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What Girls Want: An Affective Reading of Using Pair Interviewing Methods to Research Activist Girls and Their Relationships with Their Mothers and Mother Figures

by Hannah Maitland

Abstract: This paper is a critical reflection on the fieldwork and analysis stage of my dissertation project on activist girls. My project explores how an intergenerational lens can be critically applied to the actions and motivations of activist girls and asks how contemporary girls negotiate and feel about their activism, their relationships with their mothers and communities, and their imaginings for a feminist future. Between 2021 and 2022, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten activist girls (aged 11-20) and their mothers/mother figures in a series of one-on-one and paired interviews. In this paper, I reflect on the affective landscape that emerged when interviewing girls, not only about their mothers but also with their mothers, and what this methodology might offer to the field of girls' studies. I engage with how daughters and mothers negotiate, express, and sometimes struggle to articulate their desires for the future and their relationship in the context of the paired interviews and how both the subject matter and method of this study posed challenges for me as a researcher.

Keywords: activism; girls' studies; interviewing; mother-daughter relationships

Résumé : Cet article est une réflexion critique sur l'étude de terrain ainsi que sur la phase d'analyse de mon projet de thèse portant sur les jeunes filles militantes. Mon projet s'intéresse à la façon dont on peut, d'un point de vue intergénérationnel, porter un regard critique sur les actions et les motivations de jeunes filles militantes. Il cherche aussi à savoir comment les jeunes filles d'aujourd'hui abordent et perçoivent leur militantisme, leurs relations avec leurs mères et leur collectivité, ainsi que leur vision d'un avenir féministe. Entre 2021 et 2022, j'ai mené des entrevues approfondies semi-structurées auprès de dix jeunes filles militantes (âgées de 11 à 20 ans) et de leurs mères ou figures maternelles, dans le cadre d'une série d'entrevues individuelles et par paires. Dans cet article, je me penche sur la dimension affective qui est ressortie des entrevues avec les jeunes filles, en ce qui concerne non seulement leurs mères, mais aussi avec elles, et sur ce que cette méthodologie pourrait apporter au domaine des études sur les jeunes filles. J'aborde comment les jeunes filles et les mères s'y prennent pour se faire entendre, comment elles ont parfois de la difficulté à exprimer leurs désirs pour l'avenir et leur relation dans le contexte des entrevues par paires, et comment le sujet et la méthodologie de cette étude m'ont posé certains défis en tant que chercheuse.

Mots clés : militantisme; études sur les jeunes filles; entrevues; relations mère-fille

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Introduction

Youth activism has captured significant public attention as young people around the globe confront the social and ecological issues of a changing world. Media coverage of politically engaged young people is not hard to come by—popular teen-focused publications like Teen Vogue have not only embraced activist and social-justice-oriented content but have received much scholarly attention for doing so (Coulter and Moruzi 2022; Crookston and Klonowski 2021). Activism is seemingly commonplace for contemporary young people, especially girls. However, most media outlets still focus on a small handful of famously political girls. Though these activists, like education advocate Malala Yousafzai, water protector Autumn Peltier, and climate activist Greta Thunberg, have reached a level of hypervisibility that demonstrates an intense interest in political girls as both idealized and anxiety-inducing subjects, they are often framed through discourses of extraordinary girlhood and tend to be positioned as singular and exceptional (Benigno 2021; Brown 2016; Taft 2020).

Instead of seeing today's young activists as extraordinary girls who stand alone in demanding a better future, in my research, I explore the ways girls encounter the world and build a sense of self as embedded community members with close and complex relationships with the people around them. I bring an intergenerational lens to the actions and motivations of activist girls to ask how contemporary girls negotiate and feel about their activism, their place within ongoing social movements, and their relationships with their communities. To provide further focus to these networks of relationships, I am especially interested in developing a feminist interrogation of daughterhood to synthesize the ways that girls' relationships with their mothers influence their feminism and activism. Using daughterhood as the locus of connections between girls' political participation and family relationships, I aim to centre girls in my analysis without isolating them from larger support structures and without disconnecting their political activism from their family and community contexts.

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

This article offers a reflection on the field of girls' studies by way of a reflection on my dissertation fieldwork. As I will explain, my research method is a departure from the usually recommended methods of the field. Exploring mother-daughter relationships as a central research theme is uncommon in girls' studies, and interviewing girls, particularly younger girls, alongside their mothers is rare. Implementing this methodology came with many challenges. This reflection explores what girls' studies wants for and from girls and what prying into the space where the personal and political collide in girls' lives could mean.

Girling Desire

I am especially drawn to questions surrounding what activist girls want from their world and relationships and what this—that is, my research – wants from them. Wanting comes with an intriguing double meaning; wanting means both desire and lack. Girls are caught up in the doubleness of wanting—by taking up activism, they express that they desire something that is lacking in our world. However, wanting is also understood as a site of lack that indicates a kind of failure or incompleteness. Even when they are not actively engaging in politics, girls are constantly rendered through a matrix of vulnerability and risk that sees them as always inadequate and in need of adult rescue or correction. Anita Harris elucidates this in her book *Future Girl* (2004), where she points to the dominant discourses of late capitalist girlhood as the can-do girl and the at-risk girl. Harris explains that these figures are not judged just by actions such as educational attainment, reproductive age, or employment but by their aspirations. Girls either want too much, and their excessiveness is seen as dangerous, or they do not want enough and are accused of being too apathetic about the world around them. Whether society imagines girls succeeding or suffering ultimately does not matter because either scenario justifies further scrutiny. In short, we are concerned not only with whether girls are doing the right thing but if they want the right things.

Focusing on girls as wanting subjects risks reinscribing this pathologizing view where girls are missing something and need adult instruction or interpretation to be complete. Trying to get to their desires feels like repeating this anxious surveillance of girls' innermost lives. However, engaging with girls' wants does not have to be an act of anxious or corrective scrutiny. Desire is integral to understanding the connections between intergenerational relationships and girls' aspirations to make their worlds better. In the article "Breaking up with Deleuze: Desire and Valuing the Irreconcilable," Eve Tuck describes desire as a kind of intergenerationally transmitted feeling and site of knowledge: "This wisdom is assembled not just across a lifetime, but across generations, so that my desire is linked, rhizomatically, to my past and my future" (2010, 645). In this study, rather than seeing wanting as something that needs to be resolved, I suggest it can be a way to explore vulnerability and the ways that we both desire and are dependent on the people around us in both sustaining and precarious ways.

Girls' Studies and Mothers

Many girls' studies scholars write about and advocate for the importance of intergenerational relationships and solidarity between girls and adults and take a community-focused approach to girls' lives (Bent 2016; Brown 2016; Brown 2009; de Finney 2014; 2017; Winstanley and Bernier 2022). However, even in this kind of intergenerational work with girls, mothers and mothering are rarely a point of focus. In fact, the adults who carry out girls' studies research generally avoid anything that could be perceived as replicating the inequality of a mother-daughter relationship between themselves and the girls with whom they work (Bent 2016). Girls' studies scholars want to take girls seriously as people who show agency and resistance to oppression. Exploring the lives of activist girls as daughters in the domestic sphere, where they are so often confined, often feels antithetical to this goal. However, this project of centring girls' voices has had consequences for the kinds of literature that exists about girls and their mothers. As a field, girls' studies has often been reticent to explore mother-daughter relationships as a topic and resistant to explore it as a methodology. As a result, parent-child interviews are not common in girls' studies.

Girls' studies conceptualizes girls as people who inhabit a distinct social location at the intersection of age and gender; girls constitute both a diverse group whose members have been systemically marginalized and social actors who can influence the world even as it influences them (Mandrona 2016, 3). In the introduction to their edited collection, *Difficult Dialogues About Twenty-First Century Girls* (2015), Donna Marie

Johnson and Alice Ginsberg outline the history of girls' studies in the West and some of the key concepts and interventions of the field. They note that one of the core motivations for creating a distinct field of study around girlhood was the fact that girls had distinct experiences that were not adequately addressed by feminist theorizing focused on adult women (2015, 4–5). Girls are socially and politically disadvantaged in ways that resemble but do not directly mirror the experiences of boys and adult women. The combination of ageism and sexism directed at girls requires its own liberation strategies. As minors, girls still experience considerable restrictions on their lives from parents and other authorities and are often explicitly barred from civic processes like voting.

Anita Harris (2004; 2008) has noted how, within the neoliberalism of late modernity, girls are celebrated as flexible, adaptable, and successful. Still, this kind of visibility is ultimately a regulatory system where girls must live up to rising standards but keep up the appearance of looking good and having fun while doing it (Coulter 2018). In this context, girls not only face the policing of their behaviour and movement but are also expected to do the work to maintain harmonious relationships with the people around them and may, therefore, decline to openly express their feelings and opinions in certain settings (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Johnson and Ginsberg 2015). These pressures are heightened for Black, Indigenous, and other girls of colour who experience state-sponsored policing and overcriminalization and are subject to much harsher state and social consequences for taking up space and expressing political opinions (Brown 2009; de Finney 2014; 2017; Smooth and Richardson 2019).

Even programs meant to empower girls often engage in this regulatory, if not carceral, approach to girls' development and citizenship. Though often well-meaning, girl-focused programming run by adults often individualizes girls and positions them as responsible for the systemic issues they face by emphasizing individual coping skills over organizing for wider change (Winstanley and Bernier 2022). Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) points out that programming by adult white women for Black girls often replicates racist assumptions about the risks of Black girlhood and recreates the misogynoir that marginalizes Black girls (10). In her own work with Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), Brown emphasizes the need for adult women to enter into solidarity with girls rather than just supervising them or attempting to rescue them from their assumed status as victims. Courtney Cook makes a similar critique, pointing out that the nonprofit sector has few Black women in leadership roles. Organizations with a mission to empower Black girls employ a "can-do" approach that sells girls of colour a leadership dream that may never be realized (Cook 2020, 53). Like Brown (2009), Cook (2020) also emphasizes the need for Black women and girls to participate together in the activist project of dismantling exclusionary systems rather than individually overcoming systemic barriers.

In response to these marginalizing dynamics and the persistent inequality between children and adults, many girlhood studies scholars rightfully recommend that researchers engage with girls one-on-one or with their peer groups to empower girls to speak freely about their lives and have their words met by adults willing to listen to and respect their perspectives. Adult researchers should not, as the girls working with Emily Bent at the UN put it, "momsplain" to their young participants (Bent 2016, 114). As a field, girlhood studies centres girls' voices and employs methods like participatory action research, photovoice, and journaling to allow girls to express their perspectives without feeling that they must defend themselves, protect others, or otherwise please adults (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2013). The adults who carry out this research should ideally enter a research relationship with girl participants where they are speaking *with* rather than *for* girls.

While these conditions have pushed the subject of mothers to the edges of the field, this research gap is not an oversight so much as a response to how girls are continually pushed to the margins in research that does not directly focus on their experiences. It is important to note that young people, particularly those

who are queer, disabled, or otherwise marginalized, are not always safe with their parents. Involving parents and children in research can lead to material harm if something is asked or revealed that causes one or both members of the pair to feel outed, betrayed, challenged, or embarrassed. This can be especially precarious when the children live at home or are otherwise dependent on their families. Mother-daughter relationships are often the site of conflict, mistrust, and abuse, and I am not arguing that the field should engage more with mothers because mothers are an inherently positive part of girls' politics. However, whether they are a positive or negative force in a girl's life, mothers and mother figures are part of the greater context of what it means to be a girl and, significantly, a daughter.

There is no shortage of academic writing on mother-daughter relationships in general, and many feminists reflect on their lives and work from a "narrating daughter" standpoint, where they locate themselves as a single link in a much larger chain of feminist action and events. These reflections from adult women often begin with how they first learned feminism or some other form of political participation from their mothers at home (alt, Marks, and Clarke-Mitchell 2016; deAnda and Geist-Martin 2018; Fouquier 2011; Reimer and Sahagian 2013; Rastogi and Wampler 1999; Torres 2011; Sharpe 2023). Memories of girlhood are integral to narratives of adult feminist consciousness and these narratives remind us that adults are not simply post-girls. Girlhood is not just a life stage that neatly fades away once adulthood takes its place. Instead, early girlhood experiences continue influencing how adults think about their gender, relationships, and politics.

Many girls' studies scholars, such as Jessica Taft (2011), point out that because there is no such thing as a "completed" subjectivity where one reaches a finalized static identity, young people and adults inhabit the same ongoing process of becoming that occurs throughout the entire lifespan. Monica Swindle (2011) extends this idea further to argue that "girl" is an "affect that sticks to certain bodies mattering them by creating the surfaces, boundaries, and relations that seem to delimit them, the affect that animates girldom, and that is felt as girl, though not only by girls" (5). Sometimes, specific memories, sensations, or encounters can transport someone to girldom; in this respect, girlhood is something mothers and daughters share rather than a point of separation.

However, though these accounts of mother-daughter relationships from adult daughters demonstrate the ways that girlhood ebbs and flows throughout a lifetime, they are adult reflections on girlhood. Reconstructing childhood from memory involves both the benefits and limitations of adult hindsight and insight. More time has passed for these stories to be processed. Many of the scholars mentioned above return to stories of their childhoods once they have become parents and this recontextualizes how they think about their own childhood relationships with their parents. The real-time narrative of girlhood in the mother-daughter relationship is not more authentic or legitimate than the adult reflection, but it is distinct. In her introduction to *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection* (2019), Aria Halliday notes that she intentionally excluded works written exclusively from the standpoint of Black women reflecting on Black girlhood "out of concern for the general dearth of scholarship focused solely on theorizing Black girls' experiences in cultural studies" (6). The adult narrators who reflect on their familial and feminist mothers tend to be the sole authors of these accounts and have not entrusted their personal lives to a third party. Adult daughters get to narrate their lives as and if they please and they are not obligated to involve their mothers or anyone else in the process unless they feel so inclined.

Girls in their childhood and adolescence can also find ways to tell their own stories on their own terms but they often have fewer options for telling personal narratives without some kind of adult intervention. Between their parents and other authority figures, girls live with a significant amount of adult scrutiny and control and may be unable to critique these figures as freely as their adult counterparts. Young people can also have close and loving relationships with these same authority figures. Girls may be reluctant to criti-

cize these adults not out of fear, inequality, or a lack of control but out of love and protection. Children tend to be attached to their parents and express this care in how they speak about their family to others.

Affect Theory and Method

As I approached this daunting task of trying to bring mothers and daughters together into political conversations, I knew that this would be a project with a lot of feelings. Because of this, I selected feminist affect theory to offer guidance on how to conceptualize the cycles of meaning-making involved in activism, feminism, girlhood, and mothering that would emerge throughout this project. Affect is taken up differently by different scholars and is often concerned with the in-betweens, besides, capacities, and potentials that exist within and beyond our bodies. These are moments where the energy shifts when a joke fails to land or a spark of attraction is felt. In *Ordinary Affects* (2007), Kathleen Stewart explores how affects often go unnoticed but are still an integral part of the social world, writing: "A world of shared banalities can be a basis of sociality, or an exhausting undertow, or just something to do. It can pop up as a picture of staged perfection, as a momentary recognition, or as a sense of shock or relief at being 'in' something with others" (27-28).

"Affect" is often described as the conditions of emotion rather than the emotions themselves. However, the two do not have to be so clearly separated. In *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), Ann Cvetkovich uses the term "feeling" to name the "undifferentiated stuff" that spans the distinctions between emotion and affect in intentionally imprecise ways (5). Women in general and girls in particular are often imagined as inferior because they are seen as emotional (Ahmed 2014, 8). Because of this, I have taken after scholars like Sara Ahmed and primarily drawn from feminist approaches to affect theory that do not separate affect and emotion and I take feelings seriously as a site of knowledge production as girls feel their way through the world and their activism (Ahmed 2014,12). In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Ahmed offers an approach to affect that, like Cvetkovich (2012), keeps the affective and emotional connected. For Ahmed, the political and the emotional have always been intertwined and emotions are crucial to the self and the social in ways that constitute and blur the boundaries between the two (2014, 4).

Activism, feminism, and daughter-mother relationships are all categories that carry certain culturally defined expectations but when they are inhabited by real girls and women, they involve a porous flow between the social and the private that involve feelings like love, passion, anger, and desire as girls feel their way through their activism and relationships. Talking about activism and mother-daughter relationships involved the diffused hum of undefinable feelings and the directly stated emotions that mothers and daughters would name when describing their lives. An intentionally fluid and imprecise sense of these feelings felt like the best way to engage with the work of interpreting affect without claiming definitive mastery over what daughters and mothers were feeling and why.

Between politics and mother-daughter relationships, the subject matter of the interviews was intimate—and yet a stranger initiated these discussions. We had little preexisting knowledge of one another and had to feel our way through the boundaries of what could be asked and shared. Interviews with mothers and daughters often felt like a cross between a carefully staged scene and yet another encounter with something so ordinary it could scarcely need more attention. There were many instances where gestures, turns of phrase, and unfinished sentences created moments where something moved and was felt but went unspoken between the participants and me. These moments were as crucial to the layered meanings of the interviews as things stated outright.

Preparing for The Interviews

I approached the planning stage of this project with open curiosity about the kinds of relationships, activisms, and feminisms that contemporary mothers and daughters carry out. I understood activism, feminism, mothering, and daughtering as practices that anyone can enact rather than a specific standard to be met. My recruitment materials set broad parameters that invited anyone who identified with girlhood, motherhood, or daughterhood to participate. I left activism similarly undefined and was open to people who considered themselves activists for any cause. I decided to do semi-structured, in-depth interviews because I wanted to follow the participants as they described the connections – or lack thereof – between their political and personal lives. I combined direct narrative questions about activism, feminism, and their mother-daughter relationship—"How did you start with your activist work?"; "When did you first hear the word *feminism*?"; "What is your mother like?"—with more speculative questions that invited imaginative responses: "If you were interviewing mothers and daughters, what would you want to ask them?"; "What do you think a feminist future would look like?"

I also approached the planning stage with great hesitation. This openness toward the kinds of politics and relationships I would encounter extended from curiosity but also involved my own reluctance to impose on these relationships and their political implications. I was anxious about repeating the usual cycle of scrutinizing girls' inner lives or blaming mothers for social problems. I was unsure how I, a childless adult, would relate to either the daughters or the mothers and whether being between the two would create an insightful or detrimental distance between me and the participants. I was also unsure about how much of myself I should bring to the interviews. I did not want to reveal too much of my own ideals around feminism and activism and risk making a participant feel that their understandings had to meet this same standard.

I also was not sure if I should talk about my mother. I love my mother and I consider her my first feminist influence. However, I often find it difficult to talk about her without our relationship becoming distracting. I am a gay feminist scholar; my mother is a priest. People rarely know how to receive this information. Experience has taught me that revealing this part of my biography tends to shift the tone of the interaction as people are unsure if they are about to be subjected to a conversation about religion. With this in mind, I would answer questions about myself if participants asked but I tried to keep myself out of the way as much as possible during the interviews.

Beyond my particularities as a researcher, the fieldwork stage of this project was shaped by both the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and the typical difficulties of talking about mother-daughter relationships. I began recruitment in the fall of 2021 when my institution forbade most in-person fieldwork in response to COVID-19. While video conferencing made it much easier to coordinate with participants who lived in other parts of the country—especially mothers and daughters who did not live in the same household—many people were spending their entire work and school days on Zoom at the time. This made an additional two hours of Zoom calls unappealing for some while others did not have the devices or internet bandwidth available to accommodate an hour-long voluntary interview while also managing virtual work and school.

I sent over two hundred calls for participants to feminist and activist organizations, university gender studies and social justice departments, individual activists, and colleagues. My fixation on wanting was put into stark relief when I realized that no one wanted to participate in this research. The first barrier I encountered in exploring this relationship is that participation in a pair-interviewing method requires a positive enough mother-daughter relationship to facilitate discussing it together in front of a stranger – and

this does not describe every mother-daughter relationship. Even in the context of positive and supportive mother-daughter relationships, asking young people to sit down and talk about their politics and relationships with their mothers is asking a lot of them. There are many social conditions that steer girls away from talking too openly about the topics of this study. One of these conditions is expectations around who "counts" as an activist. Other scholars like Jessica Taft have found that politically active girls will decline to call themselves activists because they feel they have not done or experienced enough to earn the title and are instead becoming or learning activism (Taft 2006; 2011; 2017) Even when girls are invested in political action, they continue to receive the message that they should not take up so much space.

The other (and likely more impactful) reason for the low interest in the study is that girls are often expected to maintain harmonious relationships with the people around them and uphold the status and cohesion of their families—this can include protecting the family from prying questions asked by white professionals from state-sponsored institutions. The researcher is not separate from their society and enters relationships with participants that are always already contoured by social systems like white supremacy, colonization, and class inequality. Both historically and now, it is often "nice white ladies" like me who come to enforce white supremacy and colonization precisely by asking invasive questions to families who are racialized, poor, undocumented, and disabled. This is likely why most families who did participate were not only white but had some kind of existing familiarity and trust with educational institutions. The mothers and daughters interested in the study were overwhelmingly students, were currently working in education, or had heard about the research through a trusted friend or colleague who attended or worked for a university.

The Interviews

Once the interviews were underway, they were as varied as the mother-daughter relationships. I did not impose a consistent order of interviews to accommodate the mothers' and daughters' schedules. Sometimes, I would meet mother and daughter for the first time together for their pair interview; other times I would meet them individually for their solo interviews before the pair interview. For each family, the interviews took place over days, weeks, or even months. On a few occasions, the interviews all took place back-to-back in one day. While I remained alone and uninterrupted in my apartment, the participants were in more porous interview spaces as their families and workplaces hummed around them. Roommates would walk past and pets would demand attention. On two different occasions, a teenage son burst into the room to ask his mother a question while she was being interviewed.

I was not physically in the same room as the mothers and daughters I interviewed but the Zoom calls actually created a greater level of intimacy than I had assumed. Though we were separated by screens, participants would sit for interviews in their bedrooms and even position their laptops on their laps. I would not have been so physically close or in such intimate spaces during in-person interviews. This closeness contrasted with my own cautiousness in initiating questions about the more private aspects of people's lives and relationships. I had a very general structure to these interviews but I tended to order the topics of my questions to begin with activism, transition to feminism, and then arrive at mother-daughter relationships. Because I had recruited many participants through their activist work, I felt this was the most public topic to discuss with a stranger and we would build rapport by discussing politics before moving into family life.

Among the families participating, and particularly among the daughters, there was still a sense of protectiveness around how much could or should be entrusted to a researcher. There are many social pressures and stereotypes that pathologize women's and girls' roles in domestic life and, even in households with har-

monious relationships, many families understand the risks of being *perceived* through these stereotypes. During pair interviews, when mothers and daughters first described their relationships, it was common for them to describe their relationship as close but not too close. Heather, a graduate student and single mother and her daughter Danielle, a grade eight student, offered an example of this dynamic.

> **Heather** 01:34
>
> I call her my buddy. Cuz she's, I mean, most people who know me have met Danielle because she comes with me many places. You know, when she was little out of necessity, but now kind of, she's just fun to have around. So I'll ask you know, if she has a PA day "you want to come into work with me?" Not so much with COVID, but "and help me with something at the office?" Or "do you want to?-" you know, did this and that, so our relationship? my buddy I call it.
>
> **Danielle** 02:05
>
> Well, I wouldn't say like best friend stuff. Because like it's mother, daughter first, then, like friends, but I would say like, a very understanding, like, very talkative [both laugh]. But like, I'd say that we're very understanding. And we're like, listen, and like, we'll hear opinions. And then say our own clearly and that's tough. Yeah.

In her solo interview, Heather described how, as a single mother, she is viewed as uniquely responsible for any of her child's struggles. Heather continuously described her daughter Danielle as an easy child and a "houseplant." Dani, a bright and confident girl, described her life in the same pleasant terms. Still, Heather often returned to the idea that she felt others judged her based on her daughter's behaviour and therefore emphasized her daughter's good behaviour because good kids are believed to come from good parents. Danielle was also aware of this dynamic; when her mother described their relationship in terms of friendship, she quickly asserted that they were not too close and remained mother and daughter first. Their closeness was still within the appropriate bounds of a normal mother-and-daughter relationship.

Throughout this research, there was an ongoing tension between wanting to participate and not allowing the researcher too much access to private life. One example of this was Ellie and Elise. After a transgender student was attacked at her school, 17-year-old Ellie, who identified as straight and cis, devoted much of her time to organizing an anti-bullying pledge and a unity march in her community. Elise, a school guidance counsellor, was a family friend to Ellie, and had known her since she was in preschool. The two were very close (even choosing their own alliterative pseudonyms). They provided a great deal of support to one another as they both tried to advocate for queer and feminist changes in a conservative small town. Interestingly, Elise had her own teenage daughters who also joined Ellie in her anti-bullying initiatives and Ellie described her mother as very supportive of her work. Despite this, in their pair interview, they both expressed that it would simply be too awkward to participate in the study with family members who lived in the same household. Elise felt that her daughter might find such an earnest conversation to be "too cringey" and Ellie worried that this kind of interview process might stir up past conflicts with her mother. The two still understood their relationship to be a kind of mothering and daughtering that was as integral to their lives as their connection to their household family members; however, there remained a kind of refusal to allow the researcher too much insight into these relationships since both seemed to express how doing so would be essentially unbearable.

In other cases, a daughter would participate but the interviews never reached the pair interviewing stage

with their mother. Though one pair interview seemed to fall through because of scheduling conflicts, another failure seemed to stem from a daughter's desire to protect her mother. At age 20, Brett was already an experienced activist with much public exposure after advocating for comprehensive sex education in Ontario. We were connected through a mutual colleague and, while Brett was excited to participate, she worried that her mother, who struggled with chronic illness, might not be available for an hour-long Zoom conversation. I offered some alternatives, like a written interview, and, in the meantime, Brett was happy to meet with me for her solo interview. We talked for about an hour and Brett generously shared many stories of her activist work and had many astute things to say about the complexities of being a daughter. Toward the end of our conversation, we had the following exchange about how her mother was always supportive of feminist causes but not as interested in theoretical conversations as Brett:

> **Hannah** 45:14
>
> And, you know, despite that sort of being to material benefit, is that ever, like frustrating, that that level of depth isn't necessarily going to be part of the conversation?
>
> **Brett** 45:24
>
> Um, maybe. Don't tell my mom that I said that. I don't want her to feel bad [laughs]. Um, just don't, I mean- are you going to talk to my mom about? I'm just curious. So you're going to talk to my mom, but any of the specific things that I say here?
>
> **Hannah** 45:41
>
> No. I'll ask the same sort of questions. Like I'll ask her about feminism.
>
> **Brett** 45:45
>
> ok cool
>
> **Hannah** 45:46
>
> I will not report your answers back, no.

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

There were also times when the mothers and daughters were not hesitant about sharing their lives and I was the one left feeling protective or unsure about the kinds of questions I should ask. When I interviewed Jessica and her two daughters, the three of them not only spoke candidly about race, gender, and their relationship, but they also had a disagreement during their combined interview. Jessica was a fellow graduate student, community organizer, artist and mother of four. I first met her two daughters, Nicole, age 13, and Daisy, age 11, during their family interview. The three gathered in Jessica's sunny office, surrounded by her paintings. As the interview progressed and Daisy and Nicole grew more confident speaking with me, the three began to debate what the girls were allowed to watch on TV. The girls argued that they were old enough to critically watch a Netflix program about social media influencers. They said that their brothers

made sexist comments about the main character's provocative clothes and Nicole explained that it was wrong to be dismissive of the showrunner's outfits because she was a transgender woman who had not been able to openly express her femininity earlier in life. Jessica was not impressed to hear that her children were watching a show about the consumerist lifestyles of wealthy celebrities that she so openly disagreed with. She wanted her daughters to embrace their own identities and not live lives consumed by the external pressures of misogyny, white supremacy, fame, and money.

During this exchange, I felt myself shift between feeling more like a mother and more like a daughter as each side made their arguments about the show. The girls' account of the show and their desire to keep watching it returned me to my girlhood and memories of feeling that my mother was out of touch or failing to recognize that I was growing up. I remember being Nicole's and Daisy's age and vigorously trying to have my maturity recognized and taken seriously by my parents by arguing about what I could watch, where I could go, or what I could wear. At the time of the interview, I was also an adult feminist concerned about the world that girls inherit. I agreed with Jessica's assertion that this kind of programming and celebrity branding are not only superficial but offer an incredibly narrow image of what it means to be a successful woman. Jessica was also rightfully concerned that this kind of hyper-consumerist television reinforces not only misogyny but also white supremacy, and, as she further noted in her interview, her concern about the media landscape available to her young Black daughters extends far beyond one reality show. I was caught between feeling aligned with mother and daughters but also recognized that this family's experiences did not perfectly mirror my own. I have a scholarly understanding of how the media and other institutions contribute to the adultification of Black children (Bailey 2021; Nunn 2018; Smith 2019) but this is not my lived experience. Daisy and Nicole do not experience the exact same sexism that I encounter and, while Jessica's concerns about media influence are familiar, I am not a mother.

There were also times when, instead of feeling hesitant to intervene or control the interview, I was actively engineering the kinds of activist subjects I sought to research. The recruitment phase of this study was an arduous experience; despite sending hundreds of calls for participants, interest remained low throughout the fieldwork process. I went through various phases during this lengthy process, including an "inspiring girl author" phase. This is where I must admit that I began inventing activists rather than simply looking for them. By the spring of 2022, I was trying to send more targeted recruitment messages to activists. I noticed many girls who received media attention for their work had written books to empower other girls. I reached out to several of these authors through their websites and publishers. This was fruitless in all but one case.

Samantha, who most often went by Sam, had written a book about gender expression for 4 to 8 year olds. I interpreted this as a political thing to do. When I talked to Sam, she was excited to talk about the book and said she had written it because of her own experience as a gender-non-conforming child but she did not see her work through the same activist lens that I did. For Sam, educating other people, especially young children, about the diversity of gender expression was a commonsense activity. She had considered the topic important but had not considered her writing to be activist work:

> **Hannah** 13:31
>
> Cool, and you know, do you consider like, you know, publishing a book about gender expression, would you file that under like activism or advocacy or, you know, would you consider it something else?
>
> **Sam** 13:43

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

Though I had intended to set broad parameters for activism, there were still moments where my notions of the political and what I wanted to consider political did not align with how girls saw their actions. I was left to wonder if I should leave girls with the agency to downplay their work or intervene and smooth over these lacking moments and insist that they are political. Either way, I struggled with how my adult interpretation of these girls' work would impinge on how they saw their own lives and work.

Feminist Futures

Whenever I asked more directly about wanting in the interviews, my questions would bring up complex emotions and a tense affect would return. I often asked mothers and daughters how they envisioned a feminist future. I usually prefaced this question by saying they did not need to be practical and could be free to speculate wildly about their best possible scenario. Most still prefaced their answers with caveats like "this will never happen" or "this can't really work." Ellie, who lived in a transphobic small town, replied to this question by saying that she would like to see *less* hate crime—not *no* hate crime or a community where gender liberation was possible. Ellie wanted just a reduction in the familiar daily violence. One of the mothers, Eleanor, a sexuality studies professor, cited *Cruel Optimism* (Berlant 2011) directly when she described how longing for a future you will probably never experience is painful. It is not that these mothers and daughters could not imagine utopian futures but doing so invited further disappointment – especially since the mothers in this study often watched their daughters confront the same social and political issues they had experienced in their own youth.

When Brett and I discussed feminist futures, I asked how she thought the internet would need to change to facilitate liberatory politics, to which she exclaimed, "I'm only 20!" She was right to feel exhausted by the question because adults often ask girls such questions. We ask young people open-ended questions about what they want and then we are stubbornly unsatisfied when we get the wrong answer. When I found myself repeating these prying questions, I questioned what I wanted from this research and how I was re-adhering these girls into this constant matrix of wanting.

Conclusion: What Does the Research/er Want?

Like all research, I know that my study was often left wanting and I was usually torn between ambitious kinds of wants and feelings of inadequacy. I began this project with a desire to return mothers to girls' studies and deep anxieties about imposing anything onto these mothers and daughters. Though I was critical of how mothers have been pushed to the edges of girls' studies, I still absorbed the idea that what I was doing was a bad idea. I operated under the assumption that talking about mother-daughter relationships is risky and I was anxious that I was another adult researcher prying into girls' private lives. I was caught in a daughterly kind of desire where I both wanted to bring things together and maintain a cohesive relationship between mothering and girls' studies while also asserting my own insights through this research. I did not want to repeat girls' studies' usual exclusion of mothers because I did not want to, scholastically speaking, turn into my mother.

These pair interviews provided unique insight into girls' lives; mother-daughter interviewing should be explored further in girlhood studies. However, despite the richness of these interviews, I am still not entirely

sure why I want mother-daughter relationships to be significant to girls' studies. This paper has charted some of my early thinking around what girls want and how their wantings are constructed in both the field and my dissertation research. There are still other axes of wants in the study and I am left with more questions than answers about what my research says about girls and mother-daughter relationships. Wanting is a central affect of this project, not just because mothering, daughtering, and feminism are all structured around a series of overlapping expectations and wants—What do these family members want from each other? From the world? From feminism?—but because there were times when I did not particularly want to do this research. There were too many emotions, too much to think about, and too many of my own feelings to consider.

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