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"We're less noticeable to people": Centering Tween Girl Activist Citizenship

by Alexe Bernier

Abstract: In recent years, there has been significant attention paid to girls who are engaged in activism. When we look at *who* has been recognized for their activism, however, mainstream exposure to girl activists has primarily included teenagers and youth. Girls of the tweenhood age, for example, are also engaged in activism but their efforts go largely unnoticed or face patronization. Instead of being taken seriously, the activism of many tween girls is: (1) clouded by the constructed inherent innocence of childhood, (2) entangled with the construction of (white) tween girlhood as a time of frivolity and fun, and (3) marginalized due to the adult-centric nature of citizenship in Canada and the United States. As the very structures that would traditionally allow for adults to make their voices heard are not designed for the equitable participation of children, tween girls are required to participate in creative ways. This article, therefore, frames tween girls' activism as citizenship and offers opportunities to both reconsider and validate these varied activist practices as legitimate democratic participation. Tween girls are already shaping their social, cultural, and political worlds, asserting that they belong and deserve to be seen, heard, and taken seriously. The lenses of societal and feminist responses need to be reoriented and refocused to see it.

Keywords: activism; case study; citizenship; innocence; social construction; tween girlhood

Résumé: Ces dernières années, les filles qui font du militantisme ont suscité beaucoup d'attention. Si l'on considère les personnes *que* l'on a reconnues pour leur militantisme, on s'aperçoit que les jeunes filles militantes sont surtout des adolescentes et des jeunes. Les préadolescentes, par exemple, participent elles aussi à des activités de militantisme, mais leurs efforts passent en grande partie inaperçus ou on les traite avec condescendance. Au lieu de le prendre au sérieux, le militantisme de beaucoup de préadolescentes est : (1) éclipsé par l'innocence inhérente à l'enfance, (2) intrinsèquement lié au fait que la préadolescence (blanche) est une période de frivolité et d'amusement, et (3) marginalisé étant donné que la citoyenneté au Canada et aux États-Unis est axée sur les adultes. Puisque les structures qui permettent traditionnellement aux adultes de se faire entendre sont loin d'être faites pour permettre une participation équitable des enfants, les préadolescentes doivent faire preuve d'imagination. Cet article présente donc le militantisme des préadolescentes en tant que citoyennes tout en donnant l'occasion de revoir et de valider ces diverses pratiques de militantisme pour en faire une participation légitime à la vie démocratique. Les préadolescentes façonnent déjà leur monde social, culturel et politique, en affirmant qu'elles appartiennent à la société et qu'elles méritent d'être vues, entendues et prises au sérieux. Les réponses sociétales et féministes doivent être réorientées et recentrées pour le voir.

Mots clés: militantisme; étude de cas; citoyenneté; innocence; construction sociale; préadolescente

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Introduction

There has been a significant increase in the recognition of girl's activism over the past number of years. High profile girl activists, such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousufzai, have become household names around the globe, signaling a shift in how we publicly perceive the political power of girls (Taft 2020; Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra 2022). While the activism of certain girls has gained mainstream attention, many girls all over the world are working to make social and environmental change in their communities and beyond without this same widespread public recognition. When we look more closely at which girls have been recognized for their activism, we can see that our mainstream exposure to girl activists has been primarily limited to older girls, such as teenagers and youth, groups which broadly include young people aged up to and sometimes beyond 24 years of age (UNESCO 2021). Greta and Malala, for example, were both 15 years old when they first gained the attention of the world. The activism of younger girls, such as girls of the tweenhood age (8-12 years old) (Cook and Kaiser 2004; Coulter 2014), remains largely invisible.

The invisibility of tween girls' activism from both mainstream media channels and the scholarly literature does not reflect realities. As a former community social worker who worked with girls in gender-specific community programs for nearly five years in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, I was honoured to witness and support tween girls who were vastly diverse in terms of race, class, and ability as they worked to create positive social and environmental change in their communities and beyond. While running an after-school program in 2018, I once watched a 10-year-old girl explain what was meant by the term "racial micro-aggressions" to another small group of girls of the same age, all while sitting in a pile of stuffed animals. She answered their questions and engaged in thoughtful discussion with them, showcasing both the critical analysis and patience required when engaging with those who might have different lived experiences or worldviews. In the summer of 2016, after a difficult conversation in summer camp about gendered stereotypes, a 10-year-old girl went home and had a discussion with her father about how hurtful it was when he told her she "threw like a girl." He vowed to never use that language again. Another 10-year-old girl, in 2019, started an advocacy group at her school to change their school's name after learning that it was named after one of the architects of residential schools (Pimentel 2021). Many years later, following national public outcry after the discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves of Indigenous children who had been forced to attend residential schools (Honderich 2021), their campaign was successful.

Despite the inspiring social and environmental justice work that I saw being undertaken by dozens of young girls throughout the five years that I worked as a community social worker, their work was often patronized if recognized at all by adults. Met with phrases such as, "It's cute that they're so passionate!" and "It's just a phase that they're going through," the activism of the girls that I worked with was frequently positioned as unworthy of serious consideration. It seemed that the emphasis was often placed on the playful, pink-ified characteristics commonly associated with tween girlhood, such as the image of a group of girls sitting in a pile of stuffed animals, and not with the important work that they were doing to influence change in their social, cultural, and political worlds. As I was struck by these discrepancies, I began to

wonder why this was: what was it about tween girls, specifically, that deems their activism undeserving of attention and respect from adults? As citizens, don't they have the right to be listened to and taken seriously (UNICEF 1989)? How can we better listen to girls when they tell us what they want for their lives and their worlds? It was these experiences and questions that ultimately inspired my doctoral research, during which I explored the experiences of a group of girls aged 8-12 years from the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) of Ontario who engage in social and environmental change work.

Through both my community social work practice and my doctoral research, I have seen, spoken with, and learned that tween girls are engaging in all types and forms of activism to change their worlds. Overshadowed by the characteristics associated with tween girlhood, however, these activist efforts are often not interpreted as legitimate or valid contributions towards broader social and environmental justice endeavours. Adults generally fail to recognize that stereotypical notions of tween girlhood, political awareness, and a desire to work for change can exist in combination. As we dream and work towards more socially just futures, this urgently needs to change.

In thinking through the invisibilization of tween girls' activism, it is essential that we challenge some of the ways that tween girlhood has been constructed and instead move to center the tween girl citizen. For the purposes of this analysis, I focus exclusively on tween girlhood and subsequent understandings of tween girl citizenship as it has been constructed and familiarized in Canada and the United States. In this article, therefore, an extended proceeding from the annual Women's and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes conference presented in May of 2023, I first analyze how one contemporary construction of tween girlhood—specifically for white, middle-upper class tween girls—has been established as a time of innocence, frivolity, and fun. This construction is inherently exclusionary of girls who do not fit within these categorical boxes and who are instead racialized, lower class, disabled, or who experience life at any of these intersections. I then use contemporary citizenship theory and critical childist perspectives to understand and position the activism of tween girls as a form of participation and assertion of their citizenship, ultimately centering tween girls in theoretical debates about citizenship and activism from which they are typically excluded. To further elucidate and anchor these ideas, I share and draw from a case study from my doctoral research featuring an 11-year-old girl activist. It is my hope that presenting a new way of thinking about tween girls' activism enables and encourages us to recognize them as citizens more clearly, hear their voices more loudly, and center their perspectives more intentionally.

Constructed Tween Girlhood: Innocence, Frivolity, and Fun

As with childhood, which means different things to different people over different periods of time (Bernstein 2011; Coulter 2014; Garlen 2019; Lister 2007; Walton 2021), tween girlhood is a construct. While childhood as we know it has been constructed over the past number of centuries, the concept of tween girlhood is relatively new. Although tween girlhood represents a gendered childhood that is further conflated by various other axes of social and identity power, what is particularly unique about the concept of the tween is that it is predicated on specific parameters of age. These age parameters tend to differ based on which literature is referenced. For example, Daniel Cook and Susan Kaiser (2004) and Natalie Coulter (2014) define tween girls as between the ages of 8-12 years, whereas Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (2005) write about tween girlhood as encompassing the ages of 9-13 years. These wiggly parameters of tween girlhood may be enough to demonstrate that tween girlhood is not a clearly defined developmental period or natural aspect of a girl's life and is, instead, a construct. Yet, what is interesting about the construction of tween girlhood is the site at which this construction originated. The tween is a direct product of capitalist industry, fulsomely designed and constructed by marketing agencies to sell products to younger-aged girls (Coulter 2014). A brief history of this construction is helpful to illustrate this further.

Although the idea of tween girlhood started to gain traction following the Second World War with the emergence of "teenybopper culture" (Cook and Kaiser 2004, 214), it really materialized as we know it in the 1980s (Coulter 2014). As women and mothers took to the workforce in higher numbers throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the structure of the nuclear family changed (Coulter 2014). Mothers were no longer as available to take care of children in their homes and costs of childcare became more of a concern, resulting in the general trend of families choosing to have fewer children. For many families—particularly white, middle-class families—this also came with greater spending power as they had higher levels of disposable income (Coulter 2014). Marketers and marketing agencies noticed that young people had greater access to their family incomes through the form of allowances or that they had their own jobs to generate disposable incomes of their own. These young people therefore had access to money without the burden of bills or responsibilities; marketing agencies took this as an opportunity to intentionally build upon and exploit gender stereotypes of women as shoppers and apply these pre-existing ideas to their understanding of girls (Coulter 2014). Interestingly, boys were not constructed as consumers in the same way because boys were considered to be users of products, not the purchasers of them (Coulter 2014). Boys were understood to use the products that the girls and women in their lives bought for them. Young girls, therefore, and specifically young, white, middle-upper class girls who represented the status quo, were considered by marketing agencies to be frivolous spenders with a new pool of discretionary income: consumers. It was these conditions that effectively established the concept of tween girlhood that we are familiar with today (Cook and Kaiser 2004; Coulter 2014).

While the concept of tween girlhood was conceptualized and essentially created by marketing agencies, it is also worth noting that it was not constructed in a vacuum. Tween girlhood was constitutively constructed alongside the broader gendered, raced, classed, and able-bodied discourses surrounding childhood that shape our social, cultural, and political worlds, perhaps the most prominent of which is the discourse of childhood innocence (Robinson 2012). Emerging during the Enlightenment era, discourses surrounding childhood—and specifically white, middle-class, Christian, able-bodied childhood—constructed and understood the child to be synonymous with the "sentimental angel-child" (Bernstein 2012, 38) and thus naturally wonderous, wide-eyed, and innocent (Garlen 2019). For girls, who were expected to embody gendered characteristics of femininity such as submissiveness, domesticity, and, ultimately, sexual purity (Bernstein 2011), the innocence associated with girlhood was vastly different than the innocence associated with boyhood. During and following Enlightenment, it became the primary responsibility of adults to help children (especially girls) to maintain this innocence, protecting them from all potential influences that may be interpreted as corruptive (Bernstein 2011; Garlen 2019; Meyer 2007; Robinson 2008; Smith 2011), including exposure to certain knowledge or experiences. There is, therefore, an active relationship between the absence of what is considered to be adult knowledge and constructed childhood innocence, an important piece of the puzzle to consider when thinking about tween girls' activism.

While it is not my intention to monotonize or erase the very real and nuanced experiences of tween girls as a broad and diverse group, it is also true that tween girlhood as an idea has been constructed in a very particular and narrow way. There are therefore important distinctions to be made between tween *girls* and tween girl*hood*, with the former referring to the real lives of real tweenhood-aged girls and the latter referring to the social construction. The construction of tween girlhood as created by marketing agencies primarily included white, middle-upper class girls, which is aligned with the broader colonized, capitalist, white-supremacist, and patriarchal contexts of Canada and the United States. This construction does not reflect the complex realities of tween girls, who are infinitely diverse in race, class, ability, Indigeneity, and sexuality; nonetheless, it affects the ways in which some tween girls are perceived.

As constructed tween girlhood is closely aligned with the dominant social, cultural, and political characteristics commonly associated with childhood innocence, marketing agencies identified this as an opportunity

to build a new corner of the consumerist marketplace (Coulter 2014). Perhaps coincidentally, the language used to describe childhood innocence, such as wide-eyed wonderment and obliviousness (Bernstein 2011) is synonymous with language often used to describe tween girlhood, such as irresponsibility and carefreeness (Coulter 2014; Taft 2011). Building upon the assertion that tween girlhood is defined by innocence, frivolity, and fun (Coulter 2021), while tying in additional gendered stereotypes of women as shoppers, this particular construction of tween girlhood was created by marketing agencies because they saw financial value in the potential of white, middle-upper class tween girls as consumers (Coulter 2014). Accordingly, tween girlhood has been intricately designed as a consumerist category, created to sell specific products to a specific segment of the consumerist market.

Tween Girlhood and Consumer Citizenship

Natalie Coulter (2014), Anita Harris (2006), and Jessica Taft (2014) have written about the ways in which the tween girl has been constructed as the ideal consumer citizen. This means that the perceived primary social, cultural, and political influence of tween girls is limited to the marketplace and that tween girls are able to sway this marketplace with their spending power (Coulter 2014; Harris 2006). It is acknowledged that because of their marketplace spending, tween girls have a significant impact on market trends, including everything from advertising strategies to which products are sold (Coulter 2014). As "citizens" in this context, this is often considered the extent of their influence. Perceived as generally uninterested in the rest of the world around them, instead consumed with popular music, fashion, and their peer groups, their impact as citizen-subjects has thus been conceptualized in a very limited way. What this constructed version of tween girlhood fails to consider, however, are the many ways that tween girls, in all of their diversity, are defining girlhood themselves beyond these narrow consumerist ideals. As such, their power as citizens has been grossly underestimated. It is thus important to completely rethink our understandings of tween girlhood citizenship and challenge the narrow and limiting ways tween girlhood has been constructed (Harris 2006; Taft 2014). This includes a reimagining of the concept of citizenship itself, an idea that continues to be explored by critical citizenship scholars.

Reimagining Citizenship

Traditional conceptualizations of citizenship include a general understanding that citizenship is related to nationality and nationhood status, indicated by a sense of membership or belonging (Lister 2007). Scholarly debates about citizenship have historically revolved around the concepts of citizenship *rights* and citizenship *responsibilities* (Cohen 2005; Larkins 2014). Citizenship *rights* refer to the civic, social, and political claims awarded to citizens by way of official citizenship legislation, which in democratic societies, for example, includes the right to vote (Cohen 2005; Isin 2008). Citizenship *responsibilities* are what we are expected to do to be considered good citizens, such as actually choosing to vote (Lister 2007). In the mid to late twentieth century, however, critical thinkers and scholars began to note that these citizenship rights and responsibilities are not experienced with universality. In other words, different people experience citizenship rights and responsibilities in different ways, while some people are actively denied citizenship rights and status in the first place. In Canada, for example, colonial policies (namely the *Indian Act*) prohibited Indigenous men from voting in provincial and federal elections until 1920, and Indigenous women were not granted the right to vote until 1960 (Elections Canada 2018); there are examples like this from around the globe and across history. It is because of these inconsistencies that it is important we instead think about a "difference-centered theorization to citizenship" (Lister 2007, 698), recognizing the many different ways that people are granted and experience citizenship.

These critical perspectives on citizenship first emerged with feminist and anti-racist scholars who questioned notions of equitable citizenship for the lives of women, racialized, and Indigenous people (Larkins 2014; Lister 2007; Roche 1999). Such critical analyses ask how citizenship is experienced differently on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, ability, nationhood status, and, more recently, age. To illustrate these nuances, Jeremy Roche (1999) draws from T.H. Marshall's citizenship theorizing to distill citizenship into three realms: the civic, the social, and the political. Roche (1999) writes that an equitable and inclusive citizenship model would sit in balance at the crux of these realms, holding all three in equal weight. To maintain the political dimension of citizenship, which might include the right to vote in democratic electoral process, civic structures must first be in place (such as legislation ensuring liberty to freedom of speech). One must also therefore have social citizenship, including equitable access to power and resources to influence decision making (Roche 1999).

Critical perspectives of citizenship provide opportunities to deconstruct and think about inequitable access to these three realms of citizenship. Indigenous men and women in Canada, for example, did not have access to civic and political dimensions of citizenship until 1920 and 1960 respectively (Elections Canada 2018). While Indigenous people may now have the right to vote, however, colonial legacies and systemic anti-Indigenous racism affect how Indigenous people are currently able to access social aspects of citizenship (Blackburn 2009). Just because legislation may be in place does not mean that it is equitably applicable or experienced. When thinking about the equity of citizenship from a childist perspective, therefore, the realities of children's citizenship become clearer. In Canada and the United States, which are adultist societies that privilege adults and adult knowledge over children and children's knowledge, children have very little access to social capital. Children also do not have access to the political or civic dimensions of citizenship because of age-based legislative limitations. In addition to these age-based legislative limitations, citizenship is also experienced by children differently along varied and intersecting axes of gender, race, class, and ability. Analyzing citizenship from a nuanced and difference-centered perspective therefore creates opportunities to explore how citizenship is heavily influenced by social structures and societal values at large (Lister 2007; Moosa-Mitha 2005).

Expanding on the work of feminist and anti-racist citizenship scholars, Larkins (2014, 8) writes that it is important to take "difference-centered, relational approaches to children's citizenship, that recognize and value children's practices and differences" to adequately understand the unique and sometimes subversive citizenship experiences of children. Within the context of the current analysis of tween girl citizenship, this points to the importance of centering the ways in which tween girls are practicing citizenship differently and outside of or beyond traditional citizenship structures. There is very little written, however, about how diverse childhoods are related to different experiences of citizenship. The following initial analysis about children's citizenship is exclusive of a gender, race, class, or ability, a mere reflection of the current children's citizenship literature. Through first drawing on the literature on children's citizenship, I explicate the various ways in which the construction of childhood affects how children are able to equitably engage as citizens. This includes an analysis of how the construction of childhood is inherently exclusionary, effectively placing children at the margins of adult-centered citizenship structures.

Conceptualizing Children's Citizenship

Reifying discourses about children and children's rights that emerged in the late twentieth century (Smith 2011), the development of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 marked an official declaration of children as rights holders, which was significant in the global movement for children's rights (Taefi 2009). The UNCRC asserts that children should be recognized as independent and capable social, cultural, and political agents in their own right (Cohen 2005; Lister 2007; Smith 2011; Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra 2022; Wall 2022) and recognizes "children's rights to participate, supporting and

being supported by understandings of children as social actors within their families, communities and society at large" (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra 2022, 792). While the UNCRC has been adopted by almost 200 countries around the globe, it does not account for the ways in which perceptions of children, informed by constructed childhoods, affect whether and how they can actually participate (Tisdall and Ceuvas-Parra 2022). In Canada and the United States, and as discussed throughout this paper, these constructions have very real implications for how children are listened to and whether they are taken seriously, regardless of established international agreements.

Despite the ratification of the UNCRC, and although most children are "assumed to be citizens – they hold passports and except in the rarest of cases receive at least one nationality at birth" (Cohen 2005, 221), children are at the same time denied full citizenship rights. This denial of full citizenship rights, referred to by both Cohen (2005, 222) and Lister (2007, 717) as "semi-citizenship," is rooted in broader ideas that have been constructed around the capacity, rationality, competency, and knowledge of children (Cohen 2005; Larkins 2014; Lister 2007; Percy-Smith 2015; Roche 1999), ultimately informed by pervasive discourses of childhood innocence. To illustrate this point, Robinson (2012, 30) writes:

Children's production of knowledge has been dismissed and disqualified as local and naïve and unsophisticated. Children's knowledge has been subjugated through Western scientific discourses, such as philosophy and psychology, that have given credence to the authenticity of mature adult knowledge and experiences as rational and logical, over the perceived irrationality and naivety of children and young people.

Within the context of citizenship, the construction of childhood as a time of inherent innocence significantly affects whether their knowledge is taken seriously. The ideas that children produce about their social, cultural, and political lives and futures often face paternalism, and children are largely dismissed for their irrationality and lack of grounding in "mature" knowledge and experience. For tween girls who are working to create change in the world around them, this is a significant barrier to their knowledge being taken seriously. In addition to this form of epistemic injustice, however, how children are able to engage as citizens is also limited by the very structures that currently exist for them to do so.

Children's Activism as Citizenship

While the UNCRC has advocated for the recognition of the rights of children, there has been little done to accommodate for the different ways that children might choose and be able to participate socially, culturally, and politically outside of traditional citizenship structures (Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra 2022). Modes of citizenship remain quintessentially adult, meaning that citizenship, as a concept and as a practice, remains largely inaccessible to children (Lister 2007; Thorne 1987). Within Roche's (1999) terms, there are significant gaps in the civic and social aspects of children's citizenship in terms of children's participation. When we think plainly about the rights and responsibilities of children, we can see, for example, that children are not able to conclude legal contracts, their speech is heavily surveilled, and they are not granted autonomy or choice in many aspects of their lives – including over their own bodies (Cohen 2005). Considering participation as a way of claiming citizenship thus enables us to move away from a static definition of citizenship and instead towards one that is rooted in action (Percy-Smith 2015). In this understanding, citizenship is not just a status; it is also a process (Lister 2007; Percy-Smith 2015; Isin 2008 and 2009).

When thinking about citizenship within the terms of participation instead of purely within the terms of rights or responsibilities, we can thus also analyze how we tend to "fit children into political constructions which take adulthood as their starting point, rather than challenging the constructions themselves" (Wall

2022, 793). When we recognize that the structures that we consider to constitute citizenship have been designed by and for adults, we can also recognize that what we consider to be meaningful participation in these structures is similarly constructed. As the traditional structures of citizenship may not allow or account for the participation of children, we can instead challenge what we might consider to be participation in and of itself. When given no alternate choices within traditional citizenship structures, children assert themselves as citizens in ways that may be considered unorthodox when compared to traditional avenues of participation (Larkins 2014; Roche 1999; Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra 2022), essentially participating in ways that adults might not recognize as valid or legitimate. It is hard for us to see how children broadly, and tween girls specifically, are claiming their citizenship rights because it requires us to confront our own preconceived notions of what they can and should do, as well as what does and does not count as a practice of citizenship. Children are instead left to write their own citizenship scripts, participating and asserting their belonging in creative and often invisible ways.

In writing specifically about the activist practices of children, Roche (1999, 479) says, "Children have to start from where they are socially positioned. This means that they have to make their own space in spaces not of their making." Reflective of their diverse social positions, children make these spaces and engage in activism in varied and diverse ways. Children's activism challenges the power dynamics inherent not just in the relationships between adults and children but the power dynamics inherent to traditional citizenship structures that privilege adult participation. Engaging in activism is one way that children can disrupt the power structures that otherwise silence them. As tween girlhood has been constructed in a very particular way that generally serves to patronize and devalue the knowledge and ideas of tween girls, these disruptions represent some of the very few ways that tween girls can assert their belonging and citizenship. Tween girls who engage in activism remind us that they belong, that they are citizens, and that they have a right to be heard.

Anne, Tween Girl Activist: Confronting Barriers of Perception

Anne[1], an 11-year-old girl from Toronto, Canada, is a social and environmental justice activist with whom I had the privilege of speaking during my doctoral research project. One of Anne's parents first got in touch with me in the fall of 2023 after hearing about my doctoral study from a family friend. The intention of my doctoral research (approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board, #6495) was to explore the experiences of young girls who engage in activism. The criteria for participation was that participants must identify as a girl between the ages of 8-12 years old who was working to create social or environmental change. Once I confirmed with Anne's parents through the exchange of emails that Anne fit these criteria, we organized a time to meet over Zoom. During this Zoom call I was able to share information about the study with both Anne and her parents, obtain informed assent from Anne, informed consent from her parents, and conduct a semi-structured qualitative interview with Anne about her experiences of both girlhood and being a girl engaged in activism.

Anne is a white girl and, from the stories she told, is part of a politically active family. She shared with me that she had attended many protests throughout her lifetime, primarily surrounding issues of climate change and in demand of climate action but she was also an advocate for queer and women's rights. Anne had been previously involved in various political campaigns, the most recent being for Toronto's current mayor, and had been granted opportunities to speak to the media as well as to give presentations to classmates at her school about different social and environmental issues. She shared with me that she was primarily motivated by hope for better futures, adamantly stating that "…you need to hold out hope. You need to keep on trying until you get one more person who says yes, and then more, and more, and more."

Anne's motivation of hope for social and environmental change is consistent with what Jessica Taft (2011) found in her exciting ethnographic work about girl activists across North America. In Taft's research, girls asserted that their inclination to provide care for their communities through activism was rooted in their socialization as girls (2011). Instead of framing innocence as a trait that henceforth constructs girlhood as a period of obliviousness and incompetence,

> transforming girlhood's association with thoughtless naivete and innocence to an assertion of girls' inclination towards politicized optimism enables these young activists to place political value on the fairly common image of girls as "dreamy" and hopeful. These claims to emotionality, concern for others, optimism, and hopefulness substantially shape girls' political practice. (Taft 2011, 78)

Framed instead as an unrelenting hope for better futures, traits typically associated with girlhood thus became the very traits that moved them to engage in activism (Taft 2011 and 2014). In Taft's (2011) research, and in what Anne shared with me, hope and care for others, their communities, the land, and the world was what continues to motivate the political action of girls. Hope, therefore, is political and Anne in all of her hopefulness was taking a political stance.

While I was instantly impressed by Anne's clear passion for social and environmental justice, I was also struck by the stories that she shared about how she felt she was generally perceived when engaging in activism. When asked about how her identity as a girl impacted how she was able to create change, she shared frustrations with how she would see the media often paying greater attention to boys who are engaged in activist work:

> I think sometimes it means that we're less noticeable to people…or people try to not notice us, specifically, so like if there was a little boy who wants to support something in this protest…they [the media] might go them to make the views rather than going to me or the other girls at that same event who are doing the same or like…more work.

Anne's explanation for these biases was that media companies have to satisfy their viewers, and their viewer base might have been more open to seeing and hearing young people speak about social and environmental issues if those young people were boys. Despite her active involvement in climate change activism, and the fact that she had been involved in various causes and political organizing since she was "little," she saw that adult journalists would pay more attention to "the boys, and not the other girls who were there too." Her presence in these spaces was disruptive of ideas that typically exist about who is and should be doing social and environmental change work, including the notion that girls are politically disengaged.

As Anne spoke about the gendered biases that she experienced as a girl who was engaged in activism, she also spoke about the limited power that she had to influence change because of her age. She poignantly noted that she faced limitations in her activism because of the lack of "resources that you have and the power [that] you have over people, when you're, like, not an adult…." Through this statement, Anne directly recognized and acknowledged that children have little access to social capital (Roche 1999), pointing to the need to work collaboratively with adults because of the social and political privileges that adults have. Her experiences directly speak to the ways that age and gender, and the intersection of the two, affect how tween girls are (or aren't) taken seriously as activists and engaged citizens.

Although tween girls engage in activism through everyday acts to change their social, cultural, and political worlds, the subversive ways that they work to affect change is often rendered inconsequential with what has been constructed as proper participation in adult-centered citizenship structures. Even when Anne engaged in activist work that is congruent with adult forms of activism, such as her participation in political campaigns and protests, she felt and articulated that her and her ideas were not taken seriously in those

spaces. In recognition of how girls are thus left to work for change at the margins of traditional participation practices, Taft (2014, 263) encourages us to acknowledge that "re-defining political engagement to include a variety of challenges to power relations outside of formal institutions can draw attention to a greater range of citizenship practices." In a variety of creative and innovative ways, tween girls are already shaping their social, cultural, and political worlds, asserting that they belong and deserve to be seen, heard, and taken seriously. The lenses of societal and feminist responses need to be reoriented and refocused towards the margins in order to see it.

Tween Girls as Activist Citizens of the Now

While activism might be typically thought of in terms of highly public actions such as protests, strikes, petitions, and sit-ins, contemporary scholarly literature states that activism can also include a broad range of revolutionary actions, including community service, small acts in our everyday, and care (Larkins 2014; Lister 2007). For tween girls, this may include advocating for more effective waste reduction in their schools, initiating conversations with their peers about the diversity of gender identities, or standing in solidarity with various communities online. It might include speaking with their peers about racial microaggressions while sitting in a pile of stuffed animals, like the girls I used to work with, and it might include participating in political campaigns, like Anne. Deconstructing preconceived notions of tween girlhood, as well as thinking critically about how and where people can engage in activism, allows us to see the many creative ways that tween girls are participating as citizens in their everyday lives. If we desire to venture towards more socially just futures, we first need to critically analyze how the construction of tween girlhood affects how we understand their activism and claims to citizenship.

Although this particular construction of tween girlhood was created as a consumerist category, tween girls influence their families, peer groups, schools, and communities far beyond the parameters of their consumer citizenship. Like their identities, their interests and passions are broad and diverse, including an interest in various levels of politics and the world around them. Unfortunately, the ways that the tween girl subject has been constructed means that the efforts of tween girls are very rarely taken seriously, if recognized at all. As the recognition of tween girl's contributions are limited to the realm of consumer citizenship, the other ways that they participate and engage as citizens go unseen. It is thus essential to gain a broader understanding of citizenship as a critical concept. Understanding the ways that the diversity of tween girls are pushing the boundaries of what has been constructed for them as idealized tween girlhood will create further opportunities to understand how they are instead defining themselves as citizens through activism.

As the very structures that would traditionally allow for adults to make their perspectives and ideas are not designed for the equitable participation of children, tween girls are required to participate non-traditional in ways and locations. It is not revolutionary, however, to encourage tween girls to attempt to fit within the systems of participation in which adults have determined to be acceptable or the norm (Harris 2006). We instead need to meet and honour them where they are already working to influence change in their peer groups, schools, communities, and beyond. Learning more about and platforming the stories of tween girls who are working to create change may illuminate the many ways that they are actively shaping our communities and beyond. This may require a serious reckoning with the very specific and limited ways in which we perceive and understand tween girlhood, recognizing their diversity, moving beyond their positioning as consumer citizens, and honouring them instead as activist citizens.

It has been said time and time again that our societies are strongest when a diversity of voices and perspectives are considered. While the activist practices of tween girls are pushing us to think about and live in the

world differently, our narrow conceptualizations of girlhood, of citizenship, and of activism deter us from taking their voices and actions seriously. Recognizing and understanding the activism that they are engaged in within the terms of citizenship creates opportunities to validate and legitimize this activism as important and meaningful modes of participation (Lister 2007), an essential part of ensuring that tween girls' ideas are considered in decision-making spaces that are typically prioritize and center adults. Tween girls, through their various activist efforts, are asserting that they are citizens of the now—not just citizens of the future.

Endnotes

1. "Anne" is a pseudonym chosen by the participant. This case study, as well as Anne's direct quotes, were approved for use by both Anne and her parents for this paper.

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