A new feminist materialist analysis of girls and the sexual violence assemblage

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Abstract

Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) concept of assemblage, in this paper we address 12–13-year-old girls' experience of sexual violence as a materially embedded, relational, and affective event. In doing so, we contribute to the understanding of how girls are both constrained by violent gendered cultures in school and of their capacity to resist such violence. We give attention to sexual violence as an assemblage of materialities in the form of bodies, objects, expressions, spaces, and ideas that connect in ways that affect what girls can and cannot do within a specific place and moment in time. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, we show how the assemblage creates the potential to challenge dominant gendered scripts that structure girls' experience in schools but also point to the disabling environments that curtail such potential. We argue that while the assemblage produces agentive capacities, it may simultaneously constrain them. We conclude by offering possibilities to address sexual violence through addressing gender norms while including boys in gender transformative work.

Keywords: girls, sexual violence, assemblage, new feminist materialism, South Africa

Introduction

"The sky is vast enough for all birds to fly without collisions." Drawing on this African proverb, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2020) laments, the loss of choice, freedom, and opportunities for young girls amid the ongoing collisions in education systems in sub-Saharan Africa that are deeply rooted in gender inequalities and violence. In the last decade, scholarship on schooling and gender in this region has focused on violence and girls' disproportionate vulnerability to verbal, sexual, emotional, and physical abuse (DeJaeghere, 2018; Parkes, 2015; Porter, 2015). Evidence from these studies suggests that public institutions such as schools are high-risk contexts since girls continue to remain scared at school. Concerns about the ongoing violent collisions in schools and the effects on girls' education and well-being has become the subject of important reports and inquiries (Artz et al., 2016; The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation & The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2016). Committed to a world without collisions, UNESCO (2020) has reinforced the need to "walk alongside African girls on their journey to a life where they are empowered to make positive choices" (p. 1). Changing gender and cultural norms in socio-economic contexts has become a key objective that drives debates and interventions to prevent gender violence and develop young people's skills to address power relations and female subordination (Le Mat et al., 2021; Parkes, 2015). However, this process is not easy.

In South Africa, Meinck et al. (2016) indicated that among children between 10 and 17 years of age, it is estimated that physical violence is most prevalent and reported at 56.3% in comparison to other forms of violence, with the experience of gender violence impacting negatively, particularly on girls' agency. In school-based studies, scholars have documented how asymmetrical relations of power permeate spaces such as toilets, corridors, classrooms, and playgrounds and how this has a negative impact on girls' experience of schooling (Ngidi, 2022; Porter, 2015). Girls are exposed to sexual violence in the form of coercion, harassment, rape, bulling, and physical and verbal abuse from both schoolboys and male adult personnel such as teachers and caretakers (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). It has been argued that dominant socio-cultural norms and the use of violence reinforces girls' vulnerability to sexual harm (Bhana et al., 2021). Key to understanding the enduring patterns of gender violence is its inextricable link to race and class inequalities as well as to heteropatriarchy (Shefer, 2014). Binary constructions of gender and sexuality are reinforced through local cultural norms and practices that reinforce girls' subordination in gender relations in which male power is reified. In this binary, hegemonic masculinity is structured around sexual prowess, physical strength, and the use of violence, while femininity is viewed positively when it revolves around sexual respectability and acquiescence to cultural norms (Jewkes & Morrell, 2017).

Male culpability in the mobilisation of violence and in the broader social, cultural, and structural processes affects gender norms (Jewkes et al., 2015). As Gibbs et al. (2017) reported, changing masculine identities requires long-term interventions that cannot necessarily guarantee transformation. Despite efforts to change harmful norms, sexual violence in schools remains problematic (Leach et al., 2014; Parkes et al., 2020). Social,

cultural, and economic circumstances aggregate to limit gender equitable relationships and change "may not be as transformative as those working for gender justice hope for" (Gibbs et al., 2017, p. 15). If change is not as transformative as we hope it will be, we have to acknowledge that the current position is largely stagnant and the promise of a life without collisions for girls remains unfulfilled. What might enable us to move beyond this cul-de-sac? Given the dissatisfaction with current ways of thinking about and researching gender violence, Pincock (2020) argued that the existing body of work has obscured the dynamic relationality of the social-material and affective processes through which girls' capacity to affect and be affected materialises. Following Pincock (2020), a new feminist materialist lens that attends to the significance of the socio-material reality (bodies, things, objects, context, gender, expressions, and feelings) may help us understand how girls are capacitated or incapacitated in a specific time and place (Renold, 2018).

Drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) concept of assemblage we are interested in what capacities are produced in girls' experiences, as they talk about violence. We are concerned with the way in which girls' capacities are produced, how these capacities intra-act, affect and are affected by other materialities in the assemblage (see Pincock, 2020). Consequently, we consider materialities through their relationship with other ideas, things, and objects that all come to matter in the experience of gender and sexual violence at school. Materialities constitute matter that includes things, bodies, emotions, context and is inclusive of consciousness since it intra-acts with the material forces that are produced by such interactions (Davies, 2020). In developing these ideas, we are hoping that this realm of theorisation will allow us to think about what more girls can do as they navigate their way through collisions of sexual violence. Through reporting on semi-structured interviews, we demonstrate how girls aged between 12 and 13 years of age in a South African primary school are entangled within the everyday socio-material world that serves to mediate their potential. In doing so, we suggest that the experience of femininities and sexual violence operates through the connection between human and more-than-human elements (Barad, 2007). In this regard, we illuminate how girls adhere to and disrupt socio-cultural norms to create spaces for what they can and cannot do while simultaneously being complicit in the perpetuation of dominant norms through which their capacities are curtailed.

Understanding girls' and sexual violence through an assemblage

The conceptualisation of girls and sexual violence has been predominantly established through socio-constructivist frameworks that privilege the voices and experiences of girls (Porter, 2015; Renold, 2002). We are interested in the significance of the more-than-human connection to girls' experiences of sexual violence (Renold, 2018; Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). We seek to re-think the ways in which sexual violence and femininities are currently understood by considering the socio-material reality at work. We draw specifically on Deleuze and Guattari's (1988, p. 22) idea of assemblage. According to them, "assemblage, in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows

simultaneously" (p. 22–23). We make reference to concepts such as "intra-action" and "affect" (Barad, 2007, p. 33) along with "thing-power" (Bennet, 2010, p. 23), all of which are essential to the assemblage. Here, we consider girls' experiences of sexual violence within what we term a sexual violence assemblage of materialities in both human and non-human forms that join to produce a series of "actions" and "events" (Alldred & Fox, 2017, p. 1163), that unlock what girls are capable of becoming, doing, and feeling. Our new feminist materialist lens takes a turn to the agentic potential of matter in the form of objects, things, space, ideas, the "relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles" and the ability of matter to produce capacities to "affect and be affected" in return (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 261; see, also, Barad, 2007). Of significance to the sexual violence assemblage are its relations that are formed through "intra-action" between bodies and other heterogenous materialities that can "affect" and be "affected" (Barad, 2007, p. 33), creating spaces for girls' (in)capacities. These relations are unpredictable rather than systematic, are rather fluid, and depend on the materialities that exist within the location of the assemblage (Alldred & Fox, 2017).

We locate the sexual violence assemblage within the South African schooling context where girls navigate a highly complex socio-cultural landscape underpinned by race, class, dominant discourses of gender and sexuality, as well as socio-economic inequalities and heteropatriarchal norms. From a new feminist materialist perspective, these materialities are not isolated entities but come to affect girls' (in)capacities in their experiences of sexual violence. For instance, in South Africa, localised practices and cultural norms sanction men's use of violence, physical strength, and sexual entitlement over women as key signifiers to an idealised heterosexual masculine status that positions women as vulnerable and acquiescent, thereby constraining their capacity to become something other than passive (Jewkes & Morrell, 2017). Acquiescing to gender norms is grounded in socio-cultural patterns in which girls are seen to be complicit in the reinforcement of male power and in which resistance to this would question the basis of normative understandings of gender relations (Jewkes & Morrell, 2012). Such understandings of gender and sexuality are woven into school spaces where girls may accommodate such norms in their experience of violence, thus constraining their capacities for resistance. However, acquiescing to male domination is not the full version of girls' lives at school.

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p. 400) the way in which a "rhizome" grows is a good way of illuminating the ways in which the assemblage is susceptible to change as bodies combine with other materialities to form new relations to unlock alternative ways of being and becoming. In relation to our study, the dynamic nature of assemblages allows for the interrogation of dominant ideologies that seek to reduce what girls are capable of becoming other than passive and submissive. However, we must acknowledge here that within a materialist framing, the notion of human agency is de-privileged to consider how the agentic potential of objects, things, and space mediate what girls can or cannot do (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). In the study on which this paper is based, girls' (in)capacities in their experiences of sexual violence are not individualised, but are, rather, facilitated through intra-actions with other matter that embodies agentic power. A materialist lens allows us to

perceive objects, ideas, expressions, and space as "vibrant" matter imbued with "thing-power" (Bennet, 2010, p. xvi) that provides specific (in)capacities within a specific moment in time, transforming a body into a new "becoming" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 256) that "represents a change of state" that may be "physical, psychological, emotional or social" (Alldred & Fox, 2017, p. 1164). Deleuze and Guatarri (1988, p. 88) posited that the process of new becomings is ongoing, fleeting, and always open to change through the three distinct movements of "territorialisation", "de-territorialisation", and "re-territorialisation." Following Deleuze and Guatarri (1988), our thinking in terms of assemblage allows us to perceive a territory as more than just a geographical location and permits us to see that affects produced in relations have the capacity to control matter in ways that set limitations on what girls can do, feel, or become in their experience of sexual violence. For example, an assemblage bound by heteropatriarchal norms, as discussed earlier, will seek to territorialise girls' bodies in ways that restrict their potential for new becomings. However, girls may intra-act with other forms of matter to de-territorialise such affects, thus enabling the possibility to become something else. Yet these relations, too, are unstable since girls' intra-actions within assemblages may serve to curtail their capacities through re-territorialisation that repositions them within former assemblages (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1988).

Conceptualising sexual violence as an assemblage is significant since girls' experiences of sexual violence are not bound by systematic structures of thinking or predetermined knowledge. Instead, these are perceived as events that are materially embedded, affective, relational, and immanent within the assemblage (Barad, 2007). It is within the complex network of affective flows of capacities and incapacities produced through intra-actions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) that we analyse what girls can do, be, or feel in their experience of sexual violence from the point of view that rejects the notion of femininities as homogenous and passive.

Methods

We focus on selected narratives in a qualitative case study that forms part of a broader research project entitled *Learning from the Learners: Growing up as Girls and Boys and Negotiating Gender and Sexuality* that sought to examine how 40 Grade 7 primary schoolgirls between 12 and 13 years of age give meaning to their femininities in the context of gender and sexual violence. In the broader study, data collection methods included semi-structured individual interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. For the purpose of this smaller study, we draw specifically on the narratives offered in semi-structured individual interviews of 14 primary schoolgirls who attend Pep Primary School[1] (PPS), the context for this study. PPS is situated in a peri-urban town in the KwaZulu-Natal province (KZN) of South Africa. Learners who attend PPS are from a mixed class base; incomes range from middle to low and extend to very low in some cases. This variation in income has ramifications for the ways in which girls experience sexual violence. A purposive sampling technique was facilitated by the third author to recruit female participants in Grade

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[1]   This is, of course, pseudonymous, as are the names of the participants.

7 since we were particularly interested in how a cohort of girls in the final year of primary school were entangled within a sexual violence assemblage. The participant selection criteria were provided to teachers at the school, and they assisted in identifying girls who were either witnesses to, or victims of sexual violence at PPS. Participation in the study was voluntary. Permission for this study was granted by the University and by the Department of Basic Education in KZN. Access to the research site was permitted by the principal of the school. Parental or guardian consent was necessary for learner participation in the study as well as signed learner assent. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw from it in the event of any discomfort experienced during participation. The use of pseudonyms ensured confidentiality and anonymity. To ensure that no psychological harm was done to the participants, access to the school counsellor was made available for support. Fieldwork was conducted between 2018 and 2019 by the third author (see Govender, 2022).

Prior to conducting the interviews, we developed, as a guide, an interview schedule that included questions such as: "Does sexual violence occur at school and how?"; "What are your experiences of sexual violence?"; "Which places make you feel unsafe?"; "Who makes you feel uncomfortable at school?"; and "Do you report sexual violence to your teacher?" We considered semi-structured individual interviews to be valuable in revealing the connection between girls, violence, sexuality, and the material and affective world (Fox & Alldred, 2022). We conducted all the interviews in a classroom during the second break. The duration of each interview was approximately 30 minutes, and they were conducted in English, the medium of instruction at school. Learners whose first language is IsiZulu are very proficient in the use of English. Interviews were audio-recorded to prevent loss of information and were manually transcribed by the authors.

We analysed the data using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic coding system that involved "familiarising [ourselves] with the data", "generating initial codes", "searching for themes", "defining and naming themes" and "producing the report" (2006, pp. 16–24). All authors worked collaboratively to review the data. To ensure the accuracy of the data, interview transcripts were returned to the participants for review (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985), but no adjustments needed to be made to their responses. Thereafter, we manually colour-coded the data and developed it into themes. A new feminist materialist data analysis seeks to refrain from presenting the authenticity of human accounts by attending to the affective flows that emerge through girls' entanglements (Fox & Alldred, 2022). Our data analysis was informed by concepts of assemblage as its main focus; we paid careful attention to the affects and capacities produced through both human and non-human relations following Deleuze and Guattari (1988). The data revealed the different ways in which girls experienced movements of territorialisation, de-territorialisation, and re-territorialisation that mediated their capacity for new becomings. We identified two major themes and focus on the territorialisation of girl bodies as well as the resistance through which their potential to act is curtailed. We go on to discuss this focus on girls' constraints and capacities in the next section of the paper.

"Bad touches, isihwápha, and misogyny": The territorialisation of girl bodies and the reproduction of gender norms

Girls at PPS navigated a highly heterosexualised landscape. Here we show how collisions of materialities—both human and non-human—joined to form a sexual violence assemblage that reduced girls' capacities and their possibilities for new becomings. The overt forms of such collision gave rise to sexual violence in the form of misogynistic harassment, bad touches, swearing, objectification, and coercive practices. Our findings demonstrate how girls' entanglements with bodies, objects, imagination, socio-cultural norms, and space within the assemblage affectively territorialised them into their positions as subservient and passive. The extracts below demonstrate the movements, affectivity, and capacity that emerged within each intra-action in the assemblage.

> Ayabonga: Boys touch girls' private parts (bums, thighs, and breasts). They even pull our bra straps . . . they hit and swipe us on our bums [demonstrating how a bank card is swiped]. When we are walking around the school, they run, and they spank us also.

> Ayanda: Some of the boys even hold us and kiss us without permission. Eish! As girls we are so scared, we don't go and report it.

> Andiswa: I have seen girls being touched by boys who sit next to them on their thighs and breasts, and they don't usually react; they keep quiet.

The sexual violence assemblage constituted a series of intra-actions, both in its human (people) and more-than-human forms (bra-straps, bank card, school uniform, seating arrangements, socio-cultural norms) that affectively produced capacities for girls' continual sexual harassment at school. Drawing on girls' references such as "pull our bra straps", "hit and swipe us on our bums", and "kiss us without permission", it becomes demonstrably evident how gender power dynamics unravel as boys asserted control over girls' bodies. These enforced actions were not randomly performed but were interconnected to the broader space of the assemblage in which socio-cultural norms privilege male entitlement and heterosexual prowess, capacitating the territorialisation of girl bodies in the assemblage. In South Africa, boys' misogynistic use of violence and objectification is deeply rooted in the claim to heterosexual male power that signifies what is thought of as a *real* boy or man (Morrell et al., 2012). Such understandings not only reinforce male dominance as normative but regulate girls as passive and vulnerable to harm. The affective flow in such actions ignited fear that fuelled girls' hesitance in reporting such misconduct to teachers. Girls' reluctance and silence does not simply reinforce passivity; it alerts us to their sophisticated sense of their vulnerability and the consequences of reporting violence.

Materials featured strongly in the narratives that, when enacted, affectively capacitated the territorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) of girls' body parts (bums, thighs, and breasts). Within a materialist framing, "bra-straps" as stipulated by Ayabonga, must be understood

within the concept of thing-power through which such materials are not simply without potential but are, rather, filled with capacities to affect and be affected. In this case, bra-straps embody agentic power to ignite sexual desire in the presence of the male gaze, yet simultaneously spark capacities for sexual harassment, transforming from a material of sexual desire into something that serves as a potential source of risk for girls (see Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). The rhizomatic connections of materials like bra-straps can be connected to Renold's (2018) study of 15-year-old girls and gender-based sexual violence in that an object like a ruler was not confined to its ability to measure but, upon intra-action, was transformed into a tool for sexual violence. Through "artaphacts" crafted from girls' experiences, a ruler became imbued with the capacity to branch into becoming something other such as a "ruler-skirt" (Renold, 2018, p. 44), thus demonstrating the potential of a ruler to be intra-acted by boys so as to sexually violate girls through their dresses in class. Other relations evoked metaphorical connections to objects (a bank card and a machine) used in bank transactions to illustrate how the random swiping of a bank card can be associated with the rough mishandling of girls' private parts, as reflected in Ayabonga's narrative. Such imaginative thoughts, although not tangible, embodied transformative affects that commodified girls' bodies and violated their dignity. The sexual violence assemblage was also underlined by socio-economic materialities that constrained girls' capacities as is evident in Kerina's statement:

> If you don't give the boys what they want like lunch, money or homework, they hit you . . . I can't hit the boys back because they are stronger.

What is visible here is how objects filled with vibrant power such as "lunch, money and homework" constrained Kerina's capacities as she is coerced into submitting to boys' demands. Kerina's entanglement reflects the socio-economic circumstances of girls who attend PPS in that a variation in household income exists, and this shapes their access to resources and thus their capacity for resistance to sexual violence. Given that not all girls may have access to such materials, the possibility of sexual violence was ever present. In this case, on the one hand, Kerina's capacity appears curtailed but, on the other, she acknowledges that her resistance to boys' demands will result in violence and that her anatomy in comparison to that of boys impedes her escape. Also, Kerina's silence and submission to material demands affirms and reinforces her as submissive and obedient to male power and domination, thus amplifying boys' capacities for continued coercive demands and sexual violence. As do Jewkes and Morrell (2012) in their study of young women's capacity to resist violence, we also show the limits of what girls can do in challenging violence.

Other materialities within the assemblage included buildings such as school toilets where girls felt unsafe, as the following demonstrates.

> Researcher: Do you feel safe at the school toilets?
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> Priya: No, it's because of boys and what they do to girls. They [boys] sexually assault girls. There was this boy from Grade 7, he pushed this girl onto the wall, and he started asking her questions and it was very sexual questions and questions that he

[was] not supposed to be asking her. I didn't really hear but I did go to see what was happening and then the girl that was standing there told me if she doesn't date him, he is going to do something really bad to her. They [boys] go banging on the girls' doors, pushing [them] open and ask them what they are doing inside, and it's scary because you may never know what they [boys] up to, especially if you're a girl and you're in a girls' toilet and a boy enters.

Siyethaba: We can't tell the teacher because the boys say that they will catch and hit us after school. We stay quiet, even though we know it's wrong. Who will help us? How ma'am how can you come and just touch a girl anyhow you want but if it's you, you touch a boy on his private part, it's something big but if they [boys] do it, it's like nothing.

Visible in Priya's response is how school toilet spaces form a significant part of the sexual violence assemblage. In this case, toilet spaces served as the immediate material context in which forms of sexual violence were manifested. While school toilets, as opposed to other spaces at school, are presumed to be sites of privacy, Priya's narrative highlights how boys violated this by invading these spaces. In the absence of teacher surveillance and other school adult personnel, these isolated spaces provided a platform on which boys could exercise power and authority over girls in the form of violent threats and physical force. Evident here is how such spaces affectively increased girls' vulnerability, and in which showing resistance to boys' coercive demands would result in sexual violence. In recent research on geographies of sexual violence in a South African school, Ngidi (2022) draws our attention to how school-related sexual violence is connected to toilet spaces where girls faced increased risks of bullying, rape, and sexual harassment.

Despite such harassment, Siyethaba acknowledges the sexual double standards and asymmetrical relations that exist, yet she simultaneously recognises the danger that lurks outside school spaces should she report such violence to her teachers. Her narrative displays the lack of confidence in teacher support that reinforces her hesitancy in reporting the harassment. The absence of teacher supervision outside school hours and out of school spaces actively capacitates feelings of vulnerability in girls since the risk of sexual violence is ever present in such spaces.

Karabo: I do have friends who walk from their homes to school. I don't think it's safe to walk to school because many children live in [anonymised] and the girls, they walk down by the school, and there are many thieves over there and it's dangerous. Many [girls] walk from the taxi rank and they have to walk by the tunnel. In the tunnel there are many thugs and thieves. As well, many rape cases have been reported of children who walk by the tunnel so it's very unsafe and dangerous.

Researcher: Do you think the girls feel safe in the taxis to and from school?

Kanyo: No. taxi drivers are very rude . . . the harassment I see mostly in taxi ranks, people that are being harassed. Some men, when you are walking on the street and see

men smoking or drunk, they will see you and like look at your butt and tell you, that you look amazing, and you will try to ignore, and he will go and hit you somewhere in your body maybe your butt or somewhere. I think [girls] feel unsafe.

Of particular significance here is how materialities in the form of bodies, road spaces, tunnels, taxi ranks, and taxis were all integral parts of the assemblage where girls' capacities became further constrained. The narratives reveal how girls perceived features such as tunnels outside school spaces that they encountered on their way to and from school as being dangerous and risky. Structural features such as tunnels are physically characterised by darkness and isolation, serving as places for perpetrators to hide and commit sexual crimes. Areas such as taxi ranks were not just places of transportation but places where the expression of male power contributed to girls' daily risk of violence. Kanyo's encounter with taxi drivers and other men who sexually harass and objectify girls' body parts, created harmful affects through which girls felt unsafe and vulnerable.

The sexual violence assemblage expanded to include verbal sexual harassment and objectification of girl bodies as can be seen below.

> Asanda: Lindo said in Zulu '*ngquza ka ma*' [a popular vulgar term that refers to a mother's genitals].

> Annastacia: This one boy came to me and said he loves me and wants me to be his girlfriend. I said no, please leave me alone. He then turned around and said to the other boys around, I am an *isifebe* [bitch].

> Ansu: Boys do tease us, and they call us '*isihwápha*' [flat bum]. What they mean is that we are too thin, we are flat, we don't have nice boobs or a nice big butt. We feel hurt.

The incorporation of linguistic elements such as vulgar words embodied affects that resulted in negative consequences for girls. Derogatory comments reduced girls' capacities. Previous research has documented boys' use of pejoratives as a strategic use of power that serves to materialise an idealised heterosexual masculine performance in the presence of other individuals (Summit et al., 2016). Pejoratives spoken in IsiZulu were underpinned by cultural affects and mobilised a phallic form as reflected in other research (see Renold, 2018). Words and terms such as "ngquza ka ma", "isifebe", and "isihwápha" used within local parameters embodied meanings that defied cultural norms. For example, in Zulu cultural norms, *inhlonipha* (respect) views children's association with sex and sexuality as problematic (Irvine & Gunner, 2018). The affective flows generated through such pejoratives violated cultural norms. From Annastacia's narrative, we see how a rejection of male advances has implications for femininity where girls who resist such advances stand to lose reputational value, leading to insults and abuse. It also becomes apparent how body shape becomes integral to the sexual violence assemblage where girls who do not meet the heteronormative ideal were subjected to harassment and shame through words like "isihwápha." This categorisation produced affects that constrained girls' enactment of heterosexuality. It is also

suggestive of how sexual objectification at a young age creates conditions for the normalisation of body shaming and the pressure to conform to what counts as an idealised and desirable heterosexual female.

We can see that girls' responses are reflective of the highly sexualised environment that produced territorialising capacities limiting what they could do. The everyday lives of girls in school affects and is affected by the politics of gender. While it may be easy to condemn boys' conduct through arguments based on toxic masculinity, we argue with Keddie and Bartel (2021) that blaming boys in working class contexts has the effect of reifying racist tropes that position black men experiencing poverty as violent and hypersexual without understanding the social-material and cultural realities that produce particular understandings of masculinity. Indeed, masculinities are complex, fluid, and contextual and to reduce the experience of the sexual violence assemblage to toxic masculinity alienates boys further while diminishing the dynamic ways in which the assemblage makes certain plays of power possible while curtailing others.

"Go away! Don't touch me! I will fuck you up!": Girls' de-territorialisation and resistance

Not all girls ascribed to the affects associated with an oppressive sexual violence assemblage. In this section, we show how girls' collisions with other materialities transgressed the notion of girls as passive victims of sexual violence and as incapable of resistance. Instead, the rhizomic nature of the sexual violence assemblage assembled with other relations of matter, is filled with affective potential to challenge the collisions inflicted upon girls that constrain their capacities. It is through their intra-actions with matter that affects to unlock avenues for new potentials and becomings in nuanced ways are produced, as is evident below.

> Karuna: Boys sometimes touch girls anyhow. Some girls they don't do anything, other girls push the boys away and say, 'Go away! Don't touch me! I will fuck you up!' But still, this is something that continues to take place at school.

> Inhle: Once when she [Angel] was absent, Vusi was talking about her. He said she is an *isifebe* [bitch]. Angel found out and went to him and she swore at him. They say things like *'msunu wenja'* [dog's penis], *'masimba'* [faeces], *'s'hlama'* [stupid]. Angel even took off her shoe and hit Vusi. He ran out through the window. Then Angel came out the door and went after him, she hit him even more.

Violence sparked flows of rage, anger, and disgust that capacitated both Karuna's and Inhle's ability to fight back. Of significance here are the ways in which materialities (body parts, objects, words, forces) each embodied with power assembled in specific ways to de-territorialise and provide girls with the space to resist. Within a new materialist framework, girls' capacities for new becomings are beyond human agency but involve other "material agents" filled with vibrant capacities that when enacted, trigger a change in state (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015, p. 14). In this case, an object like a shoe as suggested by Inhle, is not

confined to its categorisation of dress but upon collision with other elements pulsated thing-power that transformed it into a tool of violence, demonstrating what else it could become or do in a distinct moment in time (Bennett, 2010). It is the agentic force of the shoe intra-acting with the body (for Inhle) that unlocks a moment of de-territorialisation, illustrating what else Angel could become, other than passive. The fluidness of touch through hitting is also pertinent here. While touch as shown in the previous section can violate girls' bodies, touch is now used by girls as a defence mechanism, indicating the reconfiguration of matter. However, while Karuna's and Inhle's capacities de-territorialised gender norms, such capacities were produced through the exact mechanisms (hitting, swearing, objectification) that are used by boys to inflict sexual violence. According to Paechter (2018), the hegemonic formation of femininities is illustrative of qualities similar to hegemonic masculinity in their mobilisation of power. In this case, notwithstanding girls' ability to resist sexual violence through new becomings, it is the violent affects produced through such a change in state that contribute to a perpetual culture of violence at PPS.

In addition, the sexual violence assemblage unlocked new becomings in new ways.

> Amahle: The other day Victor was walking, and he came and hit my bum. And then I cried that day, and I went to tell the principal. The principal said he was going to talk to Victor.

> Ayabonga: They [boys] hit the girls; they touch the girls' private parts. They [girls] cry, they tell ma'm. It stops a little but continues again. They [boys] get a parent's letter. Their parents don't end up coming school, they still look at girls in a sexual way and they [boys] just laugh, ma'm.

> Kanyo: Some of them can hide, they hide in the girls' toilet, maybe if the boys chasing the girls, the girls can run into the girl's toilet because the boys can't go in. When you are walking in a group of girls, you need to be aware of things around you. You must not get too close to certain people while walking.

From Amahle's and Ayabonga's narratives, it is clear that girls de-territorialised the affects of humiliation through reporting these events to the principal and teachers. Drawing from Ayabonga's response, we see how boys were not deterred, but, rather, dismissed girls' power, thus suggesting their lack of concern for the consequences that may emerge while simultaneously reinscribing male power. Consequently, girls' capacities appear curtailed as the male sexual gaze remained prevalent even after reporting. Thus, the male sexual gaze produces capacities that are bound by patriarchal ideologies and operative within a broader socio-cultural backdrop where male entitlement and privilege is pervasive. Girls' actions, while illustrating capacity, are apprehended by dominant masculine norms. This intra-action is reflective of re-territorialising capacities that seek to reduce girls' potential. The entanglement here illuminates how girls' capacities for new becomings are in a constant state of flux and never fixed but exist within a process of relational and infinite intra-actions that shape what girls can do, feel, or be.

Visible here are other relations in the assemblage such as parents and their lack of co-operation, and this suggests their compliance with such gendered ideologies that capacitates male power and reinforces boys' use of violence. In their research, Paechter (2018) cautioned that irrespective of the amount of power girls are able to mobilise against boys, their agentic capabilities run alongside the existing gender binaries and inequalities. From Kanyo's response, we see how buildings such as toilets can change from being unsafe to being safe within particular moments in time, demonstrating the nature of materialities as fluid and being always in flux. Kanyo highlights the girls' toilets as being a safe space that provides protection against boys who harass them and who are forbidden from entering such spaces. Additionally, girls like Kanyo showed resistance through developing their own strategies by walking in groups with other girls to mitigate the risks associated with sexual violence and thus prevent possible harm. Kanyo acknowledged the dangers of associating or allowing close contact with strangers who could be perpetrators of violence.

Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to explore girls' experience of sexual violence by attending to the surrounding materialities at play. Using Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) concept of assemblage as a theoretical backdrop, we revealed sexual violence to be a constellation of human and more-than-human elements co-existing in an affective relationship. By attending to the affective connections with matter (bodies, things, objects, buildings, space, forces, norms) within an assemblage, we have demonstrated how specific (in)capacities were produced in girls' experiences of sexual violence that mediated what they could do, feel, or be in a specific moment in time. We illuminated how girls' entanglement with matter generated capacities in ways that reduced their potential to become something other than subservient to male power. However, the vibrancy of matter in the assemblage also capacitated girls to de-territorialise the restrictive affects that constrain their potential, enabling new becomings. Notwithstanding, girls' capacities for new becomings, such capacities in some cases were unlocked by their using violence.

Looking back at the opening quotation of this paper and UNESCO's (2020) aspiration for a collision free world for girls, we suggest that girls continue to encounter sexual violence in overt forms through their daily interactions with the socio-material reality, where limited adult support reduces their capacities. Girls' agential capacities are produced in and interconnected to the socio-material reality. To understand girls' experience of violence requires paying attention to their actual lives in and outside of school. In keeping with a materialist lens through which relations are volatile, we suggest that a re-examination of the repressive ideologies that underpin girls' entanglements is indeed possible. Following Kohli et al. (2021, p. 818), a localised understanding of social norms becomes critical to the prevention of sexual violence and would "involve different agents of gender socialisation." This requires a collaborative intra-action of all relations (teachers, parents, boys, chieftains, community, government authorities) within the micropolitical level of the assemblage to address the gendered attitudes, behaviours, and inequalities through which male entitlement is upheld at schools.

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