

genders, bodies, politics

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Sexism and violence in the neoliberal university

This is the text of a keynote speech delivered at the [Sexual Harassment in Higher Education conference](#) at Goldsmiths on December 2nd 2015. Content note for sexually violent language and descriptions of traumatic experiences.

I want to talk about markets. Education markets, institutional markets, sexual markets: brought together by similar modes of assessment and audit. University league tables; module evaluation forms; 'sex charts' in student residences. Hierarchies of performance (which are often hierarchies of masculinity) at national, institutional and individual levels.

Rate your university. Rate your lecturer. Rate Your Shag.

2013 saw the emergence of a number of Facebook pages under the latter slogan, linked to universities across the country. They offered a space for students to give sexual liaisons marks out of ten based on any criteria, and were ['liked' by about 20,000 users](#) of the social network in the first 72 hours. The activity was supposed to be anonymous, but privacy quickly evaporated under the instruction to 'name them, shame them and if you must, praise them.'

Name them and shame them. All the pages were rapidly deleted by Facebook, deemed to contravene its policies on bullying and harassment. Unsolicited evaluation *is* bullying and harassment. Unsolicited evaluation is also very often gendered – women are appraised, men do the appraising. Although students of

all genders had been encouraged to post, much of the Rate Your Shag content consisted of men rating women on criteria drawn from heteronormative and objectified constructions of femininity.

'Was like shagging her mouth, best blowjob in [the city]. Eight out of ten.'

'Nought out of ten. Shit body and one heavy dose of Chlamydia. Get checked love.'

Rate Your Shag forms part of a whole lexicon of activities which in the past few years have been grouped under the banner of 'lad culture'. Sports initiations, 'pimps and hos' parties, the 'fuck a fresher' frenzy, for example. Such pursuits express traditional forms of sexism and male entitlement, but they are also inflected with something else. ['Sex charts'](#) are appearing in student residences, to quantify and assess conquests. Women are being given grades and ratings for their physical appeal. Men are scoring ['points' for sexual 'achievements'](#) – such as 'slipping a finger in on the dance floor', and 'bedding a virgin – with blood to prove it.' These [forms of sexual audit](#) evoke our contemporary marketised environment. 'Lad culture' and neoliberal culture are natural bedfellows.

Unsolicited evaluation is bullying and harassment. Constant evaluation is bullying and harassment. Contemporary 'lad culture' was defined by [one of my research participants](#) as a 'hostile environment where everyone is judging everyone else.' This also describes cultures amongst higher education staff, alienated by institutional and sectoral frameworks that constantly measure them against each other and against the curve. This evaluation is gendered: men continue to hold most of the positions of power in the sector, definitions of 'success' prioritise research (coded as masculine) over teaching and admin (coded as feminine), and criteria for assessment exercises such as the REF favour modes of [scholarship and impact](#) which reward the confidence, time and freedom to take risks and consistently self-promote.

A [UCU survey](#) in 2012 found that bullying and harassment between staff in universities was rife. This reflects both traditional hierarchies and abuses of power, and newer forms of competitive individualism which lack empathy and ethics. The university has become a dog-eat-dog environment; this is reflected in

both staff and student communities. We know less about the prevalence of staff-on-student harassment, due to the [institutionalised power relations](#) which work against it even being named. However, [we know it exists](#): and high profile examples, mostly from the US, give a sense of how these modes of violence work.

Consider the case of [famous Berkeley astronomer Geoff Marcy](#), a potential Nobel laureate who persistently violated the institution's sexual harassment policies between 2001 and 2010. According to one student's account, she was at a department dinner when Marcy slid his hand up her thigh and grabbed her crotch.

For many women, this entitlement to touch is familiar. Such 'everyday' boundary-crossings are also central to 'lad culture', although more often performed in public as part of group one-upmanship. Many of my research participants described such 'casual groping' as part and parcel of a normal night out. Indeed, such behaviours have become so commonplace that they are often invisible: instead, the aspect of 'lad culture' which has captured the media and public consciousness is its cruel and shocking 'banter'. This laddish language taps both the violence of hypermasculinity and the callousness of the neoliberal climate.

'Uni Lad does not condone rape without saying 'surprise.'"

Non-consensual sex is 'fun for one.'

I'm going out to 'get some gash.'

The marketised university is a culture based on 'having' or 'getting' (grades and/or jobs), in which education has become a transactional exchange. This is reflected in the rather estranged 'lad cultures' I have studied, with older ideas about 'having' women augmented by newer notions of accumulating sexual capital. The principle of maximum outcomes for minimal effort which now underpins educational consumption also animates the quest for an 'easy lay'.

I'm going out to 'get some gash'.

In laddish ‘banter’, ancient expressions of woman-hating co-exist with more modern sexualised consumerism, packaged up in postmodern claims to irony. Such ‘banter’ has also been observed amongst some faculty cultures – for instance, the Being a Woman in Philosophy blog, a repository for stories of sexism in the discipline, recounts a [comic containing a rape joke](#) being sent to a junior faculty member by a philosopher at another institution, copied to all the other members of her department. In [another entry](#), a recent philosophy graduate recalls a conversation about a job application essay with her previous head of department, in which chose to illustrate a point about how two people’s wills could conflict with the example of him raping her. Finally, in a post entitled [‘a sampling of minor incidents’](#), another student describes a faculty member stopping his lecture to ask her, ‘did you just flash me?’ because she adjusted her cardigan, and a famous professor discussing with male students which female students were ‘hot’ and which were ‘dogs’.

In this context, it’s perhaps unsurprising that University of Miami philosophy professor Colin McGinn, said to have subjected a female doctoral student to months of unwanted innuendo and propositions, [defined the relationship](#) as ‘warm, consensual’ and ‘full of banter’.

Don’t worry – it’s just banter.

What is the line between ‘banter’ and sexual harassment? In my research on ‘lad cultures’ amongst students, and also in media debates, the second has often been reduced to the first. There has also been a refusal to engage with how speech itself can be harmful, and how the realm of the symbolic can frame structural and embodied violence – instead, we often find ourselves on the back foot in debates about men’s rights to ‘cause offence’. Women are always getting offended by something or other.

In 2012, the Imperial College newspaper Felix published a ‘joke’ article providing male students with a recipe for the date rape drug rohypnol, as a ‘foolproof way’ to have sex on Valentine’s Day. The previous year an Exeter University society printed a ‘shag mag’ including an article speculating about how many calories a

man could burn by stripping a woman naked without her consent.

When the Facebook page 'Holyland Lad Stories' (currently 'liked' by almost 30,000 users) was criticised on Twitter, its curators responded 'get a fucking grip – we're having a bit of harmless banter.' Amongst the content highlighted as problematic was a post describing an incident in which a man had knocked a woman 'clean out with one smack' and left her for dead on the side of the road.

Get a fucking grip – [it's just banter](#).

To 'offend' with impunity is a function and exercise of privilege. This applies to the invisibilising and excusing of sexual violence perpetrated by middle class white men, and the insistence of all privileged groups that their ignorant, hurtful and harmful comments about marginalised people are 'just my opinion' or 'just a joke.' It is a cruel irony that only those with the social, cultural and political power to hurt other groups get to evade responsibility for it. This irony was recently painfully apparent when Goldsmith's Welfare and Diversity Officer Bahar Mustafa was [arrested and charged](#) for allegedly tweeting on the #killallwhitemen hashtag. The discrepancy between the punitive treatment of Bahar and the amused indulgence of laddish 'banter' is a stark reminder of the ways in which 'free speech' is the property of some and not others.

Kill all white men.

It's not rape if you shout 'surprise'.

Structural relations of gender and race inequality render one of these a much more credible threat than the other. Indeed, they make the first statement an understandable expression of frustration about a racist and misogynist society, while the second is evidence of it. Nevertheless, the political hyperbole of 'killallwhitemen' became a crime, while laddish banter is [defended as an exercise of freedom](#).

Oh, get a fucking grip – it's just banter.

The privilege to offend is often wielded in response to privilege being threatened: in this, contemporary 'laddish' masculinities are marked out from working class laddism, which has been seen as more to do with alienation. The main players in the recent theatre of student laddism in the UK are middle class and white, progeny of the 1990s 'new lad' and the Bullingdon Club toffs. These rugby players, drinking and debating society 'bros' are also siblings of the frat boys in the US who are central to debates there about campus violence.

The aggressive sexism these privileged men perpetrate in student social spaces can be defined as a 'strategic misogyny'. Sexual harassment very often functions to preserve [masculine power and space](#). Our 'uni lads' enact the backlash against feminism, embodying populist and policy concerns about the 'crisis of masculinity' and the 'feminisation' of HE. Feminism has gone too far.

Contemporary laddism is a defensive strategy by those accustomed to topping the ranks, threatened by both the reality and the hyperbole of women's achievement, the idea and practice of 'widening participation' and the increasingly blurred lines (no pun intended) of gender and sexuality amongst student and youth cultures. Laddism is an equal-opportunity offender, rooted in sexism but often incorporating [racism](#), [classism](#), [transphobia and homophobia](#) as well.

Feminism has gone too far.

Boys need to be protected.

There is evidence that in reaction to these ideas (and also in fear of their 'disruptive' working class and black contemporaries), white middle class boys are being [hothouseed by parents](#) who see them as frail and imperilled. Boys need to be protected.

This propensity to feel threatened is palpable in both 'lad culture's unmistakable 'woman rage' and the way critics of laddish behaviours have been vilified as [censorious, creepy](#) and a [menace to freedom](#). We must catch the grain of truth here – feminist initiatives, especially in the area of anti-violence, have sometimes

been co-opted by prevailing [moral panics and carceral projects](#). However, first and foremost laddish defensiveness is part of the anti-feminist backlash, and a dialectic between student communities perceived as excessively 'politically correct' because of their advocacy for the marginalised, and the privileged who experience this liberatory politics as oppression. *They* are not to be evaluated.

They just can't say *anything* any more.

Oh, get a fucking grip – it's just banter.

A similar reformulation of critique and resistance as oppression has been identified by Sara Ahmed in the way that some male academics have responded to equality initiatives in higher education. Anti-discrimination, sexual harassment and other diversity policies can be resisted alongside more problematic new managerialist reforms which threaten scholarly autonomy. Elite male professors become the victims within narratives of restricted freedom and nostalgia for a '[simpler time](#)' when their rights to do as they wished [were not curtailed](#). Feminism has gone too far. Political correctness is out of control.

As [Ahmed argues](#), these critiques often settle on 'complaining' students who are seen as entitled and demanding, even in their appeals for equality. This location of neoliberalism in the consumerist student serves to hide the fact that, as [Whitley and Page](#) contend, academics also benefit from new bureaucratic regimes which cement their [power over students](#) and make it difficult for students to speak out.

The costs of speaking out are illustrated in a heartbreaking [post](#) by a PhD student on the Being a Woman in Philosophy blog:

I just want to caution those of you out there who are thinking about coming forward to report sexual predators. Expect your department to turn on you; expect your department to retaliate against you. Expect to be bad mouthed at every PhD program to which you apply. Expect to lose your committee. Expect to lose your letter writers. Expect your department to withdraw all support from you. Expect to become persona non grata. Expect to be de facto barred from all opportunities in your department.

Expect to be gas-lighted. Expect people to be thrilled to watch your fall from grace. And, then, when you succeed, against all odds, and despite the prodigious efforts of your department to the contrary, through sheer force of will and talent, expect your department to exploit your success at every opportunity. Expect to watch as your success is used to further the career of the predator. Expect them to ignore your pleas to stop. Expect this.

In an article about being sexually harassed by her PhD supervisor, [Susan Gardner writes](#) that once she changed supervisors she was disappointed to find that her new one was not keen to support her or even discuss what she had been through, ostensibly for fear that it might impact on her ability to get tenure. In this country, similar structures of probation and performance management can make colleagues reluctant to step out of line. Furthermore, the developing '[pressure-cooker culture](#)' for senior colleagues and fears about casualisation for junior ones have created an individualism which may mean that academics turn a blind eye to difficult issues while trying to keep our jobs (at best) and advance our careers (at worst).

I began my research and activism on sexual violence against students around ten years ago, and was immediately struck by how difficult it was to get colleagues (of any gender) to show interest in, let alone take action on, issues which did not directly affect them. I have vivid memories of giving a talk to a meeting of mostly senior women, in which the customary noises of outrage failed to materialise as action. In contrast, shortly afterwards I was inundated with input and offers of help as I drafted a consultation document around maternity leave and the REF.

I am not taking the moral high ground or pointing the finger; there are plenty of issues I have overlooked. Individuals are not to blame for this, especially not women and academics from other marginalised groups for whom university life is still a struggle. The constant evaluation of the neoliberal regime makes it difficult for us look up from our desks, let alone take on the institution in what is usually a losing battle. Constant evaluation creates silence.

Higher education markets, epitomised by league tables, ensure that bullying, harassment and violence are minimised and rendered invisible. They become a

PR issue, hushed up for the sake of recruitment and reputation. In a context of widespread denial, nobody wants to risk their campus being defined as 'unsafe'. In the US, despite a [legislative framework](#) mandating the publication of campus crime statistics which is more than 20 years old, institutions [continue to be criticised](#) for covering these up, or encouraging students to drop complaints, in order to preserve their market position.

The result of this is what Ahmed has pointed out: bringing a problem to institutional attention frequently means [becoming the problem](#). This operates at multiple levels, from departmental micro-politics to the rather grandiose idea of 'bringing the university into disrepute.' [Feminist killjoys](#) and whinging women are bringing the university into disrepute – as if the prevalence of violence in the higher education sector has not brought us all into disrepute already.

We are all in disrepute already!

Amidst this denial and silencing, it is not surprising that only 4 per cent of women students experiencing serious sexual assault [report to their institutions](#). [Whitley and Page](#) add that the stress and opacity of complaints processes is also a deterrent to reporting, and the demands of student support systems can make it difficult for victims not to just drop out.

Furthermore, trends towards the [outsourcing of essential services](#) such as campus security and [student support](#) threaten student safety and the quality of pastoral care. Commercial service providers tend to offer one-size-fits-all solutions, set within cost-cutting business models. This is a particularly bleak picture in relation to [student counselling](#), already outsourced in Northern Ireland, where burned out practitioners on depressed wages are offering a reduced range of services in a context of growing psychological demand.

In the neoliberal university though, it's all about the bottom line. Supporting students costs money. Complaining students cost reputation (and threaten income streams). There is a cost/benefit equation here.

But whose cost counts?

Sexual harassment and violence in higher education are situated within cost/benefit frameworks which prioritise the welfare of the institution. Incidents must be hushed up lest they jeopardise our recruitment. Incidents must be hushed up lest they damage our reputation. [‘A Star Philosopher Falls’](#) was the way Colin McGinn, who resigned after allegations of ongoing sexual harassment, was described.

Allegations of sexual harassment and violence pose a cost to the institution. But who pays the price?

Victims and survivors do: most of them women. This price is high. It could be the loss of departmental support for research, the breakdown of a supervisory team, or the inability to go on to campus for fear of running into the perpetrator. Often, the [price is so high](#) that it is less costly to leave. There is a term for this – institutional betrayal – and it has been shown to hugely exacerbate trauma. That’s the bottom line – we are betraying our students.

In an [article in Time Magazine](#), Emma Sulkowicz, the Columbia University student who carried her mattress around campus for 8 months to protest against the handling of her rape complaint, described her experience as follows:

Every day, I am afraid to leave my room. Even seeing people who look remotely like my rapist scares me. Last semester I was working in the dark room in the photography department. Though my rapist wasn’t in my class, he asked permission from his teacher to come and work in the dark room during my class time. I started crying and hyperventilating. As long as he’s on campus with me, he can continue to harass me.

We are betraying these students.

Institutional betrayal does not just refer to responses to sexual assault, but the fact that universities actively create conditions which are conducive to it. This can be [experienced as a betrayal](#) more acute than the lack of institutional response. As Sulkowicz said of Columbia: ‘they’re more concerned about their public image

than keeping people safe.'

We are definitely betraying these students.

We are also shirking our legal responsibilities – according to the [End Violence Against Women Coalition](#), the Public Sector Equality Duty and Human Rights Act both mandate universities to deal with gender-based and sexual violence.

How do we move forward? The student movement in this country is consistently showing us the way – under the leadership of and inspired by the [NUS Women's Campaign](#), we now have consent education initiatives, bystander intervention training, awareness-raising projects, 'zero tolerance' pledges, and an effort to develop better policies and procedures. However, most of this activity is student-run: many institutions have yet to take any action at all.

In September this year, the Business Secretary asked Universities UK to [convene a task force](#) to tackle 'lad culture' and violence against women on university campuses. This task force has been tasked with developing a code of practice for institutions to support cultural change.

Support cultural change. This is a big idea. We need to think big on this.

Sexual harassment and violence in the higher education sector is primarily about gender. We need to think big about gender, confronting misogyny and male entitlement in our university communities, and connecting them with gendered norms and inequalities in society at large. We need to think big about how gender intersects with other power structures and oppressions: the racism, classism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia of 'lad culture' are evidence of this. Thinking big about gender also requires us to acknowledge that although women are very often its victims, sexual and gender-based violence affects students of all genders. There is [evidence from the US suggesting](#) that transgender, genderqueer, gender non-conforming and gender questioning students who do not identify as women face high levels of risk: this is a gender issue.

We also need to engage with neoliberalism, as it shapes the higher education sector in general and institutions in particular. Sexual harassment and violence in higher education is situated within the culture of constant evaluation. Gender relations are practised via the marketised and managerialist structures of the university, which aggravate inter-group resentments, exacerbate the abuse of hierarchies, and intensify the silencing of victims.

We cannot tackle sexism and violence in the higher education sector properly without looking honestly at neoliberal values and how these shape dysfunctional and harmful communities. Constant evaluation facilitates bullying and harassment. Constant evaluation *is* bullying and harassment.

Finally, we need to be aware of the risk that anti-violence initiatives will get caught up in, and depoliticised by, that culture of monitoring and evaluation. Let's set a target. Let's tick that box. Let's run a [workshop](#) and put it in the Annual Report. We need to resist the temptation to get our house in order, to [perform](#) what should shake the institution to its core. Although effective advocacy often involves compromise, women have been put in enough compromising positions already. It will take more than this.

Let's not just get our house in order. Let's tear the whole damn building down. Who's with me?

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