



"I AM DAUGHTERHOOD, BUT I'M NON-BINARY:"

*Mothers and Daughters on Gender, the
Family and their Feminist Futures*

By

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Introduction

Although "daughter" has many normative, gendered connotations, the subjectivities and relationalities associated with the "daughter" identity have an underexplored plasticity, where longstanding bonds can stretch to contain differently gendered and familial futurities. Grade 12 student Stea¹ was one of my first interviewees. Stea is nonbinary and enjoys a community of other trans and nonbinary peers at school and the local 2SLGBTQ+ youth center. Though they felt generally supported by their parents, their two mothers often struggled to grasp their transness. As Stea held their identity and various relationships together, they came to their own negotiated theory of daughterhood:

Stea (daughter) 47:12

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

Stea takes pride in their status as an eldest daughter, something they feel encompasses a sense of duty and responsibility that extends not only beyond the home but also beyond any singular gender identity. . No other term seemed

to reflect their familial relationships: Stea felt no attraction to the term "son," found "offspring" unpleasant, and felt that "child," while gender neutral, was simply too childlike. Stea was not the only participant with a lived experience and political outlook that involved questioning how gender situated them in the world and their relationships.

This paper draws on my dissertation study, where I interviewed politically engaged girls and their mothers and mother figures to explore a contextual and intergenerational approach to girls' activism. From September 2021 to April 2022, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews over Zoom with eleven activist daughters (aged 11-20) and their mothers and mother figures. The overarching goal of this project is to complicate popular images of girl activists as singular, heroic, and exceptional (Jessica Taft 2020; Lyn Mikel Brown 2016). Mothering, daughtering, and activism are social roles and practices—not innate, but learned in relation to other people. I wanted to explore what kinds of affective landscapes would emerge when interviewing girls not only about their mothers, but with their mothers when they described their politics, as a way to centre everyday girls' activist efforts without isolating their political actions from their family and community contexts. I argue that exploring close relationships and the interior and affective features of political life is necessary to understand girls' politics holistically.

To engage with the affects that emerge at the intersection of the personal and political for activist girls, I draw on feminist affect theory, particularly approaches that take feelings seriously as a site of knowledge production and do not separate affect and emotion (Sara Ahmed 2014; 2004; Monica Swindle 2011). When mothers and daughters stretch and reify the familiar borders of "mother" and "daughter" they are negotiating their feelings toward other people, social expectations, and their own sense of self. For example, a particularly salient feeling that emerged across the interviews was desire as mothers and daughters hoped for a better

¹ All participants are represented by pseudonyms

future for themselves and each other. Activists are very explicitly wanting subjects who point out that something is lacking in our world and needs to change. Girls are constantly rendered through a matrix of errant desire, vulnerability, and risk, which sees them as always inadequate and in need of adult rescue or correction (Sara McClelland and Michelle Fine, 2008). In her book *Future Girl* (2004), Anita Harris notes that girls are overwhelmingly expected to take on the responsibility of securing society's future and meet contradictory expectations of both preserving traditions and leading the way to new and progressive norms. Wanting is not a problem to solve, but it often feels that way for daughters who are caught between what they want and what is wanted for them.

One particularly salient site of this negotiation in the interviews was when participants queried what the future could look like, and their responsibility to secure that future by conceptualizing gender in trans-inclusive ways. Across the interviews, both trans and cisgender participants expressed hopes for truly trans-inclusive feminisms and concerns about rising transphobia. These hopes and anxieties are animated by their close relationships with trans loved ones and their own lived experiences as trans people as they desire feminist futures but struggle with the cruel optimism (Lauren Berlant 2011; Andrea Long Chu 2019) of striving for a future they may never reach. This paper examines how trans-inclusivity and more flexible notions of gender, particularly gendered relationships like those between mothers and daughters, became recurring themes across the interviews as participants imagined a feminist future. Though this analysis is based on a small study whose limited set of interviews cannot be generalized to all mothers, daughters, activists, or trans people, these vignettes still offer an opportunity to explore the cruel optimism (Berlant 2011; Chu 2019) of striving for optimistic horizons that we may never reach.

Context and Theory

I locate my work in girls' studies, a field where mothers and mothering are rarely a point of focus. This constitutes a notable gap in a field that often stresses the importance of intergenerational relationships, solidarity between girls

and adults, and the need for community-focused approaches to girls' lives (Emily Bent 2016; Brown 2016; Ruth Nicole. Brown 2009; Sandrina de Finney 2014; Sarah Winstanley and Alexe Bernier 2022; Kari Dawn Wuttunee, Jennifer Altenberg, and Sarah Flicker 2019). In fact, the adults who carry out girls' studies research generally avoid anything that could be perceived as replicating the inequality of a mother-daughter relationship between themselves and the girls with whom they work. Emily Bent (2016) explains that when the youth delegates she was working with at the United Nations began to perceive that their adult mentors were not taking them seriously, they rebuked them with a letter that accused the women of being too maternal and "momsplaining" over them (114).

This long-standing reticence emerged out of a resistance to the dominance of mother-daughter thinking when the field was initially taking shape. In the Anglosphere, girls' studies scholars often describe the field as originating from the so-called feminist third wave of the 1990s (Victoria Cann, Sarah Godfrey, and Helen Warner 2018; Elline Lipkin 2009; Claudia Mitchell 2016; Donna Marie Johnson and Alice Ginsberg 2015). Astrid Henry (2003) argued that the '90s were a decade where notions of feminist generations were the de facto way to describe differences among feminists, and these dyadic "matrophors" soon proved problematic (212). Henry cites Mary Russo (1999), who critiques the reliance on mother-daughter metaphors as replicating power imbalances and limiting the feminist imagination of what intergenerational relationships could be, intersectionally and otherwise (24). As a result, though a few studies take up mothers and mothering as a topic (Melissa Swauger 2010; Renata Ferdinand 2022), parent-child interviews are not common in girls' studies.

Queerness and transness, which are so often met with familial rejection, are one area where emphasizing the gendered mother-daughter relationship can seem particularly unappealing. As feminists have long argued, families are frequently significant sites of violence against women and girls regardless of sexuality or gender identity (Alyosxa Tudor 2023, 293). In *The Promise of Happiness and All About Love*, Sara Ahmed (2010) and bell hooks (2001),

respectively, point out that it is precisely because the patriarchal family is supposed to be the site of love, happiness, and sustaining relationships that its inequalities remain violently enforced. More often than not, people are expected to bend to conform to the kinds of normative happiness that families are supposed to provide, rather than allow the family to bend in its structure. Children, particularly girls, are often mistreated as familial property (Celia Bardwell-Jones 2021; Hazel Woodrow 2023). This ownership dynamic is antithetical to the kind of love that hooks argues is necessary for liberation (2001, 87, 221).

Transphobic rhetoric often invokes the tropes of protecting families, women, and girls (Julia Serano 2023; 2018; Susan Stryker and Talia Betcher 2016; Stryker and V Varun Chaudhry 2022; Tudor 2023; Judith Butler 2024). The growing conservative “parents’ rights” movement in the United States and Canada exemplifies this as it positions transgender identity as uniquely threatening and destabilizing to young people (Jenna Benchetrit 2023; Lauren Gambino 2023; Woodrow 2023). As Julia Serano (2023) explains, parents seeking information about their trans children are increasingly encountering online communities that radicalize them to see their child’s transness as a sickness or threat. Serano describes how this dynamic is further compounded by media bias that credulously repeats concerned parents’ stories while disregarding the scientific consensus that gender-affirming approaches are beneficial.

As a queer researcher, I do not hold a romantic view of the family as a site of unoppressive love and support. In pointing out that intergenerational and familial relationships are often violent, I acknowledge that the limited interest in interviewing children alongside their parents in girls’ studies is not an oversight but a reaction to these marginalizing dynamics. However, despite this wariness, I refuse to cede the family as an institution with no liberatory queer or feminist potential. My interest in engaging with girls and their mothers has persisted despite the reasonable notion that the hierarchies of mothers and daughters act as a barrier to solidarity rather than a positive feminist organizing or pedagogical principle, and despite the recent retrenchment of the family as a place of rigid cis

and heteronormativity. Girls’ political perspectives emerge from their unique social location at the intersection of their age and gender, and power systems like race, class, and ability further inform their political worldviews. It follows that if we understand girls’ politics as intersectional, we should also contextualize them as intergenerational. Queer and trans people have long traditions of creating chosen families where gendered and familial attachments, like Stea’s notion of daughtering, can be reinterpreted and re-negotiated.

Patriarchal family structures are neither natural nor eternal, and systems of domination like colonization enforce their confining gendered and sexual binaries. Indigenous feminists point out that decolonization offers a liberatory framework where intergenerational relationships can exist without being constrained by oppressive hierarchies or relying on biological essentialism. For example, Kari Dawn Wuttunee and Jennifer Altenberg (Wuttunee, Altenberg, and Flicker 2019) describe how a small group of Indigenous girls and women came together as nieces, aunts, and grandmothers to reclaim matrilineal teachings and how embracing these roles was essential to the group’s decolonial work. However, this was not a conservative reclamation. Wuttunee et al. noted that the group also acknowledged that their practice should and could be adapted to reflect a diversity of gender roles and expressions (74).

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

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

Materials and Methods

After receiving ethics approval from York University, I began recruiting and interviewing girls and their mothers and mother figures across Canada between September 2021 and April 2022. To recognize this spectrum of access to activist opportunities, I tried to avoid creating a hierarchy of what “counts” as activism. I essentially left “activism” as an open concept and allowed any girl who identified as an activist between the ages of 13 and 20 to participate and explain what this term meant to them in their lives. With this approach, I conceptualize youth activism as a broad category of political engagement where young people participate in direct and public initiatives to enact social change (see: Taft 2006; Jessalynn Keller 2012; Laura Rapp et al. 2010; Julia Schuster 2013).

The daughter’s activist commitments spanned various social issues, from sex education to the environment, and they worked at different scales. All of the daughters identified themselves as white, except for Danielle, who was white and Filipina; Daisy, who was Caribbean and Southeast Asian; and Daisy’s sister Nicole, who identified as Black and Scottish/English. One girl, Buffy, identified as transgender, and the others either described themselves as

cisgender or did not discuss their gender identity beyond identifying as a girl. Stea, who was non-binary, identified as a daughter but not a girl. The mothers were similar to their daughters, with all currently residing in Canada, and most were either working in education in some capacity or were enrolled as graduate students. All of the mothers identified as white, except Daisy and Nicole’s mother, Jessica, who identified as Black.

Findings



In my broad call for participants, I was not explicitly recruiting people who identified as trans or were active in trans activism. However, both transgender and cisgender participants frequently discussed the importance of including trans perspectives, the use of gender-neutral pronouns, and the need to actively combat transphobia. Across all nineteen total participants, two daughters identified themselves as transgender, four of the mothers/mother figures had a trans or questioning child, two daughters had a trans or questioning sibling, and five daughters had one or more close trans friends. Because of these close relationships and lived experiences, many of the participants felt that combating transphobia was important. Still, they did not want to over-politicize what they viewed as benign variations and a natural progression toward a society where greater self-determination should be the norm.

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

Daughters used openness to gender-neutral language and new pronouns as examples of their mothers' general progressiveness and willingness to learn from them. Amy, an anti-sexual violence activist, reassuringly noted during the pair interview that despite their more conservative upbringings, her parents were receptive to learning more about gender expression. To this, Amy's mother, Lizette, a retired Catholic school principal, replied:

Lizette (mother) 48:15

I'm still struggling with "they" because it's plural. I would be so much happier if it was a different word and you know how they did "Miss" and "Mrs" and then they created which was "Ms." So I still struggle with "they."

This comparison between "they" pronouns and the emergence of "Ms." actually came up a few times, with mothers expressing how gendered language had shifted across their lifetimes. In an essay exploring the benefits and limitations of inclusive language, Alexander Pershai (2006) makes a similar connection between the shared goals of trans and feminist thinkers who deploy non-sexist language. However, Pershai also points out that a fixation on language can be a way to avoid, rather than meaningfully engage with, inequality. Modifying words feels more actionable than altering material conditions. Among the cisgender participants, pronouns emerged as a kind of tactile signifier that could convey the broader concept of a world where gendered boundaries are more porous.

Discussion

Trans people, particularly trans children, are often imagined as a new sort of problem or possibility that is always imminent, but, as Muñoz (2009) puts it, a horizon that never arrives. Transness is positioned as either a sign of progress or a threat by cisgender people, even though trans people and trans feminism are neither new nor theoretical (Stryker and Bettcher 2016; Jules Gill-Peterson 2018; Talia Bhatt 2025). Harper Keenan (2022) notes that education scholars often entrench notions of trans newness in ways that erase the histories of trans cultures and their resilience. He notes that perpetually framing trans people as a new

social phenomenon maintains a status quo where ignorant hostility toward trans communities is excusable. Furthermore, the constant framing of trans people as a political or social crisis often serves to erase the everyday lives and relationships that trans people already have.

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

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

One participant actively resisted politicizing transness through her activism as a strategic framing. Seventeen-year-old Elizabeth, who often went by Ellie, identified as straight and cis but was deeply involved with trying to combat transphobia in her local community. She conflicted with her conservative small town, where

trans identity was at the centre of a political conflict so rancorous that students physically attacked a trans peer at her school. Rather than simply not noticing or experiencing queerness as political, Ellie had witnessed the adverse effects of what happens when queerness becomes politicized. Ellie was actively trying to frame her activism as non-political as a way to confront and de-escalate the recent violence against trans people in her school and community. She had reasoned that trying to depoliticize transness and transphobia into matters of inclusion and kindness would be the more effective strategy. If politicizing something makes it a problem, then depoliticizing it must be the solution:

Elizabeth (daughter) 15:36

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

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

I often asked mothers and daughters how they envisioned a feminist future. I usually prefaced this question by saying they did not need to be practical and could be free to speculate wildly about their best possible scenario. Ellie replied to this question by saying that she would like to see "less hate crimes." She did not say *no* hate crimes and indeed did not venture to allow

herself to imagine a world where gender liberation had been achieved.

Even when just speculating about the best possible future, Ellie struggled to see anything beyond a reduction in the familiar violence. Even though Ellie was actively involved in trying to improve conditions for her trans peers in ways that required a hopeful belief in a better horizon for her community, she would not allow herself to fully embrace a hope that was so often frustrated. The cruel optimism emerges here as she tempers her expectations for her work to avoid the painful possibility that her friends will never be truly safe despite their best efforts to secure a better future. This is both a matter of being practical with her hopes for social change and an emotional negotiation with how much she desires a kind of future that feels impossible. Ellie's resistance to politicizing transness reveals this affective negotiation. Suppose the intense and unyielding emotions of bipartisan political conflicts could be removed. In that case, the desire to remove transness from political struggle and violence altogether is a hopeful but ultimately cruel attachment—one that imagines safety could be achieved by retreating from the very political arena where rights are contested and won. This fantasy of depoliticization maintains the attachment to a world where trans existence could be normalized without confrontation. Still, this very desire for withdrawal from politics prevents the sustained engagement necessary to transform the conditions that make trans lives precarious in the first place.

Returning to family life, even in less volatile circumstances, just because something is a normal part of everyday life does not make it uncomplicated. During our interview, Stea noted that they had not considered their participation in the queer community to be activist work or even especially political. They saw working with an Indigenous community fighting for clean water as actual activism, whereas volunteering at Out Loud, the local queer youth centre, was more of a mentoring role. It is not that Stea had no concept of the idea that queerness was political or that queer people had to struggle for their rights. In fact, their parents only met because one of her mothers, Claire, was involved in an organization that supported queer people immigrating to Canada. However, despite this

generational queerness, Stea's parents still struggled to grasp their gender identity.

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

Claire (mother) 51:21

...we have a hard time developing that language, it's like, okay, let's just talk Finnish. And I'll just call you, you know, I'll just speak to you in Finnish and we don't have to worry about it...So that's, you know, a way of me kind of sidestepping the commitment to actually using "they" instead of "she," whereas I do it for her friends who are "they." And at work I do it for the child, I actually have to teach, I adopted "she" pronouns immediately. (Claire solo interview)

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

Even though Stea retained pride and affinity towards their role as an eldest daughter and had made an exception about their pronouns for their parents, this was clearly still frustrating for them:

Stea (daughter) 39:02

...it can be very frustrating at times. Constantly advocating for myself as a non-binary person is fantastic, and I love doing it. But then it's just like you tell someone, and you're like, "Hey, can you use they/them pronouns for me," and they learn, but then they still don't use those pronouns for you.

It can get very frustrating, and this isn't talking specifically about my parents, because I'm fine with them not using they/them pronouns. It's a little bit annoying, but it's something I've accepted. (Stea solo interview)

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

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

Hannah 18:42

If we're thinking about that, a dismantling of gender and of capitalism, what do you think mother-daughter relationships would look like in that world?

Eleanor (mother) 18:57

That's interesting.

Buffy (daughter) 18:58

That is interesting. I mean, honestly, hopefully, similar to ours [laughs].

...Buffy (daughter) 19:04

I think not a lot of mothers and daughters have, like, the same relationship as us where my mom is really, supportive and always, on board with me and my decisions. Whether she understands or agrees with them, she's always just like, "Do what you want to do," which is what mother-daughter and gender relationship would look like in like, the perfect like, feminist world, And I think in a world where with years of progress and feminism I think mother-daughter relationships look like, you know, both of you are always trying to like grow and change, which is what I think we have. Whereas I know some people, like especially in parent- or parental roles, where it's easy to think like you are, you know, the rightest. (Buffy Eleanor pair interview)

In contrast, though Buffy self-assuredly discussed gender and the possibilities for a feminist future, her mother, Eleanor, consistently subtly rebuffed the premise of my questions. She tended to reject the idea that gender was significant or that it would persist in an ideal world. Eleanor also rescheduled both the pair interview and her solo interview several times, giving me the impression that she was wary of what kinds of gendered implications I was trying to convey with my research. As I noted earlier, the mother-daughter relationship is haunted by gender essentialism and, like other family relationships, often mobilized to reassert conservative social values. In what I believe were efforts to protect and affirm her daughter, Eleanor always rejected the idea that gender would impact her relationships with her children. After Buffy explained why she thought their relationship was uniquely positive, Eleanor responded by critiquing the idea that mother-daughter relationships would even exist in an ideal feminist future:

Eleanor (mother) 20:55

Yeah, and it speaks to the kind of way that feminism seems to need women. But I would argue that feminism doesn't need women. It needs humans, and it needs a future without gender oppression.

So a mother-daughter relationship in this future might not even exist, because it would just be a human relationship, it would be a parent-child relationship, you know, rather than this kind of special gendered kind of logic that's sometimes attributed to like mothers and daughters, because some mothers, maybe were, you know, were assigned male at birth and they're mothers...

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

...Eleanor (mother) 26:29

Yeah. And we each identify as women, you know, so we do identify as women, but I just don't know that, you know, I would say that's the key to our relationship.

Buffy (daughter) 26:39

No, I think, well it's interesting because I think me, like transitioning, in some ways did bring me closer to my mom. I think with the expectation of being closer to her, I grew closer to her, which is a good thing, but I think I still feel like, you know, sort of my strings being pulled slightly by societal norms. (Buffy Eleanor pair interview)

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

In her solo interview, Eleanor said that her parents had “nothing but expectations,” and now that she was on the other side of this parent-child relationship, she did not want to repeat the pressures of her own childhood. Eleanor instead repeated the expected refrain that she only wants her children to be happy, and their happiness does not require them to be similar to her. At the same time, Buffy is similar to her mother, and Eleanor often revealed that she is pleased to have a daughter who shares many of her values and interests. Still, it was difficult for Eleanor to express this without feeling like she was making some kind of imposition that would make Buffy feel that she could not express herself as she pleased. A loving mother who embraces her daughter no matter who she is does not sound like the kind of disposition that fosters cruel optimism. If anything, it sounds like Eleanor is trying very hard to pre-emptively give up any attachment to any particular vision of Buffy’s present or future, explicitly to avoid the cruel optimism that Claire experiences. However, Eleanor’s attachment to the ideal of unconditional parental acceptance still prevents her from acknowledging the pleasure she derived from having a close relationship with a daughter similar to her, with whom she could share many of her interests.

Conclusion

Though I argue that the organic participation of trans people and the emergence of trans-related discussions in this study could be indicative of a broader pattern of trans acceptance and expansive gendered thinking among young feminists, this was still a small study. Ten families for a total of eleven young activists and eight mothers and mother figures are far too few people to draw generalizable conclusions about how activist girls and their mothers discuss and feel about the increasing visibility of transgender people and our society’s escalating transphobia. These families also all involved mothers and daughters who had a positive enough relationship to openly discuss it in front of each other with a researcher. It goes without saying that this comfort level is not a universal feature among mother-daughter relationships.

However, this handful of interviews still reveals some of the complexities of mothers and

daughters trying to navigate the interplay between past and future, as well as existing attachments and new possibilities when they imagined the kinds of feminist futures that might hold space for newly gendered subjectivities. This was not always an easy task, and asking about feminist futures in the context of mother-daughter relationships often served to reveal the tensions between past attachments and future horizons. For some participants, these attachments to their understanding of gender made it difficult to imagine a world or even a sense of self where these identities shifted. Still, a more gender-expansive future proved exciting for many interviewees, and they could envision a feminist future where trans-inclusive mother-daughter relationships are not only possible but desirable.

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