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‘Lines of Flight or Tethered Wings?’ A Deleuzian Analysis of Women-specific Adventure Skills Courses in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

In this paper we examine women-specific adventure sport skills training courses in the UK utilising a feminist new materialist approach. Drawing on Deleuze & Guattari’s (1987) concepts of ‘assemblage’, ‘lines of territorialisation’ and ‘lines of flight’, we apply a new lens to ask: what type(s) of material-discursive assemblages are produced through human and non-human, discursive and non-discursive intra-actions on women-specific adventure sport skills courses? To what extent do these courses enable participants to engage with an alternative praxis and ethics and to think, feel, practice, and become otherwise? Our Deleuzian reading showed that the affective capacity of these courses is currently limited by dominant understandings of these courses as bridges to the *real* outdoors and as primarily designed for women who lack the confidence to participate in mixed-gender environments. However, these courses also enabled productive lines of flight and alternative understandings and practices related to the self, the body, others, material objects, learning, movement, and physical activity to emerge. These were both characterised and supported by less instrumental and hierarchical flows of relations and an openness to not knowing.

Keywords: adventure sports, women-specific skills courses, Deleuze, assemblage, affect, lines of flight.

Women-specific Courses as Solutions to a ‘Gender Problem’

In this paper we draw on a Deleuzian informed feminist new materialist perspective to explore affective flows on women-specific adventure skills courses. In doing so, we aimed to (a) map and critique the capacity of these courses as affective forces for social change and (b) evaluate the analytical affordances of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1984; 1987) conceptual tools to investigate current strategies related to the promotion of gender equity and diversity in outdoor participation and leadership.

Despite a marked growth in Women and Girls’ participation in adventure sports in the past decade (Breivik 2010; Morton 2018), feminist research continues to highlight ‘a gender problem’ and enduring social issues and inequalities in adventure sporting contexts. These include the continued gendering of women’s outdoor experiences and the underrepresentation of women in outdoor leadership positions (Allin and West 2013; Gray and Mitten 2018). As a result, women within adventure sport spaces tend to have to work harder to be perceived as ‘competent’ and to avoid being seen as ‘troublemakers’ (Hall 2018; Puwar 2004). For example, Hall’s (2018) research into mountaineering highlighted that female leaders felt the need to continually reaffirm their status, a daily process which they found exhausting. They also felt the need to display more autocratic and traditionally masculine leadership approaches and traits (for example, speed, bravery, toughness) to counter client-based sexism. At the participation level, women continue to report inter-personal (for example, lack of partners with whom to adventure or sexist disempowering outdoor adventure partnerships), intra-personal (for example, fear or limiting self-perceptions of knowledge and ability), structural (for example, lack of time, money, or equipment related knowledge), and family constraints to participation (for example, family or household commitments) (Doran, Schofield, and Low 2018).

In light of these recognised enduring issues, disparities, and inequalities, efforts have been initiated by adventure sport scholars, adventure sport educators and professionals, outdoor centres, and local and national governing bodies to address the gender and diversity imbalance. Women-specific courses, as one such solution, were designed to address some of the more obvious, but also some of the more subtle and less visible barriers that women face in the outdoor environment (Birkett and Peascod 1989; Doran et al. 2018). There is some evidence to support the value of women-specific environments in the outdoors in terms of empowerment and physicality (Hornibrook et al. 1997; McDermott 2004), with further evidence of interest through high attendances at recent women focused United Kingdom based events (for example, Women in Adventure Sport Conference, Women's Climbing Symposium). However, as some research has also shown, single-gender courses can be controversial and have problematic unintended consequences (Fielding-Lloyd and Meân 2011; Warren 2016). For instance, Warren (2016) questioned the political efficacy of women-specific courses and their ability to lead to systemic social change if they are not embedded within, and informed by, wider critiques of the current masculine outdoor landscape and the discourses and power relations which sustain it. Furthermore, research into women-specific courses has also highlighted an ongoing mistrust of these courses by participants and instructors who assume it to be about 'extreme feminism' (Hall 2018) or designed for women of lesser ability and competence. As Hargreaves (1990) argued, there is no straightforward solution to gender and social inequities in sport. As is the case for all strategies and interventions, segregated sport provides opportunities and affordances and dangers and problematic (un)intended consequences.

This article seeks to extend research into the impact of 'gender-responsive' strategies developed to address current problematic trends in the outdoor participation and leadership sectors — issues which have, to date, largely been examined through a critical or a

poststructuralist Foucauldian theoretical lens (Roy 2013). Critical feminist and feminist Foucauldian studies have provided invaluable insights into the role of modern sport forms in the reproduction of gendered power relations and subjectivities. However, they have also been critiqued for their tendency to reproduce essentialist understandings of change strategies as either/or propositions (that is, liberating or oppressive) in the case of the former (Pringle, 2005), or to privilege analyses of social continuities and a focus on the discursive to the detriment of the affective and material dimensions of social life in the case of the latter (Knudsen and Stage 2015; Liljeström and Paasonen 2010). By drawing on a Deleuzian informed feminist new materialist approach underpinned by Deleuzian concepts of ‘assemblage’, ‘lines of territorialisation’, and ‘lines of flight’, our study seeks to partially address these limitations. Indeed, Deleuzian conceptual tools have the potential to extend those traditionally deployed within critical feminist and poststructuralist Foucauldian feminist studies in particular by foregrounding the entanglements of the affective, material, and discursive in the gendering of sporting subjectivities (Fullagar and Pavlidis 2018; Thorpe, Brice, and Clark 2021). In keeping with Deleuze’s concern with what a body can do, our analysis specifically focuses on ‘flows of agency within assemblages rather than specific practices of power’ (Wise 2005: 84) within the wider assemblage of women-specific adventure sport courses in the United Kingdom.

In what follows, we expand on the research questions that thinking *with* and *through* a Deleuzian informed feminist new materialist perspective allowed us to engage in, while recognising that both the ‘new’ and ‘materialism’ in new materialism are themselves contested and ripe for productive debates (Irni 2013; Markula 2019b; Monforte 2018).

Thinking with and through a Deleuzian informed Feminist New Materialist Perspective

Following Braidotti's (2013: 29-30) call for a post-human ethics of care that rejects 'self-centred individualism', we aim to 'locate the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others'. To do so, we draw broadly on feminist new materialist perspectives (Coole and Frost 2010; Fullagar 2017; Thorpe et al. 2021) and more specifically on feminist applications of Deleuzian theory (Bennett 2010; Coleman and Ringrose 2013; Markula 2019a).

New materialist feminisms share with other feminist traditions a deep commitment to problematise unequal power relations and to develop ethical and transformative practices within these same relations of power; however, they also foreground an understanding of the world as 'more-and other-than-human' (Hughes and Lury 2013: 786) and of gendered materialities as more than simply discursive. For feminist new materialist, humans are not isolated, free-willing agentic subjects; rather they are part of complex more-than-human assemblages through which they act upon material-discursive forces while being simultaneously un-made by these same co-emergent forces. Therefore, as Pedersen and Pini (2017: 1050) put it, it may be more accurate to speak of 'a repertoire of forces, affects, events, movements, and moments within an agentic assemblage', or of a becoming subject-assemblage rather than of bounded, unified, and autonomous individual subjects.

This relational onto-epistemology puts an emphasis on the *intra-actions* between humans and non-humans, that is on the way human and non-human materialities intra-act in ways that continuously (re)shape their surfaces and boundaries rather than on the *inter-actions* between individuals understood as relatively stable, independent subjects exercising agency. Within this new configuration, change is understood as a result of the intra-actions between human and non-human agents within an agentic assemblage. An agentic assemblage is both defined by its limits, and provides boundaries, coherence, and intelligibility to observable behaviour in social contexts (Markula 2019a). Drawing on the work of Deleuze

and Guattari's (1987), Bennett (2010: 23-24) provided the following definition of assemblages as:

Ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface.

This definition of assemblage stresses the dynamic, yet non-random nature of assemblages which are always in 'an ongoing process of arranging, organising, or fitting together various elements that then stipulate people's behavior in society' (Markula 2019a: 40). Assemblages have both machinic or non-discursive dimensions (assembling different material bodies or 'contents') and enunciative or discursive dimensions (assembling and regulating the uses of language elements or 'expressions'). These contents and expressions are brought together into a machine of production which 'produces something (for example, an effect, ways of thinking, practices)' (Markula 2019a: 44). According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 9), assemblages are further constituted by lines of segmentarity or territorialisation which seek to 'stratify, territorialize, organise, signify, attribute' in line with the dominant strata as well as 'lines of flight' or 'lines of deterritorialization down which they constantly flee'. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of assemblage, lines of territorialisation, and lines of flight provided us with a productive toolkit of concepts to theorise how women-specific adventure sport skills courses — as complex affective-material-discursive assemblages — simultaneously limit and enable alternative ways of being and becoming in the outdoors.

We see much resonance between feminist new materialist and their orientation towards an expanded relational onto-ethico-epistemology and a growing body of literature on alternative physical cultures (for example, Fullagar and Pavlidis 2018; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2014; Roy 2013; Wood and Brown 2011) which has focused on the affective capacities of non-mainstream forms of physical activity to open up spaces ‘to practice, celebrate and promote new collective subjectivities’ (Atkinson 2010:1250). This includes attention to the role of alternative lifestyle sports in reconfiguring gendered subjectivities (Baxter 2020; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2014; Roy 2013). For instance, Pavlidis and Fullagar (2014) explored the sport of roller derby as a site of cultural transformation and the ways in which roller derby extends feminine subjectivities through the mobilization of painful affects. This also includes a focus on the capacity of alternative lifestyle sports to reconfigure our understanding of the natural environment and the boundaries between mind and body, nature and culture, and human and non-human bodies (Atkinson 2010; Rossiter 2007; Stalker 2019). For instance, Stalker’s Deleuzian theorisation of ‘active’ and ‘reactive’ leisure (2019: 351) focused on the ‘relations and processes which contribute to leisure without becoming’ and reciprocally on ‘the encounters with others and the material world which innovate active leisure’.

While careful not to romanticize alternative emerging sport forms, and being cognizant of processes of commodification and assimilation and the pitfalls of contributing to the reproduction of unhelpful binaries (Wood and Brown 2011), these studies point to emerging lifestyle sports as having the potential to offer important alternatives to dominant hyper-competitive and hyper-masculine late modern capitalistic sport forms. Specifically, these studies reveal these sports and physical cultures as generative of new affective intensities, experiences, and embodiments, especially when compared to more traditional modernist sport forms which tend to be ‘highly regulated, regimented and surveilled’ (Thorpe and Rinehart 2010: 1270) — or in Deleuzian terms heavily ‘territorialized’.

As feminist scholars, we are particularly interested in ‘post-sport’ physical cultures and the possibilities they offer in terms of destabilising a dominant masculine, hyper-competitive, performative, commercialised, and hierarchical modernist sporting logic. In line with Barker-Ruchti and colleagues’ (2016) focus on gender boundary shifting, crossing and transformation, we, therefore, asked:

1. What type(s) of material-discursive assemblages are produced through human and non-human, discursive and non-discursive intra-actions on women-specific adventure sport skills courses?
2. And in what ways do these courses offer participants a space to engage with an alternative praxis and ethics, and to think, feel, practice, and become otherwise?

By mobilizing a Deleuzian inspired feminist new materialist perspective, we aimed to foreground the complex entanglements of affect, discourses, and human and non-human bodies as they intra-act within the context of women-specific adventure skills courses. In what follows, we expand on how our feminist new materialist lens informed our research methodology.

A Nomadic Rhizomatic Methodology

Our study was informed by Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) nomadic rhizomatic methodology and their concepts of assemblage, lines of flight, and lines of territorialization. Much like other new materialist methodologies (for example diffraction), rhizomatic analyses ‘take a rhizomatic (rather than hierarchical and linear shape) form that leads in different directions and keeps analysis and knowledge production on the move’ (Mazzei 2014: 743). Beyond a recognition of our reading of phenomena as co-emergent and co-constitutive, a nomadic rhizomatic methodology, therefore, moved us to attend to the subtle nuances, multiplicities, differences in mattering, and varying politico-affective forces, which continually re-shape

phenomena — in the case of our study, the un-making of wo-men and femininities in and through specific women-specific adventure sport skills courses. In so doing, it steered us to move beyond ‘an easy sense’ (Mazzei 2014) or reductionist readings of phenomena as fixed, as well as blanket and fatigued applications of concepts which tend to ‘constitute and stabilise dichotomies’ (Taguchi 2012: 267) — what Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 17) framed as ‘the arborescent system of thought’. As such, we subscribed to Wood and Brown’s (2011: 520) cautionary words that the project ‘of trying to decide whether lines of flight escape or reaffirm dominant social codes is a good way of missing their fundamental inter-relationship’. Importantly, this does not imply an erasure of differences, nor that differences can no longer be mobilised to address systematic inequalities; however, it does imply, as Barad (2007: 172) put it, ‘attending to the relational nature of difference’ and how difference *matters*.

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), nomadic science requires starting with a problem and analysing it through connecting content and expression to understand ‘how content (actions) can intertwine with different expressions’ (Markula 2019a: 56) — that is to understand processes of assemblage formation. Therefore, the aim of rhizomatic analysis is not to reveal the essence of an experience or phenomenon (for example, the essence of participating in women-only adventure sport courses as stable or fixed phenomena) or to read and interpret the experiences of women participants through a set of well-established theories and concepts, but rather to point to a reality that has not (yet) been shown in order ‘to invoke other possible material realities that can have political and material consequences’ (Taguchi 2012: 278). In what follows we briefly discuss the specificities of our research-assemblage.

A feminist new materialist research-assemblage

Our research-assemblage was constituted through the intra-actions of (amongst many others): feminist new materialist and Deleuzian concepts and method(ologies); four white-middle-

class-able-bodied-heterosexual female academics from different disciplinary backgrounds and with varying degrees of experience in adventure sport participation and leadership; women-specific and mixed-gender course participants and instructors (white-able-bodied-middle-class); indoor and outdoor physical spaces such as mountains, lakes, rivers, and forests; research and participatory equipment; various ‘images’ and ‘texts’ produced through our research assemblage; and writing generation media (in the case of our study Google docs) which enabled an ongoing metawriting dialogue between the four members of the research team.

As researchers within this research-assemblage, we employed a variety of data generation tools following ethical approval through the first author’s institutional Ethics Board. These included course participant questionnaires, participant-observations of winter and summer skills courses, semi-structured individual interviews with course participants and instructors, participant focus groups, and participant course debriefs. The course debriefs were facilitated by some of the female instructors leading the women-specific skills courses and provided opportunities for members of the research team to probe areas of discussion around qualitative differences in participants embodied learning experiences and processes of becoming on women-specific skills courses.

These data generation tools were chosen based on our specific research aims and questions as well as what was pragmatically possible in terms of access and the safety and wellbeing of participants including that of the research team. While the research tools deployed within our research-assemblage were not novel, they were ‘reworked’ (Knudsen & Stage 2015) to support our Deleuzian orientation towards ‘what gendered bodies can do’ (Fullagar 2020) and processes of becoming. For example, taking part in winter skills and introductory paddling, mountain biking, and rock-climbing women-specific skills courses provided us with some partial insights into how instructors deliver these learning

opportunities, the (gendered) assumptions that guide their practices, and the ‘affective flows of relations’ (Fox and Alldred 2015) that these courses enabled. In total, our data within this project consisted of 33 participant pre-course questionnaires, 11 semi-structured pre-course interviews with instructors, three semi-structured follow-up interviews with course participants, one winter skills participant focus group, and two winter and summer participant course debriefs. Field notes were also gathered through participant-observations of five skills courses across the winter and summer season.

Women-specific Courses as Complex Material-Discursive Assemblages

Our Deleuzian inspired analysis set out to map the ‘affective flows of relations’ (Fox and Alldred 2015) within specific women-specific adventure skills courses focusing our attention on the ways in which these courses both enabled and limited alternative understandings and practices related to the self, others, the body, learning, movement, and physical activity to emerge. As such, we organised our research to reflect the complex, contradictory, overlapping, generative aspects of women-specific adventure skills course participation at an Adventure based centre in the UK.

‘Molar, aggregative lines and molecular, singular lines that ascribe capacities...’
(Deleuze and Guattari 1984, quoted in Fox and Alldred 2015: 403)

While many participants cited confidence as a reason for participating in their outdoor course, this was typically expressed positively in terms of skills development or being able to be ‘safe on the hill’. Several explained that the single gender nature of the course was not necessarily their main motivation at the time of booking. Reasons such as timing of the course and personal availability also featured in participant decision-making, with the female nature of the course for some more incidental than sought out, or as an additional attraction. One participant wrote, simply, ‘it is nice to be able to have the choice’. As such, our initial

encounter with the data served to destabilise our gendered assumptions around the provision of women-specific courses as a solution to a ‘gender problem’. For those who did intentionally seek out the women-specific course, two expressed they had chosen this option as they had experienced such environments in a positive way before. One participant expressed that ‘as a beginner I prefer to be with women’, drawing on more subtle interactions between gendered perceptions and expectations around a more favourable learning environment. This was supported by other participants who wrote ‘for kayaking it is easier to learn from another woman who may have similar experiences with strength’ and ‘the dates fitted but I was concerned about the pace and how fit I was so felt more comfortable with a female leader’. These responses revealed the sediments of embodied gendered constraints, experiences, or expectations that permeated women’s thoughts and intruded on their desire for learning in outdoor environments. Moreover, these initial and later encounters with data served to draw our attention to the ways in which enduring stereotypes about these courses as introductory bridges to the *real* outdoors, or as primarily designed for women who lack the confidence to participate in mixed-gender environments hindered flows of relations on these courses and limited these courses’ affective capacity to produce difference and change.

The effects of these enduring stereotypes (the Deleuzian ‘expression’) was manifest in some of the instructors’ practices and interactions with participants (‘content’). As one participant expressed in response to an instructor comment around hoping that ‘she now felt confident enough to participate in mixed-gender courses’, ‘I never did...*not* feel confident’ [emphasis ours]. Reductionist assumptions around the motivations behind women’s participation in women-specific courses have implications for funding and for promoting intermediate and advanced skills courses. They also limit these courses’ capacities to act as broader vectors for questioning the intersections of ableist, racist, heteronormative, classist, sexist, and so on discourses in adventure sport and their various effects—including most

problematically which bodies *matter* and which bodies are marginalised and/or rendered invisible through such material-discursive arrangements.

As such, these narrow content and expression forms — as lines of segmentarity which seek to ‘stratify, territorialize, organise, signify’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 9) — could be understood as attempts to ‘over-code’ these specific material-discursive assemblages and draw them towards the striated (known) space of dominant strata in support of a normative masculine, performative, individualizing, and hierarchical modernist sporting logic. However, reading data through Deleuze’s concepts also drew our attention to the generative possibilities of these courses as ‘lines of flight’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and, thus, shifted our understanding towards a more layered and complex understanding of women’s participation in women-specific courses and of the concurrent workings of these courses as ‘desire-producing’ assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 1984) which we next expand upon.

‘...And productive lines of flight that carry bodies into new possibilities’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1984, quoted in Fox and Alldred 2015: 403)
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Flows of relations within these courses also supported desires for new forms of relations and ‘relational becomings’ (Nxumalo 2012) — including becomings where women are not automatically subjugated to their male outdoor adventure partners. As Maya (pseudonyms used throughout) put it, ‘I wanted to be able to get the skills and the understanding of sort of everything that we need to be aware of for myself so that I don’t have to rely on other people’. ‘Taking the lead’ outdoors is something that many of the women participants in our study had not had the opportunity to do — often because they deferred to their (perceived) more competent or experienced male partners. As Justine expressed,

We all get taken out first of all by somebody who knows more than we do[...]

I just think for the essence of women, maybe it just goes on longer, maybe that relationship, where you're the person that's being taken and someone else is doing the taking.

What these data highlight is that while women taking the lead in outdoor environments is not necessarily actively or overtly obstructed, neither is it always actively enabled — hence many women's struggle to break away from established relational patterns of deferring to their perceived more competent or experienced partners. Perhaps more problematically, for some of the women in our study, to take the lead or become self-sufficient in the outdoors required moving past negative previous experiences within ego-driven and overly competitive mixed-gender learning environments. It also required overcoming patronising attitudes. As Maya described,

Male members of my family, they do tend to assume I have less knowledge [...] and I don't think they mean it in a vengeful way, but I think there is definitely a sort of...well I feel like I have to...prove myself sometimes.

The burden of proof placed on females who take on leadership roles in the outdoors and its associated short-term and long-term negative effects on women's health and well-being as well as their career aspirations, satisfaction, and longevity has been well documented in the literature (for example, Hall 2018). It is, therefore, not surprising that escaping egos and patronising attitudes was, for many of the participants, a source of motivation for choosing to participate in women-specific courses.

As many of the participants expressed, participating in women-specific courses stemmed from desires for different types of relationships — be it to their body, others,

learning, material objects, or the movement and activity itself — which far extended simply attending to an ‘absence’ or ‘lack’ in confidence, competence, or ability to operate within mixed-gender outdoor participation settings. As such, they were reminiscent of Deleuze’s articulation of desire ‘as a force productive of connections’ rather than its dominant psychoanalytic framing as ‘something that arises from the interiority of the subject and is directed at what the subject lacks’ (Stark 2017: 4). For example, Celia spoke about the ‘female camaraderie’, while Patricia spoke about ‘a less competitive and more nurturing environment’, Maya about ‘a different energy’, and Helena about opportunities for collective and innovative technical problem-solving, especially around the use of equipment.

Indeed, opportunities to develop innovative and effective problem-solving strategies around the use of technical equipment and how to move safely and efficiently through various landscapes and in different weather conditions whilst paddling, scrambling, mountain biking, or climbing were central to the learning on both the winter and summer courses. For instance, in the winter skills courses where participants were exposed to extremely harsh snow storm weather conditions, course participants had the opportunity to collectively problem-solve and work together to provide shelter for other participants who had to stop to adjust their gear, eat, or urinate. These material and bodily function considerations may seem trivial, but they were a source of concern and anxiety for many of the participants. As Claire expressed,

I was a little bit worried about the toilet situation, ‘cos I drink a lot and I like being really hydrated and I just want to... ‘Cos I get dehydration headaches if I don’t drink enough and then... They’re like migraines; I can’t do much when I’ve got them so I’m always really conscious of how much I drink but it also means that I have to stop to go to the toilet. And I think, again, that was probably another reason why I was

using a female-only group; until I knew what the score was, I felt more comfortable in that environment.

Not only did these courses provide opportunities for creative collective problem-solving around how to manage physiological and material needs safely on the hills, rivers, and trails, but they also enabled participants to experiment with ways of ‘making things work’ for different bodies. As Andrea expressed,

Okay, we’re a group of seven women and that really heavy canoe has got to go on the top of that rack. How are we going to do it? [...] Just working out actually, how we were going to kind of do this. Erm, and just working out what we all brought to it; whether it was something to do with knowledge or height or... so actually just physically loading and unloading, knowing what to... having that kind of discussion and making those decisions. It was really good.

As Baxter (2020: 155-156) and others remind us, ‘bodies and objects have an entangled, highly politicised relationship’. Objects are neither neutral, nor inert; they have politico-affective dimensions which to quote Ahmed (2004) ‘move’ and ‘orient’ bodies in particular ways. In the context of this study, many of the course participants’ prior lived experiences in outdoor spaces had been negatively shaped by outdoor ‘objects’ (largely designed *by and for* particular bodies) as well as limited and limiting body-object ‘articulations’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). These objects and body-object articulations produced strong affects — foregrounding what bodies cannot do and reinforcing which bodies *matter* within adventure sport assemblages. Women-specific courses offered participants a chance to question some of these normative and normalising articulations (for example, why should the person at the

back of the canoe get to decide where the canoe goes?); and, in the process of doing so, to re-orient themselves towards others and outdoor ‘objects’ in ways which produced new, arguably less limited and limiting body-object articulations, practices, and affects.

A key affordance of women-specific courses was what participants identified as ‘an openness to not knowing’ often experienced as absent in mixed-gender environments. For many of the participants and instructors, this openness to not knowing within women-specific courses was a welcome respite from other types of learning environments previously experienced. They also saw it as critical to creating an environment conducive to learning. As Madrine stated, ‘we weren’t embarrassed to say ‘no, I don’t understand’. There wasn’t any problem with that, whereas, actually, in other situations, I’d be much more inclined to just nod and say...’. This openness to not knowing runs counter-current to dominant norms of masculinity and understandings of expertise which continue to hinder learning, change, and innovation in many coaching, sporting, and physical activity contexts (Mills and Denison 2018). In contrast, participants on women-specific courses not only felt that they could ask questions, but also that the learning of skills would not be jeopardised or compromised by the doing or perhaps a singular focus on reaching a particular objective — thus, also allowing for a qualitatively different relationship with time and learning as a non-linear process to develop. As Maya expressed,

I think it’s a different learning environment when it’s just women around; it changes the energy, I think. I mean, I’m regularly out with guys in the hills as well, but I think when you’re actually learning... I find it easier to be more open about not knowing stuff when you’re just with other women, whereas when you’re with guys... I feel like they show off a little bit; they can be a little bit patronising whereas when you’re

just with women, you can ask whatever questions you want and you're not going to be judged.

In that sense, it could be argued that women-only courses generated spaces and enabled ways of being and doing which sought to destabilise a normative masculine, performative, hierarchical modernist sporting logic — lines of flight which sought to re-shape and extend narrow material-discursive boundaries of adventure sport participation and leadership.

Importantly, women participants' choice to participate in a women-specific course had nothing to do with their inability to cope with competition or stress or with a lack of drive or ambition. In fact, most of the women participants in this study could be characterised as being highly driven, accomplished, and successful according to traditional normative definitions of success. This is critical, as a (mis)reading of this discussion could lend support to a body of literature that essentialises gendered binaries in ways which tend to position female leaders as inferior or female athletes as less competitive and objective driven, or as needing extra care and support (for a more detailed critique see for example Jones, Mills, and Avner 2020). What was apparent in our readings and own entanglements with the research data was that women felt more relaxed on these courses and able to express openness and vulnerabilities. For many female participants, being part of a larger network of women who are active in the outdoors was an empowering experience and something which they seldom experienced in their individual lives due to the evolving, yet still highly gendered nature of outdoor sporting participation. As Claire emphasised,

I am a really target-oriented person but sometimes I don't want to do a course that's all about being the best and winning and... I want to enjoy being around people, and chatting and having a nice experience, so I think the other objective, or, reason for me

choosing a women-only course, is I don't want to be around... A blinkered vision of... And weren't interested in communicating or chatting or... Feeling the group aspect of it.

As participants expressed, or at times struggled to express through words like 'energy', 'feel', 'bonds', 'atmosphere', learning new skills is a complex affective and affect-laden social process. And as they also articulated, part of their motivation for selecting women-specific learning spaces stemmed from a desire to affect, and be affected through 'multiplicitous flows' (Ringrose 2011) within a learning environment where flows of affect would not be so readily hindered or instrumentalised.

Lastly, while some course participants had made the conscious decision to select a women-specific course, this was not the case for all — indeed, some had arrived on the course by accident. Importantly, all the course participants interviewed claimed that they would actively seek out women-specific courses in the future. As Rose explained,

I didn't come because it was a women-only course; I came because I wanted to keep someone company and I didn't think it was a big deal that it was a women-only course but I have to say at the end of this day...So I do really appreciate the difference it makes.

Rose's comment underlined something which we, as participant-observers and researchers within this research-assemblage, also experienced — namely, a learning environment which simultaneously reified certain lines of segmentarity which attempt to fix female participants as lacking the confidence and skills to participate in mixed-gender environments yet also produced lines of flight which enabled different relational flows and individual and collective

matterings. These productive lines of flight enabled alternative understandings and practices related to the self, others, material objects, learning, movement and physical activity to emerge — practices and understandings which were both characterised and supported by less instrumental and hierarchical flows of relations and an openness to not knowing.

Concluding Thoughts

Generating and reading our data through Deleuzian concepts of assemblage, lines of flight and lines of territorialisation allowed us to draw attention to the relational and affective flows within women-specific courses as complex material-discursive assemblages. Moreover, these concepts allowed us to draw attention to the ways in which these flows both limit and enable alternative understandings, affects, practices, and matterings. What our reading also highlighted is the need for strategies and frameworks which engage with the affective dimensions of social change. Indeed, the current narrow and depoliticised framing of these courses as introductory bridges for women who lack the confidence to participate in mixed environments (that is, in line with a problematic empowerment discourse of ‘personal liberation’ (Fullagar and Pavlidis 2017) has important problematic material consequences for how these courses can be understood, represented, practiced, and experienced — that is, how these courses can and do *matter*. What our reading also highlighted is the ways in which flows of relations in these courses worked to extend and reshape narrow material-discursive boundaries and promote new collective matterings and ways of being and becoming in the outdoors. In line with Hargreaves’ (1990) critical discussion of strategies for change and the complexity of solutions to address gender equity and diversity issues in sport, our analysis shows that the value of women-specific courses lies in its capacity to generate new affective intensities, experiences, and embodiments. However, these strategies need to be considered in conjunction with other strategies which challenge dominant discourses and power relations

within adventure sporting contexts and promote new qualitative models of adventure sport participation and leadership for all genders.

Future research might pick up on some of the limitations of our own research-assemblage and its privileging of ‘textualities’ and ‘text-based practices’ by drawing on different, more innovative and creative research method(ologies) (for example, performance ethnography in Eales and Peers 2016 or filmmaking in Wood and Brown 2011) which ‘afford more space for the sensory, emotional, and the material dimensions of knowledge production to emerge’ (Thorpe et al. 2021: 46-47). Such creative research method(ologies) might, in turn, produce strong affects and potential new lines of flight. Furthermore, we would argue that feminist new materialist and Deleuzian methodologies hold much potential when it comes to generating complex understandings of change — understood as produced through affective intensities. Thus, they could be fruitfully applied to both research current strategies as well as design new strategies to address systemic inequalities in different physical activity and sporting participation/ leadership contexts — strategies, which both ‘avoid the hierarchies of value that mark modernist thought and help us think differently about embodiment’ (Shildrick 2015: 21). To conclude, we believe Deleuze’s body of work has an important contribution to make to feminist thought and practice, both by helping us ‘interrogate systems of meaning [...] but also speculatively re-imagine and materially recreate, the possibilities for thinking and for living’ (Stark 2017: 2).

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