December 2023

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Recommended Citation

Wells, Abigail (2023) ""I’m One of those Crazy Feminists!": Young Women’s Embodiment of the Feminist Killjoy during the Transition from Secondary School to Higher Education," Journal of International Women's Studies: Vol. 25: Iss. 8, Article 5.

Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss8/5

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“I’m One of those Crazy Feminists!”: Young Women’s Embodiment of the Feminist Killjoy during the Transition from Secondary School to Higher Education

By Abigail Wells

Abstract

Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s conceptualization of the “feminist killjoy,” this paper explores how young women transitioning from secondary school to higher education grapple with neoliberal notions of desirable vs. undesirable feminisms. This research aims to build on affective research on women’s lives by contextualizing their experiences as a more inclusive practice of becoming. To capture these nuanced and complex subjectivities of young women, I used a post-qualitative methodology, which disturbed the subject/object binary by exploring the affective engagements made between human and non-human matter. The data used was from a study of four Year 13 women (aged 18) who participated in a four-week, arts-based workshop. A variety of visual art methods were used, such as painting, collage, and graffiti, which also formed part of a collaborative data analysis. The results showed that the girls felt pressure from family, school, and society to do well, and achieving academic success was the most important factor. However, despite pressures to conform, they all embodied elements of the feminist killjoy which disrupted their relationships with neoliberal notions of happiness. Furthermore, these disruptions led to social blockages, which created an affirmative change in the women’s experiences at university.

Keywords: Affect theory, Nomadic subjectivity, Feminist killjoy, Women students, Higher education, Neoliberal femininities

Introduction

This paper contributes insights into how young women grapple with the juxtaposition of neoliberal realms of desirable feminisms (Danvers, 2018) and undesirable feminisms during the transition from secondary school to higher education (HE). Drawn from research data from a collaborative four-week creative arts workshop with four Year 13 women (aged 18), this work critically addresses the current neoliberal context that posits young women as a hegemonic group of gendered, unraced, unclassed, “winning” girls (McRobbie, 2009). While extending research into young women’s day to day struggles of school sexism (Pomerantz et al., 2013), feelings of academic inadequacy (Taylor, 2011), and ongoing pressures to conform to neoliberal norms (McRobbie, 2009), this paper focuses on how young women are repudiating such norms through their affective engagements. Inspired by Sara Ahmed’s conceptualization of the “feminist killjoy,” I argue that young women challenge neoliberal desirable femininities through their affective engagements with undesirable femininities, as epitomized by the feminist killjoy.

1 Abigail Wells is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Sussex. Her research focuses on girls’ educational experiences in rural and small island contexts with an emphasis on posthuman research methodologies and creative methods. Prior to her academic endeavors, Abigail founded and managed a street art gallery in London for emerging artists.
Through my analysis of the creative engagements of four women as they reflect on their education transitions, I aim to shed light on an under-researched time in young women’s lives in a way that emphasizes the transformative potential of undesirable modes of feminism (Ahmed, 2017) as a means to engender affirmative change (Braidotti, 2010). Underpinning this work is the conjunction of ideas from two major feminist theorists who focus on reconfiguring desirable modes of femininity through the subject’s affective capabilities to fragment embedded subject norms for young women. Firstly, I draw from Sara Ahmed’s (2017; 2010) figure of the feminist killjoy to contextualize how young women are challenging socially prescribed modes of happiness. By refusing to conform to the compliant, diligent, and normatively happy women of neoliberal feminism, the feminist killjoy is responsible for social “blockage points” that disrupt the happiness of others (Ahmed, 2010, p. 584).

Secondly, I posit social blockages as having the affective capabilities to fragment the subject towards a more nomadic subjectivity, which is described by Braidotti as “non-unitary… open, multi layered and relational” (Braidotti, 2011, p. 821). Nomadic subjectivity opens up the scope to reimagine new modes of young women’s subjectivity based on an affirmative ethics of multiplicity. Since both concepts involve the recognition that social change is part of a process that starts with the fragmentation of the traditional subject of “girl,” I posit that the embodiment of the feminist killjoy lays the foundations to re-imagine multiple other modes of subjectivity. Although I do not have the capacity to explore all the ontological complexities of Braidotti and Ahmed’s work, I attempt to draw out some of the challenges as well as the similarities and highlight the potential to capture new insights into young women’s lives when their theoretical provocations are put together.

The Desirable, Neoliberal Woman

The neoliberal effects on education are well documented and have impacted the growing marketization and commodification of education over the last several decades (Danvers, 2019; Morley, 2018). Although a central notion of neoliberal ideology is the reduction of governmental power, it is crucial to note that this is not a complete withdrawal of government intervention but the understanding that the government must not intervene with the effects of the market or “correct the destructive effects of the market on society” (Foucault, 2010, p. 133). It is an indirect government, or what Miller and Rose (2008) have termed “government at a distance,” which controls individuals not through explicit forms of power, but through individualized techniques which position action towards socially profitable ends. Described as an “epic of reform” (Ball, 2010, p. 215), the prioritization of market values in education has led to the increase in school regulation by means of “incentive and control” (Foucault, 2010, p. 216). Although the neoliberal regime is characterized by its “[apparent] flexibility” and freedom of choice (McNay, 2009, p. 63), performativity discourses promote a certain subjectivity to be valued or de-valued within neoliberal educational settings. Therefore, regulation of student subjectivities, identities, and experiences operate not through the delimitation of individual freedoms but through their multiplication in the context of a notion of responsible self-management (Golder, 2015; McRobbie, 2009).

Although neoliberalism posits young women’s progression from secondary school to another educational institution as the right choice (Cossens & Jackson, 2020), the highly gendered
pressure to perform as desirable subjects continues to be prevalent. Neoliberal desirability for young women is bound up in their ability to perform as hard working, tenacious, and go-getting “can-do” women (Harris, 2004) without succumbing to an unintelligible “excessive” or “aggressive” femininity (Butler, 1999). This means carefully navigating the complex and often contradictory notions of what successful femininity looks like to improve their productivity and “strive for excellence” (Francis et al., 2010; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Therefore, young women’s negotiation of success becomes part of an individualized competition, or “game” (Macfarlane, 2015), which is dependent on the “risks” and “rewards” of making the “right” decisions (Harris, 2004, p. 163). Furthermore, the pressures to conform to desirable modes of success potentially leave young women who are unwilling or unable to successfully play the game vulnerable to social ostracization.

Fragmenting the Desirable: Embodying the Feminist Killjoy

If notions of desirable femininity are synonymous with women who are diligent, hardworking, and winners of academic and social success, who is undesirable and how does she challenge dominant gendered norms? It is important to emphasize that undesirable and desirable are not positioned in opposition to each other. Rather, undesirable is an affective response to individualized pressures young women feel as a product of strict neoliberal parameters of desirable femininity. Therefore, undesirable femininity does not describe the subject’s position. Instead, it is a multitude of affective engagements that challenge or subvert gendered norms. To highlight the affective capabilities of undesirable feminisms, I draw on Ahmed’s figure of the feminist killjoy. The feminist killjoy challenges normative and desired gendered power dynamics by calling out the “unpleasant truths of sexism” (Ringrose & Renold, 2016, p. 106) and refusing to join in social obligations to promote and maintain “happiness” for women.

To highlight the potential for the feminist killjoy to subvert dominant norms, I draw on her contentious relationship with happiness (Ahmed, 2010). Within this framework, happiness becomes an “end-orientated goal” which is a product of successful subject negotiation and attainment of selected objects (Ahmed, 2010, p. 575). Happiness lures the subject towards an object that is already defined as something that will make us happy. Importantly, it is presumed that “happiness will follow” after the attainment of that object; thus, happiness becomes “object based” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 576). Neoliberal rhetoric points young women towards a desirable femininity—including the balance of a good job and a heteronormative family—becoming a social tool that reinforces traditional modes of femininity and ostracizes those who do not participate (McRobbie, 2015). Despite this, the feminist killjoy mode of subjectivity challenges object-based happiness by “refusing to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 581). For example, young women often hide the worries they have when transitioning to HE because it may spoil the happiness that others find in their success. However, as the feminist killjoy refuses to share such happiness, these wrong responses—or “inappropriate affects”—block the expected social norms (Hochschild, 2003, p. 59). In this example, the inappropriate affective response of worry becomes transformative because it creates social blockages to the expectations of others. This lays the foundations for an affective fragmentation of the subject by opening up the potential to reimagine and rebuild the girl subject. I posit that the subject’s embodiment of feminist
killjoys and her contentious relationship produce affective responses that demonstrate the subject’s capacity to challenge neoliberal gendered norms.

**Thinking with Ahmed and Braidotti**

If the feminist killjoy fragments neoliberal subject norms for young women through her affective capabilities, how is the subject able to reconfigure towards subjectivities that recognize the complex and often contradictory notions of these women’s lives? I argue that Braidotti’s (2012) nomadic subjectivity destabilizes the dominant gendered subjectivities in ways that echo those of a feminist killjoy, but also attempts to rebuild the parameters of young women’s gender performance based on an affirmative politics of multiplicity and difference. Nomadic subjectivity is an affective concept that lays down the foundations for a new kind of subjectivity that posits the subject of woman as a fully relational embodied and embedded entity. It is a site of complex multiple and contradictory sets of experiences that promote a full subjectivity, where the subject is able to speak, think, write, and represent femininity in their own terms (Braidotti, 2021). Importantly, nomadic subjectivity is not a figure such as the feminist killjoy, but a process of becoming that is fluid and varied (Braidotti, 2011). As the feminist killjoy destabilizes dominant norms through her affective engagements, I place her as part of this move towards Braidotti’s nomadic subjectivity because her affective engagements and inappropriate affects challenge social norms, laying down the groundwork to rebuild a subject that is part of a process of becoming multiple others, rather than adhering to prerequisite modes of subjectivity.

A significant difference between Braidotti and Ahmed is their positions on discourse. Braidotti (2021) argues that discourse does not discipline matter but tangles with it in shifting assemblages, whereas Ahmed (2015) is more concerned with how bodies are subject to discourse. Although these two ontological standpoints differ, it is worth noting that Ahmed, like Braidotti, posits how social relations and the material can produce and be produced by affective assemblages (Ahmed, 2004). Furthermore, Bradiotti and Ahmed both reject the humanist subject as a thinking, self-aware, truth-seeking individual (man) who is able to harness thought and reason to control his internal passions. Their shared objective is a new vision of subjectivity which recognizes that truth and knowledge are always situational and context specific. Although I do not propose to fix the ideas of these theorists, nor smooth over their ontological conflicts, I attempt to use their differing provocations and focus on their shared commonality in exploring ways to construct a different type of feminism based on individual experiences through affective capabilities.

**Methodology**

As this work aims to capture the subject’s affective capabilities to disrupt the preservation of rational humanism and patriarchal supremacy of dominant thinking (Osgood et al., 2019), I adopted a post-qualitative methodology to capture the more nuanced moments of subject transformation. My methodology draws from the growing interest in posthuman methodologies that demonstrates the importance of exploring how bodies are reconfigured in ways that disturb the subject/object binaries by unpacking connections made between human and nonhuman things through their affective engagements (Braidotti, 2011; Coleman, 2008; Hickey-Moody & Willcox, 2019). Therefore, from a posthuman stance, it is not only important to map the affect of participants and researchers, but also to map affect and the body’s capabilities in relation to objects and the
material, including art works, visual media, and social media, as well as their relation to feminism itself (Renold & Ringrose, 2008). Braidotti’s (2021) posthuman approach provides a way in which the patriarchal and ethnocentric power structures, which saturate today’s society, are able to be uprooted by an ethics that decenters these humanist values.

I used creative methods which include visual art practices—such as painting, collage, typography, graffiti—to explore the experiences and identities of feminisms that risk being overlooked by dominant narratives of heteronormativity (Hickey-Moody, 2016). The methods used had to capture how bodies are reconfigured in ways that disturb the subject/object binaries by unpacking connections made between human and nonhuman things through their affective engagements (Hickey-Moody, 2016). By exploring various modes of art making, storytelling, and discussions, I posit that creative methods have the aptitude to re-work a body’s limits (Hickey-Moody, 2016). This is because the subject is at the center of the research, producing new precepts and affects as part of the work of art, and upon terms established by the work.

The research comprised a four-part, weekly, one-hour workshop where the data collected included artwork produced, transcriptions of the workshop, and visual/written notes from my journal. To recruit students, I contacted four six-form colleges in Jersey and wrote an email detailing the project, which was circulated among Year 13 students. Those who were interested in participating were able to contact me by email, after which we spoke on the phone. Before the workshop began, the students had an introductory meeting with me and the other participants to review the consent form and their right to withdraw. The workshop was conducted in an art gallery space, and students were given a theme to discuss and then made artworks based on the discussions. Due to COVID-19 and timetabling restrictions, the workshop ran in two groups of two (Daphne and Wilma; Adam and Charlotte). Four months later, I interviewed the students at their HE institution; these were semi-structured interviews which reflected on students’ transitions and thoughts from the workshop. Ethical approval was granted by the researcher’s university research-ethics committee, participants’ information was provided, and consent forms were signed.

Inspired by Delueze and Guattari’s (1987) notions of plugging in to diverse and multiple assemblages, I used a mapping approach to analyze the data. Drawing on Braidotti’s (2011) notions of a “living map,” I created artworks and handwritten maps from the transcripts and student artworks to capture the complex entanglements of the nomadic subject and its relations and affective encounters (Figure 1). To move beyond the abstracting, reducing, and generalizing of data, I focused on the affective meanings that lurk in the cracks, and refuse to settle under codes (MacLure, 2013a). Within these cracks, “rebel becomings” (Smith, 1995, p. 27) manifest themselves as uncomfortable embodiments that have the potential to undo self-certainty, such as “nausea, complacency, disgust, embarrassment, guilt and fear” (MacLure, 2013b, p. 172). For

2 Channel Islands. As the research was based on a small island, opportunities for some students to attend HE in the UK was often limited and affected by financial and social complications.

3 Week 1: Who is your future self? Week 2: Having it all. Week 3: Who is the feminist killjoy? Week 4: What is female empowerment?

4 Adam chose her pseudonym as a dedication to her best friend at university. She was insistent that this was not a subversive decision to challenge gender norms.

5 Students assigned themselves pseudonyms and consent was ongoing.
example, meaning can often lie on the “boundary of language and body,” such as laughter, tears, snorts, shrugs, or silences (MacLure, 2013b, p. 171). Therefore, the artworks were used to capture these affective “ruptures and cracks and movement” (Renold & Ringrose, 2008, p. 318) within the data. From these drawings and maps, I explored the nuances and decoded areas of the data. Once the data was decoded by the artwork, I was able to look for themes by tracing lines of flight and zigzagging patterns (Braidotti, 2011) that highlighted new ways the participants were challenging social and academic pressures. The artwork was shown to the students and further discussions about the artwork were included as data.

Figure 1: Artwork Produced by the Researcher as an Initial Decoding of Data

Findings

Velma’s Story: Grappling with Desirable Femininity and the Embodiment of the Feminist Killjoy

Velma had come to Jersey from Romania at the age of eight. She looked forward to future happiness as a result of obtaining her “dream life” and had a clear vision of what that would look like. As depicted in her life map (Figure 2), Velma’s dream life was based on becoming a lawyer, having the means to buy expensive jewelry, the “ideal body,” power (which was directly related to money), as well as the balance between a heteronormative family, her career, and independence. Not only was Velma’s happiness bound up in the successful attainment of these goals, but she was also positioned within the dominant neoliberal framework of a “successful” woman. Despite Velma’s “can do” (Harris, 2004) attitude to hard work and meticulous planning, her affective responses during the workshop suggested she was grappling with complex social contradictions between her desirable future and her current position as a feminist. In fact, Velma was the only student in the workshop to call herself a feminist and spoke about the social ramifications of being “out” as a feminist: “Yeah… I feel like since you say you’re a feminist, men are immediately like, ‘ahhhh, you’re one of those crazy feminists,’” men who have just taken feminism and turned it into a bad thing… which it shouldn’t be. I’m one of those crazy feminists!” (personal communication).
Within her social group, Velma embodied the feminist killjoy by calling out anti-feminist behaviors, which created social awkwardness (Ahmed, 2010). Her affective response of anger and frustration towards being labeled a “crazy feminist” demonstrates her capacity to challenge sexist and misogynistic behaviors (Ahmed, 2017). However, her unwillingness to indulge in happiness often caused momentary rifts with her friends. For example, Velma’s description of Daphne’s boyfriend as sexist and misogynistic led to an affective tension between them which often culminated in Daphne rolling her eyes. However, I noted in my diary that after these conversations, Daphne or Velma would often start to reflect on what they had spoken about. Although Velma’s social blockages as the feminist killjoy initially erased the signs of getting along by “disturbing” the happiness (Ahmed, 2010, p. 584), the women’s affective engagements led to further discussion regarding social right and wrong. Importantly, the product of the awkward affective engagements between Daphne and Velma was a collective willingness to listen to each other’s conflicting ideas. I posit that within this affective space both subjectivities were fragmented, which challenged each other’s subject positioning, thus, forming a more affirmative social engagement (Braidotti, 2010) and multiplicity of ideas based on a desire to understand each other’s viewpoint better.

Figure 2: Velma’s Futureself Map and Additional Images

As described above, Velma’s embodiment of the feminist killjoy often left her vulnerable to social exclusion. When I visited her at university, I found she continued to embody the undesirable traits of the feminist killjoy, despite the social pressures to fit in. However, the response of her new social group was different to that of her friends in Jersey. Instead of being socially excluded from the group, Velma described a wider responsibility within the group to confront questionable behavior: “Oh actually yeah—we have that in the group actually. One of the guys, he very much jokes around a lot, but makes some questionable jokes sometimes… sexist. We thought it was funny at first and then a lot of people in our group are like they’re taking it too far now” (personal communication). In this instance, Velma describes the group’s initial affective response to the sexist jokes as “funny,” a response that initially caused group enjoyment. However, in retrospect the group changed their stance to “they’re taking it too far,” which demonstrated a collective refusal to pass around the initial happiness from the sexist joke, thus interrupting the
dominant social norm. Therefore, the group took social responsibility for the social blockages and inappropriate affective responses to the joke, therefore rewriting the social norms within the group. Although the feminist killjoy is a lone figure, this example demonstrates the potential power that multiple figures in a collective have to rework social norms and to bring about social change that encapsulates multiple subjectivities.

**Charlotte’s Story: The Feminist Killjoy Destabilization of the Perfect Student**

Charlotte was born and grew up in Jersey. She was a straight A student who embodied a tenacious “can do” attitude (Harris, 2004). Beyond her academic success, Charlotte took part in a variety of drama extracurriculars and was known to her peers as a kind and studious person. Often described in my journal as “reserved” and “controlled,” Charlotte embodied the compliant and hardworking traits of a desirable HE student and had high neoliberal value. However, despite Charlotte’s successful performance of the perfect (McRobbie, 2009) student, it was clear that she felt social pressures to do well and articulated her desire to escape from this role:

Yeah—I feel like my dad definitely expects me to be successful….The main pressure is from my family…and there are a lot of adults in general who expect me to do well….Sometimes I’d rather be B/C student so there wasn’t the pressure to do well, but because I’ve always been an A student people have certain expectations for my future.

As well as rejecting the straight A student role expected of her, Charlotte identifies an obligation towards the adults in her life to keep up her academic success. Charlotte’s future happiness was not only bound up in the attainment of future academic and professional success, but she was also responsible for her family’s success and happiness, particularly her father’s. This reflects what Ahmed (2010, p. 578) calls a reciprocal relationship of a “conditional happiness,” whereby Charlotte’s happiness formed from the happiness of her parents. However, as Charlotte’s conditional happiness was tied up with the desires of her family, she had little agency to change or challenge the dominant narrative of her future life as long as she wanted to keep up the reciprocal happiness.

Although Charlotte’s responsibilities towards her family reinforced pressure to keep up her desirable subjectivity (similar to Velma’s experience), she found other ways to refute her compliant and desirable subjectivity through the embodiment of the feminist killjoy. During workshop three, I noted an almost tangible change in the room when Charlotte was responding to discussions about violent, anti-feminist online content during the #notallmen campaign: “And men like not believing it… like, it’s not that high [the percentage of men who commit sexual assault]… and then the rebuttal was just like oh, we need to get [rape] the other 3%” (Charlotte, personal communication). Charlotte was forceful and unapologetic when she spoke about the #notallmen campaign. Although her family often found her discussion of these displeasing, I noted how Charlotte, who up until now had been very composed, turned red, her voice tone changed, and she spoke much more quickly. Charlotte’s affective capabilities to block (Ahmed, 2010) anti-

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6 Workshop three discussed the topic “Who is the feminist killjoy?”

7 In 2021, one common online response to #notallmen was #rapeallwomen.
feminist behaviors also challenged her compliant subjectivity. In fact, Charlotte’s embodiment of the feminist killjoy, where she openly discussed the ugly and awkward politics of rape, heightened her affective potential to destabilize gendered norms as part of her responses. Charlotte’s refusal to embody the expected subject traits of a desirable student laid the foundations for her to explore a more fragmented subjectivity and a new mode of seeing her future. For example, when I visited Charlotte at university, she had changed course from English literature to journalism. Even though employability discourse posits some subjects as having a higher value to employers than others (Glover, et al., 2002), Charlotte decided to continue with journalism despite its comparatively lower value than that of English because she saw future opportunities to “do more good and write about feminist issues” (personal communication).

Adam’s Story: Traversing the Nomadic and “Messing It Up”

Adam was a high-achieving STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) student who was transitioning to university to study physics. Although neoliberal rhetoric posits women in STEM as desirable subjects (Tolstrup Holmegaard et al., 2014), Adam had a complex relationship with her STEM-woman status. Although Adam chose to study STEM as a means to “avoid stereotypes” and “mess things up” (personal communication), she was adding to her future labor market value. By choosing to study male-dominated areas of the curriculum, Adam’s intentions were to disrupt and challenge the trajectory that pushes women towards stereotypically less feminine subjects. Despite Adam’s defiance to conform to this trajectory, her participation in STEM subjects resulted in an increase in her subject capital and desirability. As a STEM student, Adam was also grappling with notions that her high subject value overshadowed other aspects of her subjectivity: “It’s a joke—at some point, like, with STEM—it turns into a third of your personality!” (personal communication). It became clear that Adam’s decisions to subvert gender norms had consequences she did not expect.

Although Adam’s efforts to challenge dominant norms by studying male-dominated subjects were limited, her vision for the future (as depicted in Figure 3) challenged her potential neoliberal value in different ways. For example, Adam did not attach her subject value and future happiness to attaining objects. Rather, she highlighted the importance of being happy and enjoying her life over any obligations to make herself or others happy through her value as a STEM student and marketable neoliberal subject. Although it is important to mention that Adam did feel pressure from her parents, who wanted her to be a professional (as they were), she did not feel a sense of obligation to change her plan to gain experiences to follow in her parents’ professional footsteps. Interestingly, when discussing her artwork, Adam used the phrases “to be happy” or “being happy,” which emphasized the importance of her present state of ongoing happiness. In contrast to object-based happiness where happiness is a noun and something you can possess; Adam challenged notions of future happiness by exploring what makes her happy now and the possibility for future experiences (regardless of their marketable value):

It was because I had a teacher, he was like never choose a career. Careers lead to like monotonous... so just take what you can get... Like he was telling us, oh I know I am a physics teacher now but I was a goat farmer, I worked.... I’ve got a PhD in...LED liquids. He did everything....Don’t have a career.... I want to do that. (personal communication)
For Adam, happiness was more fleeting and affective. Her subjectivity seemed already fragmented and pulled in many different affective pathways. For example, Adam’s portrayal of her life as a series of future experiences fragmented her subjectivity away from the traditional neoliberal values of being a woman in STEM. Her happiness was not attached to her future high value but was a part of the journey towards a future that was unplanned. Braidotti (2011) describes nomadic subjectivity as the move towards a complete restructuring of the way women’s complex and multi-layered lived experiences are recognized outside the homogenous category of “woman,” which is often defined by dominant social structures such as neoliberalism. Interestingly, as the future experiences Adam described (such as being a goat farmer) had no marketable subject value for a woman, she was rewriting the social norms for a STEM woman who was potentially not going to participate in STEM-related labor. Adam’s affective capabilities seemed to lay the foundations to speak, think, write, and represent femininity based on her own terms, where happiness was offered as a sense of possibility instead of attached to rigid objects of desire.

Conclusion
This paper not only outlines women’s struggles with gendered neoliberal pressures at a time of heightened change, it also focuses on their affective capabilities to challenge these dominant norms. Consequently, it is not only concerned with outlining the negative impact of neoliberal and patriarchal norms of educationally successful women, but also attempts to take an affirmative stance (Braidotti, 2010) to posit ways in which women engage with each other and attempt to fragment their subjectivities. I echo both Braidotti’s (2011) and Ahmed’s (2017) theoretical concepts that the fragmentation of dominant subject formation is the foundation for social change. Furthermore, I argue that the embodiment of the feminist killjoy as a move towards
a more affirmative nomadic subjectivity presents a different way of conceptualizing women’s educational and feminist experiences.

The stories and artwork from the three women in my study depict a strong and unanimous feeling of family and societal pressure to do well. In all cases, doing well meant continuing to achieve high standards in an academic setting, juggling social and academic lives, and conforming to the strict parameters of neoliberal desirable femininity. Initially, happiness for Velma and Charlotte echoed the preconceived neoliberal objects of desire and strict parameters that constitute valuable human capital (Rottenburg, 2016). They were engaged in the complex and contradictory notions of happiness, which were bound up in either an obligation towards others (Charlotte) or in material possessions and future gains (Velma). Even Adam, who took deliberate actions against traditional norms for women, was unable to ignore these pressures which were reflected in her grappling with being a STEM woman.

Despite Velma’s, Charlotte’s, and Adam’s individual pressures to conform, they all embodied elements of the feminist killjoy, which challenged not only their relationship with happiness but also their affective capabilities to reimagine their subjectivity. Velma found a space where she could challenge sexist behavior as part of a growing collective voice that reinforced her individual voice. For Adam, her refusal to invest her future happiness in academic achievement demonstrated a desire to challenge the future others saw for her and embrace a more accidental pathway. For Velma and Charlotte, they embodied a clear feminist killjoy figure who enforced social blockages when confronted with misogynistic behaviors. Although Charlotte still considered happiness to be connected to achieving academically and doing well, she was looking forward to challenging patriarchal voices as a future journalist. Her perfect student persona was fragmented by her future potential to create social blockages beyond her friendship group and in a professional capacity.

In line with Braidotti’s nomadic subjectivity, this research highlights a different way of contextualizing young women’s experiences and contributes to the growing research that champions a more “inclusive practice of becoming” a girl (Bignall & Braidotti, 2019, p. 1). These women’s stories embodied different undesirable modes of the feminist killjoy as a means to challenge the pressures they felt to conform to neoliberal norms for young women. Despite the risks of social ostracization, the social blockages created by the participants led to an affirmative change in their experiences at university. Although the small sample size of four women is limited, the extensive time spent with the participants one-on-one and as a group captured the detailed accounts of the nomadic complexities of their lives. Therefore, there is an urgency to keep working closely with young women as part of groups and as individuals, so we can capture how other women’s subjectivities may be becoming more nomadic. Through such efforts, we can build a wider picture of how girls can be supported in their education and feminist futures. Beyond this, it is important to extend this style of research to capture more young women’s experiences, so that we can move towards a future for women that is focused on an affirmative ethics of multiple others (Braidotti, 2021; 2011).

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