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## **Reckoning up: Sexual harassment and violence in the neoliberal university**

### Abstract

This paper situates sexual harassment and violence in the neoliberal university. Using data from a 'composite ethnography' representing twelve years of research, I argue that institutional inaction on these issues reflects how they are 'reckoned up' in the context of gender and other structures. The impact of disclosure is projected in market terms: this produces *institutional airbrushing* which protects both the institution and those (usually privileged men) whose welfare is bound up with its success. Staff and students are differentiated by *power/value* relations, which interact with gender and intersecting categories. Survivors are often left with few alternatives to speaking out in the 'outrage economy' of the corporate media: however, this can support institutional airbrushing and bolster punitive technologies. I propose the method of Grounded Action Inquiry, implemented with attention to Lorde's work on anger, as a parrhesiastic practice of 'speaking in' to the neoliberal institution.

### A 'composite ethnography' of sexual harassment and violence

Starting in the 1980s, the sexual victimisation of women students has been studied across all regions of the world (see Phipps 2017a for an indicative list). Initial studies were often psychological and individualistic, focused on motivations of male perpetrators, acceptance of 'rape myths' and experiences of post-traumatic stress. There has also been a strong thread of feminist theorising framed by the concept of patriarchy (see for example Warshaw 1988, Sanday 1990), and more recently, attempts to contextualise campus violence within theories of masculinity (see for example Kimmel 2009, Chrisler et al 2012, Stead 2017). However, there has been very little work which explores in depth how sexual harassment and violence is framed by the structures, cultures and practices of the neoliberal university. This paper hopes to contribute some tools which will facilitate such an analysis.

The first national study of sexual violence in UK universities was the 2010 NUS report *Hidden Marks*, a survey of just over 2000 women students which found that 1 in 7 of the sample had experienced a serious physical or sexual assault during their studies, and 68 per cent had experienced sexual harassment.<sup>1</sup> I had been working on sexual violence against students locally before *Hidden Marks*, and was engaged as a consultant on the report: following it, NUS commissioned me to lead further work on 'lad culture' and its links to sexual harassment and assault. Conducted in 2012, this study recruited 40 participants. We held four focus groups in major cities in the north east, north west and south west of England and in Scotland, and conducted interviews with students from a range of English universities. Our report, entitled *That's What She Said*, was released in 2013.

In 2015, my research continued with a commission from an elite British university to investigate how its culture facilitated ‘laddish’ and other problematic behaviours. The resulting project was a year-long case-study. The research team collected data from around 250 staff and students using mixed methods including a survey, interviews and focus groups. We used this dataset to inform the implementation of Action Inquiry, an organisational development technique in which groups engage in cycles of discussion, action and reflection on particular issues or questions. We conducted 32 hours of this, across four groups of up to 10 staff and students. Inquirers explored themes from our initial data analysis referring to aspects of institutional culture (for instance, *power* and *entitlement*). Sessions consisted of discussions and a range of activities, which promoted inquirers’ understandings of their universities as complex systems, and their own roles within them. We did not collect data, but evidence from the sessions such as photographs and post-it notes was used alongside our main dataset to inform our final analysis. The Action Inquiry process was also used to develop capacities within the institution to create cultural change. In 2017, our team (by this time the Changing University Cultures collective) repeated this study on a larger scale at a radical 1960s university, collecting data from around 900 staff and students and conducting 112 hours of Action Inquiry.

During both these projects I was also co-directing a major multinational intervention funded by the European Commission, focused on training university staff across 6 European countries to respond to disclosures of sexual violence. Our team developed, piloted and evaluated seven unique training models at over 20 different institutions. In addition to co-leading the broader project, I led one of the local interventions at two British universities (one 1960s and one post-1992), which involved a pre-training climate analysis using a survey and focus groups (involving over 300 staff and students in total), the delivery of training to around 160 university staff, and post-training evaluation.

The data from all these projects, together with other case studies from the UK and overseas, underpin the analysis in this paper. This combined dataset comprises approximately 3150 survey responses, 161 focus groups, 150 interviews and 144 hours of Action Inquiry at a significant number of institutions.<sup>ii</sup> I term this a ‘composite ethnography’, based on my research in this area over the past twelve years. I do not attempt to reshape my different research projects into a larger construction (for instance, for comparative purposes), and in a short narrative I am able only to present ‘snapshots’ from this combined dataset. However, this composite ethnography offers rich insights, and my years of research in the field have convinced me that a key factor in institutional inaction is how sexual harassment and violence are ‘reckoned up’ in the context of gender and intersecting inequalities.

I am not going to name the institutions I have studied: I suggest that if we are going to encourage universities to act on these issues, we need to avoid this approach. I will argue that institutional reputation plays a major role in how sexual harassment and violence are dealt with, and although I wish to name and interrupt that process, it would not be fair to expose particular institutions while the rest of the sector continues to operate in this way. To ‘name and shame’ specific universities might allow others to pretend they do not have similar problems (and to enjoy the attendant market benefits), when it is now well-established that sexual harassment and violence

occur across higher education. The data I present here may therefore appear decontextualised – at points I have obscured details which may identify individual institutions. There is a need for deeper work on institutional cultures and how they refract gender and other power relations and shape bullying, harassment and violence, but until more universities are active in self-analysis it will not be possible to do this in the open.

### Neoliberalism in higher education

Neoliberalism is a slippery concept. It has been called a ‘loose signifier’ (Brown 2015, 20) and a ‘detached signifier’ (Ball 2012, 18) due to its complexity, incoherence and instability. Perhaps this is why it is often a ‘catch-all’, invoked to explain anything we feel is too big to understand or that we dislike. It operates as an economic framework, a managerial system, and a motif deployed in ways which transcend left/right political boundaries. Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a process by which capital has harnessed state power to preserve itself, often to the detriment of labour. In neoliberal systems, the role of the state is to safeguard the market through deregulation and privatisation: the rhetoric is that the social good will be ensured by the unfettered operation of market forces (McNay 2009). This makes democratic state commitments subordinate to economic ones, supporting what Lynch (2013) identifies as a shift of discourse from rights and needs to markets and ‘choices’. Market principles are cascaded into the social realm, affecting education, healthcare, transport and other public sectors (McNay 2009, 60). This sustains a rationality in which everything is understood through the metaphor of capital. We are all expected to maximise our speculative value within various systems of rating and ranking: we become what Brown, citing Foucault, calls a ‘portfolio of enterprises’ (Brown in Shenk 2015).

The university is a key neoliberal institution (Lynch 2013; Rudd & Goodson 2017). It supplies knowledge commodities for ‘self-betterment’, economic growth, and to support state relations with capital. It is not surprising that market logics have strong purchase here. They are evident in the metrics we labour under, the emphasis on higher education as an investment with a return, the ideas of student as consumer and lecturer as commodity, and the frameworks which (perhaps contradictorily) situate us all as human capital (see Brown 2015). They also frame various modes of competition (Burke 2015). Externally, we compete for students and research grants in order to survive. Internally, we are set against each other as rivals rather than colleagues (Giroux 2002). Hierarchies of performance, performatively measured (Ball 2012, 19), structure our activity. The neoliberalisation of higher education sits alongside a continuation of older forms of governance, creating what Morley (2012) describes as a binary of archaism and hyper-modernism. Universities, like neoliberalism itself, deliver the discourse of a meritocratic free market but continue to work in favour of the ruling class.

Neoliberalism has been amazingly resilient: Crouch (2013) argues that following the 2008 financial crisis, it appeared to have been strengthened rather than otherwise. Rudd and Goodson (2017, 1) describe a ‘reconstituted neoliberal period’, where there have been efforts to restore and enhance privatisation and marketisation, and austerity policies to protect capital. In higher education the reassertion of neoliberalism has

opened universities up to private providers, expanded fees regimes, and birthed additional assessment exercises such as the Teaching Excellence Framework in the UK (Rudd and Goodson 2017). Academics increasingly work under the structural domination of finance capital and are required to generate ever more services and products to chase new markets (Hall 2017, 27-29). In other words, in contemporary higher education, market ideologies appear more dominant than ever. I argue that these ideologies situate harassment and violence within ‘reckonings’, in which the institutional impact of disclosure is projected and totted up. Because value in a neoliberal institution is defined in economic terms (Downs, 2017), survivors are often marked as dispensable. Neoliberal modes of value also interact with gender, race, class and other relations to ensure that some are ‘reckoned up’ differently to others.

### Institutional airbrushing

My twelve years’ work on sexual harassment and violence in higher education has taken me into a number of different institutions: elite and non-elite, urban and rural, research- and teaching-intensive. They are all similar in how they approach these issues. Of course, communities and organisations of all types tend to close ranks around alleged sexual violence perpetrators: these acts are normalised, minimised and dismissed by patriarchal gender norms and power relations (Gavey 2005) as well as complex and uneven systems of loyalty and hierarchy (Downes 2017, Keenan 2013, xxvi). However, the neoliberal shift from university as community to university as corporation (or latterly, enterprise – see Brown 2015) grants extra layers of protection, as moral obligations are subordinated to economic concerns, and subjectivities similarly reworked (Ball 2012, 20). As one of my participants commented:

*The way a contemporary university has to market itself, and monetise every...God, I hate that word...monetise everything and business model, you know, the shiny-suited people come to faculty meetings and they talk about, you know, seeking out values of entrepreneurship and...all that kind of post-Thatcherite garbage.*

On billboards and in glossy magazines, to be marketable means to appear unblemished: and the ‘brand naming’ of the university (Giroux 2002, 435) means that not only must the institution be polished (Ahmed 2017a, 102), but all flaws must be *airbrushed out*. This was highlighted by many of my participants, who identified an emphasis on maintaining a marketable appearance to the detriment of their welfare. One of my faculty participants remarked that that their institution ‘[did] not value every individual’, and ‘decisions [were] driven by money-making practices.’ Another, who worked as an administrator for senior management, said she had been surprised by the ‘focus on finances and university reputation to the detriment of staff wellbeing.’ This participant had experienced bullying in a previous role and had not received adequate support: ‘it felt’, she said, ‘like the university wanted to brush the issue under the carpet.’ A student from a different institution used the same phrase in relation to sexual violence, citing a ‘culture of sweeping issues under the carpet and dealing with them internally, which may have more to do with appearance and a desire to recruit more students, than with student welfare.’ Another student submitted the following survey response:

*In my opinion the university tries to hide sexual violence and in particular*

*rape, because they are afraid for their good reputation. If a girl reports such a crime to a member of the university staff, they will always try to distract (sic) her from reporting to the police.*

These quotes imply that issues are swept under the carpet, or flaws airbrushed out of the picture, to ensure the security of income streams: from research, from student recruitment, or both. This situates people within economic ideologies as what Duckworth et al (2016, 904) term ‘fragments of a business plan’, which relies on making the university look good. My research on sexual harassment and violence suggests that ‘blemishes’ of this sort can be airbrushed out in one of two ways: complainants may be discouraged from pursuing allegations; or allegations may be acted upon, but alleged perpetrators allowed to withdraw quietly. In the former situation, the problem is erased. In the latter, the alleged perpetrator themselves is airbrushed out, and it is sometimes made to appear as if they were never there in the first place. In this way, as Whitley and Page (2015, 47) have argued, ‘the university can maintain its reputation. All it needs to do to address the problem is to censure or remove one individual.’ The airbrushing out of alleged perpetrators requires secrecy: one of my staff participants referred to ‘this kind of centralised “hush hush, we’re not telling anybody anything”,’ and a student described how ‘the process requires you keep it confidential – it stops there and nothing happens from that.’

The latter quote refers to non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), which play a key role in institutional airbrushing (see Whitley and Page 2015 for a longer discussion of NDAs). A Freedom of Information investigation conducted by the *Guardian* newspaper in 2016-17 found that alongside the use of NDAs, some UK universities had paid compensation to students and staff, and/or given financial settlements to staff accused of sexual harassment to encourage them to resign (Batty, Weale and Bannock 2017). As I will argue later in this paper, ‘naming and shaming’ is not necessarily constructive: however, airbrushing problems out rather than tackling them merely means they are likely to re-appear elsewhere. A recent study in the US highlighted the ‘pass the harasser’ phenomenon, by which men accused of sexual harassment are allowed to ‘move on’ quietly from faculty positions only to be subject to similar allegations in new posts (Cantalupo & Kidder 2018, 40). Behaviour which is not dealt with may also escalate: one of my student participants reported an incident of stalking by a male classmate which was dismissed by her institution, after which the alleged perpetrator went on to sexually attack three women.

Institutional airbrushing reflects particular norms and values, and an attendant reconfiguration of subjectivities (Ball and Olmedo 2013), within the neoliberal university environment. Lynch (2013, 9) cites a general ‘fabrication of image over substance’, and in a context also characterised by constant monitoring and precarity which have a silencing effect (Duckworth et al 2016, 905), it is likely that sexual harassment and violence are among many issues we overlook while we try to keep our jobs (at best) or further our careers (at worst). One of my faculty participants referred to a generalised ‘pressure to de-escalate things’, and another, in a management role, clearly felt limited in her ability to tackle issues due to pressure not to speak out.

*I’ve got staff members who we have to stop acting as tutors, academic tutors, personal tutors, because of their behaviour. I had complaints from women – female students – about a particular staff member. And they’re*

*not willing to make a [formal] complaint, they just said this is how it is. And so you just gently remove [the staff member] from that duty. So it's not exactly right, but....*

The impulse to airbrush also intersects with the patriarchal normalisation and dismissal of sexual harassment and violence. This was highlighted by many of my participants, taking various forms including the circulation of persistent gendered myths about the inevitability of male sexual aggression (Paul et al 2009), and the greater value afforded, and protection given, to privileged men (which will be explored further in the next section). An extreme example of the former was a student survey respondent's description of reporting the drug-facilitated rape of a close friend by a male student in her halls of residence. Her Hall Tutor, she wrote, 'seemed to care less and assumed it was just "one of those things" and "boys being boys".' The notion of 'banter' was also seen by participants as key to minimising or denying the harms of sexual harassment. Although this is usually a feature of student cultures (see Phipps and Young 2015), similar behaviours have been associated with staff (Whitley and Page 2015). In cases where alleged perpetrators were women (of which there were several in my research), sexual aggression was often minimised via gendered ideas of 'girls squabbles', which reflects broader trends (Girshick 2002). For instance, a female faculty participant recalled being told 'you just need a break from each other', when reporting sexual harassment by a senior female academic.

The combination of gendered and intersecting structures with institutional airbrushing places the experiences and needs of survivors as secondary. In 2014, the effect of this was embodied in Columbia student Emma Sulkowicz's performance art piece 'Carry that Weight', in which they carried a mattress around campus during the final year of their degree. Sulkowicz had alleged a rape perpetrated in their dorm room by a fellow student who was found 'not responsible' by a university inquiry. Sulkowicz's mattress represents the weight of disclosure within gendered economies of sexual violence that prioritise the cost to the institution. In the neoliberal university, the impact of disclosures on the future value of the institution is more troubling than the acts of harassment and violence they may reveal. As Sulkowicz (2014) said, 'they're more concerned with their public image than with keeping people safe.' As the institution is airbrushed, the survivor experiences a 'second rape' of institutional betrayal (Smith and Freyd 2014), which exacerbates trauma and perpetrates additional boundary violations. As one of my student participants said, 'the survivor has to be the one to accommodate', often to their detriment.

Indeed, the experiences of survivors in my research have often gone beyond what could be described as 'accommodation'. In one extreme case, a student who had been assaulted described her institution's response as follows:

*Threats. Made me go to the police. Removed the only person who had been supporting me from my life (a member of non-teaching staff). Called my parents. Threatened to remove me if my grades didn't improve. Insinuated to my parents I was lying.*

Another student who had experienced stalking recounted that her university had 'allowed my stalker to make false reports about me, took me to a disciplinary tribunal and attempted to remove me from my course.' A third student, a survivor of harassment, had an initial experience of student welfare staff she described as 'totally sympathetic', but then reported being passed on to senior managers who were

‘obstructionist, skeptical and incapable of empathy.’ In particular, she said, they were ‘obsessed with categorising my complaint as criminal or not, [and] aggressively interrogatory of me.’ These quotes reveal the grotesque reality behind attempts to create a perfect picture of the institution, and highlight the price paid by survivors within gendered economies of sexual harassment and violence in which they are assigned little value.

### Power/value relations

When sexual harassment and violence are reckoned up institutionally, an impulse to airbrush may be present regardless of the identity or position of the alleged perpetrator, due to the relationship between marketability and perfection. However, in some cases this may be stronger than in others: and when complaints are made against staff, my data show that the value of a complainant tends to be substantially less than, for example, the grant income and profile of a star (and usually male) professor. Partly, these callous reckonings reflect the way marketised and financialised cultures treat us all: Ball (2012, 25), citing Radin (2001), defines fungibility as a key characteristic of commodification in HE. When things (or people) are fungible they are capable of substitution for one other, with no inherent value of their own. As one of my staff participants commented, ‘it’s so corporate now - [senior management] keep referring to us as “assets”, which makes me feel like a thing.’ However, there are complexities here to be unpicked, in which commodity *differentiation* intersects with gender and other structures.

Although there is not the same relation of ownership or moment of exchange as with the professional footballer who is bought by an opposing team, or a ‘bride price’ paid to a family, the position of academics in higher education can be seen as what Radin (2001, 118) calls ‘commodification in conceptualisation.’ In other words, our value is not inherent but defined by what we bring to the institution, which can be used or exchanged. However, if academics are akin to commodities, they are both fungible and subject to differentiation: in the marketplace of things, a watch is a watch, but a Swatch is not a Rolex. In neoliberal higher education, there are what I will call *power/value relations*, which both reflect and perpetuate other relations such as gender, race and class, while not being completely reducible to them. Traditional hierarchies intersect with newer evaluative technologies to ensure that certain people are reckoned up differently. This differentiation may become acutely visible at times of stress – for example, when a sexual harassment allegation is made – when it becomes clear that some are worth more than others.

As in that other patriarchal institution the family, where economic resources shape access to power (Vogler 1998), generating revenue directly through grants, or indirectly through the intangible of ‘research profile’, gives some staff institutional power/value.<sup>iii</sup> Furthermore, the ability to do this is gendered, raced and classed. The domination of elite white men in many scholarly fields has long been a focus of critique (see for example Bhopal 2016); there is specific evidence of gender and racial bias in citations (Gewin 2017, Henry et al 2017) and grant capture (Lee and Ellemers 2015). The distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ knowledges and how they are valued externally and internally (Giroux 2002), also has gendered connotations, due to the relative proportion of men and women in these fields. All these factors construct some

people, usually privileged men (and often in well-funded subjects), as institutional breadwinners who contribute and matter more.<sup>iv</sup>

The power/value generated by the combination of neoliberal systems with patriarchy and other structures can be used to perpetrate harm, and to avoid accountability. Compared to the eminent professor, the complainant is dispensable. As one of my faculty participants said:

*They will protect him because of his seniority or his perceived importance, they will protect him whatever he does. Now what I've described to you is kind of indefensible, and yet it was repeatedly defended over a period of years because of the REF. So if somebody is an important professor, they can do precisely what they want.*

Another faculty participant referred to an 'unwillingness to tackle people who are these so-called research superstars and the way they behave, for fear that they may leave and take their money and their publications with them.' Power/value relations may also grant perpetrators more leverage to protect themselves. A third faculty participant described the process of silencing complainants as 'very easy', saying: 'all you need is to be someone who is in power, who just can...make that person's life really unpleasant.' These gendered, raced and classed relations may become even more acute in the context of disparities between staff and students, permanent and casualised faculty, or faculty and administrative staff: a member of the latter group commented in an interview that the academics at their institution were 'seen as gods.'

The godlike position of some male academics has been reflected in a number of high profile cases in both the US and UK in recent years, which indicate how allegations of sexual harassment and violence are dealt with (or not) when they threaten people whose welfare is intimately bound up with that of the institution. When sexual harassment and violence are reckoned up institutionally, the patriarchal impulse to shield privileged men is intensified by the fact that the reputation of the perpetrator operates as a proxy for that of the university. However, my data also suggest that relations of power/value are not always reducible to patriarchal and intersecting structures. These relations were also at play in cases where successful women were accused by white men: for example, one of my participants described a female academic who had been protected from allegations 'because she's such a big deal.' As Labaree (1998, p8) argues, exchange value is the 'coin of the realm' in a market-based sector, and very high-profile scholars may even start to resemble brands due to the intangible meanings and values attached to them. This is where the entrepreneurialisation of academics as 'human capital' (see Brown 2015) intersects with their status as institutional commodities: in 'airbrushing' its biggest brands, the university creates a more perfect picture of itself.

The protection of alleged sexual violence perpetrators also contrasts with how universities have abandoned academics attacked for their politics. In 2017, the American Association of University Professors issued two directives to universities to defend academics more proactively, after professors received threats for criticising President Trump. Also in 2017, a lecturer at Bristol University in the UK was supported by Jewish colleagues after university management launched an investigation against her following a student complaint about an article critical of Israel (Phipps 2017b). These incidents, and others like them, are framed by a context in which the 'alt'- and far-right are targeting universities as sites of critical work. This

was noted by some of my politically active faculty participants, with several commenting that universities were ‘under attack’ and one expressing doubts about whether the senior management at her institution would ‘have [her] back’ if she made it into the papers.

That political academics and alleged sexual predators are reckoned up differently may reflect structures such as gender and race, and/or disciplinary and institutional positions which do not generate as much power/value. Many of the US academics targeted by the ‘alt’-right have been scholars (and often women) of colour in ‘liberal arts’ subjects (some examples are Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Lisa Durden, Johnny Eric Williams and Tommy Curry); in the UK case mentioned above, the academic in question was a white woman. In contrast, sexual harassment and violence are disproportionately perpetrated by men, often in positions of influence. However, a divergent case in my data is worth highlighting: several participants from one institution described how a successful white male professor was ‘hung out to dry’ (in the words of one interviewee) by senior managers following a student complaint in the right-wing press. This suggests that in the right situation, the impulse to airbrush may trump power/value relations and gendered and intersecting privileges, perhaps influenced by factors such as mode of operation and media intervention. Unlike sexual predators, political academics tend to operate in the open: the protection of the former and lack of it for the latter may partly indicate what it is possible (and impossible) to airbrush out of the picture.

### The outrage economy

In a context characterised by institutional airbrushing and power/value relations which frame the protection of some at the expense of others, where can resistance go? As with other social movements (Calabrese 2005, 306), activism around sexual harassment and violence in universities tends to coalesce around specific enemies, often using the media to ‘name and shame’ individual men and/or the institutions which have failed to deal with them. Examples include the cases of Thomas Pogge, Colin McGinn and Geoff Marcy in the US, the naming of over 70 prominent academics at Indian universities in October 2017, and the exposure of sexual harassment at Goldsmiths and the Lee Salter case at Sussex University, in 2016. In neoliberal universities where there is little room for manoeuvre and where constant monitoring and precarity tend to limit the capacity for collective resistance (Giroux 2002, Duckworth et al 2016), this utilisation of media resources is understandable, perhaps even inevitable. However, it is possible that the positioning of the media as the only (or most) viable political outlet perpetuates an understanding of sexual harassment and violence as individual and interpersonal, rather than collective and structural, issues.

This theme has been strongly present in my data, with outrage over particular individuals and the idea of getting rid of ‘bad apples’ a common refrain. For example, one of my faculty participants argued that the management in her institution taking issues ‘properly seriously’ would involve ‘buying out complete and utter arseholes’. ‘It doesn’t matter how big they are’, she said, ‘they’re just idiots. They have to go.’ Although statements such as this are mobilised *against* the neoliberal institution and its airbrushing, through them activists may perpetuate the idea that the institution can

be ‘cleaned’ (Whitley and Page 2015, 49) by removing a problematic individual. Indeed, my data contained evidence that this type of politics could be co-opted by institutional reputation management efforts. Another faculty participant described how ‘outrage and witch-hunts’ had been used by managers to make it appear that predatory men were anomalous, rather than emblematic of her university’s culture. ‘Like, you know,’ she said, ‘we can’t allow misogyny to take over the department, we can’t allow this to destroy the reputation of the department.’

The process of ‘cleaning’ the institution often involves appeals to neoliberal technologies – what Lorde (1984, 111) might call the ‘master’s tools’ – to cast out individual offenders. Firing staff and expelling students were common demands by my participants: as one student said, ‘punish the perpetrators, kick them out of university and make it a clear warning for all.’ A faculty participant objected to mediation techniques she felt were not robust enough, saying: ‘this mediation culture is no good. ““Nobody’s fault...let’s mediate” - well fucking no! These guys should have been disciplined!’<sup>v</sup> When Sussex lecturer Lee Salter was convicted of assaulting a student he had been in a relationship with, a petition to have him fired was signed by 3,121 people.<sup>vi</sup> This reliance on retributive justice, especially amongst left-wing activists (who constituted a significant minority of my sample), is interesting given the wealth of intersectional scholarship showing that punitive systems tend to protect the privileged at the expense of the marginalised (see for example Davis 1981). The fact that sexual harassment and violence in universities tend to be perpetrated with impunity by those with social privilege and institutional power/value could perhaps be used to insulate punitive responses from intersectional critique. However, it remains likely that in general terms, creating a more retaliatory institution will disproportionately impact those in less advantaged positions.

The media platforms in which speaking out occurs may exacerbate retaliatory responses. Berry and Sobieraj’s (2014, 5) work on ‘outrage media’ defines this as identified by ‘venom, vilification of opponents, and hyperbolic reinterpretations of current events’. The media they examine is mainly of the political Right, characterised by individuals being *outrageous* for entertainment or to score political points. However, media coverage of sexual violence in universities displays some similarities. For example, overstatements have been made in recent UK press on faculty sexual harassment of students. There is very little good evidence on the extent and dynamics of this issue (Cantalupo & Kidder 2018), although a 2015 survey by the Association of American Universities at 27 elite institutions found that around one in ten female graduate students and around one in five transgender/genderqueer graduate students<sup>vii</sup> reported being sexually harassed by a faculty member.<sup>viii</sup> However, in 2017, sexual harassment of students by UK faculty was headlined as an ‘epidemic’, based on an investigation by the *Guardian* newspaper which uncovered almost 300 allegations in six years across a sample of 120 universities (Batty, Weale and Bannock 2017). This constituted an average of 0.41 allegations per institution, per year.<sup>ix</sup>

The following year, the National Union of Students and the 1752 Group published the first national report on sexual misconduct by UK academics. This was not a prevalence study (National Union of Students 2018, 8) and the authors stated openly that their sample had been deliberately weighted towards postgraduate students, since they are at higher risk (National Union of Students 2018, 51). Nevertheless,

subsequent headlines described sexual misconduct as ‘rife’ (Batty 2018, Busby 2018) and ‘widespread’ (Gaind 2018), despite neither of these terms being used in the report, and claimed that that ‘two in five students nationwide’ had experienced sexual misconduct (Bickersteth 2018) and that the report had ‘[laid] bare the scale of harassment at UK universities’ (Kale 2018). Such overstatements may seem harmless in the service of putting an important issue on the agenda. However, it is possible that they create alarm and make punitive reactions more likely. For instance, on the basis of the Guardian’s 2017 investigation, recommendations were made including a strict ‘no-contact’ rule between staff and students, the penalty for violating which would be a ‘swift termination with a public statement and a mandated report to a central UK registry’ (Batty, Weale and Bannock 2017).

Berry and Sobieraj (2014, 6) identify a propensity for ‘outrage media’ throughout the political spectrum, due to structural changes in the media landscape which have rendered such content profitable. Commentators have recently used the phrase ‘outrage economy’ to refer to the cycles of provocation and denunciation on which contemporary media depends (see for example Behr 2017), a term I adopt in this paper.<sup>x</sup> This particularly refers to the proliferation of online media and its associated phenomenon of ‘clickbait’, cited as the cause of a drop in journalistic standards (Sambrook 2017). Given this context, alternative avenues for disclosure may be needed which do not invite sensationalism, or are not so ripe for co-optation by oppressive modes of governmentality. Of course, outrage can perform important functions, and its role in recruitment to transformative movements should not be underestimated (see for example Calabrese 2005). However, there are important questions to be raised about how social justice ends can successfully – and ethically – be pursued via commercialised media in which truth is increasingly secondary to revenue generation.

It is important to acknowledge that critiques of outrage and punitive justice have been mobilised by alleged perpetrators and their defenders to avoid accountability. On the left, ‘puritanical’ or ‘carceral’ feminists often become the enemy in this repositioning of aggressor as victim: Julian Assange famously claimed he had fallen into a ‘hornet’s nest of revolutionary feminists’ when Swedish prosecutors began investigating rape allegations against him (Phipps 2014, 40). Similarly, conservatives have a long history of positioning themselves as victims of ‘special interests’ or ‘political correctness’ (Phipps 2014, 38). Ahmed’s (2017b) work on ‘complaint’ skilfully unpacks how alleged perpetrators are defended by casting complainants as ‘unsympathetic’ and ‘mean’ alongside voicing concerns about ‘panic’ and ‘punishment.’ Such rhetoric may be particularly likely to be deployed in the current moment, in which the ‘alt’-right has successfully (re)positioned feminist and other progressive politics as intolerant and oppressive. Our challenge, as activists, is to avoid emboldening such narratives whilst trying to understand more about the contemporary outrage economy, and asking on-going questions about whether and how we should ‘invest’ our experiences in it.

Conclusion: ‘speaking in’ to the institution

The persistence of concerns around sexual harassment and violence in higher education tells us that there is more work to do to name and challenge practices of institutional airbrushing and inequitable power/value relations. However, ‘investing’ experience in the outrage economy seems insufficient, if this can be co-opted by both reputation management efforts and punitive technologies. To conclude, I would like to introduce the method of *Grounded Action Inquiry*, developed in my work with the Changing University Cultures collective, as a potential alternative tool with which to name and interrupt power relations, and encourage institutions into more honest modes of operation. Action Inquiry (AI) is a technique in which members of an organisation or team engage in group discussion and experiential activities around common themes or questions, in a cyclical and relatively longitudinal framework. They are encouraged to understand issues at first (self), second (relations with others) and third-person (systemic or organisational) levels (Torbert and Taylor 2008, 240). Our method of *Grounded Action Inquiry*, conducted so far in two universities, consists of AI ‘grounded’ in deep knowledge of an institution’s culture and dynamics, power/value relations and intersecting structures of gender, class and race, derived from careful research.

In contrast to speaking out in the media, AI can be seen as a form of ‘speaking in’, to both the institution and oneself. It involves self-critique and experimentation, exploring different ways of being both inside and outside the inquiring space and analysing the systems (institutional and external) in which inquirers exist. It requires inquirers, especially those in positions of power, to speak their minds and open themselves up to others’ thoughts and feelings (Torbert 2001, Torbert and Taylor 2008, 242). This technique evokes the practice of *parrhesia* described in Foucault’s later work, a radical form of truth-telling which requires the moral courage to speak truth to power and/or challenge a peer about their behaviour (Foucault 1983). Like *parrhesia*, AI requires a deep awareness of power relations (Torbert 2001), and in our method of Grounded Action Inquiry we ‘ground’ our practice in data on these, as well as feminist, critical race and other theories which give us important information about how social structures shape discussion and action.

When grounded in this way, AI can provide a space to speak the truth about an institution, with awareness of the discourses, structures and relations shaping how it is heard. A key framework for facilitating this is Lorde’s (1984) work on anger, which reminds us that the emotional responses of the marginalised are qualitatively different from those of the privileged, with the latter often a response to being called to account. For instance, Lorde and other black feminists have highlighted how white women use hurt feelings to deflect black women’s anger, in discussions of racism in the feminist movement. In Grounded Action Inquiry, we recognise that both emotion and truth are structurally situated, and that although there is no ‘neutral’ social or interpersonal situation, bringing awareness to power relations can create a more constructive dialogic space. Foucault (1984) writes that in *parrhesia*, the person being told the truth must accept it. Using Lorde’s work, we can say that while nobody has a monopoly on being right, the more powerful the recipient, the more attentively listening must occur: and those in locations of social or institutional privilege and influence must listen hardest of all.

Outrage tends to be performed as a response to the behaviour of others (Goodenough 1997, 5). In contrast, both AI and *parrhesia* also require that we tell the truth about

ourselves: especially when we are in advantaged positions (Foucault 1984, Torbert and Taylor 2008). Grounded Action Inquiry can be used to uncover, and challenge leaders on, institutional dynamics: for instance, a practice such as institutional airbrushing may express deep fears, framed by sectoral conditions, which can be explored productively in an inquiring space. ‘Speaking in’ in AI also means that as well as demanding accountability from perpetrators and institutions, we examine our *own* roles in protecting colleagues and friends and/or looking the other way. This makes use of the intersectional injunction to ‘ask the other question’ (Matsuda 1991), which usually means considering multiple forms of discrimination, but can also help us to understand our lives as complex mixtures of victimhood and perpetration. It is difficult territory, but if we are to explore what Lorde (1984, 131) calls ‘the contradictions of self’, it must be acknowledged that we can occupy several positions at once.

AI can also guard against what Foucault (1983) calls negative parrhesia or ‘ignorant outspokenness’ – arguably the *modus operandi* of ‘outrage media’ - through challenging and reframing the basic premises of problematic conversations (Torbert and Taylor 2008, 242-3). In parrhesia, another person is necessary for such self-searching to be achieved: they may have a political, pedagogical, spiritual or even medical role as long as they are committed to parrhesiastic practice (Foucault 1984). Similarly, the role of the AI facilitator is to listen and reflect back truths which are spoken in the inquiring space. This is especially effective in Grounded Action Inquiry, in which conflicting truths can be brought into conversation with a dataset: the dialogue this encourages contrasts sharply with the outrage economy of the media, which tends to reward outspokenness for its own sake, due to its revenue-generating potential.

The outrage economy of the media can be seen as quintessentially neoliberal: naming, blaming and shaming individuals is a key currency. I am aware that Foucault’s ethics and aesthetics of the self have also invited critique as being uncomfortably similar to the individualised neoliberal notion of self as enterprise (see for example McNay 2009). These points are well taken: we are all subjects of neoliberalism, even those of us who critique it. However, I am hopeful that due to its self/other/system design AI can avoid being reduced to self-improvement, especially when the method is ‘grounded’ in political consciousness and an analysis of an institution’s culture. Done well, Grounded Action Inquiry could *challenge* neoliberalised subjectivities and reconfigure the university from the inside out. Unlike the ‘quick hit’ of a media story however, this is deep, slow work: creating change in institutions is a long-term (perhaps lifetime) process (Torbert 2001).

To finish, I want to reiterate that I am merely presenting an alternative, and that speaking out in the outrage economy often happens when ‘speaking in’ has failed. Survivors must speak their truths where they can, and in a world where women’s experiences especially are often minimised and/or denied, I would not advocate closing any avenue for them to be heard and validated. It is also likely that my whiteness and academic position allow me to work constructively with/in universities, when others may not be able to. Indeed, my endorsement of ‘speaking in’ may be interpreted as born of an investment in these institutions, perhaps due to the power/value I can acquire in them. I hope but cannot guarantee that this is not the case: as Ahmed (2007) argues, whiteness is an orientation to the world, a sense of

being ‘at home’ in institutions, which is designed go unnoticed by those who inhabit it. As our Grounded Action Inquiry work in universities progresses, questions around our relationship to institutions will remain. However, at present I am hopeful about the potential of our work to uncover deep truths, encourage institutional honesty, and shape constructive critiques of how the neoliberal university ‘reckons up’ sexual harassment and violence.

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<sup>i</sup> These numbers are likely to be over-estimates due to the self-selecting nature of the sample.

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- <sup>ii</sup> The total reach of this work is unknown due to the fact that *Hidden Marks*, which attracted 2058 respondents, did not collect data on participants' institutions.
- <sup>iii</sup> This may also pertain to student athletes in countries such as the US, who generate revenue through team endowments and licensing fees, and members of powerful and prosperous fraternities.
- <sup>iv</sup> In his discussion of fungibility, Ball (2012, p25-6) uses the example of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), in which academics' work is given a numerical score and aggregate numbers determine the rank of a department, while the people in it disappear. The life of such exercises *within* the university, however, is all about differentiation: numerical gradings of outputs and 'impact' mark one person as a Swatch, and another a Rolex.
- <sup>v</sup> There are many feminist critiques of alternative dispute resolution, which show how it can be used as a tool in the service of power (see for example Menkel-Meadow 1997). However, such arguments do not usually demand a reversion to punitive discipline.
- <sup>vi</sup> The particulars of this case certainly suggested that Salter should not be allowed to work closely with young people: however, the idea of firing staff by petition has broader implications.
- <sup>vii</sup> The distinction made between 'female' and 'transgender' reflects the methodology of the survey: this is a design flaw given that trans women could have selected either category. The separation between 'male', 'female' and 'transgender' also represents a failure to acknowledge that trans women and trans men are women and men.
- <sup>viii</sup> Cantalupo and Kidder (2018) caution that these numbers are considerably higher than in other surveys, perhaps due to upward reporting bias and the fact that the survey asked about verbal and written behaviours as well as physical ones. The study's authors (Cantor et al, 2016, 2-1) also found evidence of a modest positive bias due to non-response (e.g. respondents were more likely to have higher victimisation rates).
- <sup>ix</sup> The Guardian article claimed to have evidence of many unreported incidents: however, it did not quantify these.
- <sup>x</sup> The term has tended to be used by political centrists, whose critique is partly directed at the growth of progressive and radical political outrage on social media as well as the 'outrage media' of the Right. It is important to distinguish the two: however, the broader point about how heightened emotion and adversarial engagement feed contemporary media pertains.