Ruptured Dreams: Female Students' Talk About Boys as Past "Lovers"

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Abstract

When romantic encounters come to an end they often evoke a plethora of feelings associated with "breaking up". This article explores this issue in relation to a number of adolescent girls' views on this topic which emerged during focus group discussions about Eminem's song *Foolish Pride*. The lyrics of this song convey resentment towards an ex-girlfriend and accentuate racial elements which, in the words of the song, could be summed up as "Never date a Black girl because Blacks only want your money". Data were collected in two school settings, involving female students of different nationalities, in order to discover students' reactions to the provocative lyrics that demonstrate how meanings that surround the end of a romantic relationship are shaped and produced within the intersectionality of gender and race. A diffractive model of analysis is adopted to explore the girls' concerns with the misogynistic tone underlying this rap song. The girls' opposition to boys emerges as a central theme. Underlying this resistance however there was also an affirmation of heteronormative femininity. The girls' perspectives suggest that although students do not passively absorb racialised and heterosexualised constructions of gender, their apprehension of messages mediated through popular media could affirm the gender divide. It could also reinforce estrangements between teenage boys and girls that the media promotes.

Keywords: adolescent romantic relationships, adolescent friendships, race, gender, diffractive analysis, Eminem

Introduction

Adolescents think frequently about romantic relationships and intimate attachments. These constitute a major topic of conversation for them, in particular among friendship groups of adolescent girls at school (Kehily, 2002). Female adolescent students share gossip about boys within school subcultures, which are exclusively for girls (Cassar, 2014) and their eagerness to talk about romance, sexual attraction and dating demonstrates the central importance girls attach to these topics (Cassar, 2015). In addition, adolescent romantic relationships, friendships or hook ups are often short-lived and "transitional" (Galliher, Welsh, Rostosky & Kawaguchi, 2004, p.204). The experiences of breaking up therefore resonate with a considerable number of adolescents. For young adolescent girls, the end of their romantic relationship has been associated with negative feelings brought about by worry, disappointment and sense of rejection and betrayal (Richards, Crowe, Larson & Swarr, 1998). Although considered trivial flings, romantic relations might be "central in adolescents' lives" (Furman, 2002, p.177), since they occupy their thoughts to a considerable extent. Adolescent romantic encounters constitute a contested site of gendered dynamics especially in normative, heterosexual relations.

This article explores schoolgirls' talk about Eminem's rap song *Foolish Pride* (FP), as it occurred during focus group discussions. The study draws on field research conducted in two secondary schools with female students in Malta. The article's focus is on the emphasis placed by the girls on the racialised power dynamics between Eminem and his ex-girlfriend. The study aims to explore female students' reactions to the provocative lyrics of the song *Foolish Pride* with regards to its portrayal of a breakup. The inquiry focuses on meanings surrounding the end of a romantic relationship shaped and produced within the intersectionality of gender and race as they emerged from the girls' discussions. The theme of FP, concerning the aftermath of a break-up, was regarded relevant to the purpose of the study. The criteria for choosing the song was based on the content of the lyrics, which demonstrates how meanings surrounding the ending of a romantic relationship are shaped and produced within heterosexualised notions of gender and race. Students' explorations of Eminem's song FP could contribute to an understanding of teen friendships and romantic relationships and throw light on female students' conceptualisations about boys and romantic partners. The findings provide possibilities for understanding teenage girls' perspectives of the lived relations of power between girls and boys in the context of 'breaking up' a romantic relationship. The study does not present a content analysis of FP nor a critique of Eminem as an artist.

Rap is not considered only a genre of music, but also as comprising an intricate system of concepts, beliefs, values and ideologies (Taylor & Taylor, 2005), which could be passed on to listeners. A body of research documents the influence of music on adolescents' views on gender and sexuality (Aubrey, Hopper, & Mbure, 2011; Beentjes & Konig, 2013; Cobb & Boettcher, 2007). More frequent viewing of music videos by adolescents is associated with adopting more stereotypical and traditional gender roles (Ward, Hansbrough & Walker, 2005). Time spent watching music videos by adolescents has also been found to be related to their perceptions on gendered, traditional attitudes such as men dominate sexual relationships and women are sex objects (Beentjes & Konig, 2013). It is possible that music videos shape the formation of sexual attitudes based on gender stereotypes and reinforce them (Beentjes & Konig,). Taking this empirical evidence into consideration, the current study aimed at discovering students' reactions to the provocative lyrics of FP, which repetitively blame and accuse the ex-girlfriend in an aggressive tone. Rap and hip hop songs could evoke powerful

sentiments and provide a means of introspection. Female adolescents are more likely than male adolescents to reflect on their emotions through music, particularly when feeling lonely or 'down' (Roberts & Christensen, 2001).

The Funky Eminem
Eminem is one of the highest-selling musicians and one of the most popular rap artists. Eminem "is the celebrated anti-hero of mainstream youth culture who has attained the increasingly 'postmortem' American Dream" (Halnon, 2005, p. 442). He is considered a controversial artist because of the dark, vulgar and chilling lyrics of his songs which present harsh realities of violence and anger in ways which affirm misogyny and degradation of women. Misogynist and sexist language in rap/hip hop pervade this genre of music (Adams & Fuller, 2006; Conrad, Dixon & Zhang, 2009; Enck & McDaniel, 2012; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Eminem's misogynistic lyrics could be intended as a means for him to gain acceptance, popularity and credibility as a rapper (Stephens, 2005). Racist messages in his songs are mistakenly understood as a form of "advice" and are regarded as an integral part of his public persona, despite the fact that his status and popularity as a white rapper emerged from a predominantly black genre. Over the past three decades, some aspects of hip hop/rap music could have formed part of a wider cultural resistance against feminism and provided a means to interrupt developments in favour of gender equality and reinforce male domination (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Nevertheless, the graphic and sexually explicit derogatory presentations of women through rap lyrics of Eminem's and other artists' songs have been strongly criticised numerous times for justifying the victimisation, objectification and exploitation of women (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Women are more inclined than men to reject demeaning, misogynistic rap lyrics, which reinforce negative attitudes about women (Cobb & Boettcher, 2007).

Eminem's personal problems and afflictions are the subject matter of lyrics underlying a number of his songs. His "unbridled hostility toward all women", as presented in a number of his songs, mentions his relatives. This has been considered "extreme" but not unique to Eminem in the scene of rap music (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009, p. 12). FP is one of Eminem's earliest songs, released in 1998. The lyrics convey strong resentments towards a black ex-girlfriend, described as 'Brutus' and 'big whore'. Black girls are compared with white girls and described as 'dumb chicks' and 'bitches'. The following excerpts of the lyrics indicate that these degrading and insolent words are directed towards *all* black young girls in an essentialising manner:

... Blacks and whites they sometimes mix
But Black girls only want your money cause they're dumb chicks
So I'ma say like this
Don't date a Black girl

... Black girls and white girls just don't mix
Because Black girls are dumb and white girls are good chicks
... I like white girls all over the world
White girls are fine and they blow my mind
And that's why I'm here now telling you this rhyme
'Cause Black girls, I really don't like

I'm giving you a little advice
Don't date a Black girl, if you do it once you won't do it twice

You won't ever do it again because they'll take your money

I'll get straight to the point Black girls are bitches

And then you turn around and fuck another big, Black guy
Now that's pretty wrong, but you're just ganking
But that's okay because you need a goddamn spanking
From me, the funky Eminem

Alleged spousal abuse by Eminem of his (white) ex-wife Kim Mathers (Enck & McDaniel, 2012) shows that ill feelings towards an ex-lover arise irrespective of race. In 2004 Eminem released the song *Yellow Brick Road,* whose lyrics recounts that he wanted to go out with a black girl in order to 'become more popular' and "piss off" Kim. The lyrics of *Yellow Brick Road* mention that this black girl was the same one, whom he mentions in FP. An apology for the racist lyrics in FP is put forward in *Yellow Brick Road,* despite its message that FP was not "that bad" as a song:

The bombest goddamn girl in our whole school
If I could pull her, not only would I become more popular
But I would be able to piss Kim off at the same time
But it backfired, I was supposed to dump her
But she dumped me for this black guy
And that's the last I ever seen or heard
Or spoke to the 'Oh Foolish Pride' girl
But I've heard people say they heard the tape
And it ain't that bad – but it was, I singled out a whole race
And for that I apologize, I was wrong
'Cause no matter what color a girl is, she's still a ho

FP remained a topic of contention and, on numerous occasions, Eminem was confronted about the disrespect he showed towards black women. When interviewed, he responded: ''I'd just broken up with my girlfriend, who was African American, and I reacted like the angry, stupid kid I was. I hope people will take it for the foolishness that it was, not for what somebody is trying to make it into today" (cited in Dawkins, 2010, p. 479).

The Study

The data emanated from focus groups discussions conducted in two state schools in Malta (School A and B). Focus groups allow for the sharing and exploration of collective and individual experiences. A group setting provides the opportunity for informants to observe, interact and comment on their peers' perspectives and beliefs and engage with possible similarities and differences. At the time of the data collection both schools had only female students. The majority of students of both schools were Maltese and predominantly of working class background. The informants were fifteen years old. Both groups were therefore homogeneous in terms of age, social class and gender. The majority of students of school B lived in a small town, renowned for being a red-light district. Migrant students attended both schools. Those contributing to the study arrived from Belgium, China and the Philippines. Compared with other state schools in Malta, the two schools chosen for the study had a relatively high number of migrant students. Migration flows to Malta have been increasing at a steadfast rate from 2002, especially since 2004, when Malta joined the European Union.

After the schools were approached and the research objectives discussed, permission to conduct the research was granted by the *Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education* and heads of schools, who also acted as gatekeepers for the recruitment of the informants. Parental and individual consent was sought and granted. In both schools, the informants belonged to the same class and therefore they already knew each other and held a group identity. The data were collected between February and May of 2010[1]. One focus group session was held in each school and each lasted about one hour. The discussion was conducted in Maltese and the researchers translated simultaneously into English in order for the migrant students to understand. Nine and eleven students from School A and School B respectively participated in the study. Apart from the Maltese informants, there was one migrant student who was Chinese (School A). Two Belgian informants and one from the Philippines took part in the other focus group (School B). The informants listened to FP through a photo montage on video showing English subtitles of the song's lyrics. The photographs showing Eminem were chosen by the researchers. Observation notes taken after the research sessions were also included in the data analysis.

Focus group material was transcribed and thematic analysis was employed according to the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2008). This consisted of an initial familiarisation with the data followed by the identification of codes that were employed to set up the formation of themes. Repeated themes within the data formed the basis of the reporting of findings and the analysis. The data was further reviewed in order give an account of the patterns of meanings derived from the informants' discussions that were relevant to the research questions. Pseudonyms, accompanying direct quotations have not been used, since through the audio recordings it was difficult to decipher who was speaking. There were also numerous instances when the students talked at the same time.

Ethical Concerns
Ethical measures concerning respect, care and confidentiality were taken into consideration throughout the data collection procedure. The use of the lyrics of FP among the teenage informants raised a number of ethical issues, due to the aggressive tone and bizarre content of the song. There are a number of ethical implications which need to be taken in consideration when deciding whether to present racist, misogynistic and offensive material for data collection purposes. These revolve around the concern that the dissemination of this material could have been harmful and disturbing to students. The song could have further reinforced the negative messages it conveyed and accentuated the male-female divide. Another concern was about the possibility of students feeling incited to compete with the messages of hate the song contains. On the other hand, the option of not utilising this content could have enabled a sense of alienation from the music cultures that surround young people. The decision to refrain from using FP could have perpetuated the silences that surround these sensitive topics. It was decided that the lyrics merited discussion, because students could potentially benefit from a critical exploration of issues related to the aftermath of romantic relationships. The class teachers who granted permission for focus groups to occur during their *Personal and Social Development* lessons were provided with the video clip and focus group discussion questions before the sessions were conducted to ensure understanding of the research study.

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[1] The data for this paper was collected by Dr Michelle Attard Tonna and the author and formed part of the research project *Young migrant women in secondary education: Promoting understanding and mutual understanding through dialogue and exchange*. This Project was coordinated by the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (Cyprus). The Euro-Mediterranean Centre of Educational Research (Malta) was a partner organisation in this research project, together with other partner organisations from Spain, United Kingdom and Greece. The Project was funded by the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals of the European Commission. Professor Simone Galea (University of Malta) coordinated the research carried out in Malta.

Another pertinent ethical issue that was considered by the researchers was that students may disclose they had previously been victimised by their dating partner or that, during the data collection phase, they experienced intimate partner verbal aggression or some other form of abuse. These situations required immediate care for these students, who needed professional help. The questions were framed in a way which hypothetically asked them what they would have done if they were in the situation described in FP. Although some of the participants talked about their ex-boyfriends, none of them disclosed that they had experienced direct or indirect involvement with intimate partner abuse. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee.

Diffractive Methodology
The study is situated within a posthumanist theoretical framework, with particular emphasis on 'diffraction' (Barad, 2007, 2014). In classical physics, diffraction refers to the bending of light as it goes around the edge of an object. Barad explains that etymologically 'diffraction' derives from a word which signifies "break in pieces" and "shatter" (Barad, 2014, p. 184). I draw on this thinking to derive possible understandings of how the girls attempted to contest the arrogant tone of the song in relation to situations revolving around 'shattered' dreams associated with the ending of romantic relationships. A diffractive methodology (Van Der Tuin, 2014) is employed to inquire about the interplay between the girls' knowing and their lack of knowledge about how to deal with boys and breaking up. Knowing and not knowing overlap each other as diffractive waves do. Barad's works (2007, 2014) inform the analysis through a study of the girls' entanglement with conceptualizations of the masculine other and to different meanings surrounding masculinities. I use this analytical approach to explore gender norms that intersect with race. The analysis seeks to avoid generalisations based on gender stereotypes which regard the positioning of boys and girls in romantic relationships to be necessarily one of domination and subordination respectively. The analysis attempts to give possible interpretations of what the informants could have intended through a diffractive methodology that "is respectful of the entanglement of ideas and other materials..." (Barad, 2007, p. 29).

Meaning and matter occur simultaneously (Barad, 2007). From this perspective the girls' frayed, shabby and old-fashioned sweaters of their masculine-looking school uniform and their attempts to feminise their look by rolling up their skirts from the waist to perform "the teenager in the mini skirt" form part of the data. So do their eyes demarcated with eye liner, their loud voices and glaring eyes. Other data which accompanied the girls' words emerged from instances such as when one of the teachers kept coming in and out of the classroom during the focus group discussion presumably to check on the students' behaviour and looking at us suspiciously and finding students "unruly". Data which is not made up of mere words holds knowledge and contributes to insights on how to read masculinity from a lens of femininity. This approach however, does not diminish the power of the girls' articulations.

Findings

In the introduction to the video clip it was explained to students what the song was about. Caution was taken so that their opinions about the lyrics would not be shaped by how the subject matter of the song was introduced. Nevertheless, at the start of the discussion the song was described as "controversial" by the researchers. When the name of the song was mentioned, the girls unanimously said that they didn't like Eminem. After this spontaneous reaction, they listened to the song, followed the images attentively and participated actively in the discussion. Interaction amongst participants was encouraged as focus groups were

employed with this aim. In order to discern a group viewpoint attempts were made to ensure that all the participants expressed their views by directing questions to those who were holding back.

The findings from both schools show that students agreed that the contents of the song were racist and that the message embedded in it was sexist, negative and repulsive. They assumed that the lyrics referred to an episode which had actually happened to Eminem in real life and that the message of the song corresponds to what he felt and thought about the situation. A number of girls were dismayed and even shocked by his attitude and by the way he was exposing his ex-girlfriend. Spreading rumours in that way was considered unacceptable: "I don't know how they allowed him (Eminem) to record this song" (School A). The possible motives behind the song were questioned. Eminem's preference for white girls built on the assumption that "White girls are good; I like white girls" was considered flawed. The students were unsure of the validity of the accusations outlined in the lyrics against the "ex-girlfriend". For example, students of School A reasoned that perhaps she was not after money, implying that there were lies behind the "story". Students of both focus groups said that skin colour alone does not determine one's conduct and that blaming all black girls was senseless. They reasoned that in general Eminem's message was "wrong" and that he overreacted. Although none of the students justified the racist lyrics, one girl from school B deflected the criticism towards Eminem by arguing that "You don't know what he was feeling when he was saying bad things". Despite this comment, negative representations about Eminem were put firmly in place during the discussions and the girls hardly contested or negotiated this position. Students from school A in general said that if they were Eminem's black ex-girlfriend they would take action following the release of the song. Their answers ranged from: "I would punch him in the mouth", "speak to him about it", "report him (to the police) on grounds of racism" and "would react violently".

Most of the girls made it clear that they had nothing against black persons. A few girls, however, claimed that they were afraid of "Arab men", because they chased them in the streets. Students of School B mentioned "terrifying" episodes when "Arab men" also followed their female friends and relatives. Fear of black men was caused by "the way they look" (School A). With regards to choosing a romantic lover who was black, different views were held. A number of girls from School A stated that having a lover with dark (not black) skin was considered fine and even an asset, but some of them were against the idea of going out on dates with a person with "black skin". Whereas the character of the person and how one treats one's lovers were regarded more important aspects to consider, some of the girls of School A stated that they would feel uncomfortable having a relationship with a black person because their family members and other people would disapprove. The protection of their reputation was perceived as being at stake. The counter arguments brought forward by other students of the same school were that even "white guys might do wrong things" and that one should not be influenced about what other people might think and say. The idea was put forward that if one were to know black people, perhaps skin colour would not make a difference when it came to dating. They repeated that one should not generalise and assume that all black men or all white men are the same.

The majority of girls of both schools positioned themselves in opposition to boys, according to their perceptions about masculinities. Most of the girls expressed considerable resistance towards boys. They articulated an othering attitude towards them by expressing their disgust "at having to deal with them" (School B). A sense of antagonism and hostility towards boys arose during their discussions, which were devoid of positive representations of boys. A few

girls said that it's easier to make friends with girls than with boys, because "boys pretend to be grown up and they are cruel" (School B). A number of statements indicate that some girls had internalized notions of gender stereotypes: "Em boys em always try to em make fights and girls mm they try to make friends" (International student, School B). One of the criticisms against boys was that they pestered them relentlessly. Underlying some of the students' statements, there was a sense of rivalry against boys: "I can wear heels and look taller than my boyfriend" (School B).

Not all the girls had experienced a romantic relationship. One of the international students from School B said that her only friends in Malta were her schoolmates and that she had no male friends in Malta. In some instances, talking about ex-boyfriends created a painful site, arising from bad memories about past relationships. Underlying the girls' statements, there was a sense of relief that the relationship was over. Talk about missing their past boyfriend was absent. Some girls made it clear that they did not accept verbal aggression: "I had an ex and before I broke up with him he was offensive and saying bad things about my mother and I started being offensive with regards to his grandmother" (School B). Ending the relationship was not described as difficult by a number of girls: "I had one (a boyfriend) and we broke up and all the time he was saying bad things to me. I got fed up of him and told him to get lost" (School B). In general, strong words were used to describe how they dealt with ex boyfriends: "Men are a pain... because they are pests. An ex-boyfriend he sent me a letter . . . to go back and I told him I was single but that I didn't want to be his girlfriend, because all the time he pestered me" (School B). The majority however argued that in some cases one could end the relationship in an amicable way and still remain on good, friendly terms with an ex-boyfriend, "even if this is difficult one should try" (International student, School A). Others were adamant that it is not possible to remain friends. At the end of the discussion the students were asked to write their general feedback about the session. The comments were all positive and indicated that they enjoyed the discussion. For the majority, watching the video clip was their favourite part.

Discussion

The opening lyrics of Eminem's song declare that "Foolish Pride has a lot of things to say". Even the girls of the study had their say and counteracted the message of the lyrics with an aggressive tone by challenging discourses of heterosexualised aggression which works to make white girls compete with black girls. Students of both schools generally showed disgust when confronted with the lyrics of FP, in terms of its sexist, racist and misogynist content. The majority held a clear notion of what racism entails and how destructive it is. In this regard, these students showed that they do not passively absorb messages mediated through popular media and that they possess the ability to critique and resist them. The findings however also indicated that racist ideas permeated the thinking of a number of girls. A contradiction surfaced, indicating that whereas in general the students criticised the racist attitude towards Eminem's ex-girlfriend, as depicted in FP, a few of them exhibited xenophobic sentiments. The approval of romantic partners by family members was considered paramount, even if it reinforced racist views and systems. This indicates that some girls might have internalised attitudes, which constitute black people as "others". In a number of cultures, there has been a decline in outward resistance to white female - black male relations in recent years, but it has been taken over by "a more subtle form of resistance accomplished through surveillance and regulation of White female and Black male bodies and the spaces in which these bodies interact" (Irby, 2014, p. 786). According to the informants there were indicative attempts by a number of parents to distance them from black

male bodies. The parents justified their reasoning by positioning their daughters in need of bodily safety and protection from the "Arab other". The intersectionality of race and gender reveal the complex nature of girls' conceptualisations of their interactions with boys. Race is positioned alongside socio-cultural influences that link with personal emotions, gender, time and space.

There might have been a myriad of ways through which the girls could have experienced friendships and romantic relationships with boys. The personal and social environment of the Maltese and migrant students, embedded within cultural aspects of their home and host country and other countries they might have lived in, could have formed their understanding of boys. Being white or otherwise encompasses a diverse and wide range of cultures, due to the dynamic nature of ethnicity (Nayak, 2001). The girls' social backgrounds could have contributed to the process of shaping their conceptualisations of race and gender in varying degrees. The data indicates that gendered heteronormative discourses permeate the understanding of girls' conceptualisations on teenage dating. At its core, the girls' talk was embedded within anti-boy discourses, which revolve around dominant and established norms of gender binaries. Notions of adolescent boys' masculinities described as "strong, active, hard, rational" Kehily (2001, p. 117) were however also put to the test and subjected to scrutiny by the informants. The apparent discord, conflict and unease that was conveyed might have concealed other hidden realities. For example, the girls' expressions of resistance occurring in a group context could have served as means to regulate each other's conceptualisations of boys. Research on how girls regulate each other's femininity through their dynamics in friendship groups suggests that they are often driven towards the containment of other girls by policing each other's sexual behaviour, by defining the parameters of romantic relationships and friendships and by dictating the attributes of physical appearance (Brown, 2003; Kehily, 2002).

The designation of boys as the ones who "make fights" juxtaposed against "girls make friends" conveys accusations which could have resulted from experiences of betrayal, anguish and pain. In general, the boys mentioned did not seem to have lived up to the informants' expectations. Consequently, the girls might have learnt that they are to maintain boundaries with males especially "black males". The past recollections of bad memories with boys seemed to have remained alive and imprinted in their minds, as often happens:

> Memory is not a record of a fixed past that can ever be fully or simply erased, written over, or recovered (that is, taken away or taken back into one's possession, as if it were a thing that can be owned). And remembering is not a replay of a string of moments, but an enlivening and recon figuring of past and future that is larger than any individual. Remembering and re-cognizing do not take care of or satisfy, or in any other way reduce one's responsibilities (Barad, 2007, ix, parenthesis in original).

Past memories cause "diffractions" and dictate present and future circumstances. Emotional barriers by girls towards boys could work to maintain the hegemony of gendered subjectivities and interfere with their future relationships with them. Past experiences form entanglements with future possibilities. In positioning themselves against the male other through negative portrayals of masculinity, the girls could have reinforced their own constituted defence mechanisms. This perspective regards the girls' verbal expressions as counterattacks against designated positions of subordination that they might have felt caught

in. Their performance of an aggressive self could be read as a cry for help and as a way to demand respect. The ways they "othered" boys could be considered "epistemically violent in reproducing power relations of superiority and inferiority" (Phoenix, 2009, p. 101). Their use of voice could have echoed internalised cultural anxieties, possibly brought about by the media's oversexualising and objectification of girls. Verbal aggression could become the means through which the girls (and Eminem) enacted and performed their gendered identities to replicate and perhaps contest uneven social processes. As teen girls negotiate contemporary discourses of sexual aggression and competition (Ringrose, 2008), the parameters surrounding the nurturing and accommodating qualities of females, which revolve around standards that girls are expected to reach, become blurred and less defined. Aggressive words articulated by girls are in discord with feminine "good girl" qualities, associated with being nice, quiet, caring, passive, cautious, docile and modest. Feelings arising from fear, anguish, insecurity and lack of self-esteem associated with sexual attraction and dating have been found to dominate a number of Maltese adolescent girls (Cassar, 2013).

The students' attempts at making meaning of masculinities did not seem to be linear but rather fragmented and repeatedly torn apart as they engaged in the discussion of different situations, alternating between experiences related to subordination and retaliation. Nevertheless, the girls attempted to unpack, rupture and even "shatter" sexist discourses by resisting hegemonic and aggressive masculinities which work to instil submissive behaviours around girlhood. Through the lyrics of FP they could have sensed the dominance of patriarchy, accentuated through the international celebrity status of Eminem. The existing boundaries they described between boys and themselves seemed to draw them together through the sharing of their understandings about their conceptualisations of boys. These boundaries "diffracted" and seemed to shift as a result of fluid power practices which were easily destabilised by moods, expectations, pressures, conflict and revenge. In some instances, the girls' critique of the lyrics of FP replicated the same aggressive tone of the song. These findings demonstrate the struggles that operate in relationships and how estrangement and accusations easily arise in adolescent friendships between boys and girls. The fragility of such relations is accentuated through the avoidance of direct communication in person. The girls' articulations suggest that they tried to defend themselves from emotional hurt by shutting down communication with boys in order, perhaps, not to trigger confusion and feelings associated with being humiliated. A diffractive analysis of these findings points towards the recognition that the girls might have wanted to assert themselves and establish some form of power through their use of aggressive verbal expressions by "attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter" (Barad, 2007, p.71). In so doing they could have rejected opportunities to befriend caring, decent boys. Acts of protecting themselves from being bullied by boys could have required them to forgo relations. Expressions about the girls' desires for meaningful connections with boys through friendship or romantic encounters were largely absent. A sense of enthusiasm, desire, curiosity and interest in relation to forming relationships with boys was also felt to be missing. The single life was generally described as a privilege and the girls' articulations about it contrast with the dominant discourse of "wanting a man". This suggests a rupture in their desire for connecting with boys. Rather than trying to make sense of their relationships with boys, both Maltese and migrant students seemed to have enacted a defence mechanism or "obstacle" to protect their personal territory from them. Their explanations about how to handle boys seemed to be based on assumptions that portray men as pests. This perspective could lead to the suppression of sexual feelings. Although othering boys could empower the positioning of girls in the dating scene, it could also stifle their desires. The implications of distancing themselves from boys suggest that the girls did not comply with social scripts of

heterosexual femininity that dictated the importance of having a boyfriend. Living in a village where men come seeking the services of prostitutes could have mediated their understanding of what it means to be romantically coupled. The othering of boys could have stemmed from their refusal to be reduced to an object of sexual desire. Their resistance towards boys could have acted as a form of protection to ward off any attempts by men to objectify them for sexual pleasure. Their articulated preference for remaining "single" at that particular time in their life could have been the result of their perceived dangers surrounding prostitution. Adolescent girls are more concerned than boys with protecting their sexual reputation (Allen, 2004, p.162). This however contrasted with the mini skirt look. Research which employed a discursive-new materialist approach examined how short skirts act as "a powerful non-human material agent" (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015, p.92) in the making of "girls" in a school environment and "produced them as *too* sexy in the wrong ways" (p.103, emphasis in original).

The negative overtone of FP could have influenced the students' disposition in how they chose to answer the researchers' questions. Their responses could have also resulted from the group dynamics during the data collection. A focus group setting might have hindered some of the girls from expressing dissent or differing opinions from their peers, who mainly talked about boys in negative terms. Although questions were also asked directly to those girls who were providing the least response, a number of girls in both groups dominated the discussion and these expressed their need to disengage themselves from occupying spaces within romantic relationships. The fact that the school settings were not constructed on a co-education model might also have contributed to the girls' sense of estrangement from boys which was evident in their responses. No significant differences were found in the findings of the discussions held in both schools. The informants represented a range of similar social and cultural perspectives and positions in relation to the research agenda. The discussions were embedded within a strictly heterosexual context and marked by an invisibility of references to lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and queer relationships. The students followed the conventional, heteronormative path and gender nonconformity was not mentioned. The power dynamics occurring between boys and girls described in both groups in general positioned boys as losers and girls as not being accommodating of bad treatment by them. Fear of being dominated by males seems to have consumed some of the girls and prompted them to cultivate a defensive relationship with boys.

Conclusion

A posthumanist lens views girls' claims and perceptions on masculinities as possibly being transitional. Their inclination to resist conformity and compliance with the stereotypical dictates of girlhood could be temporary. The process of disentanglement from situations that make girls subservient in heterosexual romantic relationships does not entail a one-time intervention. For some girls it is an ongoing struggle. Insights derived from the notion of diffraction (Barad, 2007, 2014) position heartbreak and disappointments in break-ups as "obstacles" which could potentially lead students to better understand the causes of interpersonal aggression that ensue in some cases and how it could be resisted by critically reflecting on the possible causes that enable it. Disappointments caused by ruptured dreams in relation to teenage romantic relationships could make it possible for new circumstances to emerge. This means that relationality could be productive if reworked. Unpacking these "diffractions" is pertinent to understanding how girls respond and cope with racialised and intensified criticisms hurled at them through a number of rap and hip hop songs.

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