‘I’m allowed to be angry’: Students resist postfeminist education in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Abstract

‘FeminEast’ is a feminist club that was founded by students at Wellington East Girls’ College in 2013. At the time of writing, the club’s popularity is growing and has attracted attention from national media. This paper reports on a pilot study based on conversations with FeminEast co-founder Jess Dellabarca and analysis of media texts by and about the club. The author contextualises FeminEast in a neoliberal climate, focussing on the neoliberal discourse usually called ‘postfeminism’, the widespread belief that feminism is no longer needed because we have achieved gender equality. This paper foregrounds efforts by FeminEast’s leaders to mobilise feminist anger and contend with contemporary gender norms and postfeminist discourse. These efforts are discussed particularly in relation to the 2013–2014 ‘Roast Busters’ scandal. FeminEast members adeptly navigate postfeminist social dynamics; ultimately, they succeed in developing and disseminating their view that the Roast Busters are a product of persistent and pernicious rape culture, a key weapon of contemporary patriarchy. This paper shows that girls can and do engage activistic practices that are more worthy of scholarly attention than the dearth of recent research on girls’ activism would suggest.

Keywords
Postfeminism, girlhood, affect, feminist anger, girl power, FeminEast, Roast Busters

> The FeminEast group was and is a breath of fresh air in the place … It proves our students are agentic critical thinkers with social consciences. We give the young women full credit for … taking on social mores … Some teachers have commented neutrally that “feminism seems to be on the rise” – that was in 2013. Teacher at Wellington East Girls College[1]

In November 2013, the same year that the teachers mentioned above noticed feminism ‘rising’, the national public was scandalised by the story of a local ‘teen rape club’ (*Huffington Post*, 2013). Hyped-up news outlets reported that – allegedly – a group of teenage boys in West Auckland had formed a group called the ‘Roast Busters,’ filmed themselves sexually assaulting girls, and shared their footage on Facebook (Rutherford, 2013). Although some commentators described the gang’s actions as ‘mischief’ (Gulliver, 2013), these were outliers in a public response more typified by horror and confusion. As an observer to what *The Huffington Post* (2013) called ‘a public furore’, I noticed a trend emerge in discussion in and around the news coverage: Many commentators assumed that new media had played a causal role in the events by providing the boys with ready access to pornography as well as a platform on which to brag and shame their victims (for instance, Justice Minister Judith Collins responded by promoting new anti-cyber bullying laws – see Young, 2013). People seemed to scramble for explanations as to how the Roast Busters became so sexually aggressive and with such impunity. This was a specific iteration of moral panic discourse about the hypersexuality of youth, the exacerbatory dangers of new technologies, and the associated risks for girls in particular (Egan, 2013). The saga also arose in the context of prevailing ‘postfeminist’ discourse that girls are equal to or even outperforming boys in the spheres of education and commerce, as ‘can-do girls … The

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ultimate subjects of capacity' (Harris, 2004, p. 8).

When the police announced that the Roast Busters could not be prosecuted because too few girls were 'brave enough' to testify (Vance, 2014), a group of students at Wellington East Girls College (hereafter 'East,' its local nickname) gathered for what co-founder Jess Dellabarca called an 'emergency meeting'[2]. Founded by four students in 2013, FeminEast is a feminist club with over 200 Facebook members and approximately forty members who attend weekly meetings at the school. According to Dellabarca, FeminEast's response to the Roast Busters was quite different to that of the general public. As girls, and girls for whom new media is both a normal part of social life and a tool for political organising, FeminEast members did not respond with fears that 'today's youth' are more sexually deviant than previous generations, nor did they blame social media for facilitating rape in any way. They discussed the culpability of patriarchal[3] norms and institutions and were aggrieved and angered by the boys' actions, the police misconduct, and the abuse of sexual violence complainants in the courts. This response is a productive starting point for tackling rape culture, whereas the public moral panic halts such efforts by scapegoating new technology and purportedly hypersexual youth. Given the complexity and usefulness of FeminEast's divergence from the popular narrative, the actions and beliefs of these feminist students are worth exploring.

The club's response to the Roast Busters – and indeed FeminEast's very existence – is at odds with a trend that has concerned many scholars of feminism and girlhood over the last decade or so: the apparent rejection of feminism amongst girls, sometimes called the 'feminist disavowal' or the 'repudiation of feminism' (Jowett, 2004; Scharff, 2012). The idea that young people reject feminism en masse is often presented as proof that we have arrived at a postfeminist historical moment, where feminist politics is extinct despite being required for redressing present social injustices. My study is motivated by the recent growth of scholarship on this theme, which Rentschler and Mitchell (2014) group under an academic genre they call 'girls in crisis.' Girls-in-crisis scholarship tends to 'over-signify girlhood as a state of vulnerability and underestimate girls' own collective potential for response and change work' (Rentschler & Mitchell, 2014, p. 3). Little has been written about how postfeminism works in Aotearoa/New Zealand, let alone how girls respond to it (exceptions include Jackson & Vares, 2015, and Gavey, 2012). I hope to contribute to emergent international conversations about girls' activism (e.g. Harris, 2008, 2011, 2015; Renold & Ringrose, 2008, 2016; Ringrose, 2013; Taft 2011) and to connect these with some local scholarship about feminism (Campbell, Michelle, & Simon-Kumar, 2011) and girlhood (Gavey, 2012; Jackson & Vares, 2015; Quinlivan, 1999). Accordingly, I ask: How do the FeminEast members negotiate a purportedly postfeminist context to develop their own political discourse and community? What sort of politics emerges from these negotiations, and to what extent does it resist local postfeminist discourses and constraints?

In the first section I describe how postfeminist discourse rose to prominence in Aotearoa/New Zealand – in general and specifically in schools – with harmful consequences for social democracy as a whole. In the following section, I address the problem of how to theorise girls' resistance in this context. Here I suggest that girls' 'empowerment' is no longer useful as a yardstick for girls' resistance because postfeminist discourse asserts that girls are fully empowered neoliberal subjects (Harris, 2004). Instead I employ the post-structural approach taken by Ringrose independently (2013) and with Renold (2008, 2016) by asking, what can girls 'do to disrupt normative power relations?' (Ringrose, 2013, p. 85). The third section gives one answer to this question with an account of FeminEast's origins: the founders learned about feminism on social media and started the club to grow and share what they had learned. A thread of feeling is woven through this story as club members testify to the importance

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of emotions to feminism: they describe a movement from the hurt of experiencing gendered injustices, to anger at the structural causes of these, and on to wonder and hope for a feminist future. In mapping these movements, I am guided by Ahmed's work on affect and politics in and since her 2004 book *The cultural politics of emotion.* My ultimate claim is that FeminEast members create space to challenge gender norms in their school and beyond it. I show how successfully this politics has contested postfeminist ideology by exploring FeminEast's response to the Roast Busters saga. Finally, my fourth section introduces the founders' commitments to intersectionality and accessibility. Here, I query the extent to which these commitments translate into practice. FeminEast has revitalised feminist politics by mobilising personal experience (anger and pain) and contesting the postfeminist denial that structural inequalities persist. Although this is an impressive achievement in the context I describe, it is troubling in both senses of the word – disruptive and exciting, but not without some worrisome baggage.

Postfeminism in context: Aotearoa/New Zealand and education

Theoretical critiques of postfeminism are vital to understanding how patriarchy persists in neoliberal Aotearoa/New Zealand. Particularly useful is the work of McRobbie (2007, 2008, 2009), who uses the term 'postfeminist' to mark a contemporary era wherein liberal feminist ideals of women's free choice and empowerment have been mainstreamed by commercial co-optation. This shift has allowed some women (predominantly Pākehā, middle class, able-bodied) to enter public spheres such as commerce and politics, which in turn has inspired a plethora of popular media stories about 'successful' women leading their (consumerist) lives. The circulation of these ideas has created an illusion of gender equality so that feminism, it seems, has been 'taken into account' (McRobbie, 2008, p. 21). This shift occurs alongside pervasive expansions of socioeconomic inequalities and an increasing feminisation of poverty globally and in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2015; UN Women, 2000). The feminist language with which we might object to these shifts is confined to history because we are meant to believe that feminism poses only questions we have already settled. The popular view that women and men are equal thus operates as a 'decoy for domination' (Baker, 2008, p. 62). Gendered inequalities that persist are seen as the product of girls' and women's failure to advance themselves in the neoliberal market or, as Gill (2007) describes it, 'a grammar of individualism underpins all these notions – such that even experiences of racism or homophobia or domestic violence are framed in exclusively personal terms in a way that turns the idea of the personal as political on its head' (p. 9). The silencing of feminist talk about gender inequality simultaneously suppresses discussion of classed or racialised forms of oppression because most of those disproportionately affect women.

Postfeminist discourse thrives in Aotearoa/New Zealand due to its salience with other dominant social and political ideologies. First and foremost, postfeminism is a gender-specific iteration of the neoliberal centrality of individual choice and responsibility. Neoliberal reforms were adopted in New Zealand from the 1980s onwards and perhaps more swiftly than anywhere else (Else, 1992). Put simply, and as Gill implies above, neoliberal ideology posits that problematic individuals rather than structural forces are to blame for social problems.

Compounding the significance of neoliberal thinking, national mythology insists that Aotearoa/New Zealand is an especially equal and progressive place. My experience learning history at public schools in the early 2000s is demonstrative here: the curriculum began with a nostalgic account of the Treaty of Waitangi (never te Tiriti), which perpetuated the widespread

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belief that colonisation was/is ultimately peaceful, and followed with similarly romanticised accounts of women's enfranchisement in 1893, the mid-twentieth century welfare state, and the radical protests of the 1970s and 1980s. Only in NCEA level 3 does the curriculum become more nuanced. This narrative reflects and helps to maintain a popular understanding that Aotearoa/New Zealand has always been antiracist, antisexist, and antibourgeois as well as 'clean and green' – a haven protected from the corruption of the rest of the world. The progressive mythos supports the postfeminist illusion of structural equality by reaffirming the attitude that Aotearoa/New Zealand has no issues with social or economic injustice. This has the severe consequences at the crux of McRobbie's concern: that postfeminist ideology primes societies for the pervasive undoing of feminist gains. By silencing feminist objections to the nation's vast and fast-growing inequalities, the mirage of equality obscures and therefore promotes the pernicious persistence of postcolonial patriarchy.

According to Ringrose (2013), postfeminist dynamics manifest in schools as two major narratives of gender crisis: that girls outperform boys academically and that girls are hypersexual. These discourses pathologise feminism because it is to blame for the deviant excesses of both feminine success and feminine sexuality. This pathologisation takes shape as 'the abject feminist,' a figure framed as 'man-hating, anti-sex, prudish, butch, ugly, de-feminised, and almost always adult', as opposed to the postfeminist 'happy, sexy, girlie ideal' (Ringrose & Renold, 2016, p. 2). Because feminism is associated with such bad affects, teen feminists' politics is seen as deliberately anti-happiness as well as redundant. Their task is not only to raise consciousness about the harms of normative gender but to confront people's *feelings* about feminism, and feelings are very 'sticky' (Ahmed, 2004). For Ahmed, feelings stick to things (objects, symbols, ideas) through repetition; every time the term 'feminist' is used to insult something as hateful, ugly, outmoded, or irrational, the more stuck those feelings become to feminism. Sticky feelings can be unstuck from their objects, but doing so is difficult and can feel as though it is not in our control. (Ahmed mentions being stuck in traffic as an analogy.)

Teen feminist activism is made particularly complex by another postfeminist trend: that girls are facing 'ongoing and perhaps intensifying' sexual regulation in schools (Ringrose, 2013, p. 7). This aligns with McRobbie's (2007) argument that the terms of sexual difference are being quickly restored to protect patriarchy from the threat of public women. Gill (2007) also includes the reification of sexual difference as a key tenet of the postfeminist sensibility, and one that is evident in popular media obsessions with pseudo-scientifically expounding on differences between the sexes. The reification of sexual difference works to:

> (Re-)eroticise power relations between men and women. At one level this simply means that difference is constructed as sexy. At another, discourses of natural gender difference can be used to freeze in place existing inequalities by representing them as inevitable and – if read correctly – as pleasurable. (Gill, 2007, p. 18)

Men, freed from the shackles of 'political correctness', are encouraged to assert themselves as 'libidinous, powerful and, crucially, as different from femininity' (Gill, 2007, p. 16). School-based studies in Aotearoa/New Zealand have explored the flipside of this and found that girls are increasingly pressured to conform to strict rules of sexual embodiment – racialised, heteronormative beauty ideals that include walking a tight-rope between seeming (hetero) sexually available without being a 'slut' (Jackson & Vares, 2015; Quinlivan, 1999). Jackson and Vares (2015) argue that girls respond to these pressures in complex ways, some of which involve contestation. They explore girls' resistant practices in the interests of countering the overwhelming academic focus on 'girls in crisis.' My work builds on this.

It is important to note that postfeminism does not completely silence structural critiques.

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Even though the components of the history curriculum I described were cherry picked from a plethora of much less 'progressive' events, and even though the protests (for universal suffrage, anti-nuclear, anti-apartheid, etc.) were achieved largely by radical minorities rather than a unified nation, these events were obviously real; those minorities have descendants. Not only in universities but also in typically left-leaning circles such as human service professions and the arts, one often finds a deep-seated awareness of the grim realities belied by the myth that Aotearoa/New Zealand is fair, safe, and clean. Christina, a character in MacLean's (1992) film *Crush*, describes this awareness to an American visitor and captures its disruptive potential:

> No predators, no poisonous spiders, no snakes. New Zealand's this totally benign, paradisiacal, pre-lapsarian world ... and we're uneasy about it. There's this obsession to uncover the germ of evil, the search for the snake. That's the New Zealand psyche – looking for serpents. I guess we have a streak of perversity!

So while the myth of this country's benignity suppresses discussion of structural injustice in dominant arenas such as centre-right politics and mass media, in other spheres it creates a tense and restless grief for the nation's failure to measure up to its ideal self – and this grief can actually provoke us to object to said injustice. This may be the motivation of some teachers at East who provided FeminEast with a classroom for meetings and, as the teacher said in the opening quote, who see the club as 'a breath of fresh air' and 'give the young women full credit for … taking on social mores.' This suggests that postfeminist sexual regulation and panics about girls' 'excessive' success are contested within schools as well as perpetuated, and that FeminEast are part of that contestation.

Theorising girls' resistance

FeminEast's (and its supportive teachers') efforts exemplify Butler's (2006) insistence that power structures are always unstable because subjects are capable of exposing the arbitrariness of norms, 'their porousness and malleability, their incompleteness and their transformability' (p. 533). It is pertinent to explore and animate narratives of resistance because they 'might force a radical re-articulation' of power (Butler, 1990, p. 16). This brings me to my primary theoretical problem. Despite its usefulness as an account of how patriarchal capitalism survives the threat that feminism poses, McRobbie's work fails to account for girls' capacities to challenge and reshape normative gender. In her critique of postfeminist culture, McRobbie defines a discourse that works towards silencing feminism; she then makes a logical leap by claiming that feminism is duly eliminated. This reasoning fails to account for counter-narratives and the resistant capacities of political subjects. Consider this statement:

> By these means of containment in the landscape of spectacular femininity, women are removed once again from public life, the political sphere and from the possibility of feminism … This [is] a feminist tragedy, the 'fall of public woman'. (McRobbie, 2007, p. 734)

For this to be true – for women (and girls) to be 'contained', for feminism to be an '[im]possibility' – girls and women must uniformly and uncritically absorb the normative dictates of the 'landscape of spectacular femininity' (this refers to postfeminist popular discourse about women's 'luminous' public 'successes' – *Sex and the city* is an oft-cited example; McRobbie, 2007, p. 734). Perhaps this problem with McRobbie's theory is often overlooked because the oppressed subjects in her framework are girls, and readers are quick to believe that girls are totally oppressed – that any power a girl claims to have is not only insubstantial but a sinister ruse that 'contains' all girls and women in a position of (disguised) subservience.

Lack of regard for girls' resistant capacities and practices is problematic on two levels. On an ideological level, it contributes to a world of discourse that frames girls as objects rather

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than subjects or citizens. Driscoll (2002) argues that adult feminist activists and scholars have a long history of excluding or 'othering' girls from feminism because girlhood signifies conventional femininity. This sort of feminism works to rescue girls from the powerlessness of girlhood instead of rescuing girlhood from its equation with powerlessness. The latter would be revolutionary; the former reifies the social–symbolic rule that femininity is weakness and masculinity is power. On an instrumental level, feminist theories of power are incomplete if they fail to recognise girls' resistance, and as such they will be inadequate tools for the promotion of transformative politics. As Butler (2004) attests, 'it will not be enough to isolate and identify the particular nexus of power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things. Rather, it is necessary to track the ways in which that field meets its breaking point' (p. 216).

Admittedly, theorising girls' resistance has become a particularly difficult undertaking. Historically, studies of girls' resistance often promoted their 'empowerment', 'choice', or 'voice' (Harris & Shields Dobson, 2015). Gavey (2012) suggests that we set aside 'empowerment' as a measure for girls' resistance because it has lost political value. This is because postfeminist discourse promotes heteronormative femininity *as* empowerment and encourages girls to use their 'free' choices and voices to promote normative sexual embodiment (the pro-anorexia movement is a particularly stark example – see *proanalifestyle.wordpress.com*). This could be described as the postfeminist brand of 'girl power'[4]. Ringrose (2013) sets aside the question of empowerment and asks what 'girls can do to disrupt normative power relations' and then 'how do we perceive and map such "doings"?' (p. 85). She calls researchers to map the ways 'girls' *affective* relations and capacities … trouble the boundaries of being and doing "girl"' (p. 84, emphasis added).

In a study particularly relevant to mine, teen feminists in a high school group creatively unsettled the negative affects attached to the abject feminist figure (Ringrose & Renold, 2016). In their school, to call out sexism was to risk being silenced as a hateful failure who perversely chose not to strive for the happiness promised by postfeminist girl power. These feminists were often treated as though their thoughts were deranged and actions pointless. Affect is of key importance in this struggle. When adhering to gender norms is seen as a sure fire route to a happy life, challenging gender norms causes a miscommunication whereby others think that feminists *choose* to be disempowered and sad. For Ahmed (2010), this means that feminists are easily rejected; when she names a sexist problem with something or someone else, the 'feminist killjoy' *becomes* the problem because others see that she brings bad feelings (those stuck to feminism) into social interaction to destroy their (normative) happiness. Accordingly, Ringrose and Renold's (2016) teen feminist research participants received negative and sometimes hateful feedback from peers. They negotiated the minefield of sticky feelings by saying they had become 'known as pretty feisty' (Ringrose & Renold, 2016, p. 10). Drawing on affective resources available in contemporary girl culture, the phrase 'pretty feisty' contests the bad affects associated with feminist anger by positioning it as exciting and feminine, even a little bit sexy. This illustrates how 'doing girl differently' can be resistant, aided by the 'malleability and multiplicity of contemporary girl subjectivities, which exceed heteronormative femininity and phallogocentric desire' (Renold & Ringrose, 2008, p. 313).

As in that study of 'pretty feisty' students, *feminist* is the girl subjectivity central to my project with FeminEast. How do FeminEast members navigate postfeminist terrain, where adopting the feminist label is an act of refusal to agree that all girls are empowered and is seen, by extension, as a deliberate assault on happiness? How successfully do FeminEast members open up structural critiques or contest intensifying sexual regulation?

Due to tight time restrictions on this project, I was unable to obtain the necessary ethics approval to interview current group members or observe their discussions. This paper is based

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on conversations (in person and online) with Jess Dellabarca, now a student at The University of Auckland, in her capacity as one of FeminEast's founders. To ensure I did not misrepresent the group, Dellabarca kindly agreed to assist me in developing my research questions and review work before publication. I also spoke with a teacher at East. To supplement these conversations, I analysed publicly available media about the group, some of which FeminEast members produced, including two short films, *Consent is not a child's game* (Dellabarca & Mersi, 2014) and *FeminEast make zines* (Winter, 2014); interviews on *Radio New Zealand* (Chapman et al., 2014), *The Wireless* (Whelan, 2015), and *WellingtonZineFest.blogspot (WellingtonZineFest,* 2014); and a cover story in *Sunday Magazine* (Olds, 2015). This conversation looks set to grow: the *Sunday* piece featured at least four feminist high school groups in Auckland and Wellington, and Sue Jackson is conducting a study of FeminEast from Victoria University of Wellington, which she and her collaborators presented on at the September 2016 Women's Studies Association Conference in Auckland (Olds, 2015). My sources are mainly from 2014 and provide a rich picture of the plans, hopes, and concerns of that year's leadership.

FeminEast create political discourse and community

New media and feminist education

Social media provided FeminEast's founders with access to international conversations about feminism and the intersection of gender with other axes of power, namely ethnicity and sexuality (*WellingtonZineFest*, 2014; J. Dellabarca, personal communication, 2015; Whelan, 2015). Some researchers argue that feminist discourse on social media appeals to girls because it allows them to develop critical voices within existing spaces of contemporary girl culture – another instance where the multiplicity of girl subjectivities exceeds heteronormative femininity (Harris, 2008, 2011; Kearney, 2008; Keller, 2011, 2016). I agree that critical voices are important, but studies of girls' social media use sometimes frame girls' speech as inherently resistant, which runs into the problem with postfeminist girl power. Girls are incited to speak in ways that affirm normative gender, and if we see all girls' speech as fundamentally resistant, we are not distinguishing between postfeminist girl power and forms of empowerment that challenge gender norms. For me, more important than the simple fact that girls can and do speak is that social media connects geographically dispersed *voices of discontent*. Further, and as we can see with FeminEast, online conversations translate into activism that occupies more mainstream spaces such as schools and mass media.

Perhaps motivated by a lack of discussion about social inequalities at school, FeminEast founders were moved to use the classroom space and educational tools to promote feminism. Co-founder Caitlin Lynch attests[5],

> There were a lot of people who didn't know about [feminism] and were *suffering* because of that, so the club was a space to educate people and also a space to discuss once educated … When people come to FeminEast they learn how to talk about how they are affected by gender inequality … and that's really empowering. (Winter, 2014, emphasis added)

This effort aligns with Harris and Shield Dobson's (2015) claim that we need to reclaim that language of 'suffering' as a resource for girls to discuss their experiences of dis-empowerment, because this could expose multiple structural inequalities and promote an intersectional feminist discourse (and as Lynch testifies, this process is 'empowering' but only because it contests normative gender). Another former co-leader had high hopes for this educational movement: 'If we three can teach the group, then the group can teach their friends, and they can teach their friends, and it just continues' (Winter, 2014).

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This teaching task is obviously complicated by the bad affects Ringrose and Renold's (2016) teen feminists faced. FeminEast leaders challenged the abject status of feminism in a similar way, as Dellabarca describes, 'The rest of the school were a bit like "what, is that some sort of man-hating club?" and we were like "no, look, here's a zine, it's not, it's for everyone, take it!"' (Winter, 2014). FeminEast members describe zines as 'cute', 'fun', 'crafty', and 'accessible' (*WellingtonZineFest*, 2014; Winter, 2014). These adjectives are associated with normative femininity, but here they are used to promote feminist literacy, activism, and media-making. This represents an effort to reverse the association of feminism with bad feelings and normative gender with happiness.

Reclaiming feminist anger

FeminEast's reputation for being 'some sort of man-hating club' shows that club members had to challenge the abject status of the angry feminist. Dellabarca told me a few stories about backlash they received. Recently, a teacher advised a FeminEast member to leave the club because feminism would ruin her 'nice girl' status. This occurred in front of a full classroom, and other students supported the teacher by describing FeminEast as a 'cult', which shows how deranged and sinister the feminist figure is in postfeminist mythos. FeminEast leaders counter the rejection of feminist anger by mobilising club members' personal experience so as to use anger as a way to bond with each other and fuel resistance:

> Bella Wallace: 'Once you start reading about [feminism] you can't stop because you realise like you've been angry about all this stuff but you didn't know why, and all of a sudden it's like, I'm allowed to be angry about it! And that's like an awesome feeling.'
>
> Lynch: 'Yeah, it's really validating ...'
>
> Dellabarca: 'And I have people that are angry with me, and we're doing stuff about it!' (Winter, 2014)

Feminist anger is repositioned here as justified and collective and, as such, an 'awesome' and 'validating' feeling. This movement from anger at painful experiences ('all this stuff') to collective action ('we're doing stuff!') resonates with Lorde's (1984) use of anger against racism: 'Anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act … Anger is loaded with information and energy' (p. 127). This information and energy helps feminists 'read' the world for its problems, 'name' the objects of our resistance, and form lively and threatening alliances (Ahmed, 2004, p. 175–6). Anger thus threatens the happy affects that perpetuate illusions of equality. FeminEast's efforts to recast the angry feminist as positive have had some success, as a junior member attested in a note of thanks she wrote to Dellabarca: she 'used to think feminism was a man-hating club' but thanks to FeminEast she 'realised it is super cool' and has become 'more confident and proud'. By recasting feminist anger as a source of validity, positivity, and belonging, FeminEast contests the equation of postfeminist normative 'empowerment' with happiness, which threatens the affective mechanisms by which postfeminist ideology perpetuates its chief conspiracies. Furthermore, FeminEast's affective work creates the energy that fuels the critical agenda and actions described in my next section.

A postfeminist agenda?

Mobilising anger has a rich feminist tradition, and this heritage is also plain in FeminEast's agenda. In this section, I focus on the club's response to the Roast Busters saga. Dellabarca

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told me the group's primary focus was tackling rape culture, and perhaps for that reason I have more information on this than on their other efforts (Dellabarca and peer Marina Mersi made a film entitled *Consent is not a child's game* [2014], and Dellabarca participated in a *Radio New Zealand* panel discussion on this topic [Chapman et al., 2014]). This is not to ignore the many other issues of concern to the group, some of which Dellabarca mentioned to me: the representation of girls, women, and people of colour in local and global media; local inequalities between Pākehā and Māori and Pasifika people; lack of women in political leadership; and abortion rights.

The public moral panic about the Roast Busters illustrates how postfeminist discourses protect structural power from interrogation, because the scapegoats of the internet and the hypersexualisation of youth act as 'decoys for domination' (Baker, 2008, p. 62) by distracting us from the structures of power that actually facilitate rape. In a move that operates as a suitably neoliberal fall-back when individuals (the Roast Busters) are too young to be held solely responsible for their behaviour, parents are blamed for failing to protect children from these threats[6]. FeminEast's primary concern with rape culture draws on anger at the Roast Busters' existence, which blatantly proves that patriarchy persists, and frustration that the moral panic about hypersexual youth and technology is a counterproductive response to patriarchy's persistence. The club's objections are captured by the phrase 'rape culture,' which describes a macrostructure of dominant discourses and institutions that conspire to create a world where rape is an accepted and everyday part of social fabrics (Herman, 1988). Many contemporary feminists present rape culture as a clear demonstration that patriarchal power is macrostructural and violent (see Ridgway, 2014; Sills et al., 2016). As such, the concept boldly contests the postfeminist idea that structural inequality no longer exists and that individuals (failing parents, deviant children) or new technologies could be the cause of the Roast Busters' behaviour.

The closest I found to a public critique of rape culture was a *Radio New Zealand* panel discussion called *Rape culture and consent education* (Chapman et al., 2014). In accordance with its promising title, three of the six panellists – Dellabarca and academics Deborah Russell and Pani Farvid – explained that rape culture is a macrostructural problem not reducible to parental failure to censor the 'deviant' hypersexuality of online porn. Despite this, presenter Wallace Chapman and the other panellists repeatedly steered the conversation back to the questions of good parenting and the dangers of the internet. This did not prevent Dellabarca (nor Russell or Farvid) from insisting that the problem is a social structure that normalises rape. In an effort to contest the scapegoating of social media, Dellabarca explicitly distinguished her views from others: 'Just to go against the flow … In my community at school, [social media] has actually opened huge doors and it's very positive'. She added to this by insisting that sexual education should not be parents' responsibility: 'We don't say to parents, "teach your kids maths!" [Sexual consent] is just like maths ... It should be part of the curriculum'. This indicates that FeminEast's efforts to contest postfeminist norms have also produced concrete ideas for change; in this case, shifting the responsibility to provide just sex education from parents onto the state. This counters the neoliberal centrality of individual (and parental) choice. *Consent is not a child's game* (Dellabarca & Mersi, 2014) extends this responsibility from the state to other collectives such as Girl Guides. Along with *Consent is not a child's game*, Dellabarca's radio appearance preceded (perhaps precipitated) invitations for her and Lynch to speak at a Post Primary Teachers' Association conference on sex education reform. Thus, the consequences of FeminEast's efforts are not limited to effects on members or even to ripple effects within East. FeminEast spokespeople thus use both affective and discursive tools (such as 'rape culture') to intervene in mainstream discourse. Their efforts demonstrate how important it is to reclaim the ideas and energy of a politics that is said to be redundant.

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Intersectionality and accessibility

FeminEast members have recognised that many of the same problems persist and require responses similar to those that feminists have made historically, but both Dellabarca and Lynch also distinguish FeminEast's approach from traditional feminism: 'Our argument … was always that, if this is a fourth wave, it must be intersectional' and 'our perspective on modern feminism is that it must be intersectional and accessible' (*WellingtonZineFest,* 2014; J. Dellabarca, personal communication, March 10, 2015). The commitment to intersectionality recalls the inclusion of racial and socioeconomic inequality in the agenda I noted earlier. The pairing of intersectionality with accessibility suggests that the leaders aim to include students with less educational privilege and/or awareness of feminist ideas. Although this is cause for optimism, I cannot confirm that their commitments have prevented Pākehā middle-class dominance in practice. This is an important note in a context where 'intersectionality' has become something of a buzzword, and in some usages it has been used 'in ways that lack complexity and/or are depoliticised' (Bettie, 2014, p. xxxii) or, even worse, has been co-opted as a 'neoliberal "diversity" politics … to accrue liberal capital' (Bettie, 2014, p. xxxiii).

FeminEast's discussions of intersectionality include promisingly complex understandings of power: 'Oppression exists across multiple axes and all forms are interlinked. Understanding the complex relationship between oppression and privilege is key' (*WellingtonZineFest*, 2014). Dellabarca also described the club's active opposition to heterosexism, racism, and transphobia. I asked her about class, but she was unsure about the composition of the group and indicated that class was not discussed; perhaps, in alignment with dominant trends, class is collapsed into understandings of race and not discussed as an index of difference, but undoubtedly 'class is always omnipresent even if it is discursively invisible' (Bettie, 2014, p. 197). Despite their efforts to create an intersectional practice, in 2013–14 most FeminEast members were Pākehā and few were out as queer or trans; this does not reflect East's racial/ethnic or sex/gender diversity. Quinlivan (2014) found similar dynamics in a Queer Straight Alliance (QSA) group at a provincial high school in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where Pākehā dominance had 'the problematic effect of equating queerness with white, homo-normative privilege' (p. 274).

Dellabarca told me that the Pākehā leaders were uneasy about this and unsure about how to remedy it. Their uncertainty may be partly because local iterations of intersectional feminism are not as readily available to them as international frameworks. Dellabarca reports that the blogs from which she learned about intersectionality were most likely based in the USA and thus probably informed by Black feminism. This would contribute to an awareness of socioeconomic inequalities between White people and people of colour, which are at least statistically similar in both contexts, and perhaps to some knowledge of persistent colonialism. It would do little to build knowledge of the specific mechanics of New Zealand's colonial state. An effort to explore and employ mana wāhine Māori or Mātauranga Māori, for instance, would be radically different from equating Māori strengths and struggles with those of Black Americans. It is imperative that political projects that hope to do justice to the diversity of Aotearoa/New Zealand do intersectional feminism well (Campbell et al., 2011).

This problem of intersectional practice links to a potential issue around accessibility. Dellabarca told me that their Facebook group began as 'open' (a page on which any Facebook user can post) but was changed to a 'closed group' when former club members made inappropriate comments on the page that were read as mockery by current members. Members stopped posting on the Facebook page because they felt unsafe. The disruptive members were banned, and Facebook users now need the club's consent to view or participate in its online discussions. The decision to change the online group to 'closed' aligns with recent findings

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that, for many young feminist activists, social media 'provide(s) *safe spaces* that serve as a buffer against the negative effects of sexism' (Sills et al., 2016, p. 935, emphasis added). Safety is a legitimate concern in a context that includes the classroom bullying scene I described earlier and digital 'troll' attacks on feminists such as Laura Bates and Anita Sarkeesian, which included rape and death threats (Bates, 2014; Wheaton, 2015). However, it must be said that the banished FeminEast members were not literally endangering the others but threatening their feelings of belonging and their confidence to speak. FeminEast would need to be a welcoming place in the context I have described. For Ahmed (2010), the feminist killjoy becomes an 'affect alien' in the general community because she 'does not find happiness in the right things', so of human necessity she re-orients herself towards other 'aliens' who also find happiness in resistance (p. 8). FeminEast members turn towards one another in this way. Threats to their feelings of pride, confidence, validity, and 'awesome' anger are threats to the club's political energy, which is its foundation and strength. But what political opportunities does the 'buffer' foreclose? Addressing pertinent questions (Pākehā dominance, for instance, or the absence of discourse about class) requires discomfort because it requires people to confront their own privileges. Conflict within political movements can play a democratic role by challenging the power of dominant definitions and ideologies (Butler, 2004; Winch, 2013). The closed group also denies access to anyone geographically removed from East as well as East students who are reluctant to attend meetings. This might impede FeminEast's efforts to challenge the bad reputation of feminism amongst their peers, and it also excludes people outside East and Wellington from the same sort of social media conversations that inspired FeminEast in the first place.

According to Dellabarca, the leaders decided that 'debates are better to have in the meetings', indicating that changing the Facebook group to closed was done as a compromise between the participatory affordances of social media and the need to protect the group's cohesion. They could not 'create a perfect project', and their mission was to 'help East girls form opinions and create debate', so that the girls could 'take this knowledge out in the community and make change from there'. As I have shown, this approach effectively contests postfeminist gender norms both inside and outside East. In making these critiques, I am wary of perpetuating the tendency for adult activists and other outsiders to shoulder young activists with the responsibility of creating 'perfect projects', where the perfection demanded always reflects the values and interests of the outsider. FeminEast does not claim or aspire to represent a national movement. The fact that club leaders aim to practice an intersectional and accessible feminism means that my critiques do not challenge their goals but in fact celebrate those goals and call for them to be pursued further, in recognition that the present context poses serious obstacles to developing an effectively intersectional and accessible feminist practice.

Conclusion: The uses of feminist feelings

I have presented an array of evidence that girls can and do resist normative gender in these purportedly postfeminist times. Specifically, FeminEast members claim their right to be angry and use this anger to challenge postfeminist and patriarchal norms. They have intervened in public discourse on rape culture and consent education. FeminEast challenges the popular belief that we have achieved gender equality in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This study demonstrates that scholarship on postfeminism should always account for girls' resistant capacities because girls, like all political subjects, are never completely oppressed by power.

Most of my sources address the aims and methods of FeminEast's leaders in 2013 and 2014, not the everyday or present workings of the group or the experiences of junior members and

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others in the school community. As feminist school groups grow more popular, future research should look at these aspects of their operation in meetings and on social media.

I would like to end this discussion by introducing two feelings besides anger that FeminEast use as political energy, with the intent to capture some more of the transformative potential of the ways 'girls' affective relations and capacities … trouble the boundaries of being and doing "girl"' (Ringrose, 2013, p. 84). Journalists often ask FeminEast representatives to define feminism, and two definitions intrigued me. I encountered the first twice. In an interview for *The Wireless,* 2015 leader Olive Brown described feminism as a '*belief* in gender equality' (Whelan, 2015, emphasis added). 'Belief' also came up in one of my conversations with Dellabarca: she asked if Taylor Swift or Beyoncé identify as feminist 'because everyone else is doing it, or because [they] really *believe* in gender equality?'[7]. The second definition draws on another affective source: Lynch said that 'as an overall definition … I'd say feminism is an *active desire* for gender equality' (*WellingtonZineFest*, 2014, emphasis added). In some ways, 'belief' and 'desire' go hand in hand with a feminism that is founded on anger, because they suggest that activism is most effective when it is deeply felt. This is not the politics of the traditional public sphere, where emotions are antithetical to coveted masculine 'reason' because they are seen as feminine, bodily, and closer to nature. Girls are excluded from the rubrics of citizenship by the masculine logic that would reject a politics of desire or belief. As Caron (2011) argues, girls are not considered citizens but 'citizens of the future … (a discourse that) functions much like colonialism: it operates through regulatory practices aimed at civilising the primitive through a process of enlightenment' (p. 79). Viewed in these terms, a youthful feminism driven by anger, desire, and belief demands citizenship using means that embody a refusal to be 'civilised' according to the rules of normative gender.

'Active desire' indicates a longing for gender equality that resonates with Ahmed's (2004) work on the feminist importance of hope. Before hope comes 'wonder', which we feel when things surprise us and we see that the world is not inevitably this way. We wonder about how things came to be and how they might be different. This unsettles the naturalness of norms and encourages us to explore and expose their mechanics. 'Hope' emerges when we start to imagine a better world – in this instance, a gender-equal world. 'Hope is crucial to the act of protest', Ahmed writes, for hope 'allows us to feel that what angers us is not inevitable … . Indeed, anger without hope can lead to despair or a sense of tiredness produced by … that which one is up against' (p. 184). Lynch's 'active desire' for that world highlights the importance of not just hoping, but of *action* – activism requires activity.

'Belief' is somewhat different to hope and could be cause for concern that aligns with my unease about the closed Facebook group, because faith is often wielded by believers to essentialise their difference to non-believers and foreclose discussion. This protects the terms of difference from interrogation. Dellabarca's use of 'belief' to question what is sometimes called 'pop feminism' occupies the place of clear reasons for her scepticism. Which feminisms might her faith disqualify, and why? But there is an essential difference between feminist and religious faith. As I have shown, FeminEast members know that gender equality is not real; they believe in the *possibility* of gender equality. For Ahmed (2004), the feminist's journey begins with pain (or 'suffering', as in this paper), which evolves into anger and, as it forms an activist's alliances and aims, anger seeds hope: 'the hope that guides every moment of refusal and that structures the desire for change with the trembling that comes from an opening up of the future, an opening up of what is possible' (p. 171). FeminEast's belief in and desire for gender equality transforms anger with the present into projects that envision a different future, 'challenging the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality' (Butler, 2004, p. 29) and surpassing the limits of conservative reason by imagining what the world might look

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like if it was equitable. That dream, and the angry and active desire to realise it, are the promise of this (perhaps any) endeavour to transform the real.

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Notes

1 Quote sourced via personal communication, April 2015.

2 Except where they are cited otherwise, quotes and paraphrased accounts from Jess Dellabarca come from conversations she and I had in person and via email over the time period March–June 2015. Dellabarca has reviewed my work and given permission for her accounts to be published with her name.

3 Reviewers queried my use of 'patriarchy' throughout this paper given numerous critiques of the concept. I follow Connell's (1995) use of the term in her pioneering work on 'hegemonic masculinity' – the idealised White, wealthy, heterosexual, cisgendered, virile, and physically dominating maleness to which all other masculinities exist in subordinate relationship. For Connell, hegemonic masculinity 'could be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy' (p. 77). In other words, patriarchy requires fresh legitimacy since we are all supposedly equal, and hegemonic masculinity is its new clothes. As with all hegemony, hegemonic masculinity is idealised so we consent to domination through manufacturing rather than coercion. Women and femininity are still dominated by men and masculinity – that is patriarchy. Multiple masculinities exist in complex hierarchical relationship to hegemonic masculinity so that many men and most (if not all) queers are also injured and restricted by patriarchy. The term 'patriarchy' is useful to me because it is singularly clear: it names a pervasive cultural order of discourses and institutions that, through all their confounding complexities, have quite a simple outcome in the current ordering of bodies in the world.

4 These observations do not necessarily apply to all iterations of 'girl power', which have subversive potential whenever they undermine normative gender.

5 All quotes from Lynch and other FeminEast members (apart from Dellabarca) are taken from the public domain.

6 Blaming parents aligns with neoliberalism because the individual and the family are often interchangeably framed as the most important component of society in neoliberal thought.

7 Dellabarca was concerned that I had used this comment because the thoughts she shared on 'pop feminism' were not fully developed. Her question should be read only for the way it uses 'belief', not as a considered rejection of Swift's or Beyoncé's politics.

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