

## More than a class act? Dilemmas in researching elite school girls' feminist politics

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### **Abstract:**

Feminist scholars have long been concerned with privileged women's activism and engagement with feminist politics and how acts of resistance from privileged subjects might best be understood. In the current moment we are seeing a reinvigoration of interest in feminist activism particularly from young women, but not necessarily focusing on young women who are positioned as privileged. At the same time, there is attention in the sociology of elite schooling, to the question of social justice politics in privileged spaces. In this paper we contribute to both these scholarly conversations by reporting on the feminist activism of three young women attending an elite school in Australia. We argue that these young women's activism/feminist politics needs to be understood as a complex entanglement of resistance and reproduction with regard to gender, race and class, and that drawing on recent theorisations influenced by post-humanism in feminist educational research produces fresh insights into researching gender/race/class reproduction by young women in elite educational settings.

### **Introduction and background**

This paper explores young women's engagements with feminism in the context of an elite Australian single-sex secondary school. The paper stems from extended discussions between the two authors about the ways in which the feminist activism they witnessed in their separate studies (Charles in an elite girl's school in Australia and Allan in a similar school in the UK) might be recognised and understood.

Both authors were initially overwhelmed by the limited discursive frames which they felt were available to them in their attempts to make sense of the complex entanglements of class privilege and gender at play in these activities – feeling compelled to make sense of them through binary understandings of these as forms of resistance (e.g. as authentic and reactionary) or reproduction (e.g. as the actions of 'silly little rich girls' who were playing at the edges of feminism with very little to lose and a lot more to gain).

The sorts of questions which these initial discussions generated are not new. Indeed, if we look back to the autobiographical accounts narrated by some of the first UK suffragettes we find them wrangling with questions about the legitimacy of their endeavours and struggling to make sense of the accusations levelled against them (e.g. of supposedly self-serving motives). Lady Constance Lytton's autobiography is a particularly good case in point (Lytton & Warton, 1914).

Lytton is best known for having been imprisoned for throwing a stone at the car of (the then UK Chancellor of the Exchequer) Lloyd George in protest of the inhumane treatment of suffragette prisoners. Lytton went on to serve a number of prison sentences as a result of her ongoing militant activism. At the time of her first imprisonment Lytton found that she was subject to quite different conditions in prison compared to the majority of suffragettes who had been sentenced alongside her. In her autobiographical accounts Lytton questions this privileged treatment, which she suspects was owing to the recognised wealth and prestige of her family (her Father was Viceroy of India and her Mother a lady-in-waiting to the Queen). She also narrates her ambivalence – the feelings of shame she experienced for being so cosseted during this time, but also the relief she felt owing to the experience not being too much to endure.

On subsequent occasions Lytton assumed the pseudonym of Jane Warton and attempted to 'pass' (e.g. through physical dress and altered speech patterns) as a working-class women, in order that she might experience the full prison regime faced by other 'ordinary' suffragettes. As Lytton (1914: 137) reflects on her experiences she judiciously questions the feminist activity of privileged women like herself and the 'real' difference which this might make:

*No, the weakest link in the chain of womanhood is the woman of the leisured class. Isolated and detached, she has little sense of kinship with other women. For her there is no bond of labour, no ties of mutual service; her whole life is spent in the preservation of appearances, and she seems hardly ever to probe down to the bone of realities ... Until these women can be educated as to the lives of the bulk of women, brought up against the laws with regard to them that now disgrace the statute book, made to feel the horror of custom which still undermines their own existence, and to burst through the gilded bars which hold their own lives in bondage, they act upon the social organism in a way that is almost wholly harmful. Only when their eyes have been opened will their 'influence' and 'example' bear out a reasonable meaning of those words and their position of privilege make them worthy to lead.*

Moving on in time (to the 1970s) and we find a number of socialist feminists returning to ask similar questions (Myall, 1998). As they worked to debate the validity of researching the lives and experiences of just a few privileged suffragettes, questions abounded about the authenticity of these women's voices and the significance of their actions. Had these women really been capable of standing for ordinary women when their own lives and experiences were so far removed? Could they really be considered as having 'suffered for the cause'? Were they able to cast a critical eye over their own privileged experiences in order to act for the good of a wider collective?

And while some have heralded the current era (this supposed Fourth wave of feminism) as one which is more acutely aware of the need for intersectional analysis and more readily open to everyone (e.g. owing to social media and as evidenced in the recent Everyday Sexism and MeToo campaigns), still we find these questions resurfacing in popular media articles. Some, for example, questioning how the (white, cisgender, wealthy) actress Emma Watson can be singled out as the radical new poster girl of contemporary feminism. Or how expensive events with designer goody bags, run by organisations like TedX for women, might be considered as feminist activity for the masses. Is this 'real feminism', these articles ask, or a form of 'white supremacy in heels'?

Our interest in this paper, then, is to return to these age-old, lingering questions in the light of what we and others recognise as a renewed interest in feminist activism amongst the younger generations and to subject them to a different form of analysis – one which draws on recent theorisations influenced by post-humanism in order to move beyond a simple discursive framing of these complex, material and embodied, entanglements of gender and class privilege.

## **Literature Review**

### *Young women's agency and activism*

Our research sits at the interface of two main bodies of research: that which has been conducted by girlhood studies scholars on feminist activism in the contemporary school context, and that which has been conducted by researchers in the sociology of elite schooling with an interest in privileged young people's agency and their engagements with social justice politics.

In recent years girlhood studies scholars have shown sustained interest in girls' engagements with feminism (Edell, Mikel-Brown & Tolman, 2013; Frith, 2001; Keller & Ringrose, 2015). Some earlier studies tended to focus on girls' seeming disidentification with feminism and its apparent lack of

intergenerational currency (Budgeon, 2001; Segal, 2000; McRobbie, 2004). Later research reports a reinvigoration in feminist activities for young women both online and in other contexts such as schools (Aune & Holyoak, 2018; Charles & Wadia, 2018; Dean, 2012; Marine & Lewis, 2014; Retallack, Ringrose & Lawrence, 2016; Ringrose & Renold, 2016).

Ringrose and Renold (2016) consider the activities of five academics in seven schools across England and Wales, as they worked with young people to establish and/or facilitate feminist lunchtime or after school clubs. Through this activity, and by utilising a range of creative methodologies, the team were able to generate qualitative data with seventy-five young people and five teachers. This research, they suggest, was 'injected with posthuman feminism from the outset' (2016: 3) in order to allow them to think through the process of feminist becoming (the 'naming' and 'claiming' of feminist identities) in the discursive-material-affective terrain of the school. These explorations lead them to an awareness of the girls' outrage as they shared their collective experiences of sexism, but also the affective intensities and solidarities which were experienced owing to their being part of a physical, and sometimes virtual, group collective who could 'notice together'.

This recent study focusing on schoolgirls' feminist activism is preceded by a history of work by these and other feminist scholars drawing attention to gendered subjectivities and the complex ways in which young women are constrained by heteronormative discourse in school contexts and in their lives more generally, and the possibilities for navigating and resisting these constraints (Charles, 2010; Duits & Van Zoonen, 2006; Gill, 2007; Jackson, 2010; Renold & Ringrose, 2008; Wolfe, 2018; Youdell, 2005). This work necessitates an engagement with the various theoretical resources available for conceptualising young people's subjectivities and their agency. Recent directions in the field have taken up post-structural theorists such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Gilles Deleuze, as well as post-human and new materialist feminist theorists such as Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, and Rosi Braidotti. Such theoretical resources have enabled a complex view of young people's agency that challenges the humanist notion of agency as a capacity of individuals, and even an eschewing of the notion of agency altogether by some scholars (see Ringrose 2013 for a discussion about this). Collectively, this work draws attention to the ways in which any consideration of young women's agency must be accompanied by a complex mapping of the dominant discursive frames that shape their lives, and the classed and raced dimensions of these.

It is the classed dimensions of working with girls in very privileged schools that has perplexed us, as we have sought to make sense of the justice politics of young women in such contexts, and our own complicated feelings about their feminist activism. Some of the recent research on young feminist identification has been undertaken in relatively privileged school contexts. Renold and Ringrose (2016), for example, make mention of this when they outline the rich material and discursive resources which girls in the 'Parklands' school context could draw upon (an institution based in the suburbs of a wealthy borough of London).

Some of this research also takes up an intersectional analyses. Scharff (2010) makes some particularly insightful observations about the intersection of gender and class in girls' engagements with feminism. She notes, for example, the apparent ease with which some middle-class girls felt able to align themselves with feminism, owing to their class background and the way in which this seemed to offer affinity and common sensical alignment with their existing views and values. Though Scharff is also quick to add a note of caution here, stating that there is no straightforward link between class and feminist identification, particularly because of the ways in which other axes of differentiation might cut across this (religion, sexuality, age, ethnicity, etc). Renold and Ringrose (2016) also work to emphasise the continued importance of intersectional identitarian politics – arguing that an exploration of class and race privilege has potentially never been so important when so many popular (commodity) feminisms fail to address such complex power relations. However, to

our knowledge none of the recent research on young women's feminist activism focuses specifically on girls attending elite schools. In order to further consider the justice politics of young women in elite schools, we turn now to recent literature in the sociology of elite schooling and the critical questions it raises about elite young people's engagements with social justice.

### *Elite schools, justice politics and agency*

Research in the sociology of elite education has waxed and waned over the years, and has been subject to considerable methodological and conceptual change, though it has seen a resurgence of interest in recent years, with some now describing it as a 'lively' and 'fertile' field of interest (Kenway & Koh, 2015: 10). Kenway and Koh (2015) suggest that mapping the contours of class privilege is something which is of particular contemporary concern for researchers in this field, as they seek to move beyond earlier forms of realist documentary research in order to explore the processes of class production in a new global context.

As part of this new mapping exercise, some researchers have explored this in relation to privileged young people's engagements with social justice politics and activities in the elite school context (Courtois, 2015; Gaztambide-Fernandez & Howard, 2013; Howard, 2010; Howard & Maxwell, 2018). This is made possible both because of the incredible popularity of social service schemes in these schools, and their deep historical roots. Kenway and Fahey (2015), for example, noting that the age-old aristocratic view of social superiority stemming from moral superiority, has since morphed into what we might call 'noblesse oblige' and works to form the basis of elite schools' obsession with philanthropic and charity work. These explorations, then, lend to interesting questions surrounding the resistance or reproduction of classed identities which might be performed as young people engage in these activities.

Indeed, a number of researchers have sought to explore why it is that the young people who attend these schools might choose to participate in this activity (Howard, 2013; Swalwell, 2013; Kenway & Fahey, 2015). They have also examined the discursive strategies which might get taken up when students feel challenged in terms of their own privilege because of their participation in these service activities. Nenga (2011), for example, noted four different discourses which were often utilised: one emphasising the evasion of privilege, one which worked as an equalising discourse, another which rested on an explanation that difference resulted from the possession of varying amounts of cultural capital, and a discourse which did actively work to question and challenge the young people in their privilege. Swalwell similarly noted a number of different possible responses from young people engaging in social service work in an elite school context – with some, for example, suggesting that difference was inevitable as a result of individual merits, and others taking an activist ally stance where they demonstrated an awareness of systemic oppression and a desire to enact change.

Some of these studies have sought to explore the ways in which girls might engage with social justice politics and service activities. Cooper-Benjamin (2010), for example, highlights the ambivalence that many of the girls in her study experienced as they engaged in social service activity – particularly the difficulties they faced as they navigated the tricky terrain of classed and gendered discourses which might position them as either inauthentic or unfeminine. Some studies have also gestured towards feminist activity, and girls' agency in the elite school context. Forbes and Lingard (2013) mention the 'girls can do anything' ethos which underpinned the activity in the school where they conducted their research and which was such an important part of the institutional habitus. They conclude that it is this which contributes to the agentic and assured positions which the girls in these schools could inhabit, as they felt able to argue for empowered forms of participation in school and wider society, and to fight for their rights as protagonists.

On the whole, though, feminist identification and activism has not featured heavily in this body of work, despite a strong history of attention to gendered discourses, power and subjectivities in elite schooling (Forbes & Weiner, 2014; Kenway, Epstein & Langmead, 2015; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2010; Proweller, 1998; Walford, 1993). Fahey's (2014) study of 'flexible feminism' in an elite girls' school is the only notable exception of which we are aware. Many of the recent studies related to social justice practices in elite schools have prioritised questions about class resistance and reproduction, with less attention to gender, and without reference to girls' feminist engagement.

Furthermore, elite schools literature is often influenced by Bourdieusian theory and has not often taken up post-human theorisations of agency in order to think differently about how we produce knowledge of elite schoolgirls and their subjectivities. For example, the question of elite schoolgirls' agency has been taken up recently by Forbes and Maxwell (2018: 167) where they conceptualise agency as 'accomplished by individuals in particular contexts, but facilitated by drawing on their available resources'. The notion that agency is something accomplished by individuals, and readings of elite schoolgirls as fairly straightforwardly agentic, is precisely what has troubled us in our ongoing work with elite schoolgirls and their justice politics. Ringrose (2013: 64) calls for feminist education scholars to be up front about their political and theoretical investments and the implications this might have for how we think about young people's agency. She urges that 'when we come down on one side of the binary of empowerment vs victimisation, elaborate and justify our thinking about why'. As scholars who were both originally motivated by concerns about the influence of heteronormative discourses of gender and sexuality in girls' lives, we have always been invested in identifying and exploring girls' agency, understood as the creative ways in which they might speak back to the gendered discourses that constrain them. Such a political investment often frames feminist education research with young women and this is why there is such a rich legacy of work exploring the complexities of young women's agency and voice in school contexts, and in more recent times, a significant number of scholars drawing on post-human and new materialist feminist theory to expand our conceptual repertoire around these issues.

Yet this work has not always explored the implications of these theoretical resources for working with young women in elite school contexts. As scholars interested in social justice and girls' agency we have grappled for a long time with how to reconcile our excitement about schoolgirls' feminist politics with the obvious elements of class reproduction in their identity work. What does it mean to celebrate girls' agency and feminist politics when they are very privileged and may be simultaneously reproducing forms of power and privilege at the same time as they are speaking back to heteronormativity and racism? We simply cannot ignore these questions and the ongoing discomfort we have experienced as researchers in this space. We contend that taking these theoretical resources so usefully elaborated by other feminist education researchers in recent years, into a research encounter involving very privileged girls, we can offer new ways of utilising these resources in research with young people, and fresh insights around how we produce knowledge about elite schoolgirls' agency and justice politics.

### *Introducing the girls*

During 2014 Charles acted as an academic mentor to a group of Year 10 girls at an elite private school in a capital city in Australia. These girls were involved in an extension program at their school which required they conduct research and write a report based on this research with the assistance of an academic mentor. The teacher in charge of the extension program sought expressions of interest from University academics for this role, and upon hearing about her research interests, a group of three girls requested to work with Charles on a project looking at sexism in their everyday lives.

Sienna was born in London (as were both her parents) and lived there until the age of seven when the family moved to Australia. Her mother was white British and her father was of Indian background. Sienna wanted to study philosophy and politics at a top US or UK University and she

was a highly accomplished cellist, studying for her Associate of Music. She had a strong interest in binary constructions of gender, and the ways in which these limit and frame debates about gender politics. Jayanti was born in Australia, and both her parents were born in Northern India, and both Hindi and English were spoken at home. Jayanti wanted to study Law at Stanford. She was interested in working in human rights law, or international relations/global development. A recent school history tour of America, including a visit to Stanford, seemed to enliven her enthusiasm about this. Clem was born in India and identified as Southern Indian. She had lived in Sri Lanka for one year, and then Australia since she was eight years old and both English and Tamil were spoken at home. She was interested in studying Medicine at Harvard.

## Methodology

Ethics was granted by the University of Charles to interview the three girls, as well as to recruit further students for interviewing, however, the school never provided organisational consent. Perhaps this is not surprising, given what other scholars have noted about the access difficulties researchers can encounter when seeking to enter elite schools or other institutions (Lingard, Forbes, Weiner & Horne, 2012). We had to think creatively about methodology for this research when faced with restricted access to the school and the barrier of being unable to interview students. Partly motivated by this barrier, as well as by our ongoing struggle with how to make sense of rich girls' feminist activism, we realised that there was merit in taking a different approach from conventional ethnographic methodologies used to generate knowledge about schoolgirls and identity – an approach that would take seriously the entanglement of the researcher herself, as well as other non-human bodies, in the generation of knowledge about elite schoolgirls, their feminist activism, and the reproduction of various forms of power and privilege. We felt that this could produce fresh insights into the questions we have grappled with as researchers in this space.

In order to create a suitable methodology we turned to other feminist educational researchers drawing on new materialist and post-human theoretical resources. Alongside others, we are interested in mapping the complex ways that power works and is reproduced in young people's lives, including ways that might not be visible when using more conventional ethnographic methodology. As Jackson and Mazzei note, conventional approaches to qualitative research can work to 'limit so-called "analysis" and inhibit the inclusion of previously unthought "data"' (2012: viii). A number of other scholars have used arts-based approaches to advance new materialist or post-human readings of young people and subjectivities in education (Hickey-Moody, 2017; Mayes, 2016; Renold & Ivinson, 2014; Renold & Ringrose, 2019; Wolfe, 2017).

Rather than working with arts based approaches, we work specifically with Malou Juelskjaer's reading of Barad's 'space-time-mattering' in a special issue of *Gender and Education* focusing on new material feminisms in education (Juelskjaer, 2013). Juelskjaer refers to her project as 'feminist agential realist work on subjectivities' (2013: 757) and she poses the following key questions: How does the troubling of pre-fixed spatial scales and conceptions of past/present change the analytical practice and what we might be able to 'see' analytically? How might these new concepts of spacetime-mattering make us think otherwise about subjectivities, particularly gendered subjectivities? (755)

We are drawn to this way of thinking about data and analysis because it allows us to highlight and explore the various bodies, both human and non-human that are intraacting in the research encounters we discuss, as well as the different time scales at work. Paying attention to these intraactions, and taking them seriously as part of our data analysis, enables us to unpack how agency, when it comes to resistance and reproduction of various forms of power, is not located within individual bodies (eg: the bodies of the three girls). It instead enables us to think about the different bodies that are entangled to produce agency and to produce knowledge.

Importantly, our methodology takes seriously the role of the researcher and her embodied political investments in the advancement of our stock of knowledge of elite young women and gender race and class reproduction in elite schooling and more broadly. Distinct from some other studies that have included attention to researcher reflexivity in researching elite schooling (Forbes & Weiner, 2014), here we are specifically drawn to Karen Barad's critique of representationalism and her assertion that research is a performative practice whereby 'thinking, observing, and theorizing ... [are] practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being' (2007: 133). We agree with Juelskjaer's contention that 'there is no such thing as "knowing from a distance", only knowing from within various and specific intraactions' (2013: 756). Through discussing two research encounters, in what follows, we unpack the way the researcher is 'implicated in research practices enabling some things to matter more than others' (757) and how knowledge is being generated through specific space/time/matter intraactions, or what Hickey-Moody calls a 'nexus of experience, memory and making' (2018: 2).

In creating this different methodology for researching and understanding elite schoolgirls' reproductions of gender, race and class, we take heed of Howard and Kenway's claim that methodology is often 'mentioned in passing' (2015: 1005) when it comes to researching elites and education and that researchers have not always discussed 'the implications of studying the powerful and their institutions for the particular research approach' (1005). They point to a number of issues that they regard as worthy of further exploration including the use of unconventional methods and researcher reflexivity. We respond to both these issues by focusing on girls' reproduction of gender, race and class in elite schooling and the murky question of girls' agency and resistance, by generating a methodological approach that has the potential to produce new insights from those that might be possible within the frame of more conventional ethnographic methodology.

## **Data analysis**

### *Research Encounter One: 'Feminist sparks fly'*

One day the girls come into my office bubbling. They have heard about Julie Bishop (then deputy Prime Minister of Australia) declaring that she is not a feminist. They are incensed about this, and they talk with passion and outrage, about how it supports the post-feminist idea that women's successes and failures can be attributed to individual effort, rather than acknowledging any structural barriers that women may face in their lives. They express disappointment and disbelief that a woman in such a powerful position in politics would make the effort to publicly distance herself from feminism. In this moment my heart seems to swell. I feel so much excitement that these girls are thinking in this way. It reminds me of one of our first meetings, after I had given them an article about post-feminism and young people's subjectivities, and they came to my office very excited about the article and keen to discuss similar examples from their own experience.

Another time we sit at my desk passing around lollies and chocolate biscuits, reviewing the data from the girls' research, in which they had sought their peers' responses to an incident in which Tony Abbott (then Prime Minister of Australia) described a female member of his party as having 'sex appeal' on national television. The girls explain how few of their participants had considered this comment to be a result of sexism, instead suggesting that Abbott was probably trying to be funny and would not have meant to cause any harm. There is a collective feeling of bemusement, and affinity, as together we try to make sense of this. The girls go on to identify other instances of sexism in their daily lives. Sienna explains how she has played on a mixed hockey team for years, and that the boys occasionally make inappropriate comments. She admits that sometimes she is not able to speak back to these comments at the time. 'Sometimes there will be a response on the tip of my tongue', she says, and then I don't know what it is, but something stops it from coming out'.

Together we try to understand this. Together we share anecdotes and laughter. I feel alive, and excited to be at work, to be discussing these things with young people. It is what I am always hoping for with my own students.

In the same conversation, Jayanti and Clem talk about their anger when fellow students comment their home country, saying, 'Oh India, I'd like to go there one day, maybe on a mission'. They explain how they feel their culture is belittled by these comments, and that sometimes people only see extreme poverty, while failing to question their own privileged position. Sienna talks about how white people 'helping' racialized others seems to be a reconfiguration of the same historical colonial power dynamic. I am buzzing with positive feeling and energy. I am so impressed that these girls can comment so clearly on racialized power dynamics, and how they play out in their everyday lives. I feel a sense of energy and connection around the desk as we pass the lollies, laugh and share our stories and thoughts about racism and sexism.

### *Research Encounter Two: 'A sense of entitlement'*

Today I am reading some writing the girls have done about post-feminism, and they are browsing the University library before visiting my office. While reading a sense of shame seeps into my body. The academic literacy is of a more sophisticated standard than that of some of my undergraduate students. I imagine the girls confidently navigating around the campus in their starched blazers, using the library, and then breezily consulting my academic knowledge and using my time, even though they would never see this more humble University as a suitable option when they apply for their own undergraduate studies in two years' time. Sienna wants to do the Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) course at Cambridge or Oxford, while Jayanti has her sights set on law at Stanford. They told me about their visit to Ivy League Universities in the USA, and Sienna's encounter with an 'old white defensive republican' on a plane.

There is a niggling pressure in my chest. I wonder why I am spending my time reading this work, and meeting with these girls. Am I just a stepping stone? Am I being 'used' for the purposes of these girls' elite education and grooming them for education at an elite university? I can't ignore the feeling of inferiority that seems to emerge within me about my own situation of working in a less prestigious University that they might consider beneath them when choosing a destination for study, and someone whose parents could never have afforded to send me to a school like theirs.

Some weeks later the girls are invited to use one of the University's lecture theatres to present their research to a small group including teachers, parents, peers, and other academics from the University. I wear a pretty silk top and lipstick on this day, and I make sure my hair is styled neatly. This way my body feels more comfortable in the presence of senior staff from the school, and the girls' parents. The features of Sienna's voice are even more starkly evident in this context. Sitting in the second row I am struck, teetering on the edge of physical discomfort and the temptation to cast my gaze downward, by the volume and confidence of address emerging from a fifteen year old girl. Her articulation and diction are clear and poised with few 'ums' or 'ahs', and her accent is distinctly cultivated British. The accent, volume, and the force and clarity of the diction might be read as classed privilege, (she is immediately recognised through this voice as a successful debating team student, with British 'home counties' roots). The future PPE student is before me, fine tuning her skills at public speaking. Yet soon I feel a sense of pride and excitement that she is standing up in front of these people decrying sexism and a post-feminist culture that encourages people to pretend it doesn't exist.



## Discussion and analysis

By understanding the two research encounters outlined above as events involving various bodies, and time scales, in which ‘the material and the discursive are produced through each other as “intraactivity”’ (Juelskjaer, 2013: 756) we can produce new insights into the generation of knowledge about elite schoolgirls, their feminist activism, and the reproduction of various forms of power and privilege. The becoming subjectivities of these elite privileged schoolgirls are characterised by an entangled state of agencies in which social inequalities are both challenged and (re)produced.

With regard to these young women’s feminist activism, and their gendered subjectivities, we can see how Sienna (in particular) is deconstructing and performing girl in ways that work to queer dominant heteronormative constructions. This works both discursively (in her developing queer politics) and also materially, in her bodily comportment and voice. Her developing politics pose a clear challenge to the kind of classed femininity that requires denial of the existence of gender injustice, sexism, or the ongoing need for feminist politics. Indeed, she moves toward an engagement with queer theory in some of our conversations.

In Research Encounter One, the researcher (Charles) describes her own affective experience as she and the girls discuss recent events in Australian politics. There are various bodies intraacting in this encounter that work to produce the girls’ resistant subjectivities. There is the space, as they sit in a circle reminiscent of a feminist consciousness raising activity. There are the lollies and snacks that they share, linking their bodies in a sense of sharing and togetherness, and there is the researcher’s body and the girls’ bodies. In this encounter, these things work together to produce a sensation of feminist affinity. Ringrose and Renold also comment on the significance of a safe space, and the intra-acting bodies including those of the researchers, in their study of girls’ feminism at school, recalling how ‘rapidly we were wrapped in a swirl of “collective affects” that gripped us, in paralysis’ (2016: 231). Similarly, X’s body felt alive and tingled with outrage, as she and the three girls animatedly discussed gender and race issues. Sparks would fly around the desk between our bodies, as we expressed our collective disbelief at Tony Abbott’s ‘sex appeal’ comment, and when the girls read an article about post-feminism and came back eager to talk about it. X felt the heady rush of excitement that these girls were resisting normative gender discourses, and also raging against racism. She felt excited that they were so able to turn their anger outward and critique the structural conditions that may impact on women’s lives, and the post-feminist culture that might have us believe our success (and failure) is entirely down to individual merit.

Jackson and Mazzei (2012) urge us to consider our own implication as researchers who are of the world and participate in (re)configuring the world. This encounter shows how knowledge about the girls’ feminist activism, and their subjectivities as resistant to gendered forms of power, and therefore their agency, is produced through entanglement with X’s body as researcher. It shows how the feminist activism becomes known and seen through the researcher’s being within the encounter. Drawing on Barad, Juelskjaer describes how a move ‘to onto-epistemology, where practices of knowing and being are mutually implicated, posits knowing as a direct material engagement and concepts as “material articulations of the world” (Barad 2007: 139)’ (2013: 756). Here the concepts of agency and resistance are produced – and become recognisable - through the researchers’ direct material engagement in the research apparatus. By drawing on this ontoepistemological approach to understand how girls’ activism and agency becomes known and seen we contribute to wider debates within youth studies and feminist sociology about young people and the thorny question of agency (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014; Ringrose, 2013).

At the same time, Sienna's body is entangled with other bodies in ways that mean that her resistance also works to re-produce class privilege. Sienna narrates her encounter with an 'old white male republican' on the aeroplane during a school trip to the USA in which the girls visited Ivy League University campuses. Here Sienna's subjectivity is produced through its entanglement with the aeroplane, the white American man, and the privilege of an international school trip that would be out of reach to many other young people growing up in Australia. Class, gender and race issues can be challenged and reproduced in the same event, and agency is therefore not about a prism of coercion versus escape (Gowlett, 2014). Nor is it simply located within Sienna's body. Rather, it becomes possible in relation to other bodies.

The researcher's body continues to be agentic in the process of producing knowledge, this time about class privilege. Research Encounter Two narrates X's embodied shame and discomfort. For example, when Sienna started speaking in the lecture theatre, and at times when she would stride confidently into her office. It is this very embodied sensation that contributes to the reproduction of these girls' class privilege. Time scales are important here too. In the same encounter, Charles recalls her own government schooling in the past, and thinks about these girls' imagined futures at Cambridge and Stanford as she is experiencing embodied discomfort which feels like the materialising of her inferior level of privilege compared with these girls. As Juelskjaer observes, 'time and space are produced through iterative intra-actions that materialise specific phenomena' (755) in this case class privilege. By conceiving of this encounter as a spacetime-mattering (Barad, 2007), or a 'nexus of experience, memory and making' (Hickey-Moody, 2018: 2) we can see how the past (X's own government schooling), present (non-elite University office space) and future (girls' plans to study at Ivy League Universities) as well as different bodies/spaces (the office, the aeroplane, the girls, the researcher), come together to produce subjectivities and materialise class privilege.

Engaging with spacetime-mattering enables us to produce knowledge differently about class reproduction and gender issues, agency and young women's subjectivities in the context of elite education. In these moments, the researcher's affective response is agentic. It is part of the knowledge being produced and it makes class 'matter' because it renders them 'privileged rich girls' who know some big words, and who are on track to attend top international Universities and bolster their own privilege. As Taylor and Iverson put it, '[b]y recognising the micro intensities of here and now, "new" material feminisms invite us to reaffirm that the personal is as political as it ever was' (2013: 667).

Attending to the researcher's embodied experience can produce insight into the dynamics of class reproduction, and how these young women's subjectivities, as well as the researcher's, in concert with each other, become entangled in producing knowledge about class and gender reproduction, as well as young women's feminist activism. It can help generate knowledge outside conventional ethnographic research methodology which may not trouble humanist, individualist ways of understanding agency and subjectivity. It also forges a new direction in research exploring elite young women and subjectivity.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have engaged with age old questions about how to make sense of privileged women's activism. The broader implications of this are around class and change-making and whether or not privileged girls' efforts to make a difference and to resist power are ever anything more than class reproduction.

In order to contribute fresh insights into our stock of knowledge about this issue there are two key scholarly conversations we have engaged, and enriched. The first is existing feminist scholarship into young women's gendered subjectivities, and their feminist activism in the current moment. This

work has offered rich insights into the different ways young women's identity work might both reproduce and trouble forms of power and domination, particularly with respect to gender and sexualities. A number of recent studies have used the theoretical resources of new materialism and post-humanism, in order to theorise young women's subjectivities, and their agency and resistance, in complex ways, eschewing simplistic ideas about agency being located within rational individual bodies, and creating research practices that blur the line between research and activism, potentially working to 're-animate the regulations and ruptures of how gender and sexuality mediate children and young people's lives in schools and beyond' (Renold & Ringrose, 2019: 1). Yet they have not always explicitly taken up the issue of class privilege and the implications of these particular theoretical resources for working with privileged young women. For scholars like Ringrose and Renold, perhaps this is partly because the affective intensities they experienced in their study of school girls' feminist activism did not produce discomfort in the same way that we experienced when working with elite schoolgirls. It was our ongoing embodied discomfort around rich girls' voices that eventually lead to this paper. It was what brought us to generating this particular methodological approach. As we have shown, we need to continue to pay attention to the role of privilege and class in young people's activist efforts, and in their social justice politics. It is impossible to celebrate the feminist resistance of Siena, Jayanti and Clem without also considering their privilege and the ways in which their activism might become tied up with the reproduction of class privilege.

The second scholarly conversation we have enriched is located within the sociology of elite schooling, where there is much discussion about the politics of social justice within elite schools, and the implications of privilege for young people's efforts to make a difference. This literature has shown us that young privileged people's social justice efforts are often part and parcel of the reproduction of their privilege and questions have been raised about the capacity of such young people to engage in any kind of meaningful social transformation (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013). Yet within this literature, there is little explicit attention to young women's feminist activism in particular, and little take up of the theoretical resources of new materialism and post-humanism, in order to ask different questions about researching privileged young people's agency and activism.

In order to think differently about researching privileged young women's activism in this paper, we chose to draw on the insights of feminist scholars engaging with concepts from new materialism and post-humanism, in order to show how power and subjectivity work in complex ways and how agency is not located within individual human bodies. A key contribution is that we have asked after the implications of such theoretical resources and methodological approaches for working with young women who can be understood to be privileged and who attend an elite school. In so doing we have responded to Howard and Kenway's call for considering the implications of studying elites for the particular theoretical and methodological approach we have used.

By drawing on these theoretical resources, we constructed a methodology that enabled us to produce knowledge differently than via more conventional ethnographic methodology. In particular, it enabled us to take seriously the role of other bodies in the production of subjectivity, and of knowledge, including the body of the researcher, as well as non-human bodies such as buildings, offices, and aeroplanes. Furthermore, by drawing specifically on Julksjaer's take up of Barad's spacetime-mattering, we were able to also focus our attention to time scales in the mattering of class privilege.

For us, this theoretical approach and the methodology we created has enabled us to make sense differently of questions that had been troubling us for some time. We kept getting stuck in the tension of wanting to celebrate these girls' feminist consciousness but then feeling as though their class privilege somehow invalidated that resistance. By immersing ourselves in other studies drawing

on post-humanism, and specifically spacetime-mattering, we were able to move beyond the binary question of whether or not these three schoolgirls can be considered to be resistant and agentic. As Lisa Mazzei argues, 'agency to change the world and be changed by the world emerges within the intra-actions (pp. 139–141) of multiple people and things and does not pre-exist those encounters' (2013: 779)

When it comes to researching privileged young people's activism, our study has shown that multiple bodies and time scales are entangled in what comes to matter, and in producing knowledge. We assert that the body of the researcher is key here, and must be considered a key part of the apparatus through which both feminist resistance, and class privilege, materialise in the sociology of girls and education.

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