

(UN)COVERING: EXAMINING HOW FEMALE YOUTH IN TORONTO SCHOOLS USE
STYLE TO CONTEST NORMATIVE IDEALS OF GIRLHOOD

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Abstract

This thesis examines how girls in Canadian schools contest dress codes in order to negotiate their identity. I will engage in a critical dialogue that reshapes the discourse of women's equality in new ways by refocusing our attention towards how young girls negotiate in the gaps and fissures of the normative ideal to contest and expand the narrative of girlhood. This research has broad social implications for both educational institutions and society to examine how patriarchal and colonial discourses seek to control female students' bodies and how female students' respond in the moments of interruption to enact power, agency and construct their identity. It will also demonstrate how educational institutions can deny contestations of the regulatory ideal by foreclosing female students' interruptions instead of allowing them to develop into a politics.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Students are required to dress for school in an appropriate manner that is respectful of TDSB policy, Provincial and Federal Laws and community standards for a learning environment. Unacceptable dress includes but is not limited to: visible undergarments, tops not meeting bottoms, spaghetti straps, strapless tops, beach attire, bandanas, clothing with offensive language or depictions, gang insignia, etc.
—“Dress Code” Riverdale Collegiate Institute

1.1 Statement of the Problem

On June 23, 2003 the Harris conservative government passed the *Safe Schools Act*, which included a mandate that all Ontario schools establish a code of conduct regarding appropriate dress. Bill 81, section 302, states: “If required to do so by the Minister, a board shall establish policies and guidelines respecting appropriate dress for pupils in schools within the board’s jurisdiction, and the policies and guidelines must address such matters and include such requirements as the Minister may specify.” Thus, the Ontario government enacted legislation that directly polices youths’ bodies. Moreover, these dress codes have been increasingly used in Ontario schools as a way to combat current fashion trends and govern female youths’ bodies to reproduce a normative ideal of girlhood. Female youth have been issued a moral imperative to cover up and be “responsible” for containing their own sexuality as well as that of their male peers.

In more contemporary discourses there has been increasing scrutiny over Muslim sartorial practices that, as Sharon Todd (2009) highlights, have been seen “as being antagonistic to ‘western’ ideas of gender equality” (p. 213). While contesting arguments are made concerning these two categories of female youth—oversexualized vs. oppressed—the aims of the discourses are similar, to produce the ideal female pupil for democratic citizenship. These two categories of

young women have been set up in binary opposition to one another by framing their difference in terms of religious versus secular.

Joan Wallach Scott (2011) illuminates the creation of this binary opposition in her essay “Secularism and Gender Equality”:

These days, secularism comes up frequently in discussions of Muslims, whose religion, it is said, hold on to values and ways of being at odds with modernity. In contemporary debates about Muslims—whether they can be integrated into the societies of Europe, whether their culture is fundamentally at odds with ‘ours,’ whether their values are compatible with political democracy—secularism is usually the unquestioned standard of judgement. It is taken to be an idea, either timeless or evolving, that signifies a universal project of human emancipation specifically including women . . . there is a particular focus on the plight of women in headscarves, veils, and burqas. (p. 25)

Students who wear revealing clothing and are subsequently disciplined by either teaching staff, administration or their peers harness the discourse of “individual freedom” or women’s emancipation to justify their dress. Their bodies are their own and thus not subject to covering up. The Western gaze, when turned on Muslim women’s bodies, echoes this discourse of secularism in order to pull young Muslim women along the secular westernized project of female emancipation. Scott’s (2011) discussion of the headscarf in French schools demonstrates how veiling becomes a binary opposition of oppression to western feminist notions of freedom: “Feminists in France and elsewhere have made similar arguments, epitomized perhaps by Elisabeth Badinter, who maintains that for women ‘the headscarf is a terrible symbol of submission’ associated with ‘religious imperialism’ that the secular state was designed to

combat” (p. 25-6). Rather than look inwards at the rampant gender inequality within our own Western societies we turn a supposedly secular, modern, and civilized gaze at other women and claim that they suffer oppression. This causes an erasure of our own gender inequality as we have an “other” to point to and claim that we are free because they are oppressed. Yet, young female students at both ends of the spectrum—those who are revealing too much of their bodies and those who are not revealing enough—have their bodies scrutinized and criticized for not adhering to an idealized notion of Canadian girlhood.

How can we claim the erasure of gender inequality in the Western world when over the last year in Canada we have faced a torrent of highly public sexual assault allegations: CBC’s Jian Gimeshi is currently charged with six sexual assaults, the entire men’s hockey team at the University of Ottawa is currently suspended over rape allegations, and Dalhousie has suspended thirteen male dentistry students over a violently misogynistic Facebook page. Moreover, on a local scale, if we have achieved gender equality and are in fact living in a post-feminist world, why then do Toronto School Board dress codes so heavily focus on female bodies? Why does the discourse surrounding these dress codes focus on the female students responsibly for containing their sexuality as well as the sexuality of their male counterparts? How does the historic role of women still cause tension between how we want our young girls to participate within society—as democratic citizens who are compassionate, nurturing, and pure—and how they are simultaneously sexualized and responsible for both containing and eliciting male desire? While we espouse idealized notions of purity, modesty, intelligence and caring for our young girls we still expect them to be gazed upon. Their bodies are still a site of male consumption. When students cover their bodies the resulting discomfort with the hiddenness disrupts our own notions of gender equality. We realise that we want, require, some form of exposure in order to maintain

heteronormative desire. The male members of society must be able to gaze and desire the submissive female members of society. There is a desired imaginary for female students' identity formation that seeks to uphold a certain kind of appropriate gendered subject formation that both these groups of students disrupt. Their bodies alone call these practices into question by exposing what Judith Butler (1990) refers to as the 'gaps and fissures' in the ideal (p. xix). We are uncomfortable with the appearance of these bodies because they expose heteronormative patriarchy within a supposedly gender equal, Western world. These students are not even always conscious of what they are doing, but are subconsciously reacting to tensions in the ideal, in the prescribed normative ideal, and are not even aware that they have done something 'wrong' until they are shamed in school either by being forced to change or hearing offhand comments from teachers that they are so pretty when they take off their veil.

This study examines how female youth in Toronto schools consider their style in relation to discourses of schooling by examining case studies of girls who are perceived as underexposed (wearing cultural garments that cover their bodies) and overexposed (wearing clothing that reveals their bodies). While looking for similarities it remains important to understand that this is not a universalizing project. The focus is on bringing together participants whose intersectionality brings a variety of different experiences to bear on the question of female subjectivity and looks for similarities (not sameness) in these negotiations. This study will analyze case studies, published interviews, and news media reports through the theoretical framework of Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity and Foucault's (1978) notion of "governmentality" in order to disrupt the binary oppositions between religious veiling and Westernized overexposure in order to examine how discursive practices operate similarly on young female students in Toronto schools.

1.2 Why Dress Codes?

Within the discourses of schooling the issue of student dress consistently arises. Many parents, educators, administrators and policy makers argue that dress codes and uniform policies provide a safer more inclusive school environment. Wendell Anderson (2002) argues in a report drawn from an extensive study on dress codes and uniform policies in the United States that “sincere concern with safety has been the overriding impetus toward the implementation of dress codes and uniform policies. Many educators, and also people in the community, firmly believe that if everyone in school dresses alike, or at least dresses similarly, there will be less violence” (Anderson no.pg.). Anderson summarizes the arguments made by supporters of dress codes into four perceived advantages: 1. Enhanced school safety 2. Improved learning climate 3. Higher self-esteem for students 4. Less stress on the family. What can be drawn from these responses is that uniforms make students recognizable as belonging within the school community. For school safety, that means outsiders become instantly visible. Improving learning climate implies that if all students look alike they will suddenly get along. Moreover, a belief that uniforms will alleviate stress for families implies that uniforms act as a means of erasure of socioeconomic status—what brands students can afford to buy—and parents will not be forking over money for every fleeting fashion trend. However, a 2009 study conducted by the National Centre for Education Statistics showed that dress codes and uniforms do not statistically enhance student test scores.

Moreover, uniform policies and dress codes cannot arguably erase the socioeconomic disparities or religious identifications within schools when one needs only look a little further, at students’ accessories, to make determinations about a person’s socioeconomic status or religious identification. The hijab becomes a very symbolic marker within Canadian politics of gender inequality and the desire by many to remove the veil stands as a symbolic gesture of women’s

liberation. Dress codes serve as a regulatory ideal. They offer an image of how a female student should appear in the space of the school and a point of contestation for female youth.

1.3 Literature Review

In this section I will introduce the major works that influence the dress code conversation and that provide a jumping off point for reading girls' whose style is considered too revealing and not revealing enough as similar performative acts. Rebecca Raby (2010, 2012), an ethnographer, argues that school rules gender, class, and racialize bodies and that school dress codes act through the processes of governmentality to internalize and normalize moral regulation. Raby's focus groups also reveal how young women negotiate between their "participation in the regulation of normative gender and sexuality and their concomitant contestation of such regulation" (p. 333). Raby's work is situated in the context of southern Ontario and looks at how young women actively shape constructions of gender. Meanwhile, Shauna Pomerantz (2007, 2008) links girls' style to the social context of the school and analyzes the interplay of discursive practices through which girls negotiate the creation of their "social skin." Pomerantz's explores the "contextual significance of girls' style as a mode of self-expression, identification, and agency" and argues that style is a performative act whereby youth make themselves into recognizable social beings (p 3).

Both Sharon Todd (1998, 2009) and Tanisha Ramachandran (2009) examine how constructions of Muslim women as oppressed Other constitute Canadian women subjectivity as free and equal subjects within western society. Ramachandran (2009) problematizes multicultural policies and details how within the Canadian context Muslim women's bodies are the new site upon which battles of liberation are being waged. Sharron Todd (1998, 2009) uses

psychoanalysis and ethical theory to examine how representational practices regarding the hijab seek to construct identity. Todd challenges educational institutions to look beyond simply tolerating religious and cultural difference and seeks to explain what the discourse reveals about ourselves: “for probing the relationship between self and other lying at the heart of the representational practises in order to apprehend more fully the dynamics that fuel acts of stereotyping and intolerance” (438). While Todd’s analytical framework is Lacanian, she does illustrate how the construction of the “other” sustains social groups and is used to develop one’s own subjectivity: “Such enquiry also allows them to discuss not only how those images serve the interests of those who do the representing, but also how they invite us (the readers, the consumers) to share a certain ‘social imaginary’ – that is, a certain fantasy of self and society. Taking this into consideration, antiracist and multicultural education cannot be content with educating for tolerance (with its implicit assumption that there is an ‘us’ who tolerates ‘them’), because the very categories of ‘them’ and ‘us’ are what need to be analyzed” (p. 440). The question we must ask is not why or why not a woman, or student within a Canadian school, chooses to veil, but what is our investment in that veiling.

Lori Beaman (2013) surveys the history of judicial and public regulation of women’s bodies within Canada through patriarchy and colonialism and argues that juxtaposing the two situations—women who are considered overdressed and underexposed with women who are underdressed and overexposed—reveals the “oddness of judicial and public regulation of women’s clothing” (p. 723). She “examines the shifting nature of equality discourse and the naming of women’s oppression; the near disappearance of patriarchy as an explanatory framework; and the quagmire of women’s agency” (p. 723). Beaman ends her essay by contending that instead “of banishing patriarchy we might shift our attention, then, to the ways in

which patriarchy's hydra-like manifestations impact different women's lives differently, but with a view to the similarity of effect. Thus it is possible that the criticism that one woman deserves to be sexually assaulted because she is wearing too little is part of the same monster that wants to rip the clothing off another woman” (p. 729). Beaman argues that we need to shift our focus when reading agency from a strictly simple binary that agency is something being denied to Muslim women while it is allocated to western women. Instead she argues that we need to focus on context, condition and similarity, in order to “illuminate commonalities that might invigorate a conversation about women’s equality” (p. 731).

1.4 Methodology

I will analyze how female students negotiate with dress codes in order to disruptive normative ideals of Canadian girlhood using the following conceptual frameworks as the basis for my methodology: Michael Foucault’s (1977-1984) work on governmentality, Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity, Daniel Yon’s (2000) notion of schooling as a discursive space and Joan Wallach Scott’s (2011) genealogy of the secular/religious divide in western societies. I will work conceptually with the aforementioned theorists to perform a discourse analysis of case studies, media reports, and published literature of female students who are considered overdressed and underdressed.

1.4.1 School Rules as a Function of Governmentality

Foucault developed the concept of governmentality in his lectures at the Collège de France from 1977-1984. Foucault, in his analysis of knowledge, power and the art of government came

to see power exercised not as an external top-down force, but as relational process that comes from below:

Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix—no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body. One must suppose rather that the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole. These then form a general line of force that traverses the local oppositions and links them together; to be sure, they also bring about redistributions, realignments, homogenizations, serial arrangements, and convergences of the force of relations. Major dominations are the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all these confrontations. (*History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* p. 94)

Certain codes of behaviour and certain discourses of knowledge become regulated and normalized through power relations that create hegemonic discourses about human activity. Foucault argues that in governments where population control is decentralized, governmentality arises as the “conduct of conduct.” William Walters (2012) articulates the change in governmental discipline: “Whereas the earlier concept of discipline draws attention to power in terms of its actions on bodies, government emphasizes indirect dimensions where elements of freedom, conscience and activities of self on self are all prominent . . . in these societies the exercise of power is also bound up with countless little techniques and knowledges (diets,

investment plans, goal setting) which we perform on ourselves and others” (p. 38-9). We internalize norms and govern ourselves in the belief of autonomous individuality.

Moreover, schools are part of Foucault’s *machinery of production*. Raby (2012) posits that dress codes act as moral regulators defining what is appropriate, encouraging certain behaviour while disciplining behaviour that deviates from established moral codes. Raby analyzes school rules through the lens of governmentality and demonstrates how “dress and discipline codes can be seen as sites of knowledge production (e.g., about the ‘respectable’ student or the ‘problem’ student), the internalization of discipline, and the creation of docile citizenship. Rather than resorting to direct social control, such neoliberal governance practices conceptualize people ‘as subjects of responsibility, autonomy and choice, seek to act upon them through shaping and utilizing their freedom” (Raby, 2012, p. 13). Schools’ dress codes are framed in such a way as to encourage students to respect, and take responsibility for, themselves and others. Thus, youth internalize discourses of ‘respectable citizenship,’ and discipline for breaking the moralized codes of conduct becomes naturalized, normal and reasonable. What it means to be a respectable, Canadian girl is defined and reinforced by the school dress codes, the administrators and teachers who enforce them, and the students who act as a self-governing body in terms of how they determine who is dressed *trendy* and *rightly*.

1.4.2 Schools as a Discursive Space

Foucault’s notion of governmentality and normalization open up schooling into a discursive space and do not foreclose the school environment into what Althusser would call a state apparatus whereby citizens are simply acted upon and interpolated into appropriate citizens. Schools are spaces in which identities are contested and created. Daniel Yon (2000) illustrates

how schools operate as discursive spaces: “The school, I argue, is not simply a container of identities or a static locale, but is implicated in the production of the identities of teachers and students. Conversely, the making of identities of its teachers and students is also the making of the school’s identity. Researching schooling as a discursive space consequently means juxtaposing the various fragments of discourses to consider how these act upon the actor’s views of what is going on” (*Elusive Culture* p. 32). By reading schools as discursive spaces, education becomes a site of identity contestation and creation wherein students subconsciously and consciously negotiate their identity. Thus, using Foucault and Yon to read schools as spaces that provide an opening for contestations we can see how students’ use style within the discursive space of the school to construct, contest and reaffirm identity. Yet, female students are not always conscious of their own contestations. Using Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity, we can see how female students appear in the gaps of the normative ideal and cause moments of rupture that *queer the norm*.

1.4.3 Reading Performativity

Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) conception of gender performativity can be brought in here to discuss female students and style. For Butler (1993) “sex” acts a “regulatory ideal,” it not “only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs . . . In other words, ‘sex’ is an ideal construct that is forcibly materialized through time” (p 1). The process of becoming intelligible within a cultural hegemony relies upon the reiteration of these norms through the process of performativity. We are produced through the discourse of societal gender norms and as such can only be recognized when our bodies materialize into the “heterosexual imperative” (p. 2). Butler (1990) cautions that performativity not be read as a

conscious, singular act: “I choose to perform my gender in this way today,” but rather as “a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (p. 8). Thus, performativity becomes the sustained reiteration of pre-conceptualized culturally and historically bound identity norms that through their reiteration become naturalized and essentialized. Masculinity and femininity become natural categories of identity and bodies that do not conform become abject, in need of control and regulation. Pomerantz (2007) argues:

Dress is part of what Haraway (1991) terms “border wars,” or attempts to fix the continually shifting boundaries between a proper and improper femininity, or a right and a wrong kind of girl. This regulatory power intersects with issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship, where a girl is either a welcomed subject in the school or cast as the “constitutive outside” (Butler, 1993, p. 3) whose presence is made abject by her failure to conform to “respectable” (white, middle-class, heteronormative) girlhood. (p. 373)

Performativity opens up a space for contestation in the “non-space of cultural collision” (Butler, 1993, p. 124). Because the regulatory ideal can never fully be realized there is space of ambivalence that haunts “heterosexual regimes” (p. 237). It is in this ambivalent space that Butler offers a space of subversion, what she terms *working the weakness in the norm*, or *queering the norm* (p. 237). It is in this space where there is a reworking of the terms of gendered identity and where students take up and challenge gendered norms.

1.4.4 Scott's Disruption of the Secular/Religious Divide

In order to uncover similarities between girls who are accused of exposing too much and those who are considered to be exposing too little, I must destabilize the secular/religious divide. Joan Wallach Scott's (2011) genealogy of the secular/religious divide calls "into question the simple oppositions—modern/traditional, secular/religious, sexually liberated/sexually oppressed, gender equality/patriarchal hierarchy, West/East" and argues that "secularism has not resolved the difficulties that sexual difference poses for social and political organization in modern western societies" ("Secularism and Gender Equality" p. 26). Scott's historical overview demonstrates how the secularization of the western political landscape did little to emancipate women and worked to further cement their place in the private sphere:

When reason becomes the defining attribute of the citizen and when abstraction enables the interchangeability of one individual citizen for another, passion gets assigned not just to the marital bed (or the chambers of the courtesan), but to the sexualized body of the woman. So it is that domestic harmony *and* public disorder are figured in female form; the angel in the house and the unruly *pétroleuse* are two sides of the same coin. Masculinity is confirmed in opposition to both these representations: men are the public face of the family and the reasoning arbiters of the realm of the political. Their existence as sexual beings is at once secured in relation to women and displaced onto them. The public/private demarcation so crucial to the secular/religious divide rests on a vision of sexual difference that legitimizes the political and social inequality of women and men." (p. 27)

I would argue that the secular/religious divide seeks to erase the inequality women face within secular societies by holding up a binary opposition of Muslim oppression of women, using the

veil as an overtly visible symbol of religious oppression. As Scott states: “It is precisely the gender (and other) discriminations which remain in secular societies that are obscured when secularism and religion are categorically counterposed. That is because gender—the assignment of normative roles to men and women—is most often taken as an entirely social phenomenon; the psychic dilemmas presented by sexual difference are not taken into account. When they are, we may find that processes of secularization have, historically, served to intensify rather than relieve the dilemmas that attend sexual difference” (30). In this erasure we hold women, and girls, in binary opposition to each other, rather than seeking similarities that work towards a more powerful conversation about gender inequality. Taking up Scott’s discussion and applying it to Canadian schools I will demonstrate how these binary oppositions start to operate similarly on young female students who are both overexposed and underexposed.

1.4.5 Troubling Agency

In order to reframe how female students who veil contest regulatory ideals and become agents in their own identity formation I must interrogate western notions of agency. Thus, another theoretical consideration for this project is how western notions of agency are conceptualized. Scott (2011) states: “In definitions of secularism, the matter of equality is often linked to the autonomous agency of freely choosing individuals, the preeminent subjects of secularism. They are depicted as freely choosing, immune to the pressures that traditional communities bring to bear on their members. (p. 34). Scott, citing Saba Mahmood, uses Foucault’s definition of subjectivation to form the basis for “a strong critique of the insistence on individual autonomy in some secular feminist emancipatory discourse” and argues that “agentival capacity is entailed not only in resistance to norms, but in the multiple ways one

inhabits those norms” (p. 35). Scott, echoing Butler, further argues: “Agency, then, is not the innate property of an abstract individual, but the attribute of subjects who are defined by—subjected to—discourses that bring them into being as at once subordinate and capable of action. It follows that religious belief does not in itself deny agency; rather, it creates particular forms of agency whose meanings and history are not transparently signalled by the wearing of a veil” (p. 40). By analyzing how female students resist and inhabit norms, acts of agency begin to appear from both categories of girls and similarities can be discovered.

1.5 Analysis

Using Butler, Foucault, Yon and Scott will allow me to analyze how female students appear within the discursive space of the school, how they view that appearance, and whether or not the educative space opens up to possibilities for resistance.

In Chapter 2 I will examine case studies of female students in Ontario and Quebec secondary schools who have been told they violated the school dress code by not wearing enough clothing. I will use Foucault and Butler as a framework for reading the media representations, student interpretation, and community reaction to the students’ transgressions. I will also examine published focus group discussions regarding the topic of underdressing.

In Chapter 3 I will examine case studies and published focus group interviews with female students in Canada who choose to veil and examine the concept of “responsibility” to their religious community and how that informs identity construction within Canadian schools.

In Chapter 4 I will use Joan Wallach Scott’s work to trouble the religious/secular binary and discover the similarities that Lori Beaman argues will illuminate conversations about women’s equality. This chapter will engage with how girls use the discursive space of schooling

to construct identity and contest normative ideals of Canadian girlhood within the discursive space of schooling. This chapter will also engage with the limit to female students' agency when their interruptions are not taken up in a pedagogical questioning and helped to develop into a politics.

In this thesis I will engage in a critical dialogue that reshapes the discourse of women's equality in new ways by refocusing our attention towards how young girls negotiate in the gaps and fissures of the normative ideal to contest and expand the narrative of girlhood. This research has broad social implications for both educational institutions and society to examine how patriarchal and colonial discourses seek to control female students' bodies and how female students' respond in the moments of interruption to enact power, agency and construct their identity. It will also demonstrate how educational institutions can deny contestations of the regulatory ideal by foreclosing female students' interruptions instead of allowing them to develop into a politics.

Chapter 2: Contesting Hemlines, Negotiating Undergarments

A Dress Code strikes a balance between expression and the expectation of society for appropriate attire in a shared workplace. In order to promote an orderly learning environment at Earl Haig, in accordance with Ministry and Board Regulations, the School Council has drafted the following guidelines for student dress . . . Students shall wear clothing of such a style and design as shall be consistent with community standards. —“Dress Code” Earl Haig Secondary School

In this chapter, I will look at three cases of dress code rebellion that attracted media attention and “excited” public debate about whether or not Canadian school dress codes are sexist. The first case is that of Simone St. Louis-Anderson who, in sixth grade, successfully argued that tank top strap regulations should be relaxed from the width of four fingers to that of two, and who is currently looking to have the hemline requirements adjusted now that she is in eighth grade. The second case involves a very public social media campaign against body shaming started by Lindsey Stocker after she was told by her Quebec school administrators to cover up her “distracting legs”. The third case is Tallie Doyle’s conscious violation of her Ottawa public school’s dress code in the hopes of starting a conversation about how the dress code disproportionately targets female students at her school. When the space of schooling is viewed as a discursive space then St. Louis-Anderson’s, Stocker’s and Doyle’s acts of dress code rebellion can be seen as a more complex reworking of gender norms. I will use Foucault (1977-1984), Butler (1990, 1993) and Yon (2000) to analyze how Canadian girls who are labelled as “underdressed” by school communities negotiate the discursive space of the school in order to disrupt normative ideals of girlhood and create moments of agency within identity construction. As Yon (2000) states:

The school . . . is not simply a container of identities or a static locale, but is complicated in the production of the identities of teachers and students.

Conversely, the making of the identities of its teachers and students is also the

making of the school's identity. Researching schooling as a discursive space, consequently means juxtaposing various fragments of discourses to consider how these act upon the actor's views of what is going on . . . how the past, present, and future are imagined and what discourses and associations are summoned in these imaginings. (p. 7-8)

I argue that these three examples of dress code rebellion are critical moments of disruption that summon feminist discourses in order to expose dress codes as regulatory practices that attempt to shape how female students' bodies appear in schools while reworking normative ideals of Canadian girlhood.

2.1 Dress Codes as Discourse

Defining discourse is important here. According to Yon (2000) in the field of identity studies:

. . . discourse is defined as a collection of statements and ideas that produces networks of meanings. These networks structure the possibilities for thinking and talking and become the conceptual framework and the classificatory models for mapping the world around us. Discourse shapes how we come to think and produce new knowledge, and facilitates shared understandings and engagements. Important to note, however, is that even as discourse facilitates thoughts and actions it may also work to constrain, as it sets up the parameters, limits, and blind spots of thinking and acting . . . In other words, discourse is both enabling and constraining. (p. 4)

Dress codes are discursive because they are statements and ideas that produce an ideal student body that is neat, clean, and "appropriately" covered. What are the discursive practices of dress codes? Pomerantz (2007) argues that there are three contradictory discourses that operate within

school dress codes that position girls as: deviant, irresponsible, and in need of rescuing and that these discourses “reproduce dominate and oppressive forms of gender and sexuality” (p. 373). Dress codes provide a “scene of constraint” in which students negotiate their gender identity (Butler, 2004, p. 1). Dress codes provide an ideal image by telling students how they *ought* to appear in the space of the school and, yet, they also offer the counter-image within the same frame. If the ideal student is to appear neatly dressed with clean hair than the non-ideal student would appear dishevelled and unclean. Earl Haig’s dress code even provides female students with a list of sartorial choices that the school administration considers overly revealing and overly provocative: displaying undergarments, transparent, back-less, skimpy, bikini tops, or kinds of clothing usually worn at beaches or for recreational activities (*Parent Handbook*, 2014-2015, p. 18). However, these types of dress are constantly on display in fashion magazines, on celebrities, and in the clothing stores. There is a gap between the world of the school and the wider world of popular culture. There is a gap between the desired ideal female student that is regulated through the discursive practice of dress codes and the desired ideal young woman that is produced in the image culture of media. Female students appear in this gap, whether consciously or unconsciously, and in that appearance challenge the regulatory practices of dress codes.

In a recent *Globe and Mail* article Lara Stokes, an eighth grade teacher at Scarborough Ontario Catholic Elementary School, argued that dress codes are especially positive for young female students because they promote “a sense of equality and community at an age when [students] are very focused on appearances” (Korducki, 2013, no. pg.). Another unnamed female teacher in the article noted that dress codes prevent girls from dressing too provocatively and thus protected them from getting raped. These teachers are proliferating gender stereotypes that

female students are universally preoccupied with appearance and that they are responsible for incurring sexual violence by the way their bodies appear in public spaces. The language of self-respect and self-esteem challenges girls to be responsible for containing their own sexuality as well as protecting themselves from the sexual attention, and sexual violence, of their male counterparts. I argue that girls, within the discursive space of the school, are using dress code violations to interrogate these gender stereotypes while reshaping the normative ideal of girlhood.

Within the discourse of dress codes the most interesting and consistent reason for the regulation of girls' dress is that girls should not be distracting. Soraya Chemaly (2013), a blogger for *The Huffington Post*, attacks dress codes for their blatant sexism and homophobia:

Who gets to be distracted? And, whose distraction is central? What is a girl supposed to think in the morning when she wakes up and tries to decide what to wear to school? They aren't idiots. The logical conclusion of the "distracting" issue is, "Will I turn someone on if I wear this?" Now who is doing the sexualizing? My daughters would never have thought these things without the help of their school. The only people these policies worry about distracting are heterosexual boys. When I was a teenager, there was a boy who distracted the hell out of me. It was the way his hair brushed against his neck and an insouciant ease with his large body. I managed just fine academically, and so can straight boys who encounter girls they are attracted to. When have you ever heard someone talk about what is distracting to girls or gay kids? This idea ignores that fact that girls and LGBTQ kids exist as sexual people. But, do you know what is distracting?

Trying not to be distracting. This framing of the problem is marginalizing, sexist and heteronormative. (n. pg.)

Chemaly highlights how the discourses surrounding dress codes are permeated by heterosexism which denies female and LGBTQ sexuality. Moreover, Pomerantz (2007), in a discussion of one case of dress code violation in Langley, British Columbia, argues that framing the dress code argument as one of male distraction reproduces the idea that boys' education is more important than girls': "As a distraction, Marcia's body was a risk to the moral community of the school because girls are meant to keep boys' hormones in check—to bear the burden of responsibility—but further, the very thing that they must not distract boys from is getting a good education. In telling girls that their clothing is a distraction to boys, a disturbing reality is signified: the education of boys is more important than that of girls" (p. 379). Female youth have been issued a moral imperative to cover up and be "responsible" for everyone's sexuality. As Raby (2010) summarizes dress codes "consequently normalize certain forms of girlhood, problematize others, and suggest girls' responsibility for the school's moral climate" (p 334). While policy makers, parents, teachers and school administrators participate in the regulation of girls bodies, Pomerantz (2007, 2008) and Raby (2010, 2012) argue that school rules have been internalized by students and regulation is as much an internal process as a top-down, external one.

Raby (2010) draws on eight focus groups of female students from Southern Ontario school districts and analyzes how girls contest and reproduce "peer regulation of girls' dress" (p. 334). In a response from one student the language of self-respect is invoked:

I: What does that mean, "something degrading to themselves"?

Crystal: Uh, whorish.

[Laughing]

Allison: Basically, “I have no self-respect, I’m going to flaunt myself in the hope of feeling loved.” (p. 343-44)

Raby argues that this language of self-respect is part of the internal regulation system of governmentality: “Through the language of self-respect, schools participate directly in the production of both gendered and sexualized identities. This emphasis on self-respect disciplines and individualizes bodies. Thus, if students who wear provocative dress are considered to lack self-respect, then responsibility for their marginalization is their own, rather than located in the social control of female sexuality or slut-bashing from others” (p. 344). Girls become self-regulators as well as regulators of other girls in a way that sustains patriarchy without a direct intervention from external regulators. While Raby (2010) notes that contestation of school dress codes occurs on a daily basis, with many students breaking the rules and hoping they will not be noticed, there is an internal regulating structure that normalizes these codes and the punishments for breaking them that replicate and naturalize morality. Yet, there is something happening in school spaces as students negotiate their identity that articulates a certain kind of agency. Female students are not just becoming moral regulators in the service of patriarchy, they are actively involved in reshaping normative ideals of girlhood.

2.2 Contesting Identity

The space of schooling is a discursive space that allows students to appear in different forms, working out their identity. Daniel Yon (2000) set up the school as a discursive space in his ethnographic study of a Toronto high school in *Elusive Culture*. Yon articulates how identity can be seen as something other than a stable and static category:

Identity is not already “there”; rather, it is a production, emergent, in process. It is situational—it shifts from context to context. The identity passionately espoused in one public scenario is more ambiguously “lived” in private. Its contradictions are negotiated, not “resolved.” Meaning is essential to the whole process of identity production, but is always an open weave to be reinflected and reappropriated. The body itself, which is so much “at stake” in contemporary youth cultures, does not serve to give an essential and material grounding to identity. It, too, is handled like a text—to be read (by oneself as well as by others). Far from the traditional “culture of origin” that provides an anchor and point of reference in this fluid world, identities are constantly reworked with meaning and images drawn from rapidly changing circuits of popular culture. Accordingly, the school appears here less as an institutional site with structural properties and more as a “discursive space.” (p. 2)

Within the space of schooling identity is worked out and students recognize it as something that is constantly changing. Students spend a great deal of time thinking about who they are and how they want to appear in school. Social media provides, and fuels, an imaginary space to rework their identity and gain access to rapidly shifting popular culture. Young people are able to gain instant access to celebrities, friends and people from all over and view images on Instagram wherein peoples’ identities can be reframed instantly. Their identities, their style, their bodies are a text, an image, that can be framed in an almost limitless and immediate way to engage with a much wider social world. This wider social world is brought to bear on the regulatory practices within the school. Fashion trends combined with celebrity embracement of feminist ideology

(the image of Beyoncé standing in front of a giant feminist sign at the Video Music Awards) has given female students a platform for attacking what they view as sexist dress codes.



Figure 1 Beyoncé at the Video Music Awards. VMA, 2014

2.3 Gender Performativity

Butler (1993) argues that gender:

is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not 'do' one's gender alone. One is always 'doing' with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my 'own' gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself

in the sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself). (p. 1)

Whether the “other” is imaginary, the gender ideal is performed and cited for something outside oneself. As Butler (2004) argues, “the implicit regulation of gender takes place in the explicit regulation of sexuality” (p. 53). When schools argue that young girls need to contain and conceal their emerging sexuality from the world, they are implicitly regulating gender and creating an image of the ideal girl, a girl whose body is contained, concealed, and controlled. These dress codes then become performative acts that seek to control the bodies of female students:

“Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power.

Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statements which not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse” (Butler, 1993, p. 171). Dress codes perform a regulatory action on young girls’ bodies. They are legal in the sense that they are binding within the space of the school and are supported by Ontario government legislation, they are then legal statements about how students’ bodies should appear within schools and, as the case studies will show, they disproportionately affect female students.

Even before we are born gender is inscribed on the body through performative acts, as Butler (1990) points out, exclaiming “It’s a girl!” is a simple speech act that provides a host of assumptions and ideas to be inscribed on a child’s body in utero. Yet, this ideal provides the space for its own critique. As Butler contends, the process of reiteration and citation necessary

for gender production provides the possibility for slippage, for change: “That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law” (p. xii). In defining appropriate dress, dress codes must simultaneously define inappropriate dress. Thus, the regulatory ideal names that which is not ideal and provides its own point of contestation. While the fashions appeared before schools defined them as inappropriate, students are very aware of the dress codes and choose when and how to violate them.

2.4 Contesting Hemlines

Simone St. Louis-Anderson is an eighth grade student at a Toronto middle school who claims she does not mind the school dress code. However, Simone does feel that the dress code should accommodate the fashion world. Simone argues that stores do not typically sell regulation length shorts. Moreover, a female teacher at Simone’s school “explicitly warned girls against dressing provocatively so as not to ‘get raped’” (Korducki, 2013, no. pg.). Again, the discourse of protecting young girls from their own irresponsibility appears. Simone does not want to be perceived as a girl who dresses provocatively and articulates a desire to see some dress code regulations remain. She has, however, also appeared in the public realm twice to contest certain dress code regulations: the requirement that tank top straps be the width of four fingertips and that hemlines reach below a girl’s fingertips.

Simone was part of a student-led protest in sixth grade that saw the tank top requirement reduced from having to be the width of four fingertips to the width of two fingertips. During the sixth grade assembly on dress codes, female students were told that “girls’ inappropriate dress poses a distraction to boys and male teachers.” This message reiterates the idea that girls are responsible for maintaining the moral state of the school. As Shauna Pomerantz (2007) argues while discussing the case of an inappropriate tank top: “As a distraction, Marcia’s body was a risk to the moral community of the school because girls are meant to keep boys hormones in check—to bear the burden of responsibility—but further, the very thing that they must not distract boys from getting is a good education” (p. 379). If boys’ education is more valuable than girls, how do girls fight back? Simone uses the same language of morality that she hears from the teachers and principals. She believes that the school is an educational setting that should be respected and students should appear dressed respectfully within that space. Yet, there is a moment in which the ideal supported by the school is interrupted. When Simone grows over the school year her shorts no longer fit. When her mother hears that Simone is to be responsible for not distracting the male students and the male teachers, something does not quite fit. Simone goes to shop and the shorts on offer do not meet the dress code. Her mother finds it insulting that a male teacher would in any way be distracted by her 13-year old daughter. The educational space has attempted to regulate her body, her femininity, but it does not match with what Simone can purchase in stores, and it does match with the media ideal that puts the female body on display for consumption.

The three contradictory discourses highlighted by Pomerantz (2007) allow for interruptions because they leave gaps and fissures. How can young female students simultaneously have no sexuality and yet flaunt their sexuality. There is a rupture that Simone

takes advantage of. Not to completely overthrow the norm, but to alter it, to change the rule from four fingertips to two. Simone evacuates herself from the argument that she is being sexually distracting, and subsequently erases any emerging sexuality, by denying that she is attempting to wear shorts to make herself desirable. Raby notes that in her focus group studies she only had one student argue that a student's dress could come out of their own desire: "This comment, notable made within the focus group of LGBTQ youth, was one of the only ones, in any group, to acknowledge the potential pleasure of wearing revealing clothes and linking such pleasure to self-confidence. It was also one of the only comments to suggest observers should consider a girl's own motivations for dressing as she does" (p. 348). By denying the discourses of deviant, irresponsible, and in need of rescuing, by adhering to the notion that dress codes are valuable and important to reproducing an appropriate moral environment, Simone makes her contestation a practical one. She is not deviant, she does not speak out, she merely grew over the summer and can no longer find shorts that have an appropriate hemline. Simone works to rework the norm not by calling the norm into question, but by reframing the conversation as a practical consideration for parents trying to shop for the female children: "The resignification of norms is thus a function of their inefficacy, and so the question of subversion, of working the weakness in the norm, becomes a matter of inhabiting the practices of its rearticulation (Butler, 1993, p. 181). It is within a reiteration of the norm that Simone discovers a gap between the shorts she can buy and the school dress code requirements. Simone exposes the lack of power that dress codes can have in producing the ideal student and uses this rupture to alter the terms of her school's dress code.

Lindsey Stocker takes a much stronger stance against dress codes and harnesses a feminist discourse to interrupt the dress codes regulatory power. Lindsey was caught up in a

dress code sweep at her Quebec school in the late spring of 2014. Lindsey was accused of being deviant and irresponsible when she refused to change out of the offending shorts: “‘In front of all my peers and my teacher they said I had to change,’ Stocker said. ‘And when I said no they said I was making a bad choice. They kept shaking their heads. In front of everybody’” (Solyom, 2014, no.pg.). The prohibition of Lindsey’s appearance is part of the force that allows her performativity to become a resistance because as the school administrators attempted to discipline her body she had a contestation point. As Butler (1993) argues there can be no resistance outside the process of normative repetition:

I would suggest that performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that “performance” is not a singular “act” or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance.
(p. 59)

Lindsey’s appearance was prohibited and she was subsequently ostracized from her school community for how she repeated the ideal of girlhood, but she was able to perform her identity and open up a conversation about how dress codes shame female bodies through her citation. Lindsey’s response to the school’s prohibition of her dress was to harness a current trend within popular culture that resists body shamming as seen in figure two.



Figure 2 Lindsey Stocker's response to dress code violation, Gawker 2014.

Again, Lindsey's reaction, like Simone's, evacuates female sexuality and desire from the equation, and claims that her rebellion is not because she wants to be perceived as desirable but simply because it is hot outside. She further argues that schools should not be shaming girls' bodies and that instead boys should be taught not to see girls as sexual objects. Stocker is using the gaps of the three discourses of deviance, irresponsibility and in need of protection to defend her means of identification. Stocker argues the weakness in the norm: she is not appearing this way to insight desire or because she desires to appear this way. That is impossible if girls are denied their sexuality. Rather, she is arguing that the education system should be focusing on, and problematizing, the ways in which girls bodies are sexualized within western society.

Lindsey's case made national headlines. She used social media to highlight her schools discriminatory dress code policy. Lindsey turns the argument that she made a "bad choice" directly back on the regulatory structure. Lindsey interrupts the "practice by which gendering

occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining” (Butler, 1993, p. 176). Since “gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate,” Lindsey is able to undermine the ideal and disrupt the resignification process (Butler, 1993, pg. 176). She refuses to have the gaze remain on her body and produces a sign that directly questions patriarchal structures. Lindsey harnessed a feminist discourse to interrupt the regulatory ideal and claim that her body should not be shamed. Lindsey’s infraction was minor and allowed her a moment of political agency in which she reframed the conversation about how she is allowed to appear in public and to contest the moral code that makes her responsible for keeping her male counterparts focused on schooling rather than her body.

2.5 Negotiating Undergarments

Tallie Doyle, an eighth grade student at Fisher Park Public School (part of the Ottawa-Carleton School board), accuses her schools dress codes of being sexist. She claims that her tank top, which has spaghetti straps and subsequently shows her bra, should not be banned because it infringes on her right to self-expression. Tallie knew that her outfit might draw the gaze of her teacher and the school administration, but she wore it anyway in order to encourage a debate about how her school’s dress code unfairly targets girls. As an Ottawa Citizen article states: “Doyle went to school Thursday — in an outfit approved by her mother — knowing that she might be challenged by teachers, but she wanted to take a stand against the dress code policy that she feels prevents her from properly expressing herself” (Levac, 2014, n.pg.). Tallie clearly intended to interrupt the normative ideal that argued female students’ undergarments should not

be displayed because they are disruptive of the appropriate clean, covered and moral student that dress codes enforce within schools. Butler (1993) argues that there is a process to becoming a girl that must be enacted in order to become a viable female subject:

To the extent that the naming of the “girl” is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain “girling” is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a “girl,” however, who is compelled to “cite” the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is no “one” who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a “one,” to become viable as a “one,” where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms. (p. 177)

Tallie chooses to face regulation and punishment in order to express her subjectivity. She had her mother’s approval for the outfit and when she was disciplined for her actions she took to social media to encourage the debate beyond the space of her school. Tallie uses the language of individual freedom of expression, which is enshrined within Section 2 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, to support her desire to appear as she wishes in the discursive space of the school. The dress code itself clearly bans the showing of undergarments and spaghetti straps, but Tallie very consciously chose to violate that restriction to encourage a discussion of the schools dress codes.

When Tallie was told to cover up, she questioned the dress code, telling the teacher she was not sure why she had to cover up. Tallie then proceeded to the vice-principal's office where she received an explanation of the dress code. Tallie first clearly states that girls' bodies should not even be regulated by the school administration: "I don't think there should be a line anywhere, but a lot of people disagree with me" (Levac, 2014, n.pg). She recognizes that an outright refusal of the dress code, and the ideal female student dress codes seek to reproduce, is too outside the norm for it to be changed. Instead she takes the weakness in the norm to task and uses the same language of appropriateness to make a different argument: "I know there has to be a line drawn somewhere, but I feel that where it is drawn right now is not appropriate" (Levac, 2014, n. pg.). Moreover, when female students are compelled to be in charge of maintaining the moral community of the school and ensuring that boys are not distracted from their education, it signifies that girls education is not as valued. Tallie missed the first fifteen minutes of class in order to argue the school's dress code with her principal. She had to sacrifice her education in order to take a stand against a dress code she felt did not suit her current social world. Tallie questioned why bra straps are considered offensive in a world where an idealized female body is constantly on display for male consumption and even offered to remove the offending garment. Like Lindsey, Tallie furthered her argument by using the anti-body shaming campaign to her advantage.

The campaign against body shaming has become a readily recognizable talking point within contemporary popular culture. Always and Dove have developed advertisements around campaigns to encourage self-esteem in adolescent girls and diversify the ideal female body. This public discourse on body shaming is being used by these young girls to interrupt the school discourses that compel girls to cover-up and regulate their unruly, pubescent bodies. Lindsey's

sign clearly states that she is being shamed and Tallie's mother uses the same argument to defend her daughter:

Andrea Stokes, Doyle's mother, defended her daughter and said her outfit was not "provocative."

Stokes said she takes issue with the wording of the school's dress code that lists "appropriate" ways to dress, which she says is up for interpretation. The school's policy is also sexist, Stokes says.

"I allowed her to go to school with her bra straps showing because it's a rule I was willing to break," Stokes said. "There's nothing about it that is offensive. I don't want my daughter to feel shamed for the fact that her bra strap shows."

(Hurley, 2014, n.pg)

Tallie, and her mother, consciously violated the schools dress code and utilized contemporary campaigns against body shaming to expose how regulatory dress codes disproportionately target female students' bodies and seek to contain, combat and erase female sexuality.

2.6 Conclusions

Youth are subject to discursive practices as they formulate their identities. Dress codes in schools act to internalize normative behaviours for male and female students alike. Female youth are subject to a discourse of appropriate girlhood that compels them to contain their sexuality and maintain the "moral community" of the school. Female youth use moments of cultural ambiguity to challenge dress codes and work the weaknesses in the norm in order to resignify discourses of femininity. The citational practice of performativity allows for moments of interruption, of agency, as youth attempt to establish their identity within a secure framework.

This performance must always cite the norm, the subversion will always include the ideal, but female youth continue to contest normative practices when they fail to articulate a secure and liveable space wherein they can establish their identity. As Simone, Lindsey and Tallie demonstrate it is possible to disrupt the regulatory practises of school dress codes through a process of contestation that reworks the terms of subjectivity. It is the moments of slippage, when a bra strap is exposed or a hemline too short, wherein female youth can challenge what it means to be an appropriately dressed girl. The ideal female student looks nothing like what is presented in fashion magazines and in the media. In the media Beyoncé can stand in front of a feminist sign while wearing practically nothing and Dove sells its beauty products by using a discourse of female bodily empowerment. There are contesting ideals for the female body and this causes normative gender performativity to constantly shift. Tallie, Lindsey and Simone use the ever shifting terms of female gender identity to challenge what they see as sexist dress codes. These girls have grown up in a supposedly gender equal, post-feminist world and are coming up against sexist patriarchal attitudes. This ideological collision allows for moments of interruption wherein female students, raised to believe they are equal to their male peers, can expose the sexist regulatory norm policing their bodies.

Western feminism has developed a bench mark for the emancipation of women around a discourse of bodily liberation. Celebrities of all ages have participated in campaigns of freeing their bodies in order to draw attention to the prohibition of female desire, rape culture, and marginalization and oppression within a patriarchal culture. Social media has provided a platform to visually stimulate a debate around the baring of the female body. Western feminism has invested heavily in the uncovering of the female body. Tallie, Lindsey, and Simone used these discourses to contest their schools' dress codes. Yet, what happens when these programs

are employed, when this liberated gaze falls onto other populations within Canadian culture?

This need to liberate the female body in the name of feminism is complicated by the appearance of women who define their liberation through covering. There are other groups of female students in Toronto schools who are on the opposite end of bodily exposure. These female students are “othered” not for their provocative dress, but for their veiled appearance. Sharon Todd (2009) raises another investment in the idea of “othering” that focuses not on girls who are accused of dressing too provocatively, but towards girls who are too covered up, who reveal too little, whose bodies refuse to appear in the public space the way the western gaze wishes them to appear. My next chapter analyzes the investment that the western gaze has on unveiling Muslim students who choose to appear within schools wearing the hijab, and how religious identification complicates western feminist ideals of agency and liberation.

Chapter 3: Practicing Hijab and Resistance to Assimilation

Freedom of faith is an individual right and a collective responsibility. There is diversity within faith groups and individuals have varying levels of observance. The Board commits to work with the community it serves to foster an inclusive learning environment that promotes acceptance and protects faith freedom for all individuals. While the Board and its staff will take all reasonable steps to ensure freedom of faith and faith practices consistent with the Code, it is expected that students and their families will help the Board to understand their faith needs and will work with the Board and its schools to determine appropriate and reasonable accommodations.

—Halton District School Board “Faith Accommodation”

In this chapter, I will examine how governmental and educational policies that frame multiculturalism in terms of tolerance and accommodation are problematic because the policies uphold an “us versus them” binary. These discursive practices produce a dominant culture that “tolerates and accommodates” othered cultures. School policies, as seen in the example of the Halton District School Boards “Faith Accommodation” policy, claim a limit to tolerance when they determine which accommodations are appropriate and reasonable. I will analyze case studies, published focus group interviews with female Somali students in Toronto, and Mariam Jammal’s February 2015 blog post on aspireyouth.org, a Muslim youth initiative that seeks to promote “peaceful dialogue and understanding” between the Muslim-Canadian youth community and the larger Muslim and Canadian community, to see how performing a religious identity provides Muslim female students in Ontario schools with a space to contest normative ideals of appropriate citizenship and Canadian femininity.

I will interrogate western notions of agency, again turning to Foucault (1977-1984) and Butler (1993), in order to reframe how subjects exercise agency within normative constraints and demonstrate how female students who wear hijab contest regulatory ideals and become agents in their own identity formation. Therefore, another theoretical consideration for this project is how western notions of agency are conceptualized. Secular individuals are often constructed as freely

choosing subjects who are not constrained by “backwards” religious traditions. However, if Foucault’s definition of subject formation is brought to bear on the notion of agency, as Saba Mahmood illustrates, there forms a basis for “a strong critique of the insistence on individual autonomy in some secular feminist emancipatory discourse” and further argues that “agentival capacity is entailed not only in resistance to norms, but in the multiple ways one inhabits those norms” (Scott, 2011, p. 35). Agency must be deconstructed and viewed not as “the innate property of an abstract individual , but the attribute of subjects who are defined by—subjected to—discourses that bring them into being as at once subordinate and capable of action. It follows that religious belief does not in itself deny agency; rather, it creates particular forms of agency whose meanings and history are not transparently signalled by the wearing of a veil” (Scott, 2011, p. 40). Religious belief does not negate a subject’s agency, but rather adds another set of discourses that an individual can draw upon to make identity claims. In order to open up a conversation about Muslim female students’ agency and identity formation the questions posed need to be reframed, turning our inquiry away from the question of oppression and instead analyzing how female students resist and inhabit norms. We can then begin to see how within normative constraints Muslim female students become active subjects in constructing their identity and expanding the narrative of what it looks like to be a Canadian girl.

3.1 The “Canadian Family”

In response to the Federal Court decision, which struck down the ban on wearing the niqab during the Canadian Citizenship ceremony, Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated: “I believe, and I think most Canadians believe, that it is offensive that someone would hide their identity at the very moment where they are committing to joining the Canadian family . . . This is

a society that is transparent, open, and where people are equal. And that is just . . . I think we find that offensive” (Martin Patriquin, 2015, no. pg. para. 15). Harper exposes the limits of accommodation and tolerance. He has the power to speak for a whole country and makes a hegemonic declaration that Muslim dress is offensive to Canadians and counter to Canadian values. According to John Geddes (2015): “In the House, he later denounced the niqab, which is worn in Canada by a small minority of Muslim women, as being ‘rooted in a culture that is anti-women’” (no. pg. para 2). Harper’s claim frames Muslim society as anti-women, and declares that Muslim society is incompatible with Canadian society which values transparency, openness and equality. Moreover, entry into the Canadian family is denied to a woman who chooses to observe the religious tradition of hijab (modesty).

The response from the world of Canadian Muslims who choose to wear some form of head-covering, and non-Muslims, trended on social media with the #DressCodePM. The problematics of Harper’s comments were exposed by many women, and men, who asked Harper if he approved of their daily sartorial choices from hijabs to pants. Moreover, Rachel Browne (2015) cited Farah Khan, a counsellor at a Toronto clinic for women experiencing violence, who observed that “the last several months have signalled a growing sentiment of Islamophobia in Parliament, and across Canada. The government’s anti-terror and ‘barbaric cultural practices’ bills haven’t helped, she says, and she’s seeing Muslim women come into the clinic saying they’re being attacked on the subway and at school” (no. pg. para. 1). Khan’s statements highlight the hypocrisy within this particular Canadian discourse that holds up Islam as a perpetrator of violence against women and the hijab as a symbol of female oppression, and yet Muslim women are assaulted in Toronto by non-Muslims. Non-Muslim Torontonians, in this instance, are the perpetrators of violence against women not Islam. This demonstrates that the

current public debate over whether or not Canada will “accommodate” and “tolerate” the wearing of the hijab (head covering) or niqab (face covering) has very real and harmful bodily consequences and exposes the limits of Canadian tolerance and accommodation.

Whether Harper’s claims are valid is not what needs to be interrogated. What his statements reveal about Canadian society and the particular investments we have made symbolizing Muslim religious head-coverings as rooted in misogynistic culture and representative of women’s oppression are what need to be examined. That one cannot join the Canadian family while wearing the niqab shows that there is a limit to Canadian tolerance and accommodation. There is an intense scrutiny placed on Muslim female bodies. How those bodies negotiate with that scrutiny and policing, how they contest the limits of Canadian tolerance, is something that needs to be more closely studied.

3.2 Joan Wallach Scott and the Problematic of Secular Gender Equality

Joan Wallach Scott (2011) argues that the binary opposition between secularism and religion supports a problematic notion that the emancipation of women stems from the secularization of modern societies. The predominant narrative in western societies is that the secularization of the public sphere, the state, has led to a society in which gender equality has been achieved by freeing the state from the conservatism of religion. Moreover, Islam becomes placed in opposition to the secular state, and modernity, as questions arise as to whether or not Muslims “can be integrated into the societies of Europe, whether their culture is fundamentally at odds with ‘ours,’ whether their values are compatible with political democracy” (Scott, 2011, p. 25). In the process of this questioning an opposition is created and an “us versus them” binary develops wherein the secular state becomes the standard of achievement at the pinnacle of a

linear teleology of civilization. One of the most important signifiers of the superiority of this westernized secular state is “a universal project of human emancipation specifically including women” (Scott, 2011, p. 25). Within western discourse, movement upon movement is held up to signify that secularization supports human emancipation: the end of slavery, women’s suffrage, the civil rights movement, and the sexual revolution. However, as Scott (2011) gestures to in relation to first wave feminism, religion has underpinned many liberation movements.

Arguments for the emancipation of slaves were supported by scripture and the civil rights movement was led by preachers while demonstrations and protests were organized through churches. There are far more nuanced ways of looking at struggles for liberation. It is not simply that a secular state equals human freedom.

Moreover, when we create a fantasy of ourselves as liberators and secularization as the only means through which to emancipate individuals we erase the meaning that others have created for their lives through their own struggles for freedom and liberation. How the western world views liberation is not a universally accepted concept. Yet, the West employs liberation of people as a battle cry in its imperialist endeavours. More specifically, we hear the liberation of women from patriarchal theocracies as a justification for western invasion into Middle Eastern countries. What becomes held up as a concrete symbol of patriarchal religious oppression within the Islamic world, and what must then be removed by western liberators, are Muslim religious head-coverings.

The unveiling of Muslim women is being employed in an imperial project of bringing a “backwards” culture into the 21st century. Scott (2011) argues that one of the symbolic meanings given to the veil is that “women are subordinate to men,” and that western constructions of Islam have reduced the veil to a symbol of women’s oppression (p. 40). Western society conceptualizes

Muslim women who cover as the antithesis of liberated women in the West. This creates an image of female oppression that is brown, covered, confined, Eastern, and the result of a “backwards” culture. The Western world points to this image of a Muslim woman in a headscarf and declares that this is what female subjugation looks like while claiming that western secularization has led to a society that has achieved gender equality. This sustains an “us versus them” binary that implores the western world to export its project of secularization and human emancipation to the East (Scott, 2011, p. 41). Feminist projects that seek to dismantle patriarchal structures, are then reframed and employed by Western nations to support imperialist projects like the invasion by the United States-led coalition into Afghanistan. Many times the banner to free women from the veil has been used to justify, and gain support for, invasion into predominately Muslim countries. Prime Minister Harper is using the case of Zunera Ishaq, the woman trying to swear her Canadian citizenship oath while wearing her niqab, to create fear and gain support for both his anti-terror bill and the Conservative Party. There has been a very vocal response to Harper’s comments and a public debate is currently raging over how Muslim women should exercise their religion within Canada.

My analysis in this chapter turns away from labelling groups of people as oppressed or free and instead looks at how Muslim girls in Ontario schools attempt to reconfigure, challenge, and contest normative ideals of Canadian girlhood by examining how Muslim girls react not only to Harper’s comments, but also to multicultural education policy, comments from students and teachers that challenge their practice of hijab, and Islamophobia both inside and outside the space of the school. When we begin asking Muslim female students questions about why they choose to appear within the schooling space wearing certain garments we can begin to uncover

moments of agency wherein the citation of normative girlhood is interrupted and contested by Muslim female students who choose to practice hijab.

3.3 Interrogating agency

Agency within secular societies is often conceptualized as belonging to unbound individuals who are free to make their own choices. Since Muslim women, and by extension Muslim girls, are often constructed as oppressed and bound by their religious community they are denied agency within western secular society's definition. In order to reconceptualise how female Muslim students in Ontario schools exercise agency I must interrogate how individual agency is conceived within Western society. Scott (2011) states: "In definitions of secularism, the matter of equality is often linked to the autonomous agency of freely choosing individuals, the preeminent subjects of secularism. They are depicted as freely choosing, immune to the pressures that traditional communities bring to bear on their members" (p. 34). Members of a secular society are free to choose because they are not bound by "backwards" cultural traditions. Subjects can choose what clothes they will buy, what music they will listen to, whether they want a Mac or a PC. This conception of agency is problematic in many ways, such as the erasure of structural inequalities by blaming social and economic inequality on "bad" individual choices, and further acting to deny Muslim women who practice hijab their agency by claiming that the Muslim world subordinates women to men and part of that subordination process is forced covering. Women who veil are only doing so because of pressure from their religious community, they have no free choice. Moreover, this conception of agency undermines Muslim girls' claims that wearing hijab is a choice they have freely made. This attitude forecloses any chance of reading Muslim female students in Ontario schools as active agents in their subject

formation and shuts down any pedagogical openings created through Muslim girls' interruptions of normative Canadian girlhood. If a Muslim female student is being forced to wear her hijab in school then there is no rupture of the normative Canadian girl idea; she is constrained by her "backwards" culture, and there is no reason to open up a dialogue about why Muslim girls choose to practice hijab and how they feel about students, teachers, administrators or even the Prime Minister's negation of their choice.

Moreover, Muslim female students are constructed not only as oppressed, but also as resistant to western values. According to Sharon Todd (2010):

One of the reasons frequently given in supporting the rejection of such practices in schools is that hiding the face hinders communication. On this account, the visibility of the face is seen to be necessary on the grounds that "reading" the facial expressions of others is central to sound communicative practices. This view is compounded with the perception of these "veiling" practices as symbols of profound sexual inequality and as being inconsistent with ostensibly "European" cultural conventions. Muslim girls and women who veil, therefore, bear a double stigmatization within western liberal democratic states, and especially in public institutions such as schools: they are perceived to be both oppressed females and resistant Muslims. (p. 349)

What Todd sets up will be important for analyzing teacher attitudes towards Muslim female students. Since Muslim female students are seen as oppressed and resistant to Canadian values they are conceived as academically inferior because the Muslim community, some claim, does not value the education of girls. The Somali students interviewed for the Children's Aid Needs Assessment frequently reported being seen as troublemakers, and a participant in Jasmine Zine's

(2001) focus group claims that she was discouraged from taking advanced courses that would allow her to attend university. When Muslim females embrace their religious identity they are seen as refusing the freedoms that Canadian society is offering them. Moreover, when Muslim female students embrace their religious identity they are denying the school its ability to interpolate them into appropriate Canadian democratic citizens.

3.4 Multicultural Education or Tokenism?

Western discourse reframes racism as cultural difference. This allows western society to advocate against a “backwards” culture without being accused of racism because Western society positions itself as a liberator of oppressed Muslim women instead of as a patriarchal society itself struggling with gender equality. According to Tanisha Ramachandran (2009) Canadian multicultural educational policy leads to tokenism, wherein culture is “commodified and becomes something expressed through food, music, and clothing, a tradition which continues today” (p. 34). Moreover, the Canadian mosaic ideal of parts of a whole means “to overcome the culture of your country of origin, especially if it is a culture perceived to be connected with terrorism” (Ramachandran, 2009, p. 35). The multicultural policy reveals a Eurocentric ideal that once Muslims are introduced to liberal, democratic, secular societies they will freely abandon their “backwards” religious cultural traditions while donating their food and music to the Canadian mosaic. An important symbolic gesture then for the Muslim woman upon entering the Canadian mosaic is the removal of her veil. Liberation of the Muslim female body, to make one’s body visible to the dominant culture, is part of the assimilation process into the Canadian Family. A refusal to remove the veil is a refusal to embrace Canadian values and become a part of the Canadian Family. What is interesting is that if a woman is being compelled to veil, her

body is being controlled and if a woman is being compelled to unveil in order to swear a citizenship oath her body is still being controlled. As Ramachandran (2009) argues:

Liberation for girls and women is thus seen as the freedom—or rather the *directive*—to show her body. The perceived oppressive nature of Islam that forces women to veil is replaced by the mandate to uncover by the Canadian nation state. It would appear that covering and uncovering is the distinction between oppression and liberation in the Canadian context and the Muslim woman's body becomes the site of contestation where struggles over nation and citizenship are waged. The remarkable paradox is that while the Canadian nation wants to liberate Muslim women from what they conceive of as the coerced practice of veiling by their 'barbaric' culture, Canadian and Quebecois society are levelling a similar control over Muslim women through their dictates to unveil. (p. 37)

In order to support its ideological fantasy of West as liberator, Canada must exert control over Muslim women's bodies. The removal of the veil, a symbol of female oppression, is necessary to maintain the narrative of Canada as a free, liberal democratic society that upholds and values gender equality. This liberation of Muslim women in the name of universal gender equality ignores the myriad ways in which Muslim women construct their identity. Freedom of the body ignores how Muslim women perform their religious identity: "In other words, the specificity of racialized, religious minority is erased and then subsumed under normative white femininity" (Ramachandran, 2009, pg. 34). To be feminine in Canadian society is to expose one's body to the Canadian national gaze. To become part of what Harper refers to as the Canadian family, to swear the oath of citizenship, Muslim women must unveil.

Furthermore, when western feminism is employed in a colonial project of exporting liberal democracy around the globe or of interpolating its citizens at home, when Harper claims that the niqab is against Canadian values, the binary opposition, a free “us” and an oppressed “them,” between women is upheld. This binary opposition trickles down to female students. Students who wear revealing clothing and are subsequently disciplined by either school teaching staff, administration or their peers harness the discourse of “individual freedom” or women’s emancipation to justify their dress. Their bodies are their own and thus not subject to covering up. Yet, the western gaze on the Muslim woman’s body is just as strong and the discourse of secularism is used to pull young Muslim women along the secular westernized project of female emancipation. Both uncovered and covered female students look at the other group as subject to patriarchal exploitation and instead of opening up these moments of interruption to questions about how and why their bodies are subject to constant policing the, “us versus them” binary sustains an opposition that forecloses conversations that could allow for a politics to develop.

3.5 Butler’s *Subject*

The Muslim female students whose experiences are used in this chapter and who exercise hijab see themselves, within the context of Ontario schools, as “othered”. Muslim female bodies are racialized and read as that which does not belong, as Prime Minister Harper claimed, in the Canadian family. Certain bodies are excluded, according to Butler (1993), by white heteronormative society in order to define the normative subject:

[A] linking of this process of ‘assuming’ a sex with the question of identification, and with the discursive means by which the heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications.

This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet “subjects,” but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (p. 2)

The abject subject in a white heteronormative secular society becomes a Hijabi practicing Muslim. Practicing of Islamic religious traditions is viewed, by this hegemonic gaze, as an undesirable zone that constrains women and represents a society that has not achieved enlightenment and “this zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life” because there can be no agency in wearing a hijab when the religious tradition that avows covering is constructed, within western discourse, as the symbolic limit to Canadian society’s accommodation and tolerance (p. 2). Yet, it is precisely at the site of this exclusion where Muslim female students can become “constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection” creating a subjectivity that is founded on its own repudiation (p. 2). Much like Tallie, Lindsey, and Simone, who used inappropriate dress to open up a conversation about who decides what is appropriate and inappropriate, it is the image of an idealized Canadian female subject that provides a point of contestation for Muslim female youth to reclaim their choice to practice hijab as a rejection of the white heteronormative gaze.

Moreover, in terms of western feminism a liberated body disavows a body that chooses to cover. When we read the wearing of the hijab through the framework of western feminism there is a danger that the subject is seen as identifying with a “backward” and “anti-women” culture. This process of marginalization occurs because, according to Foucault (1977-84), marginalized subjects “have values that could meaningfully challenge our own” (p. 89). The value placed on religious dress causes an anxiety in a heteronormative world that requires some form of female bodily exposure in order to uphold heteronormative desire. To cover the female body not only undermines the heteronormative hegemonic gaze, but it also stakes a claim to a religious identity that is seen as incompatible to western liberal democratic views of gender equality. The Canadian value of gender equality, and feminist struggles, are very much tied up in the image of a liberated female body. Muslim religious head coverings then become “part of what Haraway (1991) terms ‘border wars,’ or attempts to fix the continually shifting boundaries between a proper and improper femininity, or a right and a wrong kind of girl. This regulatory power intersects with issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship, where a girl is either a welcomed subject in the school or cast as the ‘constitutive outside’ whose presence is made abject by her failure to conform to ‘respectable’ (white, middle-class, heteronormative) girlhood” (Pomerantz, 2007, p. 373). Muslim students, who choose to practice hijab, become abject because they fail to perform for the heteronormative gaze, and appear in what Butler (1993) calls the “non-space of cultural collision” by exposing the contingencies placed on supposedly liberated female bodies, bodies that are compelled to perform a certain role in exciting heteronormative desire (p. 124). Muslim female students do this through the removal of their bodies from the hegemonic gaze and call into question both western values and western notions of gender equality.

The normative role women play in constructing Canadian identity still causes tensions between how young girls are supposed to participate within society—as democratic citizens who are compassionate and nurturing, pure—and how they are simultaneously sexualized and responsible for both containing and eliciting male desire. Muslim female students who choose to veil cause a rupture within the western binary of good/bad girl or virgin/“slut”. While Canada espouses idealized notions of purity, modesty, intelligence and caring for its young girls they are still expected to be gazed upon. Their bodies are still a site of consumption for the male gaze in order to elicit and maintain heteronormative desire. This gaze becomes a social gaze when all members of society begin to employ it in order to regulate and reproduce female students’ bodies. When students cover their bodies the resulting discomfort with the hiddenness disrupts the tenuous discourse of how female adolescents should appear within schools. Some form of exposure is required in order to maintain heteronormative desire. The male members of society must be able to gaze upon and desire the submissive female members of society and female members of society use this same gaze to grade themselves against the norm and reproduce normative white femininity. Suddenly, young women are covered up and purporting the same values for women and girls that Canada claims to uphold. The removal of the female body from this hegemonic gaze destabilizes the tenuous notion of western gender equality and questions why a liberated feminist body can only look one way.

3.6 Practicing Hijab

When the hijab becomes a symbol of religious subjugation of women the discursive practice erases Muslim female agency and collapses difference by subsuming Muslim women into white heteronormative femininity. Arguments against the wearing of hijab become about

female emancipation and any notion that a woman would freely choose to wear a veil is ignored as cultural coercion. This movement erases the subtlety and nuance of religious identification.

According to the Qur'an, the practice of hijab goes much deeper than the wearing of the veil.

Figure three, from the [younghijabi.tumblr](http://younghijabi.tumblr.com) account and republished on aspireyouth.org, a Muslim student website that encourages political debate and religious tolerance, demonstrates how hijab is more than just dress:

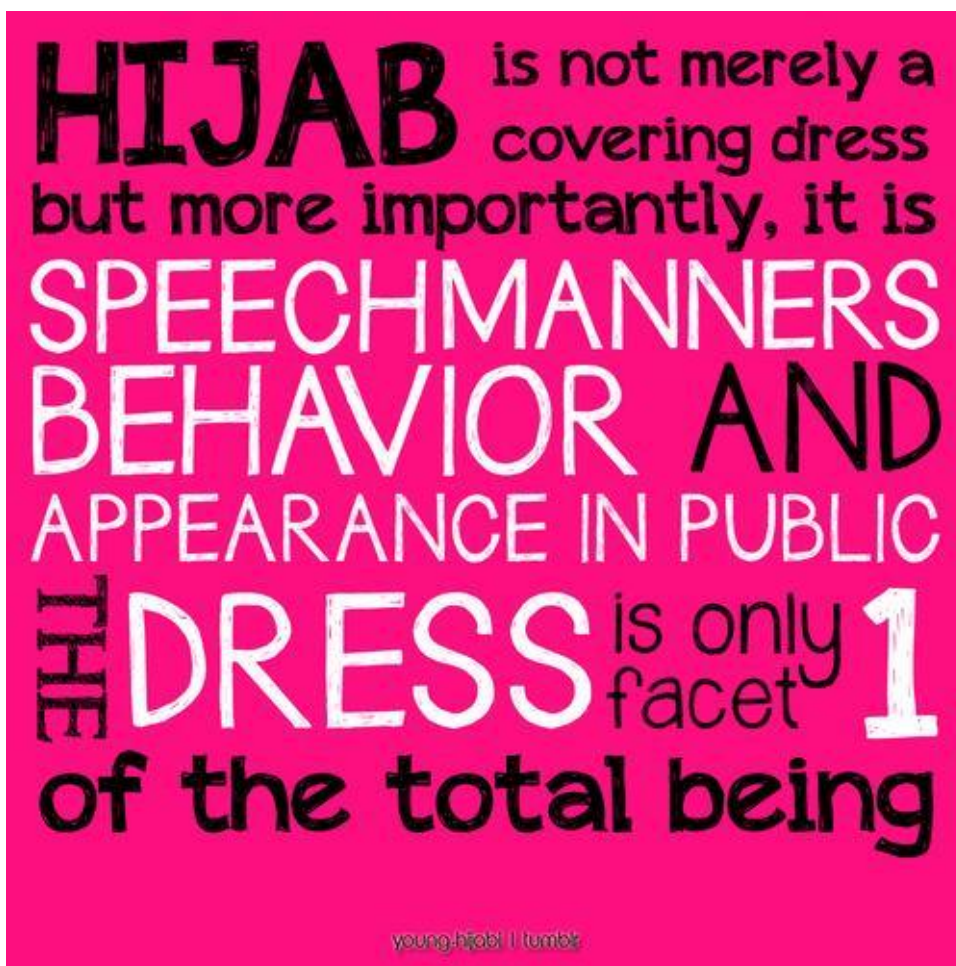


Figure 3 Practicing Hijab [younghijabi.tumblr](http://younghijabi.tumblr.com) via aspireyouth.org

The practice of hijab is not simply to cover one's body; it is for the body to inhabit a total being of modesty and submission to religious ideals. When the western gaze refutes religious

identification while participating in multicultural tokenism a few things occur. First, women who practice hijab by wearing some form of head-covering are viewed as a singly story of oppression or terrorist. Moreover, when World Hijab Day occurred on February 1st, 2015 the veil's subtle and nuanced meaning was flattened into a one-dimensional cultural symbol when Irma Coulson Public school encouraged all its students and teachers to wear a hijab for the day. This collapses difference and continues to subsume a religious practice, and subject formation, that is seemingly at odds with Canadian values of gender equality into a commodified multicultural discourse. The practice of hijab—modesty, sacrifice, religious identification—is flattened and specificity and difference are evacuated. Initiatives that ask for token participation in another person's religious tradition, supports the idea that it is possible to understand someone by wearing their headscarf for one day. This collapses difference and erases the complex reasons Muslim women and girls wear hijab. It becomes a scarf and not a carefully considered religious practice.

3.7 Muslim Youth: Resistance against assimilation

3.7.1 Di'ba, Somalis and the abject body

Students use the discursive space of the school to rework their identity. This becomes an important space for Muslim female students to resist assimilation into Canadian normative gender identity. As Ruby (2006) argues, some women who choose to wear the hijab within western cultures do so as a form of resistance to assimilation into western identity:

Although the concept of the *hijab* in the Muslim context is rooted in a notion of modesty, it has also become a sign of female Muslim identity and resistance to Western values, particularly in North America. Ibrahim (1999) stated that it was a growing feeling on the part of Muslim women that they no longer wished to

identify with the West, and that reaffirmation of their identities as Muslims required the kind of visible sign that the adoption of traditional clothing implied. For these women, the issue was not that they had to dress traditionally, but that they chose to embrace the hijab as a marker of their Muslim identities. The hijab, thus, serves at multiple levels, such as making immigrant Muslim women's identities distinct, offering a tool to oppose Western standards, and asserting agency by taking control of their appearance. (p. 6-7)

The body, and how one dresses the body, becomes an important tool in identity construction. Moreover, for Muslim female youth it becomes a resistance to the rampant consumer culture that implores girls to wear revealing clothing that sexualizes their young bodies. A tension develops between their resistance and racist stereotypes that are upheld by other students, teachers and administrators. They are perceived through a western lens that frames their covered bodies as oppressed or suspect and denies the complexity or elusiveness of "their cultural practices" (Yon, 2000, p. 29). This analysis is supported and revealed by Di'ba, a participant in Ruby's 2006 focus groups with Muslim students in Saskatoon, Canada, who tells of how she disappeared in her art classroom once she started wearing a hijab: "'It was art class,' she recalled, 'we were sitting all around the classroom and he just, like, totally skipped me. He would be handing something out or whatever . . . and I guess at the time it was bad . . . I took it hard'" (p. 63). Di'ba in her desire to practice hijab resisted western ideals of femininity and collided with racist stereotypes and assumptions about her identity. Di'ba's teacher had already formed a racist attitude towards the hijab and refused to acknowledge Di'ba when she chose to appear in his classroom wearing it. She became unrecognizable to her art teacher. The teacher's refusal to see

Di'ba' made her body an abject body excluded from the classroom space and denied of its subjectivity.

Butler's notion of the abject body can be further applied to Muslim female students in Toronto in an analysis of a comprehensive needs assessment conducted by the Children's Aid Society concerning Somali youth in Toronto. In 2001, the Children's Aid Society of Toronto conducted an in-depth needs assessment of Somali youth in Toronto. The report revealed that Somali youth felt that "multiculturalism in Canada is forced and the Somali community has remained marginalized" and "that Somalis experience varying degrees of discrimination based on colour, dress and mannerisms" (p. 11). The interviews also revealed that Somalis experienced negative reactions when they followed "religious teachings, particularly choices of dress and head-coverings for Somali girls/ women" (p. 11). Like Di'ba', the Somali students who participated in this study felt as though they did not belong within Canadian society, their bodies identified as other, despite the growing population of Somali youth in Toronto due to a decade of civil war and famine in their homeland.

In 2006, Statistics Canada reported 37, 785 people claimed Somali descent in Canada. However, unofficial numbers put the estimate closer to 150, 000. The largest influx of Somali immigration occurred in the 1990s after civil war and famine forced a mass exodus. The civil war, which was being fought with significant stores of weapons—remnants of Cold War military "aid"—made distribution of food shipments increasingly difficult. U.S. and Canadian intervention in the crisis, initially successful in distributing supplies to the hundreds of thousands starving, ceased after a disastrous attempt to capture the warlord Muhammad Aideed (Gilbert and Reynolds, 2008, p. 403). Toronto saw the largest influx of Somali immigration in Canada. According to the Children's Aid Society's (2001) "Needs Assessment" report: "Only a few

hundred Somalis lived in Toronto in 1987; this number went up to 22,500 by June 1991. The peak influx of Somali refugees was reached in 1994-95. Somalia was the source of the second largest number of refugee claimants in Canada in 1991 and 1993. Today, the size of the Somali community [in Toronto] is estimated at between 50,000 to 70,000” (p. 3). The Somali community in Toronto is an important community to speak to in order to undermine the national Canadian narrative of multicultural inclusion. What happens when a large influx of refugees enters into a community is that the limits of “toleration” and “accommodation” are exposed. Moreover, the Somali community is rather homogenous (in terms of ethnicity and language) and most refugees are a part of the majority culture in Somalia; when they arrived in Canada they report feeling a great deal of racial discrimination as they became a “minority” group (“Needs Assessment”, 2001, p. 4). In the Children’s Aid Society’s “Needs Assessment” report, Somali female students in Toronto revealed a process of marginalization and discrimination in the Ontario education system that primarily focused on their observance of the hijab.

According to the needs assessment report, Somali girls who wear a hijab all “discussed the fact that they felt they were negatively stereotyped by teachers and other students for wearing a hijab” (p. 23). Several girls discussed that others seem to think that they “‘didn’t speak English and are not smart’ because of what they wear. One girl shared a story of someone telling her ‘why do you wear a headcovering—you look so pretty without it!’ She stated that ‘there is a lot of pressure not to wear a hijab’” (p. 23). These girls report more pressure to not wear a hijab than they do to wear hijab and argue that “it takes a lot of strength to ignore what other people say” (p. 22). This pressure that Somali students feel to remove the hijab refutes the singular narrative in Canada that Muslim girls are being forced to cover. The hijab has become a symbol of non-Canadianness, of resistance to Canadian femininity, and to persist in covering is a refusal of

Canadian ideals. This becomes troubling for Canadians who then continue to question whether or not these girls are choosing to wear hijab or are being forced to by a “backwards” culture that the Canadian national discourse feels needs to be rooted out of the “Canadian Family.” Even though many female students have articulated that wearing hijab is their choice, as one girl claimed “[i]t is a choice I make myself,’ and yet, despite the constant refrain by Hijabi girls in Toronto schools, there is still a need within the dominant discourse to take up the hijab as a symbol of oppression (p. 25). Many girls now take to social media to respond to, and reject, accusations that they are forced to wear hijab and that it is symbolic of their oppression.

3.7.2 Mariam’s response

Mariam Jammal (2015) discusses her experiences of identity formation in a Toronto high school in an essay published on aspireyouth.org. While she initially supports the narrative of Toronto as a multicultural city “that recognizes and embraces different traditions, beliefs and ways of life,” she later discovers “what the implications of being a Muslim was in a Western environment” (no. pg. para. 1). Mariam (2015) explains that when she started to wear a hijab she began to be profiled by her classmates:

When I was 13, a boy in my class called me a terrorist. To say it caught me off guard would be an understatement, I was confused as to what made me a terrorist and what characterized terrorists in general. At this point in my life I had been wearing my Hijab long enough to be comfortable and confident in it, but this was my first experience with being profiled. This was the point where I realized my physical appearance did more to categorize me than who I was. This boy had been in my class all throughout elementary school, we had been from the same group

of friends for years without a problem and despite knowing each other for so long, he easily fell back onto a social construction of what my Hijab meant and what it represented. This one experience quickly put an end to my carefree naivety and made me hyper aware of people's looks and the widespread thoughts and definitions given to my Hijab. It ranged from two extremes: a symbol of terrorism and a symbol of oppression. These distinctions would factor into all my decisions from then on. (Jammal, 2015, para.2)

Mariam is denied her agency when she is constructed as either a girl oppressed by a "backward" culture or as a terrorist who participates in the destruction of Western values. Her religious identification is conflated with the construction of a culture that is dichotomous to the Canadian family. Her initial belief in the Canadian mosaic narrative is shattered by a moment of cultural collusion within the school space. A male student she has known "throughout elementary school" suddenly evokes the Muslim terrorist stereotype which rides on the prevailing discourses about covering up, in an attempt to destabilize Mariam's religious identification. Mariam no longer feels safe, her hijab now stands out to her as a symbol of otherness within the Canadian context. As Jasmine Zine (2001) argues, while discussing the looks and attitudes a Muslim student faced from members of her school community, Muslim girls are part of a larger discursive practice that seeks to remove the hijab from female youth in order to assimilate them into Canadian culture: "The hidden curriculum serves to reproduce status quo relations of power and authority" and when girls refuse assimilation they are bombarded with questions like "Why is she wearing that? What is she doing? This is Canada! When in Rome you should do as the Romans do" (p. 409).

Yet, Mariam does not allow herself to be silenced. She questions the discursive processes that evacuate specificity, how mainstream society has created an “overarching definition that makes it easier to group all ‘Hijabi’s’ together. Suddenly we’re all oppressed and forced to wear our Hijabs, suddenly we all need liberating, we’re all Arab, we’re the face of terrorism. Suddenly, we don’t get to make first impressions because the negativity surrounding our Hijab already speaks for us” (Jammal, 2015, no. pg.). She continues to appear in the space of her school with her hijab and uses social media as a platform to defy “all those who misuse my faith and taint the Muslim experience” and reclaim the hijab as “a symbol of resistance against laws that aim to limit my freedom of expression and the right to practice my faith as I see fit” (Jammal, 2015, no.pg.).

When Mariam, Di’ba’, and the Somali girls appear in the schooling space in their hijabs they are participating in a cultural collision that creates interruptions in the ideal. Their resistance to western notions of femininity and feminist bodily liberation and their embracement of religious identification challenges the idea that western society is the gender equality ideal to for which to strive. Their covered appearance refutes the idea that the veil is a universal symbol of female oppression. While the hijab has been marked as the antithesis to the claims of the secular, Western value of gender equality, these girls use their dress to construct a religious identity. By appearing in hijab Mariam, Di’ba’ and the Somali girls are refusing that symbolic investment and resisting being subsumed into western ideals of femininity. This refusal challenges a belief that western society has achieved gender equality through secularism and that the hijab is a concrete symbol of women’s oppression.

3.8 Conclusions

Female students in Canadian schools who practice hijab are subject to discursive practices that other their bodies and deny their subjectivity. Female students wear the hijab for many religious, social and cultural reasons, and in doing so disrupt normative ideals of Canadian girlhood and destabilize the notion that Canada has achieved gender equality. By covering up these girls interrupt Canadian society's consumption of young female bodies. Like the girls who are accused of wearing too little, these girls are accused of not appearing properly within the space of the school and they also argue that they have an individual right to control their own body. Are these two forms of rebellion incompatible? Is there a way that these moments of cultural disruption can be read similarly? Can covering and uncovering, seemingly incompatible interruptions of normative ideals of Canadian girlhood—one claiming freedom of the body while the other is disrupting colonial claims to the “othered” body—both be seen as disrupting the patriarchal gaze on female students bodies? In my next chapter I seek to trouble the secular/religious divide and examine how discursive practices seek to control both groups of girls and how they use the “liberal discourse of choice” to defend their sartorial choices as freedom of expression.

Chapter 4: The Campaign for Individual Freedom and the Limits of Agency

One of the saddest truths of our time is the question of the beauty myth and female self-image. Reading popular teen magazines, you can instantly find out what kind of body image is “in” or “out.” And if you have the “wrong” body type, well, then, you’re just going to have to change it, aren’t you? After all, there is no way that you can be overweight and still be beautiful.—Sultana Yusufali (1998) “My Body is My Own Business”

In this chapter, I will use Joan Wallach Scott’s (2011) work to trouble the secular/religious binary and discover the similarities that Lori Beaman (2013) argues will illuminate conversations about women’s equality. I will engage with how Mariam, Di’ba, the participants in the Somali “Needs Assessment”, Tallie, Lindsey, and Simone use the discursive space of schooling to construct identity and contest normative ideals of Canadian girlhood by reworking the norm through dress code violations. These girls all harness a liberal discourse of choice to defend how their bodies appear within the schooling space, argue that their bodies belong to themselves and are not on display for the sexist cultural gaze, and challenge the educational space to be as concerned with their education as they are with the education of their male peers. By violating actual dress codes, or by refusing to be “liberated” and instead affirming their religious dedication through the practice of hijab, these girls disrupt and challenge the ideology of a gender-equal world within Ontario schools. Moreover, I will analyse how the liberal discourse that the girls use to defend their bodies’ appearance in the educational space is limited in developing a politics because the moments of interruption become foreclosed through the ideology of consumerism and conservatism. The girls become subsumed back into the norm when their interrupted citations are refused to be discussed within the educational space that argues that students are in school in order to prepare for the world of work. This response lacks a pedagogical opening that could allow the girls to have conversations about their violations and instead interpolates them into neoliberal consumer/conservative subjects.

In Sultana Yusufali's (1998) essay "My Body is My Own Business" she identifies herself as a rebel. Her essay is currently included in the *Sightlines 10 Anthology*, a text used in many grade 10 English classrooms across Ontario. Students' reading the essay are tasked with identifying Sultana's thesis: In Islamic faith the hijab is not a symbol of oppression, but rather a symbol of empowerment and it is important to listen to Muslim women who practice hijab when having a conversation about female emancipation. Sultana (1998) argues: "When I cover myself, I make it virtually impossible for people to judge me according to the way I look. I cannot be categorized because of my attractiveness or lack thereof. Compare this to life in today's society: We are constantly sizing one another up on the basis of our clothing, jewellery, hair and makeup. What kind of depth can there be in a world like this?" (p. 52) Sultana wholly sees herself as a member of Canadian society and rejects the beauty ideal that women in western society hold themselves to. Sultana points to the way in which women, and girls, participate in their own regulation by challenging the secular notion that women in western society are free and liberated:

It is a myth that women in today's society are liberated. What kind of freedom can there be when a woman cannot walk down the street without being "checked out"? When I wear the *hijab* I feel safe from all this. I can rest assured that no one is looking at me and making assumptions about my character from the length of my skirt. There is a barrier between me and those who would exploit me. I am first and foremost a human being, equal to any man, and not vulnerable because of my sexuality. (p. 52)

Sultana harnesses a discourse of gender equality to defend her choice to practice hijab. She uses the hijab to empower herself and return the heteronormative western gaze. Her body is not a site of consumption for the western imperial gaze. She creates a barrier between herself and the

dominant culture through the religious practice of hijab. When Lindsey Stocker refused to change her outfit and posted her response to the school administration she also returned the social gaze that sought to regulate her body. She argued that her body should not be shamed into covering up and that educational spaces should teach young men not to sexualize her. While their tactics differ there is a similarity in how the discourse of gender equality is harnessed to defend female students' sartorial choices.

These two categories of female students, those who are charged with underdressing (Simone, Lindsey and Talia) and those who are charged with covering too much (the Somali girls, Mariam, Di'ba, and Sultana) are consistently placed in binary opposition. When western feminism is employed in an imperialist project of unveiling women in the name of liberation these two groups of female students are constructed as opposite, as liberated versus oppressed, as ideologically incompatible. While I maintain that there are many differences in how all girls construct their identity and that imposing universality onto female students is highly problematic, there is a moment of rupture within gender identity formation that both these particular groups of girls highlight: The desire for Canadian society to regulate their bodies through normalized gender performativity. The discursive space of schooling allows girls moments to contest regulatory ideals and question the gaze on their bodies because it is a space of cultural collision (Butler, 1993, p. 124). Within schools, meaning and identity are constantly being reworked. Moreover, whether that gaze is compelling them to undress or dress, it still compels them to enact a certain kind of white, heteronormative gender identity. Through their dress girls rearticulate their gender causing ruptures in the citation of the norm. In order to better understand how moments of rupture can be read as similar within a framework that so often places religious head-coverings and short-shorts as symbolic opposites in the liberation of women, we must first

analyze how the religious/secular divide erases inequality within the western world by constructing female oppression within the “other” Islamic culture. The symbolic use of the hijab is invoked as a powerful symbol of female oppression, in order to claim that secular societies have achieved gender equality because our women do not look “like that.” We point to a woman in religious garments that cover her body and claim “that” is what oppression looks like, and “we” do not look “like that.” If western women do not look like the oppressed “other,” and the image of oppression so readily invoked is of a woman in hijab, then gender inequality must not exist in the west.

4.1 Destabilizing the secular/religious divide

Scott (2011) calls “into question the simple oppositions—modern/traditional, secular/religious, sexually liberated/sexually oppressed, gender equality/patriarchal hierarchy, West/East” and argues that “secularism has not resolved the difficulties that sexual difference poses for social and political organization in modern western societies” (p. 26). When we disrupt these binary oppositions we can start to see how discursive practices operate similarly on young female students in Toronto schools who are both overexposed and underexposed. There is a desired imaginary for female students’ identity formation that seeks to uphold a certain kind of appropriate gender identity—subject formation—that both these groups of students disrupt. Their bodies alone call these practices into question by exposing what Butler (1993) refers to as “gaps and fissures” in the ideal (p. xix). We are uncomfortable with the appearance of these bodies because they expose heteronormative patriarchy within a supposedly gender equal Western world through their denial of the western heteronormative gaze, a gaze that structures desire

upon the female body. Both groups students are reacting to tensions in the ideal whereby their bodies are simultaneously sexualized and then shamed for being sexual.

Scott gives a historical overview that demonstrates how the secularization of the western political landscape did little to emancipate women and worked to further cement their place in the private sphere: “When reason becomes the defining attribute of the citizen and when abstraction enables the interchangeability of one individual citizen for another, passion gets assigned not just to the marital bed (or the chambers of the courtesan), but to the sexualized body of the woman” (p. 27). This changes the justification for women’s private role in the household from a religious one to one based on biological sciences. Sexual difference becomes legitimized through scientific rationality and masculinity “is confirmed in opposition to both these representations: men are the public face of the family and the reasoning arbiters of the realm of the political. Their existence as sexual beings is at once secured in relation to women and displaced onto them. The public/private demarcation so crucial to the secular/religious divide rests on a vision of sexual difference that legitimizes the political and social inequality of women and men. As the western political landscape took a secular shape the public and the private sphere took over to solidify the roles of women and men. Women become ensconced in the domestic or private sphere while men’s roles become public and political (Scott, 2011, p. 27). The narrative of progress for gender equality through the secularization of the state becomes a myth and sexual difference becomes a scientific fact, unarguable and irrefutable.

Moreover, Scott interrogates the idea that enfranchisement invested in women equals power within western society and states: “The formal enfranchisement of women did not end their subordination. Even when, after years of feminist agitation, women in these democracies won the right to vote, references to a biologically mandated sexual division of labor were used to

place them in a socially subordinate relationship to men . . . The formal rights of the citizen for women did not translate into social and economic equality; citizenship did not change the norms that established women as different” (p. 29-30). Despite winning the right to vote, women and men are still considered biologically different and responsible for fulfilling different roles within society. Secularization of society did not erase the binary that holds women as subordinate to men instead it solidified its existence through scientific rationalization. The claim is that women are subordinate to men because their biological role as child bearer ensconces them in the societal role of domestic goddess. A quick glance at contemporary advertisements demonstrates that women are still primarily targeted as responsible for the domestic sphere and if women have achieved gender equality it is not reflected in their pay checks or in their safety from gender violence.

Moreover, the secular/religious divide seeks to erase the inequality women face within secular societies by holding up Muslim oppression of women as a binary and using the veil as an overtly visible symbol of religious oppression. In western ideology, the hijab represents female oppression and because the west does not see itself as a religious society and does not require women to cover their heads then the west cannot possibly be accused of gender inequality. Scott (2011) uses an example from the Algerian war to highlight the long historical tradition of imperial projects that position the liberation of woman as justification for colonial “civilizing” missions: “At the height of the Algerian war for independence (1954-62), the wives of French colonial administrators organized women’s associations aimed at freeing native women from the constraints of Islamic law. A ceremony in 1958 that involved the unveiling of Muslim women was meant to display the ‘civilizing mission’ in action; France was not, as the nationalists claimed, an oppressor, but—in this scenario—a liberator. The removal of the veil proved it” (p.

32-33). This construction of the West as liberator continues today and the liberation of women continues to be a justification for invasions into the Middle East by Western countries. There is a way in which gender equality has been used to uphold colonialism and imperialism while still maintaining gender inequality within western society. One such exposure of gender inequality within schools is the way in which Ontario school dress codes spend a disproportionate amount of time describing how much of a girls' body should be covered. Tallie Doyle's main complaint is that her school's dress code is sexist because it only involves the girls. While western imperialist projects seek to liberate women's bodies from religious garments there is still an anxiety over how supposedly liberated female bodies appear in the Western world.

One of the problems of contemporary feminist arguments that "equate religion, patriarchy, and the subordination of women" is that the arguments deny religious women who veil agency (Scott, 2011, p. 35). It has done this by speaking for hijabi women instead of listening to them. When hijabi women are allowed to speak their articulations are refuted as not real, as inauthentic, because critics of head-coverings only read them as a symbol of oppression and "any answer that disputes their interpretation is dismissed as false consciousness" (Scott, 2011, p. 37). Young female students who veil are seen as a single story of oppression and incapable of making a choice for themselves. The conclusion is drawn that they are being pressured by their community and therefore cannot enact any form of agency. The west is then given a free pass from its own gender inequality because it shifts the focus to the liberation of the body of the oppressed "other." This free pass is called into question when as Lori Beaman (2013) highlights in an examination of legal cases, we begin to "examine the incidence of violence against women in Canadian society, including intimate partner violence and sexual assault, the differences in pay between men and women, the disparity in division of household labour

(women do more).” (p. 729). Under the weight of this evidence, Canadian society as a civilized secular gender equal world begins to collapse. This raises the stakes on the removal of the hijab from Muslim women in Canada because Canada’s national identity is at stake. Harper made it very clear that a woman wearing a Muslim head covering is not part of the Canadian family because it represents a “backwards” society based on gender inequality. If women in Canada choose to wear the hijab then they are refuting the image of oppressed “other,” celebrating their religious identity and calling into question Canadian secular values and national narratives.

How do we move beyond viewing the headscarf as a symbol of women’s oppression? As I argue in chapter three, there is a way in which Muslim women and girls use the liberal ideology of individual expression to refute the Western story of their oppression. Scott (2011) turns to the testimonies of young women in headscarves to examine how they invoke “the discourse of liberal individualism” to support their decision to wear prescribed religious dress as a choice to voluntarily submit (p. 37). The veil becomes a symbol of resistance to western culture rather than a symbol of oppression:

“I wear the veil to submit to God—and I am totally responsible for that submission—but that also means I submit myself to no one else, even my parents . . . I give myself to God and this God promises to protect and defend me. So those who want to try to tell me what to do, to hell with them” . . . what is at stake in comments like this one is the personal appropriation and reversal of a sign of what modernity sees as inferiority and a sign of women’s oppression—in this case, the headscarf: “It expresses the exteriorization and the wish to turn the stigma into a sign of power and distinction for [Muslim] women” . . . Submission, then, in this view of things, is—paradoxically—a choice freely made. That is the

point of this ironic question from a woman protesting the French ban. “If my veil is a ‘symbol of oppression,’ must I then conclude that I’m oppressing myself?”

(Scott, 2011, p. 37-39)

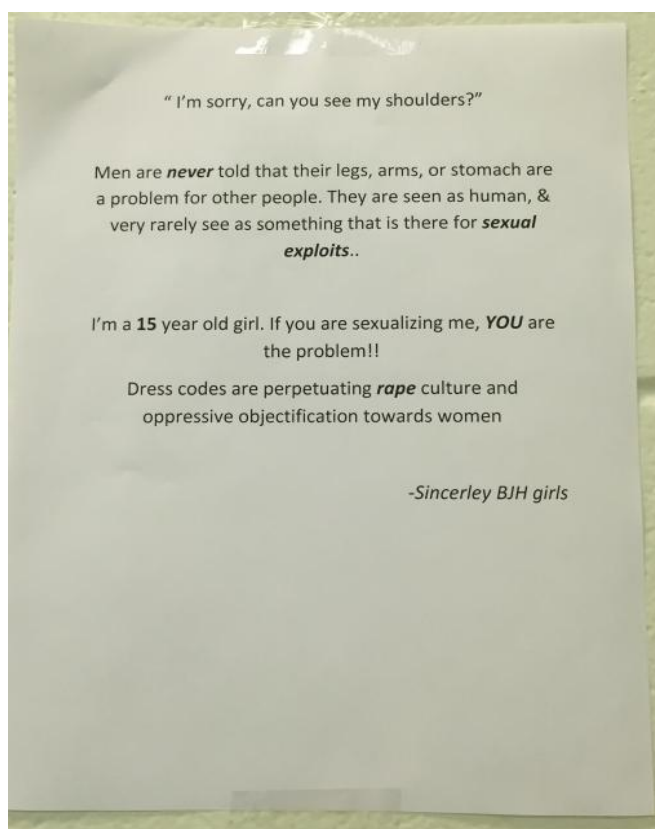
The veil, like racist and homophobic terms being reappropriated by the people they were used to injure, is reclaimed as a symbol of Muslim identity, religious freedom, and refusal of western culture. For female students in Toronto schools this appropriation of the veil to enact a symbol of power and choice can be read as a moment of enacting agency, as a resistance to normative constructions of Canadian girlhood, rather than as a moment of cultural oppression.

4.2 Please take your eyes off my body

Lindsey, Tallie, and Simone, the girls introduced in chapter one who contested their schools’ dress codes by underdressing, and Mariam and Sultana, the Toronto Muslim student’s whose essays in chapters three and two attempted to deconstruct racist stereotypes about their wearing of the hijab, all argue that their bodies should not be the most important thing about them. Lindsey’s response to being told she was “making a bad choice” exposed the regulatory ideal that shames girls’ bodies in order to keep them within the confines of the norm (Solyom, 2014, no.pg.). Lindsey, instead of covering up and remaining silent about her humiliation, refuted the gaze and made gender inequality public by posting signs throughout her school that read: “Don’t humiliate her because she is wearing shorts. It’s hot outside. Instead of shaming girls for their bodies, teach boys that girls are not sexual objects” (Solyom, 2014, no.pg.). There is a refusal to allow the regulatory process to do its work on her body. Lindsey refuses to be shamed and harnesses a feminist discourse to refute the claims the school administration made to control her body. She asks the school to teach the male members of the community that she is

not a sexual object rather than requiring her to put on more clothes. No one should look because she is more than just a body.

Sultana and Mariam use their religious beliefs to defend their choice to remove their body from the male gaze. As Sultana writes: “Yes, I have a body, a physical manifestation upon this earth. But it is the vessel of an intelligent mind and a strong spirit. It is not for the beholder to leer at or to use in advertisements to sell everything from beers to cars. Because of the superficiality of the world in which we live, external appearances are so stressed that the value of the individual counts for almost nothing” (p. 52). Sultana highlights the idea that her body is not to be sexualized and used to drive a consumer society. As Ruby (2006) argues: “The notion that the *hijab* liberates women from the male gaze and helps them to be in charge of their own bodies is a very prominent claim by those Muslim women who wear it. They argue that the *hijab* is not a mark of oppression; rather it is a sign of liberation that protects them from a sexist society” (p. 62). Liberation from a sexist society is a claim that Lindsey, Tallie, Simone, Sultana and Mariam make when they consider how they dress in schools. Figure 4, a sign posted in a school in



Newfoundland, also demonstrates how girls refute the sexualisation of their bodies and claim that dress codes participate in perpetuating the sexualisation of their bodies:

Figure 4: Dress code response highlights the refutation of the heteronormative gaze through the use of a feminist discourse of oversexualisation and oppression. Courtesy of CBC.ca

Most of the girls harnessed a “liberal discourse of choice” to defend how their bodies appeared within the schooling space. While Lindsey and Tallie uncover in order to expose and then refute the sexist discourse that supports current dress codes, Mariam and Sultana argued that when they cover they are denying the western gaze. They use these discourses to challenge the regulatory ideal that seeks to expose their bodies in certain ways. They also reaffirm the belief that covered or uncovered their bodies should be allowed to appear unconsumed within the pedagogical space. Their bodies should be safe from gazing, from consumption.

4.3 Respect my mind

Largely present in both engagements with dress within schools is the notion of respect. Whether the body is exposed or not, girls ask that their education be the foremost concern for educators and administrators within schools. Tallie Doyle, who purposely violated her school’s dress code in order to start a conversation about how the dress code is sexist, missed fifteen minutes of class while being educated about the benefits of the school’s dress code policy. Meanwhile, Lindsey was suspended for one day because she refused to change and for hanging posters around the school that challenged the dress codes. Lindsey responded: “If I’m going to be held back by this in my education, I feel that says more about the education system than it does about me” (Kelly, 2014, no. pg.). Their challenges to the school dress codes resulted in missed educational time, and they directly questioned whose education is more valued. Lindsey and Tallie directly critique the education system and cause a momentary interruption in normative regulation by bringing their critiques to the media.

Another example of exclusion from the educational space as a result of dress is when Muslim female students are constructed as “underachieving,” resistant to western education, or

simply ignored by teachers because they wear a hijab. The case of Di'ba, discussed in chapter three who was ignored by her Art teacher when she began wearing a hijab, demonstrates how teachers can reject students' sartorial choices, and subsequently their chosen identity performance, by pretending they do not even see them in their classroom. Moreover, Muslim students reveal that they are characterized as academically "underachieving," in part, because of their dress. This negative teacher attitude directly affects their achievement in schools and their perception of themselves as academically capable:

It was strongly expressed by several girls that they feel that many teachers are shocked when a Somali student does well academically. It was stated that many teachers seem to assume that a Somali student has cheated in order to do well . . . The girls reported that they feel that all Somalis are assumed to be 'stupid' . . . Several girls reported that if a Somali student talks back to a teacher, or is suspended even once, there is a bad 'association' permanently afterwards in the minds of teachers. ("Somali Needs Assessment," 2003, p. 22-23)

These negative teacher attitudes directly undermine student achievement and exclude Muslim female students from the educational space because of a clothing choice. Moreover, Jasmine Zine's (2001) focus groups included a student name Karima who revealed how she had to deal with low teacher expectations because of her religious identification:

They kept telling me, "You may not be able to handle it, you don't know how hard it is," and like I've never failed a course in high school. And then my junior high guidance councillor said, "You know maybe you should go for general courses because you may not be able to take advanced," but not telling me you can't go to university without taking advanced courses. They didn't tell me that,

and if I didn't have an older brother and sister I would have taken general. You think guidance councillors are there to help you, but they're not. (p. 414)

This is not just an instance of a young girl's sartorial choices getting her sent home for a day. There is a deeper racialized discourse at work. Karima's identity as a Muslim girl results in the "misconception that education is not valued by Muslim women" (Zine, 2001, p. 414). Again the idea that education for girls is not as valuable as education for boys is invoked. Lindsey is characterized as a wayward girl whose choice to expressly violate her school's dress code is going to hold her back throughout her life. As one school administrator stated: "The way she delivered her message was inappropriate. I feel a little bit sorry for her because this is going to be sticking with her for her future . . . If she goes to apply for a job and someone sees this on her Twitter or on her Facebook, it may affect her future possibilities" (Kelly, 2014, no.pg.). Karima's experience, combined with Lindsey's and Tallie's, reveals that when there is an interruption in the citation of normative gender performativity, when a girl dresses in a way that is seen as contrary to Canadian values, she causes a rupture to the discursive practices that seek to produce certain types of white feminine bodies. Her punishment (exclusion from school/construction as "other") does not mean that she has not reworked the norm in some way. Many girls responded to Lindsey's suspension by arriving to school the next day in similar length shorts and #DressCodePM trended on Twitter for several days when Prime Minister Harper made his comments about the niqab. The weakness in the norm, the fact that the norm can never encompass everything and that the ideal is never achievable, is worked by these girls through their citation. They enter their bodies into the discourse as they choose them to appear and work to undo a normative restriction and "the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has

greater livability as its aim” (Butler, 2004, p. 1). By appearing as underdressed or overdressed and refusing to alter their sartorial choices, Lindsey, Tallie, Mariam, Di’ba, and all the girls who challenge normative dress, attempt to create a new image of Canadian girlhood.

4.4 Resisting normative ideals: What should a girl look like?

On the one hand a girl should be dressed modestly and professionally in school environment. On the other hand, young women’s bodies are highly sexualized in the media. When female students reject one ideal and embrace the other, they are resisting prescribed notions of how their bodies should appear in public spaces. Lindsey, Tallie and Simone from the case studies in the first chapter rejected the notion that their bodies are sites of sexual desire and argued that they should be safe from body shaming and thus their bodies should not be hidden from view within the space of schooling. Likewise, the revelations from Mariam’s blog, the Somali Youth coalition, and Ruby’s and Zine’s focus groups reveal that there is a rejection of western ideals of femininity that conform to standards of a sexist culture. Both groups of students are resisting and challenging what they view as Canadian societal values, whether that is an imperative to cover up their bodies and maintain the moral climate of the community or the bombardment of images that demand their bodies to be exposed.

The ideal can never be fully realized and within the space of the school, as noted by Yon (2000), there is a perpetual shifting of meaning when it comes to identity formation and it is important to think about how discursive practices can be both constraining and enabling. While the dress codes prescribe a desired norm they also contain their own critique. By naming what is appropriate they are also naming what is inappropriate. This becomes a viable point of contestation for someone like Lindsey Stocker, who in grade 11 and well aware of her school

dress codes, used her body to contest normative ideals of modest dress that are somewhat ridiculous when compared with how women are presented in the media. Meanwhile, the ideal that asks for girls to dress modestly in schools is part of the same nationalist discourse that excludes a niqab-wearing woman from taking the Canadian citizenship oath. There is a limit to modest dress and to accommodation. So in refusing to undress, in choosing consciously to veil and reappropriate a western symbol of female oppression and use it to contest western sexualisation of the body is to interrupt the regulatory work that seeks to expose female bodies to the hegemonic gaze.

Zine's (2001) focus groups reveal that some Muslim girls struggle with western beauty standards and find support and strength in their practice of hijab. As Karima reveals:

Karima: Like even if you just look at the word "dark" it gives you images of evil or witchcraft, of not being clean. . . . So it comes in every aspect of life, white being clean, good, better, a white dress for weddings to symbolize virginity, and dark is like everything bad. So then when they look at dark people, that's the ideas that come with it, and those are the prevailing ideas in this society.

Jasmine: How did that make you feel growing up?

K: It made me feel that I could never be that beautiful woman, because I wasn't born white. I would never be able to be that beautiful woman, and being dark was not a very attractive thing. And plus that's part of Indian culture too, so I had a double wammie! One was being in this environment and then also I'm darker than most Pakistanis in general and so, the thing is I wasn't really feeling that good about the way that I looked. And then I think I stopped really caring about the

way that I looked, because I thought what is the point, I'm never going to be able to be beautiful. (p. 410)

Karima at first holds a negative perception of herself as a result of dominant norms in society that structure “whiteness” as the ideal of beauty. Throughout the interview, however, she reveals that in identifying herself more closely with Islam and her Muslim identity she is able to reject western notions of beauty and alter her negative self-perception: “Oh yeah, as I’ve grown older like I’ve realized there are all types of beauty. Just practicing Islam makes you respect yourself. It doesn’t matter how you look really, it’s just how good of a person you are. And how hard you try to become better” (p. 410). She also articulates the importance of respecting yourself and valuing what is on the inside as opposed to how one’s body is perceived by others. This notion of respecting what’s on the inside is also demonstrated in Figure 5, an artistic response to western criticisms of the hijab, posted in many hijabi social media accounts:



Figure 5: Artistic response to hijab criticism. Courtesy of IslamicArtDB.com

Karima, and other girls who wear the hijab, refute western gender ideals and instead identify more strongly with their Muslim identity, reiterating the refrain that a girl's mind and inner self is more important than being on display for a male, social gaze.

By reintroducing patriarchy and sexism back into the discourse of female dress and female identity politics, these girls are laying claim to a feminist political movement regardless of whether they violate the dress code through overexposure or underexposure. Both groups recognize something in their world that is incompatible with how they feel their gender identity should be performed within the context of the school. They are calling into question the notion that the educative space is gender equal. When we ignore patriarchy as a framework for discussing the policing of young girls bodies we uphold the binary that separates girls who underdress and girls who overdress and construct both bodies as rebellious and in need of more policing and control. What happens when “patriarchy circles round [is] we can begin to make sense of how it is that a woman can be required to strip and to dress at the same time. For, if the matter is one of control of women's bodies, these two extremes surely cover the bases” (Beaman, 2013), p. 729). In our rush to lay claim to an ideal of gender equality we have erased the ways in which Canadian society still functions as a patriarchy. What then clashes are a liberal ideology of free choice, a popular feminist discourse that is asking girls to embrace their bodies, and patriarchy's desire to control female bodies. This site of cultural collusion allows for moments of interruption that force us to “shift our attention, then, to the ways in which patriarchy's hydra-like manifestations impact different women's lives differently, but with a view to the similarity of effect” (Beaman, 2013, 729). To underdress or overdress is to expose the intense control and regulation of girls' bodies within Canadian society. Control of girls' bodies is the similarity

while there remain many differences between how these girls perceive themselves or are perceived by others as race, sexuality and class have not been brought to bear on this question.

4.5 Responsible to whom? The campaign for individual freedom

Girls who are accused of underdressing and girls who are accused of overdressing both harness the discourse of individual freedom to support their dress. Choice is an important word for all the girls presented in this study. Wrapped up in western notions of individual freedom is the idea that one has the freedom to present their body in public however they choose. Scott (2011) looks at the arguments made by Muslim women in court cases globally and makes this observation:

The defense of their right to religious expression has led many women to public activism, but not the kind usually associated with Islamist radicals who seek to impose their way of doing things on everyone else. Neither is there an endorsement of state-mandated covering for women as in Saudi Arabia or Iran . . . “We fight against the obligatory veil and against obligatory unveiling, for the right to have our heads uncovered or covered; it is the same fight: the fight for freedom of choice, and more precisely, for the right of each woman to dispose of her body as she wishes.” These are recognizable liberal democratic values— freedom of choice and women’s control of their bodies . . . (p. 38)

These liberal democratic values were echoed by Lindsey, Tallie, and Simone when they spoke to the news media about their dress code violations and in Sultana and Mariam’s essays. But the choice to do what? Appear at school in shorts that do not reach below the fingertips without fear of being publically shamed, or wear a hijab without fear of being stereotyped as a terrorist? Yes,

but more importantly, their choice, they argue, is to express themselves however they choose. This reveals the limits of the liberal discourse of freedom and choice when it is not taken up and questioned. They mention that they should not be shamed or stereotyped, but the administration removes their signs and dismisses their claims of choice as false consciousness, leaving the girls to fall back on a liberal ideology of freedom of expression. Without some space to question and challenge the interruptions caused by their dress code violations the interruptions lose their chance at becoming a politics. Students lose the chance to have their interruptions taken up as political questions. Instead their interruptions are reduced to “bad” choices” and “controlled by a backwards culture.” This reduction subsumes girls back into the regulatory norm of western individualism.

Lindsey, Tallie, and Simone were all told they were responsible for covering up so as not to distract the boys. They believed they were not free, that their freedom to express themselves through dress had become limited. Lindsey detailed the way in which the school administrators asked only the girls to stand and then made them take the fingertip test in front of all their classmates. If the hemlines did not pass their fingertips girls were in violation of the dress code. Lindsey said she was humiliated: “When I started explaining why I didn’t understand that rule, they didn’t really want to hear anything I had to say, and it was in front of my entire class. I felt very attacked . . . and I wanted to tell them how I felt . . . adding that many of the rules in the dress code appear to specifically target girls” (CBC, 2014, no.pg.). A friend of Lindsey’s further explains, using the liberal discourse of individual freedom, that: “People should be able to express themselves . . . People are being judged for the way they dress, they have to change because boys look at them. The boys should be the ones who have to learn to treat women better and look at them in a different light . . . They should approach it in a way that doesn’t target girls

at least — for starters — because that’s the first problem. They don’t really care what guys wear” (CBC, 2014, no.pg.). These girls are right to mention a specific policing of girls bodies. Yet, the administrative response to their interruption is simply to suspend Lindsey and claim that she did not contest the rules the “right” way. The educational space foreclosed an important pedagogical opening in which some of these students could have developed a dress code violation into a politics. Lindsey is shut down and sublimated back into an ideology of freedom of choice and consumerism, instead of being engaged in a critical discussion about the oversexualization of female bodies.

Mariam (2015) and Sultana (1998) express their desire to have their choices respected in their essays. Mariam states: “My hijab has given me a confidence that stems from my soul, that thrives off my personality and grows with my intellect. It is a proud representation of my choices and my struggles. It is a sign of solidarity with the global Muslim community that is suffering different levels of ignorance, Islamophobia and discrimination. It is a symbol of defiance against all those who misuse my faith and taint the Muslim experience and it is a symbol of resistance against laws that aim to limit my freedom of expression and the right to practice my faith as I see fit” (no. pg.). Mariam reclaims her hijab as a symbol of resistance against societies that seek to limit her freedom. Freedom of expression then becomes a site of contestation wherein young girls can rework the terms of their identity and challenge regulatory ideals. Yet, again, freedom of expression is a limited contestation site when there is no discussion. Mariam’s and Sultana’s essays are over fifteen years apart and they still make the same arguments about stereotypes and challenging western notions of consumerism and beauty ideals. If there has been a foreclosure of the conversation about why girls underdress, then there is an even bigger fear of undertaking a conversation about girls in Canada who reject western societal values through overdressing. The

national narrative is so reliant on human emancipation, gender equality, and secularization that to engage in a conversation with girls and accept the premise that they are in some way freely choosing to submit to religious sartorial customs would destabilize Canadian identity. When these young Muslim girls find themselves rejected by the schooling space for their sartorial choices they become sublimated back into either a conservatism that is not necessarily about female agency or western consumerism in which their hijab becomes a fashion choice. In fact, images now appear critiquing some young girls' practice of hijab as too fashionable and not adhering to the tenants of modesty. Hijab becomes a fashion statement and the ideology of consumerism remains stable. While we strive to find moments of agency within the space of the school there is a limit to which these young girls, both those who underdress and those who overdress, can develop a politics when the educational space claims that its role is to get students ready for their future as employees.

4.6 The Limits of agency within the educational space

Figure 4 demonstrates how girls harness feminist discourse in order to refuse interpolation into a certain kind of gendered identity. Girls who create these posters at their schools, as Lindsey did, are attempting a critical intervention within the discourse. Mariam, Di'ba, and Sultana also raise critical questions about the hegemonic gaze that compels them to remove their hijab and participate in certain gendered ideal of Canadian citizenship. They both express an agency through their rearticulation of gender performativity, but because they rely on a liberal discourse of choice and the educational space forecloses their rupture by shutting down their questions and claiming that their choices are not authentic, not real, their bodies become sublimated back into normative subjectivity. The girls struggle to move from refusal, rupture,

and rebellion to a politics because there is no space (because education does not provide a space) in which to creatively engage with, and problematize, the policing of their bodies. Teachers and administrators fall back on a neoliberal assertion that schools are in place to prepare students for work. An administrator asked by Global news to respond to the suspension Lindsey incurred as a result of her refusal be interpolated into the “right” kind of girl, was so dismissive of Lindsey’s political statement that there is no recourse for this interruption to be explored, to be worked through, to become a sustained political engagement with the fantasy of girls bodies and the subsequent policing of those bodies in service of regulatory norms. Steven Colpitts and Suanne Stein Day, director and chairmen of the Lester B. Pearson school board respectively, both demonstrate how the educative space is shutting down a pedagogical space that allows for a questioning of who belongs within the democratic space and instead state that Lindsey should “know better” and that there is a right way and a wrong way to contest school rules and that teachers and administrators are working hard to “prepare students for their futures in the world” as working subjects (Kelly, 2014, no.pg.).

This opens up the question: What is the role of education? If one envisions education as a interpolative space in which subjects become produced and regulated in the service of a heteronormative capitalist western world, than the shutting down of student contestations of dress codes and refusals of western consumerist ideals must continue and violators should be punished and humiliated until they embody an appropriate gendered body. But if one envisions the pedagogical space as a place in which social transformation can occur and students can develop a politics from their interruptions, than education is failing. Education is closing down possibilities for students to try out identities and foster a sustained political engagement that develops into social transformation. I am using Butler’s (2004) articulation of politics as she

reimagined it in response to her early work on gender performativity in *Gender Trouble*. She claims that a democracy is an unpredictable “process that must be undergone, as a passion must be undergone” (p. 226). What happens to Lindsey, Mariam, Simone, Tallia, Sultana and Di’ba is that there has been a foreclosure to their attempts to cultural translation. Butler (2004) elucidates: “It may also be that life itself becomes foreclosed when the right way is decided in advance, or when we impose what is right for everyone, without finding a way to enter into community and discover the ‘right’ in the midst of cultural translation” (p. 226-7). This is precisely where the girls who contest normative ideals of Canadian girlhood become limited because this is what is foreclosed—their rearticulations are not discussed, not worked through, politics is not developed—identity becomes about imitating a hypersexualized media body or a conservative religious one instead of an identity politics that reworks the terms of inclusion. What I would like to propose is that there are no right or wrong ways for girls to appear in schools, but rather staying “open to the tensions that beset the most fundamental categories we require” and giving our young girls a properly pedagogical space fostered by their education in which to turn their moments of agency into a politics so that the future they imagine can be one where they are safe to walk down the street free from violence regardless of their how much of their body is exposed (Butler, 2004, p. 227).

5.1 Conclusions

Why should young girls be responsible for the distraction of male students? Why should young girls be forced to unveil? How is one more symbolic of oppression? Girls have been using dress in schools to rework normative ideals of girlhood for generations. What is interesting is how two groups of girls who seem to be diametrically opposed use dress to interrupt normative ideals of girlhood while exposing gender inequality within their school cultures and societies. While they both challenge the heteronormative matrix, Muslim female students are subject to a racialized colonial discourse that also seeks to further control their bodies. Yet, the moments of interruption are similar: they expose gender inequality in a supposedly gender equal world, they seek to control how their bodies appear in public spaces and they seek to challenge normative ideals of Canadian girlhood whether that be “whiteness” or modesty. One girl seeks to expose her body because she can—she lives in a world that exports its gender equality—her body is liberated. One girl seeks to cover her body in order to refuse western standards of beauty that seek to sexualize her body and consciously submit to her faith—she uses a symbol that the western world has equated with her oppression to affirm her Muslim identity. Seemingly incompatible girls, and yet, they both interrupt the process of regulatory normative gendering.

There is something incredibly important to this conversation for a global (not universal) feminist project. Adolescent girls in Canadian schools are vocalizing a refusal to perpetuate certain gendered norms and are calling into question western society’s consumption of their body. Some break the dress codes knowing they will be punished in order to start a conversation through the media about sexist dress codes while others embrace religious dress that the west has symbolized as oppressive in order to refuse the oversexualization of their bodies. Yet, these interruptions are limited when the educational space refuses to sustain a space wherein these

critical questions can be interrogated. Female students' engagements with the regulatory norms are foreclosed and subsumed back into consumerism and conservatism. Rather than critically challenging the hegemonic gaze that compels their bodies to appear in certain ways and the hyperpolicing of their bodies, female students are dismissed as having a false consciousness, as being controlled either by religious fundamentalism or advertising. As I have argued, there are moments of interruption and rupture to the regulatory work of gender, yet educational institutions deny students agential capacity and dismiss Mariam, Sultana, Lindsey, Di'ba', Simone, and the Somali girls as troublesome and rebellious, girls who should know better or who are "just being difficult" or want attention. School is not the work place. By claiming that students will have to follow a dress code when they enter the work place and that school is a place to prepare students for work reduces education to an interpolative state apparatus. To engage with student interruptions and facilitate sustain critical questioning opens up the school as a pedagogical space. We cannot hope to reduce gender inequality within Canada if we refuse to help our female students develop a politics as they change the shape of Canadian girlhood.

5.2 Future Directions

This thesis has demonstrated the ways in which female students who overdress and underdress challenge dress codes in order to rework normative gender performativity in Ontario schools. The scope of this research is limited to previously published case studies, essays, and news media reports and demonstrates how educational spaces foreclose critical openings that could be used to help students develop their performative interruptions into a politics. Future research and study must work to engage directly with groups of female students who overdress and female students who underdress through focus groups that allow students to work together to examine the policing of their bodies and question gender inequality in all its facets.

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