

Psychoanalysis without Walls

Give a Woman an Inch, She'll Take a Penis: Backlash and the fragility of privilege*

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On February 8, 2018, The New School will host an event entitled “Sexual Harassment and Assault: Eros, Power, Violation, and Consent.” Psychologist Jeremy Safran will moderate a panel featuring Lew Aron and Adrienne Harris from NYU Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, Katie Gentile from John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and Lisa Rubin and Ali Shames-Dawson from the New School for Social Research, who together will creatively engage the pressing ethical, political, and psychological questions arising from the #MeToo movement. This panel is meant to sketch — rather than answer — the most significant questions this moment brings to the fore, before transitioning into workshop style breakout groups. In the weeks leading up to the event, we will host contributions from the panelists, and we invite readers to submit responses via submissions@publicseminar.org and to participate in the event on February 8 ([Registration & More Details Here](#)). The event will not be filmed. Below is our first piece, from panelist and frequent Public Seminar contributor Katie Gentile.

The term “witch hunt” has been bandied about in the past few months to describe what, to some, has appeared to be the willy-nilly the take down of one after another man of power, supposedly by the accusations of women. Berlinski recently called it a warlock hunt that is more dangerous to women than the sexual predators themselves. Daphne Merkin’s *New York Times* Op-Ed described her fears that women, embolden by the #MeToo campaign, are creating an atmosphere of patronizing protectionism at best, a new form of censorship at worst. The recent letter signed by Catherine Deneuve and some other French actresses furthered this point, equating sexual freedom with men’s “indispensable freedom to offend and bother” women as they wish. According to the letter, women need to learn to protect themselves to avoid what is termed a “Puritan” approach to sexuality. Deneuve, Berlinski, Merkin and other women, have taken issue with the #MeToo campaign and its conflation of experiences from rape to street harassment to awkward sexual advances. In these critiques, the women speaking out are becoming victimized children, unable to adequately contain male sexuality.

Certainly accusations seem to hold a form of power they could never before muster. Unfortunately this form of power is spurious and contained primarily to the accusations of white women, most of whom have a certain level of cultural status. And while these accusations might result in some men losing their status (for now), it seems this cultural upheaval has not resulted in discussions of institutional power. And as Lindy West brilliantly pointed out, the public debate has continued to situate women alone as the agents to change the system. Men

continue to bumble about, consciously or unconsciously or both, mobilizing the most effective defense used to justify the status quo: incompetence. How can they be expected to do any emotional labor around their privilege when women are so much better at it? (It's a perfectly moldable form of resistance, just insert vacuuming, childcare, etc. as needed.)

Then there are the apoplectic apologies. Apologies of the accused men appear to be attempts at reconciling the behaviors they were called out for, with who they believe they are, to paraphrase Parul Sehgal (p. 59). As she writes, the apologies are “maneuvers” that “effectively remove women from the story. The narrative changes: It becomes less about men grappling with what they’ve done to someone else and more about men lamenting what they have done to *themselves* – and especially their careers” (p. 59). As she observes, such behaviors become not about power or privilege but about having a “sickness” that then practically writes the future redemption narrative (p. 59). These men, many of whom were quite literally caught with their pants down, through their apologies, manage to once again disavow not only their accountability and responsibility, but also their shame and vulnerability.

While institutional power continues to be recast as an individual sickness striking primarily men with cultural status, women who are pointing the fingers are being blamed for fueling a moral panic. Let's be clear, the morality animating this panic has nothing to do with women's voices, nothing to do with feminism, nothing to do with treating women as humans, and nothing to do with upholding some “moral” sense of sexuality, not that this last point is in any way a valid mission. If we haven't guessed by now, those who most wish to police sex, tend to be the ones behaving the worst, breaking their own rules...a lot. This recent wave of “listening” to women is just another way of treating them as pawns in a homosocial heteropatriarchal game: a game between men, about men. After all, as Berlant observes, the men in power, protected by racial, class, gender, and sexuality privilege, still frame the “consequences in domains of capital, labor, institutional belonging, and speech situations where the structurally vulnerable are forced to “choose their battles” or “just act like a good sport.”” No, this ‘Puritanical witch hunt’ is not propelled by the accusations of women, it's merely using them to deflect responsibility.

This sudden flood of accusations and the seeming response to them, can't help but stimulate its own form of anxiety, excitement, mania, perhaps an electric, viral, panic. After years of women's claims of sexual harassment, assault and rape falling on knowing but deaf ears, and knowing but blind institutions, it is stunning, destabilizing, and yes, exhilarating to experience not just some credence given to accusations, but action – powerful men being fired. I will not apologize for having a response of glee at times. But let's be clear, the men being fired are few, given the frequency of harassment and bullying, and so far, contained to specific areas of business. We all know this is the tip of a very deep and wide iceberg, which given climate change is probably a bad metaphor. It might feel from the outside like men are tumbling with one accusation of an innocent backrub or touching a knee, but those on the inside of each situation know the years of complaints that had to be compiled in order to create this moment.

Witch-hunt might feel an appropriate term because there is a similar manic quality, but witch-hunts targeted women who had overstepped heteropatriarchal boundaries. The “warlock hunt” focuses on men who have been *exploiting* patriarchy and white supremacy. As Berlant points out, men are being taken down not by the accusers, but by an institutional response that is

more motivated to cover its ass than it is to respect women, or men for that matter. It's not women who have the power; it is the heteropatriarchal structures responding to the contagious panic. As mentioned above, it is the powerful who frame the consequences, not the accusers.

Blaming women for speaking up reinforces the problem and only protects those in power. One of the reasons women in every office have their own rumor mill is not because they are castratingly vindictive, but because the discursive level of rumor is the only space carved out for these discussions. It's the space many women have developed as an attempt at self-protection, and this includes the lists many have to keep themselves sane. I know the colleagues who talk to my breasts vs. my face. I know the creepy colleagues who, like some energizer bunny, continue to corner women to ask them out, over and over and over again. I know because I've experienced them and because I've been warned by women colleagues.

With witch hunts, the very act of exposing a witch, pointing the melodramatic finger, typically brought status to the accuser. The accuser was the pious truth teller, who, through the act of finger pointing, was embraced by the hypocritical Puritanical social body. Female accusers in this suddenly upside-down, manic world, rarely gain status for any truth telling. Indeed most have still chosen to remain, or attempted to remain, anonymous and this is for very good reason. Historically accusations have led to more harassment, more violence, more threats and often losing one's own job. To quote Kristen Meinzer formerly of WNYC, "if you complain, you disappear" (Udoji, 2017). Ideally, this is the power of the #MeToo campaign: It attempts to create some form of community amongst those who've experienced sexual harassment, assaults, or/and rape, while illustrating the frequency of these experiences of violence.

What makes the past months and ongoing accusations feel like a witch hunt is not that women are pointing fingers and using hashtags, but that the responses embody the neoliberal hot potato response to any troublesome situation, especially those of a sexual nature. As the opening credits for the TV show "Law and Order: The Special Victims Unit" make clear, crimes of a sexual nature are "special" to our sex-obsessed, Puritan culture that enjoys nothing better than to simultaneously patrol and stoke this obsession. Due to our strict puritanical approach to policing sex while sexualizing violent behavior, individuals, not institutional systems must take the hit. Decontextualizing these acts buoys the very social systems that created the conditions for their emergence and continuity. These institutions are peopled by employees and employers who knew very well what was going on but for a variety of reasons — money, fears of retribution from the accused or the company, fears of losing face or funders, advertisers, or underwriters, or fears of being identified as the uptight feminist tattle tale — stayed silent or silenced others or, in at least one case, actually sent the accuser to professional development workshops to better handle the abuse. The social and structural power imbalances that fuel such violence are left intact. Let's face it, for every Al Franken drummed out of the Senate there are likely many more Roy Moores. Just consider the public accounting of well over \$100,000 of taxpayer money used to settle sexual harassment claims of members of the House and Senate. This accounts for just recent cases.

In other words, we need to dig deeper into this moral panic to see its animating roots in heteropatriarchal panic. Morality is the trope designed to hide the vulnerability and shame of heteropatriarchal masculinity when it faces any challenge. This is akin to the fragility of whiteness when confronted with its own racism. Berlinski (2017) and others imply that by

speaking their experiences, women are castrating men. This is the perfect heteropatriarchal response to women attempting to shape (I won't even claim to say "control") access to their bodies and refusing to put the feelings of men before their own bodily integrity. It is a telling indication of the defensive use of the moral panic to deflect the vulnerability of patriarchal systems — give a woman an inch, she'll take a penis.

Heteropatriarchal institutions and systems are protecting themselves at all costs by responding to women's claims for human rights with moral panic. Projecting the morality on to women reinforces their supposed vulnerable victimization (better keep them safe at home), elevates sex as the site of this traumatic humiliation (women better wear more conservative clothing for their own protection), liberating men from their accountability or responsibility, in essence, enabling them to disavow their shame and vulnerability projecting it once again, onto female identified bodies. Men's "indispensable freedom to offend and bother" merely functions to contain vulnerability in the female-identified body.

Instead the focus needs to be on creating reflective space so we can differentiate the huggy guy in the office, from the one who grabs your ass; the kisser who pecks you on the cheek occasionally, like an annoying but fairly respectful grandpa, from the tongue that chases you down the hall. That said, innocence and fumbling sweetness are age-old excuses for groping hands and probing tongues.

Take the guy who gives unsolicited backrubs (when they actually *are* just backrubs, which typically isn't the case). He should ask himself, "Do I give backrubs, hugs, kisses, unsolicited physical contact to everyone in the office, or just the women? All women, or just certain women?" If the answer is anything other than "I give backrubs to everyone," there's a problem. What's more, given all the research on the calming effects of physical touch, it only makes health sense for men to start touching each other in a bounded, caring way, especially now, when many have described feeling anxious about being "caught" innocently stepping over an "invisible" line of sexual harassment. Hint: the line is not so invisible if you pay attention. Flirtations are forms of play that create spaces for both parties to (re-)emerge in new and exciting and *integrated* ways, even when this integration feels dizzying. Sexual harassment and assault, on the other hand, collapse such potentiating spaces, reinforcing disintegration and dissociation, leaving room only for the submission and exploitation of one party, a form of power over the other.

The potential for this moment to swing toward increased Puritanism, punishment, or reflection and institutional change, hinges on men, not women. Only when the anxiety of acknowledging and exploring vulnerability and shame can be seen for what it is, will the onus of the problem be placed where it belongs: on racist and classist heteropatriarchal institutions, those who defend them at all costs, and the rest of those who collude without solidarity. Then we can begin differentiating a complement from a threat, and men can give each other some of those innocent, calming backrubs. But expecting women alone to carry the shame and vulnerability of the moment, to do all the emotional labor, *again*, in order to buttress the petulant and unrepentant 'members' of our occupational communities, is at best, just another 'patriarchal bargain' (Lorber, 1989).

Katie Gentile, Ph.D. is Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and Director of the Gender Studies Program at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. She is the author of *Creating bodies: Eating disorders as self-destructive survival* and the forthcoming *The Business of being made: The temporalities of reproductive technologies in psychoanalysis and culture*, both from Routledge. She is the editor of the Routledge book series *Genders and Sexualities in Minds and Cultures*, co-editor of the journal *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* and on the editorial board of *Women's Studies Quarterly*. As a licensed psychologist she is on the faculty of New York University's Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis and in private practice in New York City.