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Pinky Swear? We'll be Together Forever: Queering Girlhood

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PINKY SWEAR? WE'LL BE TOGETHER FOREVER: QUEERING GIRLHOOD

By

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE AND PITZER COLLEGE IN PARTIAL

FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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Abstract

Throughout popular culture, friendships between girls are often portrayed as emotionally intimate partnerships. The fact that these relationships are rarely questioned about the possibility for attraction, while encounters between boys and girls often are, demonstrates the hegemony of the heteropatriarchal social order. The prevalence of passionate, partnership-like friendships among girls within mainstream society will be analyzed through a queer lens, positing that common conceptions of girlhood are inherently queer regardless of the presence of attraction. By conducting open-ended, semi-structured interviews, this qualitative research study aims to ask: how do young adults interpret their experiences with closeness in relationships with other girls in childhood? Study findings suggest that respondents interpret their feelings and experiences related to intimate friendships in a myriad of ways, which are impacted by how "queer accepting" their social environment is. Overall, the study highlights the pervasiveness of the elimination of lesbian possibilities from the cultural imagination due to the interaction between heteronormativity and patriarchy and the simultaneously expansive queer possibilities that prevail within girlhood friendships.

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I would like to express my gratitude to the faculty members, peers, and family members who have supported me throughout my time at Scripps College and especially through the development of this thesis project. Thank you to Kevin Williamson for guiding me as an artist over the past few years and for always encouraging me to trust my own intuition and artistic voice. Thank you to Erich Steinman for your unwavering encouragement as I have developed my sociological imagination. Both Professor Williamson and Professor Steinman have been such wonderful academic advisors and have reminded me why I am so fired up about sociology and dance.

I would also like to thank the interview respondents for sharing their insights, passion, and time with me. Their vulnerability and wisdom have contributed profoundly to this study. Lastly, and very importantly, I would like to thank the close friends who have colored my world with joy, fervor, and tenderness since I was a young girl. The, dare I say partnership-like, friendships that I have been so lucky to experience have taught me everything I know about trust and companionship. Thank you to the friends who are still at the center of my world and who have spent countless hours supporting me through this project over meals, at the makerspace, and in the suite– you all are genuinely my muses.

Introduction:

Experiences of girlhood vary immensely along the lines of race, class, cultural background, and an abundance of other social factors. However, stories of girlhood across diverse positionalities often highlight the significance of friendship among girls as they navigate their social environments. Devoted friendships– characterized by qualities associated with romantic partnerships such as companionship, inseparability, and exclusivity– abound within common conceptions of girlhood (Thompson 2006). Images of girls whispering secrets to one another at slumber parties and holding hands on the playground are commonly encountered in popular culture. During the fleeting years of childhood, girls are often encouraged to center their social worlds around their relationships with other girls. While adult women are expected to center their lives around men, due to the patriarchal social order which socializes women to conform to heteronormative roles, girls are commonly depicted spending all of their time attached at the hip to their best friends forever.

The fact that the intimate, partnership-like friendships which prevail among girls are considered normative within heteronormative social environments demonstrates that these relationships do not inherently threaten the heteropatriarchal social order. Instead, heteronormativity and patriarchy intersect to obscure lesbian possibilities from the cultural imagination, construing intimate relationships between girls as an innocent practice ground for heterosexual romantic partnerships (Rich 1980). Additionally, existing scholarship within queer theory posits that children are deemed too young and devoid of agency to fully inhabit a heterosexual identity, so while they are assumed to become straight, they are considered "not-yet-straight" (Brickman 2019). The resulting queer temporality of girlhood provides a container for relationalities between girls which allow them to formulate senses of identity outside of

heteropatriarchal roles. Thus, friendships in girlhood are rife with the potential for queer analysis.

Inspired by the possibility for a queer analysis of girlhood, this qualitative research study investigates how young adults– specifically those who identify girlhood as being a marker of experience in their childhoods– interpret their past friendships with other girls. Due to the ubiquity of close friendships between girls within common conceptions of girlhood, the study seeks to examine the nature of the intimacy that is often fostered within these relationships. In order to analyze the multitude of ways that friendship in girlhood might formulate non-normative senses of identity outside of heteropatriarchal roles, the study asks research participants to reflect on their childhood friendships. Ultimately, the study aims to ask: how do young adults interpret their experiences with closeness in relationships with other girls in childhood?

A. <u>Origins of the Project</u>

Before the conceptualization of the sociological study, the accompanying dance work had already been underway. In the fall of 2023, I began work on a dance project concerning the notion of the inherent queerness of girlhood. While I had been reflecting on the queerness of my personal childhood friendships for years, in the sense that I had retrospectively interpreted attraction in some of my relationships with girls in the past, I had just recently come across the idea that girlhood could be analyzed as inherently queer without necessarily accounting for sexual identity. I was fascinated by the simultaneous queerness and normativity of the specific intimacy portrayed in relationships between girls. I wondered, how might the prevalence of profoundly emotionally close relationships between girls both challenge and reinforce the heteropatriarchal social order? How might these friendships become spaces that foster senses of

belonging outside of heteropatriarchal roles, such as those defined by the nuclear family? These questions encouraged me to reflect on the partnership-like friendships I had engaged in with girls since early childhood. I was motivated to consume as much media as possible about friendship in girlhood, which was not a difficult task because I was already particularly drawn to these stories. The more I analyzed these cultural artifacts through a critical lens, the more inspired I felt to create a dance exploring the queerness of friendship in girlhood.

The process of developing the dance work awakened deeper curiosity about the queerness of girlhood as a sociological phenomenon. Creating the movement increased my personal and intellectual investment in the topic and I became excited about designing an accompanying qualitative research study. Consequently, I began exploring sociological literature on childhood friendships between girls in order to develop the framework for the study.

Literature Review:

Existing sociological scholarship on the ways in which girls foster friendships with one another often accounts for a particularly passionate emotional intimacy that is frequently observed in platonic relationships among girls. Queer theorists have analyzed the social and cultural factors that allow these intimate relationships to thrive within a heterosexist and heteronormative society, namely that while children are assumed and encouraged to be heterosexual they are simultaneously perceived as too innocent and devoid of agency to be fully straight, therefore existing in a "not-yet-straight queer temporality" (Brickman 2019). The specific intimacy of bonds common among girls during this period of queer temporality allows for the formulation of senses of belonging outside of roles defined by heteronormative structures. The fact that it is considered normative for young girls to center their social worlds around their relationships with other girls– as opposed to their relationships with men, as is expected in adulthood— is itself a point of queer analysis.

Due to the pervasive quality of heteronormativity, young girls are unlikely to perceive their emotionally intimate friendships with other girls as romantic in the way that they are likely socialized to perceive mixed-gender interactions. Thus, these particularly passionate emotionally intimate friendships fashioned in the queer temporality of girlhood do not inherently threaten the heteropatriarchal social order. Additionally, sociologists that study the development of sexual identity argue that individuals interpret their experiences of closeness in same gender relationships differently, depending on a variety of social and cultural factors that impact their likelihood of perceiving certain thoughts and feelings as physical or romantic attraction. Studies have examined how queer women interpret their emotionally intimate friendships with girls from

childhood but few studies have focused on why certain young adults retrospectively interpret their childhood friendships as romantic while others do not.

    A. <u>Gender Performativity and the Heterosexual Matrix</u>

Scholars of queer and gender studies have long posited the theory that normative gender categorizations within western society are inextricably linked to the cultural dominance of heterosexuality. Judith Butler's (1990) conceptualization of gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix has informed an abundance of subsequent studies about the relationship between dominant gender norms and normative sexuality. Specifically, Butler describes the compulsory character of heterosexuality as an aspect of normative gender performativity. Renold (2006), Drummond (2003), Rich (1980) and Barry (1984) have either informed or been informed by Butler's seminal theory of gender performativity, focusing on the impact of the gender binary on the pervasiveness of heteronormativity.

One of Butler's most central assertions is that there is no inherent truth to the sex or gender binary. Instead, the sex and gender binaries are based on essentialized categories that are socially constructed and imposed. Consequently, gender is not a category that one intrinsically occupies but rather, a stylized repetition of behaviors that must be acted out. Gendered socialization is so deeply embedded in society that the performative doing of gender shapes behavior and social interaction on even the most subconscious of levels. Additionally, the structure of the gender binary has such influence that it informs the very conception of sexual identity, meaning that heterosexual norms exist because of their association with essentialized gender categories. Butler coins the term "heterosexual matrix" in order to,

> designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires
> are naturalized ... a hegemonic discursive/epistemological model of gender intelligibility

that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (Butler, 1990, p. 151)

The doing of gender necessitates an engagement with heterosexuality, which is why, Butler argues, non-normative sexual identities often unsettle normative conceptualizations of gender categories.

Renold (2006) utilizes Butler's definition of the heterosexual matrix in order to formulate a discursive analysis of select ethnographic studies on children's gendered and sexual social worlds. Overall, Renold is interested in how primary schools act as sites of the reproduction of normative gender performativity and heterosexuality. Renold argues that childhood investment in heterosexual relationship culture exemplifies that being perceived as a "normal girl or boy" imposes the pursuit of heterosexual relationships. Hegemonic expectations for investment in heterosexual relationship culture differs for those socialized as girls and those socialized as boys, particularly because normative conceptions of femininity involve concern with romantic endeavors. Thus, heterosexual relationship culture becomes particularly important for young girls as a form of gender performativity. Consequently, girls who resist gender norms by refusing to participate in heterosexualized or romantic practices are identified by their "non-girlie" qualities.

The pervasiveness of compulsory heterosexuality within the social worlds of children who are as young as primary school age explains why children may be less likely to interpret their same-gender relationships as romantic in the way that they interpret mixed-gender relationships. Various ethnographic studies of primary schools show that, "mixed-gender relations are almost always heterosexualised, where even 'borrowing a pen is construed as

having sexual meaning'" (Renold, 2006, p. 499). The constant heterosexualization of mixed-gender encounters is further cemented as individuals are socialized to attribute virility with masculinity and being an object of masculine desire with femininity (Drummond 2003). As a result, children are unlikely to interpret same-gender encounters as potentially romantic. Further, young girls, who are socialized to view themselves as objects of the male gaze and recipients of romantic attention, are particularly unlikely to view their friendships with other girls as possessing the potential for homosexual desire.

Rich (1980) describes the phenomenon of the elimination of lesbian possibilities from dominant culture as a tool of patriarchy. The socialization of girls to view the locus of sexual power as male provides men as a social class with access to consistent physical and emotional power over women. Thus, the common assumption in western culture that women are "naturally" heterosexual is a social phenomenon, supported by the widespread obscuring of queer possibilities among women, which reinforces the institution of patriarchy. Consequently, the pervasiveness of compulsory heterosexuality within a given social context may impact one's likelihood to imagine lesbian possibilities within their own life.

B. Queer Temporality

Prevailing conceptions of girlhood, which include emotionally intimate friendships and regular physical affection among young girls, have been analyzed by critical theorists through a queer lens. Authors Brickman (2019), Stockton (2009), Thompson (2006), Monaghan (2019), and Valerie (1997) interpret friendship in girlhood through varying theoretical frameworks, but they all contribute to a discourse on the unique intimacy of friendship that abounds in portrayals and lived experiences of girlhood. The ubiquity of intimate friendships among girls may appear

"normative" in the sense that they do not inherently challenge the status quo, and may in fact be interpreted as upholding normative gender expectations for girls. However, the very notion that these intimate relationships are so normative and central in the social worlds of young girls can simultaneously be analyzed as queer, as these relationships often exist outside of hegemonic heteronormative roles, exemplified by the nuclear family. In other words, the fact that it is considered normative for young girls to center their social worlds around their relationships with other girls– as opposed to their relationships with men, as is expected in adulthood— is itself a point of queer analysis.

Brickman (2019) interprets girlhood as possessing an inherent queerness, arguing that the centrality of intimate friendships among girls within central conceptions of girlhood fosters a "queer temporality", which allows girls to formulate senses of identity outside of hegemonic heteronormative roles. This "queer temporality" is made possible by a system that sees children as too innocent and devoid of agency to experience any kind of attraction. Thus, while children are assumed to become heterosexual and encouraged to participate in heterosexual dating rituals, they are simultaneously considered to be too innocent to actually feel heterosexual attraction. As Stockton (2009) describes, children are perceived as "not-yet-straight" during their period of presumed sexual innocence, allowing room for them to exist within queer temporalities. In conversation with Stockton, Brickman claims that girls often exist within a particularly intensified queer temporality due to the prevalence of intimate bonds among "not-yet-straight" young girls. Exceptionally close and affectionate relationships among young girls appear, to a heteronormative society, to be completely innocent and devoid of any possibility for physical or romantic attraction. Thus, the convergence of heteronormative societal expectations, the

presumed innocence of children, and the normativity of intimate friendships among girls contributes to a particular queer temporality surrounding central conceptions of girlhood.

While there are few sociological studies that explicitly claim to examine the queer temporality of girlhood, there are more studies which analyze the particularly passionate emotional intimacy that is common in friendship among girls. Thompson's (2006) study shows that young women's friendships are not much different from romantic relationships, as they are "characterized by companionship, preoccupation, jealousy, exclusivity, inseparability, and physical affection" (Thompson, 2006, p. 49). Experiences of intensely close friendships have been reported by young women of varying sexual identities, emphasizing the widespread and normative character of friendships that resemble romantic relationships in girlhood. In order for the prevalence of these types of relationships to appear unthreatening to the heteropatriarchal social order, they are often considered innocent spaces of practice for heterosexual relationships or a passing phase in a girl's adolescent development. Hence, relationships among girls that especially resemble romantic relationships are often disregarded as temporary deviations on the path towards heterosexuality (Monaghan 2019).

C. <u>Sexual Identity Formation</u>

A queer analysis of girlhood does not necessarily need to account for sexual orientation and identity, as common conceptions of girlhood may be read as inherently queer regardless of the presence of homosexual desire. However, sexual identity formation impacts how young adults retrospectively interpret their individual experiences with friendship in girlhood. Scholars Gordon and Silva (2015), Campbell (2021, 2022, 2023), and Diamond (200, 2008), focus on the

impact of social forces on how individuals perceive and interpret their sexual orientation, contributing to the development of sexual identity.

The range of attractions, behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that an individual experiences throughout their lifetime does not necessarily determine how that individual will define their sexual identity, as sexuality is biological potential which is shaped by social and cultural factors. Gordon and Silva (2015) argue that a variety of social factors– such as individual cognitive conceptualizations of sexual identities, the broader social environment's construction of normative sexuality, and the information that individuals receive through interactions with others— impact the ways in which individuals interpret their attractions and behaviors. The range of thoughts and feelings in regards to sexuality that an individual experiences throughout their lifetime is unique to every person and the resulting interpretations are as diverse as the experiences themselves. Gordon and Silva astutely pinpoint the unquantifiable quality of individual feelings and the variety of interpretations that may result from similar feelings, proving the example,

> that many kids have feelings that they interpret as "being best friends" or "looking up to someone," while other children interpret that same experience as "having a crush" or "being in love." We have no way of knowing how qualitatively similar or different those feelings are, only how people interpret and label them. (Gordon and Silva, 2015, p. 512)

Due to the significant variety of social and cultural factors that people are exposed to, two individuals with similar experiences of sexual attraction may potentially identify in vastly different ways. Overall, a profoundly complex interplay of social and biological factors influence sexual identity formation.

Heteronormativity within contemporary western society forcibly influences how individuals perceive and interpret their feelings. The very perception of attraction, which is normatively regarded as a purely biological process, is impacted by social norms determined by the cultural dominance of heterosexuality. In other words, there is no singular feeling that surely constitutes attraction but rather, a plethora of social and cultural norms that influence which feelings an individual perceives as attraction. Thus, within social environments where heteronormativity is heavily enforced, heterosexual identities and behaviors are likely to predominate. Cultural norms such as heteronormativity are not purely deterministic, exemplified by the presence of homosexual behavior in heteronormative societies, but these norms do a great deal to influence how individuals interpret their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The potentiality that many people possess to be attracted to a variety of genders is often molded by social and cultural context (Gordon and Silva 2015).

While heteronormativity is pervasive across western contemporary society, it does not influence the sexual identity formation of all individuals to the same degree. Social location–described by factors such as age, cultural background, race, social class, gender, and religion–significantly impacts the extent to which individuals are held to heteronormative standards and consequently, the likelihood that they will internalize or resist these cultural norms. Campbell's (2022) research on the increasingly fluid sexual identities of emerging young women focuses on the quantitative relationship between exposure to heteronormative pressure due to social location and propensity to change sexual identity labels in a more or less same-sex oriented direction. Research shows that women whose social locations govern relatively low levels of heteronormativity have a higher likelihood of changing their sexual identity labels in a more same-sex oriented direction and a lower likelihood of identifying in a less same-sex oriented

direction compared to women who are exposed to more heteronormative pressure. Thus, the extent of heteronormative pressure present within an individual's social environment is a key point of analysis in order to better understand sexual identity development. Overall, the hegemonic conception of sexual identity as stable and unchanging fails to account for the myriad of social factors which influence the experience, interpretation, and perception of physical and romantic attraction.

While this qualitative research project does not explicitly analyze sexual identity formation, as respondents will not be directly asked to disclose their sexual identity or orientation, it is crucial to understand the social and cultural factors that influence how participants retrospectively interpret their experiences with friendship in girlhood. The interpretation of these past experiences has the potential to be linked with sexual identity formation, especially for individuals who identify as queer. For example, research shows that the majority of young women who identify as sexual minorities (lesbian, bisexual, unlabeled) have reported experiencing same-sex platonic friendships while growing up that felt similar in emotional intensity to a romantic relationship (Diamond 2000). While these young women may not have interpreted their feelings about their girl friends as romantic during childhood, as many of them experienced "passionate" friendships before they identified as sexual minorities, they may retrospectively interpret certain thoughts, feelings, or experiences as queer. While studies like Diamond's (2000) have examined sexual minority women's interpretations of passionate friendships from girlhood, few studies have focused on the social and cultural factors which influence varying interpretations of emotionally intimate childhood friendships among girls, regardless of sexual identity.

D. Theoretical Framework

   The theoretical frameworks which will be utilized to analyze the social and cultural factors that impact how young adults interpret their experiences with friendship in girlhood are social constructivism and symbolic interactionism. Social constructivism emphasizes the role of humans in imbuing social categories, such as sexual identity and gender, with meaning that is collectively agreed upon but not necessarily biologically determined. For example, Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity falls under the category of social constructivism, as it foregrounds the constructed nature of gender categories and the stylized repetition of behavior that is required to transmit meaning about gender within society. Thus, a social constructivist lens emphasizes the force of heteropatriarchal norms in shaping gender and sexual identity. Similar to social constructivism, symbolic interactionism focuses on the role of humans in creating social meaning. However, instead of addressing social structures more broadly, symbolic interactionism utilizes a micro level approach to analyze the ways in which individuals produce and negotiate meaning through their interactions with one another. A combination of the social constructivist and symbolic interactionist perspectives highlights the fact that social and cultural factors consistently influence individual interpretations of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Gordon and Silva 2015). These theoretical frameworks will guide data analysis by emphasizing the role of the social environment's construction of normative gender and sexual identities, individual conceptions of gender and sexual identities, and interactional responses in how individuals interpret their past experiences with friendship in girlhood.

Methodology:

This study employs qualitative research methodology to analyze young adults'
interpretations of their friendships with girls in their youth through open-ended, semi-structured
interviews. Interviews were completed between March 14th and April 9th, 2024 after receiving
Institutional Review Board approval on March 10th, 2024.

A. <u>Participants and Procedure</u>

Research participants are young adults, between the ages of 18 and 23, for whom
girlhood was an identifying experience in their childhoods and who had friendships with other
girls. Participants were recruited by word-of-mouth in shared community spaces, such as a dance
related class and rehearsals on a college campus. The recruitment script utilized in these spaces
outlined the three qualifications to participate in the study: namely, that participants must be
between the ages of 18 and 23, that they identify with girlhood as being a marker of experience
in their childhoods, and that they had friendships with other girls. Those who expressed initial
interest in participating in the study by reaching out to the primary researcher via email were sent
an informed consent form to review. Participants were asked to sign the form if they were
comfortable with the details of the study and bring it in person to their interview. Additionally,
interview times and locations were arranged via email correspondence. A total of 9 respondents
participated in the study. All interviews were held in person, outside or in a private indoor space,
and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded on a portable recording
device, smart phone, and then uploaded to a password-protected laptop.

B. <u>Interview Protocol</u>

Before agreeing to participate, respondents were told that the study purpose is to provide an analysis of the unique or non-normative ways that girls have relational experiences beyond the scope of possibilities encouraged in society. The language provided in the recruitment script and informed consent form described that respondents would mainly be asked to reflect on their friendships with other girls in childhood. The interview questionnaire covered three main topics: memories of friendship with girls from childhood, feedback from family, teachers, and peers about these friendships, and interpretations of these past experiences as a young adult within a new social and cultural environment. Interview questions included, "Did your family, teachers, or friends ever suggest that the nature of your relationships with girls were 'inappropriate' or should change in any way? If so, when did you receive this feedback?" and "In what ways, if at all, has change in [your] environment impacted the way you've thought about your friendships with other girls from childhood? " The complete interview questionnaire is provided in the Appendices of the paper.

C. <u>Positionality Statement</u>

As someone who meets the three qualifications of eligibility to participate in the study, I hold insider status with respect to the topic of study. Although I will not explicitly call attention to my insider status, participants may infer that I hold this status, especially those who have already established relationships with me and have potentially heard me talk about my personal interpretations of my friendships from girlhood. As the majority of my respondents had a pre-established relationship with me before the interview in some capacity, I acknowledge that there was a potential for respondents to provide skewed answers that they may not have given if they

did not know about my personal experiences with queerness and friendship in girlhood.

Especially while interviewing dancers who were part of the dance work portion of my dual

thesis, there was a possibility for dancers to revise their answers in order to align with their

previous interpretations of my project or out of fear of offending me. In order to mitigate bias, I

made sure to ask open-ended, non-leading questions that allowed space for respondents to reflect

on their experiences with friendship in girlhood in an abundance of ways, with or without

mentioning queerness in any sense. In addition, I made sure to highlight, both before and during

the interviews, that respondents were welcome to skip any questions that they were not

comfortable answering at any time and for any reason. While I tried my best to mitigate any bias

resulting from my pre-established relationships with the interview respondents, I also embraced

the rapport I had with these respondents which potentially allowed for increased levels of trust,

comfort, and honesty as they responded to questions.

In addition, my positionality as a cisgender white woman limits my perspective on the

diversity of experiences my respondents have had in relation to girlhood. While there may be

sociological throughlines in analyzing girlhood in many different cultural contexts, it is

important to acknowledge that my personal experiences with girlhood are steeped within a very

particular social and cultural setting as a white woman with a mixed Ashkenazi Jewish and

Korean ethnic background. While interviewing respondents from other cultural backgrounds, I

carried a certain level of outsider status which required me to stay self-reflective about my

preconceived expectations about girlhood that may be culturally specific and remain a curious

and active listener. Additionally, while interviewing participants who identified with having

girlhood as a marker of experience in their childhoods but do not identify as women or girls, I

held outsider status and worked to use intentional and inclusive language so as not to

misrepresent their perspectives and experiences. I acknowledge that the term "girlhood" is itself limiting and imperfect due to the essentialized nature of the category "girl" and I aim to remain open to varying attitudes and relationships towards the very idea of girlhood.

D. Data Analysis

The digital recording of the interviews were stored on the password-protected laptop and transcribed, using the transcription software "Otterai", within 14 days. Any identifying information revealed in the interviews was deleted from the transcription and each respondent was assigned a pseudonym to be used in the write-up of the research findings. The recordings were then deleted, and the transcriptions were stored on the password-protected laptop. The data collected during the interviews was analyzed through a series of codes. Informed by the literature, I did a focused reading of my transcripts, specifically looking for references to the social phenomena described in existing scholarship. These codes included "jealousy", "exclusive", "best friend", and "physical affection". Through the deductive coding process, I found that the majority of interview respondents described having best friendships with other girls during childhood, which were characterized by partnership-like qualities such as inseparability, exclusivity, jealousy, and physical affection. The patterns derived from this process informed the development of the "Friendship as Partnership" category of the results section.

In addition, during the coding process I noticed emerging themes and created an additional list of codes, including "religion", "conservative", "liberal", "accepting", "normal", "different", "kiss", "crush", "attraction", and "forever". While the literature I had encountered did not focus on the impacts of religion or political views on the relationships between girls, I

noticed that the majority of interview respondents attributed these factors to the kind of feedback they received about their childhood friendships. Moreover, the majority of respondents described their childhood friendships with other girls as normative, which encouraged me to interrogate the relationship between normativity and the religious and political composition of the social environment. This line of interrogation, derived from the inductive process, informed the development of the "Elimination of Lesbian Possibilities" category of the results section. Lastly, various respondents mentioned experiencing some form of attraction towards their friends who were girls. The codes which described this pattern within the findings informed the development of the "Retrospectively Interpreted Attraction" category of the results section.

Results:

A. <u>Elimination of lesbian possibilities</u>

While the magnitude of heteronormativity varies between the environments that respondents described growing up in, the majority of the respondents identified social phenomena that contribute to the obscuring or elimination of lesbian possibilities, as described by Rich (1980). One such phenomena– rooted in the Butlerian heterosexual matrix which positions heterosexual identity as a fundamental aspect of normative gender performativity– is the assumption of heterosexuality in interactions between girls and boys and the simultaneous lack of imagination for the possibility of homosexuality in interactions between girls. Another significant social phenomena contributing to the elimination of lesbian possibilities is the overall lack of representation of queer, and particularly lesbian, relationships and identities within an individual's milieu. Thus, many respondents mentioned that even if they grew up in relatively queer affirming and accepting environments, they still struggled to imagine queer possibilities for themselves or to de-center men in their everyday lives.

One recurring theme throughout interview responses was the assumption of heterosexuality in relationships between young boys and girls. In five out of nine interviews, respondents identified the process by which adults in their lives assumed heterosexuality in their relationships with boys and concurrently failed to imagine queer possibilities in their relationships with other girls. These respondents pointed to memories from childhood when their friendships with boys were questioned by adults who wanted to know if a romantic or sexual connection was present in the relationship. Specifically, adults often asked if respondents were dating or had a "crush" on their friends who were boys. Three of these five respondents

explicitly connected heteronormative assumptions to religious factors within their school and

home environments. These three respondents named either Christianity, Catholicism, or

Hinduism as the prevalent religion in their social environment, and each of them asserted that

religious factors contributed to heteronormative expectations and assumptions. One such

respondent, Alex, who grew up in a Christian household, stated,

> A: "My family was super religious that the idea that I could have been queer wasn't in
> the books, like, it just wasn't thought of. And so all of my socialization was very in a way
> that was like, "boy-girl dichotomy" and kind of keeping that separation as a kid, so I
> think my relationships with girls weren't questioned by my parents. My relationships
> with guys definitely were."

Here, Alex distinctly attributes the heteronormativity within their social environment as a child

to their family's Christian religious views. Moreover, their description of their socialization

aligns strongly with Judith Butler's (1990) heterosexual matrix which posits that heterosexuality

is an essential aspect of normative gender performativity and the maintenance of the gender

binary. Alex explains that the fact that their parents questioned whether or not they were dating

their friends who were boys when they were as young as six years old without ever asking

similar questions about their friendships with girls is inextricably linked to their investment in

the gender binary, and hence, their assumption of heterosexuality.

Another study participant, Emma, expressed that one manifestation of heteronormativity

in her conservative, Hindu school was the policing of physical touch between boys and girls.

While any form of physical touch between boys and girls was immediately interpreted as sexual

and inappropriate by adults in the school environment, physical touch between girls was viewed

as an innocent display of friendship. Emma recalled the blatantly disproportionate policing of

physical touch in mixed gender encounters as compared to same gender encounters, explaining,

E: "It was very, like, don't show any kind of affection to men in public, but with girls it was completely fine. We would do that all the time in school where like, you know, we would hug each other and we would sit on each other's laps. And we would do all these things and it was considered so normal. But, like, god forbid a guy put his hand on your shoulder"

Emma attributed the normality of extensive physical touch between girls in her "homophobic" social environment to the fact that everyone was assumed straight and thus, physical touch in same gender encounters was never interpreted as having the capacity for romantic or sexual attraction. She stated that, in the eyes of the adults in her life, there was no possibility that she could experience homosexual desire. For this reason, displays of physical affection within same gender encounters could only be interpreted by others as innocent and devoid of any form of attraction.

As Rich (1980) so astutely describes, the socialization of girls and women to view the locus of sexual power as male contributes to the elimination of lesbian possibilities in the cultural imagination and ultimately, serves as a tool of patriarchy. The fact that the majority of respondents mentioned that displays of physical affection or emotional intimacy between girls were viewed as devoid of any possibility for queerness supports Rich's claims about the prevalence of compulsory heterosexuality in society. One study participant, Megan, argued that the cultural elimination of lesbian possibilities contributes to the establishment of relationships between girls which actually reinforce structural heteropatriarchy, stating,

M: "I think in some ways certain relationalities that women and girls have with each other are almost able to reinforce heterosexuality or something because it's like, 'we're close like this because obviously nothing would ever be going on between us'... if anything it was kind of buttressing this idea of desirability to men."

Megan's argument aligns with the findings from other interviews which reveal that the existence of exceptionally close relationships between girls are not only unthreatening within significantly heteronormative social environments but are actually encouraged. The fact that girls are

encouraged to flaunt their physically affectionate and emotionally intimate relationships with one another without any possibility for their relationships to be interpreted as possessing the capacity for attraction demonstrates the extent to which heteronormativity pervades their social environments.

Study findings suggest that the more heteronormative the social environment is, the less likely intimate friendships between girls are to be questioned for potentially queer possibilities. For example, one respondent, Lillian, who described the social environment she grew up in as conservative and catholic, explained that it was considered normative for her to have one close best friendship with another girl. She expressed that her parents encouraged her inseparable relationships with other girls, especially when they inhabited similar social positions as her friends' parents. Lillian revealed that she did not know any openly queer people in school growing up, which likely contributed to the encouragement of close friendships between girls that reinforced heteronormativity within the social environment. Another study participant, Emma, attributed the assumption that everyone was straight in her social environment to the fact that she also did not know any openly queer people growing up. In both Lillian's and Emma's cases, intimate friendships between girls were encouraged within conspicuously heteronormative social environments.

While it is critical to note the encouragement of intimate friendships between girls in heteronormative social environments, it is also necessary to examine the limitations of this social phenomena. The research shows that intimate relationalities between girls are only encouraged when they reinforce heteronormative assumptions. The moment that an individual or relationship sufficiently threatens the assumption of heterosexual identity or behavior, agents of the heteronormative social order begin policing "inappropriate" ways of being. One study

participant, Mia, explained that after she was "outed" as gay at 13 years old, she was no longer able to participate in close friendships with other girls the way she was encouraged to before. She disclosed that after she was outed, she was no longer allowed to go to sleepovers with other girls. Suddenly, all of the activities and relationalities that were considered normative for young girls were "inappropriate" for her to participate in, just because heteropatriarchy's aim to eliminate lesbian possibilities from the cultural imagination had been threatened by her queerness. Thus, heteronormative social environments often police children who are suspected to be queer or are openly queer in a manner that clarifies the limitations of acceptable relationalities between girls, meaning that intimate friendships between girls are only celebrated as long as they reinforce heterosexual assumptions.

The majority of respondents who identified prevalent heteronormative assumptions in their school or familial environments attributed these norms to "conservative" political or religious views. However, respondents who grew up in "liberal" and "queer accepting" social environments still identified social phenomena which made it difficult for them to imagine queer possibilities in their own lives. Whether it be due to the lack of representation of queer identities and relationships in an individual's community and the media they consume, or a number of other heteronormative socializing forces, respondents explained that they struggled to fully accept queerness in themselves even if they grew up in queer accepting environments. One such respondent, Camila, described their struggle to accept their own queerness due to the fear of not achieving the future they had imagined, explaining,

> C: "It's kind of proof that this stuff is still so internalized, even when you're in, like,... I'm from a very accepting, liberal family…but I was just so scared of not fitting into this mold… being with a woman meant that parts of my future would not be fulfilled in the way I had imagined"

Here, Camila discerns the ubiquitous quality of heteronormativity within the social fabric of society, even within social environments that are supposedly relatively accepting of queer relationships and identities. Even though their community claimed to reject homophobia, they did not grow up imagining queer possibilities for their future. Thus, accepting their own queerness was profoundly confusing due to pervasive heteronormativity within their social environment which taught them to imagine exclusively heteronormative futures.

The same phenomena that socializes girls to view their relationships with other girls as devoid of any possibility for attraction also teaches girls to desire male attention. The socialization to view men as the locus of sexual power contributes to the pervasive centering of male emotions within society. Study findings suggest that this socialized desire for male attention prevails within "liberal" and "queer accepting" environments. This phenomenon may also contribute to an individual's struggle to accept their own queerness, and particularly to come to terms with a complete lack of attraction to men, regardless of how accepting of queerness their social environments claim to be. For example, study participant Megan, who was raised by gay parents and grew up surrounded by queer community, explained that even after she had felt attraction towards other girls, she still prioritized attention from boys and wanted them to desire her. Thus, realizing that she felt attraction towards girls was much easier than unlearning her socialization to desire male attention and ultimately, acknowledging her disinterest in romantic involvement with men. Overall, the elimination of lesbian possibilities from the cultural imagination is exceptionally pervasive within society, regardless of how "socially liberal" or "queer accepting" the social environment is. While the extent of blatant homophobia and heteronormativity certainly varies between the social environments that study participants

described growing up in, even the most queer accepting environments were affected by heteronormative socializing forces.

B. <u>Friendship as Partnership</u>

In seven out of nine interviews, respondents emphasized the partnership quality of their childhood friendships with other girls. These respondents stressed their eagerness to develop "best friendships" with other girls that were characterized by an exclusive quality. The idea of a number one best friend mimicked the romantic relationships that respondents examined between adults in their lives. Many respondents expressed a desire to have a friendship that felt like a partnership which was prioritized over all other relationships. For this reason, the majority of the study participants reported attaching themselves closely to one other girl at a time throughout their childhoods.

One of the respondents who mentioned a persistent desire to be part of a number one best friendship dynamic, Jordan, explained that their best friend would often "take over their life". In other words, their time would revolve around this prioritized friendship. In Jordan's words,

> J: "I definitely had a bit of a pattern of having one really intense best friend... me and one other person would just kind of orbit around each other"

Jordan always wanted to be around their best friend and they searched for people who were equally willing to prioritize the relationship. Another respondent, Camila, described her desire to have a best friend and be viewed in a pair as an "obsession". Additionally, Megan described her best friend as the most significant aspect of her identity in childhood. All of these respondents emphasized the gravity of having a friendship that felt like a partnership in developing a sense of belonging.

Although respondents were not asked directly if they sought out best friendship dynamics, the fact that seven out of nine interviews touched on the significance of these partnerships while reflecting on their childhood friendships demonstrates their importance in the everyday lives of many young girls. Existing scholarship, such as Thompson's (2006) study, shows that the best friend partnerships that emerge among girls often mimic heterosexual romantic relationships which are characterized by companionship, exclusivity, inseparability, jealousy, and physical affection. One interview respondent, Alex, affirmed the similarity between adult romantic partnerships and their childhood friendships, explaining,

> A: "Growing up, I had this deep belief that I was a person who would have just one best friend and I would commit everything to that one person. And the person would change but I would always have one sole person that I would give all of my love to as a friend. And I think I saw that because in my family dynamic, my parents didn't have a lot of friendships and they were very committed to each other."

Alex interpreted their approach to friendship during childhood as a way to mimic their parents' romantic partnership. Hence, they developed what they referred to as a "monogamous friendship system" which propelled them to cultivate exclusive and devoted partnerships with their friends.

Of the study participants who recounted their investment in constructing best friend dynamics with other girls in childhood, many identified feelings of jealousy that frequently arose when they feared that the exclusive nature of their partnerships were being threatened. Various respondents echoed the sentiment that their best friendships fostered jealousy, especially when their close friends would develop new or deeper friendships with others. They feared the usurping of a best friend or the threatening of their status as the number one priority to their closest friend. In this way, the kind of jealousy that emerged within respondents' childhood friendships resembles the emotional responses that are frequently observed within monogamous romantic partnerships.

Another characteristic of respondents' childhood friendships with other girls that mirrors common portrayals of romantic relationships is the prevalence of declarations of never-ending commitment. In order to display their everlasting loyalty to their closest friend, and perhaps to restrain the fear of losing their status as number one priority, many young girls declare themselves "best friends forever". These forever promises are not unlike the promises adult romantic partners commonly make during wedding ceremonies. Two interview respondents recalled moments during their childhood when they proposed to their best friend that they live together forever, similar to a proposal of marriage. One such respondent, Mia, explained that after she saw her aunts get married, she proposed to her childhood best friend that they be "gay together and get a house" when they grow up. Another respondent, Alex, conveyed that they had promised to live with their childhood best friend in their parents' basement forever. These individual anecdotes are underpinned by the ubiquity of the term "BFF" meaning "best friends forever" within the social landscape of young girls. In other words, declarations of everlasting commitment within partnerships between girls are considered normative, at least during the early years of childhood.

While the majority of respondents described the closeness within their friendships with other girls as revolving around displays of emotional intimacy such as secret keeping and making forever promises, a couple respondents explained that it was not out of the ordinary for them to kiss their childhood friends. Notably, of the two respondents who mentioned kissing childhood friends, the respondent who described her social environment as more "conservative" and "homophobic" explained that she felt completely unaffected by kissing her best friend because "it was so straight", meaning that it was interpreted as an innocent practice ground for heterosexual kisses in adulthood. In contrast, the respondent who described her social

environment as "liberal" and "queer accepting" explained that she would pray with her best friend after they would kiss because they believed that what they were doing was not appropriate. It can be inferred that the respondent from the more "liberal" social environment was more likely to view kissing her friend as a potentially homosexual act than the respondent from the more "conservative" social environment. Thus, this comparison supplements the research finding that the more heteronormative the social environment is, the less likely intimate friendships between girls are to be interpreted as potentially queer.

Overall, the research findings suggest that young girls frequently engage in close friendships that mimic certain characteristics of romantic partnerships. Namely, close friendship dynamics among girls are regularly characterized by inseparability, exclusivity, jealousy, declarations of everlasting commitment, and other displays of emotional and physical affection. As Brickman (2019) cleverly explains, the partnership-like friendships among girls that abound within a diversity of social environments are an essential aspect of the "queer temporality" of girlhood, which allows girls to formulate senses of identity outside of heteronormative roles.

C. <u>Retrospectively Interpreted Attraction</u>

Each interview respondent explained that their current social environment is either more accepting of queer identities and relationships than the environment they grew up in or, if they were already raised in a queer accepting environment, they are surrounded by more queer peers than before. Some respondents argued that this change in environment has impacted the ways in which they interpret the potential for attraction between other people. For example, one respondent, Emma, explained that moving from not knowing any openly queer people to being surrounded by queer community has transformed her perspective, stating,

> E: "I think about things differently, like if I saw two women holding hands when I was younger, I wouldn't think much of it but now, after being in this environment, I would assume that they were together."

Emma's exposure to queer community has made her more likely to imagine queer possibilities while interpreting the world around her. Similarly, other respondents shared that their change in environment has shifted not only the ways in which they imagine queer possibilities in the world around them, but also how they interpret current and past feelings of attraction. Respondents explained that being in an especially queer affirming social environment during the formative years of young adulthood has shaped the trajectory of their sexual identity formation and thus, has shifted the ways in which they interpret their own feelings of attraction.

As Gordon and Silva (2015) describe, research shows that a variety of social factors–such as individual cognitive conceptualizations of sexual identities, the broader social environment's construction of normative sexuality, and the information that individuals receive through interactions with others— impact the ways in which individuals interpret their attractions and behaviors. For this reason, the change in social environment that interview respondents described, namely, their increased exposure to queer affirming communities, is a significant factor that may impact their interpretations of current and past feelings of attraction. In this way, various respondents attributed living in queer affirming communities to the recontextualization of feelings associated with their childhood friendships with other girls. One such respondent, Jordan, explained that since being surrounded by queer community in young adulthood and embracing their own queerness, they look back on their specific attachments to childhood friends with a new perspective, expressing,

> J: "I was just very hyper aware of the details of my friends' lives or their faces or their hair… I didn't suspect that I was queer until I was 20 years old… looking back now, I just emotionally fell for my friends."

Jordan added that they would not interpret any of their feelings towards girl friends in childhood as sexual attraction but they did explain that they retrospectively interpret their attachments toward these friends as a kind of emotional attraction. Jordan asserted that they paid much closer attention to their close girl friends in childhood than their friends who were boys. While at the time they would not have interpreted this special investment in their girl friends as gay, they retrospectively interpret their feelings as some form of emotional attraction.

Two other respondents explicitly used the word "crush" to describe their retrospective interpretations of their feelings towards certain childhood girl friends. Both of these respondents, Alex and Mia, explained that they were particularly drawn to certain girls that they found pretty or interesting. However, at the time, they would not have interpreted their profound interest in other girls as attraction. Alex explained that instead of assigning this feeling the label "attraction", they understood it as a desire to seek friendship or to be more like the other person. Mia shared a similar sentiment, expressing that she frequently sought out friendships with girls that she now believes she had some sort of attraction to. Mia described her retrospective interpretation of her feelings towards one particular close friend from childhood, stating,

> M: "Looking back, analyzing with a critical lens, I feel like maybe I had some sort of crush on her and I couldn't even understand that yet"

Mia's statement bolsters Gordon and Silva's (2015) argument that social factors impact the ways in which individuals interpret feelings of attraction. While a variety of social factors may impact Mia's current interpretation of her feelings of attraction towards this one childhood friend, the study findings suggest that exposure to increased queer representation and community likely has encouraged her to recontextualize past feelings and experiences.

Another study participant, Camila, recognized the fluidity in some of her childhood and current friendships, explaining that she does not always think it is necessary to categorize whether or not she is experiencing attraction towards a friend. Camila described the fluidity in some of her friendships as follows,

> C: "sometimes the lines between attraction and just loving someone so much are kind of blurred…sometimes you feel so much love for somebody that it manifests in, like, 'oh, I think it's attraction' but it might not be and it might be"

Camila explained that it has been important for her to view the sometimes unclear distinction between platonic love and attraction as a natural phenomenon that does not always need to be decoded. The societal pressure to place fluid and complex feelings into categories limits a more expansive understanding of an individual's comprehensive emotional landscape. As the study findings suggest, the feelings that are frequently associated with close friendship may be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on the social and cultural context.

Discussion:

In response to the central research question, "how do young adults interpret their experiences with closeness in relationships with other girls in childhood?", results highlight the diversity of individual interpretations of feelings and experiences related to intimate friendship which may be influenced by social factors as well as biological factors. While various respondents explained that they retrospectively interpret certain feelings towards girl friends in childhood as some form of attraction, especially those respondents who now identify as queer young adults, various respondents also expressed that increased exposure to queer community has not impacted the ways in which they retrospectively interpret their childhood friendships. Thus, while social factors, such as the social environment's general attitudes towards queerness and the extent of lesbian representation an individual is exposed to, increase the likelihood that an individual will interpret their feelings as homosexual attraction, these social factors do not determine how an individual will identify their sexuality. This reality aligns with Gordon and Silva's (2015) argument that sexuality is a biological potential shaped by social factors.

The three main findings of the study– namely, the prevalence of the elimination of lesbian possibilities from the cultural imagination in both "conservative" and "liberal" social environments, the ubiquity of friendships among girls that mimic adult romantic partnerships, and retrospective interpretations of feelings within past friendships as attraction– bolster Brickman's (2019) argument that girlhood fosters a specific container for expansive queer possibilities. The fact that it is considered normative for girls to engage in such intimate partnership-like friendships with other girls in childhood, without these relationships threatening the heteronormative social order, demonstrates how profoundly pervasive Butler's (1990) heterosexual matrix is throughout contemporary society. The heterosexual matrix, which

positions heterosexual behavior and identity as a fundamental facet of normative gender performativity, contributes to the elimination of queer possibilities from the cultural imagination. Further, due to the specific interaction between the heterosexual matrix and the patriarchal social order which situates men as the locus of sexual power, lesbian possibilities are particularly obscured in comparison to queer possibilities between men (Rich 1980). Consequently, particularly intimate, partnership-like friendships between girls are especially unlikely to be interpreted as possessing the potential for queerness. Additionally, the fact that girls are hegemonically viewed as "not-yet-straight" because they are too young to be fully engaged in heterosexual partnerships, allows room for a queer temporality in which girls frequently prioritize relationships with other girls and are able to formulate senses of identity outside of the roles defined by heteronormative structures (Brickman 2019).

An important implication of the research findings is that while common conceptions of girlhood are rife with the potential for queer analysis, normative expectations of adult womanhood are more limiting in regards to adhering to heteronormative social roles. In other words, the partnership-like friendships between girls that abound throughout diverse social environments are no longer considered so normative and non-threatening to the heteropatriarchal social order in adulthood. While girls frequently center their entire social worlds around their relationships with other girls, adult women are expected to center their lives around men. The refusal of this societal directive by non-male adults who continue to center their lives around non-male people is non-normative, unlike many of the intimate friendships that girls engage in with one another in childhood.

Another complex implication of the research findings is that sexual identity development is likely a more socialized process than is commonly agreed upon in society. Within the

LGBTQ+ rights movement, activists have frequently made the argument that queer people should not be punished for a biologically predetermined experience. The phrase "I was born this way" has become ubiquitous within popular discourse about the importance of LGBTQ+ rights. The findings of this study complicate this assertion, suggesting that the social factors which contribute to the elimination of lesbian possibilities from the cultural imagination influence the likelihood that an individual will interpret their feelings as homosexual attraction. In other words, dominant cultural norms which are designed to bolster heteropatriarchy may decrease the likelihood that an individual will identify as gay. It is vital to clarify that this finding should not detract from the LGBTQ+ rights movement in any way. In contrast, the fact that more individuals would likely identify certain feelings as homosexual attraction if they lived outside of heteropatriarchal structures only strengthens the argument that queerness should be embraced as a significant biological and social reality. The LGBTQ+ rights movement has historically argued that humans must never be punished for loving one another, which holds true no matter how biologically or socially determined queerness is.

Scholars interested in adding on to this research might consider examining the social factors which encourage non-male young adults to subordinate their relationships with other non-male people to their relationships with men after the "queer temporality" of girlhood. In addition, future research should interrogate how experiences of friendship in girlhood are impacted by race. While this qualitative research study included the perspectives of respondents from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, it did not specifically examine the impacts of racialization within a society underpinned by institutional racism on individual experiences of girlhood. The study would undoubtedly be strengthened and nuanced by an analysis which more clearly accounts for race.

Additionally, future research could analyze friendship dynamics among young boys in order to paint a more comprehensive picture of how the interaction between heteronormativity and patriarchy contributes to the specific elimination of lesbian possibilities from the cultural imagination and the consequently particularly intimate relationships between young girls that go "unquestioned" about the possibility for queerness. In other words, research about the friendships between boys could give insight into the extent to which the elimination of queer possibilities observed in this study is due to general heteronormativity within society as opposed to patriarchal expectations that view girls as particularly unlikely to experience homosexual attraction in their relationships with one another. Previous scholarship within queer studies suggests that there is an intensified queer temporality associated with girlhood in contrast to boyhood, due to the hegemonic association of masculinity with sexual power, but it would be insightful to supplement this scholarship with qualitative research on the friendship dynamics that emerge between young boys. Overall, few qualitative sociological studies have investigated the queerness of friendship in girlhood. Thus, future research is necessary to capture the nuances of individual experiences with friendship in girlhood.

Creation of the Dance Work:

Creation of the accompanying dance work began in fall of 2023, catalyzed by my personal reflections on the unique intimacy of my own friendships. Over the preceding summer, I found myself particularly moved by stories and media centered around the complexity and tenderness of friendship in girlhood. I pondered the relationship between the development of my own queer identity and the special closeness I have experienced in my friendships with non-male people throughout my life. I wondered, why have some of my friendships felt so specifically queer even in the absence of what I might typically interpret as romantic or physical attraction. These reflections struck me as an abundant place to create movement from even before I had conceptualized the accompanying sociological research project.

A. <u>Structure of Piece</u>

The finalized work, "Pinky Swear? We'll be Together Forever", is structured as a narrative arc, chronicling a slumber party from set-up to dramatic climax to tender aftermath at the end of the night. Through the use of a "prologue" at the beginning of the piece, I aim to illustrate the concept of familiarity surrounding the entire slumber party, as if to say "we've been here before and we'll be here again". The piece begins with the dancers sprawled out across the upstage, huddled in piles rubbing each other's backs, stroking each other's hair, playing hand-clap games, making pinky promises, and telling secrets. With this first scene, I aim to establish the world of emotional intimacy and playfulness that I will build on and complicate throughout the work. The social world I hope to conjure with this first scene has been described by sociologist Frith (1978) as "the culture of the bedroom" which surrounds central conceptions of

girlhood. Brickman (2019) paints a detailed illustration of Frith's "culture of the bedroom",

writing,

> Sequestered alone but more typically with other special female friends in the bedroom, the girls of this commonplace description create a "double life" in which they write secrets in their diaries or share hushed confessions with each other, invent strange stories or shared identities, daydream, fixate on pop idols, and possess an unsettled, and unsettling, sexuality. Indeed, centered in an intimate, closeted queer space, girl culture remains disturbingly, at times defiantly, to use Stockton's terms, "not-yet-straight"" (Brickman, 2019, p. xiv)

The intensified queer temporality of girlhood, as defined in the literature review, is exemplified

by these mainstream images of passionate friendships among girls. In order to illustrate the

intensified queer temporality of girlhood, motifs of secret telling, playful secret handshakes, and

physical affection return throughout the dance work and are established in the very first moments

of the prologue.

The narrative of the prologue is driven by the acting of the dancers, who illustrate by

pointing and laughing at their friends that their initial playful secret telling has transitioned into

mean-spirited gossip. Those who are being laughed at quickly join the gossip session to fit in

with their friends and immediately begin making fun of another slumber party guest. After

almost the whole group has turned on a pair of friends, one of the two confronts the group,

begging them to stop bullying and motioning forward to direct them to embrace their dejected

friend. One by one, the group approaches and embraces the girl they had all been making fun of

mere moments before. This moment, while dramatized in a tongue in cheek manner, strives to

establish the complexity of the emotional world the audience is entering, where the same people

demonstrating passionate emotional closeness have the capacity to profoundly hurt one another.

The prologue concludes as one dancer turns the page in the book she is reading, prompting the group to collectively fall asleep. The stage goes dark, with only the reading lamp still on in the upstage corner. Shortly after, the lamp turns off, illustrating the end of the night. As the group clears off the upstage in darkness, two dancers enter in the downstage left corner and begin to "set-up" the space, showing the inception of a new slumber party. The establishment of the new slumber party prompts more and more dancers to enter the space as the upbeat song "Immaterial" by SOPHIE begins playing. Overall, the world building of the initial two minutes of the work demonstrate both the familiarity and the emotional complexity of the "culture of the bedroom" that will be explored throughout the work.

The following section of the work weaves in recognizable elements of slumber party culture, such as handshakes, games of "telephone", and secret telling in order to lean into the feel-good camaraderie that is central to common portrayals of friendship in girlhood. At one point, one dancer falls down and is made fun of but is quickly consoled and wrapped up in an intimate embrace by a friend, as the rest of the party swirls around them. In another moment, two dancers perform a playful duet and share a shocking secret as the rest of the group falls down in a circle around them. These moments reveal the pockets of tenderness and emotional intimacy woven into the fabric of the lighthearted and exuberant slumber party culture.

As the upbeat and repetitive cadence of the song "Immaterial" slows down, two dancers separate themselves from the rest of the group, holding hands and slowly walking away from the others. An alarm sound crescendos at the end of the song and the group looks on to the newly formed duet, which happens to be the same pair that was made fun of in the "prologue". One girl follows the new couple and grabs hold of the shoulder of the member of the pair who she had been consoling and hugging earlier in the piece. The couple continues to hold hands and look

into one another's eyes, oblivious to the fact that they are being followed. When she realizes that she is being completely unacknowledged by the couple, the girl who has been tracing behind lets go of the shoulder of her friend and backs away. A member of the larger group rushes forward to console the girl who has been "left out" and together, the whole group inspects the couple holding hands as they slowly retreat off stage.

The two remaining dancers perform a slowed-down duet, demonstrating the particularly intimate quality of this connection compared to the more playful connections showcased thus far. The following section of the work is accompanied by Joan Jett and The Blackhearts' classic rock performance of "Crimson and Clover" to support an emerging sense of angst as the group responds to the particularly intimate relationship developing between two of their friends. This section physicalizes feelings of jealousy, self-consciousness, and confusion as the dancers navigate the realization that they might not all be equally close to one another. In order to showcase frantic feelings of jealousy, multiple dancers chase the new couple off stage after they are seemingly close enough to kiss one another. The movement in the following group section utilizes deep plie and staccato accents, demonstrating an increased level of groundedness and strength in the dancers' movement quality.

At some point, the whole group congregates in a swarm where they appear to be flailing around and fighting one another. Two groups emerge as they pull each other by the waist away from the swarm at center stage, revealing the two dancers who recently performed a passionate duet. The dancers point and look on in shock and awe as their friends build up the courage to kiss each other. In this climactic moment, the dancers navigate insecurity and jealousy as they fear the loss or changing of their previously established friendships. Immediately following the kiss, one dancer walks away from the group with her head in her hands. This dancer, the same one

who followed the couple that just kissed when they had originally held hands and separated themselves from the group, looks disappointed and hurt. Another dancer notices that their friend has separated from the group and follows behind, hesitantly reaching out to offer comfort. At the same time, the couple that has just kissed is separated by two dancers who tenderly demand attention. This moment highlights the desire for closeness that each member of the group possesses. The group scrambles before and after the climactic kiss, demonstrating their fear that this newfound closeness may threaten their relationships and their collective desire for deeper emotional intimacy.

The narrative climax of the piece is informed by the findings of the qualitative sociological research, particularly the second section of the results regarding intimate, partnership-like friendships. The collective chaos that ensues as two dancers break off from the group and display the particular closeness of their relationship demonstrates the jealousy that many respondents reported feeling when they feared that their relationships were being threatened by other dynamics. One dancer is especially jealous of this emerging dynamic because she doesn't want her pre-existing friendships to change and craves the same kind of closeness. The "cure" to this chaos occurs as the rest of the dancers on stage declare their undying commitment and love for one another, thereby calming each other's fear that their partnership-like friendships could be threatened.

The work concludes in the tender aftermath of the climactic drama of the previous section, as the accompanying sound transitions from powerful classic rock to soft acoustic. The dancers collapse on the floor and cuddle close to one another, performing gentle duets as if they are telling hushed secrets and confiding in one another at the end of the night. Spotlights are utilized to dramatize the intimacy of these duets, illustrating the privacy of these moments of

connection even when the rest of the group is lying down mere feet away. Duets transition from occurring one by one to simultaneously, emphasizing the normalcy of these private moments within the slumber party world. The lyrical sentimentality of Eliza McLamb's "Salt Circle" drives the tender affect of the last section of the piece with lyrics such as "I'll salt circle your brain if I have to, it doesn't feel quite right to call you a friend" and "when we take on new bodies I will scour the earth to find you again". These lyrics call upon data from interviews in which the study participants emphasized the deep obsession with their friends that they experienced throughout their childhoods. Thus, the end of the work highlights the romance of friendship while dancers wrap each other in warm embraces, cuddle close to one another, and giggle into the end of the night.

B. Rehearsal Process

Inspired by the notion of the "culture of the bedroom" connected to central conceptions of girlhood, as described by Frith (1978) and Brickman (2019), I began the creation process of a fully upbeat slumber-party inspired dance in the fall of 2023. The resulting piece, "I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours", performed at Pendleton Dance Studio in the annual production of *In The Works,* was incorporated into my developed thesis work. In the fall, I worked with 6 dancers other than myself and slowly built up the piece each week, regularly teaching a small amount of new material and reviewing and clarifying old material. Towards the end of the process in the fall, I asked the dancers to create unique handshakes with partners that I could fold into the piece to imbue the work with more personalized moments of connection. The resulting handshakes helped to deepen the social world by disrupting the unison group choreography and showing the texture of the one-on-one relationships between the dancers.

When I began the process of adding on to my work from the fall in the spring, this time with 13 other dancers instead of 6, I made sure to begin the process more collaboratively, asking dancers to create their own duets early on in the semester. I wanted to incorporate these moments of personalized connection throughout the piece and thought it would be important to begin developing this vocabulary at the beginning of the process. The process of adding twice the amount of dancers to the piece I choreographed in the fall took longer than I had expected but it also offered the time to edit and clarify the piece for both new and returning dancers. With this new space to review my previous choreography, I added additional moments of connection between the dancers to add more dynamics outside of the unison choreography.

The opportunity to revise my choreography from the fall encouraged me to include narrative elements throughout the piece. For example, I added a moment where one dancer falls to the ground in the midst of unison choreography and is made fun of before being wrapped up in a prolonged hug. In addition, I appreciated having the time to clarify and review movement with dancers so that they could feel more confident with the material. I learned that building in time to review and clean movement is an important part of my choreographic process, especially while working with such a large group. Thus, during the majority of my rehearsals I would build in time to review previously taught material, learn new choreography, and run the full piece at least one time.

C. <u>Performance Reflections</u>

I could not have predicted the impact that this work would have and was deeply grateful to hear feedback from many audience members and dancers after the performance. Perhaps the most meaningful impact to me personally was that after each show, numerous friends reached

out to tell me that they cried at the end of the piece. My closest friends, who inspired the making

of the piece, emphasized that they were particularly moved by the work and cried more each

time they watched it. By the last show on Saturday night, a few of the dancers were actively

crying on stage at the end of the piece at the same time as some of my closest friends curled up

together back-stage and cried while watching from the wings. In these moments, I knew that my

piece had touched people in ways that were deeper than I could have imagined.

One friend reached out to me after the show asking if I would like to hear their personal

analysis of the piece. They explained that the piece moved them to introspect on the

expansiveness of being femme. They wrote,

> "As someone who grew up being a girl but now am reluctant to be called 'woman', I
> think a lot about myself as a girl. I view 'girl' as both gender-nonconforming and fun.
> Being a woman isn't for me, but being a girl is not so bad and this piece reminded me of
> the fun I had being a girl and how sometimes I wish I could still be a girl. 'Girlhood'
> shines as a sigil of playfulness, of viewing gender as a toy, not a creed, not an obligation
> or chore, but filled with excitement and joy…so much of the elasticity of girlhood shines
> through in these interaction [between dancers], laden with love that you are too young to
> understand"

The notion of the "elasticity" of girlhood reminds me of Brickman's (2019) conceptualization of

the queer temporality of girlhood. While children are certainly socialized into a gender binary,

they are often also afforded the opportunity to formulate senses of identity outside of

heteronormative roles, as they are considered "not-yet-straight". The fact that my work was able

to capture a piece of the expansiveness that exists within girlhood and inspire others to reflect on

their complicated relationships to gender feels empowering.

In addition to unexpected responses, it was affirming to hear my choreographic goals

reflected back to me by audience members. Multiple audience members commented on the

warmth and tenderness of the end of the work, which was the exact affect that I had hoped to

evoke when envisioning the extension of the joyous piece I choreographed in the fall semester. Moreover, I heard various interpretations of the work that highlighted its complexity, especially in its portrayal of femininity, strength, and queerness. It was particularly rewarding to hear that the emotional texture and nuance that I aimed to imbue the piece with was received by audience members in a myriad of ways.

On top of feedback from audience members, many of the dancers who were part of the piece wrote letters about the personal impact of the choreographic process. A couple of dancers mentioned that the incorporation of queerness into the work felt especially meaningful and resonant, commenting on the complexity of navigating sexuality in their own lives. The fact that the process had such a profound impact on some of the dancers themselves has been the most rewarding aspect of the work.

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Appendices:

    A. <u>Appendix I: Informed Consent Form</u>

Project Title: Interpreting Childhood Friendships Among Girls
Principal Investigator: Sophie Kim
Email: skim6993@scrippscollege.edu

<u>**KEY INFORMATION**</u>

My project:
This research project is for my senior thesis as a Sociology and Dance dual major at Scripps College. I am the Principal Investigator for this project and a student at Scripps College conducting a research study about how young adults interpret their friendships among girls from childhood. My purpose is to provide an analysis of the unique or non-normative ways that girls have relational experiences beyond the scope of possibilities portrayed in mainstream media and encouraged by society. The results of my research will be uploaded to Scholarship@Claremont, an online database of published research from students at the Claremont Colleges, as part of my dual major thesis. Any student who is at least 18 years of age and identifies with having girlhood as an identifying experience in their childhoods is welcome to participate in the study.

What Participating Involves:
I have a series of open-ended questions about your interpretation of your friendships with girls in childhood for the interview, and I anticipate this taking between 30 and 45 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded on a portable recording device (my phone) and I will also be taking notes throughout the interview. I will make sure to highlight– both before the interview and before asking any potentially sensitive questions– that you may skip any question that you are not comfortable answering.

Voluntary Participation and Right of Refusal:
Your participation in this project is voluntary, and you may discontinue and withdraw your consent at any time, for any reason, and without penalty. I will not ask you any questions about illegal activities or immigration status and I ask that you do not reveal any such information to me about yourself or others. If for any reason you would like to stop the interview, please just let me know. You may also refuse to answer any questions that I ask, and either stop the interview or ask to move on to the next question. If you would like me to omit anything you say during the interview, you may alert me to any segments that you would like omitted and I will do so during the transcription process. You may also ask that I destroy all records of your participation,

including deleting email correspondence and deleting audio recording files and written documents.

Possible Risks and Discomforts:
Participation in this study will likely involve minimal risk to you. The questions you will be asked will be similar to what you encounter in your daily life. In the event that you experience any emotional discomfort, please let me know immediately. You may also contact The Monsour Counseling Center at (909) 621-8202 if you are a student at the Claremont Colleges.

Confidentiality:
I will take every precaution to maintain your confidentiality as a participant in this research. While the questions I will ask will be fairly low risk, as they are questions about friendship that come up in every day conversation, if you have had any experiences with friendships with girls in childhood that were particularly distressing, there is the possibility for highly sensitive information to be shared and you may want to carefully consider whether or not you would like to participate in the study before consenting to participate. I will not include your name or any identifying details (e.g., image, voice) in the write-up of this research project or in any of my presentations that result from this project. The audio recording will be made on a portable recording device, my phone, and then uploaded to my password-protected laptop. The digital recording of this interview will be stored on a password-protected laptop and transcribed within 14 days. Any identifying information that you reveal in the interview will be deleted from the transcription. The recording will then be deleted, and the transcription will be stored on a password-protected laptop. No identifying information will be included on any documents associated with this study, except for this consent form. But this consent form will be stored separately from your responses.

Possible Benefits:
You are not expected to benefit directly from participation in this study.

Compensation:
You will not receive compensation for participation in this study.

IRB Review and Impartial Third Party:
This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Scripps College. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator you may contact the Scripps College Institutional Review Board at irb@scrippscollege.edu.

Signature for Consent
You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you are at least 18 years of age and have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

You may ask questions concerning the research before agreeing to participate or during the experiment. If you have any questions regarding this research, you may contact Sophie Kim at skim6993@scrippscollege.edu.

Print Participant's Name: _____

Date: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Principal Investigator's Signature: _____

Date: _____

B. Appendix II: Interview Questionnaire

1. What were your friendships with girls like growing up?
    1. Who were you friends with?
    2. Where is one place you spent a lot of time with close friends?
2. Why do you think you were drawn to these friends?
3. How did you feel when you were with these friends?
4. Do you think your friendships with girls impacted your sense of self or identity? If so, how?
5. What kinds of feedback did you receive from family, teachers, and friends about your friendships with girls in childhood?
    1. Did your family, teachers, or friends ever suggest that the nature of your relationships with girls were "inappropriate" or should change in any way? If so, when did you receive this feedback?
    2. Would you attribute any of this feedback to any specific cultural factors in your home or schooling environments? If so, what were those cultural factors?
6. What do you think those friendships meant then, compared to how you think about them now?
7. How do you think the environment you're in now differs from the environment you grew up in, especially as it relates to attitudes towards queer relationships and identities?
    1. In what ways, if at all, has this change in environment impacted the way you've thought about your friendships with other girls from childhood?

8. Would you consider any of your friendships in your childhood to be non-normative or outside of the scope of possibilities for relationships expected of non-male people? If so, how?

C. Appendix III: Dance Performance Video Link

https://youtu.be/6fTjtwScD8A