

# INTRODUCTION: SEXISM - A PROBLEM WITH A NAME

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This special issue is premised on a claim: to make sexism the explicit object of academic enquiry is to generate new knowledge and understanding. To understand how sexism works, to ask why sexism remains stubbornly persistent in shaping worlds, determining possibilities, deciding futures, despite decades of feminist activism, is to work out and to work through the very mechanics of power. Sexism seems to operate as a well-oiled machine that runs all the more smoothly and efficiently for being in constant use. The effects of this constancy are wearing on those to whom sexism is directed. In this special issue we reflect on how and why sexism remains so persistent without isolating sexism from other machineries of power. We hope to intervene collectively in the reproduction of sexism, to throw a spanner in the works or even to become, to borrow Sarah Franklin's evocative phrase, a 'wench in the works'.

It takes conscious willed effort not to reproduce sexism.<sup>1</sup> This special issue is part of this effort.

## WHY SEXISM?

Why focus on sexism *now*? Why focus on sexism *here*? It might seem that I have already provided an answer to this question by acknowledging the persistence of sexism. As the contributions to this special issue explore, even if sexism seems like some tangible thing, knowable in and from its constancy, something we come up against, repeatedly, it is remarkably difficult to pin down. And that too is one of the reasons to focus on sexism: because so much of what we experience as sexism is dismissed as just what we experience. Focusing on sexism *now* and *here* matters because too often sexism is identified as either in the past tense (as what we dealt with, what we have overcome) or as elsewhere (as a problem 'other cultures' have yet to deal with). Sexism is *present*. That is one starting point.

To answer this question 'why sexism now?' more fully I will give you the story of how this special issue came about. It began its life as a conference held at the Centre for Feminist Research at Goldsmiths in 2014.<sup>2</sup> It was in fact the inaugural conference for this new centre. In over 20 years as a feminist academic (including being based in Women's Studies for 10 years) this was the first academic event I had ever attended with sexism in the title, or in which sexism was identified as the key thematic. This fact, I think, should be startling, especially given, as Ulrika Dahl notes in her contribution, we might expect challenging sexism to be part of the job description for feminist

1. With thanks to the *New Formations* editorial board for being part of this effort not only in supporting this special issue but for collectively reading each paper and proposal submitted to the journal by bringing sexism into view: asking how many references are to women; asking how many contributors are women. Noticing: it is work. We have to make this effort because of what we have failed to bring about.

2. I would like to thank everyone who participated in our conference. My appreciation also goes to all the students who were part of the Sexism Working Group run throughout the inaugural year of the Centre. I am deeply indebted to you all, and am still learning from your collective wisdom.

academics. If anything, the word sexism seems to have ‘dropped out’ of feminist theoretical vocabularies. I want to offer some speculations on why this might be the case.

One reason might be the strategic mobilisation of the language of feminist success: as if disciplines have been transformed by feminism such that critiquing sexism is no longer necessary; or as if we have finished that task and we have now moved on. I say ‘as if’ for a reason. In recent years students have relayed to me how feminism itself is often, within their disciplines, identified as passé, as old-fashioned, dated. In a curriculum review we conducted in my own college, we were struck by how many courses - including Cultural Studies - did not engage with feminist theory at all, even when feminist work had obvious relevance to the topic. We found numerous courses organised around or even as a white male genealogy. We find that: once the pressure to modify the shape of disciplines is withdrawn they ‘spring back’ very quickly into that old shape. Feminists have to keep pushing otherwise things quickly reverse to how they were before. The history of the ‘spring back’ mechanism is impossible to separate from the history of feminist exhaustion. Which is to say: the very necessity of having to push for some things to be possible can be what makes them (eventually) impossible. Something might not come about not because we have been prevented from doing something (we might even have been officially encouraged to do something) but when the effort to make that thing come about is too much to sustain.

What I am implying here is that sexism might drop out of the feminist vocabulary not because of our success in transforming disciplines but because of the exhaustion of having to keep struggling to transform disciplines. It might be because of sexism that we do not attend to sexism. We lose the word; keep the thing.

I think we might find further clues with feminist theory itself as to why the language of sexism has receded. Take the following quote Elizabeth Grosz in 1990:

Feminist theory must always function in two directions if it is to effectively challenge patriarchal knowledges. On the one hand, it must engage in what could be called a negative or reactive project of challenging what currently exists, or criticizing prevailing social, political, and theoretical relations. Without this negative or anti-sexist goal, feminist theory remains unanchored in and unrelated to the socio-theoretical status quo. It risks repeating the problems of the past, especially patriarchal assumptions, without recognizing them as such. But if it remains simply reactive, simply a critique, it ultimately affirms the theories it wishes to move beyond. It necessarily remains on the ground it aims to contest...coupled with this negative project must be a positive constructive project, creating alternatives: producing feminist not simply anti-sexist theory.<sup>3</sup>

3. Elizabeth Grosz, 'Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity' in Sneja Gunew (ed). *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*, Routledge, London 1990, p59.

Grosz is certainly suggesting here that there are two kinds of directions for feminism; and that both directions are necessary. An affective picture is created, however, through the clustering of words: sexist is placed near critique, negative, reactive, in contrast to feminist, which is placed near constructive, positive, creative, or alternative. Although both directions are deemed necessary, it is quite clear from this description that the second direction is given more potential, or perhaps we could just say it sounds more *interesting*: it is a more hopeful, exciting, direction. The first direction is more like a work-horse: something dreary and dogged; necessary but not really quite as sparky or imaginative. The implication of this clustering is that feminism is more creative and inventive when it is not engaging in critiques of sexism. Indeed critique as such becomes identified with the past as well as present rather than the future: as what keeps us on the ground of what is or what has come to be. I think we can consider this association of anti-sexism with being negative and reactive: it might seem obvious but the obvious can still be something to think with and through. What is being evoked here is a rather familiar figure, that of the moaning feminist, the complaining feminist; yes perhaps even the feminist killjoy. She appears as the one who is always *stuck* in the mode of negative critique ('simply reactive').

I suspect that within feminism a concern with sexism has been understood as holding ourselves back, as stopping ourselves from engaging more positively and lovingly with the archive we sometimes call 'theory.' I still remember being taught in a critical theory class about one theorist as having two stories: a story of the phallus and a story of desire. We were told to bracket the former so that we could learn from the latter. In other words, we were told to bracket the question of sexism (and its kin terms such as phallogentrism), in order to engage with the text. The implication is that by putting the question of phallogentrism to one side we would learn *more* from the text because we would be reading *with* it rather than *against* it. That was a more explicit 'command' version of what I was taught elsewhere: that it was better not to critique sexism, not even to notice sexism, in order to engage with a text (and not just any texts, but certain kinds of texts that had already achieved the elevated status as 'theory').

Critique becomes identifiable as a bad feminist habit, a way that feminists are not helping themselves by being against something that would otherwise be available to us as a resource. Here the critique of sexism rather than sexism as such becomes what causes a restriction; critique as self-restriction, how feminists restrict ourselves by deciding where we will not go. Grosz later refers to the 'standard kneejerk feminist reading' of Darwin in *The Nick of Time*.<sup>4</sup> This expression 'kneejerk feminist reading' implies that being critical of sexism is an automatic bodily response that stops us from engaging more positively, thoughtfully and generously with the text; perhaps even with a world.

If feminist critiques of sexism are knee-jerk, we might need to affirm

4. Grosz, Elizabeth, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*, Duke University Press, Durham 2004, p71. <http://doi.org/8x4>

the intelligence of feminist knees. Or to make the point in more serious but related terms: there is nothing unthinking about feminist critiques of sexism. The critique of sexism is a form of intellectual and political labour that teaches us how worlds are built; how histories become concrete. We have much to learn *from* sexism *about* worlds. We have so much to learn *still* because sexism is *still*. In this special issue we aim to revitalise the feminist critique of sexism. To keep sexism the object of feminist critique requires persistence given that the injunction to 'let it go' keeps being articulated so forcefully as if sexism would be over if we just got over it. The papers combined show how attending to sexism, noticing sexism, naming sexism, surviving sexism, challenging sexism, requires creativity, spark and imagination.

## PROBLEMS WITH NAMES

We need to give problems their names. Sexism is a problem with a name. You can probably hear in this sentence a reference to Betty Friedan who famously describes 'the feminine mystique,' the unhappiness that hides behind the beaming smile of the (white, middle-class) housewife as 'a problem without a name'.<sup>5</sup> Many of the contributors in this special issue draw on Marilyn Frye's essay on 'Sexism' from her extraordinary and important book *The Politics of Reality*.<sup>6</sup> Frye begins her chapter on sexism with the following observation: 'like most women coming to a feminist perception of themselves and the world, I was seeing sexism everywhere and trying to make it perceptible to others' (p17). She suggests that making sexism 'perceptible to others' becomes a project because many 'would not see that what [she] declared to be sexist was sexist' (p17). When you declare something to be sexist, you are often accused of projecting something (even projecting yourself) onto a situation. You might say: the way it is assumed that the man next to me is the professor, that's sexism. A response typically follows: that is just the way you are seeing things. Sexism is often denied, because it is seen as a fault of perception; something is sexist because you perceive it that way: *you perceive wrongly when you perceive a wrong*.

When we put a name to a problem, we are doing something. A name comes after an event. In *Sister Outsider* Audre Lorde describes the words racism and sexism as 'grown up words'.<sup>7</sup> We encounter racism and sexism before we have the words that allow us to describe what we encounter. Sexism and racism: if they are problems we have given names, the names tend to lag behind the problems. To give a problem a name can change not only *how* we register an event but *whether* we register an event. To give the problem a name can be experienced as *magnifying the problem*; allowing something to acquire a social and physical density by gathering up what otherwise remain scattered experiences into a *tangible thing*. Making sexism and racism tangible is also a way of making them appear outside of oneself, as something that can be spoken of and addressed by and with others. It can be a relief to

5. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1965.

6. Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, Crossing Press, New York 1983. Hereafter *Politics of Reality*.

7. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, Crossing Press, New York 1984, p152.

have something to point to, or a word to allow us to point to something that otherwise can make you feel alone or lost.

We have different tactics for dealing with sexism; and one problem is that some of these tactics can be in tension. Octavia Calder Dawe's contribution to the special issue picks up on this 'tactical' dimension of talking about or around sexism (tactics can include, as Sarah Kember explores, laughter). When we give problems their names we can become a problem for those who do not want to register that there is a problem (but who might, at another level, *sense* there is a problem). You can become a problem by naming a problem. You might, as Lisa Nakamura notes, become identified as trying to *police* the behaviour of others just by refusing not to point something out. And there is an irony here: because one of the primary functions of sexism is to police the behaviour of others, as Jennifer McClearen shows in her contribution.

To name something as sexist does not make something there that was not there before: it is a sexist idea that to describe something as sexist is to make something sexist. But naming something as 'sexist' does 'do something.' It modifies a relation *given* it does not make something from nothing. Connections can be what we have to struggle for, because there is so much silence about sexism: sexism makes it costly for women to speak about sexism. Because after all to name something as sexist is not only to name something that happens as part of a wider system (to refuse to give what happens the status of an exceptional event), but it is also to give an account of that something as being wrong and unjustifiable. To name something as sexist is not only to modify a relation by modifying our understanding of that relation; it is also to insist that further modification is required. When we say 'that's sexist,' we are saying 'no' to that, as well as 'no' to the world that renders such speech or behaviour permissible; we are asking individuals to change such that these forms of speech and behaviour are no longer acceptable or permissible.

Not just individuals: the point is that individuals are encouraged and rewarded for participating in sexist culture. It might be a reward given through affirmation from peers (the 'egging on' that allows a group to solidify over how they address others as imposters). But institutions also enable and reward sexist behaviour. Sexist banter, for example, is often institutionalised. You might participate in that banter because it is costly not to participate: you become the one who is disapproving or 'uptight.' You are judged as taking something *the wrong way* when you object to something: 'I didn't mean anything by it'. And indeed then by taking something said or done *the wrong way*, you are judged not only as wrong but as wronging someone else. This is how when you talk about sexism you are heard as damaging the reputation of an individual or an organisation, as Leila Whitley and Tiffany Page explore in their contribution.

We need to think through how denials or justifications of sexism work as a social system. You are pointing out what might not even appear to others

or if it does appear is justified and neutralised as the way things are. You come up against what others are invested in not even recognising. When we name what we come up against, we come up against what we name.

## A SEXISM ARCHIVE

To name something as sexist is already to begin building an archive: we are gathering different events, situations, incidents together through using this word. We are picking things up. What are we gathering? An archive of sexism might be an 'archive of feelings' to borrow Ann Cvetkovich's expression, we are building an archive from how we are affected by something.<sup>8</sup> A number of the papers in this special issue thus draw on personal experience and testimony. This is important, and for this journal, it could be described as a departure from the writing we have tended to publish.

I have some simple propositions to help with this. *The personal is theoretical.* To bring personal experience into the text does not require assumptions of truth or authenticity (as decades of feminist scholarship in the social sciences as well as humanities has shown). The personal brings theory back to life. As I have already noted, sexism is often experienced before it is named. If a name can lag behind what is named we too can lag behind; we can lag behind ourselves. The act of naming sexism can be unsettling: we might return to an already unsettling experience with a degree of bewilderment, confusion and uncertainty. We lose confidence. We need to become more experimental to document what is veiled by familiarity. We can become estranged from ourselves in the process of recognising how sexism has shaped our own trajectory. Bringing the personal into the theoretical does not make experience into a foundation. On the contrary to write from experience is to shatter the foundation.

*The personal is institutional.* When we talk about sexism we are often referring to something that is personal, but also in the world, reproduced by institutions; sexism as a habit, orientation, series, structure; assembly; sexism as material. When we talk about sexism as material, it is dismissed as mental, as 'in your head'. Women's Studies and Gender Studies students have often said to me that want to study feminism to give them the intellectual tools to challenge these dismissals. Making a feminist case thus requires we can show how sexism is a set of attitudes that are institutionalized, a pattern that is established through use, such that it can be reproduced *almost* independently of individual will. Archiving sexism - showing that pattern made out of the fabric of our lives - is thus a crucial form of feminist activism. It does seem there has been a renewal of the feminist concern to catalogue sexism, as we can witness in the *Everyday Sexism* project referred to by a number of contributors. The project began as the creation of a virtual space in which individuals can testify to their experiences of sexism, sexual violence or sexual harassment. Such spaces enable us to connect experiences, to identify patterns and regularities.

8. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Culture*, Duke University Press, Durham 2003. <http://doi.org/8x5>

They enable us to show what feminists know: the scale of sexism. We need a *deposit system* to show the scale of sexism. When there is a place to go with these experiences - and feminism is about giving women places to go - the accounts tend to come out: a 'drip, drip' that becomes a flood. It is like a tap has been loosened, allowing what has been held back to flow.

The special issue assembles an archive of sexism. You can hear the 'drip, drip' all over these pages. The first three papers of the issue begin 'close to home': sexism in the academy. Academic sexism is the sexism we experience every day in the academy whether through citational practices that repeatedly privilege work by men (particularly when it comes to defining a new field or object of study, feminist work that leads to field formation often disappears once a field is given form); whether it is in the expectation of who the lecturers are, of how they appear; whether it is in the constant stream of questions directed at female academics about how their work relates to this or that male theorist. However if you name the problem you become the problem. One time, I pointed out that a speaker list for an event included only white men. I should add that this conference took place at Goldsmiths and these kinds of 'only white male' or 'only but one' events happen here regularly, I suspect because of the kinds of bodies that tend to be organised under the rubric of 'critical theory'. Someone replies that they thought I sounded 'very 1980s', and that they thought we had 'got over' identity politics. Not only might we want to challenge the use of identity politics as a form of political caricature, but we might want to think of this 'over'. Feminist and anti-racist critique are heard as old-fashioned, as based on identity categories that we are assumed to be over. This is how it can end up being more 'old-fashioned' to point out that only white men are speaking at an event than it is to have only white men speaking at an event! I think that criticality - the self-perception that in being critical we do not have a problem or that in being critical we are over it - is being used and performed in these academic spaces. Critical sexism is the sexism reproduced by those who think of themselves as too critical to reproduce sexism. Critical sexism is not that different to uncritical sexism, then.

There are some very good reasons to begin our archival project with academic sexism. In the first paper Sarah Franklin submits a 'bloody document' to our archive, an essay that in being marked up by scrawled red ink is marked by sexism. The marker's outrage in response to a feminist essay teaches us about how sexism is reproduced. This document is useful because of how it makes sexism tangible.<sup>9</sup> It makes explicit what is often left implicit: the horror with which feminist ideas are received. Franklin describes how to make a feminist critique of one of the male masters of a discipline (in this case Durkheim) is to be disciplined for unruly and inappropriate behavior. Her paper shows that attending to sexism means attending to the very mechanisms of reproduction; how some bodies as well as words, concepts or approaches become weeded out (of a discipline or a

9. This paper was one of those presented at the conference. When the 'bloody document' was shown on a power point slide, you could hear the groan of recognition coupled with a palpable sigh of relief from the audience. It was quite empowering to witness the mechanics of sexism; to have sexism displayed right in front of us.

university), at the same time that others are encouraged and given 'places to go'.

Leila Whitley and Tiffany Page's contribution draws on the blog, *Strategic Misogyny*, which is a virtual space created to enable students to share experiences of sexism and harassment within the academy. They draw on data from this blog; adding to our archive multiple testimonies to sexual harassment. This data allows us to document the mechanisms whereby sexual harassment is not located: students are discouraged from complaining, people turn away from what they witness; complaints are held up or wrapped up in confidentiality. The very mechanism of 'stopping' that are revealed in Franklin's 'bloody document' are here shown to operate at a wider institutional level.

In the third paper Ulrika Dahl offers us an auto-ethnography of sexism. Dahl reflects upon her experiences as a femme scholar of Gender Studies in a Swedish context where equality is an ego ideal, where sexism is something you are expected to bring up, but can be concealed by this very expectation. Dahl explores through testimony how sexism is directed toward feminine bodies (even within feminism such that it becomes possible to speak of a feminist sexism); how sexism is about the devaluing of femininities, and how sexism is lived and experienced by those who embody that which is devalued. Sexism for Dahl is thus not simply about how bodies are seen; sexism can be life trajectory; an ontology. We can add to our archive: the accumulated experiences we might have over the course of a life trajectory; a career trajectory. Sexism: a living archive. We bring together what was scattered; how we are shattered. We pick up the pieces. We put ourselves back together again.

We need to think about the role of institutions in reproducing sexism without then making the individual person disappear (if the 'institution' becomes the problem, it becomes rather easy for individuals to say, 'it has nothing to do with me'). Indeed all of these papers show the complex and messy relationship between individuals and institutions. In the fourth contribution to this special issue, Jennifer McClearn considers a different institution: sport, or more specifically, mixed martial arts. McClearn, following on from Dahl, asks us to think about the relation between the policing of gender norms and sexism. McClearn reflects upon how sexism works in relation to cissexism to assume a weak, fragile and (often) white feminine body that needs to be protected from racialised as well as sexualised others. With reference to the media responses to Fallon Fox, a trans woman athlete, McClearn shows how sexism and cissexism are interlocking systems of oppression: an interlock is how a body can be locked however a body is seen. If Fallon is seen as a woman, she is seen as too strong (sexism). If Fallon is not seen as a woman, she is seen as a threat (cissexism). We learn that when we are talking about sexism we are also talking about how social norms function; how bodies are policed as well as punished because they are assumed not to belong where they reside. Our archive here includes the experiences of



those who are assumed as 'out of place' in the institutions they inhabit as well the categories they assume as their own. Our archive would also include the multitude of media that exercise norms and judgements about those who are too masculine, too feminine or not gendered in the right way. To archive sexism is to gather these documents in one place.

The final three papers in this special issue are all in their own ways concerned with questions of strategy. If sexism persists, if it contributes to shape worlds, then feminism is partly about finding way to handle that sexism. We have to live with the problems we name because naming problems does not make them go away.

Octavia Calder-Dawe explores everyday sexism as a 'choreography,' drawing on conversations with young people. To speak about sexism is to risk being judged as dated, negative, complaining, humourless and over-sensitive. Young people thus become inventive in developing strategies for pointing out sexism: they create a distance from negativity; they play with a series of expectations. Even when bodies are 'hailed' by sexism, there is a gap that follows, a gap that can be opened up, between what is said and how we respond. The following two shorter pieces also take up the question of strategy in relation to social media and smart media. Lisa Nakamura considers the labour of women of colour within social media - the shared acts of calling or and protesting racism and sexism online - as a form of 'venture community management'. Nakamura's analysis of this political labour encourages us to recall the collectivity of anti-sexism as well as anti-racism, how we can 'up the ante' by working with others to find ways to survive as well as transform toxic environments. And finally, Sarah Kember's paper allows us to return in a different way to the figure of the humourless feminist, by taking up feminist humour as one possible strategy for dealing with the ongoing reality of sexism. At one level, of course, sexism is no laughing matter. But at another, laughing at sexism can be a rebellious act; making sexism laughable can be a way of not being undone. This is not about affirming what was previously negated, but allowing our bodies to register the full force of ambivalence.

Our sexism archive is full. Our archive is stuffed. Our archive includes not only the documents of sexism; the fragments that combine to record an upheaval. The archive makes the document into a verb: to document is to refuse to agree to something, to refuse to stay silent about something. Bodies are part of this archive; voices too. Our archive is an archive of rebellion. It testifies to a struggle. To struggle for an existence is to transform an existence. No wonder: there is hope in the assembly.

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