

ABSTRACT

Girl Talk: An Oral History Examination of Feminism's Impact on Three Generations of American Women

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Feminism has perhaps never been so present in American popular culture and social discourse as it is today, and yet there is a worrisome lack of clarity in examinations of its impact on the lives of individuals, its effectiveness in facilitating sociopolitical progress, and its relevancy in a pluralistic culture which tends to value the freedom of the individual over that of the many. How, then, has the feminist movement historically influenced the lives of American women and discourse about gender equality, and what does that influence look like on an individual level? Through the use of oral history and feminist theory, I examine three generations of women in my family and the impact feminism has had on their lives, focusing on their formative adolescent years. In doing so, I trace the evolution of the feminist movement from the midsixties to the present and reveal the ways in which class, race, culture, and politics have interacted with feminist discourse and the impact this has had on the formation of three remarkable women

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GIRL TALK: AN ORAL HISTORY EXAMINATION OF FEMINISM'S IMPACT ON
THREE GENERATIONS OF AMERICAN WOMEN

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

When the academic field of gender studies became popular in the 1990s, it brought with it an increase in scholarly work focusing on female adolescence, particularly feminist reinterpretations of the transition from girl to adult in what was, and arguably still is, a predominantly patriarchal society. These examinations were meant to illuminate the ways in which this crucial stage of adolescent girlhood might be better understood so as to ensure the full maturation and flourishing of every young woman into a confident and capable adult. The cultural and political values teenage girls form whilst crossing the bridge between childhood and adulthood often have long-lasting impact on the formation of their identities, and feminist thinkers and activists have devoted considerable energy over the last few decades to researching and reaching out to this evolving and vulnerable population. But what impact does feminist discourse have on American teenage girls? How are these young women being exposed to feminist thought? What forms do feminist ideas take, and are they helping young women navigate the choppy waters of gender inequality or further muddying them?

For reasons I shall address later, feminism in America is perhaps more visible and more paradoxical than ever, adopted as an ideological mantle by celebrities and cosmetic companies whilst also evoking images of man-hating bra burners for both men and women who continue to resist and resent what they think it represents (what it actually represents I shall address later too—there is significant disagreement and confusion on that front). American teenage girls are exposed daily to a varied and dizzying array of

feminisms via the media, and the efficacy of this bombardment is not entirely clear. Additionally, there are influences such as family, class, race, ethnicity, gender identity, socioeconomic status, and education that must inevitably inform the development of these young women's thoughts on the female condition.

My own adolescence in the early nineties was almost entirely free from overt feminist discourse, at home, in school, in the *Seventeen* magazines I began reading at age twelve. My own later-life exposure to feminist authors and texts post-adolescence has helped me immensely in better identifying and overcoming instances of inequality in my own life and articulating my stance to others. However, I often feel I am behind the curve developmentally, still grappling with issues that the younger generation will have already processed and, perhaps in some cases, resolved long before they reach their early adulthood. I need look no further for examples of this than my sixteen-year-old niece, Ella. She is, my obvious familial bias notwithstanding, an extraordinary young woman, a confident self-identified feminist who already has, as it seems to me, a far broader and deeper understanding of the challenges a young woman faces in forging a path for herself than I ever did at her age. She seems more able to identify and articulate gender inequality both in her own life and in the world at large, and she is a very critical and savvy analyzer of the various pseudofeminisms being shopped around at the moment (and I use the term *shopped* deliberately, as many consumer goods companies, with feminist pretenses, have begun hawking their wares to women).

It was Ella who provided much of my inspiration for this thesis. What is the source of Ella's feminist self-assurance, and what are the challenges she faces despite her seemingly advanced analytical and interpretive skills? Her mother, my older sister

Ghislane, has certainly been a significant feminist influence on Ella, but how and from what other sources did this inspiration spring? And how did my sister Ghislaine encounter and process feminism in her teen years? What of my mother Elinor, who profoundly shaped, as most parents do, both myself and my sister, and whose teen years took place during the Women's Liberation Movement? These women identify as feminists, yet they all matured, or are currently maturing, into adults during different periods of the feminist movement and in vastly different cultural and political environments. Each of them has a story to tell about her feminist formation, from the first stirrings caused by the publication of the *Feminine Mystique* to the latest Kardashian nude, "feminist" selfie.

I interviewed my mother, my sister, and my niece about their teenage years and the feminist thought that may or may not have trickled down to them during that formative time, be it from the heights of academia or the depths of consumer marketing. In so doing, I have traced the history of the feminist movement from the midsixties to the present day, tracking some of the progress and the setbacks of the movement and considering where the current strains of feminism are leading us and what more we need ask of them. The women in my family, clearly situated as all humans must be, in a specific intersection of race, class, and culture, are by no means representative of all American women, teenage or otherwise. No group could claim such universality. What their experiences do offer are a more profound investigation into the influences of feminism on a multigenerational family of white, middle class, heterosexual women who have, each in her own way, struggled to come to terms with being female in a world often hostile and antithetical to the (rich, varied, complex) female experience. If, as bell hooks

stated, “Sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures; by the individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo,” then how can young women—how can any of us—be sure we are working toward gender equality and not merely complicit in perpetuating a culture which does not yet allow for gender equality?¹

Why Teenage Girls? Some Background

It might be indicative of my persistent and perhaps misguided optimism that the relative success Ella seems to be enjoying in forging a path to adult womanhood has become a small but life-giving beacon of hope for me—evidence that things do, indeed, get better over time. Ella herself weighs in on just how successful she feels; no doubt her progress looks different to her than it does to me. For the moment it is worth noting that there is significant evidence that things may be getting worse, or at least significantly and progressively more difficult, for teenage girls.

According to Beatrice Forbes-Robertson Hale in her 1923 book, *What’s Wrong with Our Girls?*, the Women’s Movement ended after the Great War, and in its wake she called for women to push for more involvement in the social change so necessary to piece back together a war-torn country. While she couched the societal contribution women must make in traditional patriarchal terms of maternal nurturing, what she goes on to describe is a definite cooperative movement of women into the workplace and other social environments in order to maintain the relative equality achieved during wartime

¹ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000).

and effectively influence social change in favor of gender equality thereafter.² She further stated that young American women had come under fire postwar for falling short of societal expectations her book addresses this issue not by participating in the old tradition of female-blaming but by examining the environmental circumstances which might have given rise to these supposedly unsatisfactory outcomes. In her own words, “If things are amiss, the fault lies in the soil, not the plants. Girls are in no sense responsible for their environment; that is our affair. Physicians, we must heal ourselves.”³

That Hale was writing her book almost a hundred years ago is inspiring—she was ahead of her time. That Hale’s criticisms still ring true today is discouraging—women still have a long row to hoe. She went on to describe and then undertake the considerable task of analyzing and problematizing the society and culture which, in large part, formed young women, rather than criticizing the essential nature of the young women themselves. While Hale’s exploration of young female adulthood and the societal influences affecting it may appear conservative and dated to the modern reader, it is nevertheless important in its early identification of a line of questioning which continues into present day. What, if anything, is wrong with adolescent American women and the environments which are shaping their formation? Contemporary feminist scholars might additionally ask what specifically is needed socially, culturally, and politically to allow young women both the space and framework within which to thrive.

These questions gained urgency in the 1990s as the field of gender studies emerged and opened up academic lines of inquiry into negative cultural and societal

² Beatrice Forbes-Robertson Hale, *What’s Wrong with Our Girls?: The Environment, Training and Future of American Girls* (New York: F. A. Stokes, 1923).

³ Hale, xx.

influences on teenage girls and the ways in which these influences might be addressed and better navigated. To many scholars and activists, adolescents represent the future of feminist thought and action, and their study can serve as a meeting point for different and even conflicting branches of feminism.⁴ As Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters states in their book *Feminism and Popular Culture*, the contemporary language used in the discourse about adolescent girls is one of “flexibility, malleability, and change [which] posits the girl as a figure of transition—both as a subject moving from juvenility to maturity, and as a hinge between old and new, present and future.”⁵ Their anxieties and struggles on entering womanhood and searching for a healthy female identity represent to many feminists the struggle all women face in navigating a patriarchal society. What teenage girls uniquely represent is a nexus for change and a hope for the future.⁶

An added layer of urgency in this exploration of the American teen girl is the fairly substantial evidence that girls are encountering increasing difficulty in navigating the rocky waters of adolescence. In her influential 1997 book *Reviving Ophelia; Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, Mary Pipher describes the growing number of young female patients attending her psychotherapy sessions with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and self-destructive tendencies. The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta reported that between 1975 and 1988 there was a 75 percent increase in the suicide rate of American girls between ten and fourteen years of age.⁷ America, according to Pipher and

⁴ Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 125.

⁵⁵ Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 107.

⁶ Munford and Waters, 107.

⁷ Mary Bray Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 27.

other contemporary feminist scholars, is a “girl-destroying place” which exacerbates the natural chaos of adolescence and leaves young women flailing and misguided in their search for their authentic selves and prey to slick marketing and social pressures which undermine their self-worth.⁸ The women in my family can and will speak to the effects these pressures had on their development. Each of them have felt the hot breath of sexist conformity on their necks, of subtle or overt gender discrimination in their personal or public lives.

Pipher maintains that many American teen girls, “experience a conflict between their autonomous selves and their need to be feminine, between their status as human beings and their vocation as females.”⁹ It is this female vocation which feminist scholars wish to examine; that is, they seek to recognize and resolve the challenges teen girls are facing. Many girls begin life as independent, adventurous, confident, and curious children only to morph into unhappy, insecure, timid teenagers who engage in harmful or risky behavior without the tools with which to articulate, navigate, or cope with their struggles. For girls, adolescence can be a degenerative transition which erodes the sense of self, a transition which Simone de Beauvoir characterizes in her book *The Second Sex* as a time when “girls stop being and start seeming.”¹⁰ Authenticity and integrity are chipped away, even attacked, by a culture which demands that young women conform to a highly demanding list of cultural standards, aesthetically, intellectually, even politically.

⁸ Pipher, 44.

⁹ Pipher, 21.

¹⁰ Pipher, 22, 292.

It is a familiar old trope but it is tried and true: To understand where we are going and how to get there, we must inevitably take a long, hard look at where we have been. If young women today are still struggling with challenges similar to those described nearly a hundred years ago by writers and activists like Hale, what progress have women made, and how has feminism moved that progress along? In the midsixties when my mother was in high school, the Women's Liberation Movement was beginning to gather steam. Did that movement inspire change that could be felt by my mother in small-town Alabama? Was my sister Ghislaine aware, in her teen years of the nineteen-eighties, that while feminism may still have been trying to advocate for her, it had also become a dirty word (again), an insult that evoked man-hating stereotypes? By the midnineties Mary Pipher was deeply worried about the decline in self-worth amongst her teenage patients, and there was considerable cultural backlash against feminism.¹¹ In 2017, when the word *feminist* has become somewhat more acceptable—and certainly more lucrative in mainstream culture—what does it mean to sixteen-year-old Ella, and how does she see her prospects as she makes her way in the world? Is she truly more confident, savvy, and more capable than the previous generations of women in our family? Has American culture become a friendlier, more supportive place for growing young women, or has it merely become more complex, more fraught, more perilous as gender discrimination is masked or perpetuated by pseudofeminist rhetoric?

Popular culture, media, politics, family values and dynamics, peer groups, education—any one of these topics could result in an entire book's worth of feminist

¹¹ Kellie Bean, *Post-Backlash Feminism: Women and the Media since Reagan-Bush* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2007), 15.

critique, historical and present. My aim is to narrow the scope to a single family of women, my family, in order to reveal where the rubber hits the road with feminism on a much more intimate scale and uncover the various ways concepts of feminism and gender equality have made themselves known to a particularly situated group of women, shaping each of them in the process. In the case of each woman, her identity, her political stance, her attitude towards feminism, have been forged by myriad influences which intersect, overlap, even contradict each other. We will start at the beginning of this narrative with my mother Elinor and the rise of second-wave feminism in the sixties, and work our way up to the present day, ending with Ella and the vast and varied muddle that feminism or postfeminism is today.

CHAPTER TWO

Elinor

My mother, Elinor Mazé, was born Elinor Jane Anthony in 1947 and spent her childhood from ages five through eighteen in Auburn, Alabama. It was in Auburn that she attended high school in the mid-sixties amidst some of the most divisive years of the Civil Rights Movement and the early, noisy stirrings of the Women’s Liberation Movement. It was in her Auburn high school that she began, even if in embryonic form, to think not only of the kind of person she wanted to be and could be but also to identify the person, as she put it, that she would “never want to be again.”¹²

Auburn was—and is—a university town. As such it was, as Elinor put it, “ever-so-slightly ahead of the cultural milieu of average sixties Alabama which, of course, was awfully grateful for the existence of Mississippi, because without Mississippi, Alabama would have been at the very bottom in terms of poverty level and cultural development.” Education and college graduation levels were very high in the area thanks to Auburn University, which was also the main employer in the town. “It was a shade above what you would think of as small-town Alabama, and we were grateful for that, but it was also full of extremely conservative people, I guess is the way we [she and her parents] described them—bigoted, just to put a fine point on it, but you know, wholly in favor of segregation; segregation now, segregation forever.”

¹² Elinor Mazé, interviewed by Angelica Mazé, Riesel, Texas, October 9, 2017; all interview audio recordings cited in this article are in the author’s possession.

Civil rights was very much the hot topic of the moment, nationally, locally, and in Elinor's case, domestically, as she and her parents discussed at home the problems of segregation and Southern racism. They were politically liberal, although she herself claims not to have questioned the origins of their political leanings until recently. Historically, both her parents' families were conservative, but somehow her mother and father were staunch Democrats and strongly in favor of civil rights.

We were outsiders and we remained outsiders for the whole time I lived there, partly because of personality and all of that but also because a small town in Alabama, however relatively liberal it is, is still extremely suspicious of outsiders. "Outside agitators" was the stock phrase for anyone with a liberal view who came to the South to make change or interested in change. So we were outsiders. My mother was from New Jersey. My father was from Texas, who got his college education thanks to the GI Bill—sharecropper's son, actually, so he had risen. He was upwardly mobile. We were liberal, [and they] considered themselves to be screaming liberals, I mean right on the edge. We never did anything—well that's not true but for the most part we weren't at the barricades; we weren't bleeding. Generally speaking we weren't marching.¹³

Her family read journalism mostly, including conservative newspapers out of Montgomery and Birmingham as well as liberal publications like the *Atlanta Constitution* and *The New Yorker*. It was through journalism and her parents' discussions of current events that Elinor began to engage with the political issues of the day, most especially civil rights. While she recalled some "rather distinguished" journalists writing liberal-leaning editorials for the *Atlanta Constitution*, the Alabama papers from Birmingham and Montgomery were anything but, filled with what she described as vitriolic, racist editorials, and columns with titles like "Why Do the Heathen Rage?"¹⁴ But beyond the

¹³ Elinor Mazé interview.

¹⁴ Elinor Mazé interview.

Lester Maddoxes, Bull Connerses, and George Wallaces, whose angry segregationist rhetoric and actions were splashed all over the newspaper headlines, a more troubling and insidious brand of racism described by Elinor thrived in the Auburn community she called home. She affected a genteel Southern accent when describing the “lovely, charming church people”—most everyone, including her family, attended one church or another in Auburn—whose attitude towards integration was “We love everybody, but—.” “It’s not hate,” she said in a gentle Southern lilt. “It’s not because they’re inferior; it’s just because we’re more comfortable with our own kind.” “The hypocrisy of that,” she recalled, “really hurt more than anything,” and while her family’s Presbyterian church was not integrated, all of the pastors were quite liberal and some were actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement. “We thought of ourselves as being light-years ahead of the Baptists down the street,” she said with a wry smile.¹⁵

It was in this atmosphere of tumult and controversy that Betty Friedan’s seminal feminist work, *The Feminine Mystique*, was published in 1963.¹⁶ When Friedan described a nameless problem affecting the women she had encountered in her journalistic work, Elinor was a sophomore in high school and only vaguely aware of the book. She never read it, nor did anyone in her family or peer group (such as it was; she described herself as an outsider in that respect, too, a loner with few close friends). Current events in her school were barely discussed and “completely anodyne.”¹⁷ Elinor had “lots of strong opinions” but they were not, according to her, particularly well supported by her reading

¹⁵ Elinor Mazé interview.

¹⁶ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 50th anniversary ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).

¹⁷ Elinor Mazé interview.

or formal education. Rather, the foundation for those strong, early opinions towards equal rights for women were laid in part by her parents and formed long before Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*.

In the Anthony household, gender equality was taken as a matter of course and Elinor's mother was "certainly feminist by the standards of the times. She never, ever entertained the idea that she shouldn't have a place in the workplace, that she shouldn't be paid equally with men—although of course she never was."¹⁸ She was a librarian by training and profession, "so it was just taken for granted" that she could work and be compensated fairly for that labor.¹⁹ Friedan's "problem that has no name," a nebulous anxiety plaguing white middle-class women of the late fifties and early sixties, was not an anxiety that was shared in Elinor's home, which speaks perhaps not only to the individual personalities involved but also to the socioeconomic class of those individuals. As a result, Friedan's descriptions of despairing domesticated females and her resulting call to action may have had a less revolutionary effect in the Anthony household than it appears to have had elsewhere in the country.²⁰ Elinor's family may have been white and upwardly mobile, but the Anthony home was also a two-income household out of necessity and tradition, backed by previous generations of hard-working women, as secretaries on Elinor's mother's side and as sharecroppers on her father's. When my mother told me years ago that her grandmother on her father's side, Belle Anthony, could sew a dress without a pattern, it was clearly meant to be a testament to her grandmother's

¹⁸ Elinor Mazé interview.

¹⁹ Elinor Mazé interview.

²⁰ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 13.

ingenuity, hard work, independence, and capability as a woman making a life in relative poverty as a sharecropper's wife (she ran a small dairy operation, too), rather than her limited functions as a housewife. If the Anthonys were upwardly mobile, they also still had their roots firmly planted in the class from which they originally sprang, and a woman's right to work and be fairly compensated was taken for granted if not, in the case of equal pay, actually achieved.

Elinor remembered that her father, who was a professor at Auburn University, often had the opportunity to hire assistants and frequently hired not only women, but African American women for the positions, an unusual and controversial professional move at a time when the faculty and student body of the university had not yet been integrated, and African Americans held primarily menial labor jobs.²¹ She recalled particularly that her knowledge of this came from his proudly sharing it with the family, another rarity for a man who was normally very reserved and not much for sharing. On his death many, many years later, two of those African American women assistants sent notes of condolence to Elinor.²² But what is of note here is not a romanticized narrative of the white savior lifting poor black womenfolk out of poverty and discrimination, but rather that in some small way, Elinor's father was applying his commitment to equal rights tangibly and his teenage daughter Elinor was aware of it. In this way, an example was set early on by both parents for the kinds of values Elinor would assume for herself

²¹ Elinor Mazé

²² Elinor Mazé, conversation, October 14, 2017

as she matured, and this example might have had more impact than anything Elinor actually read.

But Friedan's presence was not altogether absent in the cultural milieu of Auburn. The *Atlanta Constitution* featured politically liberal editorials by a woman named Celestine Sibley, one of which, published in 1964, addressed a letter from a reader who was reacting loudly and favorably to Friedan's book. "You tell me where to go to join up and what the fight's about, and as soon as I finish putting up 48 more quarts of soup mix and stringing two more bushels of beans for the freezer, I'll grab Pa's old flintlock and man—no, woman—the parapet."²³ Clearly, some individuals beyond the Anthony household were reading and reacting to Friedan's work. But Sibley's response to her reader reflects, in many ways, the same attitude that Elinor and her family shared regarding gender equality, and is perhaps also telling of the nature of white feminism at the time (and, many would argue, the nature of white feminism today). Sibley responded:

I think the first one [parapet to tackle] is probably in the woman herself. What does she want to do, what is she trained to do, what can she be trained to do that beats putting up that soup mix and freezing those beans? After she has fought out that little battle she's free to take on the world. But I've never got around the feeling that I was having my cake and eating it, too—an attitude which, I am sure, will be abhorrent to the feminists. As for "feelings, findings, and recommendations," I'm going to be a disappointment to my friend. This particular battle of the sexes has never set my blood racing or my pulses hammering. I have worked since I was 15 years old at jobs I've loved and found infinitely rewarding, and I have somehow reared three very satisfactory children.²⁴

There is so much to unpack in this short response from Sibley to her reader that I could likely devote an entire thesis to its content and its implications for white feminism, then

²³ Celestine Sibley, "Feelings and Findings on Tap for Would-Be Feminist Rebel," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 7, 1964.

²⁴ Sibley.

and now. Suffice it to say that there are some strong notions expressed here which tie directly into the kind of ideological position to which Elinor and her family adhered, a position which was—and is—distinctly white, distinctly privileged, unmistakably skeptical of feminist theory and activism, and deeply rooted in American individualism and bootstrap determinism.

Sibley, like Elinor and her family, “took for granted the equality of women” and viewed feminism as somewhat redundant, or at least as a much lesser, somewhat indulgent fight when juxtaposed with the urgency of civil rights for African Americans of both genders.²⁵ But beyond comparisons to other issues of social justice was the real sense that if a woman was working and striving, as Sibley claimed to have done since her teen years, and as the women in Elinor’s family had done, the battle for equality had already been won and, indeed, there may never have been a battle at all. In the subtext of Sibley’s editorial one can hear her questioning what all the feminist fuss was about and a kind of self-satisfied complacency coupled with a desire to maintain the status quo. bell hooks has identified this particularly polite and conformist brand of feminism as being specific to white feminism, driven by women who perhaps desire change but not at the cost of upsetting their preexisting positions of privilege and cultural acceptance.²⁶ Certainly it can be said that in order to take for granted a degree of equality and opportunity one must have some kind of access to it in the first place, and it can be further assumed that an African American woman of almost any class in 1964 would

²⁵ Elinor Mazé

²⁶ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed, South End Press Classics, v. 5 (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 22.

likely have had a vastly different take on the state of women's rights and the nature of the parapet on which the forces should be marshalling.

It is here that race and class intersect with good old American bootstrap theory. Beneath the assumption that gender equality is already a foregone conclusion lies the deep-rooted, all-American faith in the power of the individual to overcome all odds. The onus is on individuals to make of themselves what they will. It is a naïve, romantic approach to individual freedom and collective prosperity, and it has been criticized by Marxist feminists for weakening collective movements for social change which require a critical mass of voices and opinions.²⁷ If the struggle for equality is played out only in terms of individual freedoms and achievements, a sense of community and empathy for others is lost, and advocacy for larger socio-political reforms is neglected—the good of the one trumping the good of the many. Taking that even one step further, if people cannot navigate their way to success in America's land of supposed equal opportunity, then the blame lies with the individual alone, regardless of any systemic hindrances encountered along the way. The result is that those who cannot strive and succeed in America experience not only the burden of their own failure, but the entire responsibility for it, regardless of circumstances or larger forces which may have assured that failure more than any individual choice or action.

This cocktail of American individualism, determinism, and complacent white privilege gives rise to an editorial, like Sibley's, with its denial of systemic American sexism, its emphasis on the individual experience over the collective, and its gentle, sideways sneer at the women fighting for gender equality, whose criticisms were

²⁷ hooks, 22

characterized, if indirectly, as whiny and self-indulgent—an unseemly upsetting of the status-quo apple cart. While Elinor and her family were not sneering at feminism, neither were they running to the barricades. According to Elinor, really radical feminism, “whatever that was at the time, as with really radical anything, was not part of our—I mean, as I’d gotten to be a more unhappy teen probably it was more in my repertoire than theirs [her parents], but it was all reasoned, I think, but not particularly well-informed, at least in my case. And my mother didn’t read these books either. She didn’t read Betty Freidan. She read journalism, so it would have been articles in the *New Yorker*, that sort of thing.”²⁸

Jill Denner, in her examination of California teenage girls and the gap between feminist theory and activism, posits that “the meaning of feminism depends on social position,” and changes in meaning, tone, and appearance on the class and social standing of the individual.²⁹ And so while feminism was taken for granted in Elinor’s household, it was not particularly discussed, and it did not spark great action in what was essentially a comfortable, white, middle class home. Her upwardly mobile family avoided radicalism in general, and feminist thought reached them not through books like Friedan’s but through newspapers and magazine journalism. Even Friedan rejected the radical feminism that her book helped inspire in the late sixties and early seventies, and radical activism from the likes of Audre Lorde and Andrea Dworkin offended her middle-class sensibilities. The anger expressed and the reforms demanded were far beyond what she had imagined when she penned *The Feminine Mystique*, and her 1981 book, *The Second*

²⁸ Elinor Mazé interview.

²⁹ Jill Denner, “The Gap between Feminist Theory and Practice: Lessons from Teenage Women in California,” *Feminism and Psychology* 11, no. 2 (May 2001): 164.

Stage, was devoted in large part to a defense of family life. She wrote, “For us, with our roots in the middle American mainstream and our own fifties’ families, equality and the personhood of women never meant the destruction of the family, repudiation of marriage and motherhood, or the implacable sexual war against men.”³⁰ The feminist movement had, in essence, strayed from Friedan’s vision, in large part because it was becoming more inclusive of voices beyond that of the white middle class. To Friedan, this was a threat to her values and her version of feminist progress. For Elinor, only peripherally aware of the feminist fight and almost completely unaware of the emerging friction between various camps within the movement itself, gender equality was nevertheless a right, not a privilege, a right she already possessed and which she alone was responsible for asserting.

Yet despite having led what Elinor herself characterizes as a charmed life with a husband and a series of careers which posed almost no challenges to her capabilities or achievements as a woman, she acknowledges that even in her teen years there were tensions between her own feminist principles and her lived reality.³¹ Through the magazine journalism which was her primary source of news and information beyond the confines of Auburn, Alabama, she was exposed to what she remembers as some first-class journalism and “Gloria Steinem and her cohorts, glamorous and smart.” The struggle for gender equality was “very much in the air.”³² But side-by-side with the messages from the vocal feminists of the day was the content focused on fashion and

³⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (New York: Summit Books, 1981), 47.

³¹ Elinor Mazé interview.

³² Elinor Mazé interview.

makeup, shaping undergarments and reducing diets, all of which Elinor devoted hours to pouring over. In a 1967 *Vogue* spread celebrating the rise of iconic sixties model Twiggy, the language used to praise her sounds, to the contemporary reader, hopelessly condescending and unprogressive. She is praised for a physique which would, “in any other age, have made her an outcast in the marriage stakes,” and for “a lack of sophistication and conceit, a limited vocabulary, and a very sweet nature.”³³ This is not, perhaps, a catalog of female assets that Steinem would applaud in her work, but there they are nonetheless, in the publication which featured Steinem and her cohorts, swirling in the mix of mid-sixties popular culture which included an amalgamation of modern woman and traditional feminine stereotype.

It is worth taking just a moment here to discuss the role of women’s magazines and consumer marketing (the two are hand-in-glove) in the history of the feminist movement since Friedan critiqued them in *The Feminist Mystique*. According to Friedan, by the mid-fifties, consumer marketing was already in full swing, promoting an ideal womanhood that most women seemed unable to live up to, either because the choices were ultimately unsatisfying, as with the white middle-class American housewife, or out of reach, as with any other woman who was not a white, middle-class housewife. But behind this propaganda for ideal femininity lay business interests and, as Friedan put it, “the real business of America is business.” In other words, women’s magazines and the ads that keep them afloat are in the business of selling material goods; subscriptions, clothes, whole material-dependent lifestyles, and there is little doubt that in the business

³³ Nicholas Drake, ed., *The Sixties: A Decade in Vogue* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1988), 148.

of marketing and selling products, deficiencies are often invented or overemphasized in order to create a buying market.³⁴ Unattainable ideals result in a very lucrative sense of material and even existential lack in consumers, a lack which marketing experts exploit to fullest economic advantage. Friedan calls this the “hidden persuasion business,” and points out that teenage girls were a particularly lucrative target; snag them young, and they are customers for life.³⁵

In her examination of the history of women’s magazines, Amy Aronson argues that women’s magazines have always essentially been a collection of miscellany and tend to offer a wide variety of content, some of it contradictory. So it is that in the magazines of Elinor’s youth, much like magazine content today, one can find articles about feminism and Gloria Steinem sandwiched between advice on perfecting a troubled complexion and the top ten vertiginous shoes for fall. Aronson claims that this wide selection of content actually enables a greater freedom for the female reader to “imagine more than one gender identity, more than one story.”³⁶ In a culture that has always valued, at least in theory and certainly economically, an individual’s freedom of choice, it is perhaps plausible to say that a wide and varied selection of content does indeed offer a little something for everyone and perhaps a wider concept of the diversity of choice and lifestyle open to anyone. On the other hand, the mixed messages presented to the reader create, as Kalia Doner observes, a “confusing hodge-podge of self-loathing attitudes and

³⁴ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 173.

³⁵ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 174, 184.

³⁶ Amy B Aronson, “Still Reading: Women’s Magazines a Half Century after *The Feminine Mystique*,” *Media Report to Women* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 32.

empowering opinion.”³⁷ Aronson believes women can navigate these contradictions better than some feminist critics give them credit for, but this does not fully account for the ways in which value-laden content can be internalized, even when first sifted and weighed by a savvy consumer who knows she is a sales target. This, surely, is a source of that tension in navigating the hodge-podge, not just the difficulty of sorting through a barrage of contradictory ideas but also the difficulty of navigating those values internalized as heart yearnings and which do not always reconcile with one’s values and principles. This is a tension Elinor remembers well.

Back home at Auburn High School, the images and ideas from her fashion magazines comingled with the glamour and appeal of the beauty pageant winners and homecoming queens, the adolescent girl’s desire to be beautiful, noticed, and therefore validated. On the one hand, Elinor knew herself to be valid already whilst on the other, she felt herself lacking when it came to the attributes which her cultural surroundings adhered to as an ideal femininity. The *Tiger*, Auburn High School’s yearbook, routinely rounded up the newest batch of teen beauties and photographed them for posterity with bare shoulders, swathed in a net or feather stole. There was Miss Auburn High and her court, the senior, junior, and sophomore Beauties and the Beauty Court, the homecoming Queen and her court, and the Halloween Queen and her court—a total of thirty-three beauties in all.³⁸ The criteria for their selection were, as Elinor recalls,

beauty and poise and graciousness and all the feminine stuff, you know, and again, in my family and among my cohort, I guess, that was all sort of, “this is ridiculous.” I wouldn’t want to—well, I desperately wanted to be one of those women—those girls. I wanted to be a beauty queen. I wanted to be the

³⁷ Kalia Doner, quoted in Aronson, “Still Reading,” 35.

³⁸ *The Sixty-Five Tiger* (Auburn, AL: Auburn High School, 1965).

homecoming queen. Had the chance of a snowball in hell. I wasn't bad looking but I was certainly a sociopath, certainly by Southern standards. If I had to say what the core tension—core feeling of the times as I remember it, is this impossible, this ripping tension between what I passionately believed to be right and true and just and what I wanted to be, what I longed for inside. I wanted to be gorgeous and I wanted to have boyfriends and I wanted to be a beauty queen and I wanted to marry somebody rich who would take me away from all of this and on and on and on. So it was the secret inside and the somewhat less secret outside, but it was all mostly fantasy. It was informed by fleetingly grasped glimpses of what reasoned writers were saying about it.³⁹

In Elinor's case, this ripping tension was felt but not particularly examined and never really articulated.

What I marvel at is how completely unconscious I was of the tension, which is to say I felt deeply these longings to be homecoming queen and have a boyfriend and a rich husband and I also had these protofeminist notions that equal pay and being married and being a housewife is not the—but I never ever examined the—what do you call it in geology—the fault between—the fault line between those two things. Self-reflection of that kind, of the fundamental kind like that, was just not in my repertoire. It was just guilty secrets. Everybody was conflicted, but nobody talked about it. Nobody was doing that.⁴⁰

Given the combination of her commitment to feminist principles and her inability to articulate and, in some ways perhaps, internalize them, I asked Elinor at what age in her life she felt she formed a strong, explicit feminist stance. Elinor, who will be turning seventy this year, replied only somewhat jokingly, "Sixty-nine."

It's almost true. The ability to bring out into the open mind the conflicting aspects of oneself is just not a habit that I grew up with. There were tensions, but they were managed by suppression and by pendulum swings. I'm going to be this and now I'm going to be this. I may not be alone in this among my generation. The ability to just speak openly, think openly, face the contradictions, is a new thing, a new phenomenon.⁴¹

³⁹ Elinor Mazé interview.

⁴⁰ Elinor Mazé interview.

⁴¹ Elinor Mazé interview.

And has feminist theory helped her along the path to articulation and perhaps imbued in her an investment in broader feminist or gender equality issues that may not touch her life personally or be a part of her own individual experience? She has been, after all, considerably blessed in her own choice of mate and careers, never felt “personally hurt, either emotionally or in the pocketbook because of inequities,” generally enjoyed a “fine, dandy salary,” and says wryly that “people treated me right, nobody condescended to me and if they did, they didn’t live to tell about it. I’ve led a charmed life and maybe that’s why it’s taken a lot for me to realize how hurt people are. I mean I knew that, I knew it was all wrong and bad but I didn’t feel it deep down in my toenails.”⁴² As for the influence of feminist theory on her growth as a feminist:

I have been intrigued by feminist rhetoric, although I’m also appalled by it...I’m an editor, so I’m appalled by it because it’s so jargony and of course the deconstructionist, postdeconstruction, postmodern, post-postmodern, remodern scholarship in which I’ve been bathed for the past decades is way unnecessarily opaque and says simple things in complicated language and that puts me off.⁴³

But, she says,

It has helped me enormously to, underneath all of that, to hear the anguish and the cries for social justice at levels that I never—I don’t think I quite realized how deep the fractures are, how very hurt, for example, the LGBT community was, is, continues to be. And so yes, I think the writing has helped but it’s also just personal—whatever passes for values, beliefs, spiritual gestalt in me has just made that happen. The openness of it, the fact that it’s out there, can be out there without—what were we afraid of? I’m not sure it was fear; it was a slug-like failure of the gray matter.”⁴⁴

⁴² Elinor Mazé interview.

⁴³ Elinor Mazé interview.

⁴⁴ Elinor Mazé interview.

What comes through in her narrative with bell-like clarity is the value she places on having the words to frame a feminist opinion and to better analyze the circumstances of her own situation and that of others. Even if we take her more tongue-and-cheek comments with a grain of salt, it is likewise clear that developing this feminist framework has taken the better part of a lifetime, in part due to her individual personality but also because of the context in which she grew up, the culture within her own family, the political climate at the time, her race, her education, and the zeitgeist of her generation. Without the right words to shape and frame them, thoughts and opinions and reactions often remain in the semi-subconscious, informing identity and actions perhaps, but so internalized as to be almost invisible. This invisibility can lead to harmful assumptions on the part of the individual, not just assumptions about one's own place in the world but also about the lives of others whose experiences, because of their race, class, and myriad other factors, do not mirror our own. Finding the right words can not only further individual development but can also foster empathy, understanding, and action for others in ways that silence, suppression, and ignorance cannot.

Part of the culture in our own house growing up was the assumption, not unlike that which pervaded Elinor's own upbringing, that the battle for equality had been won. It was up to each of us individual women, my mother, my sister, and I, to part the waves before us.⁴⁵ Feminism and gender equality were not particularly talked about at home so much as they were taken for granted as having already been achieved. What more is there to say? In retrospect this assumption seems burdensome and isolating. There is an almost existential-style burden of (seeming) freedom placed on the individual to make of her life

⁴⁵ Elinor Mazé interview.

what she will, regardless of circumstance and an isolation from the struggles or challenges experienced by others. If equality has arrived, what are *they* fussing about? So it was that when I asked Elinor how she would approach gender-related issues now, if she had my sister and me to raise all over again, she emphasized the importance not just of articulation but also of listening.

What I would hope is that I'd have a lot to listen [to] and that's—what we've talked about here is how important it is to talk to other people. The engagement with the literature is fascinating and interesting and helpful but also—and why should this be surprising, but it speaks to who I am I guess and maybe you, too—but hearing other people—it takes a village to be smart. That's one of the problems with this world we live in is that we're each one living in our own planet and at best armed camps. We never listen to each other. That's why diversity is important. The practice of coming into contact with people and actually—I mean this sounds like missionary talk and I know it sounds like pabulum but civil discourse, being able to talk about things without anyone being threatened, even if they are things that stir passions, the inestimable value of civil discourse helps you understand what hasn't been done yet. Again, hearing the cries of anguish in-between the stilted prose of academia of indigenous peoples and female indigenous peoples or gender-complex indigenous peoples, for example—hearing their personal voices through all of this has really helped. That's where the juice flows. I think that's where progress will come from. I'm not a big believer in progress but yes, we have made—there is such a thing as progress and there's also such a thing as backsliding and that rock rolls right back down on top of poor old Sisyphus and we've got to keep rolling it up the hill. If you're careful, even in the obfuscation [of academic feminist writing] you can find the personal voice, I think. It's what I pin my editorial hopes on. Hearing the personal stories, being willing to share your personal story with other people and being willing to listen to other people, that's where it's at, baby, to go back to the sixties.

More than her own experience with womanhood, what has helped Elinor become aware of gender-related social justice issues has been the narratives of others, the anguish, the struggles, even the triumphs that a diverse group of human stories can bring to light. Creating space for diverse voices to be heard both socially and politically aids not only the expansion of the individual's vocabulary and worldview, but also creates

active empathy for others beyond our own highly situated experiences. It is perhaps white feminists of a certain class who must take particular note of this, since it is usually the luxury of privilege that allows a person to ignore, dismiss, or remain oblivious to the suffering of others. Unlike the political climate of Elinor's childhood, when the civil rights discussions took precedence over that of gender equality, and the two seemed in competition somehow for energy and resources, the discussions today surrounding civil rights for people of color and the LGBTQ community seem to foster greater, deeper understanding of gender-related issues in general. Feminist academic research certainly makes this possible, as perhaps do mainstream popular media, even the miscellany of magazine content, but it lies with each of us, individually as well as within our various familial, professional, or social communities, to be willing to share our own stories and to listen to the stories of others. That, as Elinor said, is where the juice flows.

CHAPTER THREE

Ghislaine

Elinor's first daughter, my older sister Ghislaine Mazé, was born in 1974 in Kansas City, Missouri. She moved with her parents—who at the time were pursuing careers in English as a second language (ESL)—first to Takasaki, Japan, and then to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, where she spent a large part of her childhood on a compound for the employees of the Saudi Aramco Oil Company. It was a small community of some 7,000 Americans (among whom numbered a few African Americans), Britons, some Indians, and, alongside, a large population of Indian, Sri Lankan, and Filipino service-industry workers who tended to everything from road work to house cleaning to child care to—for those who were able to afford the education—nursing.

We were definitely in a well protected, self-contained, American kind of compound living experience and there was something—we were very conscious I think—I was certainly always aware of how we lived in this gated compound that for the most part excluded Saudis from all of our recreational spots, our schools, everything, basically. I think I had a fairly strong sense of cultural superiority. I'm not proud of it, and I guess I can't quite say how many of my peers or the adults shared this, but I think I picked it up from the environment, the sense that we deserved to live on our special compound and the Saudis were perhaps a sort of backward people whom we were glad not to have to interact with that much. Not that these would have been overtly stated too often, but I don't think it was too far from the surface either, at least for me.⁴⁶

In this gated community, isolated, for the most part, from Saudi culture, her classmates in middle school and junior high school were predominantly American with a few international kids thrown into the mix (about 5 to 10 percent of the student body),

⁴⁶ Ghislaine Mazé, interview by Angelica Mazé via telephone, October ??, 2017,

Ghislaine recalled, from places like Palestine, Jordan, and Nigeria. Very rarely there would be a Saudi boy or two in class but never Saudi girls, who went to their own Arab schools off of the compound.⁴⁷

In terms of her awareness of American politics, Ghislaine claimed to have been largely ignorant of the political goings-on in a country halfway around the world. Her parents were politically liberal, but she didn't have much memory of political discussions either at home or in her peer groups until she went away to boarding school for her high school years—and even then, she remembered being on the sidelines of such discussions. In high school, on her visits home from boarding school, she remembered a male Palestinian friend of hers talking into the night with her father about then-presidential candidate George Bush and whether or not he would favor Palestinian independence from Israel more than his competition, Bill Clinton. With that same friend, she recalled having a few discussions about feminist ideas she brought back from her boarding school and vaguely remembered his push-back, but otherwise American politics did not feature greatly in her early years. “I think those conversations must have gone on,” she recalled, “and I just—I’m guessing I didn’t pay attention and all I wanted to talk about was horses, because I had a horse and that was pretty much all I cared about.”⁴⁸

Back in the US, and mostly unbeknown to Ghislaine, first under President Reagan in the early-to-late eighties, then under Bush, and eventually even under Clinton in the early-to-mid nineties, there was a cultural milieu of what some feminist scholars have described as a feminist backlash against the Women’s Liberation Movement of the sixties

⁴⁷ Ghislaine Maze interview.

⁴⁸ Ghislaine Maze interview.

and seventies. As early as the late seventies and early eighties, Betty Friedan was reacting against the more radical strains of feminism that had come to the fore in the wake of her own feminist endeavors. In the late sixties Friedan coined the term “Lavender Menace” to describe the threat posed by lesbians in the feminist movement, whose involvement she felt undermined the legitimacy of what she saw as a heterosexual—and therefore more legitimate and socially acceptable—women’s movement. While she had apologized in 1977 for the homophobia of her earlier work and statements, she nonetheless attacks radical feminism in her 1981 book *The Second Stage* and promotes a feminism that was very much in the air at the time, one that was generally heterosexual and associated specifically with family values.⁴⁹ ⁵⁰She even devotes an entire chapter to women’s economic progress titled, “Take Back the Day,” a reference to and a reaction against the Take Back the Night movement of the seventies, which began as a series of protests against sexual violence and violence against women and which is now a foundation organizing events and fundraisers in support of ending violence against women and supporting victims of violence.⁵¹ Friedan’s chapter opens with a paragraph which is so telling, in its bourgeois indignation at overt expressions of anger and sexuality, that it is worth reproducing in its entirety:

In the first stage, the women’s movement directed too much of its energy into sexual politics, from personal bedroom wars against men to mass marches against rape or pornography to “take back the night.” Sexual war against men is an irrelevant, self-defeating acting out of rage. It does not

⁴⁹ Friedan, *The Second Stage*; Ashley Fetters, “Four Big Problems with *The Feminine Mystique*” *Atlantic*, February 12, 2013.

⁵⁰ Faludi, Susan. *Backlash : The Undeclared War against American Women*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006, 329, 330.

⁵¹ Take Back the Night, “History of Take Back The Night,” accessed October 26, 2017, <https://takebackthenight.org/history/>.

change the condition of our lives. Obsession with rape, even offering Band-Aids to its victims, is a kind of wallowing in that victim-state, that impotent rage, that sterile polarization. Like the aping of machismo or obsessive careerism, it dissipates our own well-springs of generative power.

Obsessive careerism? Wallowing in a victim-state? This is strong stuff and strikes a particularly discordant note with this author, who is currently attending a university (Baylor) which published an article a few weeks ago celebrating a drop in annual *reported* campus rapes from twenty-three to eleven.⁵² That protesting rape and expressing anger over rape culture were seen by Friedan as wallowing in a victim-state is frankly shocking, given how disturbingly prevalent rape culture and sexual assault remain in this country to this day. Friedan's language betrays a thinly veiled anger and frustration with a liberation movement that seeped out and expanded beyond the framework of her white, middle-class, relatively status-quo vision. What comes through in her response is her own shock and incomprehension at the anger being expressed by women who should have been her sisters in arms, women of color, rape victims, lesbians—marginalized women whose level of oppression perhaps outstripped in urgency and extremity the plight of the middle-American housewife who was the focus of Friedan's work. One senses that the Sisyphean task of rolling the rock of equality uphill somehow gained enough momentum under the pressure of a diversity of feminist agendas that Friedan felt it moving without her help and beyond her control. The work of people like Audre Lorde, Kathrine McKinnon, and Andrea Dworkin, for example—work that expressed real and relevant anger at the exclusion of lesbians and women of color from the feminist movement and at

⁵² Phillip Ericksen, "Baylor Continues Campus Crime Reporting Efforts," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, October 14, 2017, accessed October 15, 2017, http://www.wacotrib.com/news/higher_education/baylor-continues-campus-crime-reporting-efforts/article_5d1d198f-c67f-57b9-9b28-ff8e022617bb.html.

the exploitative and harmful nature of the pornography industry—was too disruptive, too confrontational, too fringe, too unseemly for Friedan’s bourgeois sensibilities. Her work in the *The Second Stage*, with its constant refrain of realigning the feminist struggle with middle-class family values, resonates with the sound of vigorous and urgent backpedaling.

Nineteen eighty-one was also the first year of Reagan’s presidency and the start of a rhetoric which Kellie Bean describes in her book *Post-Backlash Feminism: Women in the Media Since Reagan-Bush* as the “Family Values machine.” As Bean sees it, the eighties and nineties mix of hypermasculine values and conservative Christianity served to undermine the legitimacy of feminism and make room for a host of female voices to attack feminism and uphold the misogynist myths and values so often touted by men’s and women’s glossy magazines.⁵³ She calls these women *antifeminists* and references people like Camille Paglia and Naomi Wolf. In the early nineties, in interviews and articles for magazines like *Esquire*, these women assert a sex-positive feminist view that sex and embracing misogynist sexual values bring about a happiness and fulfillment that the mannish, angry women seeking gender equality would never achieve.⁵⁴ Feminism had become synonymous with impotent, misdirected female rage and the woman who played along with this misconception was, according to Bean, “the empowered, fully voiced woman who rejects the movement that won her that voice and moves every

⁵³ Kellie Bean, *Post-Backlash Feminism: Women and the Media since Reagan-Bush* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 18.

⁵⁴ Bean, 28

conversation quickly toward a discussion of male-identified sex.”⁵⁵ Setting aside the serious flaws and limitations in Friedan’s vision for feminist progress, she was perhaps relatively ahead of the curve in identifying that focusing too much on what she called “bedroom wars” would misdirect and eventually derail the feminist aim to effect any real and consolidated sociopolitical change.

Ghislaine may not have been consciously aware of this feminist backlash, but even in her relatively progressive household, the term *feminism* had about it the whiff of superfluity and unattractive, man-hating militancy.

I don’t remember talking about feminism. I did have this sense that the battle was won, that it was done. We had a strong mother who clearly worked and who personality-wise was strong and I guess in some ways the one reason one wouldn’t use the word, go as far as to say one was a feminist at the time was because you didn’t need to. It was okay. The battle was won. To be a feminist was to be antiman or you know, kind of sexlessly crusading for something that didn’t need so much fighting for anymore. But I remember, for example—I don’t remember having conversations with my parents about feminism but there were weird comments like—what was I reading? I was reading some novel and I remember my dad saying something like—I wish I could remember what the book was but he said something like, “Well you never would have stood for that if you were that character.” Maybe it was a book that was set in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. You’re too much of a—I don’t know if he said you’re too much of a feminist or you’re too strong a woman, you never would have tolerated that. And I remember even at the time thinking, well that’s weird. If I lived in a time period in which—I would do what everyone else did.⁵⁶

Ghislaine’s attitude towards feminism was much the same as that held by Elinor and her family in the sixties, an attitude which assumed that equality had already arrived and

⁵⁵ Bean, 28

⁵⁶ Ghislaine Maze interview.

which in some ways took for granted the work that came before (and certainly was oblivious to the remaining work that lay ahead). But unlike in the days of Elinor's childhood, in the eighties and nineties *feminism* had also become a dirty word, a mantle adopted exclusively by angry man-haters and fringe factions of whingeing female malcontents.

As for what popular culture was dishing up in terms of attractive, acceptable iterations of femininity, Ghislaine recalls a mish-mash of media images. Firstly, however, she remembers her early childhood in Japan, where for the first time she became aware of her own gender under the influence of some of the favored gender norms in Japanese culture.

I have started to think that I had a kind of gender uncertainty from way back in the sense that, for example, I remember when we moved—so before Saudi there was a three-year period when we lived in Japan. We moved there—I guess it would have been in '78 or so. I was five. No, that can't be, because my little sister—I was six when she was born in 1980 [in Japan]—so there was some time [before that] when we moved to Japan. I was very—I think I was a very kind of gender-neutral American kid at that point but what I remember in the Japan years, going to a Japanese school and all that, is being in a culture that had very girly girls and boyish boys. I don't think I appreciated it when I first got there but certain differences started to seep in, like red was for girls and black and whatnot were for boys, and some of the toys that I first gravitated toward when we got there, like the robot whose chest opened up and shot guns, and the black bike that I bought—I think after a year or two there I grew my hair long and began to want to play girl roles with the boys in the neighborhood. And I'm way oversimplifying Japanese culture because there was also Arare-chan, the robot girl cartoon that I watched. She was a tough, overall-wearing, purple-haired kind of tough girl.⁵⁷

Segueing into her junior high school years in Saudi Arabia, Ghislaine was increasingly exposed to American gender dynamics, not all of which she absorbed in the

⁵⁷ Ghislaine Maze interview.

expected, gender-normative ways and which, at least at first, might have been somewhat free of nascent cultural pressures to be traditionally feminine or sexy. Certainly when it came to dressing, her personal style was informed by some unusual influences.

And then of course there's Don Johnson in my junior high years. So, probably at age twelve or thirteen I remember shopping for clothes in the US which was—these trips back to the US were a big deal, a time for us to culturally get caught up and buy clothes and things to take back with us to the Saudi compound. I don't know if I ever really watched *Miami Vice* but I tremendously admired the way (laughs) Don Johnson looked. I loved his style, so I bought this, like, linen—I don't know if I had linen pants but I definitely had a couple linen shirts. I think I would wear two of them and roll the sleeves so that the under one showed and there was a way of walking that I thought was Don Johnson-esque, where I would put my hands in my pocket and turned up my collar. I'm at a loss today to say where exactly I got these ideas from and why I admired Don Johnson so much, and looking back I also find it weird that he was—of all the available—and I thought people would—I mean, you know, when you dress to be cool I guess you're thinking that people are going to look at you and think that you're cool in some way. So I cannot say what I was going for, and maybe that was a liberated time when I could say that I wanted to dress cool without having a concept of sexy. Maybe that's it.⁵⁸

Unlike her mother, she never had much time for fashion magazines or magazine journalism, but fairly quickly she did become aware of a kind of femininity being performed and celebrated in popular movies, music, and books. It was partly through these encounters that she may have had at least a taste of the hyperobjectified female sexuality that Kellie Bean claims took over ideologically in America during the feminist backlash.

I do think that our mother subscribed to *Seventeen* magazine for me when I was, like, a preteen. It's inconceivable to me that that got delivered to me in Saudi [because of Saudi censorship of foreign materials entering the country], but I want to say that that happened. But what I would really have rather read, and did read, was *Arabian Horse World*. But here's the thing: the pop culture that I started to get when I started to listen to music, for example, was hair metal. Super raunchy, sexist I suppose, macho rock

⁵⁸ Ghislaine Maze interview.

dude, Mötley Cruë, Poison kind of stuff. I think some of my earliest images of female-hood, if I can say that, when I consciously tried to take on roles in all of that, even in my junior high years, I was interested in, like, strippers and Tawny Kitaen rolling around on the jaguar in the White Snake video. “Cherry Pie” [the song which accompanied the aforementioned video]—yeah, and “Girls Girls Girls” [Mötley Cruë] and “She’s a fast machine, she keeps her motor clean [a line from ACDC’s song “You Shook Me All Night Long”].” Like, oh I better keep my motor clean. Check. Duly noted. “Knocked me out with those American thighs. [Another line from the same ACDC song].” And so even when I was still not really concerned with body anxiety, I guess I was shaped by this idea of, like, American thighs...I remember playing with my friend Celeste actually, a long day of make-believe—this was after all of my peers had stopped playing make-believe—but we were probably twelve or thirteen and it was, “Pretend we’re strippers.” And so we would play music and we would have underwear and maybe a bra on and I would pull my underwear up my bum to make it a thong and we would go out and wiggle around and flop around to music and just pretend that we were strippers. And there would be this backstory about how I’m more specialized in slow dances. (laughs) She was more of a speedy dancer. So that was just my nascent sexual—and then the media image.

Some of the movies during that time period, *Dirty Dancing*, *Salsa—Dirty Dancing*, maybe it has redeeming qualities but *Salsa* was quite objectifying. I remember spinning around trying to imitate this one girl and the camera would pan up her legs. It was the beginning of a kind of self-objectification. I know that sounds maybe heavy-handed but I did worry. I had this feeling that I was preparing for somebody at some point to be looking at me in that way. Like, how are her American thighs? Does she keep her motor clean?

The other feminist formula was the Jean Auel novels like *Clan of the Cavebear*; kind of like she’s [the main character] sexy, she’s blond, she rides a tiger, she invents the slingshot and oh, here comes Jondelar. (laughs) Jondelar was this incredible Ice Age lover who searches the world over for a woman who can accommodate him physically because he’s just so incredibly well-endowed, on top of being hunky and just amazing, and he’s the perfect mate for this incredible blonde, Ice Age woman who is an amazing hunter and all of this, but she was hot, and that was a big important part of those books.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

So it was that in her preteens and early adolescence, Ghislaine internalized a certain brand of female sexuality and sexual availability, a somewhat abstract cross between American thighs and clean motors, if you will, which informed her increasing awareness of an impending, appraising male gaze. But then, in 1989, she went off to boarding school in Massachusetts and entered a phase of adolescence marked predominantly by loneliness and insecurity. The American school on her compound in Saudi Arabia did not extend past ninth grade, and so the oil company which employed her parents paid the tuition and travel expenses for all their employees' children to complete their high school education at the boarding school of their choosing. Ghislaine spent her sophomore, junior, and senior years of high school at Phillips Academy, a large and prestigious preparatory school, which she found culturally and socially confounding, especially for a girl raised overseas who would rather read *Arabian Horse World* than *Seventeen* magazine.

I think I was okay for a month or two, just kind of bewildered and adjusting, and then mostly it became a lonely time for me, not a lot of social skills, not a lot of ability that I had at the time to make friends, have conversations with people. I knew how to have conversations with horses but not so much with the people and not so much with people my age—teens, sophisticated. And there was a bit of a culture thing. I was sort of unsophisticated and unworldly compared to a lot of the East Coast kids who were my classmates, and it was a big, diverse school and there were international students, foreign students, kids from underprivileged backgrounds who were there on scholarships. But culturally among all those groups I most resembled and probably wanted to be like the sort of sophisticated blue-blood kids who were there, but there was a lot I was missing culturally and socially.

She discovered Deadhead culture, the hippie-style fan culture that surrounded the music and lifestyle of the sixties-era band, the Grateful Dead. She stopped shaving her legs and armpits for a spell, perhaps due in part to a kind of protofeminism she was trying

on for size, but also because that image was part of the legacy of seventies-era hippie culture which she was aligning herself with but which, as she points out, was not necessarily in line with feminism per se. What is striking is that, like her mother Elinor, she possessed an interesting combination of analytical skills and curiosity at the same time that she lacked the ability to articulate what she was doing, thinking, exploring, attempting to say.⁶⁰

I think it was a kind of early sense of feminism and sort of inquiring into—I kept asking myself why we do a certain thing, like women are supposed to be hairless and men have a choice. In a really simplistic way I was starting to ask these things. I wouldn't have done it on my own; I think I fell in with friends, women, girls, at boarding school who didn't shave so I was not, like, forging my own path. But yeah, and then going back to Saudi on the vacations, the couple boys who I did have friendships with of the kind that we could have conversations about things...But they would be like, "Yeah, gross. Why are you doing this?" And I don't remember the content of the conversations, but they were fascinated. I was perhaps the first hairy girl they'd seen. And I don't think I had a very sophisticated explanation except—I have no idea what I said to them, in all honesty, but I didn't have—I wasn't reading things particularly. There was not really an ethos except I just don't understand why I should have to shave.

As for her friendships at Phillips Academy, while she did make a few, what she recalled most from those years away from home was a loneliness which her limited social skills could not fully alleviate. Some of her friends were active in racial or environmental social justice causes, and some were fellow Deadheads with whom she felt a marginal sense of belonging, having all subscribed to the same social identity, even if superficially. She was aware of the civil rights struggle, but as with feminism, her view of it was fairly undeveloped and her attitude towards it was, at best, one of complacency, and at worst, somewhat disdainful. One hears echoes of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* Celestine

⁶⁰ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

Sibley in Ghislaine's attitude towards anyone making what seemed to her an unnecessary fuss.

I believe that I had the same basic sort of complacent attitude about racial—about battles on behalf of nonwhites in the US that I had about feminism, which is that the battle was won, the work is done, hallelujah. And I say this because I remember being aware, for example, of the Af-Lat-Am student organization at Andover, my high school, that was for African American and Latino American students, and I remember not feeling engaged with or interested in what that group discussed or what—I remember feeling really, well, frankly pretty snotty, I guess, about just not understanding and not taking the time to be sympathetic to the struggles that students would be experiencing at a school like that or the communities that they came from. I think I didn't know or refused to acknowledge real—on the one hand you can say having not lived in the US I didn't have a clear sense of what lived experience was like for people who weren't white, but I think it was worse than that. I think I had a strong sort of sense that things were fine, somehow even more pernicious than ignorance. It was sort of like I knew what the right values were in regards to the civil rights movement. I knew that racism was bad, but I think I had my own kind of backward attitude about what still needed to be done or what the reality was in the US and elsewhere.⁶¹

While she was vaguely aware of the social justice issues her few friends were engaged with, they did not, as friends, discuss politics or issues of social justice, or if they did, it made so little an impression on her that she could not particularly recall any of those conversations. She credited this in part to her aforementioned attitude towards social justice issues in general, and in part to her own introverted nature.

Friends is a strong word...mostly I remember feeling like people around me knew how to socialize and I didn't...This probably says more about what I did and didn't get out of my friendships than necessarily about the character of the people who eventually were kind of my friend circle because, for example, I did have one friend at least in our group who was very active in issues of social justice in high school—member of groups, taking classes. Eventually she got an award in our graduating year for being kind of a socially engaged leader-type person. So I think there was a lot that I simply wasn't aware of or being exposed to or discussing with

⁶¹ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

my friends. I don't think it would be right to say that my whole friend group was not feminist. But issues of racial social justice activism and environmental activism were more prominent and I was perhaps more aware of them than perhaps issues of feminist activism or causes or concerns.

I don't think I had discussions about—I didn't have intellectual and political discussions with my friends, even in high school so much, and there was a kind of disdain for, like, anything too earnest and ideological was a bore, even though all of my former friends from that time have gone on to be great activists and ideologues and serious campaigners and believers in their causes. At the time there was—what I at least got from them was that it was not really that attractive to be too earnestly cause-mongering. But feminism, yeah, I do think it was not something I strived for. I felt the struggle but I would have not wanted to say that I was engaging in a feminist struggle because of judgments around that word.

Again, the complacency, the position of privileged white ignorance, the bourgeois attitude towards rocking the proverbial boat, all these currents run through Ghislaine's narrative just as surely as through her mother's. But in both cases, the personality of the individual cannot be ignored, as insignificant as it may seem rhetorically, when viewed through the lens of race and class. Ghislaine, like her mother before her, was a bit of an outsider and a loner. She preferred horses to people in her childhood and early adolescence; she was fairly alienated from many aspects of American culture to which, in high school, she was being exposed for the first time; and she found it hard to relate to and *talk* to others, even her friends. These personality traits are not highlighted here in order to emphasize what a sad-sack Ghislaine was in her early years but rather to emphasize, as indeed she does in her own telling, the isolation that can be the life of the introvert. As in Elinor's recollections, this isolation lead to a lack of a sense of community and a lack of discourse which, in both their cases, seems to have limited their ability to empathize with others and understand more profoundly the lived experiences of

those outside their field of understanding. In Ghislaine's case it also undermined her self-esteem. Human connections, it seems, are unavoidably essential to human development.

I think for me I was—and maybe I still am—first and foremost a conformist, and so I don't want to stick out and I don't have enough vision of my own to conceive another option besides those that are laid out in front of me and to just go with it, whether it's I'm going to look this way, I'm going to do this with my hair, I'm going to believe this. I think what happened is—for me, there were a series of choices of what do I want to conform to. I chose a group that I thought I would like to be part of, you know, that kind of hairy, Deadhead crowd, maybe because the women seemed strong in some way and maybe there were things that I liked, but I couldn't have said ideologically what exactly I was buying into. And what I felt and was aware of was ways in which conforming with that group put me in opposition with other groups, groups in which an attractive female is somebody who doesn't have a lot of body hair. And you know, at the same time that I was being hairy, I also began to be very uptight about my eating habits and worried a lot about my weight, so I was not—there were a whole bunch of conflicts about which set of rules I would adopt. If you adopted certain ones you were breaking the rules of another group but you know, in some ways—the ideological battle for me was who do I join and can I straddle many worlds or do I have to be all in one or the other, and what is the cost?

I don't remember media influences so much in the high school years. I don't think I watched a lot of TV or saw a lot of movies. I think I cast about and I found—yeah, I started to admire skinny girls. Maybe there was even something about not being at home and I was just like wow, nobody is sort of caring about what I eat and don't eat. I didn't have parents on a day-to-day basis, and so I think I wasn't sure what my responsibility was towards my own body. Should I feed it? Should I not feed it? Does anyone care? (laughs) I think there was a little bit of that sense of, you know, how does one even know? And because I was socially isolated, eating is social, you know, you have a good time chowing down with your friends and when it's just you feeding yourself or not feeding yourself, I think maybe the regulation of that is a little harder when you're not tied to other peoples' rhythms.

The position of feminism in our household—it was an undercurrent or a sort of backdrop that we could acknowledge from time to time but I do think what you've suggested is true, which is there was a sense that the battle was done and we didn't—for example, it didn't require vigilance. I think this is one thing that I regret, this sense that I myself didn't need to prepare as I went into the world for certain battles, certain push-backs. My self-esteem didn't seem to be something anything that any of us—we didn't

seem to think I needed to worry about my self-esteem, I should just have it. And when I didn't have a lot of self-esteem, when it went away in high school, I don't know that any of us was prepared for that...It was pretty well—I mean, I think it started out with just kind of a disorientation, who am I? I'm in this new place. But then when it came to be that I didn't really have a lot of friends and didn't develop a lot of social skills, then I started to feel bad about myself, certainly bad about my body. The best thing is to have as little body as possible. Yeah, it's sad, that kind of thing. When a girl gets into it, it occupies a lot of emotional energy.⁶²

Ghislaine went on to get a bachelor's degree at University of Chicago, moved to San Francisco, married her boyfriend, and just before she went to Stanford for her master's degree in English and embarked on a career teaching English at Community College of San Francisco, she gave birth to her first child, her daughter Ella. As she described it, all of those unexamined or latent aspects of feminism and her own approach to womanhood went largely unexamined until Ella was born. It began, she recalled, with a dream.

Well, I remember having a dream when I was pregnant with her. I didn't know the sex of the baby. She was my first child, and I had a dream sometime during my pregnancy that—if I remember the dream correctly, this is how I remember it today. It was like, I had a son and he was little and I put him up on a wall or he was sitting up on a wall and I looked up at him or I reached up to him and I thought, He's all right, he's strong because he's a boy. And at the time I remember thinking about this dream and thinking, Well, that's unfortunate. But I remember after the dream thinking, Well, that's too bad. I'm obviously thinking that boys are stronger than—I've got some deep sense and I know I had anxieties around—but then there's my daughter and I was very conscious in her littlest years, in her toddler years, to not put her in dresses, not force any kind of—not use girlhood as something that would get in the way of her being physically precocious or anything like that. There was definitely a family value of not gender stereotyping, not forcing on a kid or reinforcing with the kid—if anything, trying to help the kid break out of strict gender roles or gender choices, you know, cultural slots. Dressed her in overalls, lots of greens and yellows, initially because those were the colors that people give you when you're pregnant but don't know the sex of the baby. And then I was very happy'; I got lots of hand-me-downs of boys' clothes. In her toddler and baby pictures she's in lots of, like, little blue sweatpants and onesies with trucks on them. Some of that was happenstance. I mean, I

⁶² Ghislaine Mazé interview.

didn't go out of my way to shop in the boys' section, but I did want to be more neutral. We did occasionally—I went out with you to the French restaurant when she was little, and we put her in a little dress outfit that she explosively pooped in at the white tablecloth restaurant.⁶³

In Ella's early years, occasional fancy-dress outings aside, Ghislaine's first efforts to influencing Ella's exposure to gender and female identity were focused on gender neutrality, on not imposing gendered clothing or behaviors on her daughter before Ella could choose for herself.

I think gender neutrality was the sort of value that I brought to her early years...In terms of her early girl identity—I'm trying to think of what I observed or how I became aware of us as girls (laughs). In general, her girlhood was not very much marked by enjoying dressing very feminine. She played soccer, she tended to wear hiking boots and whatnot. I mean obviously the real discussions and her awareness is a relatively new thing over the last few years, where she and I talk about these things more explicitly. But it wasn't until, I mean, really the last year or two, age fourteen, fifteen, that she began to make more deliberate choices about how she would present herself to the world. She started to pay more attention to clothes and eventually to learn more and have opinions about hair and makeup and things; until then, I would say—I don't know where she would draw the line, but until she was at age, I don't know, fourteen perhaps, she didn't—we didn't talk a lot about how she presented—about physical stuff really, about body image or the way she wanted to dress or what she admired or didn't want. Comfort was the primary factor that we discussed until that change. So it's really in more recent years that—I mean, this is why I think it is more recent for me and my immediate life that I've had to think more about the kind of woman I am vis-à-vis the kind of modeling I do for her about what a woman is or does, and she has come to have more conversations with me about these things in relation to the news or in relation to things that she's thinking about. It can't be that I didn't think about this at all until a couple of years ago, but I'm struggling to [remember].⁶⁴

Over the years, Ghislaine and her husband have shared parenting duties equally whilst both working full time, which Ghislaine felt was helpful in demonstrating for Ella

⁶³ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

⁶⁴ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

the varied roles a woman and a man can adopt in adult life. When Ella was about fourteen, she and Ghislaine began examining questions of gender and femininity more actively in conversation with each other, conversations that were new to Ghislaine. “It’s more recent that I’ve had to come back to think about—I’ve had a lot of discussions with Ella in recent years about pop culture images and values in popular media, implicit or explicit values about women.” And were these new conversations for her, ones she didn’t have with her own mother during adolescence?⁶⁵

Yeah, as far as I recall, certainly not this frequently and vigorously and also casually. It’s sort of a running—it’s not one formal, difficult conversation. We have a kind of ongoing—sometimes it’s funny and sometimes it’s not, but yeah, I don’t remember having this kind of talk in my earlier years...How they started is a hard one, but I think some of this, the seeds, were from school. I think because the last ten years or so have been a time of big movement with gay rights and also the sort of gender discussions that accompany those, schools have taken on, like diversity training and gender training. And so some things she would come home with from school that would introduce topics of conversation about changing perspectives on where gender comes from—and she learned the term *cisgender* pretty much when I did, which was here in the last couple of years, so the idea that the cultural expressions of gender are culturally determined. So some of these things came from school, some of these things came from—like, I think BuzzFeed has been an interesting pop culture source for her and again, I don’t know if it’s our very earliest conversations, but some of our early conversations about media images of women or popular trends that may or may not be healthy came out of some of that original BuzzFeed content where, you know, they were often humorous videos but it would be sort of critiquing the way women are posed on magazines, the one where they had the BuzzFeed guys pose like Kim Kardashian in a photo shoot, for example. And some of those, then—they’re funny videos, but they lead to this discussion of standards for men, standards for women, popular media images and that kind of thing. And then she has a friend group that also includes some friends who are very—a couple of them have families that are active politically, or I don’t know what other factors there are in the other families but anyway, she has some friends who are very serious and interested in talking about different angles to social justice including women and women in the world, women in the US. Yeah, kind of an earnest and engaged friend circle. And then

⁶⁵ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

frankly, in adolescence some things come up because of family things, dinner conversations where the brother says something and the father says something and then we have to work through it. So having a father and a brother also brings up questions—is an occasion for examining differences and assumptions. Why did you say that?...

I do feel like there were early conversations about eating and healthiness, and we've known a—we've been close to a family who had a boy, actually, who, starting four or five years ago, began to suffer from terrible, life-threatening anorexia, and I did talk to Ella about it. She knows the family. I don't think it was like we sat down and had one serious conversation, but I think over the years I've acknowledged to Ella that it can be hard, just showing sympathy for them and how hard it is when you turn on your own body. And they've had education at school about eating disorders. She's had some middle-school girlfriends who start to get into boys earlier than she did or are more about their looks than she did, and maybe that's the kind of thing we observed and noted. Like, well, yeah, so-and-so cares. I guess my approach when I can is to say I want her to be comfortable to be on her own timeline and not to feel pressure to get into boys because other people are, but how exactly I say that, I don't know. But if I had an agenda, it would be that. Or girls—and that's another part of our conversations over the years more and more is, you know, if you ever get into boys *or girls*, just so she doesn't—trying to not be too heteronormative. (laughs)⁶⁶

Having a boy, her son Brady, who is four years younger than Ella, also helped inspire conversation about bodies and gender.

Well this is very rudimentary and basic and also about body parts, but one of the things that happened when Brady was a baby was that I realized how easily and obviously we all talk about penises on babies. I'm trying to think of an example, but you name it for the baby, the little boy, "There's your penis. That's your penis." I mean, it's just along with all the other body parts; it seems like it quickly becomes part of the inventory, and it made me realize that for Ella, I had not necessarily given names to all of her parts. There was this kind of absence of anatomical specificity. And I'm sure I've read that, too: "down there." Not that I ever said, "Down there." (laughs) That was a, like, an early realization, that you tell a little boy and make sure he knows, those are your testicles, and you come up with multiple names, your balls, your testicles. And so Ella, by the time I was thinking about this, was probably three or four or five. I don't remember how I addressed it with her, but I remember becoming conscious that I wanted to say *vagina*, *clitoris*, *lips*, and then I was sort of

⁶⁶ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

at a loss about what I needed to name for her. But you know, it doesn't need to be an undistinguished unit. Your motor, Ella. (laughs) Make sure your American thighs are—You go into the bathroom and clean that motor. (laughs) If I hadn't had a boy I don't know if I would have even considered, compared the experience that way. In later years, I think—I mean the last few years there's been a lot of lecturing to Brady. Ella does a lot of—she doesn't hesitate to tell him what's right and wrong and what he should and shouldn't say and to his credit, he is well educated about—usually he's just misspoken. I guess I've thought about how I can help raise the kind of—you know, a good man. It's a work in progress. (laughs) I'm not sure I have a philosophy except the same idea—to try and put him at ease, make him comfortable with talking about things that he might want to talk about or not have any body shame. I mean he's at an age [Brady is twelve now] where he really doesn't want me to see him naked and is much more careful about that stuff, so in a way I guess one of my struggles has been the potential, although he's still physical and he likes to snuggle in bed and whatnot and is fine with hugs—there's a physical closeness that I have to maybe give up because he's going to become more and more of a guy, and snuggling with your mom at some point, I hear, is not cool. (laughs) I mean, not that Ella snuggles with me per se but she wouldn't—I guess snuggling in general tapers off. (laughs) That's not really a gender thing.⁶⁷

Exploring these topics with Ella helped Ghislaine crystallize a feminist viewpoint more than any of her own teenage experiences. I asked her the same question I asked Elinor vis-à-vis when she thought she formed her own feminist stance, and her reply was much the same as Elinor's.

Yesterday. A couple weeks ago. No, I think honestly it's been a lifelong thing. I'm still the same person, in some ways, inherently just looking for groups to join and deeply struggling with the commitment and the certainty that it takes—belief is—I have a hard time committing to one or another belief, but what's become clear, for example, having a daughter, is there are ways that the world makes a girl feel less powerful, and there are ways that pop culture can—if it doesn't directly harm a girl, it can occupy—a girl's time and energy can become so misdirected and so occupied with things that are just not productive or helpful. And so seeing my daughter go through girlhood and enter adolescence and having so many conversations with her and what she sees in the world and what her friends are like, maybe more than anything that has clarified some

⁶⁷ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

fundamental dynamics about what a woman and a girl encounters in the world....

It's interesting. It's surprising. It's crazy. What's surprising is I feel like there was just such a gap between what we thought we were and knew and what we really—all the things we didn't actually talk about or engage with or made part of our day-to-day consciousness. That's what's surprising. I think had you asked us [Ghislaine, her mother Elinor] at any given time, "Well, of course I think that x, y, and z is right, equal rights for non-whites, you know." But I'm realizing how dangerous the belief was that I think I imbued somehow that it was all good. Things were fine... Yeah, it feels like a real awakening.⁶⁸

So Ghislaine, like her mother before her, is a late-blooming feminist for whom it took many years and a wider exposure to the experiences of others to help create an awareness of the broader struggle for gender equality and of her own place within that struggle. What is interesting is how the nature of the conversation has changed over the generations. When Elinor was a teenager, the discourse around African American civil rights felt distinct from that of gender equality, and in many ways took precedence in terms of urgency. In Ghislaine's teen years, neither were particularly discussed, both battles being perceived as having been won. In Ella's generation, discussion of civil rights both at school and at home helped foster discussions of gender equality, particularly those discussions surrounding the LGBTQ movement.

I think that was the climate that brought a civil rights struggle close to home, the fact that we knew gays and we knew couples who were together but couldn't marry, and it was really immediate for us, and she has then been part of school discussions and also personal discussions about that issue, and now she has friends that are gay, so that was very immediate. But somehow the gay rights discussion is a neighbor to feminism and gender. I mean, it's part of a larger conversation about gender and so it's maybe adjacent to feminism in a way that maybe the racial struggles didn't seem to be. I'm just thinking aloud but those things seem more obviously related and maybe that's another reason for the fluidity of us

⁶⁸ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

reflecting on ourselves and having those conversations in connection to what's happening politically.⁶⁹

Her experiences in raising a daughter and a son enabled her, perhaps for the first time in her life, to articulate her own feminist stance and recognize the work that lies ahead in the struggle for equality, an equality that is inclusive of gays, lesbians, and people of color instead of a white heterosexual feminism tailored for women of a specific class.

Yeah, I think if anything I am—again, for someone who is not fundamentally, not by personality, an activist, I think I am as close—I may be becoming for the first time an actual feminist. There's a real sense of alarm that I've never felt so immediately in my life, given our president and the things that have been captured, his treatment of women, the whole election campaign and the nastiness. I look back—I mean, again, I've had many, many things like this in my life, where I look back and I think, how could I have been so complacent? I thought the world had taken care of this problem and it was all tucked away, and I am utterly shocked that I could have thought that because it's so clear today that we've got—the battle continues, that women in the public sphere, women in politics—I don't know what I need to do about it but I'm feeling urgency that I've never felt before.

I'm not a marcher but I marched in the women's march. I don't know what good it did. It was all a big feel-good exercise here in San Francisco, but you know, I have no doubt in my mind that work needs to be done to talk about how women are—about issues of pay. I mean, here in Silicon Valley also, it's clear here there are issues. The whole equal pay thing hasn't been put to bed, and as a teacher, I think about the labor issues around professions that are sort of feminine work or feminized work, not that community college teaching is necessarily one of those but anyway, I'm able to look around my world and see real places and real evidence of problems that need to be fixed, and I don't know if I was aware of them before, sadly.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

⁷⁰ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

And despite her growing sense of alarm at the progress that hasn't been made or has at least been temporarily hampered by the current political climate in the US, she feels hopeful for her daughter's prospects as a woman making her way in the world, in large part because the necessary conversations are taking place, creating a greater awareness than either Ghislaine or Elinor had at that age.

I am not yet the parent who sort of despairs, like, I don't know what kind of world—I mean, I worry about the world that my kids will go into but I don't worry about Ella as a woman. I think it's clear that there's more work to be done. It's clear that she's going to go into a world where we have to keep pushing for all kinds of gender equality and asking what that means and what it looks like, but it seems if she knows and is able to talk about those dangers. I think it's the same world. It's just whether we acknowledge or don't acknowledge what's happening. It's a hostile climate under Trump, for sure; there's a backlash and an element of racial and sexist backlash right now that is worrisome, but I don't—I think people will fight and better to know it and face it. Total environmental collapse or nuclear war worry me more when I think about her future than cultural forces, although there are times when I wonder whether culturally the US is in a kind of disintegrative period. But for the most part I don't day-to-day think, Oh my God, she's going to have it so much worse than I did. That's not how I think in terms of cultural factors. I think there'll be tough things, there'll be inequality, she'll know or she'll learn. She and her generation will do what they need to do, I hope. I'm counting on them.⁷¹

⁷¹ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ella

Ghislaine's daughter, my niece Ella Moore, was born in 2001 in San Francisco, where she has lived all her life with her mother, father, and younger brother. She is a sixteen-year-old high school junior and has been attending the same private, bilingual school, the French American School, since she was five years old (International High School, where she is currently enrolled, is the high school extension of the French American school). She described San Francisco as a cool place to live, a politically liberal and fairly diverse city.⁷² By most standards her family would be considered upper middle class though, as her mother Ghislaine pointed out, in a city so costly and with Ella and her brother attending an expensive private school on scholarship aid, their socioeconomic status is still somewhat lower than that of other families in her peer group.⁷³

The era of Ella's childhood and adolescence so far has been marked by several nationwide political movements, primarily the LTBTQ movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and one of the most divisive and controversial presidential elections and subsequent presidencies in American history. Human communications have evolved beyond print journalism, e-mail, and the cell phone to include smart phones and a vast array of social media websites. Several nationwide rape and sexual assault scandals have gained nationwide attention and sparked conversations and debates about gender

⁷² Ella Mazé interview ADD FULL SOURCE

⁷³ Ghislaine Mazé interview

inequality. Some of this discourse, like the Twitter feed #MeToo—a reaction to recent accusations of serial sexual harassment on the part of Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein—take place exclusively on social media platforms.⁷⁴

Ella has always had friends,, and she and her friend circle, some of whom she has been close to since early childhood, spend a great deal of time on social media. But Ella recalled that her early conversations about gender and feminism began at home, and that those early beginnings were rocky due to a lack of ability to articulate what she was feeling and thinking.

I guess it was probably around when I entered high school, maybe a little bit earlier. Yeah, probably late middle school, eighth grade or something, and I guess it was just kind of through, like, Internet culture. I don't know if it was something that personally irked me or if I read something about experiences that other people had had. I know that my friends and I have continued to care [about] and explore feminism online and offline since then.... I guess first it was mostly [talked about] to my family, but at the time I didn't really know how to say it well, so the talks didn't really always go so well. (laughs) Partly because I would be irritated by everything. I'd think that everything was a sexist attack or a sexist remark, and sometimes things weren't. And I didn't know how to phrase things; I didn't know how to talk about what irritated me. I still don't all the time. (laughs)

Finding the right words is an ongoing process and one that was aided by the inclusion of her friends in the conversation. Her friend group is entirely female, two-thirds white, and also includes a Chinese American, a half-white, half Malaysian-Chinese American, and an African American. They are all upper-middle or upper class young women, and all of them attend the same school. At an age when her mother and grandmother were barely cognizant of gender or feminist-related discourse, Ella was already exploring these

⁷⁴ Sandee LaMotte, "How #MeToo Could Move from Social Campaign to Social Change," CNN Breaking News, accessed October 31, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/30/health/metoo-legacy/index.html>.

themes vocally, initially with her family and then with her friends, particularly in relation to the Japanese anime which several of them were interested in at the time.⁷⁵

I guess the next phase was to take it to my friends. So, because we're of the same generation and kind of have a similar culture in terms of how we interact and deal with things like sexism, we kind of mostly agree on things. And yeah, sometimes I interact with people, again, online who I know less well than my friends but that's kind of rare and more recent.... I think I'm able to articulate things partly because we basically agreed on everything, so there wasn't—we didn't really get angry. The words that we used were the same words that everyone else knew and used, so it was just kind of easier to say, to articulate.

At the time, early high school or late middle school, my friends and I were watching a lot of anime (laughs) and there's a lot of, you know, sexism embedded in that and then also a lot of feminism, I guess—less. But we were kind of—we were trying to establish first of all what it was to be a woman whose—it was mostly about sexual expression, I guess, and what it is to be expressing yourself sexually as a means of being free or because you are forced to, so we were kind of trying to figure out where the lines were, what those things meant.... There's this book that I had for a while called *Fan Girl's Guide to the Galaxy* and it was a bunch of funny anecdotes about being a girl who's in fandoms that are predominantly male, and one of things that the author brought up was that there's a difference between, say, if you have a female character who's given a power, there's a difference between her being told that to use her power she has to be sexy or her deciding that she, separately from her power, wants to be sexy. Like a lot of times, female strength is tied either to sacrificing her femininity or being totally oversexualized.⁷⁶

Around the same time, these same themes made their way into her classrooms as topics of discussion or as the focus of school projects. Ella is pursuing an International Baccalaureate degree which included a comprehensive exam in her freshman year called a *brevet*. In addition to various written components, the exam also included an oral examination on an original, student-created art project. Ella and several of her friends incorporated feminist themes into their projects, partly inspired by their own

⁷⁵ Moore interview

⁷⁶ Moore interview

conversations and partly because issues of gender identity and civil rights were being explored in the school curriculum. Ella's piece was a mixed media collage combining mutilated and manipulated images of magazine models juxtaposed with images of famous historical women like Susan B. Anthony and Marie Curie, women who, Ella said, "accomplished things outside—that have nothing to do with their bodies, intellectual things. So it's sort of a comment about how women's bodies today, and actually forever, are more important than their intellectual capacities."⁷⁷

There's one project in particular that I did that was very connected to feminism and that was for my brevet. I did an art piece and that was entirely—I mean I had help from my teachers in coming up with how to execute it, obviously, but I was the one who came up with that idea. But a lot of our teachers do sort of bring up occasionally different—you know, if we're reading a book and there's a phrase that's either a little bit out of date and not the best representation of women, then our teachers will tell us to comment on it or they'll comment on it themselves. Actually, this year my French class's entire theme is being a woman and finding a voice.... So yeah, that's pretty cool. It's just a French literature class. That was the teacher who decided to do that. So it comes up quite a bit in discussions, sometimes brought on by the teachers and sometimes by the students, partly just because of the school that I go to. We talk a lot—in our English class we had a section on the texts from the civil rights movement, so we talk a lot about different rights movements and different social justice issues that exist today and that have existed for a long time. I don't really know—I don't really have friends at other schools, so I don't really know what they're talking about except at International. I know my one friends did something where she recreated a photo of her grandma on herself, so she put on her clothes and the makeup and it was—I think she has a real connection to her grandmother and her family culture, so it was partly that and it was also about the female—female culture, sort of passing down memories and history through the women. And then last year, my friend in our art class did a project—we did a project on body parts, a body part. We had to choose a part of a body and do our own research and make a piece about our research, or something. So this girl, her body part was breasts, so she made two breasts and put little Instagram logos of the nipples, sort of in a similar statement to my

⁷⁷ Moore interview

piece about how social media has made objectification easier and for the anonymity of the Internet, I think.⁷⁸

Ella and her friend circle have developed fairly clear views on womanhood and seem to have some formidable tools at their disposal for analyzing gender dynamics and expectations, a knowledge informed not only by close examination of their own lived experiences but also those of others outside of their environment and culture. They know their history, both the history of women and the history of multiple civil rights struggles which, for them, are not mutually exclusive but complimentary and linked by a common desire for equality. They are immersed in these conversations amongst themselves, in the classroom, in their school work, and are encouraged by their teachers. They recognize the importance of an inclusive discourse that encompasses more than their own individual experiences and these discussions also inspire action.

Yeah, I mean, I guess—so the thing is that all of my friends are—basically all of my friends who I get into these discussions with are women, so the feminism discussion, we still have it a lot and it still comes up but for the most part we agree and we have kind of similar experiences. So bringing in, like, racial elements and gay rights elements sort of makes the discussion more diverse, I guess. Since some of my friends are people of color, some of my friends are gay, it makes it more—I guess it just makes it more diverse.... I mean, it's all super related. If one group is fighting for themselves then they have—I mean, you can't just claim that only this one group—in the same way that you can't claim that the group that currently has power is the only group that should have power; you can't claim that any of the other groups that don't are the only groups that should have power. If you're saying that power is for everyone, then power is for everyone....

We talk about a lot of stuff.... One of my friends—we have—it was founded last year. My friend is one of the founders. We have something called the Diversity Council and the diversity discussion club. So the Diversity Council is just—you apply and you're interviewed and the original members of the council—I mean right now I can't really generalize how it works because it's been a year and a half, but basically they organize discussions in our homerooms, they do assemblies. I've

⁷⁸ Moore interview.

heard that it's not going to happen this year but last year they had something call the Day of Action, which was an entire day where we had speakers come who talked to us about different sort of issues around diversity, and then we had discussion groups in the afternoon. And the discussion group that I was in was about feminism, and I think there were probably about twenty of us in the room, and there were two boys, one of which was put there because he didn't sign up for a different group on time so he was just put there. (laughs) Neither of them participated in the discussion very much. So in that discussion we talked about—well actually, we tried first to try to define what feminism was and it was kind of different for everybody, what it meant. Some people said it was fighting for women's rights, some people said it was establishing equal rights across the sexes, some people said it was just fighting for equality in general. And then we talked a lot about trans [transgender] women.... Well, it started out with their situation in general and then we started to talk about how they fit into feminism and eventually I think we said that, you know, since it's not—it's the identification as female ultimately that puts someone at a disadvantage; it's not really just physical traits of the female person. So you know, no matter what, if you identify as female, you're at a disadvantage. Of course trans women have other battles to fight than just as a woman.

Contrast this account of Ella and her peer's articulate engagement with issues of equality and social justice with the common running complaint lodged against the millennial generation (a category without a fixed age range but for which the date-of-birth cutoff is generally accepted to be the early 2000s)—that they are selfish, lazy, and media-obsessed.⁷⁹ These complaints have surfaced frequently in journalism in the past several years and have created a growing concern that the youth of today are heading towards disastrous adulthoods, a complaint which, it is worth noting, is not particularly new. The older generation is often righteously and vocally despairing of the younger generation's deficiencies. If you Google *millennials*, it certainly seems that most of the articles that immediately pop up are attacks on that generation's moral fiber and potential for productive engagement with society. Take, as just one example among many, the

⁷⁹ Joel Stein and Josh Sanburn, "The New Greatest Generation," *Time*, May 20, 2013, 26.

scathing *Time* article published in 2013 which provides a barrage of statistics as proof of the moral degeneracy of the millennial set.

The incidence of narcissistic personality disorder is nearly three times as high for people in their 20s as for the generation that's now 65 or older, according to the National Institutes of Health; 58% more college students scored higher on a narcissism scale in 2009 than in 1982. Millennials got so many participation trophies growing up that a recent study showed that 40% believe they should be promoted every two years, regardless of performance. They are fame-obsessed: three times as many middle school girls want to grow up to be a personal assistant to a famous person as want to be a Senator, according to a 2007 survey; four times as many would pick the assistant job over CEO of a major corporation. They're so convinced of their own greatness that the National Study of Youth and Religion found the guiding morality of 60% of millennials in any situation is that they'll just be able to feel what's right. Their development is stunted: more people ages 18 to 29 live with their parents than with a spouse, according to the 2012 Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults. And they are lazy. In 1992, the nonprofit Families and Work Institute reported that 80% of people under 23 wanted to one day have a job with greater responsibility; 10 years later, only 60% did.

Joel Stein, the article's lead author, bemoans this uptick in unproductive narcissism and bolsters his assertions with contributions from respected academics who have weighed the millennial generation and found them wanting. According to him, the blame lies partly with a movement in the seventies to actively boost the self-esteem of teenagers, which led, unintentionally, to a me-focused youth culture that possesses an overblown sense of self-worth and cares nothing for sociopolitical engagement. That, and an exorbitant amount of time spent conversing with peers on their smartphones, have shrunk the millennial worldview down exclusively to that of the individual.

They have less civic engagement and lower political participation than any previous group. This is a generation that would have made Walt Whitman wonder if maybe they should try singing a song of someone else. It turns out that self-esteem is great for getting a job or hooking up at a bar but not so great for keeping a job or a relationship. "It was an honest mistake," says Roy Baumeister, a psychology professor at Florida State University and the editor of *Self-Esteem: The Puzzle of Low Self-Regard*.

“The early findings showed that, indeed, kids with high self-esteem did better in school and were less likely to be in various kinds of trouble. It's just that we've learned later that self-esteem is a result, not a cause.” The problem is that when people try to boost self-esteem, they accidentally boost narcissism instead... Now that cell phones allow kids to socialize at every hour--they send and receive an average of 88 texts a day, according to Pew--they're living under the constant influence of their friends. “Peer pressure is anti-intellectual. It is anti-historical. It is anti-eloquence,” says Mark Bauerlein, an English professor at Emory, who wrote *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)*.

This dire picture of millennials is painted with an oversized brush and, more insidiously, what seems to be a basic misunderstanding of generational social paradigms. Older authors—older academics included—are assessing millennials based on outdated social models, so that they fail to understand that the younger generation might be much better at navigating—and judging—media and online social platforms than their predecessors give them credit for. Just as Amy Aronson posits that feminists often underestimate young women’s ability to critically navigate the cacophony of differing values presented in women’s magazines (and perhaps here we can extend the category of women’s magazines to include more contemporary forms of popular social media and online content); so, too, can they navigate the demands of a more active and digitized social and intellectual life.⁸⁰ The very nature of millennial engagement in political and social justice discussions may be misinterpreted by the older generation as nothing more than a lot of time wasted in surfing the Internet and texting when in fact, it is through these channels that they are able not only to better articulate their own developing worldviews but also to better inform those views by connecting with broader and more diverse groups and discussions than people who grew up pre-Internet can comprehend. Ella’s description of

⁸⁰ Aronson, “Still Reading,” 38

her own evolving engagement with social media presents this flip side of the coin, a side that may only become visible by actually *talking* to millennials.

I mean, it's kind of—at that point [when Ella and her friends began discussing feminist issues] I think it was mostly just repeating other people's rhetoric, stuff we found online, on blogs especially...blogs that were about anime on Tumblr. More recently, I'd say, we've started to critique the things that we find online with our own personal resources and come up with our own words and dialog, but at that point it was mostly just repeating what we'd heard or read....

We still spend a lot of time on social media, probably now more than we did then. We still—all of us—more of us now—there's more of us now and we all spend more time on Tumblr. We've moved on from anime blogs but we're still on Tumblr. Some of my friends spend a lot of time on Instagram and then Snapchat, Twitter. I don't think any of my friends use Facebook. Tumblr, I think, is appealing because a lot of us like art or writing and Tumblr is blogs; it's not just sort of a personal photo book. Kind of like Instagram is just you have photos of your life and you talk about how great you are. On Tumblr, there's a little bit less—I mean, at least the way that I use it and my friends use it, it's more anonymous and it's more about the things you like and less about your life.

Even bell hooks expresses concern over the shift of focus in popular feminism from collective group movements and advocacy for broad political and social reform to a much more individualized and romantic notion of personal freedom. Hooks and many other feminist scholars and activists see this shift as harmful and obstructive to the goal of achieving gender equality. As hooks sees it, the feminist movement was impeded “when women internalized the idea that describing their own woe was synonymous with developing a critical political consciousness.”⁸¹ But when I asked Ella to comment on these criticisms of her generation, her reply demonstrates not only her awareness of such criticism but also the possibility that at least some of the conclusions being drawn about her generation may be hitting wide of the mark. Ella is reading and writing more than her

⁸¹ hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 25, 26

mother or grandmother before her. She participates in a school radio program and supplements her knowledge of current events not just from *Buzzfeed* and social media but also by reading the *Economist*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Washington Post*.⁸²

I mean...in general there's the criticism that my generation is super selfish because we have so much that we can just do, like, you know, there's no limits to what we can do on our phones and what we can publish on our phones. But I feel like also, like, it gives—from what I can see, it enables these larger issues to become more personal. Like you know, with the #MeToo thing, it's an enormous Twitter movement and everyone's just sharing personal stories but because it's stories that actually happened, it's so powerful because it's not just like, I don't know, sexism is real and sexual harassment happens. It's like this is a thing that, this exactly, what I'm telling you right now, has happened to me and there are thousands, millions of other women who have gone through similar things. I mean, I guess people are, like, well, if this works for me it works for me.... Also the thing, like, if it works for me it works for me, I definitely see that and I think it's cool. Like, my friends and I talk a lot about labels and what good do they do versus what bad do they do, and it's kind of like if you want to have a label, if you want to label your sexual orientation, if you want to label your political view, like, go ahead. But, like, for me personally, I don't know, I don't really—labels confuse me. (laughs) They stress me out.⁸³

This is not the voice of a self-obsessed narcissist unaware and uncaring of the wider world, nor is it the voice of a young woman who blindly consumes the content she pursues online and elsewhere. Her analysis of a Pantene shampoo commercial, one which used a critique of gender discrimination in the workplace to sell their product and which implied that gorgeous, glossy hair garners workplace respect, further demonstrated her ability to identify the mixed messages being presented in popular media so much more profoundly than that of previous generations of women in her family.

⁸² Moore interview.

⁸³ Moore interview.

I mean, if you think about it, advertisements—because I did kind of think, like, well, it’s an ad and kind of a weird way to get a message, get the thing that you want. But an ad is made, for the most part, to sell as effectively as possible whatever it is that’s trying to be sold to whoever they’re trying to sell it to. So if the most effective way to sell something is to show the misogyny that exists in the workplace and they’re trying to empower women, then it means that there’s a enough money involved and enough attention being given to sexism in the workplace, like, in general, so I don’t know, I think that while ads might not be the most nuanced at really getting the rallying call across, it’s good that these things are being shown in ads.

But, as Ella’s mother Ghislaine pointed out in her interview, “it’s still the same world,” and contrary to some public opinion, Ella still wrestles with the same issues around lack of self-esteem that her mother and grandmother struggled with, even as she is able to more sagely navigate and articulate the pluralistic and contradictory nature of popular media and advertising.⁸⁴ The beauty ideal for many young American women is still that of Ghislaine’s adolescence—to have “as little body as possible.”⁸⁵ These struggles are integral to young adulthood and just as heavily influenced by cultural values and popular representations of femininity and gender as they ever were. The ripping tension described by Ella’s grandmother Elinor between her desire to embody the principles she adhered to and the desire to be beautiful, to be loved, to be not alone, are echoed in Ella’s account of her own personal development.

Yeah, definitely, because it’s, like, you just love yourself and someone will love you, but you know, sometimes you just can’t. Sometimes you feel, like, Well, I would love myself if I was just a little bit thinner or if I was just a little bit taller. And also, besides just, like, appearance, I definitely feel like I’ve internalized certain things about what to expect from my life or what to expect from a partner and stuff like that that I actively combat. You know, like certain romantic thingies—romantic clichés I guess, that are kind of like a man always paying or opening a door for a woman, stuff that’s sort of like chivalry that is sort of done

⁸⁴ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

⁸⁵ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

because a woman can't take care of herself unless she's protected that I don't really like. I don't really like that that's how I'm thought of, that I'm thought of to be weaker and smaller, but on the other hand, it seems kind of romantic to me and I'm not actually opposed to that....

In terms of how I look, fashion is not really my number-one priority. There's more—I guess in terms of how I look, it's more of how I look without the makeup and the fashion that I'm concerned about, that occupy my brain most of the time, and body stuff...I feel like...I can look at it [media representations of beauty] with a more critical lens, but I think my initial reaction to seeing models and stuff, like even when I'm watching a movie or a music video or something, I try and see a girl—I try and see the main female sideways so that I can see how thick her waist or her legs are because I still am really insecure about those things. And like, I don't know, like, who cares...but on the other hand, I care. (laughs)⁸⁶

For Ella, the struggles to internalize her own principles regarding gender and self-worth are clearly as urgent, as occupying, and as fraught as they ever were for previous generations. Despite the “talk about how great you are” culture of some social media websites Ella described, she herself is not on a big campaign of self-promotion and is actively struggling with self-acceptance.⁸⁷ The difference, here again, is her remarkable ability to talk about it, write about it, devote school projects to it, externalize what preoccupies her so much internally. Having the words to do so—or at least searching for the right words—has, so far for her, made all the difference.

Yeah, I mean one thing is that I spend a lot of time—in kind of a selfish way I spend a lot of time thinking about myself. And when I find something—when I have a reaction to something I've read or something makes me uncomfortable or I think some things—I like to, like, follow that, to not just sort of let it be there and, I don't know, words are just kind of the best way to sort of explore what it is that you're feeling. And I think it's just because I don't want to be confused. I want to know things. And of course there are probably times when the words that I come up with are actually—they're distorting what I'm actually feeling or thinking or trying to say, but I think words—if words are what—a lot of times if words are

⁸⁶ Moore interview.

⁸⁷ Moore interview.

what I'm reacting to, what make me feel limited or upset or unfree and not happy, then I should be able to come up with—reply—in words.⁸⁸

And she isn't just talking; she is listening, too. She listens to the stories of the women contributing to #MeToo. She listens to the voices of the gay and civil rights movements. She listens to her friends when they articulate their own struggles with identity or racism. Her Asian-American friends both struggle against being labeled as generically "Asian American" when one of them values equally her white-Jewish heritage and the other has step-siblings and a stepfather who are assumed not to be her family because they are white. She has a friend who has yet to come out as gay to her parents because she is aware of the disappointment she might cause. Ella herself has already encountered sexist behavior in the form of being cat-called or hit on by men on the city streets (her response, "Oh, I'm here waiting for my mom because I'm a child. Leave me alone," has served her well so far).⁸⁹ She is aware of her own struggles in the context of wider sociopolitical struggles, and she is engaged in the necessary discourse that links the individual to the larger community. She is developing a feminist stance towards issues of gender equality and broader social justice issues and is comfortable talking about feminism, even though it still carries with it a lingering misconception of hateful, close-minded, misguided militancy.

The thing is, like, some people are, like, oh, feminazis, trying to take over the world. First of all—okay, I'm sorry, I'm going to rant here a little bit. Feminists and women who—like comparing feminists to Nazis is ridiculous. As far as I know, we have not killed anyone or at least not horribly tortured and murdered men just because they're men. Like, you know, some women might feel more angry and might have experienced things that made them hate men more or, like, systematic sexism more, but

⁸⁸ Moore interview.

⁸⁹ Moore interview.

I don't know, I feel like feminism is whatever you want it to be, kind of. So yeah, I'm a feminist.⁹⁰

And what does she want feminism to be?

Oh God, just like everyone—for girls to not have to think—because you know, there are certain things like appearance and expectations that you can't really ever get rid of. Like, I mean, I'm sure boys worry about their appearance, too. But girls think things like, oh, I don't know if I'll be able to get this job because my competitors have the same...qualifications as I do but they're male. Or like, I don't want to go outside to get groceries right now even though I need to, like, make dinner because it's nine [at night]...and I don't have a car [referencing her personal safety]. Or just, you know...I like girls. I want them to be happy and not have to feel that their happiness is worth less than their bodies or...that they're worth less than someone else just because of their gender.⁹¹

As for feeling optimistic about her own prospects and those of her fellow womankind,

I mean, I think I'm hopeful. Like, then again, you know, I think things are good and then something like the Harvey Weinstein thing happens and you're like, oh, I guess—I guess we're not where I thought I was or I guess some people are still...these things still happen to some people. And you know, like, we're never—bad things happen to, like, you know, dudes too. But...especially because—and I've never been to Korea; I don't really know very many Koreans. But from what I've seen of the Korean media that I've consumed, they're a little—a lot—behind in terms of girls who—it's still okay to criticize a girl's weight or there are shows where they'll praise a girl for how thin—they'll measure a girl's waist and then praise her and talk about how great she is for—and there's so many songs. One, like, trope of K-pop [a genre of Korean pop music] songs is talking about how great you are and for male K-pop stars, a lot of those are, like, oh, I make so much more money than you or, like, I work so much harder than you. For girls it's like, I'm so much sexier than you. I can wear heels and look so much better than you. And it's, like, okay, girls can also be better than—you can flaunt yourself in other ways besides just your appearance. So, I mean, I guess I'm hopeful because at least it's out there. At least there are people who aren't okay with it and who are willing to call people out or just not say it in the first place. (laughs) But I still feel a little wary.⁹²

⁹⁰ Moore interview.

⁹¹ Moore interview.

⁹² Moore interview.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

It is this wariness on Ella's part, maybe more than anything else, which indicates that as she moves forward in the world, she may be better armed against discrimination, more aware of injustice, more sympathetic to the struggles of others, and more vigilant in confronting the complex questions of gender and civil rights as a whole than her mother or grandmother before her. Ella was, in many ways, the inspiration for this oral history investigation, because for some time now she has stood out in the Mazé-Moore family as being particularly articulate, engaged, and socially responsible. At sixteen years old, she is developing a feminist stance that her mother and grandmother claimed to have discovered for themselves as late as yesterday. In short, she seems to be proof of progress. To the women in her family, that progress is a beacon of hope that things do, in fact, get better, a hope which feels especially crucial now when the US is in a political period which Ghislaine described as "disintegrative."⁹³ One need only reflect on the myriad racist and misogynist utterances of the current US president to understand why for some, hope is currently in short supply.

Yet there are so many things the narratives of Ella and the Mazé women cannot do to forward feminist inquiry and social progress. The experiences of these three women cannot be applied universally to all womankind. Their experiences and the struggles they faced are specific to their situated lives, their class, their race, their family culture, their

⁹³ Ghislaine Mazé interview.

personalities. In feminism, as in life, there are very few universals on which to hang a complete philosophy, dogma, diagnosis, or panacea. It cannot be done here and I would never attempt it. To do so undermines the very thing that makes American feminism so wonderful and yet so maddeningly hard to pin down—its chorus of diverse and sometimes contradictory voices. Bell hooks and others have expressed concern at the difficulty of engendering a sense of solidarity amongst a vastly diverse population of American women for whom there is no monolithic shared female experience.⁹⁴ As Ella said herself, feminism has come to mean something a little different to every person depending on her circumstances—a potentially gratifying approach in terms of freedom and self-expression but perhaps problematic when a certain amount of en masse agreement is needed in order to effect real sociopolitical change.⁹⁵

The highly individualistic nature of contemporary feminism also impacts the language used in relation to it, language which simultaneously attempts to combine a self-interested personal stance and a broader, more inclusive perspective. As Nathan Heller pointed out in his *New Yorker* article, “Trump, the University of Chicago, and the Collapse of Public Language,” these two approaches to ideological language often result in a personal declaration that leads nowhere. In attempting to incorporate myriad individuals into a broader concept of feminism, one encounters a path fraught with the pitfalls of generalization, appropriation, and misrepresentation of all kinds. The result? According to Heller, “Many of us quietly give up: our self-description becomes our identity, and our community is the people who appear to understand our language, more

⁹⁴ hooks, 59

⁹⁵ Moore interview

or less, the way we do.”⁹⁶ Certainly Ella and her peers share similar worldviews and similar language with which to describe it. But Ella does not seem to be cocooning herself among like-minded people and ideas, nor is she engaging in an insulating bout of self-celebratory naval-gazing and complacency. On the contrary, she claims that she and her peers intentionally attempt to broaden their discussions to include those outside their sphere of experience and understanding to make things more interesting, to widen their scope, to not be confused.⁹⁷ Where these discussions will lead, it is early days yet and difficult to say. Will something like The Day of Action at Ella’s school help create activists and leaders for social change, or will it sputter out at conversation’s end? Certainly, all this talk must lead somewhere. At the very least, it may usher in not only greater self-awareness but also empathy and connectedness with others beyond one’s comfort zone. It could help create more conscientious people who move through the world questioning and challenging the gender dynamics they encounter instead of blindly or, perhaps worse, resignedly, accepting them.

The power of the personal narrative is one that brings the experience of the individual to the wider world and offers a window into a life which might otherwise go largely unexamined or unnoticed. An oral history offers an in-depth look at the many ways in which a person’s situation, identity, and experiences intersect with their attitudes toward gender and feminism in ways that broader group studies, statistics, or sociological surveys cannot. The voice of the individual engenders empathy for issues such as sexual

⁹⁶ Nathan Heller. “Trump, the University of Chicago, and the Collapse of Public Language,” *The New Yorker*, September 1, 2016.

⁹⁷ Moore interview

assault and racial discrimination in ways that media journalism and academic theory may not. For Ella, the importance of the #MeToo Twitter campaign was in the reality of the participant's lived experiences. They described things that actually happened to them, in their own words. For Elinor, editing oral history articles on LGBTQ issues brought home to her the real anguish members of that community suffered in a way that resonated more deeply and caused her to take notice. For Ghislaine, listening to her own daughter articulate the journey into womanhood awoke in her a level of real engagement with gender issues that her own life experience had not previously inspired.

Personal narrative will never replace theory, and bell hooks has expressed concern that women of color, if allowed to speak at all, are often limited exclusively to commenting on their own lives and experiences. Certainly in academia, just as in all other professional and social communities, there must be room and support for a diverse group of contributing voices whose work will be read and taken seriously by the academy and the world outside of scholarly discourse.⁹⁸ But the lived experience of the individual has the capacity to breathe life into debates around structural oppression. It can put a face and an emotive power behind policy, education, and social reform. The very act of articulation can lead the owner of that contributing voice to a greater sense of self-awareness and purpose.

If including diversity initiatives and feminist discourse in Ella's curriculum has helped her to become more self-aware and socially conscious, how can we extend that beyond the walls of her private school and the sphere of her politically progressive home city? "If power is for everybody, then power is for everybody," and opportunities to gain

⁹⁸ hooks, 32

that power, even if they are not the same as those which empowered Ella, then steps must be taken to make them widely available.⁹⁹ We can but try. If gender discussions at home helped Ella formulate and test out her early worldview and feminist stance, then so might other young people when given the chance. How can we better encourage parents to relate to and facilitate those discussions? If hearing personal stories helped Ella relate to issues beyond her life experience, how can we include more individual narratives in public and academic discourse? Perhaps we need to hear directly from more and diverse young people. In Ella's own words, "There's...just so many quotes dismissing what young people think. Like, we haven't experienced a lot but come on, we're worth something."¹⁰⁰

In the case of Elinor and Ghislaine, it is also what is lacking in their narrative that is most telling, most demanding of further inquiry. Their lack of awareness and engagement as young women and the ways in which they groped or stumbled their way towards a late-blooming feminist awakening raise questions about how the next generations can do better and how the older generations can facilitate that. In the case of all three women, none of their stories end here. All three women continue to search for the right words and the actions with which to reinforce them. Their narratives conclude not with the finite stability of certitude but with the hope and caution of uncertainty. They end with an active question mark. The goal, now as always, is to continue exploring what those questions are and how, as individuals who make up a potentially powerful collective voice, they can best be answered.

⁹⁹ Ella Moore interview

¹⁰⁰ Moore interview

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