Femininities, School Balls and New Materialism

[Final copy accepted for publication]

Ingram, T. (2024). Femininities, School Balls, and New Materialism. In: Allen, L., Rasmussen, M.L. (eds) The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Sexuality Education. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-56681-3_89

https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-3-031-56681-3_89

Toni Ingram
Auckland University of Technology (AUT)
Auckland
New Zealand
toni.ingram@aut.ac.nz

Introduction

Schools are central players in the construction of femininities, actively shaping and regulating girls' understandings, bodies and behaviour (Paechter 2006). Schooling environments are a complicated terrain where girls are required to navigate multiple, often contradictory, discourses of femininity and girlhood. These negotiations and tensions frequently play out at a visceral bodily level where discourses of girlpower (Aapola et al. 2005) sit alongside ideas of 'appropriate' femininity and 'ladylike' behaviour (Allan 2009), shaping how girls are expected to look, dress and behave. Girls' bodies are prime subjects of school rules, critique, admiration and surveillance, where expectations and judgement largely cohere to dominant gender and sexual norms. Yet at the same time, school girl bodies function as a powerful means for the expression of personal style, identity, confidence and desire (Pomerantz 2008); potentialities that can generate a sense of resistance to dominant expectations and feminine norms. School balls and proms are fertile sites for these complex negotiations. Discourses of gender and sexuality are intimately entangled with the materiality of girls' bodies, clothing and embodied practices – all of which are integral components within the landscape of sexuality education. By focusing specifically on school balls, it is possible to trace key theoretical approaches for conceptualising femininities and the materialisation of girls' bodies. In doing so, what these approaches offer for understanding agency and resistance within the sphere of research about sexualities at school is considered.

School balls and proms have been conceptualised as potent events within the broader sexuality education assemblage (Allen and Rasmussen 2017), where “sex ed is not, nor has it ever been, confined to a teacher standing in front of a room of students, talking about sex” (McClelland and Fine 2017, p. 212). School balls are one example of the way young people are offered powerful meanings about gender and sexuality beyond the classroom walls. These events blur the boundary between official and unofficial sexual cultures of schooling (Allen 2005); while they are an ‘official’ school event, they are often held offsite on the weekend and encompass an array of pre- and post-ball activities that far exceed the jurisdiction of school control. School ball preparations, pre-ball and after-ball parties are integral to the school ball ‘event’ and the production and regulation of girls’ bodies, femininities and sexuality (Ingram 2019): dominant sartorial and beauty norms, beauty-body practices, the expectation to ‘make an effort’, negotiating ball date dynamics and parental influences are just a few of the dynamic forces that collaboratively produce girls and the school ball.

In countries like the United States and Aotearoa New Zealand, the high school prom or ball have been a tradition for many years. These events are often heralded as a quintessential high school experience and ‘rite of passage’ for young people. Amy Best’s *Prom Night* (2000) documents young people’s experiences of the American prom in relation to dominant cultural understandings. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from cultural studies, Best characterises the prom as an iconic event in American culture – a ‘coming of age’ ritual shrouded in themes of transformation and romance. She argues proms sustain the circulation of hegemonic cultural meanings and work to secure young people’s participation in dominant social norms. Best’s study highlights the gendered terrain of the prom, in that these events are primarily constructed as a feminine space, where girls are expected, or perceived to, heavily invest in the occasion. Media commentary exemplifies this construction with an overwhelming focus on girls. Popular points of debate include girls’ ‘excessive’ spending on dresses and body work (Gorrell Anstiss 2012), school rules constraining the presentation of girls’ bodies (Ward et al., 2016), and girls being refused entry to the prom due to ‘revealing’ or ‘inappropriate’ dresses (Bahou and Orenstein 2016; Valenti 2015). These gendered constructions have been understood to provide important context for understanding school girl bodies in relation to the school ball.

Over the past two decades, feminist research has brought increased attention to the enduring surveillance of school girl bodies, clothing and behaviour (Allan 2009; Happel 2013; Pomerantz 2007; Raby 2010; Renold 2005; Youdell 2006). School rules and dress codes, judgement from peers and teachers create an environment where girls 'learn' what aspects of their bodies are considered (un)acceptable to be seen. The recent reporting of girls being told to lengthen skirts to "stop distracting male staff and students" (Roy 2016) and the photoshopping of girls' yearbook photos to cover cleavage, decolletage and shoulders (Lansdorf 2021) are examples of this ongoing scrutiny. These debates illustrate the gendered discourses, sexism and 'moral panics' that continue to regulate girls' bodies and sexualities. Under the pretence of adhering to school dress codes, girls' bodies are positioned as 'problematic' – a potential 'threat to a socially acceptable' and 'productive' learning environment. This scrutiny is not limited to the confines of the classroom or school grounds, but seep into a variety of schooling practices including the school ball. In these settings, the presentation and deportment of girls' bodies comes under intense scrutiny from both peers and adults, with female students feeling more harshly judged than their male peers (L. Smith 2012).

The term 'femininities' can be understood as "ways of 'doing girl' (West and Zimmerman 1987), as the variety of forms of girlhood that are constructed and taken up in the context of the school" (Paechter 2006, p. 365), in this instance, the school ball. Theoretical tools from feminist poststructuralism and queer theory have been invaluable for analysing the discursive constitution of girls' bodies, gender and sexualities in the schooling environment. This approach has highlighted the dominant meanings that shape current understandings of girls, femininities and the school ball. Building on this knowledge, posthumanist and new materialist thought has been seen as useful for (re)conceptualising girls' bodies and femininities with particular attention to materiality. This scholarship has drawn attention to a new materialist ontology of sexuality (Allen 2015; Fox and Alldred 2017) and the work of Karen Barad (2007), offering a material-discursive frame for understanding the becoming of sexuality at school, the 'boundaries' of the school ball, bodies and sexuality education. These theoretical approaches offer different ways of conceptualising agency and resistance, providing nuanced understandings of girls' capacities and the shifting (im)possibilities within this space.

Navigating the discursive terrain

From a Foucauldian (1976) perspective, the school ball can be understood as an institutionalised ritual of governmentality constituted through normative discourses of gender and (hetero)sexuality. Ideals of female beauty, feminine respectability and heterosexuality are intimately connected to how girls are expected to look and behave. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity has been invaluable for understanding the process through which a gendered subject comes into being. For Butler, gender is a matter of 'doing' – the performative effect of reiterative acts – rather than an attribute of individuals. Butler's approach emphasises the socially constructed nature of Western conceptualisations of gender and what is constituted as 'normal' or 'intelligible' femininity in the school ball environment.

Theoretical understandings offered by Foucault (1976; 1980) and Butler (1990; 1993) recognise the inseparability of the body and discourses of gender and sexuality. In this frame, the materiality of the body is understood and shaped through discursive meanings. A discursive approach has highlighted how girls are required to dress and present their bodies in accordance with the 'acceptable' norms of the social situation: for instance, wearing a dress, high heels and make-up are constituted as 'normal' and expected practices for girls attending the school ball. By highlighting these discourses, we can think about the way dominant meanings constitute girls' bodies as 'intelligible' or 'non-intelligible' in relation to feminine beauty norms and ideals (Butler 1990). In this sense, the possibilities for 'doing girl' in the school ball space are shaped by the discourses of femininity and sexuality on offer, and, some discourses are more powerful than others. Many of the dominant discourses are (re)produced through fairy tale, television, film and magazines. In movies, for instance, the prom is frequently portrayed as a site of potential (and idealised) romance (Best 2005). Teen magazines are another powerful producer of an idealised prom imaginary, often cohering around three prevalent themes: (heterosexual) romance, the framing of the prom as "the night of your life", and the potential for "perfection" through physical beautification (Mazzarella 1999, p. 98).

Theoretical tools from feminist post-structuralism and queer theory have drawn critical attention to young people's complex negotiation of dominant discourses, including both the accommodation of and resistance to pervasive norms. Despite popular portrayals of proms and school balls as a romantic space for young women, girls do not necessarily view the ball as romantic space for them personally (L. Smith 2014). In contrast to these culturally constructed ideas, Smith's study found that it

was male participants who were more likely to constitute the ball as a space of heterosexual romance, contradicting the portrayal of the ball as a night of "storybook romance" for young women (2014, p. 82). In the context of prom magazines, girls are understood to actively negotiate meanings as opposed to passively absorbing the dominant ideas about beauty, romance and heteronormativity on offer (Zlatunich 2009). Within a feminist post-structural frame, agency is located in the human capacity to strategically negotiate discourses of femininity and (hetero)sexuality. This can include finding ways to partially reject or resist the traditional 'trappings' of the event through 'playful' tactics such as irony and parody (Best 2000), subverting conventional codes of femininity by wearing a suit or tailcoat (L. Smith 2012) or resisting romantic discursive ideals (L. Smith 2014). In this frame, girls have been conceptualised as active social agents who negotiate of discourses of femininity in complex ways.

Heterosexuality is considered one of the most pervasive discourses shaping girls' understandings and experiences of the school ball (Best 2005; Cumming-Potvin 2022; P. Smith 2011). These events contribute to the wider heteronormative landscape of schooling where heterosexuality is normalised and privileged as the norm (Allen 2006; Quinlivan and Town 1999). As Best succinctly notes, proms "champion heterosexuality" where an opposite-sex date is presumed and promoted (2000, p. 10). In Best's study, she notes there was considerable pressure to have a prom date, and for girls, having a date was "internalized as a means to both measuring feminine self-worth and to solidifying their heterosexual identities" (2000, p. 68). Judith Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix (1990) has been crucial in highlighting how heterosexuality is a pervasive force in the constitution of 'appropriate' performances of femininity, where being a 'proper girl' includes the presentation of a heterosexual identity. This 'grid of intelligibility' demonstrates the inextricability of heterosexuality, normative binary gender (male–female) relations and gendered codes at the school ball.

The privileging of heterosexuality occurs in overt ways through discriminatory school ball 'rules' and policies, such as the explicit banning of same-sex dates, or students being required to visit the school counsellor in order to bring a same-sex partner (Wade 2011). These practices have been the subject of legal debate in both the US and Canada on the basis of its discrimination and prejudice towards LGBTQI+ students (Cumming-Potvin 2022). The case of Mark Hall in Canada is one example, where the court ruled the school breached Mark's constitutional rights for not allowing him to attend the prom

with his same-sex partner. Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand have also received media condemnation for these heteronormative practices; this critical commentary fuelled by student petitions and complaints to the Human Rights Commission. In 2013, New Zealand school principals were warned they would be in breach of the Human Rights Act if they restricted students' choice of partner (Tait 2013), which has led to a significant shift in school rules surrounding these events. Although, the freedom to bring a same-sex partner to the ball is contingent and can be constrained or enhanced by peer culture and the climate of the school, with boys' schools argued to be less accepting of sexual diversity than co-educational or girls' schools (L. Smith 2015).

Existing international scholarship suggests that although the prom can be viewed as a deeply conformist and heteronormative space, young people have the potential to resist and rework dominant meanings to varying extents (Best 2000; P. Smith 2011; Smith and Sandretto 2016). Young women, in particular, have been seen to have a larger capacity to subvert normative codes of gender compared to males, for instance, through challenging conventional codes of feminine dress or girl couples seen dancing together and kissing (Smith and Sandretto 2016). Other subversive strategies include students electing a female as prom king (Rasmussen 2006), a same-sex couple as prom queen and queen (Newlove 2016) or transgender students being crowned prom king or queen (Dockray, n.d.). The emergence of queer proms are also a subversive reconfiguring of popular cultural representations; as Best notes they effectively function as "a political strategy to take a cultural resource belonging to heterosexual society and use it to expose and challenge its hegemony" (Best 2005, p. 210). These examples illustrate how young people have been understood to be both complicit in, and disruptive of, the normative gender and heterosexual discourses that have long surrounded these events.

A new materialist (re)configuring of girls' bodies and femininities

Alongside this complex discursive landscape, school balls are rich material configurations of human and more-than-human matter. Discourses of gender and sexuality are inseparable from fleshed human bodies, material objects like clothing and high-heeled shoes, an array of spatial configurations, feelings and sensations. New materialist theories have been increasingly drawn upon in sexualities and schooling research to bring materiality to the fore, both human and non-human (Allen 2013; 2018; Allen and Rasmussen 2017). New materialisms are a diverse field of scholarship located within the

larger terrain of posthumanism – a similarly heterogenous field described as a "constellation" of diverse theories and approaches underpinned by a shared commitment to destabilising the centrality of the human (Taylor 2016, p. 6). Posthumanism calls into question the privileged position of human separability by reconfiguring understandings of the human as always in-relation with non-human and more-than-human forces. For educational researchers, posthumanist and new materialist thought has opened up possibilities for exploring schooling spaces and practices in relational and non-hierarchical ways, where the human and more-than-human are entangled in knowledge production (Snaza and Weaver 2015; Taylor and Hughes 2016).

New materialisms bring particular attention to the vitality or liveliness of matter (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010), where materiality entails "an excess, force, vitality . . . that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable" (Coole and Frost 2010, p. 9). Attending to the liveliness of matter is integral to a new materialist ethics for understanding the role of the human and non-human, materiality and discourse in understanding the world. As Karen Barad (2008, p. 122) argues: "It is vitally important that we understand how matter matters": how matter is generative and productive in the world's becoming. Barad proposes a posthumanist framework of *agential realism* (2007) as one approach that attends to both discursive practices and the material world, where neither is foundational or prior. Foregrounding an ethics of mattering, Barad encourages us to think about the human, and indeed the world, as entanglements: in Barad's words, "existence is not an individual affair" (2007, p. ix). In this sense, agential realism is not simply a move to acknowledge the multiple forces at play, but rather *how* forces work together in the becoming of the world.

Barad's theoretical ideas have been increasingly taken up to explore the becoming of girls' bodies within the schooling environment (Pomerantz and Raby 2018; Ringrose and Rawlings 2015), girls' wellbing (Lenz Taguchi and Palmer 2013), the becoming of sexuality (Allen 2015; Renold and Ringrose 2017) and sexuality education (Allen 2018; Allen and Rasmussen 2017; Garland-levett 2017). Recognising the force of matter does not negate the significance of discourse, rather it entails a reconfiguring of the relationship between discourse and materiality as co-constitutive and entangled. For Barad, discursive practices are "material (re)configurings of the world" (2007, p. 151) which means discursive practices are always material, just as materiality is always discursive. This mutual entailment occurs through the dynamics of *intra-action* – a key concept in Barad's agential realist

framework. As opposed to the notion of 'interaction' which is usually premised on a relationship between separate bodies and entities, Barad explains intra-action as "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (2007, p.33). In this frame, entities are not prior or ontologically distinct, instead they emerge through their intra-action. Applying this idea to the school ball, the girl and the ball are not discrete separate entities, rather, they emerge through their entanglement; the term ball-girl signals this mutual co-constitutive relationship (Ingram 2018).

An agential realist approach has opened up different ways of thinking about the school ball beyond a discursive and human focus. Drawing on Barad (2007), girls and the school ball have been conceptualised as intra-actively becoming through lively entanglements of material-discursive, human and more-than-human forces (Ingram 2019). This approach offers a wider expanse for attending to material objects such as high-heeled shoes, spatial configurations like the dance floor, affective relations and atmosphere as integral forces in the becoming of the school ball-girl. Rather than passive or merely background, these forces are implicated in girls' emergent capacities and constraints – what a ball-girl can do and become. As such, a relational approach has important implications for how we might think about the human 'subject', bodies, agency and resistance.

Extending the work of Judith Butler, Barad's (2003) theory of *posthumanist performativity* offers an understanding of the materialisation of the body premised on a co-constitutive relationship between materiality and discourse. Barad calls for feminists to "take account of *how the body's materiality*–for example, its anatomy and physiology–*and other material forces actively matter to the processes of materialization*" (2003, p. 809, italics in original). In Barad's reading of Butler, they suggest Butler's theory of performativity "ultimately reinscribes matter as a passive product of discursive practices" (2007, p. 151). It is not that Butler denies the materiality of the body, but by conceptualising matter as a product of discourse, Barad would argue "fails to recognise matter's dynamism" (2007, p. 64). Offering an alternate approach, Barad conceptualises matter (i.e. the materiality of the body and other material forces) as an active force in the process of materialisation. What is distinct here, is rather than a linear model of causation where power relations (and discursive practices) produce the body in particular ways, the relationship is reciprocal and multi-directional.

Working with new materialisms invites a shift from thinking about the discursive limits of girls, femininity and the school ball, to consider "the 'material limits': the material constraints and

exclusions, the material dimensions of agency, and the material dimensions of regulatory practices" (Barad 2007, p. 192). Femininity is not ascribed to bodies and identities (i.e. a fixed identity or quality that one can reveal or solidify) but emerges via intra-active entanglements. Instead of thinking about ball-girl subjectivity in relation to a 'feminine' discursive subject position, we might think about femininity as a performative enactment or an intra-active becoming (Barad 2007). This approach enables an understanding of how material forces might reconfigure discursive ideas of femininity associated with the school ball, such as the expectation to engage in beauty-body work or take a date to the ball. Ball-girl capacities are not limited to discourse, nor do they derive from an individual human body. Instead, capacities and constraints are considered emergent and relationally produced, which brings a sense of open-endedness for what a ball-girl can do and become. This does not mean anything or everything is possible; rather, capacities and limitations continually shift depending on the relational forces present.

A particularly salient aspect of an agential realist approach is a dynamic reconfiguring of the body. Barad understands bodies not as objects with clearly defined boundaries and properties, but as "material-discursive phenomena", where bodies emerge through intra-active relations of multiple elements (2003, p. 823). In this conceptual framing, the girl body does not pre-exist relations but becomes via continual and open-ended connections with other bodies, things, ideas and practices. For researchers, this approach generates possibilities for examining girls' bodies in-relation with schooling environments that include material-discursive forces such as uniforms, skirts, hoodies, hair, bullying, sluts and success (see Wolfe and Rasmussen 2020; Ringrose and Rawlings 2015; Pomerantz and Raby 2018). Instead of thinking about bodies as purely discursively produced, these studies are premised on ontological understandings of the body that emphasise relationality. In the context of the school ball, bodies materialise or emerge through particular material-discursive configurings at any given moment. These configurings include other bodies such as friends, dates and 'everyday' school girl bodies; spatial-material arrangements like the dance floor or school ball entrance; an array of embodied practices including beauty-body work, dancing and photographs.

A relational approach has been useful for reframing understandings of girls, beauty and the school ball. Engaging with Barad's concept of intra-action, beauty has been conceptualised as an affective-material process where materiality and affect are co-constitutive forces (Ingram 2021). There is an

ontological shift from thinking about beauty and the human (girl subject) as discursively produced, towards a relational approach that recognises the material force of clothing, make-up and bodies, and the affective dynamics of 'feeling pretty'. Conceptualising beauty as an affective-material process reframes beauty not as something ascribed to bodies and identities, but rather as a shifting open-ended process. This approach invites a shift from thinking about how girls resist or accommodate discursive beauty ideals, towards attending to the relations, intensities and affective flows that include but are not limited to discourse. While undeniably pervasive, dominant discourses of femininity and beauty become one element within a broader flow of affect that produces beauty-body practices and the ball-girl-body. This opens up new questions for thinking about beauty that can rework or avoid binary logic, such as good/bad, subject/object and human/non-human.

A relational approach to bodies has significant implications for understanding agency and resistance. Within a new materialist frame, agency does not reside in the individual subject nor is it restricted to notions of human will and intentionality (Barad 2007; Bennett 2005). For Barad, "agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment" (2003, p. 826). In this framing, agency is not an attribute at all, it "is 'doing' or 'being' in its intra-activity" (Barad 2007, p. 178). This means agency is no longer aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity, and matter is not considered inert and passive. Although, it is not simply a matter of saying material things have individual agency; rather, agency is an emergent quality produced in the entanglements of human and nonhuman. In a similar vein, Bennett's (2010, p. 21) theory of *distributive agency,* offers an understanding of agency as a "confederation" of human and non-human forces within assemblages. These new materialist framings of agency undermine an anthropocentric approach, which emphasises humans as exclusively productive of the social world (Fox and Alldred 2017). All manner of things become important and the potential of agency is not foreclosed or restricted to human action or intention.

A new materialist reconfiguring of agency has prompted new ways of thinking about young people, gender, sexualities and resistance. Bringing together a new materialist approach to the body with Deleuzian theories of affect, Fox and Alldred (2016, p. 125) theorise "the resisting young body" where bodily capacities for 'resistance' are produced relationally, rather than being an agentic quality pertaining to the individual body. Replacing a conventional understanding of (human) agency with a focus on the capacity to affect and be affected (Deleuze 1988), Fox and Alldred theorise 'resistance'

as an affective movement within assemblages. Attention moves away from a solely human focus (and the idea of bodies having agency) to explore the ways forces circulate in an assemblage to produce capacities for human bodies. In this frame, ball-girl bodily capacities shift from moment to moment depending on the material relations and affectivities within the assemblage, opening up ways to reimagine girls and the school ball beyond popular cultural constructions.

New materialisms and the sexuality education assemblage

New materialisms offer enticing possibilities for conceptualising sexuality education beyond a discursive and human focus (Alldred and Fox 2017; Allen 2018; Allen and Rasmussen 2017; Garland-Levitt 2017). Drawing on the work of Barad (2007), Allen (2015) conceptualises sexuality at school as becoming via entangled human and non-human intra-actions. This approach differs from viewing sexuality as discursively constituted, that is a subject position(ality), towards understanding discourse and matter as co-constitutive elements in sexuality's becoming. This means sexuality is not something that belongs to an individual, nor is it a discursive position that individuals "take up". Rather, in Allen's words, "sexuality at school is a never-ending enfolding of non-human, human, practices, objects, affect, motility, discourse, nature, smells, sound and other earthly elements" (2015, p. 951). Applying this idea to girls, sexuality and the school ball, this "never-ending enfolding" might encompass material-spatial arrangements such as the dance floor, a feeling in the atmosphere, the height of a date or high-heeled shoe.

Conceptualising sexuality-as-assemblage is another productive way of moving the location and focus of sexuality away from the body and the human (Allen 2013; Fox and Alldred 2013; Holmes et al. 2010; Lambevski 2005). A sexuality-assemblage can comprise all manner of material-discursive, human and more-than-human forces, and it is through dynamic entanglements that sexuality becomes (Allen 2013). As a result, understandings of sexuality (and sexual capacities) extend beyond discourse, individual human bodies and identities. Thinking with the idea of sexuality-as-assemblage, Fox and Alldred (2013, p. 769) view sexuality as "an impersonal affective flow within assemblages of bodies, things, ideas and social institutions, which produce sexual (and other) capacities in bodies". Agency in a sexuality-assemblage can be understood to reside in the intra-relations of elements in the assemblage (Allen 2018). Here, agency is not a property of bodies and entities but a quality that emerges via intra-active relations (Barad 2007). Similarly interested in a relational approach to

agency, Fox and Alldred (2013) draw on theories of affect (Deleuze 1988) to think about the capacity to affect and be affected within sexuality-assemblages. Affects can produce capacities (in bodies) and affects are capable of producing further affects within sexuality-assemblages (flows of affect). Applying this idea to school ball sexuality-assemblages, both human and more-than-human relations affect one another, and it is through relations of affect that produce ball-girl capacities and create conditions of possibility.

These insights have been productive for thinking about girls, sexuality and the school ball beyond popular cultural constructions, for instance, the portrayal of the prom as a romantic space where having a date is perceived as the norm. Instead, we might think about the relations in-between girls, dates and the school ball as sexuality-assemblages comprising bodies, spatial arrangements, practices and imaginings (Ingram 2022). In doing so, ball-girl capacities and desires become emergent and contingent, opening up different ways of thinking about (un)romantic expectations, desire and the decision to take a date or not to the ball. The importance of a ball date is not fixed or discursively presumed, rather, ball date importance emerges through multiple forces and affective flows including friends, imaginings, relationship status, photographs and historical legacies associated with the ball. Conceptualising ball date (un)importance as relationally produced it becomes unstable, contingent and remains open to change.

The notion of sexuality-as-assemblage is useful for thinking about the myriad practices, spaces, ideas and affects that form sexuality education (Allen 2018; Alldred and Fox 2017). New materialist ideas help reconfigure the contours of sexuality education in ways that can avoid familiar binaries that often underpin sexuality education debates and research, such as knowledge/practice, taught/not taught, effective/ineffective and home/school. Allen argues these binarisms “confine sexuality education to a cul-de-sac of familiar questions and parameters that regulate the possibilities of thinking and practice” (2018, p. 126). New materialisms have a way of blurring spatial, human and discursive boundaries providing fruitful possibilities for conceiving who or what comes to matter in sexuality education’s becoming (Barad, 2007). It also offers a way of understanding sexual subjectivity “not as involving a fully formed subject but as the conditions of emergence” (Allen 2018, p.130). Conceptualising the school ball as part of the sexuality education assemblage brings attention to the array of material

bodies, ideas and expectations, spatial-temporal configurations and affective flows at play. And importantly, the “conditions of emergence” for the becoming of sexuality these events might create.

References

Aapola, S., Gonick, M., & Harris, A. (2005). *Young femininity: Girlhood, power and social change*. Palgrave MacMillan.

Allan, A. (2009). The importance of being a 'lady': Hyper-femininity and heterosexuality in the private, single-sex primary school. *Gender and Education, 21*(2), 145–158.

Alldred, P., & Fox, N. J. (2017). Materialism and micropolitics of sexualities education research. In L. Allen, & M. Rasmussen (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of sexuality education* (pp. 655–672). Palgrave Macmillan.

Allen, L. (2005). *Sexual subjects: Young people, sexuality and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Allen, L. (2006). Keeping students on the straight and narrow: Heteronormalising practices in New Zealand secondary schools. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies, 41*(2), 311–332.

Allen, L. (2013). Sexual assemblages: mobile phones/young people/school. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 36*(1), 120–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2013.846901

Allen, L. (2015). The power of things! A 'new' ontology of sexuality at school. *Sexualities, 18*(8), 941–958. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460714550920

Allen, L. (2018). *Sexuality education and new materialism: Queer things*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Allen, L., & Rasmussen, M. (Eds.). (2017). *The Palgrave handbook of sexuality education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Bahou, O., & Orenstein, H. (2016, April 29). *These 9 girls were kicked out of school dances for their outfits.* http://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/fashion/news/a40441/banned-from-prom/

Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 28*, 801–831.

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.

Barad, K. (2008). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. In S. Alaimo, & S. Hekman (Eds.), *Material feminisms* (pp. 120–156). Indiana University Press.

Bennett, J. (2005). The agency of assemblages and the North American blackout. *Public Culture, 17*(3), 445–65.

Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: a political ecology of things*. Duke University Press.

Best, A. (2000). *Prom night: youth, schools and popular culture*. Routledge.

Best, A. (2005). The production of heterosexuality at the high school prom. In C. Ingraham (Ed.), *Thinking straight: The power, the promise and the paradox of heterosexuality* (pp. 193–214). Routledge.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Routledge.

Coole, D., & Frost, S. (Eds.). (2010). *New Materialisms: Ontology, agency and politics*. Duke University Press.

Cumming-Potvin, W. (2022). *LGBTQI+ allies in education, advocacy, activism, and participatory collaborative research*. Routledge.

Deleuze, G. (1988). *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. City Lights.

Dockray, H. (n.d). Prom's big queer takeover. https://mashable.com/feature/queer-prom-takeover.

Foucault, M. (1976). *The history of sexuality, Volume 1* (R. Hurley Trans.). Penguin.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*

Fox, N. J., & Alldred, P. (2013). The sexuality-assemblage: desire, affect, anti-humanism. *The Sociological Review, 61*, 769–789. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12075

Fox, N. J., & Alldred, P. (2016). The resisting young body. In J. Coffey, S. Budgeon & H. Cahill (Eds.), *Learning bodies: The body in youth and childhood studies* (pp. 125–140). Springer.

Fox, N. J., & Alldred, P. (2017). *Sociology and the new materialism: Theory, research, action*. Sage Publications.

Garland-Levett, S. (2020). Knowing-in-being: traversing the mind/body dualism to dissolve sexuality education's 'knowledge/practice' gap. *Gender & Education, 32*(6), 691–714. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1482414

Gorrell Anstiss, C. (2012, April 22). Bills pile up for ball belles. *The New Zealand Herald*

Happel, A. (2013). Ritualized girling: school uniforms and compulsory performance of gender. *Journal of Gender Studies, 22*(1), 92–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2012.745680

Holmes, D., O'Byrne, P., & Murray, S. J. (2010). Faceless sex: glory holes and sexual assemblages. *Nursing Philosophy, 11*, 250–259.

Ingram, T. (2018). Becoming school ball-girl: Entanglements that matter [Doctoral Thesis, University of Auckland]. https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/37116

Ingram, T. (2019). Girls and the school ball: A matter(ing) of space and time. *Emotion, Space and Society,* 33.

Ingram, T. (2022). 'I feel pretty': Beauty as an affective-material process. *Feminist Theory.*

Ingram, T. (2022). (Un)romantic becomings: Girls, sexuality-assemblages and the school ball. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Girlhood Studies, 15(*2), 71–88.

Lambevski, S. A. (2005). Bodies, schizo vibes and hallucinatory desires - Sexualities in movement. *Sexualities, 8*(5), 570–586. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460705058394

Lansdorf, K. (2021, May 23). Florida High School edited girls' yearbook photos to cover more of their chests. https://www.npr.org/2021/05/23/999596246/florida-high-school-edited-girls-yearbook-photos-to-cover-more-of-their-chests

Lenz Taguchi, H., & Palmer, A. (2013). A more 'livable' school? A diffractive analysis of the performative enactments of girls' ill-/well-being with(in) school environments. *Gender and Education, 25*(6), 671–687. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2013.829909

Mazzarella, S. (1999). The 'Superbowl of all Dates': Teenage girl magazines and the commodification of the perfect prom. In S. Mazzarella, & N. O. Pecora (Eds.), *Growing up girls: Popular culture and the construction of identity* (pp. 97). Peter Lang.

McClelland, S., & Fine, M. (2017). Sexualities education in schools. In L. Allen, & M. Rasmussen (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of sexuality education* (pp. 211–215). Palgrave MacMillan.

Newlove, A. (2016, July 10). School elects 'queen and queen' of the ball. *The New Zealand Herald.*

Paechter, C. (2006). Constructing femininities/constructing femininity. In B. Skelton, B. Francis and L. Smulyan (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Gender and Education* (pp. 365–377). Sage.

Pomerantz, S. (2007). Cleavage in a tank top: Bodily prohibition and the discourses of school dress codes. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 53*(4), 373–386.

Pomerantz, S. (2008). *Girls, style and school identity*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Pomerantz, S. & Raby, R. (2018). Bodies, hoodies, schools and success: post-human performativity and smart girlhood, *Gender and Education*, 32(8), 983–1000. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1533923.

Quinlivan, K., & Town, S. (1999). Queer pedagogy, educational practice and lesbian and gay youth. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 12*(5), 509–524.

Raby, R. (2010). 'Tank tops are ok but I don't want to see her thong': Girls' engagements with secondary school dress codes. *Youth and Society, 41*(3), 333–356.

Rasmussen, M. (2006). *Becoming subjects: Sexualities and secondary schooling*. Routledge.

Renold, E. (2005). *Girls, boys and junior sexualities: Exploring children's gender and sexual relations in the primary school*. RoutledgeFalmer.

Renold, E., & Ringrose, J. (2017). Pin-balling and boners: The posthuman phallus and intra-activist sexuality assemblages in secondary school. In L. Allen, & M. Rasmussen (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Sexuality Education* (pp. 631–654). Palgrave Macmillan.

Ringrose, J., & Rawlings, V. (2015). Posthuman performativity, gender and 'school bullying': Exploring the material-discursive intra-actions of skirts, hair, sluts and poofs. *Confero, 3*(2), 1–37. https://doi.org/10.3384/confero.2001-4562.150626

Roy, E. A. (2016, April 11). Schoolgirls in New Zealand told to lengthen skirts to 'stop distracting male staff and pupils'. *Guardian UK*

Smith, L. A. (2012). *Gender and the school formal.* (Unpublished PhD). University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

Smith, L. A. (2014). Gender, romance and the school ball. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies, 49*(1), 73–86.

Smith, L. A. (2015). Queer students and same-sex partners at the school formal. In A. Gunn, & L. A. Smith (Eds.), *Sexual cultures in Aotearoa New Zealand education* (pp. 82–98). Otago University Press.

Smith, L. A., Nairn, K., & Sandretto, S. (2016). Complicating hetero-normative spaces at school formals in New Zealand. *Gender, Place and Culture, 23*(5), 589–606. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2015.1034245

Smith, P. (2011). The prom as a spectacle of heteronormativity. *Counterpoints: The sexuality curriculum and youth culture, 92*, 156–170.

Snaza, N., & Weaver, J. A. (Eds.). (2015). *Posthumanism and Educational Research*. Routledge.

Tait, M. (2014, March 20). Scramble to be belle of ball. *The New Zealand Herald*

Taylor, C. A. (2016). Edu-crafting a cacophonous ecology: Posthumanist research practices for education. In C. A. Taylor, & C. Hughes (Eds.), *Posthuman research practices in Education* (pp. 5–24). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137453082

Taylor, C. A., & Hughes, C. (Eds.). (2016). *Posthuman research practices in education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Valenti, J. (2015, 14 May). The only thing shameful about 'revealing' prom dresses are adults who stress over them. *The Guardian*

Ward. L., Bilby, L., & Gaffaney, C. (2016, May 25). Catholic girls' school's strict ball rules: No cleavage, no backless dresses, no taking off shoes and your date must be serious. *The New Zealand Herald.*

Wade, A. (2011, June 15). Same-sex date banned at school ball. *The New Zealand Herald*.

West, C. & Zimmerman, D. (1987). Doing Gender. *Gender and Society*, 1(1), 125–151.

Wolfe, M.J. & Rasmussen. M.L. (2020). The affective matter of (Australian) school uniforms: The school-dress that *is* and *does*. In B. Dernikos, N. Lesko, S. McCall, & A. Niccolini (Eds), *Mapping the affective turn in education: Theory, research and pedagogy* (pp. 179–193). Routledge.

Youdell, D. (2006). *Impossible bodies, impossible selves: exclusions and student subjectivities*. Springer.

Zlatunich, N. (2009). Prom dreams and prom reality: Girls negotiating 'perfection' at the High School Prom. *Sociological Inquiry, 79*(3), 351–175.