





# Queer(y)ing the Politics of Offence: An Exploration of the Phenomenological Texture of Feeling in Higher Education

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This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology.

## Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Sociology Degree Committee.

For my brother Eamon Croghan (1986-2019)

*I'll never have the right words other than to say, I miss you every day.*

## Abstract

### Queer(y)ing the Politics of Offence: An Exploration of the Phenomenological Texture of Feeling in Higher Education

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Amidst the contemporary ‘War on Woke’ in the UK and elsewhere, increasing concern has been focussed on the ‘offendability’ or ‘sensitivity’ of students on university campuses – a concern that has largely been captured in the notion of an ongoing ‘culture war’. Critical voices within the media and in government – as well as in academia – claim there has been a rise of a culture of “toxic victimhood” (Fox, 2016), and a creeping “crusade of conformism” (Hume, 2016) whereby students currently seek “freedom *from* speech” in the name of “intellectual comfort” (Lukianoff, 2014). This ‘conformity’ to the principles of ‘wokeness’ is considered to have an “infantilizing” effect on a generation of young people, producing pathologically vulnerable subjects, jeopardising academic freedom, and endangering freedom of expression more broadly (O’Neill, 2015; Furedi, 2017). However, largely absent from such diagnoses of the ‘problem’ of taking offence ‘too easily’ is any empirical analysis of how offence is experienced, understood, and responded to by those social subjects who describe themselves as ‘offended’. This thesis seeks to remedy that absence by demonstrating the disconnect between what such contemporary criticism describes and participants’ own accounts of the experience and impact of being offended.

In this thesis, understood as an *archive of offence*, I map out and interrogate the phenomenon, materiality, feeling, and experience (the *texture*) of offence. This archive is primarily composed of 38 semi-structured personal interviews conducted between March 2015 and June 2017, conducted in the context of the University of Cambridge, in which participants were asked to reflect on a time in which they were offended. By interrogating the complexity and nuance of how participants describe their own experiences, and their strategic responses to offensive behaviour in the context of everyday routine university activities, I generate new models and concepts that contribute to a sociology of offence. Through unpacking participants’ accounts of feeling offended, I explore both the affective and analytical dimensions of such encounters – which I argue are powerfully indexical of under-described dimensions of ‘the politics of everyday feeling’ in contemporary society. I explore,

for example, that interviewees were able to clearly describe vulnerability to offence as a historical and materially produced relation rather than a product of individual pathology, and I argue such testimony from the study participants can help to reveal the highly *patterned* and repetitive nature of offence.

Furthermore, through an exploration of how participants themselves analysed and deconstructed their own experiences of feeling offended, as well as their accounts of strategies deployed to respond or resist such injuries, I provide a critical and sociological language of becoming and being 'woke' as a particular incarnation of being or acting 'politically correct'. Using my participants' descriptions of how they manage and navigate the feeling of being offended in relation to others, I describe being 'woke' as a *prefigurative horizon politics* legible through underlying *guiding principles* that aim to transform conditions of livability for marginalized subjects. Yet, importantly, these accounts also demonstrate that understanding 'wokeness' as a prefigurative horizon politics means that it is necessarily replete with tensions, failures, and strategic dilemmas. Being and becoming 'woke', from this perspective, is thus revealed as an ongoing project rather than something that can be mapped or known in advance. Furthermore, this politics, in seeking to extend comfort to others, often comes at a personal cost.

However, I conclude by suggesting that these operations of 'wokeness' are a means of practicing more inclusive and radical transformation through a politicization and transformation of everyday interaction. As such, this thesis utilizes queer, feminist, and anti-racist scholarship to further understanding of classical sociological issues such as identity formation, belonging, and institutional, social, and interpersonal violence through the "keyhole issue" (Hochschild, 2016) of offence and aims to provide an initial intervention into a subfield of the sociology of emotions in its own right – the sociology of offence.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

### On Being too Easily Offended

“You’re oversensitive”

Throughout my childhood, I was characterized as an “[over]sensitive” boy. I cried a lot. I was very (“overly”) expressive. I played dress-up with my grandmother’s clothes. Frankly, few eyebrows were raised when I “came out” at 16. Many had been telling (or accusing) me of being gay for as long as I could remember. This is to say that *feeling wrong*, both in the wrong way towards objects (boys aren’t *supposed* to like dressing in their grandmother’s clothes; boys aren’t supposed to like other boys *in that way*) but also feeling as if I was orientated in some other direction or experiencing a set of dilemmas that many of my other peers weren’t, was central in my experience growing up. I’d *messed up* the appropriate “feeling rules” (Hochschild, [1983]2003) characteristic of my ascribed social role of “boy.” Later this could for some be rectified following the announcement of “gay boy” as an explanation and site of inappropriately gendered affect.

This reflection isn’t a means of casting original trauma as the scene of arrival to this PhD study on the feeling and phenomenon of offence. Rather, my intention is to begin by outlining a queer (and messy) relationality between researcher and project. My emotional expressions were continually problematized as atypical for what I would be assumed to be (or should become) following the logics of heteronormative societal expectations through which gender is rendered intelligible (Butler, [1990]2007). In this sense, I am perhaps what Sara Ahmed (2010:42) terms an “affect alien,” whereby we experience a “gap between the promise of happiness and how [we] are affected by objects that promise happiness”. My sensitivity was an *unusual* or *queer* orientation to the world bound up with a disorienting sense of not-quite belonging.

Throughout my time at a Northern English State School in Barnsley (2005-09); my attendance of state 6<sup>th</sup> form in the same town (2009-11); and my first year or so at the University of Cambridge as an undergraduate student (2011 onwards), I had a complex relationality to the

word “gay.” It was common for the word “gay” to be used as an epithet to describe anything or anyone as “bad”. Anything from homework to people could be “so gay”. This was flippantly cast as something *not to be*. Aside from speaking to a wider cultural norm of casualized homophobia, this facilitated a few problems for me. The word “gay” was saturated with shame. People who were “gay” were widely understood to be the subject of ridicule. I was told that I was “gay” before I really understood what that meant. Whenever the word came up, I would tense up, even if it was used to describe something external to me (homework as “so gay”, for instance), because the word was still understood as somehow proximate to me. The word was “sticky” or saturated with an affective history (Ahmed, 2014).

This sensitivity to the word “gay” clearly speaks to a personal relationship with the explicit referent of the term – homosexuality as a way of being or identity. That is now something that I claim to be even if at one time it was precisely something, because of the saturation of the term with negative associations, I was keen to resist. Yet, when I reached 6<sup>th</sup> Form at the age of 16, and into my early undergraduate years, I began to gain a sense of confidence in calling people out when they used the term “gay” as a synonym for “bad.” The conversation would typically follow a script,

**Friend:** Ugh, I can’t be bothered to do this assignment, it’s so gay.

**Gavin:** How is it “gay?”

**Friend:** [presumably realizing that I am gay] Oh, you know I don’t mean it like *that*.

**Gavin:** Then what do you mean?

**Friend:** I just can’t be bothered to do the assignment. You know what I mean: you’re being oversensitive.

They were correct that I was “sensitive” when it came to the use of the term “gay” as synonymous with “bad.” Similarly, I usually knew that they weren’t necessarily actively or willfully attempting or intending to be homophobic or denigrate homosexuals. But they were. I reasoned that if they weren’t “really” homophobic, and were “really” my friend, they should stop using “gay” as a synonym for “bad.” The word, used in such a way, was offensive to me. If they cared about me, they ought to acknowledge that and change their behaviour.

Many didn't, however. For some, the word was such throw-away or instinctually reached for, a habitual (Bourdieu, [1984]2010) and short-hand form of denigration, that they found it difficult to change despite repeated prompts. For some, they repeated or intensified the use of the word to "wind me up" or to make a point about what was understood to be my overly controlling or sensitive behaviour. Others stopped using the term over time in recognition of my feelings. I was more likely to remain friends with those in the latter category. To me, those who were unwilling to change a behaviour that caused me pain, that offended me, weren't worth it.

Curiously, calling others out for using "gay" as a synonym for "bad" earned me the title of "gay rights Gav" during the first year of my undergraduate degree. My "calling out" of this behaviour and request for others to reflect on the language that they were using, was cast as expressly political. This characterization was true: I was making a "political" point as to me, following a feminist tradition, *the personal is political* (Hanisch, 1970). Yet, this characterization also struck me as somewhat absurd. I was characterized as an activist or expressly political for asking others not to use my identity as a flippant denigrative term which I experienced as dehumanizing and invalidating. If this made me a political activist or champion of Gay Rights, the bar seemed awfully low.

Yet asking others to not use my identity as a weapon was a kind of alternative world-building. I wanted to be able to inhabit *who I was* without the enduring feeling of shame that came from the "sticky" association of gay with everything "bad." When my peers repeatedly claimed that they weren't homophobic, asking them to change a minor behaviour to demonstrate this did not feel like a burdensome task to me. And yet, for some, it was too much. Perhaps it was too much because the action of asking others to change this behaviour came at a time of an intensification of narratives about the supposed hyper-sensitivity of students. This intensification continued throughout my university career and continues to endure today after a decade of being at the University of Cambridge. I became invested in the study of the cultural politics of offence when recognizing that people like me were being characterized as in some way threatening to free speech, as being overly sensitive, or otherwise being pathologically vulnerable. Whilst I recognized myself in what kind of events were being spoken about, I did not recognize myself in the somewhat hyperbolic media

characterizations being presented. I recognized that offence, or the taking and giving of offence (what we might call the *economy of offence*) was becoming highly politicized, with universities their battleground; “Millennials” as the combatants; and cultural values around “free speech” and other such ideas as the supposed spoils of war.

This wider reception of offence and how it was being described bore little resemblance to my own experience. Others also recognized these misrepresentations. However, I did not (and do not) believe it is simply right to dismiss the critique that students (or Millennials) are (or were) oversensitive as there was an atmosphere that *something* was changing, or that there was a kind of cultural or political shift in the air. Offence was being taken seriously in being framed as a threat, as it was simultaneously being dismissed as excessive.

### A (New?) Culture War?

Offence, “political correctness,” free speech, and “identity politics,” have a complex history of entwinement over the latter half of the twentieth century to the present day. These terms are broadly understood to be related to one-another in describing something about wider *cultural shifts* in the Anglo- or Euro-American social landscape. Yet, the meanings ascribed to them, their relation to one-another, and the moral or ethical valuation of such shifts (and whether such shifts are overstated<sup>1</sup>) is deeply contested.

For instance, Frank Furedi (2017:53), an Emeritus Professor of Sociology from the University of Kent (UK), argues that

“[The] most significant development [...] is the rise of the politics of cultural identity. In the 1960s and early 1970s, activists tended to identify themselves through the language of political affiliation or the social causes they fought for [...] But today,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the series of reports produced by King’s College London in connection with *The Policy Institute* and *Ipsos* (King’s College London, 2021) argue that the case itself for a “culture war” itself is perhaps overstated (Duffy, et al., 2021a), and suggest that the reports of a “culture war” have significantly spiked since 2015, where “There has been a huge surge in media coverage mentioning “culture wars” in recent years, with 808 articles published in UK newspapers talking about culture wars anywhere in the world in 2020 – up from 106 in 2015.” Even more strikingly, the number of articles focusing on the existence or nature of culture wars *in the UK* has gone from just 21 in 2015 to 534 in 2020.” (Duffy, et al., 2021b:3).

political affiliations have receded into the background and cultural, religious, sexual, gender or lifestyle-related identities have come [to] the fore.”

For Furedi, the most concerning shifts that follow this change from political affiliation to identity-based activism are the “psychological turn of cultural identity” (*Ibid.*54); the “normalization of cultural trauma” (*Ibid.*56); a “culture war against the past” (*Ibid.*58) with a particular sensibility whereby “identity is based on the suffering of an injury from a historical injustice” (*Ibid.*60). For Furedi, this has increased the popularity of “A particularist epistemology [which is] based on the premise that only people who are members of a particular culture can understand it.” (*Ibid.*63). Furthermore, “the imperative of cultural sensitivity and the condemnation of appropriation has acquired a uniquely febrile quality within universities [...] Often the mere suggestion that a particular form of behaviour might cause offence is sufficient to move the culture police into action.” (*Ibid.*65)

These shifts have two lasting and concerning effects for Furedi. Firstly,

“The politics of culture is oriented towards the regulation of people’s attitudes and behaviour. It does not merely seek to police people’s speech but to police the way they behave, the way they dress and their social attitudes and tastes. It dictates which values are acceptable and which ones are not.” (*Ibid.*68)

And secondly,

“In an era where cultural politics has become so prominent in higher education, it is important to remind ourselves that its values directly contradict those of the university. The modern university is founded upon liberal ideals that promote a vision of universalism. In such an institution, cultural affiliations have little bearing on the work and activities of academics and students. [...] Such an institution regards tolerance for all views as a foundational value. What matters is not your identity, but your accomplishments as a scholar or a student.” (*Ibid.*)

These arguments, made in Furedi's chapter "Culture War", demonstrate a typical set of concerns about the shifting nature of grievance and politics on university campuses contemporarily. Yet, the notion of a "culture war" on campuses (across the US and UK in particular) has a longer history. For example, in British journalist and broadcaster Sarah Dunant's (1994) edited collection *The War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate*, she remarks, "At a more apocalyptic level political correctness is hailed as a movement which, if allowed to run unchecked, will curtail free speech, deny common sense, threaten the foundations of family life and rewrite our literary and national histories until all western values are denied" (Dunant, 1994:viii). A central claim of the text is that "The PC [Political Correctness] debate is news [...] because at root PC is about more than equality or tolerance. It is about power, who has it and what they do with it." (*Ibid.*ix)

The diagnosis of *the problems* with political correctness and offence presented by some of the authors in this edited volume is remarkably like Furedi's newer text. For instance, in this volume John Annette, Head of the School of History and Politics at Middlesex University argued, "The politics of identity has also created the problem of racial, ethnic and sexual separatism and fragmentation and has led to a new politics of victimhood." (*ibid.*12)

Further still, the notion of being "politically correct" (or, "politically incorrect") can "be traced to the countercultural movements of the American left in the late 1960s and 1970s" whereby "The meaning of these terms on the left, then, was an ironic mirror image of the one now attributed to them on the right" according to linguistics scholar Deborah Cameron in the same volume (*Ibid.*18-9), who particularly focuses on the back-and-forth inversions of the character of the overly-controlling PC figure as Orwellian, or dogmatic in party line. However, the contemporary intensification and resurgence of these debates inform the context of this PhD thesis.

A central claim arising from commentaries on the so-called "culture war," particularly from more right-leaning commentary, is that offence and outrage affectively characterize a widening divide, and are threatening to the social fabric, of society. Several themes, appearing in a range of literature, speak to an intensification of problematizations surrounding offence, free speech, and moral and ethical values. I outline the broad discursive

framings that appear relevant to understand the wider cultural politics surrounding offence as an “issue” contemporarily.

### *A Duty to Offend: The Contemporary Landscape of Critique*

British columnist Brendan O’Neill, editor of the online British magazine *Spiked*, published a collection of selected essays with the title *A Duty to Offend* (2015). The essays were written between 2005 and 2015, and most (15 out of 25) are from 2014-5. The two reviews provided on the cover demonstrate the polemical style and divided reception of his work. One from *The Telegraph* describes him as “One of Britain’s sharpest social commentators.” Whereas *The Guardian* labels him “A sub-Danny Dyer obnoxious intellectual wind-up merchant” (presumably a badge of honour).

The collection presents several recurring arguments in relation to a diverse set of issues, from free speech, feminism, pornography, capitalism, environmentalism, and identity politics. In a 2015 article, *Bringing Spinoza Back*, O’Neill (2015:10) highlights what he considers to be a problematic shift, arguing, “in the apparently democratic West, people are being arrested, fined, shamed, censored, cut-off, cast out of polite society, and even jailed for the supposed crime of thinking what they like and saying what they think.” He gives a particular location and set of actors as involved in this process of judging and policing.

“Britain’s leading liberal writers and arts people can, *sans* shame, put their names to a letter calling for state regulation of the press, the very scourge their cultural forebears risked their heads fighting against. In which students in Britain, America and Australia have become bizarrely ban-happy, censoring songs, newspapers and speakers that rile their mind.” (*Ibid.*10-1)

For O’Neill, these trends have caused a shift in the principles of politics itself.

“[O]ffence-taking has become the central organizing principle of much of the political sphere, nurturing virtual gangs of the ostentatiously outraged who swarm on Twitter

to demand, often successfully, the purging from public life of any article, advert or argument that upsets them – a modern-day version of what Spinoza called ‘quarrelsome mobs’, the ‘real disturbers of the peace’. Freedom of speech is in a bad way.” (*Ibid.*11)

The text concludes with O’Neill’s speech, *A Duty to Offend*, given to the Oxford University Union on March 5<sup>th</sup>. He begins by listing several figures and publications that were once cast as inflammatory or offensive, or that would have likely been “no-platformed”<sup>2</sup> (as he intentionally links it to the contemporary expression). For example, he describes the publication of *The Chameleon* in 1894 which was offensive on the grounds of its advocacy of the right for men to have sex with one-another. He frames this by drawing a parallel with contemporary mindsets relating to offence and free speech, arguing that it survived only a single issue of publication,

“[B]ecause it was offensive. One observer called it ‘an insult to the animal creation’; there was talk about it having a ‘dangerous influence on the young’. In other words, it made Oxford an unsafe space, and therefore it had to be stopped – much as today’s student leaders ban tabloid newspapers in the name of preserving safe spaces for students. So when today’s student leaders clamp down on offensive stuff, they’re actually carrying out a very long tradition.” (*Ibid.*118)

For O’Neill, the banning of offensive materials, through the now ubiquitous techniques such as no-platforming is a strategic error and problematic on an ethical and ontological level in how it frames and characterizes those that the strategies are ostensibly deployed to protect.

For example, O’Neill argues,

“What a laughing stock today’s student leaders are, that they can so casually dismiss the right to be offensive without realizing that their lovely, enlightened lives are the

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<sup>2</sup> As a verb, this means to prevent (a person holding views regarded as unacceptable or offensive) from continuing a public debate or meeting, especially one at which they had originally being invited to speak. [See appendix A for more]

gift of individuals who gave offence; the gift of scientists, thinkers, agitators who bravely showed their arses to the dominant ideas of their eras. Their offensiveness made you free.

[...]

How progressive is it to suggest that female students are so fragile that they can't cope with seeing a pair of tits in *The Sun*? Because that doesn't sound progressive to me – it sounds paternalistic.

How progressive is it to say black students need these wise, white student leaders to protect them from harmful ideas? Because that doesn't sound progressive to me – it sounds neo-colonialist." (*Ibid.*119-20)

Two key claims appear here. First, that the error of banning certain ideas from being spoken is a *strategic error*. Using the logic that what was once offensive (for instance, homosexual acts) would not have become (presumably in O'Neill's view) now accepted societally without their open entry into public discourse through causing offence. Thus, offence is a necessarily progressive social force, one that *must* be deployed to push against crushing "conformism," "orthodoxy" or more "Orwellian" tendencies (all words that appear repeatedly through the collection of essays).

Secondly, for O'Neill, this strategic error speaks to a broader set of moral and ontological concerns about how socially marginalized groups are implicitly characterized through these strategies. The claim that such strategies "protect" marginalized subjects (such as women or black students from sexism or racism) is cast as "paternalistic" or "neo-colonialist." He argues that,

"It's the idea of inherent human weakness and incapacity; the poisonous notion that humans are fragile and therefore our speech and our interactions with each other must be monitored and policed and always checked for danger. It is this utterly orthodox, misanthropic idea that they promote, and protect from criticism, just as surely as priests once ringfenced their beliefs from ridicule." (*Ibid.*120)

The protection afforded to marginalized subjects is insidious for O’Neill in relying on an ontology of the human subject characterized by “weakness” and “incapacity” and thus in need of an external agent (e.g. the state or student leaders) to extend protections. This is “paternalistic” or “neo-colonial” as such calls diminish the agency of such groups. Agency here appears to be a product of willful action derived from a self-governing subject. This echoes another one of his arguments in an earlier article where he says, “The new illiberalism commits the double offence of shutting up those who have something to say and shutting down the critical faculties of everyone else” which “infantilizes society to discourage thoughtfulness in favour of allowing us to consume only ideas that the great, good and influential have predetermined to be right, true, scientifically or politically correct, safe for us to imbibe” (*Ibid.* 13). Tellingly, the title of Furedi’s text is, *What Happened to the University? A Sociological Exploration of Its Infantilization*. In both cases the argument is that an increase in what we might term linguistic or affective protectionism is infantilizing in that it appears to be product of, and producing, a vulnerable ontology of subjectivity.

For O’Neill, offence is a necessary (and progressive) relational force and notably, the arguments presented through his essays are echoed in a burgeoning range of literature about offence, free speech and the so-called “culture wars.”

Overwhelmingly, a range of texts describe an increased willingness to take offence and a dramatic increase in calls, particularly from those broadly described as politically on the left, for increased censorship of offensive material (for example Cohen, 2013; Lukianoff, 2014; O’Neill, 2015; Fox, 2016; Hume, 2016). These texts characterize the problem as a largely Euro- or Anglo-American and particularly intense amongst student populations on university campuses.

The understanding of why such a shift has happened to curtail freedom of speech through offence is described through deploying a wide range of terms which attempt to diagnose the intensification offence-taking. For journalist Mike Hume, “In our Anglo-American culture today free speech is not threatened by jackboot state censorship. The more insidious threat comes from a creeping **crusade for conformism** in thought and speech. The slogan

emblazoned on the crusader's banner is 'You Can't Say That!.'" [emphasis mine] (Hume, 2016:1)

This "insidious threat" of the demand for censorship through moral outrage or offence is described similarly by Gregg Lukianoff (2014:12-3), president of the *Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)*, a US organization which advocates for Free Speech on University Campuses. He describes the "call for sensitivity-based censorship" as the "dark side" of a creeping expectation of "emotional and intellectual comfort" which drives people to "stop demanding freedom of speech and start demanding **freedom from speech**" [emphasis mine]. Lukianoff describes *Trigger Warnings* as symptomatic of this shift towards greater censorship compelled by an expectation of comfort when trauma narratives are deployed by current student activists. To be "triggered" by content bears a relation to the psychological concept of PTSD, and thus,

"When students take advantage of a psychological term developed to help those traumatized in the ghastly trenches of World War I justify being protected from *The Great Gatsby*, sleepwalker statues, and, as the Oberlin policy specified, Chinua Achebe, it becomes clear that there is virtually no limit to the demands that will be made if we universalize an **expectation of intellectual comfort.**" [emphasis mine] (*Ibid.*57)

For Lukianoff, collectivized trauma compelling "sensitivity-based censorship" has the effects of shutting down academic debate around controversial topics and thus opposes what university education *ought* to be about. He argues, "nothing can replace teaching students at every level of education the old-fashioned intellectual habits of epistemic humility, giving others the benefit of the doubt, and actually listening to opposing opinions" (*Ibid.*60). The changes on university campuses and increased willingness to take offence (and defend others from receiving offence) presumably stops this.

In addition, the vulnerable ontology of the subject, said to be both reciprocally product and agent of the problem, is critiqued on the grounds of producing a *pathological* or *dangerous* focus on vulnerability. For example, writer, journalist and director of the think tank *Academy*

of *Ideas*, Claire Fox (2016:41) describes a culture of “**Toxic Victimhood**” as a “game of victimhood one-upmanship” and “a way to silence others”. In turn, “victimhood becomes such a valued social commodity, [leading] to a desperate search for it.” (*Ibid.*33). For Fox, this “trend inevitably encourages an unhealthy awareness of one’s own vulnerability, which in turn fuels the desire to claim hurt as a route to special pleading.” (*Ibid.*25).

This is insidious for British journalist, author and political commentator Nick Cohen who argues that “Challenge involves offence. Stop offending, and the world stands still” (Cohen, 2013:5-6). For Cohen, the censorious compulsion on campuses runs counter to social progress but has been steadily rising with an increased “**fashion for relativism** which was growing in Western universities in the 1980s” [emphasis mine] (*Ibid.*5). A compulsion to *respect* different points of view as equally valid (“relativism” for Cohen) prevents one from making grounded critique. This is similarly echoed by Joanna Williams, the Head of Education and Culture at *Policy Exchange*, whose book *Academic Freedom in an Age of Conformity* perhaps best ties some of these themes together. She argues poststructuralism, Foucault and the Frankfurt School are pushing an anti-Enlightenment mentality within the academic sphere, particularly in the development of critical theory; an intensification of the focus of cultural; and language and the death of the autonomous self. Williams argues (2016:154-5),

“Critical Theory goes further, it tames criticism by denying any connection with a reality beyond the text and any connection between authorial intent and text. The plethora of readers’ interpretations, each equally demanding of respect, renders criticism meaningless. Worse, it enforces conformity because when people’s identities are fragile constructions and words are a source of oppression and a threat to identity then people are encouraged to think carefully before passing any comment whatsoever. [...] The veneer of criticality attached to Critical Theory allows it to assume an illusion of subversion while at the same time posing no challenge to any particular viewpoint, least of all the status quo.”

The narrative constructed through this range of texts might be summarized as follows. “Freedom of speech is in a bad way” (O’Neill, 2015:11). This is constituted through a “Crusade of conformism” (Hume, 2016:1), built with an increased “fashion for relativism” (Cohen,

2013:5) with an understanding that “words are a source of oppression and a threat to identity” (Williams, 2016:154). This, in turn, has facilitated a culture of “Toxic victimhood” (Fox, 2016:41) and an “expectation of intellectual comfort” (Lukianoff, 2014:57), particularly on university campuses. This has resulted in a shift away from the valorization of freedom of speech to a demand for “freedom *from* speech” (*ibid.*13), particularly in the censorship of material deemed offensive.

During the period of 2013-6 (but further still contemporarily) it became difficult to read newspaper articles about students without this word “offence” lingering and labelling actions and events. A number of examples of these debates include: the debates at Oxford University about the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes (*#RhodesMustFall*) due to his strong advocacy of colonial power in Southern Africa (Moore, 2015; Coughlan, 2015; Mount, 2015 *cf.* Fenton, 2016); the removal of the fundraising campaign video (*Dear World . . . Yours, Cambridge*) which featured controversial historian David Starkey who has been linked to a history of openly racist and sexist comments (Clarke-Billings, 2015 *cf.* Cooper, Crafton, & Spence, 2015; Boyle, 2015); the continued no-platforming of Germaine Greer by student unions and feminist and queer groups, who has been linked to transmisogynist and cis-sexist comments through her trans-exclusionary radical feminism (Quinn, 2015 *cf.* Akbar, 2015); the Oxford Union and the Feminist Society’s no-platforming of two white male speakers who were the exclusive guests invited to discuss the ethics of abortion (McIntyre, 2014 *cf.* O’Neill, 2014); the banning of Robin Thicke’s *Blurred Lines* on the premise that it promoted and glorified rape (Guardian Music, 2013; Carter, 2013); the claims of ‘racism’ and ‘sexism’ after white men were asked not to come to a meeting at Goldsmith’s University by the diversity officer Bahar Mustafa and the campaign of harassment against her that followed this (McLelland, 2015 *cf.* Ahmed, A Campaign of Harassment, 2015).

We can better understand the current milieu of such debates by thinking about how at present many increasingly complex *technologies of offence* exist. I use technology to refer to a “practical rationality governed by a conscious goal” (Foucault, 1984:255). I deploy the term *technologies of offence* to capture some of the techniques which subjects contemporarily use to manage, name, and categorise offence. Examples include, “safe spaces”, “no-platforming”, “white/male/straight fragility”, “white/male/thin/straight-splaining”, “cultural

appropriation” and “trigger warnings”. The differential valuation of these technologies is emblematic of the competing structures of power within which the techniques are deployed. I offer a full glossary of these terms and others in Appendix A and I return to this Foucauldian framing in chapter 6 explicitly.

However, here I wish to highlight how these technologies or techniques can be understood to de-individualize relations. For example, Goldberg (2014:117) argues that ““-Splaining” is a general process by which a privileged figure who is nevertheless an outsider “-splains” to a marginalized insider the nature of the latter’s own experience.” The term can be said to have been popularized in Solnit’s (2015) book *Men Explain Things to Me*. She describes her experience of being at a party and explaining the premise of her most recent book. An older man tells her about a book she *must* read on that topic. This turns out to be her own book. She explores how it is possible that the man instantly assumes that she could not have written this, and that he, having no expertise in the field, assumes a superior knowledge position to her. The efficacy of such technologies of offence is located in the naming of a patterned process which in turn brings into being the possibility of shared experience. No longer becoming a single, isolated event, it becomes part of a complex interconnected web. Indeed, Sarah Franklin (2015:23) convincingly argues that stories or testimonies are never truly individual because “the individual case isn’t even individual: it is part of a larger pattern.” What is also at stake is whether such techniques are considered to open or close dialogue between groups, and whether their purpose to de-individualize relations is understood or (un)intelligible within dominant neoliberal modes of selfhood.

In this PhD thesis, I explore how the phenomenon of offence unfolds and is experienced by social subjects. I explore the feeling of being offended as a social relation governed by normative “feeling rules” (Hochschild, [1983]2003) which differentially “sticks” to (Ahmed, 2014) or “ingrows” within (Riley, 2005) social subjects. Throughout, I focus on being offended as a scene of subjection and explore the enduring impact of offence as part of a broader interpellative process. Therefore, I reflect on offence as a social relation rather than individual feeling, corresponding to the self in relation to others. I examine the patterned sedimentation of actions and events in forming offended bodies and subsequent subjects, as well as the complexities of rendering one’s injury through offence legible and hearable to others.

This doctoral thesis is an exploratory case study of how the feeling of being offended is experienced, and the phenomenon of offence unfolds in relation to different social subjects, focusing on the University of Cambridge and its constituent students, departments and colleges as participants and field site respectively. It is informed as an academic (and personal) response to the apparent social context of the contemporary “culture war” within or emanating from university campuses.

### Structure of the Thesis

The research aims to provide a more scholarly and systematic lexicon to the phenomenon of offence which appears more often as a subject of commentary rather than focused empirical study, or as a related, rather than primary topic of concern.

The thesis divided into three parts. Part I, *Researching Offence*, begins with Chapter 1, which outlines the theoretical frameworks which guide the research and explores a range of literature on Feelings, Affects, Moods, Emotions and Sensations (FAMES), and outlines my approach in examining the stratification of affect and the need to examine offence as a phenomenological or experiential texture. Chapter 2 outlines the methodological and analytical principles and practices that guide this as a study of the queer kinetics of offence through the construction of an archive.

Part II, *The Texture of Offence*, has two chapters. Chapter 3 examines three participant accounts and an autoethnographic vignette to explore the relationship between subjectification and *wounding* or *injurious* words to further theoretical discussions about the *force* of words and one’s potential vulnerability to wounding phrases. Chapter 4 examines the complexities surrounding experiences of offence derived from misrecognition especially when these misrecognitions are compounded by a refusal of others to recognize (or indeed, misrecognize or mischaracterize) the harm caused. I examine the forms of *identity work* and resultant *fatigue* and *frustration* of being repeatedly misrecognized as a complex, affective,

and phenomenological *texture* to highlight some of the common issues in rendering offence intelligible.

Part III, *Wokeness*, opens with Chapter 5 as an extended case study which deploys the concept of frame(work) to think about the varied level of affective attachment involved in maintaining a particular vision of reality in relation to racism. In this, I contrast the individual liberal frame(work) and the pragmatic racial frame(work). Chapter 6 builds on this argument to describe becoming and being “woke” as a continuation of the politics of “political correctness” more broadly. I describe what we might call “wokeness” as an ongoing affective political and ethical orientation which relies upon enabling practices or *technologies* (Foucault, 1997). This in turn works to describe “wokeness” not just as an affective sensibility, but as a *pre-figurative horizon politics*, that is to say a form of ongoing and everyday politics which collapses and combines the means and ends of political action.

I conclude that offence is a complex, layered, *textured* phenomenon. The texture of offence is constituted through a highly contextual, stratified, and historical set of relations, but precisely because of this it is also highly patterned. To describe the texture of offence as constituted through dispersed repetition means that no central or singular agent causes offence, but at the same time this also means that the precarity and vulnerability one experiences in relation to offence can be facilitated by any social actor. Rather than merely dismiss the highly contextual, precarious, and vulnerable relationality different subjects have in relation to offence, the ethical drive of the “woke” subject leans into and attempts to understand the world through this complex, vulnerable and precarious relationality. “Woke” being, in relation to the wider politics of offence, constitutes subjects through an implicit set of ethical practices, guided by interventions that we might term “technologies of offence” to manage an alternative vision of ethical relationality. This is a politicisation of the everyday which attempts to re-figure the present through pre-figuring a less toxic and ‘kinder’ social present for those that have historically been marginalised.

## PART I: RESEARCHING OFFENCE

## Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

### I: Feelings, Affects, Moods, Emotions, Sensations

In this chapter, I outline my analytic approach to the study of offence by arguing that Feelings, Affects, Moods, Emotions, and Sensations (FAMES) did not ought to be studied as isolated, discrete units. This theoretical proposition is aligned with many of the insights from queer, feminist, anti-racist and postcolonial theories of *the cultural politics of emotion* (Ahmed, 2010, 2014; Berlant, 1997, 2011; Stewart 2007) which will be explored in the second part of this chapter. To support this proposition I, perhaps counterintuitively, begin with a discussion of the unsuitability of particular theoretical models to the study of affect and emotion for this particular project. I provide a critique of the “affective turn” understood as a set of theories examining non-intentionalist and post-ideological forms of power (Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010 *cf.* Ahmed, 2014:205-11; Leys, 2011; Blackman, 2012; Knudsen & Sage, 2015). I then outline the alternative genealogy which forms the epistemic basis for this project which is heavily informed by Ruth Leys’ account in *The Turn to Affect: A Critique* (2011) and *The Ascent of Affect* (2017).

However, it is important to note that Leys’ characterisation of the “affective turn” or “affect theory” more generally is not without issue. For example, Carolyn Pedwell persuasively argues that Leys’ (2011, 2017) critique is,

“[N]ot a genealogy of the ‘turn to affect’ or a critical account of the emergence of affect theory across the humanities, social and life sciences. It is, rather, a post-war history of the ‘science of emotion’ focusing on mainstream, American, largely male, psychologists and philosophers investigating the relationship between feelings and facial expressions in human and non-human animals.” (Pedwell 2020:134)

Pedwell argues that whilst Leys offers an insightful analysis of disagreements within the emotion sciences, and makes a compelling case for moving decisively beyond a ‘basic emotions’ approach” (*Ibid.*136), there are also significant problems in Leys’ characterisation that lead her to “exaggerate key analytical claims and to frame critiques of various perspectives in overly reductive terms” (*Ibid.*137). In so doing, Pedwell argues, Leys does not

leave open the potential for generative interdisciplinary modes of exploring affect and emotion.

My theoretical framework for this thesis was developed through a search for generative languages to discuss experiences of offence. However, despite the problems embedded within Leys' (2011, 2017) characterisation of the "turn to affect", I argue that following the initial line of critique remains intellectually productive to illuminate why certain genealogies and conceptual tools and not others form the disciplinary location and intellectual influences of this project.

My criticism of the "affective turn," as characterised by Leys (2011, 2017), is threefold. First, this "turn" draws upon problematic truth claims which instrumentalize and objectify emotion/affect. Secondly, the 'zoning' (both temporal and physical) of experience is unproductive analytically. Finally, this "turn," through its citational practices, performs an erasure of feminist, queer, and anti-racist genealogies. By outlining these criticisms, I am not attempting to subscribe wholly to Leys' description of the "turn to affect", but mean to demonstrate how her critique of particular intellectual trends in the study of emotion provided an essential sense of direction for the disciplinary tools and knowledges which form my own theoretical framework.

### 1: Empirical Foundations (Instrumentalizing Emotion)

I begin with psychologist Paul Ekman not to say that the story of affect begins with Ekman (Blackman, 2012). Rather, understanding Ekman's argument for *basic emotions* is necessary to understand the foundations of the "affective turn" as characterised by Leys' work (2011, 2017). Ekman argues that there are nine characteristics that distinguish "basic emotions" from one another and from other affective phenomena. These are:

"distinctive universal signals; presence in other primates; distinctive physiology; distinctive universals in antecedent events; coherence among emotional response; quick onset; brief duration; automatic appraisal; unbidden occurrence" (Ekman, 1992:172).

The “basic” emotions are anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise which he states share all the above features, although he states that he is open to the possibility of more being included within this categorization. Ekman (1992:172) argues that basic emotions are “not a single affective state but a *family* of related states” (see also Ekman & Friesen, 1975). Furthermore, basic emotions, such as anger, are said to have “more than 60 expressions” but are fundamentally similar in “certain configurational (muscular patterns) features” (Ekman, 1992:172). Furthermore, “basic” emotions are distinct from other affective phenomena, which include “moods, emotional traits and attitudes, and emotional disorders.” (*Ibid.*174).

Ekman summarises his evidence that basic emotions have *distinctive universal signals* an example of which lies with facial expressions (Ekman, 1971, 1977, 1989). For an emotion to be “basic” we must be able to *universally* “see” it. However, Ekman (1992:177) also states that basic emotions “can occur without any evident signal” which may be due to individual management of these signals or a “threshold” which may vary across individuals. Furthermore, he states, “If we could measure the brain areas which send information to the facial nucleus during spontaneous emotional experience, I expect we would find that there is some distinctive activity even in low threshold states or when an individual is attempting to inhibit emotion.” (*Ibid.*).

Thus, whilst there may not be a facial expression, due to our ability to control the face at times, there should still be evidence (when specific equipment is used), of universal patterns of sensory experience located in the brain. Basic emotions are thus universally recognised patterns. Those that cannot be immediately mapped in this way are considered additive, or not really emotions, given that Ekman claims that emotions can *only* be basic.

Emotions are said to have *brief durations* and *quick onset*. This rests on Ekman’s functionalist and evolutionary model of emotions adapted from Charles Darwin (1965[1872]), arguing that emotions have an “adaptive function” to “mobilis[e] the organism very quickly” but also ensure that “the response changes so mobilised not to last very long unless the emotion is evoked again” (Ekman, 1992:185). He concludes that emotions would be less useful in their

adaptive function if they did not respond to rapidly unfolding events. Thus, he argues, “emotions are typically a matter of seconds not minutes or hours” (*Ibid.*186). Further, “When subjects have reported experiencing an emotion for 15 or 20 minutes, and I have had access to a videotape record of their preceding behaviour, I found that they showed multiple expressions of that emotion.” (*Ibid.*). Ekman concludes, from these verbal reports, that these were in fact “a series of repeated but discrete emotion episodes” although regrets that there was not the physiological data available in this case to also support this (*Ibid.*).

Ekman makes a strong distinction, separating emotions into brief, rapid and discrete episodes to differentiate them from moods, which “last for hours or days” (*Ibid.*). Within this model, emotions are physiologically experienced, and each has a specific pattern of display. The emotion *is* the display upon the face and series of sensations for Ekman. Each time this becomes written across the face, the emotion is experienced again. Thus, an emotion only exists if it is readily observable and testable. Unless we can make emotion into a distinct measure through instrumentalization, it does not exist.

‘Emotion’ then appears to be a performative technology within Western epistemic psychological and scientific models (Rose, 1999; Henriques, et al., 1984). By providing this critique, I am not arguing that a set of physiological sensations do not occur to the body. Nor do I mean to suggest that the face does not make particular expressions. Rather, the separating of these happenings into distinct, separate, and bounded phenomena constructs the very category of “emotion” as much as it might measure them. We might think of this much like Schneider’s (2004:269) famous critique of “kinship” who argues, ““kinship” is like totemism, matriarchy, and the “matrilineal complex”. It is a non-subject. It exists in the minds of anthropologists but not in the cultures they study.” Similarly, I suggest that “emotion” as a discrete category exists more in the minds of those who have constructed tools to measure and instrumentalize it. Yet discourse, always involved within knowledge/power relations, produces reality (Foucault, 1980, 1991, 1998).

“For instance, anthropologist Catherine Lutz argues that the ‘dichotomous categories of “cognition” and “affect” are themselves Euroamerican cultural constructions, master symbols that participate in the fundamental organization of our ways of

looking at ourselves and others [1984, 1986], both inside and outside social science' (1987:308). If this is true, then we have even more reason to wonder about the adequacy of ordinary Western ways of talking about emotion. Yet we have no access either to our own emotions or those of others independent of or unmediated by the discourse of our culture." (Lutz, 1984, 1986, 1987; Jaggar, 1989:154)

This instrumentalization of emotions appears to reduce the multitude of possibilities available to ascribe meaning and effects to emotions. This follows in conjunction with Foucault's (1991) description of disciplinary power, where the body becomes increasingly divided up and managed in smaller units that can be measured and rendered visible and knowable. Categories which do not display a unique set of physiological sequences defy the category of emotion, becoming non-basic or other affective states. To be able to measure the body (external) in this way is a means of knowing the reality of the mind (internal). Consequently, the categorization of emotion and other states *performs* this conceptual separation of mind and body. This is perhaps most telling in the following argument by Ekman:

"The confusion about what are the emotions has been due not just to a failure, by some, to organise emotions into families, with themes and variations, but also a failure to distinguish emotions from other affective phenomena" (Ekman 1992:174)

Following Ahmed (Ahmed, 2014:6), I question whether it is possible to make such "analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion and thought as if they could be 'experienced' as distinct realms of human 'experience'." Before furthering this critique, I discuss my second critique of the "affective turn" and those theorists more closely tied with the "affective turn" as characterised by Leys (2011, 2017), though I will also offer a more generous suggestion of what might still be potentially productive or generative here through Pedwell's response to Leys to avoid an overly reductive reading of the new affect theorists.

## 2: The "Zoning" of Experience

Two overlapping forms of "zoning" appear in much of the "affective turn" literature. First, the "physical" zoning of experience: *where* sensations are said to happen has implications in

models of the subject and self that are necessary to make such arguments. Second, there is a “temporal” zoning of experience, for example in Brian Massumi’s (2002:28) “mystery of the missing half second” which has implications for thinking about agency. I labour these points to demarcate why a different genealogy is more useful for this thesis.

Massumi makes the following distinction between “emotion” and “affect”:

“An emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into functions and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. [...] affect is unqualified.”  
(*ibid.*)

Massumi’s definition of affect is debited to Spinoza, the ability to *affect and be affected*, which “cuts transversally across a persistent division” and one “starts with in-betweenness” (Massumi & McKim, 2015). Affect, for Massumi, is described as “intensity” which becomes emotion after its fixing. The temporal dimension is evident here – affect happens, then comes emotion.

Ruth Leys reiterates Massumi’s claim that affect is “irreducibly bodily and automatic” and draws similarities between neuroscientific work (found in Tomkins and Ekman) that “assumes that affective processes occur independently of intention or meaning.” (Leys, 2011:437; Massumi, 2002:8). Whilst the language of Ekman and Massumi differ, they have affinities. What Massumi would call “affect”, those intensities that happen before signification and meaning, Ekman would label “basic emotions”, those evolutionary responses to stimuli which happen rapidly. Notably both appear to have this dual systems approach. The origin of these experiences is however clearly different. For example, Massumi (2002:30) states that,

“The body doesn’t just absorb pulses or discrete stimulations; it infolds *contexts*, it infolds volitions and cognitions that are nothing if not situated. Intensity is asocial, but

not presocial – it *includes* social elements but mixes them with elements of belonging to other levels of functioning and combines them according to different logic.”

Massumi more willingly accepts that social context might influence responses. Ekman is not unwilling (even if reluctant) to accept this conclusion (see Ekman, 1992:178). However, Leys (2011:443) argues that, in attempting to construct an anti-intentionalist theory by those linked with the “affective turn,” “The result is that action and behaviour are held to be determined by affective dispositions that are independent of consciousness and the mind’s control”. Whilst Massumi and similar theorists may not always draw directly upon the work of Ekman and Tomkins, they reach similar conclusions. I stress here that “affect” (Massumi) and “basic emotions” (Ekman) appear to be of the order of the body, before “signification” or “qualification” (Massumi) and “cognition” (Ekman) take over. We might say that affect/basic emotion is the “raw”, whilst emotion/cognition become the “cooked” (Douglas, 1966)<sup>3</sup>.

To separate affect and emotion, to argue for “The Autonomy of Affect”, Massumi examines several experiments, which for Ruth Leys concern,

“the relationship between conscious intention and brain activity and belongs to a group of experiments on this topic performed over a stretch of years between the 1970s and the 1990s by Benjamin Libet<sup>4</sup> [where] there seemed to be *a half second delay* between the start of the body-brain event and its completion in the form of the movement of the finger.” (Leys, 2011:452-3 drawing on Massumi, 2002:28-30)

Further to this Leys argues that in drawing on Libet’s experiments,

“Massumi concludes that the “half second is missed not because it is empty, but because it is overfull, in excess of the actually-performed actions and of its ascribed meaning,” As he puts it, during the mysterious half second “what we think of as “free,” “higher” functions, such as volition, are apparently being performed by automatic,

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<sup>3</sup> Notably Massumi argues that this is precisely not the argument he is trying to make, although I believe he is less successful in constructing a paradigm outside of this dichotomy than he argues he is.

<sup>4</sup> See Libet (1985)

bodily reactions occurring in the brain but outside consciousness, and between brain and finger but prior to action and expression” (Leys, 2011:453 quoting Massumi, 2002:206, 29)

Leys (2011:454) argues that Massumi is not the only “affect theorist” to take these conclusions “that the material processes of the body-brain generate our thoughts and that conscious thought or intention arrives too late to do anything other than supervise the results.” For example, Leys contends “Thrift cites Libet, Damasio, LeDoux, and others in order to claim that “we are ‘late for consciousness’” and that “an action is set in motion before we decide to perform it. [...] Thus we can now understand emotions as a kind of corporeal thinking” (Leys, 2011:454 quoting Thrift, 2004:67). The issue is the contradiction at the heart of this attempt to deploy Spinozan theory that opposes dualisms. They could be read as reifying one of the primary dualisms that Spinoza criticised – mind/body (Leys, 2011:455).

Lisa Blackman’s (2012:98-9) work focuses on the genealogy and histories of affect, challenging some of the core assumptions within this “turn”, arguing “that these forms of experimentation do not simply disclose or reveal psychological entities and objects, but rather are performative”. For Massumi and Thrift, affect does not require a subject, whereas emotion does. Affect precedes subjectification. Yet, Blackman asserts that this already assumes a particular model of subjectivity. Minimal theories of subjectivity are always already assumed within affect studies, even if affect is perceived to be pre-subjective (Blackman, 2012:183-4).

The argument is that affect precedes cognition, that it does not require a subject. Yet, it is necessary to have a particular model of the bounded and individual contained body to understand emotions as happening to “us”. Thus, it becomes problematic to assume there can ever be something which does not happen to a subject, or a pre-subject, or that it is possible (or indeed desirable) to speak of these processes given that we cannot talk about a *without* when we may only speak *through* a particular discourse and history. Whilst the “affective turn” thinks through new metaphors for sociality, their proposition when read this way seems much less revolutionary than claimed. These neuroscientific and psychological forms of experimentation themselves appear performative, constructing the very categories

and evidence they might be said to ‘prove’ (Jaggar, 1989; Rose, 1999; Leys, 2011, 2017; Blackman, 2012).

The claim that affect is independent of signification and meaning is only possible *through* a particular intellectual heritage that takes *a priori*, even if never explicitly acknowledged (or even in writing rejected) a mind/body dualism. Thus, paradoxically, the call to affect as independent of signification is perhaps only possible when affect already has an excess of signification and meaning. Affect might be thought of as only in excess of signification if it is paradoxically already signified as without meaning. This ‘outside’ carries with it its own meaning and history.

However, one can perform a more generous, or to borrow Pedwell’s (2020) term *generative*, reading of the affect theorists in continental philosophy, such as Massumi, but also the other new affect theorists in the humanities and social sciences such as William Connolly, Nigel Thrift and John Protevi. One of the issues with Leys’ account of these authors, for Pedwell, is that Leys attempts to assess scholars of affect via the same framework she establishes to address emotion sciences” (Pedwell 2020:137). For example, for Pedwell, Leys’ (2017) critique within *The Ascent of Affect* is structured by several overarching oppositions about the cognitive vs. non-cognitive and intentional vs. non-intentional. Whilst Pedwell (2020:137) argues that this offers the appearance of clarity in describing various intellectual trends, it also “creates an imperative to locate each of the key perspectives and scholars addressed on *one or the other side* of the binaries; instead of exploring, for example, how they may exceed or transform them in generative ways.” As such, Leys may be too quick in dismissing some of these theories wholesale for their resonances with tools formed in, or informed by, the languages which come out of the emotion sciences of Ekman and Tomkins without necessarily interrogating how these terms translate and develop through interdisciplinary dialogue<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The insights offered by Pedwell’s (2020) analysis of Leys’ (2011, 2017) work, whilst important and convincing, were incorporated after the research project and analysis had concluded, and as such the ‘new affect theorists’ discussed by Leys receive less attention than the feminist, anti-racist and queer scholarship that I turn to in the remainder of this chapter as the research was tempered by and through these theories based upon the critiques highlighted by Leys. A future project might revisit some of these theorists to interrogate what productive or generative interdisciplinary dialogue might be facilitated by placing these theories in further dialogue, but it is beyond the scope and intention of this project to do so.

Yet, my own thinking owes a particular debt to the work of Sara Ahmed. To avoid the reification of binaries of mind/body, and what appears to be the artificial (or at least difficult to intellectually sustain) distinction between FAMES, Ahmed (2014:6) offers the language of “impressions”.

“It [the term “impressions”] allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect that leaves its mark or trace. So not only do I have an impression of others, but they also leave me with an impression; they impress me, and impress upon me. I [use “impressions”] to avoid making analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion and thought as if they could be ‘experienced’ as distinct realms of human ‘experience’.”

My project interrogates the “experience” of offence through personal accounts. It does not align with the “affective turn” that is characterised by Leys (2011, 2017) in that I refuse to analytically separate FAMES from the offset. This is not to say that certain words may not be more useful or well-suited descriptions as a matter of style. Rather, by focusing on the holistic experience of offence, we might better understand the phenomenon.

### 3: Citational Politics and Erasure

“I have to confess I am somewhat reluctant to use the term *affective turn* because it implies that there is something new about the study of affect when in fact . . . this work has been going on for some time” (Cvetkovich, 2012 quoted in Ahmed, 2014:205-6)

Ahmed (2014:205) describes the call of “‘an affective turn’, [as] a declaration that often takes the form of simultaneously participating in the creation of what is being declared.” Ahmed continues, “When the affective turn becomes a turn to affect, feminist and queer work are no longer positioned as part of that turn. Even if they are acknowledged as precursors, a shift *to* affect signals a shift *from* this body of work.” (*Ibid.* 206)

Ahmed's project centres on "tracking how words for feelings, and objects of feeling, circulate and generate effects: how they move, stick, and slide. [Thus] We move, stick and slide with them" (*Ibid.*14). Further to this, "naming emotions involves different orientations towards the objects they construct. In this sense, emotions may not have a referent, but naming an emotion has effects that we can describe as referential" (*Ibid.*). This is to argue that emotions are not objects with intrinsic meaning, but derive meaning through a complex series of social, historical, and relational processes.

I examine texts which use forms of collective theorizing from the outset, coming from various activist movements and particularly "consciousness-raising" strategies. An alternative social scientific/sociological genealogy of the study of FAMES might centralise the germinal work of Arlie Russell Hochschild ([1983]2003). *The Managed Heart* synthesises Marxist work on labour and the symbolic interactionist framework of Erving Goffman to examine the dynamics of *feeling*, and the exploitation of feeling. For instance, Hochschild ([1983]2003:17-8) states:

"We often say that we *try* to feel. But how can we do this? Feelings, I suggest, are not stored "inside" us, and they are not independent of acts of management. Both the act of "getting in touch with" feelings and the act of "trying to" feel may become part of the process that makes the things we get in touch with, or the thing we manage, *into* feeling or emotion. *In managing feeling, we contribute to the creation of it.*"

I take this to be a statement on the irreducible inseparability of actions, language, and structures in the construction of those things we label as "feelings" or "emotions". Hochschild develops the concept "feeling rules" to discuss the normative dimension of interaction, exploring what is "owed" or "due" in conversation by ascription of social status and roles (*Ibid.*18). Hochschild describes the "emotion work" performed to meet these normative expectations as a form of "transmutation of an emotional system" to "convey what it is that we do privately, often unconsciously, to feelings that nowadays often fall under the sway of large organizations, social engineering, and the profit motive" (*Ibid.*19). The argument is structural, political, *and* personal.

For Hochschild, “Feeling rules” can conflict, given that “Often, feeling rules are unshared” and we often have “conflicting notions about what feelings are owed another” (*Ibid.* 78-9). Indeed, “non-payment” and “antipayment” are sometimes deployed as strategies of resistance – not showing that which is thought to be owed another. However, the costs of this are acknowledged. For instance, we might feel “guilt” when we do not pay a “debt” of gratitude to someone. In this way, “Guilt upholds feeling rules from the inside: it is an internal acknowledgement of an unpaid psychological debt.” (*Ibid.* 82)

Following her ([1989]2003) work on the division of domestic labour in heterosexual relationships, Hochschild revised her earlier model to argue that feeling rules themselves were subject to a meta-level of feeling rules (Hochschild, 1990). The invaluable insight here is a form of what I term the “queer kinetics” that structures of emotion can be said to have. It is not just that feeling is governed by certain “emotion lines” (Hochschild, 1990:123) and “feeling rules”, but that the very structure of feelings and how they are enacted are themselves governed with rules on how one should feel about their enactment (similar themes are posed in Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011). Thus, we have complicated feelings about *what* should be felt, *how* we should feel them, *where* and *when* it is appropriate to do so and this itself is subjected to unevenly distributed feelings which itself might be understood as an effect of structures of power.

These normative dimensions of emotions were similarly described by Peggy Thoits, who examined “Emotional deviance [which] refers to experiences or displays of affect that differ in quality or degree from what is expected in given situations” (Thoits, 1990:181, 1985). Whilst Thoits’ work does make some of the uneasy alliances with the work of more essentializing theories (such as Ekman), Thoits (1985) draws upon the work of Pugliesi (1981) to argue that feeling in the “wrong” way is often labelled as a sign of mental illness. Not only this, but often the “self” feeling in the “wrong” way can lead to a process of self-labelling as mentally ill. This theme is central for many, who argue that emotional deviance becomes a sign of pathology or otherwise poorly managed and inappropriate selfhood (Rich, 1979; Jaggar, 1989; Ngai, 2005; Henderson, 2008; Ahmed, 2010; Cvetkovich, 2012; Asad, Brown, Butler, & Mahmood, 2013; Stringer, 2014).

It is important to think about by whom or how these norms of intelligibility of feeling in the “right way” are constructed. Ahmed (2014:4) states,

“[...] emotionality as a claim *about* a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power, which endow ‘others’ with meaning and value. [...] ‘being emotional’ comes to be seen as a characteristic of some bodies and not others [...] we need to consider how emotions operate to ‘make’ and ‘shape’ bodies as forms of action, which also involve orientations towards others. [...] I will track how emotions circulate between bodies, examining how they ‘stick’ as well as move.”

Ahmed considers the origin of the word emotion, coming “from the Latin, *emovere*, referring to ‘to move, to move out’” (*ibid.*11). Ahmed examines the performativity of emotional vocabulary to “suggest that the work of emotion involves the ‘sticking’ of signs to bodies” (*ibid.*13). Emotions do not *just* move, but also become “stuck” in particular places, on particular bodies.

Ahmed draws upon (and redraws in many ways) Marxism and psychoanalysis aiming to think about the ways in which: “objects get displaced, and consider the role of repression in what makes objects ‘sticky’”; and that such “Objects only seem to have such value, by an erasure of these histories, as histories of production and labour.” (*ibid.*11). Ahmed describes how emotions are simultaneously produced and naturalised. Ahmed (2014:12) argues, following Butler (1993:9), “it is through the repetition of norms that worlds materialise, and that ‘boundary, fixity and surface’ are produced”.

This project on offence asks several questions: What does it mean to call a person “oversensitive”? When does this claim that a person, or group of people are “oversensitive” become perceived as a threat (to what and whom)? Who is considered justified in their offence? Who gets to make such evaluations (stick)? Or how do such evaluations stick? I explore the differential judgement of certain bodies as either *too* emotional or improperly emotional. To do so, however, it is necessary to develop further a conceptual framework to think about the differential (e)valuation of FAMES.

## II: Stratified Affect

“The feelings of the lower-status party may be discounted in two ways: by considering them rational but unimportant or by considering them irrational and hence dismissible.”  
(Hochschild, [1983]2003:172)

I offer the concept of “stratified affect” as a means of arguing that emotions, as they circulate and are differentially perceived as coming from certain bodies are valued differentially. This idea is endemic to much feminist, queer, and anti-racist scholarship. This section places a range of such literature into dialogue, providing guiding questions that underpin my research.

For Ahmed, Hochschild, and Thoits, emotions carry normative orientations to bodies. “Stratified affect” is proposed as a set of theoretical tools to understand how emotional labels differentially attach themselves to bodies, through a range of mechanisms and technologies, which can participate in the continued subordination of particular social subjects and groups within wider structures of power and domination. Below I discuss four operations that I consider to be part of the wider assemblage of “stratified affect”. I label these operations: expectations and entitlement; causality and directionality; legitimation and agency; and affective intelligibility and temporality.

### 1: Expectations and Entitlement

“My ‘dream’ action for the women’s liberation movement: *a smile boycott*, [where] all women would instantly abandon their ‘pleasing’ smiles, henceforth smiling only when something pleased *them*.” (Firestone, 1979:89)

“Was just told to ‘cheer up’ by two men. When I didn’t, they yelled ‘slag’ and ‘dirty little cunt’. This didn’t cheer me up.” (Bates, 2015:177)

How does a refusal to smile as a political strategy for women illuminate something important about the structure of expectations and entitlement? We might think about the forms of discipline that are enacted upon women’s bodies when not conforming to social expectations.

Socially, endless categories are coined for women who do not conform to societal expectations of femininity, whether it is the 'slag' or 'dirty little cunt' above, or the "Bitch [who is] blunt, direct, arrogant, at time egoistic" who as a result "is dismissed as a deviant" (Joreen, 1973:52-3).

The "emotion work" performed to achieve a state of harmony is unevenly distributed because particular bodies are "naturally" expected to do certain things (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2004; hooks, 1992:6). For Hochschild ([1983]2003:84-5), "the encouraging smiles [of women], the attentive listening, the appreciative laughter, the comments of affirmation, or concern – comes to seem normal, even built into personality rather than inherent in the kinds of exchange that low-status people commonly enter into." The refusal to participate in smiling becomes considered a threat to this naturalized structure. In the expectation of smiling or compulsory happiness, the woman's feeling appears much less important than the obligation that she perform happiness (Ahmed, 2010). The emotional display appears more important than the subjects' actual feelings. This is one way affect might be thought to be stratified – through the rules and expectations of display. My question with offence follows: *who is allowed to express offence and what forms of emotional labour go into concealing or expressing offence?*

## 2: Causality and Directionality

"[Women of colour's] anger is what threatens the social bond. As Audre Lorde describes: "When women of Color speak out of the anger that laces so many of our contacts with white women, we are often told that we are 'creating a mood of helplessness,' 'preventing white women from getting past guilt,' or 'standing in the way of trusting communication and action'" (Lorde, 1984:131). The exposure of violence becomes the origin of violence. The woman of color must let go of her anger for the white woman to move on." (Ahmed, 2010:67-8)

To reflect on *who* is perceived as the cause of violence or discomfort within a particular situation is essential to understand stratified affect. Ahmed reflects on what it means to make a situation comfortable. Ahmed (2014:147-9) describes the feeling of comfort as when bodies

can “sink” into space. Yet, comfort is unevenly distributed and requires the differential labour of certain bodies (*Ibid.* 68-9). Furthermore,

“Maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies “go along with it.” To refuse to go along with it, to refuse the place in which you are placed, is to be seen as trouble, as causing discomfort for others. There is a political struggle about how we attribute good and bad feelings, which hesitates around the apparently simple question of who introduces what feelings to whom.” (*ibid.*)

In many situations *to claim offence is to be perceived as causing the offence*. There is a particular *reversibility* to the attribution of blame and wilfulness. For instance, Rebecca Stringer (2014:10) names this process as *reverse victimology* which “reorganizes the way suffering and the sufferer are perceived, in which those claiming victim status for themselves or for others are recast as non-credible victimizers”. As expressed earlier, Ahmed’s work examines how emotions move and on whose bodies they become *stuck* as a means of thinking about power. There is a directional element and question: *from whose bodies are good and bad feelings perceived as originating?* In the above case, the women of colour who “call out” white woman are perceived as the source of the discomfort, disallowing others comfort. Thus, bad feeling is attributed to the body of the woman of colour, as opposed to the relation of power and domination that one is calling out. Who is required to do this “letting go” of particular feelings?

Ahmed (2010) deploys exemplary figures, the “feminist killjoy”, the “melancholy migrant” and “the unhappy queer,” to reflect on where discomfort is *perceived* to derive from. Similarly, I want to think about the “oversensitive”, “censorious” or “hysterical” students as particular figures and bodies which come to be perceived as the source of discomfort – the origin of the very things they name. The central question is: *how is a history of violence erased or a grievance unhearable when particular bodies become perceived as the source of a grievance?* And related to this, *what kinds of bodies become sticky and saturated with labels such as “oversensitive”?*

### 3: Legitimation and Agency

“In many ways, gay men and lesbians perform a kind of unpaid labor for straights, embodying the symbolic and romanticized position of sincere gayness and amplifying the normalcy of those whose homosexuality is insincere and “meaningless.”” (Ward, 2015:191)

Jane Ward’s *Not Gay*, explores the terms through which desire, shame, secrecy, and sexuality are considered “genuine” or “real”. Ward (2015:14-20) argues that cultural readings of men who have sex with men, particularly white men who have sex with men, are able to *dis*-claim or *dis*-identify with homosexuality in a way that is not available to other social groups as an effect of privilege. Ward follows McIntosh’s (1988) definition of privilege as an “invisible knapsack of unearned assets”. Ward states, “Among the many privileges of whiteness, the power to both normalize and exceptionalize one’s behaviour, including one’s “discordant” sex practices, as central” whereas “the sexual fluidity of men of color quickly falls subject to heightened surveillance and misrepresentation.” (Ward, 2015:21)

Ward analyses various hazing rituals among white American men (in Fraternity Houses, the Navy, among bikers etc.), including pornographic production of such events and how the “rhetorical and subcultural meanings” of men having sex with men are differentially taken up and used to (re)produce both the “not gay” subject and “normative gay personhood, to call us gays into being, and to co-create the evolving standards for authentic gayness to which all non-straights are held accountable.” (*Ibid.*192). Ward concludes,

“Increasingly central to contemporary discourse about the difference between heteroflexibility and authentic gayness is a romantic story about queerness as same-sex *love*, as opposed to “meaningless” same-sex *sex*. The former is reserved for the real gays, while the latter is available to heteroflexible straights as well.” (*Ibid.*197)

These claims highlight several important questions for me. First is a question of which bodies are “stuck” with “genuine” desire, which has affective meaning deeper than the sexual encounter itself (queer subjects), and those bodies which can participate in sexual acts with an absence of affective value (straight white men). This presents a telling question about

which bodies can seemingly control the interpretation of their actions and behaviours: invariably a question of agency and power. There is also a question of the 'genuineness' of actions in expressing a 'true' interiority: which bodies become *more* or *truly* emotional? Furthermore, the logic of feminization underscores this account. "Real men" might be considered to *do* and the feminized (queers, women etc.) *feel*.

These dynamics however are incredibly complex with very specific contextual meanings and histories. The legitimate/illegitimate or genuine/insincere scales might best be thought of as another normative question applied to particular emotions and situations. When is a feeling considered genuine (or not)? When is an emotion considered useful, rational, or helpful (or not)? In Ngai's work on *Ugly Feelings*, questions of agency, power, and emotions are central. Ngai (2005:7) describes her text as, "a bestiary of affects [...] one filled with rats and possums rather than lions, its categories of feeling generally being, well, weaker and nastier." Ngai examines "those negative affects that read the predicaments posed by a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social as such" (*ibid.*3). This obstructed agency can be "actual or fantasised" or "individual or collective" (*ibid.*). On envy, Ngai states,

"The fact that feminization and moralization of envy have operated in collusion to suppress its potential as a means of recognizing and polemically responding to social inequalities, casting suspicion on the possible validity of such a response and converting it into a reflection of petty or "diseased" selfhood, should alert us to the fact that forms of negative affect are more likely to be stripped of their critical implications when the impassioned subject is female." (*ibid.*130)

Doubting the validity of an emotion or feeling, as well as assessing the appropriateness of such a response exists in a complex relationship with the bodies the emotion is presupposed to come from. To individualize emotions, whilst simultaneously attaching them to collective bodies, is an interesting but complex process here. That envy comes primarily in a feminized form of desiring without proper action is denigrated in such a way that it no longer reflects an inequality or a reflection of structures of power, but rather a *toxic individuality*.

This does not seem limited to envy but has wider implications for how we consider the curtailment of agency within the context of particular emotions, bodies, and subjectivities. For instance, Stringer (2014:8) argues of the category of “victim” within neoliberal thinking:

“neoliberalism’s intensification of economic inequality is accompanied by discourses that derogate and pathologize complaints against inequality. Rejection of ‘victimhood’ as a worthy place from which to forge personal identity and wage political struggle has been essential to this process.”

Certain subjects within these discourses are placed within a precarious position. Viewed already with suspicion due to the dynamics of hyper-surveillance (see Goldberg, 1996; Dyer, 1997; Puwar, 2004:61-2) certain bodies are already targeted and constructed as less reliable and agentic in producing “rational,” “detached,” or “logical” arguments about inequality (Applebaum, 2018). In this sense, certain bodies, non-white, queer, women’s bodies etc. (that is to say *marked* bodies) bear a particular burden of doubt in that they no longer represent a universal (McIntosh, 1988; Dyer, 1997:14, 80; Kimmel, 2003; Puwar, 2004:59). To merely express one’s disappointment at a system can then be translated into a toxic way of viewing the world – a way of viewing the world that reinforces one’s own subjugation. Thus, the problem is rendered individual, detached from the history of associations that makes particular emotions appear to “stick” to certain bodies. At times, “The hierarchy between emotion and thought/reason gets displaced, of course, into a hierarchy between emotions: some emotions are ‘elevated’ as signs of cultivation, whilst others remain ‘lower’ as signs of weakness.” (Ahmed, 2014:3). Furthermore, ‘experts’ are involved within these processes. For example, Victoria Henderson (2008:34) explores the politics to anger and the reception of it,

“Industrial psychologists, human resource staff, guidance counsellors – and, dare I add, academics – among others, figure in a long process of affective engineering that lends itself to a politics of ‘complete determinacy’, a politics increasingly devoid of *disruptive* emotion.”

Similarly to Ahmed, Henderson links this to a process of constructing ‘civilized’ bodies. Following this, my questions are: *who, or what groups, have the ability or agency to mark an emotion as “genuine” or “necessary”?* *When are particular emotions taken seriously as pertaining to something other than an individual (and often pathological) predicament?*

#### 4: Affective Intelligibility and Temporality

“What I am describing as “feeling brown, feeling down” is a modality of recognizing the racial performativity generated by an affective particularity that is coded to specific historical subjects who can provisionally be recognized by the term Latina. Feeling brown in my analysis is descriptive of the ways in which minoritarian affect is always, no matter what its register, partially illegible in relation to the normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects.” (Muñoz, 2006:679)

It is a feminist insight that knowledge production and reception can never be severed from those bodies that produce it (see for example Haraway, 1985, 1988, 2004). Through the term ‘intelligibility,’ I am focusing on the ways that feeling is considered comprehensible to others. This is linked to temporality in complex ways. Certain feelings appear only taken seriously on account that they are tending to the immediate. Yet, histories are lost within many current narratives that refuse to hear the pain of others. Indeed, when histories, bodies, subjects, and feelings are severed from one another, they can be harshly criticised for their supposed inadequacy.

The quote above from Muñoz claims that empathy might not always be possible. Indeed, at times minoritarian affect cannot be fully intelligible to subjects of different positionalities. To feel brown is to feel down in a very specific way, which in many cases will be unheard to those who do not have the same experiences. For Muñoz, “whiteness” is “a cultural logic that prescribes and regulates national feelings and comportment” but similarly, “Modes of white womanhood or white ethnicities do not correspond with the affective ruler that measures and naturalizes white feelings as the norm” (Muñoz, 2006:680). Lauren Berlant (1991, 1997, 2011) has similarly thought about the construction of an *official national sentiment* and affective structures throughout her work. To feel in an alternative way to the official or normative sentiment is to have “outlaw feelings” (Jaggar, 1989), to be an “affect alien”

(Ahmed, 2010). This is similarly explored in Butler, Mahmood and Asad's (2013) dialogue on the meaning of the responses to the Danish Muhammad Cartoon scandal, and the problem of the supposedly neutral liberal juridical-legal framework applied to their interpretation that makes certain grievances unhearable.

The normative questions of what one *should* feel (those *feeling rules* for Hochschild) are clearly questions of power. Moreover, Adrienne Rich writes, "Women have been driven mad, "gaslighted," for centuries by the refutation of our experience and our instincts in a culture which validates only male experience." (Rich, 1979:190) Similarly, we might understand divisions *within* political movements as about a debate over singular frameworks of interpretation. For instance, Friedan's ([1963]2010) "problem without a name" was critiqued by bell hooks, who criticised the universalizing position of "woman" as described by "white women" - "In most of their writing, the white American woman's experience is made synonymous with *the* American woman's experience." (hooks, 1992:137).

Rich and hooks here oppose singular frameworks of interpretation. The question of power here is: *Who gets to make a declaration that a grievance is intelligible?* To understand this, it is important to think about the temporal dimension of the process of affective intelligibility. *When does a particular history cease to matter?* When I ask this question, I think of two campaigns: *Smuts*<sup>6</sup> and *Rhodes Must Fall*<sup>7</sup>. Both question symbols of colonialism standing within the Academy. It is a question of how we remember the past, and how we perceive the past as affecting the present. Butler (2004:4-5) reasons,

"[A] frame for understanding violence emerges in tandem with the experience, and that the frame works both to preclude certain kinds of questions, certain kinds of historical injuries, and to function as a moral justification for retaliation. It seems crucial to attend to this frame, since it decides, in a forceful way, *what we can hear*,

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<sup>6</sup> The campaign #SmutsMustFall aimed at the questioning and later demand of the removal of the statue in honour of Jan Smuts in Christ's College, Cambridge due to his role particularly in the Boer war and his associated colonial legacies (Wei, 2016; Moore, 2018)

<sup>7</sup> The campaign #RhodesMustFall began as a protest action at the University of Cape Town in March 2015 but quickly spread to several other South African universities and beyond also to the University of Oxford in the UK, where various statues of prominent colonial figure Cecil Rhodes was campaigned to be removed (Chaudhuri, 2016; Rhodes Must Fall, 2018)

whether a view will be taken as explanation or as exoneration, whether we can hear the difference, and abide by it.”

Furthermore, we might wonder who bears the burden of justification and intelligibility within debates. If unmarked subjects are not regarded with the same affective suspicion as particular minoritarian points of view, then there is a pernicious emotional labour in continually trying to explain one’s point to others (something I explore in chapter 4). Temporality links to this in complex ways. One of the most interesting findings from my research (and my own personal experience) is how a *single* debate or question for an asker (e.g., “Where are you *really* from?” or “So why are gay people more promiscuous?”) is precisely *not* singular for the receiver of such a question. The offence resonates *precisely because it is not a single, isolated question*. Yet, to respond to such a question with discomfort or annoyance can often provoke the previously discussed dimension of *reversibility*, precisely because the feeling of a question being asked in the singular, between two equal individuals is considered the affective norm and sentiment, whereas the minoritarian position and affective understanding often makes this untenable. Those affective traces and repetitions might “haunt” (Gordon, 2004) or “ingrow” (Riley, 2005) for subjects. So, *how then do we make a grievance hearable?*

### III: Situating Bodies, Subjectivities and Selves

#### 1: Experience, Impressions and Textures of Oppression: (A)dressing Offence

“Racism can be a live texture in the composition of a subject. So can dreams of racial utopia” (Stewart, 2007:107).

That structures are “live textures”, and that identity is experienced in “surges”, are useful metaphors to think with. We might extend racism in the above quotation to other dynamics of structural oppression (noting however that they will have differential practices and histories).

Texture can be “the feel, appearance, or consistency of a surface or a substance.” Or “[to] give (a surface) a rough or raised texture” originally taken from Latin “text-” (woven) and “textura” (weaving). That the textures are “live” means that they remain unfinished – in

production. This is a process of weaving which continues (frays and unfolds continuously). How can we talk about the “textures” of structures or the textures of offence (meaning at once those weavings which give rise to and construct a texture, but also the feeling of that texture)? Texture works as the unfolding construction (weaving) of the thing/event and the feeling of it (to feel a texture). Texture is also something material, being a strong metaphor/image that already has a material component to it. We might also think about how textures might display patterns, if woven continuously in the same way. But textures can also be ripped apart, sewn together, and textures can be felt in different ways. It is important to think about what kinds of subjects are involved in these processes of simultaneously weaving and feeling textures of oppression. It seems a useful metaphor as a parallel to think about an affectively framed form of “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1991, 2017).

Feminist, queer, and anti-racist literature has a long genealogy of attempting to take seriously the affective dimensions of everyday life, and how these affective dimensions are constitutive of experiences of social domination more broadly. This is captured powerfully in the feminist mantra previously cited, *the personal is political* (Hanisch, 1970). This aimed at opening the possibilities of knowledge production, both in the form of expanding *who* is considered a knower, and *what* is considered the subject of knowability (or knowledge more broadly). At the centre of the feminist mantra was a notion that “personal experience” can guide the process of knowledge production.

Yet, “experience” is complex. As Joan Scott’s (1991:797) interrogation of the value or place of experience within feminist research claims,

“Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward: it is always contested, and always therefore political”

My project seeks to understand the *experience* of offence, understanding that experience is a complex and reflexive exercise.

The theoretical underpinnings of my approach owe much to the framework provided by Ahmed (2014:6) and the conceptual innovation of thinking about, and through, *affective economies*. Ahmed proposes an examination of emotions as relational elements that “are not simply ‘in’ the subject or the object. [Yet] This does not mean that emotions are not read as being ‘resident’ in subjects or objects”. Rather, Ahmed’s work in this text aims to “show how objects are often read as the cause of emotions in the very process of taking an orientation towards them” (*Ibid.*). This is to argue, then, that emotions (or emotional responses) are relationally produced and gather around particular objects, but are not finally reducible to objects. In this sense we might think about the “object” as the *event*, which in turn is translated to an *experience of something* which leaves an *impression*.

Crucially, Ahmed describes how bodily sensation, emotion, and thought are mutually constitutive in *human experience*. In this sense, the individual involved in the event becomes a kind of “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991) of various social forces and histories. By asking individuals to recount what occurred to them and then asking them what thoughts, feelings and sensations facilitated the characterization of the *object* (i.e. the *event*) as offensive, I gained insight into the mechanisms and processes through which offence is differentially understood as well as trying to gain insight into the enduring impact (if any) of such impressions. Thus, whilst ostensibly interested in the study of offence as an emotion which appeared to have an almost zeitgeist-like characterization contemporarily, I did not want to limit the analysis to a narrow or reductionist definition of offence as purely an emotional, cognitive, bodily, moral, cultural, social or political phenomenon. Rather, I wanted to give participants, through prompts, the flexibility to define what appears significant to them, and indeed, what about a particular event or experience impressed upon them.

I found, as one might expect from such an intentionally vague opening question, “can you tell me about a time in which you were offended?” that participants responded with a vast range of experiences framed by the term “offence” or “offensive.” To give a very brief sense of this, these ranged from: friends who were always late; to the interpretation of a rejection from an MPhil program as unjust; being called a “faggot” whilst playing rugby; being forcibly kissed and called a “psycho” at a drinking society event; to hearing someone refer to their female supervisor as a “clapped bitch”; and seeing an art installation of a crucifix in a tank of human

urine. Yet, even in describing some of the elements of the “archive” of offence that I curated through interviewing a range of individuals, the description of offensive *moments* or *events* is insufficient in capturing the *experience* of offence if we take experience to be constituted through this language of “impression,” which refutes the simple isolation of one element of the emotion-cognition-sensation triad. A crucial nuance is missed when *experience* is taken as synonymous in some way to an *event* or *moment*. It misses the historical, social, cultural, embodied, and affective processes and dimensions which facilitate the interpretation and feeling of offence: That is, the *texture of offence*.

Offence *could* be characterized as a single moment, but it is never reducible *to* that moment. This is to say that offence might better be thought of as *indexically expressed* in moments. It is *indexical* in that the feeling might be thought to express something more profound and indeed structural.

As such, there are several theoretical claims I make in using the term *experience*, which are informed by this research. First, an *experience* of offence may be articulated through a narration of a particular event but is not reducible to a ‘moment.’ The experience is constituted by a history (I explore this in Chapters 3 and 4). Secondly, the temporality of *experience* is not linear. It is not the case that something happens and, following this happening, we gain an “experience” of it (as if it were a bounded object). Rather, the very ‘object’ of experience changes as it is articulated and rearticulated both in tandem with one’s own memories, in dialogue with others, and when presented with new information or forms of interpretation. This follows Scott’s (1991:779) assertion that “It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience”. Experiences are *in-* and *re-*formative. In Chapter 4, I explore cases where this the articulation of feeling comes through repetitive experience to form a means of interpretation. As such, I begin to set up some of the issues of making grievance intelligible to others, which will be more of the focus Part III of the thesis.

This leads me to a third claim: that experience is not “individual.” Rather, the way we come to feel, understand, interpret, or know a particular event is a social and collective process rather than an isolated interpretative exercise. This is not to say that the process of

understanding may always *feel* social or collaborative, but rather, that the very things which draw boundaries around something to make it intelligible as an “experience” are always social processes, for example language and discourse (Scott 1991). In Chapter 6, I explore some of the social and collaborative techniques that my participants deploy to articulate and understand their experiences of offence.

Much of this thesis reflects on my participants’ articulation of their experiences as a means of thinking about why and how the experience of offence might be, first, difficult to articulate, and secondly, difficult to render intelligible, important, or significant to others. This is to say there might be a gap between speaking and being heard; between articulation and understanding; between recounting and empathetic reception. Importantly, this is where an articulation of dynamics, structures and mechanisms of power requires careful analysis. I examine the institutional, social, cultural, and political implications for thinking about the articulation of offence and the dynamics of legibility, hearability and grievability. I explore the stratification of offence and resultant grievance in much the same ways philosopher Judith Butler (2004, 2010) encourages us to think about the uneven distribution of mourning, grievability and death. I suggest that the combination of thinking about the constitution of experience, the uneven stratification of emotion in offence, and the dynamics of power involved within these processes, might best be used to encourage a particular ethical orientation in listening, hearing, and responding to offence (what I later call “wokeness”). One such site of changing the way we think about offence is indeed within Higher Education as an institution. Whilst I suggest some of these resultant processes might be specific to Higher Education, I also assert that some of these lessons are not bounded by the specific institution of Cambridge Colleges, of the University of Cambridge, or even Higher Education in general, but also express more fundamental epistemological, ethical, and ontological frameworks through which we orientate ourselves towards and away from others.

In exploring the nexus between personal experience, subjectivity, offence, and institutional process, this thesis aims to enhance understanding of a range of classic sociological issues through an alternative lens. I explore and challenge some of the contemporary public discourse which surrounds the supposed hyper-offendability of particular groups to think about what is at stake ontologically, culturally, politically and epistemologically when offence

is often seen as simultaneously (and often contradictorily) trivial and threatening; as a cultural and political predicament born out of unsuitably robust individual disposition; as a new episode of an old “culture war;” and as expressing of something in excess of its own content.

## 2: Theories of the Self (Fracture and Precarity)

It is also necessary to reflect on theories of selfhood, given that the modalities of understanding *experience* through *texture* as an affective mode of intersectional understanding were clearly bound with an implicit ontology of the subject in relation to context.

For example, following Butler (2004:11), “Conditions do not “act” in the way that individual agents do, but no agent acts without them.” Popular notions of the Self see maintenance of the Self and attachment to others as fundamental. For instance, Kathleen Stewart (2007:86) argues of ‘agency,’

“It’s what we mean by “having a life” (as in “get a life”). But it’s caught up in things. Circuits, bodies, moves, connections. It takes unpredictable and counterintuitive forms [...] It’s not really about willpower but rather something much more complicated and much more rooted in things.”

Similarly, to put a self (“pull yourself”) together after an event is a conscious process, and the imperative to do that, to present wholeness, is ubiquitous. If offence is unevenly distributed, then particular subjects (fractured as offence moves through and “sticks” to them) are required to repeatedly perform this re-making of the self (of course, we all do this, but the visibility of fracture is unevenly distributed). No matter how much one works on the self that agency is frustrated. Willpower is often not enough to manage misrecognition, pain, and offence. This means that the self is always a failure of wholeness (precisely because the self, understood as wholeness and the individual unit is impossible). Therefore, precarity is a useful conceptual framework through which to understand a fractured and continuously (re)negotiated, (re)constructed self in relation to a complex modality of agency. More curious

a question is the possibility of recognition in such fracture and instability. For instance, Butler (2010:53) states,

“How I am encountered, and how I am sustained, depends fundamentally on the social and political networks in which this body lives, how I am regarded and treated, and how that regard and treatment facilitates this life or fails to make it livable. So the norms of gender through which I come to understand myself or my survivability are not made by me alone.”

To *feel* in particular ways inevitably links one to a particular structure. That certain bodies are perceived as having and evoking emotions rely upon an understanding of bodies relationally. Steph Lawler (2014:17) argues,

“‘Without you I’m nothing’: without a nexus of others, none of us could be ‘who we are’. The Western notion of the individual, however, rests on the massive suppression of this complex interdependency and suggests a model of identity which is, at its heart, outside the social world.”

Furthermore, Identity is not “‘within’ the individual person” but is “produced between persons and within social relations” (*Ibid.*). These conceptions of “agency” and the “self” are fundamental throughout this work and Chapter 3 features a continuation of this theoretical discussion in relation to linguistic interpellation.

### 3: The Queer Kinetics of Offence

To re-think agency and subjectivity as constituted through the affective textures of experience I offer the language of “queer kinetics” as a means of thinking about how offence, as a term and feeling, travels. It moves between individuals and groups, arriving and landing in particular places, but is not a possession of individuals. Nobody can claim to always and forever be in an affective state of offence (even if we acknowledge this is unevenly distributed). Rather, offence is a relation between subjects. However, “subjects” in this sense can never be an isolated unit, as in liberal, humanist narratives and conceptions. It is precisely

because we exist in a *precarious* relation to others, through whom we are constituted mutually into groups, relations, and modes of being (some more or less malleable and “plastic” than others) that we might take, or give, offence. Note the specifically economic language contained here - *Offence is economic*. It specifically involves exchange between multiple agents. At times these agents are ‘traditional,’ or human agents. Equally, a particular cartoon image, a poster, a statue and so on, could offend. Objects in this sense are imbued with agency. They are agents in the sense that they have the capacity to *do* things (to *move* us, to *move with* us, to *move against* us). Indeed, it could be a combination of multiple forms of agents: an object might become offensive when someone uses the object in a specific way, if it were to become *matter out of place* (Douglas, 1966), polluted by an action. Or a person might become offensive if they possess a particular object, or if they become associated with a particular object. Objects and people may become analogous to one another in this sense.

The word offence itself has travelled significantly given the root of the word itself has a long and ambiguous history. “A striking” is perhaps the most common, or in biblical terms, a striking of the foot against – a falling. In moving through, it can also stop us in our tracks and force us to change our course. Sometimes it is easy to recover after such a fall, a striking, at other times this is experienced more as a breaking, a shattering. When following offence around, or at least try to, it’s often in the glimpse, a side-glance that we find it. Unspoken in a relation, we can follow it through anger, humour, rage, irritation, envy and jealousy, it’s almost there but never quite rises to the surface in discourse. Offence as a term, when applied, can cause violence, or threat, or be perceived as the very source of the thing it names- as if to speak it is to cause it. The lines offence follows are “queer” in the sense that they are not straight lines, teleological lines (the thinking of queer in such a way follows authors such as (Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2005, 2011; Ahmed, 2006). Then “queer” here is deployed in ways that position it against normative ontological closure. From this it was important to think about a methodology that might allow one to *move with* (or at times *against*) and follow offence which pays attention to such movements and connections as they were relevant to my participants – to enable me to follow what at first might have seemed like queer directions to attend to.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

As detailed in Chapter 1, my work utilises “offence” as a “keyhole issue” (Hochschild, 2016) through which to understand classical sociological issues such as identity formation, belonging, and institutional, social, and interpersonal violence. I propose that offence does not so much happen to a subject (already fully formed): rather, offence moves through bodies, institutions, and discourses, interpellating and (re)producing subjects. Yet, this (re)production is due to complex histories and webs of significance that surround each participant in each situation. Thus, offence has the appearance of differentially “sticking” (Ahmed, 2010) to some bodies and not others. As a result, the methodological approach taken to this project was to compile an archive that would map out and interrogate the physical, affective, and institutional forms offence takes when differentially attached to particular bodies.

Teresa de Lauretis (1984:3) argued that “one must be willing “to begin an argument,” and so formulate questions that will redefine the context, displace the terms of the metaphors, and make up new ones.” My research combines personal accounts and testimonies of offence to think about offence as a phenomenon and explores questions of subjectification, embodiment, and power. Following Alison Jaggar (1989:171) “Critical reflection on emotion is itself a kind of political theory and political practice, indispensable for an adequate social theory and social transformation.”

In this chapter, I explain precisely how this archive was compiled, and its respective ‘formal’ components: (i) semi-structured interviews and (ii) auto-ethnography. I provide an outline of the reflexive styles and strategies used to interrogate the varied forms of data throughout, and clarifications and practical steps to maintain an ethical research practice where relevant throughout. First, however, I detail what is meant by the archive as a methodology.

### An Offensive Archive

The decision to compile an archive to study the phenomenon of feeling offended was guided

by the interdisciplinary queer, feminist and anti-racist theories that underpin this work. While archival methods in the traditional social scientific sense involve the use of existing historical sources to address specific research questions (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004), I understand the process of compiling the archive in this thesis as a kind of *queer methodology*: “a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information [...] attempt[ing] to combine methods that are often at odds with each other, and [refusing] the compulsion toward disciplinary coherence” (Halberstam, 1998:13).

This scavenger project will think through the words, events, and histories of different participants to reflect on offence as a feeling that, whilst seemingly ubiquitous, often appears only at the margins of academic writing, often unnamed. Thus, to slightly alter (and perhaps strain) the wording of Ahmed’s (2012:12) methodology from *On Being Included*,

“To ask what [offence] does, we need to follow [offence] around, which is to say, we need to follow the those [objects, events, hauntings, bodies, and impressions] that give [offence] a physical and institutional form. Following [the above] is also about *following the actors who use these forms*. The question of what [offence] does is also, then, a question of where [offence] goes (and where it does not), as well as in whom and in what [offence] is deposited (as well as in whom or in what it is not).”

Each of the testimonies that make up this project are theories of a phenomenon in themselves. Thus, this project is both an “archive” and “contact zone”. I understand a “contact zone,” as a “social space where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1991:34).

In more practical terms, the description of the study as an *archive* is a way of highlighting how the interview data was supplemented by ongoing dialogue with participants as well as a means of drawing attention to the varied reflexive forms of labour that I undertook to contextualise and weave together varied testimonies. For example, in Chapter 5, I provide an extended case study which arises out of a testimony provided by my participant Nadia. In this testimony she describes two events, which happened approximately a year apart, that became scrutinised by news outlets and became the source of wider public debate as well as

a heated dispute on the social media platform Facebook. As will be made clear in Chapter 5, Nadia felt she could only make her feelings of offence fully intelligible in relation to a constellation of sources, from screenshots of an extended Facebook thread; photographs which were posted online; discussions that she had with friends; and reference to other events that she constituted as relevant for the broader context. The events that Nadia discusses in her interview were also something that another participant, Paris, also reflected on. In this sense, my analysis of the event that Nadia discussed that appears in Chapter 5 travelled beyond the initial description that Nadia provided in her interview testimonial. To remain felicitous to the notion of *following offence around*, I use the term archive to highlight how these different sources were intentionally woven together as a means of rendering the event intelligible in line with participants' varied understandings of what constituted the phenomenological texture of their experience and feeling of being offended.

## Semi-Structured Interviews

### Participant recruitment

Four approaches to participant recruitment were taken, two of which involved opportunity sampling, the third, through snowballing, and the fourth, by contacting student contacts directly. Firstly, I advertised through emails lists across the University of Cambridge asking for volunteers for a study on the feeling of being offended (Appendix C). The recruitment email was sent to a range of University and College networks around Cambridge including College JCRs and MCRs (student representative bodies which act as central hubs for their student constituents in each College); the Cambridge University Student Union (CUSU); and independent social groups and campaigns at university level (the BME, Women's, LGBT+, and cultural and religious groups). I also used a recruitment poster, which was displayed on various college and departmental noticeboards across the university (Appendix D). These approaches to participant recruitment were considered optimal in that they reflect non-intrusive but widespread means of approaching students within the university, on whose experiences this thesis is based. Contacting independent social groups was also an important feature insofar as it offered the potential to access different experiences of offence among a non-homogenous student population.

While the primary mode of gathering participants was through a self-selected recruitment process, this was also complemented by a third strategy of ad hoc snowball sampling. Some participants were referred informally by friends. Finally, I approached members of my extended network informally via email to bring the study to their attention (per Appendix C). Potential participants needed to be a current student at the University of Cambridge and needed to have experienced offence however they chose to define this.

The choice to interview only students was a strategic one based upon my understanding of the nature of the debates surrounding offence when I began the project, informed by some guiding ethical principles. In the first instance I wished to capitalize on my familiarity with the student population at the University of Cambridge as well as my embodied knowledge of the networks, languages and social groupings that are familiar within that population, capitalizing on my “insider” status with that group. I was only just beginning to teach at the University when I began the interviews for my PhD, so was less familiar with staff networks. I had also identified “students” as a particular group of concern within the wider public discourse surrounding offence (as detailed in the introduction to this thesis). Yet, what was notably absent from such public discussions were detailed, critical and sustained engagement with students’ wider experiences of offence. As I hope will be made clear throughout the thesis, the participants’ accounts of their experiences were incredibly complex and nuanced. As the wider public discourse in the offence literature identified in the thesis introduction demonstrates, there was a tendency to homogenize, simplify or distrust the grievances of students, or to characterize their feelings in reductive manners. I thus identified my point of intervention into these public debates as seeking to remedy the lack of sustained engagement with student voices and their experiences surrounding “offence”.

However, a future project might productively also cast a wider net to see how the term offence takes on different properties or forms when tempered through the experiences of other social actors attached to the institution of the University of Cambridge (or indeed beyond the University institution itself). In seeking to see where offence moves, sticks, and gathers, I also felt it necessary to limit my initial exploration for practical reasons. Given, once more, the contextual specificity and complexity of these accounts, or what we might term the

layered and thick *texture* of the feelings of offence that participants brought, a more modest approach to following offence around by focusing on this particular group of social actors that I had a greater contextual understanding of seemed wise for an initial exploratory project. However, the boon of having composed this project as an 'archive', and 'contact zone' (Pratt, 1991) means that further research, perhaps bringing in academic, support, and other staff members as another facet of this archive in the future is entirely possible and fertile ground for further study. In so doing, I would suspect the kinds of stories gathered, or the way offence is understood by different constituent groups within the University, would show variety and likely raise different moral and ethical concerns. However, to do justice to the complexity of those other stories would require a much longer thesis and is, I would argue, beyond the scope of a single project.

In all cases, prospective participants were advised to contact me via email if they desired to participate or wished for further information about the study. The most common question asked at this stage by participants was whether their experience 'counted' as offence. I assured them during email exchanges that I was happy to listen to whatever they wished to discuss. Irrespective of their initial means of engagement with the study, several prospective participants appeared to have a strong desire to take part in the project, something that would come to shape both my approach to the interview generally, and how I conceptualized the ethical relationship between participant and researcher. For instance, Paris, a gay black undergraduate student that I taught sent me the following email:

"RE: Hi, please interview me for your PhD i've had enough

Dear Gavin

I know I was really slow/unresponsive before about being interviewed for your PhD, but [Nadia] has told me all about being interviewed and, for want of more formal expression, please for the love of God interview me I am in need of a long rant about everything. I'm

sure [Nadia] has also sent you the low down on the drama on Queerbridge<sup>8</sup> and honestly just so sick of how terrible everyone here is tbh [to be honest]???

Best,

[Paris]”<sup>9</sup>

From Paris’ comments, there was a feeling or desire to have someone *really listen* to his accounts or experiences. There was a widespread feeling that nobody else was listening and that I, in a unique position somewhere between an institutional authority figure and a student who had gone through the same process as them in many ways (as a student of Cambridge), might “get it” (an idea I return to in greater in Part III of the thesis).

#### Interview Participant Composition

Thirty-eight students took part in an individual interview. Throughout the thesis, when introducing a particular participant’s account, I offer a brief description of their identity. As in Table 1, participant descriptions are drawn from words and phrases that they used to describe themselves throughout the interview.

I could have asked each participant to describe their identity, yet I was more interested in the ways that identity was constituted or apparent within the stories themselves rather than asking participants to fix this in advance. This stems from an understanding that identities shift and move based upon the framework or discourses they are constituted in and through, that identity is spatiotemporally, linguistically, and subjectively complex, and at times ambivalent or shifting (Bourdieu, [1984]2010; Probyn, 1996; Cavarero, 2000; Butler, 2005; Connell, 2005; Lawler, 2014). However, the table below offers a general compositional breakdown of participant identity, drawing on the amalgamation of terms of self-reference where available and from what was otherwise implied by particular phrases or expressions.

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<sup>8</sup> A Facebook group ran as an anonymous collective help group for queer students at the University of Cambridge, where people can post anonymous questions relating to queer experience, sexuality, “coming out” and other such things.

<sup>9</sup> I had asked Paris to participate due to his involvement in a particularly heated discussion that had reached the national press. Notably, Nadia was one of the participants who described the interview process as “like therapy” and an opportunity to “rant” and “get things off her chest.” Paris’ interview was the longest of all my interviews (nearing 2.5 hours).

Where such information was not forthcoming, even by implication, ND (Not Disclosed) is used.

Pseudonym	Research Period	Social Class	Gender	Age	'Race'/Ethnicity	Nationality	Education Status	Sexuality	Disability Status	Other Important Factors of self-description
Eleanor	2015	ND	Female	20	white	British	undergraduate	straight	ND	
Saskia	2015	ND	Female	21	white	British	undergraduate	straight	ND	Doesn't drink alcohol, feminist
Mark	2015	ND	Male	21	white	British	undergraduate	gay	ND	"struggled with weight issues"
Maggie	2015	ND	Female	20	white	British	undergraduate	straight	ND	feminist
Sophia	2015	ND	Female	24	white	American	MPhil	straight	ND	
Sorcha	2015	ND	Female	21	white	British-German	MPhil	Bisexual	ND	"Third Culture Kid"
Vivienne	2015	"working class"	Female	20	white	British	undergraduate	straight	"Mental health issues" / depression	
Jay Marker	2015	ND	Male	21	white	British	undergraduate	gay	ND	
Frank	2015	ND	Male	23	white	American	MPhil	straight	ND	Post-Evangelical Anglican American Christian
Sally	2015	ND	Female	25	mixed-race	Australian	MPhil	straight	ND	feminist
Lyra	2015	ND	female	21	white	British	undergraduate	ND but mentions a heterosexual relationship	ND	
Rain	2015	ND	female	20	white	British	undergraduate	gay	ND	

<b>Jasmine</b>	2015	ND	Female	23	Asian-American	American	MPhil	straight	ND	
<b>Balbus</b>	2015	ND	male	21	Iraqi	Iraqi-British	undergraduate	gay	Visually-Impaired	Apostate of Islam, Originally Iraqi but spent life in Britain ("Culturally Iraqi")
<b>Rex</b>	2015	ND	male	21	white	British-American	undergraduate	straight	ND	feminist
<b>Simeon</b>	2016-7	ND	male	20	white	British	undergraduate	gay	ND	Rugby player
<b>Emma</b>	2016-7	ND	female	early 20s	white	Lithuanian	undergraduate	ND	ND	
<b>Nisha</b>	2016-7	ND	female	early 20s	mixed-race	British	undergraduate	ND but Mentions a heterosexual relationship	ND	
<b>Patrick</b>	2016-7	ND	male	19	white	British (Northern Irish)	undergraduate	gay	ND	Catholic
<b>Igloo</b>	2016-7	ND	female	late 20s	Chinese	Chinese	PhD	straight	ND	
<b>Maya</b>	2016-7	ND	female	early 20s	brown	Indian	undergraduate	queer	ND	Grew up in Dubai and Britain and went to international schools for many years
<b>Kate</b>	2016-7	ND	female	mid 20s	white	British	PhD	ND	ND	

<b>G</b>	2016-7	ND	male	30	none specifically mentioned	Egyptian	PhD	straight	ND	Muslim
<b>Ru Shi</b>	2016-7	ND	Non-binary	21	Chinese	British	undergraduate	queer	ND	
<b>Raj</b>	2016-7	ND	male	mid 20s	brown	British	PhD	ND	ND	
<b>Will</b>	2016-7	ND	male	mid 30s	white	British	PhD	ND	ND	Quaker
<b>Benjamin</b>	2016-7	ND	male	around 30	white	British	PhD	straight	ND	
<b>Ola</b>	2016-7	ND	female	mid 20s	white	Irish	MPhil	ND	ND	
<b>Ray</b>	2016-7	ND	Non-binary	28	Latin American	Puerto Rican	PhD	queer/lesbian	ND	
<b>Kezza</b>	2016-7	"financially privileged"	female	21	white	British/French/German	undergraduate	ND	ND	Vegetarian and environmental activist
<b>Byron</b>	2016-7	ND	male	21	white	British	undergraduate	gay	ND	Nursing Student at Anglia Ruskin
<b>Nadia</b>	2016-7	"working-class"	female	21	Arab / of colour	British-Tunisian	undergraduate	bisexual	ND	
<b>Natalia</b>	2016-7	ND	female	21	white	British-Polish	undergraduate	ND	ND	
<b>Andre</b>	2016-7	ND	male	21	white	British	undergraduate	gay	ND	

<b>Paris</b>	2016-7	ND	male	21	black	British-Nigerian	undergraduate	gay	ND	
<b>Latoya</b>	2016-7	ND	female	26	mixed-race / black	British-American	PhD	straight	ND	
<b>Kathryn</b>	2016-7	"semi-middle class"	female	21	white	British	undergraduate	ND	ND	
<b>Chioma</b>	2016-7	ND	female	19	black	British-Nigerian	undergraduate	ND	ND	

*Table 1: Participant Composition*

As Table 1 demonstrates, 14 participants were men, 22 were women and 2 were non-binary. 24 of my participants described themselves as “white” whilst 14 were people of colour from a wide range of racial backgrounds, many of which took on slightly different labels throughout the interview. For example, Latoya described herself as both “black” and as “mixed-race” depending on the context, (a point I revisit in Chapter 4). The descriptions of nationality were not always necessarily simple descriptions of citizenship, often reflecting ideas of belonging rather than strictly bureaucratic or legal categories. This was particularly the case for participants such as Balbus who described himself as “British but culturally Iraqi.” In just above two thirds of cases (27) participants explicitly disclosed a sexual identity, 13 of these using the label “straight” or “heterosexual” to describe their sexuality, 9 describing themselves as “gay,” 2 as “bisexual” and 3 as “queer.” 24 participants were undergraduate students, 6 were MPhil students and 8 were PhD students. Two participants explicitly disclosed disability status. Vivienne described herself as “someone with depression and a history of mental illness.” Balbus described himself as “visually impaired.” Few participants explicitly characterized themselves using the language of a social class, with only four participants giving themselves an explicit social class position during the interview. Participants tended to be clustered in the age range of the early to mid-twenties with the youngest participant being 19 years old and the oldest participant describing themselves as in their mid-30s.

Three primary reflections seem pertinent from the overall composition of the sample. First, women and LGBT+ identifying individuals were in some ways both more prominent within the participant group. I also was caused to pause and reflect when I saw that only 3 of my participants were 'straight white men.' The cause for pause was also informed by a recurring experience during the recruitment process in 2015, in which several male peers approached me to tell me that they had seen my study, and that it looked interesting and whilst they would love to participate, they *"just don't really get offended by anything."* I don't wish to use this anecdote to make grand claims, but in line with Hochschild, Ahmed's, and others' claims, it would appear that affect or emotion appears (at least ostensibly) to be differentially stratified by group membership (Ahmed, 2010; Hochschild, 2012, 1990). This is to perhaps suggest that whilst the feeling of offence may be universal, there appears to be a differentially "stickiness" or compulsion to speak about the feeling that might give a modest suggestion of differential precarity in relation to the feeling.

Second, the "additional labels" column was kept to respect some of the labels that particular participants used to describe themselves throughout their interview. They were often forms of affinity to groups or ideas (for example political or religious affinity) and although not something necessarily interrogated more fully in the thesis, I keep them as a mode of demonstrating at least some of the cursory complexities and multi-dimensionalities of narrating the self.

Third, a modest suggestion as to why social class appeared to be a less prominent label used to describe the self than some other identity markers, particularly in the context of the University of Cambridge, can be offered, though this is a speculative observation based upon my time at the institution. The University of Cambridge is an elite educational institution, one that evokes images historically and contemporarily of financial privilege. At an elite (and international) educational institution that evokes strong images of social mobility symbolically, culturally, and institutionally, defining one's social class can become especially problematic or difficult. As one attends the institution, the "sticky" association of privilege, institutional elitism, and shifting class positionality, make a simple description of one's class position difficult. I speculate therefore that the language of class might not necessarily be

forthcoming as a primary modality of distinction for many of my participants, as it becomes something that opens as a much more complex question itself rather than something that is easily described once one begins to study at such an elite educational institution with a pressing history and symbolism of social class. My own experience of moving from an ex-mining town in the north of England (Barnsley) to the University of Cambridge constructed something of a troubled relation with social class. Cambridge was for “posh” people. For many in my hometown (friends and relatives), by going to Cambridge, I would become “posh.” I was also, however, considered somewhat “posh” for my hometown in Barnsley: understood as comfortably middle-class both culturally and materially. Yet, when I arrived at the University of Cambridge, the signifiers that presented me as middle-class in Barnsley were not recognized as such amongst other students. For instance, what was a slightly “posh” accent in Barnsley, giving me away as middle-class, was registered as a “thick” northern accent and carried with it connotations of being firmly “working class” at the University. The reading of my accent as “incredibly Northern” by other students at Cambridge was the source of great humour to my friends and family in Barnsley, who expressed deep surprise that my accent would be read as anything other than distinctly middle-class.

Similarly, I went to a state school and had only met a small handful of people that went to a fee-paying school before attending the University of Cambridge. Going to a fee-paying school in Barnsley was almost unheard of, so did not commonly register as a mode of class distinction outside of a realm of exceptional wealth. This was quite different at the University of Cambridge where large numbers of my peers had attended fee-paying schools. These reflections on class *distinction* align with theoretical insights that understand class as a complex, intersecting and spatiotemporally constituted phenomenon (Bourdieu, [1984]2010; Skeggs, 2004; Reay, 2017). I am not suggesting that other identities aren’t also complex and precariously constituted (indeed, this thesis will demonstrate that they are). Neither is this to suggest that social class as a topic did not come up during the interviews. Indeed, social class and privilege were prominent themes in the discussion with several participants but as a means of defining others through exception rather than forthcoming in self-description.

## The Interview Process

Interviews were conducted in two phases: the first 15 interviews took place between March and April 2015, while the latter 23 interviews were conducted between October 2016 and June 2017. The interviews averaged 1 hour, the shortest being approximately 35 minutes and the longest being just under 2.5 hours in length. The interviews from both phases used the same interview prompt sheet (Appendix E).

I began each face-to-face interview in a private location sat directly across from my participants. Between us were snacks (usually biscuits, tea, coffee, and fruit). Just in front of my participants was a sketchpad surrounded by coloring pencils, pens, and crayons.

I was more insistent during the first wave of the project (undertaken during my MPhil studies) of having participants contribute visual or graphic accompaniment during their interview, offering them lots of prompts and nudges to do so, and so had pictures to accompany each interview. This is because at the time I was interested in thinking about the potential of art as a method of mapping affect (Knudsen & Stage, 2015). I came to understand the medium of visual representation as a tool which *could* facilitate new ways of experiencing, retelling, and representing the event, thoughts, and feelings during the interview.

Sometimes emotions and experiences, in their deep ambivalence, are difficult to characterize with words alone. I wanted to offer participants tools to try and communicate with me. I was inspired to originally try out this method during interviews in discussions I had with my friend and colleague Dr. Sophie Zadeh who was part of a research team in the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge who mentioned some of the techniques her team used when interviewing children about their understandings and experience of family. She suggested that visual representation or drawing might facilitate the potential of sharing information through a practice which organizes itself around a particular material object which can then facilitate more discussion. In other words, it produces something 'static' to then discuss further. Beyond that, asking someone to draw a visual representation of a time in which they were offended, or those thoughts and feelings that they had, is intentionally (presumably) an odd task. To ask someone to reflect in new or novel ways seemed like an interesting thing to do which couldn't harm the process of research.

For the second phase of interviews (conducted during my PhD studies), I provided the materials and offered a few nudges for participants to complete the drawing, but I was much less insistent. I attempted to observe each participant's relative level of comfort with the task and did not push those who seemed less enthusiastic. I let participants know that it was fine to merely doodle if that's something they liked to do. I used the expression "the page is yours, do as you like with it" but mentioned specifically that it was there if they'd like to use it to clarify or express anything. These drawings, although forming part of my MPhil thesis, do not appear within the PhD thesis. For the purposes of this piece, they might be understood as background data (Appendix H), but perhaps more importantly as a tool of discursive facilitation during the interview. The use of art within research is a possible further element of study and methodological innovation I would explore in future research.

In terms of the verbal component of the interviews, I employed the feminist interviewing "strategies" outlined by Marjorie Devault, where the messiness of everyday speech, the slippages, and at times inarticulate or incoherent elements of speech, can themselves be rich with information. For instance, Devault (1990:103) states,

"Often, I believe, this halting, hesitant, tentative talk signals the realm of the not-quite-articulated experience, where standard vocabulary is inadequate, and where a respondent tries to speak from experience and finds language wanting. I tried to listen most carefully to this kind of talk."

The implications of such strategies as a mode of trying to attend to, or deeply *listen* to, participants' accounts had an important impact on my interview style (and on my approach to analysis). My interview style was premised on the assumption that the *feeling* or *experience* of offence is often deeply complex, filled with ambivalences, and often difficult to articulate. I had invited participants to tell me about a time in which they were offended but did not presuppose what offence *was*. My aim was to see what "stuck" to these experiences for them. Often, a participant was clear that they "felt offence" at a given situation, but the reasoning on why offence (or at times *if* offence) was the best label for the experience was less clear to them or required significant explanation. As such, my interviews are filled with clarifying and

facilitating questions, where I would often pick up on particular words that a participant used, repeat this back and ask for clarification.

Several participants remarked that the style of interview at times felt “like a therapy session.” I offered participants time and space to reflect on their feelings and attempted to facilitate further explanation when commonality in knowledge or position may have been assumed between researcher and participants. Yet, I was careful to do so in a way that did not undermine the validity of the participant’s feelings or experiences. For instance, I would say, “What I’m asking you might seem somewhat obvious. I’m not questioning your interpretation of the event, but want to make sure I understand where you’re coming from,” or, “You used the word X, what do you mean by that? Or what does that word mean to you?”

I made notes throughout the interview of expressive and non-verbal communications that I observed. Often participants would use gestures such as air quotations or roll their eyes. I would remark on these gestures to ensure that the transcript would reflect these forms of non-verbal communication.

To further facilitate an ethical and safe interviewing environment where participants understood that anything they wished to talk about was “relevant to the study,” I regularly and explicitly thanked them for sharing particular stories with me and “checked-in” with participants. When participants initially described an experience, I would say, “Thank you for sharing that. Would it be alright if I asked you some more questions about that?” This took on increased importance throughout the research when, somewhat unexpectedly, participants wished to discuss with me events that I would not have initially expected to be characterized through the lens of offence, which seemed more “minor” a term. For instance, several participants mentioned sexual and physical assault, whether this was something that they had experienced or was a significant element of the stories that they shared; as well as longstanding or ongoing discriminatory practices experienced within the institution of Cambridge University.

Where the events spoke about appeared to raise ethical concerns about a participant’s wellbeing, or it was clear that they had experienced discrimination from the institution of

Cambridge, peers, or others, I ensured that there was time during the interview (or afterwards) to discuss this with the participant. In some cases, I offered support in the form of acting as an advocate or mediator to bring an institutional complaint should the participant wish to. Whilst some participants considered this briefly, all, tellingly, told me that they would either rather not pursue a complaint, firmly believing that “*nothing would come of it,*” or that they would rather move on from the experience. This is something that I will explore in the thesis conclusion.

#### Transcription and presentation of the interviews

All interviews were voice-recorded with participant permission and stored as password-protected files. This was in line with the consent sheet that participants were asked to sign, also giving participants the right to withdraw their data from the study (Appendix F). Interviews were transcribed verbatim, leaving in significant pauses, grammatical errors, and other idiosyncrasies in speech (DeVault, 1990). All participants were given an opportunity to select a pseudonym, and only pseudonyms are used to refer to participants within the study. I selected a pseudonym where the participant did not wish to offer one. When my participants referred to friends (or other individuals) by name, I gave them pseudonyms. To further ensure participants’ anonymity, identifying contextual information is at times changed. However, in large part, the information relating to specific college institutions has not been changed. Much of the information about colleges is a matter of widely cited record. For instance, in Chapter 5, where a discussion of a debate within Pembroke College ensued and received wider press attention, the media materials referred to identify the college. As such information was a matter of public record, it seemed unnecessarily obfuscatory to use pseudonyms for institutions.

In the process of transcription, I kept some of the messiness associated with everyday speech practices and attempted not impose a framework of mastery over my participants’ language. There are several stylized elements of participants’ quotes. Where speech overlaps, I indicate this with the use of a “/” to indicate parts where we both spoke simultaneously. When a participant directly quotes another person, I use speech marks surrounding the particular quote. Where participants offer more of an internal monologue within their speech or

reflection, I use italics to highlight this. For non-verbal and tonal expressions, I use square brackets to demarcate this. Where sentences or words are stopped and restarted, I use dashes. Where possible, I try to keep remain true to the style and expression of participants' speech in keeping slang or other idiosyncratic speech patterns but offer clarification in square brackets where I felt this might be useful for a reader. When I use bold font within participants' quotations, this is to make *my own emphasis* for the purpose of analysis and reflection rather than necessarily the participant changing tone or mode of expression (unless otherwise noted explicitly). To keep the dialogical context of the interview present, the reader will also notice that I similarly transcribe my own parts of the interview in many cases and keep this within the text of the thesis. This is to demonstrate the co-constructed nature of the interview.

The quotations that I present might appear unusually long. Rather than cutting longer extracts, it was useful to keep the full dialogue. First, it became clear that the dialogical exchange between the participants and myself was itself deeply analytical. As I offered space and encouraged participants to reflect on how or why they felt a particular way in relation to their experience, they offered deeply theoretical accounts of their position within social relations and how they managed these relationships. As such, the dialogue itself, between participant and researcher, performed much of the hermeneutic interrogation one might expect to see in a qualitative sociological thesis. Thus, it seemed more useful to keep a fuller transcription but draw attention to particular remarks afterwards to clarify elements for further analysis.

### Institutional and Auto- Ethnography

Initially, I had difficulties in finding an appropriate label for my research method. Semi-structured interviews formed the most substantive visible part of my data. However, the description of this project as merely composed of 38 semi-structured interviews would be misleading. This is considering two primary elements: the unique position I found myself in as a researcher; and the complexity of studying offence with a mind for its *queer kinetics*.

I selected Cambridge students as participants because of the networks I have built here which enabled me to recruit participants more easily. Furthermore, having studied in Cambridge for ten years, I have detailed knowledge of the specific campaigns that have taken place and a more detailed knowledge of the social and academic environment than any other institution. This kind of context-specific knowledge advantaged this project in many ways, given the often highly contextual nature of offence. For some this might provide a troubling of the relationship between research subject, object, and researcher. Yet, this kind of “insider” status, constituted through the many years I had already spent at the institution, as well as my intimate ties to the phenomenon itself (being someone who is, by the description of others, “too easily offended”) compelled me to collect accounts of being offended with a suspicion that the phenomenon of offence was much more complex and multi-leveled than many contemporary critiques (such as those presented in the introduction) had given it credit.

In my own life, when trying to explain why something had bothered me so much, I had noticed that it was often difficult to explain why a particular interaction had offended me without reference to things beyond the incident itself. The feeling of being offended is often not a bounded or discrete unit, but an affective *texture* that constituted an experiential phenomenon. As such, I sought a methodology that might allow the exploration of connections, to “follow offence around.” Part of this required a flexible method of study that kept my unique positionality as a researcher (intimately embedded in the phenomenon studied) as a central element of the analytical and methodological project. Following reflection, the language of “institutional ethnography” (Smith, 2005) appeared to make the most sense in explaining how my “archive” was both constructed and interrogated.

#### Institutional ethnography

Smith (2005:2) outlines that institutional ethnography is always about “research as *discovery* rather than, say, the testing of hypothesis or the explication of theory as analysis of the empirical.” For Smith, “Institutional ethnography aims at a knowledge that is essentially an extension of the ordinary ways in which we know our everyday worlds into regions we have not been to, and perhaps could not go to, without the explorer’s interests and cartographic skills” (*Ibid.*). Smith describes institutional ethnography as in large part deriving from her experiences within the women’s movement and the set of techniques that arose when a focus

was placed on *embodied knowing* versus the *ruling relations* (of knowledge practices understood as more masculinist). Smith argued that one of the outcomes of the women's movement that "We began to name "oppression," "rape," "harassment," "sexism," "violence," and others. These were terms that did more than name. They gave shared experiences a political presence." (*Ibid.*7)

The act of *naming* particular patterns of behaviour renders them visible or intelligible in a differential orientation to their previous understandings through *ruling relations*. This process was described by Smith as "transformative" when it became understood that "Talking our experience was a means of discovery" (*ibid.*). This began to transform into a sociological project when "women's standpoint" (Harstock, 1998; Harding, 1988) became understood as "not a finalized form of knowledge but as a ground in experience from which discoveries are to be made" (Smith, 2005:8). Furthermore,

"Standpoint" as the design of a subject position in institutional ethnography creates a point of entry into discovering the social that does not subordinate the knowing subject to objectified forms of knowledge of society or political economy. It is a method of inquiry that works from the actualities of people's everyday lives and experience to discover the social as it extends beyond experience." (*Ibid.*10)

To explore how the phenomenon of "offence" is experienced and understood, and to attempt, where possible, to discover the mechanics, logics, and drivers which appear to underpin the feeling and how it moves (and moves us), where it "sticks" and what kind of ethical, moral, ontological and epistemic issues surround and are embedded within it, I knew I needed to resist conventionalities, which the use of the institutional ethnographic method facilitated.

Firstly, I wanted to start with participants' accounts of the phenomenon without a priori defining what the phenomenon or feeling of offence meant. I intentionally left the primary interview question open: "Can you tell me about a time in which you were offended?" By asking an intentionally broad question without pre-defined criteria beyond what kind of experience the participant attached to the feeling, I sought not to foreclose in advance what

the phenomenon or feeling was “really” or “officially” about. Through discussing participants’ accounts and seeing what other experiences and feelings they attached to such accounts, I sought to perceive or interrogate “the social” more broadly through offence as a “keyhole issue” (Hochschild, 2016).

As many of the accounts explicitly discussed racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, transphobia, and classism, I could have sought to organize the dissertation around these conventional categories of offence and had a chapter on each. Yet, to allow the possibility of hearing something beyond these categories, I resisted this compulsion. Whilst my participants did deploy these terms and attached these labels to them as means of explaining how we might interpret the offences they received, that really was only a part of the story for them, rather than the entirety of the phenomenon. My participants were broadly aware that *something more* was going on with offence. For instance, many interview accounts were filled with additional reflections on the term “offence” and the “feeling rules” (Hochschild, [1983]2003) which appeared to surround that feeling. For example,

**Kathryn:** I don’t think it’s fair to say that someone is too easily offended because I don’t know what they’ve been through. [...] I don’t think that people are offended too easily. I think that if someone is offended it’s for a reason. Something has hurt them and I think that other people should try and accommodate for that. ‘Cause if you tell someone they’ve been offended too easily, it’s like you’re not even trying to understand why. You’re like telling time it’s their fault. I don’t think it’s a choice really.

**Ola:** Offence doesn’t have very [pause] it has kind of negative- obviously negative – connotations to it. The feeling of being offended has negative connotations to the person who expresses or- or experiences it. It sounds sometimes like it could be- not self-righteous exactly, but making a fuss of offence. Whereas, and I know that it’s not and it’s really important to- when something is offensive – when something is bad or crap – to say it. [...] I think the word offence it has derogatory connotations with this idea of the PC Brigade and- and like people policing language and- and the media, which is important but as in now kind of like [pause] almost a like- ridiculed [sighs] [...] Anyone who is not like a straight white Cis male who sort of voices their opinion about a situation being bad is

stuck with this- like they are offended. And rightfully so, but I think- I don't know if the word offence itself- what am I trying to say? I don't know if the word offence now doesn't really do justice to the feeling of deep personal er hurt or whatever has happened and instead kind of belittles it in some way. Offended: to be offended seems [pause] seems like a performance of the hurt you are feeling in some way and [pause] which errr [pause and sigh] hmmm [pause]...

**Andre:** There seems to be a lot of offence taken from the behaviour of like Millennials. So this idea of PC culture and they seems to be disparaging of like – offended by different identities that exist now- or don't like exist now – or are actually articulated now. [...] Erm I think it might come out of fear in a sense. Offence from fear. Because I think it could be perceived as an attack on a way of life in a sense. Obviously the way that society is now more open, it's very different to what it was say 50 years ago. So, the kinds of norms that people would have grown up with are just different now. So, there's this fear that their way of life is under attack. So, it's protective. It's like an offence in a protective sense.

**Ru Shi:** I also really hate the word offence because I think it like masks a lot of things that are happening in interactions like I guess [...] Because I think when people use offence there is like a fundamental mismatch between what people mean and how it's always interpreted and I just think it is useful anymore. [...] like basically the word "offence" and the person who responds to them seizes the word "offence" [brief pause] there is just like a mismatch of understanding of what one person is trying to say and what the other person is reacting to and trying to discuss. Um [brief pause] [Gavin: So, what is it really about, then, for you?] I guess it's really about power [small laugh] power um, it's about power um- it's about power umm, and when people say they are offended about things it is an expression of like hmmm [pause].

**Maya:** Offence feels a little bit like a gateway emotion [Gavin: Okay, what do you mean by that then?] Like, something happens to you, then you get offended, but that like leads to you feeling sad or angry or, which I'm sure is like how all emotions work but I feel like the final emotion is never really just offence. You never really lay in bed and think *I was so offended*, you think *I was so hurt*, or *I was so angry*.

Whether it appears to be a “fundamental mismatch” (Ru Shi) in how offence is understood, received and felt, contemporarily; whether it is understood as a “gateway emotion” (Maya) to other feelings; or carries with it censorious connotations, like “the PC Brigade” (Ola); many of my participants were keenly aware that the feeling of offence has taken on a deeply symbolic meaning and that the reception of the feeling had a highly contested stratification. As the aim of institutional ethnography is to start with the “everyday” on a journey of discovery about how these events give insight into the workings and mechanisms which structure social life, this project followed offence around to examine how the feeling takes shape within the social world through a specific case study focusing on the University of Cambridge.

It is also prescient to reflect on the kinds of dialogue and exchanges I was able to have with this student population and the unique methodological challenges that this brought up. My participants were in large part highly versed in the language of social theory and/or progressive political activism. Many deployed conceptual or theoretical terms such as “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1991), a concept from critical race and legal theory, or were able to speak with some fluency about their experiences in relation to wider structures of power or social norms. For example, in Chapter 3 Simeon places his reflections of injurious terms in relation to what he calls a kind of “structuralism” and similarly Kathryn makes recourse to the “weight of history”. Many participants, for instance Ru Shi in the above passage, refers to offence being about “power” and in an interview with Paris, he also provided a discussion of his experience of offence through the scholarship of Erving Goffman ([1958] 1984), using concepts such as “frontstage” and “backstage”, even as he went on to critique how he believed this separation was untenable for particular social subjects (especially racialized social subjects).

However, what became interesting to observe was how each participant deployed their own understandings of these critical terms in relation to their own experiences. Strategically, in interviews where participants did use academic, conceptual, or activist language that I was deeply familiar with as a sociologist, I did not assume in advance that we shared the same understandings of the terms. As will be seen for instance in Chapter 4 with Sally’s description

of “mansplaining”, I ask Sally, “Could you describe to me what you mean by mansplaining?” By attending to the unique ways that my participants deployed these languages I sought then to focus on the participant’s characterization of these terms. Rather than assessing the faithfulness to the textual references of these terms in the first instance, I foregrounded how participants used these terms to shape their understandings and experiences of offence and how these terms might be understood as *technologies of offence* (which is a focus of Part III of the thesis). What is important to highlight is that common critical languages were deployed by a diverse set of students in understanding their experiences, but that the use of these terms did not foreclose in advance the interpretation of these stories but offered another layer of complexity in how, for many of my participants, recourse to academic or activist language was a part of their everyday lexicon and as Kathryn’s account outlines in Chapter 6, this began before her journey to University, becoming exposed to such languages via social media platforms such as Twitter as a teenager.

The fluency with the language of critical social theory and/or progressive social activism is likely to be exacerbated in a study which focuses on the experiences of university students. However, methodologically, and analytically, my key concern was to give a faithful account to my participants’ understanding of their experiences. As such, their particular use of these terms was always analyzed in the first instance in relation to their explanations and how they used these terms to frame their own experiences. This, once more is why I often keep longer passages from participants, allowing readers an insight into the thought processes of the participants in explanation of their interpretative realities. It would be interesting to see whether this same fluency and ease at the use of critical theory is a product of this particular university environment or a wider social trend, but again is a question that beyond the scope of a single project.

#### Autoethnography

The institutional ethnography was supported by an ongoing autoethnography (Chang, 2008; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016), situating and remaining reflexive about my own position within these relations. I see this element as important for multiple reasons, but especially having always been, according to my father and many acquaintances over the years, “too easily offended” or “oversensitive”, which is often explicitly linked to my subject position as

a queer person and a left-wing student activist. Following Elspeth Probyn (1993:83), my interest in autoethnography and critical reflexivity, “is in feminist uses of the autobiographical as a tactic within the production of theory, or more precisely within the process of speaking theoretically.” Various writers from different academic disciplines have done just that, thinking about and situating personal experience and one’s life history in order to think about broader terms of sociality and power (examples include McIntosh, 1988; Delany, 2001; Stewart, 2007).

The autoethnographic account within this thesis is understood as both a “process and product”, which aims to both reflect on my own position within the debates and phenomenon of inquiry and “to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). This is to understand that my own account of the world, through various contact zones, is invariably linked to and situated in that social world. Yet, I also understand that particular ways of speaking, or frames of intelligibility, are not ubiquitous. My reflections consider carefully how my own experiences are similar or different to those of my participants, not as a matter of navel-gazing, but to understand and think through where interpretation and understanding appears more challenging for, and less intelligible to, myself. To take seriously the notion that not all emotions are intelligible – that affect is stratified – requires thinking through my own involvement as an agent in reproducing (and resisting) these very systems. The reason I use the term autoethnography rather than reflexivity is to highlight the more prominent use of the autobiographical within this research.

### Why Offence?

As a final note on the methodology of this project, I might offer some reflections on why in the end “offence” was chosen as the “keyhole” or lens of exploration. I could have chosen other terms which engaged with the so-called “culture wars” contemporarily. For example, I might have chosen to ask participants to recount experiences which relate to comparable terms like “political correctness”, “harm”, “sensitivity”, “violence”, “outrage” and so forth. “Offence”, However, was chosen for several interconnected reasons: first, a personal connection to the term; second, the somewhat ambiguous classification of the term; and third, the highly contested nature of the term contemporarily.

First, as I have outlined in the introduction, “offence” was a term that had both tempered my own experiences significantly in both how the term was used to describe my own supposed “sensitivity”, and thus was of a particular biographical and personal interest. Furthermore, I already sensed that the feeling of offence in my own experience was often quickly dismissed or otherwise often perceived as inconsequential, or a product of poor self-regulation. I was curious both academically and personally to explore whether my experience of this feeling; the experiences which assembled around the term; and the common mechanisms and processes that I had experienced were indeed personal idiosyncrasies; or whether there might be ways to give a sociological and systematic language to these experiences.

Second, “offence” was chosen specifically because of the somewhat queer nature of the term which in some ways refuses simple classification, hence my approach to the study of this through FAMES. As expressed in the above quotation from Maya, offence might be understood as “a little bit like a gateway emotion”, one that is often then linked to other emotions such as “hurt” and “anger”. The way offence seemed to straddle the status of emotion and thought process and seemed indicative of moral and ethical sensibilities made the term seem even more fertile for study, especially then when it links to my final reason.

Third, as each of the participants’ quotes above in some way demonstrate, the term itself appears highly contested in popular public discourse seeming to indicate a range of possible moral or ethical concerns. For example, Ru Shi points out that there is often a “fundamental mismatch” in how offence is expressed and received. As I was deeply interested in the contested representations and receptions of emotions, or what we can term the “feeling rules” (Hochschild [1983] 2003) which surround emotional expressions, the publicly contested nature of offence and the frequency at which the term was used contemporarily once more compounded my interest in the term. The sheer range, scope and ambiguity of the feeling, which seemed at once to offer such a wide range of possible interpretations, whilst at the same time being something that seemed to be highly contested through overly determined narratives in public discourse seemed to offer something open for more scholarly and systematic study. Notably all the comparable terms mentioned above also came up

during the interviews and my exploration and as such the project explored the networked relationality of these terms through the “keyhole” or lens of offence.

However, I would expect that the tempering of this project through a different term would have produced different results. For example, I expect, had I used “political correctness” as the guiding term or “keyhole” for the project, given the largely self-selected nature of the term, it might have resonated with other kinds of social subjects and perhaps more of my interviewees might have brought to the interviews experiences of having felt “silenced” or shut down by others under the guise of “political correctness”. As such, perhaps many of my participants would have slightly different ethical and moral priorities. Had I chosen a term such as “violence”, perhaps asking the interview question, *can you tell me about a time in which you experienced “violence”*, again I might expect that the term would temper the kinds of responses and participants that I received for the project. Given that “violence” is, I would argue, generally considered a stronger term than “offence”, one that often (but not always) in the first instance conveys physical harm for many, I expect that I might not have received the same kind of data which relates to microaggressions, or those forms of injury that are less tangible. Notably, through the term “offence”, I somewhat unexpectedly still received stories of physical violence that I did not expect.

What is perhaps the most important reflection here is that inevitably the word or term of entry into the project, which term I wished to “follow” and trace the movements of, would have tempered the kinds of participants who volunteered as well as what kinds of stories they brought to the interview. To repeat a similar study using one of these other terms would be fertile grounds for future exploration but beyond the scope of this thesis. The term “offence” overall felt broadly ambiguous enough to invite a range of different stories and experiences and was a highly contested term contemporarily. As such, “offence” was the term that I went with in the knowledge that it would resonate with some and not others, even if I could not know in advance how exactly this would temper responses.

This project is not an exhaustive study of the feeling of offence. Nor does it seek finally to define what offence ‘really’ is. Rather, I have assembled this archive of offence to construct a contact zone to examine the *queer kinetics of offence* (how it moves, travels and “sticks” in

odd, shifting and at times ambivalent ways). I have constructed a space to facilitate a dialogue between what may at first seem to be deeply individual and heterogeneous accounts to explore whether more general mechanisms and logics underpin the feeling. I wished to remain open to the possibility of learning something new about the social and power dynamics embedded through an exploration of this particular feeling, the logics and meanings that social actors/subjects attach to it, and the forms of relationality that appear to assemble (or indeed disassemble) around or in reference to the feeling of being offended.

## PART II: THE TEXTURE OF OFFENCE

## Chapter 3: “Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones...” but Words Might Make Me Matter

### Introduction: Feeling Phrases

This chapter explores what words *do*. I examine 4 accounts from my archive. One is autoethnographic, whilst the remainder are from interviews conducted in 2017. In each instance something offensive was expressed through language. However, the cases differ in a few qualities. In Simeon’s encounter, a homophobic insult was directly and intentionally launched at him. In Kathryn’s testimony, a pair of words were experienced as injurious even though they weren’t explicitly directed at her. The words were taken as a personal slight because they were considered to bear “the weight of history”. In Maya’s encounter with a porter, the offence was inferred from context, requiring some manner of interpretive work, yet, importantly, despite (or precisely because) of this, was still received and felt deeply and injuriously. For Maya, the encounter felt readily over-determined, leading her to assert the racialised nature of the scene. In my autoethnographic example, the situation was more explicitly ambivalent, as the offence appeared to “fail” to take a deep and injurious root as apparently intended.

I (re)examine the manner that words *do* things by exploring the affective dimensions of interpellation, which is possible as linguistic vulnerability is a necessity in subjection. However, I suggest that whilst we are all linguistically vulnerable subjects in the manner that interpellation and subjection functions through language, we, importantly, may not all experience this vulnerability in the same way. Some subjects may *experience* this linguistically vulnerability more explicitly or violently. Some may feel a deep and physical impact to wounding words, whilst others may feel that words can never harm them. I argue that this is a function of power, rather than an indication of individual willpower.

The title of this paper references an old adage: “Sticks and stones may break my bones (but words will never hurt me)”. It is understood as a “common childhood chant meaning hurtful words cannot cause any physical pain and thus will be ignored or disregarded” (Farlex Dictionary of Idioms, 2015). This phrase is good to think with. The adage, taught to children

often in the context of playground bullying, might be interpreted, in the case of offence-taking, as a strong case for an understanding of a liberal, individualist, and sovereign ontology of selfhood. This conception of a liberal sovereign ontology of selfhood is genealogically traced by authors such as Foucault and Rose, and stands in stark contrast to more vulnerable, precarious, or relational ontologies of selfhood described by a range of feminist authors (Foucault, 1991, 1998; Rose, 1999 *cf.* Ahmed, 1998; Butler, 2004, 2005, 2015; Page, 2017).

The aforementioned “sticks and stones” might be considered a softer version of a popular aphorism “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent” (usually attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt). Rather than speculating on Roosevelt’s intention with the aphorism, a more personal history with the phrase inspired me to think with it throughout this chapter. When I received Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) related to (among other things) an eating disorder during my teen years, the therapist I worked with regularly repeated this phrase to me, particularly when I discussed my feelings in relation to having been bullied. Although, presumably, the phrase was used to give me a sense of empowerment, I distinctly remember that the phrase did not fill me with the sense of power. Indeed, it made me feel worse.

Both phrases might be said to make argue that insults, slights, or offences are ‘immaterial,’ or do not ‘matter’ in the sense of producing tangible effects from the moment of their enunciation. The self is envisaged in both models as a kind of fortress barring passage to words through the sheer force of will.

In the playground adage “harm” is constituted as a presumably *physical* force. “Sticks and stones” are then those things that can injure in a material way. Thus, words do not ‘matter,’ or terms of injury, given that the harm is not constituted as physical, should be easily gotten over, moved past, or forgotten.

“Harm” in Roosevelt’s aphorism comes from consenting to and accepting one’s own sense of inferiority. Therefore, the subject is complicit in their own subordination to the injury. I argue that the constitution of subjects as impregnable to linguistic acts without prior consent marks a logical fallacy if we understand subjects as not prior to, but precisely constituted through

language. Rather, then, the very conditions of selfhood (through subjection) require an understanding of linguistic vulnerability as an *a priori* condition. This is not to argue that this linguistic vulnerability is experienced equally. Importantly, I make some suggestions here about why certain subjects may *experience* a higher level of linguistic vulnerability to wounding words and continue this theme in the next chapter. To examine offence as a scene of interpellation or subjection is to return to these questions through an affective lens, which attempts to foreground the emotional attachments in this iterative, ritualistic process of subjection.

### (What) Do Words Do?

The question of when, how, and under what conditions words might be thought to ‘do things’ is not a new one. In *How to Do Things With Words* ([1962]1976), Austin makes distinctions between a multitude of ‘speech acts’. Austin argues that illocutionary utterances *do what they say* insofar as they might be understood as *ritual or ceremonial acts*. It is not that the words themselves have an intrinsic agency, but that certain conventions are invoked within the moment of the utterance, necessitating also that the speaker is authorised to do so within a particular temporal and spatial location. These conditions might be understood as the “total speech situation” (*Ibid.* 52). Reflecting on this in *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler (1997:3) argues that illocutionary utterances,

“work to the extent that they are **given in the form of a ritual**, that is, repeated in time, and, hence, maintain a sphere of operation that is not restricted to the moment of the utterance itself. The illocutionary speech act performs its deed *at the moment* of the utterance, and yet to the extent that the moment is ritualised, it is never merely a single moment. **The “moment” in ritual is condensed historicity**” [Bold emphasis mine]

By focusing on the illocutionary utterance as ritual, Butler argues that the speech situation is “not a simple sort of context [that] might be defined easily by spatial and temporal boundaries.” (*Ibid.* 4) As such, a certain “excess” to the illocutionary utterance means that its force cannot be fully known in advance. This is to say, significantly, that we cannot know in advance of speech what the final effects might be. Understanding illocutionary speech acts

as *expressive moments* by virtue of *condensed and ritualistic historicity* facilitates understanding the injurious potential of certain words or phrases in time and in relation to specific affective and historical structures, *without reducing or inscribing agency to words themselves*.

The debate about injurious words is taken up by several authors to describe the process of interpellation. For example, Ahmed argues that interpellation as a scene of contingency and subjectification, in many senses may 'fail,' as meaning is never finally foreclosed. However, this contingency is not a kind of free play. Ahmed (1998:118) argues that "de-limitation and fixation occur, however temporarily" within the drama of interpellation. Similarly, Denise Riley (2005) argues that we are linguistic subjects, contingent because of this process, but not finally determined because of this.

This chapter questions whether words *do* things in the case of insult or wounding words. Butler (1997:2) argues that the insult,

"assumes its specific proportion in time. To be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns. But not all name-calling is injurious. Being called a name is also one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language; indeed, it is one of the examples Althusser [1971] supplies for an understanding of "interpellation.""

Butler's engagement with Althusser's understanding of "interpellation" can be found throughout her corpus of work (particularly Butler, 1993, 2005, 2015). Butler describes the processes through which subjects are constituted into being as a consequence of language but also within the very terms of that language. What is crucial to Althusser's allegorical scene of interpellation, the turning of an individual to the hailing of a police officer shouting "hey you there!" is the moment at which we turn in recognition of address by the figure of law. Butler (1997:117) argues that that whilst the grammar of the allegory might imply a foundational moment, subjection is not a foundational act or moment, but an iterative/repeated process with no single foundational act. Rather, the laws that govern the possibility of this act of (mis)recognition exist prior to the subject who is enunciated in and

through this process. Whilst this feminist theory engages with Althusser's allegory, one of the central points of contention or diversion is the way interpellation might in some respect 'fail'.

However, turning to the figure of law does not simply represent a submission to the *terms* and *meaning* of the law. Indeed, we might *recognise* that we are being hailed, yet simultaneously attempt to reject the terms through which we are being hailed. For instance, if I were waiting in a shop and someone next to me said, "Excuse me, Madam?" I might turn in recognition that I was being addressed (especially if nobody else was present), yet I would, understand this form of address as a *misrecognition* as I understand myself as a man. However, interpellation as a scene of subjection works precisely through the fact that I am still constituted as a subject (even in rejecting the term that is given to describe me) *through* the terms of the law (in this case, gender). My *agency* to reject the term of address "Madam?" by the enunciation of myself as really "Sir?" still requires my submission or subjection to the law itself - that of the rules of gendering as a site of intelligibility as a subject. We might also draw attention to the likely affective dimensions of this *misrecognition*. It is likely that the correction would elicit a scene of embarrassment (on the part of the one who performed the misrecognition), or perhaps anger or embarrassment (on the part of the one who is misrecognised). We might interpret this affective saturation within the *interpellative drama* as part of the *condensed historicity* expressed in scenes of interpellation. There is unlikely to be a strong emotional reaction unless something is "at stake" within the scene of (mis)recognition.

The allegory of "turning" to the hail of the law, this *interpellative drama*, is something I explore, pursuing the notion of the "enabling vulnerability" (Butler, 1997:2) in language to think about the pair of old adages mentioned previously. This is not to reduce the body to a mere effect of linguistic description. Rather, it is to say that the social body need be understood as (re)formed through linguistic interpellation. As Butler argues, "If language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence." (*Ibid.* 5) By focusing on the ways that bodies can become threatened by words, and on the conditions which facilitate such scenes of "enabling vulnerability," I explore how a mode of sovereign subjectivity (as expressed in the adages) might reinforce or constitute particular subjects as pathologically vulnerable (a critique raised in the introduction to this thesis). It is my argument that such an analytical

move weakens our ability to understand the complexity of the uneven distribution of offence. Furthermore, I am also influenced in pursuing a line of (re)inquiry formulated from Austin within Riley's *Impersonal Passions* (2005:3), where she focuses more on how words to things "with us" – as distinct from "to us" – arguing that "If language exerts a torsion on its users, it does not immobilise them, let alone strangle them."

Rather than sticking with the initial claim that *words do things* (for instance, that words might hurt us or make us feel inferior), I push this frame to understand the conditions for the "enabling vulnerability" through language in the scene of injurious interpellation, to understand how the experience of vulnerability to linguistic forms of address might be unevenly distributed. I describe the way that an uneven stratification of the *feeling* and *experience* of vulnerability is an effect of power. This is to say that certain subjects may experience words as stoppages or stumbling blocks that negatively affectively resonate. As such, the invocation of the figure of a sovereign agency might do little more than render vulnerability as pathological when it perhaps may be more analytically useful to see vulnerability as a necessary condition for selfhood (Butler, 1997, 2004; Ahmed, 1998; Riley, 2005; Lawler, 2014).

I indicated that the emotionality expressed within an event might indicate something of a condensed historicity. It is important to note the embodied dimension of this. That I *feel* a particular way about modes of address might allow us also to see the ritualistic reproduction at work. I argue that to experience a relation to a word as embodied is only possible by looking beyond a model of words as having intrinsic agency; or a model whereby the subject is considered sovereign and invulnerable to language. Rather, one need understand the manner in which words do hurt, but in quite a different way potentially to sticks and stones. As Riley (2005:11-2) evocatively argues,

"The tendency of malignant speech is to ingrow like a toenail, embedding itself in its hearer until it's no longer felt to come "from the outside." The significance of its original emanation from another's hostility becomes lost to the recipient as a tinnitus of remembered attack buzzes in her inner ear. The hard word reverberates"

I will return to this formulation, but first, I explore vignettes marred by the contradictions inherent within these interpellative dramas.

### “Faggots” and “Cunts”

Simeon a white, British, gay, male undergraduate and a rugby player recounts a time he played rugby for the University of Cambridge against a Royal Air Force team. During this match, a member of the opposing team used the word “faggot,” which Simeon believed was directed at him. After the referee claimed not to have heard it, Simeon left the pitch. He describes himself as being “triggered,” “shaken,” and “disappointed” and “offended” by the homophobic epithet. I suggest that this first part of the story represents the scene of interpellation when Simeon literally and figuratively turns to the site of law.

**Simeon:** I heard someone, probably sort of about ten metres away, just sort of- group of [sucking in noise] just a group of players - just sort of - from their team [pause] shout, “you’re a faggot” or “shut up you faggot”- something like that.

Simeon stops and starts his sentence multiple times. There appears to be a delayed building up to the use of the word “faggot”. There is an affective saturation of the word “faggot,” which he goes onto describe, as well as the clear attribution of agency to the word and its power to injure.

**Simeon:** Erm [sucking in sound] and I- I [brief laugh] I try not to get offended by things but for some reason the word “faggot”- being openly gay erm obviously- probably want that on there [the tape recorder]- is that- that- that is a *horrible, horrible* word. I absolutely *hate* that word.

Simeon tells me that being openly gay is significant in terms of the efficacy of the term “faggot” to injure. This is expressed as *obviously* of relevance. For Simeon, as a result of being gay, the word “faggot” has injurious force. He hesitates as he reaches for an adequate description of the injurious power of the word.

**Simeon:** I can deal with most other things erm, y'know? I'd like to think that I have a reasonably thick skin erm [brief pause] I don't know why that word triggers- triggers something, but it does.

Simeon characterizes himself as someone with a "reasonably thick skin," and a general ability to cope with, or not get offended by, "most other things." Yet, he mentions that the word "faggot" "triggers something" for him. Simeon expresses an exceptional or uncharacteristic vulnerability to this mode of address: "faggot". Again, the word at this point appears to be the primary site of agency for the initiation of wounding. Simeon thus expresses his feeling of vulnerability in reference to this word, wherein the term is then considered a *direct* form of abuse.

**Simeon:** And, erm, yeah, for me it's a horrible word and to do it on [brief pause] I've had largely very positive experiences having erm being a rugby player who's gay, y'know? Some people think they're mutually exclusive erm but I- I've had largely very positive experiences and for me that was the first time that I'd ever received direct homophobic abuse.

I ask him to clarify what he means, both by the word being 'triggering' but also if he might say a little more about the conception of gay and rugby player as mutually-exclusive,

**Simeon:** There's a lot of like lazy homophobia which I dislike in rugby but that was the first time that anyone had ever, ever said anything like that. Erm, aaaaand, I basically went absolutely mental. So, I was about ten metres away from the person who did it so, I don't know who it was. I was walking over to the referee who is sort of probably two of three metres away from me er, and I go "sir, did you hear that?"

Simeon goes "absolutely mental" as the word reaches him. He decides to leave the pitch as the referee claimed not to have heard the word "faggot" being used. When he enters the changing room, having refused to continue playing, he describes,

**Simeon:** I was shaken quite a lot. So when I got into the changing rooms I was shaking

for a while- sort- took my shirt off, took my shorts off- sort of put them on the floor and just sat there for a few minutes.

Importantly, we see here the deeply visceral reaction to the scene, his being “shaken” as an expression or articulation of something being “triggering.” During the interview he regularly repeats the phrase “it’s that word”. When I ask him why this word (“faggot”) clearly had such an impact, he tells me,

**Simeon:** I think words like that- “bent,” “faggot,” “bent gay” – I think they get thrown around like quite a lot at school. Not necessarily directed at people but as I sort of said earlier about “lazy homophobia.” Sort of, “that’s gay” or something, that almost like became a synonym for “uncool” at school at the age of like 15/16.

It is at this point we might focus more on the *ritualised* nature of the insult. In the above quotation, the word “faggot” enters into a taxonomy of wounding words and phrases which are understood as forms of “lazy homophobia”. Of particular interest are the characteristics of what appears to constitute “lazy homophobia” as a class of behaviours or words. He tells us that many of these terms, like “faggot,” or “bent,” are not necessarily *directed* at *individuals* or even human subjects. Indeed, rather than a mere denigrative description of homosexual bodies, the terms are deployed as synonyms for “uncool”. Within this lexicon a chair or having to go to mathematics class might be considered “so gay.” The everyday and ritualised reproduction of the terms facilitates a transformation of meaning. Yet, this transformation (or semantic slippage) relies upon the history of the terms as denigrated in the first place. It would not make sense to describe something as “so gay” as a means of declaring it “uncool” unless the term was already assumed to be denigrative. Thus, there is already a complex relation between the homosexual referent of the terms “faggot,” and “bent,” for Simeon, and their deployment within everyday contexts which extend the “stickiness” (Ahmed, 2014) of their denigrative potential or force. It is, paradoxically, the very

quotidian nature of their usage that grants them such force in the context of “lazy homophobia” as they go unrecognized by many as *directly* denigrative of homosexuality<sup>10</sup>.

I asked Simeon if he recalled the first time he heard the word “faggot” to which he replied “a specific instance? Sadly not.” The word “faggot” appears to function as part of a background space when he is growing up and attending his all-boys school.<sup>11</sup> A word, with negative connotations as a means of denigrating a particular identity, can become a common insult as a way of rendering certain kinds of masculinity valorised and others not (for example, see Kimmel, 1994; Pascoe, 2011). What effects might this repetitive and everyday denigration of identity have? I asked Simeon how it felt to recall the event again in the context of the interview.

**Simeon:** I think it does bring up the feeling of disappointment that somebody- that somebody would do that. But, again that- I sort of mentioned earlier that it was quite- I guess a kind of cathartic experience for me and I guess that is kind of true. It’s almost like- I sort of hesitate to put it like this- but for a long time when I was sort of fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, whatever- sort of didn’t think that people who played rugby could also be gay. I just didn’t think that. And, I had sort of a stereotype in my head that was reproduced by the media and TV that I watched or whatever about what- what gay people were or how they acted. Things like that.

That a word can hold such power, is tied to a pattern of repetition as well as a personal relationship to a particular signifier. Simeon both recognises himself in the call “faggot” as a negative signifier of “gay” whilst simultaneously rejecting the connotations of the signifier. “That word” seems to carry with it a history of wounding which viscerally affects Simeon to the point that he feels leaving the pitch is his only justifiable means to defend his body from such an attack. What it is also necessary to highlight as we attempt to understand why the mode of address appears to hold such power is the way the speaker of the term “faggot”

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<sup>10</sup> A common pattern similarly noted with other structures of violence such as casual or “everyday sexism” (see for example Bates, 2015; Whitley & Page, 2015; Vera-Gray, 2017; Jackson & Sundaram, 2018), the continual everyday manifestations of racism (see for example Puwar, 2004; Rankine, 2014; Cousins, 2019); and “microaggression” more broadly (Sue, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Although, this is not characteristic of all-boys schools, it was quite a common epithet within my own mixed state comprehensive education as well.

appears to enter a historical relation with a community of previous speakers. The use of “faggot” as a term of injury derives its wounding force in the context of the repeated and ritualistic denigration of homosexual bodies through “lazy homophobia”. This is received as particularly troubling for Simeon’s attempt to navigate two modes of identification (rugby player *and* gay).

Simeon reflects on his own journey of making two seemingly mutually exclusive signifiers, “gay” and “rugby player,” align. This misalignment is constituted through the context of everyday homophobia; the continuous denigration of the gay body as feminised through “fag discourse” (Pascoe, 2011); as well as a wider media representation reproduced through television. Simeon is troubled by the foreclosure of a possible mode of identification that he then must continually resist. The catharsis he mentions derives from the decision to refuse to continue to participate in the rugby match where homophobic attitudes were present. His narrative about defending himself and walking away is telling of a context where that kind of defence of gay bodies is not expected or part of the norm. When homophobia is “lazy” and gets “thrown around a lot” it functions as an expected background. Simeon’s catharsis then rests with disrupting the routine denigration of gay bodies from “that word.”

Simeon discusses the reaction of his teammates being a positive one afterwards, where he felt that they supported his decision to leave the pitch. However, he notes a kind of precarious doubt that surrounded the situation.

**Simeon:** A couple of people asked me afterwards if I knew it [the word “faggot”] was directed at me. Erm, and I wear on my rugby boots rainbow laces in them. Erm, yeah, which is like er-erm an awareness scheme about homophobia and sport and things like that [which] started in football. So, I mainly knew that it was pretty much directed at me.

Doubt simultaneously exists with a sense of surety in Simeon’s account. Even with quite as powerful a word as “knew” to characterise Simeon’s felt sense that the word “faggot” was directed at him (as his rainbow laces are taken as a signifier in the context of sports of an LGBT+ inclusive attitude) he still inserts “mainly” as a means of articulating a sense of doubt.

I found an interesting comparison to the structure of particular words and their varied emotional impacts from Kathryn, a heterosexual white undergraduate woman of a similar age. This comparison is first formed of Simeon's reflections on the varied impacts different insults him might have had on him.

**Simeon:** I wouldn't- I wouldn't have cared if he'd have just said "oh, shut up you cunt" or something like that. For me, **I don't know if there's some kind of structuralism in terms of words that I find more offensive than others**, but I wouldn't have found any offence to that. That's- for me ["cunt" is] just a word. But a direct attack on something that I'm- y'know, very proud of- being gay- for me wasn't really acceptable.

Simeon wonders if there is a kind of "structuralism" to what might be considered offensive. "That word" resonates and "triggers" *something* as it appears to attach to a wider context *and* a personal history of injury that he was forced to deal with throughout his teen years (the context of "lazy homophobia" he refers to). Throughout his account, the power of the word "faggot" to injure Simeon, requires an explanation of how the word enters into a kind of "structuralism," which refers simultaneously to the wider context, the history of the word to wound, and the way certain bodies, by virtue of their relation as recipients of an insidious and continuous denigration, become vulnerable to particular means of wounding. Importantly also, is the affective misalignment displayed in the injury: Simeon sees being gay as a source of pride, yet the use of the term "faggot" attempts to transform this sense of belonging or being into a source of shame. The word then, rather than being a single moment of denigration takes effect precisely through its repeated enunciation by an imagined community of speakers. Whilst in Simeon's vignette, he was the recipient of an intentional and direct form of homophobic abuse, we might usefully compare this to Kathryn's account of the term "cunt" below to note the difference on why certain forms of address might differentially "stick," to (Ahmed, 2014), to "ingrow in" (Riley, 2005) or injure (specific/certain) bodies.

**Kathryn:** Erm, so yesterday night [a white male peer] was talking to me about his director of studies and he said, "she's a clapped bitch," [...] he also called her a "cunt" as well, [...] I think that was the worst bit for me. Erm, he started saying, "I don't get

how it's offensive because I call my friends who are guys "cunts" all the time and they don't think it's sexist" and I said to him, "Well it is, because it literally means like vagina," and he said, "Erm, yeah, but you've called me a "dick" before. Isn't that the same thing?" and I was like, "No, it's obviously not **because it ["cunt"] has the weight of history behind it** and connotations that dick doesn't have. Because, when people call women "cunts," they're reducing them [to] the idea that that's what they are" um and he was like- eventually, he did come 'round and he agreed with what I said but it did take a while. It took about three hours because he kept trying to have a debate with me.

Kathryn attempts to make a man she meets understand why the word "cunt," when used to describe women is sexist. Whilst the man in the story uses the comparison with the term "dick," Kathryn reasons that it is a false equivalent. She argues "cunt" carries with it "the weight of history". For Kathryn, words appear to have specific histories with differential weights.

**Kathryn:** He just kept arguing with me and being like um- I think he had a bit of arrogance as well, because he's a lawyer and he thinks he can argue his way out of anything. And, I was like, "No- you're just wrong." And then I said "it's okay for you to stand there and say words are just words- they don't mean- they're not inherently offensive," and I was like "they're not," but I was like: **he can abstract himself from the word "bitch" and "cunt" and it doesn't make him feel much because he hasn't experienced what it's like to feel that people see you as that.** And then, after I said that to him, after I'd basically told him my feelings as opposed to just arguing with me, he was like "actually, you've really changed my mind".

Kathryn argues that he can "abstract" himself from the terms "cunt" and "bitch." For Kathryn, the result of such *abstraction* is that the words "bitch" and "cunt" do not make him *feel* a particular way. Rather, the conditions for such a *feeling* bad, from the modes of address "bitch" and "cunt," is the *experience of feeling like others see you as that.*

The crucial notion of “abstraction” appears to be linked to an ability to not experience the term as an embodied and affective relation. In Kathryn’s assessment, the word “cunt” does not affect him, as his body is not intimately tied to the history of denigration carried through the term. Kathryn’s description evokes a longer history of the reduction of women to sexual body part – the woman *as* vagina (“cunt”) – in a way that she does not feel (particular<sup>12</sup>) men have experienced the same – man *as* penis (“dick”).

**Kathryn:** Because I don’t feel like men, like straight men anyway- straight, white men- have been reduced to their genitalia in the same way that women often are and perhaps like trans people as well. Actually, definitely trans people are, and I guess black men are fetishised a lot of the time. But like him calling someone a “cunt” was like really like made me feel a bit sick [...] So like if I- me turning around to this guy and being like “that’s so sexist,” he’s just not used to it because it just doesn’t have the same weight for him or his friends.

Again, Kathryn references the notion of a differential “weight” as a means of understanding the impact of particular words. This differential “weight” is tied into the history of embodied relations, where she recognises and feels that only particular bodies must endure an objectifying reduction of self to genitals. Kathryn’s assessment of offence highlights the specificity of the relation between bodies, words, and histories as a complex drama about power. She cites this as the reason for his inability to understand that manifests in the continuation for the argument for such an extended period (besides her jibe about the characteristic arrogance of law students).

Furthermore, she tells me, “I feel like if you’ve experienced feeling like that’s how people see you [as a being reduced to one’s genitals], it really hurts.” Kathryn references an experience of how others see her and women more generally. A word acts as a signal for the thing it names. For Kathryn, to be called a “cunt,” as a woman, is confirmation of a pattern of observing women not as people, but as sexual objects. This is what “really hurts” for Kathryn.

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<sup>12</sup> In the quotation below Kathryn demonstrates an awareness of the complexities of the intersectional construction of manhood whereby historically, black men for instance have often been reduced to their genitals through racialized tropes historically (Foster, 2011), or indeed, that trans people are often fetishized (Anzani et al. 2021).

Kathryn's account shares similarity with Simeon's account when she goes on to characterise this in a manner akin to Simeon's description of "lazy homophobia,"

**Kathryn:** I think it's really flippant for this guy yesterday and like my little brother [when he calls her a "bitch" or "cunt"] because they just hear it all the time and they don't think about what it means.

Kathryn describes how some of the men who surround her do not appear to reflect on the impact of the language they use in reference to women. There appears then, at least initially, a lack of understanding about the differential vulnerability of particular bodies to particular forms of address. What Kathryn importantly asserts explicitly, though is perhaps a little more implicit in Simeon's account, is the manner in which the words become *horrible* or injurious, not in explicit self-reference, as if the word itself is inherently powerful, but rather, when the word exists in a specific, ritualised, repeated, and historical relation as a manner of speaking between and about bodies.

The evocative language deployed by Sara Ahmed allows me draw out some significant insights in how we might more explicitly weave together an earlier claim that words might do things *with us*, with the emotional or affective dimensions of interpellation. Ahmed (2004:30) deploys the language of 'impressions' to think about the material relationality of emotions as constitutive of the surfaces and boundaries of bodies and groups,

"We need to remember the 'press' in an impression. It allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very 'mark' left by the press of one surface upon another. So not only do I have an impression of others, but they also leave me with an impression; they impress me and impress upon me."

Ahmed highlights that experience and meaning are mutually-constitutive. If, for Kathryn, the words "bitch" and "cunt," as they are used to refer to women are considered injurious, it is because they carry the "weight of history." It is because they are repeatedly experienced as denigrative terms that their denigrative capacity builds in their circulation. Their ritualistic

reproduction allows their citation to carry with it the community of previous speakers of such injurious terms. Kathryn's metaphor of "weight," much like Simeon's indication of a kind of "structuralism" in the words, indicates that the words exist beyond the single moment of their enunciation. It is the fact that the words are citational, rather than foundational, therefore repeated over time, which lends them wounding potential. Yet, evidently, there needs also be a relation to *particular bodies*, otherwise both the boy in Kathryn's vignette, as Simeon himself, would not otherwise be able to claim that the word "cunt" does not enact upon them a particular or significant site of injury.

Drawing on Ahmed's language, the word "cunt" does not *impress* upon Simeon in the same way as the word "faggot" because the word is not simultaneously a description for his body as well as a term of denigration for that same body. This affective dimension of resonance is built up over time, as words take root in bodies (more like ingrown toenails as Riley would have it). Simeon and the man in Kathryn's story can "abstract" terms, or affectively distance themselves as the word doesn't take root in the same way. In important ways, whilst he remains vulnerable to the call of address (of being a "dick" or a "cunt" to his friends), for Kathryn, the injury fails to take root because it fails to describe the body it is used to injure. Far from being a process of "consent" to be injured in the mode of address, it is a historical relation that orientates a body to vulnerability in address.

Within the drama of interpellation, then, what matters is the way identification or subjection is *sensation-al*. We may, of course, accept or reject the imposed, implied, explicit, or implicit meaning of a term of address. However, importantly, the intention of the mode of address is not necessarily the most significant element. What appears important are the conditions for which we accept or reject the mode of address. If words come charged with a kind of condensed historicity (their "structuralism" or the "weight of history") we come to know this first through a resonance in an affective sense. That we may take offence in a mode of address beyond the 'moment' of address is an expression of a ritualistic and citational wounding rather than an intrinsic relation to an *a priori* power. To explore this further, I turn to another pair of vignettes that might seem (initially) a little less "obvious" or direct in their wounding potential.

## Bombs and Other Belongings

Maya, a woman of colour, grew up in multiple national contexts, including the UK and described herself as Indian. She recollected an encounter with a porter when waiting to meet her friend outside of the Porter's Lodge of Trinity College, Cambridge. The porter questioned her right to be there. Within the encounter he justifies the logic of his line of inquiry using the phrase "I don't want any bombs going off here." Maya said that this emotionally-charged encounter was clearly "racial."

**Maya:** If people say something to me, I get really defensive. So, my first reaction is also defence and so I think that comes from like taking offence. Erm, so I walk to Trinity college and I'm waiting for a friend. So, I'm waiting and basically your friend has to come and pick you up from Trinity Porter's Lodge because they don't just let [ironic tone] "riff-raff" walk around. I walk in, and my phone dies, and I sit on the steps of Trinity and I go to message her [on my laptop]. And the porter goes "Excuse me, are you a member of trinity?" and I go, "No, I'm a member of Corpus," and he's like "well, Corpus is that way" and I'm like, "Well, I'm aware where Corpus is, but I'm waiting for a friend at Trinity." And, again, I'm already on the defensive because of the tone he's taken with me. So, I'm quite rude back to him. I'm like, "I'm waiting for a friend" and he's like, "well, you're supposed to show us your card" and I'm like, "well, I wasn't aware" and he's like "Well, you just walked in and sat down, how am I supposed to know..." **and I just kind of look at him and he goes "well, I don't want any bombs going off here"** and I went "excuse me" and he went "errrr," and I said "I can assure you I haven't got any bombs on me," and he said "how can I be sure of that?" and I said "you can check my bag if you like" and then erm then I think my first emotion is: *I'm going to cry, but I do not want to cry in front of this man and embarrass myself.* And then, I think the offence was tied into. I think the offence started with him first like being like quite abrupt and rude to me. And the girl behind me, who happened to be white, and she was offered a seat in the Porter's Lodge, and he was like, "Are you waiting for someone, do you want to sit down?" –he didn't offer me a seat. He didn't ask me if I was waiting for someone. And I think the offence is tied into that- and the offence is tied into *this is racial* and- and [laughs a little] **you don't know it's racial, but**

*it is racial.* You can't just ask people if they're carrying bombs. Um, so yeah, I was really offended- and also really hurt and like I remember just being like I am going to cry but I cannot cry right now."

Maya mentions her disposition of being "defensive" at the beginning of the encounter. As a result of his tone, she tells me that she's rude back to him, displayed in her shortness of response. There is a shift in affective register mid-way through the encounter. After the porter justifies his line of inquiry with reference to the possibility of "bombs going off," Maya tells me that she begins to want to cry. She also mentions the importance of *not crying* in front of this man - crying would lead to a feeling of embarrassment. As an additional (but important) note, if crying might be thought of as an expression of "feeling inferior," it would be a somewhat difficult stretch, given the amount of "emotion work" (Hochschild, 1979) Maya puts into not crying, to argue that she "consented" to this feeling.

Beyond her initial description, Maya highlights the favourable and hospitable treatment of the *white girl* who entered the lodge after her. At this point, Maya brings in a frame to understand and interpret the event, that "this is racial". After her brief pause and laugh, she delivers a very complex statement, "You don't know it's racial, but it's racial". Whilst at first a seemingly paradoxical statement, I argue that it constitutes a profound insight into the nature of precarious and vulnerable subjectification through linguistic interpellation (and it will be a phrase I return to repeatedly in this thesis). Indeed, what conditions foreclose the possibility, for Maya, of seeing the event as anything other than racially charged?

To understand the racialised nature of the encounter requires examining how Maya connects events narratively and affectively. When analysing this particular interview, the manner in which evidence was used to build the case relied on a particular kind of sticking and patching together of intersubjective accounts. For example,

**Maya:** I think the nail on the head was also like the [white] girl behind me [...] I think the offence maybe partly came from my own guilt that maybe I'd done something wrong. Maybe that's not offence, maybe that's just guilt. Maybe, like because, I sat down and took up so much space he has a right to talk to me like this. Or, maybe, I

done something wrong and like doubt. So, I think it was a lot of things. I think offence is maybe like a big one and I think that like I'm not just offended on my behalf, **but I'm offended on behalf of like all of the people of colour at Cambridge because like- like there are networks of women of colour in Cambridge and I read about stuff like this all the time. So, it was like offence on like a structural level.** Again, I think that comes from being a social science student, so like **offence on a structural level.**

What becomes significant for Maya is the way this event is considered not a singular act, but as "stuff like that" which happens to people of colour at Cambridge. The testimonies of other people of colour having encountered similar things, as well as her status as a social science student, allows her (indeed, *compels* her) to interpret the event as a racialised encounter. Furthermore, in a list of words that Maya gave me to characterise the event, amongst the *feelings* of offence, guilt and hurt, she mentioned the word "representative".

**Maya:** As in I think that representative of like er, of like larger structure. So, like [brief pause] like I remember like the day after like the Paris attacks<sup>13</sup> being really afraid to go outside because (I'm not Muslim) but to people who are like prejudice against people with my skin colour, that's not going to make a difference. And, I think that's what I meant by representative. I think that he was somehow representing his race, and I was somehow representing mine.

Further, Maya's own sense of injury is patched together as a kind of collective wound, which intensifies the affectivity of the encounter on reflection.

**Maya:** I think knowing that that fits into a wider context was both reassuring and pretty sad - that it isn't just me - **if that incident didn't happen in the context of it happening to a lot of other people, it wouldn't have been an incident if that makes sense [...]** In the moment it was deeply personal but in hindsight I can now extrapolate that to be like this is the experience of a lot of people. This is the way a lot of people are treated."

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<sup>13</sup> Referring to the 07/01/2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris.

Maya's description of the encounter quickly became, on reflection, an archetypal encounter about the racialised dynamics of belonging, expressed through encounters with the porters as symbolic institutional gatekeepers. The encounter becomes 'archetypal' in the way it comes to represent something beyond the immediacy of the encounter - that it represents broader social structures. Maya argues that the encounter becomes an 'incident' by way of it being the repetition of a character of behaviours and dynamics. This encounter is explicitly understood as ritual (the citation of particular kinds of authority and language in a repeated form). If, as Butler (1997:3) argues, the "'moment' in ritual is condensed historicity" we might also do well to understand the affective as an expression of condensed historicity. For example, Stewart (2007:40) argues, "Affects are not so much forms of signification, or units of knowledge, as they are expressions of ideas or problems performed as a kind of involuntary and powerful learning and participation." This is to say, affective responses might tell us something about *how* bodies come to express habitual forms of recognition (in much the same way Bourdieu might think about *habits* as formed over time through processes of repetition<sup>14</sup>).

For Maya, there is no other logical way to render the encounter legible but through an understanding of racialised power dynamics and structures. To justify the necessity of questioning why she entered the college, he reaches for a particular 'threatening' image to institutional security (the terrorist) which in the popular imagination comes to have a very particular kind of racialised history of "problematic proximity" in popular discourse (Ahmed, 2011, 2014:71-80). The mention of bombs works as a justificatory mechanism for securitisation at entry because it taps into an affective register of threat and the possibility of grave physical injury to masses for whom he oversees safety. The invocation of this image of the terrorist shares similarities with what Simeon termed "lazy homophobia" in that the interpellative frame works beyond the mere moment of its authorisation and beyond the intentionality of the speaker. What matters are the ways an image is immediately reached for in citing a certain kind of authority (as protector against external threat) which is not innocent of a racialised history. Yet, at the same time, this only appears to immediately register as racialised for Maya because of a particular awareness of race as citational rather than

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<sup>14</sup> See for example Bourdieu, [1984]2010 or expanded discussions on habit by Pedwell, 2017

foundational. As such, words might historically become “sticky” with affect, as Ahmed argues, through their circulation and “problematic proximity” to other terms. Yet, importantly, the differential vulnerability to such terms of injury is constituted through the specificity of particular bodies in relation to these terms of address. Even if we reject the mode of address explicitly, we cannot remove or necessarily distance ourselves from the affective dimensions of this condensed historicity as so much is already always at work in excess of what appears immediate (and is significantly and apparently unavailable to the injurer).

I turn to a final vignette before moving into some concluding remarks by way of my original adages. An intended form of injurious address might draw its power from an intended community of speakers beyond the self. Below is an autoethnographic reflection.

It’s in the lull between Christmas and New Year in 2018 and my brother and I are taking a bus from our parents’ house to Barnsley town centre. This journey usually takes around 15 minutes. 5 Minutes into the trip, a white man gets onto the bus and sits at the back. My brother and I are on adjacent seats idly chatting. The man at the back is loud and comments about how the bus smells bad. Soon after he makes a comment, “He’s not from ‘ere is ‘e?” The initial comment doesn’t register with me – I continue talking to my brother. The man continues, “I’m not been funny, but there’s no black in’t Union Jack!” My brother and I stop speaking at this point, clearly both distracted by the man at the back of the bus who continues, “I know he’s white like, but still he’s definitely not from ‘ere.” It was at that point I realised that the man was speaking about me: there were only white people on the bus, and he was directly looking at me when saying, “‘way e’s talkin’, ‘e’s not English”. The man continues for a little while longer before he leaves the bus. My brother and I, until the man’s departure, sit in an uncomfortable silence, only occasionally raising our eyebrows to one-another in recognition of the strangeness of the encounter.

I decided not to respond to the man directly. Although slightly anxious or afraid, as I thought any response to this would likely be taken as a provocation and could lead to violence, I was also slightly bemused at the complexity of the mode of address issued towards me.

The statement, “There’s no black in the Union Jack”, is a way of trying to demarcate a ‘proper’ sense of belonging – to exercise, commonly, a racialised criteria of national belonging. This usually relies on a necessary conflation – that national belonging to the United Kingdom requires whiteness and therefore the non-white person is ‘foreign’ or Other to the proper sense of citizenship. The statement draws its potential force from the statement being allegedly composed of a *community of speakers*. The mantra or slogan functions precisely because it implicitly references a history behind the mode of address, which cites the proper conditions of belonging (in this case racialised conditions). When he declares this, he does so with the backing of an imagined community of speakers. Or as Butler (1997:80) articulates,

“The racial slur is always cited from elsewhere, and in the speaking of it, one chimes in with a chorus of racists, producing at that moment the linguistic occasion for an imagined relation to an historically transmitted community of racists. In this sense, racist speech does not originate with the subject, even if it requires the subject for its efficacy, as it surely does. Indeed, racist speech could not act as racist speech if it were not a citation of itself; only because we already know its force from its prior instances do we know it to be so offensive now, and we brace ourselves against its future invocations. The iterability of hate speech is effectively dissimulated by the “subject” who speaks the speech of hate.”

However, he realises what we might call his ‘mistake’. Given my own (apparent or obvious) whiteness, the attempt to signify me as not belonging through the declaration “there’s no black in the Union Jack” is infelicitous. I would not fail the proper conditions for citizenship - my whiteness here giving me necessary (but perhaps not sufficient) condition for citizenship under this declaration. What appears significant is that the performative force might be constituted in the rehearsal of the conventional formulae in non-conventional ways (*Ibid.*147). For example, he then ‘corrects’ himself through what we might understand recognition of racial belonging, but picks up on another expression of not belonging - my mode of articulation in speech: “‘way ‘e’s talkin’...”. Thus, what we see as important within the man’s articulation is the way I do not belong to some notion of *being English*. Or, if we speculate that my accent from having lived and studied in Cambridge for so many years was the target of my

not belonging, or perhaps the “campness” of some of my speech affectations<sup>15</sup>, we could interpret this as a more general sense of not belonging, that people should stay in their ‘own’ countries slides to people should stay in their ‘own’ cities or neighbourhoods.

Within this vignette the man makes declarations on what appears to ‘matter’ with regards the conditions for belonging. His attempted mode of address tells us about the conditions of belonging in both spatiotemporal terms that display themselves apparently in modes of linguistic articulation or behaviour. It ‘matters’ for him that I appear not to be English, or that I appear to be ‘foreign,’ or an outsider, and this claim is bolstered by an imagined community of speakers who simultaneously enact the form of a particular (racialised/ethnic) form of national belonging as they are ritualistically invoked. The speech act itself ‘fails’ to construct a mode of address which ‘truly’ captures the nuance of my own (not) belonging.

The apparent attempt to injure through what we might understand as infelicitous terms was not a simple or complete failure, however. There was still a sense in which prior vulnerability to injury was ‘activated’. I recognised an attempt from the man to bar my own sense of belonging. Or, if not to explicitly and intentionally bar *my* sense of belonging in the enunciation, it at least enacted a formalised criteria for belonging (being English). In addition, the phrase, beyond setting limits on the possibility of belonging (to both the country and implicitly questioning my place as such on the bus, in the town, in the country) enacted, through citation, a history of violent refusal.

The somewhat *impersonal* nature of the mode of address was used in a manner to incite something in the way of a *personal* injury or attack (even if this required a clarification that this was the intent of the original speech act). The impersonal nature is perhaps most apparent here because the use of “No Black in the Union Jack” evidently does not have my body intended as an explicit referent. The reaching for a slogan (intentional or not) becomes a means through which bodies can become aligned to groups and this is what can potentially

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, when previously conducting fieldwork in Barnsley amongst drag queens, I was met with surprise when I mentioned that I was gay. They responded to this assertion by saying, “Oh, we just thought you were posh, not gay.” Interestingly, my behaviour or mannerisms are rarely read as “posh” within Cambridge, but often are read as displays of “camp” behaviour. This is all to say that the manner in which class and sexuality through articulation are variably read in different contexts are deeply complex, and beyond the scope of necessity of the argument within this paper beyond expressing something “interesting” about the failure of language and articulation to always faithfully capture “essence”.

make a speech act injurious - that one joins a chorus that declares something - in declaring something as a group (with implications on modes of belonging), there can be material effects. The thing that apparently 'matters' within these phrases is the affective force behind the declaration - a mode of belonging is enunciated in the phrase which has a history of self-affirmation (of whiteness in citizenship, full of a particular prideful orientation) and a denigration of others (not belonging, not white, a threat to cohesion). What apparently then 'matters' within this story is not the exact words in themselves, but the relation of words to affective identification. The words 'do' something 'with us' in that they exist through a relation of power, exercising proper conditions for belonging by citing an external authority of a community of speakers in their enunciation: the use of the phrase attempts to enact a form of social exclusion by citing a historical form of exclusion.

My offence at the speech act comes from two places primarily, and a third if we wish to be more psychoanalytic in our exploration. First, the offence comes from someone else attempting to declare where and how I do or do not belong. What is apparently my own (personal) relation to belonging is made, through his intrusion, public and open to debate. My mode of articulation is something to be scrutinised, which seems somewhat inappropriate for the bus, no less because I was not talking to him. In this sense, my offence might be thought to be aligned with social convention, or what Goffman ([1959]1984) termed the "interaction order".

The second sense of my offence would be of a more 'moral' or 'ethical' sense in relation to my own cultural and political values. I would characterise the man's behaviour as racist: "There's no Black in the Union Jack," is a racist and xenophobic slogan.

The third sense perhaps combines elements of the previous two. Perhaps I had an unsettled reaction to this (even if bemusing) because of an element of guilt. Perhaps what he said registered in some way with me, that I was in some important sense 'foreign' to my hometown. My accent, for instance, and manner of articulation are subject to plenty of (mainly jocular) comments amongst family and friends in Barnsley, as having "become very Cambridge" since I left Barnsley in 2011 and moved to Cambridge as an undergraduate student. Perhaps the efficacy of the man's speech in *unsettling* me or causing discomfort, that

I articulate as having found *something* offensive, relied upon this prior vulnerability in terms of my own *character*. Whilst I do not discount this as a possibility, I would argue limiting the interpretation to a singular and specific personal history of feeling that I do not belong, limits our interpretative scope in a way that is not quite so helpful analytically. It is, for me, a vulnerability constructed in all the above senses, but simultaneously reducible to none of them singularly. In this sense the “total speech situation” is formed of so many disparate elements, to attempt to account for all of them can become a distraction to what is perhaps more useful to understand from the perspective of attempting to flesh out the performative force of words. What I believe ‘matters’ in the above story is the way vulnerability and contingency to linguistic address is a necessary condition for subjection and scenes of interpellation and that this process is continuous and ongoing. What is at stake more generally is to ask why certain injuries might be things one cannot ‘get over’ simply by wishing it so. Why do certain words and phrases seem to elicit some profound emotional responses in excess of the situation and the enunciation of the words themselves? To imagine the self as a fortress against externally imposed modes of address significantly misses the way we are contingent and vulnerable subjects in language. Yet, importantly, this contingency, whilst providing the conditions for violence and hurt, do not foreclose the possibility that it might be otherwise. This contingency is also the site of agency.

Before moving onto the conclusion, it is necessary to offer some reflections on the varied levels of vulnerability and impact characterized in both Maya’s and my own vignette. I want to suggest, by way of thinking about vulnerability, that we can only understand the differential impact of each story on the individual who was affected through some suggestion in the differential stakes at play within each encounter. If both scenes were fundamentally about offence taken as what we might call a misrecognition of the subject whom the injurer attempted to describe, the condensed historicity expressed in each scene of interpellation through linguistic subjection reverberated differentially.

For Maya, the possibility of being named a “terrorist” through the complex elision of bomb-brown-foreign-threat-terrorist reverberates with a particular history, for her, of the exclusion of bodies of colour at Cambridge, but also a wider sense of not belonging. She understands bodies that are constituted as “like hers” through racialised lenses are not only considered

threatening in the popular imaginary but are also (for this very reason) threatened or vulnerable to a certain kind of racialised violence. That a figure with institutional gatekeeping potential (the porter as literal and figurative institutional gatekeeper) acts as the site of authority is also significant – he is imbued with an official power to bar her movement through a particular space. Whilst my own body is read by the man on the bus as somehow not belonging, I have a distinct awareness of my own privileges within that space. In Simeon’s case, being called a “faggot” on the pitch does not necessarily limit his access to that space. Yet, he goes to the referee – the mediator responsible for ensuring ‘fair play’ – and is upset by the referee’s apathy. In the case of Maya, there is a more direct issue of access to a particular space. In comparison, I have an understanding that little about the man’s words on the bus could actually authorize a limitation on my movement through space even if at the moment of his enunciation he attempts to invoke the power of a community of speakers. Whilst the imagined threat of physical violence in this situation stopped me from responding to his attempted mode of address, I did not perceive the injury as in any way felicitous or more enduring – it seemed unlikely, ultimately, that his words could enact the form of exclusion on me it announced through its implicit criteria. Whilst all the stories demonstrate manners in which injurious language can shut down modalities of being, it is Maya’s case in particular where the racialised scene of (mis)recognition has clear implications of potentially barring her access to a particular space.

### The Force of Will

If we take the first statement “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me” as a mere declaration of truth, we might note this is false based upon the testimonies presented in the chapter. In simple terms, my participants told me about times they found words hurtful. But if we take the statement as saying “words will never harm me [in direct parallel or equivalence to sticks and stones]” perhaps there is something more in the way of a helpful understanding. The harm is different. This is not to say that the harm is “immaterial”: as if sticks and stones represent a force that is physical, material and therefore somehow more “real,” than words. Rather, I have shown the manner in which words too might be said to have a force, but this force is constituted through a contingent historicity that “ingrows” (Riley, 2005), that “sticks” (Ahmed, 2014), that in many and important ways acts in

excess of the moment of enunciation. If we understand injurious words as something that is said in a single moment, rather than constituted through condensed historicity, we miss the ways that language repeatedly acts *on* us and *with* us. Yet, that we are embodied subjects means also that our relation to particular terms is bound to hold differences. To say we are vulnerable to linguistic interpellation as a site of subjection is not to say that we *experience* vulnerability in the same ways.

This leads me to my second of the phrases: “Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent.” The efficacy of injurious words is not contained within the words themselves. If that were the case, this writing itself might be thought to be an incredibly violent reproduction of such injury. The is not to say that some will not find this particular piece of writing in some way injurious (I have no doubt that the repetition of “cunt” and “faggot” repeatedly in writing may cause an emotional stir in some readers), the repetition of these terms is necessary as a means of unpicking their particular violent relation to certain bodies.

To analyse *feeling inferior* within a model of ‘consent’ places feeling within a particular relation to agency. To ‘consent’ to an action is to permit for something to happen. If we consent to feeling inferior, then we are the final authors of our own denigration. As such, it is presupposed that feeling inferior is authorised by the subject who feels inferior. If this is the case, it would make little sense to inquire further about offensive speech’s potential power or efficacy, as the attribution of sovereign will presupposes that the experience is profoundly individual. We might, indeed, under this model, be better thinking about those who feel injured as exceptional in their vulnerability. As such, we might better prescribe tools to effectively bolster the individual will of those whose expression of sovereign agency has somehow been pathologically damaged.

However, if words carry with them historical weights by virtue of the fact that words are citational rather than foundational, it matters that bodies have been differentially historically constructed. If words differentially impress upon subjects, that is to say, have differential affective resonances based upon the virtue that we embody historical relations to varying degrees as effects of power, we need to think carefully about the implications of linguistic vulnerability. If we are contingent linguistic subjects, all vulnerable to language, what appears

to be important is the degree to which words might leave impressions upon us. I don't want to reduce the complexity of this relation to contingent linguistic vulnerability to a simple expression of certain groups being inherently *more* vulnerable, as I do not believe this simple equation of vulnerability to numerical unit would intellectually suffice to explain why words injure. This is precisely because the "total speech situation," composed of ritualised and condensed historicity, cannot be known in advance, it is highly complex, contextual and stratified. It is a part of a deeper interconnected *texture*. And indeed, certain kinds of presumably historically more invulnerable subjects can appear to be exceptionally vulnerable contemporarily.

The insistence on the sovereign constitution of subjects as impervious to language is theoretically unsound as it is ethically problematic (leading to a valorisation of a historically contingent relation whereby certain subjects are likely to be regarded as pathological). However, if we remove any notion of intention, we might encounter another ethical dilemma where the ultimate contingency of subjects in language, and the impossibility to know in advance the "total speech situation," removes any sense by which we might be held accountable for the feelings of others in our speech. Part III of the thesis will turn to explore the ethical and relational ontologies implied and derived from such a way of thinking, particularly in understanding some of the techniques by which vulnerability to offence is deployed as a means of rendering oneself in an ethical orientation to others (through an understanding of vulnerability as a constitutive element or technology of ethical or "woke" selfhood). However, the next chapter turns to focus on more on the dynamics of work, and resultant fatigue, in rendering offence legible to others to think more carefully about this differential distribution of vulnerability and how varied social actors manage this.

## Chapter 4: (A)effectively Work: Recognition, Repetition, Fatigue

This chapter focuses on 3 primary case studies that reflect on the complexities surrounding experiences of offence derived from misrecognition. The misrecognitions are also compounded by a refusal of others to recognize (to misrecognize or mischaracterize) the harm caused.

I examine the forms of *identity work* and resultant *fatigue* and *frustration* of being repeatedly misrecognized as a complex, affective, and phenomenological *texture* to highlight some common issues in rendering offence intelligible and having such harms recognized and attended to by others. I demonstrate that “microaggressions” are often not registered as harmful or dismissed as the phenomenon is experienced through a process of *dispersed repetition*.

Derald Wing Sue defines microaggressions as the,

“brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” whereby “Perpetrators are usually unaware that they have engaged in an exchange that demeans the recipient of the communication.” (Sue 2010:5; Sue et al., 2008).

Furthermore, Sue (2010:66) highlights that whilst microaggressions

“often appear to be small slights that in isolation produce minimal harm to recipients [...] being exposed to a lifetime of daily assaults, insults, disregard, and disrespect has been shown to be extremely harmful unless mitigated in some fashion. The effect of microaggressions may be compared to the perennial “slow death by a thousand cuts.””

“Microaggressions” are not “micro” in their potential force. Rather, “micro” highlights issues

of legibility and scale. The force of the microaggression is constituted through cumulative process: the “thousand cuts”. The term is deployed here to give an initial indication to one of the central issues within this chapter: making a grievance or an offence hearable and legible and why this is experienced as a form of ongoing *work* (often that is quite taxing in the way it is unrecognized). Counterintuitively, the ubiquitous and dispersed nature of injury means that it often goes un- or mis-recognized by others.

#### Rain: “Gender Confusion”

Rain, a white British gay woman, begins her interview by comparing what she feels that she “should probably be offended by” in comparison to “like more of like a trivial thing” which she describes as “actually” offending her. The former refers to a political discussion that she has with an acquaintance at university, but the latter, the “trivial” encounter that “actually” offended her will be my focus.

**Rain:** thinking back to like last week it was like more of like a trivial thing but like I was like getting on the bus and then the bus driver said like “oh can you hold on for a second mate?” like, like that to me and like it’s just like that moment where he- I think he like- it was gender *confusion*. And then that actually kind of offended me so that like provoked more of an offensive like an offended feeling in me than like the discussion I had yesterday.

Rain characterises the bus driver’s “gender confusion” as provoking an “offended feeling.” I asked her to explain how or why this was offensive to her.

**Rain:** Well like [brief pause] I think it’s something like **it’s happened before**. So I’ve had situations before when I was like- I was in London and I was in Pret and then the person behind the till was like, “Thank you sir.” And that like- so that’s more obvious than saying “mate” because “mate” can be taken as a term which doesn’t necessarily saying you’re a male but **I think it’s because it’s linked to like other things** that I like felt like [brief pause] that feeling of offence and it’s like- it’s happened when I- like when I was like in India it happened all the time erm- I remember I was like queuing

up to go into like erm [brief pause] the subway, Deli, metro station and they erm body search you before you go in and they've got like a male line and a female line. I went in the female line and then like she [the security guard] like stood back for a second and looked a bit confused and then I was just like [pause] **I think it's because it like links with a lot of other things, that's probably why.**

For Rain, the moment with the bus driver is offensive in relation to other situations that she experiences as analogous or similar. In a café in London, the server refers to her as “sir,” (mis)recognizing her as male. In the subway in Deli, the brief, questioning glance from the security guard indicates the (mis)recognition or “gender confusion,” where the security guard is apparently unsure of Rain’s belonging in the “female line.” The bus driver’s use of “mate” is understood as “gender confusion” in relation to this continual pattern of misrecognitions.

Rain proceeds to describe an “ugh” feeling which characterizes her experience of situations of “gender confusion”.

**Rain:** I think I get less offended [now] but as soon as like [the bus driver] said it that- **that initially makes you feel like *ugh*.**

**Gavin:** Yeah. Can you describe that kind of ***ugh*** feeling or what kind of [brief pause] in terms of the physicality of it- the emotionality of it- what’s your process of thinking and being in that situation?

**Rain:** Erm, I think like [pause] I feel like initially maybe I feel like a bit *angry*, because I feel like the person who said it’s a bit ignorant. Erm, and then also like erm I’m getting on a bus- there’s other people on the bus- so you’re gonna feel a bit like **errrrgh** like see the situation and then they realise you’re a female [pause] and it’s just like maybe like embarrassment, maybe or something, but I think like- I think was like predominantly **like I felt just like a bit like *ugh* at the bus driver**

To characterise the “ugh” feeling in the situations of “gender confusion” or misrecognition, Rain highlights two feelings. The first is “anger” which stems from a feeling that “the person who said it’s a bit ignorant.” The second is expressed through a different interjection, “errrrgh” which is used to frame a sense of embarrassment at the public nature of the

misrecognition. However, Rain relegates this as a less important element of the offence than the “ugh” feeling.

**Rain:** Well, I don't- I don't *actually* feel like I look male. So, it's not something which I actually have a like problem with because if I felt like that then I probably wouldn't do my hair like this way or like wear the clothes I wear. It's not like- like something that would- something that really concerns me. It's more just like a feeling that when someone says something like that they're not really accepting of like [brief pause] of like who you are, in a way. And they can't- I feel like they can't accept like females look in that way, that's just kind of the feeling I get. So, it- I think it's more of just like just a sense of anger towards the other person than like a deep insecurity, but then maybe I'm just not recognising something if it affects me in that way. **But I don't- I don't feel uncomfortable in the way I feel. I just feel offended when people get confused.**

For Rain, the primacy of anger is linked to her interpretation of how the misrecognition comes about. Rain does not “feel like [she] look[s] male.” If we might understand embarrassment, the “errrrgh” feeling of self-consciousness, shame, or awkwardness as stemming from discomfort at the public nature of the encounter, Rain is keen to highlight that this misrecognition is not her problem. Rather, the sense of *anger*, the “ugh” feeling offers an interpretation which characterises the misrecognition as arising out of the man's ignorance rather than her appearance. In this sense, Rain tells us that the hail from the bus driver, the use of “mate,” is indicative of a more general sensibility or way of understanding bodies as gendered: “I feel like they can't accept like females look in that way.”

She proceeds,

**Rain:** I don't feel uncomfortable in the way I feel- I just feel offended when people get confused.

**Gavin:** Yeah. Would you say that it's the confusion that you're upset and angry at or them? Yeah, so is it them actually them being confused that annoys you or acting on their confusion?

**Rain:** I think it's [pause] I think maybe- I dunno, maybe it is their confusion [pause] may- I think I'm just annoyed primarily by the fact that they're just not acknowledging the fact that like females can look like that and I feel like when- When he said it, it was just like he wasn't doing it deliberately to offend me. I think he just genuinely thought I was a guy. So, like, that feeling of him not recognising that like females can look in this way and aren't just stereotype or maybe he would think of a female as. I think that's what like offended me- I think it's just like- just like my feeling of him being a bit [brief pause] *closed off* about things.

She reflects on whether these feelings might be her own "insecurity," yet doubles-down on her interpretation that "it is their confusion" that annoys her. In particular, "that feeling of him not recognising that like females can look in this way and aren't just [this] stereotype" which, for her, forms "just like my feeling of him being a bit [brief pause] *closed off* about things."

As Rain unpicks this event, she raises several factors which facilitate her interpretation of the bus driver as "ignorant" and lead to the "ugh" feeling. One element we might describe as *space* or *context* and the second we might describe as *characterisation*. Whilst these are initially different elements, Rain describes how they are experienced as deeply connected.

On the issue of *space* or *context*, Rain says,

**Rain:** The place I live in is quite like a [brief pause] like it's quite like a Tory town, so, I think like [laughs] that ties into other things

**Gavin:** Yeah.

**Rain:** like it makes me think that **everyone there is a bit like ugh** [brief pause].

**Gavin:** or more conservative with a small c?

**Rain:** Yeah.

**Gavin:** or well big and small c in this case.

**Rain:** yeah.

**Gavin:** yeah, I think that makes sense. So [brief pause] is there a sense of being apprehensive ever in these situations or are they always, would you say unexpected when the misgendering occurs?

**Rain:** I think it's partially dependent on the place. So, like, I would definitely like be more inclined to think that like a bus driver in Witney [brief pause] which is like where David Cameron is an MP-

**Gavin:** -oh right okay-

**Rain:** -it's like that sort of place. I feel more like that in Witney than I would in Oxford. Because I didn't always live in Witney. Like, I lived in Oxford for like [brief pause] for like eighteen years and then I moved to Witney recently. And so, Oxford is quite like multicultural and quite like- just like mixed and you feel comfortable with whatever and then I moved to Witney which is like [brief pause] that's just like a big Tory town and everyone's like- like old and white. It's just a bit of a weird place. So, **I feel more uncomfortable in Witney than I do Oxford. Like, I feel much more comfortable in Oxford.**

**Gavin:** Right, yeah

**Rain:** But I wouldn't like not go on a bus or like do something because I felt apprehensive but it's like something that I'm like slightly aware of sometimes.

Rain says that "everyone there," referring to *Witney*, the historic market town to the west of Oxford, "is a bit like *ugh*." She agrees with the description of *Whitney* as *C/conservative* (a social and political description) and lacking the "multicultural" and "mixed" environment of a larger city like Oxford. I asked her if there are other words which might capture this feeling of offence, which is where her assessment of the identity or *characterisation* of the offender comes to light.

**Rain:** erm [pause] *ignorant* [brief pause] *male* [small laugh and brief pause] *Witney*, even though you won't really understand like what Wit- but that just embodied *Witney* for me.

**Gavin:** Right, okay, yeah [small laugh]

**Rain:** kind of [brief pause] *angry* erm like embarrassed [brief pause] *frustrated* erm [pause] but there was also, it was also kind of temporary so like I kind of got over it like reasonably quickly

[...]

**Rain:** Erm, and claustrophobic as well

**Gavin:** *Claustrophobic*, yeah [pause] well, let's start with that then. So what- what made this claustrophobic for you?

**Rain:** Like because I [brief pause] he said the thing and then I was like *tied* in the situation, in the sense I still had to get on the bus and I still had to like interact with him. And then, I had to go sit on the bus and like with the people who had maybe like observed the situation. So, that kind of makes you feel a bit like claustrophobic, but then again it was only [brief pause] it was only *temporary*, so it kind of blew off like- I kind of like sat down and I was kind of like [irritated sigh] maybe for like ten minutes or so I was just like thinking about it and thinking about the other things that had happened, because that happens when that happens [brief pause] I just think about the other things but then I just think like *errrrgh*, and then I just got my iPod out and then I was fine, basically by just kind of blocking it out, but I did feel just a bit like [brief pause] *trap/ped*

**Gavin:** /yeah/ because you can't leave /the bus once your on/

**Rain:** /yeah, I can't leave the bus, yeah/

**Gavin:** Erm, yeah, what about this- when you said male, was that [participant laughs] was that you being misrecognised as a male or was that something-

**Rain:** No, it was more *him*. It was just him being a man. I don't wanna say like [brief pause] I just felt like it wouldn't happen with a female bus driver.

**Gavin:** Right, okay, yeah.

**Rain:** Like, I just felt that was very like [pause] I kind of basically I just stereotyped him. I just kind of thought of him as the kind of guy who goes down the pub and like watches football and just like- is just kind of, maybe acts like sometimes in a like [brief pause] demeaning way to women- that's just kind of how I felt when he said that. And I think that all kind of like [pause] kind of led to me thinking he was ignorant. Like, they were the reasons that I thought he was ignorant.

**Gavin:** So, a very specific brand of male ignorance?

**Rain:** Yeah 'cause, had a female done like- called me "mate," I would have probably felt like *differently* towards it. Like, I felt like [brief pause] I dunno I felt like- I just felt like he was being like sexist or whatever. But if a female had done it, I probably would have just been like, *oh it's just- it's just her actually just being con-* I dunno, it feels like more of an attack if a male does it, but not like an actual like [brief pause] it just feels different if it's like a man.

The combination of the C/conservative characterisation of space is then also placed in relation to her assessment of who the offender likely was. She recognises that she "stereotyped him," and that she "just felt like he was being like sexist or whatever." The interpretation of the situation and actions of others is importantly tied to social context. Oxford is represented as a space of possibility for more gender variance in presentation in contrast to the conservative space of Whitney which is demonstrated through the diversity of demographic (the "multicultural") makeup of Oxford. The attribution of these factors is based on an embodied, *felt sense*, of what is going through the minds of others.

Rain draws upon several spatial metaphors to express her feelings about, and understanding of, the misrecognition. She mentions the "claustrophobia" that comes from being trapped in physical proximity to both the bus driver and those who witnessed the misrecognition. She is "tied" to that situation. She also describes the bus driver as "closed off about things." This expression of being "closed off" is apparently an inability to see, or recognise, the diversity of how women can look. It is perhaps difficult to ignore or brush off these instances because of the historical, personal, and affective ties to the situation. Rain is a woman but relies on others recognising this. In this sense, recognition is deeply contestable precisely because it is relational, thus precarious (Ahmed, 1998; Butler, 2004; Lawler, 2014).

Rain's account offers a deeply reflexive articulation of the offence she experiences from moments where her gender is "misrecognised." She begins by framing the event with the bus driver as "trivial," but illuminates the feelings which become attributed to the event, granting them significance and an embodied and affective response. One element is repetition: that she *repeatedly* experiences misrecognitions means that she comes to *anticipate* them. In this sense, she becomes sensitive more and less subtle cues of "gender confusion" or

misrecognition. These moments also gather significance in relation to her characterisation of the context and how context is understood to shape the way other social actors perceive her. Thus, whilst offence is felt in the *moment* of misrecognition, it is not finally reducible to that. Rather, the experience of offence becomes legible in relation to a complex, dynamic, and ongoing interpretative framework that is developed over and through time, which in turn shapes the interpretive framework for future encounters. The necessity of an interpretative framework is perhaps a result of the at times somewhat ambiguous nature of the misrecognitions: the intention and thought process of the offender is not definitively available to Rain in these transitory encounters. The ambiguity is something that she must process and deal with. It's a form of labour she is compelled to do because of the actions of others. In this sense, the "trivial" event takes on significance in relation to personal history, experience, reflexive interpretation, and social context, arising out of (but not finally reducible to) a "moment" in time. This is what we might then term the affective *texture* of the offence.

Whilst Rain offers a deeply articulate account of why the "gender confusion" of others is offensive, she finds elements of this relationship difficult to express in conventional language. She repeatedly uses "ugh," a common exclamation to express disgust or horror. The "ugh," is a characterisation of a particular form of anger directed at those who misrecognise the possibility of her being female not *despite* what she looks like, but *in recognition of* what she looks like. The offence is taken to be a denial of an entire way of being female, characterised as others being "closed off," which represents an entire worldview or relation of being in the world. Whilst the event might be "trivial," its significance appears anything but "trivial."

In many senses, Rain's account of offence is very specific. It is an account of offence arising out of repeated misrecognitions of her gender found in fleeting encounters with others. Yet, whilst the specificity is important to recognise and understand, her account of the offence she felt; how she experienced the comments; and how she came to interpret the situation in that way, has remarkable similarities to a more diverse set of accounts of offence.

Sally: Skin

Sally, a “mixed-race female postgraduate student,” and “heterosexual Australian feminist,” details an incident in her college student bar (*Dar Bar*).

**Sally:** We’d been out for drinks and dinner. So, we get Dar Bar at about eight thirty or something. I was getting a drink and my best mate was chatting to two people that I hadn’t met before [pause] and so I introduced myself and my best mate was like “oh this person’s also Australian- you guys can be friends.” And so, automatically, I felt some sort of connection to this guy [...] And so, you think *Dar Bar*, young, like-minded students- you’re gunna have a pretty nice conversation [pause] erm and so this guy, without any warning, not like, “hi what’s your name” or anything- just looked at me and was like “oh you’ve got- you have a like tan or something” I was like “sure” and “that’s a weird observation, but that’s fine.”

The Australian man, who she expected to have a connection with based upon shared national identity (both being Australians in Cambridge) begins with what she calls a “weird observation” about her having a “tan.” He continues pursuing this line of inquiry.

**Sally:** He’s like “is that your skin or is it a tan?” [pause] “it’s my skin,” and just the way he was approaching it, **I knew exactly what he was getting at.** But, the way he was approaching it was really awkward and clunky. So, I was like “yes, yes, this is my skin” and sort of gave him a sceptical look. And he was like “ah, nah-nah-nah.” Like, I mean like, what he was inferring was that to be Australian- or that there was something different about me erm and something that he couldn’t put his hand on. And so, **his sort of concern about my racial ambiguity made it my problem that I had to put him at ease by telling him what it was.**

Sally swiftly moves from describing the event to offering an interpretation about the historical and structural implications embedded within his line of inquiry. The description of *what happened* and *the interpretation of the meaning* of it almost instantly collapse into one-another. She describes how his “concern” about her apparent “racial ambiguity” becomes her

“problem”. This is experienced as a form of compelled labour: she feels she must “put him at ease”. Yet, she does not mind doing so *because* it is something that she has come to expect.

**Sally:** I don’t mind doing that because that’s a really common experience. *But* I like to use these moments as kind of a teaching moment and sort of saying “this is probably a better way of going about it.” And so, he was *fumbling around* and just digging himself further in a hole and he was getting very defensive about me saying “do you wanna perhaps ask that question in a different way?”

For Sally, such questions become an opportunity to engage in a pedagogical exchange (a “teaching moment”). Notably, rather than the term “offensive,” thus far, Sally characterised the line of questioning as “weird,” “awkward,” and “clunky.” The “offensive” nature of the interaction is characterised as coming from, not necessarily the line of questioning in and of itself (as this is something she has come to expect through the commonality of the experience), but rather through how the conversation continued to unfold.

**Sally:** My friend at this point- she knows- ‘cause this is my area of research [mixed-race studies] and so she knows this stuff and so she just laughed and like left. And that’s fine. But I was left with this other guy and this Australian man. And this other man was so sympathetic- like he’s like “okay listen to her” like “she’s saying reasonable things.” And he’s [the Australian man] like “nah-nah-nah, she’s just not being- she just doesn’t have a thick skin about this. Why is she getting so offended about this?” And I’m like “okay, **I am getting offended, but perhaps not because what you’re asking, but how you’re saying it**” and so I was sort of reflecting on this last night. The conversation went on for ages and **he just couldn’t freaking understand that perhaps I would have authority in this discussion.** And I think that’s what got me really upset afterwards: It’s that **he wasn’t respecting my authority or my intellect on this issue- that it’s something that I’ve dealt with for years**, that he for some reason [brief pause] would understand the situation better than I would. Erm [brief pause] and so afterward, I tried to be a pleasant person and sort of disarm the conversation and see if we could come to some sort of conclusion and then he sort of brushed it off and he changed the topic and [brief pause] and after a while even that topic wasn’t

very fun and so after a while I just said “look, erm I’m gunna go.” [...] **And I’m like, there’s no way of winning this conversation. I tried to be helpful and patient but the way he was engaging with me was really aggressive and I didn’t really feel like he respected me at all.**

Sally’s feeling offended, on reflection, arose from the way the Australian man was approaching the conversation. What was characterised as making her “upset” was that “he wasn’t respecting [her] authority or [her] intellect on the issue”. She understands herself as having a greater “authority in this discussion.” For Sally, the discussion was clearly about the issue of race and national belonging, whereas the conversation appears to operate on a different level for the Australian man. She attempts to offer him a way to understand why she experiences his line of questioning as “weird,” “awkward,” or “clunky.” She offers him a way to understand why his question is based upon problematic assumptions about race and national belonging. Yet, for Sally, he mischaracterises her “authority” on the subject as a matter of not “having a thick skin,” a common expression used to criticise others for lacking the individual capacity to handle criticism, offence, or becoming upset.

The situation *became* offensive over time and through an ongoing and highly reflexive process of interpretation both *in* and *after* the encounter. Sally elucidates this further by explaining the “layers” of meaning and offence embedded within the situation.

**Sally: I think [the offence] happened on several layers. One is sort of a racialised layer. One is sort of more of an intellectual layer.** Like, he racialised me. The way I look, I can’t help it. That’s fine. I’m very very proud of my mixed ancestry. That’s okay. But one, that he felt that he had the right to ask like sort of for me to define myself even before we’ve had a conversation. Like my friends ask me after I’ve known them for y’know three nights in the pub: that’s fine. The fact that that’s the first thing he needed to know about me: I really disliked that. And so, I think on the second level- so yeah basically my racial identity- well, the way I look- I can’t control, but what I can control is my intellect. And I’ve worked really really hard in what I’ve done over the last 25 years to sort of build up my rapport and the way I communicate myself and the fact that he wasn’t accepting that, and I couldn’t project myself to him in a way that

he understood, probably only because he was getting defensive erm, I think that's what I found more offensive. That there was a *complete lack of respect* and a non-acceptance of my authority on the subject intellectually and personally.

For Sally, there are two "layers" through which she understands the offence: a "racialised layer" and an "intellectual layer," which are linked. The "racialised layer" is something she understands that she cannot control, she "can't help it." Yet, experienced as problematic is the fact that "that's the first thing he needed to know about me." The racialised layer of offence is about entitlement, obligation, and labour. Entitlement, in the sense that he "had the right to ask" her to define herself; obligation, that he "needed to know"; and compelled labour, "that [she] had to put him at ease". We might understand this as a reflection of the "feeling rules" of the situation which contextually demand particular forms of "emotion work" (Hochschild, [1983]2003).

If this racialisation is something that she has come to expect over time, understanding the context of how race and nationality are linked in the common imagining of Australia as White, this is outside of her control. In some ways, Sally fatalistically accepts this aspect of the situation. She dislikes this, it is "awkward," and "weird," but not necessarily something that she can control. However, this site of injury or disconnection is also a potential site of agency when taken as an opportunity to transfer the moment into a "teaching moment" and regain some control over the situation. This leads to the second "layer" of offence, the "intellectual layer," which on reflection, is "more offensive." What is more offensive is his "non-acceptance of [her] authority on the subject" both "intellectually and personally."

Sally characterises her "authority" in this situation as a product of both repeated experience as well as ongoing intellectual labour. Sally articulates a feeling of coming to a situation "already armed."

**Sally:** Erm- I do find in those situations that I- because sort of *what race are you question* sort of- **it's happened all my life. I come already armed** and I've developed a sort of technique to deal with that and I would try to keep very very calm about it. **What I'm concerned with is how they've asked and when they've asked.** And so, this

guy when he asked, I don't even think he knew my name and how he asked was *ridiculous* and very very shallow. Completely just asking why I look the way I do- "*is that your skin?*" Ridiculous question. Do I feel as offended about it now? Possibly not, because I have had time to reflect on it and realise it was *him* that was in the wrong [brief pause] basically because I've reflected on it and he's an idiot. It's his problem, not mine. [...] and because **it was personal and a repetition of something that's occurred to me my whole life it was more than annoying.**

The expression of "being armed" for Sally is a way of characterising herself as building up a series of techniques to deal with these questions and "remain calm" when doing so. The imperative to "remain calm" is explained in the context of the physical or embodied dimension of offence. For instance,

**Sally:** I think it [the feeling] was immediate- I think my heart started racing perhaps even before I'd registered what was going to happen in anticipation for this conversation that I've had so many times before [...] I was very very open to new friendships at that point erm and it was just like yeah- absolute turn of the table I- and yeah it doesn't really sounds [pause] I think that's the weird thing, like inquiring about skin-tone *itself*, in isolation is probably not such a terrible thing but **because it's connected to histories I've it [brief pause] yeah it made it worse because I knew exactly where this was going and also had reflected on situations where I think these questions are appropriate and *knew* these questions weren't appropriate at that point in time.**

Sally articulates that her personal history of repeatedly experiencing such questions facilitates seeing "layers" of meaning embedded within the question. Sally expresses how this ability to perceive the question through a historical or structural lens, because of this repetition of experience, also constructs a feeling of ethical obligation in how she responds. Indeed, it becomes a form of "arduous" labour she feels compelled to participate in.

**Sally:** I find it very arduous that I have to explain my racial background just to satisfy someone else's curiosity. I think it sort of plays into the **bigger discourse of racialising**

someone that even though **it's not an aggressive form of racism, you're still racialising someone and expecting them to satisfy your needs** and I think that's what I find [brief pause] *most troubling* about these situations.

**Gavin:** Yeah. So, just to clarify this then, it's this idea that the burden falls on you to explain /something/ to comfort other people's curiosity or lack of knowledge or whatever it is that causes them to ask these questions?

**Sally:** /absolutely/ absolutely, yeah. And also that flows on and **I sort of also feel-almost feel guilty if I don't use these as teaching moments** because this person could [brief pause] perhaps approach another person in my situation and *repeat* the situation. Whereas I sort of- but that's a huge burden to bear, trying to make the world a better place just because this arsehole might be an arsehole to the next person.

**Gavin:** How does that feel generally to erm- to feel like you- that the burden is on you to explain things or that you feel that you have to use them as teaching moments?

**Sally:** I think that comes from doing mixed-race studies. That I am not- just as a mixed-race individual- but as a person who's well-versed in the discourses- that I'm better equipped to handle the situation than someone else who hasn't actually been introspective about their mixed-race identity. Erm [brief pause] and maybe like I said [brief laugh] just tranna make the world a better place sometimes like it's- it's some innate sense of social justice that- just that if I can make this moment better for someone else then that- that's a job well done.

The feeling of obligation arises out of being not “just a mixed-race individual” but “as a person who's well-versed in these discourses.” The combination of her mixed-race identity and her scholarship gives her space to be “introspective about their mixed-race identity.” Her authority is constructed through these two dimensions which facilitates a sense of obligation to make these situations into “teaching moments,” or face a feeling of “guilt” for not deploying her expertise, understanding that the individual who offends her might repeat this to another. Her “authority” on the subject, something she has worked hard to achieve, *should* present her as an expert on the situation. As she expresses elsewhere in the interview, “it makes these instances even more jarring when I come up against people- people who [brief pause] *actually sort of test me*, on- on my own identity.” For Sally, surely her own expression of identity, finally, should be accepted by others.

Sally offers an interpretation as to why he would not respect or accept her authority on the subject.

**Sally:** [laughs] erm, **also coming from a gendered perspective** I [pause] this is also a very large interest of mine so, it is something that I pick up quite often in social situations that- it was- **he was mansplaining all of the time.** Erm, but perhaps I didn't think about this when I was considering it yesterday- the whole mansplaining aspect of it was probably what I was hugely offended by as well- that **I really hate feeling like the dumb, silly little woman.**

**Gavin:** Yeah. Could you describe to me what you mean by mansplaining?

**Sally:** I feel that **mansplaining is a situation** in a discussion where a man is talking to a woman or a group of women where he automatically assumes authority on the subject by virtue of his gender, rather than considering the knowledges that the woman, or the group of women have. I think that's how I would describe it.

**Gavin:** yeah yeah, that's great, thank you. And so, would the mansplaining then, and feel free to say no if I'm characterising this wrong, but does that feed into the kind of sense of kind of academic offence or the idea that he wouldn't respect your knowledge on the subject and you've worked incredibly hard to gain this knowledge- yeah, so it kind of fits into that?

**Sally:** *Definitely, definitely.* Erm, he wasn't willing to hear my opinion on these subjects- whether or not that was because he didn't want to listen to me as a woman- but **he didn't want to hear my opinion on the topics even though I have a personal and an academic claim to these things that he doesn't and he never would- and never has tried to-** which I think was really really frustrating- that he's never had to think about mixed race issues a day in his life, but it's something that I think about **every single day.**

For Sally, what's "really frustrating" is his non-acceptance of her authority on the subject (both intellectually and personally) on the grounds of gender. This causes her to feel like "the dumb, silly little woman." She also identifies this as part of a broader social pattern, deploying the term "mansplaining" to articulate a generally recognisable pattern of men not accepting

that women might, can, or do have authority or expertise (Solnit, 2015). That someone, who she characterises as having never truly reflected on these subjects, would claim to understand the situation better than she, is considered the most offensive aspect of all. Furthermore, Sally feels “disappointed” about the entire situation as it unfolded.

**Sally: if I was a white, blonde Australian he wouldn't obviously ask these sorts of questions and therefore that link of Australianness would still be there** but he [pause] yeah, that's something that I find really disturbing in these [brief pause] *questions* about me being mixed race, it's the assumption that I can't be Australian- like I said with this other one- with your skin you can't be Australian and **that's really disappointing to me because I see Australia as a hugely diverse country but projects itself as this white, nationalist place** and it's total bullshit! But people still internalise that erm I think that's- that's one thing I find really confronting [...] But Australians in Cambridge, you have a double connection- y'know, you get homesick and you can talk about home or something and have a bit of a laugh but [brief pause] *yeah*, I think automatically that was [brief pause] *severed* because I don't think he included me in his perception of what Australian was.

For Sally, the situation was filled with the promise of connection and friendship. Yet, this was ultimately impossible as he refused to listen to her. She offered him multiple pieces of equipment from her armoury, techniques to allow him to understand the inappropriateness of the manner and tone his line of inquiry. These are tools she that she has built up over time, through multiple sources, but he refuses to accept this. Importantly, she sees this as connected to a wider set of structural patterns, citing “racialisation,” “discourse,” “mansplaining” as elements to articulate that something was happening beyond the immediacy of the situation. Whilst her offence is understood as embodied, a visceral and almost instinctual reaction to the situation, the feelings she has are part of a deeply embodied somato-consciousness that facilitates her ability to see the situation in context and connection to history and structures. Again, we might usefully term this complex dynamic as the *texture* of the offence: it is felt in the ‘moment’ but is constituted by and through dynamics much more far reaching than the ‘moment’ of the offence, or the “microaggression” itself. Yet, the very fact that she felt something within the encounter is characterised as a

product of her mishandling of her own emotions – her not having a “thick skin” – rather than his unwillingness to listen, lack of critical reflexivity, and ultimately, his unwillingness to accept that he may have participated in the reproduction of structural violence.

Precisely because this situation is, for Sally, embedded within, and arising out of, an embodied relation to structural and historical factors, she experiences two forms of compelled labour out of a sense of ethical obligation. As she understands this as embedded within the logics of racialisation that she has been given opportunity to reflect upon, she feels a sense of obligation to articulate the forms of injury located through the line of inquiry as a means of making the world better for others who shared a similar structural position to herself (other “mixed-race” individuals). Whilst she is working to carve out a space for herself to be recognised as Australian and to maintain a sense of national belonging which is repeatedly denied to her, she is also doing so in the context of potentially forging a space for others, understood as like herself, to also be able to exist within this national imaginary. She recognises herself, “it’s a huge burden to bear,” because one is simultaneously trying to have oneself recognised as a means of trying to carve out space for others as an ethical practice (I return to this theme in chapter 6).

Whilst Sally participates actively in forms of labour (providing “teaching moments”), Rain appears to be caught in a similar emotional or existential predicament. Rain’s offence and anger stems from the refusal of others (implicitly or explicitly) to recognise diversity within the category of “woman,” and this is something that irritates her because it happens repeatedly. For Sally, it is the category of “Australian” which appears to be limited in the minds of others. She feels she must actively and explicitly *stretch out* the category to belong. In both cases, what is apparently being denied is a felt sense of *belonging* through a lack of the ability (or willingness) of others to recognise their claims of being (Identity).

#### Latoya: Mixed

Latoya described herself as a ‘mixed-race’ woman, having a White British mother and African American father. However, her self-description changed throughout the interview. She explicitly acknowledged and contextualised this, stating that in certain spaces she is “black,”

in others might be considered “mixed,” and in others still “exotic” or even an “enigma.” She began her testimony by setting up the context of an encounter whereby her then partner, “Rich,” a black MPhil student, was stopped from entering his own college (*Corpus Christi*) without proof of his identity.

**Latoya:** So last May, I was dating this guy at Corpus. I used to go there a lot for dinner. And so, I went there for dinner one day and I met him outside and we walked into Corpus. And Corpus is obviously a really small college, and they have like no BME students. I think he was one of ten in the college. So, we were walking through the Plodge and this porter came like running up to us and he looked really really angry. And he was like “Oh, I need to see your ID” and I was like “Oh, okay, weird” and Rich was like “I’ve been a student here for ages, you see me every day. I know who you are. Why don’t you recognise me?” and he was like, “I don’t recognise you. I need to see your ID”. And he [the porter] was really really really kind of abrasive and rude about it. And he was directing all this attention at Rich and not me who wasn’t a student at that college. And I was like “if you want to ask anyone- why don’t you ask me because I don’t actually go here, I’m at Newnham?” And he was like “oh, I need to see yours as well”. So, I got my ID out and Rich got his out and Rich was like “well, again, this is a problem because you see me every single day” and he was like “Oh, well, now I’ve seen your ID you can go on”. And we went to dinner, and he was really upset about it. He was like “this really bothers me because I spend so much time in college” and he’s also [sighs] a bit pretentious- he liked to play rugby for his college, and he liked to make himself a part of the college and so he was really upset about it. And I was like “well, we should do something” and he was like “Yeah, we should *probably* do something” and he just kind of dismissed it.

Latoya highlights several important details of the context. First, the overwhelming whiteness of the college: there are only around 10 BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] students within the college<sup>16</sup>. She mentions that the college is a particularly small one. Rich is both surprised and upset that he is not recognised as belonging to the college, that he is stopped by the porter

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<sup>16</sup> A college comprised of approximately 290 undergraduate and 220 postgraduate students at any given time (University of Cambridge, 2021)

and asked to provide ID for entry, especially since she describes the effort that he has put into visibly being an active member of the college community (both spending so much time there, being part of the rugby team, etc.)

This is exacerbated by the fact that *he* was asked for his ID and not her. Latoya expresses that she was offended “on behalf” of Rich.

**Latoya:** I was offended- **initially I was offended on behalf of Rich with the porter.** Because the porter’s attention was directed at him instead of me. And he was a student, and I wasn’t. So that bothered me.

I asked Latoya to access *why* she thought that this had happened to Rich. Her response to this was initially short and definitive.

**Latoya: Because we’re black.**

This immediate response is something she further describes, highlighting why this interpretation of the event was clearly, for her, about the dynamics of race. Latoya emails the porters and explains that her interpretation of the situation as happening “because we’re black” relied upon an observation of this incident as part of a repeated pattern of behaviours in the context of the University of Cambridge.

**Latoya:** That’s- initially I thought that that was because- that was why he did it initially and then I kind of raised this thing- and I made a point in the email of saying “this happens a lot to BME students at Cambridge”

[...]

**Gavin:** So, what do you think goes into that process of- because you said it was- or you said you think it’s because you’re black that they stopped you. What is that about? Or what would make you instantly think that?

**Latoya:** Erm, I think that at Cambridge because I’m involved in like *Decolonize the Curriculum* and all these different things- **I think it’s on part- me being really aware of the fact that this kind of thing does happen in Cambridge.** So, when it happens it’s

very difficult. And this is the case with “microaggressions” [using air quotes] in general- it’s really difficult to- to kind of distinguish whether it’s just because of that or it’s because you’re thinking it and you’re over-thinking it and make it about that. But I think that’s why “safe spaces” [using air quotes]- as they’re called- are so useful.

Latoya’s account shares similarities with Maya’s encounter with the porter in the previous chapter. Maya said, “if that incident didn’t happen in the context of it happening to a lot of other people, it wouldn’t have been an incident if that makes sense.” This in turn led Maya to express, “You don’t know it’s racial, but it’s racial.” The logics of confirming the racialized nature of the encounter are a product of dispersed repetition the individual experiences of this type of encounter, as well as the wider context and politics of race which are discussed and disseminated in particular circles. This is like Sally’s understanding of the inappropriateness of questions about her skin and others not listening to her account of *why* and *how* these questions are offensive being a product of the experience being repeated (“it’s happened all my life”), and Rain’s account of having repeatedly experienced the “gender confusion” of others.

However, if the repetitive nature of the encounter is precisely what makes it legible as a racialized (or in Rain’s case gendered) form of offence, the dispersed nature of the repetition also may well construct difficulties for the offended party. The legibility of the encounter relies upon a repeated kind of exposure to articulate why and how the experience is harmful or offensive. Latoya introduces the terms “microaggression,” and “safe spaces” as a means of giving a language to these problems of articulation and legibility. She uses air quotes around “microaggression” to articulate this problem of making the grievance intelligible to those who, by virtue of not having experienced this kind of offence, might not be able to access what Sally might understand as the “layers” of offence embedded within an encounter.

**Gavin:** You used inverted commas-

**Latoya:** -Yeah, because people contest that. A lot of people argue that safe spaces are pointless and it’s just like [pause] I was having this conversation with that guy I dated in DC- and I was like *what’s the point of safe spaces- you just go and preach to the choir, and nothing is done about it so they’re not really- they’re safe spaces but they’re*

**not really useful spaces.** They're not productive in any way. Which obviously I was arguing about. But it's really difficult because in safe spaces you do feel like you can kind of like let all of this out and then it's kind of left in this space and you can go away from it and then you feel better. And **you have people around you that do recognise it as a thing that you do recognise it as- whereas if you're talking to other people they might be like "well, he just didn't recognise you- it's got nothing to do with the fact that you're black- it's just because you don't go to that college so maybe seeing you made him question the other guy" even when I was like "Well, he didn't really direct any anger at me it was at Rich."**

**Gavin:** So, people are so willing to bat off the evidence?

**Latoya:** Yeah, people don't really- it's really frustrating actually, and it leads you to really question yourself and you think "Am I just being too sensitive?" and is it just because I'm reading lots of things about these kinds of issues at Cambridge and I'm listening to people who talk about this at Cambridge and I've kind of imbibed that and now I'm- I'm reacting against these people.

**Gavin:** So, you used the term microaggression as well- do you- what does that kind of mean for you?

**Latoya:** Yeah. So, with **microaggressions**- it's a term that I didn't hear until I came to Cambridge and I heard it at one of the FLY [a group for Women and Non-Binary people of colour at the University of Cambridge] meetings. I kind of understand it as incidents that happen that are seemingly implicit in their racism and their sexism and there- I *used* the term to describe situations that can be seen as situations which aren't really situations um **so things that people don't typically believe are problems but that you think are problems because of your position.**

**Gavin:** So, you'd describe this situation as a microaggression- a microaggressive incident?

**Latoya:** I think so. But I'm only saying that because I'm aware of how that- it would be perceived by other people. Like, **I saw it as a racist incident. But I think that other people would question that.** So, again, and people would say "he just didn't recognise you" so that's how I'm using it because how other people would see it but that's not how it felt at the time.

**Gavin:** So, then, just to make sure I'm getting this right- a microaggressive incident is one that can be kind of invisibilised as having a racist element by other people?

**Latoya:** Yeah.

**Gavin:** That kind of invisibility element?

**Latoya:** Yeah, yeah.

Latoya details a link between "safe spaces" and "microaggressions." For Latoya, a "safe space" is characterised as a place one goes to "let it all out," as "you have people around you that do recognise it [a microaggression or a racist encounter] as a thing." This is presented in contrast to others, outside of this *shared* space, who might be unwilling to accept a racialised framework of understanding of the event. The term microaggression is then used to highlight the uneven conditions for rendering an experience as visibly injurious in the context of broader structural patterns. To know or experience a particular situation as a racial microaggression, for Latoya, results from "your position" – one's experience as a particular kind of social subject. In Latoya's story it is "because we're black" that the event both happened, and that they were able to recognise that it happened. The conditions of legibility are embedded in the very conditions for the event's possibility, yet at the same time invisible to others because of this (a theme I will return to in much more detail in the next two chapters).

If repetition and the sharing of experience amongst those similarly positioned within broader social structures appear to construct the possibility of "layered" ways of interpreting an event (to borrow Sally's term), Latoya also highlights the way the feeling and perception of certain spaces might prompt a sense of anticipation in relation to offence.

**Latoya:** There is constantly in certain places and in certain situations that are very very white and middle class- it's weird because sometimes **you're anticipating some kind of affront** [...] that happens in Cambridge sometimes where I kind of anticipate some kind of remark and nine times out of ten it doesn't actually happen. But it's waiting for it that's really annoying and it's kind of anticipating it that makes me think I don't really want to go to this event. But then I kind of have to go and I'm going to have to sit there and be on edge because I think that someone is going to say something.

Latoya highlights that the “anticipation” or “waiting” for an offence to happen is “really annoying.” What this language seems to suggest is that, even if the frequency of the experience of racism is less than it could be, it is still a case of *when* and not *if* a racialised remark might happen: she’s “waiting for it.”

Throughout her interview Latoya recounts a range of situations where her skin tone, nationality, hair texture or other physical features become the target of others’ curiosity.

**Latoya:** Y’know you get the people who stand out in the street and try and get you to sign up for charities- I get stopped by those *all the time*- I don’t know why [...] they’ll ask me where I’m from. And [sighs] **it’s really frustrating because I know exactly what they mean** [...] they kind of look at me and go “where are you from?” and then I- **I know what they mean but I always make them work for it because I want them to like admit that that’s what they mean.** So, I’ll say, “I’m from Hampshire” and “oh, but where are you parents from?” and I’ll say, “Well, my mum’s English and my dad’s American” and they’ll be like “oh” and they’ll work at it and they’ll get to a point where they have to ask, “where does your colour come from?”

[...]

**Latoya:** I was one of very very few mixed-race children in my hometown [Hampshire, United Kingdom]. And it’s a lot different now. But then I was one of very few. And my mum, who is white, was walking around with me. And, I remember, because my mum’s family are from there and so she knows everyone, she’d like walk around town and say “hello” to people. And people would stop, and chat and they would look at me and I was around five and they would say, “oh, when she’s older, she’s going to be so beautiful” and they’d just kind of stare at me. And I got this a lot as I was growing up when I was really little. And I was saying to [my friend], I always felt like, at this stage, I was like [laughs] chubby, with no teeth. I wasn’t like a pretty child at this point, I didn’t think. And I always thought **they’re not really talking about me, they’re like seeing straight through me** and they’re only saying that because I’m brown and have

green eyes and big hair. And like, they don't quite know yet how that's going to look because I'm one of the first they'd ever seen. And so, I feel like **when people ask questions** like "what are you?" or "where did you get your colour from?" or something like that that people ask, **they're looking straight through me in the same way. It's like this weird fascination that has nothing to do with who I am, and everything to do with what my body suggests about me.** And it's a weird feeling of **invisibility** then. But then there's a weird **disconnect** between who you are and who they think you are. And you can't communicate who you are to them because they can't see it in relation to how you look because **their view is completely clouded by what they think they know about you.**

Latoya continually experiences situations where others ostensibly attempt to understand who she apparently is, drawing on information about "what [her] body suggests about [her]". In the first extract, as Latoya discusses her repeated experience of the "where are you *really* from" question similarly to Sally as she "makes them work for it", both attempting to point out the underlying structural logics of the lines of inquiry.

The second extract details how her early experience of others apparently struggling to properly characterise or categorise her have shaped her current understanding of how her body is received by others in space as well as the significance of this process of (mis)recognising her. When she receives questions about her appearance, she understands that the questions are not really about *her* as a person, but rather "this weird fascination that has nothing to do with **who I am**, and everything to do with **what my body suggests about me.**" This leads to two "weird" feelings. First, a feeling of "invisibility" and second, a feeling of "disconnect." The body is understood as an indication of *what* one is. Yet, the questions Latoya is asked are framed as if they are questions about *who* she is. For Latoya, the collapsing of these two things is something that she continually navigates. In this sense, the questions are received through this language of "disconnection" and "invisibility" – it is that others are not really seeing her at all. Latoya suggests that this leads to other forms of discomfort that she manages because of this precarious relation between *who* and *what* one is.

**Latoya: I don't think of myself really as black.** Like, at the beginning, when you asked me about the porters- I thought and I said "because we're black"- I only said- it makes me a little bit uncomfortable kind of saying that because **that's how other people would see us.** Or that's how I think other people would see us. **Whereas I think of myself as mixed race because obviously my mum's white.**

Latoya, much like both Rain and Sally, highlights that one's own sense of belonging to a particular category or group is navigated in relation to others. The possibility of projecting oneself (of demonstrating *who one is*) is always produced in relation to the ability of others to accept or reject these claims in relation to what one's body suggests about oneself (*what one is*). Apparent discrepancies or disconnection between *who* and *what one is*<sup>17</sup> for all three is a repeated and ongoing experience. Each of them appears compelled to perform various forms of work merely to be recognised as what they already understand themselves to be, taking on the labour of managing the precarious relation between *what* and *who one is*, which ideally should not have discrepancy.

However, the personal or existential dilemma of being recognised as *belonging* to a particular group, or identifying in a particular way, is further complicated when understood as a structural and repeated pattern of behaviours. My participants' responses to forms of misrecognition are understood not just as having personal implications, but also for others who might be similarly misrecognised. Being, then, is more immediately felt as relational and precarious (precarious in its relationality), something to be managed and navigated explicitly, a form of *compelled work* that each engages in.

### Recognising the Feeling of the Repeatedly Being Misrecognised

My archive was filled with similar stories of offence derived from misrecognition or denials of forms of belonging. For instance, Jasmine, an Asian-American woman expressed that others often refused to accept that she "is really" American. She states,

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<sup>17</sup> What Goffman might term as a discrepancy between 'virtual' and 'actual' social self which results, often, in 'stigma' (Goffman, [1963]1990)

**Jasmine:** -but for me it's like- I don't think other people get asked "oh well, where are you *really* from?" Er and I can see- **it's annoying to me that I have to justify being American.**

This management of one's sense of belonging to particular categories, groups, or identities was something highlighted by a multitude of other participants in relation to gender, sexuality and race. For instance, this was a pressing issue for Paris, a gay black man. Paris told me about an article that he was writing for a student newspaper with the title "Being Black and Queer – a Negotiated Identity" where he was reflecting on the effects of having to consistently manage the "stereotyping" views of others with relation to his blackness, masculinity, and queerness.

**Paris:** People like invalidate me. Like, I'm soft and queer and like this "faggot" basically. But then, on the other side, because I'm black, I'm like [gruff voice] *ooh, masculine and angry*. And, it's like, so where does that leave me? What's the truth? What am I actually? [...] **They're just stereotyping me. And it just leaves you with an identity crisis.** Because when you're hearing like multiple different things about your identity, what does that mean? What is it? What does it mean? [...] It upsets me because people don't think about it as much as I can think about it and know what it is myself people are still going to do it all the time. **It's happened all my life really.** Erm [pause] so yeah. I just don't know what to do about it [sighs].

There is a palpable sense of discomfort, of exhaustion and pain that Paris highlights. The repetitive nature of managing other's expectations about elements of his identity upsets him because they "don't think about it as much as I can think about it". He suggests that it's difficult and upsetting to continually navigate such misrecognitions, leading to this sense of "identity crisis." One is precariously reliant on others to accept one's own sense of belonging and the meaning of those belongings. The fact that it's repetitive means it's exhausting. Yet, it is also importantly a *dispersed* repetition, meaning that no two encounters are identical. One is continually, in many senses, starting afresh explaining oneself in each new encounter.

I personally related to a feeling in the interviews of both Andre and Byron, both gay white men who were partners at the time of the interview. Although the content of their stories different, it was the form and pattern of the cluster of feelings associated with the encounters that seemed starkly similar.

For instance, Byron highlighted how he was often caricatured by heterosexual women, who came to form certain expectations of his behaviour.

**Byron:** I suppose they view me as a gay person as like a person who sleeps around-homogenises me as the stereotypical gay person. And it's like, *well, actually, there isn't really one and we're all very different people*. I suppose they just [brief pause] it's that *gay best friend* type of thing [...] they always want me to sort of be a bit campy and always talking about guys. Or, when I'm with them within the first sort of three minutes they'll change the conversation to guys or things that they've done [sexually] and they'll expect my input into it and talking about dick quite a lot to be totally honest. I can almost sort of do a countdown in my head until how long it will take to move onto those conversations. And yeah, they're quite frequent, yeah.

Whilst Byron is recognised as gay, what this means as an aspect of his belonging and identity is shaped by the stereotyped views of what these women expect of gay men. His sense of identity is denied in a form like Latoya's when she speaks about others looking at, but seeing right through, her. As Byron lists multiple times that he is reduced to a stereotype, he reflects,

**Byron:** I sit there and I think *why does it have to be that way around for me?* If I did that to them, they'd tell me to bugger-off.

Byron recognises that he is compelled to experience these things because of his position and there is a deeply felt sense of injustice embedded within this process. His partner suggests this comparative sense of injustice in another form, in the glances of others as he holds his same-sex partner's hand in the street.

**Andre:** So, sounds funny, but walking down the street, holding my partner's hand and getting like- not necessarily funny looks, but extended looks. And it's kind of that whole abnormal kind of thing. I felt slightly offended by that [...] I feel quite vulnerable, I'd say, almost exposed. There's the kind of vulnerability of being in that position, but also then kind of annoyed, like, ***why should I have to feel like that?*** [...] because it's something that's easily judged upon in society any kind of attention to it [holding a same-sex partner's hand] in a not necessarily friendly manner comes across as quite like threatening. So, I'm aware- I feel like **I'm overly aware of potentially seeing, or something potentially happening in a sense. Because I've experienced things before, so being on guard for that.**

Andre had disclosed past experiences of homophobic violence which meant that he felt constantly on edge, looking, or rather *waiting* for the next experience of violence to occur. He remains on guard against such things, which makes the often taken-for-granted intimate act of holding one's partner's hand in the street something that one must precariously manage in relation to violence. As he says, "*why should I have to feel like that?*"

One of the fundamental problems contained within these stories, these relationships, is a widespread social pattern whereby others find it difficult to recognise and acknowledge difference without reducing *being* entirely to conditions or sites of those differences. Or, being unwilling to hear what that "difference" might mean for, or to, the individual. This is to argue that all belonging is precarious as *being* is not unproblematically fixed. Rather, *being* and *belonging* is relationally constituted through and over time in repetitive acts. Yet, this precarity is not evenly experienced. The forms of labour that go into the insistence of *being* what you already consider yourself to *be* are deeply stratified. This is further complicated when others are unwilling to listen. The offence of what we might term as misrecognition, or denying the possibility of belonging, stems not just from a moment in time, an individual isolated act which causes injury, but from the very cyclical, relational, repeated, and dispersed process which constitutes us as relational and precarious subjects. Thus, it becomes about conditions of legibility, forms of knowing and relating to others, as well as the felt sense of understanding one's position within these relational structures. Paradoxically, the conditions which make these encounters legibly sexist, racist, or homophobic for some becomes the very

conditions that make them illegible for others. We are all precariously and relationally constituted, yet, because relationality is also tied up with knowledge, power, and the demand to be recognised, it is in no way evenly experienced, felt, or equally as pressing an issue for all.

This is one of the complexities of the stratification of offence: that it is constituted by and through a shifting and ongoing affective and historical *texture*. Offence, particularly in the form of what we might term a “microaggression,” is complex in that it is an indexical ‘moment’ of harm recognised as the manifestation of an ongoing structural pattern of dispersed repetition acting upon a body and intelligible through this experiential repetition which constitutes an embodied understanding of the *texture* (or felt sense) of something like racism or homophobia. However, for this very reason, perhaps counterintuitively, this constructs a problem in rendering a grievance hearable or intelligible to others. Often, one can feel as if one embodies or lives within another kind of reality because of this lack of recognition or refusal to recognise the lived reality, the *texture* of someone’s experience of offence.

This chapter examined the phenomenon of offence as often characterised by and through *dispersed repetition* to highlight how such repetition constitutes a possible paradox in modes of seeing and feeling. What is so obviously offensive to some is rendered trivial to others precisely because of an uneven experience of repetitive action. The *dispersed* nature of the repetition further often forces the participants to think strategically about how to respond to offence (in the form of reconfiguring these events as “teaching moments”) as a means of taking charge of the situation once more. In this sense, these “moments” of offence, as they are products of repetitive and historical processes, often become experienced as frustrating or exhausting emotional and intellectual labour as individuals are compelled to try and carve out a space for belonging. Yet, there often appears to be limited success in making others “see” or understand the forms of injury embedded within misrecognition. As such, I now turn to examine in more detail the complexities of seeing, awareness and consciousness captured by the term “woke” as a means of further exploring this paradox, and importantly, how (and why) my participants deal with this.

## PART III: WOKENESS

## Chapter 5: Irreconcilable Realities? (un)Deniable and Sensational Evidence

“Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.” Philip K. Dick.

The previous chapter characterized common elements that describe the phenomenon of offence, from repetition, frustration, a sense of anticipation, disappointment, and disconnection. I demonstrated that being offended is constituted in and through the process of experiential understanding and that we might usefully term this the *texture* of offence. My participants demonstrated highly reflexive (hermeneutic) capacity to interpret encounters in relation to their personal experience, social environment, and wider political and cultural context. This reflexive capacity to interpret encounters was usually built up over time to the point that one might come to know *exactly where someone is going* with their comments, or that a word or look might be demonstrative of an entire world view. I suggested that the mode of repetition which renders offence not only legible, but seemingly inevitable, for some social subjects means that they can precisely remain unseen or unnoticed by others.

When something appears obvious or undeniable to oneself, it is often frustrating to have others not recognize or acknowledge what one can see. This might be especially frustrating when attempting to make others see what it is that you already *know* and have this denied. Or, perhaps worse, have one’s conditions for knowing something become the very reason why one cannot know. For instance, Sally, in the previous chapter, described a kind of cyclical relationship, whereby her being a mixed-race woman *should* have given her epistemic authority to describe why a question about skin was inappropriate upon first meeting her. Yet, the man precisely refuses to recognize her authority, as her authority is apparently constituted by the very things which would invalidate her as an authority.

These accounts suggest that there is a certain absence or lack when it comes to others who participate in the behaviours or logics which offend. This *lack* might be demonstrated through the articulation of offence in microaggressions; an unwillingness to listen to the inappropriate nature of a question; the misrecognition of someone’s gender; the treatment of another as a mere stereotype; or expectation that one should fulfil a particular role based on assumed

identity. If those who offend are perceived as “lacking,” what is it that they might “lack?” Is it always the same thing? Similarly, we might consider the reverse question: if others “lack” something, what is it that others “have” in contrast to this?

Ultimately, these paradoxes embedded within the complex texture of offence, perhaps best demonstrated in the feelings of the inevitability of repetition, the exhaustion at the labour of having the same arguments and discussions over and over again and seemingly contradictory comments, “You don’t know it’s racial, but it’s racial” can be explored through a discussion of “wokeness” or being or becoming “woke.” Among many of my participants, describing someone as “woke” acted as a short-hand, signifying a way of seeing and interpreting social action. It was simultaneously presented as a counter-discourse to mainstream presentations and understandings of being in the world in relation to social structures, systems of domination, and experiencing reality, whilst simultaneously being exceptional (a characteristic that some more or less appear to possess or embody whilst others simply *don’t get it*).

When I first began this project “woke,” in the formulation that my participants used it, did not appear in the Google Dictionary search. Yet, tellingly, it is now included. It was added to the Oxford English dictionary in 2017. It is a concept that has gained significant currency in its circulation.

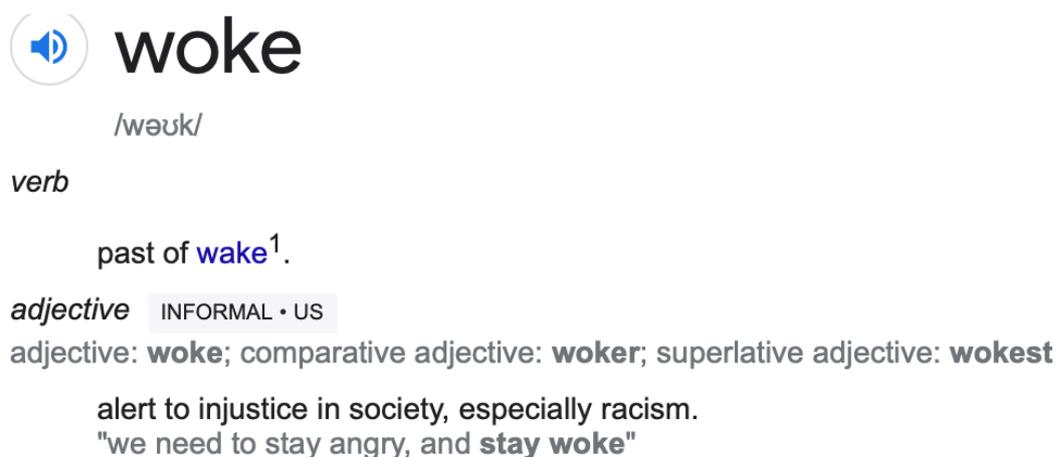


Figure 1: Google Search "Woke definition" [date accessed 03/06/2021]

The sense of being “alert” to something describes a particular state or effort to attend to a mode of seeing, in this case “injustice” but “especially racism.” This stands in contrast to what we might find on a site like “Urban Dictionary,” where being woke is derided in various ways as a kind of pretention or excess.

TOP DEFINITION



## woke

Deluded or fake awareness.

Lebron acts woke about China, he just full of shiite.

by **gmoochie** October 15, 2019

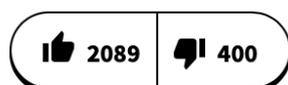


Figure 2: Urban Dictionary Define "Woke" [date accessed 03/06/2021]

2



## woke

The act of being very pretentious about how much you care about a social issue

Yeah most people don't care about parking spaces for families with disabled pets. I wish they were woke like me.

by **Vensamos** May 16, 2018



Figure 3: Urban Dictionary Define "Woke" [date accessed 03/06/2021]

4



# Woke

Woke is a [politically correct alternative](#) to "stupid" or "[retarded](#)".

[OMG Sean Penn](#) is so [woke!](#)

by [Santa Clues](#) June 19, 2020

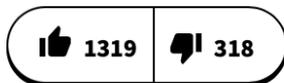


Figure 4: Urban Dictionary Define "Woke" [date accessed 03/06/2021]

Like many of the assemblage of terms surrounding discourses of offence, the meaning and value placed on being “woke” is contested. The word not only *describes* but *represents* something more than its initial description. It might be simultaneously understood as a way of seeing, a way of being, and a way of acting. Both an action, an interpretation, and a person can be described variously as “woke” (or not). Exploring the contestation surrounding its meaning and use can provide an opening into thinking about the politics and constitution of the social interpretation(s) of reality. To explore the contentious cultural politics of offence, as well as how various social actors are differentially positioned and constituted through this politics, I present an extended case study of Nadia’s interview, interrogating the complexities involved in recognizing and describing the “reality” of that which is thought to be (or “*should*” be) obvious. Yet, before detailing Nadia’s case study, I wish to provide a little more historical context to the term “woke” so as not to suggest that the term itself, or the ideas represented through the term, merely appeared in the past few years, but rather itself has a complex historicity that shares comparability with other terms.

## Historicising Wokeness

*Rise like Lions after slumber  
In unvanquishable number—  
Shake your chains to earth like dew  
Which in sleep had fallen on you—  
Ye are many—they are few.*

(excerpt from *The Masque of Anarchy*, Percy Bysshe Shelley 1819)

The metaphor of becoming in some way *awakened from slumber* is a recurrent theme within calls to political activity. The stanza from Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley is an extract from *The Masque of Anarchy*, written following the Peterloo Massacre in 1819, taking place in St Peter's Field, in Manchester, England where 15 people were killed when protestors demanding reform to parliamentary representation were charged by cavalry. It is documented that a version of these lines was deployed by both Henry David Thoreau in his essay *Civil Disobedience* and by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in his doctrine of *Satyagraha* associated with the ideas and practice of non-violent resistance (Nichols, 1994).

Waking from slumber or becoming awakened or “conscious” is usually an indication of a radical transformation of vision coming with a critical understanding of one's social context that causes a broad reevaluation of one's past and present social circumstances. One, through coming to “consciousness” or “waking up”, comes to comprehend social reality in a different way. These metaphors are common in a broad range of radical political traditions, from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' (1848) classic description of “class consciousness” awakening in relation to the material contradictions of capitalism as a mode of production; Black radical and postcolonial traditions of searching through contradictions of structures of Whiteness, Colonialism and racism especially in relation to such concepts as “black consciousness” or “double consciousness” (see for example Du Bois, 1903; Fanon, [1952] 2008, [1961] 2001; Biko, [1978] 2002); varied feminist traditions of “consciousness raising” through both collective action and the facilitation of critical dialogue between “women” however contentiously and variably defined historically (see for example Truth, [1851-1867] 2020; Morgan, 1970; Koedt, Levine & Rapone, 1973; Rowbotham [1973] 2015; Rich, 1979; Davis [1981] 2019; Bartky, 1990; Mohanty, 2003; Bates, 2015; Ahmed 2017); or varied descriptions of a broad “critical consciousness” (see for example Freire [1974] 2019; Butler, Laclau & Žižek 2000).

A detailed and nuanced exploration of each of these genealogies is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, to focus on one particularly illustrative description of (feminist)

“consciousness”, I examine Sandra Lee Bartky’s (1990), text *Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness* to draw out some of the most common themes of coming to consciousness. She argues that in order to *be* a feminist, “one has first to become one” which “involves the experience of a profound personal transformation” (Bartky, 1990:11). For Bartky, these transformations are understood to be both behavioural but also a radical alteration of one’s consciousness: “These changes in behaviour go hand in hand with changes in *consciousness*: to become a feminist is to develop a radically altered consciousness of oneself and others, and of what, for lack of a better term, I shall call “social reality” (*Ibid.*12). In many ways, the act of coming to view the world in a different way, the act of “raising” one’s “consciousness” to apprehend a new social reality is a political act. It is useful then to ask a pair of interlinked questions of Bartky’s assertion: *how does this happen?* And *what are the implications of this process?*

Bartky is clear that “although the oppression of women might be universal, feminist consciousness is not” (*Ibid.*). As such she identifies what she understands as the features of social reality which act as necessary conditions (but perhaps not in themselves sufficient conditions) for the emergence of a feminist consciousness: “I refer, first, to the existence of what Marxists call “contradictions” in our society and, second, to the presence, due to these same contradictions, of concrete circumstances which would permit a significant alteration of the status of women” (*Ibid.*). For Bartky, “feminist consciousness” arises not just out of a feeling of lament at their current social reality and conditions, but when there appears to be also an apprehension that conditions could be otherwise. As such, “The very *meaning* of what the feminist apprehends is illuminated by the light of what it ought to be” (*Ibid.*14). That is to say that feminist consciousness apprehends reality not through a fatalistic narrative that *it is what it is*, but rather an understanding which foregrounds the radical possibility of the social transformation of the present- *it is what it could be*.

Perhaps a clear example of this can be found in Laura Bates’ (2015) intervention in *Everyday Sexism*, particularly in her introduction to the book, *Everybody Has a Tipping Point* (which is analogous also to Sara Ahmed’s 2017 description of *feminist snap* or breaking points). In this introduction Bates describes her tipping point as the culmination of “just another week of little pinpricks” of sexism, which, in their rapid succession triggered a change in her thought

process: "I started for the first time to really think about how many of these little incidents I was just putting up with from day to day" (Bates, 2015:11). Bates argues that the more she reflected on sexist encounters, the more they began to collect together differently. In the first instance, these sexist encounters "hadn't seemed exceptional enough for me to object to them because they *weren't out of the ordinary*. Because this kind of thing was just part of life-or, rather, part of being a woman. Simply, I was used to it" (Ibid.12). Bates then goes on to catalogue her journey of speaking to other women about their experiences of everyday sexism, among family and friends and more widely. This left her with what she describes as a "mosaic of miniatures" (Ibid.13) of everyday sexism.

However, Bates also then pointed out the contradictions she began to face when speaking about the quotidian nature of sexism with others: "The more stories I heard, the more I tried to talk about the problem. And yet time and again I found myself coming up against the same response: sexism doesn't exist anymore. Women are equal now, more or less" (Ibid.13). Part of Bates' awakening to the problem came through this stark contradiction in how reality was being (re)presented to her in contrast to the evident reality of inequality and violence that women experience contemporarily. The image and the reality did not match up, causing her to question: "How, I wondered, was it possible for there to be so much evidence of the existence of sexism alongside so much protest to the contrary?" (Ibid.). Once Bates had her "'Eureka!' moment" (Ibid.14) it appeared there was no way to unsee the widespread and quotidian nature of everyday sexism. Rather than seeing each seemingly small, innocuous, and normalized sexist encounter as something exceptional or individual, they entered into a highly patterned "mosaic of miniatures" which, although presented as somehow normal and natural, were indicative of a wider social problem and pattern. This is what we might understand as coming to a feminist consciousness in Bartky's sense: to comprehend reality in an alternative manner through bearing witness to the contradictions in one's present social conditions and refusing to fatalistically accept those conditions as natural or inevitable.

Yet, Bartky also outlines how this potential, developed through feminist consciousness, of a differential apprehension of social reality which appears to demand changes in one's behaviour, may come with its own contradictions. For example, a women may develop a feminist consciousness whereby she comes to understand womanhood as shaped through an

unjust system of political power but “remain blind to the extent to which they themselves are implicated in the victimization of others” (Bartky, 1990:16). This has long been a contention within black feminist thought of myopic *white feminist* apprehensions of social reality which singularly (or primarily) focus on gender as a unit or location of oppression in exclusion of other systems of unjust or unequal systems of power such as race and social class (see for example Truth, [1851-1867] 2020; hooks, [1982] 1992; Lorde, 1984; Ahmed, 2010; Crenshaw, 2017). This is to argue, through an intersectional framework, that coming to “consciousness” or “waking up” did not ought to be understood as a singular ‘Eureka!’ moment to face a singular and “truer” social reality. Rather, that the apprehension of social injustice is perhaps indefinitely expansive, as social structures, social positionalities, and the resultant social identities which are formed in and through them, are equally indefinitely expansive<sup>18</sup>. Thus, whilst one might have an initial ‘tipping point’ into a radical and critical consciousness, this appears to be an ongoing project (something that I will return to in Chapter 6).

“Because it *obviously*- it just stems in racism”

Early on a Friday morning in May 2017 Nadia, a young second-generation Tunisian-British woman from London, studying Human, Social and Political Sciences at Pembroke College, sat across from me. Nadia helped herself to snacks, and the mood felt relaxed. I’d come to know Nadia well since the beginning of the academic year in October 2016 as one of the supervisors of her academic work, but here she was an interviewee.

In the interview, Nadia surprised me. She vividly, repeatedly, and in vast quantities recalled events, situations and memories related to the word ‘offence’. Nadia’s recall came in the form of a ‘pouring’ or ‘spilling over’, as events seemed to run into one another. Amidst her repeated apologies – “do you mind if I go on a tangent?”; “sorry, this will turn into a rant”; “Oh and then there was this other thing- do you mind if I talk about that?” – I counted 22

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<sup>18</sup> However, such metaphors of “waking up” in relation to a change in consciousness are not an exclusive possession of “progressive” social movements. For example, within the online “manosphere” (Banet-Weiser, 2018) popular misogynist discourses discuss waking up in relation to “blackpill philosophy” (see for example Jiang, 2018), although the current incarnation of “woke” that I will discuss aligns with more progressive political movements and is often criticized from those with more right-wing political leanings (as outlined in the introduction to this thesis)

discrete events that Nadia recalled as offensive, many of them containing multiple sources of offence.<sup>19</sup>

Nadia began to speak about the reception of a photograph labelled “Black Men of Cambridge,” a photograph posted on social media by the then president of Cambridge ACS (African-Caribbean Society) which depicted a group of 14 of the 15 current black male undergraduates at the University. The intended message was about the underrepresentation of black men at Cambridge yet one which, “they hope will inspire black men to apply for the elite institution” (Sanusi, 2017). This was an echo of a similar social media post at Yale University a few weeks before (Kwateng-Clark, 2017).

**Nadia:** I don’t know if you saw but literally in the past few days there was like that “Black Boys of Cambridge” thing that trended. And so obviously it was like all over Facebook and Channel 4 shared it and all of the comments underneath were just like “Well, maybe Black Boys just aren’t good enough for Cambridge” and like just the general stuff like that under.

**Gavin:** Erm, so my first of the seemingly really obvious or redundant questions- why did you find that offensive?

**Nadia:** **Because it obviously- it just stems in racism.** And people are just trying to act like they’re making smart points about “maybe this, maybe that, maybe that” and it’s just like ***you’re just being racist and I just have zero time for it.***

In advance of the explanation of *why* the comments underneath the post were offensive, I already suggest that I “get it” in some way. My first question about why it was offensive seems “redundant” or “really obvious.” Nadia’s answer is blunt, highlighting for her the obviousness of the situation: “it just stems from racism.” She indicates that there is something fatiguing about the entire thing, “I just have zero time for it.”

When I asked Nadia if there was a particular comment that stuck with her, she responded in more general terms saying that the issue just “blew up”.

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<sup>19</sup> Although these events or moments are hard to quantify (when precisely does an offence begin and end?), I attempt this for the sake of argument.

**Nadia:** They [the negative comments] came up quite a lot. Just general things about how they might have not been good enough to get in anyway because along with the picture there was this long piece of writing about how in 2015 only like 15 black males were accepted into the University and all of the comments were kind of critiquing everything angle possible- *oh maybe they're not good enough blah blah blah*- all that kind of things and I was just- **I was offended because it was just constantly like devaluing people of colour.**

For Nadia, the negative comments underneath the reshared image across various news outlets represented a more general denigration of people of colour contemporarily in the UK and elsewhere. I tried to ask her why the connection to racism was so instant and the conversation which followed began to explain the interpretation of this event in relation to another.

**Gavin:** And what would make you say that do you think, or what would makes you- because I'm not questioning your analysis at all but I'm just trying to work out what makes you instantly make that connection?

**Nadia:** Because [sighs] **why else would you say it?** Why else would you type out a comment and say that? This- **can I go on a tangent** because I just remembered something else that also-

**Gavin:** -Please do-

**Nadia:** -Also like really offended me. So there's this girl in my college. She met Katie Hopkins when she spoke at the Union and then she decided- nobody asked her to- but write a blog post, on her blog that Katie Hopkins- "she's such a lovely person." [Gavin expresses surprise through a stifled laugh] Yeah, when she met her- and we were all screaming and it was shocking and how she basically was saying how "we need to stop [brief pause] like mixing public and private and like, we can- she's actually a nice person" and stuff and that offended me. Then when I saw mutual friends that we have liked the post, that offended me. And then, also, people were commenting "good for you [author's name]", and stuff like that. I don't even know these people and that offended me because it shows that people obviously are agreeing with this and then

when a lot of people had posted like *this is literally disgusting- she's literally devaluing people's existence* and *we shouldn't separate that and her responses*, these people were just like *obviously, like* veiled in her like middle class white feminism and that offended me. I kind of like link both of these things. Like, the comments about the black boys and this because it's like people [brief pause] firstly no one even asked you to write this and even I know it comes- even if it's not overtly racist it comes from deep-seated like *it's not affecting me so it's okay*, like

**Gavin:** So, can I make the assumption that the person who write the blog was white?

**Nadia:** Yeah [laughs]

**Gavin:** Erm, so can you tell me a little bit, just explain again so I can really capture it, how those things are really linked for you. Or what is it that underpins both of those things?

**Nadia:** **It's just [pause] ignorance.** And obviously people- this is just me because I'm just a very pessimistic person and I just get annoyed very easily and a lot of me being offended is just me being angry. Erm, **when people just don't- are just so ignorant and live in their own bubble and don't know reality.** Like the person who posted "well, maybe black boys aren't good enough" well obviously that's not true. Because there's obviously a group of them in the picture, so they obviously are good enough. Erm, her posting this article about "oh, we should just be nice to Katie Hopkins because she's actually a very lovely person," **Okay, she's lovely to you, because you're blonde and cute and white, but if a girl in a Hijab went up to her, it would be a different scenario. I Just don't [sigh] I just can't stand people who just don't live in the real world.** And it does offend me because you- you- everything that you say and do is not coming from a place that's even trying to understand the other side. Because like a few of the comments on the article about the black boys, when people would be like, "No, no, this is wrong" whatever but they would respond to them and be will "well these statistics show that Afro-Caribbean men are like the least achieving in schools in the UK"- it's just like **why are you trying so hard to justify your ignorance?**

**Gavin:** Yeah, yeah.

**Nadia:** Which is exactly what she was doing in the article about Katie Hopkins as well.

**Gavin:** Yeah, they're going so far to defend what is essentially obviously a racist position?

**Nadia:** Yeah, because somebody just started talking about “Black-on-black crime” in America [laughs a little] which had like no relevance! Had no relevance.

Nadia attributes “ignorance” to both the negative commentators underneath the Black Men of Cambridge image as well as the second article which asks us to consider Katie Hopkins the person as separate from Katie Hopkins the right-wing media commentator. In this discussion Nadia later references some of Katie Hopkins’ more infamous statements about migrants being “cockroaches” or her demands for a “final solution” following the Manchester terror attack in 2017 (Jones, 2015; Hitchings-Hales, 2017; Calderwood, 2018). This “ignorance,” for Nadia, speaks to a lack of understanding of “reality” which they, these “ignorant” people, are protected from by virtue of living in “their own bubble.”

For Nadia, a clear demonstration of this ignorant worldview is the hypothetical comparison she poses – that the “lovely” conversation that the “blond and cute and white” girl had with Katie Hopkins would have been much different if “a girl in a Hijab” went up to her. For Nadia, the ability to separate one’s public character and actions (or the ability to “stop mixing public and private”) is evidently because of a kind of myopic, unreflexive Whiteness. Similarly, with the Black Men of Cambridge commentary, the strategies of deflection<sup>20</sup> used to explain educational and access inequalities that cause underrepresentation of black men at Cambridge have little relevance (for example, the mention of “Black-on-black crime” in America) yet are cited as sources of authority to dismiss the problems of systemic or institutional racism in the UK. Nadia’s exasperation at both events is rearticulated powerfully in her question, “why are you trying so hard to justify your ignorance?” For Nadia, these strategies of deflection and alternative explanation, are “deep-seated” and speak to a wider culture of racism in the UK.

The use of the “tangent” or additional story to explain her interpretation of the first event is important. The interpretation and explanation of one event as racist relies on the interconnection between on the surface seemingly disparate elements. For Nadia, one cannot

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<sup>20</sup> A strategy researchers such as (Aveling, 2002; Hytten & Warren, 2003; Applebaum, 2008) note is particularly common in discussions of racial inequalities by white people in the environment of broader post-race ideological contexts or what we might similarly term “racism without racists” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010).

bifurcate the action, person, or statement from the wider context. This is to suggest then, if we might argue that Nadia presents a “woke” interpretation of the world, then “wokeness” relies on a complex stitching together of events to form an interpretative reality. Without understanding these connections, without the ability to hear or see them, one just doesn’t, can’t, or wont “know reality.”

Nadia describes herself as “a very pessimistic person”. This could leave her open to the accusation of a certain kind of willful attachment to seeing the worst in others, something that Ahmed describes is a common trope emblemized in the figure of the “melancholy migrant” (Ahmed, 2010). Yet, perhaps it’s more useful to think about this pessimism not as an inherent quality of Nadia, but rather a product of a particular social environment that constitutes this pessimistic reality<sup>21</sup>. Her pessimism, to me, appeared much more clearly a response to, rather than agent which produced, her social reality.

#### Nadia’s Reality: “It’s Constant”

**Nadia:** Just mass, mass ignorance. And to be honest, a lot of the time it’s just racism [sigh] there’s so much just [pause] *covert* racism and overt racism and it’s just implicit in everything at this University.

**Gavin:** So, it’s something you’re constantly-

**Nadia:** -**Constantly conscious about** and it’s something that- whenever something happens that me that I’m offended about I’m like “Is this about race?” and sometimes I think *Am I over-exaggerating?* And you also have the criticism of like people who are like “why do you make everything about race?” but unfortunately it is about a race. **Literally everything in this University is about race.** Like I was walking down the street with a few friends and a homeless guy came up to us and was like “the bible tells us to kill Niggers like you” and I’m not even black and I got this!

**Gavin:** How did you feel when you got that?

**Nadia:** I was just like disgusted.

**Gavin:** How did you deal with that encounter- what-

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<sup>21</sup> See Muñoz (2006) or Ngai (2005), particularly within the latter’s analysis of *envy* as a negative affect which describes a modality of frustrated agency.

**Nadia:** -we were kind of all drunk so it faded. But another one recently with Paris- it was like 2.30am, we were walking home from a party and a taxi went passed and some guy was like “you fucking faggot!” and threw a burger at us. And that was like- has shocked us to the core. And since that moment we’ve not gone out past 10pm.

**Gavin:** So how does it make you feel generally? All of these-

**Nadia:** -kind of like shit. And I think this is similar for a lot of BME people. We’ve kind of like accepted it now. It’s almost like we’ve transcended being offended. Because like, what can we do? This is [pause]

**Gavin:** So, that kind of feeling powerless about doing anything to address it?

**Nadia:** Yeah, because really, what can you do? **If you go and report a racist incident, most of the time nothing is going to happen, so people don’t report anything. And a lot of the times it’s not somebody coming up and saying something racist to your face, it’s those nagging little like comments and things like that that are the worst**

**Gavin:** I think it’s interesting how you are able to list off quickly occasion after occasion where this has happened. Does it- when you begin to think about these kinds of instances of racism, is it something that very much that you think about one thing and then it spirals into lots of things?

**Nadia:** Yeah.

**Gavin:** Or would it only be this kind of setting when somebody directly asks you about your experience that you’d think about all of these things together do you think?

**Nadia:** I kind of connect it generally, just because it is continuous. Even for example it is on Tinder- all of my pictures are me with like curly hair and then in one picture I’ve got straight hair- so then some like crusty Eton boy will message me and be like “I prefer the straight hair”- okay, no one asked. It’s stuff like that that’s like- it’s not like really racist but [claps] it’s veiled.

Nadia highlights how the experience of racism is constant, both in covert and overt manifestations. This leads her to “connect it generally, just because it’s continuous.” Paris, a gay black male student, and close friend of Nadia’s echoed similar sentiments about the experience of racism in his interview.

**Paris:** There's no back door. There's no backstage. **It's constant.** [...] I'm literally just like- actually just like no- there's no escape from this stuff, literally. [...] **There is no space to not be racialised at all.** Anywhere you can be racialised. As long as there are people of other races- or even just different shades of skin to you- you're gonna be racialised.

The experience of continued racialization, the accounting of continual experience of racism, build up a necessarily bleak picture of social reality for both Nadia and Paris. Yet, this is not dissimilar from the experiences of fatigue at the repetitive nature of, for example, Rain's misgendering or Byron and Andre's constant feelings of having to be on guard against homophobia, both implicit in the actions and questions of others, and in their proximity and vulnerability to physical danger that they had received in the past. This suggests, importantly, that one's *disposition* or orientation to the world (what Nadia describes as her "pessimism") is constituted by and through experience. Their various social realities are constituted through experiential repetition, that *texture* of offence.

However, Nadia also highlights how her social reality is often denied by others. She highlights the futility in reporting experiences of racism to anyone: "most of the time nothing is going to happen, so people don't report anything." This comes with a feeling of powerlessness. Both the scale of the problem (how continual the experience of racism is) is matched with a lack of receptivity from others about the problem. I asked Nadia how she dealt with this more generally.

**Nadia:** I don't know. At this point it's more like I'll be angry- I'll be offended and I'll like bitch about it and rant about it to a mutual friend and then **you just kind of have to like [pause] mentally put it in the box with like everything else that's happened.** [...] It's a very regular thing. And it's, even if it doesn't end up happening to you, you end up being offended on behalf of other people.

When Nadia receives these repeated offences, she does not trust she will be heard by formal institutional mechanisms. Thus, her release from this is to "rant about it to a mutual friend" before "mentally put[ting] it in a box." Initially, we could describe this as a somewhat fatalistic

worldview – that one feels little can be done and thus one is forced to compartmentalize these experiences. Yet, I suggest another reading, that we might hear this as a compulsion to archive such events and share them with others who might understand. This labour of building up evidence, putting things in “the box” could instead be thought about as trying to archive a reality so often denied. Making connections between seemingly disparate individual events to form a tapestry of interconnected experiences might be understood as a fatalistic pessimism, but this then would ignore the significant ways that Nadia repeatedly challenges the reproduction of racism or attempts to forge space for others like herself to continue to endure and survive within the and beyond the institution of Cambridge. In this, I argue she demonstrates not a fatalistic pessimism, but a form of “lateral agency” (Berlant, 2011) as a mode of resistance, or enduring social relations as a demonstration of resistance to them (Lorde, 1988).

To support this claim, I focus on an example of this compulsion to archive experiences in the box. I take seriously Nadia’s tendency to “go off on a rant” or “tangent” to give a sense of her social reality. In many ways, I offer what we might understand as a “woke” reading of a series of Facebook discussions that garnered wider media attention and that Nadia was significantly involved in. I provide contrasting readings of the events to demonstrate that the social construction of reality is bound up with affective framings of events which are complex, textured, but ultimately might better be thought of as expressing differential *historically constituted* dispositions or affective modalities, rather than essential characteristics of individual bodies. This is to say that seeing is bound up in complex ways through affective processes – that we *see emotionally* (Moreno Figueroa, 2008).

### [Boxing, Archiving, Showing the Receipts](#)

Despite my insistence that Nadia did not need to provide evidence of the Facebook arguments that she mentioned, she insisted. As such, the archive of material I had around two debates grew exponentially. What began as a series of social media posts quickly generated a vast array of public critique and speculation. These debates took place in Pembroke College at the

University of Cambridge in March 2016 and February 2017<sup>22</sup> and centred upon food, and the theme of a Junior Parlor Committee (JPC<sup>23</sup>)-organized party (bop), respectively. I examine Nadia's understanding of these debates as manifestations of a wider context. They were not only offensive but, for Nadia, typical demonstrations of the realities of racism within the University context. Nadia's insistence on providing further evidence and repeated additions and asides demonstrated that her understanding of the two events was inseparable from a wider context, where so often racism is denied outright or displaced or registered as an exceptional phenomenon rather than a part of the fabric of everyday life (much in line with Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Wekker, 2016; Aveling, 2002; Eddo-Lodge, 2018).

As Nadia recalled the events, her recollection jumped from event to event, was filled with asides and reflections and was evidently difficult to simply explain in full detail in a linear narrative fashion. This is precisely because the events became intelligible and held deep affective resonances as part of a *textured reality*, rather than in isolation, for Nadia. Indeed, the understanding of the events as isolated incidents or 'moments' in many ways appeared to exacerbate their injurious nature or effects.

### The Bop Debate

This debate centred on the cancellation of a "Bop" by Pembroke College's JPC, which broke with an informal tradition whereby the JPC repeated the theme of the first bop for an incoming year (in this case the "Freshers 2013") with the final bop for the students (Graduating Summer 2016). This theme was "Around the World in 80 Days", a reference to a classic adventure novel by French writer Jules Verne, the story of Phileas Fogg, a man from London who takes part in a wager to travel the world in 80 days. The JPC sent out an email to the undergraduate population which read, according to *The Telegraph*: "Having discussed the matter at length as a committee, the JPC have decided that the most appropriate action is to

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<sup>22</sup> The differential descriptions of the events come from Nadia's own descriptions, provided to me in the interview; from the Facebook threads that Nadia insisted on sharing with me after the interview in order to support her claims; and to a much lesser extent, from the newspaper coverage of the debates that Nadia speaks about.

<sup>23</sup> The JPC (Junior Parlor Committee) is an elected body of undergraduate representatives. Each of the Cambridge Colleges has something similar (usually having a "junior", "middle" and "senior" parlor of some kind, for each of the undergraduate, postgraduate, and postdoc/faculty/fellowship respectively). The student versions vote for a number of identity-based positions (ethnic minorities officer, women's office) and a number of other kinds of positions (President, social secretaries and entertainment officers etc.) who go on to organize events, deal with budgets and work to represent various interests and groups within college life.

break with the tradition of reusing finalists' first fresher BOP theme. Instead we are using an alternative theme, to avoid the potential for offence to be caused by the theme 'Around the World in 80 Days'" (The Telegraph, 2016).

The changing of the Bop theme triggered an online debate on the *Pembroke Exchange*<sup>24</sup> on *Facebook* on the 8<sup>th</sup> March 2016 and rapidly gained much wider media attention (Cole, 2016; Dunn, 2016; BBC, 2016). The contention rested on why the theme was considered inappropriate (if at all) and whether the cancellation of such a theme had implications in the realm of freedom of expression. The debate escalated quickly.

### The Food Debate

The second debate was sparked when Paris re-posted an anonymous post from the *Facebook* page *Grudgebridge*<sup>25</sup> page which read,

“Dear Pembroke catering staff,  
Stop mixing mango and beef and calling it 'Jamaican Stew', it's rude”

This “Grudgebridge” comment was originally posted online on the 8<sup>th</sup> February 2017 and was re-posted on the *Pembroke Catering Page*<sup>26</sup> on the 9<sup>th</sup> February 2017. The central issue that was presented in the ensuing argument was one over the cultural misrepresentation of national or regional cuisine. Whilst the beginning of the discussion was playful in its tone, the discussion became a heated debate about privilege, multiculturalism, “political correctness,” and minority invalidation.

Unlike the “Bop” debate, the food debate took a little longer to receive media attention and was not widely discussed in (online) newspapers until the 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> February (Pells, 2017;

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<sup>24</sup> A Facebook discussion group with a link to the Pembroke JPC website. It is described as a “Forum for people at Pembroke to give away stuff they no longer need”. The group also features extensive information about various kinds of pastoral support the college offers. It is also used as a discussion page for various issues concerning the student population at the College.

<sup>25</sup> A Facebook group where anonymised messages are posted for all to see criticising elements of the University of Cambridge and those who attend there. The criticisms are meant to be humorous in the first instance, although there is often controversy as to whether some post amount of bullying.

<sup>26</sup> A Facebook discussion group specifically for Pembroke College students to discuss the catering in their canteen (known to the students as “Trough”).

Sheppard, 2017; Molden, 2017). Many of these articles referenced in some way the first online article by the Cambridge *Tab* on the 20<sup>th</sup> February (Wijetilaka, 2017).

When Nadia reflected on this debate, she foregrounded the original context of the post as,

**Nadia:** all the BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] people started commenting like- it was a joke like- we found it funny- because Pembroke has this thing, the “ethnic food of the day” and it’s like “Indian fish piece” and stuff [...] So every day they have to have like Thai this and Nigerian this, Jamaican this- and it’s just like not- they had this Chinese chicken thing and my friend was like- commented like “we haven’t seen this shit in like 5000 years of civilization” and everyone- it was funny like. I even posted this comment because they had this Tunisian thing that was like tofu, rice and I was like “what is that?” I was like, “I can guarantee you no Arab eats tofu”. So we all posted this. And then like whatever. And then some white guy goes “and the Yorkshire puddings are awful” which is like- it’s funny- it’s funny, but it’s not the place.

Nadia described how the debate rapidly escalated from the original understanding of the comments as humorous.

**Nadia:** “[...] **And then my friend- she’s white but she’s woke and everything-** decides 5 days later she’s going to @ him and say “Next time leave your **white privilege** out of something that a black man is saying” and **then it became a race war** and people were like- the same Indian guy who was commenting on the other post was like “yeah, you BME people need to get over it, just because the Indian food they serve in hall isn’t from my dad’s Mumbai high-rise back in India doesn’t mean you have to complain about everything” and like they were like “**you guys are snowflakes**” basically saying “you must be deluded and so arrogant to complain about the food at the world’s best institution” and were like “how dare you- you’re going to offend the catering staff” and we just messaged back saying “this whole page is criticising the fucking catering staff, why are you only picking this post to make it **as if we’re offending people**” and they were like “**check your privilege**” and loads of BME people were like “we’re not

going to check our privilege because you don't know what kind of privilege we don't have". **Again, race war. And it divided Pembroke *again*.**

Nadia describes the escalation of the commentary around the catering provision as moving from "a joke" to a "race war." She tells us that this was typical as she repeats this phrasing, "Again, race war. And it divided Pembroke *again*." When the language of "privilege" and racial positioning enter the debate as ways of articulating what's going on, "Next time leave your white privilege out of something that a black man is saying," this is understood to have triggered this escalation. The discussion becomes filled with accusations surrounding "privilege," "snowflakes," and "offending people." A set of ethical obligations are contested, "check your privilege," and "we're not going to check our privilege because..." In focusing on the language of repetition, the "again," there is a clear sense that this debate is not unique. Rather, the event itself becomes a symbolic battleground for a much wider set of political contestations surrounding the affective assemblage and reception of offence in more public discourse. The debate apparently struck a nerve or tapped into something that was already ongoing. Importantly, though I focus much more on a close analysis of the Bop debate on Facebook, the two events were inseparable for Nadia and news outlets similarly made links between the two of them.

If the debate clearly struck into something already ongoing which facilitated a feeling of something of a "race war" coming up "again," there is also a curious juxtaposition embedded within this. Both parties in some way appear to understand the debate as articulating something beyond itself (it's clearly not *just* about food), yet there appears to be little agreement on what this wider meaning *is* or more broadly *represents*. I suggest that the tension derives from a "war" over meaning, which is constituted through the differential framing and contextualisation of the events. To take seriously how and why such a rapid escalation of a post intended to be humorous can become a "race war" requires a careful consideration of how we constitute or render intelligible the affective *texture* that have a certain *already there-ness* to them. I highlight how differential framings of the events make them differentially legible and significant and demonstrate starkly contrasting constructions of reality for the different social actors involved. However, in bracketing off the (work) in frame(work) I highlight a combination of emotional investment and effort that is apparent in

maintaining a way of seeing and interpreting the world. This is to argue that perception is not innocent, but rather filtered through particular technologies of perception (Haraway, 1988).

### Frame(work)

I deploy the language of frame(work) which is my own concept borrowing from and synthesizing conceptual devices from Natasha Warikoo's (2016) *The Diversity Bargain* with the insights of Ahmed (2010), following Hochschild (Hochschild, 1979), of the *patterned entitlements* and forms of *emotion work* embedded in social life. I use frame(work) to highlight those ways of viewing the world (frames), rather than being modalities of *modest witnessing* (Haraway, 2004), are filtered through complex webs of affective, ontological, and epistemological positions which, in turn, (re)produce particular modes of seeing through feeling. Work is separated with parenthesis to highlight that this process is a set of operations which are also active, as we both work on them as they work on us (Butler, 2015). Thus, frames are not just theories of knowledge *applied* to a situation, they are in turn worked on, work on, and work through the subjects that deploy and maintain them<sup>27</sup>.

When discussing why the JPC, of which Nadia was a member, had decided to not reuse the Bop theme of *Around the World in 80 Days*, Nadia highlighted the way in which the racist depictions and costumes worn by members of the college in the first Bop was obvious, demonstrable, and yet simultaneously denied.

**Nadia:** [Sai] was like, "nothing was wrong, here's the photo album"- the first picture (he's Indian)- the first picture is of him dressed as a Chinese peasant farmer with eyeliner to make his eyes look thinner. The first picture in the album! And he's there like "oh no, nothing was offensive."

For Nadia, the racism was clear: the first photo on the thread showed this. Thus, it should have been self-evident that the theme needed to be changed. Yet, the entry point into the

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<sup>27</sup> In some ways, one could perhaps use "doxa" (Bourdieu) or "discourse" (Foucault) to capture this, but my use of a different genealogy and citational practice is to highlight the strength of the affective pull of such frame(work)s

debate online on Facebook was through the understanding of what the event meant for the previous Entertainment [Ents] Officer of the JPC, a white male undergraduate student I name “Matthew”.<sup>28</sup>



I'd like to express my feelings towards the JPC's decision not to repeat the bop theme "Around the world in 80 Days" (when I picked as Ents Office of the 13 freshers' bop) on the grounds of its potential to cause offence.

Yes, some inappropriate costumes based on culturally significant clothing, iconography or art could be attached to this theme. However, doesn't any theme contain aspects which could be spun into an offensive costume? I felt confident when I chose the theme that the students of Pembroke would dress sensibly, and wasn't proven wrong at the time.

I feel that deliberately changing the theme implies that the student body isn't capable of dressing appropriately by itself, and that the JPC feels it has to impose this on us. This seems overly controlling, and a little insulting. It's also very upsetting to have my own theme effectively banned on the grounds of its offensiveness, as this reflects badly on me.

I know that bop themes aren't the most important thing in the world, and hope everyone has a great time. I'm mostly just upset that I can't use the man-sized hot air balloon costume I made.



Write a comment...



Matthew states that any theme could contain potentially offensive aspects. When he chose the theme, he believed that students dressed appropriately. For Matthew, changing the theme implies that students are incapable of making an appropriate decision about dress which is both “controlling” and “insulting”. He finds it “upsetting” as this reflects badly on him for having picked the theme. His hurt comes both from the patronizing level of control and from a claim his judgement was inappropriate.

Matthew’s framing work relies on centring of his own intention and by extension his faith in his peers. He suggests that claiming students have an incapacity to dress appropriately (not offensively) would suggest a deficiency in their cognitive ability or reason. The frame works

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<sup>28</sup> To grant an additional layer of anonymity, I have used a free online program to construct replicas of the Facebook comments as they appeared online. The text is the same but images and other identifying information removed.

to suggest that to be *reasonable* individual is to be liberal. I call this frame the *liberal individual frame(work)*.

He maintains this frame through reframing or deflecting the offence onto the “insulting” and “controlling” JPC. He *felt confident* that students would dress sensibly and that he “wasn’t proven wrong at the time”. The reality for him was that no racism took place. He uses the photo album of costumes at the previous event as evidence of the lack of racist costuming (something that Nadia explicitly stated was not the case, focusing on the Chinese peasant farmer costume).

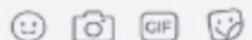
Matthew receives support peers. For example,



Agreed. Also, more people will have been offended by this mollycoddling intervention than the one or two that would have had some passing thought about some mildly questionable outfit here and there. Another classic example of 'there are bigger things to be worried about' I feel



Write a comment...





Matthew

8 March 2016 · 

It seems like a few people share my feelings. As such it'd be nice to have an open discussion about reinstating the "Around the World in 80 Days" theme for next term's bop



Write a comment...



One example, Samuel, another white male student, argues that a larger number of people will have been offended at the “mollycoddling intervention” than the “one or two” who would have held some “passing thought” at a “mildly questionable outfit”. Thus, “there are bigger things to worry about”. Again, the maintenance of the frame simultaneously relies upon a deflection of the issue elsewhere and a denial of an issue having taken place.

This liberal individual frame(work) necessarily relies upon a wider conception of racism as *exception* or *exceptional*. Wendy Brown in *States of Injury* (1995:27) argues,

“This effort, which strives to establish racism, sexism, and homophobia as morally heinous in the law, and to prosecute its individual perpetrators [...] delimits a specific site of blame for suffering by constituting sovereign subjects and events as responsible for the “injury” of social subordination.”

Brown continues,

“Social injury such as that conveyed through derogatory speech becomes that which is “unacceptable” and “individually culpable” rather than that which symptomizes deep political distress in a culture; injury is thereby rendered intentional and individual” (*Ibid.*27-8)

This focus on individual culpability limits a line of interpretation for injury towards individual bodies, rather than structures of power and domination that cannot be fixed with specific restitutive mechanisms. Indeed, restitution is only possible if one assumes that injury is constructed in a single moment and action, rather than functioning as a stratified and complex historical potentiality.

These appeals to a reasonable and rational individual subject appear as discursive deflections or diversions that can work to position oneself as aware of a particular dynamic on the surface, whilst simultaneously denying the possibility of one's involvement or complicity within those very dynamics. Deflection then orientates us away from *structures* to presumed *pathological individuals*. This is a problematic misconceptualisation of the nature and workings of power outlined by a wide range of theorists, particularly in relation to sexism and racism which actively then reproduces the dynamic that is ostensibly displaced (see for example Brown, 1995:27-8; Hytten & Warren, 2003; Srivastava, 2005; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Ahmed, 2012:44; Whitley & Page, 2015; Jackson & Sundaram, 2018).

For Matthew, to understand himself and others as rational individuals capable of making decisions that reflect this, the reality of racism that Nadia sees in the Chinese peasant farmer costume must be denied. The rational liberal self that relies on the presupposition and maintenance of "the racist" as an exceptional figure cannot survive a notion of its own complicity within a structure of violence. If a frame(work) is a way of seeing, it appears simultaneously as a way of not seeing. *Racism does exist, but it exists outside of my body (and institution). Out there, not here.*



Sai

8 March 2016 · 🌐

I don't feel that dressing up in costumes that celebrate cultural diversity should be reprimanded. Can't we take joy in spending an evening in the national dress of another country? Samuel's right, we have bigger issues on our plates than making a mountain out of a molehill. This just serves to perpetuate the downward spiral of extreme political correctness that I feel that universities across the world seems to be succumbing to. We can do better than this. We're Pembroke!

👍 17



Write a comment...



“Sai,” the “Indian man” Nadia mentions, claims that celebrating diversity should not be reprimanded. Sai says, “Can't **we** take joy in spending the evening in the national dress of another country?” For Sai, imitation is considered a form of flattery and self-exploration. He argues that, “**We** can do better than this. We're Pembroke!” The pride in the elite positioning of the University and College is used to distance from behaviours that are presented as illogical or counterintuitive to normative (presumably liberal) values. Furthermore, this asserts another form of collectivity, one that runs counter to the collective identifications that might interpellate individuals or groups within explicit racialized, ethnic, and gendered terms. The “joy” is cast against those who are assumed to be humourless in the face of cultural exchange. “Joy” here works to maintain a system of distance from the irrationality of “making a mountain out of a molehill”. To kill joy becomes an accusation that shuts down alternative lines of interpretation and maintains a conception that the Other who disagrees is the “killjoy” (Ahmed, 2010, 2017). Indeed, to be “called out” interpellates an individual as part of a wider structure – no longer an atomistic and joyful single unit, but potentially complicit in structures of domination.



Indeed. How are we ever supposed to appreciate non-western cultures if we are supposed to avoid them like the plague?



Write a comment...



Rick asks, “How are we ever supposed to *appreciate* non-western cultures if we are supposed to avoid them like the plague?” The language of “diversity” here is cast within a frame(work) of appreciation. To appreciate: to “recognise the full worth of” and “understand (a situation) fully; grasp the full implications of it”. Here “diversity” appears to move with empathy, “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another”. The pattern of consumption (wearing particular garments) is assumed to facilitate placing oneself in a position to understand the Other through self-transformation, or, as Carolyn Pedwell argues,

“Through empathetic identification with another, it is suggested, one can open oneself up to a different way of knowing and new forms of intersubjectivity which dislodge and rearticulate dominant assumptions... [and] hierarchies.” (Pedwell, 2012:164; Bartky, 1996)

Yet, Pedwell takes a critical approach to the notion that empathy inherently promotes an ethical relation of meaningful understanding and exchange and along these lines I would argue that this frame(work) seems to imply that an encounter with the Other through certain material forms of imitation (national dress) is enough to understand (and even flatter) the Other in its attempt. Yet, curious here, if understanding is the key, is that criticism of this process from the bodies that are claimed are represented, then becomes unhearable. The gaze is assumed to be unidirectional: the subject “taking on” the other culture is assumed to escape a critical gaze back from the Other being imitated. This appears to resonate deeply with Nadia’s general scepticism expressed much earlier in the chapter, people just “don’t know reality” and are “ignorant” in that there appears to be a complete failure to properly

understand the complexities of the issue at hand in favour of re-centring the hurt feelings of Matthew as an individual. This, in turn, is similar to how “Olivia,” a woman of colour at Pembroke, responds to the ongoing argument on Facebook.



Dear all.

Who actually cares that much about the principle of a bop theme. This is not symptomatic of a wider conspiracy of the JPC to curb your freedom of expression. The JPC is not accusing you personally of racism. This is actually not about you. This is literally a way to minimise the risk of people of colour having a shit night, being reminded that we share a college with ignorant people who don't understand the impact of their 'harmless' bop outfit. It would be great if there was a guarantee that everyone was woke enough to not abuse this inherently innocent theme, but it's just easier with this theme than others to make mistakes. It's also a lot easier to make mistakes when you don't have the lived experiences of an ethnic minority in the UK, or have an ethnic background in a historically colonised country. The problems with power dynamics are less obvious. When these mistakes are a risk, however small or large, in the context of the serious problems that bop presents like sexual assault, binge-drinking, over-crowding, the presence of unaccountable non-Valencians, can the JPC really be blamed for wanting to eliminate this one element? This isn't a big deal. It's a bop. Chill out.

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Write a comment...



Olivia reframes the cancelling of the theme not as something accusatory, but as a means of minimizing risk of students of colour having a “shit” night out. Olivia explicitly challenges the liberal individual frame(work) asserted by Matthew, saying “This is actually not about you” and re-focuses the attention from Matthew’s hurt at being accused of being hurtful, to the students of colour in the College. She argues that an outfit might seem harmless to some who are not “woke”. “Woke” meaning in the sense of being awakened in reference to discussions of social justice and critical racial liberation politics.

Whilst the liberal individual frame(work) assumes a state of understanding has already been achieved within the context of a presumably liberal, Rights-supporting society, Olivia’s

frame(work) claims that racism is an ordinary rather than exceptional affect. This economy of “wokeness” is unevenly distributed for Olivia, who highlights the importance of “lived experiences” in contributing to *becoming* “woke”. Indeed, “the problems with power dynamics are less obvious” for those who do not share the experiences of being an ethnic minority in the UK or part of a historically colonized country.

Volition also plays an important yet ambivalent role within Olivia’s formulation. Her wording, “It would be great if there was a guarantee that everyone was woke enough to not abuse this inherently innocent theme” seems to imply the intention to abuse (*abuse* after all is received from an *abuser*). Yet, Olivia also points out that “it’s just easier with this theme than others to make mistakes” which is much less definite in its evocation of volition. Indeed, a mistake can be accidental. When it comes to making “mistakes” in Olivia’s frame, it is the “woke” who can dictate the boundaries of what constitutes a “mistake”. The “woke” are more likely to be those who have “lived experience” which allows them to render visible histories of violence which continue contemporarily in the “mistakes” of behaviour. Thus, wokeness is about embodied knowledge contributing to possibilities in action, versus Matthew’s intention and pure reason framework.

I call this the “pragmatic racial frame(work)”. What is foregrounded here is the necessity of a concrete action to protect people of colour, already assuming there is a strong likelihood with the theme to make “mistakes”. What is minimized is the focus on individual accusation in favour of foregrounding understanding through the “lived experience” of marginalised groups. Overall, within the pragmatic racial frame(work) the importance is placed on the defence of minority bodies and the minimization of “risk” of racism, that which disallows the comfort of certain bodies precisely because of the comfortable sinking of other bodies into space (Ahmed, 2012:40-2).

“Reality,” or the construction of the “real,” is very much what is at stake in the various frame(work)s. For Nadia, the visual (the photographic evidence of the racist costuming at the previous event) is taken as that which ought to be self-evident. This is similar to how the same photos are used by Matthew and his insistence that he “was not proven wrong at the time”. Various senses of incredulity stem from a belief in the visual as a truth-bearing device. Yet, if

the same visual evidence can be used to make a claim for two incommensurable views, it necessitates an understanding of the visual as organised through particular lenses or frames. Certain grids of intelligibility and emotional attachments render the possibility of “seeing” or, perhaps more broadly, facilitate a particular dynamic sensory way of “knowing”.

For Sai, wearing a “costume” that “celebrates cultural diversity” is an act to be celebrated in its imperfections and appears unproblematic. Similarly, Matthew’s inability to “see” the racism that Nadia highlights in the visual evidence is lacking precisely because of his working of a particular frame(work) whereby it becomes almost impossible to see the outfits as *racist* because racism is presumed to refer to an individual intention to harm. To make an appeal to the self-evident nature of reality (what is ‘actually’ there in visual evidence) necessitates an understanding of the self who makes an appeal to the evidence.

Nadia insisted on providing evidence of this debate through photographs. Nadia’s re-counting of events tied to racism comes as a repeated compulsion precisely when those experiences are continuously dis-counted. Indeed, what appears to ‘count’ as undeniable proof for Nadia is simultaneously counted and dis-counted in a move that works to obscure what she believes ought to be revealed.

The differential means of attending to the debates through multiple forms of frame(work) construct a vision of self with particular horizons, structures of feeling, and orientations towards others. These frame(work)s participate in the construction of reality that they name. For example, within the liberal individual frame(work), Matthew’s attention on his own feelings of being hurt at being assumed to be hurtful work to foreground a model of self which refuses complicity within a system of racism, precisely because it repudiates and locates racism as external to the ‘good’ and ‘liberal’ self. This does not appear to allow the possibility of taking responsibility for racism beyond an externalization of racism to presumed pathological others. The alternative frame(work)s provided by Olivia and Nadia on the other hand maintains a self through a conception of being “woke”. The maintenance of being “woke” relies on a continued attending to a range of voices which at times implicitly and at other times explicitly demand a seeing and being seen; a hearing and being heard not only

through Whiteness, but also may at times insist on killing the joy of another (Ahmed, 2010, 2017).

It seems there is a keenly felt emotional attachment to a particular way of seeing. To accept another way of seeing may mortify a particular way of being. Yet, the necessity to see for certain subjects, the ability to name racism as a structure which impacts not only on a model of self, but on the materiality of one's existence, provides some subjects with a means of no-longer blaming themselves, whilst simultaneously becoming unbearable, unhearable and unintelligible for others. Thus, we might conclude that the visual or sensory is stratified in several highly complex ways, but to capture this stratification, we need to attend to the various forms of emotional attachment and self-work that go into maintaining a frame(work).

#### (un)Boxing: Realising, Archiving and Waking as Lateral Agency

“[T]he very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. [...] None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.” (Morrison, 1975)

Becoming “woke” appears as a sense of realization: a way of seeing and understanding the world that runs apparently counter to particular ways of seeing which might individualise or exceptionalise something like racial inequalities or racism more broadly. To “realize” as a verb, has multiple meanings and exploring these is a useful exercise for thinking through what “wokeness” appears to be about.

# realize

/ˈrɪəlaɪz/

See definitions in:

All

Linguistics

Music

Finance

verb

gerund or present participle: **realising**

1. become fully aware of (something) as a fact; understand clearly.

"he realized his mistake at once"

Similar:

register

perceive

discern

notice

understand

grasp

take in



2. cause to happen.

"his worst fears have been realized"

- achieve (something desired or anticipated); fulfil.

"it is only now that she is beginning to realize her potential"

Similar:

fulfil

achieve

accomplish

make real

make a reality



3. give actual or physical form to.

"the stage designs have been beautifully realized"

- use (a linguistic feature) in a particular spoken or written form.

"the item can be realized with a fully low front vowel"

- MUSIC

add to or complete (a piece of music left sparsely notated by the composer).

"other reconstruction work has involved realizing short score into full score"

4. make (a profit) from a transaction.

"she realized a profit of \$100,000"

Similar:

make

obtain

clear

acquire

gain

bring in

reap

earn



- be sold for.

"the drawings are expected to realize £500,000"

- convert (an asset) into cash.

"he realized all the assets in her trust fund"

Similar:

cash in

convert into cash

liquidate

capitalize

Figure 5: Google Search "Realise Definition" [Date Accessed 04/06/2021]

This first sense of "realize" relates to matters of perception or consciousness: to realize as a mode of seeing. Logically, one could "see" inequalities without this necessarily conferring a sense of ethical obligations. One could know without truly caring. The second sense of "realize" refers to a sense of manifestation or activity which I would argue appear constitutive of the "woke" subject. To "cause" or "give form" imply an acting in the world. The combination of these two aspects of realizing something constituting a way of being, acting or doing in the world appear to describe the dualistic nature of being or becoming "woke".

For Olivia, her "woke" intervention (this use of pragmatic racial frame(work)) into the debate was to reframe the issue as not about Matthew's individual feelings of being hurt at the implication of being hurtful through his theme selection. Rather, the frame(work) that Olivia offers asks Matthew de-centre his own individual hurt feelings and consider the event as embedded within a wider circuit of historical activity to think more about the racialized social

subjects who endure ongoing conditions of racism. It is a step to reconfigure what might be understood as *white fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018).

This set of interventions is echoed by Paris, a black gay student at Pembroke, who further demands a reconceptualization and prioritization of feeling with regards the debates.



I'm used to as a minority student here being constantly invalidated when flagging up specific issues which is just the culture at Pembroke, but Sai you don't speak on behalf of all minorities and neither do I, but if people feel their cultures are misrepresented they have the right to address this. There are some of you who constantly feel the need to add your two pence or undermine conversations started by minorities about their representation here? Sure, I know there are bigger issues, but microaggressions are a reality of the everyday existence of many people of colour. Maybe try and appreciate this rather than swooping in to undermine again and again. Some of you go to access forums and go 'oh yeah there aren't any black students!' but for those few minorities who are here, you routinely silence and undermine when we flag up issues relevant to us. You are already empowered by an institution which is dominated by whiteness yet pile on whenever minorities raise concerns and declare some perceived 'agenda' or 'minority takeover'. What are you so afraid of?

 18



Write a comment...



Paris highlights the more quotidian and enduring ways that, whilst an uneven representation of students of colour might be acknowledged more broadly, when minority students speak about cultural misrepresentation, they are repeatedly “invalidated”. For Paris, racism is a quotidian experience. He takes exception to the unreasonable or excessive scrutiny of students of colour. Paris argues that this skepticism towards the feeling of students of colour is the real issue. When racism is thought about as exceptional, any issue minority students

might have with regards to something like misrepresentation are already cast as unwelcome intrusions into the otherwise ostensibly *good* functioning of the institution<sup>29</sup>.

Paris asks, “What are you so afraid of?” as a powerful challenge speaking to the contradictions embedded within contemporary understandings of racism as exceptional. *If*, as the liberal individual frame(work) suggests, we are all equal, and stand together against racism as a “badness” located within a historical past, working collectively to quash its contemporary manifestations, then why would students of colour talking about their experience of misrepresentation and violence not be welcome? For Paris, the reflections of others about lack of diversity and representation are hollow when any issues minority students have are dismissed so easily (I return Paris’ critique in the next chapter). In this sense, whilst a problem might be acknowledged or “realized” in the sense of being “seen,” it misses the second important sense of “realizing” or doing something about it, precisely because the filter through which the issue is conceptualized *a priori* removes the possibility for the issue’s legibility or intelligibility in the first instance. In this sense, the minority student is unable to “speak” (or be “heard”) when it is assumed that the problem can only be conceptualized as individual exception rather than an ongoing product of a series of historical relationships. To be “woke” then appears to suggest that one cannot bifurcate action, person, and context. Being “woke” relies upon a complex stitching together of events to form an interpretative reality or *texture*. *The fact that others are unwilling to hear that there might be a problem, in the language and framings of those who experience the problem, is itself constitutive of the problem.*

To think in this way about “wokeness” might allow us now to return to Nadia’s compulsion to provide, collect, or store “evidence” of the ongoing nature of racialization or discrimination more broadly. To reiterate a brief excerpt from Nadia and my discussion of the regularity at which she experiences “offence” in relation to aspects of her identity:

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<sup>29</sup> An argument which resonates with Eddo-Lodge’s (2018) influential blog post and now book *Why I’m no Longer Talking to White People About Race*.

**Nadia:** I'll be offended and I'll like bitch about it and rant about it to a mutual friend and then you **just kind of have to like [pause] mentally put it in the box with like everything else that's happened.**

Nadia expresses deep frustration about those that don't live in "reality." If part of the problem for Nadia (and Olivia and Paris) is that others might accuse them of "exaggerating," or otherwise "invalidate" their experience of reality, part of this archiving, boxing, and recounting of experience might be explained as compulsion to evidence or validate this reality which is unintelligible when one of the dominant manners that such experiences of racism are conceptualized is through a post-racial or exceptional framework (Brown, 1995; Aveling, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Ahmed, 2012).

"Wokeness" constructs a set of ethical obligations that are derived from a mode of making connections or seeing. It might be conceptualized as a kind of agency. Yet, as it is paired with a sense of obligation to educate others (as touched upon in the previous chapter); or provides a means of seeing violence embedded as a product of dispersed and omnipresent repetition; it is not quite simply a kind of absolute or spectacular resistance. It requires we conceptualise a modality of agency beyond the classic binaries of *victim bad, agent good* (as reflected on by authors such as Stringer, 2014 and Gilson, 2016).

The archiving and sharing of experience with others can come as a relief: the construction and validation of a way of seeing. Yet, this way of seeing "reality" is in many ways a product of a violent reality itself which is precisely not chosen. The evidencing of this experience offers tools for potential transformation. Yet, when these experiences are invalidated due to the uneven prioritization of certain modes of seeing, the transformative potential or "agency" or "resistance" embedded within this archiving process can feel pyrrhic or indeed deeply frustrating. If being "woke" relies also on an attempt to "awaken" others to the realities of something like everyday racism and the "reality" of inequalities, it demands also a critical and reflexive labour on the part of others that might not be "awake" because of what might be called a lack of direct or visceral experience of something like racial inequality. This is to say, you might need help to "get it" if you're not "in it." Yet this "getting it" requires a self that is

vulnerable to the possibilities that we might not fully understand or know. Thus, the next chapter explores the process of *becoming* woke, and how this might translate to practices.

## Chapter 6: Waking Up: Becoming, Being and Staying “Woke”

This chapter describes becoming and being “woke” as a continuation of the politics of “political correctness”. I describe “wokeness” as an ongoing affective political and ethical orientation which relies upon a number of enabling practices or “technologies” (Foucault, 1997) to maintain.

Being or becoming “woke” resist simple definition. That wokeness is an *affective* and *ongoing* sensibility or orientation means that it is a precarious relation that cannot be finally, successfully, or permanently inhabited. Indeed, being or becoming “woke,” perhaps counterintuitively, only holds logic as a way of being insofar as one is constantly and necessarily at risk of falling short in one’s attempt to achieve it. I demonstrate that “wokeness” shares similarities with how Muñoz (2009:1) describes “queerness as horizon,” in that “wokeness” might best be understood as an imaginative utopian politics which “longingly propels us onwards” and reaches to produce enabling conditions of livability with an understanding that present conditions are “toxic and impoverished for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and “rational” expectations” (*Ibid.*27). It is a utopian project founded on the principles of concrete rather than abstract utopias (*Ibid.*).

The ethical and political (re)orientation of “wokeness” can be understood as a set of interventions and techniques (“technologies”) aimed at transformation of present conditions. Through a demonstration of alternative means of relating to others through practices of *reflexivity*, an understanding of oneself as a *partial and positional knower*, guided by a *vulnerable and open ontology of the self* that demands a certain kind of *relational empathy*, “wokeness” is a reorientation of the horizon, purpose, and conceptualization of the political. To be “woke” acts as a shorthand for “getting it” or being conscious to particular social, cultural and political dynamics and acting in accordance with this information. It is what we might call a politic or ethics of “civility” or “friendship” (Gandhi, 2006). This chapter broadly describes what goes into “getting it,” the challenges of maintaining this position (however precariously), and begins to think through the ethical and ontological dimensions of this “woke” self.

## Woke Being: Technologies of the Self

Foucault (1997:225) describes “technologies” as “matrix of practical reason,” which, he outlines have four major types: production, sign systems, power, and the self. For Foucault, these “technologies hardly ever function separately, although each of them is associated with a certain type of domination” and that “This contact between technologies of domination of others [power] and those of the self I call governmentality.” Foucault, within this interview on *technologies of the self*, discusses the practical logics underpinning relations between knowing and care and the broad historical shifts he sees as characterizing different ethical relations to the self. For example, he states,

“To summarize: there has been an inversion between the hierarchy of the two principles of antiquity: “Take care of yourself” and “Know thyself”. In Greco-Roman culture of knowledge of oneself appeared as the consequence of taking care of yourself. In the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle.” (*Ibid.*228)

Rather than faithfully or dogmatically reiterating Foucault’s full account of the nuances of these shifts, I am instead interested in trying to uncover the relations to self, knowledge, care, and others that appear embedded within a description of the “woke” subject and its other, which we might term the “sleeping” subject.

What strikes me about the accounts of the “woke subject” (or broader descriptions of *being* “politically correct”) is the set of ethical demands brought about by a particular understanding of the self in relation to others. These guiding principles, understood as *technologies of wokeness*, I label: *positionality* (as an understanding of one’s sense of self in historical relation with others); *reflexivity* (as a necessary and ethical practice of self-interrogation utilizing knowledge of oneself to understand how one does and *should* feel and act in relation to others); *vulnerability* (or what we might call epistemic modesty and humility in appreciation of one’s partial perspective of the world which necessitates an openness to the possibility of being ‘wrong’ in one’s own presuppositions about others in the world and the potential inadequacies of extending care to others); and *relational empathy* (understood as a refined

skill constituted through action and practices that demonstrate a reflexive understanding of one's precarious relationality to others). These ethical principles appear to be facilitated through an arrangement of linguistic interventions (trigger warnings, “#notallmen,” calling out etc.), understood as *technologies of offence*, which function as tactical modes of intervention to describe a reorientation of self in the world in relation to others. These signs, terms, and practices also appear to have a signal function to others. The words themselves, or demonstration of particular techniques, become a means of building community with others, demonstrating ethical selfhood, but also function to enable particular action of practice in the world, something we might call pre-figuratively political.

This has much wider implications for how we constitute ethics, politics, and the distribution of *expertise* in relation to the question of doing and being within the world. If there's something apparently “threatening” within the politics of “political correctness” or the “woke” subject, it's that it demands considerable work as part of this set of ethical obligations. It requires simultaneously a deep ontological and epistemic shift. Broadly, then, the language of *technology of the self*, as a lens through which to understand “wokeness,” is a means of thinking about the practical reasoning which my participants describe as underpinning being “woke” or “politically correct” as a way of ethically relating to the world and others. It is a set of practical knowledges and orientations which implicitly or explicitly govern the meaning of relations between the self and others.

### Technologies of Wokeness – Guiding Principles

#### Positionality

In the previous chapter, when discussing the escalation of online debates to a “race war,” Nadia offered a telling phrase to begin thinking through the complexities of *becoming* woke.

**Nadia:** And then my friend – **she's white *but* she's woke and everything...**

If someone is described as white *but* woke, being white appears to serve a limiting function in the constitution of the woke subject. Yet, this limit, given that in the end the white friend

is still described as “woke and everything” (despite her whiteness) tells us that being white is a potential rather than finally limiting barrier to wokeness. Here, Nadia is broadly talking about being awakened to anti-racist politics and thus whiteness becomes a potential barrier to a critical understanding of race and racism.

However, Nadia also offered a clear account where being a person of colour did not automatically equate to being more woke. For instance, Sai, described as Indian, engages in the practice of yellowface and dismisses the critique of other people of colour as a mark of a dubious obsession with political correctness. Thus, much like being white might serve to function as a barrier to becoming woke, being a racialized subject does not necessarily constitute a subject as woke.

However, there was a clear suggestion that these things matter, both implied in Nadia’s description of the various social actors within the event, but also expressed in Olivia’s reframing of the discussion in the previous chapter. Olivia stated,

“It’s a lot easier to make mistakes when you don’t have the lived experiences of an ethnic minority in the UK or have an ethnic background in a historically colonized country. The problems with power dynamics are less obvious.”

The “mistakes” are a reference to the potential to cause offence through racist costuming beyond the intention of the wearer. Olivia’s argument demonstrates that there is a patterned stratification to wokeness which relies upon, yet is not finally reducible to, an economy of experience. This is to suggest that it’s easier to “get it,” or to see the “problem” with certain costumes if one has a specific kind of experience based upon one’s personal history.

Yet, this personal history is not quite reducible to *individual experience*. The interpellation of subjects within these descriptions are precisely collective. Subjects are constituted through their ties to collective positions: Nadia uses the label “white,” whilst Olivia discusses the experience of an “ethnic minority in the UK” or “ethnic background in a historically colonized country.”

The theme of being able to see or not see in relation to one's *position* within social structures, expressed through identity signifiers (such as race, sexuality, gender, social class, disability status or experience) was almost ubiquitous in interviews. For example, at the end of Chapter 4, Byron expresses his frustration at being transformed into a gay caricature by heterosexual women on his university course:

**Byron:** I suppose they view me as a gay person as like a person who sleeps around-homogenises me as the stereotypical gay person [...] I sit there, and I think *why does it have to be that way around for me?* If I did that to them, they'd tell me to bugger-off.

Byron highlights the unique, yet *patterned*, experience of being fashioned into a particular social subject. His experience of the social world is relationally produced in how he is *read* and how he perceived himself (something symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman ([1963]1990) might heuristically label the discrepancy produced through social interaction between *virtual* and *actual* social identity).

Similarly, Sally, the mixed-race Australian woman, in her conversation with the white Australian man in her college, vents her frustration at his apparent lack of respect of her feelings and expertise in the discussion of her identity.

**Sally:** he's never had to think about mixed race issues a day in his life, but it's something that I think about every single day.

The apparent gap in understanding is constituted through repeated experience (or lack thereof) of a particular relational dynamic.

Furthermore, Kathryn and Simeon both highlight an awareness that particular words ("bitch" and "cunt" for Kathryn when used against women; and the word "faggot" for Simeon) have differential impacts on bodies because of "the weight of history" (Kathryn) or a kind of "structuralism" (Simeon) to the words that is explained through particular personal relations to the repetition of the words in denigrating aspects of their own identities (and others

understood as sharing this position). The impact of particular words, for both, is derived from one's position in relation to the history of that word.

What appears key in becoming "woke," then, is a theory of what we could usefully call "positionality." Though the term might take on slightly different meanings, the accounts throughout the study seem to have a resonance with a feminist understanding of *positionality* as a way of understanding and relating to experience. I find the most useful conception of *positionality* for the purpose of this discussion from Linda Alcoff (1988) who attempts to resolve the paradox of speaking from or about an identity (i.e. "woman") without falling into essentialized constructions of such categories. For Alcoff, a theory of *positionality* avoids both the pitfalls of nominalism and essentialism by taking up the category of "woman" as "a position within a moving historical context" (*ibid.*435) whereby

"the concept "woman" is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position, the internal characteristics of the person thus identities are not denoted so much as the external context within which that person is situated. The external situation determines the person's relative position, just as the position of a pawn on a chessboard is considered safe or dangerous, powerful or weak, according to its relation to the other chess pieces." (*ibid.*433)

Importantly, what we call "identity" is not a metaphysical or ontological a priori, but rather a relative position produced by external conditions. Speaking from an identity position reflects an unfolding and ongoing historical situation rather than an essential position. One derives a sense of the world through one's historical predicament, which in turn produces the potential of a patterned affective sensibility or *textured feeling* of being in the world.

For my participants above, their identity is understood to offer a guiding sense of the world and wider social relations. This in turn has the *potential* to shape and inform one's interpretation of social reality. That is to say, one's *position* within social relations has the potential to shape and inform one's understanding and interpretation of social reality. This is

a common assertion within a range of (particularly but not exclusively<sup>30</sup>) feminist literature which offers a range of concepts to assert positional and relative structures of knowledge. For instance, theories of positionality (Alcoff, 1988) are strongly related to historical and ongoing discussions within feminist theory about the utility of “standpoint” theory (Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1992; Janack, 1997) or “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1988).

Importantly, however, the claim is not merely that one’s experience is uncritically direct evidence or “proof” of something (Scott, 1991), but rather can be understood a basis from which to work when combined with other critical tools of self- and societal interrogation. This is then to argue that positionality becomes important as it links to a related practice of reflexivity.

#### Reflexivity

The reason that *positionality* appears to matter so much in these accounts and in understanding how woke subjects *become* woke (how certain subjects appear to have an easier time “getting it” when it comes to accounting for offence), is expressed in a discussion Kathryn provided about her college brother<sup>31</sup>.

**Kathryn:** oh yeah, one guy actually said to me- my college brother- “I feel like scared to say anything because I’m a white man” and I was like [pause] “that must be awful for you” [we both laugh].

**Gavin:** Yeah, and how do you think- or specifically then with your college brother saying that- how do you genuinely feel about that? Or-

**Kathryn:** -I just feel like he’s being a bit self-absorbed. Like if that’s his biggest worry in life- that he’s a white man- he’s obviously not paying enough attention to everything that’s going on around him.

Kathryn’s college brother has fears about saying “anything” because he’s a white man. This is something we both share a laugh over, indicating something of a shared

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<sup>30</sup> This is also a trend within postcolonial literature (for example, see Go, 2016 on *the subaltern standpoint*).

<sup>31</sup> When new students arrive at the University of Cambridge, they are given college “parents” and “siblings”. The “parents” are second- or third-year students who offer the “college child” and their “siblings” a primary set of student faces to offer a point of contact for navigating and easing the transition to university and college life.

recognition in her sarcastic response. Despite the immediate recognition of *something* going on there between the two of us, I ask for clarification. She characterises his response as “self-absorbed” whereby he’s, “obviously not paying attention” to what’s going on around himself. She begins to describe something of a “lack” expressed in his anxieties. Following the above quote, Kathryn outlines a theory of *positionality* in relation to what we might call a necessary technique of *reflexivity*.

**Kathryn:** Like, I guess like yeah you could feel quite on the defence I suppose, if you feel attacked but I feel like it’s not hard to respond to that like feeling of shock or whatever to be like *oh, I’m going to find out why people are saying this*. Because I remember when I first went on Twitter, when I was like 14 or something and I discovered all this like feminist conversation and one of them- I saw this tweet which was like really shocked me at the time- it was like “white college students are awful” and I was like *oh my god, how can she say that? Does she really think that? Does she really think that all white college students are awful? Like how can she say that?* And I was like really shocked but then like I actually started reading her page more because I wanted to understand why she would say that because it really shocked me at the time. When I was like a bit younger. But then once I spent a bit of time reading her tweets more and I followed her on twitter, then I realised that actually she [pause] that everything she was saying was right, but it’s just like understanding that **people shouldn’t have to qualify all of their feelings all of the time**. Because I feel like for me that would have been semantics would be like “oh, but not all white college students” which is obviously like really disregarding when people are like “oh, not all men” or like [Gavin laughs]-

**Gavin:** -Yeah, great way to shut down an argument-

**Kathryn:** -Yeah, so I definitely felt that- I felt that sense of being attacked myself when I read that. And I felt on the defensive and possibly quite insecure but then- **I think the thing that matters is not that people feel that way but to actually pay attention and respond to the feeling. If my college brother is like “I feel scared to speak because I’m a white man” I feel like he’s old enough and has the opportunities to like try and engage with that feeling and to figure out so why is it that I feel that way? Why is it that people are saying these things? And maybe then he would learn more?**

Through discussing her uncomfortable feeling on first encountering a critique of white college students, Kathryn outlines her curiosity to discover the underlying reasons why someone might make a claim about *all white college students* being awful. She posits reading and reflecting on the words of others when such accounts are available (rather than immediately dismissing them through one's own sense of defensiveness) as a kind of ethical imperative, especially when such resources appear available (for example on *Twitter*). A core part of this reflexivity in relation to positionality is to interrogate one's own feelings in relation to the feelings and experiences of others. Yet, Kathryn also offers speculation about why this might not be a more widespread practice.

**Gavin:** Why do you think there isn't a mass movement of people trying to work out where people who say like "I hate white college students" are coming from?

**Kathryn:** **Because people are lazy. I literally think that that's the reason. People are lazy and they don't like to hear that they're wrong. Nobody really likes to hear that they're wrong. I don't. But it needs to be done. I feel like it's just part of life and if you can't be bothered to hear that you're wrong it's just like a character flaw. It's just laziness. I think. Laziness- ignorance- wilful ignorance because I feel like most people know that there's problems in society and they acknowledge that racism exists, same with sexism and homophobia- I feel like most people- at least tacitly are aware of that but they just can't be bothered to go out and change themselves. Or like to read things.** I guess it's probably quite similar with politics as well. People just can't be bothered to educate themselves. Sometimes people can't, which I get. But I feel like most people- at least- definitely people at [The University of] Cambridge- definitely people I go to uni with, can. But they don't. [laughs] In that case I think they're lazy.

**Gavin:** And **where did you first educate yourself then? Was it Twitter?**

**Kathryn:** **Twitter, definitely. I've learnt more about social issues from Twitter than from any other source.** Which is why it always makes me laugh when people are like "why do you spend so much time on your phone when you could be reading books or whatever?" because I've learnt so much from it, like- **I can't even stress enough how much it has changed my worldview. Because I**

**think if I hadn't read stuff on Twitter I wouldn't have heard the opinions anywhere else. Because I feel like people are less scared to say what they think online and I grew up in a very white town, in quite a middle-class-ish area. It wasn't like I wasn't aware of these things, because I was, but I didn't understand them.** But when I read people's tweets like [pause] tweeting about how they've experienced racism or whatever- I don't think I would have got that close to having that conversation with someone in person. Because it just wouldn't come up.

When probed about why others might remain defensive or be unwilling to listen to others' experiences of the world, Kathryn suggests that people are "lazy" in the sense that "they can't be bothered to go out and change themselves." She offers nuance in suggesting that this "laziness" might differentially be problematic arguing that educating oneself might be more or less easy ("sometimes people can't, which I get") which is tacitly linked to educational privilege (as she mentions the laziness of her fellow students at the University of Cambridge). However, she highlights the availability of an increased proximity to accounts of racism using the social media platform *Twitter*. Reading about the experiences of racism, as a white woman who "grew up in a very white town", gave her a kind of proximity that enabled the building of a particular kind of awareness.

For Kathryn, most acknowledge that there are "problems in society and they acknowledge that racism exists, same with sexism and homophobia," but what appears to be lacking for her is the more nuanced level of self-interrogation that might enable a different means of understanding the impact of these forms of domination. For instance, she states that "It wasn't like I wasn't aware of these things [racism, sexism, and homophobia], because I was. But I didn't understand them." To acknowledge the existence of racism, sexism and homophobia appears to be different from an understanding of them. *Understanding* appears to be constituted through a proximity to the experience of the thing. The proximity to experience can be through the accounts of others rather than being direct. Yet, one must be willing to listen and in turn be transformed through that process of listening. Reflexivity thus reflects a dynamic and relational means of listening and knowing the other in relation to the self.

This description of reflexivity as a dynamic and relational practice of knowing the self in relation to both others and wider social structures shares stark similarities to many of the elements of Barbara Myerhoff and Jay Ruby's (1982) description of *reflexivity and its relatives* in the text *A Crack in the Mirror*. The text draws together insights from the field of anthropology about the role and presence of reflexive research practice and paradigms in a similar fashion to James Clifford and George Marcus' later text *Writing Culture* (1986). Crucially, Myerhoff and Ruby (1982:2) argue that,

"A long tradition exists in which thought has been distinguished from unconsidered experience: where life is not merely lived naively without being pondered, but regarded with detachment, creating an awareness that finally separates the one who lives from his [sic] history, society, from other people [...] Reflexive knowledge, then, contained not only messages, but also information as to how it came into being, the process by which it was obtained."

What importantly separates "reflexivity" from similar terms like "reflective", for Myerhoff and Ruby, is what we might characterise as the aim of, and labour undertaken in, intervening into the processes of *knowing*. For instance, Myerhoff and Ruby state that being "reflective" does not have "the requirement of explicit awareness of the implications of our display" (*Ibid.*3). Whilst being "reflective" might demonstrate some capacity to try and engage with how the self as an object feels within a particular situation, "reflexivity" requires that "the mirrors must be doubled, creating an endless regress of possibilities" (*Ibid.*).

To consider Kathryn's above comparison between herself and her college brother through this distinction is productive. Kathryn describes her college brother as "self-absorbed". He reflects, perhaps, on how he might be symbolically (in public discourse) the subject of an ongoing critique (being a "white man" as a symbolic position), but his reflection appears only as a mirror to look back singularly at the self (becoming "self-absorbed"). Kathryn compares this to her own defensiveness when first encountering the tweet, "I hate white college students". Kathryn states that she initially felt defensive when encountering this. She recognises this as a moment where a mirror is held up to her. However, rather than sticking with her own initial feeling of defensiveness, she then goes on, through a continued

engagement with the claim and other sources of knowledge (the accounts of other people of colour making similar reflections on Twitter) to “educate” herself about how and why these claims are constituted by others. What appears particularly crucial in Kathryn’s account is the necessity of interrogating one’s own understanding of the world, and one’s own emotional reactions, through a variety of available tools and discourses. Thus, if positionality is important as an understanding of one’s (the “self’s”) position relative to others, it is important then to highlight the complexities and nuances of how and why people experience the world differently (Scott, 1991). This kind of reflexivity appears deeply hermeneutic but also driven by an ethical imperative to know and understand oneself in a dynamic and ongoing relationality to others.

As will be explored later in the chapter, however, this process of self-interrogation through not merely reflection (as a holding a mirror up to the self), but reflexivity as holding mirrors up to mirrors and seeing the self and others endlessly reflected, is that whilst the self-interrogation is central to both reflection and reflexivity, the purpose and process of reflexivity appears to desire to integrate the knowledge of the other and be transformed through that relational process of knowing. Perhaps one of the most crucial elements to highlight from Kathryn’s account is that she describes this as a process that is conducted by the self (seeking out the accounts of others), but that it in many ways is not an isolated, individual, or monastic self-reflection, as the aim is to engage with and understand the other in order to open oneself up to the possibility of change. This appears also to be an ongoing ethical imperative, which links then to what I term “vulnerability” in epistemic modesty, or *humility*.

Vulnerability (in epistemic modesty/humility)

In the one of the above passages, Kathryn outlines the necessity of being told that one is “wrong.”

**Kathryn: People are lazy and they don’t like to hear that they’re wrong.** Nobody really likes to hear that they’re wrong. I don’t. **But it needs to be done.** I feel like it’s

just part of life and if you can't be bothered to hear that you're wrong it's just like a character flaw.

In chapter 4, Sally also gave an account of how the white Australian man completely misunderstood, for her, the way "race" functioned within their conversation and more broadly as a historical category and process. Yet, especially problematic for Sally was the refusal of the man to listen to her expertise (both personal and academic) about the subject. He was unwilling to hear another line of interpretation. Olivia similarly points out how "mistakes" are easier to make with regards racist costuming for those who do not have a particular set of experiences. The varied disparagements about being unwilling to listen, or to see one's mistakes, appear to speak to a particular orientation surrounding knowledge – that one must be open (or vulnerable) to the possibility that one might not be in a good position to know. Or, one might need to admit that, through one's positionality, one cannot finally understand all things. One must be willing to be open to the possibility of being wrong, of doing the wrong thing, or precisely not understanding another. Yet, rather than assuming being "wrong" as an inherent character flaw, the assumption that one would always be "right" becomes the character flaw. One must then remain vulnerable or open to what one is precisely unable to know directly by virtue of one's position. One needs to remain open to the accounts and experiences of others.

A further example of this comes from Kezza who speaks about a necessity of listening carefully to the accounts of others precisely because she does not (or cannot) have a particular kind of direct experience of a phenomenon by virtue of her positionality.

**Kezza:** I mean, this is probably quite a generic case, but **I mean, as a white woman of privilege the moment like something – probably about finance, class, race, that's when I start to like definitely have like considered arguments and be extremely willing to listen kind of thing.**

**Gavin:** And why do you think you do that?

**Kezza:** Because, I mean, I don't- I think- I'm not a person who has lived those experiences or erm, so it's definitely a- **I come from a fairly privileged position and it wouldn't be my place to lead a discussion of, for example, problems for working-**

**class students when I've never experienced working-class conditions really.** I can of course empathize, and I can of course build on their arguments, maybe, but that's not really my place because I don't feel that is my place.

In lack of direct or embodied understanding of a phenomenon like racism or classism, Kezza outlines the ethical imperative to listen to the accounts of others and learn from them.

However, for many, this ethical imperative to listen to others is paired with an understanding that experience is constituted not necessarily through singular categories. Rather, experience and positionality are composed of and stratified through highly complex relations. For example, Nadia discusses this in the context of the women and non-binary people of colour group FLY, where she mentions that she will often attend meeting to listen to the accounts of others.

**Nadia:** Because sometimes they're not for me. So sometimes they're for specific women of colour and so we like go to listen to people have discussions and things like that. Erm [pause] so sometimes I leave like *oh, solidarity- I listen and I've learnt from these people.* I find it interesting.

"Solidarity," for Nadia, is an outcome of the process of being open or vulnerable to the accounts of others. To listen to how others experience the world and giving the space for others to express their concerns facilitates one's learning and self-improvement. Similarly, this goes into the account of Nisha, an undergraduate woman of colour, in her characterisation of why she likes the idea of being "PC" (Politically Correct) despite it being quite a difficult practice to maintain.

**Nisha:** I quite like the idea of being PC- I think it's important but at the same time it's very, it can very quickly become something where you just don't know what to say and it's like **it's always evolving so you have to keep up with what is PC and what's not.**

**Gavin:** So, what goes into political correctness for you then?

**Nisha:** errrrm, big things like class, and race, and- erm [pause] yeah, those might be two of the biggest I think [pause].

Gavin: Okay, what, erm- what does being politically correct involve or what kind of things-

**Nisha:** -I think it's about being *aware* of history and not like- having that benefit of **hindsight** [pause] and just kind of like with- with education you learn all about that and you you just don't want to fall into that trap of being ignorant about it.

If political correctness involves “being aware of history,” it is simultaneously difficult precisely because “it's always evolving,” thus one must “keep up with what's PC and what's not”. Within these descriptions there is, at varied times, implicit and explicit understanding that social relations are ever *in process* and as a result, knowledge of how to act with and in relation to others is similarly ongoing.

### Relational Empathy

To learn about the lives of others, indeed, to listen to accounts of the deep feelings of others, is understood to facilitate the *potential* conditions for a deep relational empathy when practiced in tandem with reflexivity. For instance, Byron discusses his repeated experiences of offence surrounding “awkward” or “clumsy” questions about his sexuality. He explains how this makes him first more willing to acknowledge when he makes “mistakes” in addressing others, but also causes him to be cautious or reflect on how he addresses others to avoid causing offence.

**Byron:** I avoided saying stuff which I thought could be a bit problematic. So, I suppose I thought twice about what I was saying, so Erm, a little bit [more cautious]. I suppose if I did end up saying the wrong thing, I'd say “I apologise if that was a question” but I'd avoid getting to that place in the first place if that makes sense. I know- or I hope I know like things I'd not say at all. Like, if I met a black person, instead of saying “where are you from?” or “where are you *from* from originally?” like I wouldn't- that's not the sort of stuff I'd get into. So, I suppose it's just about educating myself a bit more.

**Gavin:** Yeah, and why do you think it's important for you to do that?

**Byron:** I suppose it's just about understanding erm how other people feel personally and I suppose- it's an interesting one anyway just to know more about other people and how they live and how they feel but why I don't- **I just don't really want to cause offence to them because I know obviously how it feels myself- it's not nice to be put into those situations.** So, I suppose I'm just conscious of that and I suppose and I don't want to be like slandered as a nasty person [small laugh] I suppose that comes into it as well.

In the above case, the context of Byron being both willing to apologise if he does cause offence, but attempting not to do so in the first place, follows a long discussion about various people in his life who ask him repeatedly intrusive questions about his sexuality in relation to his personal life (particularly questions about whether his twin was homosexual because he was; about his use of *Grindr*<sup>32</sup> and "one-night-stands"). In reflecting on how others inappropriately address him, Byron develops a relational ethic of extending comfort to others through avoiding things which might be "problematic." It is in many ways like the religious principle *treat others as you would like to be treated*.

Ola, a heterosexual Irish postgraduate student echoes some of this sentiment through a slightly different metaphorical lens when discussing her thoughts on "political correctness".

**Ola:** Erm [pause] **political correctness I think [pause] is about giving everybody the space to have the identity that they- that they- or the space where every identity without ascribing or erm negating their experience if that makes sense.** And also it's about not erm [pause] treating all identities equally in er in [long pause]

**Gavin:** What- what goes into that making space for something do you think?

**Ola:** Erm, I think [pause] it- **I think it involves an opening out or an allowance for- for difference.** Erm, and, er [pause] hmmm [pause] **when I see- when I think something is not politically correct, I see it as like shutting down a potential way of experiencing things for somebody.**

**Gavin:** Yeah.

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<sup>32</sup> A location-based social networking app, predominantly used by men seeking intimate and sexual encounters, or relationships with other men.

**Ola:** So being politically correct means not having these like er- not borders- but criteria for what is normal or like what is the acceptable or the main way of looking at something.

[...]

**Ola:** I mean, there erm way that in it's [pause] being aware of political correctness makes you check your language a lot I guess and ways that it makes- I guess for example a college be more inclusive to more cultural or religious or other minorities but I- it feels like it should be more just a general attitude of inclusivity than or- of widely held- or wide acceptance I guess

**Gavin:** okay, yeah yeah. So it [pause]

**Ola:** I feel like the way that it is used a lot now is in the way that it- y'know- like is in this- brings this idea of policing people's actions or pulling out any sort of mistakes in being PC whereas I don't know if that's very helpful as opposed to just thinking about-

**Gavin:** -no, no I think that- tell me if I'm getting this right- you think that it's more about the positive inclusion of people as opposed to the policing of people

**Ola:** Yeah, exactly, exactly

**Gavin:** So, it's often framed in this quite negative light-

**Ola:** -yeah

**Gavin:** -whereas for you it's quite positive? Or can be positive?

**Ola:** -or it can be. And it should be.

For Ola, "political correctness" is a way of "giving space" to others. It is understood as a "general attitude of inclusivity" or "wide acceptance". She contrasts this to the idea of "policing of people". This metaphor of giving space might be understood as facilitating conditions to extend comfort to a range of people. I would label this general attitude a kind of *relational empathy*. If we understand empathy as the ability to understand and share the feeling of another through the shifting of one's viewpoint to another frame of reference, the exercise of reflecting on one's own position to construct and facilitate other ways of being appears central to the politics of "wokeness." This appears to ethically demand changes in one's own behaviour, particularly a willingness to acknowledge that one might be "wrong" or need to apologise to others.

## The Tensions in Becoming and Staying Woke: Technologies of Offence as Strategic Interventions

On one level, the ethics or *guiding principles* that underpin being “woke” appear simple in that they describe relating to others with kindness and being willing to act with a certain kind of humility (being willing to apologise when one causes offence). And for many of my participants, at least on the surface, this was a simple and obvious thing that people *ought* to be willing to do. However, digging a little deeper into participants’ accounts quickly demonstrated that the “matrix of practical reason” that underpins the “technologies” (or guiding principles) of “wokeness” had an incredibly broad range of implications that, whilst ostensibly simple to practice on the surface, required extensive time and energy to practice fully and faithfully.

Whilst I argue that these principles are invariably complex, I focus on four examples that demonstrate some of the problems, paradoxes, and contradictions that come up when exploring how the move from *guiding ethical principles* (technologies of wokeness) to the practice and strategic applications of such principles is a process fraught with tensions.

### Hollow Gestures: *What and Who is this for?*

Some offerings of relational empathy might seem devoid of ‘real’ meaning contextually. This was certainly the case for Paris, who discussed the issue of “virtue signalling.” Virtue signalling, as a *public expression of a moral viewpoint with the intent of communicating one’s own good character*, is conceptualised as a somewhat hollow marker of solidarity. Paris discusses this issue first in relation to both receiving “pity” or “surprise” from others when he mentions experiences of racism but takes issue with others stopping with sentiments rather than moving to concrete action. It is important to attend to the reflexive strategies Paris uses to make his assessment of the apparent genuineness or appropriateness of particularly affective responses to the “discovery” of inequality by others.

**Paris:** -I sometimes- I try to be forgiving because I get like- you [referring generally to many white British students] don't live these experiences and you don't necessarily have a reason to think about it. There's no reason that you in your village up North ever need to think about race like if it doesn't affect you [...] People might say this place is quite white- frame it- even if it's something as mild as like "black people aren't represented in media unless it's through stereotypes" or make like more definitive comments "oh yes, someone said this to me and it's kind of sad" playing the pity role and I feel like it comes from a position of like pitying and looking down on people to be honest. Erm, I do try to be forgiving because not everyone knows- not everyone has to think about it like- some people are genuinely surprised because they've got no idea- like there's just the way- it's a language which then follows that surprise and how they then act on it. Like some of them will be like "WOW! Oh my god" but continue doing whatever. They'll be some people who will be like "oh my god, I didn't realise that there were not black women" but then won't give a shit about a BME access day.

Paris *tries* to be forgiving at the naivety of others with regards to "discovering" racial inequalities which become expressed so often in demonstrations of pity and surprise as he links this to a broader principle of positionality, understanding that for many white students from areas demarcated as more racially or ethnically homogenous, these realisations in some ways are perhaps more genuine. However, Paris also remains critical of the overall productivity of demonstrations of shock or pity when this does not translate into support for concrete initiatives. For Paris, it is not enough to "spot" the problem. Rather, it appears that understanding or recognition ought to construct a sense of ethical obligation that translates feeling into action, lest emotional displays become hollow acts.

Paris extends this critique of "virtue signalling" to discuss the flying of the LGBT+ flag at his college during Pride Month. He offers is a deeply reflexive and critical account of the efficacy and purpose of political gestures and their impact.

**Paris:** And like, I dunno- I just feel like sometimes surprise and even **like trident happiness at some stuff is like just all a performance** because like- when like

Pembroke like- when Pembroke raised its like LBGT+ flag last year I was like “this is a joke” because they raised the flag and then sent an email around being like **“Pembroke college is committed to diversity and making sure people of different backgrounds are comfortable here”** and I was like *well that’s bullshit*. Because, first of all, you’ve got your LGBT+ flag up but you won’t allow gender neutral toilets, so who is this for? Second of all, they have a picture showing diversity and it was three fucking white men! And they’re like, “oh but they’re gay” and it’s like *this is not diversity though!* It was literally like the Master<sup>33</sup>, the LGBT officer at the time who is a white man, and the CUSU LGBT Pres[ident] who is [name omitted] who is a prick. Sorry.

**Gavin:** [Smiles] That’s alright.

**Paris:** **So, it’s like who is this for? It’s like one image of like he- of like the G in LGBT and that’s it.** And it’s like a tilted performance and then some people might be like “Yeah- that’s really great, isn’t it? I can’t believe Pembroke did that!” **But you voted against gender neutral toilets, so do you actually give a shit or is this just virtue signalling?** And it’s like-

**Gavin:** Do you think that happens a lot, that kind of virtue signalling? Do you think that’s a Cambridge-specific thing or do you think that’s much wider?

**Paris:** I think that’s much wider. But I think any college that flew an LGBT flag that doesn’t have gender neutral toilets is taking the piss. That’s it. That’s why you’ll never sharing on my timeline I’m so- not someone- it’s mainly my white friends to be honest like- “so proud of my college- I feel so proud and validated and happy” and it’s like “do your non-binary friends feel happy and validated when they go to the toilet?” “Do I feel happy and validated? Or Is this just for you?” Who is this for? Like, it might be great that like- I mean, just flying a flag- means- I- and I mean I’m not trying to invalidate people who it means something for- that’s fair enough- but *who* does it mean something for? **WHO? Who does it mean something for? Because it means nothing to me. Absolutely nothing.**

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<sup>33</sup> The title of the “Head of House” of Pembroke College.

For Paris, the act of flying the LGBT+ flag during Pride Month is demonstrably a hollow act (or “taking the piss”) when performed instead of more concrete actions that would demonstrate support for the broad spectrum of LGBT+ identities. Paris mentions that Pembroke College did not have gender neutral toilets (indeed, the administration had voted against having them). Similarly, the display of “diversity” for Paris was understood to be nothing more than a performance. For Paris, the act of flying the LGBT+ flag resonates only with a very small element of the LGBT+ community because, in reality, the material conditions for members of the wider LGBT+ community beyond the white gay men that are represented and validated by this act do not match this signal of a supposedly “diverse” (and inclusive) space.

We might learn from this example that it is not simply enough to declare that an institution is “diverse.” Such acts of “virtue signalling” might be understood as problematic in the sense that they appear to be “non-performative” in the sense that “they “work” precisely by not bringing about the effects that they name” (Ahmed, 2006b). The claim that the institution is “diverse,” a declaration ostensibly made by the flying of the flag “works” to gloss over the ways in which the institution does not facilitate the inclusion of non-binary members of the community. Thus, what appears to be a positive move for the inclusion of LGBT+ people in the college renders invisible the way that certain members of this group are not included. What at first appears a “woke” move in its demonstration of solidarity obfuscates the more fundamental and concrete institutional problems.

#### Calling Out: Who am I to Say? Is it My Place?

Maya reflects on two related issues for her that make practicing “woke” particularly difficult. She discusses how her current environment and friendship group, composed primarily of social science students at Cambridge, facilitates continual discussions of social and power dynamics which aid in staying “woke.” Yet, this positionality is constituted and maintained in a somewhat exceptional set of circumstances.

**Maya:** I think I take for granted within the circles in Cambridge that I do run in that people are politically aware, or politically of the same kind of attitude as I am but I’m also aware when people are like- *your politics doesn’t push it far enough, or my politics*

*is more radical, or my politics is more intersectional than yours*, so I am aware of that. And I think, yes, in interactions with friends [outside of Cambridge] it's one of the things that I'm aware of holding back because I'm aware of that they don't understand it as well as I do but like maybe it like doesn't affect you as much or you haven't thought about it as much or your subject doesn't lend itself as much.

I probed Maya on what this understanding of her friendship group at the University of Cambridge as being "politically aware" meant in terms of her relationships with those outside of an environment where political awareness is one of the prominent themes of discussion. In response she offered an anecdote about her time at a Youth Exchange program outside of Cambridge.

**Gavin:** Do you feel like you carry a lot of this around with you all the time then?

**Maya:** Yes, all the time. *All the time*. And it's- it's only when you put it in context when it's not welcome that you realise. So, like I was on a youth exchange in like- last year- in like Easter term- it was me and three- four boys. Ummm, one of them who also went to Cambridge and three of them were from like poorish backgrounds in Wales, and I remember like one of them said something like openly homophobic to me and one of them was really like sexually inappropriate with me and was also like just like darn right offensive all the time but then like he once- there was- there was a point that yeah when- so someone was like going around introducing each other and there was one kid who was really rude and really shy, and he was really weird, and I don't know what it was about it- but he was a strange person- and we went around the table and everyone introduced each other and we went to this guy, Jamie, and he was like, "can you say your name?" and he like shied away ummm and he just looked embarrassed and someone went "I'mmmm" prompting him and the offensive guy went "mildly autistic?" and I was like- and then it turned out he [the offensive guy who said "mildly autistic?"] had Asperger's, and it also turned out he like had it himself and I was like- I bit my tongue now- I really wanted to be like "that's so fucking not okay" and it also turned out he was autistic himself and it was just not my place to be like- I'm not autistic, it's not my place to be speaking over him but then he's saying something that's really hard to be like "you're partaking in oppressing yourself" it's

really hard to be like- I was also really aware that like this kid- kid again [laughs] he like- he like went to school in like a poor part of Wales and now works like in construction as like a builder- he's not had access to the like privilege I've had access to and everything we do is like very intellectual and very academic and very like- these debates are very like not stuff that like real people concern themselves with- they're very like theoretical and think if you're like a single black mum working four jobs, you're not going to be introduced to these things on a daily basis. Because like you don't have time to be thinking that, because maybe you don't have the energy or maybe you don't have the resources to be, y'know like- as carrying it around you all of the time as perhaps we are and I think- so yeah.

Rather than reaching a firm conclusion about what the "correct" response to such a dynamic was, Maya offers a different reflection. After positioning the University of Cambridge and her subject of study and friends as somewhat exceptional in their political awareness, precisely because of the time and space afforded to them to reflect on what we might call issues of power more broadly, Maya offers a somewhat telling anxiety about quite how much work is involved in remaining or staying "woke."

**Maya:** And like- so I think in that way I don't think I can help but carry it around.

**Gavin:** Yeah, yeah yeah, so everything exists in reference to these things?

**Maya:** Yeaaaah, which is hard! I just don't want it to anymore, I just want it to- y'know! I remember reading this quote, it's like a really shit quote which is something like *when you're in your twenties, you're like a radical liberal and then you hit forty and you have a mortgage to pay and then you become sensible and you become a Tory*, and I was like, *is this just a phase?* I don't want it to be just a phase in my life but I'm scared like- like that political awareness is just a phase. Or maybe I'll become forty and be like *I have real world concerns now- I don't have time to be concerning myself with this shit*

**Gavin:** Yeah. So you get the sense that you're able to think about these things precisely because of the times and spaces you're occupying right now?

**Maya:** And the people I'm around. Again, I am in a position to be around people who understand what I'm talking about but [brief pause] the majority of people I meet in my life are probably not going to- y'know and it's going to be hard to engage in a

conversation like this like off the cuff. Like I can't just be like "oh, so tell me what you think about like, y'know..." whereas I can here.

Two prominent issues come from Maya's reflections which are deeply entwined. First, being politically aware, through the process of self-interrogation, requires a great deal of time and energy. Maya realises that she has a greater level of privilege than most as a social science student at the University of Cambridge, where she is afforded time and space to continually engage in self-reflection and has a facilitating group of friends to achieve this. Yet, even in this environment where continual self-reflection is a possibility, the conditions for an act of "calling out" a problematic behaviour of another are not always entirely clear (for example in the example of calling someone who is disabled out for the use of an ableist term when one is not disabled). This is precisely because *privilege* is conceptualised as a complex manifestation of intersecting structures of power (McIntosh, 1988; Crenshaw, 1991, 2017; Bhopal, 2018). This renders the issue of working out how, where, and why one might make an intervention somewhat difficult. For instance, Maya offers another anecdote where she was given pause to think in relation to the phenomenon of "cultural appropriation."

**Maya:** So, this is a very strange, specific example but today I saw that someone had liked clicked attending on a sushi making course, and it was run by the [brief pause] Anglo-Japan society or something- I think it was Japanese people in England, I can't remember the name but that was the effect. And I remember, I was about to click, and I was like "oooooh that's interesting" but then I was like "is it deeply offensive for me to go?" [laughs a little] and I was like- somehow am I trying to appropriate Japanese culture and my first thought was this like Japanese friend I have on Facebook and I was like "oh god" and then I was like "right, no, I'm not" and then I just clicked

**Gavin:** Yeah, so what was the apprehensiveness there?

**Maya:** I think it was like a thing organised by the Japanese society presumably for Japanese people and it's not really my place to go and infiltrate just because like I'm curious about how to make sushi, y'know?

Despite the difficulties in navigating when or how it might be appropriate to do or say something (or indeed, not), what appears to be more important is the process of reflection

itself – asking the questions and interrogating the phenomenon is the ethical practice. For instance, when discussing “cultural appropriation” and its complexities:

**Gavin:** So what I’m getting then is/

**Maya:** /Context/

**Gavin:** So, then what is the appropriate context? Is it nation, is it skin, is a particular space and time?

**Maya:** Um-hum-um-hum and history, like how far back do you look? Like the tattoo thing, you’re looking back centuries it’s like-

**Gavin:** -or do you go with the Meryl Streep line that “we’re all originally from Africa”?

**Maya:** [both laugh] “Yeah babe, we are originally but-“ [pause]

**Gavin:** [both laugh] Yeah, some stuff happened in between?

**Maya:** Little bit of colonisation, not a big deal [both laugh].

The joke we share here is embedded with a point that dismisses universalising narrative. Rather, what is ostensibly brought into question is the specificities and particularities of social and political dynamics in historical context rather than the application of universal logics to govern action.

What Maya’s accounts highlights, which was a common feature of many of my participants, was that the continual process of self-interrogation was necessary to constitute oneself as an ethical subject. Yet, this ethical relationality with others often presented strategic problems when it came to intervention precisely because the myriad factors which constituted a particular situation were complex and textured. For example, Maya is unsure how one should strategically respond to calling out an ableist slur when one is not disabled themselves in a relational context when the user of the slur is a disabled person.

This is then to suggest that being “woke” relies on an attempt to remain open to the limits of one’s knowing, through understanding one’s position in relation to others, and doing work on the self to live ethically considering this relationality. The *process* of self-interrogation becomes a necessary and ethical practice. At times, these processes of self-interrogation led to obvious strategies of intervention, at other times, given the complexity of the *texture* of a

particular situation, it remains more ambiguous or ambivalent what kind of intervention is required.

#### Shutting Down: Can't I Speak?

One of the key features embedded within the politics of “wokeness” is the extension of relational empathy constituted through both reflection and dialogue. This requires that one be willing and open to listening to the accounts of others, facilitated through vulnerability or what we might term epistemic humility. The extension of relational empathy might also require calling others out as a means of demonstrating solidarity. However, the extension of solidarity might be understood to be, in some cases, strategically flawed, or otherwise an unwelcomed over-extension. For example, Latoya outlines several times where the extension of a kind of defensive solidarity or protectiveness from others was felt to be problematic.

**Latoya:** Like the other day, I went to my old flat with my old flatmates because we get on really really well. And we were just sat and talking about Disney films. And I was saying that when I hopefully have children one day I'll be really careful about them seeing Disney films because of all of the racism and sexism in Disney films and it was that- one of my friends is Indian and the other one is Spanish- and I was talking to my Spanish friend and being like “oh yeah- these are really really bad- I used to have like dreams of myself as this like blonde sleeping beauty lookalike and it shows it's really problematic” and my [Spanish] friend was like “but I- I don't really see that as a problem. It's interesting because I never really thought about that” she was just thinking out loud. And then my Indian friend- she's a bit aggressive- she was like “that's because you don't have to think about it because you're a white girl watching these films.” **And it was really weird, because it was like she was offended on my behalf whereas I saw my Spanish friend as just thinking out loud and realising that she did see herself and I didn't see myself and what that meant. And so, it's weird-things like that will happen all the time.**

For Latoya, her Indian friend appeared to rush to her aid too quickly in this case. The Spanish friend is characterised as “thinking out loud.” She then presents a further case where someone rushes ostensibly to her defence too quickly.

**Latoya: People will speak for me when they think I’m offended.** In my undergrad when I studied in the States I [laughs] I was a cheerleader- I went to this cheerleading meeting and there was this girl and I had my hair um- I think it was up in a ponytail but obviously my hair is massive and so I had like it back and my ponytail was massive- and this girl um is a white student and was like “oh, why don’t you straighten it for this competition thing” and this other girl, this like black girl- I think her hair was like afro- was like natural and jumped in before I even spoke and was like “why should she straighten her hair? She should wear her hair naturally- it’s beautiful the way it is” blah blah blah and I didn’t even get a chance to kind of say anything. And then this girl felt really really bad because that’s not really what she meant and so I just couldn’t speak.

The political, social, and cultural meanings of “black hair” are complex and contested – hair acting as a signifier of a long racial history of assimilation to Whiteness in the United States and other contexts (Davis, 1994; Patton, 2006; Randle, 2015). Yet, Latoya expresses that the “black girl” who jumped to her defence meant that she “just couldn’t speak” for herself in this context. I asked her how this felt.

**Latoya: It’s really difficult** because you feel like you don’t have a chance- because you can see- **I can see that that’s not what- they don’t mean to offend me- they don’t mean to upset me in any way it’s just that they don’t understand. So I think that by jumping in and just shooting them down you just destroy any chance you have of facilitating the conversation about it and for educating them and I really want to educate them and to talk to them about it.** So, I feel like by the time that the other person has finished speaking for me the other person already thinks “oh, no, I can’t talk anymore” so they don’t want to have that conversation, so you can’t have it. So, I think that’s really unhelpful, but I don’t know how to kind of soften the kind of conversation and to open it up again so that that person isn’t completely shut down.

Latoya presents occasions where someone else reaching instinctively to her defence, assuming that she would be offended or hurt, appears to be unhelpful. For Latoya, she wants to “educate them and talk to them about it.” She wishes to facilitate a dialogue to help the *offending party* to understand the meaning of their words, understanding in these cases that their intention was not to offend.

Recalling Latoya’s accounts in Chapter 4 is a useful point of comparison. Latoya mentions that she prefers to “make them work for it” when it comes to helping others to see that their line of questioning about her hair or skin (in relation to her racial and ethnic categorisation) is problematic. Latoya highlights a strategic problem embedded within a certain kind of pragmatic philosophy. If the aim is to help others understand, there are times when a more “aggressive” shutting down of another is unhelpful. Furthermore, she not only finds this “really unhelpful”, but it also means that she herself couldn’t speak or deal with things in the way that she wished to. Thus, as much as solidarity might be important, it can also over-reach. We might also note that this ‘over-reach’ stands in contrast to what we might say is the ‘under-reach’ embedded in Paris’ assessment of *virtue signalling*, thus highlighting the precarity embedded within this economy of woke actions.

#### Impact: Will They Ever Really Understand?

Arguably one of the most central issues that repeatedly comes up throughout this thesis is the problem of understanding the true “impact” of offence or harm for those that do not have what we might consider direct exposure to the feelings themselves. If knowledge is situated, positional, partial, affective, and experiential, it logically follows, by virtue of one’s positionality, an individual may reach a limit to what they can truly and fully understand. Whilst in some cases this might be responded to with epistemic humility, at times this lack of a more holistic experiential understanding of the impact of particular forms of harm can present a paradox that might constitute a kind of despairing resentment. This was particularly pertinent in one of the stories that Kathryn provided me during her interview which, for clarity and brevity, I will initially narrate, but will give her reflections on this in quotations.

During her first week at the University of Cambridge, Kathryn, amongst a group of other young female “Freshers<sup>34</sup>” from Magdalene College were sent letters inviting them to dine with a male *Drinking Society*<sup>35</sup> at St. John’s College (a “swap”<sup>36</sup>). At this invitation-only event to a Cambridge restaurant, several typical drinking games were played. One of the drinking games involved standing up and “fining” others (making others drink) following declarative statements. Three particular “fines” made Kathryn feel deeply uncomfortable. “Fine if you hate the poor.” “Fine if you could buy this restaurant with your ring.” “Fine if you’ve had sex with girls who were unconscious.” Each of the fines was responded to with cheers and laughter, particularly but not exclusively from the boys. When Kathryn did not laugh at the initial two “fines” the boys surrounding her cast her as “humourless.” She said the final “fine” caused her to leave, after she remarked that the comment was “disgusting” and noted how many of the boys stood up and drank as an admission that they had had sex with (sexually assaulted) an unconscious woman. Kathryn was disappointed that nobody else left with her.

The following day it came to light that over the course of the night, after Kathryn had left the event, one of her new friends that she had met during Freshers’ week and had also attended the event was sexually assaulted by one of the boys. Further to this, several other complaints were made to the college of St. John’s about the conduct and behaviour of the boys of the college. The boys were asked to write a letter of apology to the “Magdalene Girls” which apologised *if offence was taken at their behaviour*.

On reflection, Kathryn highlights the insincere nature of the apology that was received for the behaviour of the boys and highlights how this appeared for her an attempt to protect institutional reputation rather than address the classism and misogyny experienced at the event.

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<sup>34</sup> A term for 1<sup>st</sup> year student who have just ‘freshly’ arrived at university.

<sup>35</sup> A drinking society is a collection of students, often but not always single-gender groups, who may have affiliation around particular clubs or sports (or in some cases an affiliation based more purely on drinking alcohol together) who most commonly recruit through invitation-only. They organise “swaps” with other drinking societies. They are regularly the subject of scrutiny (see for example McMenemy, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> “A swap (or ‘crew date’, as they’re known in Oxford) is Cambridge slang for a social gathering between two groups of students from different colleges or societies.” (Smith, 2017).

**Kathryn:** Yeah, like they were addressed as “to the Magdalene girls” or something- and I- they were so insincere- you could tell they just sat there whilst their dean said “say you’re sorry” and like, also it was such a cop-out at the time- like I took it at the time because I was like at least they’re saying something- but actually the dean was saying “we don’t want what’s happened to get out to the media” and it was- you could just tell they didn’t want anything bad to happen to the reputation of John’s.

**Gavin:** But that for you is what it was about more than anything else?

**Kathryn:** Um-hum and it was like “we’re sorry you got upset” it wasn’t “sorry for hurting your friend and sorry for” erm “sorry for like saying we hate the poor etc. at your first week at Cambridge” it was “sorry you got so upset and sorry you got so offended”.

The insincerity of the apologies did not seek to admit fault in behaviour, but implicitly cast fault and blame that *they were offended*. The recipient of the offence was implicitly characterised as the problem (the “girls” framed as humourless). Yet, for Kathryn this understanding of the insincere nature of the apology and the real lack of understanding of the impact that this event had was further solidified after the event.

**Kathryn:** I felt worse because I felt like- **I found out that one of my friends had been assaulted by one of the guys** and it’s basically ruined her year. And so, I felt even worse that it was in the context of like- in fact [pause] like the whole- everything they said- I still felt sick about but I felt *worse* about my friend because it was just like horrific for everyone. Especially her. And like I was just- like if that’s there- it was the fact that they were like “oh, we don’t actually think that- we don’t actually-“ Oh my god, yeah! **One of the guys was like “I didn’t actually shag a girl who was asleep- I didn’t actually do that y’know, it’s just a joke” but then a guy from the same group assaulted one of my friends** and then when erm- because he’s- like we know him and then one of my friends- he came up to her the next day and was like “ahh, like erm [pause]” he spoke about my mate that he thought he got with as if nothing- as if it was normal. **And he was completely oblivious.** And he was like “Is she okay- she was a bit

drunk?” and it was like “can you not put two and two- can you literally not make the connection that we all hate your group and you’re wondering why?”

**Gavin:** Do you think they were- do you think they genuinely were oblivious, or do you think they were using that as some kind of defensive thing or?

**Kathryn:** The guy who assaulted my friend?

**Gavin:** Yeah

**Kathryn:** I think [brief pause] I don’t think he was completely oblivious. I think he knew something was up and he could tell. And, I think that’s why he approached my friend and was like “oh, is your mate okay?” And I think it was because he probably deep down clocked something was a bit dodgy. But I don’t think he appreciated it to the extent that we all do because I feel like it’s not- I guess education about consent and stuff is not normalised and-

**Gavin:** -do they still do the consent workshops?<sup>37</sup>

**Kathryn:** Yeah, they still do them. So, he should have been to one- so he probably did go- well I think maybe it’s so engrained that if someone is really drunk it’s not a problem. I dunno. I’m not sure. I’m not sure how aware he was. I think he turned a bit of a blind eye. But erm-

**Gavin:** -But kind of like a wilful disengagement?

**Kathryn:** I think he was being a bit wilfully ignorant, but **I doubt he understands the gravity of it at all**. Like, I really doubt it because like- if he’d have spent like a year with my friend, he would have seen the effect it had on her. But, I don’t think he will ever understand or get it. So, **he probably just thinks he messed up a tiny bit but doesn’t get like the gravity**. But, yeah.

**Gavin:** Because presumably this did affect your friend long after the actual-

**Kathryn:** -even still now. Like, it’s- she’s completely been erm like [pause] **I don’t know what the word is- but she’s been changed as a person completely**.

Moving from her initial disgust at the “fines” used as an attempt to be funny, Kathryn thinks about this in relation to the realities of sexual assault and the enduring impact this had on her

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<sup>37</sup> In 2016 Cambridge University introduced compulsory *Consent Workshops* in recognition of the normalization of sexual violence on campus and these workshops are targeted at incoming Freshers (University of Cambridge, 2021), which have received somewhat mixed reception since their incarnation (see for example (Ashworth & Gayne, 2016; Poppy, 2017).

friend. Kathryn highlights the absurdity of making “jokes” about sexual assault as a badge of honour. Whilst one of the boys (after the fact) claims that he does not actually “shag unconscious girls” (sexually assault), she is quite clear: *it does, and did, happen*. Kathryn doubts whether any of the boys, but particularly the perpetrator fully realises the extent of the impact this event and the assault had on her friend. For Kathryn, he doesn’t understand the “gravity” of his actions, and this is likely because of the “normalisation” of assault in the context of environments with large quantities of alcohol.

What is perhaps most important to recognise is the differential registers in which Kathryn recounts this story. In one sense, it is a deeply personal account of a deeply unpleasant experience. Yet, a second and far more analytical register is also deployed. For example, Kathryn speaks about the process of “normalization” a language of social process and structure through which to understand a personal experience.

For Kathryn, one of the issues is a disconnection between understanding the “gravity” and consequences of sexual assault, and the “normalisation” of sexual violence through jokes. The jokes appear to function precisely in making the phenomenon appear distant, but sexual assault is precisely not distant for Kathryn who has a deeper understanding of the enduring impact of sexual assault by proximity to her close friend.

Reflecting on this story of sexual assault in the context of offence might at first seem inappropriate given the “gravity” of sexual assault and the manner in which “offence” is understood so often as a lesser form of violence or harm. Yet it is telling that Kathryn brought up this story in an interview on offence. What Kathryn highlights here is the manner in which certain things are offensive (i.e., joking about sexual assault) in the context where this *does* happen. Indeed, the joking about the phenomenon works to produce the phenomenon as if it were exceptional rather than frequent. Yet, because these boys presumably do not have access to the same experiential understanding of the phenomenon of sexual violence against women (if they are involved in it, they apparently do not see it as such), there is difficulty in rendering intelligible what precisely the “gravity” of this is. Furthermore, this lack of understanding is in many ways institutionally facilitated too. Kathryn highlights how the institutional reputation of the college of St. John’s apparently took priority in this instance as

a means of swiftly moving on from the event. This is an alarming common and widely recognised problem with institutional reputation and sexual violence (Whitley & Page, 2015; Jackson & Sundaram, 2018; Lewis, Marine, & Kenney, 2018; Page, Bull, & Chapman, 2019).

It appears that when the reality of the harm remains unintelligible, facilitated through the casting of the behaviours as playful or funny, there remains little ability to communicate the scale and impact of the problem. When sexual assault is understood as exceptional, facilitated by the casting of the behaviour as external through the use of humour, the problem becomes normalised, rendered invisible (Bates, 2015; Ahmed, 2017).

From this vignette, we see the complexity of rendering harm and impact of offence intelligible. The “jokes” of the boys are so offensive precisely because they make light of such a serious incident. Sexual assault has “gravity” in the way that the event has the potential to endure and shape an individual long after the moment itself. The harm or offence that is derived from the jokes about sexual assault does not then exist in isolation, from the phenomenon of sexual assault itself. The vulnerability to feeling offended by a particular joke about sexual assault is unevenly stratified based upon apparent proximity to understanding the particular forms of harm. This is not limited to sexual assault but is a common theme throughout my interviews. Many people do not, or apparently cannot (or will not) understand the “gravity” of the harm of particular offences because they experience the world in and through a different body.

For example, Simeon talks about hating the word “faggot” so much precisely because he is “gay” and the word has a particular historical relation to him as an individual, but as an individual by virtue of a social positionality (being gay). Similarly, Maya derives particular offence through the remark about “carrying bombs” because of a complex racialised history of the symbol of the terrorist as attached to *brown skin*, but this is intelligible to her (and presumably not the porter who made the comment). For Latoya and Sally, frustration is felt when others attempt to apparently work through her ethnic and racial ambiguity with clumsy or awkward questions, and the same is true when Rain experiences the misrecognition of her gender.

Rendering offence intelligible often requires looking beyond the “moment” of offence itself to understand the complex “texture” of offence, which is constituted through an embodied, historical, subjective, and often institutional set of relations. Therefore, the description of being “woke” is quite so complex to pin down beyond a sense of a general feeling or “getting it” because it is a solution not to a singular problem, but a way of understanding the complexities of clashing social realities that in turn make ethical demands upon subjects. As such, it is useful to begin to understand these practices (and their resultant complexities and problems) as a kind of prefigurative or horizon politics.

#### (Re)Imagining the Political: Horizon and Pre-Figurative Politics

Clare Fox (2016:50-1), one of the commentators from the introduction who disparages the culture of (so-called) “toxic victimhood”, states,

“I hear similar complaints from many academics in UK universities, who see their own students as aggressive perpetrators of offence disputes. They moan that they have to negotiate nervously around too many topics to avoid offending a generational cohort who hurl around accusations such as whorephobic, transphobic, biphobic and Islamophobic with (gay) abandon. One older academic (by which I mean in his forties) confessed that he felt he needed an offence dictionary even to negotiate the new language etiquette: ‘What the hell do “cissexism”, “Mx” [and] “non-binary” mean?’ There is pressure on staff to conform to student-centred speech codes, anti-harassment policies and safe-space initiatives. How to teach ideas, let alone challenge ideas, in such an atmosphere?”

Luckily, for Fox and the academic mentioned, I provide one such “offence dictionary” by way of Appendix A and this is in recognition of one of their points that there has been a rapid expansion of terms deployed to navigate and describe the contemporary landscape of offence. However, I am sceptical that these terms simply shut down or foreclose debate. Nor does it seem a useful assessment to describe these tools as creating a culture of conformism as many commentators dictate.

To “get it,” to become and in some way sustain “woke being,” or “wokeness,” one might deploy a range of technologies of offence, if we understand technologies or techniques in the sense of *technē*, that refers to a sense of making and doing. Indeed, as an activity, *technē* is concrete, variable, and context-dependent (Foucault, 1997). By naming something as such, one opens it to the realm of the social, as a patterned phenomenon that is rendered visible, knowable and (potentially) changeable. This appears to be fundamental in the process of naming particular relations and social processes with the intention to facilitate *more*, not *less*, dialogue.

A key demonstration of this comes from Paris’ insightful discussion about the (mis)characterisation of “Trigger Warnings” and “No-Platforming” as techniques. He provides an insightful, incisive, and damning account of what he describes as “the anti-political correctness trend”.

**Paris:** Some academic got asked “what do you think of the trend of like putting like-putting like content notes or trigger warnings on texts?” So it was like so if someone has been raped and there’s a text which mentions rape- they might want to know about that before they read it and then like she just goes “I think that’s ridiculous and you should be engaging with ideas and like with both sides of it and just because you don’t like one side of the debate” and like- **what do you think a fucking blurb is for?!** It’s like there’s no actual thought that goes into it- it’s just an excuse to bash millennials and marginalised people. If you’ve got a DVD, it has an age rating so you know what’s on it. So why can you not have that in lectures? [...] but once it’s in an academic space and actually when it’s got a colourful face on it it’s like “why aren’t they engaging with ideas?” “They should be immersed in everything!” To be honest, if I went to a lecture and they’re going to start talking about rape and racial abuse- I want to know about it and I want to know about what’s going on in there because maybe I don’t want to hear about that today. And it’s not about not appreciating a side of a debate. What side? That rape is okay?

**Gavin:** Or as if you’re going to somehow by not engaging that day you’re going to somehow avoid this issue and never encounter it?

**Paris:** yeah, and it's like maybe people don't want to hear about it because they have encountered these issues. Like- it's always like "people need to start living in the real world" maybe people don't want to read things about rape because they have been raped- because they live in the real world and it's awful. Maybe because there is actually no space to skip these stresses and they're asking "hey can I just have- can I just go to this lecture and have some academic stuff without literally having my past experiences shoved in my face?" [...] **I think pol- the anti-political correctness trend pisses me off the most because it's the least self-aware thing and it's just like- I can't take it seriously and I can't engage in [mocking voice] serious debate about it because it's just bullshit.** I remember when Julie Bindel on the Guardian did a whole thing- did a whole fucking video with millions of shares about how she doesn't have platforms and she's being silenced and doesn't have free speech when she's- like- *hello!?* **Your video on the Guardian has popped up on my newsfeed like 20 times, I think you're getting the platform- people hear what you're saying!**

**Gavin:** Yeah. Was that the "sorry we can't ban everything that offend you" video?<sup>38</sup>

**Paris:** Yeah, and it was like- this has been- it was on my timeline- like I started unfriending people because I was sick of seeing this now. Like it was on my timeline literally about 50 times and it was like the irony of it was just so beyond- so- it was beyond comprehension. I cannot believe this person has [pause] like produced this video to basically an international audience basically to say that they're being silenced. What?! It is ridiculous [...] **I don't even frame things in no-platforming because I just know that's gonna go nowhere. But I frame things as "better platforming".** So, I'm coming- so like some girl in my college she wrote this article about how- this was a mess- she went to the Union to see Katie Hopkins- and I'm like, okay fine- I'm not going to bitch about you because you want to see Katie Hopkins- fine, that's your life-fine. But then she wrote this article being like "I saw Katie Hopkins and I gave her a hug and she was actually quite nice and funny so people need to stop shutting her down and it's a huge issue that you're not protecting her freedom of speech"<sup>39</sup> and I commented [...] "let's forget the free speech arguments. **Katie Hopkins has got a hill to die on. She's like everywhere**" and the irony was that like she was in the same

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<sup>38</sup> Bindel, Green, & Rinvulcri (2016)

<sup>39</sup> Notably, also something that Paris' close friend Nadia cited in her reflections in Chapter 5.

article where she wrote Katie Hopkins isn't getting a platform, she also wrote that Donald Trump tweeted about how good Katie Hopkins is. I think she's getting a platform if the president of the United States of America is tweeting about how good she is. And I literally said like "the irony of complaining about people not having platforms is ridiculous" and like okay, **if you want people to hear opposing sides of the debate, why has the Union only invited white speakers?**

For Paris, the anti-political correctness trend is difficult to engage with as it is "ridiculous" and apparently in excess of a logical reality. What Paris highlights with the examples of both Katie Hopkins and Julie Bindel being "no-platformed" is that the term itself is a poor fit for the reality. Neither figure, by having appearances 'cancelled'<sup>40</sup> at universities, has really lost access to public platforms to express their views. Paris highlights a hypocrisy in the discussion of the erosion of free speech through political correctness by presenting an alternative lens through which to understand the problem, which explains his skepticism about the wider discussion as expressed in his provocations: "nobody cares, but once it's in an academic space and when it actually has like agents talking about it- this is like- and actually when it's got a colourful face on it it's like "why aren't they engaging with ideas?" / "it's just an excuse to bash [...] marginalised people"

Paris makes this argument in even stronger terms in the interview when discussing how he is differentially scrutinised for his actions as a gay black man within his college. He focuses on a deep hypocrisy of what appears to become an "issue" within the college, referencing the *food debate* that appeared in the previous chapter:

**Paris:** Probably the stupidest thing to happen was I made a little joke in this like Facebook page saying "Please stop mixing mango and beef and calling it Jamaican stew"<sup>41</sup> because I thought it was funny. [small laugh] I was like *that's really funny*. I made a joke about it and then everyone was talking about [mocking voice] "Oh why is he triggered by this- he's making everything political and about race" I was like I

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<sup>40</sup> See for example Hime, 2017; Brooks, 2019; Pengelly, 2019; University of Reading, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> A reference to the "food debate," one of the topics that Nadia brought up in Chapter 5.

literally just made a joke and then for some reason someone leaked it to *the Tab*<sup>42</sup>, and it was like it's just not- it's not news. And *obviously* it made it to national press because *political correctness*- and all of the comments were like "Oh, it's great that people have this much spare time and they have no other issue in their life" and it's like- why is it that- bearing in mind this was a joke- but even if it was like a legitimate complaint- and it could have been a legitimate complaint that the food is being- you can't just lift things out of people's cultures- it could have been- I didn't care that much- I'm not Jamaican- I didn't care that much about it really but I got- I saw comments like that and it was like- my dad has just died. I've had some serious emotion abuse in the past year- I've had- how can you just assume when I speak about something racial- *oh that's everything you talk about! That's all you care about!* And it's actually like comments are like so hurtful. I think it's like those comments actually hurt me more than like just being shut down- comments which are like "Oh, have you got nothing else to do- this is all you do!" And it's like do you not actually recognise that maybe I'm having a hard time and I've got different complexities to me. [...] do you ever consider that maybe I'm having a harder life than you- just because you don't have to- **I have to wake up and worry about race- but I also have to wake up and look at my phone and worry about my mum and like my brother and all sorts of things that are going on in my life [since my dad died]. It's all so invalidating to then throw everything out and be like "oh, all he cares about are these abstract, ideological things" which have got nothing to do with it and it's like you can just keep it to yourself and mind your own business. All you do is invalidate.** And I dunno, it's weird, because some of the boys- there's like a group of white boys in my year who constantly do this and invalidate. The thing I, **I get called aggressive just for talking about race. I don't do anything aggressive but then some of these boys are awful.**

In referring to these boys as "awful" Paris spends a significant amount of time telling me about the "white boys" in his year group "sleeping with underaged girls;" "purposefully shitting on a girl he slept with;" "punching several people in college when he got too drunk;" and

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<sup>42</sup> One of the student newspapers at The University of Cambridge which is now a franchise across many UK universities.

“disrespecting women” more generally. He continues to highlight a feeling of hypocrisy in how his actions are differentially characterised by others.

Paris: I’m kind of like *you’re gonna tell me that I need to feel bad about doing race activism when people are doing bullshit like that and that’s funny?* and they get away with it and it’s like- what do you think the difference between us is? Those are white boys and I’m a black boy talking about myself- I get more stick from literally just being like “hey, you stole this and murdered lots of people- maybe give it back” [a reference to the debate about the repatriation of a Benin Bronze at Jesus College<sup>43</sup>] and **they get *nothing* for literally punching people up; disrespecting women; some of them are rapists because on the- my friend told me that one of the drinking games they played one of them was like “Drink if you had sex with a girl unconscious more than once<sup>44</sup>” and apparently two of them drank. [...] And it’s like why do white men get away with everything?** I guarantee you if I were to- and I’m not saying this is right- but if I were to sleep with an underaged girl- jail. It would be jail, it would be pariah, it would be plastered everywhere. *How am I supposed to take any of you seriously or even consider constructive criticism or whatever when you literally engage in some of the worst things?* And it’s the same kind of boys who will like bitch about consent workshops and bitch about “oh we’re being babied- why do we need to do this? Why do we need welfare committees?” and it’s like *maybe because you do things like sleep with underaged girls?* **At the moment they’re trying to like abstract it into nonexistence and it’s as if it doesn’t happen. You literally make confessions about sleeping with underaged girls, shitting on girls in bed- that’s really disgusting. If someone did that to me, I would be traumatized and it’s like- when you get this perspective of actually like- because when I say like some of the white men here are terrible, I’m not just saying “oh they’re problematic”- no, they actually do some really terrible things. It’s like [pause] I don’t think I’ve raped anyone- I don’t think I’ve done anything terrible- er, the idea that you are somehow a worse person for**

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example Neuendorf (2016).

<sup>44</sup> Notably, despite the similarities to Kathryn’s story about the boys of St. John’s earlier in this chapter, this was a reference to a different group of boys making the same boast.

**talking about reparation politics- but they are just called “Dan” when they literally rape people and punch people up it’s kind of really fucked up.**

The very challenge to the idea of political correctness, expressed through a differential scrutiny of minority bodies; a hostility towards any kind of critique from minority bodies; and the ability for white people (particularly white boys) to exist free of the consequences of their actions (socially and legally) is taken as a clear demonstration of the widespread and ubiquitous nature of racism. Certain bodies are cast, for Paris, as oversensitive or as caring only about “abstract ideological things,” yet for Paris, race is not abstract or ideological – it is clearly a palpable reality that shapes not just who he is, but the level at which his everyday actions are scrutinized by others. As such, any one of his given actions is subject to a system of *hyper-surveillance* (Puwar, 2004).

Interventions in the form of “no platforming” (or “better platforming”) and “trigger warnings” appear more broadly as an attempt to bring certain phenomena or dynamics into the realm of the social as a means of highlighting the quotidian nature of violence in recognition of the ongoing, lived realities of marginalization and invalidation. They are initial steps in a pre-figurative chain of action. I use the term pre-figurative politics to mean a transformation of the present as a mode of changing the future through building the conditions of possibility for the future in present action. Thus, prefigurative politics focuses on combining the *means* and *ends* of political action (Boggs, 1977a, 1977b).

This manner of pre-figuring the political was particularly popular amongst anarchist and utopian socialist movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who argued that “self-emancipation [...] could only come about through direct action and prefigurative politics – usually talked about in terms of the correspondence between means and ends.” (Raekstad & Gardin, 2020:21)

Raekstad and Gardin encourage thinking about pre-figurative politics not as a differential means of institutionalised politics in non-hierarchical forms, but to shift the focus of the pre-figurative politics to a lens through which to understand “broader organizational culture, social relations, and everyday practice.” (*Ibid.*31) This broader conception of the pre-figuratively political then shares a much greater kinship with the feminist mantra “the

personal is political” where *how* one *does* politics becomes integral to social transformation more broadly (Hanisch, 1970; Rowbotham, [1979]2013; Raekstad & Gardin, 2020).

For example, Raekstad and Gardin summarize from Rowbotham’s critique of the Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist organizations of the 60s/70s.

“they saw political analysis and revolution as a kind of pristine ‘objective science’ that could neatly be detached from people’s social context and experience. [...] Political analysis, in this view, is a kind of technical skill that is not necessarily affected by the social context, experiences, or emotion of the person who is doing it; it is simply a matter of pure rational thought. To Rowbotham, this particular kind of scientism fuels existing inequalities since it serves to legitimate certain people’s concerns, in this case white men’s, as the most ‘real’ or ‘correct’ ones, while marginalizing those of others.” (Raekstad & Gardin, 2020:31-2)

This is to argue that the idea of a solid political road map based on ‘objective’ or ‘detached’ analysis became a barrier to the very structures and forms of domination that it ostensibly sought to overcome. What is perhaps one of the most insightful quotations that captures the *sentiment* of pre-figurative politics from Raekstad and Gardin’s analysis is that “Our societies don’t need resistance, they need reconstruction.” (*Ibid.*2).

For instance, if we were to understand Paris’ description of “better platforming” as a prefiguratively political move, we might understand the logics underpinning the action in the following way. For Paris, racism is ubiquitous within contemporary society – his experience of being in the world as a black man makes this immediately apparent and felt. “No-platforming” a figure like Katie Hopkins who is well-known for racist proclamations, offers that space on a platform from which to speak at a university institution to a person of colour who might not otherwise have access to the same kind of wider institutional platforms. This is in recognition that, in the present, a figure like Katie Hopkins and her views will inevitably find spaces to be heard. The extension of the offer to another attempts to build the possibility of something else being heard.

Many of the accounts throughout the thesis bring up the feeling of obligation to “educate others” (for instance, Latoya) or redeploy the experience of something offensive as a “teaching moment”. They used varied tactics to “call out” the behaviour of others. The intervention of “calling out” someone’s behaviour is in many ways a complex action to think about in conventional political terms for a number of reasons, especially when thought about in relation to calling out another for a “microaggressive” (Sue, 2020) behaviour. I characterize these reasons as related to “continuity,” “scale,” and “locational diffusion.”

The issue of “locational diffusion” with microaggressions is that they can appear from anywhere, at any given time. Violence, rather than exceptional, is cast as quotidian. This is compounded by the issue of what we might call “continuity.” The problem of microaggressions, particularly in rendering the violence of a microaggression legible, is that they are recognized and have enduring impact precisely because they exist in an economy of repetitive action which is often visible only to those that endure them by virtue of this repetition. This links to the final issue of “scale.” A microaggression only appears “micro” when it is understood in isolation, or analytically bifurcated from the economy of exchange that it exists and gains legibility within. Yet, as Sue argues, the impact of a “microaggression” is precisely in its collectivity representing a mode of injury analogous to “death by a thousand cuts” (Sue, 2020).

The action of “calling out” as a response to a microaggressive action aims to make an intervention into the repetition of injury by highlighting the history of a particular action, behaviour, word, or phrase. If, for instance, I call out someone for using the term “gay” as a synonym for “bad,” I historicise the term of injury in the hope that the action will not be repeated. Yet, this action of calling out a particular behaviour can become exhausting because of the associated issues of rendering the harm legible to others.

For instance, if someone were to say (as often happens), “you know I don’t mean it like that”, the attempt to individualise the action through the realm of intention of the speaker may be seen to render the issue of “continuity” unintelligible. There is a recognition that homophobia is a problem, but the speaker, through denial of complicity within a historical structure,

distances themselves through a realm of exceptionalism, thus denying the repetition or continuity of homophobia in the moment.

Similarly, if told to “get over it” on the basis that it is “just a word,” the issue of “scale” can be simultaneously denied. In that moment, perhaps, it is “just a word,” but the word garners injurious nature through its repetitive history within an economy of exchange. Thus, to render the moment of annunciation of “gay” as synonym for “bad” paradoxically uses the commonplace nature of the microaggression as justification for the triviality of the harm and illegitimacy of the grievance. The analogy here would be only seeing the single minor cut on the ankle rather than allowing the camera to pan out to see that the entire body is covered in cuts. The cumulation of cuts is the injury that needs attending, but the myopic focus only allows a single minor injury to be intelligible. It might appear minor, but that is precisely because the lens to understand the injury forecloses the possibility of seeing things other than the singular by bifurcating the event from the way it is phenomenologically experienced for the recipient of the injury.

Yet, perhaps a more serious problem comes in the breaking of this repetitive action of homophobic microaggression: the problem of “locational diffusion” constructs a potential problem in thinking about strategies and modes of resistance for social change. Because of the quotidian nature of the homophobic microaggression, it becomes a habitual mode of expression (the way that it is subconsciously embedded as a throwaway term without a history); it can and will happen again. Even if we were to assume that every “calling out” was successful on the part of the person who called out the microaggressive behaviour, as many of my accounts demonstrate (particularly in Chapter 4), one comes to anticipate offence happening again because collectively (societally, culturally) we are embedded within a society compelled to repeat particular actions as things become habitual through repetitive practice. To interrupt an individual’s practice of homophobic microaggression may make one individual potentially stop repeating this behaviour (if we assume ‘the best’) but this does not in any way necessarily stop others repeating this behaviour.

As Kathryn, Simeon, Sally, Latoya, Jasmine and others all point out, often calling someone out for a behaviour then leads to a long and arduous discussion where one is often characterised

as oversensitive for pointing out the behaviour. If, as an individual, one has to make repeated efforts to make an experience be believed to an unreceptive audience in the hope of changing a single person's behaviour in the hope that then another might not experience the microaggression, the victory achieved from calling another out on this micro- or individual scale is pyrrhic at best, especially when calling out the behaviour of a stranger whom one will likely never meet again. Yet, there appears to be hope embedded within this practice. For example, Simeon reflects on his experience of walking off the rugby pitch after being called a "faggot".

**Simeon:** But if that had happened when I was sixteen and not happy with who I am and somebody else had left the field [after someone was called a "faggot"] and said "that's not acceptable" y'know I feel that would have made me feel a lot better about everything.

**Gavin:** Yeah.

**Simeon:** Y'know, I don't- I don't know if there's anyone else on that team that's gay or who struggles with their sexuality or anything like that but regardless of that **I hope that if- if there is out- or- or if there's someone who's not- that if they see some kind of homophobia in the future they'll think that actually I can kind of- kind of do that- y'know that's an okay thing to say "listen, that's not acceptable"**.

For Simeon, walking off the pitch is imagined as an act of solidarity in an interesting way temporally. In recognition of his past self, characterized in many ways as vulnerable, the act of walking off the pitch and refusal to accept homophobic language is imagined as an extension of solidarity that was lacking when he was younger. Simeon's aim is to construct the conditions of comfort, of possibility and liveability in the future for those who may be like his past self. The demonstration of challenge is an attempt to break the causal chain of repetition, to break the habit of homophobia and in turn constitute a new habitual environment where homophobia is not tolerated. Understanding the vulnerability experienced in the past constructs a feeling of ethical obligation in the present to construct more enabling conditions for the future.

Yet, this description is still perhaps a little too linear to understand the complexities of “woke being” as a kind of prefigurative politics. The practice of making or facilitating a space of possibility, recognizing the mutual vulnerability of bodies is, as the case studies on the some of the moments of tension in being “woke” demonstrate, much more complex and multi-leveled precisely because the constitution of subjectivity and the historical webs which (re)produce subjects are similarly complex and multi-leveled. This is perhaps why “woke being” is better characterized as an *opening orientation*, or to borrow Muñoz’s (2009) term, a *horizon politics*.

To quote Muñoz (2009:185) on *queerness*,

“What we need to know is that queerness is not yet here but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality. And we must give in to its propulsion, its status as a destination. Willingly we let ourselves feel queerness’s pull, knowing it as something else that we can feel, that we must feel. We must take ecstasy.”

For Muñoz, “we are not yet queer.” My analogy is that *we are not yet fully woke*. Rather, wokeness, like queerness for Muñoz, might best be thought of as a horizon which is reached for with prefiguratively political techniques that aim to open out space for being, for comfort and belonging, to a wider set of social subjects that currently “do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging” (*Ibid.*27). Looking for ways to be “woke” through the practices of *reflexivity*, embedded within a theory of *positionality*, deploying *vulnerability* as a mode of epistemic humility to construct an *empathetic* mode of relationality, aims to open out or facilitate new possibilities for belonging by giving name and structure to violence that is understood to have been rendered paradoxically ubiquitous, normalized, and thus invisible. It is a politics which is based on *disorientation* as a mode of ethical being captured evocatively in a phrase I borrow from pop musician Taylor Swift, “I don’t know if you know who you are until you lose who you are.” One must be willing to render one’s own position to partiality and situate oneself as embedded within structures of violence to begin to “get it.” Or rather counterintuitively, one must accept the limits of one’s own ability to “know” how the world really is and be vulnerable to the accounts of others to produce an ethical and empathetic relationality with others precisely because the world and reality is an experientially and

differentially stratified production rather than something that in advance can be finally rendered knowable through a single framework.

Yet, importantly, “being woke” remains a horizon, more of a collection of broad aims rather than a singular political agenda. For Muñoz (2009:4), at the centre of his work “is the idea of hope, which is both a critical affect and a methodology”. Rather than dismissing *hope* as a kind of naïve and idealistic utopianism, Muñoz instead focuses on hope as bound with *potentiality* rather than mere *possibility*: “Unlike a possibility, a thing that simply might happen, a potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense.” (*ibid.*9). Despite the problems with challenging the quotidian nature of violence embedded and expressed in my participants’ accounts of offence, amongst the frustration, fatigue and even some fatalistic claims about the possibility of change, there is embedded a *potentiality* and *hope* within many of their actions. The attempt to live another way, to be “woke,” and open to the possibility of relating empathetically with others, is a kind of alternative world-building project. It is evidently characterized by a certain kind of messiness, at times paradox and confusion, but it is a mode of being which refuses to be bound by a project of singular rational coherence. The politics is premised on the idea of remaining vulnerable and open to the possibility of relating to others and being in the world differently, but not prefiguring what that necessarily is. Rather, it is remaining open to seeing what could be through this differential relating to others. As such, the means and ends, remaining open and searching for a better way of relating to others, not only appear central to the precarious position of attempting to remain woke, they are the same. Therefore, “wokeness” is an affective sensibility legible through its techniques rather than a singular coherent political enterprise. It is a mood, and an affective sensibility which reconstitutes subjects in their collective relation to others. The (potential) consequences or deployment of this mode of being will be the subject of the conclusion of this thesis.

## Conclusion

### Giving an Account of Offence

This thesis explored the feeling of being offended as a keyhole issue to revisit classic sociological questions. The project was both a personal and academic response to contemporary commentary about a so-called “culture war” within Anglo-American universities. Having always been cast as a particularly “oversensitive” person, and being an undergraduate student (2011-4) at the time of the intensification of discourses surrounding offence, I recognised that I was one of the targets of the critique of “crusade conformism” (Hume, 2016) seeking “freedom *from* speech” in the name of “intellectual comfort” (Lukianoff, 2014), and was, as such, contributing to an apparent culture of “toxic victimhood”, whereby victimhood is turned into a kind of “currency” (Fox, 2016). Central to these critiques is a notion that a *willingness* to take offence, and an expectation of protections against offensive speech “infantilizes” (O'Neill, 2015; Freudi, 2017) a generation of young people producing pathologically vulnerable subjects. Taking offence was being widely described as a threat to social order and academic progress.

It would have been easy to dismiss this as a classic example of “moral panic” (Cohen, 2002), especially since it is recognised that the case itself for a “culture war” is recognised as likely over-stated (Duffy, et al. 2021a, 2021b). However real or imagined the level of threat to the culture of the academy, it was evident that the feeling of being offended was being increasingly scrutinized, ridiculed, and diagnosed by commentators. Yet, this commentary lacked any real sense of voice from those cast as “oversensitive”. Whilst the voices of the offended might be included in diagnosing the problems with the contemporary “culture war”, the accounts so often seemed reductive or partial. This qualitative project sought to remedy that by recentering the voices of the offended and giving time and space to understand how, where, and why students at the University of Cambridge took offence.

I began each interview with a deceptively simple question: “Can you tell me about a time that you were offended?” In my 38 interview testimonies, my participants told me about a vast range of incidents defined as offensive. These incidents ranged from friends repeatedly turning up late; the experience of gender misrecognition; hearing derogatory terms used

against particular social groups; being racially profiled at the entry to colleges; to having sexual assault used as a punchline. However, it quickly became apparent through my participants' accounts that understanding the experience of offence, and the affective processes involved in the phenomenon, was often not as simple as the initial broad question might suggest. I organised my thesis into three parts that might demonstrate the way that offence is a deeply layered, historical and complex phenomenon.

Part I: Researching Offence is comprised of my theoretical framework and methodology, offering the beginning of a conceptual language that guided my investigation, analysis, and writing. Following insights from feminist, queer, and anti-racist scholarship on feeling and experience, I argued that strong analytic distinction between feelings, affects, moods, emotions, and sensations was less useful for the study of offence than a theoretical framework which would enable one to explore the *queer kinetics* of offence. This was a means of highlighting how offence *moves queerly* in the sense that it is temporally complex and often defies a neat, linear teleology when accounts of it are narrated.

For example, to express why she was offended by the responses to the *Black Men of Cambridge* photograph, Nadia went off on multiple "tangents" about other offensive incidents. The "tangents" were used as a means of constructing an archive ("a box") to provide a necessary context for interpretation of the world, of "reality." Rather than being products of a purposeless narrative wandering, Nadia's "tangents" worked to build up the *texture of offence*. I use the phrase *texture of offence* as an analytical and methodological intervention which suggests that the study of a feeling cannot be analytically separated from the complex multiplicity of *threads* that historically enable the feeling "in" a person. This would claim that the felt sense of a given moment, the phenomenological "experience" of a feeling is (and should be analysed as) a materially produced and historical relation that takes distinct and patterned modes of expression.

By analysing offence as a *texture* eliminated a priori presupposition of what was "relevant" information, thus enabling focus on how and why offence was understood and gained significance for my participants. I was guided to examine the *stratification* of offence to discover whether recognizable patterns could be found which shape or govern the *texture of*

*offence*. I argued that the appropriate methodology for such an investigation would need a certain level of flexibility and I found this in the principles of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), working to build an *archive of offence* which formed the *contact zone* (Pratt, 1991) of analysis. Whilst the primary form of data that appeared within the thesis were the semi-structured interview testimonies, chapter 5 stands as a demonstration of the co-constituted nature of this archive. Nadia was insistent in providing me with additional data in the form of Facebook threads. I respected her wishes to provide this additional evidence of her experience and it provided an incredibly illuminating addition to her interview, where her account could be further *enfolded* with the wider perception and debates surrounding her testimony. Allowing such a contribution to my own research, in the form of objects like articles and Facebook threads, meant that I could continue to explore the *textured* way that accounts, and experiences, are *woven* through disparate and ongoing social events from dispersed locations.

Part II, *The Texture of Offence*, described some of the key constitutive features of the experience of offence. I highlighted that whilst the *content* of these experiences of offence was different, the *form* of the experience often shared remarkable similarities. For instance, in Chapter 3, I explored the ways that words might “hurt,” “injure,” or “ingrow”. Kathryn, Simeon, and Maya each gave an account of their differential vulnerability to denigrative words. The impact of the terms they experienced as injurious was explained as a product of historical and social relationships. The personal impact of terms of injury (whether “faggot,” “cunt,” or comments about “bombs”) was not, however, reducible to “individual” impact. That is, “personal” was not a synonym for “individual”. Rather, the “personal” injury was tied to collective understandings of identity. These terms of injury were experienced as forceful in the way that they implicitly or explicitly shut down modes of possible being and belonging. For instance, Kathryn took issue with the term “cunt” through her experience of being reduced to a sexual object. Similarly, Simeon experienced the term “faggot” as saturated with stereotypes which would foreclose the possibility of being a “gay rugby player”.

Importantly, the descriptions relied heavily on foregrounding the process of repetition that was constitutive of the experience of offence. For example, Maya then claimed that “In the moment it was deeply personal but in hindsight I can now extrapolate that to be like this is

the experience of a lot of people. This is the way a lot of people are treated". What is quickly experienced as a *personal* injury is understood as both related to something wider, but also constituted through a *collective* experience of repetition. This is to say that if "sticks and stones may break *my* bones," the "I" that is vulnerable to having their bones broken is relationally constituted - a precarious self (Butler, 2004, 2015; Lawler, 2014).

I expanded on these themes in chapter 4, focusing on the accounts of Rain, Latoya, and Sally. I characterise their offence as deriving from forms of *misrecognition* but demonstrated that these misrecognitions were often compounded by others who refuse to either accept responsibility for, or recognise the injury caused by, the offence. The experience of offence, and resultant feelings of *fatigue*, *frustration*, and *anger* arising from their varied offences at being misrecognised, were understood explicitly in their repeated and dispersed nature. The injurious force of being misrecognised was both legible and painful precisely in reference to the fact that it happened repeatedly. Offence was recognised as socially patterned. This constructed something of a paradox in the conditions which make a grievance hearable or legible. For instance, both Sally and Latoya claim that their repeated experience of racialisation facilitated an ability to see particular lines of questioning as "layered" (to borrow Sally's term). This ability to see the multiplicity of levels a question operates on (historical, personal, and structural) constructed a feeling of obligation to use offensive encounters as "teaching moments" or to make others "work for it". Both engaged in pedagogical strategies as a means of highlighting their injury to others.

However, as they performed the labour of highlighting their injury, they describe this as *exhausting* because the labour is *repetitive*. It is indeed so repetitive that one might come to know "exactly what they're getting at". This is to rearticulate then that offence is a product of a *dispersed repetition*. The fact that the same kind of injury can be repeated almost anywhere at any time has then a somewhat troubled relationship with methods of intervention.

Offence is the product of a kind of dispersed repetition. The injuries sustained (and that "ingrow" or endure) are the products of historical processes that are simultaneously personal (about one's own experience) as well as more impersonal forms of discursive categorisation through which we are collectively constituted as subjects. It is the repetition of these forms

of injury and the manner that we are precariously related and vulnerable to such dispersed repetition that facilitates (often) a sense of frustration and fatigue. One might feel one is caught in a kind of repetitive loop, having the same conversation time and again. Thus, offence might appear to be experienced in a 'moment,' but that 'moment' is precisely constituted through something more. To get others to recognise this effectively becomes a form of emotional work. To be recognised, one needs to explain themselves time and again. This labour is often compounded when the expertise of the individual narrating a version of themselves is dismissed.

Rain remained irritated at the process of being repeatedly misrecognised, yet didn't explicitly "call out" these misrecognitions, and instead internally managed her anger at this process. She argued that the misrecognitions of her gender are products of a conservative worldview that is wider than those moments. However, Latoya and Sally are more explicit in their intervention into the reproduction of what are for them violent social dynamics. In part, their interventions work as a defence of the self and insistence on the importance of having their selves recognised. Yet, it appears to be more than a simple relation with the self. Both express a desire to educate others so that the same form of offence might not happen to others. The defence of the self appeared to be linked to an imperative to make space for others by interrupting the habitual reproduction of certain forms of injury. As these interventions seemed to be about more than simply defending the self, I turned to consider the ethical relations that apparently underpin such a compulsion to educate others and to "call out" behaviours. Whilst embedded within an understanding of offence as a product of dispersed repetition was a precarious and vulnerable self, this modality of differentially experienced vulnerability appeared to drive a sense of ethical obligations and means of relating to others.

Part III: Wokeness opens with an apparent paradox in Chapter 5: *Irreconcilable Realities?* The testimony that Nadia gave expressed frustration at the ways that her experiences of racism, as well as the phenomenon of racism was more widely denied. She claimed that others are "ignorant", and this is at times a wilful ignorance. I explored the paradox of how the same visual evidence, a set of photographs of costumes worn at an *Around the World in 80 Days* themed party, could be used by Nadia to clearly demonstrate that racism was a feature of the costumes at the party, whilst the same photos were then used by others to deny this. I argued

that this is a product of the way that vision and experience are filtered through affective attachments. I used the term frame(work) as a conceptual device to highlight the forms of affective, epistemic, ontological, and practical work that govern or facilitate an interpretation of the meaning and/or significance of an event that appear to constitute its “reality”. This conceptual device aids us to focus on what prior assumptions, affective attachments, and assumed ethical obligations underlie a particular framing of an event, action, or reality. This is particularly significant in cases when the same ‘evidence’ or ‘proof’ can be deployed to make seemingly opposing claims about the meaning, reality, or implications of an event, behaviour, or action.

Taking the understanding derived from the previous chapter, that the conditions of ‘reality’ are filtered through affective modalities of ‘seeing’ that are worked on and through, Chapter 6: *Waking Up*, described becoming and being “woke” as a continuation of the politics of “political correctness”. I described “wokeness” as an ongoing affective political and ethical orientation which relies upon a number of enabling practices or “technologies”. I argued that “wokeness” can be described as a set of guiding principles which inform and govern interactions with others. Through my participants’ descriptions of being “politically correct” or “educating themselves”, I argued that these guiding principles of being “woke”, the practices of *reflexivity*, embedded within a theory of *positionality*, deploying *vulnerability* as a mode of epistemic humility to construct an *empathetic* mode of relationality, aim to open out or facilitate new possibilities for belonging by giving name and structure to violence that is understood to have been rendered paradoxically ubiquitous, normalized, and thus, invisible.

Whilst these guiding principles of “wokeness” appear simple on the surface as a politics which extends kindness or friendship to others, I also demonstrated that the practical application of such principles is often fraught with tensions. For instance, Latoya highlighted the problem of others speaking over her before she can raise an issue or “call out” someone’s behaviour herself. This, for Latoya, becomes a way of “shutting down” a potentially more productive pedagogical exchange.

Another pertinent example of the tensions embedded within these guiding principles raises once more a central paradox at the heart of the thesis. For instance, Kathryn doubts whether the boys of St. Johns (and the boy who sexually assaulted her friend) will ever really understand the “gravity” of their actions. If all knowledge is partial and positional, and offence is so often derived from a process of dispersed and repetitive experience, *how can someone who is unlikely to experience a particular phenomenon come to build a full or empathetic understanding* (how can they understand the “gravity” of it)? In some ways we might suggest that one might never fully be able to understand it. Yet, the guiding principle of *vulnerability* would demand that one perhaps try to “educate yourself”.

Following my initial description of the guiding principles of being “woke”, and highlighting some of the tensions embedded with the practical application of these principles, I described being “woke” as a pre-figurative, utopian, and “horizon” (Muñoz, 2009) politics. Being “woke” as a modality of ethical being appears driven by an understanding of *the personal as political* (Hanisch, 1970), understanding the mutual precariousness of relationally constituted subjects. Acting through an understanding of precarity, my participants offer deeply reflexive accounts of the social world and necessity of extending a sense of kindness to others to make the world less “toxic”.

Offence is a complex, layered, *textured* phenomenon. The texture of offence is constituted through a highly contextual, stratified, and historical set of relations, but precisely because of this, it is also at times highly patterned. The texture of offence, as constituted through dispersed repetition, means that no central or singular agent causes offence, but at the same time this also means that the precarity and vulnerability one experiences in relation to offence can be facilitated by any social actor. Rather than merely dismiss the highly contextual, precarious, and vulnerable relationality different subjects have in relation to offence as a product of dispersed repetition, the ethical drive of the “woke” subject leans into and attempts to understand the world through this complex, vulnerable and precarious, relationality. Woke being, in relation to the wider politics of offence, constitutes subjects through an implicit set of ethical practices and manages an alternative vision of ethical relationality, guided by interventions that we might term “technologies of offence”. This is a

politicisation of the everyday which attempts to re-figure the present through pre-figuring a less toxic and 'kinder' social present for those that have historically been marginalised.

Following this summary, I now wish to focus on three final reflections on the potential impact of this thesis.

### I: The Texture of Offence

Perhaps one of the clearest findings of this thesis is to suggest that the study of feeling, politics, culture, institutional life, and being cannot and should not be considered separate realms of study when attempting to understand the complexity of a phenomenon like *feeling offended*. These things are *necessarily co-constitutive*. Institutional life is experienced sensationally, affectively, emotionally. Our experience of the world is relationally and historically produced (Scott, 1991). This is a much older feminist epistemic claim which follows and expands upon the logics that *the personal is political* (Hanisch, 1970). This means, for instance, following Sarachild, that **"feelings are saying something political [...]** Our feelings will lead us to ideas and then to actions." (Sarachild, 1969).

This is not, however, to suggest that experience is simply evidence in and of itself, precisely because, following Scott (1991:779-80),

"It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience [...] To think about experience in this way is to historicize it as well as to historicize the identities it produces."

By providing a realm where participants can reflect on their feelings, and similarly facilitating an open and non-judgmental environment where they can indeed "rant" or "go off on a tangent", allows us to see how participants make sense of their social world and environment without foreclosing the issue of relevance and intelligibility in advance. As Kathryn said of offence in Chapter 6, which is particularly telling here,

**Kathryn:** I think the thing that matters is not that people feel that way but to actually pay attention and respond to the feeling.

The critical exercise embedded within a project which explores the *texture* of offence is to not foreclose the possibilities of explanation, but rather to remain *vulnerable* (Page, 2017) to alternative ways and means of *knowing* the social world. Part of this practice then ethically entails listening to participants in their account of the world and how structures of violence, like racism, homophobia, sexism etc., experienced as offensive, are so often quotidian, omnipresent, and continually wearing. Yet, as Chapter 5 and 6 entail, the process of “getting it” or becoming “woke” to such ongoing structures of violence also requires in some ways a differential ontology of the self.

This is to say that one of the impacts of the research itself is to provide a space for others to be listened to. I will not stop there, but I also don’t want to dismiss the act of listening and providing a space for someone to work through feelings as merely a research input. Listening itself is an ought to be considered an impactful output of research, one that defies simple quantification, perhaps, and one that does not look “sexy” for “impact,” but an extension of ethical practice.

The idea of needing a rant also speaks to the idea of shouting into a void – a lack of reception – a need to vent – a mad stirring of multiple stories, linked but lacking in coherence. Providing a space to vent is an ethical practice – allowing others the space to be listened to and to accept their conditions for coherence is an ethical practice. But ranting can also be a collective rather than individual practice. The commentator Claire Fox disparages about the complexities of the language or discursive expansion of terms of offence (such as those perhaps listed in Appendix A). Yet, for many of my participants, it was clear that the ability to name a phenomenon through a language like “mansplaining” brought an action into the realm of a patterned and recognisable behaviour rather than merely an isolated ‘moment’ in time. These various “technologies” of offence provide a means of collectively speaking about (and back) to enduring structures which actively work to silence or make the world un- (or at least less-) inhabitable for particular social subjects. They are pedagogical interventions and means of articulating a collectivised way of knowing and *feeling* the world. The act of the

naming of patterns of violence, through collectivising terms, extends an act of solidarity through pedagogical intervention. Kathryn, for instance, learns so much from listening to others on Twitter. That feminist strategy of “consciousness raising” might also be associated with a range of more popular texts (such as Bates, 2015; Eddo-Lodge, 2018) or invested and demonstrated in and through social movements like #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo. The “viral” nature of such things, the rapid spreading of such information attempts to build legibility and intelligibility to grievances to a much wider audience of reception facilitated by new media technologies.

Yet, what is clear from my participants’ accounts is that such rapid discursive explosions are not in and of themselves enough to necessarily construct an enduring impact. One must be in some ways *willing* to be affected by the accounts or be vulnerable to the possibilities of coming up against what one cannot know by virtue of one’s positionality (Alcoff, 1988) as a *potentially* but *not necessarily* limiting factor.

## II: Vulnerable Ontologies, Vulnerable Subjectivities, Vulnerable Knowledge

How do you know what you don’t know? How do you “get it” when you’re not “in it”? These questions are one of the central paradoxes embedded within notions of becoming, maintaining or being “woke”. The answer, by thinking about “wokeness” as a *horizon* or *prefigurative politics*, is to accept a certain kind of modesty through epistemic humility but certainly not to give into absolute relativism nor fatalistically give into the impulse to change the world as invested in a certain kind of naïve optimistic utopianism. Rather, in many ways, it is to attempt to lean into this very kind of *naïve utopianism*, a queerer modality of knowing and constituting knowledge (Muñoz, 2009; Halberstam, 2011, 2012).

The feeling of optimism is bound also and necessarily with failure and disappointment (Berlant, 2011; Chu, 2019). Building upon Berlant’s work on *Cruel Optimism*, Chu (2019:64) argues in relation to the promises (and resultant disappointment of feminism as a political movement not securing the more utopian visions imagined),

“[I]f optimism is the fundamental orientation of all subjects to the world, then optimism’s persistence is wholly independent of the capacity of any given object to meet its expectations. Disappointment, then, is the subject’s rediscovery of the fact that all optimism is in the final analysis blind. So when I say that feminism is disappointing, one thing I mean is that while feminism as a concrete political project may require objects (e.g., women, sex) or institutions (e.g., the family, the workplace), feminism as a structure of desire does not depend, for its sense, force, or direction, on *anything in the world at all.*”

Furthermore,

“To say that feminism is a fandom is to argue that popular feminist beliefs—including being “for” intersectionality, consent, body-positivity, and self-care, and “against” erasure, the gender binary, and white feminism—are held, not out of ideological orthodoxy, but primarily in order to produce belongingness as a habitable form for going about everyday life. I could mean this derogatorily, but I don’t. Politics is never accessed except by way of aesthetic mediation; on the contrary, I do not think it possible to think doing politics apart from *feeling political*, and hence the aesthetic practices people use to produce this second thing.” (*Ibid.*67)

In this, I want to reflect on these quotations with the proposal that “wokeness” is analogous to the structure of feeling embedded within the desires of “feminism” as a form of aesthetic mediation and sensibility. “Wokeness,” like “feminism” is similarly bound to this contrary site of both disappointment and optimism. In imagining that the world *could* be better, we inevitably come up against the disappointment of the habitual repetition of things like quotidian violence (for instance others being unwilling to listen to or recognise one’s experience of a microaggression).

If calling someone out for a behaviour aims on one level to render visible and intelligible a form of violence or harm with the aim that it will not be repeated again, I suggested in Chapters 4 and 6 in particular, that the “victory” is often “pyrrhic” at best. Even if one convinces the person that what they said was hurtful and they apologise, the microaggression (or other violence one “calls out”) is precisely a problem in that it is intelligible by and through

a process of *dispersed repetition*. As such, convincing an individual (singular) that what they have said was hurtful, almost especially a stranger, does not stop the behaviour happening to yourself again. So, *what's the use?*

Rather than conceptualising this as entirely pointless, often, the act of “calling out” is imagined as an extension of solidarity to others imagined to be like oneself (or even, in the case of Simeon in Chapter 3), an extension of solidarity to a past self who was in some ways unable to inhabit the world as he does now. This is the analogy I wish to draw with Chu’s conceptualisation of feminism as a “feeling political” to “produce belongingness as a habitable form for going about everyday life”. It is the sense of imagined connection, through interrupting habitual and quotidian forms of violence in the present, through the naming and rendering visible as *patterned* particular behaviours that sustains a modality of being in a present imagined, understood and felt to be “toxic” or “impoverished” (Muñoz, 2009). To give a collectivised annunciation to a social dynamic in the ‘moment’ casts that ‘moment’ as a collective, historical, and repetitive injury which, as much as it may be used as a way to sustain a current modality of being by highlighting one’s own precarious vulnerability in the world, (telling someone that the word “faggot” is hurtful) it simultaneously casts one as part of an “imagined community” (Anderson, [1983]2006) or “affective community” (Gandhi, 2006).

Interestingly, in stark contrast to the narrow “identity” or “cultural politics” outlined as a primary means of criticising the *politics of offence* more broadly that appears in the introduction through accounts such as Freudi (2017) and O’Neil (2015), the kind of solidarity that is produced through a sensibility of “being woke” is arguably much more complex and indefinite, sharing more commonalities with more indefinite ontologies of the subject embedded within theoretical interventions aligned more with ideas like *cyborg subjectivity* (Haraway, 2016) or *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1991, 2017).

Those moments, for instance, when I often found myself laughing with participants at the mutual recognition of a patterned social dynamic, expressed through a phrase, represent a recognition and extension of the *political* through *feeling together*. For instance:

**Kathryn:** oh yeah, one guy actually said to me - my college brother - "I feel like scared to say anything because I'm a white man" and I was like [pause] "that must be awful for you" [both laugh]

Or with Maya:

**Maya:** Um-hum-um-hum and history, like how far back do you look? Like the tattoo thing, you're looking back centuries it's like-

**Gavin:** -or do you go with the Meryl Streep line that "we're all originally from Africa"?

**Maya:** [both laugh] "Yeah babe, we are originally but-" [pause]

**Gavin:** [both laugh] Yeah, some stuff happened in between

**Maya:** little bit of colonisation, not a big deal [both laugh]

The differential way of acting in the world, and indeed *feeling reality*, through the utilisation of particular prefigurative technologies, actions or languages is not sufficient in itself to radically alter the world in itself. Yet, it constructs feelings of possibility or *potentiality* to work towards an ever-shifting utopian horizon. "Wokeness" is political, then, like "feminism" as a system of *desire*.

"Feminism's being impossible doesn't keep us feminists from wanting it. That's hopeful, in a disappointing kind of way, but it's the closest I'm going to get to performing the perfunctory optimism of a final paragraph. If you like, we can call it the Impossibility of Not-Feminism." (Chu, 2019:78)

This is to say, the costs of giving up just because one cannot finally discover the "right" path forward, or that one comes up against repeated and difficult failures for improving present social conditions, are for many too high. Accepting and working through one's vulnerability in the world appears then as both means and ends of the politics of wokeness as an affective modality of being in the world and prefiguring a more liveable horizon.

### III: Institutional Wokeness?

Beyond the affective solidarity that “being” (or trying to “be”) woke might offer, I want to offer a reflection on how such a series of affective and utopian desires might (perhaps in some ways counterintuitively) be linked to institutional intervention and practice. The translation from a system of desire to institutional logics and procedures is not a comfortable nor easy one. But, in the spirit of being naively optimistic, I try.

I distinctly remember my first *Governing Body* meeting when I started as an *Early Career Research Fellow* at Murray Edwards College in October 2018. A new *Race and Ethnicity Working Group* had been set up to examine the experiences of racism and inequality within the college and more broadly due to a feeling of discontent noted amongst (particularly) students of colour in the college. During a discussion about the formation of this group, a white male science fellow shared his thoughts and opinions. The fellow in question, who I will call “Ian” questioned how serious the problem of racism really was within the college. He had been working within the college for over a decade, where he had also been a tutor amongst holding other roles and teaching, and he only recalled a single complaint from “Chinese students” about the “quality and provision of the catering in Hall”. As such, he wondered what the “data” or “evidence” of the problem of racism was.

As it was my first meeting of a new job, I was initially hesitant to say anything, lest I present myself in a way that meant I be cast as a “troublemaker.” Yet, I felt compelled to speak, given the subject of my research, especially. I mentioned that racism is ubiquitous but in such a way that often defies simple metrics of quantification which renders the problem unintelligible. His response to this (a raised eyebrow more than a comment back) suggested to me that my comment might have similarly been unintelligible. Yet, equally surprising (not really “surprising”) to me was the stark contrast of the framing of what was at stake, or even if anything was really at stake here. For some, racism appears to come as a surprise. For others, the surprise at racism is the thing that is surprising.

If one of the very problems of a phenomenon like racism (understood as part of the wider texture of offence) is, as I have argued, that the dispersed experiential repetition of the injury makes it intelligible to some and for the reverse reason unintelligible to others based on

differential proximity (what we might call one of its constitutive *affective* or *experiential textures*), then there are particular institutional procedures that might work to further render the problem of such grievances unintelligible as legitimate forms of injury.

In Chapter 2, when I outlined some of the ethical considerations of my methodology and analysis, I mentioned how I offered, where appropriate, myself as an advocate to guide a participant to make an institutional complaint where it was clear that my participant had grounds to do so in cases of harassment and discrimination. However, none of them did. This attitude was perhaps best summarised by Nadia,

**Nadia:** I'll be offended and I'll like bitch about it and rant about it to a mutual friend and then you **just kind of have to like [pause] mentally put it in the box with like everything else that's happened.**

**Nadia:** Yeah, because really, what can you do? **If you go and report a racist incident, most of the time nothing is going to happen, so people don't report anything.** And a lot of the times it's not somebody coming up and saying something racist to your face, it's those nagging little like comments and things like that that are the worst.

If one already suspects that nothing will happen if one reports a racist incident, one doesn't bother reporting it. Yet, as Nadia insightfully outlines, the "incident" itself isn't necessarily the problem (incident here being perhaps a more verifiable and direct form of racism). Rather, "it's those nagging little comments and things that are the worst". Nadia describes the *texture* of racism as precisely composed of the sum of a series of dispersed and repetitive actions rather than necessarily the "incident" itself. If, as is common, institutional complaints procedures work on the description of an "event" or "moment" in time where one experienced unfair treatment, how then does one make a grievance about something more akin to a "culture" or "environment" of racism? The very means of rendering racism institutionally verifiable and quantifiable often foreclose the possibilities of recognising the way that the series of violences manifest at quotidian and everyday levels which in turn makes the experience of it akin to "death by a thousand cuts" (Sue, 2020). The modality of *measuring* the violence becomes a means of foreclosing in some ways violence itself. A similar pattern is

demonstrated in the work of Page, Whitley, and others particularly thinking about sexual harassment and violence within higher education (Whitley & Page, 2015; Page, Bull, & Chapman, 2019).

To look across Tiffany Page's varied proposals (epistemic, methodological, political, and ontological) to thinking about and characterising violence and vulnerability relationally is particularly productive here. For Page, researchers should employ a "vulnerable" methodology as a feminist practice, which means being open to the possibilities that we might not only reach the limits of what we can know, but that there are gaps in how we know (in my mind following a similarly critical line to Spivak claims in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Spivak, 1988; Page, 2017). Page responds to rendering intelligible modalities of "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011) and "slow death" (Berlant, 2011) (but sharing deep analogy with Sue's 2020 claims also) is to be open to modalities of seeing violence not as something expressed only in exceptional moments, but to broaden the analytical lens to look at the everyday manifestations of violence which slowly wear down the subject. To borrow an adage: "It is not the mountains ahead that wear you down, but the grains of sand in your shoes".

What is significant about this shift in conceptualisation, then, is also the modalities of resisting such structures and patterns of quotidian violence. If violence is not a single and exceptional problem, no single or exceptional policy will "resolve" *the* "problem". For this, Page suggests we think about modalities of "slow activism" (Page, Bull, & Chapman, 2019). For Page et al., one of the primary issues with challenging a structure of violence like sexual misconduct in Higher Education is that "the problem remains largely invisible", especially in a context where "those experiencing those forms of violence fear speaking out" (*Ibid.*1310). Page et al. are speaking about quite specific institutional issues of sexual misconduct in this article which produce the fear of speaking out. For example, the problem of the differential power relationship between a lecturer and student and the latter's reliance on the lecturer for the completion and grading of their academic work. However, I want to suggest an analogy more broadly to thinking about not necessarily the "fear" of speaking out in the case of offence (although that might be part of it), but the perception of speaking out, or speaking through institutional procedure, as a waste of time. It largely will be a waste of time if the procedures

are set up in such a way that the ‘moment’ is analysed at the expense of the ongoing and enduring nature of structures of violence.

“Slow activism” is the term proposed for thinking about alternative modalities of resistance, a term they “utilize to get at the varying levels of speed required (and the ensuing frustration at the slow pace at which change occurs) when attempting to work at different levels of the sector to enact change” (*Ibid.*1316-7). For example, Page et al. are thinking about the necessity of balancing more immediate social action and demands for change with the *slower* work of institutional and habitual change.

To *rush* for social change or “fixing” the problem through punitive measures against injurers might at times be necessary, but this only highlights a manifestation of the issue rather than the issue itself. Rather, one needs to think about the conditions which enable differential experiences of vulnerability in the first place. This is the real insight I want to highlight from Page’s work on vulnerability and this is the clearest link I see by way of conclusion to my own work.

So often, others appear unwilling to hear that they have enacted a particular kind of offence, or are unwilling to acknowledge the pain that they have caused as serious, because racism, sexism, homophobia (etc.) are so often cast as *individual* and *wilful* acts committed by *bad* subjects which casts the behaviours as exceptional rather than quotidian habitual repetitions (Brown, 1995; Hytten & Warren, 2003; Srivastava, 2005; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; DiAngelo, 2018). One might rush to dismiss or explain away such grievances because of a need to maintain a particular ontology of the good self (complicity is an “icky” feeling after all). Yet, what is curious about the compulsion to explain away, deny, or otherwise not take seriously the injury cast onto others is the oft cited personal and institution claim that one is (or an institution is) actively committed to diversity. Mission statements often express a desire and interest in “promot[ing] an inclusive culture, and valu[ing] diversity” (Cambridge, 2021). If this is an institutional desire, how and why is it apparently so disconnected from the realities of attending an institution like the University of Cambridge? Perhaps it is because, at the moment, the institution itself isn’t always set up to *hear* when others speak.

In Chapter 6, I argued that a discursive explosion in the form of a variety of technologies of offence is growing contemporarily - ways of naming particular dynamics and phenomenon as patterned and repetitive experiences. I also outlined that part of the politics of becoming and maintaining being “woke” relies on a series of principles involved through *reflexivity* in the building of *relational empathy*. One needs to learn to listen through becoming *vulnerable* to accepting what one cannot currently know. As institutions become more “diverse”, an increasing range of bodies historically denied institutional access now have it. This is the case in fields such as Higher Education. And this can and should be celebrated as a social good. Yet, it is illogical to assume that the mere arrival of those bodies in institutions *predicated* on the exclusion of particular bodies, forms of knowing, relating and being, would and could be a simple process.

This is evident, perhaps by the burgeoning range of texts written particularly by women of colour who attended the University of Cambridge who reflect on their experiences of attempting to both endure and transform the institution through various modes of activism (see for example Kwakye & Ogunbiyi, 2019; Olufemi, Younge, Sebatindira, & Manzoor-Khan, 2019; Olufemi, 2020). I want to suggest that listening to the collective accounts being carved out as modalities to make the world more liveable rather than dismissing experience as merely “anecdotal” or “exceptional” is necessary for rigorous institutional reform. To truly *listen* to the accounts of others and render the voices of marginalised individuals hearable, we might also need to reflect on the conditions through which grievance are heard. This might mean looking beyond the juridical and punitive to think about wider cultures of “slow violence” that prevent one from thriving rather than merely surviving an institution. We might learn something, then, from the optimism and utopian pushing at a better horizon embedded within the (at times perhaps contradictory) politics of “wokeness”.

I want to finish with a quotation from Paris, who now graduated several years ago, but that gave me much to think about in relation to the feeling of belonging to an institution, and I leave it to let us think more broadly about the aims of diversity and inclusion - an opening to further discussion rather than a conclusion as a way of finally wrapping up:

**Paris:** I kind of like the work and enjoy it to be honest - it's just I can't get it done because I've just had stress and all sorts. Erm, and like [sighs] particularly at Cambridge like - because you're seen as having done so well to get here as like a marginal person, you're seen as like "oh, he's resilient" and he's - narratives that talk about how resilient you are and how hard you worked to get here and how you've beaten the system by getting here - it just means that you then do get left behind when you do get here because the problems don't disappear. It's kind of like *he has beaten institutional racism by getting to this place and he's like a model minority now because he has reached the promised land* and it's not true. Because this place is just as racist as everywhere else and it's like harbours even more experiences. Because Cambridge is so intense, it's even more intensified so it's like actually I probably defeated the racist system more by gra- graduating if I graduate rather than by getting here. Like I feel I've beaten institutional racism more by doing that actually because actually sometimes I just want to leave. Like every time I always think like had I just gone to - had I grown up in the US and obviously the US is not got equality in racial - but they have like all-black - sometimes I think if I had gone to an all-black college in the US then I would have been fine - it's not like Cambridge, or Oxford, or Harvard - but I would have had a better time in terms of race. I might have had different experiences like there might have been sexism and homophobia and stuff but like - but this you can't literally have the space - particularly when you have like in the like - you just can't have a space which is free from discrimination, institutional prejudice and bias.

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## Appendix A: Dictionary of Terms Relating to the Politics Offence

The following Dictionary is intended to be a useful reference point for an expansive set of terms that often come up when *following around offence*. The list is neither intended to be comprehensive of all terms, nor finally authoritative of the meaning of these terms. Rather, this list acts primarily as an initial point of reference and at times a tool to signpost a reader to further information.

- **-splain:** In the past 30 years, “Splain began to be used sarcastically, particularly in Usenet chat rooms, to call out someone for explaining something either without taking the original poster’s comments into consideration or in a extensive and sometimes condescending way. [...] It wasn’t until Rebecca Solnit’s 2008 essay "Men Explain Things To Me" that 'splain became attached to a particular kind of splaining: men explaining things to women as if those women didn’t know anything about the things in question. Though Solnit didn’t coin the word that describes this phenomenon, mansplain, she inspired it. Our earliest evidence for mansplain comes from 2009, the year after Solnit's essay appeared. Mansplain (the word) took off, and people began using the -splain from mansplain to mark other condescending explanations. In the past six years, we’ve seen a multitude of -splains, from whitesplain, rightsplain, gaysplain, journosplain, and straightsplain to one-offs like potlucksplain and grammarsplain. And while the -splain train may slow down, it may never stop: the affix -splain will likely continue to spawn more words to describe a know-it-all condescending behavior.” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).
- **“Cancel Culture”:** A term used to diagnose, often with negative connotations, an increasing trend of “calling out” an offensive or problematic behaviour of (often) a cultural or public figure, and as a result of these behaviours, in some way attempting to ostracize them from public life or platforms. Other forms of “cancelling” might also include the boycotting of particular goods or otherwise attempting to withdraw from direct engagement with the cancelled figure. The term has evolved over the past several years to take on both different connotations and specific practices under this general term (See for example Romano, 2020 & 2021).
- **#NotAllMen:** The expression “not all men” is often used to counteract claims of what are perceived to be overgeneralizations about the behaviours of men akin to a

kind of “reverse sexism.” However, the hashtag expression “#NotAllMen” increased in circulation on platforms such as Twitter from 2014 as a means of highlighting the often bad-faith way that this phrase is used to deflect conversations away from difficult topics such as the frequency of sexual assault experienced by women in society (see for example Zimmerman, 2014).

- **#YesAllWomen:** The hashtag expression #YesAllWomen was deployed on social media sites, such as Twitter, when sharing personal stories of harassment and discrimination and was partially a response to the use of #NotAllMen when the latter expression was understood to be used as a means of detracting from conversations about systematic discrimination and harassment against women. The Hashtag was used to highlight that *all* women are affected by sexism and misogyny within society (see for example Grinberg, 2014).
- **Better Platforming:** A reframing of the term “No Platforming” which aims to highlight the positive contributions of “No Platforming” by suggestion the disinclination of one speaker to make space for a speaker regarded as more appropriate or suited to the subject is an ethical act.
- **Blackfishing:** “Commonly perpetrated by females of European descent (white) which involves artificial tanning (**spray tanning** and tanning booths) and using makeup to manipulate facial features in order to appear to have some type of Black African ancestry. The general point of **blackfishing** is for a female of European descent to appear of African, Arab, or Hispanic ancestry. Some consider it to be equivalent to modern day “**black face**” because it capitalizes off the looks of historically oppressed groups of people by people who come from more privileged backgrounds.  
*“Emma **Hallberg** is a beautiful mixed race **Swede**.” “No, Emma isn’t mixed race, she’s just **blackfishing**.” “They want to be black without being black.”” (Lebanese Bebe, 2018)*
- **Calling In:** The act of checking one’s peers in an effort to change a problematic behaviour. This is often considered to be contrasted to the act of “calling out,” although the two are functionally similar. “Calling in” may be thought to be more inclusive in that there is a desire to extend patience and compassion to the person

who was 'mis-stepped' in behaviour or language by pointing out the behaviour and aiding them to see how and why this behaviour was inappropriate.

- **Calling Out:** The act of drawing attention to a problematic behaviour of another. This may be in public as a means of providing a wider pedagogical moment for those who witness the scene, behaviour or encounter, or could be done in a more 'private' setting. However, in a more 'private' setting, the language of "calling in" may be more appropriate to describe the action, depending largely on whether the intention is primarily located in rendering a behaviour a publicly transformative pedagogical moment or to change an individual's behaviour in the first instance. Both "calling in" and "calling out" may also be used simply as synonyms.
- **Content Note / Trigger warning:** "A statement at the start of a piece of writing, video, etc. informing a reader or viewer that it contains potentially distressing material (often used to introduce a description of such content)." (Oxford Languages, n.d.). The two terms, "content note" and "trigger warning" are often used as synonyms for one another. "Content note" is considered a more neutral term.
- **Cultural Appropriation:** "The unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society." (Oxford Languages, n.d.). See also bell hooks (1992).
- **Decolonizing (the curriculum):** "decolonizing the curriculum means creating spaces and resources for a dialogue among all members of the university on how to imagine and envision all cultures and knowledge systems in the curriculum, and with respect to what is being taught and how it frames the world." (Keele Decolonising the Curriculum Network, n.d.). Further information about the social and political movements and history of this term can be found in Charles, 2019).
- **Gaslight[ing]:** "[to] manipulate (someone) by psychological means into doubting their own sanity." (Oxford Languages, n.d.). This is particularly used to highlight how the accounts of minorities may be dismissed in a social situation or invalidated, causing the person to doubt their sense of reality in relation to the experience or phenomenon of structures like racism and sexism.

- **No Platforming:** “The policy of ‘no platform’ was formally adopted by the National Union of Students [UK] at its conference in April 1984, initiated by students linked to the International Marxist Group (IMG) and the International Socialists (IS), and also supported briefly by the communist Party affiliated Broad Left. The policy, although controversial, was a formalization of an approach that left-wing students had taken towards controversial speakers since the late 1960s, denying them the physical space and opportunity to speak. [...] The ‘no platform’ resolution in 1974 attempted to co-ordinate anti-fascist and anti-racist actions against undesirable speakers that had been much more ad hoc and localized in the past. The resolution encouraged student unions to be proactive in this area and deny controversial speakers the opportunity to speak on campus, by disinvitation, denial of funds for groups that invited these speakers and by physical protest (if required).” (Smith E. , 2020)

Contemporarily, the term is used to label the broad set of behaviours which include defunding and disinvitation of a range of speakers with controversial views, including, but not limited to, fascist, transphobic, misogynist, homophobic and racist views. This strategy might also be detailed expressed more broadly under the umbrella term “cancel culture” or “cancelling” a speaker or otherwise controversial individual.
- **Privilege (to check one’s):** The engagement in a reflexive exercise to consider the way in which one’s privileged position may act as a potential barrier to understanding or the source of a behaviour deemed problematic by others. One can be asked to “check your privilege” by another, or engage in this as a self-reflexive exercise.
- **Privilege:** A term used to highlight the unearned advantages that members of dominant groups (White people, men, heterosexuals etc.) have in relation to others in the social world. This term draws from work of authors such Peggy MacIntosh (1988) described “white privilege” as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.”

- **Safe Space:** “a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm.” (Oxford Languages, n.d.). At times, the term “safer space” may be used to highlight the impossibility of constructing an entirely “safe space” (a space entirely free of harm), however, the focus becomes on attempting to minimize forms of harm. The use of “safer space” then highlights that mechanisms and processes are in place to facilitate the minimization of harm in a given space by, for instance, gathering individuals together who ostensibly share the same identity position.
- **Snowflake:** a derogatory and informal term used to mean “an overly sensitive or easily offended person, or one who believes they are entitled to special treatment on account of their supposedly unique characteristics.” (Oxford Languages, n.d.). The term is often used by those characterized as politically more right-leaning to describe a range of contemporary social actors, usually of minority groups, engaged in some form of identity politics, or politically on the left more broadly.
- **Tone Policing:** A term used to highlight a strategy of deflection whereby a grievance of another is considered illegitimate because of the *tone* the critique was delivered in. See for example Srivastava (2005) and (Everyday Feminism, 2015).
- **Toxic Masculinity:** “Toxic masculinity is the constellation of social regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence.” (Kupers, 2005:714)
- **White Fragility:** Robin DiAngelo (2018:1-2) describes *white fragility* as the result of white people’s “insulation from racial stress” which results in a lack of “racial stamina” in conversations about race and racism. This often results in a range of “defensive responses” on the part of the white person in conversations about race and racism which work to reinstate “white equilibrium”. In summary DiAngelo claims that “Though white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement.” (DiAngelo, 2018:2)
- **Whitewashing:** A term used to describe the way cultural and historical productions present a monochromatic universe whereby attention is drawn to almost exclusively

White figures and indigenous or people of colour's contributions to history are minimized or rendered entirely invisible. For a longer discussion see (Helligar, 2021).

- **Woke:** Commonly characterized as having achieved a state of political consciousness in relation to issues such as racism, sexism homophobia etc. This term is often used ironically or can be used in ridicule. (Note, this definition here remains at a surface level to capture the common parlance of the term and is not intended to substitute the more conceptual use of the term found across Part III of this thesis).

## Appendix B: University of Cambridge Terms of Reference

- **Bop:** A party organized by the JCR/JPC/JMA within a college that is usually (but not necessarily exclusively) ran for college members. It will usually feature a theme, fancy dress, and heavily subsidized drinks.
- **College Family:** A student-led pastoral support system where “college parents” (which might marry in mock ceremonies during their first year or second of university) are given their “children’s” contact details before they arrive at university. The “children” are incoming students, often (but not always) allocated to “parents” matching their intended degree. This pastoral support system is ostensibly a means of providing a soft-touch peer support system to allow incoming students to have a point of contact for questions to help navigate the initial period of transition to university. This provision is administered at college rather than university level. At some colleges, students had to campaign to allow same-sex couples to be allowed to have college children, the official rules for some time holding that only opposite-sex couples could have college children (Veitch, 2015).
- **College:** The University of Cambridge is comprised of 29 independent Colleges and students (both postgraduate and undergraduate) are affiliated to one of these institutions. Colleges are most frequently understood as the “home” of students whilst they study, having their own libraries, eating spaces and accommodation, whilst the term “University” or “Department” is used to refer to the broader organizational, teaching, and administrative structure. It is typically colleges who deal with disciplinary and financial issues that students face and are understood to be the primary welfare and pastoral support institutions for students.
- **CUSU/Cambridge SU:** Formerly Cambridge University Student Union, now Cambridge Student Union. Ran by elected and paid sabbatical officers to advocate and represent the interests and needs of all students at the University of Cambridge through both independent campaigns and liaising with student bodies at each of the independent colleges.
- **Department:** Sometimes referred to as the faculty or “Fac” by students, this refers to the collection of academics, libraries and buildings associated with each of the degree courses (e.g. “English Fac”).

- **Drinking Soc/Society:** A drinking society is a collection of students, often but not always single-gender groups, who may have affiliation around particular clubs or sports (or in some cases an affiliation based more purely on drinking alcohol together) who most commonly recruit through invitation-only. They organise “swaps” with other drinking societies. They are regularly the subject of scrutiny (see for example McMenemy, 2018).
- **Fellow:** Whilst denoting particular academic status of varied typing, the term “fellow” is most often used to denote an academic with affiliation to a college and a member of a college’s governing body. It is most often used as a catch-all term for an academic currently working at the University who might be involved in both teaching (as a supervisor) and pastoral care of students (as a tutor).
- **FLY (*Freedom. Loving. You.*):** A network and forum for women and non-binary people of colour at the University of Cambridge. Founded in 2014.
- **Formal (Hall):** A three-course dinner, usually held within a college for its undergraduate or postgraduate members, where gowns are usually worn over suits and cocktails dresses. The current Head of House of the College usually begins the event with a Latin Grace. These formal dinners usually run at least once per week in each college during term time.
- **Governing Body (of a college):** “The ultimate authority in most Colleges, usually consisting of all or most of the Fellows. Under the Oxford and Cambridge Act of 1923 in every College the Head and the Fellows constitute the Governing Body for changing statutes. Gonville and Caius College has, apart from this, no Governing Body as such, and the ultimate authority is current the General Meeting of fellows. The governing body of the University is the Regent House.” (Cambridge University Library, 2021)
- **JCR/JPC/JMA:** Junior Common Room, Junior Parlor Committee, and Junior Membership Association respectively – these are usually elected bodies of undergraduate students in each college who are intended to represent the various interests of the undergraduate population within a given college. The “Presidents” of these various committees are also affiliated with the student union with voting rights on matters affecting the wider student policy at the university. Some members

of these committees might oversee organizing college parties (see Bops), such as the Ents (Entertainments) Officers, whilst others might represent members of identity positions (such as BAME or LGBTQ+ Officers). Each committee has its own statutes and composition, meaning that whilst many might have similar compositions, particular positions are not guaranteed. For example, some colleges might have a Welfare and Rights Officer as a broader position intended to take on the responsibilities of what might be a specific Women's or BAME Officer in another college.

- **Plodge:** A common contraction of *Porters' Lodge*, which is a space acts as the mail room and station of the Porters of a college. The Porters' Lodge is usually staffed 24/7 and the porters act as institutional gatekeepers, controlling the flow of individuals into a college.
- **Swap:** "A swap (or 'crew date', as they're known in Oxford) is Cambridge slang for a social gathering between two groups of students from different colleges or societies." (Smith, 2017)
- **The Cambridge Union:** "From its small beginnings as a debating society, the Cambridge Union now has over 70,000 life members worldwide. Now the oldest debating society in the world, and the largest student society in Cambridge, the Union remains a unique forum for the free exchange of ideas and the art of public debate. The Union Society is proud of our long and extensive tradition of hosting prominent figures from all areas of public life, including the Dalai Lama, President Ronald Reagan, Bill Gates, Stephen Hawking, Prime Ministers Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, and John Major." (<https://cus.org> Date accessed 14/09/2021) Lifetime Membership costs between £115-155.
- **Town and Gown:** A colloquialism representing the split between the University (gown) and the broader local population (town). Usually referred to as a somewhat adversarial split and in many cases particular nights at nightclubs might be labelled as a "town" or "gown" night to indicate whether the night is run for students or other members of the student population. This might manifest in the way students refer to weekend nights at the Wetherspoons as "Danger Spoons" to indicate that this space is not intended for University of Cambridge students. The element of

“danger” indicating a presupposition of hostility towards University of Cambridge students or a notion that one might “rough it” with the local population for a night. As such, the split is often laden with classist connotations.

- **Tripes:** Referring officially to any of the examinations that qualify an undergraduate bachelor’s degree at the University of Cambridge. The term may be used as a synonym for one’s undergraduate exams or course more broadly (i.e. “She topped the English Tripes this year.”)

## Appendix C: Recruitment Email

My name is Gavin Stevenson, I am a PhD student in the department of Sociology and am **currently undertaking a project into the feeling of being *offended***. I am recruiting participants for **interviews**, expected to last **one hour** to discuss the nature of being offended and causing offence.

If you are willing to participate, you will be asked before the interview to think of something that you have recently been offended by. You will be asked to give a description of a situation in which you took or felt offence, and will be asked a series of questions about this. Please ensure it is something that you are comfortable and able to talk about during the interview. It is important if you wish to part to participate in this study that you should *consider and prioritise your own well-being*, given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic.

All interviews will be conducted in university department buildings or colleges and rooms will be found and negotiated based upon *convenience to you*, if you volunteer to participate. All interviews will be voice-recorded to allow a full-transcription by the interviewer (unless requested otherwise), but all information will be anonymized within the study, to ensure no information or quotations can be directly linked back to you.

For more information about the study, or to volunteer to participate, *please do not hesitate to email me*: [REDACTED]

Thank you for your time,

Gavin Stevenson

PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology

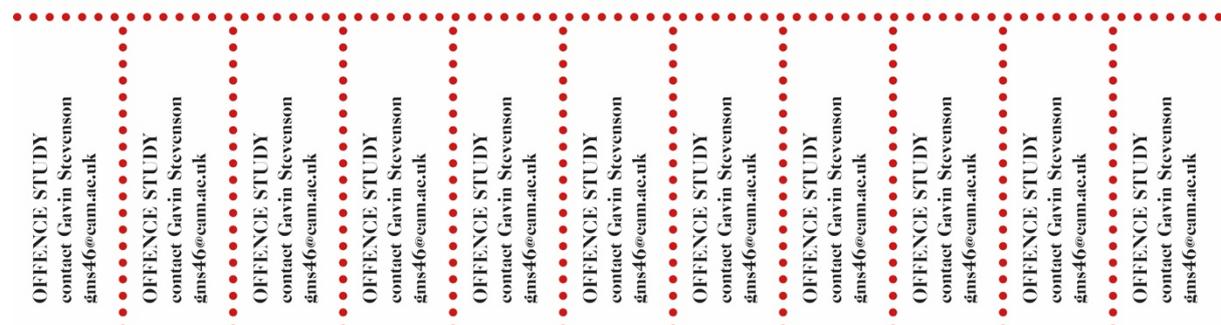
Fitzwilliam College

# have you been offended lately?

My name is Gavin Stevenson, I am a PhD student in the department of Sociology and am currently undertaking a project into the feeling of being offended. I am recruiting current undergraduates and postgraduates for interviews, expected to last one hour to discuss their experiences of having been offended. If you are willing to participate, you will be asked before the interview to think of something that you have recently been offended by. Following your descriptions you will be asked a series of questions about your experiences.

Times and locations of interviews can be decided by you. All interviews will be voice-recorded to allow a full-transcription by the interviewer (unless requested otherwise). All information will be anonymised within the study, to ensure no information or quotations can be directly linked back to you.

For more information about the study, or to volunteer to participate, please do not hesitate to email me: 



## Appendix E: Sample Interview Prompt Sheet

### Discussion of experience brought in by participant

- Prior to the interview I asked you to think of a time in which you were offended.  
Could you describe that to me please?
- Why is this offensive?
- How is this offensive?
- When did you first see/hear this? (was the offence you felt immediate? Do you feel as offended by this as when you first saw/heard it?)
- Why use the word offence to describe this situation? (What specifically makes it offensive, and not (Scott, 1991) (Scott, 1991) say annoying?)
- What kind of a reaction was this offence?
- Where did you feel the offence?
- What emotions, words and feelings made up this instance of offence? (either in terms of a list, or describe different things that made up this feeling offended)
- Were there other thoughts or situations you had in mind when thinking about what situation or event to discuss within this interview?

### Broadening the discussion out

- What do you think of when you think of the word offence? What kinds of things come to mind?
- Have you ever had that feeling of biting your tongue?
- Do you ever feel like you have to hold back or stop yourself from saying something?
- Do you ever avoid certain people or places for fear of either offending others or being offended yourself?

## Appendix F: Consent Form

**Title of Project: “Queer(y)ing the Politics of Offence: A Case Study in Higher Education”**

**Name of Researcher: Gavin Stevenson**

As part of a research project on the relationship between offence and identity among students in higher education, I am conducting interviews. You will be asked questions about things that have offended you personally; how you manage those relationships when offended; and questions about the impact of your having felt offended. This research is being conducted as part of a PhD thesis in the department of Sociology at the University of Cambridge.

The interview will take about 60 minutes.

**Please  
tick box**

1. I confirm that I have understood these instructions and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am Free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.
3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised and only used for academic research.
4. I understand that my interview may be recorded.
5. I agree to take part in the above project.

Please delete as appropriate:

- I **would / would not** be interested in receiving additional information about the study over email
- I **would / would not** be interested in being asked about a potential follow-up interview (although understand that this is not a commitment, but a registration of interest)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## Appendix G: Interview Participant Composition Table

Pseudonym	Research Period	Social Class	Gender	Age	'Race'/Ethnicity	Nationality	Education Status	Sexuality	Disability Status	Other Important Factors of self-description
Eleanor	2015	ND	Female	20	white	British	undergraduate	straight	ND	
Saskia	2015	ND	Female	21	white	British	undergraduate	straight	ND	Doesn't drink alcohol, feminist
Mark	2015	ND	Male	21	white	British	undergraduate	gay	ND	"struggled with weight issues"
Maggie	2015	ND	Female	20	white	British	undergraduate	straight	ND	feminist
Sophia	2015	ND	Female	24	white	American	MPhil	straight	ND	
Sorcha	2015	ND	Female	21	white	British-German	MPhil	Bisexual	ND	"Third Culture Kid"
Vivienne	2015	"working class"	Female	20	white	British	undergraduate	straight	"Mental health issues" / depression	
Jay Marker	2015	ND	Male	21	white	British	undergraduate	gay	ND	
Frank	2015	ND	Male	23	white	American	MPhil	straight	ND	Post-Evangelical Anglican American Christian
Sally	2015	ND	Female	25	mixed-race	Australian	MPhil	straight	ND	feminist
Lyra	2015	ND	female	21	white	British	undergraduate	ND but mentions a heterosexual relationship	ND	

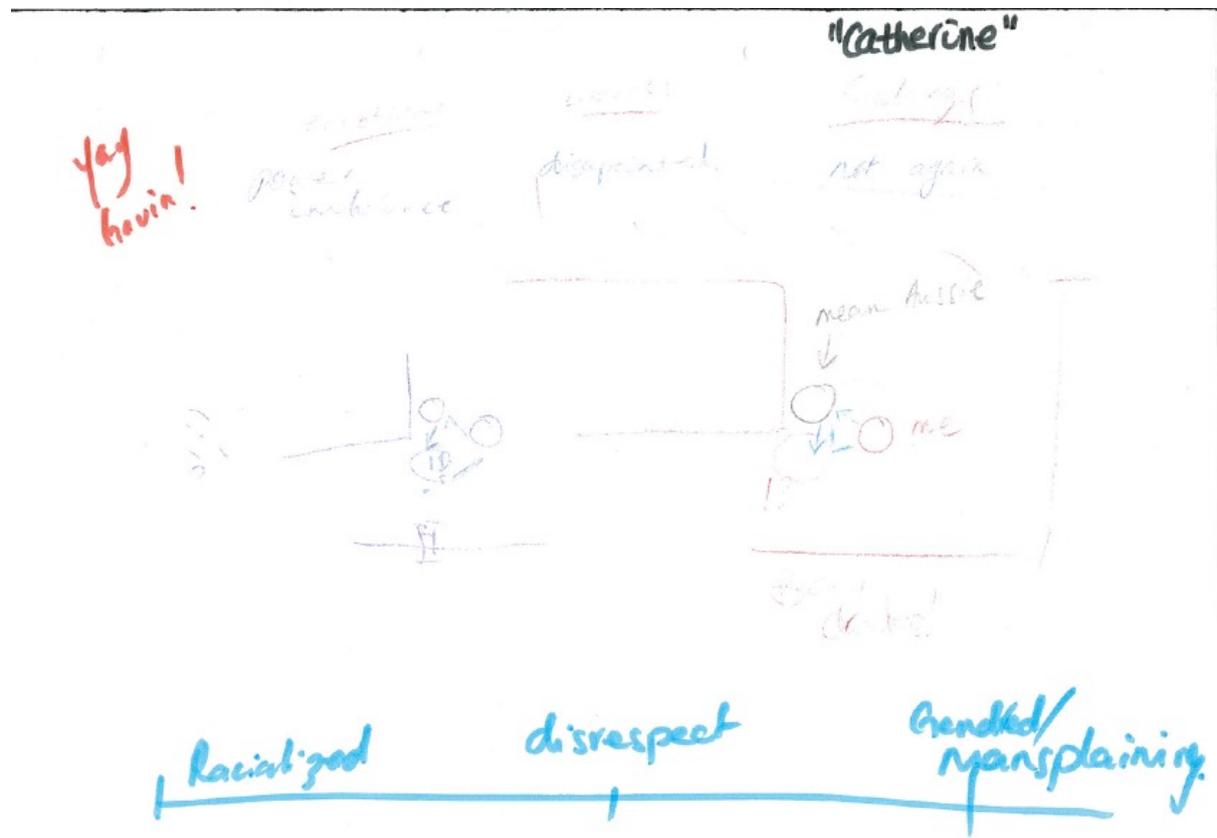
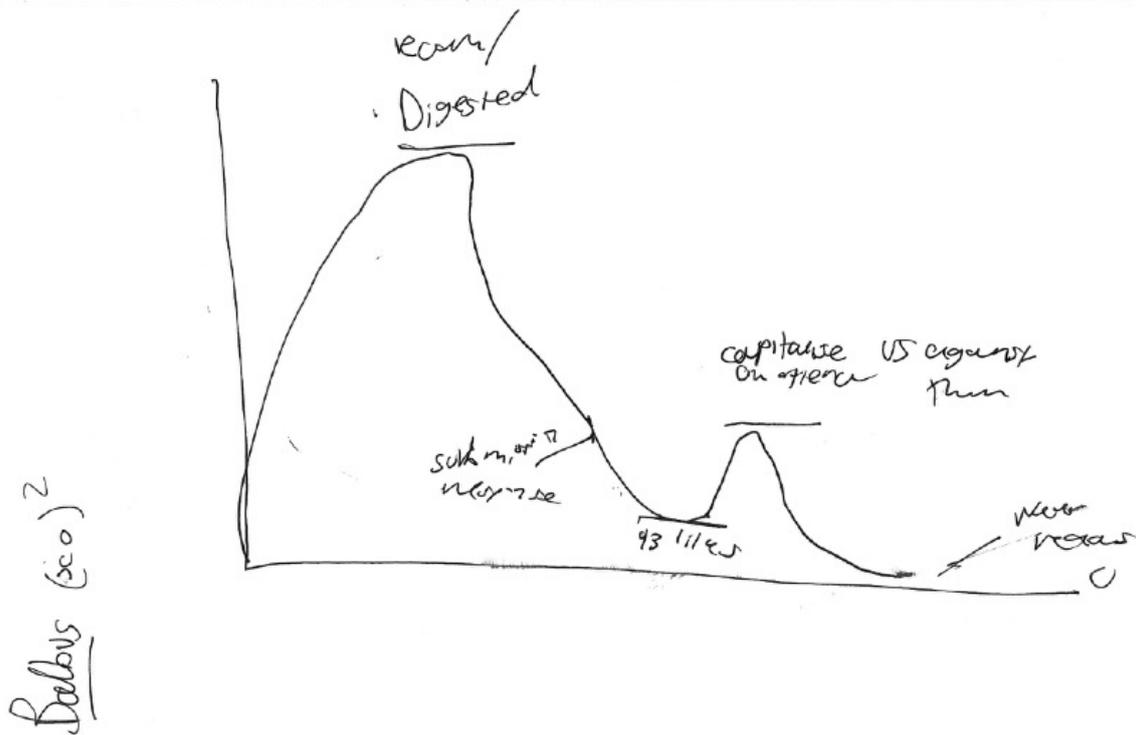
Rain	2015	ND	female	20	white	British	undergraduate	gay	ND	
Jasmine	2015	ND	Female	23	Asian-American	American	MPhil	straight	ND	
Balbus	2015	ND	male	21	Iraqi	Iraqi-British	undergraduate	gay	Visually-Impaired	Apostate of Islam, Originally Iraqi but spent life in Britain ("Culturally Iraqi")
Rex	2015	ND	male	21	white	British-American	undergraduate	straight	ND	feminist
Simeon	2016-7	ND	male	20	white	British	undergraduate	gay	ND	Rugby player
Emma	2016-7	ND	female	early 20s	white	Lithuanian	undergraduate	ND	ND	
Nisha	2016-7	ND	female	early 20s	mixed-race	British	undergraduate	ND but Mentions a heterosexual relationship	ND	
Patrick	2016-7	ND	male	19	white	British (Northern Irish)	undergraduate	gay	ND	Catholic
Igloo	2016-7	ND	female	late 20s	Chinese	Chinese	PhD	straight	ND	
Maya	2016-7	ND	female	early 20s	brown	Indian	undergraduate	queer	ND	Grew up in Dubai and Britain and went to international schools for many years
Kate	2016-7	ND	female	mid 20s	white	British	PhD	ND	ND	

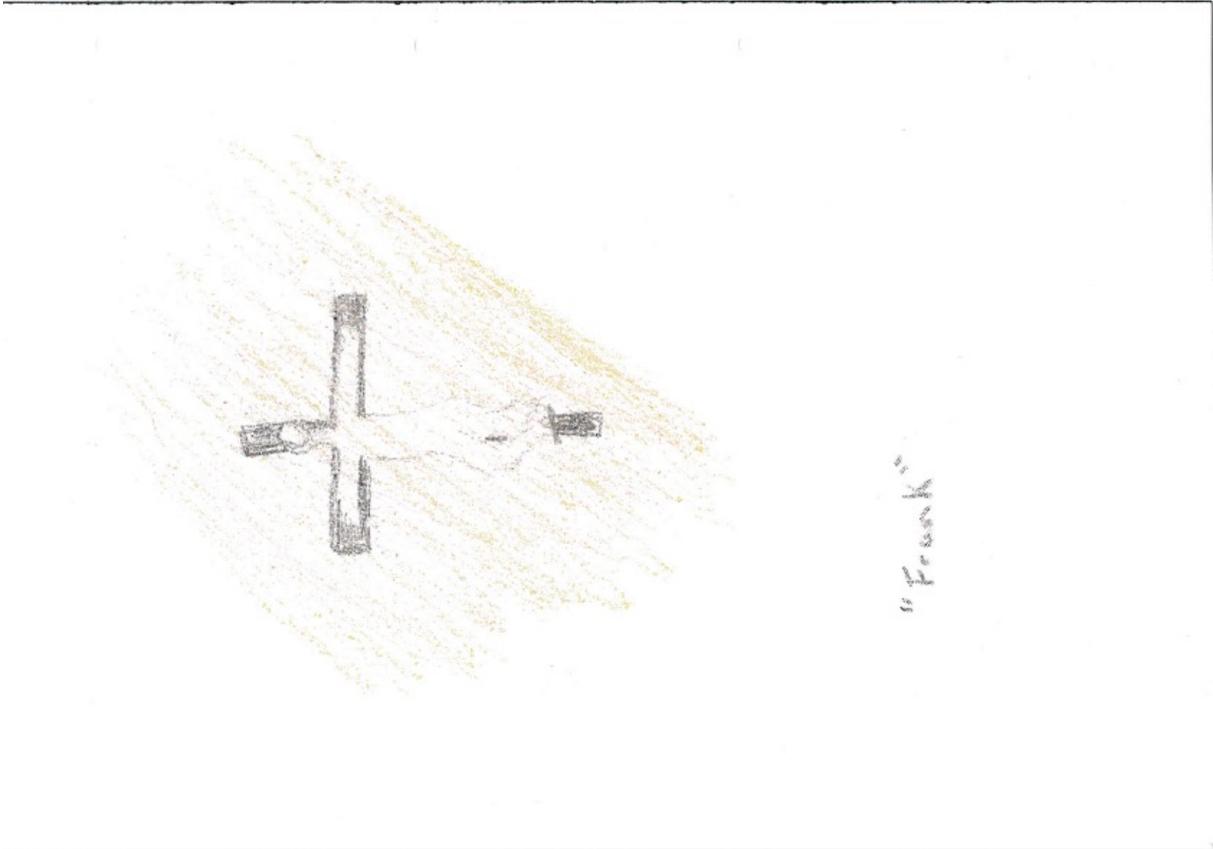
G	2016-7	ND	male	30	none specifically mentioned	Egyptian	PhD	straight	ND	Muslim
Ru Shi	2016-7	ND	Non-binary	21	Chinese	British	undergraduate	queer	ND	
Raj	2016-7	ND	male	mid 20s	brown	British	PhD	ND	ND	
Will	2016-7	ND	male	mid 30s	white	British	PhD	ND	ND	Quaker
Benjamin	2016-7	ND	male	around 30	white	British	PhD	straight	ND	
Ola	2016-7	ND	female	mid 20s	white	Irish	MPhil	ND	ND	
Ray	2016-7	ND	Non-binary	28	Latin American	Puerto Rican	PhD	queer/lesbian	ND	
Kezza	2016-7	"financially privileged"	female	21	white	British/French/German	undergraduate	ND	ND	Vegetarian and environmental activist
Byron	2016-7	ND	male	21	white	British	undergraduate	gay	ND	Nursing Student at Anglia Ruskin
Nadia	2016-7	"working-class"	female	21	Arab / of colour	British-Tunisian	undergraduate	bisexual	ND	
Natalia	2016-7	ND	female	21	white	British-Polish	undergraduate	ND	ND	
Andre	2016-7	ND	male	21	white	British	undergraduate	gay	ND	

Paris	2016-7	ND	male	21	black	British-Nigerian	undergraduate	gay	ND	
Latoya	2016-7	ND	female	26	mixed-race / black	British-American	PhD	straight	ND	
Kathryn	2016-7	"semi-middle class"	female	21	white	British	undergraduate	ND	ND	
Chioma	2016-7	ND	female	19	black	British-Nigerian	undergraduate	ND	ND	

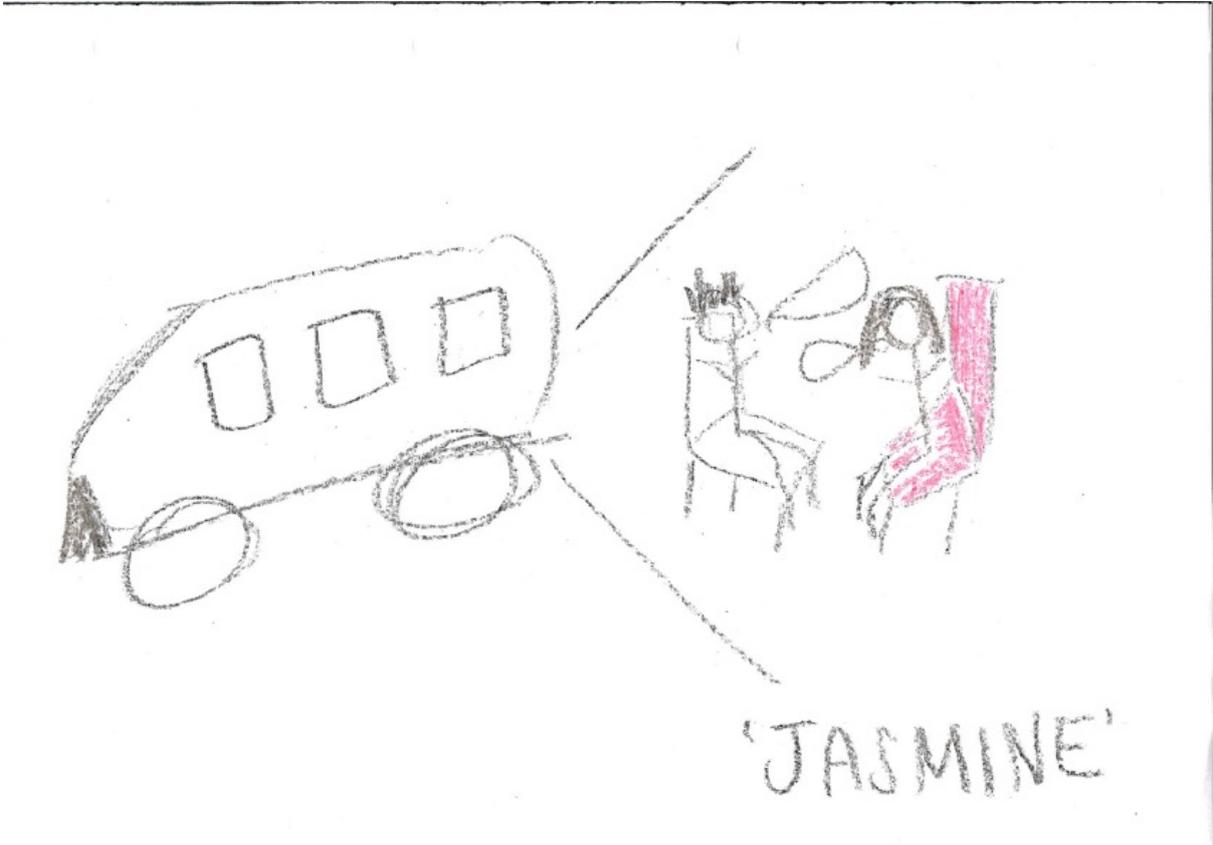
*Table 2: Participant Composition*

Appendix H: Samples of Participant Drawings





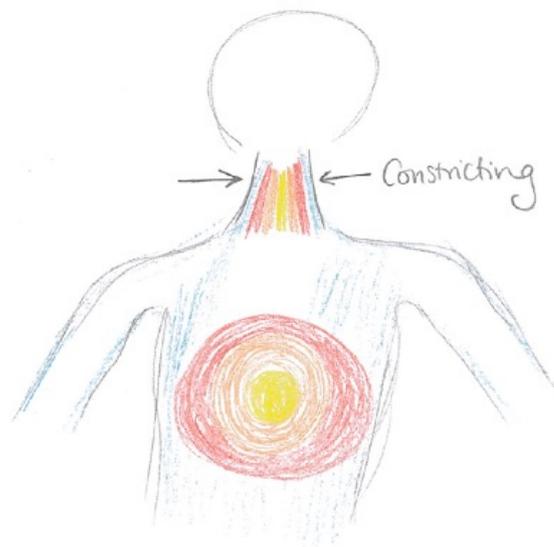
"Frank"



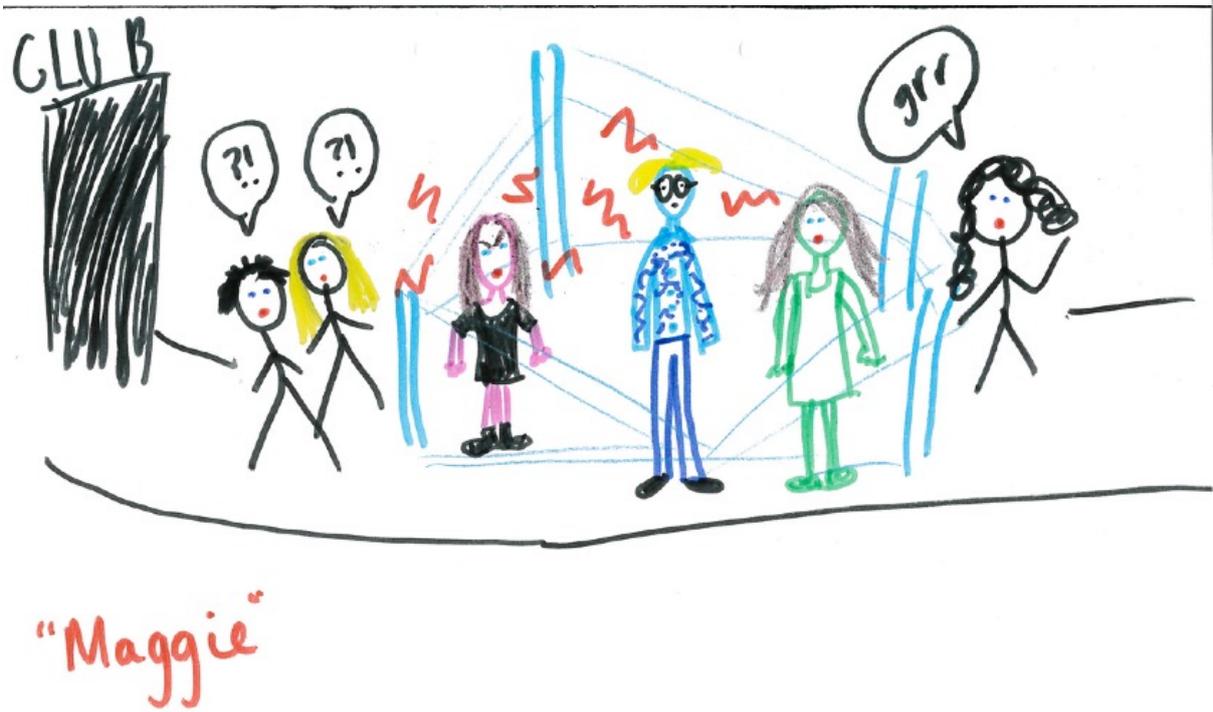
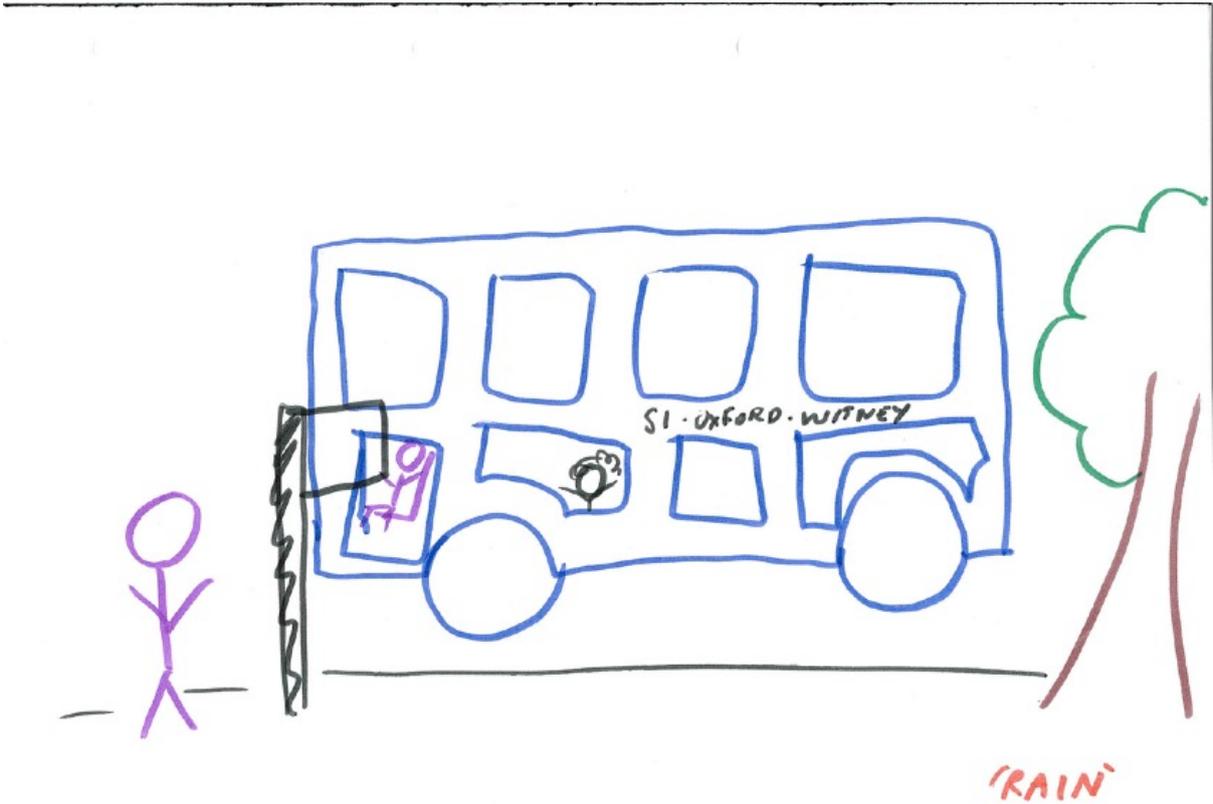
'JASMINE'



'Jay Maker'



"Lyra"





'Sophia'



Ansicht

"Vierne" (sic)

