

## **Traversing the ‘feminist killjoy’ as an affective social assemblage during the transition from secondary school to Higher Education.**

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### **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### **Abstract**

This paper looks at the affective engagements of girls’ transitions from school to Higher Education. Specifically, it explores the juxtaposition of girls who are traversing neoliberal realms of ‘desirable’ feminism as well as ‘undesirable’ feminisms as epitomised by Sara Ahmed’s figure of the feminist killjoy. Although different to Ahmed in her ontological stance, I theorise this paper using Rosi Bradotti’s notions of the ‘nomadic subject’ that posits a potential reconfiguration of the subject of Woman through a collective assemblage committed to the processes of change with a strong ethics of community. The data from which this paper emerges comes from qualitative research conducted as part of PhD research. It consisted of four recently graduated Year 13 girls who were asked to participate in an arts workshop, where creative methods, such as painting and collage, were used to better capture the affective and nuanced moments in the data.

### **Full paper**

This paper looks at the emotional and affective engagements of girls’ transitions from school to Higher Education (HE). Specifically, it explores the juxtaposition of students who are traversing neoliberal realms of ‘desirable’ feminisms (Danvers, 2018), as well as ‘undesirable’ feminisms as epitomised by Sara Ahmed’s (2017)

conceptualization of the feminist killjoy. Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy challenges the normative and desired, gendered power dynamics, whilst also being portrayed as tiresome, a stick in the mud, an abject 'other', whose voice is unwanted and often refuted. In fact, the feminist killjoy is polarized against the 'ideal' neoliberal subject in HE, where girls are often portrayed as diligent, hardworking, desirable subjects and the 'winners' of academic and social success (Danvers, 2018). Therefore, this paper identifies the ways in which girls are subverting and rejecting the preconceived notions of the 'ideal' female student in attempts to steer away from reproducing the dominant neoliberal norms of female success within HE.

To theorise this paper I draw on social theory that moves away from language/discourse to notions of affect by means of the 'affective turn', so as to place the feminist killjoy within a collective assemblage of social change (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013; Ringrose and Renold, 2016). I argue that emotions and affects are transformative entities that greatly impact student engagements, where the subject oscillates in, through and around multiple collective social assemblages. Importantly, as the abject feminist killjoy defies the social purity (Condren, 1999; Kristeva, 1982) of the dominant and socially desired neoliberal femininity, the space for girls to challenge traditional femininity lies in the recognition of an undesirable subject traversing through multiple assemblages. Therefore, I draw particular attention to Rosi Bradotti's (2011) notions of the 'nomadic subject' that posits a potential reconfiguration of the subject of Woman through a collective assemblage committed to the processes of change with a strong ethics of community.

The data from which this paper emerges comes from qualitative research conducted as part of my PhD research. I recruited four recently graduated Year 13 students, who were living at home in Jersey (Channel Islands), and who were asked to participate in a creative arts workshop. The data (including transcriptions of the sessions and artwork) was gathered during a four week period over the summer holidays, where students were asked to produce artworks around a certain theme to do with feminism and their future. Four months later (December), I revisited all four students

after they had transitioned to HE for a follow up interview.

The creative methods adopted here were aimed at better capturing the affective and nuanced moments in the data than more traditional qualitative methods. I drew from emerging research from feminist new materialism who engage with how material and affective forces meet in messy entanglement (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013). I applied Rosi Braidotti's (2011) concepts of nomadic thinking, alongside emerging feminist methodologies based on Deleuzian (1987) concepts of becoming to engage within the relational conceptualization of bodies and objects through a post-human lens. Using painting, drawing and collage, these activities ranged from creating collages about their futureselves, to drawn comic strips detailing their conceptualisation of female empowerment.

Emergent findings suggest that despite the potential social and academic stigmatisation of embodied traits of the feminist killjoy, students were forming affective responses that subvert the normative expectations of the 'successful' female student. Prior to leaving school, students experienced anxiety over whether they would be academically and socially 'successful' at their HE institutions, and how this would dictate the success they would have in 'real' life after graduation. However, upon entering HE, students found ways in which they knowingly and unknowingly embodied the abject feminist subject, displacing the fear and anxiety of the 'other' with a renewed capacity to challenge these notions. Furthermore, students embodied change through a multitude of affective capabilities as part of collective assemblages, including strong notions of wonder about how their future might unfold.

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