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# Disbelief, denial, and failure: a critical collaborative autoethnography of feminist pedagogies educating against Tate-fuelled sexism in Australian schools

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## ABSTRACT

As societal microcosms, schools are key sites for shaping healthy masculinities, but the rise of 'manfluencers' - amplified by digital platforms - has deepened the marginalisation of women and non-binary individuals, reinforcing traditional power structures and inhibiting gender equity. In Australia, where hyper-masculinity dominates, ubiquitous manfluencer content emphasising traits like assertiveness, physical strength, and sexual conquest has amplified school-based sexism and misogyny. In response, this paper uses critical collaborative autoethnography between a male 'Asian' Australian ex school teacher and a female white Australian teacher, to explore feminist pedagogies addressing manfluencer misogyny in classrooms. Through intersectional dialogue, the paper provides insights into how a shared feminist approach can challenge harmful constructions of masculinity and gender. Set in an Australian school marked by white patriarchal socioeconomic privilege, it expands on how feminist praxis resists manfluencer logic and the harmful impacts of the manosphere, offering strategies to promote gender equity and deconstruct hegemonic masculinity.

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## 'What do you think of Andrew Tate, sir?'

It's the first lesson of the year, and, despite being a seasoned schoolteacher in my eighth year of high school teaching, I'm cognisant of the mixed flutter of nervous anticipation in my stomach at the prospect of my new roster of classes for the year ahead. As senior teachers at the co-educational school I was at, we usually followed our Year 11 students through to the end of Year 12, but it was different this year – a change in staffing meant that I was starting with Year 12 students I had no prior experience – or rapport – with.

As I make my way to the classroom with Business teaching resources in hand, I wonder about the class's familiarity with the course's two-year long subject content and how

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much I would need to catch them up in preparation for the barrage of summative assessment in this final year. I cannot help but wonder, too, what the class will be like, how we'll get along, and whether it's more of the preexisting unfamiliarity or impending academic stakes exacerbating my nervousness. Reaching the classroom, I breathe deeply as I push open the door, tingling with a mix of apprehension and eagerness to impress.

The lesson starts smoothly. The students are respectful as I introduce myself via a personal story, and outline what's in store for the year ahead. They become animated as I ask them to introduce themselves by way of an online questionnaire, and buzz at the tangible show of interest in getting to know them. As a relational feminist educator, their reaction makes me smile.<sup>1</sup> As the excitement gradually settles down, I wrap up the introductory section of the lesson and settle into an explicit content teaching segment. This too proceeds smoothly, until my flow of instruction is – to my mind at least – brusquely interrupted by a question.

What do you think of Andrew Tate, sir?

I stand stuck in my spot, momentarily at a loss for how to respond. The question is completely off-topic, and I wonder if this is a malicious attempt at disrupting the lesson, or perhaps, the (somewhat mistimed) aftermath of the earlier excitement of initial teacher-student relationship building. Perhaps it's a mixture of both. I look at the South Asian male-presenting<sup>2</sup> student who has asked the question and note the puffing up of his chest and proud grin on his face. I look at his white male counterparts seated around him and notice them sniggering amidst muted congratulatory oohs and aahs. I further note one of the white male counterparts reaching forward to pat the questioner on his back.<sup>3</sup> I feel a deep unease implode within. I remain physically stuck, mentally weighing up my response – I'm eager to impress and thus avoid outright confrontation, but judging from their reactions, recognize that I also have a response-ability<sup>4</sup> to educate.

## Sexism in (Australian) schools

We start with Aaron's lived experience of school teaching to demonstrate one of the many ways Andrew Tate is invoked in classrooms across Australia as a neutral talking point, but often with underlying malevolent sexist intentions (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024). This vignette encapsulates 'the conjuring of Tate in classroom discourse – particularly in ways that performatively invite teachers in dialogue that eventually becomes a treatise on his merit – and [thus] ... indicate his position in boys' view as epitomizing ... 'honoured ways' of expressing masculinity' (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024, 175). We see the misplaced 'humour' and congratulations here as a form of 'lad's banter' that excuses the mobilization of – or complicity in – sexism (Haslop et al. 2024), and crucially, as a manifestation of the sense of male supremacy among schoolboys which subsequently delegitimises women's authority (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024).

Of course, the 'intransigence of gender inequalities' and sexism (Gannon, Higham, and Smith 2024, 838) in Australian schools is certainly not new news. Sexism begins beyond the school but manifests within it, and, as microcosms of broader society, schools 'institutionalise gender relations' (Connell 2005, 139). Accordingly, scholarship converges on the fact that sexism is ubiquitous in schools (Keddie 2007; Variyan and Wilkinson, 2022; Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024), and yet, remains concerningly underresearched

(Variyan & Wilkinson, 2022; Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024). Such sexism manifests as gendered stereotypes, violence, and sexual harassment in new guises and with new complexities (Gannon, Higham, and Smith 2024), which are cultural and social in origin rather than a matter of mere disrespect or bad behaviour (Roberts and Wescott 2024). Scholarship tells us as well that schools – as sites that (re)produce gender inequity – hold women teachers to higher standards of pedagogical (and behaviour management) practice than their male counterparts without accounting for structural and interpersonal injustices (Zhao et al. 2025). Specifically, women teachers – rather than male students who demonstrate sexist behaviour – are seen as the problem, causing women teachers to internalize the issue and assign blame to themselves (Keddie 2007; Robinson 2000).

Beyond having to deal with sexism in the form of sexualized groaning, gaslighting, misogynistic language and behaviours as well as physical intimidation (Roberts and Wescott 2024; Schulz 2024), women teachers also face a double bind because of a lack of bystander action (Schulz and McDonald 2024) or broader structural apathy. For instance, it is common for male teaching counterparts to try to remain ‘neutral’ when hearing stories about gender-based violence against women colleagues, where they ‘disbelieve, deny or diminish such accounts’ (Zhao et al. 2025, 4). Worse still, some male teachers are also responsible for perpetrating gendered violence themselves. Exacerbating this, school leaders can be complicit in refusing to engage with, or address, experiences of sexism (Roberts and Wescott 2024; Schulz and McDonald 2024), resulting in women teachers’ disappointment and frustration at school leaderships’ lack of action. Indeed, male teachers and school leadership remain – consciously or otherwise – bewitched by gender regimes that uphold patriarchal institutional norms which subordinate girls and women. They lack empathy or are blind to their privilege, often reinforcing a victim-blaming mentality that trivializes and individualizes the issue rather than understanding it as an issue of gendered power difference within schools’ male-dominated cultures (Keddie 2007). Because of this, male teachers are often poor allies in the fight for gender justice (Zhao et al. 2025).

Schools are critical sites of masculinity formation and expression (Roberts and Wescott 2024) and spaces for regulating gendered identities and gendered violence (Gannon, Higham, and Smith 2024). Consequently, considering the ‘revitalization of pernicious behaviours and attitudes underpinned by a brazen confidence in a logic of assumed male supremacy’ (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024, 168), questions of male allyship in the fight against sexism upheld by forms of hegemonic masculinity are more important than ever (Elwell and Buchanan 2021). Alas, as intimated in the opening vignette, contemporary Australian schools have seen a resurgence of sexist behaviours and hegemonic masculinity among schoolboys beguiled by Tate’s male supremacist ideas (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024), particularly the internalization of Tate’s ‘alpha mindset’ tropes concerning wealth, dominance, and sexist male superiority over women (Roberts and Wescott 2024).

### **Tate, manfluencers, and masculinity formation**

Tate’s rhetoric concurrently leverages and reifies the broader recent phenomenon of the manosphere – explained by Farrell et al. (2019, as cited in Roberts and Wescott 2024) as the ‘group of loosely incorporated websites and social media communities where men’s

perspectives, needs, gripes, frustrations and desires are explicitly explored' (126) – and manfluencers, online figures who exploit exaggerated and extreme views of masculinity, advocating outdated and sexist attitudes towards women. As Haslop et al. (2024) further argue, Tate's logics mainstream existing misogynistic 'manosphere' thinking that promotes male domination of feminine Others. Embodying these politics of domination, Tate – as simultaneous manosphere contributor and figurehead – exploits the economies of social media and how volume, intensity, and controversy can masquerade as facts in post-truth societies (Haslop et al. 2024) to spread misogyny and harmful modes of masculinity. This re-stabilizes masculine hegemony through a reassertion of traditional, patriarchal masculine norms, or as Robinson (2000) puts it, exert a sense of gendered authority. Schoolboys – even from a young age<sup>5</sup> – then learn to leverage this sense of authority as they are aware of how hegemonic masculinity endows power and forms of capital that privilege only bodily-assigned males. In schools, they deploy these gendered discourses to unsettle teacher authority in ways that undermine and trivialize women teachers' personal and professional standing (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024).

In this sense, Tate and the manfluencer crisis simultaneously highlight and amplify the ways in which gender profoundly and unevenly shapes lives in schools (Gannon, Higham, and Smith 2024). Accordingly, there is an urgency to (continue to) interrogate the wider – and entrenched – gender issues at play in entangled online and offline misogynies seen in Australian schooling (Roberts and Wescott 2024). While there is growing research examining how Tate's influence informs women teachers' concerns about, and experiences of, misogyny and sexual harassment in school (see Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024), little is known about the 'collective will to name and address misogyny in school settings' (Roberts and Wescott 2024, 127), and in particular, the ways that Australian women schoolteachers – and their male allies – address manfluencer misogyny in their respective classrooms. We turn our attention to this now.

## **Feminist pedagogies**

As Wescott and colleagues (2024) remind us, there is dire need for valuable, pedagogical opportunities that allow teachers (and students) to challenge and transform gender stereotypes, misogynistic views, and societal discourses around violence and masculinity. While schools are germane sites for healthy masculinity formation (Roberts and Wescott 2024) and speaking back to the 'deeply ingrained discrimination against women and their value in society' (Robinson 2000, 88), Australian education is found wanting here amidst a lack of explicit focus on gender equity in education policy, disproportionate pedagogical focus on curriculum and 'quality' teaching (Gannon 2016), and other neoliberal testing and professional standard agendas (Elwell and Buchanan 2021). Put differently, opportunities for anti-sexist teaching with a feminist sensibility are inevitably shaped by a 'culture of limitation ... a messy plethora of perspectives, beliefs and attitudes' (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020, as cited in Gannon, Higham, and Smith 2024, 838).

Further complexifying the situation is the fact that anti-sexist – feminist – pedagogies are challenging to define; 'monolithic and amorphous' (Elwell and Buchanan 2021, 157), referring in the plural to a variety of approaches, are diverse and constantly evolving, resist a fixed definition, and take shape in different contexts. Furthermore, feminist pedagogies are hard to enact, since they might replicate 'the very conditions [they] are trying

to work against, including eurocentrism, racism, sexism, classism, and “banking education” (Ellsworth 1989, 298). Nevertheless, they are united by the common aim of rethinking educational power and prioritizing students’ diverse experiences and voices. These pedagogies view the classroom as a space for transformation, activism, and social justice, emphasize the need to recognise women role models and theoretical perspectives, and provide methods for challenging patriarchy in education (hooks 1994).

Citing Weiler (1991), Elwell and Buchanan (2021) reinforce the difficulty of providing a coherent feminist pedagogy, opting instead to describe the methods used, since ‘the difficulties and contradictions that have emerged in the attempt to create feminist pedagogy ... raise serious questions for all liberatory pedagogies’ (157). They elaborate on this, arguing that the flexible and complex ways that feminist pedagogies challenge traditional classroom power dynamics have sparked scepticism and antipathy to feminist pedagogies vis-a-vis broader gender reform (Elwell and Buchanan 2021). Concurrently, they remind us that liberation and equity through feminist pedagogies is inherently challenging because experiences of oppression inherently vary and are impacted by intersecting contextual considerations. In this sense, feminist pedagogies embody both the ‘pitfalls and possibilities of gender justice’ (Keddie 2008, 347) in schools.

### **Positionality, school context, and methodology**

Before we continue unravelling what feminist pedagogies might look like in the Australian teaching context, we provide some insight into our intersect-ing/onal positionalities, school context, and critical collaborative autoethnographic methodology.

Aaron identifies as a male ‘Asian’ (Singaporean Chinese) Australian ex-schoolteacher-researcher who comes from a middle-class background. He is a trained Sociologist of Education working as a tenured University Lecturer. Aaron was a schoolteacher before and during his PhD, and, at the time of the opening vignette, was teaching and researching simultaneously. Accordingly, he was – and is – keenly aware of the white patriarchal socio-economic privilege that marked the school and shaped many of his colleagues and students. Aaron was particularly aware of the classed dimensions that perpetuate hegemonic forms of masculinity (Variyan & Wilkin, 2022) seen from how the school engaged with students and parents as clients at the expense of consideration for gender equity. For example, beyond the opening incident which demonstrates how Tate transcends class (and race) (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024), Aaron remains haunted by a school-wide incident in his first year (2020) at the school – which school management kept under wraps – where senior boys created and circulated a misogynistic list ranking their female peers’ attractiveness.<sup>6</sup> To speak back, he has since written about how male students within the same school have been unwilling to engage with feminist content (Teo 2023), and continues to do so through this paper. He is unsurprised by the school’s pattern of sexism given that it ‘fails to model egalitarian gender relations for boys, but [instead] reinforces the ideologies of hegemonic masculinity and de-legitimizes women’s authority’ (Zhao et al. 2025, 14).

Roseanna identifies as a female white Australian practicing schoolteacher at the same school and is Aaron’s spouse. She comes from a lower-middle class rural background and has intimate experience with intersecting gendered (raced and classed) discrimination through blatant sexism from her country town upbringing. Because of this, she spent

her formative years internalizing the fallacy that gender disparities didn't exist, and that anything related to feminism encapsulated a 'victim mentality'. As a working professional, personal experience coupled with 'coming to theory' (hooks 1994) has given her a greater awareness of sexism's systemic yet subtle nature. Roseanna acknowledges that teaching for gender justice in Queensland where we are based is a fraught endeavour, given that the policy milieu obliges schoolteachers in state schools – as public servants – to 'accept and value their duty to provide advice which is objective, independent, apolitical and impartial' (Department of Education n.d.). She acknowledges that this call for an ostensibly apolitical and impartial teaching approach is exceedingly precarious in our particular Independent School<sup>7</sup> context, where staff are beholden to 'conduct themselves both professionally and in a manner that upholds the [Christian] ethos and reputation of the College', and where gender is not even mentioned once in the school's Anti-Discrimination Policy.<sup>8</sup> Roseanna is also concerned by the school's 'safe' responses to the manosphere via one-off punitive talks from school leadership and letters home outlining Tate's dangerous influence (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024).

Aaron is troubled by ongoing sexist disrespect from male teachers towards their women counterparts (Elwell and Buchanan 2021) and the disparity in schoolboys' treatment of male versus female teachers through physical/verbal displays of domination (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024). He thus writes in protest with Roseanna – and broader feminist agendas – as a 'tempered radical' (Meyerson and Tompkins-Stange 2007) embodying 'ally politics' (Flood 2019). Nevertheless, he recognises that 'privilege [is] indelibly inscribed onto men, and men embody it whether they choose to or not' (Kimmel 1998, 62) and thus seeks to write from a space where we acknowledge men's experience without privileging it (Kimmel 1998). He takes comfort in hooks' (2014) assurance that 'a male who has divested of male privilege, who has embraced feminist politics, is a worthy comrade in struggle, in no way a threat to feminism' (12), and Mills (2013) reminder that it is problematic to propose that 'men cannot engage with feminism in supportive ways ... [since it] suggest[s] that it is not possible for *anyone* [emphasis added] who benefits from a current system of oppression to act in ways that potentially undermine that privilege' (200).

Consequently, we unravel the ways a shared feminist personal-political-professional-pedagogical approach productively engages the complex interplay of social media, hegemonic masculinity, and schoolboys through critical collaborative autoethnography. The research question guiding this paper asks: As feminist educators, how can feminist pedagogies – storied through our lived experience – resist manosphere logics and its commensurate harms through challenging manfluencer constructions of masculinity and critiquing harmful gender stereotypes within Australian schooling?

Our critical collaborative autoethnographic approach works to 'understand the lived experience of real people in context, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination' (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, 20). Based on our existing relationship and shared passion for anti-sexist praxis, we use autoethnography, which Ellis (2004) explains as

research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political. Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self – consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot. Thus autoethnography claims the conventions of literary writing. (xix)

Specifically, we use critical collaborative autoethnography, which fuses our separately written narratives into a cohesive story (Cann and DeMeulenaere 2012). Our individual narratives were compiled through co-construction in two different steps. Firstly, we each wrote narratives drawing on our personal experience of teaching against Tate and the manosphere. The general brief was to foreground experiences stemming from our unique positionalities. We then engaged in critical dialogue after reading each other's narratives, questioning their links to theoretical framings such as hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005), intersectional feminism (Crenshaw 2017), feminist pedagogies (hooks 1994; Lather 1998), and to each other. Secondly, through our ongoing conversations, we collaboratively (re)constructed exchanges on Tate and sexism that incidentally occurred while teaching that proved to be retrospectively valuable to this project. We thus created 'retrospective field notes' (Ellis 2004) of the dialogue we had on school-based sexism well before we had the idea to write about it.

In doing so, we foreground a theoretically robust interpersonal reflexivity that pushes against each other's writing in ways that incorporate reflective *and* reflexive action (Cann and DeMeulenaere 2012). We see our existing relationship as infused with transformative possibilities when it comes to confronting the spatial and temporal workings of dominant discourses of power, and hope to simultaneously convey the value of, and encouragement for, similar untold stories (Cann and DeMeulenaere 2012). Through ongoing theorizing, we were able to distil the focus vignettes for this paper – an integral part of the paper's cohesive narrative that simultaneously demonstrates our process and reveals our findings (Cann and DeMeulenaere 2012). We share this in this next section, before closing out with a discussion.

### **Roseanna: storying disbelief and denial**

Disbelief and denial mark my experiences with sexism as a secondary teacher. Mirroring my rural town upbringing, many disbelieve that sexism is rife and even more deny its existence entirely, resulting in *my own* disbelief at the brazenness of it all.

Years of being disbelieved and having my words denied and dismissed prompted me to create a *Sexism in the Workplace* memo on my phone: short documentation of personal encounters with sexism. I keep it handy because poorly informed, parroted rhetoric defending and spruiking sexism isn't uncommon in my classes.

Detailing my own run-ins with sexism has often been the only way to make students pause and consider the reality that sexism is rife.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes it's been the turning point for students to concede that it wasn't me, a woman, just playing the victim card, but rather, a system that's already rigged. I talk about my whiteness, too, hoping that hearing about my concurrent experiences of discrimination and privilege fuels a critical awareness in my students.

As a Senior English and History teacher, critical awareness, especially when deconstructing media, is a core skill I want to impart. Yet, the manosphere's draw seems impervious to logic, reason, or evidence when challenging the way male-presenting teenagers conceptualize gender roles and the harmfulness of their words and actions.

During the height of Tate's infamy, shortly before his arrest, my classrooms were filled with teenage schoolboys raving about how inspirational he was, with female counterparts simultaneously lamenting that he was a sexist pig.

The controversy continued into my Senior English class. It wasn't uncommon for this class to discuss big issues, with students clamouring to know who I agreed with.

In such situations, I reserve personal opinion for as long as possible and instead ask students to carefully explain their position, prompting with questions like, 'Why do you think that's true?', 'How could that be perceived by someone else?', or 'What if that situation was reversed?'

It's important to note that this class was male student-heavy, but I also had excellent rapport with them and firm boundaries.<sup>10</sup> Tensions came to a head one afternoon during practice persuasive speeches. Personally one of my favourite tasks,<sup>11</sup> students independently chose an issue they were passionate about and wrote a persuasive speech deconstructing media.

One young woman – Alice – chose gender discrimination and stereotyping fuelled by social media. We'd spoken about these issues before. Tate's influence across the year on her cohort concerned her. She'd recounted worrying instances of female peers being categorized, ranked, or objectified in bets. I encouraged her to document and speak up, and promised to support her, but each time, she declined. Her topic choice was a way of deliberately speaking back to mansphere sexism in her own cohort. She confided that she knew some of her male-presenting peers would react strongly. Sadly, I knew she was right, but I was proud of her.

Alice delivered a clear, level-headed, and exceptionally well-evidenced speech.

'I think my sister is her husband's property.'

'Grip her up the neck. Boom. Slap.'

When confronted with the argument that many of Tate's quotes were harmfully misogynistic, some schoolboys reacted viscerally. Their bodies jerked upright, one even stood up from his chair, others immediately tried to speak over Alice. I cannot believe the entitlement and rudeness of their interruption, nor how personally an attack on Tate has been taken.

'Gentlemen, sit. You *will* show your peers the same courtesy and consideration they extended to you. There will be a time and place for this discussion later.'

Alice had barely concluded her speech when the first boy interjected, 'Andrew Tate isn't like that, he never said those things!'

Calmly, Alice replied, 'I have a link to the videos where I took those quotes. I can send them to you, if you'd like.'

'Yeah ... do that because you're taking it *way* out of context! He respects women!'

'He's a really great businessman who works hard and gives great life advice,' another boy chimes in. 'Miss! She's wrong. He just says controversial things for likes. He's actually a good guy.'

My disbelief grew as this group of boys closed in like a pack of wolves.<sup>12</sup>

'He's a great guy.'

'You've misunderstood him.'

'He respects women.'

I relegated them back to their seats, trying desperately to make it a teachable moment.<sup>13</sup>

'Gentlemen. Do you think that everyone here agreed with the topic of your speeches?'

Silence.

'Clearly, some of you feel *very* strongly about this topic, and we can continue this conversation once we're calmer. Alice has referenced her work very clearly, and she's made a compelling argument. BUT! I see that you're more familiar with Tate's videos than me, so I'll do some research tonight and we can continue this discussion tomorrow.'

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I trawled through Instagram Reels and YouTube, consuming every Tate video I could find before our next class, prepared to hear why Alice's speech had bothered them so deeply, and why they were adamant that Tate was 'a good guy'.

The next day, the male-presenting students hesitated when given their chance to speak.

'Well, he gives good business advice and encourages men to work hard, look after their bodies and be successful.'

'Lads, we've known each other awhile now. Be honest. Are those *really* markers of what makes someone 'good' or worth emulating? Is it possible that while you like his fitness and business advice, he could still be promoting sexist and harmful views?'

'Well, I guess a lot of what he says is ... sexist – but he doesn't mean it! It's just part of his brand to get more likes. He says he respects women.'

Disbelief again. How could they defend someone who outrightly endorses controlling, coercing, and using women like property?

'Leo, my algorithm is destroyed. I watched plenty of videos last night. Can you see how constantly referring to women as 'bitches' or in other derogatory terms *shows* that he doesn't respect women, even though he says he does?'

Silence.

'What if I told you that I'm wildly into skateboarding? As good as Tony Hawk, subscribe to my tricks channel. Would you believe me?'

'Ah ... No,' the skateboarding enthusiast of the group responds.

'Why not?'

'Umm ... Because you're just saying it. You don't do it.'

'Exactly.'

Silence again, this time nodding their heads and considering the conversation. They disperse back to their seats, seemingly with nothing more to add. One aspiring entrepreneur looks back and quietly says, 'he still gives great business advice.'

I sighed to myself as the practice presentations resumed, wondering about my own challenges unlearning white patriarchy and correspondingly, how much of the discussion had sunk in<sup>14</sup>, and if they would eventually recognise links to our previous *Sexism in the Workplace* discussions.

### **Aaron: cautions about pedagogical failure**

It was much later in the school year with the same Senior Business class. By this point, I'd successfully established rapport with the class. For some students, a shared interest in the performing arts; for the Tate-admirers, a mutual love for football and football-related video games. Although it didn't always relate directly to the Business content, I'd leveraged this rapport to strategically increase the breadth and depth of political content in our classroom activities and discussions. In this particular lesson, our focus was on marketing and discussing whether affirmative action (AA) was more than just a (successful) marketing tactic.

As I'm about to split students into groups to start brainstorming about AA, one of the Tate-admirers interjects with a question about what AA is. I recognise that other students are comparatively politically aware, so I decide to let his question linger briefly. One of his peers responds with aplomb, and as I turn to smile at her, the questioner retorts dismissively.

'That's SO stupid ...'

I feel a lump stuck in my throat as I'm immediately thrown back into the same cacophony of shock, panic, and discomfort upon hearing the question from our first lesson together. I cannot help but notice the aggressive body language accompanying the question. Moments pass as I try to mask my concern. I eventually ask him why he thinks so.

'I don't see why people should receive *special* privileges because they're from a certain background. I mean, just because they're ... you know ... black, doesn't mean they should be able to get into university more easily. Just because they're gender diverse doesn't mean they should receive special consideration for a job. How's that fair for us guys who constantly hustle and work hard??'

The other Tate-admirers around him unite in agreement.

I sigh under my breath as I hear the myth of meritocracy echo – albeit in a wholly different context – the misconceptions from my own privileged upbringing. I shudder at how these students have internalized a manosphere-fuelled skewing of social power dynamics, seeing themselves as disempowered and disadvantaged by contemporary feminist – and broader social justice – movements (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024). I glance again at the questioner's crossed arms, tense posture, and fiery glare and think about how Tate appeals through a categorical model for how males should enact manhood in daily interactions (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024). As a race critical scholar, I think, too, about how all but one of the Tate-admirers is white, and Roberts and Wescott's (2024) reminder that whiteness – despite being a prime marker of privilege – does not 'offer some degree of inoculation to manosphere and manfluencer 'masculinity in crisis' proclamations' (Roberts and Wescott 2024, 126). I'm keen to challenge the 'entitlement they ... feel in relation to their [male] privilege and to provide them with opportunities to resist that privilege actively' (Mills and Keddie 2007, 350).

I inhale deeply as I pose a different question. I ask the questioner whether he believes there's a disproportionate representation of bodies assigned male in Engineering. He nods. I then ask why that's the case. With arms still crossed, he shrugs. I ask if he thinks that bodies assigned female will be advantageous to companies and the larger field, and consequently, whether there ought to be policies in place to attract more diversity. He nods tentatively and hesitantly. I challenge him to think more about it vis-a-vis my experiences with anti-Asian racism, and our previous discussions on workplace inequity.

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The red carpet is rolled out in full glory. As the Year 12 graduates arrive in their vintage cars for their formal,<sup>15</sup> I can't help but feel a familiar mixture of pride, excitement, and sadness as I see yet another student cohort off. As the camera flashes and cheering continue to burst and erupt, I retreat into myself momentarily to reflect on my time with the Senior Business class. I grin at our fake arguments about the best living football player, and the students' 'lightbulb moments' during discussions. I giggle at the child-like excitement and sense of competition during game-based learning activities, and the nicknames we'd bestowed each other.

Lost in my thoughts, I nearly miss the group of Tate-admirers sauntering down the red carpet. Arriving as a pack, they each take turns showcasing different displays of machismo, chortling to themselves while thumping their own and each other's chests. When they reach the end of the carpet where the photographer is, they coordinate a pose with Tate's 'power-up' hand gesture without prompting.

As they continue to flex and laugh among themselves, I shake my head at the pitch-perfect performance of harmful homosociality on display.<sup>16</sup> I recognise that the current display accrues male homosocial currency, helping them accumulate access to hegemonic masculinity. I recognise that for these privileged students, it's an enactment of specific components of Tate's masculinist archetypes used to 'present socially' (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024). I recognise, too, that in deploying these Tate-inspired mannerisms, the group continued to weaponise toxic forms of hegemonic masculinity to assert dominance and wield power (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024), even out of the classroom.

Head bowed and shoulders slumped, I'm conscious that my failure with these schoolboys after an entire year of teaching had disrupted the 'right story' (Lather 1998) of what effective pedagogy should look like, and wonder "what to do next" in academic [and pedagogical] work that hopes to be of use in struggles for social justice' (488).

## Discussion

### *Tate and the manosphere in the Australian classroom*

Through our respective stories on the enactment of feminist pedagogies against the manosphere-fuelled resurgence of toxic masculinity in our classrooms, we show how gender is 'simultaneously relational, contingent, interactive, reliant on recognition and mastery of gendered norms – and also institutionally formed and regulated' (Gannon, Higham, and Smith 2024, 837) in Australian schools. In this paper, we have captured many existing concerns in the still nascent – but vital – body of work exploring the impact of influencers in Australian education, including how Andrew Tate, as part of a broader contemporary phenomenon of the manosphere, is not only conjured up in classrooms, but also lionized. In this conjuring, we see how schoolboys mobilize warped hegemonic masculine notions of humour to legitimise Tate as idol and focal subject matter, how his projected image of a 'good, hard working and savvy businessman' is regurgitated in highly uncritical ways, and how Tate's rhetoric and mannerisms function as strong homosocial currency between boys. We see, too, in line with the trivialization and individualization of women's experiences (Keddie 2007) that belie deeply (and historically) entrenched sexism in schools, how teaching against Tate is unsurprisingly met with denial and dismissal. Similarly, our stories shed light on how boys' invocation of Tate reflects and reifies macro patterns of sexism and a skewed sense of the gender order.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper (and our guidelines for praxis in writing critical collaborative autoethnography that aims to challenge processes of (gendered) domination (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016)) we acknowledge – and in some cases, have lived experiences with – other concerns to do with manosphere sexism in schools as captured in the literature. This includes schoolboys' delegitimization of female teaching authority (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024), and schools' complicity in sexism through silencing or a lack of teaching colleague and leadership support (Zhao et al. 2025). Because of

this, we agree wholeheartedly that “schools need to deal with the construction of various masculinities and their relationships with femininities to really move towards gender equity for all” (Mills and Keddie 2007; as cited in Keddie 2007, 33).

### ***(Re)turning to feminist pedagogies***

Our stories also shed light on the ways that feminist pedagogies are shaped by women teachers’ internalized awareness of how patriarchal expectations skew the fairness of the pedagogical playing field, and how leveraging specific teachable moments might inculcate a sense of critical literacy in students towards Tate and his ilk. Further, our stories elaborate on pedagogical strategies that can be mobilized – with varying success – to speak back to sexism in the classroom. As feminist educators, we find it generative to linger on this point. While feminist pedagogies are crucial in ‘problematiz[ing] the masculine and masculinizing structures and processes of schooling’ (Keddie 2007, 23), its enactment is unfortunately also riddled with complexity. Within our conservative Independent (ex-)school, there was the ‘struggle of doing feminist work in contexts in which feminism can be seen as a threat to the status quo’ (Elwell and Buchanan 2021, 161) – a double bind where the very naming of sexism – that necessarily presupposes its disassembling (Roberts and Wescott 2024) – is taboo. Within our feminist classrooms, we are aware that feminist pedagogy cannot afford to ‘assume that all classrooms are alike ... [As such,] it does not automatically preclude any technique or approach ... [and] it is not limited to any specific subject matter but it does include a reflexive element’ (Shrewbury, 1987, as cited in Elwell and Buchanan 2021, 164). Seen from Roseanna’s vignette, student-teacher power-sharing is a ‘dynamic entity in flux’ (Elwell and Buchanan 2021, 158) – this necessitates balance between maintaining order without silencing, while also taking risks, to ‘transform the curriculum so it does not reflect biases that reinforce systems of domination’ (hooks 1994, 21). Further, tension and discomfort must be sensitively negotiated as the normative gender hierarchy of the classroom is disrupted and as seen from our vignettes, can cause conflict and discomfort (Elwell and Buchanan 2021). Consequently, it is crucial to (strategically and precariously) manage the dynamics of in-class discussions through a balance of allowing students to feel heard, without perpetuating damaging discourses circulated either through classroom dialogue or unconscious masculinist models of teaching (Elwell and Buchanan 2021).

Of course, as seen from Aaron’s experience at the school formal and Roseanna’s (ongoing) conversation with the boys in her English class, our transgressive pedagogies might not go according to plan. Sometimes, they might even become unstuck and fail. Despite our best efforts at disrupting discourses of masculinity that spoke our respective schoolboys into existence (Connell 2005), the obstinacy of white patriarchal gendered biases that pervade Australian schools continues to endure. To that end, we suggest that beyond the natural reaction of ‘feelings of anger ... and disappointment with men’ (hooks 2014, 192), our feminist praxis *must* embrace a ‘stuckedness’ with/in the ‘necessary misfirings of pedagogy’ (Lather and Ellsworth 1996, 1). This necessitates the pursuit of constant movement, of never finishing, defining, and of not being sure; one which appreciates the ‘between space of any knowing that will make a difference in the expansion in social justice and the canons of value toward which we aspire’ (Lather 1998, 495).

### **Male teachers and anti-sexist allyship**

Considering white Australia's hyper-masculinist context and the ubiquity of manfluencer content – which emphasizes hegemonically masculine traits such as assertiveness, physical prowess, and sexual conquest – that has amplified school-based sexism and misogyny, we argue that male teachers have a unique deconstructive response-ability (Barad 2010) to take up a feminist mantle. We acknowledge – per Aaron's opening vignette – that, even without witnessing blatant sexism, there are still tangible tensions for male teachers around being liked, or perhaps, uncertainties with how to best respond.

Nevertheless, accounting for the entanglement of gendered relations, we are issuing this call-to-action because 'feminism provides both women and men with an extraordinarily powerful analytic prism through which to understand their lives, and a political and moral imperative to transform the unequal conditions of those relationships' (Kimmel 1998, 61). We agree with Kimmel (1998) that this is an ethical imperative, and with hooks (2014) that there is an indisputable urgency for men to persist with a clear, socially just, feminist focus that challenges the patriarchy. Importantly, we see Aaron's students' stubborn reification of Tate's misogyny at the formal as a germane lesson and reminder of the urgency of rupturing and renouncing membership in the club of masculinity, and risking fears of rejection when confronting male students (Kimmel 1998).

Of course, male teachers adopting feminist pedagogy must be mindful to not 'involuntarily appropriate the term which does not belong to [them] and to which [they are] not entitled' (Prasad et al. 2020, 1592), while remaining aware that no teacher is free of these learned and internalized sexist oppressions (Ellsworth 1989). Accordingly, we suggest that such allyship needs to actively engage with female leadership (hooks 1994) but also be willing to continue to press along with a 'degree of lived, articulated ambivalence' (Prasad et al. 2020, 1589). As Kimmel (1998) argues, men are 'necessary, but not sufficient elements' in the fight for gender equality (68), and as such, feminist pedagogical practice alongside female teaching colleagues is necessarily an ongoing lifelong process (Burrell and Flood 2019). Put differently, male teachers need to proceed with a posture of humility that simultaneously recognises that male involvement is central to changing gendered cultures and practices where boys/men positively influence the views and behaviour of other boys/men, but that it is also 'not men's place to make claims about which direction the women's movement should take' (Burrell and Flood 2019, 239). Indeed, we challenge all male school leaders and teaching colleagues to reflect on our charge here to ensure they are not 'speaking too loudly, too frequently, or with assumed author-ity' (Prasad et al. 2020, 1591).

### **Conclusion**

As microcosms of society, schools function as crucial sites for the cultivation and negotiation of healthy masculinities. Unfortunately, however, the growing influence of the manosphere and manfluencers like Tate, amplified by digital platforms, introduces new dynamics that exacerbate the marginalization of women and non-binary individuals, reinforcing traditional power structures and inhibiting gender equity within school spaces. As we have explicated in this paper, feminist pedagogies are one way to push back against the vitriol of hegemonic masculine norms, upholding possibilities for 'practice to a future

that must remain to come' (Lather 1998, 497). While we have not exhausted the toolbox of pedagogical strategies that fall under this 'big tent' in the context of ingrained yet contemporary Tate-fuelled sexism – something that future research might look at – we are excited by the transformative promise that feminist pedagogy holds as it actively avoids 'conventional paradigms of domination [that] reinforce and maintain [masculine] power' (hooks 1994, 105). We thus encourage schoolteachers and school leaders – in Australia and beyond – to seize the liberatory potential of feminist pedagogy which is engaged in not only speaking back to injustice and empowering students, but, as a holistic model of learning, creates an environment where teachers themselves grow and are empowered in the process of its enactment (hooks 1994). We further encourage future feminist pedagogy practitioners to negotiate such strategies with regard for their own context and with careful reflection of their relevance and effectiveness (Elwell and Buchanan 2021), and perhaps most importantly, to do so with a vision of classrooms as locations of possibility for radical transformation and discursive change (hooks 1994).

## Notes

1. As Elwell and Buchanan (2021) and hooks (1994) explain, feminist educators share personal stories of their lives with their students, forming authentic connections on which their relationships are built.
2. We use the terms male or female-presenting – and schoolboys or girls as shorthand respectively – in this paper vis-à-vis Butler's (1988) notion of gender as a "constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (p.520).
3. While not the central focus of our paper, I highlight race explicitly here in line with our intersecting anti-sexist, anti-racist sensibilities which we discuss briefly later, and to reveal how intersecting identity markers coalesce to uphold white patriarchal supremacy.
4. Channelling Barad (2010), I am referring to response-ability as a deconstructive move, an ongoing process of accounting for, and being accountable to the absent yet present knowledge-practices that continuously (re)produce education, whether they are problematic or full of possibility. Response-ability is the double(d) process of (re)opening spaces of responsiveness to enact that responsibilities towards the co-constitutive relationships we are always already entangled in.
5. In the absence of Australian data, a recent Safer Schools Northern Ireland (2023) report indicated that boys as young as 11 are quoting Tate.
6. A similar incident in an Independent Victorian school recently made the news: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-06/sexist-offensive-student-list-melbourne-yarra-valley-grammar/103808062>
7. Independent schools are diverse non-government schools for various communities, which are funded by Federal and State Governments and through school fees/other contributions from the community. Queensland's Independent school enrolments comprise 16.2% of all school-age children (Independent Schools Queensland, n.d.).
8. We have omitted references to the Code of Conduct and Anti-Discrimination Policy to maintain anonymity but take up Zhao et al.'s (2025) concerns that "schools evading using precise language has material implications for this issue, as an avoidance of recording behaviour accurately means an absence of data and recordkeeping that might illustrate the scope of the problem". Indeed, without the right language, capturing all sexist behaviour - Tate-related or otherwise - merely as disrespect renders "women's accounts become purely anecdotal and therefore able to be derided as unreliable testimony" (p.14).
9. Sexism has compelled me to "model a femininity that does not ascribe to dominant stereotypes but rather one that seeks to challenge these stereotypes" (Keddie 2007, 27), and,

drawing on hooks (1994) when teaching, I often “take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material” and wider societal issues (p.21).

10. Based on an awareness that many (male) teachers often blame women who experience bad classroom behaviour from schoolboys attributed to a supposed inability to enforce discipline or lack of ‘masculine’ qualities needed to manage (older) schoolboys in the classroom (Robinson 2000). As Zhao and colleagues (2024) highlight, respect/authority is not automatically ascribed to women and femininity, and incidents of harassment/other negative behaviours “are inflected by intersections between gender and other forms of social power” (p.11).
11. My preference here draws on feminist pedagogies which include student-led discussion and relating personal experiences to curriculum content as part of power-sharing and valuing dialogic student-teacher experiences (hooks 1994).
12. A prime example of Tate’s influence on skewed concepts of masculinity vis-a-vis a hardworking ‘battler’ archetype which encourages patronising sexist behaviour (Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024).
13. An instance where my “feminism informs [my] teaching and allows [me] to capitalise on (feminist) teachable moments” (Elwell and Buchanan 2021, 165)
14. Part of a broader call to educate young people with a critical (digital) literacy that problematizes manfluencers’ business models and related gendered disinformation (Haslop et al. 2024).
15. A.k.a., a school prom.
16. The bonds between men where elements of hegemonic masculinity are resisted, reified, or complicitly taken up, and where Tate’s tropes - often masked as humour - function as “potent homosocial currencies for boys” (Haslop et al. 2024, 1).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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