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FINAL AUTHOR VERSION

Title: Hopeful, Harmless, and Heroic: Figuring the Girl Activist as Global Savior

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Abstract: There has been a notable increase in the public visibility of girl activists in the past ten years. This paper analyzes media narratives about several individual girl activists to highlight key components of the newly desirable figure of the girl activist. After tracing the expansion of “girl power” discourses from an emphasis on individual empowerment to the invocation of girls as global saviors, it argues that girls are particularly desirable figures for public consumption because the encoding of girls as symbols of hope helps to resolve public anxieties about the future, while their more radical political views are managed through girlhood’s association with harmlessness. Ultimately, the figure of the hopeful and harmless girl activist hero is simultaneously inspirational and demobilizing.

Keywords: figuration; Girl Effect; girl power discourses; political co-optation

Ten years ago I wrote that girl activists were largely invisible in both academic literature and public discourse. I noted that “finding documentation of their stories, their organizations, and their words is not easy; they are rarely considered and written about as significant political actors. They appear, but they do not speak” (AUTHOR, YEAR). Further, girl activists were “not the kind of empowered girls usually celebrated by the media.” At that time, these were easily defensible positions based on a thorough assessment of the field. Now, in 2019, these statements are clearly no longer true. In addition to a substantial growth in the academic literature on girls’ activism (R. N. Brown 2013; L. M. Brown 2016; Cervantes-Soon 2017; Clay 2012; Edell, Brown, and Tolman 2013; Keller 2012; Taft 2011), several teenage girl activists from around the world have become widely recognizable public figures in both traditional and social media contexts, with Greta Thunberg as just the most recent example. Girl activists have rapidly gone from being a present but basically unrecognized political force to celebrated cultural figures.

The past ten years have seen an explosion of stories in major media outlets with titles like “The Dreams of Today’s Teen Girl Activists” (Watson 2018), “Wonder Girls: How Girl-led Activists are Changing the World” (McGrath and Winsor 2017), and “7 Female Activists under 23 who are Changing the World” (Conley 2018). New popular press books are being released on the topic and Google search trends show a steady upward tick in searches for the paired words “girl activist.” Historical girl activists like Claudette Colvin, the fifteen-year-old civil rights activist who first refused to give up a seat on the segregated buses of Birmingham, are also increasingly being recognized for their contributions. In 2010, there were few if any examples of contemporary girl activists who could easily be considered “famous.” Today many adults who

follow political news could name at least a few of these individuals, including figures like Malala Yousafzai, Emma González, and Greta Thunberg.

One possible explanation for this heightened visibility could be that there are substantially more girl activists today than there were in previous decades. While there is no systematic empirical evidence that would allow us to make an accurate comparison across time, girl activists have been active participants and leaders in many social movements since at least the 19th century. They have sometimes organized themselves around the collective identity of girl, as in the Factory Girls' Association striking in the textile mills in New England in the 1830s, or the high school feminist organizations of the 1960s and 1970s (Lovell 2016). More often girls have played important roles in a larger landscape of youth activism, as with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and other civil rights organizations (Robnett 1997; Schweinitz 2011) or high school student organizing for educational justice (Gordon 2010). Further, girls have been active within many intergenerational social movements, including anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggles, LGBTQ and sexual rights activism, and immigrant rights organizing (Taft 2011). In short, girls' activism is not a new phenomenon that has only recently emerged. While there could be a modest increase in the number of girls involved in activism, changes in the political, social, and cultural landscape have made girl activists both more legible and more desirable for media attention and public consumption. The girl activist has become a compelling figure.

Following Claudia Castañeda, I use the concepts of figure and figuration to describe an entity's "appearances in discourses as well as across them" and to "unpack the domains of practice and significance that are built into each figure" (2002: 3). According to Castañeda, a figure is "the simultaneously material and semiotic effect of specific practices. Understood as

figures... particular categories of existence can also be considered in terms of their uses” (3). Each figuration of the girl activist is “the effect of a specific configuration of knowledges, practices, and power” (4). This article explores this figuration through an analysis of English-language news media texts produced between 2011 and 2019 that invoke the idea of girls’ activism as well as news coverage of five girl activists who have each achieved significant public visibility over the past ten years: Camila Vallejo, Malala Yousafzai, Ahed Tamimi, Emma González, and Greta Thunberg. Using multiple databases and search terms, I systematically gathered digital and print news media articles about these five individual girl activists as well as articles that referenced either “girls’ activism” or “girl activists.” I then used inductive thematic coding to search for narrative themes in the discussion of these girls, with a particular focus on how the intersecting dynamics of gender, age, race, and nation play out in the figuration of girl activists. I explore the meanings that circulate around this figure; the public reception or decoding of these representations and the ways that girl activists themselves respond to these narratives about them are beyond the scope of this article.

Girlhood, as a social and cultural category, has multiple associations that make the figure of the girl activist especially desirable in the contemporary context of profound inequality, structural violence, and climate crisis. Specifically, the girl activist savior is defined by her unique combination of hopefulness, harmlessness, and heroism. Through these three mutually constituting elements, the figure of the girl activist functions to symbolically resolve public anxieties about the future. While she is inspiring, her figuration as a global savior also ironically has demobilizing effects. In this way, I argue that her radical potential for transformative social change is ultimately contained.

Girl Power and Girl Effects: Making The Figure of the Girl Activist Legible

In the 1990s, the discourse of girl power primarily emphasized girls' individual abilities to make themselves into empowered subjects. As girls' studies scholar Anita Harris (2004) noted, in a knitting together of neoliberalism and feminism, the figure of the "can-do girl" was defined by her capacities to become successful, unique, autonomous, and responsible for her own well-being. By the mid-2000s, however, girls were increasingly invoked as model citizen-subjects who were not only expected to thrive as empowered self-reliant individuals, but to also uplift their communities and nations (Harris 2004; Taft 2014). For example, in a widely cited speech, then Secretary General of the UN Kofi Annan (2004) stated, "When it comes to solving the problems of the world, I believe in girl power." Girl power, in this second formulation, no longer just indexed a girl's ability to be upwardly mobile, self-made, and confident, but also her power to solve local and global social problems.

The figure of the empowered girl as a source of social progress and community improvement has consistently been racialized, classed, and shaped by geopolitics. While some girls are symbolically excluded from this figuration and instead imagined primarily as "at-risk" (Harris 2004), the contours of this discourse also diverge for differently situated girlhoods. In the Global North, Black girls' critical agency has primarily been treated as a social problem, rather than a strength (Jones 2009; R.N. Brown 2013; Morris 2016), leading to their generalized exclusion from the public figuration of the girl as a community leader (Cox 2015). On the other hand, Latina immigrant girls in the U.S. are frequently called on to play a key role in accomplishing the ideal of assimilation and are explicitly tasked with serving as bridges between migrant families and their contexts (Orellana 2009; Soto 2018). And as Shenila Khoja-Mooli (2018) writes, "Muslim girls are popularly touted as ideal for reforming the extremist tendencies

in Muslim-majority nations” (10). Girls in the Global South have also been homogenized into a “a precarious subject position in which she is simultaneously a universalized victim in need of saving and ‘the answer’ to solving the problems of development and growth” (Moeller 2018: 12). The Nike Foundation, UN agencies, and international development institutions like Plan International produced a discursive and policy framework that “endowed [girls] with the unleashed capacity to ‘save the future of humanity’” (Switzer, Bent, and Endsley 2016: 36).¹ And, while this “Girl Effect apparatus” (Moeller 2018) called on girls in the Global South to uplift their nations through education and personal responsibility, it also invited privileged (white, middle class) girls in the Global North to see themselves as already empowered subjects who live in a post-feminist context and therefore can act as missionary figures who will save girls in the Global South (Bent 2013; Bent and Switzer 2016). In each of these figurations of the girl as a source of social improvement or uplift, the meaning of girl power has been discursively expanded beyond girls’ responsibility for self and family to include responsibility for whole communities, nations, and even the entire world.

The feminist critiques of these interlocking figurations are extensive and important. Multiple scholars have identified how the Girl Effect paradigm in particular invokes colonialist images of third world women and girls as oppressed by their own “cultures,” erases the structures of imperialism and global capitalism that actually produce poverty and inequality, and suggests that the way for girls in the Global South to “save the world” is to go to school, delay childbirth, and become entrepreneurs (Koffman and Gill 2013; Moeller 2018; Switzer 2018). Girls in the Global South are given the message that they personally are responsible for the development of their communities and ending poverty. It is not the job of governments, corporations, or even large organizations: if they just go to school, do not have babies, and work

hard, then all will be well in the world. While these figurations have expanded the messaging around girls' power by saying that girls will be the ones to "solve problems" and "save the world" and "improve their communities," they have done so in a way that ignored collective action, organizing, social movements, and the pursuit of structural change in favor of an emphasis on individualized hard work, education, and a politics of respectability.

The Girl Effect and similar girl power discourses are deeply rooted in neoliberal and colonial logics, but have paradoxically opened up the possibility for the greater legibility of girl activists who resist these logics. If Nike is saying the "revolution will be led by a twelve year old girl," even if they mean she will lead it by going to school, this figuration of the girl as community leader creates an opportunity for more dissident and activist girls to insert themselves into an already existing and widely celebrated public discourse. The repeated emphasis on the girl savior makes room for more critical versions of girls' activism, both in terms of girls' own feminist activist practices (Walters 2018) and the public legibility of the girl activist figure. While girls who directly challenge capitalism, hyper-individualism, and coloniality were almost certainly not the figures that The Girl Effect PR team or other proponents of girls' community leadership envisioned when they developed their slogans about girls' transformative potential, this discursive shift extended the idea of girl power beyond individual girls' personal strength and resilience. These developments in the rhetorics of girl power provided a cultural context in which girls, as a social group, could now be seen as political actors in pursuit of a better world. That new discursive context then allowed for the articulation of even more explicitly political versions of girl power, including versions that called for collective organizing for structural change. In short, this expansion of girl power has helped to make the girl activist a legible figure and continues to inform *how* she is figured.

She's Optimistic Anyway: Figuring Girl Activists as Hopeful

Girl activists are not just increasingly intelligible—they are also distinctively desirable figures because they represent a brighter, better future. Of course, the association between youth and futurity is long-standing (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015). But in the past twenty years this representative role has been increasingly shifted to girls (McRobbie 2000; Harris 2006). Girls are particularly well-positioned to figure as carriers of optimism and hope given that, as Rebecca Solnit argues, “to be hopeful is to take on a different persona, one that might be considered feminine, or childish, or sweet” (Solnit 2004, 16). And girl activists themselves have frequently embraced this association, arguing girls’ socialized stance of hopefulness is one quality that makes them especially suited for activism (Taft 2011).

Contemporary articles about girl activists frequently articulate adults’ hopes that these young people will save them from the nightmare scenarios of climate crisis, profound inequality, and violence that they have created. For example, in a piece in *Slate* about the Parkland student gun control activists, Dalia Lithwick (2018) writes, “I, for one, have found myself humbled to near-silence by these brave teenagers, and not just because they are media savvy and seemingly without fear. They are extraordinary. With each spin of the news cycle, these students are offering a lesson for all of us about what protests can look like, and how we can reimagine social justice, in the Trump era. These kids aren’t naïve. They are just better at this than we are” (Lithwick 2018). Or, Eric Holthaus (2018), on youth climate strikers: “It seems as though fearlessness among teenagers who haven’t yet reached voting age is one symptom of the cultural and environmental anxieties their generation is steeped in ... Combine [the] near-inevitability of radical environmental change with a federal government that holds climate denial as an official

position — and you’ve got a generation that accepts radical political change as the only reasonable option.” Although both of these authors use the gender-neutral framing of “youth” or “teenagers” in these quotes, they, like most representations of contemporary youth activism, focus significant attention on the girls in these movements. These kinds of stories suggest that adults are avidly looking for young people’s leadership, that they are pinning their hopes on the next generation, and that girls are understood to be central to the creation of this better future.

Media coverage of girl activists often features girls talking about their own anxieties about the future and how their activism is a hopeful response to crisis. A profile of Jamie Margolin, the queer Latina founder of This is Zero Hour, notes that “despite her fears, Margolin says she has ‘no choice but to be hopeful.’ ‘If you think there is no hope, then how could you fight this without completely going insane?’” said Margolin. ‘I have no choice but to believe that that somehow we’re going to get through this, because otherwise what are you even fighting for?’” (Keating 2018). An article in *Elle*, titled “The World is Burning: These Girls are Fighting to Save It,” also centers girls as the carriers of optimism. The reporter quotes twelve-year-old US national climate strike organizer Haven Coleman saying, “adults can get depressed and sad when they think about climate change. They're not optimistic about fixing it, because they've seen so many trials and errors. But we haven't seen that, so we're more optimistic” (Minutaglio 2019). A piece on the youth-led Sunrise movement foregrounds this theme by quoting activist Marcella Molhaland: “there has been no better antidote to despair and hopelessness than finding other people who feel as I do and working with them to fix what is breaking our hearts” (Lerner 2019). Much of the coverage of Greta Thunberg also emphasizes her experience of depression and anxiety and the way that activism has been a hopeful response to those feelings.

The use of these quotes from girl activists about overcoming their own fears and finding hope allows the writers to acknowledge a widespread sense of despair and crisis, but then to narratively resolve these troubling negative emotions via the inspiring optimism of teenage girls. This figuration of the girl activist draws on a longer-standing semiotic linkage between girls and hope. It invites readers to also feel optimistic about a brighter future, despite the serious social and ecological problems to which girl activists are demanding we pay attention. We can read about the girl activist's struggles against injustice and violence or hear her speak about the destruction of the planet, and yet still feel positively about the future because she is figured as hopeful. This figuration of the girl activist as a symbol of hope can thus be potentially demobilizing in that it assuages public feelings of concern and returns us to a position of political comfort.

She's Just a Girl: Figuring Girl Activists as Harmless

While the girl activist's figuration as a symbol of hope helps resolve public anxieties about the future through a positive emotional association with optimism, this resolution is only possible because of her simultaneous figuration as harmless. Girl activists are not only drawing attention to social problems, but they also express strong views about the need to change the structures of society, remaking the political and economic context. While hopefulness serves to manage anxiety about the former, the idea that girl activists are "just girls" and therefore ultimately harmless defends against too much consideration of the latter. Figuring the girl activist as harmless contains her politics and keeps the specter of revolutions, uprisings, or a radical transformation of power relations at bay.

Harmlessness, of course, is not equally available to all girls. As many commentators have noted, the media's focus on Greta Thunberg as the voice of youth climate change activism must be understood as tied to her whiteness. There were many girl activists working on climate change before Greta, and many of those were girls of color, including the founders of This is Zero Hour and the Sunrise Movement. While media narratives focus on profiling a few individual girls, there are many other girl activists who are also doing the hard work of social movement organizing, but whose identities and political visions are perhaps more challenging to contain or less desirable for public consumption. Further, while some girls of color, especially Latina and indigenous girls, have begun to get some more attention due to the efforts of many advocates raising this issue, Black girls continue to be largely erased. Much as anti-blackness has marked Black girls more as social problems than social solutions, it also makes it far more difficult for Black girls to be read as harmless. Black girls' rebelliousness, resistance, and anger are perceived as a threat to the social order and are not so readily digestible due to the logics of white supremacy (R.N. Brown 2013; Evans-Winters 2017; Lindsey 2018).

Girl activists' figuration as harmless is simultaneously racialized, gendered, and aged. As Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill (2013) write, girls and women in the Global South are described as "more 'responsible' than their male counterparts and more 'worthy' of investment in a way that reproduces classed and colonial ideas about the deserving or undeserving poor.... they will buy a cow, not alcohol or cigarettes" (98). Girls' imagined responsibility for solving both local and global problems is premised on a racist cultural framework that sees young men of color as inherently violent, gang affiliated, and dangerous (Rios 2011). Further, when young men's potential role in global social change is called into public discourse, they are more often described as a ticking time bomb and a potential threat to stability and order (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015).

This image of the girl as the less dangerous face of contemporary youth resistance undergirds the celebration of the figure of the girl activist. The case of Ahed Tamimi, the seventeen-year-old Palestinian girl activist who was arrested and jailed for eight months for slapping two Israeli soldiers, illustrates this point. Tamimi first captured the world's attention in 2012 in response to viral images of her threatening to punch a soldier who was trying to detain her brother. Both then and in the 2017 incident that led to her arrest, her embodied anger as a small girl with long curly hair was frequently presented as the expression of strong emotions and passion, rather than as truly dangerous or threatening. Supporters talk about how her feelings were a response to the shooting of her cousin that same day: she was emotional, but, as Amnesty International (2018) wrote in their petition for her, "no actual threat to [the soldiers]." And while some small number of sources call her a terrorist, more often her opponents also use her girlhood as a way to diminish the seriousness of her rage, nicknaming her "Shirley Temper" (Underwood 2018). Ahed Tamini, figured as an angry and emotional girl, is thus a more palatable representative of Palestinian resistance than her own brothers and cousins.

Even the most revolutionary girl activists can be made acceptable in the public view by the deep cultural connotations of girls as harmless. The example of Camila Vallejo gives us another opportunity to see this at work, but highlights the role of appearance and sexuality in this process. Vallejo was by far the most visible student leader in the Chilean student uprisings for a free and equitable education system that took place during 2011 and 2012. In 2011, she was voted "Person of the Year" by readers of *The Guardian*, listed in *Time Magazine*'s "People who Mattered" feature, and she continues to appear in online lists of influential young women. Vallejo was and is an active member of the Chilean Communist Party and she explicitly challenges neoliberalism and capitalism in her many speeches and interviews. Despite her views,

she was notably *not* dismissed for being a radical. Instead, her radicalism was largely managed and contained via a media emphasis on her as a young, feminine, and glamorous figure. A *Newsweek* article by Mac Margolis titled “Camila Vallejo: Chile’s Hard Left Heartthrob,” gives a vague quote from Vallejo about wanting to “change the model of development,” but focuses primarily on her appearance and stardom, writing “with soft green eyes, a silver nose ring, and 63,000 fans on Facebook, the Santiago-born student leader would be a better fit on the catwalks than at the barricades” (Margolis 2011). He describes her clothing, her eyes, her expressions, and her physical movement in far more detail than her politics. He encourages us to see her as just a pretty girl, a model who is “better” for our collective gaze than our political and intellectual attention.

An extensive profile in the *New York Times Magazine* written by Francisco Goldman (2012), titled “Camila Vallejo, the World’s Most Glamorous Revolutionary,” repeats this same maneuver. He starts the article by quoting a bartender who supports Vallejo simply because “she’s hot,” goes on to refer to her as a “Botticelli beauty who wears a silver nose ring,” and makes note of tweets and comments from people that talk about either “having a crush” on her, finding her attractive, or wanting her to have their child. He says she was sympathetic because of her “pretty face,” highlights a debate over which student leader is more beautiful, and describes her “languorously kissing her boyfriend.” The article talks some about the movement’s tactics and internal struggles, but we do not learn much about Vallejo’s ideas. Her Communist affiliation is used as an alluring element of her sex appeal and treated as something that has caused her challenges within the movement, but coverage of the actual content of her politics is minimal. Like many Latin American and Latina women and girls in other discursive contexts, Vallejo is reduced to an exotic and passionate sexual object (Garcia 2012; Mendible 2010).

Vallejo's gendered, aged, and racialized identity is thus used in these narratives to encourage readers to acknowledge her activism, but, in the end, to see her as just another pretty face and no real threat to the current social order.

Figuring girl activists as harmless helps to contain the more radical elements of girls' politics. It enables the public to continue to feel positively about the girl activist herself as a hopeful figure of possibility, and to skip over a serious engagement with her demands for collective action and major social change. This is particularly significant for those audiences with various kinds of privilege and power that might be more challenged by girls' transformative visions. As with the emphasis on hopefulness, the figuration of the girl activist as harmless invites us to focus on her, and on our positive feelings about her, rather than larger political, economic, and ecological contexts. Through this figuration, the girl activist can, ironically, be depoliticized and treated as just another inspirational example of an empowered girl, no different from performers, athletes, or other celebrities.

She's Extraordinary: Figuring Girl Activists as Heroes

Hopefulness and harmlessness work together to produce the figure of the girl activist as an easily digestible symbol of a brighter future. They are thus foundational to the third key element in her figuration: heroism. Figuring girl activists as heroes has two components: first, and most centrally, is the narrative that she can and will save the world. Second, she is understood to be able to do this precisely because she is an exceptional individual. As individual girl activists, rooted in collective social movements and struggle, are made into celebrity girl activist figures, they are reimagined as singular heroes whose bravery, dedication, and effort will resolve the social, ecological, economic, and political problems they draw to our attention.

Many accounts of girls' activism explicitly compare girl activists to the girl heroes of contemporary young adult fiction. In March of 2018, an online column in *The Cut* offered readers an image pairing Parkland activist Emma González with the fictional character of Katniss Everdeen, as portrayed by Jennifer Lawrence. Alongside the parallel images, the author quotes a viral tweet that stated, "I'm not sure why people are so surprised that the students are rising up—we've been feeding them a steady diet of dystopian literature showing teens leading the charge for years. We have told teen girls they are empowered. What, you thought it was fiction? It was preparation" (Miller 2018). The idea that girls and young women are the world's heroes, found in countless films and YA novels (Montz, Green-Barteet, and Day 2014), allows for the figuration of the girl activist as *the* solution to social problems. By comparing González to Katniss or talking about other girl activists in the language of heroism, this figuration suggests that these girls will "shoulder the burdens and responsibilities associated with changing the world" (Bent Forthcoming). Having moved through a rhetorical chain from girls can do anything to girls can save the world, we seem to now have arrived at girls *must* save the world. The responsibility for social change thus shifts away from governments and other powerful actors, as well as away from broader public engagement and political activism.

Despite the fact that most of celebrity girl activists are part of larger youth activist communities, they are lauded as exceptional heroes in a public narrative structured by the neoliberal ideals of empowered can-do girlhood and autonomous individualism (L.M. Brown 2016). Shenila Khoja-Moolji (2018a; 2018b) has written extensively about how Malala Yousafzai has been presented by Western media as an exceptional figure in ways that both erase the widespread resistant actions of other girls and women and that forward the colonialist imaginary of Muslims and Pakistan as "backward" and "pre-modern." Yousafzai is described as

“the champion for girls everywhere,” as “uniquely brave,” and “an exceptional girl.” Her uniqueness, as Khoja-Mooli writes, is emphasized in a way that positions her as “a singular force against local customs and cultural elements” (2018b). Figuring Malala as exceptional in this way serves to minimize the political potential of her activism by implying both that other girls and women in Pakistan are *not* fighting for gender equality and by suggesting that the social problem she is confronting is merely a local injustice, rather than a problem tied to broader global structures. While the discourse surrounding Yousafzai is perhaps the clearest example of this exceptionalizing tendency and has the specific gloss of a colonial lens, we see a similar trend in the descriptions of the other celebrity girl activists who are also talked about as remarkable, amazing, and wise beyond their years. When individual girl activists are presented as lone heroes or exceptional figures, activism is made to seem like something distant and unusual, rather than something that thousands of girls around the world are practicing and have been practicing for decades.

Lyn Mikel Brown describes how media narratives create an “economy of the special girl” that turns the messy and complex work of collective activism into marketable images of individual girl activists. They do this by “removing signs of relationships, family stories, cultural background, lived experience,” which allows the girl activists to become “blank screens onto which we can project our hopes and dreams for all girls” (2016, 17-18). My analysis here expands on Brown’s argument to add that the figure of the extraordinary girl activist hero also becomes the carrier of our hopes and dreams for the planet, not just for girls. The heroic girl activist symbolically resolves collective anxieties about the future without necessarily asking us to take action alongside her. The focus on the individual heroic girl creates a narrative emphasis on how much she is doing and can do, all on her own. It obscures the support that she already

has from activist collectives and communities, and allows the watching public to continue to rely on and expect her to save us, rather than to think about what we might each do to further her cause. Again, we see how the current figuration of the girl activist is paradoxically simultaneously inspiring and demobilizing.

Conclusion

Through a potent combination of hopefulness, harmlessness, and heroism, the girl activist is figured in such a way that she and her politics do not generate too much discomfort about the serious changes needed to solve the planet's social, political, and ecological problems. We can appreciate that she is going to "save the world" for us, but also feel comforted by the fact that she is "just a girl." The figure of the girl activist as a hopeful and harmless hero generates positive feelings about the future, assuages anxieties, and, as I have suggested throughout this analysis, can paradoxically function to discourage collective political engagement and action.

But, of course, this figuration is not what actual embodied girl activists want (Taft 2011; L.M. Brown 2016). As Greta Thunberg told a *New York Times* reporter: "It's sometimes annoying when people say, 'Oh you children, you young people are the hope. You will save the world' ... I think it would be helpful if you could help us just a little bit" (Sengupta 2019). Girl activists do not want to be used as figures who symbolically resolve collective fears about living in a world of inequality, injustice, and climate catastrophe. They want others to act with them to transform this world into a better one. Importantly, figures are not immutable and figuration is an ongoing material and symbolic process. Girl activists could, therefore, be re-figured in ways that acknowledge their transformative leadership and support, rather than undermine, their efforts to build collective power and resistance.

¹ As just a few examples of this construction of the girl as global savior, the Nike Foundation’s “Girl Effect” campaigns have offered slogans like “invest in a girl and she’ll do the rest,” or “the revolution will be led by a twelve-year old girl” and “Girl Effect, noun. The unique potential of 600 million adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves and for the world.” (See Bent 2013; Koffman and Gill 2013).

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