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Citation for final published version:

Boyer, Kate ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8356-4412> 2022. Sexual harassment and the right to everyday life. *Progress in Human Geography* 46 (2) , pp. 398-415. 10.1177/03091325211024340 file

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325211024340>
<<https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325211024340>>

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Sexual Harassment and the Right to Everyday Life

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Published in [Progress in Human Geography](#) on-line July 8th 2021

Abstract

Freedom from harassment is a basic human right and precondition to mental and physical health. While sexual harassment has become a higher-profile issue in recent years across a range of cultural contexts, including through the global rise of the *#MeToo* movement and the *Everyday Sexism* project, this issue has also attracted the attention of policymakers at the highest levels, leading, in the UK, to a Parliamentary Inquiry in 2018 on sexual harassment in public places, and a briefing paper on sexual harassment in higher education from the House of Commons in 2018. All of these highlight the urgent need for both deeper understanding and cultural change on this issue. Meanwhile, sexual harassment constitutes an important area of academic inquiry across a wide range of scholarly fields including psychology, sociology, women's studies, criminology, law and social policy as well as geography. This article critically reviews key trends in scholarship on sexual harassment in public. It focuses on the spatial contexts of the street, the night-time economy and higher education institutions. A fundamental question of spatial justice, I argue that sexual harassment can be approached through three conceptual lenses: the relational emergence of bodies; the politics of everyday spatial practice; and the ways affects and the atmospheres they generate shape spatial experience. I argue that geographers have a vital role to play in advancing knowledge on this issue, and conclude by outlining a research agenda tracing outlines along which this work might unfold.

I Introduction

Sexual harassment has become a high-profile issue in recent years across a range of cultural contexts, including through the global rise of the *#MeToo* movement and the *Everyday Sexism* project. The UK (and elsewhere) has seen regular media coverage of high-profile cases of sexual harassment and other forms of gender violence across many different sectors (including organized sport; organized religion; social and child welfare services and the entertainment industry, to name just a few) ([Anitha and Lewis, 2018](#): 5). Meanwhile, awareness about the prevalence of sexual harassment within spaces

of higher education (including within geography programmes specifically)¹ has also risen ([Batty et al., 2017](#); [Mansfield et al., 2019](#)), with research suggesting that up to three of every five university students in the UK have been sexually harassed or assaulted at some point ([Busby, 2018](#)).

From the perspective of the 'right to everyday life' ([Beebeejaun, 2017](#)) and right to the city ([Fenster, 2005](#)), this state of affairs can only be viewed as an abject failure. Fear of sexual harassment can limit movement for women and other feminised and gender diverse subjects, and freedom from harassment is a basic human right and precondition to mental and physical health and well-being. In the UK, concern about this issue has now attracted the attention of policymakers at the highest levels, leading to a Parliamentary Inquiry in 2018 on sexual harassment in public places² and a briefing article on sexual harassment in higher education from the House of Commons in 2018. All of these highlight the urgent need for both deeper understanding and cultural change on this issue.

This essay provides a critical reading of contemporary scholarship on sexual harassment within and beyond geography, arguing that human geographers have an important role to play in taking this work forward. Sexual harassment connects to a number of key conceptual frames in contemporary human geography. In addition to being a question of rights to space and the right to everyday life, this issue relates to calls for greater attunement to the sexual politics of citizenship and belonging ([Johnston, 2017](#)) as well as calls to attend to the body as a locus through which power operates ([Hopkins, 2019](#); [Mountz, 2018](#)). Harassment relates to embodied day-to-day spatial practice ([Brickell and Maddrell, 2016](#); [Simonsen, 2010](#)) and reflects relational approaches to embodiment ([Bray and Colebrook, 1998](#); [Braidotti, 2002](#); [Stark, 2017](#)).³ While harassment can occur through threatening or demeaning words or actions, it can also occur through non-verbal signs that pass between people, the theorisation of which has been deepened by work within and beyond geography on affect ([Anderson, 2009](#); [Duff, 2010](#); [Stewart, 2011](#)). Each of these conceptual frames can help deepen our understanding of sexual harassment. Building on these approaches, I suggest that sexual harassment can be conceptualized (after Deleuze) as an apparatus of capture through which certain bodies are fixed affectively, materially and discursively within cultural logics of gender power, limiting what they can do and where and how they can move. This essay takes knowledge forward by providing

a critical review of scholarship on sexual harassment within and beyond geography and outlining an agenda for future research in this field, which includes consideration of efforts to fight back against sexual harassment. While this field constitutes a rich corpus of scholarship, its findings have not been drawn together to allow consideration of key findings in the round: now is the time for such a review.

Sexual harassment operates as a mechanism for maintaining heteropatriarchy through the sexual objectification of women and other feminised subjects. It can be understood as forming a kind of cultural 'wallpaper' to patriarchy and serving as part of a 'continuum of violence' that normalises both male power generally and more serious forms of sexual violence ([Kelly, 1988](#) in [Anitha and Lewis, 2018](#):1). Put another way, harassment stands in a reciprocal relationship to patriarchy in that it is both caused by and helps maintain this system of gender power, and it is in this capacity that it persists.

Starting with Pain and Valentine's foundational work on the geography of women's fear ([Pain, 1991](#); [Valentine, 1989](#); [1992](#)), geographers have made important contributions to understanding sexual harassment and other forms of gender violence ([Brickell and Maddrell, 2016](#); [Brickell and Cuomo, 2020](#); [Day, 2001](#); [Pain, 2001](#); [Pain, 2014](#)). This work has advanced scholarship by arguing that women's fear of rape and subsequent avoidance of certain kinds of public spaces constitutes, at its root, a 'spatial expression of patriarchy' ([Valentine, 1989](#): 315). Despite the greater statistical likelihood of rape occurring in private space by a known attacker ([Pain, 1991](#); [Valentine, 1989](#)), this scholarship powerfully illustrates the role that fear of stranger rape plays in limiting women's spatial freedom ([Pain, 1991](#); [Valentine, 1989](#)). Conceptually, this work casts harassment as a symbolic threat of sexual violence and the failure of the state to intervene as an illustration of its complicity in the maintenance of patriarchy as a gender order ([Pain, 1991](#); [Valentine, 1992](#)).

Scholarship on sexual harassment within and beyond geography has expanded over the last 30 years to highlight how harassment functions across myriad cultural contexts, creating environments in which more serious forms of gender violence⁴ are more likely to occur ([Anitha and Lewis, 2018](#); [Bhattacharyya, 2015](#); [Duckel Graglia, 2016](#); [Park et al., 2013](#)). This work has highlighted how

intersectional difference shapes experiences of harassment ([Browne, 2004](#); [Doan, 2010](#); [Lubitow et al., 2017](#)). As scholarship of black feminists (and scholarship that builds on this body of work) has shown, systems of social power that structure advantage and disadvantage based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation and other factors interplay such that multiple forms of discrimination can compound one another in policies, institutions, and at the level of lived practice ([Collins, 2002](#); [Crenshaw, 1989](#); [Hopkins, 2019](#); [Kendi, 2019](#); [Lorde, 1984](#)). Intersectional difference can have a significant impact on how women and other feminised subjects are treated in public space, and as research has shown women of colour both experience more sexual violence than white women, and this violence is racialised ([Buchanan and Ormerod, 2002](#); [Nielsen, 2009](#)). This pattern is bound up with historical legacies of slavery and colonialism in which women of colour have been subjected to institutionalized sexual violence ([Collins, 2002](#); [Hernandez, 2000](#); [Woods et al., 2009](#)). The ways that gender discrimination and racism can intertwine are suggested in the portmanteau *misogynoir* recently coined by Moya Bailey ([Bailey, 2010](#); [Kwakyee and Ogunbiyi, 2019](#)).

Building on this work, this essay will synthesize current scholarship on sexual harassment through the lens of the three spatial contexts of street-space; the night-time economy; and spaces of higher education. Through this discussion, I argue that there is considerable scope for geographers to extend work in this field through employing conceptual lenses of embodiment, relationality and everyday practice.⁵ These three sites were chosen so as to echo the tripartite focus of the *Inquiry on Sexual Harassment of Women and Girls in Public Places* undertaken by the Women and Equalities Committee of the UK Parliament in 2018.⁶ These three (sometimes overlapping) sites were chosen for particular focus because together they constitute the spaces in which sexual harassment is most prevalent. While street-space and other spaces of public transport (marked by crowding and anonymity) have long been recognised as sites of sexual harassment, gender-based harassment and assault (especially in the form of groping) within spaces in the night-time economy are now considered ‘the norm’ in the UK according to Parliamentary inquiries.⁷ Finally, higher education was selected as the final site of analysis due to the rates of sexual and gender violence in these spaces, with over 60 per cent of all UK students reporting that they experience some form of gender violence while at university ([NUS, 2019](#); [Revolt Report, 2018](#)). This essay is not meant to be exhaustive but instead

seeks to highlight key trends and conceptual innovations within this field. I conclude by laying out a research agenda through which geographers might fruitfully extend work on sexual harassment – including by considering efforts to bring forth cultural change – arguing that geographers have an important role to play in deepening understanding on this subject.

1 Sexual Harassment in Relation to Mobility and Spaces of Transport

With the ‘mobilities turn’ over the last 10 years, geographers have begun attending to the sensory, affective, embodied and experiential aspects of movement and transport ([Cresswell, 2010](#)). In regards to experiences of moving through urban (and other kinds of) space, the mobilities turn has generated a suite of work focusing on the poetic and artistic nature of walking ([Edensor, 2010](#); [Pile, 2005](#); [Pinder 2001](#); [Solnit, 2001](#); [Wylie, 2005](#)). Drawing on Lefebvre’s concept of rhythmanalysis, this work has led to heightened conceptual understandings of walking as a sensory experience that can function as a form of ‘mobile belonging’ ([Edensor, 2010](#): 70) including through collaborations with the more-than-human. Yet, as a rejoinder to this, Middleton cautions that ‘the emancipatory potential and democratic possibilities of...walking are far from straightforward and unproblematic as much of the literature on walking in the city is imbued with a degree of romanticism, whereby walking is often considered, without question, as a positive urban practice’ ([Middleton, 2010](#): 579).

As scholarship in feminist geography has shown, the possibility of experiencing walking as a poetic practice is fundamentally bound up with multiple intersecting forms of social privilege, which are experienced through and read-off bodies in the public realm to produce spatial and other kinds of freedoms. As Simonsen observes, it is crucial to attend to the ways social positionality and intersecting power geometries of race, gender, class and other factors shape everyday experiences of walking, embodiment and public space (also see [Cresswell, 2010](#); [Simonsen, 2010](#)). While certain kinds of social markers (whiteness, middle-classness, heterosexuality, maleness and cis-gender identity) increase the likelihood of experiencing walking as an artistic practice, other kinds of social positions can lead to significantly different kinds of experiences.

Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht have called attention to the 'political importance of everyday acts and manners as mechanisms of resistance and subjugation' ([Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009](#): 87), focusing particularly on the role of sidewalks as a site of oppression and social control. As research has shown, sidewalks are important sites for making determinations about who 'belongs' in public space and reproducing social hierarchies, highlighting that the ability to pass without comment in public space is fundamental to feeling respected and establishing a sense of belonging ([Fyfe, 2006](#); [Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009](#); [Ryan, 1992](#)). These conscious and unconscious determinations about 'who belongs where' can be shaped by tenacious spatial imaginaries, which code public space as 'male', leading to the tolerance of harassment and victim-blaming in cases of sexual violence ([Rendell et al., 2000](#); [Sweet and Ortiz Escalante, 2015](#)).

As feminist theorist Sara Ahmed observes, in addition to being bound up with gender, the ability to pass without notice or comment in a given space is also bound up with race and white privilege, such that people of colour can be made to feel that their very presence disrupts the 'public comfort' or is viewed as a challenge within white space ([Ahmed, 2010](#): 548). As scholar-activist Ore Ogunbiyi noted about her experience as a student in a UK university: 'as a black woman in a white-dominated space, I discovered my very existence was an act of resistance' ([Kwakyie and Ogunbiyi, 2019](#): 225). Being continually marked and othered in public space can lead to feelings of alienation and social isolation ([Ahmed, 2010](#); [Browne, 2004](#)). For people of colour, this can take a heavy toll in terms of mental health with, for example, the experience of continually being treated as a potential source of danger to which many black and brown men (and even children) are subject; and the experience of being sexually objectified which many black and brown women and children are subject can be a source of trauma and suffering throughout life ([Hernandez, 2000](#); [Kendi, 2019](#)).

Following on from this, scholarship on minoritised subjects' experiences of public space suggest, on the whole, significantly less pleasurable and less liberatory experiences of walking than the invocations of walking as poetry or a form of artistic practice noted earlier. For example, street harassment has been shown to be a common feature of (especially young) women's (including trans-women's) and non-binary peoples' experiences of movement in urban space across a range

of cultural contexts ([Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014](#); [Fairchild and Rudman, 2008](#); [Fileborn, 2014](#); [Logan, 2015](#); [Macmillan et al., 2000](#); [West, 2002](#)). As noted, research also shows that women of colour face higher levels of harassment and violence than white women, and that, owing to broader racialized patterns of economic inequality and sexualized stereotypes, racism and sexism are often combined within these encounters ([Buchanan and Ormerod, 2002](#); Kerl, 2010; [Nielsen, 2009](#)). Though little work has examined experiences of harassment on the part of gay and bisexual men, what work that has been done in this area shows 90 per cent of gay and bisexual men to experience street harassment ([McNeil, 2012](#)).

While variegated by race, sexual orientation and other factors, street harassment is also a global phenomenon ([Senthillingam, 2017](#); [Sen et al., 2018](#)), in which police campaigns often reinforce the view that certain kinds of streets, at certain times, are unsafe for women ([Loukaitou Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009](#): 92). Work from 2008 suggests that 70 per cent of US women in their late teens and early 20s experience some form of gender-based street harassment at least once a month, with 30 per cent experiencing harassment every few days and over 25 per cent experiencing groping or grabbing about once a month ([Fairchild and Rudman, 2008](#)). Similarly, over 90 per cent of women in Afghanistan ([WCLRF, 2015](#)) and just under 90 per cent of women in Australia ([Fileborn, 2014](#); [Johnson and Bennett, 2015](#)) report experiencing gender-based harassment in public at some point in their lives, while women in India report experiencing harassment between half and all the time they go out in public ([Dhillon and Bhakya, 2014](#)). However, it is important to note that these figures exist within very different levels of overall gender discrimination, meaning that the nature and intensity of harassment, how it is perceived socially and whether legal remedies exist to challenge it all vary significantly by cultural context. A systematic country-by-country review of sexual harassment in a global context is beyond the scope of this article. However, the research on global trends has noted the broadscale normalisation of male control of public space in many parts of Asia, South-Asia and Latin America, together with the potential for shame and fear of retribution on the part of victims in some Middle Eastern and North African contexts to be powerful factors shaping the prevalence and intensity of harassment and whether it is reported ([Senthillingam, 2017](#)).

Street harassment often happens in broad daylight, and victims can fear retaliation if they confront harassers. Such fears can be especially strong in cultural contexts in which there have been high-profile cases of violent retaliation from confronted harassers (such as India in the form of acid attacks) ([Dhillon and Bhakya, 2014](#)). Scholarship further shows that harassment can lead to a range of negative feelings including depression, anger, distrust, fear and increased body self-surveillance ([Logan, 2015](#)). The combination of repetitively experiencing harassment and limited legal recourse to address it can be experienced as dehumanising ([Fileborn and Vera-Gray, 2017](#)) and traumatic ([Buchanan and Ormerod, 2002](#)), and can lead those experiencing harassment to feel unsafe and anxious, have poor sleep and limit their mobility outside the home ([Dhillon and Bhakya, 2014](#); [Logan, 2015](#)). Harassment can also lead to long-term emotional problems including feeling haunted by a particular incident for years, while experiences of sexual harassment in public as a young person can lead to the feeling of having had one's childhood taken away ([Fileborn and Vera-Gray, 2017](#)). As this scholarship amply shows, while some experience the street as a space of belonging, others patently do not.

In addition to sidewalks, spaces associated with other forms of mobilities can be problematic as well. As Dunckel Graglia's work on sexual violence within Mexico City's public transit system shows, for example, 9 out of 10 women are sexually assaulted on the city's busses, metro or taxi system at least once in their lifetimes ([Dunckel Graglia, 2016](#)). Based on interviews with survivors of encounters ranging from leering and rude comments to groping and being assaulted, this work argues that women's sense of possibility and confidence can be bound up with their freedom of movement and that experiences of sexual harassment and other forms of gender violence can erode this. This work situates harassment within the broader spatial politics of gender violence, showing how 'transport is an institution through which hegemonic masculinity is maintained' ([Dunckel Graglia, 2016](#): 625). Similarly, framed by the shocking gang rape of a 23-year-old student on a bus in Delhi in 2012, Bhattacharyya's work has charted the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault of women in India in public spaces of roads and lanes, within markets and in spaces of public transport, together with the connections between gender violence in public and other forms of violence, including partner violence ([Bhattacharyya, 2015](#)).

Meanwhile, in the global north, Lubitow et al. have explored experiences of harassment (including rude or threatening remarks and 'weird looks') on the part of transgender and gender diverse public transit riders in Portland, Oregon ([Lubitow et al., 2017](#)). Building on the work of [Doan \(2010\)](#), [Johnson \(2016\)](#), [Nash \(2010\)](#) and [Browne et al. \(2010\)](#), which has expanded understanding of the lived experiences of transgender and gender diverse individuals, [Lubitow et al. \(2017\)](#) found high levels of harassment among trans and gender diverse riders, especially among trans people of colour. Usefully, this work shows how, in addition to occurring in ways that are clearly recognizable, harassment can also occur in more subtle, 'below the radar' (including non-verbal) registers. Following Deleuze and Guattari's observation that 'affects transpire the body like arrows' ([Deleuze and Guattari, 1988](#): 356), non-verbal signals such as 'weird looks' can send a powerful message about who does and does not belong in public space. Through this work, we see how harassment in public transport works through affective and material environments to exert a range of different kinds of domination including sexism, racism, heterosexism and cissexism as well as transphobia and trans-misogyny.

That said, even high-cost, relatively privileged spaces of transport are not immune to harassment. As [Adiv \(2017\)](#) has highlighted in her work on being in one instance groped on an airplane and in another instance stared at the duration of the flight, the shock of these events is bound up in complicated ways with the cultural value placed on 'not making a fuss' in public (alongside concerns about not being believed and violence escalation). Like the previous example of being subject to 'weird looks', through the example of prolonged staring (and the profound sense of discomfort it can produce), we see again how harassment is bound up with affect as much as embodiment (as revealed in feelings of violation in the absence of any physical contact) as well as powerful proscriptions against disrupting 'smooth' relations with others in public, after Ahmed.

At the same time, it is also important to note the various efforts to challenge street harassment (and harassment in other spaces of transport) that have emerged in recent years. Laura Bates' *Everyday Sexism* project, which began life as an online forum to share experiences of sexual harassment and other forms of gender violence and which has since turned into a book, has created an outlet for sharing troubling or traumatic events while creating a document of collective testimony,

raising popular awareness of the range and extent of this problem ([Bates, 2014](#)). In a similar vein, the online *Hollaback* project, which began in 2005 and is designed to identify street harassers, likewise constitutes a site of informal or alternative justice and space of support ([Fileborn, 2014](#); [Fileborn and Vera-Gray, 2017](#)). Documentary film has been another means of drawing attention to the issue of street harassment, such as the film *Cairo 678* ([Logan, 2015](#): 200). Scholars and activists have also called for the need for stronger policies and laws and better reporting mechanisms ([Bhattacharyya, 2015](#); [Dunckel Graglia, 2016](#)) and the need for targeted training for those who work in public transport ([Lubitow et al., 2017](#)).

This section has considered some of the ways scholars have explored how intersectional difference shapes experiences of harassment in the context of spaces of mobility and transport, highlighting the ongoing need to attend to this issue ([Mollett and Faria, 2018](#)). It has shown how sidewalks function as a space of social control in the maintenance of gender orders ([Loukaitou Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009](#); [Ryan, 1992](#)), highlighting the cost of everyday embodied racist and sexist microaggressions when considered in aggregate. This work reveals how certain citizens are objectified, assaulted and otherwise degraded within spaces of transport and mobility through words, gestures and even staring and other non-verbal actions that create threatening atmospheres for those on the receiving end of harassment. As such, this scholarship reveals how harassment is bound up with affect as much as embodiment as well as proscriptions against disrupting 'public comfort' ([Ahmed, 2010](#)). Having considered harassment in spaces of transport and mobility, let us now turn to consider harassment in the night-time city.

2 The Night-Time City

As scholarship has shown, night-time space (and particularly night-time cities) are marked both by a sense of risk and a sense of excitement ([Jayne et al., 2010](#)). In recent years, work in and beyond geography has begun to explore some of the different kinds of identity- and body-work that take place in the night-time city, particularly in the context of alcohol drinking on 'nights out' ([Brands and Schwanen, 2014](#); [Jayne et al., 2010](#); [Leyshon, 2008](#); [Nicholls, 2017](#); [Waitt et al., 2011](#)). This work has shown the role of nights out in female sociability and

bonding including through shared and collective bodily display ([Waite et al., 2011](#)), and explored bodily self-presentation as a means to celebrate or alternatively disguise one's sexuality or gender identity ([Nichols, 2017](#)) or deflect unwanted sexual attention ([Leyshon, 2008](#); [Nicholls, 2017](#)). Other work has focused on alcohol as a means to achieve the 'carefree' body ([Brands and Schwanen, 2014](#)), including through enhanced confidence and reduced bodily inhibition ([Waite et al., 2011](#)).

In a similar vein, [Jayne et al. \(2010\)](#) have explored the forms of community and belonging that can emerge in the night-time city in the context of drinking alcohol and walking between venues. They point out how these spaces can be both playful and create a sense of heightened sexual desire, and argue that this can be liberating ([Jayne et al., 2010](#): 547). They cast: 'consuming alcohol as a project of experimentation, of allowing venturesome couplings, of being creative and "letting go"' ([Jayne et al., 2010](#): 548), further arguing that 'alcohol consumption combined with the time spent in public spaces and commercial venues (facilitates) "ethical" interactions of belonging and sociability' ([Jayne et al., 2010](#): 550). This experience of 'liberation through drinking' is expressed by one young male study participant thus:

I don't get much time to see my mates, I work hard and I'm often tired but on a Friday you get a buzz there's nothing like that feeling that you've the whole weekend ahead of you to do what you want . . you don't have to get up to work so you can go out and get pissed...drink what you want, do what you want, go where you want...mess around...you feel the places you go are aimed at you and the way you want to live. After a hard week at work it's exactly what I need ([Jayne et al., 2010](#): 548).

Jayne et al. go on to argue that even 'bad behaviour' can play a positive role in night-time social-scapes, providing opportunities for 'remembering, forgiving and forgetting' among friend groups (550). While Jayne et al. do note some participants mentioning hearing sexist comments during their nights out, these are not explored, and instead, the text paints what is an overall very rosy picture of alcohol-fuelled night-time sociability. In this rendering, the night-time economy is marked by ethical encounters, camaraderie and general bonhomie. Indeed, even 'bad behaviour' appears as a force for good, providing a means of collective

remembering (and then forgetting) of particular actions, enabling friend groups to strengthen the bonds between them.

We do not know the actions or intentions of the participants in this particular study. That said, it is worth flagging up the fact that 'harmless fun' for some night-time revellers might be understood very differently by others. As research has shown, sexual harassment is typically understood by perpetrators as simply part of 'normal gendered interactions' ([Quinn, 2002](#): 386, quoted in [Logan, 2015](#): 203), while Benard and Schlaffer have shown that most men view sexual harassment as harmless fun, which confers a 'feeling of youthful camaraderie' when done with friends ([Benard and Schlaffer, 1984](#): 71 in [Logan, 2015](#): 203-4). [Wesselmann and Kelly \(2010\)](#) have likewise found male social bonding to be a key motivating factor in harassment ([Wesselmann and Kelly, 2010](#), in [Logan, 2015](#): 204).

As this research suggests, interactions within crowded, dark spaces of lowered inhibitions and heightened sexual desire among drunken revellers are not experienced as equally fun by all. Without doubt, some actions understood as 'harmless fun' by some are experienced as threatening by others. And, the way actions are interpreted is framed by social positionality and intersectional differences between revellers, with those in positions of greater social power (by race, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity) most likely being able to 'go where they want and do what they want', and others less so. Again, this highlights the need to bring the role of embodied difference and how it shapes experiences of everyday space and patterns of spatial privilege back into the frame.

While some have focused on the creative and liberatory aspects of the night-time economy, others have instead investigated how night-time space is experienced by those who do not possess the kind of social and spatial entitlements suggested in the above quote. Alongside excitement, these experiences are also likely to be marked by feelings of risk and concern about personal safety. As research within and beyond geography has shown, verbal and physical harassment is ever-common within spaces of the night-time economy; and women (including trans-women) and LGBTQ people commonly employ a range of tactics ('safety work') to both feel safer and try to decrease the amount and kind of harassment they receive ([Fileborn, 2016](#); [Kavanaugh, 2013](#); [Nicholls, 2017](#); [Wattis et al., 2011](#)).

Recalling [Valentine \(1989, 1992\)](#), these tactics can include limiting where they go ([Fileborn, 2016](#)); going out in groups and looking after one another while out ([Fileborn, 2016](#); [Waitt et al., 2011](#)); dressing to downplay one's sexuality as read within the framework of heteronormativity ([Leyshon, 2008](#); [Nicholls, 2017](#)) and using one's phone as a means to stay connected to friends while travelling home ([Brands and Schwanen, 2014](#)). As [Brands and Schwanen argue \(2014\)](#), these tactics illustrate some of the ways in which safety is relational and subjectively constituted ([Brands and Schwanen, 2014](#)). In addition to constituting an example of the classic neoliberal subject who is expected to be responsible for their own wellbeing and safety ([Rose, 1999](#); [Walklate, 1997](#)), Fileborn argues that the cultivation of these forms of vigilance and personal preparedness to produce feelings of safety can also be understood as a form of gender-work ([Fileborn, 2016](#)).

In addition to constituting a means of symbolically reinforcing patriarchal power ([Valentine, 1989](#)), recent scholarship has shown that sexual harassment in spaces of the night-time economy also functions to reinforce compulsory heterosexuality and the gender binary ([Kavanaugh, 2013](#); [Nicholls, 2016](#); [Nicholls, 2017](#); [Waitt et al., 2011](#)). Within such spaces, women are expected to conform to often highly stylized expressions of hyper-feminine forms of bodily self-presentation that echo celebrity culture as disseminated by social media ([Kavanaugh, 2013](#); [Nicholls, 2016](#)). Indeed, as recent work argues the night-time economy can even be viewed as 'pornified' space ([Griffin et al, 2013](#)) in which expectations of female bodily self-presentation can border on caricature. Within this context, sexual harassment functions as part of a continuum of violence in which smaller acts of sexual violence are trivialized, symbolically legitimating more serious forms of violence ([Kavanaugh, 2013](#)). Thus, while the night-time economy serves as a space for different kinds of sociability and gender and identity work, it also functions as a disciplinary space reinforcing heteropatriarchy through the control and regulation of a whole range of bodily practices.

Yet, as with daytime street harassment, those on the receiving end of harassment are not simply passive victims, and the research has outlined both collective and individual forms of resistance to harassment within spaces of the night-time economy. While events such as *Take Back the Night* marches have long constituted a means of resisting harassment and gender violence in night-time

space as well as providing a means for people to develop activist identities ([Lewis and Marine, 2018](#) [b]: 137; [Logan, 2015](#): 200), more contemporary activist initiatives such as slut walks emphasize the message that no form of bodily self-presentation equates to sexual consent ([Logan, 2015](#): 199-200). Meanwhile, in the UK, young women have mobilised with bands to stop groping at gigs and music festivals ([Garvan, 2015](#)). In addition to these more formalized types of activism research has also detailed some of the many 'everyday' resistances that take place in night-time space in which individuals let harassers know their words or actions are not appropriate ([Phipps and Young, 2015](#): 13). Having explored key themes in scholarship on harassment in spaces of transport and the night-time economy (together with efforts to resist these), let us now turn to consider the issue of sexual harassment within spaces of higher education.

3 Spaces of Higher Education

In addition to street-spaces and spaces within the night-time economy, in recent years, spaces of higher education have been increasingly recognized as particularly problematic sites for sexual harassment and other forms of gender violence⁸ ([Batty et al., 2017](#); [Busby, 2018](#), [NUS, 2019](#); [Dills et al., 2016](#); [NUS, 2014](#); [Reynolds, 2018](#)). Research from the UK has shown that over 60 per cent of all students experience some form of sexual violence while at university,⁹ with 40 per cent reporting experiencing sexual misconduct on the part of staff.¹⁰ Within this, women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ students experience the highest levels of violence ([NUS, 2014](#); [Revolt Report, 2018](#)). 48 per cent of female university students and 17 per cent of male university students in the UK report having experienced sexual assault while 46 per cent of non-binary students and 54 per cent of students with a disability report having experienced sexual assault while at university ([Revolt Report, 2018](#)). The most common form of assault is groping or unwanted touching, and the spaces where assaults are most likely to take place are halls of residence, social events and university social spaces ([Revolt Report, 2018](#)).

Linking back to the argument about the continuum of sexual violence in which everyday microaggressions create an environment in which more serious violations are more likely to occur, research suggests that students at university in England and Wales are twice as likely to be raped than the general population,

while environments in which sexual violence is normalised also take a toll on learning, with a quarter of students reporting that they have skipped lectures or seminars or dropped out of a module to avoid a perpetrator ([Revolt Report, 2018](#)). Scholarship also shows these trends to resonate across a wide range of cultural contexts. Research from the US suggests that over 60 per cent of female university students experience sexual harassment ([Cantor et al., 2015](#)) while research from India reveals 45 per cent of women to be affected by sexual harassment at university ([Dhillon and Bhakaya, 2014](#): 2). Scholarship likewise shows sexual harassment and other forms of gender violence in educational spaces to be an issue in South Korea ([Park et al., 2013](#)); Jordan ([Takash et al., 2013](#)); Chile ([Lehrer et al., 2013](#)); Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain ([Feldes et al., 2009](#)).

Scholarship has focused on two factors in explaining this problem. The first is reticence on the part of universities to acknowledge issues of sexual violence out of fear of reputational damage within fiercely competitive higher education marketplaces ([Anitha and Lewis, 2018](#); [Jackson and Sundaram, 2015](#)). The argument here is that the widespread failure to track, investigate or prosecute sexual harassment and violence on the one hand or implement rigorous prevention programmes on the other is not simply a matter of institutional negligence but instead an intentional strategy to downplay this issue to allow institutions to save face and preserve reputations. Sexual harassment and other forms of misconduct occur both among students and between students and staff. The invisibilisation, silencing and historical acceptance of sexual misconduct on the part of (typically male, often senior) academic staff is compounded by the tremendous power (including over marks and career prospects) perpetrators wield over victims (typically female students and junior academic staff). This problem was recently brought into sharp relief in the UK when social theorist Sara Ahmed resigned her post at Goldsmiths University out of protest over her institution's failure/unwillingness to address issues of sexual harassment ([Ahmed, 2016](#)). Within geography, [Mansfield et al. \(2019\)](#) have called for the need to confront the magnitude and severity of sexual misconduct on the part of senior males in our own discipline, highlighting how harassment constitutes a message of non-belonging, which can (and does) cause gifted individuals to leave academia.

The second explanatory factor has been the prevalence of lad culture/rape culture ([Heldman and Brown, 2014](#)) in shaping atmospheres on university campuses. In broad outline, lad culture refers to male social cultures of heavy drinking, shared participation in sport, sexist and homophobic banter (and sometimes actions) and (hetero)sexual prowess/promiscuity ([Phipps and Young, 2015](#)). The pack mentalities (and practices) of some male sports and other kinds of elite clubs, include heavy drinking, performative and competitive displays of (hyper) masculinity and initiation rituals drawing on elements of domination, and bodily and often sexual degradation ([Phipps and Young, 2015](#); [Phipps et al., 2018](#)). This strand of laddism is bound up with proscriptions about bodily comportment in which women are expected to present themselves in a sexualised manner in night-time social settings, expected to always be 'up' for sex and may be shamed and mocked if they are not ([Griffin et al., 2013](#); [Phipps and Young, 2015](#)). Shaped by soft-porn 'lad mags' of the 1990s and easily accessible hard-core pornography online in current times, this strand of middle-class misogyny is further marked by a thoroughly male-focused understanding of sexual pleasure, in which women are expected to be almost entirely passive during sex ([Bates, 2019](#); [Phipps and Young, 2015](#)). It is likewise associated with the perpetuation of rape myths, victim-blaming and victim non-believing, reinforced through social media ([Bates, 2019](#)).

This strand of laddism is closely linked to the feminist backlash and is fundamentally bound up with the prevalence and normalization of everyday sexual harassment ([Anitha and Lewis, 2018](#); ; [Phipps, 2017](#); [Phipps et al., 2018](#)). While such impulses are evident within the broader culture, within the relatively isolated microcultures of university life, lad culture can have a disproportionate sway in tone-setting, making higher education a toxic and unsafe space for many ([Jackson and Sundaram, 2015](#); [Phipps et al., 2018](#)). At the same time, echoing activism against sexual harassment in other settings, a range of different forms of activism and educational programming has emerged in recent years to combat sexual harassment in spaces of higher education. This research has shown education-based prevention programmes which explore gender socialization and challenge rape myths to have success in changing sexist attitudes(which in turn are linked to the incidence of sexual violence) ([Day, 1995](#); [Vladutiu et al., 2011](#)). In the US and the UK, intervention programmes seeking to achieve these goals have gained traction in recent years, with sessions featuring emotional engagement and activities designed to develop empathy such as through role

play reporting some of the best results in terms of attitude change ([Fenton and Mott, 2018](#)).

And finally, at the same time as university campuses can be challenging spaces, they can also be supportive environments for feminist activism, including by providing physical space on campus as well as ICT and other kinds of infrastructure to support community-building activities ([Lewis et al., 2018](#); [Lewis and Marine, 2018](#)). As Ruth Lewis and Susan Marine's work on feminist activism on university campuses has shown, in addition to the many negative emotions harassment and other forms of sexual violence can generate, these experiences can also be galvanizing and serve as a motivation for collective action and resistance ([Lewis and Marine, 2018](#)). Building communities with other feminist-identified students can be empowering and create a shared sense of belonging. Feminist societies can serve as a space to process experiences of everyday sexism and build confidence ([Lewis and Marine, 2018](#)). Members often become change-agents on campus, calling-out instances of sexist behaviour and actions on the part of students and staff, while also challenging sexual violence collectively through performative, artistic and other means ([Lewis and Marine, 2018](#)). These activities can also include men and the cultivation of allyship, for example, through the Scottish National Union of Students' campaign *#I'mNotThatLad* aimed at challenging lad culture ([Phipps and Young, 2015](#)). However, it is also worth noting the broader power relations structuring whose voices tend to be heard within higher education spaces and whose do not. Reflecting UK higher education as a whole, feminist activist spaces are often dominated by white women, and as scholar-activists Chelsea Kwakye and Ore Ogunbiyi note, work still needs to be done to ensure issues of white privilege and racism can be raised and discussed openly within these spaces (as well as beyond them) ([Kwakye and Ogunbiyi, 2019](#): 255-256).

II Conclusion

This article has explored key themes in current scholarship on sexual harassment within and beyond geography through the three spatial frames of street-space, the night-time economy and spaces of higher education, arguing that through day-to-day interactions in public space bodies become territorialized within heteropatriarchal relations of power. While some scholarship in and beyond

geography has celebrated the poetic potential of walking and the 'playful and creative' nature of stranger interactions in public, I have argued that some of this work unhelpfully romanticises these practices and encounters, failing to recognise the multiple systems of domination and oppression that underlie such 'carefree' experiences of urban space.

I have highlighted how, after Ahmed, the pressure to maintain public comfort can shape how harassment is experienced, the extent to which it is (or is not) discussed or reported, and the impact that everyday exchanges between strangers in public can have on nurturing – or foreclosing – one's sense of belonging in a given space. Through this work we can see the corrosive and cumulative effect such interactions can have on one's mental health, sense of self and sense of one's place in the world. We can see how harassment is tied up with the feminist backlash, racism and homo/transphobia, and how harassment may relate to feelings of 'fragility' amongst subjects who occupy positions of historical (and contemporary) social dominance based on whiteness, class-privilege, heterosexuality, masculinity and traditional binary gender identity when confronted with their privilege ([DiAngelo, 2018](#)).

Such a review is needed at this time to both shape an agenda for future research and inform the work of policymakers and activists seeking to challenge harassment culture. Geographers have both an opportunity and a responsibility to contribute to this discussion. There is work to be done in terms of understanding the extent of harassment and how it is experienced both across different cultural contexts and across axis of social difference, especially by race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability. Geographers might also fruitfully extend understanding about sexual harassment as an embodied experience by exploring how such microaggressions operate in and through material, discursive and affective practices of spatial dominance. I suggest that theoretical lenses of relationality, embodiment and affect could prove particularly useful in this regard. Especially in light of Colls's argument about the potential of the more than representational to advancing feminist theory (and practice) within and beyond geography ([Colls, 2012](#)), one can see the value of the more than discursive in approaching this issue. This might include the exploration of how affective atmospheres are shaped in and through harassment, and/or the role of the non-

verbal in constructing feelings of belonging and non-belonging in interactions between strangers in different kinds of space, in addition to other approaches.

In addition to the need to extend our understanding about both the magnitude of sexual harassment and how it is experienced, more work is needed to understand efforts to combat it, in order that the 'right to everyday life' ([Beebeejaun, 2017](#)) may be experienced by all. One way geographers could extend knowledge in this area is by working collaboratively with activists seeking to challenge the interlocking forms of societal privilege that currently structure the potential for having a sense of 'mobile belonging' ([Edensor, 2010](#)) in public space, thus building on the strong tradition of scholar-activism in our discipline ([Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010](#); [Gilmore, 2007](#); [Routledge and Derickson, 2015](#); [Wright, 2009](#)).

The *#MeToo* movement has led to a massive increase in awareness about harassment and the need for both policy and cultural change on this issue. In turn, this has led to a range of initiatives directly or indirectly aimed at reducing harassment across different cultural contexts. However, little as yet is known about many such initiatives. To give just one example from the UK in 2020, the UK government made Relationships and Sex Education mandatory for all Secondary School students, thus creating the potential to roll out a version of what is currently delivered in 'consent workshops' at some universities across the population as a whole. This ambitious move constitutes a potentially rich field of research for exploring what is needed to effect wide-scale culture change regarding understandings of gender, race, embodiment and rights to space including through the cultivation of understanding, empathy and allyship.

Finally, after [Mansfield et al. \(2019\)](#), I suggest we also look to our *own* workplaces and institutions to consider what may be going on in our own metaphorical backyards. It behoves us to take account of the role we play – and might play – as educators, leaders and community members in settings where harassment is an increasingly recognized problem. We might do this by raising awareness about this issue within our own departments, collaborating with students and staff already engaged in the work of raising awareness about and combatting this issue, and reflecting on how else we might effect change as members of the learning communities and other contexts of which we are a part.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by a £2,000 grant given as part of a Study Leave in 2019-2020 from the School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University.

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Notes

1. It is noted that the AAG has initiated work groups to combat sexual harassment at annual conferences.

2. Although this inquiry nominatively focused on 'Sexual Harassment of Women and Girls in Public Places', it is important to stress that people of any gender can experience sexual harassment and that LGBTQ+ individuals can experience significantly higher levels of harassment than cisgender and heterosexual individuals.

3. It should also be noted that in Deleuze and Guattari's work, 'bodies' do not necessarily or always mean human bodies but are conceptualized more expansively to include the social body and other kinds of forms.

4. Gender violence can be understood as threatening or hurtful words or actions towards someone 'because of their [perceived] gender or sexuality' ([Anitha and Lewis, 2018](#): 1).

5. This article does not consider sexual harassment in the workplace for two reasons. First, while sharing some features with the more common phenomenon of stranger sexual harassment ([Fairchild and Rudman, 2008](#)), unlike stranger harassment sexual harassment in the workplace occurs within the context of existing social relations and power relations. Second, sexual harassment in the

workplace occurs within the context of myriad distinct policy and legal contexts that both differ from sexual harassment in public and are beyond the scope of this article to examine properly.

6. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/701/70102.htm> (accessed 17 November 2020).

7. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/701/70102.htm> (accessed 17 November 2020).

8. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/701/70102.htm> (accessed 17 November 2020).

9. Report on Sexual Violence at University Revolt Sexual Assault', The Student Room, 2018. https://web.unican.es/unidades/igualdad/SiteAssets/guia-derecursos/acoso/NUS_staff-student_misconduct_report.pdf (accessed 17 November 2020). This report was based on responses from 4500 students at 153 institutions.

10. 'Power in the Academy: staff sexual misconduct in UK higher education, National Union of Students, 2018' <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/nus-staff-student-sexual-misconduct-report> (accessed 18 November 2020).

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