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# The material-discursive phenomena of queer-bodies, clothing and schooling

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## ABSTRACT

This article draws on feminist new materialist theory to examine the relations in-between queer-bodies, clothing and the schooling environment. Working with Karen Barad's agential realist concepts of intra-action and entanglement, queer-bodies and clothing are conceptualized as material-discursive phenomena, co-constitutive and emergent through their entangled relations. Through this approach, school uniforms, spatial environments, practices such as the school ball (prom), peers, parents, climate, and bodily sensations become integral forces in the mattering of queer-bodies and clothing. Notions of sartorial 'choice', agency and intelligibility are reconfigured in ways that exceed a pre-existing individual body and identity. I consider how a relational approach attends to the shifting complexities of queer-bodies and clothing in ways that avoid binary frameworks such as materiality/discourse, subject/object, dress/suit, and in turn, expands the possibilities for doing justice to the diversity of queer-bodies.

## KEYWORDS

Agential realism; Barad; dress; new materialisms; queer youth; sexuality

## Introduction

Schools have a long history of reinforcing gender norms that govern the presentation of student bodies and clothing. School uniform policies in Aotearoa New Zealand, for instance, have been heavily influenced by British colonial gender norms, prescribing dresses and skirts for female bodies, and shorts and pants for male bodies. These policies reinforce a gender binary and play a powerful role in the discrimination and exclusion experienced by LGBTQIA+ students on a daily basis (Fenaughty et al., 2021a, 2021b; Jones & Hillier, 2013; Meyer, 2010). Drawing on Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity, clothing can be understood as a powerful means to delineate or materialize bodies as (in)appropriate or (un)intelligible in relation to dominant gender discourses, constituting some bodies as 'normal' or acceptable within the schooling environment and marginalizing others (Happel, 2013; Pomerantz, 2007; Raby, 2005).

While clothing functions as potent visible markers of normative gendered bodies at school, clothes can also be a strategic means for resistance (Ingrey, 2013; Raby, 2010).

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A girl wearing a suit to the school ball or prom, for instance, can be conceptualized as resistance to conventional ideas of femininity and a means to position themselves differently (Best, 2000; Smith, Nairn, & Sandretto, 2016). Clothing can also be an effective mode to communicate queer identity (Geczy & Karaminas, 2013; Reddy-Best & Choi, 2020; Reddy-Best & Pedersen, 2015), suggesting a complex relationship between queer bodies and clothing that includes both sartorial regulation and agency (Lasser & Wicker, 2008; Ma'ayan, 2003; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2001).

Building on existing scholarship, this article explores the potential of feminist new materialisms, in particular the work of Karen Barad (2003; 2007), for opening different ways of thinking about the complex relations in-between queer bodies, clothing and schooling. Barad brings together feminist and queer theory with quantum physics to develop *agential realism* – an ethico-onto-epistemological framework that emphasizes the entangled and relational mattering of the world. Agential realism provides a dynamic reworking of the relationship between the human and more-than-human, materiality and discourse, to one of entanglement and ontological inseparability. Entanglement, in Barad's (2007) words, 'is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence' (p. ix). Entanglement is dynamic and generative, ontologically reconfiguring the human 'subject' in-relation with other things and with the world, in this instance, clothing and schooling.

Rather than conceiving bodies and clothing as separate entities, this article conceptualizes queer-bodies and clothing as material-discursive phenomena (Barad, 2007), co-constitutive and emergent through their mutual entanglement. This perspective is premised on the agential realist concept of *intra-action*, which refers to a relationship between things where there are no distinct pre-existing boundaries. Instead, 'agencies' such as bodies and clothing are in a state of intra-action – a material-discursive process where they emerge through their entanglement rather than precede it. In this sense, bodies and clothing lack an independent self-contained existence and are brought into being as an effect of their mutual engagement (see also Brice, 2021; Brice & Thorpe, 2021; McCall, 2022). For Barad (2007), 'individuals' only exist within phenomena (particular materialized/materializing relations), and it is through agential intra-actions the boundaries and properties of 'individuals' become distinct. This means bodies do not have inherent properties or clearly defined boundaries, rather, they congeal or emerge through particular configurings (or intra-actions) at any given moment.

The following discussion conceptualizes queer-bodies as emergent via material-discursive entanglements involving school uniforms, dresses and suits, climate, peers, parents, the schooling environment and the school ball. These entanglements comprise an array of human and more-than-human forces, expanding notions of sartorial 'choice', (dis)comfort and agency beyond a human and discursive focus. In blurring the familiar borders of the human 'subject', bodily capacities and constraints become relationally produced and notions of intelligibility and difference are reworked. I am interested in how such an approach might hold promise for conceptualizing queer youth in ways that avoid or disrupt pre-defined norms and expectations often framed by dualistic representations and binary logic (Allen, 2015b), and in turn, expanding possibilities for embracing difference in ways that do justice to the diversity of queer-bodies.

The perspective developed in this article contributes to growing posthumanist and new materialist scholarship examining the relational becoming of sexuality, gender, clothing and educational environments (e.g. Lyttleton-Smith & Robinson, 2019; Pomerantz & Raby, 2020; Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015; Shanks, Ovington, Cross, & Carnarvon, 2023; Taylor, 2013; Wolfe & Rasmussen, 2020). This body of work brings attention to the relational matter(ing) of clothing and ‘the powerful but usually unremarked material-discursive work they do in installing gendered practices’ (Taylor, 2013, p. 698). Agential realism has been particularly influential in bringing these entanglements to the fore, not only reconfiguring who or what comes to matter, but *how* they matter and with what *e/* affects. Barad’s account of the materialization of bodies extends the work of Judith Butler by conceptualizing matter (i.e. the materiality of the body and other material forces) as an active force in the materialization of the body. It does so through a reworking of the relationship between discursive practices (gender and heterosexual norms) and materiality (bodies, clothing) as ontologically inseparable. Neither materiality nor discourse is prior or privileged over the other, instead, ‘matter and meaning are mutually articulated’ (Barad, 2007, p. 152). This means discourses are always already material – as evident in the conjoined term *material-discursive* – providing a wider expanse of understanding the mattering of bodies, gender and sexuality at school. A relational approach prompts new questions and understandings that attend to the material-discursive workings of power and avoid binary frameworks (e.g. material/discursive, human/nonhuman, subject/object, oppressed/empowered). We get a sense of how materiality and the force of matter are integral to gendering practices within schooling environments, and more broadly, the production of discourses themselves.

A central tenet of queer theory is its capacity to disrupt normative gender and sexual identities and binaries (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 1998; Jagose, 1996). Hence the term *queer* has been mobilized to signal identities and practices which complicate or fail to ‘fit’ normative identity categories, *and* to signal a process of disrupting or queering dominant norms and expectations. Allen (2018) suggests Barad’s new materialist approach ‘takes up queer theory’s modus operandi by disturbing the familiar and stimulating a rethinking of notions of identity and difference’ (p. 28). Feminist new materialist thought has been mobilized as ‘a queer undertaking’ to reorient research and current debates surrounding young people, sexualities and schooling (Allen, 2018, p. 17). Central to this work (and the following discussion) is a new materialist reimagining of sexuality as continually becoming through multiple entangled forces including the human and more-than-human (Alldred & Fox, 2015; Allen, 2013; 2015a; Fox & Alldred, 2013). A relational ontology offers a way of thinking about sexuality as not wholly located in, or emanating from, an individual human body. Instead, material objects such as clothing, spatial configurations and affective atmospheres are entangled in the becoming of sexuality at school (Allen, 2013; Ingram, 2022; Janak & Bhana, 2023; Renold & Ringrose, 2017; Taylor, 2013). In short, sexuality becomes at least material-discursive (Allen, 2015a), enabling things that might have gone unnoticed or considered peripheral in gender and sexualities research to become of interest.

Within a new materialist ontology of sexuality, the notion of sexual identity is also reworked. Rather than a fixed or pre-existing identity category, sexual identity is conceptualized as an emergent becoming or mattering. What might be considered identity formation is a contingent on-going process. As Barad (2014) suggests: ‘The key is

understanding that identity is not essence, fixity or givenness, but a contingent iterative performativity' (p. 173). Judith Butler (1990) similarly conceptualized identity not as a fixed attribute or essence but as something performatively constituted – an ongoing doing. Although, Barad's iterative performativity is premised on an ontologically different understanding of the material-discursive relationship, one of agential entanglement and inseparability through the dynamics of intra-activity. The terms queer identity and queer-bodies used in this article might be better thought of as a verb rather than a noun – a process or queer mattering that exceeds discourse and the human. The term queer-bodies – and the hyphen in-between – signals the entanglement of queer identity, bodies, clothing and other forces in an intra-active sense, disrupting or queering fixed or stable boundaries often associated with the body and identity. Crucially, queer-bodies do not exist out there in the world as ontologically prior or predetermined, instead, they come to matter through each configuration (intra-action). The perspective or mattering this article offers is one such configuration.

### The research-assemblage

Agential realism emphasizes entanglement over separability which has important methodological implications for understanding 'reality', the becoming of research and knowledge production. The research informing this article can be conceptualized as an assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Fox & Alldred, 2014) comprising (but not limited to) theory-data-participants-researcher. A relational approach recognizes elements of research as entangled: 'data', for instance, are not separate to 'theory' or the 'researcher' as these elements are in a co-constitutive relationship. The material-discursive matterings of queer-bodies, clothing and schooling discussed in this article derive from a larger study conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand exploring the relations in-between girls, sexuality and the school ball (see Ingram, 2023). Engaging with feminist new materialisms, the project explored the array of material-discursive forces that collaboratively produce girls' bodies, femininities and sexuality. Forty-one girls (aged 16–18 years) participated in the research, sharing their experiences of the school ball visually and verbally through participant generated photographs and video, focus group discussions and individual interviews.<sup>1</sup>

The following discussion largely coheres around a participant Dari, who was in her final year of schooling at a co-educational secondary school, and was out among her peers, teachers and family. Dari first entered the research-assemblage when fellow participants mentioned their friend (Dari) who was one of very few girls at their school (and the only research participant) who had worn a suit to the previous year's ball. Dari and I then met in-person and during an individual interview we discussed the school ball and life at school more generally. Clothing emerged as a central focal point in our discussions, which ranged from her preference to wear pants to school even though they were not an official part of the girls' school uniform, to the clothing she had worn to the previous year's ball and what she planned on wearing this year. As mentioned, data and researcher are entangled, acting upon one another in particular ways. As MacLure (2013) argues, data have their own way of 'making themselves intelligible to us. This can be seen, or rather felt' (p. 660). In this instance, verbal fragments from our conversations shimmered and 'glowed' (MacLure, 2013), sparking curiosity about the material-discursive relations in-

between Dari, clothing and the schooling environment, and in particular, who or what might play a role in producing sartorial possibilities and constraints.

Within an agential realist framework, there is no ontological separability between the observer and the observed. Therefore, the notion of agential ‘cuts’ is vital as it allows for the possibility of being able to separate something out for analysis. A specific intra-action (of which the researcher is part) enacts an agential cut. The cut is not a separation in a permanent sense, but agential separability: a ‘cutting together-apart (one move)’ (Barad, 2014, p. 168): or put another way, ‘a cut that differentiates-entangles’ (Barad, 2014, p. 175). Verbal fragments are understood to perform agential cuts – temporary separations between entanglements – to produce or enact queer-body becomings. Or put another way, verbal fragments enact specific material-discursive assemblages through which the queer-body becomes. These fragments bring an array of relational forces to the fore: the materiality of clothing, bodily sensations of (dis)comfort, spatial-material schooling environments, discourses of gender and sexuality, wind, temperature, beauty-body practices and expectations from friends and family. Pertinent to this approach (and the following discussion) is ‘different agential cuts materialize different phenomena’ (Barad, 2007, p. 178) or differential matterings of clothing and the queer-body.

### **A material-discursive mattering of sartorial ‘choice’ and (dis)comfort**

As mentioned, skirts and dresses have long been a prominent feature of girls’ school uniforms and school ball (prom) attire, and discursively, can be understood as key markers of intelligible femininity within the New Zealand schooling environment. A new materialist ontology reorients the frame to conceptualize clothing as an intra-active material-discursive set of relations, involving signifying (discursive) and material forces in the same moment (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). This approach recognizes the force of matter and helps elucidate the ‘conjoined material-discursive nature of constraints, conditions, and practices’ (Barad, 2007, p. 152). Bodily capacities and constraints are understood to emerge through particular configurings or intra-actions in any given moment. Applying this idea to Dari and clothing, notions of sartorial ‘choice’ and (dis)comfort become a matter of intra-active entanglement involving an array of human and more-than-human forces:

I prefer not to wear dresses, they’re not my thing. I don’t like them. But that’s mostly from a practical point of view, I stopped wearing a skirt in year 12 because like, honestly, if you walk up and down any of these stairs your skirt is just like up in your face. I spent all of year 9, 10 and 11 having my skirt blown up, and having my legs freezing cold in the winter, and having to shave every second day, and I was like, this is ridiculous, this is stupid, I’m not doing it anymore, and then I was like I’m getting pants. I don’t care, uniform violation I don’t even, nup, I’m wearing pants.

Dari’s ‘preference’ to wear pants to school instead of the regulation school skirt is a material-discursive mattering involving fabric, flesh, the spatial-material environment, atmosphere and beauty-body practices. The architectural design of schools in Aotearoa New Zealand often requires students to walk outside when moving between classes; this inside-outside flow continually entangles student bodies with the physical

environment such as stairs and atmospheric conditions. The skirt-school-body configuration emerges as impractical and annoying: exposed flesh, feeling cold, the labor of regularly shaving legs and managing a wayward skirt being blown up in the wind. A pants-school-body configuration comes to matter differently through bodily sensations of warmth and comfort, increased freedom navigating stairs and the school environment, the ability to avoid expectations of feminine beauty (smooth hair-free legs) and modesty (not exposing 'too much' flesh). These capacities induced '*I don't care*' feelings of ambivalence and defiance toward the potential threat of a uniform violation.

A new materialist approach invites us to think *more* about clothing-body-school relations, beyond what clothing might signify or 'tell us' about bodies (in a discursive/representational sense), toward understanding meaning and materiality as inseparable. As Barad notes, 'bodily materiality is not a passive blank surface awaiting the imprint of culture or history to give meaning or open it to change' (2008, p. 325); instead, matter – in this instance, flesh, fabric, the spatial-material environment and atmosphere – become active forces in the materialization of bodies. The relationship between bodies and clothing is also one of mutual entanglement as opposed to being thought of as separate entities (i.e. a subject/object divide). This means boundaries, properties and meanings are not pre-determined but differentially enacted through the dynamics of intra-activity – a point I return to shortly.

Within a new materialist account, notions of 'choice' and agency become relationally produced and intention is distributed (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2005). For Barad, agency is not aligned to human intentionality or subjectivity, '*agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has*' (2007, p. 178, italics in original). This means agency does not derive from individual bodies but emerges intra-actively through a wider field of more-than-human relations. Describing the suit she wore to the previous year's ball, Dari explained how she '*didn't want to have like the whole collar, tie situation*' and instead, her suit comprised black pants, blazer, a sleeveless black and gold top, and black stilettos. Like wearing pants to school, the materiality of the suit in-relation with the fleshed-moving body produced feelings of ease, comfort and efficiency: the layers of clothing could be adjusted depending on the temperature of the room and body, and the blazer and pants had pockets that carried belongings eliminating the need for a bag.

Bodily capacities and constraints shift and change depending on relational forces, offering a nuanced view of the contingent (im)possibilities within particular configurations or matterings. Despite Dari's 'preference' for wearing pants, this year she planned on wearing a dress to the ball: a sartorial 'decision' produced through an entanglement of material-discursive and affective forces:

Ah yeah, dress this year, suit last year, that's the deal. I was like 'Mum I want to wear a suit'. She was like [sigh], and I was like 'come on Mum, come on'. She was like 'oh fine'. I was like, 'I'll wear a dress next year, promise'.

The sartorial 'deal' between Dari and her mother encompasses a complex network of parental expectations and approval, the materiality of dresses and suits, bodily sensations of (dis)comfort and discursive feminine norms surrounding the school ball. Conceptualizing sartorial 'choice' as a material-discursive mattering recognizes 'the importance of the sensory (material) and relational (discursive) within experience, as an emerging encounter

that produces meaning' (Wolfe & Rasmussen, 2020, p. 181). Dari had resigned herself to feeling cold this year and had no idea where she was going to put her ball ticket and mobile phone – a predicament Dari found both annoying and cumbersome. Compared to wearing a suit, the body-dress configuration produced different material a/effects:

The dress was a pain, my boobs wouldn't stay where I wanted them. People kept stepping on my train. I feel far more comfortable in my suits, but it was nice to show off my girly side and my back [laughter].

The shape and qualities of the dress – the fabric, train, ability to wear a bra or not – make itself intelligible to Dari as '*a pain*' (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). The comment '*my boobs wouldn't stay where I wanted them*' alludes to the aliveness of both the body and dress. The body-dress configuration also comes to matter through Dari's capacity to '*show off my girly side and my back*' – a mattering produced through the cut and style of a dress, exposure of bodily flesh, discourses of femininity, being viewed by others, and feelings in a particular moment. It is not that wearing a dress made Dari feel a certain way in a linear cause-and-effect fashion, as this perspective would be premised on a subject/object divide; rather, the material-affective arrangement of fabric, skin, breasts, bodily sensations and the public 'on display' school ball environment collaboratively produce feelings of both discomfort and pleasure. This approach elucidates further texture in understanding the material-discursive conditions that produce bodies and clothing in schooling environments. We are urged to consider the embeddedness of bodies in the material world, the liveliness, and at times unruliness of materiality, how matter is itself felt and what emerges in these lively encounters.

### Relational becomings and intelligibility

If clothing and bodies emerge through particular configurings or intra-actions at any given moment, there is no essential or pre-existing queer-body (or clothing). This suggests any queerness associated with queer-bodies is not pre-determined or known in advance. As material-discursive phenomena, it is 'through specific agential intra-actions that boundaries and properties of the 'components' of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful' (Barad, 2003, p. 815). This understanding of queer-bodies and clothing reconfigures regulatory practices and expectations shaped by binary logic. During the research, participants spoke positively about girls (including Dari) who wore clothing other than a formal dress to the ball, although, the capacity to do so appeared contingent and only 'made sense' in relation with certain students. One participant explains how she was tempted to wear a playsuit, however, felt '*if you weren't making a statement in a suit, or you were gay and wanted to express yourself, like it would be a bit weird*'. A discursive reading of this sentiment would illuminate the powerful discourses of femininity and sexuality at work. How certain clothing becomes intelligible in relation with specific subject positions (and discourses), in that it is constituted as intelligible for Dari to wear a suit as she is queer, but '*weird*' for anyone else: the 'anyone else' in this scenario appear to be girls who are, or perceived to be, heterosexual.

These 'rules of intelligibility' are reminiscent of Butler's (1990) heterosexual matrix which illuminates the inextricability of gender and sexuality, where 'appropriate' or

intelligible performances of gender (including the clothed body) are intertwined or understood in relation with the presentation of a heterosexual identity. Although in this instance, what is considered intelligible for Dari's clothed body is aligned with her queer identity. Meanings associated with dresses and suits appear mapped to feminine/masculine and queer/heterosexual dichotomous positionings, and when dresses and suits are positioned as binary opposites it can become an either/or scenario in terms of what is seen as intelligible or 'normal' for certain bodies.

An agential realist approach provides an ontological reorientation to intelligibility, in that discourses and meanings associated with identity and bodies are not prior. When discursive practices are understood as 'material (re)configurings of the world' (Barad, 2003, p. 821), the (un)intelligibility of bodies and clothing are not solely a product of discourse, nor is it the preserve of the human. Instead, intelligibility becomes an emergent mattering through entangled intra-actions of material-discursive practices (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). Intelligibility is a dynamic and ongoing process of meaning-making, which means it is always situated and contingent:

Every now and then I'll show up to a party or an event with a skirt, and people will be like 'what are you doing?' Like once a year in the height of summer and school is just too hot to function, I'll wear a skirt and those days everyone is like 'what?'. I literally had someone come up to me one day when I wore a skirt, it was really hot, and they go 'Dari, why are you wearing a skirt today?'

Through a relational mattering of summer heat, the fleshed moving-sensing body, peer expectation, surprise and curiosity, pants are enacted as intelligible for Dari's queer-body and the wearing of a skirt as the opposite: '*Dari, why are you wearing a skirt today?*' As Barad (2007) explains: 'intelligibility is an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation. It is not a human-dependent characteristic but a feature of the world in its differential becoming' (p. 149). What becomes (un)intelligible for queer-bodies is never fixed or stable, but open to new configurings, new matterings at any given moment. Integral to this instability is an understanding of the body and identity as unbounded, where neither are wholly confined to, or defined by, the human or discourse.

An agential realist approach prompts me to ask what happens when we think about clothing (dresses, skirts, and suits) and queer-bodies as coming into being 'only and always through dynamic, co-constitutive emergence' (Taylor & Ivinson, 2013, p. 666). One implication is a troubling of an either/or positioning of dresses and suits, complicating the regulatory assumption that queer-girl-bodies 'typically' wear either dresses or suits. It is not that Dari simply wears a suit or a dress, it could be argued that this queer-body becoming involves both.

I think because I wore a suit last year everyone is going to be like 'Dari will come in a suit?'. And I'll rock up in a dress and everyone will be like 'what are you doing?' Always got to keep people guessing.

The material body, suit *and* dress are entangled together with peer relations, climate and other (un)known forces to produce a relational and situated queer-body, and the capacity to '*keep people guessing*'. In Taylor's (2013) words, 'clothing as materialities become with us as we become with them in an open, contingent unfolding of mattering' (p. 699). Here,

the queer-body and dress come to matter in ways that disrupt or queer peer expectations confined by binary logic. This entanglement means clothing is never determinate or stable but experiences its own dynamic becoming. As Wolfe and Rasmussen (2020) contend: 'the dress is never self-evident, but always enacted within the event' (p. 189). In their exploration of school uniforms and the gendering of dress at school, they argue Barad's concept of intra-action opens up ways of thinking about school-dress, not as a problematic object, but as a *thing* with indeterminate qualities that materialize anew within each encounter. I argue this indeterminacy holds promise for understanding queer-bodies and clothing beyond dualistic representations, and importantly, adds further insight into how we might trouble what is perceived as 'normal' or expected for queer-bodies.

### **Toward an ethics of mattering**

Conceptualizing queer-bodies as material-discursive phenomena has important implications for understanding notions of identity and difference. An agential realist approach does not begin with conventional pre-existing identity categories attached to certain bodies, nor do bodies have inherent meanings. This complicates fixed and categorical notions of identity and difference, and in doing so, unsettles identity politics tied to a bounded individual. If 'individuals' materialize through intra-action then the queer-body does not begin with a set of given or fixed differences; rather, differences become made and remade through intra-active processes of mattering. Separation and differentiation only exist within phenomena, hence Barad (2007) calls phenomena 'differential patterns of mattering' (p. 140). Agential realism encourages us to attend to the specificities through which differences emerge, and to consider how these differences are implicated in the production of knowledge.

For Barad (2007), this is an ethical response, in the sense that 'ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are a part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities – even the smallest cuts matter' (p. 384). The agential cuts enacted in this article help bring some of the relational intricacies in-between Dari, clothing and the Aotearoa schooling environment to the fore. It is through specific intra-actions (and agential cuts) that entities (clothing and bodies) become determinate and distinct, which highlights the situated nature of knowledge production (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 1988). Intra-actions are boundary-making practices, where the boundaries and properties of phenomena are made and remade. Thus, queer-bodies do not exist 'out there' as ontologically prior or determinate, nor are they defined by 'external' pre-defined norms; rather, they iteratively come to matter through each intra-action, each material-discursive mattering. This openness has the potential to embrace difference in ways that are more ethical to the diversity of queer-bodies and the myriad ways they matter.

For educators and researchers, our attention and debates shift away from what students are wearing (and how) framed by a clear subject/object divide, to what clothing-school-body relations might inaugurate. What understandings these lively encounters might generate when bodies (including clothing) are not bounded separate entities located *in* space and time, but iteratively (re)materializing with each intra-action. This perspective foregrounds emergent capacities and constraints, where agency is 'the

conditions of possibility that arise out of entangled constellations of material objects, human bodies, discourses and shifting locations' (Pomerantz & Raby, 2020, p. 14). With every 'entangled constellation' the conditions of possibility are open to change. Sartorial 'choice' and agency become more expansive than individual intentionality or resistance. Although, this does not mean anything and everything is possible at any given moment, rather, (im)possibilities are contextual and specific, contingent upon relational forces and the intricate material-discursive workings of power (Barad, 2007).

Such an approach holds promise for conceiving the shifting complexities of queer-bodies and clothing beyond dichotomous representations that fall on the side of either oppression or empowerment (Allen, 2015b). Drawing on Barad's concept of intra-action, Allen (2015b) complicates representations of LGBTQIA + youth in educational research that position them as either 'victims' or 'heroes', arguing these dualistic representations 'not only obscures the lived realities of these young people but offers them limited possibilities for *becoming* in this context' (p. 381, italics in original). Conceptualizing queer-bodies as emergent via specific material-discursive entanglements is a step toward complicating restrictive understandings of queer youth, bringing attention to the active role of materiality and the material-discursive nature of constraints and possibilities (Barad, 2007). Agential realism and queer theory 'share a desire for radical openness' and 'an optimism for opening new possibilities for ways of thinking and being' (Allen, 2018, p. 29). The ontological foundation of agential realism invites, and often demands, different questions, different ways of thinking about the becoming of bodies and sexuality. It is with this sense of optimism and curiosity I look to the continuing possibilities of agential realism for doing justice to the complexities of queer-bodies and student realities.

## Note

1. Ethics approval was granted by The University of Auckland ethics committee. Participants provided informed consent and chose how they wished to participate in the project (i.e., through the sharing of photographs, videos and/or focus group discussion and/or interview interview).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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