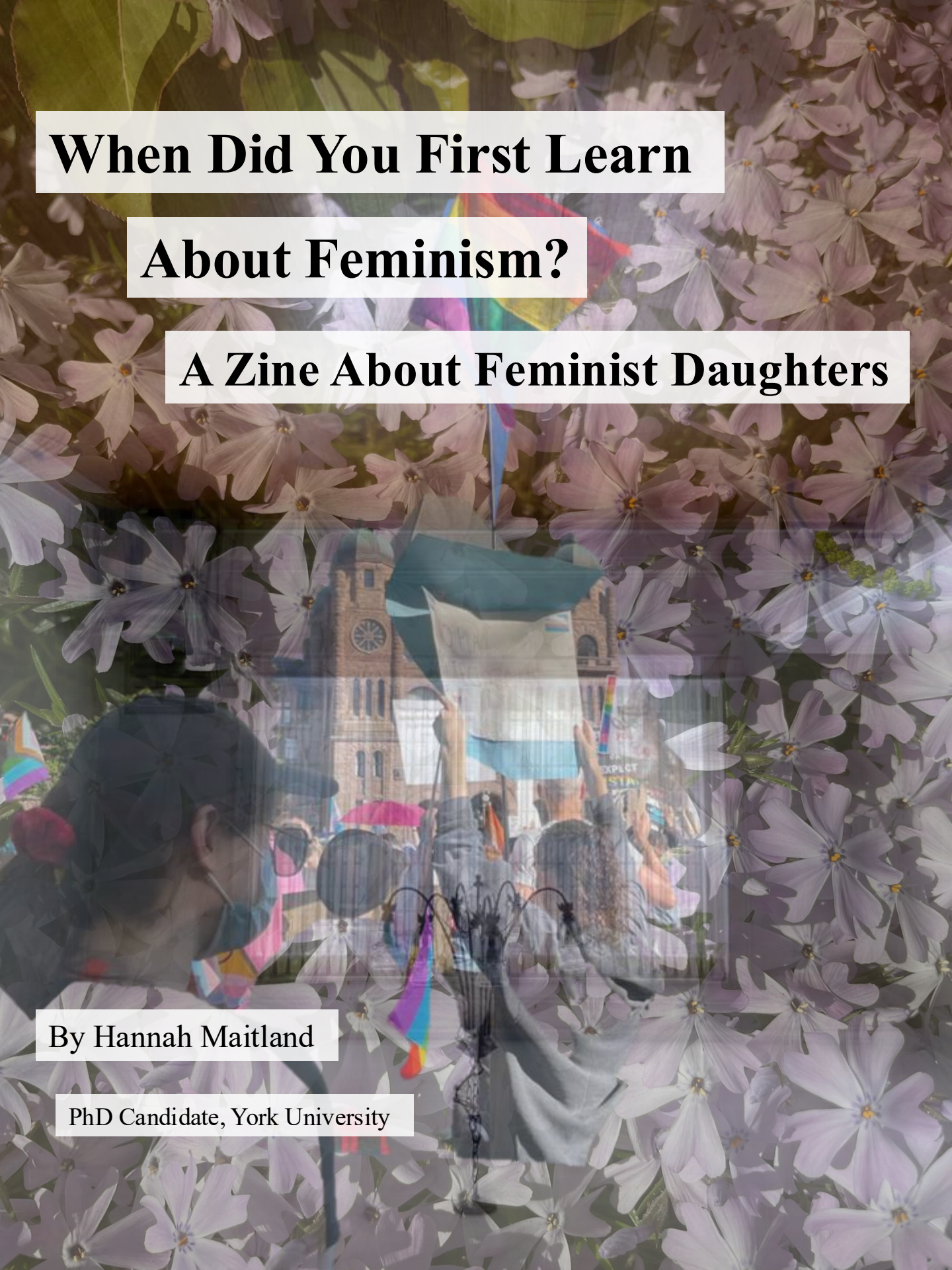


# When Did You First Learn About Feminism?

## A Zine About Feminist Daughters

By Hannah Maitland

PhD Candidate, York University

The process of contextualizing the relationships and feminist inheritances between activist girls and their mothers is not a linear or orderly process. The intersecting layers of personal experiences, social histories and systems of power always sit on top of one another and cannot be fully disentangled. This zine is based on my dissertation research with eleven activist daughters (ages 11-20) and eight of their mothers and mother figures. My study combined one-on-one and paired interviews with daughters and mothers to explore how this relationship impacts feminist and activist participation and how this participation, in turn, impacts the relationship.

**"I guess 1975 was a big event in Toronto, and 'Why Not?' was the slogan for the UN International Women's Year of 1975. And I very clearly remember all the buttons and posters and the parade that my mom took me to. So, I don't think I would have thought of that before. I would have been like 11 in 1975. But my mom had books like *The Lace Ghetto*, like around the house, so she would have had books and like *Our Bodies Ourselves*."**

**"I was like, 'huh am I a feminist parent?' but I've really had to interrogate what that means lately. So, I think it's very interesting to be on the other side of the interviews and to think critically about, like, is feminism changing? Is it gonna be something that I recognize? When Danielle is my age, is it gonna be a bad word? I mean, it's already, I think we're already going back, it used to be something cool."**

As straitforward as that research question may seem, the process of analyzing all these voices together has often been difficult to capture with words.

**"I mean, sort of speaking about like mothers and daughters. So I encountered feminism the first time through my own mother and my aunt. So, I was growing up, was born in '69, so I grew up in the 70s, my aunt was very much involved in the Equal Rights Amendment struggle at the time, which was, as we know, lost in the United States. My mom would go to the, they were called women's lib meetings [laughs]. So that's how I grew up. I grew up in a feminist family."**

These layers of home life, political participation, memories, anticipated feminist futures, and feelings that come together when girls talk about their growing political lives often feel better represented through these hazy layers of images and words that structured academic writing.

This zine offers a visual representation of these layers of personal and political that overlapped for the mothers and daughters I interviewed. The photos include a blend of my own images of my family home and various protests and demonstrations I've attended over the course of this research project. This layering of home and activist life is something I share with the feminist participants in this research. The quotes presented here do not explicitly identify the speaker as either a daughter or mother or youth or adult. I have layered these quotes with the images to emphasize how the connections between relationships at home and politics are shared across the different age groups.

**"I grew up in a family where my mum was a social worker and worked for health promotion, addictions and mental health. So, this actually relates to your study and was in and would identify herself as a feminist. I always grew up with that."**

**"Yeah, like I said, she works at a big company. She's pretty high up, like high up person in the company. And so she's dealt with a lot of sexism in her day just with being talked down to or like just little acts that build up over time. And so she always expressed these struggles to me and how they were wrong."**

Collapsing the voices of daughters and mothers is not an unproblematic approach. Feminists have long warned about the ways mothers lose their identity when they are collapsed into their children, and children are denied their rights when they are seen as mere extensions or property of their parents. It is especially worth noting that the mothers and daughters who participated in this voluntary study had a positive enough relationship to be interviewed together, and this certainly does not reflect all mother-daughter relationships. By presenting these undifferentiated quotes about mothers and feminism from the mother and daughter cohorts, my point is not to argue that all mothers and daughters are exactly the same, share the same political allegiances, or even have each other's best interests at heart. Instead, the quotes are an attempt to depict how the feminist girls of today are part of a longer chain of feminist work.

**"I'm trying to bring women into the group who I know need it. But they're still attached to this productivity mentality. Like my mom, for example, was supposed to be retired a year ago. And she's like, 'Well, what am I going to do? What am I,' like, she just has an attachment to labour. She's constantly working, or cleaning, or like, she's never just chilling, she'll only chill, if I go downstairs, and I sit with her, and then we chat. So, it's very hard for women, for Black women to really embody that, because we feel like the way we earn our place in society is by being the worker bees, actually not the worker bees. It's by being the, the mules, right? That's how we earn our place. If we are not seen as being high efficient, like, over productive, people who just keep on going, no matter how bad we're breaking, then we don't really feel like we can say we are women."**

While there were generational differences between the mothers and daughters in this study, the girls experienced many of the same oppressive systems as their mothers, and their leadership was supported by intergenerational solidarity from their mothers and mother figures. Just as the girl activist leaders of today do not emerge from nowhere, the girls of yesterday do not just give up their political participation once they become adults. Age significantly impacts social location, and young people have a distinct worldview as a result. However, though young people have legitimate political insights from their own lived experiences as youth, no one is born an activist. Intergenerational conversations are essential in helping young people contextualize their experiences and learn from more seasoned members of their communities (Allen and Jaramillo-Sierra 2015; Gordon and Taft 2011; Grealy, Driscoll, and Hickey-Moody 2018; Hopkins and Pain 2007; Morris, Greteman, and Weststrate 2022; Taft 2014).

Even when young people are leading direct action, their relationships with adults — whether supportive or hostile — are still significant to their politics.

**"I remember hearing sexism for the first time, like, my teacher was very sexist. So he would say things like, you know, 'that's not very lady like,' and that's where, and I would tell this to my mom and she'd be like "that's sexism," you know that, so I think that was the first time I heard the term sexism. Feminist had a different connotation to me, I think my mom was, as encouraging as she was of me to be active and anti-sexist, feminism, when I grew up was very much tied to the Mark Lépine incident at École Polytechnique. And so it was, I mean, I would have been 10, so about that time. And so saying that you're a feminist was kind of considered a bit dangerous. And so it really, I didn't come back to that term until probably first year university."**

**"My mom's really amazing. Both my parents have done a lot to shape the way I view people in general. My mom more so than my dad, but where they were very different, politically, but you know, that they got here and my parents are both feminists. And you know, it's, it feels like, there is like, some hope there [laughs] at least I think so."**

**"Um, I think my mom's type of feminism is the fact that, like, she grew up in a small town. And she was a girl. So she wasn't expected to like, do very big things. She was expected to shrink herself to fit into a room and she never did that. Whereas I'm someone who she I think, the way I would put my mom's feminism is she fights for herself. And I fight for other people."**

When I began theorizing what girlhood is and what it does to its inhabitants, I turned to Monica Swindle's (2011) notion of girl as affect. describes girl not as an identity, gender, sex, or body, but instead as "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). Though there are certain traits associated with normative girlhood, including whiteness, able-bodiedness, heterosexuality, and the physical characteristics we ascribe to cisgender female bodies, girlhood itself contains many generative possibilities. While they may each attach very different meanings to girlhood, girls of very different bodies, races, gender identities, or expressions may all claim "girl" as their identity.

**"My mother is a militant feminist. She, I'm trying to remember the first time I like encountered feminism. Um, I don't know, like, my whole life. I think I, there's never a time when I wasn't encountering feminism. And like, as I as I grew up my, like, perspectives on feminism and, and sort of the way that I engaged with it definitely, like, clashed with my mother's a little, you know, like, just like generationally and, and stuff like that. But I've always been extremely a feminist. And I've always been familiar with it."**

**"It's always so interesting to have people like my grandma, or my aunt, or my mom, talk to me and be like, like, "I'm so impressed that, like, you're, you're doing this." And I also think that I did grow up in a new generation that allowed for that. Whereas all of the like, the strong women in my life are strong, because they fought for themselves and stood up for themselves, and made sure that the world like made room for them, versus I think now we're in a place in time where we can make sure there's room for everyone, not just ourselves."**

Daughtering is also something that "sticks to certain bodies mattering them by creating the surfaces, boundaries, and relations that seem to delimit them" (5) even as this role changes over the lifespan. Daughtering can be a way to describe how systems of knowledge and obligation pass between generations, and this does not have to be a strictly linear and hierarchical process. While knowledge may be said to pass "down" to daughters, this process is not unidirectional nor stops once daughters transfer knowledge to their parents and children.

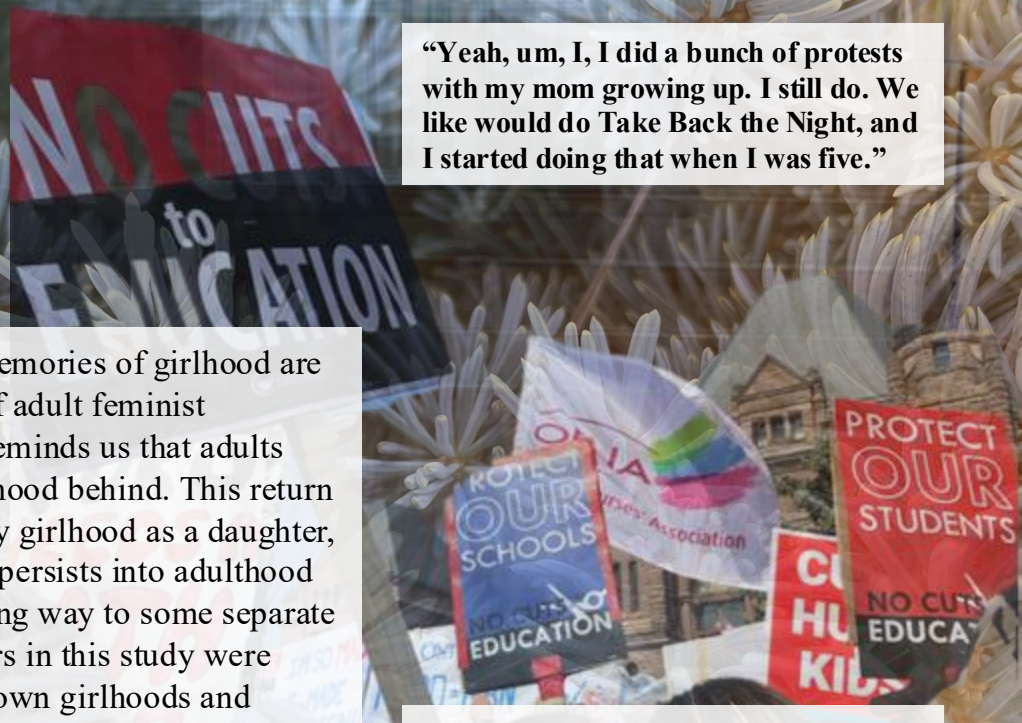
**"Um, my mum was very proud of me. And my mum has been very sick for my whole life. I was about to be like, sorry, if that's an overshare. But I guess that's maybe kind of the purpose of this [laughs] investigation. So especially during those years, when I was first really getting into activism, she didn't have the capacity to be like, super present. But it was always very clear that she was very proud of me. I think. And I always felt very supported by her, I always really felt like she was on my side."**

Someone may always be a daughter, but some moments and encounters bring this status to the surface. In everyday life, some moments feel more daughterly than others. Many adult feminists reflect on their lives and work from a "narrating daughter" standpoint, locating themselves as a single link in a much larger chain of action and events.

It follows then, that if girls are not just pre-women, then their mothers are not just post-girls

**"I mean, my mom is absolutely like a fuck the police, defund the police type of person. Like she definitely knows that that's correct. I think that she's sometimes I would guess, like, we haven't had super long conversations about it. But I would guess that she maybe has trouble, truly wrapping her head around it, as many people do. And as I even do, like everyone does sometimes. Because obviously, she was raised in like, second wave and early third wave feminism. And I think that there are just a lot of ideas in abolitionist feminism, that are very uncomfortable. And nobody really quite knows how to reckon with yet."**

**"Yeah, um, I, I did a bunch of protests with my mom growing up. I still do. We like would do Take Back the Night, and I started doing that when I was five."**




Significantly, memories of girlhood are integral to narratives of adult feminist consciousness, and it reminds us that adults have not just left childhood behind. This return to girlhood, particularly girlhood as a daughter, indicates that girlhood persists into adulthood rather than clearly giving way to some separate adult form. The mothers in this study were often returned to their own girlhoods and girlhood feelings when they spoke about their daughters. As they described their daughters, they almost always returned to describing their own mothers and how they were and continue to be daughters to their mothers. Many of them had begun to politicize when they were teenagers, and learning new political discourses from their daughters created the same curiosities and challenges in adulthood that they had felt in their youth.

**"I'm interested in, like, trans rights, gay rights, feminism rights, obviously [laughs], my mother [laughs]. Like, ableism which is going on the world. I like knowing a lot that's going on. So, um, and like this, mainly because, well, it's just me and my mom here, so it's like, we talk about that stuff. And we have like, little debates and stuff. And it's like, it's, it's fun to, like, actually have a good talk about it, even when you are young."**

In this respect, girlhood, and particularly daughtering, is something that girls and their mothers share rather than a point of separation.

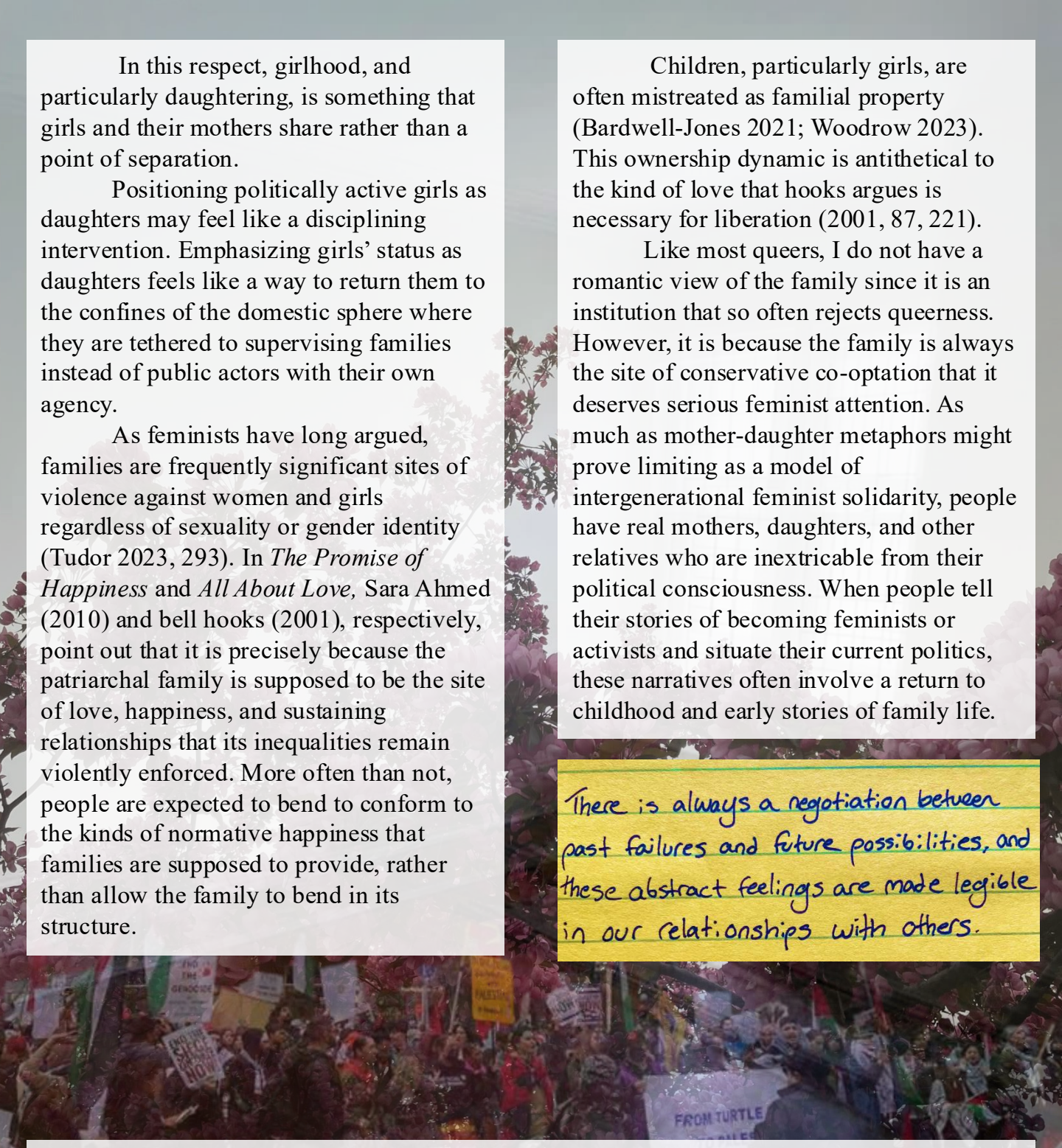
Positioning politically active girls as daughters may feel like a disciplining intervention. Emphasizing girls' status as daughters feels like a way to return them to the confines of the domestic sphere where they are tethered to supervising families instead of public actors with their own agency.

As feminists have long argued, families are frequently significant sites of violence against women and girls regardless of sexuality or gender identity (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 (Bardwell-Jones 2021; Woodrow 2023). This ownership dynamic is antithetical to the kind of love that hooks argues is necessary for liberation (2001, 87, 221).

Like most queers, I do not have a romantic view of the family since it is an institution that so often rejects queerness. However, it is because the family is always the site of conservative co-optation that it deserves serious feminist attention. As much as mother-daughter metaphors might prove limiting as a model of intergenerational feminist solidarity, people have real mothers, daughters, and other relatives who are inextricable from their political consciousness. When people tell their stories of becoming feminists or activists and situate their current politics, these narratives often involve a return to childhood and early stories of family life.

There is always a negotiation between past failures and future possibilities, and these abstract feelings are made legible in our relationships with others.




**"I don't know. I mean, I don't think we ever really forgave our moms, right? You know a lot of the parenting literature, I find is really about remedying the wrongs your mother did to you as opposed to recognizing the oppression she might have dealt with that caused her to parent the way that she did [laughs]. So I find it very interesting to watch that and go, 'That's not, it might seem like feminist parenting, but it's actually pretty shitty.' …I worry that there's not an appreciation for the elders of the movement. And that they're still here. And they're watching all of their work just been tossed out the window, while, while losing the freedoms they fought for, right?"**

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