

## **“I Was Strangely Sexually Excited By How You Stood Your Ground In There”: My Auto-ethnographic Story of Sexual Harassment in Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

Reflecting on the entrenched dominant and cultural narratives at work in the academy as they relate to sexual harassment is the focus of this paper. Following Celia Brackenridge [1], sexual harassment is defined as part of the sexual exploitation continuum, anchored on the one end by an institutional “chilly climate”, through unwanted attention, and on the other by personal sexual abuse. By using the method of autoethnography, I deconstruct the plot line of my own experience [2] of sexual harassment as a first-year Assistant Professor and then connect it to the larger system of the academy. As autoethnographers [3-7] suggest, by first uncovering such “...entrenched cultural...and dominant ‘master’ narratives” in our worlds [6], we can then examine the stories currently shaping our lives, how they both constrain and empower us as well as others, whether we want them to change, what a new story and plot line might be, how we can alter and resist the old stories, how we can change, and how our stories can “...connect to those of others to become part of a new collective story” [6].

As Sparkes [6] suggests, writing autoethnographically can help us deconstruct the plot lines of our own lives [2]. This is because autoethnography involves “... writing [in the first person voice] about the personal and its relationship to culture” [3]. This type of writing process has been compared to a camera lens, where the writer moves back and forth between the cultural/social parts of her experience and the inward vulnerable self, a self that “...move(s) through, refract(s), and resist(s) cultural interpretations” of that same experience [3]. By uncovering first the “...entrenched cultural...and dominant ‘master’ narratives” in our worlds [6], autoethnographers [3-7] invite us to examine the stories currently shaping our lives, how they both constrain and empower us as well as others, whether we want them to change, what a new story and plot line might be, how we can alter and resist the old stories, how we can change, and how our stories can “...connect to those of others to become part of a new collective story” [6].

Reflecting on these questions as they relate to my own experience of sexual harassment in higher education using auto-ethnography is the major focus of this paper. As an academic trained in a positivist scientific framework, these questions and this methodology are very new to me. Truth be told, I am figuring it out as I go. However, I’ve purposefully chosen to use it because I think my story of sexual harassment in higher education is not unique. In fact, according to recent statistics [8], my story appears to be representative of the statistics related to the sexual harassment of women in higher education in general. In addition, since I was trained in the areas of sport and sport studies—both of which are male-dominated environments - following sport

studies researcher Celia Brackenridge [1], I understand sexual harassment in these environments to be part of the sexual exploitation continuum anchored on the one end by an institutional “chilly climate” through unwanted attention and on the other end by actual personal sexual abuse. Using auto-ethnography, and, specifically, a dramatic story with one scene and composite characters, I now present to you my personal experience of sexual harassment.

### **Scene I: The King<sup>1</sup> and I**

With his free hand, he opens the door to the conference room for me. I take my seat at the conference room table next to him, eager to please him with my pages full of edits and my best navy blue suit on, a recent graduation present from my parents. “I’d like to start by thanking the committee”, he says, “for all their hard work on Mark’s thesis proposal”. As he’s speaking, I pull the skin off my thumb until it bleeds, a habit from childhood, a nod to the familiar nerves I feel inside. It’s trance-like, this picking...pulling and picking...picking and pulling until the skin breaks free from its mooring...not thinking...avoiding the thoughts of fear, panic, weakness, and lack of control I feel inside. The pain is instantaneous and breaks the stronghold of the trance, bringing me back to the present.

As the blood runs down my finger, I nod without speaking, making eye contact with the graduate student Mark as he describes his study; I am hoping to reassure him. I finger my pen as I glance at the others, three white men bearing gifts—the gifts of experience, of whiteness, of power - and me—the youngest, the newest, the one who is different.

The King invites the wise men to ask their questions of Mark first, their glasses pushed down on the bridge of their noses as they glance back and forth between their notes, the handouts and the screen. I look at my watch wondering, *When will it be my turn? My turn to please him? My mentor, my King?* I suck the blood off my thumb so that it won’t stain the handout Mark has given us to follow along.

The wise men congratulate the King on helping Mark develop a “very thorough” presentation, one that they “enjoyed reading” and think has “tremendous potential”. Their comments are glowing but without substantive punch. They commend the King - as he sits at the head of the table - on his “exceptional student”. While they’re talking, I wonder, *Should I say what I need to about the problems with Mark’s study? Will my comments matter?* One more good tug on my thumb and all the loose ends, the flaws on my skin, are tidied up.

The King looks in my direction when the wise men’s questions are finished, asking, “Dr. Fisher, do you have any comments for Mark?”, finally giving me permission to speak. I remember the first time he called me “Dr. Fisher”, something I relished nine months ago fresh out of my doctoral program and during my job interview with him. Before I began working there, the word on the street was that he had “difficulty working with women”. But, *I would be different, and better, work hard to fit in.*

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<sup>1</sup> The King represents a composite character, developed from over 25 years of experiences with mentors in the academy. All other character names have also been changed.

The King is the most senior member of my department, of my college, in fact, a man who has worked his way up from coach to professor to dean. It is His voice that speaks the loudest at the faculty meetings, His voice the one that faculty listen to and respect. Faculty dance around him, hoping to curry favor, have him on their side. But, mostly, they want to avoid getting on his bad side. *And, he is my mentor, my advisor, my King.*

Since I'm new at this game, I start off by complimenting Mark on his presentation. But, then I start in on the questions. I say, "Mark, I have some concerns about your choice of research participants".

Before Mark can respond, the King's voice booms, "**What are you IMPLYING??**", using no "Dr. Fisher" this time. His voice ricochets off the paneled walls of the conference room as the vessels in his neck gorge full of blood and his face fills with red.

"Well..." I say calmly, my recent psychology training kicking in, as my voice gets softer and softer in direct proportion to the loudness of his echoing boom. "I'm concerned about Mark's choice of interview participants", I continue, "...especially since he's proposing to interview his own high school African American basketball players about how they feel about having him, a white coach and teacher". I pause to see if the wise men understand what I'm saying, support me, confirm me. The silence is deafening, the "othering" complete.

The King continues: "**Well, WHAT do you want him to DO, Dr. Fisher?!!!!!**", using "Dr. Fisher" this time. **Scrap his ENTIRE thesis PROPOSAL and come up with something NEW?** His anger is palpable, his message is clear: *YOU should keep silent, keep nodding, keep bleeding....YOU should just please me, your mentor, your King.*

With my heart beating faster and my breaths getting shorter, I press on with my point, ready for battle. "I'd agree to Mark's proposal, King, if he interviews athletes from another high school team that he isn't teaching and coaching, players he doesn't have power and control over, in terms of playing time, having them in his class and giving them grades, etc.". My academic training takes over in this tennis match of wills—point to his counterpoint, neither of us yielding, both at full strength as the ball flies over the net and back. His face is still red as he leans toward me at the table, invading my personal space. Maintaining eye contact, I keep hitting the ball back to him, getting softer and softer in my voice, but not backing down. I feel his ire as I return serve for match point.

Without acknowledging the full weight of my argument, the King leans back in his chair, his voice calm, stating, "Mark, Dr. Fisher would like you to change your participants to another high school team other than your own in the greater metropolitan area. I appreciate everyone else's contributions. We will make the change and send you a revised copy of Mark's thesis proposal when we're finished".

*I did it! I showed him, how smart and discerning! But, what is he thinking, my mentor, my King?*

With his free hand, he re-opens the door to the conference room for me. "Thank you", I say, so proud of what I've accomplished in there, all my academic training paying off, proving I am an exceptional new junior faculty member. Then, he touches my arm,

looking straight at me and says, “I was strangely sexually excited by how you held your ground in there, Dr. Fisher”.

*Keep silent, keep nodding, keep bleeding, my Queen.* End Scene.

### **The Coronation and The Mythical Court of the Academy**

As a method, autoethnography features “...concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot” [3]. It combines literary and ethnographic techniques. As stated earlier, using autoethnography to examine how these stories/scenes influence our lives requires that we first explore how they shape, constrain, and empower us. It also calls us to invite others to read and give feedback on our work [3]. In this way, it is a living document, changing with each iteration so that we can go back and see the progression of our thinking on a particular experience and then connect it to larger social, cultural, and political issues.

As of today, I have invited my husband, both of my priests, another church member, a longtime friend, four colleagues and four students from my current university and one colleague from an outside university to read this paper, to provide feedback on it. Each has provided feedback on his/her personal and professional reaction to the scene. Each has also commented on how the story felt familiar to him/her, not in terms of the specific scene but related to the overall experience of being harassed by a supervisor who had power over him/her. I now discuss my scene/experience based on all of our reflections by answering the following questions: (a) what is/are the master narrative(s) of this story (which have become dominant and entrenched in academia) that are reflected in my writing?; (b) what might a new story and plot line look like related to sexual harassment?; (c) how could I have resisted and altered my story of sexual harassment?; (d) how could my story- connected to others’ stories - become part of a new, resistant story [3-7]?

*Master narratives of the academy: Positivist training and sexism.* What I notice about the start of this paper is that it very much reflects my training in the positivist scientific framework - I don’t begin the paper with a personal narrative, but rather an explanation and justification of the scientific method of autoethnography. I also notice that “I” am secondary in both the title and scene set-up; both begin with him—the King—and not me. This means that regardless of whether he is the villain or the hero, the way I experienced this interaction and wrote the story, he takes center stage; the viewer sees him first and he is the active part as the scene opens. He also ends the scene, holding power as the senior/mentor faculty member. I could have written this scene very differently by establishing myself first, or by establishing us as equals. However, as a recent graduate and new junior faculty member, this was not how I experienced the sexual harassment; I experienced the King—my mentor—as having all the power to downplay my professionalism by sexualizing me in the moment when I dared to challenge his authority. The dilemma with Mark’s thesis—a high school teacher/coach who wants to interview his own African American students about having him as a white teacher/coach - also mirrors the dilemma about the power dynamics between the King and I as senior and junior faculty members, respectively.

Interestingly, in the last sentence of the scene, I have also inverted the King's sexual harassment into a compliment. His action—touching my arm and telling me that he was sexually attracted to me when I disagreed with him—at the same time shapes, constrains, and empowers me. In feminist poststructural terms [9-10], I have made sense of his behavior by making it a compliment to be wanted as a sex object because this maintains a certain version of myself, my academic self. This self is based on the discourse of the academy and my subject position within it (e.g, what it means to be a “female junior faculty member” trying to please my male mentor). However, discourses such as these limit the possibilities for my feelings and behavior, because they construct and reinforce particular views of myself and other women as sexual objects. In other words, in this majoritarian narrative of royalty where kings and queens rule, though I am a suffering Queen, I am a Queen nonetheless. In the (white male) academy, since I am not King nor can I ever be, I need this “coronation” by my mentor, my King, to prove my worth as a female on the mythical “court”.

Perhaps equally as important, what it feels like as a woman who advocates against the politics of domination [11] to give the King permission to “coronate” me is complex. On the one hand, when this coronation occurs, in that moment he crowns me as his equal in title. There are privileges associated with this such as having the power to make changes in this student's thesis, for example. Nevertheless, am I really his Queen? Since my coronation is tainted with the subtext, “I can't wait to get you in bed after the coronation”, wouldn't I be more like his mistress, sexually exciting to him but below him in status? By saying what he said, he exerts power and control over me. When a King makes a woman his queen, he does not mean to make her his equal. He makes her his possession. He remains dominant and has the power to tell her to “keep silent, keep nodding” and to leave her bleeding. My display of power arouses him, but only as long as he stays in charge.

At its core, sexual harassment is about the impact words and actions have on the harassed, not what the intent is from the harasser. It is made up of both institutional and personal sexism. It is mainly experienced as “...unwanted approaches, behavior or attention on the basis of sex and is perpetrated by an individual or small group against, usually, a single person” [1]. In my case, the unwanted attention consisted of “intimidating sexual remarks...[and] condescending or patronizing behavior undermining self-respect or work performance” [1]. The bottom line is that the King—who had power over me as my mentor and the one who could promote and tenure me—sexually harassed me. However twisted the honor was—especially since patriarchy saturates us all—the King's sexual expression, laced with both innuendo and invitation INVADDED me, my work, my identity as a scholar, woman, mentee, and pleaser. At the very moment that I felt pride in doing my job “the right way” in the academy, the King used his power and sexual expression to invade and disrupt my space and safety as a mentee.

*Bleeding skin: Disruption of positivist training.* This method of autoethnography invites us to let the reader into our own vulnerability. As Ellis [3] states, “To be successful, [autoethnographic ] researchers have to be comfortable with emotionality—their own and others” (p. 136). Letting the reader in on my habit of picking and bleeding—a habit I still have

when dealing with stress - is very personal and intimate, clearly disrupting and even violating our notions of what scientific writing and research should be like in the social sciences. I think this is what makes it so powerful for me and for those who have given me feedback on it—it disrupts our “normal” academic discourse by privileging emotional knowledge over scientific knowledge [12]. It allows the reader to feel as though like s/he is in the room with me, literally, in my skin.

*Scene II: Prologue.* As stated earlier, those researchers who take up autoethnography invite us to consider what a new story and plot line might look like [3-7]. In my case, this consideration is related to how to eliminate sexual harassment in the academy in general and in the sport environment in particular. One way to do this is to observe how we can resist and alter “master narratives” in our own localities as well as begin to connect our stories to others to become part of a new, resistant story. Since oppression—including racism, sexism, sexual harassment, etc.—is not one thing but a multifaceted system, there are gaps and holes within it from which to resist and even undermine it [13].

In contrast, in my own story of sexual harassment, I did not write myself in as the agent; “I” am secondary. In fact, I do not even report what I did in the moment following the King’s touching of my arm and telling me he was sexually excited by me when I held my ground. Again, I realize that even in my use of an alternative method like auto- ethnography—even when I am given permission to claim my own voice - patriarchy, sexism, and positivism still saturate me. To illustrate, here is where I ended my story, in **Scene I: The King and I:**

With his free hand, he re-opens the door to the conference room for me. “Thank you”, I say, so proud of what I’ve accomplished in there, all my academic training paying off, proving I am an exceptional new junior faculty member. Then, he touches my arm, looking straight at me and says, “I was strangely sexually excited by how you held your ground in there, Dr. Fisher”.

*Keep silent, keep nodding, keep bleeding, my Queen. End Scene.*

However, what I realized after getting feedback from others is that I actually said something to the King in that moment which resulted in his behavior stopping and never occurring again. Here is what actually happened immediately after his statement and what should be titled **Scene II: Prologue:**

*Did he just say that to me?*, I thought to myself, incredulous that a man of his stature and reputation would dare say something so obviously inappropriate. I thought back to the rumors I heard before taking the job about how he treated female coaches back in the days when he was coaching. Many were no longer employed by the institution. *Should I say something to him? Will that reflect badly on me? Will he retaliate towards me?* These are all thoughts running through my head in the split second before I blurt out:

“You *know* that’s sexual harassment, right?!!”.

The King laughed and backed away from me, as if it was all suddenly a misunderstanding. “I was just joking with you, Leslee, you know that, right?”

But, I repeated:

“No, you *know* that’s sexual harassment, right?!!”.

The King laughed again and made a beeline for his office. **End Scene.**

### **Epilogue**

Reflecting on own experience of sexual harassment in higher education using autoethnography was the major focus of this paper. As I mentioned in the introduction, I chose to use autoethnography purposefully because my story of sexual harassment in higher education is one of many stories that need to be told; it is not unique. Further, using autoethnography, and, specifically, a dramatic story with one scene and composite characters, is a form of resistance to the canon. It has enabled me to connect with others, to hear their stories, and to begin to co-create a new story of an academy devoid of sexual harassment.

Trained in the male-dominated environments of sport and sport studies, I resonate with sport studies researcher Celia Brackenridge [1] who describes sexual harassment in these environments as part of a continuum of sexual exploitation, anchored on the one end by an institutional “chilly climate” - through unwanted attention, which I experienced—to the other end represented by actual personal sexual abuse, which I did not. However, while Brackenridge suggests that we know a great deal about sexual exploitation such as how to predict the conditions under which sexual exploitation—including harassment - will occur as well as the interpersonal and social processes leading to sexual abuse, there is much we don’t know. As she maintains:

What is it about sport that promotes and condones sexually exploitative behaviour by men?’. Ridding sport of the spoilsports, then is not just a project about particular individuals or even stakeholder groups; it is one involving the entire social and cultural system (p. 239).

By extending our camera lens out from sport to the academy, then, we should ask: What is it about the academy that promotes and condones sexually exploitative behavior by men? What is it about the entire social and cultural system of the academy which makes available this kind of behavior? I have used the analogy of the mythical royal court to describe the academy, an institution and system of hierarchy filled with kings and queens who hold varying degrees of power and status based on sexism and ownership of land, among other criteria. But, “court” also means “to woo” and “to cozy up to”; its antonym is “to shun” [14]. When the King sexually harassed me within the academy walls, I felt at the same time both wooed by the sovereign as well as the pain from the potential to be shunned by him, depending upon whether or not I returned his advances. These are things I should not have had to worry about as a newly graduated PhD student and neophyte faculty member in the academy. This kind of potential for the exploitation of power by the “ruler” and by extension the “ruling class” appears inherent in a system where mentees are dependent upon their mentors for approval and where untenured faculty members are voted on for tenure by both their mentors and other more senior colleagues.

As feminist post-structuralist sport studies researchers McGannon and Busanich [9] suggest:

...intervening to change women’s negative self-related feelings and unhealthy behaviors...requires an awareness of the power located in particular sociocultural influences...with *internal self-related views* the ultimate focus of

change...viewed in this way, women's choices are their own (i.e., they have some agency)...but they are not entirely free from webs and regimes of productive power (i.e., choices are limited and structured in particular ways by the conditions of possibility within the discourses drawn upon)(p.222).

While McGannon and Busanich are describing exercise psychology interventions, the same interventions could be useful for examining sexual harassment of women in the academy. Following their example in the academic context, one potential reason that mentees may take up such constricted academic self-images (e.g., doing whatever it takes to please the mentor) could be that they have internalized the power relations and discourses related to this relationship; in other words, their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are impacted and ostensibly structured by the discursive (and sociopolitical) construction of taken-for-granted ideas about "the perfect mentee" as well as practices within the academy that reinforce these relationships.

As McGannon and Busanich posit, in order for things to change in women's lives, they must first be made aware of how their own thoughts, language, actions, feelings, etc., contribute to reinforcing such taken-for-granted notions. This is very much in line with proponents of autoethnography [1] who advocate for the strong and direct connection between the examined life and social change. It is my hope that this paper is the beginning of a conversation with others who are committed to advocating for social justice in the academy [15].

The King represents a composite character, developed from over 25 years of experiences with mentors in the academy. All other character names have also been changed.

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