THE EXTRA-ORDINARY GIRL UNDER NEOLIBERALISM,
ON AND OFF SCREEN:
HOW TEEN GIRLS IN TORONTO NEGOTIATE CARE, CONNECTION,
AND FIGURATIONS OF GIRLHOOD

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the "extra-ordinary" girl as she exists under neoliberalismm today. The extra-ordinary girl in this dissertation refers to the girl with a public presence who has great physical, mental and/or social power. Through a combination of qualitative research group interviews with teen girls in Toronto, and textual and cultural analyses of figurations of girlhood in popular culture, I emphasize the importance of listening to real teen girls whose perspectives and values might not match those attributed to dominant cultural models of girlhood. I explore contemporary girl figures and figurations of girlhood, on and off screen, highlighting how girls who are not in the public eye negotiate standards of exceptionality in relation to their own experiences of social power, while also defining the importance of care and connection to their relationships and personal values.

Katniss from *The Hunger Games* and Sabrina from *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* are two case examples within contemporary YA speculative fiction film and TV of an extra-ordinary teen girl protagonist. These two cases of the extra-ordinary girl – the warrior-activist and the witch – share some common traits rooted in an ethic of care. Moreover, these two character types are compelling for the ways they reflect social practices that real girls also engage in: activism and alternative spirituality. The fictional representations of extra-ordinary girlhood have a dialogic relationship with cultural-historical practices of girls who are visible activists, and with those who are increasingly interested in alternative spirituality. Both figures not only wield their exceptional power to effect social change, but they also become models for popular media to co-opt and appropriate into an extra-ordinary girl figure.

For the girls in my study, the extra-ordinariness of the characters, like the extraordinariness of the activist discussed in our sessions, is understood within the context of

care and connection. While the girls I interviewed value relationships and community, their

underlying feelings of needing to work on being braver and more confident reveal internalized

neoliberal messages. In my analysis of coming of age and figurations of extra-ordinary girlhood,

I illuminate the complexity of care under neoliberalism for the teen girl today.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Grace and Bruno Benigno.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

"I *try* to be courageous, but she's the next level courageous. Next level brave."

(R.D., 16 years old)

When R.D. made this comment about Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* in our group interview, I did not think much of it. Only after sitting with the video footage and transcripts of the interviews did I realize that this statement essentially encapsulates many of the other participants' sentiments about how they experience the world. "Next level courageous" and "next level brave" perfectly captures how the teenage girl today is presented through figurations of girlhood, and thus expected to be within North American[1] society.

From the outset of this project, I knew that having conversations with teen girls would be an enlightening and informative experience. From my recollection of being a teen who cared about social issues and wanted to effect change in some way, I was intrigued to learn more about how girls today, from various parts of Toronto, view the world and their role within it. My ideas for this project changed along the way, as the following chapter will explain, but the structure this study ended up taking illuminates some crucial information about the teen girl in North America today.

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[1] I am using North American as short-hand for English-speaking culture in the United States and Canada, while recognizing that its geographical range includes Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. My reference to North American ideals and figures includes those that have been taken up by North American culture even if not originating within it. For example, activist Greta Thunberg is from Sweden, but is taken up by North American culture.

Through discussions initially focused on the topic of social issues with a discussion of relationship scenes from *The Hunger Games* film (2012) and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (*Sabrina*) television program series (2018-2020), some specific themes became apparent in the girls' answers to the different topics. Although I set out to do my study with particular research questions in mind, the discussions alerted me to some other significant views that the girls had. Out of the interviews, Katniss from *The Hunger Games* and Sabrina from *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* are two examples within contemporary young adult film and television where the lead teen girl is extra-ordinary in some way. The activist-warrior and the witch characters serve as case studies of the extra-ordinary girl figure as she exists on screen. The shows present two instances of contemporary figurations of extra-ordinary girlhood as they exist under neoliberalism.

The year 2018 is when the extraordinary girl figuration took on significant socio-cultural weight in the media and popular culture as public depictions of the teen girl on screen and off screen presented an exceptionally powerful girl. In 2018, on March 24, March for Our Lives, a student-led demonstration in protest of stronger gun-control legislation took place in Washington, D.C. This protest was in response to the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting that took place in Parkland, Florida a few weeks earlier on February 14, 2018, and received mass media attention. Later this year, teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg addressed the United Nations Climate Change Conference with a powerful speech about climate change, initiating the global student-led climate strike movement, "Fridays for Future." The popular culture texts I examine are examples from this moment: alongside other popular media presenting extraordinary girls, *Sabrina* was released the fall of 2018, and the final film of *The Hunger Games* film series was released in 2015 with promise of a prequel movie to be released in the

future to endure the franchise's legacy. There is a strong pull for girls to be not only empowered, but also powerful activists today.

The teen girl public figure in this contemporary moment is powerful, and this dissertation analyzes these figures and figurations of girlhood while exploring how girls not in the public eye, specifically the girls in my focus groups, negotiate the visible and invisible standards of exceptional girlhood. Interestingly, the girls in my study perceived the extra-ordinariness of the characters in the show case studies within the context of care and connection. Exceptionality also framed their views on what it would take to be a true activist themselves. What they believe is required of them to be a true activist was at times at odds with their care for loved ones, specifically their family members.

Being extraordinary or powerful was not only overwhelming and intimidating in many ways for the girls in my study, but it was ultimately secondary to care and connection. These girls from my study are actually quite extraordinary in their upholding of personal values, which are at time at odds with what the status quo values. Both the relationships and community that they value, and their underlying feelings of needing to work on being stronger, braver, and more confident, reveal internalized neoliberal messages. Moreover, the particular types of the extra-ordinary girl figure that Katniss and Sabrina represent coincide with two dominant public figures of the teen girl today as well: the activist/warrior and witch.

These fictional representations of extra-ordinary girls have a dialogic relationship with cultural-historical practices of girls who are visible activists and those who are increasingly interested in alternative spirituality. Incidentally, through close analysis, it becomes apparent that these two examples of the extra-ordinary girl figure – the warrior-activist and the witch – share some common traits, and at times overlap in motivation that ultimately revolves around care.

These commonalities amongst the case studies reinforce my assertion that the extra-ordinary girl figure is socio-politically located. Care is foundational to these figures' actions, and their exceptional power and visibility are wielded to affect positive social change. The two case study examples of this figure of the girl are just two iterations of this contemporary popular culture archetype[2] and stand alone as significant in their own right.

My analysis of the figurations of girlhood in which these figures are embedded illuminates this phenomenon particular to contemporary society. The very fact that there are similarities across these examples of the extra-ordinary girl figure speaks to the nature of figuration as I use it, which I describe more fully in the following chapter. I do not mean for figuration to convey purely symbolic ideas and representations of girlhood. My use of the term attempts to capture the quality of girlhood that emerges from the conversation between symbolic depictions of girlhood and real material practices and experiences of lived girls.

Since the figure of the extra-ordinary girl is located in and across discourses, and located in the contemporary moment, the qualities behind this specific figuration of girlhood reveals socially relevant issues and motivations. Both the real (as opposed to fictional) girl activists and witches who still oblige to and fit within the extra-ordinary model are largely inspired to fight injustice that is typically rooted in profit over care for people. Although the roles and function of the extra-ordinary girl characters are more complex, they actually appear to be striving to do the same: fight injustice, driven by care.

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[2] My use of 'archetype' does not allude to the term's mythic or Jungian usage. Rather, I use archetype to represent a figuration that has gained the significance of a type through cultural reinforcement.

Ultimately, care and connection, which were first articulated as a fundamental concern for the girls in my study, underlie the actions of both extra-ordinary girl figures as well as the girls with less social power and public visibility, whom I occasionally refer to as the "ordinary" girls. My rationale for this descriptor, which draws attention to the complications of this term, is found in the "Terms and Concepts" section of this chapter. Although many of the girl activists and girl witches discussed in the "extra-ordinary" girl sections are in fact real girls who might not necessarily be afforded the resources others have, they are embracing the extra-ordinary in some way, within one model or the other. The girls in the focus groups, on the other hand, recognized the extra-ordinary as beyond or intangible to them as they navigate their current lives. Capitalism and neoliberal rationality are implicit in these real, lived experiences of the girls I met with. Society's fascination with individual success and exceptionality further complicates these circumstances.

Throughout this dissertation, there are various triangulations that emerge to substantiate my observations and argument. My three methodological approaches (i.e., qualitative interviews, textual analysis, cultural analysis) allow for a full exploration from various angles of the phenomena of the girl. The three different contexts of the girl (i.e., girls in the group, girls on screen, girls in the world at large) connect to the methodological approaches, supporting a thorough understanding and analysis of the girl in a cultural context. Lastly, the three categorizations of the girl (i.e., the Toronto girls, extra-ordinary activists, extra-ordinary witches) set the foundational structure for this dissertation. At the centre of these various triangulated ideologies are capitalism and neoliberal feminism as the underlying and framing ideology. Moreover, I notice a theme of a tension between desire and defiance that works in tandem with Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of "cruel optimism" as a device of this capitalist ideology. This

concept suggests that that which you desire or long for actually ends up being an obstacle, impeding you from thriving (Berlant, 2011). This concept is particularly relevant to the teen girl as it works to perpetuate the figurations and expectations of extra-ordinary girlhood. The unfulfillment that is implicit in cruel optimism is connected to the unattainability of being or becoming extra-ordinary for the girl with less social power and public visibility. The unattainability, like cruel optimism, is a device of neoliberalism, aligned with the desire and defiance dialectic, to keep the teen girl interested and hopeful, yet dissatisfied. Through these various methods and approaches, care and connection emerge as the ultimate theme behind the girl's objectives and are a sort of antithesis to the extra-ordinary in this context.

Emergent Questions

This interdisciplinary project aims to provide information that will be useful to girls' studies, but also youth studies, cultural studies, media studies, humanities, and sociology more broadly. There are diverse questions driving the various aspects of the study. What are teen girls in Toronto's responses to culturally relevant phenomena, such as activism and relationships, in popular show adaptations? What is the significance and relevance of these texts being speculative fiction?[3] What do the girls' conversations say about their values? What are these values that come out of their responses to these specific topics, and how do they fit within dominant North American political ideologies? How do the film and television adaptations and themes of *The Hunger Games* and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, as well as real social circumstances, interrelate with one another to generate meaning and social significance? What role does coming-of-age play in figurations of extra-ordinary girlhood? How do the fictional

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[3] I explain and describe the significance of speculative fiction to this project more thoroughly in the following chapters.

warrior-activist and witch figures and teen girls involved in real life activism and alternative spiritual practices comprise figurations of the contemporary girl? Lastly, why should any of these questions and issues matter?

Overview

In this girls' studies project, my framework leverages the real girls' views within a social context. My qualitative methods intersect with how I position my project in terms of disciplines, specifically within girls' studies. The qualitative, textual, and cultural frameworks come together, but all ultimately stem from the girls' conversations. Branching out of the video elicitation component of the interviews, I analyze the shows that we viewed in the interviews. In the group interviews, activism and (romantic) relationships were the central themes, and variations of these topics are also essentially the focus of the show analyses within the context of their respective genres. Moreover, as Ralph Cohen (2017) asserts, there is a certain amount of meaning that comes out of genre that is both shaped and overlaps with historical context. The extra-ordinary girl in contemporary speculative fiction genre adaptations is one such example of this idea. Because romance narratives are especially pronounced in teen film and television, exploring this storyline with the teen girls in my study offered insight into their thoughts and feelings about interpersonal relationships in general. While studying girls' responses to the romantic narratives of the shows (like Shara L. Crookston's (2021) research), I consider the relationship storyline, and romantic relationships in general, alongside other social issues and topics such as activism. The romance storylines in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and *The Hunger Games*, in turn serves as a means, or proxy, for conversations about connection. This connection, and the actions (and non-actions) the girls take out of care for this connection, and in

opposition to the individualism of neoliberal mentality, align with how they think they should be better, or "next level," to quote R.D.

Mainstream media is understood colloquially and academically to often have a neoliberal agenda, especially one that leverages feminist empowerment as a tool to serve its means. What has been less evident, however, is that not only have teen girls internalized the neoliberal message of needing to be better and meet an illusory standard as a condition for action, but also that this desire for defiance is not compatible with some of their other roles and other values, such as those pertaining to care for loved ones. The girl as an "everyday" girl or "ordinary" or extra-ordinary is one way such societal values are currently articulated. In the following chapter, I will examine the way the different methodologies reveal certain themes and theoretical and ideological models.

Through a survey into the scholarship on girls in activism, popular media, and even alternative spirituality, I have noticed a few gaps that my study aspires to address. Firstly, while there has been much research on teen girl activists and their views, not much has been conducted around non-activist girls who aspire for fairness in society, often referred to as social justice. While every activist has a desire for justice to some extent, not everyone who desires justice is an activist. My study begins to explore what being an activist means for the teen girl who does not engage in activism.

The second gap that my project speaks to revolves around figures and figurations of girlhood and speculative fiction, which serves as a site for exceptionally (super-)powerful characters. While academics have addressed connections between activism, ideology, and popular culture in a general sense, as well as in relation to the girl, not much has been written

about the relationship between speculative fiction shows featuring powerful teen girl heroines and real teen girls' values.

My project elucidates how the teen girl characters in these contemporary popular shows function as both archetype-like figures for real young women, while also emanating from a collective cultural understanding of the girl in North America. Thirdly, while there is evidently a branch of scholarship on teen girls and activism, as well as a separate branch of study on girls and relationship narratives in popular media culture (including media-making), there is a connection between them that has yet to be adequately analyzed. In this dissertation, I argue that the link between these streams is magnified in speculative fiction adaptations that increasingly have feminist-inspired extra-ordinary heroines, specifically the warrior-activist and witch. Although both tropes have been studied, the connection between these two figures has yet to be examined. Furthermore, the social relevance of these figures as representative of the extra-ordinary expectations of girls to be remarkable has not been analyzed. This project will foreground the socio-cultural connections between these fields of study pertaining to the teen girl in North America.

Epistemological Perspective

The fields of girls' studies and youth studies are, by necessity, interdisciplinary. They relate to many areas of the social sciences, arts, humanities, and even sciences. My project follows in this interdisciplinary tradition. Such an interdisciplinary approach has proven to be challenging in some ways, such as in defining the framework and methodologies. Ultimately, however, my objective and approach have in fact benefited from such an expansive approach. Epistemologically, my approach is interpretive. I have been interested in engaging with teen girls in Toronto to better understand their views on certain topics – or various phenomena –

specifically, activism and the activist self, relationships and how they are represented in popular speculative fiction adaptations. My analysis of these focus group meetings is very much subjective, and emerges through our group interactions, the participants' comments, statements and actions, my observations, as well as scholarly knowledge base. I am not interested in uncovering a positivist objective truth. Rather, my work fits into the interpretivist tradition, which Michael Crotty (1998) describes as looking for "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (p. 67). This approach allows me to demonstrate the connections between the real world, the shows, and fictional narratives. In interpreting the findings based on the aforementioned ways, not only do I make meaning out of them, but I foreground the interrelationship between girls on and off screen as well.

This project is first and foremost research focused on teen girls. The group interviews with the girls are the foundation for what follows. The media case studies of exceptional girls and girlhood emerge from the work with the girls. Within girls' and girlhood studies there are particular methodological approaches that are commonly used to understand girls' lived experiences. Typically, the work is feminist-driven and interested in social change. The work is especially concerned with having girls be active participants, and to express their own thoughts and beliefs. Although my project borrows perspectives, methods, theories, and analytical tools from various disciplines such as sociology, cultural studies, English, cinema/media studies, and political science, at its core is girls' studies' and children and youth studies' principle of having the research on young people emerge from their own experiences and perspectives. This principle determined how I developed my research questions, how I designed my study, and how I have attached meaning to the findings.

Terms and Concepts

The Girl

Throughout this project, I use terms that need to be both defined and problematized. Most obviously is the use of the term "girl." In girlhood studies, this term is commonly applied to teenagers and children alike, distinguishing them from adults. Because the term in its most literal sense refers to a child, when it is used to refer to women, it is infantilizing. In the context of girlhood studies, however, a young woman between childhood and adulthood is acceptably referred to as a "teen girl." Throughout this project, I frequently refer to young women under the age of eighteen as "girls," "teens," and "teen girls," recognizing that girl is not quite the right term to describe a teenage young woman.

I also refer to the girl in different contexts, in different ways including as she pertains to figurations of girlhood, as actual girls, as "ordinary" girls, and extra-ordinary girls. In theorizing the girl and in describing the various girls discussed in this project in certain ways, there is the risk of overlooking and disregarding the complexity of each person's life and experiences. In theorizing the fictional girl characters, the consequences of generalizing and archetyping are significantly less problematic, but still risk being simplifications of more complex topics. Throughout this dissertation I will address these potential concerns as they emerge in the various context.

The Extra-Ordinary Girl and the Girl with Less Social Power and Public Visibility (aka the "Ordinary" Girl)

I use extra-ordinary in a variety of ways throughout this dissertation when referring to girls with great power and also some form of public visibility. For the lead characters in the shows, this power or exceptionality looks like incredible strength, supernatural gifts, and even the power to effect change. In the teen girl activists and girls who practice alternative spirituality,

the extra-ordinariness lies either in their social power and public visibility, or their invocation of super-natural strength. All of these extra-ordinary girls are also framed as "regular" girls who are able to achieve and be better, or "extra." These girl figures thus shape contemporary figurations of girlhood while also being integral to these figurations.

The extra-ordinary girl figures and their semiotic practices around extra-ordinary girlhood stand in contrast to the girls in my study, not because they are any less special, but because they distinguished themselves as not being "next level" the way Katniss is, for example. I am exploring girls and girl figures who hold varying levels of power. Anita Harris asserts that girls are often categorized as either the "can-do girl" or the "at-risk girl," with little attention to the girls in between (2004b). While I am not exploring these dichotomies of girls, I am interested in the girls in between who may not hold great or extra-ordinary power, who are also not troubled. The girls in my study, in their candid and vulnerable discussions, exist on a very concrete accessible level, in contrast to the extra-ordinary girl figure. The extra-ordinary girl figure functions semiotically, regardless of being fictional or real, whereas the girls from my study who engage in the material practice of the group interviews and their various methodological components, function as a practical point of contextualization. The vulnerability that the girls in my study express is significant under this model of exceptionality which can suggest an element of superficiality or bravado. In framing the extra-ordinary girl in terms of their semiotic significance, the girls from my study then represent a girl figure who in her grounded earnestness and accessibility, challenges what society deems as valuable.

To differentiate the girls from my study from the extra-ordinary girl figures who hold social power and public personas (both fictional and real), I occasionally use "ordinary" to describe them in a concise way. Using "ordinary" at times is the clearest and simplest root word

to compare them to the extra-ordinary girl figures, from a lexical perspective. The word "ordinary," however, has negative connotations that can be grossly problematic when used to describe vulnerable people, such as youth with less social power, especially when from lower income communities. In no way do I mean for the word "ordinary" to evoke the derogatory connotations that it does in vernacular language.

In fact, the negative associations around not being exceptional or well-accomplished, especially by standards set by neoliberal society, are entirely what I am advocating against. The participants in my study are in fact quite extraordinary in their moving faithfulness to their personal values that are sometimes in conflict with what the status quo values. These girls are anything but inadequate and inferior, as the word "ordinary" alone can suggest.

I am reclaiming the word "ordinary" in this project to assert that there is in fact tremendous value in everyday practices that may not receive or even warrant (by neoliberal society's standards) public visibility and praise. The most germane example of this issue around value is that of care, which is in fact the very underlying principle of my study. "Ordinary" in this study is not pejorative. I am using it as a heuristic device to encourage reflection in the reader on etymology and its relation to social structures, and to thus challenge common conceptions of what constitutes value. Alison Waller (2020) uses the term "ordinary" to refer to everyday day practices in British realist YA literature, such as drinking tea or taking the bus. She alerts the reader to the ways such mundane practices can be markers or class and ethnicity (2020, p. 4), which supports the notion that language can capture, reinforce, and also challenge social significance. My use of the word is cognizant of the negative connotations, and challenges them in my demonstration of the value of the voices and sentiments of the girls in my study.

My reclaiming of the term is in line with my objective in this dissertation. I am calling into question what neoliberal society marks as the standard for what constitutes what is worthy of material and symbolic value. Figures and figurations of extra-ordinary girlhood are one example of this society's emphasis on exceptionality, which, as I demonstrate, is complicated by the actual value in being truly empowered, especially when motivated by care.

I argue that all of these girls and girl figures – extra-ordinary and ordinary – whether real or fictional, must be studied together in order to begin to adequately understand the nuances of ideology within semiotic and material presentations of girls and girlhood. Together, these figures of girls and their respective figurations of girlhood offer new models for understanding girlhood in contemporary society. These extra-ordinary and ordinary girl figures, respectively, are thus in conversation with contemporary figurations of girlhood that revolve around varying levels of exceptionality, power, and empowerment. The textual and cultural approaches of my project, in combination with the qualitative focus groups with real girls, offer a substantiated model for thinking about contemporary figurations of girlhood that reconciles semiotic and material practices.

Figure and Figuration

My use of the terms "figure" and "figuration" are borrowed from Claudia Castañeda (2002). While Castañeda focuses on figures and figurations of the child, her theories apply to the teenage girl as well. Acknowledging developmental and normative perspectives that frame childhood in terms of its value of potentiality, her discussion of figurations of the child strives to locate them in "being" rather than simply "becoming." Her use of figuration encapsulates both "semiotic *and* material practices" (Castañeda, 2002, p. 3). In contrast to how figuration is used in literary studies, she explains that she intends for it to facilitate "unpack[ing] the domains of

practice and significance that are built into each figure" (2002, p. 3). She is also critical of post-structuralist approaches that fall short of considering how both the child and adult are different subjects, each with their own agency and capacity for transformation.

Castañeda's study on figures and figurations of the young person draws attention to how they have been theorized and represented, with the intention of demonstrating that configurations of the child frame them as "entit[ies] in the making" (2002, p. 3). My project extends from this notion, especially as the teenage girl is conceptualized in terms of coming of age. While Castañeda does not explore how assumptions about childhood affect real children, my study attempts to understand and foreground real girls within contemporary narratives about real girlhood, particularly as it is modeled around iterations of the extra-ordinary girl.

I use the terms "figure" and "figuration" in a similar way to Castañeda. Although I use these terms interchangeably at times, each has its own distinct meaning for my project. Figure encapsulates a general idea or image of the teenage girl, and I use it to refer to both fictional and real public girls, such as the extra-ordinary characters of Katniss and Sabrina from the shows, as well as the warrior-activist and witch iterations. Figurations, similar to Castañeda's use of the term, refers to discourses and conceptual models of girlhood and the girl figure as they are informed by socio-cultural factors and textual representations. My use of figuration attempts to capture the quality of girlhood that materializes from the dialogue between symbolic depictions of girlhood and real material practices and experiences of lived girlhoods.

The figurations of both the teen girl activist and teen girl witch are, by this logic, "the effect of a specific configuration of knowledges, practices, and power" (Castañeda, 2002, p. 4). Although figuration is meant to locate the young person as an actual being in the world in and across discourses, using figuration as a heuristic device does risk compartmentalizing the girl as

it positions her in theory. When foregrounding the girl, whether she be the girl from my study or the girl in the public eye, I use the term "figure." When referring to the discourses around girlhood as they emerge from various cultural texts, contexts and histories – fictional and real – I use the term "figuration." Moreover, I use "figure" and "figuration" to delineate the nuances of power for girls and within girlhood.

Activism

Activism generally refers to activity aimed at challenging and opposing certain social or political realities, and the forms it takes vary. Furthermore, what constitutes activist methods, and feminist activist methods as they may be used by young people, varies amongst activists themselves and scholars (Bent, 2013, 2020; Bobel, 2007; Campbell, 2018; Gordon, 2007, 2008; Gordon & Taft, 2011; Hutcheon, 2016; Keller, 2012, 2016; Kimball, 2019; Renold, 2018; Sheridan-Rabideau, 2008; Taft, 2011, 2017; Writer, 2020). My use of the term activism refers to actions that are driven by ideological motivation that is in opposition to harmful social realities and politics. Moreover, when I refer to the progressive in relation to activism and politics, I mean an ideological stance that aspires towards social reform that is rooted in progress with the goal of improving life equitably for all. The goal of the progressive and activism in this sense is social justice.

Care

Care is a broad topic that covers a range of experiences and feelings across disciplines. For this project, I use "care" in the broadest sense, specifically as it pertains to concern for other people. I see it as encompassing an array of practices and feeling. I especially mean it as it encompasses experiences related to care work, such as in the fields of healthcare, personal support services, circles of care and social reproduction that draw attention to social and

economic inequalities, as well as the affective experience of being concerned about the needs of other people. Francesca M. Cancian and Stacey J. Oliker's (2000) definition of care helps to articulate this connection: it is the "feelings of affection and responsibility combined with actions [that] provide responsively for an individual's personal needs or well-being, in a face-to-face relationship" (p. 2). Both the emotional, affective aspect and the action of doing the caring are components of care.

Connection

The term "connection" refers to various interpersonal experiences throughout this project. I use "connection" to signify types of relational experiences and community, but this term also has different meanings for the different girls throughout this study who have varying degrees of power. For the girls in my study, connection encapsulates familial and romantic relationships, but also a sense of community. Inherent in connection is the feeling of closeness, unity and safety. I contrast connection with neoliberal individualism. For the warrior-activist figure, connection is intimately tied to a similar sense of collectivity and unity in the face of injustice. For Katniss, connection also includes interpersonal relationships. For the witch figure, connection similarly embraces an affective, symbolic, and cultural uniting in desire and defiance. There may be an actual, virtual, or even imagined community such as a relationship to a deity for the witch, that provides support and safety, and thus strength to challenge oppressive forces.

Connection and community are also fundamental qualities associated with paganism or alternative spirituality as it relates to youth studies. Not only does Paganism emphasize interconnectedness amongst various beings, but its association with Romantic ideals means it adheres to a child-like playfulness and openness to the natural and spiritual world (Cook, 2020). For the character Sabrina in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, connection includes familiar and

romantic relationships, much like it does for Katniss and the girls not in the public eye, like those in my study.

Connection embodies all these literal and perceived experiences of community, safety and interpersonal relatedness. Regardless of being real or imagined, connection and community are important. Moreover, connection is closely related to care. Generally, care and connection represent a compassionate approach and view of humanity that support wellness and livelihood in this project and stand in contrast to neoliberal ideology.

The Desire and Defiance Dialectic

Both desire and defiance are themes that come up throughout this project in various contexts. Although these topics are not explicitly discussed in the interviews, they emerge as underlying themes in our conversations. These themes are also present for the characters of the TV series and movie, as well as in the hypothetical audience. Desire as the longing for something, be it a person, experience, outcome, or object, fuels certain beliefs and actions/behaviours. Although longing does not necessarily mean there is a lack – be it real or imagined – the very wanting can sometimes suggest one. Furthermore, this sense of missing something, wanting to change something, or not having or being enough can come from messages internalized from the external world. From this desire, defiance arises, and in this project, desire and defiance go hand in hand, appearing in various forms across different circumstances. Desire is a concept deeply rooted and explored in psychoanalytic theory and feminist theory, but I do not mean it in that sense. In these theories, desire is tied to lack and sexuality. When I refer to desire I simply mean it as an aspiration or wanting, not a deep lack rooted in sexuality.

Between the group interviews, the film and TV programs, and even the socio-historical examples, there is a synchronous relationship between desire and defiance. In the romance storylines of the shows[4], there is an obvious desire amongst the characters involved, but the question of a desire for a relationship is also raised for hypothetical teen audiences as well as in the actual participant viewers of my study. These girl participants also express desire for less suffering and injustice in the world, but also familial harmony. Moreover, the desire for social justice is evident in the real teen activists and witches. In the interviews, a very particular desire surfaced around wanting to be better: to be more confident and more self-assured. Although the characters in the shows rarely communicate such desire for a better self (because they are the template to which the real girls aspire), these characters do express a similar interest in effecting change, but also family- and care-centred, non-romantic desire. This type of desire is where the defiance emerges.

The participants in my study, the lead girl characters, as well as the activists and witches in the real world, are defying systems of oppression by either revolting against it or embracing the opposite of what the dominant neoliberal ideology enforces. Although this type of defiance might seem antithetical to the dominant structure of capitalism, the very nature of this system has in some ways appropriated and commodified the common sentiment and manipulated it to its advantage, which is most evident in the shows sections. Desire and defiance, then, are fuelled by socio-political circumstances.

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[4] When I discuss *The Hunger Games* film and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* television program series together, collectively, I refer to them as shows for simplicity. I am grouping them together as moving image texts within a larger discussion about figurations of girlhood.

This duality of desire and defiance is driven by a capitalist and neoliberal agenda, and serves as a distraction from the underlying ideology. In wanting, especially in wanting something for the self, the source of the wanting can be overshadowed by the process or object of longing. When the source of the wanting is connected to ideological messages that reinforce the inadequacy that drives desire, the ideological system continues to function, despite any interest in defying it. The shows discussed propel the desire for change and the defiance against oppressive structures. There are parallels between what the action heroine and teen witch in the shows signify for actual contemporary teen girl activists and young women interested in alternative spirituality today. The longstanding history of women "witches" and capitalism is relevant in this conversation. These real phenomena and the topics/themes of the shows overlap and are interrelated, and this is typical of any cultural product/artifact. The neoliberal-capitalism theoretical thread also connects to these experiences, and I provide some historical context to support the lineage of this underpinning.

Desire and Defiance, and Care and Connection

The desire and defiance duality or dialectic is framed as a progressive feminist quality in this project – and is essentially rooted in care for other people. The figures of the extra-ordinary girl most explicitly demonstrate this dynamic, thus reinforcing a standard of exceptional girlhood. These girls are compelled to act in defiant ways, out of a care for loved ones and for the world. This quality of desire and defiance, as rooted in care, is appealing and becomes commodified. Care and connection, and desire and defiance are related in this study insofar as they serve as a mirror to the society that utilizes their affective and very human qualities to its own end. Moreover, care and connection as they are embraced by the participants in my study

become a version of actual defiance, destabilizing a neoliberal agenda that exploits the desire and defiance pull.

Organization of Chapters

This dissertation is divided into six main chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. The three body chapters are each divided into the same three sections: The Girl, The Text, and Cultural Context. Within these sections, there are subsections and sub-subsections specific to the particular chapter.

The second chapter is where I provide a brief, focused literature review on topics relevant to this project, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and methodologies and methods. The three main methodologies mentioned earlier (qualitative research, textual analysis, and cultural analysis) each have their own set of methods. In this chapter, under each approach, I provide relevant information for each respective methodology. In some instances, like for the qualitative research, where the methods are clear and traditional, the breakdown of that section is quite practical. In the Textual Analysis section, the subsections provide more context for the analysis that follows in the body chapters. In the Cultural Analysis section, the subsections are even more broad as they make connections to the various cultural phenomena that the following chapters explore.

Chapter Three, "Figurations of Extra-Ordinary Girlhood: The Warrior-Activist Figure," discusses the first of two examples of the extra-ordinary teen girl as she exists as an activist figure in the public sphere. The combination of fictional and real girl figures paints a picture of this model of exceptional girlhood. The first section, "The Girl: Katniss and the Warrior/Activist Figure Case Study," analyzes the case example of the warrior-activist as exemplified by the character Katniss from *The Hunger Games*. Although a warrior and an

activist are two separate figurations, they both are powerful and have a conviction to fight for a certain cause. While the two identities are not interchangeable, in many contemporary dystopian fiction narratives, the warrior figure functions like an activist. I am naming a contemporary iteration of the teen girl activist figure that gets co-opted by social discourse and reframed as a heroic warrior in popular media. This section offers an overview of the scholarship and ideological implications of her character as an extra-ordinary girl within the dystopian genre, and also in the context of feminism. The second section, "The Text: Context, Analysis & Responses to *The Hunger Games*," provides an overview of the dystopian genre, offering a framework for how this genre fits into a neoliberal model. The activist-warrior figure's coming-of-age offers insight into this one iteration of this figuration of extra-ordinary girlhood. This section also provides an in-depth analysis of the scene from the film with the girls' responses to it as they are relevant to the larger project. The last section, "Cultural Context: Teen Girl Activists in North America," provides social context for the teen girl activist in society. This section offers an overview of the scholarship on this topic as well as a framework for this figure of the teen activist figure, and this figuration of extra-ordinary girlhood in the world today.

Like Chapter Three, Chapter Four, "Figurations of Extra-Ordinary Girlhood: The Witch Figure," focuses on another case study of the extra-ordinary girl, specifically the teen witch, and the deconstruction of this figuration of girlhood. Through exploration of the fiction and real experiences of the girl figure who identifies with the supernatural or alternative spirituality, I offer insight into this figuration of extra-ordinary girlhood. The first section, "The Girl: Sabrina and the Witch Figure Case Study," outlines the figure of the teen witch as exemplified by Sabrina from *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. This extra-ordinary girl is positioned within the supernatural genre, and situated alongside other teen witches in popular media. Moreover,

Sabrina in particular is discussed alongside progressive issues, and her extra-ordinariness is positioned within a conversation around feminism. In the second section, "The Text: Context, Analysis & Responses to *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*," I provide a more in-depth description of the supernatural genre, especially featuring the teen witch, and how progressive or revolutionary messages fit within it. This figure's coming-of-age articulates her as powerful and contributes to this figuration of girlhood. Like in the previous chapter, here a close analysis of the scene from *Sabrina* illuminates the way a popular text fits within a social context. This analysis also offers an opportunity to understand how the girls in my study respond to the relationship narrative as it connects to an ethic of care at large. The final section of this chapter, "Cultural Context: Teen Witches Today and In History," offers the most historical account of all three body chapters. In this section, I outline various avenues of spirituality as they are connected to the teen witch, while commenting on the way such esoteric or occult practices are often commodified. Here, I also foreground the prevalence of teen girls who are interested in witchcraft, especially as a means to improving life (for the world, as well as for themselves). Lastly, because this project revolves around neoliberal issues, in this section, I necessarily address the historical background on the emergence of the witch alongside capitalism, which is currently the dominant political and economic system in North American society. This historical account provides relevant context in the discussion of the extra-ordinary teen girl witch in contemporary society and the factors that shape this figuration of exceptional and powerful girlhood.

Chapter Five "Negotiating Figurations of Girlhood: Toronto Girls & the Complexity of Care," focuses on the girls from my focus group interviews and their perspectives on a variety of issues that are pertinent to the contemporary girl in North American society today. Through these

conversations, the girls negotiate issues around power, connection and care. In the first section of this chapter, "The Girl: Teen Girls in Toronto Interviewed," I locate the girls from my study as distinct from the extra-ordinary girl figures, problematizing the negative connotations of the word "ordinary." The focus of this section is our group conversations around activism as these discussions reveal the crucial underlying messages that prevail in all the other topics discussed. These messages revolve around care and becoming better, providing the foundational neoliberal framework for the rest of the findings. In the second section of this chapter, "The Text: Context, Analysis & Responses to Care, Relationships & Power," I share the girls' responses around relationship narratives in general and of the case example texts from this study. These topics are discussed with particular attention to the theme of care and the extra-ordinary, bringing attention to the role power plays in these experiences. In the final section, "Cultural Context: Neoliberalism, Media, and Community," I provide some more theoretical background on the neoliberal conditions as they apply to the girls' responses, while also providing context for the girls' responses to social issues and activism. The girls' responses to relationship narratives are also linked to care and framed as a collective issue within neoliberal society. This chapter reveals not only the Toronto girls' lived experiences of girlhood, but also the ways these girls are negotiating standards of extra-ordinary girlhood with their own experiences and values.

In the conclusion, I reflect briefly on my reason for pursuing this project, situating the findings in the context of girl culture. I revisit the pertinent themes and arguments discussed throughout this dissertation, while suggesting areas for further research.

CHAPTER TWO:

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGIES

SECTION 2.1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Negotiating Empowerment: A Focused Literature Review on the Girl in Popular Media

In this exploration of the teen girl in all her (extra-)ordinariness, some background scholarship around the teen girl and her empowerment within the context of activism and media culture is essential. Within both domains, the common theme and trope of coming-of-age has typically accompanied the narrative around girlhood, and a brief overview of this theme provides further context for her within extra-ordinary narratives. The coming-of-age story as presented through popular contemporary teen media is also at times a standard against which real girls' lived experiences in the world are compared and may fall short. The empowerment that often gets attributed to contemporary discourses around the girl, including around the coming-of-age trope, is closely tied to capitalist and neoliberal conditions.

This will to empowerment, if you will, as it is presented in girl media culture, also fosters inadequacy and longing in young viewers. Based on the conversations in my study, as well as on scholarship around neoliberal feminism (Gill & Orgad 2015), this sentiment is at times rooted in shame. Sarah Ahmed (2004b) defines shame as an "intense and painful sensation that is bound up in how the self feels about itself" (p. 103). How the self feels about itself often has to do with external factors. Brené Brown (2012) similarly defines shame as the feeling of being flawed and unworthy. This feeling exists because of comparison to a standard. Within contemporary North American society, and especially in postfeminist and neoliberal discourses, shame is a discreet

tool utilized by neoliberalism to ensure that the girl feels inadequate in some way and is always wanting and striving to be better. Shame inhibits authentic coming-of-age and coming-to-power.

Teen Girls in Activism and Media Cultures

In the literature on girls and activism, as well as girls and popular film and TV, the discourses generally overlap in their emphasis on girls' empowerment. The ways this fundamental message is conveyed in scholarship around activism typically revolves around identity, while in film and TV, empowerment is delineated out of analyses of relationships, sex, and the body. Fundamental to both streams is the idea that strengthening girls' sense of self is crucial to their well-being, and that this strong sense of self can foster positive change. Moreover, the girls' identity or selfhood is reinforced through activity (i.e., media-making, activism, witchcraft, sports), as well as through identification with representations on screen. Coming out of the literature is the idea that there is a pervasive expectation for girls to just be empowered – to borrow Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2018) popular feminism sentiment – and that this can actually be disempowering. Expectations and demands to be empowered and exceptional can be discouraging for some girls. While feeling agential and genuinely being empowered to engage in the world are important, the "cult(ure) of confidence" that Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2015) describe, which emerges out of neoliberalism, can actually be a barrier to true empowerment or self-actualization. In other words, the pressure to be confident and liberated can make someone feel inferior.

Regarding girls in popular media, specifically film and TV, there has been significant work done on representation and its implications for well-being, especially regarding identity, love, and sexuality. This scholarship has been approached across disciplines and has thus taken various approaches. Most pertinent to my study are the works that employ feminist and

neoliberal ideological critiques, as well as analyses of the relationship between popular media and teen girls' descriptions of their own views and actions related to the media texts. This is the literature within which my project is located. My work is in conversation with these texts. Colloquially, there is often a degree of moral panic around media and young people, so this literature not only attempts to address the concern by foregrounding girls' voices, but also illuminates that what is most disconcerting is not the media per se, but the dominant social structure behind it. Although not focusing solely on girls, sociologist Karen Sternheimer (2003) emphasizes that a great deal of our concern about the media's potential negative effects on children – which can be extended to teenagers – has more to do with "uncertainty about the future and the changing landscape of childhood" (p. 2). She also points out that the irony is that it is in fact policy decisions made by adults, and the poverty that families experience as a result of socio-economic structures in place, that end up causing more of a crisis for children than media culture. This assertion echoes the critiques of neoliberal feminism outlined throughout this dissertation.

While criticism of capitalism and neoliberalism is often implicit (and occasionally overt) in studies of activism insofar as it is embedded in the activism itself, such matters with respect to film and TV are typically addressed through critical media studies, especially within the last twenty years amongst scholars focusing on girls. Media culture has emerged as part of the patriarchal capitalist ideological system. Within this structure, whereby socio-economic status is a determining factor of one's experiences in life, messages about how one should be in the world are typically profit-driven rather than interested in people's well-being. Girls' and girlhood studies emerge in response to this political landscape with the hope of providing a platform for girls to navigate the social climate. In looking back to the 1980s and 1990s, Natalie Coulter

investigates how the "tween girl" emerges as a marketing demographic in *Tweening the Girl: The Crystallization of The Tween Market* (2014) and "From the Top Drawer to the Bottom Line: The Commodification of Children's Culture" (2013). During this time in the United States of America and Canada, there was a change in consumer culture instigated by neoliberal politics, which Coulter (2013) notes, "opened up new spaces for the girl audience to be a lucrative, viable market" (p. 414). The toy industry in particular began to create toys based on popular television shows. Around this time, television shows were increasingly gendered, opening up opportunities to make profit through not only the shows, but other products such as toys, clothing, bedding, and even party favours. The role of capitalism and the young market is not specific to tween girls.

Harris (2004b) warns that as girls of all ages become more visible through the proliferation of girl power culture, they become more susceptible to enquiry by governing bodies, but that they also become more aware of their social role. My study's findings confirm this concern in girls' awareness of their social role, but also how this role is not necessarily compatible with their values and desires. The participants in Emilie Zaslow's TV and music-focused study with seventy urban girls also experience a discordance in the cultural messages that ring with neoliberal empowerment language and "their real social and emotional experiences of gender, race, and class inequalities" (2009, p.9). In *Feminism, Inc.: The Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture* (2009), Zaslow emphasizes that neoliberalism directly fuels girl power media culture and that "urban teen girls come to understand female power as an individualistic stance rather than a collective achievement" (pp. 8-9). This tension between individual and collective action resurfaces throughout recent literature on girls' media culture and is also echoed in my study. Amidst this tension, Zaslow illuminates that there is a benefit that arises out of the

girl power media culture: from its defiance of feminism proper, girls are allowed "to engage with counter-normative discourses about female expression, sexual desire, and self-determination" (2009, p. 9). Here is fertile ground where girls can engage with controversial or progressive topics addressed through media texts or even begin to create their own texts.

One way that girls have attempted to express themselves and challenge messages is through the creation of various types of media. Louisa Ellen Stein (2015) suggests that producing media gives teens a way "to express their resistance to the prescribed gendered roles they face in their everyday lives" (p. 115). Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) also acknowledges the potential of using media creation as an oppositional force. She asserts that girls who turn to making various forms of media often do so to communicate "their resistance to, if not refusal of, the traditional ideologies of gender and generation" (p. 11). Media making is one aspect of media literacy that is used as a way for young people to feel empowered. In her work with girl media producers between the ages of twelve and twenty-one in *Girls Make Media* (2006), Kearney asserts that when girls are media producers, stereotypical conceptions of girlhood and girls' culture are dramatically changed, and so is the common understanding of media production, which is historically adult- and male-dominated (p. 12). Simply being a girl media producer does not necessarily mean stereotypical ideas about girlhood and youth are put to rest. American girl-made media is "not as diverse as it should be" (Kearney, 2006, pp. 13-14). Furthermore, and quite importantly, economically disadvantaged girls have little access to media technology and the time to devote to it (Kearney, 2006, p. 14). Socio-economic class is a significant factor that determines if girls create media. While youth is often studied as a biologically complex and formative period of life (Danesi, 2010), social and economic circumstances play a crucial role to the teen's experiences of identity, relationships, and the world around them.

Youth and girls' studies scholars often examine the relationship between popular media, media making, and identity. On the one hand, Marcel Danesi (2010) argues that for young people identity construction is often a result of "media-reinforced images of teen identities" (p. 26). Zaslow, however, astutely points out that much research on youth and media does not consider the social practices wherein girls merge culture into "their narratives of self" (p. 10). Moreover, the existing scholarship at the time of her writing does not allow for an investigation of how girls incorporate media experiences with "real life" experiences leading to the formation of gendered identities. Mary K. Bentley (1999), in "The Body of Evidence: Dangerous Intersections between Development and Culture in the Lives of Adolescent Girls," contemplates the strategies that teen girls employ to make it through adolescence unharmed. She emphasizes that media literacy that entails being discerning about media messages is crucial for young people to have, and based on my findings, many girls do. This media literacy often serves as a tool for activist work that, in fact, Jessica K. Taft's (2011) study in *Rebel Girls* reveals. The girl activists she worked with were aware of how to navigate and employ media in a way that was effective for their causes.

As activism and media culture increasingly overlap and become more reliant on one another, the cultural significance of this connection, with respect to girls, becomes increasingly apparent. Figurations of girlhood are socially, culturally and temporally located. The intersections of cultural practices around activism and media culture are not new developments and are very much historically and politically relevant. In fact, Maryann Wherry (2013) foregrounds how love and romance, as well as popular media and activism, are all dialogic experiences. She notes that as the political landscape of the U.S. in the 1960s changed through radical student activism, notions of love and romance did as well. On the one hand, she argues that music shifted from sentimental to sexual, and that the sexual revolution of the youth culture

and free love movements became more mainstream, blending the personal and the political (2013, p. 3). On the other hand, she argues there was a deeper and more radical shift among Americans around love and marriage. She argues that the political climate prompted drastic social cultural changes, even though the revolutionary agendas of the civil rights movement and the New Left did not accomplish all of their objectives (2013, p. 3). Reflecting on the current moment, although the specific details are different, we can see the symbiotic relationship between various forms of media and activist responses to political injustice. Love and relationships are positioned against a backdrop of advocating for justice, with care and connection as the foundation.

Without setting out to recognize trends between love and activism similar to the ones Wherry outlines, the fundamental concept behind both topics – that is, of care and connection – would be a compass offering insight into how constructs of love and activism intersect today for teen girls amidst popular media culture. The themes of my focus groups began as activism and romance narratives in two shows or films chosen by the participants from a short list of options. Although the list was short, both texts are adaptations of speculative fiction, which has become an increasingly popular genre. Speculative fiction is an umbrella genre that presents worlds with imaginative qualities, in contrast to realism. Later in this dissertation, I describe this genre and its subgenres in greater detail as it is relevant to figures and figurations of extra-ordinary girlhood.

The connection between contemporary girls' social justice and popular media has not been thoroughly explored in relation to girls and culture, and the empowerment motif for both phenomena serves as a unifying concept. Moreover, while the connection between hip hop culture, music, TV, and activism has been studied (Clay, 2012; Riordan, 2001; Zaslow, 2009), I assert that there is a very culturally and historically specific relationship between activism and

speculative fiction film and TV adaptations, especially focusing on the teen girl. Specifically, this dialogic relationship between the real and the imagined girl is rooted in the socio-historical world.

The Girl, Coming of Age, and Power

Coming of age is a theme and genre within literature, film and TV that is often tied to girlhood. Coming of age can refer to the moment when a young person moves from childhood to adulthood and thus acquires various privileges and rights associated with adulthood. In terms of narrative fiction, including film and TV, coming of age can centre around a character's maturity and thus appoint the text as fitting the genre of the same name. In both these cases, the transition into maturity is at the crux of this coming of age, suggesting a journey into experience. As Mary Celeste Kearney (2002) and Joseph F. Kett (1977) assert, coming of age emerges as part of industrialisation in the United States, and was initially applied to boys who entered adult life through labour outside of the home (Kearney, p. 126). I will explore the ways coming of age has been applied to girlhood and also embedded in discussions of contemporary girlhood, especially within the context of media culture.

Within childhood and youth studies, the topic of futurity and the young person as being in a state of becoming, further validates analysis of this theme. In analyzing figures of the girl in various cultural forms, exploring the coming-of-age motif as it exists in narratives about the girl offers an understanding of these figurations of the girl and their implications. The coming-of-age theme in the film and TV adaptations of *Hunger Games* and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is linked to teen girls revolting against a greater power that threatens their (and others') wellbeing and livelihood in some way, which is inspiring to the girls I met with. Ultimately, the coming-of-

age story is tied to girls' empowerment, and empowerment language is often employed by neoliberal feminism.

The coming-of-age stories in these texts further ignite a desire – to be powerful and confident, to defy oppressive authority – in teen girl audiences, but this desire and defiance is complicated by the system in which it emerges. Driscoll (2018) illuminates that the speculative genre allows for girl action heroes to flourish better than a realist hero since she is allowed – and I argue, expected – to be aggressive while also being feminine. None of the dangers the action hero of speculative fiction encounters need be realistic, just as her exceptionality need not be either. In a speculative fiction world where the parameters of experience are beyond those in the real world, the girl character is set up for extra-ordinariness. The real world is not speculative fiction, however, and what signifies extra-ordinariness is not realistically attainable for just any girl. The teen speculative franchise of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* from the mid-1990s to early 2000s (followed by a comic and an ongoing novel series) is one such influential example. Through narrative and formal analyses of *The Hunger Games* and *Sabrina*, we will see how the speculative fiction aspects of these adaptations – dystopia and activist-like heroism and supernatural witchery, respectively – both complement and enable the theme of desire and defiance, both in the stories and for the viewers.

A young person's experience of growing into adulthood is often referred to as a coming-of-age and entails a perceived loss of innocence. Coming-of-age is not only a theme in stories of various media (literature, film, television, etc.), but is also a genre. If, as Kearney (2002) notes, coming-of-age for boys was understood in relation to labour outside of the home, she says female coming-of-age was viewed more as a private matter in relation to the girl's maturing body. Today, we typically associate coming-of-age stories with girlhood and sexual awakening.

Kearney (2002) draws attention to how before the 1930s, the coming-of-age process for female characters in film involved "transforming quickly into women through heterosexual romance" (p. 126). She argues that since the 1990s, however, amidst the girl power era, there have been more films about teenage girls that are not primarily heterosexual romance narratives (2002, p. 130). By referring to films about preteens like *Now and Then* (1995), she demonstrates the transformative strength of girl friendships in the coming-of-age story. She also notes, that other teen films present friends as competing against each other for power and boys, leaving girls estranged rather than supported by one another (2002, p. 133). This struggle between individuals competing with one another, friendship, and connectedness all arose in the conversations with the girls in my study, as we will see in the following chapters.

In the supernatural genre, coming-of-age explores an underlying fear in society around girlhood and even sexuality. Martin Fradley (2013), although looking specifically at teen horror, notes that this genre of teen supernatural is "both symptomatic of, and a potentially oppositional force in relation to, the socially emaciated politics of a postfeminist culture" (p. 207). Is the girl already assumed to be powerful, and is she challenging this culture? Regarding teen films of the supernatural/horror genre, using *Ginger Snaps* (2000) and *Carrie* (1976) as examples, Kearney (2002) argues the (late) onset of menstruation for both lead characters is presented in a horrific light. The young women's supernatural powers are ignited by this embodied passage into womanhood, a coming of age, if you will. Both characters have super- or non-human powers: Carrie's is of telekinesis, and Ginger's is that of becoming a werewolf. The significance of these examples is that their transformative experiences make them frightening to other people, like Sabrina's dark baptism at the beginning of season one and even more so as she unknowingly (and unwillingly) proceeds to fulfill the Satanic herald prophecy throughout the second season.

These coming-of-age narratives and tropes do indeed resonate with audiences, of all ages. Taft (2017) noticed there were "coming of age tales and vocabularies of becoming" in the responses of the teen girl activists she interviewed, in five cities throughout North and South America, regarding their views on the activist self (p. 30). The girls in my study also echoed these sentiments, as we will see, although I am not framing their responses through a coming-of-age perspective. Coming-of-age narratives often draw attention to young people's feelings of not belonging and being an outsider (Rishoi, 2003), and although I found this to be somewhat true of the participants' in my study's responses, that is not what stood out most. That said, this sense of not quite belonging, while also of being in the process of becoming, is fertile ground for hope to grow. The coming-of-age story nurtures girls' empowerment, inspiring a sense of personal growth and agency.

As this dissertation will argue, empowerment language is often employed by neoliberal feminism. More than fifteen years prior to Catherine Rottenberg's work on the subject, Kearney (2002) asserted that feminist ideas have led to different depictions of female empowerment on screen the last thirty years. An empowered girl, according to Kearney's observations of the way she is represented on screen, has traits associated with masculinity (i.e., leadership, independence, physical strength). Furthermore, she gains the requisite confidence through same-sex friendships (Kearney, 2002, p. 131). Around the time of this piece, Ellen Riordan (2001) also explores how "pro-girl rhetoric" during this period is connected to consumption and commodity. Not only do these analyses reverberate with the elements of neoliberal feminism, we see both of these empowerment criteria being met by the characters of Sabrina and Katniss. Sabrina has directly been described as being "empowered" by Lesley Goldberg (2018) in *The Hollywood Reporter*. As I will continue to reiterate throughout this project, empowerment itself is not a

problem. Rather, it is the guising of oppressive structures through empowerment language where the issue lies.

This neoliberal empowerment motif is relevant to girlhood and the coming-of-age theme especially within the speculative fiction genre. The coming-of-age theme within the speculative fiction shows helps to create a sense of verisimilitude/realness, whereby the teen girl viewer may be drawn to identify with the lead character who is undergoing this experience. Coming-of-age can be viewed as a development process, but that is not what I am doing here. I explore the experience as a socially-situated and socially-informed one. Aligning oneself with this narrative suggests that there are requirements to girlhood and that girls must follow a certain trajectory to become an adult and to become empowered. 2018 illuminates how, in this liminal moment of transformation, these girl figures are learning how to find and control their power in a way.

The coming-of-age genre is also one of the components in the manufacturing of the love story into a commodity, often through a heteronormative lens. Sarah Hentges (2005) emphasizes that "mainstream coming-of-age narratives may challenge certain characteristics of adult and teen culture, but they do not fundamentally challenge these structures. Instead, they reinforce structures of power and privilege" (p. 61). Even though these narratives might highlight the quest to find oneself or overcome adversity, Hentges argues that ultimately these stories are about "conforming to adult standards or dominant mainstream expectations" (p. 61). This assessment is very much relevant to the discussion of *Sabrina* and *The Hunger Games*. Coming-of-age in these texts is linked to girls revolting against a greater power that threatens their (and others') wellbeing and livelihood in some way. The ways Sabrina and Katniss challenge the status quo in their respective worlds does not necessarily conform to mainstream expectations, but I argue that

this is because the very nature of the circumstances within these speculative fiction texts are by their nature beyond what would actually happen in the real world.

SECTION 2.2 FRAMEWORK AND RELEVANT BACKGROUND

Framework: Figures of the Girl, Figurations of Girlhood, and Neoliberalism

This research project is based in a variety of cultural realms, examining various social and historical moments, while being positioned in present day. Generally speaking, this project is located in my longstanding interest in how real teen girls relate to figures of teen girls in media, the experiences these real girls have, and the issues they care about. In this current moment, teen girl activism is especially relevant to social and historical issues, while the relationship narrative is a longer standing socially and culturally relevant theme. These two points lay the foundation for discovering two of the most predominant teen girl figures today: the activist-warrior and the witch. These two figures exist not only in popular film/TV, but also in the real world. Moreover, the relationship narrative that exists in both the fictional teen girl figures' stories is not the traditional love story, which in itself is also a commentary on the times.

At the heart of this love story is actually a message about care and connection, and care and connection are in fact at the very core of what the real teen girls express as what is important to them. Care and connection in contemporary neoliberal society become complicated, however. Not only are these practices and experiences often gendered as feminine, and undervalued, they are also commodified and even weaponized at times for profit gains. The teen girl who is compelled by care and connection, then, is a complex figure.

I am situating the teen girl in a neoliberal framework: a framework that values the exceptional individual and an idealized self over interpersonal relationships and genuine care and

connection. Although this is a project about girls, the conceptual framework is not exclusively a feminist one, though it employs various feminisms throughout. Specifically, my analysis of the tension between the lived experiences of Toronto teen girls and the figurations of the teen girl, as she is presented in the public, exists within this neoliberal framework, using critiques of neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism, as well as analysis of relevant cultural-historical circumstances. This figure of the extra-ordinary girl is shaped by the interests and values of the given society, which is one dominated by the capitalist system, and the girls' understanding of the world is ideologically informed by this ruling system, as exemplified by the theme of care and connection that stands in contention and contrast to the dominant neoliberal ideology. The model of extra-ordinary girl figures and figurations in contemporary society serve as a means for examining a variety of issues within capitalism, including socio-economic class, individualism, gender, age, race, the complexity of care, and the struggle for connection.

Underlying these topics throughout this entire work is the assertion that neoliberal ideology and the capitalist system informs the feminism in the *The Hunger Games* and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, as well as the messages the girls absorb about how they themselves need to be. This theoretical underpinning is foundational in the topics of relationships and activism that emerge from both the girls' responses in the interviews and from the analyses of the shows. Moreover, this concept underscores engagement in alternative spirituality.

Connection, care, and relationships are at the heart of what motivates the girls I interviewed, but also the characters in the shows, further establishing the desire and defiance pull. This belief and interest in community and care is at odds with the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and profit over people. Within a neoliberal framework, these issues and convictions are in conversation with each other and articulated through the figures of girls who

hold varying degrees of power and social visibility. Detailed exploration and analysis of conversations with the girls interviewed, girls in the public sphere – including the lead girl characters of the shows – and even in the imagined girl viewer, not only inform the ideology of this framework, but support it, thus reinforcing its relevance and validity.

Neoliberalism and Capitalism, Brief Overview

The current dominant economic and political governing structure is a capitalist one, prioritizing profit that is driven by private ownership rather than government-determined decisions. Moreover, capitalism is served by neoliberal ideological principles that offload structural responsibility onto the individual, framing ordinary experiences and needs in such a way that a profit can be garnered from them. Even realms of human life such as learning, health and fitness, romantic relationships, activism, and spirituality become construed as wealth-generating within neoliberalism. These domains become framed within market terms, thereby rendering people as human capital fully responsible for managing their value (Brown in Shenk interview, 2015). This system ensures that people also acquire a self-centred outlook, and thus actions and behaviour, reinforcing divisions and prejudices among people. Cultural forms, like the shows discussed in this project, as well as various desires of characters and real girls alike, follow a logic of commodification, and capitalism relies on an exploitative relationship, much like that between desire and defiance.

Through the synthesizing and coding of the group interviews, it becomes apparent that many of the girls' statements and attitudes connect back to neoliberal ideology and capitalism. Alongside this realization, the subtle neoliberal messaging in *The Hunger Games* and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* became more apparent, complimenting the obvious capital-driven aspect to popular film and television adaptations. Through a close analysis of these speculative fiction

shows, especially the lead teen girl protagonists of the action heroine Katniss and teen witch Sabrina, the connection to real girls in similar roles (i.e., the activists and "witches") who are actively rebelling against the oppressive dominant system became more apparent and relevant. The teen girl who thinks independently, expresses her views, utilizes her strengths, and revolts against social injustice is a powerful feminist figure. Herein is where notions of feminism (and justice) become conflated. For the teen girls in my study who have lived experiences of caring for others, vulnerability, and even marginalization – experiences and ways of being that are not necessarily valued or respected by society – the choices they make given their own values and circumstances may not be deemed as important or valuable. It is in this very tension that the word "ordinary" is a complicated term with pejorative connotations.

Relevant Background: Postfeminism to Neoliberal Feminism

Within the context of a neoliberal society, there has been growing awareness of the ways neoliberal rationality informs even purportedly progressive theories and issues such as feminism. An overview of two specific variations of feminism are especially relevant in this study that focus on the teen girl. In the 1980s and 1990s there was a backlash against the second wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, largely embraced by women, that has been referred to as postfeminism (Becker et al. 2016). Postfeminism is an ideological belief system that retains the progress made by feminism, while simultaneously declaring it no longer relevant. The belief is that sexism no longer exists, and that feminism's work is complete (Banet-Weiser 2018; Gill & Orgad 2015). Within girls' studies, postfeminism has been used to discuss how girls in contemporary society are presented as effortlessly able to accomplish anything they want, personally and socially, all the while being monitored by social structures. As such, the emphasis in contemporary popular culture on individualism is a disservice to bringing about true equality.

In popular culture of the 1990s-2000s, especially with the emergence of the "girl power" mentality popularized by the Spice Girls in the 1990s, many young women refused to identify with a feminist agenda. Girls and women can return to being traditionally feminine objects of desire while also being powerful active agents in postfeminism. Essentially, "girl power is proffered as the gentle and nonthreatening alternative to feminism, so that girls view the contradictions in their lives as a result of their own personal failures rather than as part of social and political realities" (Erzen, 2012, p. 11). Very much in accordance with the neoliberal backdrop, girls and women can choose when to be feminine, mothers, career-driven, assertive, and sexual for themselves or for male pleasure, as Emilie Zaslow (2009) points out. Girl power is embraced by popular media, fueling profit and therefore cannot fully challenge the hegemonic discourses such as those around sexuality. Girl power becomes a commodity. As Meenakshi Gigi Durham (2003) argues, girl power cannot challenge these paradigms because they are rooted in a capitalist economy. Postfeminism, with its girl power message, is a product of neoliberalism, as scholars such as Angela McRobbie (2009) and Rosalind Gill (2008) have argued. As Sarah Becker et al. (2016) argue, it "celebrates women's ability to transform themselves – or to literally become more powerful versions of themselves – through consumption" (p. 1220). In *Future Girl* (2004b), Harris argues that out of this culture, girls become engrained in the cultural imagination as powerful citizens and that as they become more visible in society (i.e., as consumers, workers, etc.), they become more vulnerable to the governing body.

Harris (2004a) also reminds us that although girls are empowered (to consume), girl power is a commodity and the power promoted is divested from social change, ignoring socio-political factors that impact one's opportunities. Coming out of Girl Power culture, it is of no surprise that Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris (2005) declared that "a new

phase of 'girls' studies' is needed; one which grapples with theorizing the changing conditions

under which young women's diverse self-making occurs" (p. 7). A decade and a half later, this

call for an exploration into the ways neoliberalism impacts girls' lives is increasingly being

addressed, and this dissertation contributes to this research. Although there has been a gradual

shift in views on feminism since the turn of the 21st century that emerge from women in

positions of power in the United States identifying as feminists and thus problematizing

postfeminism, the role of neoliberalism in girls' lives is still pertinent.

There is an increasing cultural shift towards "progressive neoliberalism," as Nancy Fraser

(2017) describes it. In this iteration, individuals and businesses alike work together in a quest for

a liberal-informed notion of progress, a new mentality around gender achievement and equality

begins to emerge, replacing postfeminism with a feminism that shares sentiments of liberal

feminism. Well-established women including Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, former director

of policy planning for the US State Department and tenured-professor Anne-Marie Slaughter,

actress Emma Watson, and musical artists Miley Cyrus and Beyoncé begin to vocalize the

struggles women encounter in balancing work success and parenthood. Rottenberg (2018) cites

the year 2012 – the year Slaughter's *Atlantic* article, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," and

Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In* were published – as a pivotal moment in the changing

landscape. During this past decade, a bastion of texts in mainstream media emerge supporting

this new feminist discourse in various forms including articles, television series, mommy blogs,

and how-to-succeed self-help literature for women commiserating in the struggle in achieving a

happy work-family balance, while encouraging them to be confident and empowered to invest in

themselves, thus having ownership of their well-being. Here, we see feminism has been revived

as a necessary social concern, yet the neoliberal subtext is as relevant as it was with postfeminism.

This revived feminism that Rottenberg has labeled neoliberal feminism – a term I employ through this project – is distinguished from postfeminism particularly in that it recognizes that there are real ongoing gender inequalities such as in the gender wage gap and sexual harassment, as exemplified by the Harvey Weinstein condemnation and #metoo movement. Referring to the United States specifically, Rottenberg asserts that several factors have contributed to the emergence of neoliberal feminism: the overlapping of private and public spaces, the growing number of middle-class women entering the work force, as well as a pervasive neoliberal rationality becoming the hegemony. This combination of cultural phenomena is worth noting insofar as it demonstrates how social trends emerge. This experience extends to teen girls as well. In the context of girl activism, Dana Edell, Lyn Mikel Brown and Celeste Montano (2016) assert that narratives of extraordinary girls "overcoming obstacles and succeeding on their own have power" across media and within a neoliberal climate (p. 698). The characteristics of neoliberal feminism apply not only to adult women's experiences, but also to contemporary teen girls and teen girl culture.

As the name suggests, neoliberal feminism is a version of feminism influenced by neoliberal principles. Essentially, this dominant feminism works to support the status quo, focusing on self-development and self-improvement as the path towards happiness. Rottenberg contends that in appealing to aspirational women who already have a substantial amount of social, cultural, and economic capital, neoliberal feminism reinforces class privilege and white privilege. Everyone is presented as more or less having the same opportunities and access to resources, and this, as Jo Littler (2017) argues, is a fundamental way neoliberal meritocracy

thrives. In reality, immigrant women, women of colour, and poor women often function as care-workers for the professional women who strive to obtain the work-family balance that neoliberalism values, thus fueling the division. Circles of care and social reproduction, as I will examine in Chapter Four, are especially relevant to this argument. Neoliberal feminism replicates the exploitation of class and race in its own way.

On the one hand, neoliberal feminism criticizes the systemic disparities that are responsible for issues of gender inequality and sexual harassment, yet on the other, it ignores that the dominant system is responsible for other injustices. I am using this term of neoliberal feminism to denote how social and symbolic figures of "progressive" feminism place responsibility onto individual girls to be exceptional, without accounting for lived experiences of disparity. Rottenberg contends that the self-improvement and self-responsibility for happiness and wellness language is extremely appealing and builds on the momentum of powerful women exalting similar sentiments the past decade. Rottenberg further explains that this neoliberal feminism has in fact laid the cultural foundation for what Banet-Weiser labels "popular feminism" that "tinkers on the surface, embracing a palatable feminism, encouraging individual girls and women to just *be* empowered" (2018, p. 21). Rottenberg views the widespread embracing of feminism as in part facilitated by neoliberal feminism, which has in effect set the stage for mass feminist movements including #MeToo, which was originally a grassroots movement from over a decade ago, led by African American activist Tarana Burk. Because feminism had already been advocated by successful, powerful women like Sandberg, Watson, and Beyoncé, mass movements such as #MeToo and the Global Women's Strike gained momentum, according to Rottenberg. The pervasive neoliberal feminist mentality has fairly clear

repercussions for adult women, especially aspirational ones with a certain level of capital, but is also relevant in a discussion about girls.

Young people are impacted by social and political realities as much as adults. Although neoliberal feminism is not explicitly discussed in relation to girls the way the "girl power" language of postfeminism is, its empowerment messaging directly reaches the girls, especially when we think about girls' consumer culture. Moreover, Catherine Driscoll (2002) suggests that girls might be able to serve as a crucial focus in thinking about the relationships between popular culture and critical theory. For the girls in my study, the social, geographic, and economic realities of teen girls in various neighbourhoods in Toronto inform their views about (and actions around) themselves, their relationships, social issues, and popular shows. Neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism are embedded in these realities and also underlie popular shows featuring teen girls, and to some extent inform how the teen girls in my study think about their relationships, themselves and their roles in the world. Interestingly, these girls do not necessarily act in accordance with the status quo, as this project will demonstrate. The qualitative research that I conduct with teenage girls elucidates these ideological realities as they are grounded in social contexts, and contribute to contemporary figures and figurations of girls and girlhood.

Working with Young People

As an adult conducting a study with young people, I must be aware of various ethical and practical issues that can arise, such as the way authority can complicate how open and safe a young person feels. When adults are doing research with children and teens, there inherently exists a power dynamic no matter how much the researcher attempts to balance the power. I was cognizant of this dynamic in my work, and took several measures to try to minimize any reticence that might accompany participating in doctoral research with me. I tried to dress in

casual, yet professional clothing to facilitate being approachable, while also conveying that I am doing work. I also sat at the table with the girls, and joined in their conversations when appropriate. It is also important to understand how power relations work amongst young people themselves, as Claire O'Kane attests in her chapter, "The development of participatory techniques," in *Research with children: Perspectives and practice* (2008, p. 126). An adult researcher must be able to navigate the power dynamics that exist among peers, and establish a safe environment for those with less power to be able to engage in the study. Many of the sources about how to do research with children and adolescents advocate a participatory technique wherein the young person and researcher are both active participants in the study.

This approach is also useful in balancing power dynamics among young people if the facilitator can navigate it such that they all can speak freely about the issues that affect them. These approaches involve continuous interaction between theory and practice. Young Digital (2016), an initiative operating out of Scotland that promotes young people acting as co-researchers and co-producers of digital texts, also advocates a participatory research design more generally. This approach is in keeping with the "new childhood paradigm" in childhood studies emerging in the 1990s. Enabling young people to be co-researchers themselves reflects the shift in methodology wherein the youth are encouraged to exemplify their capabilities. Young Digital indicates that such a design can lead to youth creating works that are tailored to their own needs. O'Kane (2008) discusses how participatory techniques are used as a way for young people to talk about issues that affect them (pp. 126-127). Although my study ended up veering away from the action aspect of participatory action research, the participatory component remained.

SECTION 2.3 METHODOLOGIES AND METHODS

Overview of Methodologies and their Methods

I use several different methodologies to explore the cultural significance and implications of the teen girl figures and the figurations of contemporary girlhood. For each methodological approach there are specific methods or domains that I focus on. All three methodologies are in conversation with each other, but the content that emerges from the qualitative research methodology and methods drives my framework and the direction I take with the other two methodologies and methods. I began my project by conducting focus group interviews at two different high schools in Toronto. The qualitative methods that I used include focus group interviews, pre- and post- session questionnaires, arts-based project, and a video elicitation/film viewing component. I will examine these specific methods, and the content that emerged in our group sessions, in the following section. As a feminist and youth studies researcher, I ensured that the shape these sessions took was directed by the participants. I began this project with some questions I wanted to explore and allowed the study to develop and progress according to signals the girls gave me.

The qualitative research informed my second methodological approach of textual analysis in a few ways. It was always my intention to combine textual analysis of films and/or shows with qualitative research. The specific textual analytic methods I use emerge in response to the research with the young women, however. Not only did the content from the interviews with the girls solidify which texts I analyze, but the conversations in the sessions informed my framework for how these texts are significant. As a feminist and youth studies researcher, I allowed the interviews to guide the meaning around these texts. In the interviews, we watched one scene from each text. The discussions around *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and/or *The Hunger Games* – the shows from which we viewed clips – in combination with my own critical media

studies skills, pointed me towards recognizing certain commonalities in themes, archetypes, and tendencies in film and TV for young people. These texts, and specifically the teen girl heroines in them, become case studies for the extra-ordinary teen girl figure as well as figurations of girlhood. School A viewed only one of these shows, whereas School B viewed the clip from both shows. I explain the reason for this difference in the breakdown of the study later in the following section on qualitative research, but the difference is essentially because the participants at each school had different interests around what they wanted to do in our sessions. As a feminist and youth researcher, I was happy to comply with their preferences. The textual analysis methods that I use for this specific project include formal shot-by-shot analysis of segments from the two case studies on exceptional girls and girlhood, viewer response analysis, genre analysis, and narrative analysis. These methods are present for both texts and extra-ordinary girl figure case studies.

As these textual analyses on the case studies reveal, the shows, the figures and figurations of girls and girlhood, as well as the research participants' perspectives, all exist within a social and cultural context. The textual analysis and qualitative research methodologies for this project lend themselves to my third methodological approach: cultural analysis. The social, cultural, ideological, and geographic circumstances surrounding the subjects that I study are essential to locating the figure of the girl and figurations of girlhood in contemporary society. The methods for this approach are more specifically analyses of different relevant social domains and issues. I explore the sociological, media cultural, ideologically political, and historical realms as well as teen girl activism and spirituality as part of this cultural analytic methodological approach.

Qualitative Research and Its Methods

The qualitative methods I used were focus groups that included video elicitation interviews, questionnaires, as well as a participatory collaborative creative project. These methods are the dominant ones at the core of my study and lay the groundwork for the other methodologies I use in describing figures of the girl today and especially figurations of girlhood. Part of my critical analysis of the content from discussions in these groups includes encouraging the girls to engage in their own media literacy and self-awareness by being attentive to formal and narrative contributions of the shows viewed in our sessions. Although I engage in formal and thematic textual analysis in the following methodological approach, I begin to explore these qualities in our focus groups. Out of both qualitative and textual approaches, it became clear that neoliberal feminism underlies the girls' statements, and that this is one of the threads cohering this entire project. Although I did not initially expect to find such strong ideological undertones from the group interviews, I did approach the sessions from a values-based stance. My original plan was to conduct a more participatory arts-creation project, which is also in line with challenging issues in the world at large. As examined towards the end of this section, the project unfolded somewhat differently from expected. The rest of this dissertation will be pulling from the conversations rather than the arts-creation aspect.

Initially, I considered these qualitative methods to be a component of Participatory Action Research (PAR) based on the project I had set out to do, whereby self-reflexivity and self-positioning as part of a reflective practice would be the crux of what I was hoping to accomplish. As the fieldwork progressed, however, the action research component became less applicable, for reasons that I will explain later in this chapter. Although the study became less in line with PAR, the elicitation aspect of the interview still had an important role. In this type of interview, some power dynamics that are present in the traditional interview are disrupted

(Clark-Ibáñez, 2007). Taking into consideration Curran Nault's (2013) assertion that "marginalized individuals often encounter difficulties in telling their own stories because" stories of class are "virtually untellable due to the lack of an adequate framework for their comprehension" (p. 305), I was pleased that the girls in my study did open up about their and their families' difficult experiences. To protect confidentiality of the participants, I have removed identifiers, such as the names of the schools and of the participants. The girls had an opportunity to pick a pseudonym to be used in publications coming out of this study. For the participants who did not pick a name, I assigned random initials for them instead. I believe the framing and environment of the interviews allowed for some vulnerable conversations. Promoting agency was originally one of the objectives of my study, and such a method facilitates this.

Because movie and TV spectatorship is typically thought of as a passive experience, offering the girls the opportunity to communicate their own views and perceptions not only about the shows, but also their lives in general, while also being able to reflect and actively engage with a text, fundamentally aligns with the girls-centred framework. As Mark Jancovich et al. (2003) note, although spectatorship is explored within cinema studies, film audiences have not been addressed as fully as television audiences have. In using a TV show and movie as parallel texts to analyze the figure of the teen girl and figurations of girlhood, I am thus merging the two respective types of audiences. Doing so is effective in analyzing these figures and figurations of girlhood, specifically on teenage girl reception. Although I originally set out to understand the affective spectatorial experience as well as discourses of identity for the girls in my groups, what happened in practice throughout the sessions inspired me to pay attention to other information. The conversations that emerged out of my questions revealed more about the girls' values and how they saw themselves in relation to others and the world at large.

Background for The Study

When advertising and recruiting for the project, I foregrounded the media component of the project as opposed to both the media and activism themes. Doing so facilitated a way to explore how tteenage girls who are not explicitly drawn to activism think about speaking out against issues that concern them. How do girls who are drawn to a media-specific topic, rather than activism, think about the world and their role within it? Our focus groups revealed the girls' varying thoughts about what an activist is and how they position themselves within preconceived notions of activism. These girls' accounts exist not only in opposition to those produced by adults, as Taft suggests, but alongside delightfully surprising responses to the romantic narratives in popular science-fiction and supernatural shows that were chosen by the participants. Their responses highlight the conflicted relationship between caring – about the world and loved ones – while also not feeling exceptional or extraordinary enough to do both well.

In the time I began reaching out to high schools to recruit participants and the end of the last focus group session, a variety of circumstances – both internal and external to the focus groups – emerged that I adapted to along the way. As such, some of my methods also changed along the way. I began my recruitment by emailing school principals, and after months of doing so, secured two schools for this project. With the school administrators' help, I distributed flyers I created in each school along with going to various classrooms to talk about my project. Once students had signed up for the study, I began scheduling the sessions.

From the outset, I advertised my study as being based on the viewership of popular shows, along with the opportunity to put together a creative project. One reason I felt it was important to study how and why girls create media is because when I was a teenager, I immersed myself in creative projects for various reasons. In the time before blogs and YouTube, I felt

limited in my ability to effect change, so young people making media today intrigues me. On the one hand, I didn't know how to, and on the other, using the arts seemed like the only way to communicate certain messages. The literature around young people and media-making supports that creative projects do in fact promote a sense of agency. As Kearney asserts in *Girls Make Media* (2006), when girls are media producers, stereotypical societal conceptions of girlhood and girls' culture are dramatically changed (p. 12). However, to be a media-producer requires access to materials, time, energy, literacy, as well a desire to be one.

During the recruitment process, I began to think more seriously about the feasibility of some of the techniques and objectives with which I had set out, given the resources available to me, as well as my own skill limitations. It took several months of emailing and calling numerous high school principals from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) until I had a second school interested in participating. As I was in the process of beginning to reach out to schools for this study, March for Our Lives happened. This movement prompted me to wonder how young girls in Toronto who would be hearing about the movement on the news from afar might be thinking about activism and social justice after this event. Although American and Canadian political structures and circumstances differ, they are also very similar. While this was not the first youth activist activity, especially in non-North American parts of the world, as we will see in in the following chapters, this event in particular received a great deal of media coverage. Since then, there have been an increasing number of visible youth activist activities.

I became increasingly curious about what girls from Toronto who were not necessarily involved in activist work thought about social justice. The connection between youth activism and relationships in popular media are not explicitly connected, but they do overlap. This dissertation illuminates the connection between the two. The recruitment approach of advertising

the study for one of these topics only to delve into the other later is not unique to my study. Karolien Driesmans et al. (2016) recruited the girls for their study on romantic beliefs and teen films through youth movements in Flanders, Belgium, telling the girls that the study was a youth movement activity. The level of deceit was minimal, and deemed relatively harmless compared to the benefit of framing the study this way. My original interest in exploring how and why girls make media as a form of resistance and to feeling agential, especially in response to romance narratives, was still present, so I decided to continue to advertise my study as I had been, and to incorporate my newly-developed question: how are girls from two different socio-economic neighbourhoods in Toronto, who are drawn to a media-specific study, rather than activism, think about the world and their role within it? My methodologies essentially remained the same throughout the entire study, but as we will see later in this chapter, some of the methods changed.

As a feminist and youth studies researcher, I wanted to ensure that my project was girls-centred and grounded in the girl participants. The way I ensured that the direction of the study as well as core themes of the project emerged from the girl participants rather than myself as a researcher was by conducting qualitative research whereby I used inductive analysis as a way to generate themes from the information and data collected.

The Study: Interviews Breakdown

Context

I conducted focus groups with eight 15–16-year-old self-identified girls from two different high schools from the Toronto District School Board in Toronto, Ontario: School A, a public arts high school in a relatively affluent neighborhood, and School B, a public high school in a lower income priority neighborhood as defined by the City of Toronto's Neighborhood Improvement Areas under the Toronto Strong Neighborhoods Strategy 2020 (NIA, 2019).

Although School A is located in a relatively affluent neighbourhood, it is important to note that anyone can audition to attend the school and that not all students are from affluent families. Because these students come from across the city, we cannot assume homogeneity in terms of privilege and access to resources. Students attending School B are more likely to live in the neighbourhood where it is located, attending because it is their feeder school. For some less-privileged students, the cost of travelling to an arts-based school like School A may be prohibitive.

Getting schools on board to participate in the study was a challenge. Many schools that I reached out to explained that they were extremely busy and unable to assist in helping me run my project. Even after having solidified two schools, recruiting and retaining participants was difficult, for reasons I can only speculate upon. Twenty-two students initially expressed interest in the study, but by the end I had eight participants total from both schools. A clear outline of the study breakdown appears in Appendix B: Qualitative Study Breakdown.

At School A, there were six students who expressed interest in the study, but in the end, only three followed through with the focus groups. At School B, sixteen students expressed interest, but only five followed through. Although eight participants in total, from both schools, is not a significant sample size, I was able to glean valuable information from our sessions. I met with the girls from each school as a group during lunch hour on three separate occasions per school. I provided pizza lunch each time and video-recorded every session, which the girls and their guardians consented to. One student from School A preferred to only have her voice recorded, so I arranged the camera in such a way as to not have her in the frame. The three sessions focused on different topics.

Video-recording the sessions proved to be very useful as I transcribed the sessions. Not only did it enable me to identify who was speaking, it allowed me to pay attention to the non-verbal behaviors of the participants as well as myself, which are details I might have overlooked during the sessions. I was able to be more fully present during the sessions because I was not focusing on taking notes during our meetings. After transcribing, I began writing. My analysis of the findings emerged through this writing process. By describing and analyzing the various statements the girls made and reactions they had, I started to recognize some themes and overarching ideological connections.

Informal Meeting

Prior to our first session, I held an informal meeting with the girls from each school to chat about the project and to collect consent forms. During this first gathering, in attempt to make this project as young person-centric as possible, I asked the girls each to vote on one of three shows/movies to watch a clip from, and then answer questions about in our study. The students voted by writing their choice down on paper, and they had the option of it being anonymous. The options I gave the participants were *The Hate U Give* (2018) *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-20), *The Hunger Games* (2012*)*. I chose these three texts because two of them were popular young adult shows from that year, and the other – *The Hunger Games* – has continued to be a favourite amongst teen audiences based on informal surveys I've conducted with young women in my life and in my tutorials. I didn't include more than three options because there was more room for dispersed responses the more options there were. My instinct to include *The Hunger Games* was apt because the majority from School B voted for *The Hunger Games*, despite much enthusiasm expressed for *The Hate U Give.* The majority present on the day of voting at School A chose *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. This informal meeting

was less than half an hour, but it allowed me to introduce myself and my project so that when we met the following week we could begin with the content I had planned.

Session One

This first session revolved around the topic of social justice and activism, although in the questionnaire there were some questions related to relationships, which would become the focus of the later session. These questions are included in Appendix A. The girls did not communicate any involvement in political organizations or activism. For both schools, in the first 15 minutes of our first session, the participants individually answered some questions on paper. When we came together as a group, the girls shared their answers, and I expanded on them, asking them about their values and what they believed could be done to improve on the social issues that were important to them. In the "Negotiating Figurations of Girlhood" chapter, I will explore their responses to this session.

Session Two

In the second session, each school watched, on my laptop, a short clip with a romantic narrative from the show or movie that the girls had voted for in the earlier session. I encouraged them to write down any observations or reflections as they watched the clip, and only some of them did this. After the screening, they were welcome to share what they had written down, and I also asked some questions about the show. From these questions, a conversation emerged. At the end of this session, I reminded them that in our final session we would get to create a work in response to any issue discussed over the past few weeks, and I provided some possible forms (i.e., short video using a smartphone). This is where the study took a bit of a turn. The girls at School A decided that they wanted to challenge the idea of a polished relationship in the form of

a collage. It is very likely that they chose this topic because relationships were the topic of this week's session.

At School B, we had more trouble deciding on which issues to focus on, and what form the project would take. When it became clear that the girls were having difficulty choosing topics and type of project, I suggested we also work on a collage the following week, and that we could address any of the issues they mentioned throughout the study. I also mentioned that if any of them wanted to create a video with their phone to accompany the collage, that was an option. For both schools, I was hoping to guide critical thinking, as well as provide a platform for young people to put forth into the world their creative projects that challenged ideological issues that were important to them in a way that I would have appreciated as a teenage myself.

Session Three

At School A, we spent this last session putting together the collage that they had decided on in the previous session. A photograph of this collage is included in Appendix C. Some of the girls had prepared drawings and quotations to include in the piece. This collage depicts a variety of quotes and photos around love relationships and what they believe a positive relationship would look like.

For School B, however, our last session was different. On the morning of this session, given that the girls' seemed uninterested and confused about the creative assignment, I decided to give them an alternative option. I gave them the option of watching the clip from *Sabrina* that School A watched and having a discussion around the way we did for *Hunger Games*, instead of working on the collage. The girls unanimously voted in favour of the clip and discussion. While this was not my initial plan for the study, it provided me with valuable information, as well as a point for comparison to the girls from School A's study. Admittedly, I was also pleased that they

had voted in favour of this option. I also felt like I would get more information about them through this video-elicitation-type discussion. Although in theory I wanted to conduct participatory action research, this methodology did not quite fit my objectives as they transformed through the research process. Adapting to the girls' cues is one of the best adaptations I made as a researcher at this point. My recognition that the girls preferred to do a different activity in that final session, and especially my pivoting to ensure their preferences were respected and accounted for, was essential to conducting a study that is girls-centred.

The girls' reasons for wanting and not wanting to work on a creative project are not something I delve into in this study, but the reasons are potentially a topic for a future project. Kearney raises the issues that economically-disadvantaged girls have little access to media technology, especially at home, and they also do not have as much time since they are often asked to help with housework while parents work (2006, p. 14). I cannot help but wonder how applicable this reality is for these girls from School B in this context. Regardless, the creative project component at each school would have gone more smoothly had circumstances been different. If I had the connections and resources to generate and distribute meaningful creative projects, the study might have taken a different form, but perhaps I also would not have executed, or even approached, the study the way I did initially. This challenge is significant because it points to the very issue underlying my findings. In such a stratified capitalist society, with neoliberalism's emphasis on value, individualism prevails, and resources and opportunities are limited.

Post-Focus Group

About a week after our final session, I emailed all the participants with a link to a very short questionnaire where I asked them questions about the study and if they learned anything about themselves from it.

<u>Analyzing the Findings</u>

After all the focus groups were complete, I transcribed the interviews while watching the video recorded footage, making note of as many non-verbal details as possible. Then, after several times of reading over the transcripts, I was able to breakdown certain statements to recognize themes at their core. There is a level of discourse analysis in this process, which informed my textual and cultural analysis.

Textual Analysis and Its Methods

Context and Approach

While qualitative research is the grounding approach around which this study emerges, the textual analysis is integral to understanding and situating the girl today, and especially to identifying figurations of contemporary girlhood. Analyzing fictional figures of the extra-ordinary girl is one way of bringing attention to the qualities ascribed to contemporary figures of the girl, which ultimately become part of discourses around figurations of contemporary girlhood. Describing the views, values and experiences of the girls from my study in response to these fictional depictions of girl's experiences offers perspective on conceptions of girlhood and coming-of-age, while also offering a more robust figuration of girlhood.

One of the aspects of this approach that is relevant to this study is the way meaning is created through the media texts. A component of the interviews involved the girls viewing a segment from their group's chosen show/movie and discussing responses to it. The sensory-rich and imaginative aspects of the speculative fiction film and television adaptations are just some of

the factors that contribute to the phenomenological experience the teen viewer has. What I mean by phenomenological experience here is the holistic experience that embodies physical, mental and affective qualities that can inform views and perspectives. Phenomenology here is "the objects of our experience before we start thinking about them, interpreting them or attributing any meaning to them" (Crotty, 1998, p. 79). I keep this understanding in mind as I listen to the girls, and it in fact allows me to interpret them with greater openness. The reason I refer to phenomenology here is not because I take a phenomenological research approach, but rather because it informs the way I interpret the both the findings and the texts. In our screening sessions, I encouraged the girls to reflect on their embodied experiences of affective emotional and physiological responses while watching the clips, but I also asked them to make notes and share anything at all that they observed or thought while viewing. I did glean some phenomenological information from my interpretivist approach, but *their responses* guided my analysis.

While on the one hand I encouraged reflection on the narrative and content, as well as on technical aspects of the shows, I myself also conduct a close textual analysis of the scenes from the shows as a way to explain how texts are composed to generate meaning. A close analysis entails a description of various aspects to the show/movie, recognizing it as quasi-phenomenological. In the Textual Analysis sections of each chapter, I conduct a close shot-by-shot analysis of the scenes showed in the focus groups. John Belton (2016) notes that "the operations of segmentation and the shot-by-shot analysis of individual scenes impose a certain rationality upon the phenomenological method, but close analysis nonetheless seeks to describe the film as a necessary first step in exploring its meaning" (para. 3). Both of the angles I have

taken have attributes of the phenomenological insofar as they both ask us to make sense of the phenomena in our world.

Both of the approaches I have implemented – inductive analysis of group interviews and close textual analysis – complement each other in this study. Close textual analysis helps me understand how meaning can be generated, and inductive analysis of interviews is the making meaning out of people's responses. I attempt to balance making sense of how these texts create certain effects, but also how the girls themselves think about these texts, their relationships, the world, and their role within it. So, although both aspects of my study speak to each other, my main objective is the interpretation of the girls' responses rather than the textual analysis.

Although I use formal analysis as one of the methods, I am not arguing in favour of a formalist theoretical approach. Moreover, although my emphasis on the dialogic relationship between texts, viewers and the socio-historical realities of the girls alludes to Bakhtin's dialogic and phenomenology (Bernard-Donals, 1994), these are not the foundation or theoretical frameworks to my project. Rather, the dialogic relationship that I refer to when discussing the texts, the viewers and cultural context is secondary to the underlying theme of care and connection that serves as the compass for the all of the girl figures, who have varying degrees of power, in the context of a neoliberal society that valorizes the extraordinary.

The Shows: The Hunger Games and Chilling Adventures of Sabrina

The Hunger Games and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* are two case studies in this project. The shows and the protagonist girl figures are not meant to be read in comparison, but through a textual analysis, similarities between the two emerge. These similarities around care and rebellion are crucial to this project in that they also reflect themes from my focus groups, and thus speak to contemporary societal circumstances and values.

These shows both incidentally feature teen girls who are rebelling against authority, specifically an authority or system that ultimately threatens to harm them and/or their loved ones. *The Hunger Games* movie from 2012 is the first in a film series based on the Young Adult (YA) novels of the same name, written by Suzanne Collins. The book series is a trilogy; however, the last book was divided into two films, resulting in a total of four film adaptations. I read this series before learning it was going to be adapted into film. The story is set in the ruins of what used to be North America, which is divided into twelve districts. The Capitol of the country of Panem annually draws the names of one boy and one girl between the ages of twelve and eighteen from each district to compete in the Hunger Games. The Games are a televised event where these representatives of the districts, known as "tributes," compete and fight each other to the death, in an arena that resembles the wilderness, until only one remains. When twelve-year old Primrose Everdeen is "reaped" for the Games, her older sister Katniss volunteers as tribute instead. The film centres around the events that unfold during The Hunger Games.

While *The Hunger Games* film (2012) is an adaptation of the YA novel, the Netflix series *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020) is an adaptation of the Archie comic series written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa. The Sabrina series is not categorized as Young Adult literature, but because it features a teen girl and her peers, and its adaptation is targeted at young viewers, I consider to be a YA text. There are four parts (seasons), as well as a Christmas special episode that was released in December 2018, all of which were adapted from the two-volume graphic novel series. Furthermore, the series was created after the 1990s sitcom *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. Unlike the *Hunger Games* books, the *Sabrina* comic was not as well-known before the adaptation. All three texts that the girls in my study were presented with as options to view (*The Hunger Games*, *Sabrina*, and *The Hate U Give*) are adaptations that have ties to YA literary

texts. YA has become an increasingly popular mainstream genre for people of all ages, whereas graphic novels are not as mainstream. Sabrina is approaching her sixteenth birthday when the story begins, and she must navigate being half-witch and half-mortal. As she attempts to reconcile her dual nature, evil forces that are connected to her through her witch-side threaten her livelihood, as well as her family and mortal friends' lives. The series follows her as she attempts to be true to her witch self while continuing to live an ordinary mortal life. This ordinary life for Sabrina includes navigating her relationship with her boyfriend from Baxter High, the high school she and her mortal friends attend.

Amidst the struggles the main characters in both shows experience, there is a love story that complicates the girls' choices and actions. In using the romantic relationship narrative as a means to discuss relationships in general, the clips from both shows depict an aspect of the two main love interests' relationships. In the first film of *The Hunger Games* series, we see a potential, albeit subtle, intimacy develop between Katniss and her district partner Peeta, while in part one of the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* show, the relationship between Sabrina and her mortal boyfriend, Harvey, is overtly romantic from the very first episode. Despite the different natures of these relationships, the implication is that Katniss and Sabrina are experiencing romantic love in one way or another. A close formal analysis of the scenes viewed in our focus groups illuminates how form and narrative content work in tandem with one another and are also located in genre and themes relevant to the time.

Response Analysis

As I will discuss in the "Figurations of Extra-Ordinary Girlhood" chapters, the texts we look at are works of speculative fiction, and the television and movie adaptations utilize the media's multi-sensory components to convey/present an affective experience. Furthermore, I

selected a clip from *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and *The Hunger Games* that focused on love between the lead protagonists. I wanted to explore how young teens interpret these storylines, and how these perceptions are related to what they express as being important to them and their experiences in the world. While I was hopeful they would speak to the ideological ramifications of such discourses, I was intrigued that the actual issues they alluded to – such as connection and care – were even more a commentary on the status quo.

As we see in the "Textual Context" sections of each chapter, the romance aspect of these scenes is not the main topic that the girls in my study talked about. Most of them were particularly attentive to the formal and generic qualities of the shows. In fact, the girls seemed to be removed from the shows, rather than immersed in them, which could certainly be because they were simply watching clips rather than the shows in their entirety. Although this attention to the technical might not seem relevant, it is significant for several reasons. The girls' distance from the text raises the issue of how extracting a scene from its larger body of work can disrupt the viewer's reaction. Regardless of whether or not the participants might have had different reactions had they been more fully sutured into the text, as many traditional film theorists might have argued (Heath, 1977; Miller, 1977; Oudart, 1977; Silverman, 1983), these girls' reactions are noteworthy. The girls had very perceptive and cerebral responses to scenes saturated in affect and emotion. They were not swept away in the love story, which is a response we have been conditioned to expect, especially from teen girls.

Adaptation

There has been an abundance of television and film adaptations of Young Adult literature, particularly in the last twenty years. In this project, rather than delve into various theories about adaptation, I will be discussing a few of the ideological factors, such as

neoliberalism and different variations of feminism that have been at play as these particular show adaptations have emerged. Moreover, although I am exploring young adult stories, I cannot ignore the multitude of superhero comic adaptations that have dominated cinemas and online show streaming platforms during this time as well. Aside from these superhero narratives also arguably being works of speculative fiction, the only meaningful way they are relevant to my discussion is when we consider the woman superhero, especially within the context of the extra-ordinary girl. I will not be delving into an analysis of these superheroines or the superhero genre, but as I analyze the strong and powerful women and girl characters – the extra-ordinary girl – these superhero adaptations becomes especially relevant.

It can be argued that the fact that these shows are adaptations of popular fiction is not terribly important to the focus of this dissertation. Since I am focusing on the shows and the girls' responses, what relevance does adaptation play? After all, this is not a comparative project exploring what gets lost in translation from one medium to another. Rather, the significance of adaptation, especially of Young Adult fiction, is that it is a product of our time, which is one governed by capital and impressive individualism. If it sounds terribly unromantic that these very enjoyable works of fiction can be reduced to monetary, numeric value, that is because in a way it is. We are meant to experience pleasure from these shows, and we certainly do (myself included!), but these shows are also products of the entertainment industry. The extra-ordinary girl figure, although complex as we will see throughout this study, does serve as a tool to the status quo's end, which is ultimately profit.

Adapting a novel into a show can be seen as a way to enhance the way we experience creative works, and can be exciting for fan audiences. The trans-media nature of entertainment is also a way to drive profit, and it is particularly significant that these texts are marketed toward

young adults, who have notoriously been understood as driving the entertainment industry (Driscoll, 2011; Schrum, 2004). These texts become types of commodities. Transforming a pre-existing book into a film or TV series makes the story become like a brand, often inspiring themed merchandise. Although not exactly the same, the adaptation phenomenon echoes what Natalie Coulter illuminates about the branding of children's television. In "From the Top Drawer to the Bottom Line: The Commodification of Children's Culture" (2013), she explains that with Ronald Reagan's deregulation of media in the 1980s, "children were able to engage in the fantasy of democratic choice offered by the rationality of a free market that was supposedly simply responding to children's needs and wants" (p. 413). Similarly, although not emerging from the same circumstances, this adaptation culture purports to be responding to a demand that has in fact been created by the industry. *The Hunger Games* and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* as two case studies of popular media texts present some powerful messages that seem to challenge the ideological factors that are in fact implicit in their creation.

Speculative Fiction: Genre Context for The Hunger Games and Sabrina

To better understand the context of the girl figures of Katniss and Sabrina, some background on the genre of their respective shows is relevant context. In fact, as Ralph Cohen (2017) asserts, there is some pertinent meaning for genre within a historical context. Both the American Netflix series *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and the dystopian American movie *The Hunger Games* fit within the broad umbrella genre of speculative fiction. Sabrina is more specifically supernatural-horror and *The Hunger Games* is more specifically dystopian science fiction. One way of describing this category is that speculative fiction has imaginative qualities, or is non-mimetic, as opposed to realism that portrays events and characters that could exist in the world as we know it. It is interesting to me that the girls in my study chose shows from this

genre. Even though I gave the participants only a few show/film options to choose from, *The Hate U Give* is realist; the participants actively did not choose this realist option. The speculative fiction aspect of the chosen texts is relevant to the figuration of extra-ordinary girlhood. These adaptations of speculative fiction literature that feature powerful teen girl protagonists attempt to assert progressive and feminist messages but are still in fact perpetuating the status quo. Speculative fiction lays the foundation for the extra-ordinary girl to be especially extraordinary.

The popularity of speculative fiction in a children and youth context emerges alongside literacy and education for girls. Catherine Driscoll and Alexandra Heatwole (2018) explain that although girls were not closely tied to science fiction, they were to fantasy, citing the Lewis Carroll *Alice* books, first published in 1865, as an example of the girl-self in fantasy (p. 37). Alice's experience is one of coming-of-age, a theme traditionally tied to girlhood, as noted earlier and that will be incorporated in the following chapters. Speculative fiction serves as a site that can nurture representations of exceptional girlhood in that the premise of this genre is the quality of being extra or beyond ordinary.

Speculative fiction was originally a term that science fiction author Robert Heinlein (1947) used to describe a subgenre of science fiction, in his essay, "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction." According to Marek Oziewicz's definition of the term in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2017), speculative fiction "has three historically located meanings: a subgenre of science fiction that deals with human rather than technological problems, a genre distinct from and opposite to science fiction in its exclusive focus on possible futures, and a super category for all genres that deliberately departs from imitating 'consensus reality' of everyday experience" (p. 1). The last of these meanings is the one that we colloquially use today, and this is the description I am referring to when I discuss the term. Furthermore,

Canadian science fiction writer Judith Merril's (1967) definition also supports this current use of the term: it is "a special sort of contemporary writing which makes use of fantastic and inventive elements to comment on, or speculate about, society, humanity, life, the cosmos, reality [a]nd any other topic under the general heading of philosophy" (Merril, p. 3). Speculative fiction in this sense describes the umbrella genre encompassing science fiction, fantasy, and horror, as well as their subgenres/derivatives such as dystopia, magic realism, supernatural, superhero stories, and steampunk. Oziewicz argues that this genre is like one of Pierre Bourdieu's cultural fields, that is, "a domain of activity defined by its own field-specific rules of functioning, agents, and institutions" (2017, p. 2). As such, he argues that speculative fiction, as a domain, is not just about the texts, but is also about their various productions and receptions (2017, p. 1).

Thinking about this genre as a cultural field helps situate why I am linking a discussion of the term speculative fiction as it applies to literature with adaptations of texts of this genre that are aimed at young adult audiences. Oziewicz emphasizes that this genre develops as a sort of tool to dismantle traditional North American fiction with its cultural biases. According to this argument, speculative fiction essentially represents a "global reaction to human creative imagination struggling to envision a possible future at the time of a major transition from local to global humanity" (Oziewicz, 2017, p. 2). This understanding of this literary genre can also extend to contemporary film and TV adaptations. What might the current mainstream North American proliferation of such shows suggest in terms of imagination – both individual and cultural? Moreover, how does the teen girl in contemporary speculative fiction adaptations get positioned and used within this model?

With this understanding of this umbrella genre in mind, culturally-specific theorization about how audiences experience speculative fiction is essential. Oziewicz draws upon Raymond

Williams' idea that historical periods are comprised of a specific "structure of feeling" (Williams, 1988, p. 357), and he connects this notion to Bourdieu's discussion of social and cultural fields as a way to explain how speculative fiction currently functions, especially for young readers (2017, p. 8). This interpretation also covers adaptations of speculative fiction texts featuring, and marketed towards, young people. In *The Long Revolution* (1961), Williams discusses a "community of experience" whereby an emergent culture with its own structures of feeling based on its context and lived experiences challenges the pre-existing dominant one (p. 48). Oziewicz argues that "the emerging culture… has wholeheartedly owned the label of speculative fiction as a way to conceptualize its experience of new types of non-mimetic writing and to position them in a contiguous relation to older, ideologically loaded forms" in contrast to "the dominant fantasy and science fiction culture, institutionalized in today's academia" (2017, p. 8). He notes that this emergent culture is comprised of young readers, online sources, grassroots initiatives, and as such are immersed in a different "structure of feeling," to borrow Williams' term again (1961, p. 48). Oziewicz claims that this group accepts the term speculative fiction and that "the appeal of the term… lies in its inclusiveness and open-ended porousness" (2017, p. 8). I argue that this broad and fluid quality lends itself to transgressing media boundaries as well. Figurations of girlhood abound across media text and thus also discourses.

The transmedia nature of adaptation that Henry Jenkins (2011) speaks about goes hand in hand with this concept of speculative fiction itself. The imaginative, non-mimetic qualities of the genre, in conjunction with the structures of feeling of the emergent culture that uses this term, matches the conceptual nature of transmedia adaptation. The extra-ordinary girl is a site where these qualities come together within a neoliberal framework, thus contributing to figurations of contemporary girlhood.

For the teen viewer, that is the girls in my study, whose lives and views are informed by their lived experiences of caring for loved ones, and vulnerability, how is the imaginative element to speculative fiction – regardless of the medium – relevant? The vulnerability that the girls in my study expressed illuminates a contrast between the real girl viewer and the extravagance of the exceptional girl figure. In the forward of Nina Mikkelsen's *Powerful Magic: Learning from Children's Responses to Fantasy Literature* (2005), writer Laurence Yep comments on how he spent his childhood in ghettos where the children in his neighbourhood did not have bikes, and families would have multiple locks on their doors for safety and out of fear. He says he could not relate to the "realistic" books of the 1950s because the children's ordinary lives were very different from his lived experiences as a working-class child of colour, living in an African-American neighbourhood, and going to school in Chinatown. Instead, he "could identify with the children in fantasy novels, who through some magical means stumbled from our everyday world to a new world where they had to learn new customs and even new languages" (2005, p. vii). He says that "fantasy books were the opposite of escapism, because they taught me basic survival strategies such as the flexibility of mind that children demonstrated in the pages of these fantasy novels: I saw how they adapted to the strange and even uncomfortable and, more importantly, what happened when they guessed wrong" (2005, p. vii). Zetta Elliott (2013) recalls a similar feeling of not "belonging" that she as a young Black girl felt in reading fiction, but specifically British fantasy texts as opposed to works of realism that Yep discusses. Although Yep's assessment of fantasy does not perfectly transfer to how a young person experiences speculative fiction, it suggests the genre has the potential to be a site of change.

Neither *Sabrina* or *The Hunger Games* follow the conventions of the fantasy genre as Yep describes them, but these shows nonetheless illuminate this genre, creating something *beyond real* that can captivate a viewer and expand the way they think about existence. These adaptations of a comic series and YA book into a TV series and movie, respectively, add another, different, element of sensory immersion for the audience.

Relationship Narrative as Proxy/Means for Conversations about Care and Connection

One of the predominant interpersonal relationship narratives across media is the romantic one. Because this storyline is especially pronounced in teen film and television, exploring this narrative with the teen girls in my study offered an opportunity to learn about their thoughts and feelings about interpersonal relationships in general. The romance storyline in turn serves as a means, or proxy, for conversations about connection. Traditionally, the love story in teen media is a site to explore social and cultural values and consequences. Romantic relationships are especially tied to notions of coming of age, and they are embedded in contemporary figurations of girlhood.

Teen love on and off the screen has been studied in great depth from various perspectives. Some of the most relevant studies to this project examine the dialogic relationship between the text and the viewer. In *Some Wore Bobby Socks: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture 1920-1945* (2004), Kelly Schrum illuminates the interrelationship between girls' interests and desires and cultural structures including cinema. She explains that in the 1930s and 1940s, generally, girls entering their teen years were interested in movies featuring idealized love, physical intimacy and relationships, and would often imitate the actresses or love scenes. Moreover, sociologist Herbert Blumer's 1920s research on the relationship between movies and sexual desire and behaviour of young people attempts to address moral panic around these films.

On the one hand, girls in high school during this time did learn about heterosexual romance, femininity, dating, and sexuality from movies they saw, accepting these idealized relationships and incorporating them into their fantasies. On the other hand, Blumer assuaged the anxiety that many people have had: movies did not cause young people to be sexually active. More recent research by Segrin and Nabi (2002) echoes that exposure to television shows that focus on romantic relationships is correlated with idealized relationship expectations, with 'correlated' as the operative word. Driesmans et al. (2016)'s experimental study with 11–14-year-old girls in Belgium examines more closely the factors that might contribute to such adoptions of views and desires. They find that the higher the parasocial interaction with characters,[5] the greater the inclination to endorse idealistic romantic views, with *High School Musical* as the sample movie. None of the girls I spoke with had idealistic images of what their future relationships would be like, but all of them hoped that they would be rooted in mutual trust, and that this among other qualities, should make for a healthy relationship. Moreover, for Driesmans et al., age is a moderate factor in this audience experience, with older audiences being less shaped by the romantic elements of a movie.

These studies explore popular traditional teen films and shows that have love and relationships as one of the primary themes. There are few contemporary speculative fiction YA adaptations that foreground the romantic relationship as the primary narrative, however, with the exception of the *Twilight* series. Because of this supernatural film series adaptation's tremendous popularity and success, it is imperative to outline some of the criticisms and concerns around the text by and for teen girls, especially to provide context for why I chose to examine the romance narrative in two other speculative fiction shows.

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[5] Parasocial interaction is a psychological term referring to how connected one feels to the characters on screen.

Twilight as Context

        The *Twilight Saga* film series adaptations (2008-2012) and franchise is relevant in a conversation about popular supernatural teen shows, especially when analyzing their love narratives. The supernatural vampire series is one of the earlier contemporary examples within this trend of popular YA speculative fiction adaptations. The story has been studied by many scholars intrigued by the mass appeal as well as problematic representations of relationships. Referring mostly to the *Twilight* book series, Tricia Clasen (2010) explains that *Twilight* prioritizes romantic relationships over other types of relationships, and this suggests that romantic love is the most important facet of life.

        Even more specifically, Clasen notes that the story perpetuates four myths in general about romantic love: the possibility of love at first sight, that love is forever, that romantic relationships are the most important relationship, and that love requires mind reading (p. 131). The main problem with such unrealistic messages about love and relationships, she argues, drawing upon Dreyfus (2005) and Winn (2007), is that people might view their own relationships through this lens, leading to unmet expectations and unhappiness (p. 120). Not all the girl audiences of *Twilight* reception studies abide by worldviews about love and relationships that *Twilight* presents either. One girl in Catherine Strong's (2011) study declares, "I don't think it's healthy for girls who haven't experienced real relationships to read about a boy who cuts a girl's car wires when he doesn't want her to go somewhere, and then to be told that's love" (p. 79). In fact, as we will see from the responses from my study, romantic love does not appear to be the most important type of relationship for these girls.

        Although the texts viewed in my study are quite different from *Twilight*, the girls' keen critical interpretations of depictions of relationships suggest that there are a variety of factors that

would leave one impressionable to such messages. Like Driesmans et al. (2016), Behm-Morawitz et al. (2010) noticed age is a factor in the audience's interpretations of the romantic relationship. The caveat here is that age and ideology work in tandem for this interpretation. Adults who identify as feminists had lower levels of immersion in the books than the non-self-identified feminist adults and were less likely to desire the romantic relationship of Edward and Bella, which was not the case for the teen fans (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2010, p. 151). In the last chapter, I discuss the interpretations of narrative and how the viewers' age is significant in this understanding.

Ideology and age are pertinent factors that emerge from my interviews and underlie many of the girls' responses to activism as well as the romance narratives in the speculative fiction shows we explore – texts that do not foreground romance as the dominant theme the way *Twilight* does. Although romance is not a dominant theme in *The Hunger Games* or *Sabrina*, it is certainly present, and the cultural context of *Twilight* as it is one of the first major texts in this genre of popular YA speculative fiction adaptation shows.

Coming of Age

As articulated earlier in this chapter, coming-of-age is a theme and genre present in many texts about youth, especially girlhood, thus contributing to figurations of contemporary girlhood. Coming of age suggests being in the process of becoming who one is meant to be. In contemporary North American society, informed by theories of developmentalism, the young person's experiences are located in their future potential. Youth is often thought of as a liminal period whereby the young person is understood as being betwixt and between childhood and adulthood. Child and youth studies problematizes the notion of futurity as it gets attributed to youth (Castañeda, 2002). The coming-of-age narrative draws upon this worldview while also

exploring the affective and social qualities associated with youth. Adolescence, for example, is typically understood to be a period of incredible social and emotional development and identity formation (Erikson, 1950; Rice & Dolgin, 2005). Child and youth studies as a field advocates for these affective and relational experiences, which are socially and culturally dependent, to exist in their own right for the young person. The coming-of-age narrative and theme does not deny the young person of being in their own right, but does co-opt these qualities. In drawing upon these affective experiences, figurations of youth continue to be linked to futurity.

Futurity and becoming for the young person become commodified in a neoliberal economy. The emotional and relational aspects of this period of life are what enrich this theme and genre. The teenager is perhaps the most profound figure embodying the desire and defiance duality. The teen is colloquially and symbolically understood in North American culture to be a figure who longs for or wants any number of things, and also rejects or denies that which does not meet their values. As such, the desire and defiance dialect both attracts and distracts from the commodification. Although these qualities have been ascribed to teen girl culture earlier in history as well, as Kelly Schrum (2004) alludes, they are arguably utilized as devices of neoliberalism in the iterations of the extra-ordinary girl discussed in my project. Moreover, the care and connection that young people value, as exemplified by the figures and figurations of girls and girlhoods in my study, are expressed as inherent in coming of age. The inherent care and connection paired with the desire and defiance ascribed to youth is attractive and appealing. The relatability of these feelings and experiences in coming-of-age stories is especially commodifiable within a neoliberal economy.

Cultural Analysis and Its Methods

Context and Approach

Just as the textual analysis approach is integral to understanding the figure of the extra-ordinary girl today, a cultural analysis helps to further locate and contextualize the girl within a neoliberal context. The cultural analysis in this project speaks to specific moments or topics that are relevant to the themes and phenomena of the respective sections, often overlapping with one another, ranging from social, historical, political and cultural realities of the world in the context of the girl. Moreover, all three approaches or methodologies together reinforce the neoliberal framework. The teen girls in my study's school and neighbourhood demographics and relevant socio-economic implications provide a foundation for the cultural analysis for that aspect of the study. In the following chapters, a sociological analysis of teen girl activism in the world is relevant context for the extra-ordinary teen girl activist/warrior figure. The relationship narrative as representative of care and connection supports the actions of this extra-ordinary girl figure. Sociological and media culture analyses of teen girls interested in alternative spirituality and witchcraft, as well as the teen witch figure in popular teen shows, offer perspective and context for the extra-ordinary teen witch figure. Furthermore, historical background on alternative spirituality, but especially of the history of the witch in the context of capitalism is crucial in this cultural analysis to understand the extra-ordinary girl within a neoliberal framework.

Activism, Spirituality, and Young People

The textual analysis of the show and character case studies reveals that the semiotic practices and identities of the characters of Katniss and Sabrina reflect some dominant practices that real, material girls also engage in: activism and alternative spirituality. These practices are relevant to figurations of contemporary girlhood, especially as these practices comment on the exceptional girl figure.

Although youth activism and girls' interest in embracing alternative spiritualities are not new practices, both have recently become more exposed, and consequently gained traction in North America. In the case of activism, is there an element of idealization of young people fighting for positive change, and if so, why? In revisiting universal notions of youth and childhood, Henry Jenkins (1998) reminds us that childhood innocence fills adult nostalgic ideals of childhood and also enables adults to control children or use them as justification for certain actions in political debate. According to Jenkins (1998), for the adult, "childhood – a temporary state – becomes an emblem for our anxieties about the passing of time, the destruction of historical formations, or conversely, a vehicle for our hopes for the future" (p. 5). Are adults intrigued by these young activists because they are doing that which we deem too difficult for us to do and because we do not expect them to be capable of such action? Right before the worldwide youth-led climate strike on September 20th, 2019, Jessica K. Taft emphasized that young people are certainly suited to effecting social change. She asserts that it is our "cultural assumptions about childhood and adulthood" that inform views and policies that exclude children from political engagement (McNulty, 2019 para. 12). Engaging with alternative spirituality is not precisely the same as being involved in activism, but the young women who do so are attempting to challenge the status quo in their own way.

Girl Activists, Alternative Spirituality, Witches, and Capitalism

Throughout this project, the participants in the focus groups' feelings about activism, personal integrity, power, and relationships are expressed. These views are further illuminated in our discussions around the scenes from the case studies of *The Hunger Games* and *Sabrina.* Building off of a discussion of the movie and show, the figure of the teen girl with strong moral convictions and extraordinary abilities in mainstream popular media invites analysis and

reflection on real life girls that parallel the heroine-activist (Katniss) and the supernaturally-attuned (Sabrina). While the actual girls' motivations are typically in opposition to the underlying capitalist system, as we will see, ironically, it is this very system that offers us these popular show adaptations featuring these character types. Here I elucidate the relationships between teen girl activists, young witches in popular shows/media, present-day young women identifying as witches, and "witches" of the past to capitalism and neoliberalism, whereby the very human experience of caring challenges the latter. Again, the two case studies of the extra-ordinary girl figure have illuminated certain commonalities around care and also the rebellion that can be required to ensure care ensues, in these contemporary figurations of girlhood.

Given the recent activist demonstrations and movements being led by girls in the world, rebelling against harmful and oppressive structures, as well as the abundance of contemporary young women "witches" who similarly strive to destabilize the status quo – all of whom are driven by care – I reflect upon the significance of witch-hunts in relation to this capitalist system. On the one hand, historically witches and witch hunts have been based on factors that threaten the Christian, patriarchal, capitalist system. Girl activists today, as they rebel against oppressive authority and the damage their ideology and policies procure, are in a way collectively revolting against the witch-hunt. When girls become notable activists, the line between commodity activism and genuine social change in the face of capitalism can becomes blurry. Harris (2004a) has noted that youth are often valued for their role as consumers, and that girls in particular are viewed as models for this consumer "citizenship" (p. 163). This model of the young person as consumer not only complicates some forms of activism, but also alternative spiritual practices when those practices are mass-commodified, thus speaking to a type of ideological negotiation.

The girls and girl figures discussed throughout this project not only navigate challenging the status quo with the tools and platforms society has provided, often in a push and pull between desire and defiance, but also how they navigate the ordinary and the extraordinary for the greater good. This dissertation, especially Chapter Four, elucidates the real ways teen girls experience all the aforementioned topics. This discussion illuminates a disparity that exists for teen girls who are coming of age on the extra-ordinary girl and figurations of exceptional girlhood in a neoliberal framework.

CHAPTER THREE:

FIGURATIONS OF EXTRA-ORDINARY GIRLHOOD:

THE WARRIOR-ACTIVIST FIGURE

SECTION 3.1 THE GIRL: KATNISS AND THE WARRIOR/ACTIVIST FIGURE CASE STUDY

Teen Girl Activist Figure in Society

The teen girl activist has become a prominent figure in society, as exemplified by the case study example of Katniss as well as the numerous girl activists with public visibility that will be discussed later in this chapter. Implicit in this role of the activist is an element of care to improve life or circumstances in one way or another, according to the activist's standards. As I will explore in depth in the "Negotiating Figurations of Girlhood" chapter, for the teen girls in my study, to be a public activist is to be and do more than what they thought they were ready for or willing to do. An activist is an extra-ordinary girl, by this definition, and this exceptionality is especially pronounced in the figuration of the teen girl warrior-activist as exemplified by the character Katniss in *The Hunger Games*. This chapter will discuss more fully the teen girl activists, revealing another angle as to how the activist leader figure becomes associated with

exceptional girlhood. Although Katniss and these real activists are not one in the same, they share many qualities that render them extraordinary. Qualities such as leadership often overlap with those that neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism admires, even when such ideologies are at the root of what the activist is fighting against. These figures, both symbolic and material, in tandem with one another, shape one figuration of extra-ordinary girlhood motivated by social justice.

Warrior and Activist Connection

Although a warrior and an activist are not the same figure, nor are they mutually exclusive, there is an underlying assumption that they both have a conviction to fight for a certain cause. I observe a contemporary iteration of the teen girl activist figure that gets co-opted by media culture, and reframed as a heroic warrior in popular media, shaping one figuration of extra-ordinary girlhood. The warrior-activist figure serves to embody a fighter for a cause. In many contemporary dystopian fiction narratives, the warrior figure looks a lot like an activist. This comparison is not to be confused with the "social justice warrior" concept in the contemporary vernacular that evokes a crusader for social justice issues – sometimes an insufferable one, according to one of my participants, C.P. Moreover, the blurring of the line between militarism and activism in these texts complicates what it means to fight for the greater good.

The nature of the dystopian genre that encapsulates a damaged world that needs saving in one way or another, as I will discuss in the following section, calls to action a warrior-like figure, who, I argue, takes on an activist role as well. Although the warrior girl in speculative fiction has a long history in literature, the contemporary teen girl warrior-activist is a new iteration particular to popular contemporary YA science fiction and dystopian media. Katniss Everdeen

from *The Hunger Games* trilogy novels and film adaptations is one example of the many teen girl heroines in speculative fiction taking on warrior-activist roles, such as Tris from the *Divergent* series (2014-16), Cassie from *The 5th Wave* (2016), and arguably even Princess Leia in *Star Wars* (1977). Katniss is thrown into the role of fighter, and assumes activist-like behaviour as she is guided by her values and moral convictions. The circumstances and environment around her are so dire and at odds with her values, and who and what she cares about, that she challenges the oppressive structure. Her actions are powerful and are driven by care, and thus resonate with qualities attributed to the activist figure.

Even though not an activist in the way we might think of one, Katniss, like other fighter/warrior heroines in this contemporary genre has become an archetype of youth rebelling against injustice. In fact, Katniss's three-finger salute became a rallying call among activists in Thailand, and more recently Myanmar (Hill, 2018; Quinley, 2021). This model of the girl has a dialogic relationship with the current socio-cultural climate. This figure emerges within popular young adult media culture under capitalism that recognizes that many young people are knowledgeable and keen on changing the world. Moreover, these qualities and experiences work together shaping one figuration of girlhood. Young people in North America have been participating in and leading activist actions, as we will see later in this chapter; however, not all young people think of themselves as capable or willing to engage in such practices, as the "Negotiating Figurations of Girlhood" chapter reveals. Whether or not these perspectives are typical, media creators are embracing the cultural trend informed by both neoliberal feminism as well as youth uprisings.

There is complexity behind these practices, figures, and figurations of young people from an ideological standpoint. As Richard Dyer elucidates in "Entertainment and Utopia" (1976),

film genres like the musical can offer utopian hope while also embodying and presenting the lack and limitations of the socioeconomic condition. The viewer need not feel guilty about the dissonance. Dyer draws attention to the ideological interpellation that entertainment media embodies, while also illuminating that there is appeal in this entertainment, especially as it raises legitimate social problems that the text negotiates. Ideological closure is difficult, at best, and beside the point. Inviting real spectators to engage with and negotiate meaning, informed by their social conditions, invites a reading of ideology that reveals a sense of human agency and negotiation. The scenes from the shows discussed in this project capture the dissonance Dyer describes, reinforcing a sense of ideological negotiation that can exist for the girls who have varying degrees of power and public visibility, both on and off screen. Moreover, the extra-ordinary girl serves to satisfy the expectation that girls can be strong characters, while also superficially assuaging anxieties around the repercussions of capitalism, of which these adaptations are in fact a product.

The Girl Figure in Contemporary Dystopian Teen Film & TV

In contemporary popular media over the past decade, there has been an abundance of young adult speculative fiction film and TV adaptations. Within this umbrella genre, YA science fiction-dystopian adaptations of novels featuring teen girl heroines have been especially popular. *The Hunger Games* trilogy, featuring Katniss as the protagonist, is arguably the most popular and successful of this genre, along with the *Divergent* film trilogy series (2014-16), which are based on the novels by Veronica Roth. The less popular adaptation film *The 5th Wave* (2016) also fits the mold of a strong teen girl heroine of a dystopian text. The protagonists of these texts are each emblematic of this extra-ordinary warrior figuration of the teen girl in a YA dystopian adaptation film. Underlying these narratives and characters' journeys is an element of coming-of-age as the

warrior-activist girl gains awareness about herself, often through her activism, and is challenged to embrace her innate strength, activating an extra-ordinary fighter-activist.

The girls from these texts undergo a personal coming-of-age as they are forced to demonstrate their strength. The *Divergent* films feature sixteen-year-old Beatrice "Tris" Prior. After undergoing the standard aptitude test that determines which faction one belongs to, Tris is considered Divergent: she has attributes of multiple factions. Her proctor advises her to keep this result secret because, as a Divergent, she has greater awareness and capacity for independent thinking. She cannot be controlled by the government and is thus a threat to the social order. As we will see later in this chapter, Katniss is also a threat to the social order. Although not as well-received as the former films, *The 5th Wave* film adaptation featuring Cassiopeia "Cassie" Marie Sullivan demonstrates a girl's journey into forced extra-ordinariness. Cassie is also a sixteen-year-old girl, and although not as remarkable as Katniss or Tris, goes on a character journey throughout the narrative. She begins as an average, ordinary girl, then after the apocalypse, becomes a fighter and killer out of necessity for survival, much like Katniss. In these texts, the lead heroines come into their own in a dystopian coming-of-age arc as warrior figures fighting for justice. The narrative and generic context are significant to the way the characters act. As we see throughout this project, care underlies much of the girls' – both ordinary and extra-ordinary – actions. The ways care is presented looks different depending on the girl and the narrative.

These teen girl heroines, through their resourcefulness and quick ability to adapt and thrive amidst political and environmental destruction, function as an emblem for the girl under neoliberal capitalism. Although the world might be unjust and oppressive, the individual girl can embrace her power to overcome the challenges. Herein lies the complexity of the warrior-activist figure: her extraordinariness is either praised or feared depending on context, values, and

objectives. Either way, even when viewing her as a progressive activist, the fascination with and admiration for the extraordinary young person is inflected by neoliberal individualism where worth and value are to be strived for, trumping the ordinary and mundane gears that keep the machine of life working.

Katniss the Extra-Ordinary Girl

At the outset of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss is a sixteen-year-old girl from the smallest and poorest district in the post-apocalyptic world of Panem. It is significant that all the girl characters in these texts are sixteen. This age is colloquially and thus symbolically considered an age of transition from young adulthood to womanhood. In North American culture, it is common practice to celebrate the "sweet sixteen" birthday, tokenizing optimal teenagehood on the verge of adulthood. The sixteen-year-old activist, like the witch figure who will be explored in the following chapter, is further embracing her power and extra-ordinariness. Katniss is humble and subdued, and the most impressive aspect to her is her archery skill, which has been perfected through hunting as a means of survival for her, her mother, and her younger sister. As the narrative progresses, Katniss prepares to compete in the Hunger Games. During this training, not only do we witness the extent of Katniss's archery ability, but we begin to see her seemingly mental strength as she cleverly outwits the game masters during their tests. Once immersed in The Games, her physical strength becomes even more evident.

Through the series of obstacles and challenges within The Games, and amongst interactions with other players, Katniss is revealed as a truly gifted and powerful teen girl with tremendous mental, physical, social, and emotional skills. Her talents, that are brought to light because of The Games, are ultimately a means to her and her loved ones' survival. These extra ordinary gifts are a way to provide care. Her care and her exceptionality are also, however,

exploited by the game makers in a similar way that care is exploited in neoliberal society. The girl with less public visibility and power, like the girls in my study, is thus justified (and validated) in her reluctance to fully aspire to be extra-ordinary when the consequences of exceptionality complicate the care and connection that they value most.

Katniss's skills and gifts are many and great, and emerge naturally and seamlessly from within, as the stakes require them. Throughout Katniss's journey throughout *The Hunger Games* series, she undergoes a coming-of-age. Her experience with The Games is significant in her growth from the idea of innocence to accomplished adulthood. It is through this coming-of-age that her extra-ordinariness becomes apparent. To possess such innate cleverness and talent on various fronts is remarkable, even for a fictional character, and arguably is not typical for an ordinary person. Katniss is indeed an extra-ordinary girl, and although fictional, is a model of the teen girl none the less. Even with the understanding that speculative fiction is not meant to emulate real life, messages do have a dialogic relationship with the real world. Society's fascination with the exceptional and extraordinary, such as with reality competition and talent shows, is one such case in point. The Games themselves are in fact an ironic meta critique of this phenomenon. The Games where the most strong and clever – the most extraordinary – young person survives is a gross emblem of this phenomenon.

The social significance of the extra-ordinary girl is indeed connected to neoliberal ideology that valorizes individualistic exceptionalism, and is detached from human interest. Driscoll and Heatwole (2018) argue that Guy Debord's adoption of Marx's commodity

fetishism[6] is relevant in explaining The Games as well as Katniss's navigation of them within the context of what the girl symbolizes in society today. The Games foreground that social relations within a media-saturated culture are not detached from sociopolitical structures and human interest. The Games are dictated by the political structures and are also broadcast on television for all the districts to watch. Moreover, Tiqqun (2012) argues that the "Young Girl occupies the central kernel of the present system of desires" (p. 9). The girl figure, much like the child figure, when considered symbolically, can reflect society back onto itself.

Katniss has become an iconic figure in many regards, but as the extraordinary girl, she is a commentary on girlhood under capitalism. She is both figuratively and literally a girl on fire both within and outside of the narrative. As all the game contenders are being sworn in during a broadcast ceremony, Katniss's costume intentionally lights up into flames behind her. She is both a figuratively impressive girl and also enshrouded in flames. The second novel in the trilogy is in fact called *Catching Fire*. In their 2018 book, *The Hunger Games: Spectacle, Risk and the Girl Action Hero*, Driscoll and Heatwole explore what Katniss symbolizes and represents in a variety of contexts. Katniss is "a spectacle of power, vulnerability, resilience, and transformation; as an icon of virtue, reward and promise" as well as a figure embodying the "risks attendant on the complex significance of girlhood today" (p. 2). Their analysis examines all of Katniss's qualities within the framework of contemporary feminism, which are indeed complex and varying.

Katniss and Feminism

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[6] Commodity fetishism is a concept defined by Karl Marx in 1867. In simple terms, it explains how commodities may be separated from the industrial and social relations that produce them, rendering them to be like objects of "worship" (Marx, 2003).

Amidst these critical analyses of *The Hunger Games*' deceivingly radical messages, there are multiple assertions that the character of Katniss and her storyline do in fact offer some powerful feminist messages. In fact, the strongest arguments for this being a revolutionary text revolve around Katniss. I argue that Katniss's progressive feminist message within the context of the mass hit film adaptation complicates what is revolutionary, while also encouraging ideological negotiation. What are these feminist messages, and can we call them progressive when they are embedded in a text that might be covertly presenting a contradictory one? Although there are indeed admirable qualities to Katniss, making her a powerful lead girl character – and role model – in this dystopian story, we cannot extract her character from the larger context (i.e., narrative, but also blockbuster cinema adaptation).

Katniss most certainly displays many characteristics that render her the antithesis of the traditional figure of the girl, which is why she has been described by writers and academics as a positive feminist role model (Greenaway, 2014; Hall, 2012; Kimball, 2019; Kirby, 2015). She is serious, strong, defiant, smart, courageous/daring, and angry. Her goal is survival – and eventually justice for all – rather than only romance, and she is determined to act in ways that will achieve these goals despite what other people think of her. These characteristics are quite contrary to the traditional girl figure who is conditioned to self-scrutinize and to please other people. In this sense, Katniss's drive and focus on what is important to her (her convictions are fierce) are admirable and certainly paint her as a positive female role model. In many ways, Katniss is an activist-like heroine. In searching through over thirty feminist blogs, Philip Kirby (2015) found notable intersections between feminist politics and the film among feminist audiences. Interestingly, he notes that *Vagina: The Zine* has compared Katniss to Joan of Arc insofar as she is "a woman being a catalyst for political upheaval" (p. 470). Joan of Arc has been

a serious young feminist standard to which contemporary young women – real or imagined – are measured against. As we see in the following chapter, comparing young women rebelling against political authority to Joan of Arc is a trope in North American culture. Kirby aptly points out that this Joan of Arc reference with respect to Katniss is interesting given that the film's director actually compared her to Rosa Parks, a more recent woman catalyst for political change. There are many and also not enough well-known renowned young women agents of change, and this is changing. That said, should we compare Katniss to such figures? Kirby's geopolitical study supports the notion that *The Hunger Games* is a progressive feminist text, and while I agree that the character of Katniss is indeed a powerful figure, I am hesitant to separate the text from its making. David Baker and Elena Schak (2019) argue that *The Hunger Games* book series offers positive inspiration for women, but the adaptations and transmedia aspects of this story erase them as a result of commercial and consumeristic objectives. *The Hunger Games* adaptations and franchise generate a great deal of profit. Although the consumer and capital-driven aspect to the story does not disqualify positive messages in the text, what Katniss represents is positioned and viewed within a neoliberal context.

Katniss's character embodies the complex struggle that exists within feminism today. Kelly Oliver (2014) points out that Katniss "has an ambiguous gender identity, both masculine and feminine, paternal and maternal… [and] that this ambiguity and ambivalence open up new possibilities for girls and initiate an aesthetics of ambiguity" (p. 675). While her desires may be ambiguous, thus expanding what acceptable models of desire might be, we cannot ignore that Katniss in the film also adheres to traditional ideals of attractiveness: she is tall, thin, white, strong, busty, able-bodied, and conventionally pretty. In the book series, Katniss is short to average height, with olive skin and straight Black hair. Although her unclear desires allow for

expanding conventional notions of longing and her attractiveness are not mutually exclusive, they are important to address before making general claims that the character in and of herself is either progressive or not. Audiences will read the characters in different ways. Katniss also demonstrates exceptional moral character within the narrative, but this in itself does not necessarily grant license to declare the story a progressive feminist text. Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Emily D. Ryalls (2014) explore how Katniss is an honourable and reliable character, while analyzing the implications of these traits when they are attached to how she is visually depicted. Her defiance in Panem is made evident through her reluctance to perform the script President Snow expects, as well as in her detesting to adorn her body as expected. Although these qualities are admirable in their own right against a dictatorship, especially when traditionally young women have been expected to conform to certain standards, in this context they produce a new message aligned with a neoliberal or white feminist agenda. When we attribute the qualities of bravery and honesty to her natural earnestness and white femininity, what messages are being reproduced? She is revolutionary within the *The Hunger Games* universe, but this world is one that has been produced within a certain society where the feminist icon is palatable. She disrupts the status quo within her society, but she herself as a character does not challenge certain standards of hegemonic discourse. As such, this tension – this cruel optimism, to borrow Berlant's conception – of desire and defiance percolates for young viewers.

As a resilient and strong character who overcomes obstacles using her physical and mental skills, Katniss demonstrates many traits that make her a model female character, especially one that contemporary white, neoliberal feminism can herald. Oliver (2014) likens her to Julia Kristeva's "extravagant girl" "who wants to have it all and to be the best at everything" (Oliver, 2014, p. 675). By this definition, Katniss embodies the neoliberal feminist qualities

whereby a young woman strives in spite of all odds to achieve valuable goals. The odds are very much not in her favour in the game, but she perseveres and succeeds anyway. Jennifer McClearen's audience research illuminates similar sentiments, as well as some postfeminist messages that come out of such action heroines, including Katniss. The participants in McClearen's study view these characters' feats as metaphors for career and academic success, but they also struggle to reconcile the improbability of their physical strength (McClearen, 2015, p. 840). Characters like Katniss emerge out of a postfeminism that declared that feminism's job was done and that girl power has prevailed. Feminism is not dead, but it has been utilized for a neoliberal agenda.

The postfeminist sensibilities tied to girl power that have informed the creation of action heroines like Katniss have consequentially led to neoliberal feminist interpretations and discourses. Because of the context of her creation and the ideological conditions informing audiences' reception, she can function as an icon of neoliberal feminism, which is precisely what the market would like. I am not arguing that strong teen girl characters like Katniss are inherently problematic, because society certainly needs characters challenging passive subordinate girlhood; rather, to exalt such characters as ideal and progressive echoes postfeminism's message that feminism's work is done because neoliberal feminism dominates.

How do teen girl protagonists in other speculative fiction adaptations like *Sabrina* compare to Katniss and action heroines in general? The strong teen girl lead in contemporary dystopian and supernatural fiction alike necessarily engage with varieties of feminism and femininity, albeit in a different way. The girls I interviewed aspire to be more confident, and in general better overall, admiring the lead girl characters' strength and power. Katniss may not have supernatural abilities the way Sabrina the witch does, but like the witch in popular media,

she is also a site where the young woman's strength illuminates socially constructed anxieties around power. How does this compare to the witch/supernatural show's feminism, and why is this important? Does the contemporary dystopian heroine who possesses extra-ordinary abilities end up having a similar signifying function as the teen witch? These questions will be addressed in this chapter and the next.

SECTION 3.2 THE TEXT: CONTEXT, ANALYSIS AND RESPONSES TO *THE HUNGER GAMES*

Context

Extra-Ordinary Girl in the Text: Katniss in The Hunger Games Movie

The world in which the extra-ordinary girl figure exists offers important information and insight into what she represents. This world includes the diegetic world of the film, enhanced by form, technique and style, as well as the world where reception occurs, informed by viewer's own interpretations and experiences, which are also informed by the world at large that created the text. What Katniss as the extra-ordinary girl character in *The Hunger Games* signifies is enmeshed with the narrative and can be most fully understood through a textual analysis. Integral to this textual analysis is the reminder of how the girls in my study engaged with the film. Their responses to a specific sequence from this movie offer important information, especially about how they think of themselves and the world at large, as well as how they believe they should be within it. The genre of the film is also intricately tied to the narrative and represents its own bundle of social significance, which is relevant to the activist-warrior girl figure.

The story of the film *The Hunger Games,* and the YA fiction trilogy written by Suzanne Collins that it adapts, are set in the post-apocalyptic world of Panem, which is divided into

thirteen districts, each of which features a distinct industry and certain characteristics specific to the region. The narrative follows Katniss, a sixteen-year-old who volunteers herself as the female tribute for district twelve – the poorest district – to participate in the Hunger Games (The Games) so that her younger sister Primrose does not have to. The Games are a live-broadcast competition where young people from each district (one male and female, under the age of eighteen), who have been randomly selected, are fighting for their lives, as they kill and compete against each other in an arena until there is only one left alive. The winner's reward aligns with capitalism. Victors are not only granted special status in their districts but are allowed to live in the lavish Victors' Village with their families. Moreover, the victors can then go on to mentor future tributes, all while grappling with their own residual trauma from The Games.

While this film falls under speculative film, Driscoll and Heatwole (2018) state that it is essentially a teen film. She argues that there is more to teen film than its appeal to young audiences, emphasizing that it focuses on the "the liminal experience of adolescence" where young lead characters are faced with challenges within "narratives centred on coming of age (learning the way of the world) and rites of passage (becoming another self)" (2018, p. 44). In this sense, The *Hunger Games* (and *Sabrina*) are indeed teen film (and TV). I argue that teen film has changed and adapted over time, retaining some characteristics and tropes, while challenging and appropriating other conventions. Currently, teen film is largely constituted of speculative fiction adaptations featuring powerful girl characters, driven by a combination of desire and defiance in both content and form.

For this project, I focus on the first film in the series adaptation, based on the first novel in the book trilogy, and in my focus groups, we specifically only watched one particular scene that will be examined later in this chapter, and that leads to a discussion of the film. The

storylines cannot be separated from the narrative at large, so an analysis of the film will illuminate crucial arguments related to the text. In analyzing various aspects of this first film of *The Hunger Games* series, alongside existing literature on the topic, Katniss becomes even more crystalized as the extra-ordinary warrior-activist figure. In a close textual breakdown, the particular scene that my focus group watched, the way meaning is created through the text for the viewer, also becomes clearer. Furthermore, various theories about the dystopian genre, particularly in relation to YA texts, are relevant context for understanding the extra-ordinary girl. The genre's ideological origins and associations have implications for young viewers as well as for Katniss as the warrior-activist figure.

Contemporary Dystopia and Ideology: Revolutionary or Not?

Dystopian fiction, once thought to be inherently radical/progressive, becomes a complex and often deceivingly contradictory domain in its contemporary form to explore ideology, especially with adaptation and its often capital-driven production. The term dystopia originates from the word "dustopia," coined in 1747 (Claeys, 2016, p. 273). A year later, dystopia was described as an "unhappy country" (Budakov, 2010, pp. 86-88). The term is understood in contrast to utopia, a term introduced by Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) in his 1516 work *Utopia*. Maria Varsam (2003) writes that "whereas… utopia is a manifestation of desire and hope for a better world and an 'unalienated order' that upsets the status quo… dystopia delineates the crushing of hope and the displacement of desire for the purpose of upholding that status quo" (p. 209). A premise of this genre is that we are left with dystopia when technological advancement and government overrule society.

The Hunger Games story and the various ways meaning is created in the text – that is through the medium and formal devices, but also through connection to the overarching

narrative, dialogue, and actors – work in tandem with one another to convey the dystopian world. While dystopian literature of the past served to hold a mirror up to society to illuminate the problems with the dominant ideology in place, contemporary YA dystopian literature and its adaptations have become hegemonic tools rather than texts for change. The film adaptations of *The Hunger Games* raise some of these ideological messages in a distinctive way compared to the original YA book series. Baker and Schak (2019) assert, for example, that the medium of the text determines the narrative's progressive potential. They assert that the adaptations and transmedia aspects of this story erase these progressive messages through their consumeristic objectives. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan (1964), the medium itself also signifies a message. Although the transmedia aspect has some potential for creating opportunities for increased engagement and intrigue in audiences, the potential for social advancement is limited insofar as it is a product of the system that allows for its making. There are also differing views on whether or not the narrative of *The Hunger Games* is a revolutionary one. As Dyer's (1976) model suggests, the film can be a contradictory text that has both revolutionary and regressive qualities. Different audiences, at different times and in different places, may respond to these elements in different ways. The elements of the film can be activated accordingly.

The novels and films of *The Hunger Games* series, while presenting progressive messages in many ways, function ideologically as media texts. The production of the film adaptations do speak to consumerism, but they also have the potential to extend the story to a wider audience. Moreover, the film version of the story positions the viewer as an audience member of The Games as well, with the citizens of Panem. The form of the story (i.e., film versus book) can create different or new meaning and significance, including with respect to how the audience identifies with it and its characters.

In this dystopian universe, questions of morality, humanity and government drive the narrative, raising ideological intrigue and concerns. Insofar as power and competition as well as the struggle for a better world are some dominant topics called into question, the film adaptation invites discussion about the ideological messages it presents. In The Games themselves, young people are thrown into an arena to fight for survival, at the hands of a dictatorial government. They are forced to become warriors, and as Katniss begins to oppose the structure, and President Snow himself, she becomes a reluctant warrior-activist. The Games are presented as an obviously inhumane and grotesque activity. In this sense, as *The Hunger Games* illuminates the horrific injustice of this governing system, it appears to be progressive and revolutionary, featuring Katniss – an image of the teen girl activist-warrior – as its extra-ordinary hero.

Some writers and scholars consider this to be a progressive story whereby a young woman leads a resistance against authoritarian control and succeeds (Jones, 2020; Kirby, 2015; Lesnick, 2012). In the *Medium* article, "The Potential of Dystopian Novels to Mold Teen Activists" (2020), Skye Jones touches upon the ways young people become inspired to act for a better future through dystopian texts. Although she is speaking primarily about novels, many of these dystopian novels have been adapted to film and television, reaching an even wider audience. Moreover, young women are often figured as heroes of YA novels (Day et al., 2014), which renders the warrior-activist character in dystopian fiction an especially appealing savior for the world's problems. Celebrities like Donald Sutherland, who stars in the film, have described the values as being similar to those of Occupy Wall Street (Lesnick, 2012). Moreover, in Thailand, activists used the three-finger salute from the movie to protest the military government put into place by the 2014 coup, offering free tickets to the third film in the series

(Hill, 2018). Although *The Hunger Games* has become a symbol of resistance in the world for many, the intricacies of the story reveal nuances that complicate what it signifies ideologically.

Although there are ways the text and the warrior-activist girl figure symbolize resistance, there are certain culturally established ideological messages embedded in the text that complicate what progressive means and reveals it to be not simply a revolutionary text. Mark Fisher (2012) illuminates the political aspects and implications of events within the narrative and how the characters behave in response to them. He argues that the teenagers competing as "entertainment (for) a bored elite… compel(s) an image of the privation of solidarity in our world" and he wonders if "Collins's novels are not only in tune with our actually existing but disintegrating neoliberal dystopia, but also with the world that will replace it?" (2012, p. 33). In this sense, the narrative reflects the bleak possibilities/options that exist in the real world. There is a 'cruel optimism' to this story that depicts a young woman who rebels against an oppressive authority, yet who reinforces the very system that many young people would like to rebel against. Competition is presented as abhorrent in The Games, which illuminates the irony in that The Games closely resemble extreme game shows.

Ideologically, the popular genre of contemporary YA dystopian fiction – particularly when adapted to the screen, as is the case for *The Hunger Games* – can be contradictory. Although *The Hunger Games* has been described as sending the message of resistance against capitalist and fascist governments, academics (Baker & Schak, 2019; Fisher, 2012) have argued that the content actually promotes quite the opposite message, or in the very least, a different one. Although this narrative is about revolutionary consciousness, the government differs from the neoliberal capitalist one under which the story was created. Fisher points out that although the Capitol might appear like a capitalist society, "the mode of power at work in Panem is better

described as cyber-feudal" (2012, p, 28). Although commodities are ever present, the market

does not appear to exist. President Snow, who seems to own everything, demonstrates power

through Peacekeepers that essentially resemble police force. He also exerts punishment through

this white-uniformed force, as well as through the Hunger Games. Furthermore, the series

alludes to ancient Rome and its type of governance – hence the city's name Panem, deriving

from the Latin phrase 'panem et circenses' meaning bread and circuses. By presenting a cyber-

fascist state that everyone can agree to oppose, the film lessens its critique of issues that are more

noticeable as neoliberal issues, such as class division and competition. The features of

contemporary society that *The Hunger Games* extrapolates include class division, reality TV

competition and state surveillance. As such, viewers and readers alike are presented with a

universe that is both cautionary and comforting in its familiarity.

Such narratives encourage the dialectical desire and defiance pull in audiences through

this very mechanism, and the warrior-activist teen heroine is woven into this dynamic. Dystopian

fiction in its original sense is meant "to warn readers about the possible outcomes of the present

world and entails an extrapolation of key features of contemporary society" as Rafaela Baccolini

asserts (2013, p. 115). The skillful weaving of different realities – real and imagined – aptly

reflects the complexity of living in the world today, especially for young people who feel moral

convictions to make the world a better place. It is interesting to note that Collins started her

career as a television writer. Hill draws upon the work of Communications scholar John Fiske

(1986) to remind us that television content must possess polysemy[7] if it is to appeal to mass

audiences (2018). With this concept in mind, Hill (2018) argues that the series emulates post-

9/11 representations of war and national security, such as *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004),

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[7] Polysemy is when a word or concept has more than one possible meaning.

which David Holloway (2008) describes as "allegory lite." Stacy Takacs (2012) applies this concept to popular texts like *The Hunger Games* film series, drawing upon Holloway's observations. Specifically, Holloway argues that in a feat of "pure capitalist utilitarianism," shows like these appeal "simultaneously to multiple audiences, alienating as few customers as possible, while transferring responsibility for any politicizing of films to viewers themselves" (2008, p. 83).

When these narratives are covertly encouraging – sometimes even manipulating – audiences into subscribing to the ideological messages of the status quo under the guise of bettering society, media literacy becomes crucial. The care and connection that both viewers and characters value are co-opted by franchises. Moreover, the extra-ordinary character becomes the leader in an often-disheartening quest to either return to or forge a new utopian ideal. David Christopher (2015) asserts that dystopian cinema "is primarily concerned with the social conditions inherent to patriarchal capitalism in which the narratives simultaneously expose and reproduce social and economic contradictions in an ideological process of repressive tolerance" (p. 56). He illuminates the paradox at play: while films in this genre appear to be critical of the "damaging effects of self-indulgent capitalism (and posit) fantasies of class integration," they are actually reinforcing the system's values. It is up to the characters to resolve the inequalities and class contradictions. Furthermore, the fantasy of class integration becomes about altruistic characters rather than the inner workings of capitalism and its self-interest in commodification.

In contrast to dystopian literature proper, mainstream contemporary dystopian texts cannot serve the genre's original function. Ewan Morrison (2014), from *The Guardian,* argues that contemporary dystopian YA literature as a whole is very much like a type of right-wing propaganda. He argues that although dystopian fiction of the past served left-wing ways of

challenging authority, more recent narratives serve a different ideological purpose. His use of right-wing refers to the politically conservative, and left-wing, more politically socialist. In the mid-twentieth century, dystopian fiction authors were indeed aligned with progressive ideological messages. Morrison reminds us of H.G. Wells' connection with communism "which filtered into the 1960s through left-engaged authors like Philip K. Dick. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (adapted for the screen as *Blade Runner*) saw a post-apocalyptic world in which a massive private global corporation had replaced governments and nations" (2014, para. 3). Furthermore, Claire P. Curtis (2010) argues that post-apocalyptic fiction encourages the reader to think about how people might come together to establish new structures and contracts. It is worth noting that *The Hunger Games* books do at the very least communicate awareness that old structures will return in place of what has been destroyed. Contemporary dystopian fiction, however, "support(s) one of the key ideologies that the left has been battling against for a century: the idea that human nature, rather than nurture, determines how we act and live. These books propose a laissez-faire existence, with heroic individuals who are guided by the innate forces of human nature against evil social planners" (Morrison, 2014, para. 6). As YA literature has expanded its reach, has dystopian fiction and its adaptations adjusted their function to comply with contemporary neoliberal, capitalist society?

It is the illusion that these texts continue to challenge authority that highlights the cruel optimism of it all. The pretense that a text is for change, when it very much also supports the status quo inhibits the fulfilment of the desire, as Berlant's term suggests. The defiance narrative and the extra-ordinary warrior-activist girl alike are co-opted by neoliberal society, and care and connection are the objects of desire. The very rebelling that readers may yearn to pursue, through the extra-ordinary warrior-activist girl as proxy, would be against the structure of authority that

provides these texts to them. Stella Morabito (2014) further argues, in the conservative online magazine *The Federalist*, that "political correctness" is what tricks the left into thinking this story is progressive, and that they overlook that "big government has been used throughout the ages to accumulate wealth for the powerful, to tax excessively those of lesser means, and then to create a huge class who are utterly dependent upon the likes of President Snow, who ends up justifying his harsh policies as a means to 'peace'" (para. 17). Morrison (2014) also asserts that in *The Hunger Games*, there are "substantial attacks on many of the foundational projects and aims of the left: big government, the welfare state, progress, social planning and equality," and while I do not entirely agree that this story attacks these issues, I do support his point that this dystopian text, like many other contemporary ones, enforces that "one of the key ideologies that the left has been battling against for a century: the idea that human nature, rather than nurture, determines how we act and live" (Morrison, para. 6). We see this with the innately gifted and powerful lead character Katniss whose cleverness and strength means her survival.

She has also been traumatized by her activism. The texts reveal that there is a cost for being extra-ordinary, a point I shall develop further in this dissertation.

Coming of Age: A Metaphor for Change, A Means to an End

Although viewers may think of these shows as metaphors for the real-life rebellion that they are encouraged to crave, there are a few factors at play that ensure they do not actually dismantle the structures that they would need to in order to effect actual revolution. Arguably, it is might be an impossible task for any work of entertainment or art to ensure dismantling, given the complexity of the relation between text to social change. As noted, the fictional worlds within these speculative fiction stories, while appearing to resemble our world, essentially follow a different order. Although metaphor is a powerful tool, there need to be certain resources

available in order to utilize it appropriately when the metaphor encourages a call to action. These shows themselves – these adaptations – are products of the very system that would need to be challenged. They generate a great deal of profit. These shows are commodities. The coming-of-age story further ignites a desire to be powerful and confident, and to defy oppressive authority in teen girl audiences. This desire and defiance, however, gets fulfilled through the imaginative process of engaging with the stories. On one level, the viewer experiences her own coming-of-age fantasy through the consumption of the narratives, fulfilling an aspect of that desire. More significantly however, the tools (i.e., community and unity) that are necessary for the viewer to challenge the structure that oppresses her are undermined by the system's ideological messages of individualism and self-improvement. This story does present a community behind Katniss, even though many of her actions are driven by herself. The care and connection motivating the extra-ordinary girl's action is also what helps her focus her power.

The community supporting her is arguably what gives her the strength to persevere, thus displaying the importance of the collective even for personal pursuits. The residents of Katniss's district are especially encouraging and supportive for her. Katniss's care for the livelihood of her family and community motivate her. This drive is framed within a model of coming-of-age. Although not explicit, herein lies the cruel optimism of the coming-of-age story inherent in such texts. The coming-of-age story as depicted through popular teen media perpetuates images of girlhood that may be at odds with real girls' lived experiences in the world. The coming-of-age arc as we know it is culturally specific but is presented as universal. Katniss is able to navigate and conquer the oppressive forces as she comes of age in an archetypal way. She is arguably able to rise up and defeat very much because of support and inspiration from the collective, whom she is fighting for. This experience is not standard for the girl with less power who may be supported

by her community, and driven to protect it. A desire to be more powerful can, but does not

necessarily, exist alongside a feeling of inadequacy. The will to empowerment that is implicit in

this theme further solidifies a desire in young viewers, rooted in shame, that inhibits coming-to-

power.

The lead girl characters are powerful and defiant, and purportedly progressive. These

characters inspire in viewers – specifically the girls in my study – a desire to be stronger, and

defy an oppressive order/system. Furthermore, the coming-of-age theme that applies to the

protagonists in *The Hunger Games* and *Sabrina* works to immerse the viewer into the story,

which can reinforce a sense of identification with the characters. This connection to the inspiring

characters can support the agenda of generating capital from the success of the adaptations.

There is a large body of work in the tradition of feminist film theory examining spectator

identification with narratives and characters on screen (Doane, 1982; hooks, 1992; Mulvey,

1975; Mulvey, 1981; Stacey, 1993). The relevance of emotion in this process is crucial. Emotion

and care, as they are integrated into the fabric of the film and TV shows, both narratively and

formally, and consequently also experienced by the viewers, help suture and solidify various

identifications and interpellations. This connection between emotion and film will be examined

later in this chapter to further demonstrate the interrelationships between texts, society and real

young viewers' experiences with narratives. Despite the adaptions discussed in this project as

capital-producing entities, viewers can and do experience enjoyment from these texts. The

dissonance that can arise from this dynamic can even produce shame, which has the potential to

reinforce a desire-defiance pull. Although I do not delve into work by psychoanalytic film

theorists such as Laura Mulvey, I assert that the pleasures and displeasures for young girl

viewers of narrative cinema and television foreground the complexity of narrative media reception.

Analysis and Responses

Scene Breakdown and Close Analysis

While a wider perspective and analysis regarding the messages embedded in and presented by the film offers some external context for thinking about the extra-ordinary girl warrior-activist, a close textual shot-by-shot analysis of a scene from the film offers information about both the extra-ordinary girl, as well as the girl with less social power. The scene analysis articulates the nuanced way care and connection are part of the extra-ordinary girl's character and also what motivate her to action. A close analysis of the text, and its dialogic relationship to the world at large, also reinforces the relational values of girl viewers. Care and connection are the compass that guides the ordinary girl in the context of neoliberal society that valorizes the extraordinary. The dialogic relationship between the formal qualities of the film and the cultural context reinforces how the affective experiences of care are responses to, and also responses in defiance of, a society that exploits care and community for its own benefit. The relationship narrative provides as an opportunity to learn more about the views and values of the participants in this study.

A close analysis of one scene that is emblematic of this relationship storyline is a way to focus on specific details that work towards establishing this narrative. The following scene from *The Hunger Games* is what the girls at School B watched in our session. The scene viewed in session occurs in the middle of the film, with the characters already immersed in The Games. The players have been informed of a new policy specific to this year's Game: there can be two winners as long as they are from the same district. The motivation for this change in the rules is

to captivate viewers of The Games with the development of Katniss and Peeta, both from district twelve, as star-crossed lovers.

This clip prompted the conversations around the Katniss-Peeta love story, offering insight into other qualities such as trust and honesty (analyzed in Chapter Five), including care. The discussion of various qualities of the narrative suggest interest among the girls in more than the romance storyline. Although care and relationships were some of the themes of the conversation with the girls, as explored earlier, their insight into other aspects of the texts provided information about their views on relationships and narrative in general. Their perspectives on the technical aspect of the film, as well as identification with characters, regardless of gender, came up. Moreover, in response to this particular scene, the ways the extra-ordinary qualities inherent in actions around care and in participating in The Games further draw attention to the desire-defiance dichotomy – and sometimes also dialectic – for the girl with less social power and public visibility.

Because Katniss and Peeta are now working in partnership to both survive The Games, they are taking care of each other. Some of the girls in the study, however, wondered if they would perhaps be taking care of each other regardless. Although the story makes it clear that Peeta has romantic feelings for Katniss, it is less clear what the nature of her feelings are for him. Regardless, it is clear she cares about him as well. The care, like the care described by the participants in the "Negotiating Figurations of Girlhood" chapter, is a basis for connection, and underlies many choices and actions (or non-actions) the girls would take. In this scene, Katniss finds Peeta extremely wounded, which warrants a deliberate degree of care. She notices him lying down, injured, and camouflaged with rocks amidst trees and soil. No one is around and all we hear is the birds chirping and melancholic instrumental music.

As Katniss inspects his wound, the music halts, and she begins to attempt to help him. Recognizing that she is making great effort to care for him, Peeta communicates with the tone of his voice as he says her name that he wants to tell her that she should not waste her time saving him. She infers as much and affirmatively tells him she's not going to leave him. He asks why not and she looks at him without responding. There is a cut to her helping him walk to a dark, quiet cave where it would be difficult for other tributes to find him. He lays down and through a series of close-up shots and reverse-shots between the two of them, we learn that Peeta is very discouraged and despondent about his situation, even as Katniss tries to reassure him that they will find a way to help him heal. He even tries to explain to her that he is not extra-ordinary the way she is. He does not "get many parachutes," referring to the practice of a viewer of The Games being moved by a player enough to purchase a healing product customized for the individual to be parachuted into the arena for them. The series of technical editing choices, as well as the mise-en-scène, reinforces that a bond is forming between the characters. Just after Katniss leans in to kiss Peeta on the cheek, we then are reminded that these two players in The Game are being watched. There is a cut to Gale (another potential love interest for Katniss) and others from District Twelve watching The Games live on television. These characters may be manufacturing romance for the sake of survival in the arena, but the ambiguity opens a conversation about care and actions people would take in its name.

A few moments after Peeta shares this sentiment of affection, the tone changes. The characters hear chimes in the forest and Katniss makes her way to find out that the chimes are alerting her to a container of soup that had been parachuted in for Peeta. The note enclosed with the container tells her that the package is a gift from their District Twelve mentor, Haymitch and reads, "You call that a kiss?" This message suggests that if they want to get sponsors to help

them survive The Games, they will have to develop a stronger love story for the viewers. They will have to have an extraordinary love story. On a meta level, this manufacturing of a love story is also a way for a narrative to captivate audiences. My use of the romantic relationship storyline as a means to have conversations in my focus group about relationships, care, and values in general was deliberate.

In this storyline, it is largely up to Katniss to perform as the romantic heroine at this point since Peeta has already professed his love for her in a television interview in a live broadcast leading up to The Games. She cares for Peeta – and possibly also loves him – but as the participants in my study demonstrate, the romantic relationship is only one facet of care and connection. Upon reading Haymitch's note, she looks to the sky, presumably where the cameras are, to acknowledge the message, and then makes her way back to Peeta. As Peeta rests in the dark cave, Katniss begins to feed him the soup, reminding him that she was happy to help him since he fed her once, referring to when he threw her a loaf of (burnt) bread from his family's bakery as she was lingering nearby in the cold rain searching for scraps to bring her family. He tells her he regrets throwing her the loaf rather than handing it to her. This scene is particularly intimate as he continues to tell her about his fond memories of her from their school days. Eventually she lies beside him. Interrupting this pleasant moment under the trees in these contrived woods arena in which they are fighting, an announcement is made by the gamekeepers. They have announced that at sunrise there will be a feast at the Cornucopia where the tributes will presumably be faced with a life and death challenge in order to receive the object or product that they each need at that moment. For district twelve, they would presumably be providing medicine to heal Peeta.

This new plot point within The Games draws even more attention to the dynamic between Katniss and Peeta. As Katniss prepares to go to this meeting, Peeta strongly discourages her from doing so. R.D. from School B is confused by this moment, commenting on how she did not understand why Peeta was so against Katniss helping him. She asks, "Why wasn't like… Why was Peeta being so hesitant about Katniss helping him? Yeah, because every time Katniss tried to do something, he felt as though oh, I shouldn't be helped, although he needed it, so why was that... If it was someone different…" R.D. draws attention to a certain message that underlies many love stories: the concern for protecting someone you love, potentially at the cost of your own health, or life in this case, but also not wanting to risk losing a loved one no matter the toll. There are many facets of care here. Katniss insists on helping Peeta, telling him that he would do the same for her if the roles were reversed. He asks why she is helping him, and then, possibly remembering Haymitch's note, she leans in and kisses him, this time on the lips. There is a cut to a close up shot of Gale's hurt face, then a shot from behind his head showing that he has been watching this scene between Katniss and Peeta on the screen in front of him. The editing of this sequence, as well as the contrasting mise-en-scènes of both settings (i.e., the forest in The Games and where Gale is watching), express a tension, thus reinforcing an intriguing love story.

This sequence in particular opened up a rich conversation about relationship dynamics for the girls in the interviews. The girls from School B who watched this scene had a variety of thoughts about the moment when Gale witnesses Katniss kiss Peeta. Regarding Gale's reaction and the love triangle, S.A. says, "I wanted to laugh also 'cause I saw his face. I felt bad for him too 'cause like he likes her, but then he saw her kissing Peeta, but I then I wanted Katniss and Peeta to be together so I was kinda happy too." Although this response is to be expected based

on how the form is presenting the story, it is also communicating how empathic the girls are, especially when it comes to complex relationship dynamics. Moreover, in one of the most endearing moments during the focus group, all the girls confessed that they related most to Gale in the clip we viewed. In a flurry of self-conscious laughter, R.D. told me, "I can relate to Gale 100%." Gale, it can be argued, is a version of the ordinary male figure in comparison to Peeta. Although Peeta may be humble, he is an extraordinarily talented artist and baker, with exceptional physical strength, all while wearing his heart on his sleeve. The girls in my study have varying reasons for identifying with Gale here, as will be explored in Chapter Five. Spectator identification is complex and happens for many reasons, including connection to a storyline or character and personality, and the ways that relationship dynamics in the text are reinforced through deliberate formal cinematic techniques. This merging of factors informs certain interpretations and ways of thinking about the characters and their situations.

The scene continues to develop the relationships between Katniss and Peeta. After Gale sees Katniss kiss Peeta, Peeta begs her not to go. She would be putting herself in great danger by attending the event at the Cornucopia. To put his mind at ease, she stays with him until he falls asleep and then sneaks off to try to get his medicine. As presented in the "Negotiating Figurations of Girlhood" chapter, it is evident that the girls understood the complex dynamic between Katniss and Peeta in this scene. Katniss's motives are ambiguous, but the film implies that love is one of the underlying emotions driving her behaviour. The affective qualities behind the characters' interactions, which are embellished through the formal aspects of the film, are complicated by the overarching dilemma within the narrative. In fact, Philip Kirby (2015) highlights that "Katniss's personal security is intimately connected to others through their emotional relationship, and it is in this way that the draconian impositions of the Capitol become

meaningful in her life" (p. 471). The personal and the political are truly intertwined, and the human qualities are illuminated in contrast to the external events. The dire environmental circumstances and varying ways care and relationships overlap work in tandem with each other, revealing many activist qualities to Katniss. Through varying levels and forms of care, she becomes more of an activist-warrior because of, and in spite of, the terrible world around her. This dynamic can be said to be true of other teen girl activist figures.

SECTION 3.3 CULTURAL CONTEXT: TEEN GIRL ACTIVISTS IN NORTH AMERICA

Introduction: Teen Girl Activist Figure in Context

As discussed throughout this project, the teen girl activist, unlike the teen girl warrior-activist character represented by Katniss, is a real person, not just a symbolic figure. When presented in the media, as a young person embarking on extraordinary missions to change the world, taking on a public persona, as many teen girl activist leaders in North America have been over the years, the teen girl activist is a figure of the extra-ordinary girl. There is a dialogic relationship between this real girl figure and the girl activist-warrior archetype discussed earlier, whereby both are not only in conversation with the world at large, but fighting to improve it. While ten years ago, teen girl activism was largely overlooked in scholarship, today she is a prominent figure. Discussion of specific teen girl activists in the world – specifically North American society – and scholarship on teen girl activism inform understandings of the extra-ordinary in a neoliberal world. This analysis also illuminates the expectations this world imposes on the girl to be extra-ordinary.

Teen Girl Activism in Theory

Teen girl activism has been in the forefront of the news the past few years, but there is a remarkable history of young people engaging in social justice activity throughout the world. Why is gender, specifically girlhood, significant when we talk about youth activism? Insofar as girlhood is a relevant social category, both in terms of capital and citizenship, girls' involvement in political resistance in the Americas is incredibly meaningful. Postcolonial and transnational theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) asserts that "it is especially on the bodies and lives of women and girls from the Third World/South – the Two-Thirds World – that global capitalism writes its script, and it is by paying attention to … these communities of women and girls that we demystify capitalism … and envision anti-capitalist resistance" (p. 514). Perhaps this very oppression is one of the reasons Latin American girls in Taft's study in *Rebel Girls* (2011) have more locations where they can develop their political understanding and analysis compared to the girls in North America (p. 109); it is in response to persecution. Furthermore, the rich history and current culture of radical, Left-wing politics in Latin America informs the girls' political education, while also inspiring them to establish their own critical knowledge, inserting themselves into these movements. In North America today, a decade after *Rebel Girls* was published, although lacking the rich radical history of Latin America, there is a growing progressive, socialist culture in response to oppressive and/or violent social and political structural powers.

Much of the work done by scholars around teen girls and activism focuses on girls who are currently involved in activism, as opposed to girls not involved. While this is understandable, it does not offer insight into how non-activist girls think about social issues, or why they might not be participating in ways to bring about social change if they want to be. Perhaps feeling overwhelmed or ashamed contributes to abstaining from traditional sites of public activism. The

care and connection that even non-activist teen girls value, as exemplified in my study, suggest there are structural barriers and/or too great a personal risk to performing such action. While scholarship around gender focuses mostly on identity, I argue that external factors and structures in place set the foundation for how young people think of themselves in the world, but especially how they act in it.

Figures and figurations of the extra-ordinary girl and girlhood reinforce expectations of girlhood. Whether it is regarding girls participating in traditional activist organizations (Bent, 2013, 2020; Bobel, 2007; Gordon, 2007, 2008; Gordon & Taft, 2011; Taft, 2011, 2017; Writer, 2020), or girls utilizing digital spaces and media for activism (Campbell, 2018; Hutcheon, 2016; Keller, 2012, 2016; Kimball, 2019; Renold, 2018; Sheridan-Rabideau, 2008), the research on girl activism typically comes back to girls' identity. By identity I include how these girls think of themselves, which includes how they think of themselves in terms of values, gender, political affiliation and power. Identity might be discussed in the broad sense, such as in relation to the status quo of the political agent, or as in each girl's own sense of identity individually, and as it relates to her activist community. Contemporary scholarship on the girl who is active against social injustice has acknowledged the role of girl power culture, empowerment discourse, and neoliberalism in North America (Goessling 2017; Gill & Orgad 2015; Taft 2004). Jessalynn Keller (2016) suggests that since girls have typically been marginalized from traditional sites of activism, like the streets and voting booths, researchers must recognize the ways girls create alternative spaces where they can work towards effecting social change. To ignore these alternative sites is to assume that girls are not concerned or speaking out about social issues. For the girl with less social power and public visibility who values care and connection but may not

feel she meets the standard of the extra-ordinary girl activist, alternative sites of action can be appealing.

One of these alternative forms is fan activism, as Melissa Brough and Sangita Shresthova (2012), as well as Keller (2016) explore. Fan activism is when activist outreach and political participation emerge out of fan communities. This realm of fan activism is one of the ways activism and popular media culture are increasingly overlapping. This overlap in forms and methods also poses questions that are not only ideological in nature (e.g. fandom and consumerism often go hand in hand), but also about the effectiveness of the methods. Fan activism becomes a complex site where figurations of extra-ordinary girlhood are perhaps most accessible to the girl with less social power in its promise of public access and visibility. The scholars studying fan activism note that fan participation through commercial entertainment is not essentially complicit or resistant – and can be both, "but its political significance lies in part in the changes in relations of power that may occur through such participation" (Brough & Shresthova, 2012, pp. 12-13). They argue that a transnational analysis of fan activism is needed, and that further research should examine how "content worlds… serve to bridge networked individualism and collective action" (p. 20). Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (2014) argue, however, that with producers looking for fans, fan culture is not as much a form of resistance as researchers in the 1980s and 1990s claimed (p. 135).

The tension between "networked individualism and collective action" that Brough and Shresthova (2012) examine applies to my study, and is at the crux of the desire and defiance theme. Exploring the research done with teen girls engaging in traditional forms of resistance and activism, such as that conducted by Taft in *Rebel Girls* (2011) and "Teenage girls' narratives of becoming activists" (2017), emphasizes the how real this tension is. These texts extensively

present girl activists' reflexive views on activism and what it means for their subjectivities. The insight about the socio-political and geographic environments of the girls in these projects provide necessary context in understanding how ideology and environment inform experiences of care and connection. Fan activism is a site where figurations of girlhood centred on the teen girl activist might seem more relatable. Regardless of whether or not fan activist spaces provide space for girls with less social power to experiment with the extra-ordinary, the care and connection that both the ordinary and extra-ordinary girl values are vulnerable to being co-opted by media culture.

Contemporary Teen Girl Activists

Social Context

The teen girl activist driven by care and connection has a long history, but what this activist figure has come to represent is currently embedded in neoliberal ideology. Although I am not conducting a comprehensive account of this history, my socio-historical perspective in this section locates the teen girl activist today within neoliberal society, revealing what she signifies. The girl activist driven by care is commodified into the warrior-activist to serve a neoliberal agenda. Moreover, the media wants to make the activist-warrior a figure of exceptionality by the care and connection that drives her. This care and connection thus get exploited and commodified. The real activists explored in this chapter and the figures of the activist-warrior are thus interconnected in this project. This iteration of the activist-warrior girl in her extraordinary fight for justice is significant in that both the real activist and the activist-warrior figures have shaped contemporary figurations of extraordinary teenage girlhood. This iteration of the extraordinary girl, like that of the witch, becomes a standard against which young people may measure themselves. The shame that might emerge from feeling inadequate against this standard

thus fuels the neoliberal system that encourages constant unattainable desire – in this case of being a defiant activist-warrior. These figures and figurations of teen girls as extraordinarily battling against oppression and injustice function to serve neoliberal values, especially through visibility in the media.

In *Rebel Girls* (2011), Taft highlights that at the time of publication of her book, activism undertaken by girls had been underexplored in scholarly literature on girlhood and social movements alike. Not only do most of these feminist accounts focus on college-aged women's experiences, ignoring the teenage girls' experiences, she emphasizes that the research that has been done in girls' studies has either discussed girls' acts of resistance in relation to dominant gender norms, or it has spoken of girls as consumers within "commodified versions of feminism" (2011, p. 4). Her interjection with a study of "girls' politics of political identities" offers a useful foundation for understanding and historicizing the teen girl activist today (2011, p 4). This stance also provides context for understanding the views of the teen girls in my study around social engagement and popular film and TV. Very much because of Taft's work, other girls' studies scholars today, such as Emily Bent, and Spring-Serenity Duvall and Nicole Heckemeyer (2018), have been able to better discuss contemporary teen girl activism. Girl activism is not a new product of the times, but an ongoing product of the times, especially when the moment is especially politically difficult. These times also dictate what teen girl activism looks like to the public. Although, like Taft, I address the girl activist as she is studied in relation to gender and consumerism, my focus is on how the girl activist becomes a model for popular media to co-opt and appropriate into an extra-ordinary girl figure.

Taft (2020) has since acknowledged that it is no longer the case that teen girl activism is invisible in the media. There has been significant development in the literature on girl activism

since 2011 (R.N. Brown, 2013; L.M. Brown, 2016; Cervantes-Soon, 2017; Clay, 2012; Edell et al., 2013; Keller, 2012; Taft, 2011). Further, the teenage girl activist has become the type of girl popular media embraces, as exemplified by several activists from around the world who have become recognizable girl activist figures. There can be a number of reasons there is more visibility of teen girl activism today. Taft speculates one explanation for this attention is simply that there are more girl activists now than there were in the past (2020, p. 2). There is no concrete evidence to suggest this is an exact truth, but it is certainly the reality that today there is an abundance of well-known individual girl activists in the world, some of whom have acquired quasi-celebrity status. This media attention arguably feeds the publics' intrigue with these girl figures. There is especially a dialogic relationship between cultural figures and practices. The girl activist-warrior figuration of girlhood exemplifies this connection. Both the media attention to, and the public's interest in, the individual activist over their valued relationships prevails, resonating with neoliberal ideology.

An aspect of this argument that is relevant to my neoliberal critique is that often in the past, teen girls have worked collectively and identified as the collective girl – arguably, akin to what I theorize as the girl with less social power. Being part of the collective is a way of claiming power and public visibility, opening up an alternative figuration of extra-ordinary girlhood. Examples include: The Factory Girls' Association in New England in the 1830s who went on strike in the textile industry; high school feminist organizations in the 1960s and 1970s (Lovell, 2016); and Civil Rights-era Black teen girls protesting for their civil rights in Georgia in 1963 (Hinz, n.d.). Girls have very often had crucial roles in youth activism at large, such as with various civil rights organizations, including the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (Robnett, 1997; de Schweinitz, 2011) and high schools working towards educational justice

(Gordon, 2010). Moreover, as Taft notes in *Rebel Girls*, these teenage girls have been exceptionally involved in intergenerational social movements, especially anti-capitalist and anti-colonial ones. Taft (2020) argues that girl activists today are "more legible and more desirable for media attention and public consumption" because of "changes in the political, social, and cultural landscape" (p. 2). I contend that this new landscape is one especially captivated by the extra-ordinary girl figure. This figure is representative of activists as a collective, but each activist is also her own person with unique perspectives. So, although there might not necessarily be more teen girl activists today, the visibility of individual teen girl activist leaders positions them as extra-ordinary girl figures engaging in a dialogic relationship with media, procuring other extra-ordinary girl figures, as exemplified by Katniss. Although the reasons there is more media attention to teen girl activists are relevant, the implications of the increased representations in media are as significant. Increased visibility of youth activism not only marks young people as capable of social action and change, but can encourage other young people to act in ways that align with their values. These increased representations of powerful young activists, however, can also contribute to a standard of exceptional youth, which can be intimidating for some people who may not feel willing or able to uphold such a presence.

The dialogic relationship between the extra-ordinary girl that is embedded in media culture and the consumer market that is attuned to the public discourse around the extraordinary activist girl figure perpetuates this figuration of extraordinary girlhood revolving around activism. Lyn Mikel Brown explains that media narratives establish a certain "economy of the special girl" (2016, p. 17). In the context of girl activism, this phenomenon is complicated when there are in fact organizations of collective activism that cannot be neatly dissected into images of individual girl activists that would facilitate marketability. Brown (2016) argues that the

media attempts to construct this figure of the girl by "removing signs of relationships, family stories, cultural background, lived experience," thus turning this figure into "blank screens onto which we can project our hopes and dreams for all girls" (pp. 17–18). The extra-ordinary girl figure in this perspective is very much a figure who contrasts with the "ordinary" or actual girls, like those interviewed in this study. Moreover, the *tabula rasa*-like model that Brown alludes to is one that has been applied to the "universal" child, in theory, as well, suggesting any figure or figuration, especially of a minority figure, is essentially? a canvas or screen for authority figures' projections.

The way that this empowered girl figure has been racialized and classed, as white and middle class, is significant. Not only does this figure exclude some girls – and the premise of a figure is such that it excludes – this exclusion can further stratify girls and suggest they are at risk, based on North American conceptions, as Harris contends. For example, in North America, Black girls' agency has been constructed as a social problem, as opposed to an asset (Jones, 2009; Brown, 2013; Morris, 2016), and this has in turn excluded them from the conceptualization of the girl community leader (Cox, 2015). Girls in the Global South have been conceptualized and universalized as needing saving, based on North American notions of both the universal child and the universal girl (Moeller 2018). Girls with less social power who do not fit the mold of the teenage girl figure as discussed in this project are still, interestingly, expected to be extra-ordinary, which draws even more attention to the complicated expectations and implications of girlhood in the world today.

The Activists

An important factor that can be overlooked when we speak admiringly of youth activism is that it arises in reaction to oppressive, violent, socio-political circumstances. Such convictions

become a template for activist-warrior conceptualizations. These are the issues these girls care about. Furthermore, the nature of the activism does not look the same everywhere. Different circumstances shape the social climate, and the culture of activism looks different in response. In *Rebel Girls* (2011), for example, Taft explores very specific experiences of five different teenage girl activists across the Americas, reminding us that youth activism looks different in different locations, and that these differences are due to socio-political factors. More recently, on a larger scale, there have been numerous notable teen girl activists throughout the world working towards various forms of social justice.[8] The media attempts to co-opt these girls, who are compelled to act by care and connection, to be figures of neoliberal activism. Some of these girls are more well-known around the world than others, such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai, but all of them have contributed tremendously towards their causes. It is interesting then that none of the girls I met with for my study mentioned any of these activists in our discussions. These activists are public figures, but one need not be famous to be an activist, as discussed throughout this dissertation. The prominence both on and off screen of the activist-like girl figures complicates what it means to be an activist and lends itself to historical-ideological analysis.

In recent history, there have been a number of prominent teen girl activist leaders around the world whom we know about because of the fast transference of information through

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[8] These girl activists include water advocate Autumn Peltier (born Sept. 27, 2004), Anishinaabe-kwe member of the Wikwemikong First Nation; Indigenous environmental and human rights activist Helena Gualinga (born Feb. 27, 2002) from Ecuador; Ontario sex education activists Lia Valente and Tessa Hill; South African environmental activist Ayakha Melithafa (born 2002) from the Western Cape; girls' education activist Malala Yousafzai (born July 12, 1997) from Pakistan; the Parkland gun control activists, including Emma González and Naomi Wadler; climate change activists Jamie Margolin (born Dec. 10, 2001) from Seattle; and Greta Thunberg (born Jan. 3, 2003) from Stockholm.

contemporary media. Most prominent of these teens is environmental activist Thunberg, who began her activism on a large scale at the age of fifteen. In 2018, she addressed the United Nations Climate Change Conference with a heartfelt and poignant speech about climate change, and organized with other students a climate strike movement called "Fridays for Future." In 2019, student-led protests took place throughout the world as part of this movement. A few weeks later, Thunberg came to North America to attend the 2019 United Nations General Assembly where she gave another powerful speech, exclaiming, "how dare you" to the leaders regarding their inadequate work around the climate crisis (Thunberg, 2019, 0:31). Her passion and conviction echo the warrior-like conviction that the activist figure and respective figurations of girlhood embodies. Thunberg received backlash and opposition from climate-change deniers, such as U.S. president Donald Trump, to which she responded with a statement that epitomizes that young people are indeed agents of change: "I guess of course it means something – they are terrified of young people bringing change which they don't want – but that is just proof that we are actually doing something and that they see us as some kind of threat" (Helmore, 2019, par. 11). Young people have indeed been working towards change globally, and media culture embraces this. The girl activist's care and passion are compelling and become inspiration for neoliberal media culture's conceptualization of the activist-warrior iteration of the extra-ordinary girl.

Throughout the course of writing this dissertation, several momentous world events have taken place and girl activists have been visibly active in varying extents in these experiences and movements. These recent actions by young activists further increase visibility of teen girl activism. Girls are increasingly taking initiative in the face of an oppressive, violent, and unjust society. Some examples of these recent initiatives reinforce a steadfast fight of the activist driven

by care in her fight against oppression and injustice. These examples include youth protesting the

development of the British Columbia (BC) pipeline that would cross over into the Wet'suwet'en

nation;[9] Black Lives Matter;[10] and most relevant to this project given its temporal moment,

March for Our Lives.

March for Our Lives was a critical moment in contemporary North American history

when a youth-led social movement swept the nation. On February 14, 2018, there was a mass

school shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in which 17 people were

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[9] This pipeline crossover would happen without the Indigenous hereditary chiefs' consent or approval to do so on

their traditional territory. Indigenous youth have protested the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) raid on

Wet'suwet'en, and these youth, along with settler youth, have also occupied the BC legislature. Currently, there

have been numerous ongoing blockade protest actions across Canada, shutting down the railway systems. Because

of Canada's deeply colonial past and ongoing violent activity in the world, including on our home soil, Indigenous

rights are a crucial issue. Canada's colonial roots persist today as evident in the Wet'suwet'en crisis, and young

people have come together in protest. Such actions against colonial forces resemble those in Latin America, and

while it is impressive and inspiring that such activism exists, the circumstances to which it is a response to are

devastating.

[10] Black Lives Matter is an organization founded by three Black women (Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza and

Opal Tometi). In May 2020, there was an uprising across America following the brutal murder of George Floyd,

amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic. There have been several mainstream articles illuminating the voices of

youth propelling the Black Lives Matter protests (Bennett, 2020; Gray, 2020; Wanshel, 2020; Yelimeli, 2020;

Zaveri, 2020). Jessica Bennett in the *New York Times* foregrounds four teen girls in the U.S. who led protests during

this time. Some of these girls were already activists, while others felt driven to action by the horrors unfolding.

Tiana (seventeen years old) explains, "I was never really an activist before. But this movement lit a fire in me… I

have always had this, like, boiling *thing*, this boiling passion in my body to want to make a change in the world"

(Bennett, 2020, paras. 16, 18).

killed and 15 were injured. In response to this tragedy, student survivors of the shooting,

including Emma González,[11] led the March for Our Lives demonstration in Washington, D.C. on

March 24, 2018, in protest for stronger gun-control legislation. Described as one of the biggest

youth-led protests since the Vietnam War (Lopez, 2018; George-Allen, 2019), March for Our

Lives gathered approximately 800 000 people, according to protest organizers, making it one of

the largest single-day protests in the United States' capital (Lopez, 2018). The fact that this

protest was organized by young people is significant. Youth is commonly thought of as a liminal

period between childhood and adulthood, and as such, young people are not necessarily viewed

as capable of legitimate social or political activity.

Young People for Change

The analysis of youth activists in this chapter draws attention to young people as highly

competent figures for political change. As childhood scholars attest, young people do not have

access to the same rights and public policy as adults do. Because young people do not have

voting and citizenship rights, they do not have as much sway with political decision makers the

way voting adults do (Taft, 2011, p. 49). Because of this limitation, young people must resort to

other means to have their views heard. Emily Bent (2020b) asserts that the young activists from

March for Our Lives actually "leveraged narratives of age and generation to scaffold their

rhetoric of socio-political justice," and did so through three means: "forwarding a politics of

hope, calculated resistance, and political threat" (p. 56). When young people's political power is

limited, as it is in our current adult-centric society, drawing upon generation is one way that

young activists frame their concerns, asserting their legitimacy. The young MFOL protesters also

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[11] Other survivors who led the MFOL were Alex Wind, Jaclyn Corin, David Hogg, Sam Fuentes, Sarah Chadwick, and Ryan Deitsch.

directly draw attention to the hypocrisy of politics and policies, especially in relation to the standards imposed on children. They leverage their age, and in doing so, articulate a sense of empowerment. The most recognizable activists from the March for Our Lives are girls: Emma González and Naomi Wadler. González's powerful presence in this movement has positioned her as one of the faces of the movement, in part due to her moving speech at the protest. Wadler from Maret School also caught the media's attention for her articulate and powerful speech in which she asserted that she was there to represent the African American girl and women victims of gun violence. She was even more admired because she was eleven years old. Regardless of location, when girls are involved in activism, the aforementioned empowerment motif gets attached to discourses around girl power, complicating colloquial notions of girls and agency.

Public Activism and the Extra-ordinary Girl

Mainstream visibility of girl activists reveals the complex relationship these girls have to popular feminist discourse and praxis. In "This is Not Another Girl-Power Story: Reading Emma González as a Public Feminist Intellectual" (2020), Bent uses González to articulate this complexity of public feminism. In contrast to girl-power feminism, as the name suggests, public feminism translates feminist information for the public, shining light on structural inequalities with the aim of driving social change. The persistence of the spotlight on González is significant since young people involved in resistance tend to view family and peer relationships as central to their political selves (Bent, 2020a; Taft, 2017; Zaslow, 2018). González has shared that her family has been a fundamental and crucial factor in her political success and ability to maintain a semblance of a normal personal life (Bent, 2020a). In line with the activist figure as extra-ordinary girl, and in drawing connection to the media's role in reinforcing concepts, in an online article in *The Cut* (Miller, 2018), Parkland activist González is compared to Katniss.

Paradoxically – yet fittingly – the media attention to, and the public's interest in, the individual activist over their valued relationships prevails, echoing neoliberal ideology again.

The extra-ordinary girl is inspiring and appealing, yet Bent argues that activists like González challenge the "exceptional girlhood" trope as they can navigate and utilize their appeal in a way that serves their cause. Taft (2020) examines how these teen girl activists from March for Our Lives are rendered to be contemporary heroes. While this appeal can give them power that they can wield towards their cause, it also further places the responsibility for solving the world's problems on the extra-ordinary individual girl. González's speech, which was especially notable because of the lengthy silence, strengthened her image as powerful and poignant. In response to the silence in her speech González admits needing "to capitalize off of the impact" (Bent, 2020a, p. 803). Bent argues that González's performative silence, although poignant, enforced her image as a girl-power figure. On such a platform, an activist could articulate their thoughts and vision for justice. The reality for many girls is that they are "living in a culture where (they) continue to be excluded from formal political and citizenship rights" (Keller, 2012, p. 443). Bent suggests that the silence was a missed opportunity to challenge this truth even though it does solidify her as a sort of girl celebrity and political subject (Switzer, Bent & Endsley, 2016). Girls have historically been expected to remain silent and Bent (2020a) argues that González's performative silence speaks to ageist and sexist beliefs (p. 804). Although González does speak after several minutes of silence, the lengthy silence on this platform limits political dialogue between young people and adults in positions of authority. It is arguable that this silence was a way to keep the victims of the shooting present, as a way to let the memory of the dead speak. Bent asserts that it is narratives of "exceptional girlhood," much like those

described throughout this dissertation, that encourage girls to capitalize and lean into moments in the spotlight. Such narratives strengthen and also inform girls' political activism.

The March for Our Lives activists did, however, leverage their visibility to acknowledge the circumstances that enabled them to enter the public domain as youth activists. González emphasizes that her activism follows the long history of activist work and resistance in other instances addresses her privileges (González 2018). She also emphasizes the parameters of age as they apply to the work done by youth activists, foregrounding the hypocrisy of adults, which Thunberg does as well. In an interview with *Harper's Bazaar*, González declares, "we have always been told that if we see something wrong, we need to speak up; but now that we are, all we're getting is disrespect from the people who made the rules in the first place" (González, 2018, para. 8). Although the silence in her speech at the MFOL rally may have reinforced González as an extraordinary girl figure, ultimately, she utilizes her platform in her resistance. Furthermore, the collectivity of the March for Our Lives student activists decentered her visibility, foregrounding the unfairness and danger in the system. The tension between girl-power feminism and "public feminist intellectual," as Bent (2020a) describes it, can be mitigated by emphasis on collective resistance and education. Young activists in North America such as the MFOL teens collectively work towards remolding what constitutes legitimate activism in the public, utilizing discourses about age (and sometimes gender) in the process.

Contemporary teen girl activists who are visible to the public are not the only girls challenging and defying certain cultural scripts with the purpose of effecting positive change. Reflecting on my focus groups, the girls I interviewed were indeed intrigued and inspired by prominent displays of activism. To varying extents, although their interest and desire for social and political change were evident, their engagement – and willingness to engage – in large-scale

activism was dampened by valid factors and circumstances. The "Negotiating Figurations of Girlhood" chapter will delve into the factors around these views and experiences. The very values, beliefs, and practices these girls express about issues concerning humanity and the environment in themselves challenge girl-power narratives such as those identified in this chapter. Interviews like these are essential to demonstrate how crucial it is to have open-ended conversations with girls who may not be in the spotlight. Moreover, the desire amongst young women to be connected, and to embrace methods to improve the world and their lives, is gaining more public attention. Young women today who are exploring alternative spiritual practices are one such demographic crafting ways to channel and negotiate the extra-ordinary amidst their everyday lives, as will be explored in the following chapter.

Emotion and Care in Teen Girl Activism: A brief overview

As apparent throughout this section, emotion and care play an important part in the ordinary and extra-ordinary girl's desire to defy oppressive forces. The young women activists discussed in this chapter are enraged by policies that have damaging consequences. Their pursuits to challenge and change these circumstances are driven by deep care and concern. The connection between anger driving activism and care for the collective good is compelling. Negative emotions have traditionally been thought of as juvenile when attributed to young people and minorities in general, but here we can see how such affective responses can be channeled for positive change. I am cautious about reinforcing damaging dualistic thinking such as those around reason versus emotion and masculine versus feminine, but it is important to draw attention to the fact that such attributions are still embedded in society. The complexity of what constitutes valid versus immature emotional responses is rooted in a politics of different value systems, and this notion will be explored further in the following section. Moreover, while

emotions like anger, disgust, and love might drive the action and activism, as we have seen, emotions like love, fear, and shame can motivate a different type of activism that is less public or large-scale, which is meaningful in its own way.

These emotions, especially when love and care are present, are what neoliberalism thrives on. It goes without saying that to conduct an exhaustive account of the role and repercussions of emotions in everyday life is outside the parameters of this project. Rather, emotion as it relates to care – a thread intimately tied to the various iterations of desire and defiance throughout this project – is integral to the critiques of capitalism. It is crucial to note, however, that although caring involves an element of affect or sentiment, it is not necessarily always driven by emotion. Caring in its truest sense, although related to sentiment, is not necessarily synonymous with what we know as care work. As discussed earlier, and as will be explored towards the end of the following chapter, what constitutes care and care work, especially as they relate to social reproduction, illuminates the complexity of care within capitalism. The relevance of emotion and its connection to care for the collective is relevant to this project in that it emerges out of not only the focus group participants' responses, but also the girls in the shows, as well as the motives of contemporary girl activists and the witches who are the subject of the next chapter. Moreover, emotion and care for collective wellbeing stand out as being in contrast to the neoliberal and capitalist value of individualistic greed.

The teen girl activists highlighted in this section publicly call into question the absurdity of certain structural realities as well as the audacity of political leaders. Their activist methods reveal the utility of embracing the emotional aspect of human experience to challenge the status quo. As we have seen, social movements can aim to ignite emotions and repurpose difficult ones such as anger and shame in a call to action (Gould, 2002; Holmes, 2004). Sara Ahmed, in her

influential book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004b), explains that insofar as emotions can guide how we relate to one another, informing a series of actions and reactions, emotions are in fact fundamental to social structures. Her relational model resists describing emotion as being psychological and social, or individual and collective. Rather, emotions "produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (2004, p. 10). In "Affective Economies" (2004a) Ahmed argues that we must think about how emotions work on many levels. Many of the girls discussed in my study recognize the significance of emotion and care with respect to life experience, but especially with respect to inspiring other people to empathize and care for one another.

The arts and entertainment industries are avenues through which some activists choose to mobilize emotion and thus elicit and encourage care for others. According to the girls Taft spoke with, "political education… includes teaching and learning new ways to feel… In Josephine's words, 'we want people to care, to feel something'" (Taft, 2011, p. 111). These activists argue that watching films has an affective quality that might be missed from reading about an issue. Rather than simply providing critical information, they believe that using films as a form of political education can help generate feelings such as compassion and outrage. Taft draws upon James Jasper (1997) and Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp (2002) to emphasize the role arts can play in activism. These practices offer a sense of grounding and power for the emotional aspect of any given movement. By using artistic methods, these girl activists are deliberately nurturing human emotional responses to social issues rather than just analytical rational ones (Taft, 2011). Arts and entertainment can certainly prompt various emotional responses in viewers, and as we see in the Textual Context sections, they can even be elicited and manufactured with less than altruistic motivations in mind when they are driven by market values.

Such speculative fiction adaptations discussed throughout this project can appeal to neoliberal feminist sensibilities. Although they disavow gender inequality, they can overlook socioeconomic and cultural structures and disparities in real life. So, while a feminist emerges from this ideology, she is one who takes personal responsibility for her well-being and self-care, perhaps neglecting the inequalities around her that a collective mentality could change. The figure of the extra-ordinary girl is a natural progression by this logic. Moreover, her seemingly innate gifts, as exemplified by the warrior-activist archetype, but also the witch archetype, is intimately presented as being utilized because of care and concern.

CHAPTER FOUR:

FIGURATIONS OF EXTRA-ORDINARY GILRHOOD: THE WITCH FIGURE

SECTION 4.1 THE GIRL: SABRINA AND THE WITCH FIGURE CASE STUDY

Teen Girl Witch Figure in Society

The teen girl witch has become a visible figure in society, although not necessarily in the same way as the activist. For the witch, like for the activist-warrior, there is also a quality of care tied to her use of her supernatural abilities. This care looks similar to that of the activist in its focus on improving life or circumstances in one way or another, according to her standards. The witch for the teen girls in this study generally denotes possessing great gifts. To be a witch, like Sabrina, or to be a public activist is to be more than what they feel they are. She is an extra-ordinary girl, and this exceptionality is especially pronounced in the depiction of the teen girl witch figure as exemplified by Sabrina.

There are also real teen girls in the world today who aspire to embrace and channel alternative spiritual power, and they are preceded by a long history of various definitions of witch-hood. This dynamic reveals more angles to how the witch figure becomes associated with exceptional girlhood today. Although Sabrina and these real girls' interest in the esoteric are not one in the same, they share many qualities that render them extraordinary in comparison to the girl with less social power and public visibility. Ironically, like with the activist, these qualities, such as power, can overlap with those that neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism admires, even when such ideologies are at the root of what the witch is conjuring against.

Joan of Arc: warrior, witch, saint, and symbolic figure

The witch and warrior figures discussed in this project are positioned within contemporary neoliberal society, but these figures of the girl and girlhood are rooted in history.

Joan of Arc (1412-1431) is a historical and religious girl figure who was both the warrior and witch. Although extremely different from the (extra-)ordinary girls and characters discussed in this project, she is one of the most infamous figures of a defiant and scorned young woman who not only was compelled to disguise herself to go to battle to save France, but was also persecuted for witchcraft because of what compelled her. The symbolic function that Joan of Arc carries today for young women is apparent: she is the extraordinary girl but also the girl who is condemned. Although the young women and fictional characters discussed in this dissertation have differing types of experiences from each other as well as from Joan of Arc, Joan's exceptionality has led her to be a symbolic figure that some girls today are sometimes inappropriately compared to. These comparisons to such a deeply powerful girl are most prevalent and exploited around contemporary capitalist renditions of the extraordinary girl, such as with Sabrina the witch. Joan of Arc's legacy is profound and understandably one that contemporary media would be drawn to, even if misaligned in comparing her to the contemporary extraordinary girl. The witch, as an ordinary woman in history, but also as a contemporary teen figure, provides a commentary on how the teen girl can be characterized both within and because of social-political structures.

Witch and the Supernatural

As with the warrior and activist figure, the witch and the supernatural figure are also archetypal in both popular media and North American culture. The witch is not specific to contemporary fiction, however. The witch dates back centuries in literature, history, as well as religion, which I will explore later in this chapter. Although some YA texts present witchcraft as a religious choice, much of teen fiction today depicts the witch as a supernatural being. Furthermore, as Hannah E. Johnston (2009) notes, it is through engagement with such media

content that the teen witch as an identity rooted in spiritual longing and craft has emerged as

distinct from Neo-Pagan Witchcraft (p. 509). The contemporary teen witch figure therefore has

unique colloquial understandings in present day as interrelated with young adult media culture.

She is a widely recognized and intriguing supernatural figure, and has a strong presence in

popular film and TV from the past few decades, including Sabrina from *Sabrina the Teenage

Witch* (1996-2003) and Willow from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003).[12] The extra-ordinary

figure and the super-natural world embody that which is beyond ordinary existence. Sabrina

Spellman from *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* Netflix series adaptation is one example from

present day of the teen witch – an extra-ordinary girl – from contemporary supernatural

television. Importantly, the teen girl with supernatural abilities in contemporary culture is often

activist-like, similar to the heroines of the dystopian text in that they channel their power to fight

structural oppression.

Sabrina as a teen witch with super-natural abilities in a contemporary supernatural show

challenges injustice and raises relevant social issues and with her powers has become another

iteration of the archetype of the extra-ordinary girl today. This model of the girl, like the

warrior/activist from the previous chapter, has a dialogic relationship with the current socio-

cultural climate, emerging within popular young adult media culture under capitalism that

recognizes that many young people are knowledgeable and keen on changing the world. Even

though, unlike Katniss, Sabrina possesses supernatural abilities from the outset of the narrative,

she is forced to make difficult choices throughout the story around her role and identity as a

witch, driven by her values and moral convictions, much like Katniss is. Her actions have

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[12] In contrast to mainstream media representations, there are literary representations that intervene in the exceptionality of the

witch figure. One such example is the Canadian graphic novel, *Skim* (2008) by Mariko Tamaki.

consequences not just for herself, but also her loved ones and the various worlds within the diegesis. Her actions are founded in Sabrina's values, and take on an activist-like quality. Supernatural characters are less obviously connected to a political resistance than the activist-warrior. That said, the contemporary teen witch within the supernatural genre, as well as the contemporary teen girl in society interested in alternative spirituality, is channeling her magic towards improving life and removing that which causes harm, as we will see later in this chapter. The teen witch as extra-ordinary girl, like the warrior/activist, poses her own type of threat, and embodies the culturally relevant expectation that girls can be powerful and also heal the ills of individuals and society at large.

The Girl Figure in Contemporary Supernatural Teen Film & TV

In contemporary popular media, there has been an abundance of supernatural genre shows and films, spanning various subgenres. Within this expansive genre, the YA supernatural adaptations for a television audience featuring teen girls have been especially popular. Many popular contemporary YA supernatural shows and films from North America the past decade feature enchanted teen female figures including vampires, demons, fairies, elves, and witches. Although not quite the same genre, and from earlier than these shows, the *Harry Potter* film adaptations have been another body of work within speculative narratives featuring Hermione Granger, a young witch, as one of the main characters. Films and shows such as the *Twilight* series, *Shadowhunters, The Vampire Diaries, Teen Wolf,* and of course, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* are just a few that embrace various types of supernatural characters. The teen witch figure as depicted by Sabrina in the largely successful show *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, however, encapsulates a particular image and figure of the teen girl in contemporary North American society: white, middle-upper class, attractive, and self-confident.

Although this project focuses on the current figure of the witch in speculative fiction shows, there is a long-running archetype of the teen half-witch/half-human, especially on television. Sabrina first appeared briefly in the *Archie's Madhouse* (#22) comic in 1962 but did not get her own comic until almost a decade later in 1971, after the Saturday-morning cartoon *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1969-1972) was already a hit. Even before Sabrina, there was *Bewitched* (1964-1972), another light-hearted sit-com, albeit not about a teen girl, nor aimed specifically at a teen audience. In the 1990s, the young witch remerged in television. In 1996, Sabrina returned with a sitcom version of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* where she lived with her feminist witch aunts and extravagant talking cat, Salem. The show was rich with the feminism and girl culture of the nineties. But it was not the only series featuring young witches to emerge during this decade, and not all depictions of the witch were light-hearted and funny. The 1996 film *The Craft* featured four teen girl witches in a supernatural story as they navigate alienation and bullying, and channel their power to stand up to oppressive figures. A sequel to this film, *The Craft: Legacy* has just been released in 2020 and strives to be more politically progressive. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Charmed* (1998-2006, rebooted and refashioned in 2018) also offered a darker depiction of the young contemporary witch. Buffy, the lead character in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* fits the warrior-activist figure in many ways. This show, in fact, arguably, launched the popularity of this supernatural genre as well as such conceptualizations of these girl characters in recent cultural history. But the current teen witch figure that I explore in this project is very much positioned within the current socio-political world, revealing a particular figuration of extra-ordinary girlhood enchanted with the super-natural.

When the teen girl is presented as a central figure in a text, or positions herself as an active agent in the world, she becomes an even more seductive subject. While once she was

deemed frivolous by some, as with Bella from *Twilight*, she now is embraced as powerful – but always still attractive – as either an activist, media-maker, or sassy witch. The irony in the teen girl being taken more seriously, working to leverage a neoliberal prerogative, is critical to a feminist agenda and apt to a capitalist one. Drawing from Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology (1845)* (1965), Wojcik-Andrews (2000) explains that the ideologies behind the capitalist mode of production that appear to be for the common interest of society actually disguise the inequalities of wealth. Mainstream sources of entertainment, such as Hollywood cinema, distract and shift attention towards the content of the film, as opposed to real discrimination and inequality. Mark Jancovich et al. (2003) emphasize that film industries and agencies try to understand, organize, and control audiences, emphasizing that meaning and significance of texts changes over time.

The witch figure is an extra-ordinary girl that is able to resourcefully channel her gifts and convictions to challenge contemporary capitalist society. When analyzing this figure in isolation, however, like with the warrior/activist, she ironically also can represent the neoliberal notion of individualized greatness. Although the world might be unjust and oppressive, the individual girl can embrace her power to overcome obstacles. Herein lies the complexity of the witch figure. Like the warrior/activist, her extraordinariness is either admired or feared. Whether she is viewed as a progressive activist-like figure or not, the fascination with and admiration for the extraordinary young person is rooted in neoliberal individualism. A crucial question that emerges out of this reality then, is if the effects of this figure can transcend these neoliberal roots.

Trajectory of the Teen Witch Show: Cartoons, Comedy, and Supernatural

The witch figure, including the teen half-witch/ half-human has a long-standing history in popular television in North America. While every iteration of this figure is different, each signifies something about the culture in which she is created. The fear and moral panic around the *un-tame* female have been pervasive in modern North American history and is articulated through various narratives. In the original Archie cartoon, Sabrina was the all-American student at Riverdale High spending time with her friends, Archie and the gang, all while keeping her witchcraft a secret. Even though the occult was already enchanting child TV audiences with shows like *Groovie Goolies* (1970-1971) and *The Funky Phantom* (1971-1972), Sabrina was distinctly captivating, using magic to "get her out of trouble!" as the theme song explained (Sheffield 2018, para. 3). These shows and characters are lighthearted, wholesome entertainment.

While in some ways, networks attempted to embrace more progressive messages in the 1960s and '70s, like with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, when it came to shows for children and youth, messaging was a bit different and more complex. America contended that it wanted to protect the innocence of children and young people. This is evident in initiatives such as Action for Children's Television (ACT), a public interest organization founded in 1968 that petitioned in the 1970s for the government to create policies to protect children from being manipulated by corporate media (Montgomery, 1990). Lighthearted supernatural shows featuring enchanted characters is one way to negotiate these social topics. I argue that while television was embracing progressive issues in the 1960s and 1970s, society was also still anxious about some of them, especially as they pertain to the depiction of women's bodies (Dow, 1999). By portraying the lead woman – and teen, no less – as a silly other who has power, television networks were satisfying the desire to see an empowered lead woman, while keeping her subordinate.

The witch, as mentioned earlier, re-emerges in the 1990s in television and film. As noted in the previous section, in 1996 the sitcom version of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* featured the half-witch living with her feminist witch aunts and cat Salem. The show reflected the feminism and girl culture of the nineties in a light-hearted way and was not the only show featuring young witches to emerge during this decade. Catherine Spooner (2006) and Estella Tincknell (2010) describe this trend in popular media as the new teen gothic whereby we see the marriage of girl culture with personal relationships. They certainly reflect messages that young women in the late 1990s and early 2000s were navigating.

All these shows featuring the young teen witch are a site for conversation between various feminist discourses, and at the same time, serve as commentary on the culture that produces them. Rachel Moseley (2002) argues that the teen witch in these popular media communicates "the shifting relationship between 1970s second-wave feminism, postfeminism in the 1990s and femininity" (p. 403). She highlights that many feminist covens were created during second-wave feminism in the 1970s. These groups were comprised of women-only "and/or lesbian-separatist groups which celebrated witchcraft as a goddess-centred religion, based on a feminine principle which looked back to a universal matriarchal history and lineage and forward to a woman-centred feminist future" (Moseley, 2002, pp. 409-410). Mary Daly (1979) reminds us that Robin Morgan (1970) has described witches as the original warriors in the fight against the oppression of women. Contemporary popular culture has taken from this history and aestheticized it. Moseley explores the glamour of the teen witch in certain movies and shows from the 1980s and 1990s to demonstrate the relationships between feminism and femininity. I am continuing this conversation by drawing attention to these themes and motifs in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. Sheffield (2018) declares that this new series is "a darker show,

for darker times – the optimism of the 1970s or 1990s versions would look absurd now. This is Resistance Sabrina" (para. 7). While I agree that the new *Sabrina* is a commentary on current society, in the following sections I will explore what constitutes resistance in the context of this contemporary popular show.

Sabrina the Extra-Ordinary Girl

At the outset of *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, Sabrina is a fifteen-year-old part-human and part-witch on the cusp of sixteen, living in the town of Greendale. Although possessing some supernatural abilities, she must decide by her sixteenth birthday, in just a few days, if she will commit more wholly to her witch identity. This birthday is her dark baptism, an "unholy" sacrament marking a rebirth. It is a rite of passage in becoming an adult witch. Such a rite of passage marks both a literal and symbolic shift in her growth and movement from innocence to greater and darker experience. Her outer appearance also reflects this change throughout the show as she wears darker lipstick, has starker hair, and wears more "mature" clothes. In a typical coming-of-age story, the teen embarks on a journey into adulthood and experiences various life events along the way, contributing to a loss of innocence. Sabrina is an ordinary teen girl in many ways at the beginning of the series, attending high school with her friends, and hiding the witch aspect of her identity and family. Marked by her dark baptism, she begins her extra-ordinary journey. It is through Sabrina's process of delving deeper into the witch aspect of herself that her extra-ordinariness flourishes.

While Katniss's talents are brought to light because of dire circumstances, Sabrina's supernatural abilities further illuminate her inner character and values that inspire her magical actions. Like Katniss, Sabrina wields her power when circumstances become dire. Through a series of challenges and obstacles involving the alternate world governed by the Dark Lord, not

only do we become privy to Sabrina's witch abilities, but we begin to see her inner strength as she cleverly strategizes and negotiates with dark supernatural forces. The teen girl witch is one more iteration of an extra-ordinary girl, and like Katniss, Sabrina symbolizes society's fascination with young people conjuring up their remarkable innate power to conquer oppressive forces. Sabrina's witch abilities demonstrate the interconnectedness of the physical, mental and emotional realms of this extraordinariness, even though she does not use physical strength to survive the way the warrior/activist figure does. Regardless, however, both characters are an image of remarkable physical and mental ability, which could be argued to go beyond even the typical able-bodied and able-mindedness.

As archetypes of the extra-ordinary girl, both Katniss and Sabrina implicitly stand for an ideal with exceptional abilities. The fact that these figures are white, attractive, and self-assured speaks back to the interviews from my focus groups where the girls expressed vulnerability about their readiness, worthiness, and willingness to subscribe to being extraordinary in the way contemporary capitalist North American culture defines it. Although Sabrina's supernatural abilities are what most obviously make her extra-ordinary, her confidence and gumption with authority figures, including the frighteningly powerful supernatural ones, make her an admirable teen girl figure. These are qualities society generally valorizes, especially within neoliberal feminism. Moreover, the ordinary aspects of Sabrina, as well as of Katniss, make these girl figures *somewhat* relatable. Here there is room for the dialectical desire and defiance pull. There is enough appeal to the characters to elicit intrigue, attraction and even a desire to be like them, especially in their defiance of oppressive forces around them. The role of contemporary, popular, feminism as it informs and is informed by these texts reinforces how there is a dialogic relationship between these girl figures and girls in the world.

Sabrina and Feminism

Building upon the history of teen witches in popular media, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and Sabrina continue this dialogue between feminisms and femininity. Almost twenty years after Moseley's work, "Glamorous witchcraft: Gender and magic in teen film and television" (2002), there continue to be similar trends not only in what the teen witch in popular culture represents culturally and historically, but also in what the heroine in contemporary speculative fiction shows signifies. Unlike the woman-ruled covens of the 1970s, the supernatural order in Sabrina is a patriarchal and misogynistic one – the Dark Lord – that the female characters work to dismantle. Sabrina, her aunts, and even Lilith disguised as Sabrina's teacher, overtly and covertly challenge the misogyny, and they do so while wearing bold feminine outfits and make-up, to varying extents of sensuality, thus supporting this dialogic relationship between feminism and femininity. Moreover, the dualism of the good and bad woman, as well as the Madonna and the whore, are also explored in the show. Sabrina, for one, often goes back and forth between embracing a more sexual aura and appearance with a more serious and traditional one, demonstrating that the two are not mutually exclusive and that neither are determinate. Moreover, Sabrina consistently challenges Father Blackwood's authority as High Priest – and patriarchal power – of the Church of Night by using her cleverness and supernatural abilities together.

Later in the series, Sabrina learns that the Dark Lord is in fact her father, and that she is heir to his throne. This news complicates not only her dilemma of whether to exists in the mortal or supernatural realm, but it also propels her to challenge and revolt against the misogynistic order of the dark world whereby men rule women and witches, and punish them should they disobey. We also see commentary on gender, power and rebellion against authority through

Lilith – Madame Satan, Queen of Hell – who takes form through Sabrina's meek teacher Ms. Wardwell at the very beginning of the first episode of the series, but then flourishes as herself later in the series. Lilith's story in the show dates to the beginning of time. She was the first wife of Adam, but was banished from the Garden of Eden by God for refusing to submit to him. After wandering the universe, she encountered Lucifer Morningstar, a fallen angel who helped her. In return she healed the wounds on his back where his angel wings had been removed. She was not just the first woman, but the first witch, and pledged her allegiance to him ever since. Throughout the first season and most of the second season, she continues to be his handmaiden, but as the series continues, she comes into her own and turns against him and his misogynistic rule. Although Sabrina is the main character of the series, Lilith's story is crucial, and Sabrina's aunts, Hilda and Zelda, are also important women figures in their care of Sabrina, while also cleverly navigating and guiding happenings in the immortal world.

From the outset of the series, Sabrina encounters opposition from external forces and structures, both earthly and supernatural ones, which challenge her to reflect on the kind of being she wants to be. Sabrina is the vehicle that the show uses to address feminist concerns, and the show itself lays bare complex moral dialectics, especially around girls and witches. People and witches are not just all good or all bad. Throughout the series, the show grapples with surrendering to darkness, embracing it, and denying it. Ultimately, Sabrina chooses to straddle both the mortal and supernatural worlds and assert her values and agency in both, and doing so often entails putting herself and loved ones in danger. In season one, the Dark Lord is entitled to Sabrina's body and free will, which echoes patriarchal sentiments that have been applied to witches, including the young witch, whose female body is "unregulated and unsettling" (Pulliam, 2014, p. 147). At first, she resists this ownership, but then decides to surrender for the greater

good of the safety of her family, only to then rebel against it in the end. Although the Church of Night under reign of the Dark Lord through Father Blackwood oppresses her, she immerses herself in this dark culture and thereby is able to better transform it. Katniss similarly puts aside her reservations and fears when she participates in The Games. Both Katniss's and Sabrina's integrity guides them in their pursuits, working "within the system." Initially Katniss volunteers herself as tribute to protect her sister, but by the end it becomes clear that doing so is also a way for her to challenge the authority. No one has every volunteered as tribute before this occasion. Such a powerful action, regardless of motive, has a destabilizing effect on authority, setting a precedent for the events and dynamics to come.

Young women with tremendous moral character choosing to participate in events elicited by violent and oppressive authority in order to protect their loved ones and beat the system from the inside is a common theme, and is one the girls in my study have absorbed. June Pulliam (2014) has noted that in YA horror fiction, when young women like Sabrina are forced into restrictive gender roles, rather than outwardly defy authority, they skillfully destroy it, and often do so within the parameters of what is acceptable. Sabrina relishes her powers, embracing some of the pre-existing rules, while manipulating others according to her own value system. Her gumption lends itself to an even more stereotypical feminist interpretation. Sheffield (2018) has described Sabrina's strength and edge as "Joan of Arc crashing into a mastermix of Harry Potter and *The Craft*" (para. 8). Joan of Arc is the cultural reference for a young woman firmly abiding by what she knows to be true and good only to be met with violent opposition. Moreover, actress Kiernan Shipka, who plays Sabrina, has described the character as a "woke witch," echoing Sheffield's declaration that she is "resistance Sabrina" (2018, paras. 2, 7). What constitutes this "wokeness," and what does this resistance entail? Betwixt and between challenging oppressive,

unjust structures and holding back out of care and concern for loved ones, these young women may feel they are in an impossible position. In *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, Sabrina is the teen witch figure embracing her extra-ordinariness to tackle relevant oppression.

SECTION 4.2 THE TEXT: CONTEXT, ANALYSIS AND RESPONSES TO *CHILLING ADVENTURES OF SABRINA*

Context

Extra-Ordinary Girl in the Text: Sabrina in the Chilling Adventures of Sabrina

The world in which Sabrina exists, although a magical one, provides context for this extra-ordinary girl to demonstrate her power. The formal aspects of the show provide context for understanding what messages are presented, as well as for what the teen girl viewers from my study make of Sabrina's abilities and relationships. What she as the extra-ordinary girl figure signifies is connected to the narrative and is most fully understood through a textual analysis. Moreover, the genre is relevant to the narrative and formal presentation, further reinforcing the importance of the teen witch figure. As noted earlier, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is a supernatural-horror Netflix show adaptation of the comic book series written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa. The story is set in Greendale, a neighbouring town to Riverdale in the Archie Comics universe, and the show aired just less than two years after Netflix's dark teen drama adaptation of the Archie Comics' show *Riverdale* (2017-present). Teen adaptations, especially translated into pseudo-supernatural shows and films, are ever-present. The series is dark and horrific at times, and touches upon many contemporary sociopolitical issues while indulging the supernatural.

For this project, while I do the close analysis of the scene from the first season that we watched in the focus group, I refer to the entire series, unlike with *The Hunger Games*. Covering all films in *The Hunger Games* series would be too large a task for this project, especially since the first film captures the main themes that re-emerge throughout the film series. For the *Sabrina* series, however, significant new developments in the storyline emerge around the themes of progressiveness, which are relevant to this project. In the scene breakdown, I will demonstrate how the show articulates its stance on certain issues, and how the extra-ordinary girl fits into this reality. Given that the series is relatively new, most existing literature on it comes from popular online journals rather than academic scholarship, and I engage with these as evidence of their reception. While the supernatural genre is not as explicitly political as dystopian fiction, the teen witch in this text does also reflect social anxieties that are inextricably tied to ideology. Furthermore, both Sabrina and the show are sites where feminist discourses abound, and these messages are especially relevant in the context of their production and implied young audience.

The Supernatural, Ideology, and Sabrina

Although resistance is not as explicit in the supernatural genre as in the dystopian, the dark fantastical elements of the supernatural-horror text lend it to being a site to critique the unjust, horrific, and absurd in society. Many aspects of the second season of *Sabrina* in particular are even arguably what film scholar Kristen Thompson refers to as excess – "cinematic excess" specifically, both disrupting and challenging the unity of a narrative film (1986). This excess describes stylistic aspects of the show that are superfluous to the story or message within narrative cinema, or in this case, television. That said, these moments of excess or extravagance of style and form in *Sabrina* actually reinforce the extra-ordinariness of the supernatural and also of Sabrina. Linda Williams (1991) also touches upon how excess is integral to certain genres of

film including the horror, in which *Sabrina* is categorized. With respect to *Sabrina*, the entire diegetic world is spectacular and even fantastical, opening up possibility to examine a variety of topics. Insofar as the super-natural encapsulates that which is beyond nature – whether that be the corporeal body or the physical world as we know it – it allows for the existence and exploration of what cannot be understood with reason or science, or more relevantly, what can seem nonsensical and unjust.

In the current socio-political moment, with much awareness and fury about oppressive and violent injustices in the world, a show about a teen witch today can utilize the genre's intimacy with the eerie. The extra-ordinary girl who is motivated by care and connection is a powerful force, utilizing desire and defiance as her tools. The tone of a show about a teen witch today has gravitas, presenting an edgy and defiant girl to reflect contemporary society's embracing of "feminism." Not only is the occult very much part of the vernacular in contemporary North American culture, a character with supernatural abilities on TV is an opportunity to embody the force needed to change the ills that exist in the current world. Sabrina, both the character and the show, utilize the beyond-real of the supernatural to challenge real sociopolitical issues that exist both within and outside of the diegesis.

Sabrina not only confronts current socio-political issues but does so while commenting on the teen show supernatural-horror genre, building upon gothic sensibilities. Gothic literature emerged as a genre in Europe (specifically England) in the eighteenth century, exposing eerie and uncanny aspects of human experience, foregrounding the affective both within the text and for the reader. John Bowen (2014) describes the gothic as "a world of doubt, particularly doubt about the supernatural and the spiritual. It seeks to create in our minds the possibility that there may be things beyond human power, reason and knowledge. But that possibility is constantly

accompanied by uncertainty" (para. 7). We certainly see these characteristics in *Sabrina*, as the show grapples with questions of power, mortality, the unhuman, and the unseen. These unsettling qualities reflect back onto society fear and unease, and do so in a magnified and distorted and grotesque story.

Such dark qualities are framed in the context of human qualities of care and connection in some supernatural texts. Fred Botting (1995) notes that in some gothic texts, including 1990s adaptations of the gothic literary works, there is a blending of horror with sentimental themes, especially of romance (pp. 115-116). Embedded in the sentimental is a profound interest in care and connection. Using *Dracula* as an example, Botting argues that the dominant theme of pure horror is replaced by "care and mercy" (1995, p. 116). The complex duality of these qualities resembles the dialect of desire and defiance in its contrasting yet compelling nature. We see these sentiments in the contemporary teen supernatural text as well. The extra-ordinary witch Sabrina is motivated by care and connection in an often dark and horrific world.

Further compounding, and demonstrating the complexity of care amidst neoliberal rationality, *Sabrina* explores the Satanic principle of "Do what thou wilt," especially in the first two seasons. This credo rejoices with desire and individual will, disregarding social responsibility. This sentiment parallels the rationality behind extreme neoliberalism. For the male figures in the show, this celebration of (their) will means female submission to the Dark Lord. Although Sabrina and her aunts attempt to partake in elements of this credo, as the series progresses, their paradigm shifts. Their shift later in the series, to worship Hecate and a collective feminine power for the Academy, reflects their resolve towards an ethics of care.

Sabrina is a powerful contemporary supernatural heroine who demonstrates what contemporary neoliberal society views as emblematic of what teen girls aspire for, in her desire,

defiance, and care. Furthermore, allusions to what Ellen Moers (1985) describes as the "female gothic" abound with Sabrina. Moers describes this motif/trope in reference to late eighteenth century writing by women whereby they were able to express their fears about being controlled in society. Anne Morey (2012) notes that interest in the female gothic resurfaced in the 1970s and 1980s with second-wave feminism's concerns about male domination and suppression (p. 50). Sabrina, a half-witch in a supernatural-horror narrative, asserts her struggle for power against the misogynistic authority, as we will see later in this section. Spooner and McEvoy (2007) argue that this sentiment of the female gothic has continued today, taking various forms, and is currently thriving. I contend that *Sabrina* is one such form. Sabrina's values of care and connection are not simply gender-related, although these qualities are often associated with women and women's work in a patriarchal neoliberal society. In most instances, Sabrina conquers the violent and oppressive authority, making her a truly inspiring, defiant and extra-ordinary girl hero. Her care and connection can only take her so far, however, and her extra-ordinariness is only so powerful. She eventually dies, saving the world. While her ending is not as comforting as Katniss's, both extra-ordinary girls overpower the oppressive system, and have been given post-story lives of romantic and domestic quasi-contentment with their heterosexual partners.

Chilling Adventures of Sabrina explores fear in various forms, and youth is an ideal subject around which to address the ethics of moral panic, while engaging with socio-political issues through teenage characters in high school and witch-warlock academy. I am not referring to the socio-political function of the school in an ideological sense, but rather the way the characters engage with these issues within school environments. Good versus evil is overtly illuminated in the show around discussions of Satanism versus what the status quo deems good,

but these issues also exist on a subtler level. As Roz, a friend of Sabrina's, begins to go blind, she learns that their high school, Baxter High, will be banning the book *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison that she had been wanting to read before losing her vision. Banning books in schools is one way the educational institution exerts power over young people in an attempt to protect them, or rather, to protect their perceived innocence (Larsen, 1980). As Kara Lycke and Thomas Lucey (2018) assert, these policies are also greatly influenced by political and economic authorities. Concern about literature is also evident in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, especially around Gothic fiction and romances. These genres were deemed to be corrupting young women. More recently, moral panic for young people has been evident in various arts and entertainment, from the colloquial myth that sees rock and roll as Satan's music, to violent video games as the cause of bad behaviour. While care may be motivating these protective measures, such restrictions are one way that adults control young people and maintain authority over them.

As these authorial impositions and moral panics abound, *Sabrina* attempts to enmesh magic with progressive values, addressing issues of gender, sexuality, and race while also drawing attention to class. The show comments on gender and sexuality throughout the series in overt ways. While the show has plenty of commentary on femininity and feminisms, it also challenges conventions of masculinity and patriarchy in relation to good and evil through Harvey, the jock bullies, Harvey's dad, Dark Lord, and Father Blackwood, as well as through a non-binary character, Susie/Theo. In season one, Susie, one of Sabrina's friends, played by a non-binary actor, Lachlan Watson, begins to relate to the phantasm of their late aunt who acted and looked, and presumably felt, more authentic as a man. By the second season, Susie reveals that they feel more like a boy than a girl and has decided to undergo both a gender and sex transition, changing their name to Theo. Theo's journey follows its own coming-of-age

trajectory. We are privy to Susie's journey, which develops as we, along with Susie, learn about their relative's gender non-conforming identities and performativities. Their aunt was not the only relative whose gender challenged societal expectations. Susie learns from their father that their uncle would dress in women's clothes as a child. Susie's father, a working-class farmer, is not quick to embrace the non-conforming gender roles, but very much does so as Susie expresses their need to identify as Theo. This storyline and representation are significant and important, and eloquently incorporated into the show. C.P. from School A, who identifies as a member of the LGBTQ2+ community, noted in one of our sessions, however, that although this storyline is important, its representation in one show is not enough. The work is not done.

Embedded in the narrative, specifically in season one, is the topic of socio-economic class and the stereotypes associated with the working class. These messages are hinted at through Susie's family, but even more so through Harvey's family. Stereotypes of a small-town blue-collar worker are embodied in Harvey's father, who is an abusive, racist, alcoholic miner. His family ancestors were known to be witch-hunters, in fact, aligning them with colonial figures. Oppression and oppressive forces are also gently mentioned around the topics of racism and supernatural power. Roz, Sabrina's best friend, is a Black girl whose matrilineal ancestors had been oppressed by the witches of Greendale – that is, Sabrina's ancestors. The Black best friend to a white protagonist is crucial to note, as many movies and TV shows have included the token Black friend of a white protagonist (Warren, 2018). Roz, however, becomes a much more central character, very close to being Sabrina's equal in terms of power (though not quite), as the series progresses.

The detailed storylines of Sabrina's friends offer an opportunity for the show to demonstrate that it is in touch with the current socio-cultural moment and relevant ideological

issues. Moreover, Sabrina as the witch protagonist uses her extra-ordinary abilities to alter and try to fix many of the challenges her friends endure because of oppressive circumstances.

Further complicating issues of power is that witches are not the only characters with supernatural abilities. Roz has "the Cunning," which her grandmother explains is a curse that the Greendale Thirteen, the white witches hung in 1692, placed on their family line. Physiologically, she has myopic atrophy, causing her to lose her sight, but there is a mystical aspect to this condition in the show. Roz's grandmother explains that the curse is that the women in their family gradually lose their sight and as they do, they increasingly have prophetic visions. In season four of the series, it is revealed that Roz, like her grandmother, is in fact a witch herself, and that Roz is in fact a Sentinel, a Seer. This witch identity had to be kept secret. Roz is a Black girl, part of a Black family, and we can assume that racism is most certainly at the root of this violence by the white witches, but it is never explicitly stated. Furthermore, this discrimination and Roz's plight are deeply embedded in Roz's family's lower socioeconomic class. Although the show is leaving room for viewers to reflect on the embedded discrimination that exists in society, it can be argued that a show that is as outrageous and progressive as it sets out to be is doing a disservice by not addressing this racism more directly.

Although discrimination is addressed in this show – in some instances better than others – some writers have raised concerns about the show reinforcing stereotypes of othering. We must remember that the extra-ordinary girl lead characters in the examples of this project are white. Arielle Gray (2018) argues that many of the supernatural methods employed in the show are a gross perpetuation of Afro-Indigenous cultural practices, such as the use of voodoo and dreamcatchers. Gray (2018) and Charles Pulliam-Moore (2018) also draw attention to problematical ways Prudence, the Black witch and one of the Weird Sisters, is aligned with

stereotypical and punishable misogynistic racism. Conversely, as the series develops, Prudence becomes even more of an integral character in the fight against misogynistic power, further elaborating on the show's advocacy for matriarchal woman-driven collaboration.

It is worth noting that the show does not mention anything about a curse being put on the men in Roz's family. The show is cunningly and discreetly drawing attention to how competition can exist between people, specifically women in this case, around issues of power and value. This tension is very much aligned with the competition that exists in a neoliberal context. Although neoliberal feminism argues that women should help one another rise to success, inherent in the drive for power is a mentality of competition. Although competition is not a significant theme in *Sabrina*, the show's attention to power struggles is interlinked with the supernatural. In the fictional world, the show attempts to subvert the various ways hegemonic power oppresses in our real world. This content is important and if we take the essence of these messages to heart, we could challenge the larger system in which the show is produced.

Analysis and Responses

Scene Breakdown and Close Analysis

While an exploration of the messages embedded in and presented by the show offers a framework and context for thinking about the extra-ordinary girl witch, a close textual shot-by shot analysis of a scene from *Sabrina* offers information about both the extra-ordinary girl, specifically how the witch negotiates care and connection, echoing the struggle between relational values and power that the ordinary girl viewers expressed. Care and connection are the compass that guides the girl who has less social power. As with *The Hunger Games,* the dialogic relationship between the formal qualities of the show and its cultural context foregrounds how

the interpersonal and emotional experiences of care are responses to, and also responses in defiance of, a society that exploits care and community to its own advantage.

As emphasized throughout this project, the relationship narrative provides an opportunity to learn more about the views and values of the participants in this study. A close analysis of one scene that is emblematic of this relationship storyline, as well as the tension that can emerge for the extra-ordinary girl, is a way to focus on specific details that work towards establishing this narrative. The following scene from *Sabrina* is what the girls at both schools watched in our sessions. This scene occurs in the very first episode of the show, and foregrounds Sabrina and Harvey as high school sweethearts.

While Katniss and Peeta's relationship in *The Hunger Games* is complex, and the nature of their affection is unclear, Sabrina and Harvey from *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* have a clearly established romantic relationship from the onset of the show. The scene begins with Harvey trying to encourage Sabrina to cancel the mysterious plans she has that are preventing her from celebrating her sixteenth birthday with him and their friends. As the two characters walk along a pathway through the woods, presumably after school since they are wearing their backpacks, the camera follows them in a slightly low angle medium shot with faint music accompaniment. She is obligated to attend her dark baptism – the most sacred sacrament for a witch – but cannot reveal this to Harvey. She simply tells him that the event she is required to attend is important to her aunts (her guardians) and to her. She tries to explain to him that the significance of this birthday has more to do with what "comes after" she turns sixteen. She stops walking, turns to face Harvey and tells him that she will be moving and switching schools, because she will have to attend a school for witches and cannot tell him that. Understandably confused, Harvey begins to get agitated by this news that she is only vaguely explaining. He tells

her that it feels like she is hiding something from him and reassures her that "there's nothing we can't handle as long as we're being honest with each other." Convinced by her boyfriend's message, she decides to take him deeper into the woods to try to explain to him her situation.

The stylistic and formal elements of the show begin to embrace the extra-ordinary quality, and message, that Sabrina has for Harvey. A low-angle moving shot of the trees in the sky with accompanying mystical music embodies the ethereal quality of the moment, as a dolly long shot[13] shows Harvey entering a secluded area of the forest walking towards Sabrina, who is standing in the centre of the space. The camera jumps to a slightly low angle medium shot of Sabrina looking up to the sky as she comments on how she loves the sound of the "wind blowing through tree branches." The colours in this scene are rich, and we are shown Sabrina immersed in her experience of nature, as the trees around her appear distorted and blurry through the wide-angle lens. The cut to Harvey approaching her breaks this transcendental moment as he asks what it is she wanted to show him. The wide-angle lens continues to distort the background in this scene, suggesting expanded true excess, and an altered state and world. These formal elements, including the lens distortion and uneasy camera movement, further stratify Sabrina and Harvey's experience. The instability and jarring technical and stylistic effects express their relational discord. This effect further elucidates the responses of the participants in my study to this scene. They interpreted the complexity of this relational and situational moment in the narrative. Their comments reflect how a viewer can feel Sabrina's experience and also understand how Harvey's different understanding of it further pulls them apart. This complexity also reinforces how a text can be a site to reflect and create dissonance much like that which is present in ideological negotiation.

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[13] A dolly long shot is a steady moving shot capturing the landscape around the main subjects of the scene.

Sabrina begins to explain to Harvey that she was born in that very space sixteen years ago and will be reborn here on her birthday, her dark baptism, and through a series of close-up shot-reverse shots we experience his reaction to her telling him this. She cares about him and values their connection, but she understands her truth will be overwhelming. This technique, in this setting especially, truly centres around the couple and their relationship. The formal arrangement of this scene reflects the couple's closeness as well as the extra-ordinary news. She tries to explain what a dark baptism is and that she "will be leaving (her) girlhood behind," and Harvey is uncomfortable and confused about what she has told him. In an attempt to explain her extra-ordinariness, she proceeds to try to get him to understand that there are witches living in their town, Greendale, and that she is one of them: "a half-witch on (her) father's side." She explains that after her baptism she will have to leave Baxter High to go to the Academy of Unseen Arts, a school for witches, and "renounce any and all meaningful connections to mortals." He becomes agitated and upset as she bestows this information on him, not at all responding in the way he promised he would. Because it is unfathomable that there is such a thing as a supernatural being, he finds it difficult to believe this news and thinks she is making up an excuse for not wanting to be with him, which she quickly addresses. He is so upset by this news and begins to walk away from her as she is talking. When he angrily tells her that it is hard for him to believe that she is a half-witch, she responds by frantically asking him to forget she said any of it. She then quickly casts a spell to make it so, predominantly out of care for him, but also perhaps out of concern for herself and her aunts. In an instant, he has lost any memory of learning about the witches of Greendale and his girlfriend's half-witch identity. As Sabrina is providing a cover story for Harvey about what they were just talking about, there is a two-shot of the two characters walking

towards the camera, with Sabrina in the forefront. This shot composition that favours Sabrina suggests that she is directing the conversation more than Harvey in this scene.

This clip prompted discussion around the Sabrina-Harvey love story, but especially about Sabrina's witch abilities. Moreover, it offered insight into the girls' views on power and expectations, as the "Negotiating Figurations of Girlhood" chapter will articulate. The girls in the interviews voiced concern and frustration about how sometimes in relationships, the truth, such as the girl character's powers in this case, can be challenging despite good intentions. They suggested that it can be disappointing for them when loved ones do not react in the positive way they promise they will once the truth of a situation is revealed. This discussion of various qualities of the narrative suggest they are interested in more than the romance storyline. They communicated their perspectives on the realism and technical aspect of the show, as well as the relatability of the characters. Moreover, the ways Sabrina uses her extra-ordinary abilities as an expression of care further draws attention to the desire-defiance dialectic for the girl not in the public eye who has less social power.

There is a complex and sometimes paradoxical reality to what someone says and does because of care. This dynamic can also highlight a desire-defiance dialectic even in a care dynamic. The inconsistency between how Harvey said he would respond to Sabrina's news and how he actually reacted was one of the aspects of this scene that a few girls from the interviews commented on. The girls in my study mention that his response is dialectically both realistic and unfair. These girls connect to the relationship dynamic in this scene regardless of whether they are in romantic relationships themselves. Because the participants from my focus group value care and connection, they find it relatable, albeit unsettling, that Harvey does not react the way he said he would.

SECTION 4.3 CULTURAL CONTEXT: TEEN WITCHES TODAY AND IN HISTORY

Introduction: Teen Girls and Alternative Spirituality as Extra-Ordinary, in Context

The teen witch fictional character is very much a symbol, but that is not to say she is not grounded in the material world. The archetype and the real girl witch figures are in dialogue with one another. There are certainly real teenage girls who identify as witches or are interested in the esoteric, or in alternative spirituality more broadly. Both, arguably, either possess or strive to possess exceptional or super-natural abilities, thus embodying the extra-ordinary girl figure. This real girl and the girl witch archetype have an especially long-standing history and are in dialogic relationship with the world at large, including contemporary popular culture, consumer society, and religion. I offer an overview of the spiritual, cultural, political, and historical context for teenage witches and those interested in alternative spirituality– specifically in North America – and an analysis of how care is intrinsic to much of these practices and lifestyles that inform an understanding of how the extra-ordinary can be complicated in a capitalist context. Exploring cultural relevance of the witch iteration of the extra-ordinary girl figure offers insight into another figuration of girlhood.

My two case study examples of extra-ordinary girl figures coincidentally share some underlying qualities, which in turn shape figurations of contemporary extra-ordinary girlhood. Contemporary teen girls interested in alternative spirituality and teen girl activists, although distinct from one another, share some values and are united in some core ways, especially within contemporary capitalism. In their existence at the margins of this dominant system, these teens embody resistance to oppression and persistence of life. Katniss and Sabrina respectively represent the warrior/activist and witch; ironically, these archetypes as they have come to be

developed have been invented within a media culture that essentially supports the ideology these girls would oppose. In my focus groups, although the girls only spoke about activism – and not in the ways that one might expect – and did not talk about their own views on spirituality or the occult, they did emphasize their desire to care for their loved ones. They emphasized their commitment to sustaining the life of the relationships they value, which in some cases defied the defiance that they felt was expected of them by society. Moreover, in one of our sessions, Sabrina the half-witch's (supernatural) abilities prompted discussion about vulnerability and honesty about oneself in relationships, and its consequences – a topic closely tied to the girls' trepidation around being a true activist. In our conversations the feeling of not being confident enough or brave enough to weather opposition as a public activist followed conversations about the importance of honesty and vulnerability in private relationships. The girls in my study shared how challenging it can be to be brave in both scenarios.

The extra-ordinary girl characters and real girls doing extraordinary things in the world, such as the public activists, reveal the tension and pressure capitalism imposes on girls who do not necessarily feel extraordinary themselves, like those in my focus groups. The dialogic relationship between popular texts and growing mainstream interest in the occult exposes the risk that exists in potentially exploiting radical practices for the sake of commodity, much like with activism. Moreover, this show not only exists in a moment when there is great popularity in the occult, but alludes to the longstanding history (going back to medieval Europe) around patriarchal capitalism and witches. There has been a growing interest in mysticism and alternative spirituality over the last several years, yet modern witchcraft as we know it has been prominent since the 1950s, and the history of the "witch" dates back centuries. In this section, I will be focusing mostly on a contemporary generic, non-denominational variation of witchcraft,

best described as alternative spirituality, yet there are numerous versions and iterations of the "witch" and witchcraft that are relevant to our understanding of this current form.

The Occult, Popular Culture, Commercialization and Commodity

Popular media narratives throughout contemporary history have based their representations of the witch on an assortment of traditions. The "Hollywood witch" figure is not monolithic. She embodies different qualities and tones, in essence and in practice, depending on genre, audience, and especially historical moment. The "witch" dates even further back than these colloquial understandings, however, to the 15th century, when her disenfranchisement emerges from the political context. Susan Greenwood (2000, 2020) illuminates that there is a connection between modern North American practitioners of magic and shamans in traditional societies. Contemporary and traditional iterations of magic are based on a connection to the spiritual world. Moreover, this holistic worldview informs the contemporary Pagan who use their mind to move energy, thus influencing a series of events in the corporeal realm. It is important to note that many of the colloquial notions of the witch are North American ones and do not include witch figures and practices of the Global South, such as the Haitian Vodou religion, which emerged in the 16th century. Interestingly, Vodou and its witch-like figure of the mambo (priestess) has been incorporated into some contemporary mainstream media iterations of the witch including *True Blood* (2008-2014) and *Sabrina,* especially in part three of the series. Regardless of the iteration of the teen witch, she represents a figure with an affiliation to the supernatural and is quite literally extra-ordinary and powerful. The cultural context of the witch iteration of the extra-ordinary girl figure offers insight into this figuration of extra-ordinary girlhood as it relates to power.

The growing interest in alternative health and spirituality in this North American society is closely connected to the teen witch figure. This phenomenon has become prominent in popular culture and is also reflected in social media (Instagram especially) during the past decade, which in turn propels interest in the matter. For example, Lauren Robertson, the manager of the store Rock Star Crystals in New York City, explains that singer Adele mentioning in an awards acceptance speech that she used healing crystals for good luck sparked immense curiosity and interest in people (Hogan, 2020). Even herbalist Lata Chettri-Kennedy explains that there is not just one demographic who comes to her. Her clientele ranges from children to older adults, including people who have not had success with medications, as well as celebrities (Hogan, 2020). With respect to alternative witch-like practices today, however, the teen girl has been recognized as one of the target demographics engaging in them (Al-Hakim, 2018; Paul, 2018; Singh-Kurtz & Kopf, 2018; Houseman, 2016; Cuen, 2016; Rudder, 2019; "My daughter wants witch gifts," 2019). Popular media and these lived experiences of girls have a symbiotic relationship in such figurations of girlhood.

Scholars like Peg Aloi (2007) and Hannah E. Johnston (2007) have been fascinated by the teen witch in popular media and the relationship between these phenomena. Within the last few years, but also in the two decades prior, teen girls have been appropriating the esoteric, and I argue that this has been occurring in tandem with socio-historical circumstances. What constitutes alternative in one culture is different in another, so here, "alternative" is defined in relation to the North American, minority world capitalist system. In fact, Berger argues that one of the reasons the neo-pagan movement began to flourish in the 1960s as part of the counterculture is because it is about one's relationship with the earth and about returning to a pre-capitalist existence that seems purer (Hogan, 2020, para. 25). This section will further

elucidate how witchcraft has not only been connected to countercultures, but also as defying and challenging the status quo of Christianity, patriarchy, and capitalism. Ironically, the popularity of this and similar belief systems has become an opportunity for profit, and the extra-ordinary girl witch figure is one site of tension where this dynamic – this desire-defiance pull – is articulated.

To further substantiate that cultural practices become entangled in the market economy, even when the practices are "alternative" ones, there has been growing popularity of alternative spiritual practices to which companies have responded. The rising popularity of alternative practices, including witchcraft and nature-based spirituality, offers an opportunity to capitalize on the interest, thus reshaping the witch figure and her role in the world. More and more alternative health and occult shops have been emerging. Although healing crystals and stones, tarot cards, herbalism, and intricate astrological charting are certainly not at all novel new age practices, they are becoming more prominent in mainstream daily life. For these businesses, the division between what is counterculture and what is mainstream becomes blurred. Jeremy Charrette and Richard King (2004) argue that in our individualistic, profit-driven society, "'spirituality' has become a new cultural addiction and claimed panacea for the angst of modern living (p. 1). Douglas Izzy (2006) asserts that there is a "consumer-oriented Witchcraft," which contributed to the popularity and growth of these alternative spiritual practices, effectively shapes Witchcraft "to be consistent with consumer values and ethics" (p. 15). Nadia Bartolini et al. (2013) also discuss alternative spirituality in relation to economic factors in Manchester and London, noting that social, economic, and geographical differences are evident in the varying interest (or lack thereof) in alternative spirituality and their economies. Not one girl in my study mentioned anything about being personally interested in such alternative practices (although that does not mean they are not). The purpose of this context, rather, is to emphasize the intricacies of

the social factors that shape figurations of extra-ordinary girlhood that girls with less social

power may interpret as "next level," regardless of which iteration of extra-ordinary the girl figure

embodies.

Alternative Spirituality, Power, and Resistance

The commonality between extra-ordinary girl figures of the activist-warrior and witch is

that care drives them to utilize their power for resistance against oppression. Young women seek

alternative methods to effect change. Ironically, utilizing the alternative can reinforce the extra-

ordinary girl's appeal with the status quo and with mainstream audiences. The figuration of

girlhood associated with the supernatural witch iteration of the extra-ordinary girl suggests a

girlhood complemented by resistance. Lynn Schofield Clark (2003) has argued that teen girls

engage in supernatural practices because "their familiarity with …real-life 'horrors' adds to the

appeal that supernatural events featuring the confrontation of (or working with) fear can lead to a

sense of power that may otherwise be lacking" (p. 135). Feeling fearful and powerless begets the

need to conjure power from an unconventional source when typical ways to demonstrate power

feel out of reach. Not all women who are interested in the supernatural or practice witchcraft are

victims of suffering and trauma, however.

The appeal of alternative spirituality comes from the empowerment it confer to girls.

Douglas Izzy and Helen Berger's in-depth 2007 study on teenage witches found that nearly every

participant said that being a witch made them more confident. They infer this to mean that

"witchcraft… increases their self-worth and self-respect, makes them less shy, reduces their self-

hatred, makes them happier with themselves, reduces their sense of powerlessness, makes them

less afraid, provides a sense of self-purpose, and results in their valuing themselves more," and

that these practices offered "greater sense of meaning and purpose [which] facilitate increased

individual responsibility and reflexivity" (2007, p. 111). There is certainly a positive element of empowerment here, and while personal responsibility is important, it is worth mentioning again that an ideological system like capitalism relishes such self-focused betterment. The appeal of the extra-ordinary girl is a part of this ideology. Such a system puts the onus on the individual to rectify deep systemic problems, and may capitalize on alternative practices by embracing empowerment discourses. The way the two case study examples of extra-ordinary girl figures coincidentally share some underlying themes with one another speaks to a particular figuration of girlhood that embraces a desire and defiance dialectic reflecting a tension in ideological negotiation.

Witchcraft or alternative spiritual practicing in general has increasingly been tied to political involvement and activism. Whether or not neo-Pagans practice in groups or individually also indicates activist involvement. Although not factoring in age, Berger (2019) highlights that with respect to contemporary Pagans, solitary practitioners stay regularly connected to each other. Moreover, although solitary Pagans vote less than group practitioners, her findings suggest that contemporary Pagans in general vote more than the typical American (p. 125). With respect to an American demographic, Berger explains that typically people who identify as witches are more politically active around issues they care about, and that these issues tend to be environmental in nature (Berger, 2019; Hogan, 2020). Speaking about an American demographic, Berger's findings reveal that those involved in group activism are more involved in environmental activism than those in solitary practice (2019, p. 133). For Sarah Lyons, author of *Revolutionary Witchcraft, a Guide to Magical Activism* (2019), being a witch is synonymous with being an environmental activist. She also argues that climate change is closely tied to other socio-political ills, sourcing capitalism as the cause of them all.

Various popular news sources have echoed this sentiment, connecting the growing interest in the occult with political activism (Bennett, 2019; Doyle, 2015, 2019a, 2019b; Emba, 2018; Mohdin, 2019). On November 8, 2019, *The Guardian* published the article, "'Waking up to our power': witchcraft gets political" leading up to Witchfest and foregrounding the connection between contemporary witches and activism. Witchfest is one of the largest witchcraft festivals in the world, held in the UK and organized by the organization, "Children of Artemis" that is open to witches and pagans. Mohdin (2019) states that there is an increasing number of "radicals in the country who believe witchcraft and magic are natural extensions of their feminist and environmental activism" (para. 2). Young people are especially embracing these practices, especially if there is a personal connection to oppression. Teen Earth Magic!, "a youth intensive in the Reclaiming tradition," is an example of an initiative of teens and young adults uniting in their passion to combine magic with activism. The organization offers a variety of resources and activities for young people, including a retreat, to channel their activism with alternative spirituality. The fact that the case study examples of the activist-warrior and the witch increasingly intersect in values and their wielding of power, out of care, to fight injustice, speaks to the contemporary moment that both values powerful girls and also has created circumstances that these girls strongly object to.

The Personal is Political

For young people who have experienced hardship, the popular teen witch narrative that is increasingly linked to progressive engagement, as with *Sabrina*, is enwrapped in discourses of power in addition to being entertaining and helping to drive the interest in alternative spirituality. Hannah E. Johnston's (2007) research on teen girl witches, their representation in popular media, as well as discourses by teen girls around witchcraft and victimhood, sheds light on the appeal of

these alternative practices. She argues that although these narratives may counter the characters' victim status through both selflessness and witchcraft, the way they do so is in fact a disservice from a feminist standpoint (p. 102). Although these narratives may seem to be empowering, the girl characters' responses to victimization "adhere to traditional constructions of female power" insofar as it is the character's "'female-ness' that gives her access to these powers" (Johnston, 2007, p. 102). While I agree that empowerment discourse can be problematic when aligned with postfeminism – as it is with the shows she is talking about – I challenge this stance. The problem is not so much that the girls are privy to the supernatural because they are girls. The symbolic connection between femaleness, creation and nature – or super-nature – is worth embracing should the subject in question want to, but the concern is more complex.

The real issue is the grand structures and figures that have either directly or generationally victimized the girls in the first place. Negotiating power becomes crucial for the extra-ordinary girl. In this sense, the narratives Johnston is describing function in a similar way to the ones I discuss in this project. The girl characters draw upon their innate gift as a response and challenge to the various forms of oppression and violence and are thus empowered from doing so. The narratives, however, leverage this empowerment, distracting from the fact that the oppressive forces that the girls are bewitching share in fundamental ideological factors with the capitalism that created them. Furthermore, what does it say about the world if one of the most palatable methods for the teen to confront the oppression is otherworldly in nature? One thing that is evident through these magical practices is that the craft entails confronting or channeling an invisible, intangible, and uncertain quality to effect change of some sort. This figuration of girlhood is navigating and claiming her power by alternative means.

North American teen girls today are increasingly embracing their desire to subvert and defy the status quo power and oppressive forces. Elise Weidtmann and Jennifer Jones[14] are two teen girls from Twitter who have identified themselves to me as being interested in alternative spirituality. While both girls had strong concerns about justice around socio-political issues, only Jennifer was confident in identifying the connection between her spirituality and activism. Both girls seemed passionate about various social and political issues, and much like the girls in my focus groups, there is hesitancy around what constitutes an activist.

There is indeed a common desire in both the spiritual practices and activism to effect positive change, but there is some discomfort with respect to identity. In Taft's research with girl activists, the girls explain that because they are girls, they are more likely to be activists than their male peers. These girls feel compelled to assert themselves, but perhaps also activism feels like a type of care work. Gender is also relevant to girls who participate in the occult. Perhaps just as the girls in Taft's study "use their activist identities, knowledge, and experiences to resist the pressures to conform to a narrow version of girlhood," young women activists similarly – perhaps subconsciously – utilize their identities to challenge those ascribed to them by society (2011, p. 90). The youth activist communities discussed promote critical analyses of gender and power, and they offer these teenage girls new ways of understanding and resisting oppressive versions of girlhood and gendered relationships (Taft, 2011, p. 87). In embracing their roles as activists, much like embracing alternative spirituality like witchcraft, these girls position themselves in contrast to the dominant hegemonic system. In doing so, the individual teen herself experiences positive personal experiences like confidence, as scholars like Taft, Berger, and Izzy

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[14] Elise Weidtmann is an alias chosen by the girl on Twitter, and Jennifer Jones is an alias I assigned to the other girl from Twitter who shared her views, with her permission.

note. These positive self-perceptions of identity are more a pleasant effect of these practices than motivation to engage in them. Working towards creating a better world is the primary interest, so feeling good about oneself for doing so understandably follows.

Witch Hunts in Medieval Europe and the Development of Capitalism: A Brief Overview

There is a long-standing history of women being shunned and hunted for perceived immoral, devious activity in Europe, and this persecution is intimately tied to capitalism. Throughout the world, there were variations of what the witch hunts looked like, and while not all those accused were women, 75-80% of those persecuted were (Almond, 2020). Although the history of witches in Europe and capitalism seems removed from contemporary phenomena, they are all connected, emanating from patriarchal capitalism, whereby tensions in economics, power and gender have numerous consequences. Misogyny, however, precedes capitalism, and the persecution of women for 'witchcraft' has an ancient history.

A close analysis of the emergence of "witches" and witch hunts in 15th century Europe illuminates its connection to the rise of capitalism. In *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), Silvia Federici explains that peasant European women in the middle ages who guided reproduction, helped with birthing and abortion, came to be thought of as witches as capitalism was beginning to rise. Federici argues that the witch hunts play a significant role in the development of a capitalist society, with moral and spiritual associations secondary to economic ones.

Out of witch hunts comes a whole new regime of what becomes the norm for women. The practices and beliefs women enforced and embodied became incompatible with capitalist work and worldview. Social reproduction was thus redefined. Alongside the economic factors at play around accusations of witchcraft, there was an "increasingly misogynous institutional policy that confined women to a subordinate social position with respect to men and severely punished

any assertion of independence on their part and any sexual transgression as a subversion of the social order" (Federici, 2018, p. 19). The woman as "witch" became a woman with an unpleasant and undesirable reputation. Witch hunts, driven mostly by "magistrates and demonologists" more than neighbours, further stratified people on moral ground (Federici, 2018, Oct. 31, para. 10). As a political activity, witch hunts were upheld not only by men of the law, but also the intellectuals at the time, with their legacy of rationality and a Cartesian worldview, and reinforced by the partnering of feuding Catholic and Protestant religions that had the persecution of witches as the shared objective.

The witch hunt was a step in the creation of the new sexual division of labour. With the connection between property and paternity, women became bound to one man through monogamy so that money transferred through bourgeoise families stayed within the family. Women's bodies became associated with nature and thus existed outside of the market regardless of her class. This naturalizing of her body further confined her, marking her as being meant for reproduction, despite her being a citizen of law. Here, as sources of human reproduction, women become a commodity that is accessible to everybody, rather than subjects in themselves. Reproduction becomes reproduction for the labour market. Moreover, this division supports capitalism's process of the accumulation that happens by the means of dividing the working class, as through gender, race and age.

There was not only an international division of labour, but the sexual division of labour that was also a power relation insofar as it was a division within the work force while being a boost to capital. The state benefits from controlling women's bodies, which includes the way they can reproduce, and the very fact that they will reproduce workers. The state also benefits from the division within the household: the man is able to go to work and the woman's work,

which is naturalized and therefore not requiring of remuneration, facilitates this division both in the home and in the state, thus boosting capital. Here we see how patriarchy flourishes through further dividing men and women according to capital values whereby women's work is secondary. Federici argues that this shift to agrarian capitalism offers relevant social background with respect to understanding many of the more contemporary witchcraft accusations, as well as the relationship between witch-hunting and capital accumulation (2018, p. 15).

Defiant Women

While many of the peasant women were victims of the new order in Europe, poverty in itself was not the primary factor in witchcraft charges; rather, it was a rebellious disposition and behaviour – in response to injustice – that instigated charges, calling to mind the young women activists discussed earlier. Federici notes that witches were willful and fought back against their exclusion.

> They threatened, cast reproachful looks, and cursed those who refused them help; some made nuisances of themselves by sudden, uninvited appearances on their better-off neighbors' doorsteps or made uncalled for attempts to have themselves accepted by giving small gifts to children. Those who prosecuted them charged them with being quarrelsome, with having an evil tongue, with stirring up trouble among their neighbors, charges that historians have often accepted. But we may wonder if behind the threats and the evil words we should not read a resentment born of anger at the injustice and a rejection of marginalization. (Federici, 2018, p. 19).

Indeed, anger and resistance are understandable sentiments in the face of such rejection and injustice. These feelings and behaviours resemble what activists demonstrate, including the young women activists discussed earlier. Behaviour that opposes the dominant worldview is

considered to be resistant, and in some instances, punishable. This chain of consequence is exceptionally articulated through Joan of Arc, who was tormented and killed at the age of nineteen due to accusations of witchcraft and "cross-dressing." She was steadfast in pursuit of her beliefs and is a point of comparison for more contemporary heroine-like young women and characters alike, such as Emma González, Katniss, and Sabrina. There is greater social consciousness and knowledge of history today of such violent misogynistic history and of retaliation against feminists of all kinds.

The monstrosities of the past are undeniable, but this does not mean they do not continue to exist today in different forms, often necessarily veiled in more appealing and insidious forms. Capitalism submerges history of wrongfully scorning women and adapts to the times by capitalizing on feminist insurgences. In a feat of striking a balance between eliciting desire and defiance in young women who reject oppressive institutional power, the system cleverly appropriates ideological awareness and consciousness to maintain power and interest in individualism and capital over community and humanity. Humanity and qualities and experiences that are integral to quality of life are very much embedded in many of the alternative practices discussed. Care for this life, as explored throughout this project, is presented in various ways, holding different meaning in different contexts.

The various ways young women have been defiant in response to socio-political systems illuminates the tension between humanity and power. Moreover, the contemporary co-optation of the witch in both popular culture and consumer culture erases the complex history of marginalization for the woman. This erasure or oversight is so commonplace and ingrained in contemporary culture that the girls in my focus groups did not even address that Sabrina's witch

identity could make her a marginal figure. Her care, however, like the care of all the girls I discuss, is the underlying connecting quality for such defiant and marginalized figures.

The Complexity of Care

Affect and Care

Care is a strong motivating factor for the various girl figures discussed in this dissertation, regardless of the action she takes to practice it. Implicit in the practices of people who participate in alternative spirituality and witchcraft is engagement with emotional and mental experiences. These affective qualities of life, including how they relate to the body, are not removed from social and cultural realities, even though scholarship can often ignore these factors. Skott-Myhre (2018) highlights that many rituals associated with witchcraft, indigenous culture, as well as pre-industrial practices are aligned with intuition and imagination, are often feminized, and might be thought of as a form of mysticism, otherness or sorcery within capitalism. Such experiences and practices, she argues, require "the appropriation, evisceration, or subjugation of alternative trance states or ways of knowing" (Skott-Myhre, 2018, p. 20). In other words, alternative epistemological experiences of life are not as valued in certain circles and contexts. She argues that this assertion is especially significant now during the beginning of the 21st century as capitalism's mode of production shifts from "the subjugation of bodies to the appropriation of our unconscious desires" – that is from "industrial capitalism to cyber capitalism" (Skott-Myhre, 2018, p. 20). I contend that it is not so much that there is a shift from industrial to cyber, as there is an expansion. Although using bodies for physical labour may not be *as* essential today, they are still necessary. The human has not been eliminated for capitalism to thrive. In fact, as we have seen, neoliberalism has been capitalizing on this co-optation of alternative experience in popular media.

The young women in particular who have been embracing such practices that tap into the affective aspect of life, in turn, have acquired a sort of affective capital. This affective capital challenges the status quo that favours a more Cartesian dualistic worldview and the tangible accumulation it implies. Jason W. Moore (2015) argues that the Nature/Society binary "is directly implicated in the colossal violence, inequality, and oppression of the modern world. … [T]he view of Nature as external is a fundamental condition of capital accumulation" (p. 2). I argue that contemporary young women embracing alternative spirituality and honing their intuition and affective qualities, embracing a connection with nature, are radically challenging the current dominant capitalist ideology and worldview. Although their comfort and skill with the affective aspects of life can stand in contrast to the current system, I am not arguing that in and of themselves they are sufficient to challenge the system. These practices and penchants are particularly symbolic and emblematic of a rejection of the current status quo worldview. But the affective qualities that such alternative practices run on are not inherently rejected by neoliberal capitalist endeavours.

Skills and qualities pertaining to affect become extremely valuable and also easily exploitable in certain contemporary contexts that help capitalism function, such as with virtual cyber life, corporate culture, and care work. Skott-Myhre asserts that capitalism strongly needs "intellectual, creative, and affective capital to be strip mined from bodies and minds as the raw material for the production of cyberspace" (2018, p. 20) The affective, or emotional realms of the mind and spirit are part of the fuel of what she calls "cyber capitalism." The role of women changes with these shifts in society. The management of affect that was once contained within the home is now extended outward and as a form of social labour. Hardt and Negri (2009) call this phenomenon the "feminization of work," whereby the role of women in families, where they

are thought of as the ones managing affect and emotion, is appropriated and exploited (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 133).[15] Even corporate environments have increasingly been expanding their social skills training and emotion and affect management skills. Although this trend has its merits, it follows the same vein as neoliberal feminism: it purports to care for the wellbeing of its workers, yet systemically perpetuates their less than ideal circumstances. Embracing affect becomes a complex issue when it becomes a form of capital.

As we see in this section, young women practicing power in alternative ways are tapping into affect in a way that challenges the status quo, despite the current system's capitalization of such qualities. Witches and witchcraft pose a threat to the dominant structure as it exists today in the twenty-first century insofar as they embody alternative value and power systems rooted in spirituality and intuition. This is not to say that scientific advancement is not essential to bettering and sustaining life. As we have seen in this section, young women utilize affect to heal, in one way or another. Care is complex within capitalism, and the way women who tended to reproduction and to sustaining life fit into the development of capitalism will be examined in the following section. The extra-ordinary girl witch figure today captures this affective care. Moreover, the capitalist neoliberal conditions integral to the manufacturing of the conditions for affective care underlie the ordinary girls' discerning reluctance to compromise their own caring.

Care and Social Reproduction Under Capitalism: the (Extra-)ordinary Girl

Care for other people, whether genuine or structurally imposed, underlies the dominant actions of the various young women discussed in this project: the girls in my study, the protagonists of the shows, the teen girl activists, contemporary witches and girls interested in

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[15] I argue that using the term, "feminization of labor," risks perpetuating dualistic thinking since it suggests an original masculine labour, but for the sake of this argument around affect and care, it is useful.

alternative spirituality, as well as the early "witches" who helped in reproduction. The girls in

my study expressed deep care for their families, noting that they would prioritize their loved ones

over themselves if they had to choose. The lead characters Katniss and Sabrina, although

complicated by the platforms and systems of their creation, demonstrate exceptional care for

loved ones and other people in general, utilizing their extraordinary talents towards this end. The

girl activists act out of concern about the state of the world and for themselves, as well as people

whom they have never met, recognizing that everyone's livelihoods and feelings matter. The

contemporary witches and people interested in alternative spiritual practices strive to challenge

oppressive worldviews by tapping into inner energy. The women of the fifteenth century

described in this section quite literally help guide reproduction, helping people navigate life.

Care becomes contentious when it compromises livelihoods, and this issue is especially

solidified with the development of capitalism.

Often care and the work it entails – especially for the participants in my study – is

positioned in contrast to the dominant governing system that ultimately values profit over people.

Physical and emotional work goes into ensuring that life can continue, and in thinking about this

reality in terms of generating the means to sustain life rather than increase profit, social

reproduction is understood as in tension with capitalism. As Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill

(2003) note, however, all societies reproduce, not just capitalist ones. In a capitalist neoliberal

society, what is required for social reproduction is unequally distributed and valued. Care

therefore becomes complicated in a capitalist system. As Rottenberg asserts, "as an economic

order, neoliberalism relies on reproduction and care work in order to reproduce and maintain

human capital. Yet, on the other hand, as a political rationality – and in stark contrast to

liberalism – neoliberalism has no lexicon that can recognize let alone value reproduction and care work due to its focus on generic human capital" (Rottenberg, 2019, para. 15).

Caring for other people, and the physical, emotional, and mental work that goes into ensuring people are well are not mutually exclusive, but sometimes society presents them as though they should be. This overlap of what care is, why, if, and how caring and care work should be performed and what care means for other people, but also society at large, entangles care in a web of conflicting values systems. As we see in the interviews with the girls in my study, there is an astute awareness of the various implications – and costs – of care. Care for other people and their experiences, when emerging organically and genuinely, is often tied to emotion and a very human response to sustaining life. In this sense, care and emotion are intimately connected to reproduction, especially social reproduction. The labour of taking care of people in various ways does not require genuine care as an emotive experience for those people. In fact, any sincere care can become increasingly difficult to maintain when the carer is being exploited by the system that does not value them. An example of such a scenario is with global care chains and reliance on migrant workers.

Ironically, with the integration of women into the workforce in North America as part of increasing gender equality, there has been an increase in social division and exploitation of other minorities under capitalism. The criticisms of neoliberal feminism are greatly tied to this reality. The neoliberal feminism that exalts perseverance in one's career can suggest that non-professional labour is less important, further stratifying people – often women – when it comes to domestic work or work of social reproduction. It is no coincidence that there is a gender association to care and care work. The literature on this topic is vast and beyond the scope of this project, but it is relevant to a contemporary neoliberal feminist analysis of girls' culture.

Interestingly, both radical and neoliberal feminism have utilized this history to fuel

empowerment messaging, with neoliberal feminism furthering the division between valuable and

less valuable labour. In the 1970s and 1980s, Marxist Feminists, through domestic labour

scholarship on political economy. started to raise attention around this issue that further

marginalized women. Today, this theory of social reproduction is still relevant and pertinent to

discussions around labour and care (Andrucki et al., 2017; Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson et al.,

2016).

Social reproduction entails the work of everyday life that sustains social functioning, and

is often invisible to the economic eye. As Federici and Gago (2015) argue, "women's struggle

for domestic work is a central anti-capitalist struggle. It truly goes to the root of social

reproduction, it subverts the slavery in which capitalist relations are based and it subverts the

power relations they create in the body of the proletariat" (Federici & Gago, 2015, para. 11).

Gender relations, which are shaped by various patriarchal dynamics, are interrelated to the

ongoing capitalist social structure. All this context on care and its relationship to gender is

relevant to much of what the ordinary girls shared in our interviews. Although these girls did not

speak in terms of care work and labour value, implicit in their sentiments about the various

topics we covered was the message that they understand care – and nurturing their relationships

– to be a fundamental and important component of their lives.

Care about the collective – about other people – is also evident amongst the girls in my

study, as well as the activists and teens interested in alternative spirituality, and even the

characters in the shows discussed. Moreover, Taft notes that the girl activists in her study were

concerned about the rights and well-being of children and young people, and thus engaged in

projects to improve these circumstances for them (2011, p. 27). Although in all cases there is a

sense of empowerment that emerges from this efficacy amongst teen girls that comes from working towards social change, familial wellness, or personal healing, it differs from the individualistic self-empowerment neoliberal lexicon. While emotion can be a tool for generating care, as noted earlier, it also fuels care work, which is one of the ways society can capitalize on it. Many humans will care for one another, to varying extents, regardless of remuneration. The care that the girls I have foregrounded demonstrate, which includes care for the collective and the work this care entails, is in a way its own form of resistance against neoliberalism. Ironically, in a variation of cruel optimism and a dance of desire and defiance, this care also keeps capitalism in motion when the work does not require compensation. Moreover, although care underlies much of both the ordinary and extra-ordinary girls' actions and desires, the consequences for the girl with less social power are more pronounced than for the extra-ordinary girl, who can embrace and utilize her exceptionality to become more extraordinary in spite of barriers.

CHAPTER FIVE:

NEGOTIATING FIGURATIONS OF GIRLHOOD:

TORONTO GIRS & THE COMPLEXITY OF CARE

SECTION 5.1 THE GIRL: TORONTO TEEN GIRLS INTERVIEWED

Toronto Teen Girls

The girls in my focus groups, though not characters or public personas, are extraordinary in a way that differs from the "extra-ordinary" figures in my study. Insofar as the girls in my study do not have the social power or public visibility that the extra-ordinary girls have (nor do some of them even want those qualities), I occasionally refer to them in this chapter as "ordinary" girls. This descriptor is simply to distinguish between the girls I met and spoke with in our focus groups who are not in the public and have less social power compared to the girls in the world at large – both fictional and real – who have exceptional power and public personas.

To reiterate, I am reclaiming the word ordinary in this project to emphasize that there is value in experiences and values that may not receive public attention, and that in turn may not be viewed by neoliberal society as exceptional. The most germane example is the value of care. As this dissertation has demonstrated, care and care work are complex in a world that can undervalue or misrepresent work that has long been done by women for free outside of the labour market. "Ordinary" in this study is not derogatory. I cannot emphasize my definition of the term enough, especially since "ordinary" may colloquially be used to perpetuate negative stereotypes and discrimination against vulnerable people, such as youth with less social power, especially when from lower income communities. My reclaiming of the term matches my objective of this project: to call into question what neoliberal society sets as a standard worthy of material and symbolic fortune. Figures and figurations of extra-ordinary girlhood are one

example of this society's emphasis on exceptionality, which is complicated by the actual value in being truly empowered, especially when shaped by care. The negative associations around not being exceptional or well-accomplished, especially as they may contribute to feelings of inadequacy, are what I am advocating against. The participants in my study are in fact quite extraordinary in their touching faithfulness to personal values that are at times in opposition to the status quo. These girls are anything but inadequate, as the word "ordinary" alone can suggest.

Through the conversations with the girls in my focus group, it became clear that many of their views and outlooks seemed contrary to common public conceptions of the girl. The "ordinariness" of the girls in the groups, which I will explore in this chapter, is in fact the antithesis of capitalist neoliberal ideology. Through our discussions, in various ways the girls alluded to an extra-ordinariness in girls – the protagonists in the shows, as well as their own hypothetical activist self – that they did not quite feel they possess, despite some desire and effort in achieving it. The ordinary girl is not the same type of figure that the extra-ordinary girl is, but she represents an authentic girl in the private, local sphere. The girls in my study opened up about their own views, insecurities, and perspectives with tremendous vulnerability in the safe environment of our sessions. Their stories, self-perceptions, and outlooks both reflect and challenge the status quo. The ordinary girl thus becomes a figure of resistance to the dominant North American capitalist ideology that complicates what it means to be an extraordinary girl. The notion of futurity and young people "becoming" is prevalent in childhood studies, so the coming-of-age theme is especially relevant in this scholarship on girlhood. In the context of a coming-of-age framework, the ordinary girl whose arc is still in progress comes of age in relation to the Extra-ordinary Girl figure. Out of our discussions around activism, the shows, and relationships, the existence of the extra-ordinary girl as a figure of our time, with her varying

forms and extents of power, became increasingly apparent. What the girls say about these issues and topics reveals the various ways they are negotiating figurations of girlhood that revolve around issues of exceptionality, power, and care.

Background on the Study with Toronto Teen Girls

Months before I conducted my fieldwork, March for Our Lives took place in the United States. This movement prompted me to wonder how young girls in Toronto are thinking about activism and social justice after this event received significant media coverage. With such a massive display of initiative and solidarity amongst young people in the face of injustice, surely many young people here in Ontario would also feel compelled to embrace such practices. Canada is certainly not without its violent sanctions, after all. Canada is responsible for inflicting violence on Indigenous nations and continues to function as an imperial power in the world (Klassen, 2009, 2014). There is also a Black Lives Matter chapter in Canada because anti-Black racism is rampant in our society. BLM is an "international organization and movement fighting police and state violence, and anti-Black racism" (BLM, 2021), in which many young people in Canada are involved. While there has been a great deal of attention on young activists around the world, I began to think about how there must also be teenagers who care deeply about social change, but do not know exactly how to effect it. How do teen girls, in particular, negotiate their own desire to contribute to social change with the challenges that they identify as holding them back from being more active? Taft (2017) found that "teenage girl activists produce narratives of the activist self that are distinct from those produced by adults," but what about the narratives of the activist self by aspiring activists? (p. 37). Building upon the idea that teen girls do not define themselves in the same way that adults do, the girls in my study expressed varying narratives of what an activist self is, as well as ambivalence about the concept. These conversations around

activism, as well as around the narratives and heroines of the shows and relationships, illuminate that there is certainly a contemporary understanding of the extra-ordinary girl that functions as a standard against which young people compare themselves. These conceptualizations are embedded in various figurations of girlhood today that often are unspoken.

Context for Negotiating Figurations of Girlhood, From Activism to Neoliberal Feminism, On and Off Screen

This chapter illuminates the thoughts and perspectives of girls in my study on issues around activism, the self, care, power, and relationships, particularly as they are framed within neoliberalism and neoliberal feminist rationality. What the girls share reveals the various ways they are negotiating issues of exceptionality, power and care. The ways teen girls define the activist, their role in activism, and the challenges holding them back from being more active, coincide with Rottenberg's concept of a neoliberal feminist self that valorizes self-confidence. This notion underlies many of my observations and critiques throughout the dissertation, including those in the following section of this chapter on the girls' responses to the shows.

In this section 5.1 of this chapter, I will examine the girls' views on the activism component of the study. In the following sections of this chapter, the relationship between these girls' views on activism and the shows' narratives will be explored more fully, revealing the ways girls with less social power and public visibility negotiate various standards and figurations of girlhood. The connection between the attitudes of teen girl viewers of popular sci-fi and supernatural shows, and their beliefs about their own roles in activism and relationships, are crucial to this analysis of figurations of girlhood that revolves around power and care. Moreover, the shows that feature strong girl characters who navigate romantic love amidst greater struggle are foundational to the extra-ordinary girl figure and the figurations of exceptional girlhood.

The activist/non-activist self and the self who has strong views about romantic relationships on and off screen seem unrelated on the surface. The discussion of romantic narratives, however, is actually a proxy for speaking about love, care, and connection more broadly. Throughout this chapter, I will explore the complex relationship between care and the extra-ordinary. Interestingly, it became evident in our sessions that the crux of this complex relationship between care and the extra ordinary also underlies the romantic relationship narrative and the aspiring (or non-aspiring in some cases) activist self. Care and being extraordinary are in dialogic and sometimes conflicting conversation with each other. Neoliberal standards and expectations for greatness emphasize this pressure for the girl with less social power.

The Girl in the Clips, Under Neoliberalism

In the clips that I selected for the video elicitation component of the sessions, the extra-ordinary girl characters epitomize the struggle that many women today face in the shadows of postfeminism. These girls are powerful and empowered, and yet there is still work to be done to tackle inequality. Furthermore, responses from the girls in my study to these clips are pragmatic, with undertones of vulnerability, a response that is emblematic of our time. Under neoliberal feminism, there is pressure – especially for young women – to be driven, rational, and goal-oriented while also maintaining gentleness and vulnerability. I noticed that this struggle is also at the root of why the girls in my study are not more active towards social change on a large scale. Desire in itself, whether it be for a relationship or social change, is unthreatening, and many would argue, is even desirable. Although female desire can be perceived as threatening within patriarchal cultures, and desire for social change can be threatening as well, it is not the desire itself that is the threat. Rather, the threat comes from the powerful pairing of the desire with

action towards satisfying it. Cruel optimism works to curb this pairing and thus limit the actual action. Moreover, when the romantic relationship and activism become a type of commodity, as they do in the multitude of adaptations of YA texts into mainstream media, as well as media attention to young celebrity activism, it serves a neoliberal agenda to ensure that young people have just the right balance of hope, desire, and defiance around the extra-ordinary. Insofar as the teen girl continues to reach for change or self-improvement, while also desiring defiance, the commodities that maintain this dialectic experience are working to uphold neoliberal economy.

How to Solve the World's Problems

The girls in my study had varying opinions on the type of action that was necessary for their social issues of concern to be resolved, including immigrant rights, environmentalism, violence, LGBTQ+ issues, mental health, and poverty. Both groups of girls' responses, however, were informed by values stemming from a neoliberal ideology. They either focused on small-scale individual practices that enforced the idea of personal responsibility for systemic problems, which was most apparent in the responses from the girls at School A, or they did not think that the change they wanted to see was possible, as was the case for the girls at School B. This change would require universal agreement and collective action about what the problems are, and this kind of solidarity seemed unfathomable to them. The girls at School A, however, believed that there were things they could do – that we all could do – to effect change. Much of this sense of efficacy came from their knowledge of social and political issues. As some of my participant explained:

I've grown up my entire life with a very political family. We always talk about

politics, we always watch the news. I was born and raised on this stuff, so ever since I was young… As soon as I am of voting age, I am THERE. Whether it is for some weird community person or the prime minister. It makes a huge difference. (C.P., 15 years old)

My parents actually talked about voting. My dad, he told me. I was pretty young, I didn't really care at that point. He was like, people were like there's no way Trump is going to win, so I'm just not going to vote, and then them not voting led to Trump winning, and so me too, as soon as I'm able to vote… If I know there are going to be elections… I think every vote counts. It's good that people have come to realize that. Yes, they should have realized that beforehand, but it's good that now people are talking. (Helen, 15 years old)

Although they are adamant about the importance of voting, they are so politically savvy that they also recognized the problems in the current democratic process:

Another thing's that ties into [this] is the voting system itself. Um because really in Canada the voting system that we have, it's not really that every vote counts. It's whoever gets the most. It's kinda like hard to describe... The reason people weren't voting is because they felt like their vote didn't matter because it really didn't. (C.P.)

By this logic, we are all responsible for who is in power and also not entirely responsible because of the system in place. To this end, individual actions become a crucial way to make a difference when the system itself inhibits the outcomes one values.

Many of the actions the girls from School A discussed were individual practices, such as conserving energy at home, reducing meat consumption, and being thoughtful and vigilant consumers as ways to effect change in the world. Helen explained, "I'd rather focus on myself, getting everything that I want in check. The whole plastic straw movement. Getting all the plastic, really shrinking my plastic intake. I'd rather focus on that first, then slowly move out into the public so that I have more to fall back on." This response reflects how significant it seems for a girl to believe she needs to master her individual life before venturing into the larger sphere. This response demonstrates neoliberal rationality at play, especially as it speaks to tensions of power as they pertain to figurations of contemporary girlhood. We must invest in the self first, before tackling larger issues, but the system ensures that the self is never enough and must continue to be invested in.

These girls also expressed frustration that more people do not take such simple personal measures to try to improve the world. C.P. told me: "one thing that really bothers me is that people will go out to a protest and that's all they'll do and they'll be like, 'Okay! I did something for society.' You hardly did everything. You showed up, walked around for like a couple hours. Like, sure that's amazing that you did that, but actually do something that's going to help society." Helen chimed in, "even the small things. Like environmentally. I'm going to use the environment as an example. There are people who'll just go to rallies and then they'll go home and leave all the lights on, and then leave the water running. My brother does this and I complain all the time. People are just like, oh I went to a protest, I had a sign, I took a picture, I posted it online, I'm cool now, I'm done. And then they don't actually care." The girls continued to express concern about people who are "fake woke," and they felt it was essential to "practice what you preach." "Fake woke" is a term to describe people who appear to be politically savvy

but who actually do not practice these values in their everyday lives, and/or do not take any action.

For these girls, it is important for our everyday practices to reflect our values. The figuration of girlhood that the "ordinary" girl is forging revolves around integrity and care. Although some people may not care about changing their habits to improve the world, as the girls suggest, there are those who do care but are not able to implement individual acts for various reasons. Many people may not have the resources to be able to make these changes, and many may not believe their actions will truly make a difference, which is not necessarily incorrect. Anthony Giddens (1991) was one of the first to describe how personal and individual life choices become political, resulting in changes to policies. He explains that this lifestyle politics emerges in late modernity as a new type of politics. Recycling and energy conservation at home are some examples.[16] I asked the girls if there were anything on a larger scale that would make it easier for us to do these "little things" in our everyday lives, or what barriers exist making these changes difficult to practice. C.P. pointed out that people can become comfortable in their habits, be loyal to certain products, and that there can be a "mental block." Helen jumped right in to say that people in power, such as Trump who "doesn't believe in pollution!" can persuade people into following their beliefs, or at least in discouraging them from proceeding to behave in a certain way. Although they are aware of the challenges to implementing change, they still communicated dissatisfaction and irritation about people's actions not necessarily reflecting their values.

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[16] Giddons distinguishes this politics from activities such as voting or demonstrating, which he describes as "emancipatory politics," attributing their popularity [of lifestyle politics?] to globalization and its technological developments.

While the girls at School A communicated a sense of frustration about people not doing their part to effect change, the girls at School B did not have the same expectation of others. How they experience and view power and powerlessness varied, and these diverse perspectives also emerged in conversations around the shows and the extra-ordinary girl characters. Instead of being irritated by other people not doing their part, the girls at School B expressed a sense of helplessness with respect to truly effecting change. This example articulates why examining the social and cultural contexts of both girls' experiences would be valuable for further study. The girls from School B are first generation immigrants (children of parents not born in Canada) from majority world countries, specifically Philippines and Kenya. How might all the girls' understanding of people and the world emerge in tandem with their lived experiences? Both groups of girls definitely cared about a variety of issues, I was curious about how they thought these issues might be resolved. R.D. (15 years old) from School B did not need to think about her response when she promptly and emphatically told me:

> They can't. I feel like there's just too many people in the world and there's just too many issues so that... I mean it can get better, but it will never 100% be fully resolved because there's always going to be people out there that think differently and have different opinions than you and what you stand for.

J.P. (16 years old) added, "I mean I have the same like thought, but like, I mean it could get better but some people just have like a certain mindset or thought drilled into their brain, so like I dunno how." When I asked what it would take to change people's mindsets, they both agreed that it would be difficult to do this. R.D. added, "for an example, when you grow up with a certain religion in your household, it's drilled into your mind that there's only that religion, or it's that that one thing you can believe in, so it's the same thing." The girls from both schools

agreed that attitudes and behaviours can be engrained and specific to the diverse beliefs and values that individuals have. Although all these girls understand that these attitudes can be difficult to change, the girls at School A seemed more optimistic that change was more in their control.

Numerous studies have shown links between self-efficacy and privilege (Lapour & Heppner, 2009; Quiroga-Garza et al., 2018;). A. S. Lapour and M. J. Heppner (2009), for example, found that for girls, social class privilege was a factor in feeling that there were plenty of career options available to them. Barbara A. Kerr and Jessica Gahm (2018) highlight that most studies to date about giftedness among young people focus mainly on white people of a privileged socioeconomic background. *Smart Girls in the Twenty-First Century* (Kerr & McKay, 2014) also explores the role privilege plays in girls' expressions of talent and ability.

Coming of Age: On Being and Becoming Better

Regardless of believing they could make a difference, all the girls in my study, on some level, felt somewhat like an activist, although not fully. As noted earlier, there is arguably a level of privilege that the students from School A have in comparison to those from School B. Although this privilege suggests greater self-efficacy, there is still an element of needing to be better for them. Specifically, the participants at School A admitted that their age was one of the reasons they did not quite consider themselves to be true activists. This sentiment is echoed throughout childhood and youth studies, which recognizes that in North American society, young people are often thought of having value in the future rather than the present. The girls in this project who are not in the public eye and have less social power, are in the process of coming of age in a way that differs from the extra-ordinary girl figures, especially as we think of coming of age semiotically. Coming of age for these girls in my study ironically reinforces the concept of

youth as being in the process of becoming. Although the extra-ordinary girl in the fictional texts discussed in this dissertation experiences a fuller coming-of-age arc, the snippet into this process for the girl not in the public eye offers a different and fuller perspective on what it means to think symbolically about girlhood today. Moreover, these narratives of the extra-ordinary girl as part of the cultural landscape are relevant to how the material girl with less social power comes of age. The in-betweenness of being and becoming that is often attributed to youth suggests an incompleteness and impressionability to youth, but the excerpts from the interviews illuminate how crucial it is to look to experiences within the process of being a teen and of coming-of-age into their values.

As the girls' responses suggest, there is a dialogic experience with the world at large that is essential to understanding how the girl not in the public eye relates to herself and the world. Helen began to explain her thoughts on the subject by saying, "I feel like when I'm older I really … Once I am old enough to do, to make…" and as she trailed off, C.P. jumped in to help her finish her thought, "old enough to not be treated as a kid, like 'you can't say this because you're a kid, or you can't do this because you're a kid…" This sentiment resonates with what Taft (2017) found in her study with girl activists. She argues that when girls describe themselves as "'becoming' rather than 'being' activists" they unintentionally are "contributing to their own invisibility and to the widespread dismissal of young people's politics as merely practice for the future" (p. 28). I had been so immersed and impressed by the mature and knowledgeable content of what these teens had been telling me, that I was admittedly caught off guard by the girls at School A lamenting about how their young age was a hinderance to them fulfilling their desire to be activists proper. As a youth researcher, I should not have been surprised that their young age meant that they might not be taken seriously, but the very fact that what they were saying was so

insightful that I myself forgot about how age can be a discriminatory factor. It is important to note that the girls at School B were aware of the fact that their young age *could* be preventing them from being more active, but they quickly denounced it as the main factor; rather, they felt that the irresolvability of the issues was why they were not activists proper. Their responses convey defiance of age discrimination and its control over their sense of self. Although age is one reason the girls do not consider themselves to be true activists, it is not the only reason, as we will see later in this chapter. Regardless of whether or not they identified as "real" activists, these girls from my study each understood that their sense of self was connected to their beliefs.

All the girls in my study understand that it is important to be vulnerable and true to themselves and their values but doing so requires them to behave with a certain strength and confidence that they either may not feel they have or comes at a cost that they are unwilling to pay. The girls at School A, in particular, conveyed feeling pressure to not let the external environment affect them harshly:

> People will yell at me and I'll just be like trying not to cry, and I think that my parents… and I'm really lucky people don't see me that way, but I know there will be people that will see me that way. I think so much about what people think about me and I don't want to be seen as like someone who's a hypocrite and whatever and just is doing it. I want to, before I really throw myself out there to my full extent, I want to have learned to be okay that there will be people who will say negative things about what I am doing because I really want to be an activist for certain things like inequality/equality, and seeing that it's something I care so much about that if people were to start saying negative things about me because of what I'm doing to try to help equality, I think that would at this point in

my life, I think that would throw me off and I would completely just stop doing it. So I'd want to learn to be able to take whatever and just do it. (Helen, 15 years old)

I'm just going to agree with you. I feel like I really need to have a tough skin to be a true activist 'cause there will always be, no matter what you're fighting about, there will always be someone who's opposing you, and they will do whatever means necessary to kind of beat you down and say like you're wrong or that's not it, and I feel I just really need to build up tough skin so that I can take it and kind of have it just bounce back. I'm not fully there yet. I mean I'm definitely starting to be able to take it a bit more, but like I said there's always room to grow. (C.P., 15 years old)

Both girls emphasized that they want to make sure they are doing the most they can for the world in their personal lives before venturing into the public sphere, but that they also hope this feeling of being not ready will change as they get older. Neoliberal feminism suggests that "the solution to injustice is to work on the self rather than to work with others for social and political transformation" (Gill, 2016, p. 617). These girls' responses are understandably complex, and through no fault of their own, are also aligned with a neoliberal agenda of individualism, stratification and personal responsibility for systemic problems. In her study with urban girls growing up during the girl power period, Emilie Zaslow (2009) also found a similar discordance in "the tension between the neoliberal empowerment language and narratives that they adopt, and their real social and emotional experiences of gender, race, and class inequalities" (p. 9). The refusal of the girls at School B to let their age be the reason for not being more active in the public sphere communicates this tension.

Care over Risk

Although the girls from School B did not seem to believe that they needed to improve themselves, they disavowed even making an effort. What they want for their adult selves is not compatible with what they believe is necessary to effect the change they want to see in the world, and therefore their effort was not worth the cost. Although speaking about policy intervention in the United Kingdom for working class young people's educational aspirations, Gavin Brown's (2011) attention to the emotional geographies of young people is relevant here. He emphasizes that there is a "disconnection between working class young people's aspirations and those promoted by policy interventions" (2011, p. 1). Girls from both schools believed they had much to risk by pursuing public activism. One of the factors that concerned some of these girls was losing "time." This statement, while striking, is not entirely surprising, coming from fifteen-year-olds. Teenagers are very aware of their status as being in progress towards becoming adults. Although not all young people may be worried about making the most of their youth and not compromising their future selves, this sentiment was certainly true for myself when I was a teenager. Rather than ascribe an explanation for this urgency young people have to salvage time, I am compelled to draw attention to how these girls' reluctance to participate in activism is connected to their saturation in social reproduction in other areas of life. R.D. communicated that she wants to have a family and "be there" for her relatives, and that if she could not see progress being made from her activist efforts, she would feel that her relatives would suffer from her not providing for them what was expected of her.

For R.D., activism was very much framed as a type of ongoing labour. She recognizes there are limits to her care work and that the labour coincides with consumed time. J.P. expressed similar concern for loved ones, adding that privacy was at stake as well: "Once you

put yourself out there, there's gonna be people who don't agree with what you say or don't want you addressing certain issues… So like once you put yourself out there it's risky for you and your family." Underlying the responses of the girls at School B was an awareness of how their actions would likely affect others. This sentiment was also present in their discussion about relationships in response to the shows we viewed. Making sure their loved ones were taken care of was of utmost importance, especially for the girls at School B. As such, the effort and labour of activist work felt futile.

There certainly are factors that the girls described as holding them back from being more socially active; however, there is no doubt that they all cared deeply about the issues they raised. The figuration of "ordinary" girlhood is sustained by stories of and connections to care. Part of the reason the girls in my study felt so strongly about these issues is that they were personally connected to them.

Helen explains that her desire to be more active towards her causes is her direct experience of them. She explains, "I think a big part of why I'm so involved in certain things is just because I actually see them firsthand. The ones I see firsthand are the ones I'm more… I care more about." This sentiment rang true for all the participants in my study. C.P.'s dissatisfaction with the representation of the LGBTQ2+ community in popular media, despite some progress being made, is tied to her connection to the issue. She asserted, "I feel as a member of that community, it's just not really represented as much as it should be." The traditional heteronormative romance narrative in popular media is problematic for C.P. Similarly, traditional gender roles that emerge from a heteronormative discourse were frustrating for Helen, who also expressed concern about the gender pay gap. She explained that her family life did not conform to traditional gender expectations, with her mother being the working parent and her

father being a stay-at-home dad: "I was always that one person that had that when usually it was the other way around and everyone was so shocked and I don't think that's a reason to be shocked. Like, you shouldn't be shocked when a man is doing that stuff. Like it's normal, either one who does it should be fine." Similarly, J.P.'s concern about equality and rights for immigrants was connected to her Filipino family's experience: "'Cause like my parents being immigrants and stuff, so like it was hard for them… When you're not from a specific country, they just look at you different. Treat you different." R.D. echoed J.P.'s sentiment that her family's experiences, as well as her own affective interpretations of these struggles have informed her views and values:

> I've been told stories by my grandparents, and I've been told stories by my mother, and I've seen it with my own eyes when I go to Kenya or something like that. I just see the poverty, I see the violence that happens at home, and I see that sometimes the world is just not the best place to be in, and sometimes… Mental health effects that as well, and they all tie in together…

All the girls expressed genuine care and concern for the lived inequalities that they and their loved ones' have experienced; however, passion in itself is not enough to bring about change. R.D. added, "there's just too many things and too many issues to tackle. Solving one issue won't solve another." Despite being personally connected to certain problems, it is difficult, if not impossible, to tackle them all unless we address the systemic root. All these issues, such as those raised by the girls, most certainly will not adequately be resolved as long as an individualistic and stratified mentality dominates minority world consciousness.

In the following section, the girls' responses to the clips from *The Hunger Games* and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* further highlight the importance of care and connection for these

girls. Their views on activism are not disconnected from their views on the narratives. Moreover, the speculative fiction genre of these popular texts – and the theme of love within them – although seemingly tangential in a conversation about the girl with less social power, activism and care – is relevant and crucial to an analysis of the extra-ordinary in present day.

SECTION 5.2 THE TEXT: CONTEXT, ANALYSIS AND RESPONSES TO CARE, RELATIONSHIPS & POWER

Context

Relationship Narratives, Care, Power

As we have seen in the previous section, the girls very much value their relationships, and would proudly behave in ways that prioritize their loved ones. This figuration of girlhood features care at its heart, much like the extra-ordinary case studies. Despite, or perhaps because, of these values, the girls were critical of the way romantic relationships are represented in the clips we viewed from *The Hunger Games* and *Chilling Adventure of Sabrina*. From the conversations with the teen girls in my study around activism, the girl with less social power negotiates her own desire to contribute to social change with the challenges that she identifies as holding her back from being more activist-like. In this section, through analysis of romantic relationship narratives in these texts and in the girls' responses to them, it becomes apparent that desire – in the romantic sense as well as an aspiration – is enmeshed with care and is in fact secondary to it. Although both desire and care are interconnected within the narratives, as well as in the lives of both the ordinary and extra-ordinary girls, care and connection are actually at the crux of any sense of desire the girl with less social power has. These include desire or longing for a romantic relationship, for becoming a better version of themselves, or even being a better

activist. In fact, care and connection are in many ways superior to any of these longings they communicate in our discussions. The relationship narrative for the extra-ordinary girl, as a proxy for understanding care and connection for the girl with less social power, is enmeshed with neoliberal feminist sentiment.

Although these shows, like many of their kind, appear to embrace a strong, defiant girl challenging *some* stereotypical ideas about girlhood, the young women protagonists of these shows also adhere to some traditional notions of femininity, particularly as they relate to romance. This is not necessarily a problem in itself; rather, the problem is the guising of traditional feminine ideals within a story that purports to challenge them. The characters' confidence and strength are of utmost importance not only for them to accomplish their desired goal in their environmental struggles, but also in their intimate relationships, and the girls I interviewed acknowledge this tension.

In sessions three (and four for School B), we watched clips from *The Hunger Games* and *Chilling Adventure of Sabrina* that are emblematic of the romance storyline. From our conversation around the clips, three observations stand out: (1) the girls in this study value relationships very much and had responses to the romance storylines that are in line with conceptions of the typical North American teen girl audience; (2) they had very removed and cerebral reactions to the scenes; and (3) they seemed compelled by the girl characters' power and strength – their extraordinariness. Furthermore, the ways the girls react to relationships on screen, and how they describe what they want for themselves, parallels their responses around activism, revealing the prominence of the neoliberal feminist-self. The ordinary girl, who is rooted in care, is cognizant of the extraordinary expectations that are put upon her.

In the clips we watched, the extra-ordinary girl characters – who are white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, thin, able-bodied, and conventionally attractive – have romantic storylines that both foreground their prototypical feminist independence and power, while also eliciting intrigue. Although the participants in my study, not surprisingly, expressed a common interest in the relationship narrative and what they hoped a romantic relationship would look like for them, they had critical responses to the segments.

These girls with less social power and public visibility had views that challenge preconceived ideas about girlhood and desire that society imposes on teen girls. As I assert throughout this project, characters and viewers alike demonstrate some traditionally feminine qualities, as well as the understanding that they must be confident and strong, all while being true to their own selves and values. The girls in this study admire the power and strength that the girl characters in these shows possess. The ordinary girl admires the extra-ordinary girl, and simultaneously recognizes an impossibility in becoming her with a disdain for what she represents, especially when care and caring for loved ones are the cost. By listening to what teen girls themselves think about the world and the relationships they have or would like to have, the intricacies of these ideological messages become apparent, but so too does the astute emotional awareness of young people who know what their personal values truly are.

Love and YA Speculative Fiction: The Ordinary and the Extraordinary

Love on the Teen Screen

The relationship narrative in this project is both symbolic as a means to talk about love, care, and connection, and also a significant theme in arts and entertainment. Moreover, relationship narratives open up conversations about power. Scholars across disciplines (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2010; Driesmans et al., 2016; Erzen, 2012; Schrum, 2004; Smith, 2012; Hylmö,

2006; Impett et al. 2011; Kaveney, 2006; Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009; Lewis, 1992) have long been interested in love and romance narratives for girls' film and TV audiences, approaching these topics from various perspectives with different objectives in mind. The objectives of such research range from ascertaining fear and moral panic to girls' well-being, to sheer curiosity about youth culture, providing context for how some aspects of desire have been understood in relation to girls and media. Moreover, this context foregrounds the ways my participants' responses on the topic compare and contrast to/with the existing literature.

Although in popular speculative fiction shows like *Hunger Games* and *Sabrina* romance is not the dominant theme, it is certainly present. In order to explore how love and relationships function in such texts and for the viewer, it is important to understand the cultural significance of love narratives. Drawing upon Pamela Regis' (2003) work on the romance novel, romance contains a "*definition of society*, always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform" (p. 14). Moreover, Janice Radway (1983) emphasizes that romance reading is propelled by dissatisfaction with ordinary life. Care and connection, while not necessarily extraordinary experiences, can imbue meaning into mundane life, thus transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary. It is the care and connection that all the girl figures in this project value that challenges what ordinary means. This dissertation argues that whether or not these values and practices of care render them extra-ordinary, girls depend on neoliberal society's standards, and thus contribute to various figurations of girlhood that further complicate care and exceptionality.

Romance in dystopian fiction can have a more obvious political aspect than in the romance text, but how the girls interpret and respond to such storylines in various speculative fiction films and shows depends a great deal on the text itself. With respect to children's and YA literature, Clémentine Beauvais (2012) emphasizes that young adult romance in dystopian texts

foregrounds the junction of adult authoritarianism and teenage emotional growth. In the romance text, like the traditional teen film, although teenage love exists as a rebellion of sorts and as a "gut reaction against hegemonic discourse," its power to contest the unsatisfactory world depends on adults not expecting it or utilizing it for their benefit (Beauvais, 2012, p. 64). I argue that this message is most greatly exemplified at the end of *The Hunger Games* film when Katniss and Peeta unite to defy the game makers. The formal aspects of the texts within the narratives create meaning, as Belton (2016) notes. These messages, in their holistic presentation, carry ideological signification.

In my study, exploring the girls' responses to the films, particularly the scenes emblematic of their romance storylines, creates space to examine the various messages around love, human relationships and power as presented in the texts, but also as emanating from the girls themselves. The elicitation interview sessions provide a platform for the girls themselves to explain their actual views on desire and defiance.

Private, Powerful Girls with Heart

Women's strength and success are important, but the idea of powerful girls and girls who want to be powerful is what I am most interested in. Although the characters of Sabrina and Katniss are distinct case examples and not particularly similar to each other, they both possess extra-ordinary strength and power. Sabrina is a teenage witch, and Katniss is strong, both physically and mentally, and a skilled fighter. Furthermore, both are framed as being special and as having innate giftedness. This type of powerful lead girl character is definitely important. The representation of an exceptionally powerful girl does, however, lend itself to Banet-Weiser's critique of 'popular feminism' in shows like these. Even in our activism conversation, C.P. confessed that she did not have a "thick enough skin" for it. I argue that this feeling is a product

of the neoliberal ideology that is in fact responsible for the very societal problems that these girls care so deeply about.

The girl viewer, who may aspire to be as self-possessed as Sabrina or Katniss yet does not have the supernatural abilities or extra-ordinary strength that these characters do, is bewitched by the "cruel optimism" that these purportedly feminist shows perpetuate. They want to be super powerful in ways that are beyond their reach. Of course, not all viewers desire to be like these characters. The way the characters are presented here communicates a strong empowered girl, which is captivating. The strength and power the characters possess serves as a metaphor for power in anything. The girls in my study express admiration for Katniss's strength of character.

> And then Katniss, I mean, I *try* to be courageous, but she's the next level courageous. Next level brave… I also think about like Katniss being a strong powerful woman in position. That's why I really like the movie because you know, you don't really see that many girls in that kind of position showing that much bravery. And I dunno, it kind of inspired me. I really liked watching her and her performance. (R.D., 15 years old)

> Usually like you see like the male characters trying to save like the female characters, but in this case it was her trying to save Peeta so I feel like that kind of highlights her strong personality. (S.A., 15 years old)

The girls in my study commented on the strength or power of the main characters in these shows with admiration. McClearen (2015), who conducted research with women audiences of action films, found that the "women interviewed are reluctant to believe that the female bodies onscreen

are physically capable of the action they perform when compared with action heroes" (p. 833). Although these audiences recognize the impossibility of emulating the heroines' physical strength, they think of her performance as a "visual metaphor for career and academic success and take pleasure in seeing women succeed despite adversity" (McClearen, 2015, p. 833). McClearen asserts that the participants' responses to the action heroine reveal postfeminist ideals such as individualism. Rottenberg would argue that this message is more specifically a neoliberal feminist one when the participants recognize that there is still a need for feminism, as many of the girls in my study do; and so would Sabrina and Katniss, I suspect.

Although the participants in my study all identified as girls, they did not relate unconditionally to the girl characters on screen, regardless of recognizing the ways gender may be at play. Many of the girls from School B surprised me with their delightful admission that they related most to Gale, Katniss's long-time district friend, in the scene I showed from *The Hunger Games*. "Just seeing a person that I like with someone else, like it's happened to me so many times like, that's why I laugh whenever I see it. Like Oh my god, that's me!" (R.D.). This feeling was not exclusively pertaining to romance, however. S.A. added, "for… me, it wasn't like about me liking that person, it was just I saw something I just like shouldn't see. I would be better off not seeing it because I would just feel bad if I did. Probably that's why I relate to Gale… I feel like he would have been better off if he didn't see that 'cause he has like a different perspective of Katniss now." The girls' responses illuminate that the reality of a situation can sometimes complicate a relationship, regardless of gender. The girls in my study are negotiating various qualities such as power and care as they exist in figurations of extra-ordinary girlhood as demonstrated in their responses to these texts, as well as to activism.

Analysis and Responses

Cerebral Reactions

The girls in my study had similar reactions to the clips to one another, even across the different shows. Because School A worked on a creative project in their last session, rather than discuss a second clip the way School B did, I cannot compare responses to *The Hunger Games* scene for both schools. That said, the information I did gather was meaningful in its own way. I was amused (and admittedly slightly disappointed) by their amusement and skepticism around the segments, specifically to the scene from *Sabrina*.

At School A, E.L., who did not know anything about *Sabrina*, says, "she tells him randomly out of the blue 'Yeah, I'm going to a boarding school,' which is also like very cliché. And then she looks at him seriously and takes him into the woods, like a hostage, and then the boy's randomly like 'you don't want to be with me?' and he doesn't even think that she's psycho or anything. 'Oh my gosh, you're a witch!? Oh my gosh.' I'd call 911." Helen drew attention to the fact that of course this show was not intended to be realistic, "I didn't write it down, that it's unrealistic, 'cause like it's an unrealistic show." C.P., who even prior to this study loved the show, chimed in, "I'm just gonna say it's very corny and cheesy, but I did think that when Sabrina was trying to break up with him, he did convey a lot of like, 'it's fine, we can work this out, we can make it long distance,' which I think is almost realistic in some relationships when someone has to go away." For C.P., as someone who identifies as part of the LGBTQ2+ community, it is the traditional heteronormative romance narratives in general that are problematic.

Some of the girls' responses were not even related to the storylines. J.P., from School B, commented on genre scripts: "I mean, well the plot was different, but I feel like all these new shows are basically the same. Like they, they all have the same twist to it. Like, their loved one

is in disbelief of whatever they are like witch, werewolf, all that stuff. And then, yeah. I feel there's a lot of TV shows and movies that have that." Here she steps back from the narrative of *Sabrina* and comments on how formulaic the structure of the story is. Perhaps because this scene was presented on its own, disconnected from the rest of the show, she was more critical of the various elements that went into its making. The very fact that she commented on the formal and stylistic components highlights a certain level of critical acuity that all of the girls expressed.

Even in response to the scene from *The Hunger Games*, the girls expressed detachment. R.D. said, "I wanted to laugh." She playfully explains that she reacted this way because when we are shown Gale's face, she remembers that his character is in love with Katniss. Giggling a lot, she says, "It's like the kids at our school. Yeah, it's so funny! One person's with another, then another wants to be with them. It's like a love triangle." The girls in my study were very attentive to formal and stylistic aspects of the shows. They were also drawn to Peeta's scars and bruises. M.H. was sure to emphasize her affective reaction about the wounds, asserting that they were "kinda disgusting." The scene is disconnected from the rest of the movie here, and because R.D. already knew the storyline, her amused reaction was informed by knowledge of the context from which it was extracted. Incidentally, she also said that she was very suspicious of Peeta's desire to protect Katniss, given the nature of The Games. The girls had very cerebral reactions to the relationship scenes. They commented very practically on narrative and technical matters in the shows more than their emotional experience of them.

When I asked the girls what stood out for them from the clips we viewed, many of them focused on whether or not the scenes were realistic. Although later in our session I asked the girls about how realistic the romance storyline seemed, I did not raise the question of realism at all before this; they thought about the story on these terms. I think it is understandable to try to

identify and connect with elements of a story. If something seems 'realistic' to us, then it is easier to identify with it. Helen from School A asserted that she did not make note of the show being "unrealistic, 'cause like it's an unrealistic show," implying that the supernatural quality of *Sabrina* necessarily removed it from the realm of realism. She asserted that the one thing she took away from this show is a "spooky and ominous" mood. Looking past the genre, C.P. commented on the characters:

> I just really focused on the contrast between the two characters. Harvey seemed to be almost... definitely more realistic in many aspects to what a regular teenage boy might be like. I know like in the show he has a messy room and all those teenage boy stuff. And then Sabrina saying stuff like 'there are so many delicious things about being a witch' and she's in all these extravagant kind of like weird clothes. I just notice a lot of contrast between the two characters.

E.L., from the same school, who does not like this genre, spoke mostly about the story and how it did not make sense to her. Interestingly, C.P., who loves the show and appreciates many of the messages behind the show, also has issue with it, especially around its depiction of LGBTQ2+ rights in season one, as mentioned earlier:

> The whole premise of the show is like accept yourself, love yourself. It doesn't matter who you are you can always be who you want, do what you want. If you're a witch, go to mortal school... (The characters) are so drastically different, that there isn't much room for people to relate to them. Even though there is diversity. There is a trans character, which shouldn't be like a huge thing, like 'oh my god, there's a trans character!' but it is, and that's reality. And I think that a lot of people can relate to that but I think there's still so much room for them to create more characters and more aspects of the characters for

people to be able to relate to. That kind of really drifted from your questions, but I needed to get that out there!

While the students at School A focused mostly on the storyline in *Sabrina*, the students at School B were most drawn to the technical aspects of the show. R.D. in speaking about Ross Lynch, the actor who portrays Sabrina's boyfriend Harvey, definitively asserted, "I'd change the actor. No hate on him, but I feel like there were many other actors who could." G.S. also did not like the actor who played Harvey. She notes that there are so many shows in the supernatural genre and that she felt an actor who is connected to this genre through his other work should have been cast. She also would have liked more variety in the setting for the scene we looked at. J.P. was the only participant from both schools to comment on cinematography: "The camera angles were a little weird too. I'm not saying... I mean. Hold on. They were like close up and then just after a few seconds they would switch it and then keep switching it. It was hard to adjust."

I believe a major reason the girls reacted skeptically and with amusement is because they viewed the segments out of context, many not having any prior knowledge of the stories at all, with *Sabrina* in particular. Even though we did not screen both series in their entirety, I suspect their responses would still be similar. After all, echoing what Driesmans et al. (2016) found in their study, "watching a romantic movie did not increase the endorsement of romantic beliefs" (p. 312). The girls' reactions to these segments still communicate important and useful information, however. When we extract and analyze parts of a larger discourse, we can get a better appreciation for how context plays a role in the overall narrative/message. The girls' skepticism and analysis of these scenes, much like their convictions around social issues, reveals that these young women possess critical consciousness of what choices and actions are aligned

with their values. Their cerebral responses are especially significant in that they not only demonstrate their media literacy but also their critical agency.

Relationships Matter

From all of the conversations in the group interviews, the importance of relationships for these girls is significant. Moreover, the girls communicated empathy for the characters on screen, which, in following Gary Olson's (2013) argument, is inherently contrary to the individualism of neoliberal capitalist rationality. In response to the scene from *The Hunger Games*, Mandy shares, "I feel for Katniss because she's trying to save him. If I was in that position, and my friend was hurt, or a loved one, I would risk my life to save them. If I'm really close with them, you know? I would." This loyalty and care for loved ones came up in our conversation about activism as well. Connectedness, which is facilitated by care and empathy, is simultaneously encouraged and limited within our current society. A simple and commonly discussed example of this complex phenomenon is with social media. In *Filling the Void: Emotion Capitalism and Social Media* (2017), for example, Marcus Gilroy-Ware analyzes the interrelationship between the complex ways humans experience and engage with social media within capitalism. In fact, Siân Lincoln (2012) found that young people find themselves drifting between public and private realms. They desire individuality, but also connection and commonalities with their peers (p. 149). Although this is a common dialectical reality, it reflects a tension within neoliberal society.

Although none of the girls in my study were in romantic relationships during the time we met, all of them envisioned being in positive relationships in the future. It became apparent to me that these relationships, like the activist work they talked about, depended on building a better self first. As Brown points out, neoliberal reasoning has us thinking about our future value. The weight of this messaging is especially heavy for young people who are often thought of in terms

of having more value in the future. All the girls I spoke with either believed being a true activist required them to be stronger or more confident than they were, or they felt their loved ones would suffer from the dispersion of their care. The protagonists of the shows also illuminate the struggle between coming into power and nurturing their relationships. A woman or girl should not have to choose one over the other though, as per neoliberal feminism. By this rationality, the goal is to find the right balance between the two.

Although strength and confidence may indeed facilitate interpersonal relationships and activist work, society's emphasis on achieving these qualities can be vacuous, placing the responsibility on the individual. This emphasis on confidence and passion as a way to achieve meaningful goals is relevant in both intimate relationship narratives featuring young people, as well as discourses around social justice. The neoliberal agenda flourishes at the junction where the real and the possible meet the fantasy or desire for change that the girls want to accomplish. Here is where the reality of regular experiences is ornamented with the promise of a better, empowered life if we work hard, including on ourselves. Poverty was one of the issues that R.D. raised as being important to her in our social issues conversation. It is not surprising then that she points out that class inequality in *The Hunger Games* is a topic that seemed realistic to her: "And given the situation, like, they're all really, some of them are really, they're all actually really poor and they're just trying to survive and make it to the top, it sounds like" (R.D.). In *The Hunger Games* and *Sabrina*, like in any other show of this genre, there are greater struggles than the personal ones that the characters are working towards overcoming. These struggles challenge their convictions, as well as their romantic relationships. Young romantic relationships in the midst of an onerous storyline in mainstream adaptations evoke a similar struggle to that which

the girls in my study communicated regarding not having fully developed the strength they think they need to be effectual.

On Gender and Relationship Dynamics

In our sessions, the girls noted that for the girl characters in the shows, their power presented an extra challenge when it came to their romantic relationship storyline. They acknowledged a downside to this extraordinariness in the context of romantic relationships. E.L. emphatically pointed out that Sabrina's supernatural abilities are viewed negatively by her boyfriend: "He was like, 'Oh you're a witch? That's a negative thing' But it could be a positive thing. Like, come on, she could be like Harry Potter. Make a cupcake appear in front of your eyes" (E.L.). Harvey, instead, was upset to learn that his girlfriend was part witch. Furthermore, R.D. even wonders if what the characters expected from one another in the scene from *The Hunger Games* would have been different if the gender roles were reversed: "I was thinking if Peeta was in Katniss's position, would he have gone to get the medicine, or would he have stayed. She stayed because she has a heart. It's just 'cause he doesn't want her to go because she's a girl" (R.D.). Here we see how these viewers recognize some of the complex ways gender roles and power dynamics – quite literally in these cases – can play out in relationships. The neoliberal feminist is especially cognizant of these gender dynamics, but persists nevertheless.

The girls emphasized the realism in the representation of both the relationship and gender dynamics on screen, highlighting their significance in their own lives. The complex nuances of how the characters react have relevance to real interactions they have experienced, and thus are significant to their view on relationships. Helen points out that Harvey's reaction to Sabrina's being a witch seemed realistic to her: "I like how he kept being like, 'oh yeah you can trust me, you can tell me the truth, we'll work through it,' which is like something every single guy says

probably. So, yeah." R.D. from School B also jumped on Harvey's inconsistent reaction in the scene:

> "That pisses me off so much. Because *that* happens in real life all the time. And I've seen that person with like friends and family. Sometimes you're like, I love you just tell me what's wrong, and you tell them and then they, you know, they just don't agree with or believe you. And it's happened to me… Sometimes I don't say things for a reason 'cause I know you're going to get mad, but if you force me to say it I expect you to agree with it or at least accept it."

Although the actual situation in this show is not the most realistic, the girls are touching upon an important aspect of relationships. They acknowledge that being honest and vulnerable is important to intimacy, and also that loved ones may not react the way they say they will when they find out a truth that they do not like. This is its very own version of cruel optimism. The promise of something is thwarted by the reality of the circumstance. Figuratively speaking, here the girl with less social power empathizes with the extra-ordinary girl in the context of relationships of all kinds. Care and connection are here the uniting qualities for the ordinary and extra-ordinary girl.

Character Identification

While the girls connected and empathized with the characters in some contexts, they did not identify with them unconditionally. Moreover, as girls, they did not necessarily relate to the girl characters on screen, even when they connected with the characters and regardless of recognizing the ways gender and relationships may be at play. There is an entire body of scholarship devoted to spectator identification, including within feminist film theory and reception studies (Doane, 1982; hooks, 1992; Mulvey, 1975, 1981; Stacey, 1993), that explores

notions of desire similar to those in this project. My main interest around spectator identification with characters on screen revolves around how it pertains to the girls in my study's experiences and values. Through the conversations about the relationships and relationship dynamics on screen, it became apparent that care and compromise were fundamental to what the girls struggle with when it comes to love of all kinds, regardless of gender and extraordinariness, as when the girls from School B said that they related most to Gale.

The girls from School A were adamant about how real-life relationships of all kinds are much more complex than how they are typically presented in shows and movies. Care and a desire for connection include a variety of challenges. The conversation that came out of the scene from *Sabrina* developed into a discussion about romance in popular media in general, offering greater insight into how the girls understand relationships. Helen pointed out that she felt in shows, relationships are "either really polished, or they show abusive relationships. There's like no in-between. 'Cause like in between there are fights but they're not necessarily abusive. But in TV they're either abusive (with both emotional or physical abuse) or they're like SO perfect." Not only does she emphasize an understanding of a conflicted reality of all sorts of relationships, what she shares reinforces just how complex care is. The girls I met with vehemently oppose polished representations of experiences that in reality can be difficult and also important. In a way, to deny or alter the complexity of these experiences is a disservice that, although pleasant to watch because of their ease and simplicity, essentially perpetuates the status quo. The criticism the girls have does not mean they are not interested in relationships. In fact, the truth is quite the opposite of that. The girls care deeply about their loved ones and the way they describe their relationships suggests that they embrace connection. Moreover, this desire for community and

care starkly contrasts the individualism and emphasis on achievement behind neoliberal rationality.

Care and Commodity

Themes of care, connection, love, the romantic relationship, activism, and power, although each with their own meaning, all arose and interrelated in the interviews, and speak to greater socio-political issues as they relate to extra-ordinary girlhood. These very human experiences, although not experienced by everyone, are also thus easily exploited and commodified. Although not necessarily commodities in themselves, when these experiences are presented within a text as a way to cement the immersion of a girl viewer who aspires to be powerful like the lead girl characters, they do become a type of commodity. The text that presents this desirable extra-ordinary girl phenomenon becomes like a commodity as the demand for such representations and figures of the girl increases. For the extra-ordinary girl, this storyline opens up dialogue about exceptionality and neoliberal rationality. A strong girl protagonist reinforces this ideology when she struggles to negotiate loving feelings (for a young man) with great "important" objectives such as survival or saving society. This is a struggle that young women who aspire to be great might come to relate to, if they do not already. The girls I had conversations with are cognizant and critical to some degree of the way love is represented in media. The larger struggle in the narratives where the extra-ordinary girls are vocationally passionate about a greater good – and are sometimes extra-ordinary because of their convictions – often involves rebelling against the status quo. This rebellion creates the perception – and often the illusion – that the shows are revolutionary. In reality, although there are empowering aspects to these stories, they can further stratify young viewers into a mentality of aspiring to be powerful and leave their mark on the world, without addressing that this is currently a world that

complicates the very relationships and social issues it purports to care about. The girls in my study are negotiating various qualities attributed to contemporary figurations of extra-ordinary girlhood, and in doing so are carving out their own figuration of girlhood.

SECTION 5.3 CULTURAL CONTEXT: NEOLIBERALISM, MEDIA, AND COMMUNITY

Introduction: Toronto Girls in Context

There are a variety of factors that contribute to the girls' reception of the shows examined, as well as their views of themselves and social issues, especially as they relate to care and connection. These cultural and socio-economic aspects hold ideological meaning and provide crucial context for understanding how the lived experiences of a young person are not necessarily in-line with the theoretical. These environmental circumstances are foundational to how the girl thinks about herself, her loved ones, and the world at large. By environment in this case, I am referring to familial, socio-economic and geographic factors, rather than those specific to the natural world. Moreover, these factors that are a culmination of the current ideological-political structures also have consequences that affect their livelihoods and how they engage with the world. What the girls communicate as important to them foregrounds a tension between the dominant neoliberal ideology and their own values rooted in care and collectivity.

Social Context

Class and the Classroom: Schools and Neighbourhoods

While I at times compare responses of the girls from each school, doing so ultimately serves to illuminate larger socio-political issues at play that shape contemporary figures of the extra-ordinary girl and figurations of exceptional girlhood. Insofar as my comparison of the girls' responses foregrounds issues of power (as exemplified by class, ethnicity, and age) that

contribute to their feeling a need for self-improvement, background on where they are located in these categories is relevant information. Even though the comparison of the two schools is secondary to my larger argument, the details that emerge in this comparison serve my larger argument as they foreground neoliberal rationality.

As noted in Chapter Two, these interviews were conducted with students from two different high schools from the Toronto District School Board: School A and School B. The former is a public arts high school in a relatively affluent neighborhood, and the latter is a public high school in a lower income priority neighborhood as defined by the City of Toronto's Neighborhood Improvement Areas under the Toronto Strong Neighborhoods Strategy 2020 (NIA, 2019). Although the communities in which these schools are based do not determine the girls' outlooks, they provide useful context. As noted earlier, although School A is located in a relatively affluent neighbourhood, anyone can audition to attend the school. These students come from across the city, we cannot assume homogeneity in terms of privilege. Students attending School B are more likely to attend because it is their feeder school.

Demographic information about the schools offers relevant information in contextualizing the girls' perspectives and values. According to the Toronto District School Board website, as of December 2017, 61% of the students at School B have a primary language other than English and 15% of the students who provided information about their language have been living in Canada for five years or less. These percentages are high, especially compared to School A, where 17% of the students have a primary language other than English, and only 0.02% of students have been living in Canada for five years or less (TDSB, 2019). These statistics support that there is a strong immigrant population in School B's neighbourhood; although this information does not tell us the incomes of the families, we can pair this data with

information about the neighborhoods in which the schools are situated. Sociologist Carl E. James (2012), renowned for his work on schools in the neighborhood of Jane and Finch, points out that this area has essentially been understood to be the exemplary "troubled" and "at-risk" community in Canada because of the "inequitable socio-economic structures that mediate individuals' social circumstances as well as their opportunities and possibilities" (p. 24). The high poverty rate is a consequence of these circumstances and prompted the creation of the resident-led grassroots organization, Jane and Finch Action Against Poverty (JFAAP).

This information is relevant to an understanding of the experiences of young people in these environments. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus offers a foundation for conceptualizing how and why the teen girls in my study might have the views they do. Habitus is the encapsulation of our cultural, social, and physical environment through which our preferences, tendencies, and practices grow. Bourdieu explains that while family is the key primary determinant of one's habitus, it sets the tone for one's interactions with education (1984). The girls in my study spoke of their families interchangeably with the other topics of conversation. Family is a foundational basis of experience. As with any environment or experience, the schooling experience is not static and can change and also contribute to one's habitus. The young people's habitus as established through the school is determined by the class of the school, which often intersects with the class positions of their families, whose neighbourhoods often – although not always – determine school. Socio-economic class is embedded in the education system and environment, and as such, is the primary determinant of one's access to resources and expertise. The current habitus and its class-component for the girls in my study is important to keep in mind when interpreting their views.

Cultural-Political Context

Neoliberal Conditions

Before exploring some significant socio-economic factors specific to the girls in my study, an outline of the neoliberal in a theoretical sense as it pertains to the engagement with the popular text provides a point of departure for thinking about the ideological context for the lived experiences of the girls. As examined earlier, their engagement with the extra-ordinary girl and relationships is complex and, to varying extents, a comment on the status quo. As the previous chapters have argued, the shows featuring the extra-ordinary girl also engage in a dialogic relationship with North American society. This dialogue reflects back onto society the girl as a rebellious hero who fights against oppressive figures and structures. Such a text can satisfy or ignite a kind of fantasy in the teen girl who also might aspire to make life better.

The fantasy that is ignited in these teen girls resembles Berlant's cruel optimism. The stories, adaptations and media attention attract the girls to aspire for change while making it difficult for them to actually challenge the structural issues that are complicating the fulfillment of their desire. Political theorist Wendy Brown's idea of neoliberal rationality also applies here. Following Michel Foucault's thinking, Brown asserts that the rationality that governs the state infiltrates the inner working of the individual as well. As an interpellated subject, how we think about ourselves and orient our actions are informed by these capital-enhancing values (2015). She argues that we have achieved "the rationality required for self-sovereignty, including being master of our desires, rather than slave to them, as well as resisting social and state interference in our life choices" (2015, p. 97). Jim McGuigan (2014) points out that "signs and symbols of ostensible dissent are joyfully inscribed into capitalism itself through mass-popular forms and practices" (pp. 229-230). This is not to say that there is not value to these depictions and

messages; rather, the message here is to think critically about the origins of such projects to better understand their actual significance.

The girls in my study mentioned that their young age was a factor holding them back from participating more fully in activism, but some of them also confessed vulnerability about not having a "thick enough skin" to endure the trials and tribulations that accompany activist work. I argue that this feeling is a product of the very society that is in fact responsible for the very societal problems that these girls care so deeply about. Furthermore, how are these internalized narratives of not being strong enough a product of the social context and lived experiences of (in)equality Gill and Orgad (2015) argue that the need for women to be confident, regardless of their age, is a "new technology of self, and one that is profoundly gendered" (p. 339). Foucault (1988) developed the idea of a technology of self to explore how individuals connect their own values, behaviours and bodies with wider discourses (p. 18). For him, it was a way to imbue individuals with agency. For Gill and Orgad, this term opens up a new way of thinking about the relationship between culture and subjectivity, while taking into consideration the role power plays for both.

The figure of a strong confident woman is not in itself problematic and is in fact crucial to feminism. When it emerges as part of neoliberal feminism, however, it is important to think critically about how it not only might divide girlhood into valuable versus unworthy, using shame as its tool, but also how it might enable more racialized and class-stratified gender exploitation. This type of exploitation is that which Rottenberg asserts "increasingly constitutes the invisible infrastructure of our neoliberal order" (Rottenberg, 2019, para. 32). Neoliberal feminism has laid the foundation for Banet-Weiser's popular feminism that "tinkers on the surface, embracing a palatable feminism, encouraging individual girls and women to just *be*

empowered" (2018, p. 21). By listening to what teen girls themselves think about the world and the relationships they have or would like to have, the intricacies of these ideological messages become apparent, but so does the astute emotional awareness of young people who know what their personal values are.

Youth Activism in Media Culture

The dialogic relationship between media culture – and its ideological implications – and how people interpret and perceive the world and themselves, also applies to media coverage of activism. Over the past several years there has been a great deal of media attention to youth activism in North America, particularly in the United States. Youth social movements have been an integral part of North American society and provide relevant context for the activism component of the group interviews. Media coverage of youth activism has the potential to inspire young people into action, activating activists. Given this possibility, it is noteworthy that none of the girls in my study mentioned anything about March for Our Lives youth activist Emma Gonzalez, March for Our Lives itself, or other social movements involving young people that have garnered media coverage over the past several years. Martin Luther King Jr. was the only activist mentioned, he was only referred to once, and it was later brought to my attention that learning about him was part of the school curriculum. I did not ask the girls directly to name examples of activism because I wanted them to direct the conversation as much as possible.

The closest the girls came to mentioning examples of activism in media was when the girls at School A discussed some social media posts around social issues. C.P. mentioned that many of her peers were sharing on their social media a video of a rhinoceros and its horn removal to raise awareness of rhinoceros poaching and animal cruelty at large. Although sharing information via social media is a fast way for it to reach a large number of people, she is critical

about this sort of activism: "That really bothers me 'cause then they turn around and go back to using make-up products that are still not cruelty-free." She also declared that this type of activity is just one more way for "fake woke" people to build up their image as socially aware. Again, here we see that it is important to her that individual acts are aligned with personal values, particularly when the goal is the betterment of society. She also underscores the complex and often contentious relationship between consumerism and social justice.

Activism as I have been discussing it is essentially the antithesis of commodity, and yet, the line between the two can easily become blurred. On the one hand, there are many ways that companies exploit activism as a way to make profit. Some examples of this include Dove's Real Beauty campaign and buying red products from Apple to fight AIDS. Although there is some benefit to bringing to light the issues these companies claim to care about, the message is attached to making a profit. When young celebrities speak out about important social issues, this can also fit into this idea of commodity activism, although less obviously so. The type of social work being advocated by celebrities typically reinforces the status quo. Furthermore, although young celebrity activism can inspire other young people to participate in social justice work, the average young person does not have the means to do so in the way their role models do. This particular type of activism can ignite hope and desire in young people to improve the world, yet it does not truly equip them with the information and methods to do so effectively. This cruel optimism is also at play when celebrities like Emma Watson, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, talk about the importance of feminism, like she did at the #HeForShe campaign launch. This speech was delivered at the United Nations in September 2014. The demographic of young women that such popular feminist activism excludes (e.g. women with less social power

and class) may be inspired by the message, yet unable to experience its promise because of social barriers.

These displays can be inspiring for young women, but for the girl with less social power and public visibility, these particular messages of feminism come with the structural obstacles preventing the girls from flourishing in a way they might desire to. Such messages are certainly important, but this type of "accommodating feminism" dances around the type of disruption that would be necessary to truly instigate change (McRobbie, 2013, p. 135). The confidence and strength that are intrinsic to this vision of feminism are precisely the qualities that the girls in my study feel they still have not fully developed.

Not only are these the qualities that these girls believe they need to master in order to be "proper" activists, but these are also the characteristics that they seem to identify as the secret to success in all areas of life. As examined in the earlier section, young relationships in the midst of an apocalyptic or horrific storyline in mainstream adaptations evoke a similar struggle, based on the girls' responses to them. Although strength and confidence may indeed facilitate interpersonal relationships and activist work, society's emphasis on achieving these qualities raises impossible expectations, placing the responsibility on the individual. This emphasis on confidence and passion as a way to achieve meaningful goals is relevant in both relationship narratives featuring young people, as well as discourses around social justice.

Activating Activists

The girls told me that their understanding of activism is informed by various sources, including school, shows, the news (where many social movements are given exposure), as well as through Facebook pages and hashtags on social media. Neoliberal ideals inform many of these outlets. Rottenberg points out that neoliberal feminism differs from postfeminism in that

neoliberal feminism acknowledges some feminist issues, such as gendered wage inequality and sexual harassment. It works to support (often indirectly) the status quo and the overarching emphasis on individualism. The girls at School A in particular recognize feminist issues, such as the gender pay gap and sexualization of women, but their activism does not challenge deep structural issues. The girls at School B do not adhere as explicitly to supporting neoliberal ideology, but their inhibited outreach is, I argue, directly connected to them navigating being young women of colour in a lower-income neighbourhood in our current North American society. As Taft reveals in *Rebel Girls* (2011), teen girl activism looks different across the Americas: "Compared to their North American peers, Latin American girls have more places where they can practice expressing their critical knowledges, expand on their skills of political analysis, and learn more extensive political vocabularies" (Taft, 2011, p. 109).

Taft has since acknowledged a shift in the political climate in North America with more young people here involved in social movements (2020). R.D. even recognizes that in school they are learning about social issues that in the past would not have been discussed: "I'd say probably all of us are activists in a way because in school we're told to stick up for those things, and we learn about issues. We're learning about issues that were never really brought into the light about five years ago, so I think that's just one step that an activist takes and so I feel like somehow we're all contributing to that." Moving forward, it will be interesting to hear what teen girls think about these issues as we continue to engage with them and ask them what it means to them to be active towards social change.

Social Concerns Raised by the Girls

In the group interviews, the girls raised some critical social issues that they cared about and tried to work on improving even though none of them were involved in public activism. As I

mention in Chapter Two, I framed my study as being focused on media as opposed to activism. This approach set the foundation for a conversation about social concerns without the pressure of potentially meeting certain activism standards or of performing an activist role. I was able to gain insight into how girls who might not be primed for a discussion about social issues think about issues that are important to them. Furthermore, and arguably most importantly, I learned about how they think these issues can be resolved or improved, and what they identified as holding them back from being more engaged in effecting change. Understanding their perspectives and what they considered to be obstacles is essential to avoid making theoretical generalizations about young people. Before delving into these details, I asked the participants if there were any social issues that were important to them, and I provided a long list of examples to clarify what I meant.

The issues raised were different at each school. The girls at School A voiced LGBTQ2+ rights, gender equality, and the objectification and sexualization of women as important concerns for them when I asked them directly if there were social problems they felt strongly about. As the interviews progressed, environmentalism was a shared issue for them, as well as animal cruelty. Although there were only two students present on this day, both were white girls from upper-middle class families, and their responses have similar underlying messages throughout the sessions. At School B, there were also only two girls present at this first official meeting, but their responses echoed those from School A. The issues these girls cared about were equality for immigrants, mental health, violence, domestic abuse, and environmental issues. Regarding how these issues might be improved, these girls were quick to communicate their thoughts.

Invisible Solution: Collective Action

In the spaces between the girls' words, collective action is the solution to the issues that matter to them. J.P. referred to Martin Luther King Jr. as a "big" activist to her. King is a famous activist for many reasons, and his legacy if one of racial equality, collectivity, and of bringing justice to the poor and oppressed. Interestingly, a fundamental aspect of King's political strength was his radicalness. This aspect of his work has been overlooked, largely because Ronald Reagan manipulated King's activism to support his own neoliberal political agenda. He asserted that King had helped to achieve equal opportunity on a large scale for the United States, and that now it was up to individuals to further the progress of equality (Bostdorff & Goldzigg, 2005). This approach is also evident in postfeminist discourse that proclaims with girl power, gender equality has been achieved and feminism is no longer needed. Any discrepancy between empowerment narratives and real lived inequalities become the problem of the individual. Reagan declared to high school students in 1987, "You can honor Dr. King today by making certain you try your hardest to take advantage of the great opportunities available to you" (Bostdorff & Goldzigg, 2005, p. 672). The girls in my study have indeed internalized this message, as many people have. Sometimes opportunities are few and far between, but even when they are present the neoliberal rationality has on some level infiltrated the collective consciousness, as we have seen with Helen and C.P.'s self-criticalness around being good individual activist in their personal lives. Only a large community of like-minded people invested in true social justice can challenge deep structural change. Even the word "invested" alludes to market value discourse. King's true past as a radical activist has recently been discussed in the media (Gershon, 2016; West, 2018), so I like to think that the information J.P. has been given about King is not just the polished version that used to be presented in schools. As explored in

the previous section, the girls I met with oppose polished representations of experiences that are in reality complex.

Love and a Larger Struggle

On Screen

Both case studies of Katniss and Sabrina navigate large obstacles that are life-changing, and how they navigate love amidst it all adds another dimension to this analysis of neoliberal feminism as it speaks to this figuration of extra-ordinary girlhood. These characters must be self-reliant in their quests and also take care of others, both in romantic and familial contexts. Neoliberal feminism suggests that "the solution to injustice is to work on the self rather than to work with others for social and political transformation" (Gill, 2016, p. 617). There is a crucial moment where Katniss challenges this message. At the end of the Game, she and Peeta are the last survivors and are told the rules have changed again and only one of them can win/live. Katniss encourages Peeta to eat the poisonous berries *with* her, which would mean there would be no winner at all. By remaining united, their plan works to subvert the injustice of The Games. It would be a stretch to say that Katniss chose to proceed like this because she was in love with Peeta; she likely would have done it for anyone she had teamed up with by this point. Moreover, she challenges the game in refusing them a winner, which is another demonstration of activism. As S.A. points out, Katniss's "goal was just to survive." She then puts this goal aside to challenge the power structures of Panem. All the girls in my study were particularly interested in the circumstances affecting the characters in both shows. Regardless of this focus on the situations the characters are working through, the girls also recognized the struggle the characters face in love.

Love and accomplishing their goals appear to be in contention with one another, especially in the eyes of the girls I interviewed: "In the meantime, she (Katniss) started having some sort of feeling for Peeta and that kind of held her back from her goal because… if she didn't really care much about Peeta she would have just left him and try to win herself but she stayed by his side 'cause she wanted him to come to the end with her" (S.A.). Young romantic relationships in the midst of a gruelling storyline in mainstream adaptations evoke a similar struggle to that which the girls in my study communicated regarding not having fully developed the strength they think they need. Although strength and confidence may indeed facilitate interpersonal relationships and activist work, society's emphasis on achieving these qualities can be overwhelming and self-defeating, placing the responsibility on the individual. This emphasis on confidence and passion as a way to achieve meaningful goals is relevant in both intimate relationship narratives featuring young people, as well as discourses around social justice.

In the World at Large: Care and Connection

The girls in this study have communicated a sense of care on many fronts, such as for their loved ones, for people struggling, for themselves, and for the physical environment. The conversations about the romantic relationship provided an opportunity to understand that love, relationships, care and action (or non-action) although interchangeable, can overlap. Traditionally, as Carol Gilligan articulates in *A Different Voice* (1993), girls and women especially have thought of themselves "in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care" (p. 17). This sentiment is increasingly being challenged by neoliberalism and it is crucial in understanding the affective quality of care. Moreover, Gilligan articulates just how significant the connection between care and relationships can be. She argues that "the ideal of care is thus an activity of relationship, of seeing and

responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one

is left alone" (p. 62). As demonstrated by the girls in my study, the feeling of care and the act of

caring are not mutually exclusive, and thus have diverse implications. Moreover, Erik Olin

Wright and Nancy Folbre (2012) emphasize that the way we classify care in contemporary

society draws "attention to both the labor process and the direct beneficiary of service provided"

(pp. 4-5). As I demonstrate in Chapter Four, care work takes on a market role under certain

conditions and is therefore especially complex under capitalism.

With respect to the teen girls in this study, although the social role of care is not as

relevant as the affective quality of caring, the girls communicated awareness of the consuming

and conscientious quality that care entails, which is part of this labour process. When R.D.

expressed disregard for participating in activist work because of the implications on her loved

ones, she highlights how activist work is also a labour of care. This viewpoint echoes Joan

Tronto's assertion that care is an activity that sustains, maintains, and fixes the world so that it

can be as easy to live in as possible. Moreover, this world encapsulates various life forms

including our bodies, selves, and environment (Tronto, 1993, p. 103). Care is a "species activity"

rather than an individualistic one, as Mary V. Wrenn and William Waller (2017) emphasize.

Connection and collectivity as integral to genuine care challenge, and can even upend,

neoliberal individualism that strives to profit from care work, even at the cost of proper care.

Public activism is one way care and community come together and challenge the status quo,

although as exemplified in the group interviews, the implications of care and action are complex.

Moreover, although activism is not care work in the traditional sense, and does not typically have

monetary value unless it is being commodified, there is indeed an underlying element of care to

it in its truest form. Examining the extra-ordinary girl figure in popular media further highlights

the complex dialogic and dialectical realities under contemporary capitalism. It is thus crucial to listen to the voices of girls with less social power and public visibility, like the girls in my study. Doing so helps shape more substantial figurations of girlhood that transcend the ordinary.

CHAPTER SIX:

CONCLUSION

In this project, I locate the figures of the girl and the figurations of girlhood in relation to

criticism of neoliberalism, a field typically examined in relation to the adult world.

Neoliberalism infuses these figures, figurations, and real girls with values of individualism,

further commodifying young people as futurity. The extra-ordinary warrior-activist and witch are

embodied representations of coming-of-age. They are the embodiment of the young person's

futurity, and an exceptional one at that. Their extra-ordinary powers, driven by their desire and

defiance, are symbolic neoliberal devices to further commodify youth as futurity, while also

setting a standard that the real teenage girl cannot meet. As demonstrated by the girls in my

study, the neoliberal rationality of being in the process of becoming better is secondary to their

values of care and connection. Care and connection stand in contrast to neoliberal individualism

and self-improvement. Moreover, care and connection, when embraced and leveraged, serve to

locate the teenage girl as being – rather than simply becoming – in the world.

I first started thinking about this project many years ago, and while some details have

changed throughout the process, the heart of the study remains the same. I knew I wanted to

untangle the reasons some teenagers in the world seemed to be able to gain visibility in effecting

change while others were not, and to make sense of where popular culture fits into this question.

The way the topic has taken shape in this time is absolutely true to my initial motivation for

following through with the research. I was a tween and teen in the 1990s and early 2000s,

devouring popular media and culture while also keenly aware of – and feeling powerless in –

fixing social issues in the world and relieving people of their suffering. My girl power was going

to waste, and I did not know what to do about it. There were extraordinary young people

everywhere, it seemed, changing the world. No matter how much I channeled my care into various arts (which was the only medium/platform that seemed malleable enough to give me leverage in my pursuit), I did not make a dent and there was still poverty, chronic illness, civil war, and a climate crisis.

This study reveals that this struggle also exists for the girls from Toronto interviewed in this project who are just as concerned about, and overwhelmed by, these very issues. Although there are arguably more platforms for young people to demonstrate their agency today than there were more than two decades ago, the underlying capitalist neoliberal structure behind the various issues is still a barrier in fixing them. The extra-ordinary girl, with her innate ability and exceptional resources, becomes especially alluring. The extraordinary girl in the public has become increasingly pervasive, and is especially pronounced with remarkable girl figures, real and fictitious: the warrior/activist and the witch. Girl power now looks like the girl with extra-ordinary abilities who can conquer social issues using super-natural or extraordinary force. Meanwhile, the system from which she emerges – and revolts against – continues to prioritize a discourse of individualism and self-improvement over relationships, genuine care, and connection.

As this project has outlined, the group interviews with the girls highlighted a variety of themes, directing my attention towards some core ones related to neoliberalism. Their choice of speculative fiction shows and film that features a strong and powerful teen girl character were informative and enlightening, as were their conversations about these characters and narratives, and about social issues and their own values. Out of these interviews, I realized that Katniss and Sabrina are two examples in a trend towards the extra-ordinary teen girl, and that they in fact are a sort of popular culture archetype for two versions of the extra-ordinary girl in the public today:

the activist/warrior and supernaturally-inclined witch. These characters exist in a speculative fictional world that lends itself to exceptional *beyond realistic* models of girlhood as well. Their coming of age adds to their appeal. Moreover, the extra-ordinariness of these teen girl figures has in a sense been internalized by the girls in my study, and also framed in the context of care – that is, channeled through their views on caring and connection. Becoming more confident, more courageous and more self-assured is perhaps one way they see as becoming extraordinary. Not only is to become this type of extra-ordinary an intimidating feat, it is in fact secondary to the care and connection they value. The girls I interviewed recognize the extra-ordinary as something beyond or intangible to them as they and their lives currently are, in contrast to the extra-ordinary girls. Both the relationships and better world that they value, and their desire to work on being better, highlight internalized neoliberal messages.

Limitations

As with any major research project, this one has its limitations. The small sample size means the findings are not representative of a larger population of teenage girls in Toronto. Regarding the interviews, it would have been useful to have a session exploring the witch/alternative spirituality theme to compare to the same girls' responses around social issues. The framework around the extra-ordinary teen girl figures did not come to me until working on the first draft, which is why I did not include such a session.

Although the interdisciplinary nature of this project offers the ability to draw upon multiple disciplines and explore the overlap of the teen girl in popular film and TV and social historical phenomena, this approach also has its drawbacks. Providing a comprehensive background for each realm and subject matter is challenging. As such, this project's research

draws upon scholarship in the respective fields, attempting to balance relevant information with that which pertains to the girl, which is often the girl in a contemporary North American context.

The close textual analysis, while effective in establishing in-depth understanding of the scenes, narratives and characters, as well as the way the text is situated in a larger conversation, has its limitations for this type of project. Within the context of this study, however, the close attention to form and genre serves a distinct purpose, which is to illuminate the way various elements of a popular media text can not only create specific meaning for a viewer, but also reflect the society from which it is created. Similarly, while the scope of cultural analysis in this project is broad, it offers critical context for the extra-ordinary girl, as well as real circumstances around the teen activist/ warrior and witch, but also has its drawbacks. The types of culture and culturally relevant information borrows from many different fields, which can be confusing. The fields I focus on, although varying from chapter to chapter, are what I consider to be relevant to the respective chapter. Again, this issue speaks to one of the challenges of doing interdisciplinary work. Depending on future research coming out of this project, a more consistent type of cultural-historical-political reference structure could be used.

Future Research

There are various ways future research out of this interdisciplinary project could go, and two specifically that are most appealing to me. As discussed in chapter three, scholars including Emily Bent and Jessica K. Taft have been acknowledging the teen girl activist as an exceptional girl, and even that there are parallels to characters like Katniss. While there is an abundance of scholarship on the teen witch figure, however, she (and the supernatural girl in general) has not been studied as an exceptional girl the same way the activist has been. Moreover, the connection between the activist and the witch figure are less clear, even though, as examined in chapter four,

there is overlap between the two in real life. This study makes explicit this connection within a neoliberal framework, opening up more research opportunities to explore the topic.

While I am intrigued by the film and TV series, and their representation of girl characters, as well as relationship narratives, what is most interesting to me is the interviews with the girls. A larger sample size of girls from various neighbourhoods and backgrounds is essential moving forward. Moreover, I believe it is crucial to better understand the barriers that hold young people back from participating in or identifying with certain practices or causes that they care about. Future research, then, should focus on girls who do not wholeheartedly participate in public activism and who are not outwardly engaged in alternative spiritual practices or witchcraft. Moreover, greater focus around care in its various forms and motivations as well as connection and relationships of all kinds is essential to understanding the local, "micro" realities of ordinary life.

Young people who are not in the public eye might not be figures in the way described here but are impacted by the social circumstances and structures of their world. Identifying how media culture and social phenomena both work to present figures and figurations of the teen girl, which consequently has implications for the real girl with less social power, is a necessary step in advocating for these girls not in the public, but is not enough in itself. Ultimately the consequences of such structures and figurations are lived through the real girls, and the focus of future research should now be more about the girls. This research should focus on girls who recognize and/or relate to social and personal issues, but feel they need to be "next level courageous" for there to be change, addressing that becoming "next level" is a fool's errand largely informed by the neoliberal ideology.

Writing this conclusion in 2021, there have been several significant social and political changes in the world since I conduced the focus groups at the end of 2018. The COVID-19 global pandemic has radically changed how people live. As more people are feeling the importance and impact of various types of care work, especially on women and families, care in neoliberal society is increasingly gaining public attention (Power, 2020). Moreover, in the U.S., extensive grassroots organizing and mobilizing has been praised as being responsible for the election of new U.S. President Joseph Biden. Such activist work is creating new opportunities and interest for young people in activism.

Young people have increasingly been collectively working towards various social change. It will be interesting to see if and how teen girls in North American society but also the world at large develop on what has appeared to be the very beginning of revolutionary action. Will future research that builds on the connections I have made between the activist/warrior and witch figures reveal similar findings that the extra-ordinary girl still feels removed and out of reach for the girl not in the public eye? The system is still a neoliberal one, so will these real girls with experiences of vulnerability and varying degrees of apathy for a better world still feel the same as more girls appear to be extraordinary? Regardless of the answers to these questions, I anticipate that care and connection will continue to be the primary concern for these teen girls, regardless of how it is expressed. As outlined throughout this project, community, relationships and care are secondary to the individual achievement that neoliberalism encourages, however. So, under the current system, despite small changes and popular depictions of the defiant girl that ordinary girls might desire to be like, I suspect the teen girl will always be striving to be "next level."

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Questionnaire

1) Do you get emotionally invested in characters and/or storylines of movies and T.V. shows? Explain. Can you think of any examples?

2) Do you feel like you are listened to and heard by adults? By your peers? Explain why or why not.

3) Are you in a romantic relationship and/or do you want to be in one? Can you tell me why or why not?

4) If you're not in a relationship, what do you think that relationship would be like?

5) Are there any issue that are particularly important to you (e.g. eliminating poverty, racism, gender inequality, LGBTQ+ rights, labour rights, environmentalism, mental health, body image, disability rights, sexual and/or domestic violence, arts education, school violence, etc.)? What is it about these issue(s) that are important to you? Why do these issues matter to you?

6) How do you think these issues can get resolved/changed in society? What would it take?

7) What do you think of when you hear the word 'activism'? What has informed this idea of activism?

8) Would you describe yourself as an activist? Explain why or why not.

9) Do you have a desire to be more active or outspoken about issues that are important to you?

10) Does anything hold you back from being more active in this way? Explain what.

Appendix B: Qualitative Study Breakdown

Timeline	Key Information of Study
March 2018	School A confirms participation in study
September 2018	School B confirms participation in study
November 23, 2018	Informal Meeting at School A • Vote in favour of *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*
November 26, 2018	Informal Meeting at School B • Vote in favour of *The Hunger Games*
November 29, 2018	Session One at School A • Participants complete questionnaire revolving around social issues and relationships • Discussion about responses
December 4, 2018	Session One at School B • Participants complete questionnaire revolving around social issues, social justice, and relationships • Discussion about responses
December 5, 2018	Session Two at School A • Screening and discussion of clip from *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* • Brainstorming for creative project(s) that challenge issue(s)/topic(s) discussed in session one. • Discussion of materials to bring in to create the poster that was agreed upon by everyone.
December 10, 2018	Session Two at School B • Screening and discussion of clip from *The Hunger Games* • Brainstorming creative project(s) challenging issues discussed in session 1. • Participants seem uninterested in this option but agree to come up with something the following session.
December 11, 2018	Session Three at School A • Workshop period putting together a poster that challenges "pristine" media representations of relationships, while drawing upon moments from the clip viewed in session two.
December 12, 2018	Session Three at School B • Participants are relieved when I give them the option of viewing and discussing the clip from *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* that School A viewed instead of working on a creative project • Screening and discussion of clip from *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*
December 18, 2018	Emailed participants an optional post-study questionnaire/feedback form

Appendix C: Collage by School A