



## Post-Weinstein Academia

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### Introduction

*We need to collectively disempower colleagues who systematically discriminate against and/or harass our colleagues and students.*

Like many of my students and peers, after the 2016 presidential election in the United States, I was distracted from my core intellectual tasks. Like many others, the election brought up memories of my own action, inaction, and uncertainty when faced with discrimination and harassment in universities. More intensively than usual, I spoke about and read the academic literature, as well as literature about my legal and ethical responsibilities, and sought to understand the degree of confidentiality available in reporting. I wondered about the professional consequences of naming inappropriate behaviours. I was reminded that my quest to navigate this murky water is far from uncommon. Months later, as allegations against Harvey Weinstein were made and the #MeToo movement emerged, traditional and social media became platforms for a greater number of testimonials and analyses. Undoubtedly, these usefully brought overdue attention to a long-standing but pressing set of concerns. For me, with many others, it seemed that this election might serve as a catalyst for change (see Gilbert, 2017).



But how do we make this change happen? Testimonials and analyses of the problem are surely necessary. The development of a social movement is, surely, necessary. But peppered throughout media analyses are questions of what next (The Mercury News, 2018; Ream, 2018). What is the plan? As Harman argues, “We can celebrate that we’ve changed the mood. But we need to change the reality and that means change in policy and processes.” Mindful of the limitations of my experience, my intention here is far from providing a definitive analysis or singular plan. Rather, I seek to contribute to building a much more direct and specific conversation about a range of possibilities and their differential utilities for strategic intervention with the specific context of our university departments.

### **Geographical struggles within the university**

Much has been written on discrimination and harassment in geography (Alderman and Dowler, 2018; Domosh, 2000; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000; Mahtani 2004; 2006; 2014; Valentine, 1998). Our discipline, like the academy more widely, has long been permeated by heteronormative, masculinist, global northern individuals and insights (McKittrick, 2006; Esson et al., 2017). While exclusionary ideas and social practices are important to grapple with throughout society and specifically academic contexts, geographers have demonstrated that they are particularly important for our discipline. Our historical associations with the colonial project, for example, are difficult to disentangle from the way we currently imagine and research the world (Power and Sidaway, 2004; Robinson 2003; Esson et al., 2017). Geography is an engaged science: as Peake and Kobayashi (2002) suggest, it is and ought to be centered in the streets rather than an ivory tower. For many critical geographers, our work is motivated by the possibility of creating positive social change (Castree et al., 2010). We are widely aware that our discipline continues to be dominated by privileged voices, which problematically do not represent global majorities, and we are struggling to find ways to make the discipline more open to these voices (Mahtani, 2014; Esson et al., 2017).

Much of my own academic work has focused on creating the intellectual space for a more pluralist geography (Lawhon et al., 2016; cf Barnes and Sheppard, 2010) in a belief that this can contribute to a more inclusive discipline. But as Esson et al. (2017) have recently and provocatively asserted, changing knowledge generation practices is not an end in itself. We must also work to undermine the structures, institutions and practices that create our unequal world. This includes our disciplinary practices, for “while our scholarship in geography has been revitalized by its engagement with issues of diversity and difference, our policies and practices within geography departments continue to reflect a pervasive persistence of racialized and gendered inequities in the workplace” (Mahtani, 2004, 91; see also Mahtani, 2014). Creating a more open discipline, in short, requires not

only changes in our intellectual practice, but also changes in our disciplinary culture.

But how exactly might we do this? Mahtani (2006) gives some pointers, suggesting networks (subsequently instantiated by the black geographies speciality group), looking to other disciplines, and imaginative thinking. But much of the geographical literature on the subject is testimonial (Valentine, 1998; Mahtani, 2004; Sanders, 2006; see Coddington, 2017 for a problematization of voice) or analysis of the problem of discrimination and harassment (Kobayashi, 2006; Sanders, 2006; Foote, 2008). As with the wider #MeToo movement, and as articulated particularly trenchantly by feminists of color (Menchu, 1984; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012), testimonial is a powerful methodology and analysis is necessary to understand the problems. Others call for individual action, including emotional healing: these are similarly useful, although they place an extraordinarily high burden on those with already heavy loads (Valentine, 1998; Sioh, 2006).

Testimonial, analysis, healing and individual action are not (nor were ever intended to be) the final step of process of social change. Engaging with existing materials is vital, but often leaves readers without a systematic understanding of what might be useful responses. Further, such accounts are, surely, most often read by those who already agree that discrimination and harassment are problematic. They offer insights into the emotional process, solidarity for those experiencing similar issues, and a sense of just how pervasive and everyday problems are. But my strong suspicion is that these insights or testimonials are rarely read by, and do little to change the behavior of, the most problematic of actors. This is, I cannot say strongly enough, no critique: it is not their purpose nor their burden. My aim is to point to a gap rather than a fault and assert that, in this context, we need to think more strategically about what comes next.

The literature on discrimination and harassment from institutions found in handbooks and websites suggests that all incidents should be –sometimes, are legally obligated to be– reported. This strategy is supported by what has been named a “call out culture” in which individuals are tasked with reporting all incidents, often on social media (Munro, 2013). But as public conversations about Hollywood and Washington are making clear, and as is supported by extensive research, victims have historically rarely reported events, a concern particularly true for everyday incidents (Hunt et al., 2007; Vijayasiri, 2008). This may change as the #MeToo movement has helped to draw attention to the pervasiveness specifically of gender-based harassment (Respers France, 2017). Yet, a major contributor to unreporting is a sense that doing so is unlikely to change things for the better (e.g. Valentine, 1998; Adams-Roy and Barling, 1998) and thus far little has actually changed, particularly for those with limited social power (Semuels, 2017). In fact, generally speaking, very often the converse happens: reporting is emotionally difficult and retribution is not uncommon (McDonald, 2012). If this broader social moment does not lead to change, it is unlikely to maintain

momentum. Further, geography is an international discipline, and while there are ripples elsewhere, we need to be mindful of the limited global scope of recent movements.

Universities have been, and with #MeToo are increasingly becoming sites of discussion (Cantalupo and Kider, Forthcoming; Thakur and Paul, 2017; Gluckman et al., 2017): many universities including my own have held on campus dialogues. Universities are sites of extensive intergenerational interactions, and the everyday audience for most professors is both particularly impressionable and vulnerable. Tenure, both for those who have it and for those seeking it, creates safety for some and risk for others. Beyond this, as in government and Hollywood, we are a professional practice in which reputation is particularly important. This set of factors makes it particularly difficult and professionally risky to address specific cases as well as wider cultural trends within academia (although mindful that harassment and discrimination are most prevalent in traditionally female, low-wage work done by people of color, see Semuels, 2017). But universities are also institutions in which a significant amount of decision-making happens within departments, a point I draw on below in thinking through mechanisms for change.

### **Strategic points of intervention**

In this context, I attempt a somewhat more systematic and analytical approach specific to the academic context. It is not that I am unwilling to bear the burdens that go with being a reporter, although it is more difficult to advise students and junior colleagues to also undertake such burdens. It is, instead, that there are so many incidences, and so many options, for how to engage. I do not want such energies to be wasted: I want my actions to leverage change.

Far from the final word, my hope here is to spark a more explicit conversation (including but not limited to testimonials) specifically focused on intervention from my own far from conclusive or holistic observations. I recognize one of the major challenges with thinking about this issue is that it is both professionally risky and personally difficult to narrate the specifics of incidents, but equally, that the specifics of a case do matter. I therefore seek to draw out key influences rather than provide a narrative, recognizing these generalizations do not always apply.

*1. Disembedded complaints are rarely positively impactful.* Not long ago, I visited another academic institution, where there were a few relatively minor incidents that raised some concerns for me. Afterwards, I sent an email to a colleague at this institution highlighting how a visit could have been more accommodating to someone with my positionality. The response was a reactionary defense and an attack of my scholarship. I better understand now that this is a moment in which I should have remained silent. I was an institutional outsider and an untrustworthy reporter. I am not arguing that it was *unethical* to raise my

concerns. Instead, I believe it was imprudent to expect positive results, for my complaint to have been worth the emotional toll and personal consequences. I felt safer because it was not my institution, but I was reminded how small our academic community is, how quickly word travels, and how small complaints can have large personal impact. But this disembeddedness, I believe, also contributed to the ineffectiveness of my complaint.

2. *Institutional responses have institutional logics: they may be useful for extreme, well-evidenced cases but are often inadequate.* Changes at universities in the last few years have created new regulations, but the formal regulatory context is at present uncertain (Melnick, 2018). I speak here, then, to a more general context rather than the specificities of institutions or policies. Singular or spread out complaints are unlikely to have much impact, but institutional processes can be useful when problematic actions are seen to be part of a wider, documented pattern. While there is often a single official channel, conversations with colleagues suggest most of us do not know that official channel or even how to follow it even when raising concerns within the institutional structures. Thus, complaints are often sprawled across different individuals and offices, making cumulative concerns largely unknown to the institution. When students and faculty know that other students have also filed complaints, it can be safer for individuals, and can also help centralize concerns (Harman, 2018).

But reporters would be well served to remember that, fundamentally, *institutional responses are driven by concern for the institution not the individual complainant*; when done well and in circumstances that are extreme and well-evidenced, they can matter. When the incidents are less severe or hard to substantiate, reporting to the institution rarely feels like enough or has the hoped-for consequences. I believe a key (but not exclusive) failure of institutional responses is that (as is often the case with testimonials) *they do not convince offenders that their actions are unethical*. The institutional narrative is that certain actions are illegal, but also begins with an assertion of an imagined consensus that we all know and agree about what actions are problematic and why. They are meant to discipline –institutionally and in a Foucauldian sense– but often fail to enrol offenders into a collective ideology.

Under these circumstances many of us feel helpless. I believe, however, there is more that can and ought to be done. I have not seen the following strategy discussed in the literature nor heard of it being enacted in departments (although it would not be surprising if it was already happening), but I believe it both creates possibilities for immediately reducing the impact of particular actions and changing our departmental cultures.

3. *Power can be removed from systematic offenders in ways that change power-laden relationships.* All faculty have power, but not equally: we can reduce the power certain faculty are able to exert over students and colleagues by not

giving systematic offenders specific, power-laden responsibilities (e.g. participate in hiring of faculty and adjuncts, be heads/chairs of departments or responsible for decisions that particularly impact students and junior faculty). Determining whether an individual has a history of offense must become integral to deciding whether a person is appropriately suited to hold such power-laden responsibilities. Doing so is not a quick path nor a guaranteed success, nor am I suggesting it ought to be our only tactic. Instead, I believe that it points us towards making our values more explicitly part of our departmental processes.

My intent in raising this, as with this piece more generally, is not to assert more wisdom or experience than I possess. This is not a perfect nor holistic solution, and raises numerous more specific questions about process: what should disqualify a person from particular roles? What the burden of proof should be required? Should the offender be given an opportunity to respond? No doubt, if implemented, this strategy would release some individuals from certain service obligations. But I have equally no doubt that creative departmental leaders can reallocate other responsibilities: assigning the teaching of large classes, working with course schedules, or the many other background service tasks that make our departments function.

It is beyond my ability to answer the questions raised above, for myriad reasons: I am a junior faculty person with rather partial insight into the flows and functionings of departments and this is quite far from my professional expertise. I raise these thoughts here, however, because this strategy is based on a very different logic than what currently dominates public and academic discourse (individual or institutional action). In what I have proposed, judgments come from peers within the department, and this I believe is more likely to garner change in behaviour and cultures. It usefully shifts responsibility away from both individuals and institutions and towards departments in a way that gives ownership but reduces individual burdens as well as risk for retribution.

Harassment and discrimination have for too long disabled the full participation of the global social majority in academic life. I have written this intervention in a post-Weinstein spirit, hoping a collective conversation can enable us to better understand the conditions and tactics through which confronting discriminations and harassment can contribute towards a more inclusive academic culture. General calls and specific testimonials have utility, as do individual and institutional responses. But they must be coupled with articulation and analyses of more specific tactics. We need to think more, collectively, about when and how to intervene in more creative ways, enabling us to strategically deploy our energies in ways likely to garner change.

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