# Willful Networked Girls: Thinking/Feeling/Doing Climate Activism

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> *We are fighting for your lives. We are fighting for our lives. We are fighting for our sacred territory. But we are being persecuted, threatened, murdered, only for protecting our own territories. We cannot accept one more drop of indigenous blood spilled.*
>
> Artemisa Xakriaba, Climate Strike speech, NYC (Xakriaba,2019)

> *We must remember to fight for not only our own communities but those in the Global South that aren't being fought for today.*
>
> Isra Hirsi, Tweet, US climate strike organizer, (Hirsi, 2019)

> *We've been talking about climate change as if it was one of a thousand other issues, as if we could keep saying 'there's environment on one side and then families, health and jobs on the other…We have to recognize that we're going straight into a wall, and that families' jobs and health are a climate issue now.*
>
> Alienor Rougeot, TV interview, (Somos, 2019)

These are small fragments from powerful speeches, interviews and tweets by girls working as activists in the struggle to confront the climate crisis. They often speak in the plural "we" and they advocate for ways of thinking and acting as a collective process, across expansive physical distances and cultural differences. And there are many more speeches by thousands of girls that connect and expand ideas, actions and affective intensities across the globe. That their words and actions are actively aligned with others in no way assumes sameness or erases the tensions and power differences between them, rather it signifies a complex, questioning and constantly changing group identity that rallies around difficult issues, addressing the very inequalities and injustices that makes fraught yet insistent forms of solidarity so necessary. The collective imperative articulated is deeply intersectional in terms of thinking through how and why climate change impacts communities, who has access and resources to resist and which voices are heard and amplified. Leah Thomas coined the term "intersectional environmentalism" in an Instagram post in 2020 (Capshaw-Mack, 2021) as a young black activist and educator, insisting upon sustained forms of racial justice as inextricable from climate justice approaches. Critical intersectional perspectives are central across activist networks, pivotal to how they tell their personal stories and orient their political strategies. While mainstream media tends to smooth over differences in their portrayal of a narrow set of issues and focus attention on a few leaders in a celebration of white celebrity girlhood, the complicated and persistent work of a

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multitude of girls interrupts these surface images, refocusing energy on the climate crisis through their commitments to social justice and caring communities.

While I am focusing on "girls" throughout this essay I am in no way using this as a self-evident, universal or binary category. I purposely use the category "girls" as a way of attending to age and gender specificity while also acknowledging the openness and limitations of this choice. In terms of gender I use "girls" to signify a broad and permeable identity that includes cis gendered, non-binary, transgender subjects. There is no fixity to the term "girls" and the intersectional focus here renders it very heterogeneous and criss-crossed by multiple social and cultural relations. I did not want to erase the fact that so many girls are at the forefront of student led climate activism and so I have consciously avoided using the generic terms "teens" or "youth" which would gloss over girls' experiences and leadership. In terms of age, the fact that so many of the young activists begin their political work while under twenty and still in high school is remarkable, and so "girls" rather than "women" or even "young women" seems more attuned to the age specificities of their experiences. This interest in attending to girls as an inclusive term is imperfect yet important within research on climate activism. In Ugandan activist Vanessa Nakate's words:

> This is a conversation that many people don't want to have. People don't like mixing climate and, for example, race or climate and gender. But it's evident that women and girls are disproportionately affected by the climate crisis in communities like mine. In many communities across the global south, where women and girls have the responsibility of providing food for their families or collecting water for their families or firewood for their families. So many times women are at the frontlines when these disasters happen. It is their hard work that is put to nothing when the farms are destroyed or when their crops are destroyed. It is women who have to walk very long distances to look for water for their families in case of extreme water scarcity. (2020)

The complex historical conditions of gender relations across varied struggles surrounding climate change are inextricable from the historical surge of girls as leaders within youth climate activist movements. Without totalizing or reducing their activist work and embodied experiences to any single dimension of identity, it's important to complicate how girls are understood, to expand the concepts and narratives through which their participation becomes meaningful. Here I focus on the willful and networked dimensions of girls' activism so as to focus on their embodied collective practices.

Differences of experience, privilege and power between activists are acknowledged in the daily dialogues that circulate online, and in this way it is vital to read climate activist stories in terms of their evolving interconnections rather than as isolated individual gestures, since it is this quality of learning and working across differences that shapes this movement over time, from intimate interpersonal relationships to the more distributed social networks that relay information and help to forge political alliances. Intimate counter-publics offer a way to think through the relations between girls' situated expressions of awareness, determination and action,



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their interpersonal tie and their collective networked formations. Lauren Berlant's work on intimate publics helps us to contextualize relations and attachments between young climate activists in terms of the emergence of "porous and affective scenes of identification among strangers that promise a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline and discussion about how to live" (Berlant, 2008). The integration of emotional, social and political facets of everyday experiences within this understanding of intimate publics opens up room to recognize the life worlds inhabited by girls, as well as their deliberations about threats to their lives and the life they wish to fight for in the face of ecological catastrophe. In this way girls forge counter-public challenges to the normative expectations within dominant public spaces and institutions through their intimate engagements. More recent work on proliferation of digital intimate publics (Dobson et. al., 2018) provides theoretical insights for thinking about the socio-technological contours of digitally mediated identifications and participations. The complex emotional investments and political knowledge sharing on social media mobilized by girls advocating for climate justice, pivots my emphasis not only on the technological nuances of their intimate publics but also on the "counter-public" orientations of their struggles as both creative resistance and world building (Warner, 2005).

It is striking how often young climate activists speak explicitly about value of their connections with other activists and address the ways these bonds drive their commitments and shape their political approaches. Across media, passionate mutual recognitions of the work and ideas by, for and between young activists forge a strong basis for global alliances. Artemisa Xakriaba, a nineteen-year-old member of the Xacriabas indigenous peoples from Brazil affirms her ties with Greta Thunberg from Sweden, asserting that "Our futures are connected by the same threats of the climate crisis" (Xakriaba, 2019). Alexandra Villasenor the thirteen-year-old founder of the US Fridays for Future strikes speaks of how she "coordinated with a bunch of other activists all around the world … Australian organizer Jean Hinchliffe was actually the person who got me started. I also had talked with people in Sweden. We all have the same message to echo out." (Villasenor, 2019). What emerges are the personalized collective bonds based on peer mentorships, friendships and political alliances that propel conversations between girls, inspiring, supporting and teaching each other to think and act beyond the boundaries of conventional politics. The intimately networked qualities of this movement are prolific and varied, from face-to-face interactions to street protests, to massive decentralized digitally mediated events. Their reach spans local initiatives to plant trees, through to global campaigns to boycott corporations; with hundreds of actions in between including school eco-clubs, neighborhood advocacy groups, blockading pipe developments, educating peers, suing governments and protecting and supporting vulnerable communities through regional, national and international associations that lobby governments.

At every level of an expanding system of networks, outspoken girls are the driving force of campaigns addressing the climate emergency and criticizing state policies and corporate systems. Not only are they changing the "face of environmentalism" as



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proclaims a *Washington Post* headline (Kaplan, 2019), but their pervasive presence as smart passionate political actors is also altering the affective and signifying relations through which girls become visible, culturally meaningful and valued. Significantly it is their intimately forged political collaborations with each other and the mutual recognition of their work that challenges the often competitive individualism that pits girls against each other across media formats. While mainstream reporting centers on Greta Thunberg as a singular figure, the critical knowledge she imparts and the proliferation of girls mobilizing from diverse locations and experiences breaks through narrow siloed images to expand the range of stories and intersectional perspectives emerging across social media, altering the terms through which girl activists are understood. It is not only the large numbers of girls that is meaningful but it is the caring, supportive and relational orientations of their communications across boundaries that marks their work as transformative. In listening closely to what girls are saying as leaders in this fight, we need to take notice of the reciprocal emotional and social qualities of their alliance building at the core of their political engagements. Rather than isolate and valorize individual girls as static icons of change or symbols of hope, it is their relational, embodied, and materially grounded ways of thinking through the entanglements of ecological, social, political and economic relationships that help us focus on their collective process. If we listen to their messages and follow their networked strategies, we can begin to map out the intersectional social justice approaches they are communicating across expansive intimately networked formations.

In an effort to follow this transformation we need to listen in detail to what is being said and how girls participate in climate change movements through their differences and the creations of specific projects and coalitions. Across the globe Indigenous girls are at the forefront of these struggles: as we hear Anishinabek Nation Chief Water Commissioner Autumn Peltier speaking out at the UN as an indigenous girl asserting her role as a water protector, and listen to Tokata Iron Eyes taking the lead at standing rock Sioux Nation's battle against the Dakota pipe line, and pay attention to Xiye Bastida of the Otomi-Toltec indigenous peoples in Mexico who is a driving force within the US Fridays for Future movement. The list goes on and on across nations and continents, Indigenous girls are the vanguard of climate activism and their intimate awareness of the effects of environmental devastation within their communities drive their passionate engagements to protect life and resist domination, recounting their awareness of long historical colonial legacies. The decolonial knowledges they convey resonate and are taking up by others situated in other places, driving the alignments between girls around the globe committed to decolonization. What has emerged transnationally in a proliferation of recent actions are concerted attempts to share stories, collaborate plans and create coalitions across diverse communities. Commonalities are forged through the situated storytelling of girls that unfolds the material and affective realities of personal connections to the land and the natural ecologies their have grown up within, as well as the suffering and trauma they have experienced in relation to environmental degradation and social marginalization. As



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Leah Thomas a young activist, educator, podcaster, and writer who coined the term "intersectional environmentalism" has argued:

> I wanted to protect the natural environment, but I also wanted to protect vulnerable communities like mine back home. I wasn't able to separate my identity from my environmentalism and this is when I discovered environmental justice. Environmental justice is the intersection of both social justice and environmentalism, where the inequity in environmental degradation is also considered. (2020)

Leah Thomas among many others insist on grounding collective visions for change through the gathering of their personalized stories rooted in local kinship and community consciousness that becomes the basis for imagining alternative futures, bridging the lived and historical dimensions of experience with a recognition of hegemonic global forces of corporate and state power that align their interests and goals. And it is this quality of combining and sharing intimate reflections and conversations in relation to the large scale structural analysis of climate change that shapes the potentials through which these counter-publics build momentum.

## "Critical intimacies" as standpoint and method

My work in this essay marks an initial process of following multiple points across networked relations and that have been mobilized in the recent surge of girl led climate activism. At this stage in my research, I am curiously immersed in the flows of digital information, publications and events that crisscross local community organizations and more globally oriented groupings. While Fridays for Future has been a key nodal point within a decentralized networked movement that I am paying close attention to, it becomes clear that many smaller groups converge and extend the work of this particular project and so the boundaries of what enters the feed of social networks are flexible and shifting. It becomes useful to study how messages travel across various platforms and where they move beyond any singular website or profile page, across newsfeeds and back and forth into everyday practices and protests, valuing the relational force of their movement. Student climate strikes have become hubs of complex relations, ideas and feelings that generate a range of reactions and degrees of environmental awareness and mobilization from which conversations and actions flow. While many organizations pivot around strike action led by school girls, they reach outwards to inform and effect many other people and institutions. There is a proliferation of multimodal data that emerges out of the speeches, interviews, essays, posters, books, tweets, videos, selfies and memes. At this point in time when this movement remains a living, fluctuating and intensive site of networked activity, I am trying to be careful not to produce totalizing or static claims, but rather I'm hoping to remain open to the capacious possibilities and changes that I see and begin a loose form of conceptual mapping that allows for interruptions, lines of flight and new ways of thinking. I enter in the here and now to provisionally and modestly interpret some recurring signs and point to some interesting



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patterns to reflect upon. This is uncertain work on the cusp of girls experimenting as public actors, giving press conferences, holding workshops, coordinating events, planning actions and build alliances. I have to admit the girl activists I am following across social media are captivating in their public assertions of determination and intelligence, they affectively move me and spur me to think very hard about what they are saying and how they are emerging as some of the most impassioned leaders of our time.

I follow Gayatri Spivak's approach of "critical intimacy" such that I avoid claims to objectivity or critical distance and detachment, owning my own interest and attachments to these girls, and affirming the value of their solidarities, commitments, and the willful persistence of their struggles. In this sense my analysis might seem biased toward their work as I seek out as much complexity as possible, especially in context where girls and young activists are often reduced to binary terms and individualizing logics. And so I am claiming this bias along with its affective inclinations as a critical standpoint that helps me to pay close attention, to look and listen closely and affirm those features of climate activism that are overlooked, devalued, or assimilated into more generalized and adult centered approaches to environmental change.

I have chosen to focus on two seemingly distinct dimensions of girls' climate activism. On the willful effects of girls' engagement in climate struggles and simultaneously on the networked formations of their collective praxis. Yet I consider these to be part of a process that considers girls willfulness as an important embodied, intellectual, and affective orientation, inseparable from their networked collaborations. It is vital to value the distinct passions, ideas and labour of girls struggling to address crises within their local communities while also seeing how they are working together and securing forms of belonging within an expansive and collaborative political horizon of climate justice.

## Willful Girls: the complex thinking and intense feelings of climate resisters

> *I see more of the structures that society has put in place. And that's why my generation has been so impactful with the climate movement. We're organizing outside of the structures that adults work in. Since getting involved, I just see how the system is broken, and it's one of the things that needs to change.*
>
> Alexandria Villasenor, co-founder of US Youth Climate Strike and founder of Earth Uprising, (Kormann, 2019)

Represented as the predominant voices addressing environmental injustice and directing political actions to challenge the status quo, girls are figured as headlines within mainstream news articles and are represented as key spokespeople across the networked distribution of online videos and speeches. It is important to acknowledge the significance of girls as the frontline publicly visible subjects articulating anger and complex social and political critiques across both mainstream media and alternative



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social networks. Sharing their own personal stories and affectively charged mobilizations of science, girls emerge as public intellectuals combining compassion, insight and refusal to accept the status quo. I want to use Sara Ahmed's notion of willful subjects (Ahmed, 2014) to analyze how girls are affectively orienting themselves as activists and also how they are often perceived by adults (including a well coordinated network of climate deniers) as unruly in their defiance and going too far in their demands for change or alternately as symbols of hope and idealized futurity. The mainstream fixation on individualized images of willful girls resisting dominant institutions obscures the significance and effectiveness their collective attachments and actions.

Ahmed starts her book with the figure of the willful child within Western literature. Cast as a problem, the willful child is seen to stray from appropriate behavior, refusing to conform and comply to adult wishes, willful children challenge ideals of innocence and goodness and as such have specific gendered racialized and class meanings establishing boundaries between those denigrated and those celebrated. If the good white girl has been normatively inscribed as quiet and obedient, girls who complain, argue and question those around them are open to surveillance and control especially if they are racialized, queer and poor. Characterized as persistent, curious, and defiant, the willful child asserts themselves in ways that make adults uncomfortable. Acting out by refusing authority and resisting power, the willful child is marked as difficult and precocious. And while the sign of the willful child is overly coded in negative judgments that something is wrong, it also gestures towards a recognition of young subjects who do not fit into neat normative categories, whose affects and intelligence exceed adult preconceptions. A space opens up to consider girls who defy our expectations. And yet the fixation on the willfulness of singular girl heroes whose privilege marks them as exceptional and recognizable needs to be questioned and redirected. While affirming the wilful capacity of diverse girls to think and act critically, it is important to trace this affective intensity through their dynamic interpersonal relations and collective actions.

Indignant, persistent, and intractable in their calls to confront an emergency here and now also positions these climate activists as refusing to back down. This temporal urgency intensifies their demands and also pushes beyond the limits of neoliberal individualization. They enact the interconnectedness of their individual and collective desires as they forcefully demand attention and rally others, insisting that they will not retreat in the face of opposition. It is striking to hear girls publicly articulate the social, economic and cultural dimensions of climate change in terms of a crisis of legitimacy within existing institutions. Jamie Margolin, 17 year old founder of Zero Hour, asserts that "issues of justice – economic justice, racial justice, gender justice and intergenerational justice – lie at the heart of this crisis, and these injustices must be addressed if the fight for a livable future is to succeed…We have to dismantle the systems of oppression that gave rise to and perpetuate the climate crisis, including colonialism, racism and patriarchy" (Yurcaba, 2019). The vast scale and breadth of their critiques unfolds through the convergence of their voices as they insist on speaking with



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unity against fossil fuel industries and the inequities of capitalist systems that leaves them most vulnerable to suffer from the effects of climate disasters. Margolin's asserts that "the majority of what everyone should do is system change, and the little eco-friendly things here and there are the cherry on top" (Yurcaba, 2019). Placing system change at the center of their projects, their goals are not abstract but concrete and coordinated as they confront powerful institutions and leaders and demonstrate a complex understanding of the intersections of class, race, gender and national inequalities exacerbated by the ecological breakdown they are addressing. By directly criticizing the apathy and negligence of adults in privileged positions, these girls enact a willfulness in the strongest sense of the term as they call out some of the most powerful global institutions. In the ways they speak truth to power together in comprehensive and uncompromising ways, their willfulness coincides with concerted and public demands persuasively spread across media.

What stands out across girls' enactments of willful subjectivity are active public assertions of sharp intelligence, as they ask questions, interweave personal stories, and draw upon scientific and culturally specific interpretations of climate change. Autumn Peltier recently addressed the UN stating "I come from Manitoulin Island. It's the largest fresh-water island in the world. It is surrounded by Lake Huron and Georgian Bay. It is here where my activism work began. It all started by learning why my people couldn't drink the water on Ontario Indigenous lands. I was confused, as Canada is not a Third World country, but here in my country, the Indigenous People live in Third World conditions" (Peltier, 2019). Autumn Pelier communicates awareness that reaches out to teach others of the importance of thinking about water through a lens of human rights. She raises awareness about the the the historical legacies and inequities of colonialism and capitalism that underpin the environmental crisis and advocates for change to the policies and practices that perpetuate them. Across many global examples, Indigenous girls' public expressions of environmental resistance and knowledge are instances of what Sandrina de Finney calls "presencing" (2014) a term she draws from Leanne Simpson (2011), centering on creative and empowering responses of girls grounded within specific cultural contexts that not merely reject colonial powers but generate alternatives that exceed their logics. This approach valorizes dynamic forms of resurgence by indigenous girls engaging in decolonial actions against Western neocolonial impositions that violate and deplete the land and natural ecologies, and simultaneously devalue indigenous girls and reify them as disposable and passive victims of trauma. "Presencing" offers a capacious process of embodied becoming, expanding the contours of how indigenous girls' willful resistance is represented and communicated beyond the boundaries of Western white middle class individualized logics.

Following enactments of willfulness across specific contexts and traditions, they can be understood as forces of affective intensity that propels critical engagement and collaborative forms of learning about the climate crisis. While many young people grapple with local crises and talk through understandings of global systems of power and ecological crisis as focal points of their networked political discourses, their



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embodied experiences and perceptions open up situated and diverse perspectives propelling activist projects. There is a hybrid weaving of deeply personal detailed accounts addressing the living impacts of the crisis across communities, as well as imaginative storytelling. While much attention has been on girls attending large scale events and referencing documents such as those of the United Nations, IPCC and other Climate Institute reports compiling scientific evidence, across their networks, activists do not privilege these dominant discourses but rather approach them alongside and in tension with recognition of the value of embodied local understandings that include indigenous knowledges and practices. Greta Thunberg's speeches draw upon facts embedded within numerous scientific studies, she weaves this data into her own personalized accounts of learning from indigenous communities, as well as talking with youth and gathering stories of people who have suffered from the immediate effects climate emergencies. This multiplicity forges new political languages of engagement that allow for varied entry points and forms of problem solving. So that while a direct appeal is made to listen to science, this mode of knowledge becomes articulated with indigenous accounts as well as more nuanced narrations of ecological harms and grass-roots efforts to intervene. Similarly, the styles and modes of representation and storytelling are heterogenous, from the creative work of visual signs for demonstrations, memes, video narratives, songs, to music, performance and art based projects. Connections are fostered across a range of representations that converge around key issues while diffracting multiple experiential stories within a broad movement.

The speeches, interviews, essays, tweets and videos of girls, unwavering in their commitments and collective orientations toward climate justice, are signs of how much they are worried and motivated to spread awareness and develop practical solutions and long term goals. While the stress and existential fears experienced by young people in response to climate change have been studied in ways that often depoliticize and reduce their reactions to individual psychological pathologies such as "eco-anxiety"[i], it is also vital to focus on the ways strong emotional responses underpin transformations in terms of how young people speak out and take charge of their worry through collective action that avows and activates their anxiety, outrage and fear. Such persistence communicating critical ideas and negative affect aligns with Ahmed's notion of the "feminist killjoy" as "those who refuse to laugh at the right points; those who are unwilling to be seated and the table of happiness…willful women, unwilling to get along, unwilling to preserve an idea of happiness" (Ahmed, 2014). And while the feminist killjoy has a long history of resistance and organization, girls figured as killjoys have more marginal status and are taboo within a culture that valorizes the temperament and cultural sensibilities of the frivolous happy compliant girl (Coulter, 2018). And yet the refusal to buy into normalizing commodified ideas of happiness and satisfaction is a consistent feature of girl climate activists. They show that they are unafraid to publicly express sadness, rage and frustration, to hold and return an unhappy gaze and assert their discontent in the face of exclusion, ridicule and rejection. By firmly challenging authority, articulating complex ideas and expressing negative emotions that are rarely sanctioned within public spaces open to girls, the assertions of such negative affects and



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willful desires are powerfully embodied enactments of girl climate activists. It is the coordinated and collective orientation of these affective expressions that shifts them away from individualizing signs of pathology into a concerted labour of networked activism. By connecting a willful affective and political orientation of girls to a more transindividual networked practice, it becomes possible to think across these registers without either discounting the specificities and differences of girls' lives, desires and ways of thinking.

**Networked Collectivism: activating personal and political connections**

> *Digital activism is an effective way to create movements like #FridaysForFuture, a digitally present idea that penetrated deeply enough to mobilize students all over the world to walk out of their classrooms. Digital activism is multidimensional and can get complex, especially if you try to quantify the real impact of engaging in advocacy online. Are likes and shares equal to impact? Do a thousand clicks on an ecological justice blog post mean something? With these and many more apprehensions, I set out to create a content strategy calendar to help us explore digital activism in a new light.*
>
> Deepa Venkatesan, Digital Communications Coordinator,
> Kairos Canada (Venkatesan, 2019)

As with other youth driven participatory networked movements (Dreamers, Idle No More, Black Lives Matter) the multimodal horizontal and distributed forms of communication and organization are productive toward building inclusivity and diversity, flexible in allowing for local experiences to interact with more expansive ideas and goals of a global movement.

Situating girls as critically questioning and action oriented subjects connected through prolific networked activities provides a more nuanced understanding of how girls willfulness is mobilized into collectively meaningful communicative practices. In this way the willful subjectivities of girls are unbound by individualistic neoliberal logics, enabling solidarities and community formations that connect local spaces to broader transnational relations. There is an intensive affective transference that is embodied and relayed by girls working alongside others, speaking out about climate injustice as a coalitional process across cultural and national differences. While the headlines and images center on singular actors and often profile girls in relative isolation, the substance and process of girls communication defies neoliberal conceptions of selfhood and autonomy. It is significant that girls are calling out the media for their exceptionalism and exclusion of poor and racialized girls. Isra Hirsi tweets "Climate change is disproportionately affecting black and brown communities and the media choosing a white organizer from a white dominated country to lead a movement that was created by black and brown people is problematic" (Hirsi, 2019b). These difficult



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conversations weave through social media as integral to the ways movements attempt to address injustice as the basis of effective climate activism. Ongoing questioning allows for open critical participatory engagement by young people marginalized by dominant media systems, contingent on the the girls themselves that make reflexive and critical inquiry a part of the intimately networked knowledges they put into circulation.

Girls are connecting with and eliciting others not only through their ideas but also the affectively charged images words, images and actions that constitute interactive and networked modes of communication. Vanessa Nakate a young activist from Uganda states that "when I started my climate strikes, I only had like a marker, like a pencil to write my sign … so that was the first thing that we used to go to the climate strike, and we just kept on sharing on social media," highlighting various materials and modes of communication, from physical posters to social media. It is important to see the various media in horizontal and fluid terms rather than merely prioritizing complex digital formats. Close readings of the tweets, speeches, posters and interviews reveal the thick and dynamic socialities shaping how these girls situate and orient themselves in relation with others. Ahmed writes that "It is the willingness of a community that allows an act to acquire the status of willful for others" (2014). Girls reference the work of other girls, repost information, generating a caring networked process that interrupts attacks directed at these girls from hostile climate deniers. It is vital to attend to how they articulate themselves collectively by exchanging information, sharing stories, building communities, and planning events. Opening up spaces for sharing ideas and addressing unjust intersections of global power within the climate strike campaign *Fridays for Future,* girls are at the frontlines expanding its reach to hundreds of cities and small towns involving almost 7 million people during the September mobilizations in 2019. Such networked formations inspire young activists to assert their willful anger, speak up online, call out adults and protest on the streets. These girls are disseminating information, connecting communities and sharing resources as practical efforts to mobilize together. The multimodal dynamics shaping how information flows have been increasing since the strikes spread in March 2019. The mainstream press has amplified the voices of young activists by reprinting speeches and interviews and also given some youth space to write their own articles and publish books that offer personal stories and hands on advise for young activists. In turn, girls have remediated fragments of these texts back into more personalized networks, usually supplementing them a stream of comments and links to other resources.

In working to conceptualize the collective orientation of the networked actions instigated by girls as climate activists, its useful to push against the neoliberal approaches. "Networked individualism" (Wellman et. al., 2003) has been the predominant framework for thinking about young peoples' social media engagements and fixate on profiles, popularity and status. Mainstream journalistic fixation on youth selfies and self-promotional media and discrete forms of identity curation and competition has followed an individualistic line of thinking that reduces young people, and particularly girls' experiences within psychologizing discourses that emphasize narcissistic tendencies, and narrow interpersonal dynamics that reproduce social



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hierarchies and normative ideals of belonging and identity. The pervasive ways girls' online participation has become hyper-individualized even when the focus is on social media is a problem tied to neoliberal and postfeminist ideals that center upon entrepreneurial selfhood preoccupied with ambition, appearance and popularity (Dobson, 2015). Along these lines Julian Gill-Peterson argues the neoliberal assumptions are embedded within liberal feminist valuations of the sovereignty of girls empowered by networked technologies, privileging mediated practices of white middle class girls and marginalizing girls who have less currency within digital culture (Gill-Peterson, 2015). In many ways the individualizing promotion of online empowerment reproduces the "Can-do" girl ideology that Anita Harris conceptualizes in terms of those girls whose normative abilities and privileges foster their success within a system that sets many girls up to fall behind and fail to achieve recognition (Harris, 2004). In many ways girls' digital presence and success has been delimited by individualism, paying very little attention to collective forms of participation working toward structural social critique and change.

In contrast to the emphasis on networked postfeminist individualism that frames girls in terms of their individual aspirations and accomplishments, the social activist practices undertaken by girls leading the Fridays for Future campaign alongside other groups bridge intimacy and political engagement. In her article "The New Shape of Online Community," Nancy Baym theorizes a notion of "'networked collectivism" in which loose collectives of associated individuals bind networks together…this means that groups can avail themselves of many mediated opportunities to share different sorts of materials including text, music, video, and photographs in real time and asynchronously" (2007). And while fans are the focus of Baym study, it provides a productive attuned to the crisscrossing of personal and collective networking. Work on networked social movements such as Manual Castell's expansive research has shifted thinking about the distributed organization and collective logics of digital media that shape possibilities for activist communication and transformation (Castells, 1996). Unfortunately, most of the literature on activist networks do not pay specific attention to gender and by default often relies on normative assumptions of adult male led activism.

Even academic studies of youth online participation in the expansive MacArthur Foundation Series on *Digital Media and Learning* underplays the specificity of girls media practices, and while girls are included in case studies, gender is given very little theoretical space in relation to the extensive empirical accounts of digital engagement. Even Danah Boyd's work on youth and "networked publics" which detail general structural affordances including Persistence, Replicability, Scalability, and Searchability, remain bound to gender neutral terms of reference with regards to young people's engagements (2010). While she does touch upon the ways girls amplify social dynamics of drama and gossip within their everyday social media worlds in her essay with Alice Marwick titled "The Drama! Teen Conflict, Gossip, and Bullying in Networked Publics" (2011) the scope of girls' interests, desires and actions remain relatively circumscribed within narrow interpersonal boundaries, friendship hierarchies and



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discussions of "relatability" (Kanai, 2018). Work on the political dimensions of youth networking has been taken up through a participatory culture and politics lens in the books *#Youthaction: becoming Political in the Digital* Age (Kirshner and Middaugh, 2014) and *By Any Media Necessary: the new youth activism (Jenkins et. al, 2016)* which bring together a range of projects and attends to multimodal forms of political representation and resistance. While girls' voices are included throughout these books, they are rarely highlighted as movement leaders, and the specific gendered stakes of their participation lacks interpretive notice or elaboration. The fields of both networked publics and participatory cultures open up ways of thinking beyond individualism, following the creative connectivities of young people, yet they continue to overlook the intersectional conditions and contours of girls experiences as political instigators and organizers using digital communication technologies for social justice work.

Feminist research on girls blogging, vlogging, and online political campaigning draws attention to collaborative uses of online technologies alongside the affective and gendered contours of political engagements. Recognition of girls at the forefront of online public cultures and creative production (Eichhorn, 2020, Kearney 2006, Reid-Walsh and Mitchell 2005; Anita Harris 2003) has helped to hone in on the lifeworlds of girls as they utilize technologies to shape their cultures and express what Anita Harris calls a "public self" (2003) as vital in the elaboration of political citizenship. Following this approach, Jessalynn Keller studies the counter-public possibilities within small scale feminist projects of teen girls (Keller 2012), and the "platform vernacular" of girls talking about feminist issues on Tumblr (Keller, 2019). With the emergence of hashtag feminisms and the expansive networking of young women's feminist activism online, a growing body of literature affirms the diverse and productive political engagements afforded by social media (Mendes et al. 2019, Keller and Ryan 2018, Rentschler 2018). This rich body of work addressing girls' emergent feminist participation through networked media works to shift the individualizing terms of reference that isolate and simplify what girls do online and how they connect with others, focusing on expansive affective and creative forms of mediation as part of the process of becoming wilful activist subjects. Situating the climate activist labour of girls within this broader field of public digital participation becomes important in terms of foregrounding the relational, counter-public and politicized orientation of their media practices. Significantly, many girls online leading climate justice movements represent racialized and indigenous experiences and work to center the voices of those often excluded within mainstream and commercialized girl centered media.

Girl climate activists assert intimately mediated forms of collective willfulness directed towards challenging structural conditions of inequalities and environmental degradation by targeting governmental policies, raising awareness and building alliances. There is no doubt that social media is widely acknowledged as a vital part of the climate strike movements' success not only in terms of spreading information but in terms of creating strong interpersonal relationships and broader political outreach. Many girls leading climate organizations talk about strong ties to other girls organizing who are linked through social media that starts them on the path of broader



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engagement. It is very common within the public discourses generated in speeches, essays, twitter feeds for them to reference the inspiration and work of other activists. The fluid lines between close friendship ties and political alliances is an important feature that is conveyed in interviews and narrative accounts of their process of coming into leadership roles. Articulations of this personal ties through Instagram, TikTok and Twitter seems vital for building mutual lines of trust, support and fostering peer to peer learning about the diverse effects of the ecological crisis in communities around the world. These strong peer relations are not only embedded in the content of the messages and stories, in terms of explicit recognition of each others living conditions and projects, but are integral to their daily practices of organizing and communicating back and forth across multiple platforms.

Young climate activists adopt a deeply personalized approach to the ways social media is used to convey the urgency of the crisis. Embedded within political discussions are stories about becoming aware and motivated to create change through very intimate accounts of experiencing the crisis first hand, sharing emotionally painful ways they have encountered fires, floods, pollution, tainted water and many other life threatening experiences. Girls speak about the impact of this devastation on their families, communities and even on their own bodies as part of the sharing that comprises these networked intimate publics. The personal fear and anger convey through these stories becomes a shared basis of vulnerability and empathy that circulates through the networks. It enables a bridging between affective and embodied effects of climate change with bigger issues addressed within their political projects. In this way the networked knowledges that are transferred are not abstract but interweave the personal stakes of involvement for these activists. Girls actively situate themselves though very personal and emotionally charged experiences that are shared as they reach out to others through social media. This dimension of interpersonal sharing and support is a remarkable quality of this digital movement. This gives rise to what Adi Kuntsman calls the online affective "reverberations" (2012) that surround and spur on the passionate feelings and discourses across digital spaces that give rise to change and resistance. I would call these the wilful "reverberations" that conjoin and inspire activist participation. As such it is not only a question of communicating information through networks but of moving others to action through the affectively intense uses of images and language to convey emotionally charged urgency and meaning.

Multiple networked channels are referenced in how girls talk about their process of organizing and building a movement. Villasenor talks about the purposeful approach to choosing specific media platforms:

> For our US Climate Strike on Slack, everyone on here are are state leads…We have Different channels for different subjects. We just have a general channel where we make announcements, but we also have intros for new people. We use Zoom a lot to communicate through video with each other. So we'll hop onto a Zoom call and sort through something. (2019)

These choices offer different degrees of closeness, coordination and outreach and help girls to shift their communication tools in relation to specific needs, issues and



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actions. While Twitter and Facebook offer useful places for live streaming of events and circulating information, Instagram becomes the place to document visual evidence. Negotiating diverse platforms and the uses of multiple hashtags (#ClimateBreakdown, #FridaysforFuture, #ClimateStrike, and #GreenNewDeal, and many more) to spread their messages becomes interwoven within the communications across geographical boundaries. It is notable that the Hashtag #climatestrike "topped Twitter Trends Worldwide for seven hours on Friday September 20 as the Global Protests hit the streets" (Ismall, 2019). Girls are leaders driving these hashtag campaigns and connecting them to local protests and policy interventions. Nineteen-year-old founder of Green Hope Foundation Kahkashan Basu who is based in Dubai points to her most successful attempts to reach others online "During the one hour span of discussion, Twitter analytics showed that we influenced over 35000 people which was truly amazing…I was absolutely elated" (Tait, 2019).

From the more intimate social media connections forging friendships and personal allies to the expansive reach hashtags, these activists are very thoughtful about public and private lines of communication and the difficulties of navigating the complex networks they are immersed within. They talk openly about the pressures of being so visible online and hyperconnected and the need at times to actively withdraw from the network. Grace Yang writes to her fellow activists "To all my lovely organizers out there: remember yourself. Don't sacrifice your sanity for the movement. I promise you, the movement will be better off if you get off Slack and Telegram and go to bed" (Maddrell, 75). There are many caring exchanges through which girls focus on the need for self-care and care of others on the verge of exhaustion from doing so much networked labour. In her book *Youth to Power* (2019), Jamie Margolin guides young activists to attend to their needs, addressing the importance of resting and retreating from the frenzied demands of organizing. There are lots of conversations through which girls address the challenges and dangers of the work they do, and in the process offer peer advise and tips on managing the risks and protecting each other.

The ability to reach so many people globally is empowering but also brings risks of bullying and attacks by climate deniers who have targeted activists in vicious and concerted ways. This has forced girls who are threatened by online harassment to use their networks to counter and deflect those who go after them. They transfer skills and support honed through their online work to actively challenge the hatred and violence directed at them. Kahkashan Basu talks about being harassed online since she started her environmental work at the young age of ten, recounting how "anonymous messages, malicious content and even threats of physical abuse were hurled at me to derail my work." But this harassment does not deter her, she goes on to say that the attacks subside as she publicly acknowledges and challenges them, claiming "she scares away the bullies" (Tait, 2019). Grappling with online harassment is a dimension of networked activism that these girls are forced to deal with on a daily basis. And yet they are not backing down but rather they are calling out and confronting trolls in strategic ways, using the logic of viral mimicry Greta Thunberg turns the viciously sarcastic tweet of Donald Trump back onto him as she uses his words 'A very happy young girl looking



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forward to a bright and wonderful future,' to define her profile which in turn goes viral through clever reappropriation. Such a public display of her satirical media savvy is more evidence not only of her willful refusal to be put down by those in power but also her insights into how social media works and using awareness of how slogans can be resignified and circulated against the grain of her detractors intentions, resonating with her peers using humor as an effective way to sustain connections within intimate publics. It is this kind of digital intervention through playful reversals and clever responses that mark this generation of girl activists as remarkably adept at using the tools afforded by social media in order to address online hatred and dismissal.

It is interesting to consider all of the interconnections of affect, knowledge, collaboration and different types of communication that girls engage with as they participate as climate activists. And it is important to think about their social media work as part of a much more expansive process of forging intimate counter publics as they share stories, teach and care for each other, and do the daily practical work of organizing. I have framed them as willful subjects not as an attempt to celebrate them as individuals but as a way of thinking about the shared affective relations propelling collective actions on and offline. It is precisely their connectivity that matters not only in terms of the ecological causes they fight for, but also as a way of understanding the process of working together to build sustainable futures. Using Ahmed's theory, willfulness encompasses the affective dynamic driving resistance and becomes a basis for collective identifications, action and political consciousness, harnessed by climate change activists to challenge institutions of domination that are destroying life and exacerbating inequities. In this way, it is important to highlight girls as leaders mobilizing for social justice through intersectional understandings of power and utilizing networked communications. Digital media have been vital to this work but it is important to situate girls and their stories and experiences within these technologies so that we don't lose touch with the meaningful relationships at the heart of their expansive networks of collective action. By taking into account the embodied subjectivities, affects and relational dynamics that propel their participation, we begin to grapple with the complexities of their emergence as outspoken leaders in a transnational movement to change the world.

## Notes

[1] Several studies including those of the American Psychology Association and the Climate Psychology Alliance warn against rise of "eco-anxiety" amongst youth confronting climate crises.
https://www.newsweek.com/eco-anxiety-climate-change-parent-fear-discussion-children-global-warming-depression-effects-1459731
https://www.apa.org/monitor/2016/07-08/climate-change



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