

'I feel pretty': beauty as an affective-material process

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Abstract

This article explores the potential of feminist new materialisms and theories of affect for reframing how we might think about beauty and the body. Through an exploration of girls, beauty and the school ball (prom), the article engages with Karen Barad's concept of intra-action to conceptualise beauty as an affective-material process. This perspective involves an ontological shift in how girls, bodies and beauty are understood; from thinking about beauty and the human as discursively produced, towards a relational approach that conceptualises materiality and affect as co-constitutive forces. The article is interested in how such a framing might invite ways of understanding beauty that avoid binary frameworks, such as good/bad, subject/object and discourse/matter. I consider the potential this might offer feminist analyses of beauty, where the focus is less on what beauty is or what it means, and more on how it comes to be.

Keywords

Affect, Barad, beauty, bodies, feminist new materialisms, intra-action

Introduction

Beauty is a complex and contested terrain for feminist scholarship. For decades, the relationship between beauty and the female body has been a source of feminist analysis and debate. Amid this work, two competing approaches to beauty have emerged (Craig, 2006). One approach highlights the way beauty norms operate as an oppressive force in women's lives (Bartky, 1990; Wolf, 1992; Bordo, 1993; Jeffreys, 2005); while the other sheds light on women's experiences of beauty as

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a potential source of agency or pleasure (Friday, 1996; Scarry, 1999). More recently, there is growing concern over the productiveness of the oppression/empowerment dichotomy for extending feminist understandings of beauty (Cahill, 2003; Colebrook, 2006; Craig, 2006; Felski, 2006; Coleman and Moreno Figueroa, 2010). Claire Colebrook (2006), for instance, suggests that feminist politics would benefit from a pragmatic approach moving beyond questions of whether beauty is 'good' or 'bad' for women. These familiar questions often confine feminist politics to dualistic framings and cause and effect logic, where beauty is conceived as either solely oppressive or unproblematic. Within dualistic positionings, the complex, nuanced and often contradictory relations between beauty and the female body may go unnoticed – an aspect this article seeks to explore.

In an attempt to move beyond binary thinking, Maxine Craig wonders whether 'perhaps feminist theory remains stalled in this dichotomy because it has been asking the wrong questions about beauty' (2006: 159). Engaging with Craig's pertinent question, this article considers the generative potential of feminist new materialisms (Barad, 2007) and theories of affect (Deleuze, 1988; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010) for reframing how we might think about beauty and the questions we might (not) ask. It is interested in exploring beauty in ways that avoid binary frameworks, such as subject/object and discourse/matter. Beauty and the feminine body are often framed as separate entities where beauty norms work to constrain, objectify or empower the feminine subject. Here, discursive understandings of beauty shape how female bodies are understood and experienced – an approach that has been crucial for attending to the ways power relations (and discursive practices) produce the female body in particular ways. The aim of this article is to consider how feminist new materialisms ontologically reorient the relations in-between beauty and the body towards an emergent process or becoming. In doing so, it turns its attention towards the relational forces of materiality and affect.

The following exploration of beauty is situated within the context of girls and the high school ball (prom). Previous research has highlighted how beauty ideals, expectations and practices are pervasive forces in girls' experiences of the event; for instance, the expectation to wear a dress and make-up to the ball (Best, 2000; Smith, 2012). These studies document the discursive conditions of the event, illustrating how dominant discourses of femininity structure how girls are expected to look, dress and behave. Alongside these pervasive expectations, the school ball is a rich landscape of material and affective forces: clothing, beauty-body practices, feelings and sensations. The article draws on fieldwork from a study interested in the human and more-than-human forces that collaboratively produce girls and the school ball (Ingram, 2019). The focus for this article is to consider how theoretical tools from feminist new materialisms invite an ontological shift in how girls, bodies and beauty are understood; from thinking about the human as discursively produced towards a relational becoming involving multiple co-constitutive forces. In a new materialist sense, it considers how this approach to beauty might provide a

larger scope for who, or what, comes to *matter* in its becoming and how (Barad, 2007).

Beginning with the *how*, the following discussion explores beauty as a process (Cahill, 2003; Coleman and Moreno Figueroa, 2010). It is interested in the way beauty emerges as a feeling (Colebrook, 2006) where the concept of ‘pretty’ is more than a discursive positioning. In Rebecca Coleman and Mónica Moreno Figueroa’s analysis of beauty, they argue it is ‘important to see beauty as an embodied social, cultural and economic process’ (2010: 358). Drawing on theories of affect (Clough, 2007), the authors posit an understanding of beauty as *hope*: ‘an embodied affective process or inclination’ (Coleman and Moreno Figueroa, 2010: 360). Their conceptualisation of beauty is underpinned by a desire to explore it as both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ (Felski, 2006), manifesting a nuanced understanding of beauty that attends to both its limitations and possibilities (Cahill, 2003).

In what follows, I take up the idea of beauty as a process through a feminist new materialist framework. I bring together the work of feminist philosopher and quantum physicist Karen Barad (2003, 2007) and affect theory to explore *feeling-pretty* as an intra-active affective-material process. Moving away from a focus on what beauty is, Barad’s posthumanist framework of *agential realism* offers a way of conceptualising beauty as emergent – a process or becoming. Barad conceives the world as entanglements: in her words, ‘existence is not an individual affair’ (2007: ix). Central to this relational understanding of the world is Barad’s concept of *intra-action*: a process denoting a relationship of entanglement between organisms and matter (human and nonhuman), where there are no inherent boundaries or prior independent existence. The notion of intra-action differs from the concept of ‘interaction’ which is premised on a relationship between distinctly separate bodies and entities. Instead, Barad explains intra-action as ‘the mutual constitution of entangled agencies’ (2007: 33). It is a material-discursive process where agencies emerge through their intra-action rather than precede it. In other words, they emerge as an effect of their mutual engagement.

Applying this idea to the context of the article, the girl and the school ball are not discrete separate entities; rather, they emerge through their entanglement. In other words, the school ball becomes with the girl and the girl becomes with the school ball (Hultman and Lenz Taguchi, 2010); one is not prior to the other. The term *ball-girl* used in the article denotes this mutual co-constitutive entanglement. The concept of intra-action can be useful for thinking about the becoming of bodies and beauty, where the relationship between materiality and discourse is one of mutual co-constitution. It offers a way of conceptualising beauty where discursive practices are related to the material world and vice versa: one is not prior or privileged over the other. I consider how this framing reorients questions about beauty, where it is less about what beauty means and more about *how* it comes to be.

Brief methodological details

To develop this idea, the article draws on verbal fragments from a study conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand exploring girls' experiences of the school ball. Similar to the prom in the US, school balls have a long history in New Zealand secondary schooling. The study involved forty-one girls in their final two years of schooling (Years 12 and 13), from two urban state-funded schools: one co-educational and the other an all-girls school. Participants were invited to share their experiences of the school ball visually (through participant-generated photographs and video) and verbally (through focus groups and individual interviews). In this article, verbal data enact specific material-discursive assemblages through which beauty and the ball-girl *become*. Data *become* within particular ontological, epistemological and methodological structures (St. Pierre, 2013). The verbal fragments that inform this article are conceptualised within a posthumanist methodological approach (MacLure, 2013; Mazzei, 2013; St. Pierre, 2013), where voice does not emanate from an individual subject, and nor can voice be separated from 'the milieu in which it exists' (Mazzei, 2013: 734).

Drawing on Baradian understandings of performativity, Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (2012) suggest that narratives (i.e. verbal data) can be understood as enactments rather than descriptions. In this framing, narration can be conceptualised as a performative practice, acknowledging the entangled material-discursive and affective forces in girls' tellings. As opposed to a representation of 'reality', narration (language) can be understood as 'material articulations of the world' (Barad, 2007: 139). As girls discuss the school ball, multiple forces and intensities are implicated in these 'material articulations', including space and time (Juelskjær, 2013), and the researcher (Bodén, 2015). Narratives/language are material-discursive intra-activity. As such, thinking about girls' narratives as data is to understand them as open-ended and continual becomings.

In alignment with this open-ended approach, the study employs a posthumanist conceptualisation of voice (Mazzei, 2013, 2016). Drawing inspiration from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1984), Mazzei theorises voice as 'an assemblage, a complex network of human and nonhuman agents that exceeds the traditional notion of the individual' (2013: 734). It is a *voice without a subject*; there is no individual person or participant in an interview to which a single voice can be linked – everything is entangled – researcher-participant-data-theory-analysis. We can think of the posthumanist voice as 'uncontainable', not bound to a singular body or by discursive and material binaries (Mazzei, 2013: 739). Therefore, words in the following 'fragments' (MacLure, 2013) are not attributed to individual subjects (i.e. participants or researcher), nor are the comments from the researcher differentiated from those of the participants. Mazzei's posthumanist stance towards interview data and voice acknowledges the array of forces and intensities (human and more-than-human) that are entangled in the material-discursive enactments through which the ball-girl and beauty become.

The body as an intra-active becoming

Researchers have become increasingly interested in thinking about the body in terms of *becoming*, rather than *being* (Grosz, 1994; Budgeon, 2003; Coleman, 2008, 2009; Fox, 2012; Coffey, 2013; Ivinson and Renold, 2013). Employing Deleuzian and feminist theory, Coleman develops a feminist approach to understanding bodies as *becomings*: in Coleman's words, 'the term "the becoming of bodies" refers to a conviction that bodies must be conceived as processes which are constantly moving rather than as discrete, autonomous entities' (2009: 1). For Deleuze (1992), a body is not an independent entity, but is in process – always becoming through the connections it makes with multiple and different bodies (human and nonhuman). In this approach, the body is inseparable from its relations with the world. Bodies are no longer autonomous bounded beings but are constituted relationally; for example, the girl body does not pre-exist relations but becomes via continual and open-ended connections with other bodies, things, ideas and practices. One implication of this approach is that the binary distinction between subject (i.e. the girl) and objects is no longer viable. Bodies can be thought of as assemblages of all manner of things – human and more-than-human – and it is through these entangled relations that the body is constituted or becomes.

Both Deleuze and Barad, among others, propose a relational perspective towards bodies. The meaning of the term relational – its intricacies and dynamics – can differ depending on the theoretical framework in which it is used. In this article, I draw on a Baradian framing to think of bodies as intra-actively becoming via an array of forces. It is a relational approach premised on no ontological separation between bodies, discourses and other relations. I draw on Barad to conceptualise the ball-girl-body as 'material-discursive phenomena' (2003: 823): an approach that posits the body as becoming through particular material-discursive configurings in any given moment. In this framing, bodies are not pre-existing objects with clearly defined boundaries and properties; rather, ball-girl-bodies materialise through intra-activity, and it is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of phenomena become determinate (Barad, 2003). What emerges as 'femininity' or 'beauty', for instance, is unstable performative phenomena (an enactment) rather than a fixed attribute of bodies. Such an approach provides a way to account for multiple and open-ended becomings of beauty and ball-girl-bodies that include material-affective forces.

This article follows other feminist theorists who have brought Barad's theoretical tools into conversation with the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of affect (Hultman and Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Ringrose and Renold, 2014, 2016; Pomerantz and Raby, 2018; Wolfe and Rasmussen, 2020). Theories of affect are useful for fostering a relational approach to beauty and bodies, where understandings are not limited to language and discourse. From Spinoza's *affectus*, Deleuze and Guattari theorise affect as 'an ability to affect and be affected': a pre-personal intensity that can augment or diminish a body's capacity to act (Massumi, 1987: xiv). Characterising 'the turn to affect' in body studies, Lisa Blackman and

Couze Venn suggest that theories of affect offer a ‘rethinking of the concept of embodiment’ which ‘take us beyond discourse and the social construction of bodily matters’ (2010: 9). For Patricia Clough, ‘the turn to affect’ points ‘to a dynamism immanent to bodily matter and matter generally’ (2008: 1). While affect can be registered bodily as intensity (Mulcahy, 2012), it is not restricted to, or contained within, the human subject or body. The idea of affect as ‘the capacity to affect and be affected’ is relational: as Massumi describes, ‘it places affect in the space of relation [. . .]. It focuses on the middle, directly on what happens *between*’ (2015: 91; emphasis in original). Or in a Baradian sense, affect does not belong to specific bodies but flows intra-actively through dynamic shifting entanglements (Barad, 2007).

This approach has implications for how we understand the production of bodily capacities, including emotions. In a relational framing, the capacity of a body can ‘never be defined by a body alone but is always aided and abetted by, and dovetails with, the field or context of its force-relations’ (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 3). This means that ball-girl bodily capacities are not limited to discourse, nor do they derive from an individual human body. In the following discussion, emotion is understood not as an individually embodied feeling or response, but as part of an ‘affective flow that produces bodies and the social world’ (Fox, 2015: 301). Attention turns to what emotions do (Ahmed, 2004), what actions they perform and what e/affects follow. Emotions are conceptualised as affect (Ahmed, 2004); however, affect is also more than emotion (Massumi, 2002). Affect is understood as material (Mulcahy, 2012) in that it ‘registers on the body’ and ‘affects’ other bodies (MacLure, 2010: 284), yet it is more than human. For example, the affective atmosphere of the school ball can be felt and sensed bodily, yet it exceeds the individual human (ball-girl) body. This article is interested in how affect (including emotion) is productive – it does something. The flow of affect is a productive force in the becoming of beauty and the ball-girl, both limiting and expanding what is possible. Importantly, affects are not tethered to human intention or agency, nor are they wholly reducible to discursive practices. It is this potential that makes *affect* a fruitful theoretical entanglement in this feminist new materialist approach to thinking about beauty.

‘I feel so pretty!’

In order to elucidate an understanding of beauty as an affective-material process, consider the array of relations in the following fragment, including dresses, dancing, make-up, friends, feelings of enjoyment and surprise:

What are you looking forward to . . . the good things about the ball? [. . .]
 Looking pretty
 Yeah, I just like dressing up real nice
 Taking good photos

Cause you never get the chance to dress up like that fancy, for anything else, so you can just get dressed up and 'I feel so pretty!' [Laughter]
 Seeing everyone is actually a highlight because everyone looks good
 Especially because like people like us who don't wear heaps of make-up to school, or people you only see in your sport teams, you don't usually see them dressed up real nice, and then you see them at the ball and you're like . . .
 Whoa! [In unison]
 Damn! Is that the same person?
 Some people it's actually hard to recognise, like wow! Wowee.
 (Year 13, focus group, four voices)

This fragment enacts aspects of the ball that participants are looking forward to: dancing, 'looking pretty', 'dressing up real nice', 'taking good photos', feelings of pleasure and surprise in seeing both themselves and their peers looking different. These 'highlights' can be understood as material-discursive practices entangled in the production of ball-girl-bodies. Material-discursive entanglements involve multiple relations including evening dresses, beauty practices, body work, their own bodies, bodies of friends, everyday bodies at school, sporty bodies, looking and feeling pretty, beauty ideals, discourses of femininity, the beauty industry, photographs, seeing others and being seen. Collective exclamations such as 'Whoa!' and comments like 'I feel so pretty!' create a sense of the affective forces – feelings, emotions and bodily sensations. These material-discursive and affective entanglements form dynamic shifting assemblages that co-constitute and enact ball-girl-bodies as material-discursive phenomena. In this framing, ball-girl-bodies are inseparable from material objects, embodied practices and discourses: they form an interdependent relationship, always affecting and being affected by one another (Barad, 2007; Lenz Taguchi, 2012). It is a continual intra-active process, where ball-girl-bodies become unstable emergent phenomena continually (re)assembling at any given moment.

Thinking about the concept of beauty in relation with girls and the school ball, the expectation and desire to 'look good' are central. This process involves an array of material-discursive embodied practices that intra-actively produce ball-girl-bodies in particular ways; for instance, the look and feel of wearing make-up and false eyelashes, the styling of hair and nails. The following fragment draws attention to the ways girls enact 'looking good' or 'pretty' as a felt quality:

What are the positives about the ball?
 Finding a dress that looks nice
 Getting to like, feel like you're looking good
 I feel pretty [Singing]
 [Laughter]
 Having an opportunity to get your make-up done and like expressing yourself, cause like at school you have to wear a uniform and no one really knows like what sort of

stuff you're into, so you can choose, if you go to the ball you can show what your opinions are

And like seeing all your friends dressed up as well, it's really nice, it's like you normally see them in school uniform or sweaty sports gear, so it's nice

Getting nice photos to keep, not that mine were nice but

Yeah, I think like a fun night with your friends is always exciting.

(Year 13, focus group, five voices)

Here, girls enact 'getting to like, feel like you're looking good' as a positive aspect of the school ball. A participant supports this comment by singing 'I feel pretty', a song from the musical *West Side Story*. The idea of 'feeling pretty' resonates with the earlier fragment, where girls share their thoughts on what they like about the ball: 'you can just get dressed up and "I feel so pretty!"'. The utterance 'I feel so pretty' emerged in a light-hearted jovial singing voice, not dissimilar to the cheery enactment of the *West Side Story* song, the comment sparking laughter from their peers. In these fragments, the concept of 'pretty' emerges as a feeling rather than a fixed attribute associated with someone's identity.

'Feeling pretty' is an affect produced in the intra-activity of various matter – where things affect and are affected by other matter. The intra-action of bodies, beauty-body practices, having make-up professionally applied by a make-up artist, long formal ball dresses, corsages, along with discursive beauty ideals associated with femininity, produce the affective response of 'feeling pretty'. Pretty, in this sense, is associated with dominant understandings of femininity and beauty, including wearing make-up, painted nails and a dress. The ways girls enacted 'feeling pretty' through their cheery light-hearted utterances and singing evoked a sense of playfulness and 'dress up', perhaps even a sense of artificiality. This sense of playfulness resonates in the following comment:

So yeah, I think most girls are just like 'oh yeah I want to look my best, this is my one occasion a year where I get to like go all out and be the most ridiculous', but it's nice, it's nice. You get to feel like a princess, if that's what you're into [...] so yes, don't know how I feel about that one but yeah, I'll get to dance with all the princesses so that'll be fun. [Laughter]

(Year 13, individual interview, one voice)

In this fragment, the embodied beauty practices associated with the school ball produce the affective responses of 'feeling pretty' and feeling 'like a princess, if that's what you're into'. These affective qualities circulate in-between bodies and other materialities, including clothing, shoes, beauty-body practices and photographs. There is a sense of whimsy and temporality to the enactment of 'feeling pretty'; it is not a permanent state, nor does it reveal an 'authentic' feminine self. Rather, 'feeling pretty' is one component within a broader 'flow of affect' (Fox, 2015) that constitutes beauty and the ball-girl-body.

‘Feeling pretty’: capacities and constraints

Examining affective relations is argued to raise new questions for feminist research (Coleman, 2009), moving analyses beyond the understanding that certain things or practices have negative effects on bodies. Instead, relations are theorised as productive of particular affects. In the context of this research, affects, perhaps feelings, sensations or actions, may limit or extend the becoming of ball-girl-bodies in varied ways. This approach offers a nuanced understanding of the relations in-between girls, beauty, power and resistance, that includes but is not limited to discourse. Rather than thinking about how girls resist or accommodate discursive beauty ideals, emphasis is realigned to the relations, intensities and flows that intra-actively produce beauty as an affective-material process.

The idea of bodies as processes (i.e. becoming) rather than stable entities invites a shift in focus from what a body *is*, to what a body can do (Deleuze, 1988; Coleman, 2008). Deleuze (1988) offers a way to think about how relations between bodies and other ‘things’ produce affects. For Deleuze, bodies are defined not by what they are but by their affective capacities. These capacities are not pre-existing but are produced via relations within assemblages. In this article, relations of affect (e.g. ‘feeling pretty’) create conditions of possibility for what a ball-girl-body can do and become. ‘Feeling pretty’ as an affective relation works to limit or expand the becoming of ball-girl-bodies. The affects of ‘feeling pretty’ function to direct ball-girl-bodies towards certain objects and practices. Here, affect is what ‘sticks’ or sustains the connection between particular ideas, values and things (Ahmed, 2010): in this instance, beauty practices and things associated with traditional norms of femininity, gendered beauty ideals and the lucrative beauty industry. This connection is evident in the expectation that girls would wear make-up to the ball and the potential embarrassment or shame someone might experience if they did not:

I think people would laugh at you if you didn’t wear make-up

Mmm [In agreement]

What about someone who isn’t into make-up?

You wear make-up; if you’re not into make-up, you don’t go to the ball.

(Year 13, focus group, three voices)

In this fragment, dominant discourses of femininity circulate as co-constitutive forces in the becoming of beauty and the ball-girl-body. As one participant notes, ‘if you’re not into make-up, you don’t go to the ball’. Another participant echoes this sentiment: ‘it’s not really an option, everyone does it, no one thinks about not doing it’. The ‘decision’ to wear make-up is not located in the individual human subject. Rather, as Barad suggests, ‘intentionality might better be understood as attributable to a complex network of human and nonhuman agents, including historically specific sets of material conditions’ (2007: 23). The network of relations, in this instance, includes the enduring discursive expectation to wear

make-up and a perceived threat (affective force) of being laughed at if someone did not. These relations produce a powerful exclusionary affective force: 'if you're not into make-up, you don't go to the ball'.

The material-discursive practice of wearing make-up is an integral element in girls' enactments of 'feeling pretty' and the capacity to 'look different'. Pondering what was 'good' about the ball, a participant noted the following:

I guess it gives you the opportunity to try looking different, 'cause I know especially for me and quite a few of my friends we don't really, I don't really know how to apply make-up that well. I'll put mascara on or a bit of foundation, but never so like nicely as at the ball. So like last ball was the first time I had ever seen myself with full-on make-up, so that was quite nice to try something new. Um, yeah I don't know really, I guess it's just you get to try looking different to how you usually do.

(Year 13, individual interview, one voice)

Conceptualised as an enactment, 'looking different to how you usually do' is enacted or produced through material-discursive relations of bodies, make-up, 'usual' beauty-body practices and the feeling of trying something new. One participant noted how she usually wears only a small amount of foundation and mascara; therefore, seeing herself with 'full-on make-up' felt novel and different. 'Looking different' is not an attribute of a particular body, for example a body that changes from one state to another; rather, it is an enactment produced through particular configurations. The enactment of 'looking different' involves multiple temporalities and bodies, such as a girl's 'usual' everyday-body, school-girl-body and the ball-girl-body. One body is not prior to the other; instead, they are inseparable and mutually dependent on one another. Neither body is fixed or stable, as they are continually reconfigured depending on affective relations.

'Looking different' is a specific form of embodiment (or enactment) co-constituted through boundary-making practices that distinguish the ball-girl-body from the everyday-body and school-girl-body (Barad, 2007). For another participant, having make-up applied by a professional, not having 'fluffy hair' and wearing fake eyelashes are material-discursive practices that collaboratively enact the ball-girl-body as 'looking different'. These productive practices are entangled with, and produced through, affective forces such as 'making an effort' and 'feeling pretty'. As mentioned, these affects are intimately connected with, and shaped by, dominant discourses of feminine beauty and the beauty industry: for instance, the expectation that girls would wear make-up and style their hair for the occasion. While pervasive, expectations and beauty norms are just one element within a broader flow of affect that produces beauty-body practices and the ball-girl-body. Consider the affective dynamics in the following discussion:

There's a huge expectation to make an improvement to yourself

Oh yeah, hard, like everyone is like 'oh I need to look better than what I do normally'

[Scoff] Screw that, I always look good
[Group laughter]
In terms of making that effort and looking better, you mentioned make-up ...
Your hair and even your dress
Losing weight
Oh my gosh, so many people are talking about that
Everyone is fasting for the ball
I'm not
Hell no
(Year 12, focus group, four voices)

This fragment enacts various expectations surrounding the becoming of ball-girl-bodies, including the expectation to 'make an improvement to yourself' and 'look better than what I do normally'. These expectations form part of the affective process that also includes material-discursive relations of hair, make-up, dresses, beauty norms, dieting, body image and body satisfaction, affective bodily responses such as a scoff, laughter and feelings of indignation. Conceptualising bodies as becoming, ball-girl-bodies are produced through but not determined by their relations with other things (Coleman, 2009): for instance, while some girls may feel pressure to lose weight and fast before the ball, others may not, as evident in the dismissal of dieting and refusal to lose weight in this fragment.

This 'resistance' can be conceptualised as an 'affective movement' or process (Fox and Alldred, 2016) within a particular ball-girl-body-beauty assemblage. The new materialist approach to power and resistance posited by Fox and Alldred suggests that the capacity for 'resisting' emerges through 'material forces and intensities' within various assemblages (2016: 128). The affective movement is not stable; rather, it flows and shifts as relations assemble and reassemble in open-ended assemblages. Conceiving 'resistance' as an affective movement aligns with a new materialist approach to agency: a quality or capacity that emerges 'in-between' wider relations, including the material (Bennett, 2005; Barad, 2007). In the intra-action of bodies, corporeal practices, feelings, ideas, values, body image and confidence, the ball-girl-body materialises in ways that may destabilise beauty norms and expectations; for instance, rejecting the idea that the female body needs improvement through make-up and dieting.

Feminist analyses that employ a Butlerian/Foucauldian approach to bodies and beauty have largely understood agency as inseparable from subjectivity, and that the individual operates as an effect of power, for instance through discursive formations (Coole, 2005; Frost, 2011). If the subject is constituted through discursive practices, then agency lies in the potential for discourses to be undermined, subverted and reworked. This conceptualisation of agency has enabled researchers to document girls' subversive and resistant practices to hegemonic gendered and sexual scripts (Gonick, 2003; Harris, 2004; Kelly et al., 2005; Renold and Ringrose, 2008). A feminist new materialist approach offers a rethinking of girls' bodies and agency beyond notions of human will and intentionality (Bennett, 2005; Barad,

2007). Following Barad, agency is not a 'choice' in a humanist sense, but a quality that emerges via intra-active relations, including affect. Agency does not reside in the individual subject and is not restricted to possibilities of human action; instead, capacities are produced through particular material-discursive and affective entanglements.

What might this approach to beauty offer?

Thinking about beauty with feminist new materialisms *and* affect theory generates new questions; while making other, perhaps more familiar, questions redundant. This capacity is heightened due to their shared interest in relational ontologies, attention towards matter and the nonhuman, and a critique of dualisms (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2016). Conceptualising beauty as an intra-active affective-material process opens up questions about beauty that can avoid binary frameworks. The ontological reorientation offered by the concept of intra-action renders dichotomous framings of beauty unintelligible; for instance, harmful/pleasurable, subject/object and discursive/material. Binaries become unstable and these concepts are no longer exclusive of one another (Craig, 2006). Intra-activity also provides a reworking of causality in that causal relations are not pre-existing distinct entities (Barad, 2007). Therefore, a linear notion of cause and effect, where one distinct entity affects another, no longer makes sense.

When beauty is conceptualised as a process or emergent phenomena, then possibilities for reimagining beauty are open-ended. Barad's concept of intra-action invites an understanding where beauty 'is never self-evident, but always enacted in the event' (Wolfe and Rasmussen, 2020: 189). Therefore, understandings are not limited to discourse and the human body; capacities and constraints become less determinate. This does not mean that anything or everything is possible; rather, capacities and limitations are continually shifting through on-going relational matterings (or intra-activity). Discursive forces are not ignored; instead, norms and ideals become part of the entanglement that produces beauty and the body. As a result, understandings of beauty might reinforce, supersede or potentially rework pre-conceived discursive boundaries; for instance, expectations to engage in beauty-body work. The focus is not so much on what beauty means, but rather how beauty emerges in relation *with* bodies, school ball spatial-temporalities, embodied practices, expectations, feelings and sensations.

Conceptualising beauty as an affective-material process entails a shift in the politics, where beauty is not ascribed to bodies and identities (i.e. a fixed identity or quality that one can reveal or solidify). Understanding beauty as emergent via intra-active entanglements generates new questions about agency and resistance, where 'resistance' can be conceived of as an affective movement (Fox and Alldred, 2016). Affective politics are no longer tied to human intention, nor is agency located in an individual body. This framing of agency has been met with caution by some feminists, amid concern it might result in a loss of feminist politics. Yet for others, including Barad, an ethico-political focus remains central in a

feminist new materialist approach (Osgood and Robinson, 2019; Revelles-Benavente et al., 2019). As Sarah Truman notes, ‘feminist new materialist concepts bring an important political orientation to conducting research that is accountable, situated, and responsible’ (2019: 7–8). This involves a shift from a place of critique to one of reconstruction (Osgood and Robinson, 2019). This capacity is appealing to feminist scholars who feel a sense of unease or disinterest with conventional mobilisations of critique (Barad, cited in Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012; MacLure, 2015). In relation to beauty, this might include critique (and questions) that are underpinned by dichotomous positionings of beauty practices as good/bad and oppressive/empowering.

Feminist new materialisms are grounded in ‘a politics of entanglement’ (Truman, 2019: 9); as such, they demand a rethinking of critique. This rethinking occurs at an ontological and epistemological level. Critique, in a conventional sense, becomes untenable with new materialist thought as judgements often rely on representation and binary logic, such as true and false, good and bad (MacLure, 2015). Within a new materialist approach, Maggie MacLure explains how ‘critique cannot be conceived as a matter of pulling the rug out of from under common sense or false consciousness, or lifting the veil of ideology, neoliberal discourse of media spin. We always start in the middle of things’ (2015: 97). This article has been an attempt to explore beauty from ‘the middle’. Conceiving beauty as an affective-material process, there is no clear beginning or end, nor are there separate pre-existing entities (i.e. the body).

The concepts of affect and intra-action offer an ontological shift in how we conceptualise beauty. As Rita Felski notes: ‘Feminist perspectives on beauty, it appears, often have much to do with the discipline or methodological framework within which a scholar is situated’ (2006: 277); this article is no exception. My intention has not been to offer any ‘truths’ or fixed answers about beauty and the female body, as this would be antithetical to the article’s theoretical framing; rather, the aim has been to consider the becoming of beauty when conceptualised with feminist new materialisms and theories of affect. What questions might it open up for how we conceptualise the relations in-between beauty and the body? And what questions become redundant? An ontological shift in how we conceptualise beauty entails different ‘answers’: answers that might not be so neatly packaged in the form of a firm resolution. A lack of determinacy is part of the potential of feminist new materialist thought. This is not an abandonment of politics; rather, it is a generative ethico-political approach that opens a wider space for new questions.

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