationship with her daughter, Buffy felt that their shared identity as women brought them closer together. She notes that this could be a social expectation, but this does not dismiss the fact that she did feel closer to her as she transitioned and still feels that this is a good thing.

It was not clear to me whether there was a singular explanation for Eleanor's resistance to seeing gender as significant to her relationship with Buffy, and Buffy's contrasting relaxed attitude despite undergoing a gender transition. In her solo interview, Eleanor said that her parents had "nothing but expectations," and now that she was on the other side of this parent-child relationship, she did not want to repeat the pressures of her own childhood. Eleanor instead repeated the expected refrain that she only wants her children to be happy, and their happiness does not require them to be similar to her. At the same time, Buffy *is* similar to her mother, and Eleanor often revealed that she is pleased to have a daughter who shares many of her values and interests. Still, it was difficult for Eleanor to express this without feeling like she was making some kind of imposition that would make Buffy feel that she could not express herself as she pleased. It might be the case that Buffy feels unbothered about adhering to some normative social expectations precisely because her mother did not make them feel mandatory. Perhaps Eleanor worries that loving a child who is similar to her somehow implies that she would not love a child who is unlike her. Or maybe she fears that enjoying their moments of sameness will make Buffy feel that she must inhabit only the same kinds of femininity as her mother instead of living as the kind of woman she really wants to be.

Conclusion

A loving mother who embraces her daughter no matter who she is does not sound like the kind of disposition that fosters cruel optimism. If anything, it sounds like Eleanor is trying very hard to pre-emptively give up any attachment to any particular vision of Buffy's present or future, explicitly to avoid the cruel optimism that Claire experiences. In fact, Eleanor explicitly discussed cruel optimism in her solo interview. Toward the end of our one-on-one conversation, when I asked her about her hopes for the future, Eleanor again intellectualized the question away from her own desires and toward the impossibility of living with such desires in general:

> **Eleanor (mother)** 57:39
> I think you have to have a utopian horizon that you're sort of working toward and believing in but it's always receding. Do you get there? I don't think so. Lauren

> Berlant, has theorized this as cruel optimism, right? If you believe in it too much, it's going to bite you in the ass, you know [laughs]. But if you can picture it, that's itself utopian. But it's a utopia of the present. Because you say, "I'm not giving up the possibility that things might be better." Right? And better not like in an It Gets Better kind of way. But like, what can we do right now, so that we can, so that trans women can feel more safe? What can we do right now to support queer kids? What can we do right now, that creates pockets of resistance that changes the possibilities of how we conceive of gender and equality and politics in the first place? It continues to be a utopianism and then optimism of the present. I think this changes the future. But it also doesn't. (Eleanor Solo Interview)

Eleanor negotiates with a future that she expects never to arrive and already tries to reason with the pain of disappointed expectations. Her critique of the It Gets Better campaign stems from her own life, where she has witnessed both the world's improvement and decline, and knows that progress takes work. Eleanor is a queer adult, and she is directly responsible for a queer child. That means she both hopes for a better future for her daughter and knows that this future is not guaranteed.

It was Eleanor's reference to cruel optimism that initiated my theoretical framing for this chapter. Eleanor's succinctly wavering feeling of "I think this changes the future. But it also doesn't." also seemed like a representative expression of how a lot of the mothers and daughters felt about their own changing attitudes and lexicons toward gender. It is difficult to offer a definitive interpretation of these feelings because they all coexist in incoherent ways. On one hand, they belong to a demonstrably changing world where changing hearts and minds seem to matter. However, on the other hand, this internal work seemed ineffectual as the world moved in directions that the participants felt powerless to stop. No matter what they wanted for themselves and the people around them, they were left to contend with a world full of book bans, hate crimes, and identities they could not manage to accept.

At the same time, despite these complex and contradictory feelings, there were moments when visions of the future did not come with caveats or anticipated disappointments. Though her mother articulated her sense of the future through cruel optimism, Buffy offered a horizon that seemed within reach:

> **Buffy (daughter) 15:43**
> I have a lot of things. I think of a feminist future; I saw something going around on social media that was very powerful to me. It was, like, "I don't want trans politicians, I don't want like, trans, rich people, I want trans musicians, I want trans

> artists, I want trans poets, trans like woodworkers." And, you know, just that you see in everyday life, roles in society that are, like, productive, where there's, sort of this equal playing field, I guess, where it's not like, a trans person in order to be impressive or to have value has to be in this position of power, where they're viewed in the same light as like a politician, like, politicians, are usually not good [laughs]. (Buffy Solo Interview)

Buffy is not the naïve young foil to her mother's experienced sense of a difficult future. However, she does offer this clear sense of a liberated future without having to disavow it as impossible first. Much like Stea's nonbinary daughtering, Buffy imagines a society of trans banality where they belong to the same unbroken human traditions of artmaking and belonging as everyone else. Trans people are valuable not because they are individually impressive or wield political power, but because they contribute to and participate in society. The particularity of transness remains, but it is not a disparaged characteristic. There is something especially compelling to me about how Buffy, during a Zoom interview, reaches for something as tactile as woodworking as one of her examples. She evokes a kind of graspable, material work of transformation where one body changes another. Buffy also sees a future that requires tremendous and skilled work to achieve, but she at least allows herself to imagine it.

Ten families for a total of eleven young activists and eight mothers and mother figures are far too few people to draw generalizable conclusions about how activist girls and their mothers discuss and feel about the increasing visibility of transgender people and our society's escalating transphobia. A collection of mostly cisgender interviewees is also a limited data set for understanding the current conditions for transgender people. However, this handful of interviews still reveals some of the complexities of mothers and daughters trying to navigate the interplay between past and future, as well as existing attachments and new possibilities when they imagined the kinds of feminist futures that might hold space for newly gendered subjectivities. This was not always an easy task, and asking about feminist futures in the context of mother-daughter relationships often served to reveal the tensions between past attachments and future horizons. For some participants, these attachments to their understanding of gender made it difficult to imagine a world or even a sense of self where these identities shifted. Still, a more gender-expansive future proved exciting for many interviewees, and they could envision a feminist future where trans-inclusive mother-daughter relationships are not only possible but also valued.

8. Chapter 8: Conclusion: Some Final Thoughts on Daughtering

Introduction

> **Hannah (daughter)** 29:20
> Do you think that's going to be like an entrenched generational divide? Or do you think, this generation might grow up and kind of forgive the second wave a bit more?
>
> **Heather (mother)** 29:35
> I don't know. I mean, I don't think we ever really forgave our moms, right? (Heather Solo Interview)

I'm unsure how to conclude this project. I should probably end where I began, with my own mother, but as I mentioned at the outset, I did not initially want to undertake this project at all because it would require a level of vulnerability that I am uncomfortable with. Aside from this personal squeamishness, I think Heather's question about whether or not we can, or should, forgive our mothers gets to the heart of my discomfort with reaching any kind of definitive conclusion about this project's findings.

On the one hand, Heather perfectly exemplifies one of my main arguments: that the personal and the political are always intertwined, and our understanding of our political history and subjectivity becomes legible through our close relationships. The principles we do and do not want to adopt are made real when we see examples of what we do and do not want to be reflected in the people around us. When it comes to feminism, our mothers are usually our first example, for better or for worse, of how to navigate an unequally gendered world. I asked Heather a question about the generational divides between feminists, and she answered with a matrophor. She is alluding to the same dynamic that Jacqueline Rose asserts in *Mothers: Essays on Love and Cruelty* (2019) when she argues that mothers are symbolically overloaded with all of society's anxieties, desires, ideals, and condemnations.

Heather's question also highlights the importance of understanding where people's feelings and motivations originate when it comes to their politics and family relationships. I asked her this question about the second wave because we had been discussing Heather's general disappointment with the graduate program where she was completing her own Ph.D. Heather had always been a committed feminist scholar, but when she moved from disability studies to a gender studies program to continue her research, she was frustrated by how her ostensibly

feminist department was resistant to accommodations for graduate students, particularly mothers. She was disappointed that her feminist mentors in the university had done little to stymie the ableist and competitive norms of graduate education and had failed to carve out a liberatory space in this hostile institution. At the same time, while Heather grappled with her criticisms of established university feminisms, her fourteen-year-old daughter, Danielle, was bringing home new feminist politics from her peers and TikTok. Heather was excited by these new political conversations, but admitted to feeling concerned that this new generation was starting over without learning from their feminist predecessors. She wondered if this younger generation might be too hasty in their rebukes of older feminists and their feminisms, not because of the content of their work, but because there is a natural rebellion among younger generations against their political parents.

Heather sits in an ambivalent space where her feminist mentors offer both radical political thinking and a disappointing inability to live out those politics. She does not belong to the daughter cohort of this study, and yet she positions herself as a daughter when she expresses this disappointment with the older feminists around her. At the same time, her young daughter Danielle acts as both an exciting ally and an emerging critic of her own feminism. She supports my argument that there is something politically significant about daughtering that does not fade between childhood and adulthood, but instead speaks to an endless cycle of inheritance. When Heather muses about whether we ever forgive "our mothers," she gestures toward a collective sense of our mothers that blends both our feminist predecessors and the mothers who raised us. Heather is not just critical of mothers and mentors she is struggling to forgive, but bracing herself for the ways that Dani might need (or refuse) to forgive her.

On the other hand, despite the rich insight of Heather's question, her remark gets to the heart of the more difficult questions that lurk in this project, namely, whether we really can or should forgive the people who come before us. Activism often tends to be a project of unfinished business, and, as I explored in Chapter Six, being a feminist can feel like being caught in an endless cycle of retreading the same ground. Oppressive systems like racism and misogyny are long-standing, and many participants felt the generational exhaustion of continuing to confront something that seems so irresolvable. It is understandable that this exhaustion can turn to resentment toward the people who we feel failed to secure a freer future for us; even when our own conditions are significantly better than theirs.

It might seem too heavy-handed to talk about this dynamic with a charged term like "forgiveness" but Heather's matrophor is getting to this tense feeling of forgiving someone that we feel has let us down, despite also feeling that we owe them something. The complexity is not determining that hurt and gratitude can coexist, but discerning the point where harm outweighs gratitude or obligation. This is not easy work, and it is easier to reckon with Heather's question of forgiveness in the context of the limitations and regressions of the feminist movement than it is to confront the interpersonal relationships where real harm has been done.

In this project, I have sought to bring mothers and daughters together and explore the solidarity between them; however, this work has been consistently haunted by the question of the unforgivable mother. Between my participants and me, it is easy to theorize about activist girls who have sustaining relationships with their feminist mothers. They may disagree and have conflicting politics at times, but they are ultimately on the same side. Due to the voluntary nature of this interview study, where mothers and daughters had to be able to at least tolerate each other long enough to sit for a pair interview, I only attracted mothers and daughters who had (or at least wished to perform) a positive and supportive relationship. These were dyads where activism and other politics had not created a significant enough rift between them that they would refuse to participate in the lengthy interview process.

I know that sometimes, when people learn of my dissertation and cringe, it is because they anticipate a work of mother blame. But, as I noted in my introduction, sometimes I get the opposite reaction, where the mother-blame is eagerly anticipated. My limited findings suggest that feminist mothers raise feminist daughters who feel they can turn to their mothers for support, but I cannot fully commit to this argument as something universal. While it is true that mothers are an oppressed group in a patriarchal system, many mothers also punish and oppress. Mothers with access to whiteness and capital can wield them to uphold white supremacy, neoliberalism, cissexism, and any other number of oppressive systems despite their own precarious status as mothers. In fact, according to many daughters, when their mothers have the feminist insight to recognize that motherhood is marginalized, this just makes the shortcomings and abuses of their parenting more painful.

At a conference, I once witnessed a panel discussion devolve into a polite but terse disagreement about the question of forgiving our mothers. Forgiveness is already difficult, and perhaps rightfully impossible in the context of the obvious and egregious harms of something

like enabling or perpetrating sexual abuse, conversion therapy, or racism, and the panellists and attendees debated when our mothers' patriarchal attitudes must be confronted and when the relationship must be completely dissolved. This question of forgiveness also includes the more subtle but no less impactful harms that occur when our mothers obsess over our weight, or comment on our appearance, or fret about when we'll meet the right man, or favour our brothers. Mothers usually absorb these attitudes from their own childhoods, and, as participants like Jessica demonstrated in Chapter Six, sometimes these policing behaviours extend from a desire to prepare and protect daughters from a patriarchal world. Some conference attendees defended the impossible conditions and contradictions that mothers face, but there seemed to be a consensus (at least among the Zoom chat) that daughters had extended this grace to their mothers for long enough. Daughters felt that some mothers (including their own) were unforgivable, and it was their feminist consciousness that allowed them to see the misogyny they experienced at the hands of their mothers.

Since I began this project, I have continually encountered stories of abusive mothers, including several disturbing stories of daughters estranged from their famous feminist mothers. As I was writing this dissertation in 2024, Andrea Skinner, the youngest daughter of Canadian author Alice Munro, publicly revealed that her stepfather sexually abused her throughout her childhood (Skinner 2024). After learning of the abuse, Munro briefly left her husband, only to ultimately return to him. While this is harrowing enough, it is especially distressing in the context of Munro's career writing blisteringly insightful stories about abused children, negligent mothers, and marriages founded on secrets (Harvey 2024).

While I was reading for my comprehensive exams, I came across the story of how Rebecca Walker, the daughter of the renowned womanist and writer Alice Walker, became estranged from her mother. In 2008, she authored a scathing explanation of why she and her mother no longer spoke, titled "How my mother's fanatical feminist views tore us apart" (Walker 2008; Chideya 2008) and accused her mother of always resenting motherhood and neglecting her in response. She describes Alice as a "rabid feminist" and explains that she has come to understand her mother's behaviour when she was a child as unacceptable now that she is the mother to her own young son. The collapse between personal and political here is devastating as Walker goes on to use her own experience of a deprived childhood and desire to be a mother as a way to condemn feminism itself. She embraces childbearing as women's highest purpose,

writing: “Feminism has betrayed an entire generation of women into childlessness. It is devastating.” In defiance of her mother’s politics, Rebecca Walker comes to the opposite stance, and instead of seeing motherhood as burdensome, she argues that it is the only thing that can make a woman whole.

When I encounter these stories, I feel that I have failed to read the room with this project. Now seems like a bad time to arrive at conclusions about the importance of supportive mothers or the ways that daughters might need to offer more understanding to their mothers. I have never claimed generalizability about any aspect of this project, but I sometimes feel that I am speaking over daughters with stories of abusive mothers when I offer my analysis of how much mothers and daughters rely on each other and provide both personal and political support. I even feel similarly when I talk about my own mother and describe the unique absurdity of my life as a queer with a positive experience of organized Christianity. I am lucky to have evaded the same structural violences that have crushed so many of my peers, and I am not always sure what insights I can really offer from such a privileged standpoint.

However, despite its limitations, this project can offer a counternarrative to the instances when mother-daughter relationships are a site of oppression rather than solidarity. The stories that my participants share demonstrate that something else is possible in a world where mothers and daughters often struggle to care for each other. I concluded the final analysis chapter, Chapter Seven, with Eleanor and Buffy because they feel that they have already arrived in their ideal future. They position themselves as a model for a feminist future because they know that the openness and support in their relationship is unusual, but they show that it can be possible. Stories of queer, and particularly trans, young people are often rendered through a prism of risk, rejection, and violence. This emphasis can offer an honest depiction of their lives and incite the needed urgency to improve their conditions, but it also solidifies their status as abject subjects (Bryan 2019; Gilbert et al. 2018). Though the risk is real, it is not the totality of queer young people’s existence, and moments of joy and resistance are also worth illuminating.

Some Final Thoughts on Daughtering

These questions about mothers bring me back to this project’s central questions about daughters. What does it mean to be a daughter? Is it a role we perform or a station that just sort of happens to us? What does it mean to be a good daughter? A good daughter to feminism? A good daughter to your parents? What does it mean to *want* to be a good daughter? These are not

questions I have managed to fully answer in this project, but they remain compelling to me. Being a girl is always a site of becoming, and so is being a daughter. This role is always unfolding and changing across the lifespan. Despite seeming confined to the domestic sphere, daughtering, as both a role and a practice, often extends into the political. Young people often use their status as children to make certain political appeals to the adults in power. Using one's status as a child, particularly the child of a specific group or movement, is also not off the table for adults. It has not been uncommon for women to leverage their position as daughters for their political organizing.

This kind of political daughtering emphasizes a particular kind of continuity, and this type of lineage- and family-centric organizing is conservative and revolves around maintaining something that already exists. Organizations like Daughters of the American Revolution, for example, require members to trace their ancestry back to someone who participated in the revolution, and until recently, this has meant only white women with access to legible records of their genealogy have been able to join. Many more explicitly white supremacist organizations, like Daughters of the Confederacy or Daughters of Empire, also use daughters in their names. White women's use of daughters in the names of these organizations emphasizes their sense of their birthright to a system of oppression that they did not create (they are dutiful daughters and not inciting mothers, after all) but will fight to maintain and inherit.

In these contexts, where women work to uphold the very systems that oppress them and others out of filial obligation, daughtering does not seem to hold much feminist potential. Feminists, who generally critique how the family positions women, have long pointed out that daughters are often regarded as a family's possession. In an article reflecting on her relationship with her father as a "Filipina, feminist/peminist, dutiful daughter," Celia T. Bardwell-Jones (2021) explains that her father abruptly disowned her when he realized she was published under her married name and not her maiden name, which was, of course, his name (384).

In a project that explores girls' political participation, it can feel demeaning to frame their activism through a role whose boundaries and obligations have been drawn by patriarchy. Girls have their own complex identities and experiences, but because they are marginalized by both their gender and age, their importance is often reduced to their connection to the nearest relevant adult. Emphasizing girls' status as daughters feels like a way to return them to the confines of the domestic sphere where they are tethered to supervising families instead of public actors with

their own agency. Daughtering is especially questionable at a moment when "tradwives" and other romanticized images of white patriarchal domesticity are circulating social media as an ideal for young women (Proctor 2022). Forgetting about daughtering may help to avoid the status quo where we are only inclined to care about girls because they are someone's daughter and that someone is the one who deserves our respect.

However, despite this cycle of prioritizing family connections over girls, I don't think it has to be this way. I'm not satisfied with the isolation of not being anyone's daughter because we always arrive late to a world that already exists. In "Affective Economies" (2004), Sara Ahmed describes how the affects of the everyday resonate through channels of "present histories." There is probably no clearer example of how history always haunts the present than in what is expected of daughters. Daughtering is something girls do, and there are possibilities for doing daughtering differently, even if past expectations still contour these possibilities in the present. Daughtering can be a way to describe how systems of knowledge and obligation pass between generations, and this does not have to be a strictly linear and hierarchical process. While knowledge may be said to pass "down" to daughters, this process is not unidirectional nor stops once daughters begin transferring knowledge to their own parents and children.

We are inevitably connected to other people in ways that are both sustaining and confining – we can choose to connect ourselves to some people and be hopelessly stuck to others. This sticking is direct when adhered to real living people and one's current environment and indirect when we think of broader kinships and categories like our connections to concepts and communities like race or religion. Daughtering also provides a focused look at the relationships between girls and adults and questions about how to conceptualize the tensions between young people needing adult guidance but also needing space away from their parents to develop their own worldview.

Girls often feel this daughterly tension of loving their parents but not wanting to repeat their lives or choices. The love that connects family members also makes it difficult to simply walk away from an unfulfilling family situation or trajectory. Returning to Bardwell-Jones (2021), though her father had moved to reject her, she could not simply reject her family and the Filipina identity and history that came with them:

> …the social obligation of the daughter to understand the stance of resistance of the family to racism may result in maintaining a position of subordination in which the

> two ethical impulses are at odds with each other. The dutiful Filipina daughter's interest in resisting social injustice grates upon and informs the social obligation of the family. The compliance with the expectations of amor propio, which might involve accepting the limits placed on one's autonomy and personal decision-making, leaves a resonance, a mood of a feminist acting in bad faith. The Cordelian option of desertion might look more appealing and perhaps more feminist. But would desertion really be feminist and could the act be regarded as consistent with Filipino culture enacted by a genuine Filipina daughter, one whose elemental claim to the family centrally defines her identity? (388)

For Bardwell-Jones, her role as a Filipina daughter connected her to much more than her parents, and she cites Jane Addam's description of daughter as an "elemental claim" that is impossible to abandon and Gloria Anzaldúa's rendering of borderlands and the difficulty but necessity of returning home. She models her reflection after theirs because of this enduring conflict, saying: "I'm inspired by these simultaneous acts of criticism against the family that yet pause on complete abandonment." (389). It is this sense of the enduringness of daughtering and its ability to both connect with and critique the family that interests me. Far from just a diminutive position beholden to tradition and the past, in many ways, it is the daughter who gets the final say on the family.

I will again return to *"The Conversation Begins: Mothers and Daughters Talk About Living Feminism"* (1996), a collection of essays by feminist mothers and their daughters. Mother-daughter co-authors Christina Looper Baker and Christina Baker-Kline describe the dynamic between mother and daughter with the following:

> Mothers have, at least partially, established their identities before a daughter is born, whereas a daughter, in discussing her experiences, is reflecting on a relationship with a powerful figure against whom she has measured herself her entire life. At the same time, daughters have enormous power in the relationship–the power of judging. (xviii)

It is the daughter who decides if her family was correct in what they set out for her and if she wishes to carry it forward.

At the same time, the judging daughter, despite her feminist potential, is also inclined to maintain her connection to the family precisely by devaluing her own mother. Mary E. Thomas (2008) found that as teenage girls navigate a fledgling feminist consciousness, they become intensely critical of the ways that their mothers replicate normative femininity and appear passive in their relationships with men. However, even as they expressed these condemnations of

their mothers, they replicated normative femininity themselves. These girls were able to understand that they engaged in a complex inner negotiation between societal gender expectations, feminist consciousness, and personal wants but could not yet extend this benefit of the doubt to their mothers.

However, other daughters are able to recognize that even though they know their mothers intimately, their assessment of their mothers is still coloured by misogyny. Throughout the interviews with participants, the mothers and daughters alike would reflect on the conditions that led them to view their mothers in certain ways and how this perception shifted as they aged and came to recognize the social context that shaped their relationship. One participant, Brett, gave an especially astute reflection on the ways sexism shapes mother-daughter relationships. At twenty years old, Brett was not only an experienced activist and published feminist thinker but also lived on her own. At the time of our interview, she was reflecting on her relationship with her mother now that she was an independent adult and how her dynamic with her mother both had and had not changed. As we discussed this, she recalled the ways that a patriarchal society will often pit mothers and daughters against each other and how daughters will vilify their mothers, thinking this will spare them their mothers' fate:

Hannah Maitland 49:16
And how do you feel about that transition that you and your mom are both adults now with an adult relationship?

Brett 49:23
Um, I feel good about it. I think that sometimes I feel sad because I feel like me and my mom never really got to have like a, like a caregiver-child relationship in the traditional sense, but I don't know maybe that's, I don't know how many people actually really get that [laughs]. Because everybody's like, it's it's hard to be a mother. Recently, I've been just thinking a lot about like man, it is so hard to be a mother. Do, had; you know that quote? It's been like all over the internet recently that's like, like often daughter and father like join forces against the mother Do you know what I'm talking about?

Hannah Maitland 50:12
I think so? in, I'm not quite-

Brett 50:15
Can I read it?

Hannah Maitland 50:16

Sure!

Brett 50:32
Okay, it says: "often father and daughter look down on mother together they exchanged meaningful glances when she misses a point, they agree that she is not as bright as they are, cannot reason as they do. But this collusion does not save the daughter from the mother's fate." It's from "radical feminist therapy working in the context of violence." And I read that, I read that quote, like a year ago, and I was, "man! It's so hard to be a woman." And that was definitely like a big part of my childhood, I guess, sort of that relationship between me and my father and my mother. And I thought about it a lot. And I was like, "I'm never doing that again." And now I forgot what the original question was [laughs]. Sorry. Um, okay. What was the original question?

Brett 52:13
Yes, yes. I think it's also hard to be a daughter, I think it's hard to be an eldest daughter, in perhaps a unique way, which I am, and because I think, I think often, the mother can view the daughter as a vehicle, for all of the things that she wanted to have or felt were taken from her. In some ways, like, either through the experience of motherhood, or through whatever problems she's had in her life. I think it's like a pretty common thing that people write or talk about, like mothers trying to live vicariously through their daughters, or trying to view their daughter's successes as their successes, and likewise with their failures and stuff like that. Which is all things that have been present in me and my mother's relationship, but not really, to a notable extent, just to the extent that I think they're present in maybe most relationships. But yeah, I mean, the thing about me and my, me and my mother, is that a lot of the problems, or the, you know, traumas or whatever, from our relationship weren't because of anything she did wrong. They were like, because of things like illness and disability and death and things that are kind of harder to point a finger at. (Brett Solo Interview)

As Brett explains, she is quoting from Bonnie Burstow's *Radical Feminist Therapy: Working in the Context of Violence* (1992). The book looks specifically at violence against women and how women respond to violence; how women participate in violence against themselves and each other in an attempt to individually avoid the consequences of a system they cannot escape. Daughters often fear becoming their mothers because they fear inheriting their marginalized position. The judgment that Brett issues about her relationship with her mother is not harsh or rejecting but understanding. She has come to the conclusion that she should resist the temptation to uplift herself by judging her mother negatively and instead contextualize her mother's actions within the overwhelming difficulty of existing as a woman and a mother. The mother-daughter relationship is also a crowded relationship where death, illness and other things

beyond anyone's control create the unavoidable traumas of life. The judging daughter is not just a punitive figure (though they can take on that role) but one who judges the context that shaped her mother and their relationship. Most daughters come to recognize that they will also exist in a social context where they will struggle to avoid repeating harmful attitudes and behaviours, but this realization does not actually resolve what has transpired between mother and daughter; even if it makes it legible.

Her view of mothers is not wholly exonerating, and Brett points out that the mother can view the daughter as a "vehicle" to express her own wants and losses. She notes that these are all things that have been present in her and her mother's relationship but moves quickly away from this point and returns to positioning this experience into a more universal perspective on relationships:

> **Brett** 48:22
> Yeah, yeah, I would say I do. Um, yeah, it's I don't know, I think I think that I do. But it's kind of hard, because I still never want my mom to feel bad about anything. And ever since we talked about [laughs] ever since we like talked about that specific thing where I never wanted her to feel bad. Every time that we'll like talk about anything. This is mostly just funny. This isn't like a real problem. Any, anytime we like talk about anything, and I like comfort her on any level, she's like, "You don't have to comfort me! You're the daughter, I'm the mother," like cuz she's like, read all these books and stuff like that, which I just think is cute, mostly. But yeah, we talk about it a lot more and in a way that I guess, is healthier and more responsible. And I feel like our relationship is more that of adults. Now, in part because I'm more of an adult. (Brett Solo Interview)

As a young adult entering a new stage of independence, Brett was coming to the conclusion that much of adult life is still uncontrollable. The mother's inability to prevent life's frustrations from reaching her relationship with her children is understandable— and this is something the daughter can empathize with intimately as a woman— but this reality is still painful. It is perhaps because it is painful that Brett wants the pain to at least not come from her, and she never wants her mom to feel bad about anything because she loves her. It is difficult to live with this emotionally fraught sense of understanding that your mother is human while still acknowledging that she failed or harmed you in some way.

This is where daughtering is distinct from girlhood or young womanhood. The distinction is not just created by time, where mothers are older women who have already experienced what contemporary girls will encounter, or by the fact that mothers are part of the structures of what

girlhood is like, but because mothers and daughters are supposed to love each other in a way that should overcome all this.

These tensions between judgment and forgiveness, resentment and understanding, and continuity and abandonment all return to the question of what daughters want. Brett's description of mothers seeing daughters as a vehicle for their own wants and losses indicates a site of desire where mothers want something for themselves through their daughters. Daughtering is a role structured through what others want for the daughter and how the daughter wants to be in relation to whatever and whoever it is that constitutes their parents.

Returning to Brett and her assessment of what it means to be a daughter, it is important to note that Brett never put me in touch with her mother after her solo interview. There could be any number of reasons for this, and it is possible that her mother was simply not in good health at the time. However, while I will never know for sure, I am left to wonder if Brett decided that her daughterly responsibility was to protect her mother from not only this research but also from some of the opinions she had expressed during the interview.

Research Objectives

This dissertation set out to examine the contemporary everyday political lives of girls in the era of the spectacularized activist girl. It explores how girls negotiate and feel about their activism, their place within ongoing social movements, and their relationships with their mothers and communities. When I began the project, I argued that mother-daughter relationships have been underexplored in girls' studies, and I interrogate how girls' roles as daughters inform their political worldviews to explore the connections between the personal and political in girls' lives. The overarching goal of this project is to complicate popular images of girl activists as singular, heroic, and exceptional by centring everyday girls' activist efforts without isolating their political actions from their family and community contexts. I analyzed the mother-daughter interviews through feminist affect theory and an adapted psychosocial model to gain a deeper understanding of not only what politicized girls and their mothers are doing, but also how their thoughts, feelings, and desires inform and resonate through these actions.

The findings from the participants did affirm that close relationships are significant to girls' politics. The process of contextualizing their activist commitments in their family relationships and wider cultural conversations around feminism and activism revealed that the daughter cohort thought deeply about how their actions impacted others and how they were

perceived by others. In fact, I found that the personal and political were so intertwined that both mothers and daughters emphasized their early relationships with family members when narrating their stories of developing their activist and feminist consciousness. Whether these relationships served as positive or negative examples, they were still significant in shaping how the mothers and daughters situated their identities as feminists and activists.

While this blend of personal and political histories proved significant, a major theme was the ambivalent inheritances of daughterhood. As the participants worked towards what they saw as an ideal (or at least possible) future with their work, they had to negotiate what strategies, identities, relationships, and ideologies from their past and present that they wanted to reject and carry forward. Both mothers and daughters are in a constant state of becoming, where they never reach a finalized identity, political stance, or relationship dynamic. The mothers were no firmer in their beliefs than their daughters, and they were just as immersed in the process of figuring out how to navigate the world. The process of negotiation does not end with childhood, and, in fact, I argue that girlhood persists. Memories and ongoing personal evolution continually bring girlhood to the surface, at times even returning mothers to the feelings and perspectives of their own girlhood or a moment of alignment with their daughters. Both cohorts reported that discussing activism, the news, and their encounters with new ways of thinking about the world with each other was a significant way to both develop and sustain the confidence and conviction to take public action. As I argued in the last analysis chapter, shifting notions of gender identity and expression emerged as a salient example of the affective negotiations that take place between mothers and daughters as they navigate a world where gender seems to be changing, and what that means for their politics and relationship.

Limitations and Contributions

As I wrote about this project in a recent article (Maitland 2024), this entire undertaking often felt like a bad idea, because it could not capture something as vast as political participation or mother-daughter relationships. When people ask me about my project findings, I am never able to answer because I do not believe there is anything conclusive enough to assert. This project was both too big and too small, and there are moments throughout this dissertation where all the ideas do not quite cohere. The scope and sample size of this small project, and the limitations of the researcher, have created significant gaps and limitations in this project overall.

Although I have not positioned my participants as representative of any kind of universal experience, it is still worth putting the small sample size into perspective. There were only eleven daughters and eight mothers interviewed here, and when I offer statements such as "most" or "many" about the interviewee's perspectives, I am only referring to something like seven or eight members of a cohort. As I explained in Chapter Three, because this was a voluntary study with people not in my immediate circle, it attracted a narrow demographic of participants. I have already explained that the only mothers and daughters who came forward to participate were ones who had a positive or at least civil enough relationship to sit together and discuss it with a stranger. This dynamic does not apply to all mother daughter relationships, and one of this study's limitations is that it does not capture more strained or estranged relationships.

Another limit of the method is that many activists, particularly those involved in more radical organizing or who have already experienced arrest/other policing, have no incentive to talk to an unknown researcher. I was intentional about recruiting participants who were not in my immediate circle because I felt that some distance would make it easier to discuss mother-daughter relationships without creating a situation where a colleague felt obligated to participate for my sake or that I was prying into the private life of someone I would keep running into at protests. There are advantages to this distance, and sometimes, it is easier to talk about the tangle of personal and political life with a stranger. However, this method comes with consequences. Because I was not researching with young people or adults with whom I had an existing relationship, participants were not aware of my politics, did not know if I intended to interfere with their work or publicize sensitive organizing information, and had no way of knowing if I was inclined to report participants to the police. Even though the study promised anonymity, people who do not know me do not know if I can be trusted to keep such a promise. Activism encompasses a spectrum of activities, and some of those activities are dangerous or otherwise high-risk. This study employed a method that ultimately excluded participants engaged in this kind of activism because it did not allow time for me to develop a strong enough rapport with participants to hold the kinds of sensitive information that might come with halting a shipment of weapons or disabling logging equipment.

As a result of these methodological limitations, the participants were overwhelmingly white and middle-class, with significant access to education and other resources. While there is value in exploring how girls with access to hegemonic systems of power engage in the same

activist work that could disrupt the very systems that benefit them, this perspective is already the norm in much of girls' studies. While I engaged with this critique of the field in the literature review, girls' studies has struggled to disrupt the hegemonic cis, white, able-bodied, middle-class, heterosexual girl as *the* girl, and this project has not helped to disrupt this hegemon either. Due to the lack of a diverse sample, I have largely failed to substantively capture race as a significant factor in activism or mother-daughter relationships in this study. Though participants like Dani, Daisy, Nicole, and Jessica often offered insights into how their experiences as people of colour significantly impacted their politics and relationships with their mothers and daughters, there is still a need for work that truly centres race in its analysis. There are many significant intersections that shape how the personal and political intersect in mothers' and daughters' lives, and I regret my inability to explore more of them in this project.

I also did not engage very thoroughly with motherhood studies in this project. My goal was to limit the scope of this project to how mothers appear and disappear in works that focus specifically on girls. Even though motherhood studies contains significant research on political participation and mother-daughter relationships, and I have cited some in this project (Story 2014; Rich 1995; Rose 2019; alt et al. 2016; Bulbeck 2010), I did not think that I had the capacity to fully explore motherhood studies in the detail that it requires. Though I have been interested in the experiences of the mother cohort, I was also trying to intentionally engage with them through the lens of girl- and daughterhood. Additionally, while I am a daughter, and I was (and perhaps still am) a girl, I am not a mother. While I believe that researchers can and ultimately should study communities beyond their personal experience, I also argue that such work requires a particular kind of depth, humility, and reflexivity. I did not feel personally equipped to claim any expertise on the lived reality of mothering or to authoritatively intervene in debates in the field of motherhood studies. By ultimately centring the project on girls and the process of "daughtering," I have sought to give it a more coherent and sustainable shape. I wanted to offer a thorough and focused contribution to girls' studies and did not feel I could quite offer the same to motherhood studies.

Although my focus on girls provided some scope for this project, the experiences and meanings of girlhood are still so vast that they have been difficult to capture here. My research set out to understand girlhood as an ongoing and relational practice and process of becoming, where what it means to be a girl is never static, but this unfinishedness is not a site of

incompleteness or lack. However, no matter how expansively or intersectionally the term is rendered, and as exciting as this orientation towards girlhood may be, "girl" has persisted as an unsatisfying category. I do not want to ensnare anyone in an identity they would rather leave behind. I wondered if daughter might be a better place to start and explore the kind of flexible fixity that keeps appearing across my interviewees and their lives.

However, even among people who identify as girls and women, the connection implied by daughter, not just the gendering of the term, may be the problem. For many daughters, their families are places where they have endured discrimination, rejection, and violence. For some, rejecting daughtering is a way to assert a rejection of oppressive familial bonds. Like most queers, I do not have an idyllic view of the family as it currently exists under white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. I am deeply wary of the ways that discussions of mothering, daughtering, and even women's relationships in this context can slide into romantic notions of gender essentialism that are then weaponized against trans people and people of colour.

Daughterhood may not be any different from girlhood in a meaningful sense, and it also sticks people together in ways that are both welcome and unwelcome. Questions surrounding what constitutes a family and who is recognized socially and legally as mothers, daughters, and other kinds of kin are embedded in histories of white supremacy, colonization, and eugenics that continue to resonate in even the most generous conceptions of what makes a family. Daughter remains overwhelming in its history and meaning, and these layers of complexity defy simplistic resolutions to questions of what this relationship means, what material realities it involves, and who can and cannot inhabit it.

One of the significant research conditions, and therefore, limitations of this project is the researcher. This project argues that context matters and feelings should be taken seriously, and the researcher is implicated in both central tenets of the research. My position as an educated, middle-class white woman not only contours my perspective as someone with access to hegemonic systems of power but also influences how research participants respond to me and whether they view me as trustworthy. While I believe it is important to disclose this information, the risk in revealing my identity and social location is that the researcher's position overshadows or distracts from the actual subject of the research. While I want to be mindful of how my own limited perspective informs my interpretation of the interviews, I did not want this project to devolve too far into an exploration of just my own politics, relationships, and other issues.

I was never quite sure how or when to appear in this work and if I should include some kind of positionality statement. A positionality statement in the form of a bulleted list of identities assumes those identities have fixed meanings that coherently align with systems of power and domination. It is also easy to assert privilege—especially because this is now a normative process that does not actually require any real vulnerability or sacrifice. Declaring identities does not fully provide insight into how power operated in the interviews or the rest of the research, and by examining their position, many privileged researchers end up reifying the idea that their hegemonic social location is the proper vantage point for conducting research. International relations scholars Gani and Khan (2024, 6), for example, assert that positionality statements are just colonial narcissism that reifies the white researcher as a real researcher and reinscribes a power dynamic where others exist only to serve white self-actualization. By declaring that I am a middle-class, cisgender, white settler, lesbian woman, I am not necessarily engaging with what any of that means. For someone with a list like mine, there are no real risks to openly declaring the identities. If anything, the list operates not as a tool to mitigate power but as a credential to assert that I am the usual kind of researcher in my field.

I theorize political mothers and daughters as defended subjects who desire to hold things together amid life's many contradictions, and I am also a defended subject uncomfortable with allowing my own dissonant thoughts to be exposed. It is, for example, significant that I have long understood that telling people my parents are priests often rapidly changes their opinion of me. I feel myself scrambling to dig their impression of me back out from under the weight of Christianity. I become defensive and reassure them that despite my being gay, they're not like that, and neither am I (whatever that means). I can't get too defensive because I do not want to get into apologetics. I often cannot help but project my personal experience of what it means to tell someone about my mother onto my research participants, leading me to assume that others are similarly wary of offering up biographical details. This is also one of those instances where being a queer researcher doesn't provide radical liberatory insights but just projects the injury of the closet over and over again—I can't shake the idea that asking people questions about their home life is equivalent to outing them.

In some ways, this is an advantageous sensitivity. When people did not seem comfortable or interested in sharing more about a topic, even if it seemed banal, I would move on rather than force a disclosure. In other ways, assuming that other people spend their time anxiously

calculating if revealing the wrong biographical detail will ruin their lives is a warped perspective that does not offer enough space for participants to express things that they feel are important to declare, even if the declaration is painful. As much as all this unmanaged anxiety is embarrassing to admit, the researcher significantly contributes to the research conditions.

I was very committed to the idea that what I was doing was somehow violent in ways I now regret. This was a voluntary study where the participants did not know me and had no reason to feel that they had to engage in the research for my sake. Still, I imagined that I was prying into places I did not have the right to access and was unqualified to assess. I now see the irony in attempting to take girls and their mothers seriously as political people while underestimating their ability to consent to research. If I had been more open to the idea that people could talk about themselves excitedly, rather than begrudgingly, I think I could have had more fruitful conversations. Sometimes, people do want to share painful details as a way to reclaim power over their experiences. If I can trust that girls have the capacity to intervene in the systemic issues in their local communities, then it stands to reason that these same girls can approach participating in research as an extension of their activist goals.

I am glad I took the risks of this work seriously and was not cavalier about the fact that many mothers and daughters have profoundly negative and abusive relationships. I was not wrong to be aware that mothers and daughters might coerce each other to participate in order to keep up appearances about the family, settle the score on some longstanding conflict, or humiliate one other. It was possible that this research could create an inciting incident where profoundly distressing traumas could be resurfaced, destructive secrets revealed, or an insubordinate daughter could be thrown out of their home. Even the most gregarious and open people have secrets or topics they simply aren't comfortable discussing. It was good to be cautious, but this cautiousness has left a particular mark on this work.

At the same time, while there is still a great deal of unfinished business in this dissertation, this project does make some significant contributions to girls' studies. Amid the many ebbs and flows of feminism and youth activism it is important to capture a moment in time and understand the concerns and motivations of young people at the beginning of the 2020s. Beginning with the COVID-19 pandemic, the decade seems to be one of significant cultural and political change and girls are part of these changes.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the method applied in this project does offer some innovations for girls' studies that can be explored in further research. Interviewing young daughters and their mothers together proved to be a viable method for engaging with girls' politics and helped to contextualize their political participation in their family relationships. My work adds to the existing scholarship that explores intergenerational relationships between youth activists and adults and questions of how adults can research with young people. This project helps to push the field toward further developing further approaches for studying mother-daughter relationships in ways that centre girls and offer liberatory feminist perspectives on this relationship. This dissertation offers an exploration of the affects and inner worlds of daughters and mothers and insists that they are important. It demonstrates that activism is emotional work and these emotions are a site of expertise.

The most significant contribution from this dissertation is the notion of daughtering as a generative way to think about activist girls and the coalescences between the personal and political that emerge in feminist work and identity. By using daughterhood as the locus of connections between girls' political participation and family relationships, girls emerge as people inhabiting a unique social location at the intersection of their age and gender, but in a way that does not isolate them or disconnect their political activism from their family and community contexts. Daughtering is both a practice and a role and the participants in this study, particularly Stea, offered some ways to queer the taken-for-granted norms of this position. Daughterhood may be fraught, but its ambivalences are worth exploring further

People often ask if I will study sons or fathers next and I often feel that they are asking me when I will get to the serious work of talking about men. Though feminists have long wrestled with the political and social significance of mother-daughter relationships, the notion that women and girls are serious people to be taken seriously is still not a universal belief. As frustrating as this is, these comments reaffirm the necessity of doing feminist work that positions girls as significant political actors and sees mothers as potential allies and collaborators instead of just members of a fading past generation. Returning to the notion that the personal is political, I agree that mothers and daughters are "really neat people" (Hanisch 1970, 5) whose complex feelings and inner lives are not problems to be solved or minor notes in feminist history.

9. Bibliography

Chapter 1 Introduction

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Chapter 2 Who's Afraid of Mary Pipher? Looking for the Mother-Daughter Relationship in the Girls' Studies Literature

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Appendix I

Sample Interviewing Protocol

Introduction
Discuss the project and goals for "Daughtering the Movement: Girls, their feminism, and their mothers"

1. Before we begin, do you have any questions about the research or research process?
2. How would you like to introduce yourself? Any Identifying information will be anonymous

Sample Interview Questions

Daughters

What did/do you most want to be when you grow up?
What's it like being an activist?
What is your favourite part of your activism?
What inspires your activism?

How would you describe your mother? How do you think she would describe you?
What is your relationship like?
What does your mother think of your activism?

Is feminism part of your activism?
Can you describe how you came to be a feminist?
Are there any relationships that are important to your feminism?

Mothers

What did/do you most want to be when you grow up?
What is/was your activism experience like?

Can you describe how you came to be a feminist?
Has your experience of motherhood influenced how you understand feminism and activism?
Are there any relationships that are important to your feminism?

How would you describe your daughter? How do you think she would describe you?
What is it like seeing your daughter involved in activism?
Has that changed your relationship?

Together

What is your favourite thing to do together?

How has feminist activism changed your relationship?
Do you two participate in feminist activism together?
Do you discuss feminism together? What are those discussions like? What do you talk about?

How do you feel about the future?
What kind of future do you want for yourselves? Each other?