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Diffractional Ripples of Girls, Schooling, Feminism and Femininities

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relational becomings of girls, feminism, femininity and the schooling environment. Drawing on feminist new materialisms and affect theory, it conceptualises femininity and feminism as emerging through dynamic material-discursive assemblages of sensations, bodies, things, ideas and practices. These assemblages derive from a study conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand examining girls' engagements with the school ball; a practice deeply entangled with traditional norms of femininity and heterosexuality. Verbal and embodied fragments from study participants, feminist theory and ideas are diffractively read through one another to see what ripples, connections and questions might emerge. I consider how a relational approach shifts understandings of feminism and femininity away from pre-existing, self-contained entities or identities, towards thinking about the specificities through which they emerge. This perspective offers nuanced understandings of the relations in-between girls, femininity and feminism that avoid judgements based on binary logic (e.g. good/bad, feminist/not feminist), and instead, helps do justice to the lively and multifaceted nature of feminism, femininities and girls' lives.

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Introduction

Femininity has long been a source of intense interest and discontent for feminism. While feminist perspectives on femininity vary, a dominant Western discourse has tended to frame femininity as a problem or constraint for women. Second-wave feminism, for instance, critiqued femininity as a tool of patriarchal oppression (Friedan 1963), enabling analyses of the disempowering and oppressive effects femininity has upon the lives of girls and women (Bartky 1990; Bordo 1993; Brownmiller 1984; Jeffries 2005; Wolf 1990). Feminine styling has been implicated in the objectification and sexualisation of girls and women, and associated with a loss or undoing of feminism within a postfeminist landscape (Levy 2005; McRobbie 2004). Thus it is unsurprising that the topic of femininity has, as Ulrika Dahl (2016, 7) puts it, acquired 'a bit of a bad reputation in feminist theory; far too often tied to the phenomena feminism seeks to eliminate'.

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The tense relationship between feminism and femininity often hinges on a clear separation between the two, each appearing as independent self-contained entities that are clearly definable and recognisable. As separate entities, feminism and femininity can fall into dichotomous or oppositional positionings, where one is perceived as detrimental or antithetical to the other. Drawing on feminist new materialisms, this article proceeds from a different starting point, one that emphasises ontological entanglement and relationality (Barad 2007). Both femininity and feminism are conceptualised as emergent becomings, where neither are pre-determined entities or identities, rather they emerge relationally with each other and the world. I consider how this approach has the potential to hold femininity and feminism together in such a way that attends to the material, sensorial and affective dimensions of experience, where feminist wonderings and (g)rumbles emerge in-relation *with* femininity, sometimes in complex and curious ways. In a sense, I am less interested in thinking about feminism and femininity as nouns (i.e. discrete, definable things), and more interested in thinking about them as verbs – as action, feelings, sensations and intuition. While a noun names a thing, verbs set it in motion.

As verbs, feminism and femininity are lively, continually swirling in, around, and through bodies, things, feelings and places. This liveliness recognises the intricate and multifaceted nature of feminisms and femininities more broadly, perhaps a mutual recalcitrance to being ‘pinned down’ or reduced to a particular mode of critique. It recognises the mutable nature of feminism, not in the sense of being fickle, but as a dynamic force responsive to the changing world. Feminism has never been a fixed or unitary category. The same logic can be applied to femininity. As Dahl (2012, 58) rightly points out, in our attempts to challenge the ‘power-laden relations of gender that continue to subordinate the feminine, femininity is such an obvious and central question that we often forget that we never agreed on what we mean by femininity’. Hence the continued call for complex theorisings of femininity that avoid monolithic understandings often associated with lack, weakness and subordination (Dahl 2012; Dahl and Sundén 2018; Hoskin and Blair 2022; McCann 2017; Serano 2007). Critical femininity studies, for instance, seek to imagine femininity otherwise by attending to the relational and intersectional dimensions within and between femininities, which requires nuanced and multidimensional approaches (Hoskin and Blair 2022), along with ‘creativity, imagination and both returning to old paths and embarking on new ones’ (Dahl and Sundén 2018, 275).

This article responds to this call by paying attention to the dynamic relational matterings (Barad 2007) of both feminism and femininity, which emerge through lively entanglements involving the school ball, feeling-sensing bodies, objects, material spaces and practices. Femininity is not considered inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad’, nor do I wish to map girls’ experiences of femininity and the school ball onto dichotomous frameworks such as empowerment/disempowerment or feminist/not feminist. This would be antithetical to a feminist new materialist approach as it would suggest there is some prior version of feminism or femininity upon which to make these judgements. The aim is to try to avoid these binaries altogether, and instead, focus on the intricate relations *in-between* girls, femininity, feminism and schooling, where manifestations of power, agency and resistance are relationally produced (Barad 2007; Fox and Alldred 2016). In short, this article asks, how do relations bring feminism and feminist politics into being, and with what a/effects?

This endeavour also draws inspiration from feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed’s articulation of *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), where feminism entails a sense of hope, energy and

movement. Ahmed (2017, 3) envisions feminist action ‘as like ripples in the water, a small wave, possibly created by agitation from weather; here, there, each movement making another possible, another ripple, outward reaching’. With Ahmed’s idea of ripples and movement in mind, I employ a diffractive methodology (Barad 2007; Haraway 1997) to bring together verbal and embodied fragments from study participants, Ahmed’s text *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), feminist new materialisms and affect theory to see what ripples might emerge. Ahmed (2017, 3) describes feminism as ‘the dynamism of making connections’: I bring this idea of connectivity to life by diffractively thinking *with* and *through* participant responses and feminist philosophy, where ‘I’ as a researcher and ‘you’ as a reader are inextricably entangled in the ripples produced. These connections and ripples are conceptualised through a posthuman feminist framework (Braidotti 2022, 6), where political subjectivity does not derive from a bounded humanist subject but a ‘heterogeneous assemblage of embodied and embedded humans’. The relationship between femininity and feminism is reconfigured, which I argue has the capacity to open up nuanced understandings of the relations in-between girls, femininity and feminism that does justice to the complexities of girls’ lives.

Girls and Feminism

The field of Girlhood Studies was born out of a desire to attend to the multifaceted and contextual richness of girls’ lives and experiences. In part, this desire was fuelled by the marginalisation of girls’ experiences within feminist scholarship, where the girl subject was either overlooked or examined within an adult-centred framework (Kearney 2009). Over the past three decades, girlhood scholars have helped address this absence by examining the complex relations between girls and feminism (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005; Frith 2001; Harris 2004, 2008; McRobbie 1991; Taft 2011): debates range from concern over girls’ apparent lack of interest and disidentification with feminism (Budgeon 2001; Scharff 2012), to the deployment of Girl Power discourses and their implications for girls’ activism (Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz 2009; Driscoll 1999; Gonick 2006; Taft 2004), and the configuring and othering of the ‘girl’ subject within feminism more broadly (Eisenhauer 2004).

Girlhood scholarship has helped complicate adult-centric perspectives and generational judgements about what feminist activism is and should be. The girl subject has been conceptualised as ‘a disruptive potentiality’ (Eisenhauer 2004, 80) challenging normative assumptions about the ‘subject’ of feminism; this disruption sparking a shift in questions from ‘Why should the ‘girl’ be considered a feminist subject?’ to ‘What assumptions have resulted in her exclusion?’ (Eisenhauer 2004, 87). Adult-centred perspectives have been critiqued for trivialising girls’ politics and activism (Aapola et al. 2005; Harris 2008; Taft 2011), their dismissal evident in the depiction of girls’ activism as a ‘phase’ or ‘generational rebellion’ rather than meaningful political engagement (Taft 2011, 49). Girls have also been portrayed as a ‘problem’ for feminism due to a perceived dissociation with the term ‘feminist’. Although, feminist scholars have complicated these concerns by arguing that while some girls might reject the ‘feminist’ label, their identities and perspectives are shaped by feminist frameworks (Budgeon 2001; Sharpe 2001), these insights adding further texture to the shape of girls’ feminist politics beyond identity labels.

Debates about whether girls call themselves feminist or not have incited critique for homogenising girls' diverse voices and relying on a monolithic form of feminism that girls either adopt or reject (Frith 2001). As Griffin (2001, 182) points out, these dichotomous representations position young women and feminism as 'distinct and separate entities, each with their own internal cohesion, so that diversity between young women – and between feminisms – is overlooked'. The idea that there is one version of feminism in which to make these judgements fails to acknowledge feminism as a diverse assemblage of political perspectives, analyses and practices. These generational politics also point to feminisms' unruliness and reluctance to be constrained within clearly defined boundaries of what it is, how it should 'look', and who it is for. Girls' engagements with feminism are situated and relational, shaped by intersectional axes of age, sexuality, class and ethnicity (Charles and Allan 2022; Ringrose and Renold 2016a; Scharff 2010). Like femininity, complex theorisings are needed to attend to the intricacies of girls' relationships with feminism, including the material and affective dimensions of girls' experiences and politics. Girls' engagements with online and school-based feminist groups, for instance, have provided rich and nuanced understandings of girls' feminist activism (Blackett 2016; Kim and Ringrose 2018; Retallack, Ringrose and Lawrence 2015), assuaging earlier concerns over girls' apathy towards feminism.

There has also been a generative shift towards thinking about 'feminist becomings' as emergent through assembled relations (Ringrose and Renold 2014, 2016a, 2016b), expanding the locus of feminism beyond the individual human and identity. Conceptual tools from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), affect theory (Ahmed 2004, 2010) and posthumanist thinkers such as Barad (2007) and Braidotti (2013) have been instrumental in providing relational concepts that bring material and affective forces to the fore. Ringrose and Renold (2016a, 231), for instance, map the affective intensities and 'affective solidarities' that emerge in the collective school-based feminist group environment, opening up understandings of how affective flows can energise or curtail girls' capacities to challenge everyday sexism and sexual harassment (Ringrose and Renold 2014). A relational understanding of feminist becomings shifts the notion of agency beyond humanist framings (i.e. as something belonging to or wielded by an individual) towards conceptualising school girl agency as relationally produced (Ivinson and Renold 2013; Wolfe 2016). This expansive approach recognises a wider array of forces at play, and in doing so, helps avoid reductive arguments and judgements based on fixed, stable entities/identities.

Femininities and School Ball

The relational becomings explored in this article derive from a study conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand examining girls' entanglements with the school ball (Ingram 2023). School balls are a yearly event for senior students in Aotearoa, and like the prom in the US, are entrenched in normative discourses gender and heterosexuality, shaping how young people are expected to look, dress and behave. The school ball is also a rich material environment of fleshed-moving bodies, material objects such as clothing and high-heeled shoes, beauty-body practices, feelings and affective atmospheres. Engaging with feminist new materialisms, the research explores the myriad material-discursive relations that collaboratively produce girls, femininity and the school ball. 41 girls (aged 16–18) participated in the project, sharing their thoughts and experiences through

participant generated photos and video diaries, focus group discussions and individual interviews.¹ The participants were in their final two years of schooling (years 12–13) at two state-funded urban secondary schools (one co-educational and the other an all-girls school), and their self-identified ethnicities included Māori, New Zealand European/Pākehā, Sri Lankan, Chinese, Korean, Indian, NZ/German and European/American.

The school ball provides a dynamic landscape in which to examine the relations in-between girls, femininity and feminism. Popular cultural narratives often construct school balls and proms as a 'rite of passage' and 'milestone' for young people, and it is girls in particular, who are expected to, or perceived to, heavily invest in the occasion (Best 2000). Studies highlight the regulation of girls' bodies and behaviour through traditional norms of femininity, where taking a male date, wearing a dress, make-up and high-heeled shoes are constituted as the norm (Best 2004; Smith 2014). Heterosexuality is considered one of the most pervasive discourses shaping girls' understandings and experiences of the school ball (Best 2005), and these events contribute to the wider cis-heteronormative landscape of schooling (Allen 2006; Ferfolja 2007). Female students also report feeling more harshly judged than their male peers (Smith 2012), this gendered surveillance is evident in media commentary on strict school ball dress codes or girls being refused entry to the prom due to 'revealing' or 'inappropriate' dresses (Bahou and Orenstein 2016; Ward, Bilby, and Gaffaney 2016). The scrutiny of girls' bodies within the school ball environment reflects a broader culture of surveillance: girls being told to lengthen skirts to 'stop distracting male staff and students' (Roy 2016; Schoultz 2016) and the photoshopping of girls' yearbook photos to cover cleavage, décolletage and shoulders (Elliot 2021) are further examples of the moral panics and sexism that continue to regulate how girls are expected to look and behave in schooling environments.

While calling attention to the enduring surveillance of girls' bodies, media commentary simultaneously reinforces the narrative that girls are heavily invested in the school ball. Headlines such as 'Scramble to be belle of ball' (Tait 2014) and 'Frock horror as girls show up in same dress' (Eriksen 2012) construct the ball as a high stakes environment for girls resulting in excessive and competitive behaviour. Articles such as these were instrumental in the study's inception. They provoked my feminist sense-abilities: a sense of unease and scepticism at the frequent negative and reductive portrayal of girls; curiosity as to whether these media articles resonated with girls' experiences of the school ball; and a sense of injustice at the cruel tightrope girls walk, where they are expected to conform to dominant ideals of femininity and beauty, yet these norms are then weaponised against girls to belittle and disparage their behaviour as excessive, catty and competitive.

These media portrayals illustrate the powerful gender(ed) discourses surrounding school ball environments and girls' behaviour. Feminist new materialisms offer a way of conceptualising these discursive forces as entangled with materiality, enabling understandings of the 'material constraints and exclusions, the material dimensions of agency, and the material dimensions of regulatory practices' (Barad 2007, 192). Femininity is conceptualised as an intra-active becoming (Barad 2007) involving a shifting array of material-discursive forces. This means there is no fixed definition of what femininity 'really is', and instead, femininities become emergent and multiple. Bodily capacities and constraints also become relationally produced, contingent upon the myriad forces at play. There is a sense of indeterminacy and openness to the becoming of femininity,

expanding understandings of who or what might play a role in its becoming and with what a/effects. Like femininity, feminist becomings are understood as emergent through particular configurings or matterings in any given moment, and this article can be understood as one such mattering.

A Diffractive Approach

The following discussion brings together fragments from study participants, Ahmed's (2017) *Living a Feminist Life* and feminist new materialist and affect theories, diffractively reading insights through one another to create 'spaces of encounter' (Ahmed 2017, 17). The physical phenomenon of diffraction refers to the bending and spreading of waves – water, sound or light – that occurs when waves encounter an obstruction or barrier. As waves intercept and overlap, a diffractive pattern is produced. Donna Haraway (1997) leveraged the optical metaphor of diffraction to propose a reading method that embraces interference, where different reading skills or texts interrupt each other productively. Karen Barad (2007, 2014) builds on Haraway's ideas to further elaborate diffraction as both a method and methodology. Diffraction is at the heart of Barad's agential realism, where they diffractively read insights from quantum physics, feminist and queer theory through one another to produce their onto-epistemological framework of entanglement. Like Haraway, Barad conceptualises diffractive readings as respectful, detailed and ethical engagements attuned to the relational nature of difference, not in the sense of treating theories or ideas as separate entities, but rather as 'thinking with and through difference' to produce 'new patterns of thinking-being' (Barad in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 58). Diffractive readings do not set texts or ideas against one another in the mode of comparison or critique, nor is one seen as foundational; rather, texts, artefacts or approaches are respectfully read through each other in a relational way to come to more creative insights (Bozalek and Murriss 2021; Murriss and Bozalek 2019). I am interested in the diffractive ripples – patterns of interference – that emerge when participant fragments, feminist theory and ideas connect or collide, perhaps making new ripples, connections or questions. To *diffract* is a doing – a verb – and as such, we might ask what texts and ideas coming together as phenomena might *do*.

Drawing on Jackson and Mazzei (2023, 2), the verbal and embodied fragments from participants can be thought of as *performative accounts*: 'Their accounts *are* not things (i.e. stories which reflect experience); their accounts *do* things. They are a *force*'. In this sense, performative accounts are not 'brute data' that reflect the truth of individual experience, rather they are a force that 'bring forth the very life they speak' (Jackson and Mazzei 2023, 2). Engaging diffractively with girls' performative accounts and other texts entails understanding the world from within and as part of it, where being, knowing and doing are inseparable. For Barad, knowing is a direct material engagement with the world, which means there is no 'knowing' from a distance, no conventional separation between research and researcher. This means the researcher is not an ontologically separate observer that is capable of offering a birds-eye view, instead, they are part of the research assemblage – part of the diffractive pattern. Hence, I am not interested in mapping girls' performative accounts onto a framework of feminist/not feminist, as this would presume I am an independent outside observer in which to make these judgements. My own feminist-feminine subjectivities matter, as do my memories of

attending school balls both as a teenager and as a researcher, my encounters with media articles, the comments and ideas that have sparked my curiosity (MacLure 2013b) and feminist sense-abilities in some way. When diffractively reading these texts and ideas through one another, neither 'I' as researcher, nor 'you' as reader are ontologically separate from the connections, ripples and sensations that emerge.

Diffracting feminism & femininity & girls & schooling & ...

'To live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable. The question of how to live a feminist life is alive as a question as well as being a life question.' (Ahmed 2017, 2).

Questions can create a spark, an opening for something new to emerge. They can incite movement, a shift in direction or a ripple in the room, paradoxically igniting or dousing flames of contention and creativity. In short, questions *do* something, whether intentional or not. For Ahmed, the act of questioning – to make something questionable – is a form of resistance against oppression, inequality and injustice. To question something is to create something. Participant questions and wonderings sparked throughout the research, at times, evoking a sensation, a memory or response. Other times, a question from a participant was left unanswered; the asking being the point. Questions create connections in-between things, bodies, desires, cultural norms and politics. The question of whether to take a date or not to the ball was a frequent spark among participants. While popular cultural narratives often portray school balls and proms as a romantic space, participants rarely associated the event with romance, nor was a date a required accessory (see also Ingram 2022; Smith 2014). At both schools, taking a date to the ball was optional and could include male or female dates from inside or outside of school. Within a new materialist frame, the 'decision', and indeed question, of whether to take a date or not can be thought of as a material-discursive mattering (Barad 2007) involving forces such as material bodies, photographs, relationship status, the dance floor, the desire for freedom and to have fun with friends. Within a relational ontology, the (un)importance of a ball date is not fixed or discursively presumed, rather it emerges through a complex network of forces and affective flows:

Well I took one last year, but um, this one is a bit complicated for me because I want to take a date but then I'm kind of like, I'm Head Girl, do I want to have that image? Or do I want to be the strong independent woman, you know like? I'm still trying to figure out if I want to take one or not.

Shalini wonders whether she wants to take a date and have 'that image' or whether she wants to go on her own and be 'the strong independent woman'. Her leadership role as Head Girl, the responsibility to greet guests upon arrival, the desire for freedom of movement and the affective intensities related to a perceived/projected 'image' are all entangled in her wonderings. Conceptualising these relations as a sexuality-assemblage (Allen 2013; Fox and Alldred 2013), the 'decision' to take a date or not shifts away from an autonomous agentic human subject to flows of affect within assembled relations. Affects circulate in-between bodies, spaces, ideas and social relations as a collective force (affective flow) which produces capacities, desires and sensations (Fox and Alldred 2013). The material presence of a date, the school ball environment and discourses associated with being part of a couple collaboratively produce a particular

'image', a sensation, perhaps one resonating with desirable/desiring femininity. Going solo, on the other hand, forms part of an affective flow that enacts a sense of freedom, strength and independence.

'... feminism begins with sensation: with a sense of things.' (Ahmed 2017, 21).

Feminism, for Ahmed (2017, 22), 'often begins with intensity: you are aroused by what you come up against'. Intensity is affective and embodied – bodies can sense, and be incensed by, injustice and inequality. These same bodies are often prime sites for regulation and control: the enduring surveillance of school-girl bodies is one such intensity. School rules and practices that govern the exposure of bodily flesh and 'appropriate' school ball attire continue to provoke student, media and researcher attention both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally. Media headlines such as, 'Catholic girls' school's strict ball rules: No cleavage, no backless dresses, no taking off shoes and your date must be serious' (Ward et al. 2016) and 'Strict dress code at Kerikeri High School ball sees dresses above ankle banned' (Earley 2019) are two examples. Shalini attended an all-girls school and when discussing what she planned on wearing to the ball, I asked if the school had any rules that would impact her sartorial choices. Shalini paused and took a moment to think:

Yeah ... no they don't say anything, that is interesting, no they don't. I don't think they can really. I think because we are a girls' school, so they can't be like 'you have to be modest' because the feminists would rage

Shalini's response conveys a sense of intrigue – a wondering – 'that is interesting, no they don't. I don't think they can really'. While Shalini was cognisant of the regulatory norms of femininity surrounding the school ball, the idea that the school would, or even could, enforce expectations of modesty felt inconceivable due to the nature of the all-girls environment, the presence of feminist students (herself included) and the potential force of feminist rage. As an affective feminist sensation, feminist rage feels potent in its ability to thwart any attempt by the school to mandate 'modest' school ball attire. Although, the school ball was not devoid of sartorial constraints: while the school might not overtly influence girls' sartorial choices through explicit rules, Shalini went on to note, 'obviously, it goes on facebook so people will start judging'. Online social media platforms, the sharing and viewing of photographs and dominant discourses of femininity collaboratively produce the regulatory gaze of peer judgement. Ripples of wonderings emerge: I wonder about the dynamics of the school culture; are feminine norms surrounding these events so thoroughly entrenched that the school did not need to impose sartorial rules like those seen in the media? I wonder about the palpable force of feminist rage, how it might be sensed in the school atmosphere and what it might do?

'Feminism is a movement in many senses: We are moved to become feminists. Perhaps we are moved by something: a sense of injustice, that something is wrong' (Ahmed 2017, 3)

A new materialist approach to power and resistance can be conceptualised as an 'affective movement' or process (Fox and Alldred 2016), where the capacity for 'resisting' emerges through material forces and intensities within various assemblages. Rather than an agentic bodily act or attribute, resistance as an affective movement is unstable, it flows and shifts as relations assemble and reassemble in open-ended assemblages. This

conceptualisation of resistance aligns with a new materialist approach to agency, as a quality or capacity that emerges in-between wider relations that include the human and more-than-human (Barad 2007; Bennett 2005). ‘Resisting’ girl bodies emerge through relational networks of forces, sensations and intensities, opening up nuanced understandings of the material-discursive manifestations of power and resistance beyond dualistic framings of young bodies as oppressed or empowered, problematic or celebrated (Fox and Alldred 2016). Resisting as an affective movement is about connections, sensations and flows; the ‘fluctuating micropolitics of daily actions and encounters between people, things and social formations’ (Alldred and Fox 2017, 1170). A sense of things that does not derive from, nor wholly limited to, the human.

Conceptualising feminism as a collective movement, Ahmed invites us to think about movement as solidarity: a movement with others, with the senses. For Ahmed (2017, 22), ‘sensation is often felt by the skin’: an intensity, perhaps a sense of injustice or curiosity, or an ‘impression that is not clear or distinct’. Sensation recognises the body in contact with the world. In a new materialist sense, bodies are not simply situated *in* the world as discrete self-contained entities, rather, they become *of* the world, always in a process of becoming or mattering with others (Barad 2007). Bodies are dynamic and relational, continually coming to matter in complex and indeterminate ways. Sensation forms part of this mattering. During our conversation, I asked Shalini whether being a feminist evoked any particular perspectives or thoughts – feminist sensations – about the ball:

Yes, I guess so, um ... I guess we all, at the end of the day, we do want to look good. We can’t always say we don’t need to shave our legs etc. and I don’t think it’s all about that, we’re allowed to look good. Yeah, I think it brings up the idea whether we do need to spend this much money on it all as well

Feminism and being a feminist emerge as compatible and co-habitable with a desire and ability to ‘*look good*’: Shalini not simply noting that as feminists ‘we do want to look good’ but ‘we’re allowed to look good’, albeit at a financial cost. Several participants mentioned the time commitment and financial costs associated with the school ball, these (g)rumbings complicating the idea that girls are uncritically invested in the ball as often portrayed in the media. Beauty-body practices and ‘looking good’ emerge through tangled webs of effort, anxiety, excitement, (dis)comfort, financial investment, consumption, time and labour. Beauty can be conceptualised as an affective-material process, shifting the focus from what beauty is or means, to how it comes to be. The *how* is relational, reorienting debates about beauty beyond binary framings such as good or bad, oppression or empowerment, towards the entangled relations that collaboratively produce bodies, beauty and ‘looking good’ as unstable performative phenomena (Barad 2007).

The same logic applies to feminism and a feminist identity. The feminist ‘subject’ is not a bounded self-contained individual, rather, *feminist* is a material-discursive mattering, a movement with and *of* the world. Within a relational ontology, femininity and feminism come together as open-ended matterings – the ‘dynamism of making connections’ (Ahmed 2017, 3). At times, a desire to ‘look good’ emerged with feelings of frustration, boredom, ambivalence and critique, often in complex ways. Pertinent to this approach is an understanding of discursive norms of femininity and beauty as co-constitutive

with materiality, bringing attention to how matter makes itself felt and with what a/effects (Barad 2007).

As you become aware of how the social world is organized, norms appear as palpable things. (Ahmed 2017, 43)

Feminine norms are a constellation of material-discursive and affective forces, at times coalescing in curious ways. Norms are not only felt or experienced by a material body, norms are material – they matter and come to matter in complex ways. The wearing of high-heeled shoes, for instance, involves complex configurations of human and more-than-human matter, feminine norms, movement and bodily sensations. Throughout the research, high-heeled shoes made their presence felt (MacLure 2013b) in a way that was not easily ‘explained’ or even contained through a discursive approach alone. As a material-discursive mattering, wearing high heels produced an array of affective embodied responses (i.e. feeling confident, desirable, uncomfortable). The rubbing of flesh, fibre and sweat created sensations of discomfort and pain, often prompting the removal of high heels at the ball. It was not unusual to see shoes without feet under tables, and feet without shoes on the dance floor. Material-affective configurations produce ‘resisting’ bodies, where the removal of shoes enabled comfort and freedom of movement. At other times, high heel-ball-girl configurations produced a threat of emasculation and a sense of anxiety over potentially being taller than a male date, along with a sense of the sexism underpinning these concerns:

They want to be superior, have the power

It’s the whole sexist thing that goes way back

For girls, it’s just this expectation, idea about that’s how it should be

That the boys are tall and muscly and protect you and stuff like that

[groan] oh my gosh, I’ll protect myself

And it’s an aesthetic thing as well, like if you take the pictures and then the girl is taller than the guy, then like I don’t know it’s just weird for both parties. It’s ingrained in the culture I guess

You just pick them up

Just lie on the floor [laughter]

(Focus group, 3 voices)

Sexism is palpable, sensed through the body, giving rise to affective responses of indignation, mockery, groans and eye-rolling. The gendered expectation that ‘boys are tall and muscly and protect you and stuff’, registers bodily (MacLure 2013a) through a participant’s groan and exclamation of ‘oh my gosh, I’ll protect myself’. The tone of voice, facial expressions (rolling of eyes) and use of humour ‘you just pick them up ... just lie on the floor’ produces a subsequent flow of laughter. Ahmed (2017, 246) reminds us of the potential of humour: ‘To laugh at something can be to make something more real, to magnify it, and to reduce something’s power or hold over you, simultaneously’. Laughter frequently sparkled throughout the research discussions, bubbling and flowing among the participants and researcher.

Dwelling in the In-between

The wonderings, laughter, sighs and (g)rumbles that emerge in this article give shape to some of the nuanced, perhaps mundane, and at times contradictory aspects of girls' entanglements with femininity and feminism. It is a relational and situated perspective that not only helps attend to the dynamism of feminism and femininity, but also the complexities of girlhood more broadly. Central to Girlhood Studies is the recognition that there is no singular 'girl' or 'girlhood' experience. Two decades ago, Eisenhauer (2004, 87) posed the question: 'I wonder what it would mean for feminisms and feminist pedagogies to understand the "girl" not as a singular state defined by age or behaviour, but as a constantly shifting, discursively constituted sign that comes to mean and represent many things besides "young female".' Re-turning (Barad 2014) to this idea within a feminist new materialist frame – turning it over and over again – the 'girl' is understood as emerging through dynamic material-discursive configurations, an open-ended process continually shifting and flowing with the world. Subjectivity becomes a matter of entanglement. For instance, feminist subjectivity is not a bounded self-contained feminist 'I', rather it is a dynamic subjectivity that emerges through 'a web of interconnections' (Braidotti 2022, 8) or intra-relations (Barad 2007), including forces that may relate to ethnicity, age, class, sexuality and the myriad intricacies within affective-material environments. In this sense, 'living a feminist life' can be understood as an open-ended lively affair that exceeds discourse and the human.

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. Detaching femininity and feminist from a bounded body or identity avoids reductive judgements about girls not being feminist or not feminist enough, particularly when these judgements are based on a predetermined version of feminism that only some may recognise. Feminist politics shift from self-contained entities – whether that be feminism or femininity, those being judged or those making the judgements – towards a politics of entanglement and emergence. For feminist new materialists, politics are inseparable from a sense of response-ability: 'a need to account for how and what it is that we, feminists, participate in materialising' (Hinton and van der Tuin 2014, 4). A diffractive methodology – reading texts carefully through one another – involves an onto-epistemological reconfiguring of what we think data is or can do, and how we perceive our involvement as researchers. We cannot separate ourselves from our research matter, or as Lenz Taguchi (2012, 272) explains, 'the data is itself understood as a co-constitutive force, working with and upon the researcher, as the researcher is working with the data'.

For me, diffracting feminism, femininities, girls and schooling invites a sense of dwelling in the in-between – in the openness – with a sense of curiosity, not as a separate observer or entity, but as part of the mattering, part of the in-between. Dwelling is often thought of as the act of inhabiting something, or a place of habitation, however, what might dwelling look like when spaces and relations are continually being reconfigured? Dwelling in a diffractive sense, might be thought of as dwelling in, or rather *with* the world through dynamic intra-active processes (Barad 2007): to dwell is to be entangled, to lack an independent self-contained existence. This perspective also reorients how we might think about the concept of dwelling in-relation with femininity and feminism. Femininity, for instance, can appear as a place or space we might inhabit,

where, it becomes 'a kind of residence; an occupation of a place where someone, generally a subject called woman, dwells' (Dahl 2012, 60). In this frame, femininity appears to have cohesive borders, a container we might inhabit, however, as Dahl (2012, 60) notes, the perception of femininity as 'a dwelling place, rests on an idea of a boundary between interior and exterior that has very specific consequences for theories of (feminine) subjectivity'. Within a feminist new materialist approach, identities, spaces and subjectivities are continually (re)made through iterative processes of mattering, a doing or becoming, rather than a thing or space one might 'sit' or inhabit (Barad 2007). As conventional boundaries are continually made and remade, notions of interior and exterior are reworked. It is a dynamic ongoing process; hence, while feminism and femininity can be defined as nouns, in this article they are better thought of as verbs, lived and coming to matter in (un)predictable ways.

(In)conclusion

The intent of this article has not been to fix meaning to girls' comments in a representational sense, however, it does tell something of a story. Although, diffractively, the story I am telling – or think I am telling – connects with the story you are perceiving, and something emerges in the in-between. This article itself is an intra-active becoming – 'not a thing, but a doing' (Barad 2007, 183) – that is on-going: 'what appears on these pages is not a "final product" but rather representations of some of the diffractive patterns that (continue to) resonate' with me and now with you as the reader (Thorpe and Newman 2023, 109). Therefore, rather than asking 'what does this mean?', we are encouraged to ask 'how does this work?' 'What gets produced in the entanglements? And, how might these entanglements attend to the nuances of both femininity and feminism in ways that do justice to the diversity and complexities of girls' lives? Perhaps the 'story' that emerges in-between offers a way of posing more questions about girls, femininity and feminism, rather than answers. These questions emerge through diffractive ripples and patterns of interference. Ripples can create sensations and movement. Ripples make an ocean. For me, the feminist ripples, (g)rumbings and wonderings that emerge are vibrant and granular. There is something lively in the spark in-between feminist theory, Ahmed's words, participant comments, their laughter, sighs and rolling of eyes. There is something alive in the affective-material flow in-between the writing and reading of this article. If feminism is the 'dynamism of making connections' (Ahmed 2017, 3), then feminism is alive in these in-between spaces.

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 individual interview).

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