

**The Choreography of Everyday Sexism: Reworking Sexism
in Interaction**

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Abstract

Sexism thrives in the present because it appears to dwell in the past. Shielded by the claim that we have successfully dispatched it, contemporary sexism flourishes as ‘retro’, ‘hipster’ or ‘ironic’ sexism, or else passes unnoticed. Accusations of sexism sound amusingly out-dated and those speaking seriously of sexism may be dismissed as out-of-date themselves – or else as unreasonable and oversensitive. Under these conditions, the persistent presence of sexism has appeared virtually ‘unspeakable’. In this essay I examine this dynamic at close quarters, asking how sexism is performed and resisted in young people’s everyday interactions. Drawing from interviews with twenty secondary school students aged sixteen to eighteen, I develop an account of the ‘choreography’ of sexism: the organising patterns through which sexism is communicated in interaction. This choreography shapes what is said, but also what is felt: how bodies are hailed by sexist communication and recruited into particular patterns of feeling and response. I focus my attention on the moves those I interviewed made to challenge sexism, and the possibilities these manoeuvres hold for unravelling sexism in interaction.

Key Words: *everyday sexism, feminism, young people, anti-sexism, resistance*

For some time, the successes and freedoms of women, especially young, white, heterosexual and upwardly-mobile women, have been proclaimed and celebrated across the the “advanced democracies” of the west.¹ While evidence documenting the persistence of sexism abounds, a mundane counter-rhetoric suggests otherwise. Sexism is an/Other’s problem; in western democracies it is commonly supposed that sexism is no longer a serious concern and we ought not to take it seriously.² In this milieu, the gendered constraints western women encounter are considered a matter for personal rather than political management. If structural gendered inequalities are overcome, all that remains is for individual women to ‘lean in’ and grab their dues.³ Should a particular practice achieve recognition as sexist (generally instances related to cultural pressure points of sexuality and sexual violence) discussion is compartmentalised and does little to trouble the broad consensus that gender equality is achieved – or close enough.

Ironically, it is the apparent extinction of sexism that allows gendered inequalities to thrive. Over the past decade, various feminist scholars have shown how, through repetition, narratives of women’s economic, social and sexual liberation come to stand in for the real thing, sheltering sexism while appearing to expunge it.⁴ Judith Williamson, for example, has tracked this dynamic through contemporary visual culture, where the persistence of sexism, she argues, is simply ‘airbrushed away’.⁵ As Williamson explains, this disappearing-act is not simply aspirational. It works to

secure sexism by eclipsing or downplaying ongoing inequalities: the problem of sexism is hidden in plain sight.

This sleight of hand is the signature move of ‘postfeminism’ or the ‘postfeminist sensibility’.⁶ Postfeminism is a contested term, one I use as shorthand for the network of common-sense discourses that claim gender equality has been achieved, that sexism is vanquished – and, consequently, that gender no longer has any determining power in women’s lives. The apparent pastness of sexism against women lends it a quasi-nostalgic aesthetic. Sexism sounds ‘almost quaint’, and popular culture invites us to revive and indulge in ‘ironic’, ‘hipster’ and ‘retro-sexism’.⁷ Reformulated as a practice of pleasure rather than power, sexism colonises new spaces while maintaining its purchase in familiar ones.⁸ Following Sara Ahmed, we might understand postfeminism as a ‘non-performative’: rather than bringing about the effect it names (as a performative does), postfeminist discourse functions as a non-performative in its repetitive citation of a gender equality that has not come to pass.⁹

When sexism is routinely presented as harmless, its harms become difficult to see and speak of, even as they accumulate around us. Rosalind Gill has suggested that the postfeminist disavowal of gender inequality has removed an accessible vocabulary for naming and resisting sexism, leaving sexism virtually ‘unspeakable’.¹⁰ Others have reached similar conclusions: Pomerantz, Raby and Stefanik were struck by the absence of a critical language with which to ‘name...sexism *as* sexism’ in their interviews with Canadian girls.¹¹ Naming sexism matters because language and action go together: sexism is open to challenge only insofar as it is visible and representable.¹² Indeed, this premise animates this special issue: we must continue to think and to write about sexism; most of all, we must find ways to talk about it. The pressing question, then, is how best to expand our capacity to speak of and, then, to contest sexism under these stifling conditions. Sexism is, after all, a problem *with* a name – how might we put that name to work?

One thing is certain: any efforts along these lines must grapple with more than a missing vocabulary. The act of naming sexism exposes injustices that some might wish to forget. Recognising systems, ideas and practices as sexist disturbs and threatens many of those imbricated within them. At the very least, pointing out sexism is an uneasy business – and the one who points sexism out is the visible source of this discomfort. The mere presence of someone who recalls or signifies injustice may be enough to dampen or rupture good feeling.¹³ Within this web of affect, a critique of the collective problem of sexism is easily dismissed as the individual problem of an embittered speaker.¹⁴ In short, when speaking about sexism, we may find others unwilling to listen; we may find ourselves reluctant to speak out at all. This is part of the discursive-affective machinery that makes naming and resisting sexism difficult. The ‘unspeakability’ of sexism is more than an absence of talk: it is a structured silence.

In late 2012, I began a research project exploring gender, sexism and power-knowledge with senior secondary school students in Auckland, Aotearoa New

Zealand that I hoped would help to counter this climate of silence about sexism. From a post-structuralist feminist perspective, articulating a (missing) vocabulary, language or discourse has ethical and political potential insofar as it makes visible alternative possibilities for subjectivity and action. Guided by my personal and professional feminist commitments, I planned to undertake ‘action-oriented’ group workshops and follow-up interviews that would invite participants to explore feminist discursive resources as well as mapping discourse already in circulation. The collaborative workshops offered participants spacious, open-ended encounters with feminist perspectives on sexism, gender, feminism, activism, power and the politics of knowledge; follow-up interviews explored whether and how participants were making use of feminist perspectives explored during the workshops. This project dwells at the intersection of qualitative feminist research, feminist pedagogy, critical participatory action research and liberation psychology.¹⁵ The project (in general) and the workshops (in particular) are informed by these traditions, without being a straightforward instance of any one in particular.

In the spirit of feminist and liberation approaches, the workshops were conceived as a space for inquiry, problem-posing and the destabilisation of assumptions, as opposed to an arena for one-way knowledge transmission where predetermined “outcomes” are achieved or the “truth” is revealed. The workshops addressed participants as active, knowledgeable meaning-makers, inviting them to experiment and to explore, if and as they chose, critical and feminist theory and its (potential) resonances and dissonances in their lives. My role within the workshops was to share ideas and ask questions, and to step back as participants did the same. A typical workshop day began with physical warm-ups and icebreakers, and moved into themed sessions lasting between one and two hours addressing, for instance, power-knowledge, everyday sexism, activism, the politics of choice or free speech. Sessions included a range of discussion-based, reflective and socio-dramatic activities designed to invite a ‘problem-posing’ relation to the issue at hand (and potentially to gender, sexism and sexuality and the social more generally). I present a fuller account of the ethics, theory and content of the workshops in a freely available online workshop resource.¹⁶

Twenty of the twenty-three workshop participants subsequently agreed to a follow-up interview six to ten weeks later. We met and talked wherever participants chose: their homes, my home, cafés, public libraries or on the University of Auckland campus. Those who volunteered to be interviewed were in some respects a varied bunch. Sixteen participants described themselves as women and four described themselves as men; all were aged between sixteen and eighteen. Self-described sexualities included gay (one interviewee), straight (fifteen interviewees), straight-ish (one interviewee) and female (one interviewee); two did not specify. Interviewees identified with a range of ethnicities, including one or more of the following: Chinese (three interviewees), Israeli (one interviewee), Japanese (one), Korean (one), Māori (two), Niuean (one), Pākehā/New Zealand European (eleven), Polish (one), Scottish (one) and South African (one). The educational and family histories of participants varied. Many were born in Aotearoa New Zealand, while others had immigrated as

children and had consequently undertaken some schooling overseas. One had participated in Māori language immersion schooling (Kura Kaupapa Māori) and two others had been home-schooled. Thirteen participants lived in two-parent households, four lived with mothers only, two lived in composite families and one lived in a homestay. The socioeconomic profiles of the five large, state-funded secondary schools participants attended varied but were weighted towards relative privilege: two were decile nine (privileged), one was decile eight, one decile seven and one decile three (less privileged).¹⁷ Accordingly, most of the young people whose words I share here come from communities with socioeconomic indicators above the national average.

Tuning In to Sexism

In conducting interviews with workshop participants, I hoped to build a sense of what – if anything – participants were doing with the critical analysis of gender and power explored in the workshops. Which ideas gelled? What, if anything, had changed? And, most germane to this essay, what were participants' experiences of coming up against sexism before and after the workshop? What moves did they make to dodge sexism, and to what effect? Those I interviewed appeared eager to mull over whether and how sexism figured in their lives, and to share their reflections on the workshop experience and their strategies for negotiating a sexist world. Though fewer than half had identified as feminist at the start of the workshops, most described themselves as feminist during follow-up interviews. Almost all had a great deal to say about feminism, sexism and sexuality, as well as the rewards and frustrations of having a critical analysis of gender and power.

The workshops offered participants the tools and the opportunity to tune in to sexism around them. During workshops, we discussed a range of potential sites and instances of sexism: gendered inequalities in income, in the workplace, in sport and media sports coverage, as well as broader talk about how masculinity and femininity intersect with power. Our discussions touched on street harassment, violence, gendered models of intimacy and embodied experiences of gender. These examples were offered as starting points for reflection rather than as a laundry list of bona fide sexism. Sexism went undefined, and precisely what sexism was, and who could experience it, remained an open question.¹⁸

Many interviewees transposed a language of sexism into salient contexts that workshop discussions had not attended to: everyday experiences in school, at home and with friends. For many, workshop participation brought the white noise of everyday sexism in these familiar spaces into sharper focus. Describing this experience of attunement, Paige spoke of a capacity to 'mak[e] connections' and 'see[...] signs' that were invisible to her before:¹⁹

I think I came out of it a lot more kind of aware of this kind of inequality that I didn't really know of this before even though it was right in front of me I wasn't making connections and like seeing like signs

Tuning in to sexism meant participants heard the everyday differently: familiar and normalised practices and attitudes took on a different character. Many interviewees described the weeks since the workshop as a period of reappraisal. Participants began to connect ‘niggly feelings’ (Claudia), ‘things [...] that I just kind of accepted’ (Holly), and ‘general pressures that you wouldn’t have noticed’ (Nina) to a wider matrix of sexism that they were able to trace through their everyday lives.²⁰

Reflecting on her experiences since the workshop, Claudia explained:

there was kind of things that kind of talked at me, kind of made me uncomfortable, but I didn’t know how to phrase it. It’s learning about feminism, sexism, it’s like I know what it is now somehow.

Thomas echoed Claudia almost exactly: ‘I’ve like viewed everything in a different light [...] I know what [sexism] is now.’ Through tuning in to sexism around them, participants became more aware of their own brushes with sexism, more sensitised to its pressure and texture. For many I interviewed, sexism had become especially visible – and especially jarring – in the fabric of everyday interactions: ‘things that people say’ or ‘things that people do’ (Jade). For Jessie, the extent of mundane sexism, its ‘alwaysness’, was a ‘big shock’:

I have realised, this was kind of always obviously before but I’ve just like realised the alwaysness of it

Interviewees’ sensitivity to sexism vied with postfeminist “common sense” perspectives on gender relations. Speaking in the abstract, those I interviewed often hedged and qualified the impact of sexism on women and girls, suggesting that, today, sexism was not a ‘big deal’ (Phoebe). When recalling everyday experiences of stifling sexism or sexist diminishment, however, a gender-neutral approach to sexism appeared thin and insufficient. Georgia’s recollection of mundane sexist jokes spurs her to envision a thicker gender equality: one that reaches beyond ‘get[ting] everything the same’ towards sexist practices that need to ‘stop’:

it’s not just equality in the sense of like we’ll get everything the same, it’s more like, I don’t know. It’s kind of like you want, I don’t know, for me what I want to stop is like women in the kitchen jokes and stuff like that

Recalling feminist and Freirean consciousness-raising, Sara Ahmed explains how this sensation of pressure or ‘coming up against’ is integral to feminist politics: it is only through consciousness of an obstacle that we begin to perceive the possibility and necessity of pushing against it.²¹ So it was for those I interviewed. The moments where participants described the pressure of normalised sexism on their lives were often moments of resistance, moments where they affirmed their determination to push back. Rather than following others’ advice to ‘learn to live’ with street harassment, Holly, along with other interviewees, was more interested in finding ways to live without it:

it's accepted and it's just like "oh that's going to happen to you, you're going to have to learn to live with that" and it's like should I have to learn to live with that? It's actually not good.

Jade, too, described her 'will' to challenge 'how sexist things are':

I'll just realise how sexist, how sexist things are, and it has really created a real will for me to want to change those things, really want it to be different to how it is.

Those energised like Jade by this transformative impulse faced the challenge of putting it to work against the plastic, slippery sexism they saw around them.

Plausible Deniability and Sexism

This brings us to my chief interest in this essay: how young people set about disorganising sexism. Everyday, face-to-face interactions were by far the most common context in which interviewees described experiencing and resisting sexism; consequently, they are my focus. As interviews piled up, I was struck by the patterning of these rich accounts of interactional sexism. Others' performances of sexism— along with interviewees' attempts to derail them — appeared to be structured around a kind of plausible deniability. Frequently, those doing sexism deployed manoeuvres securing that deniability — maintaining their capacity to do sexism while plausibly denying that anything genuinely sexist had taken place. This is what Judith Williamson has called sexism with an 'alibi': sexist actions and comments retain their power without appearing to have any.²²

One such manoeuvre individualises and depoliticises sexism by positioning it as a personal opinion that one has a right to express: Paige's history teacher assured his class that he wasn't 'anti-women', he 'just thought men were better'. As many I interviewed discovered, attempts to challenge this brand of "personal opinion" sexism become tangled up in hegemonic discourses that champion individual self-expression. If I am simply "being me", then my right to express sexist opinions becomes a matter of freedom of speech — and any attempts to curtail me look like oppressive censorship. Holly's description of her classmates' victim-blaming illustrates this dynamic:

these girls' view was that it was okay, like [...] okay for the girl to be raped when she was drunk and then they stood by that. And then they were kind of like "oh these crazy feminists, like is angry at me because I stated my opinion"

In another move, the diminishing effects of sexism are erased when others underplay their sexist behaviour as 'just a compliment' (Holly) or 'just joking' (Claudia). Claudia's brother puts this strategy to work, protecting himself from critique by framing his sexist comments as light-hearted and therefore harmless:

when you confront him or take that, make a serious comment about why that's sexism, he will say something like "I was just joking" or "it's just having fun"

In protesting these forms of sexist speech, critics of sexism are seen to be overreacting: ‘crazy feminists’ making a ‘big deal’ (Rose) out of something harmless and inconsequential. Attempts to name and problematise sexism fail so long as the sexism in question can hide behind sacrosanct self-expression on one hand, and playful, complimentary or harmless joshing on the other.

As I read and re-read interviewees’ evaluations, observations and experiences of interactional sexism, their accounts evoked a sense of parry, of patterned back-and-forwards movement. It struck me that these instances had the hallmarks of choreography: recurring patterns of orientation, action and response that seemed to organise sexism in interaction. Moving within it, those I interviewed found little space to offer a challenge to sexism that would not be swiftly counteracted. As they came up against sexism time and time again, interviewees described developing a feel for this sequence of moves and countermoves and began to anticipate where certain lines of response would lead. Holly plots the steps in this way:

you turn around and get angry, “oh it was just a compliment”, you keep walking, they keep doing it. It’s like there’s no winning, you know

The plausible deniability of sexism sustains an interactional choreography wherein challenges to sexism are easily deflected, rendering challenges to sexism ‘unspeakable’ – or perhaps, more precisely, unintelligible.²³ Plausible deniability scaffolds a structure of interaction wherein critics of sexism are always-already in the wrong: oppressive or unreasonable, a source of bad feeling and interactional trouble.²⁴

Thinking Sexism Choreographically

Choreography can be a helpful metaphor for understanding the moves and counter moves of interactional sexism: how it circulates on the social stage and how this circulation might be interrupted. An analysis of the choreography of a social practice examines its embodied, interactional achievement, the reciprocal flows of arguments and affects that enable and secure it. Thinking about sexism in this way attunes us to the interplay between instigator(s) and target(s) of sexism. Both have moves to make. In initiating the choreography of sexism, the instigator attempts to draw others into a pattern of interaction that diminishes the target’s power and shores up his or her own. The success or failure of sexism as an interactional practice of power depends, too, on others’ susceptibility to recruitment, and on the counter-moves available. By investigating the choreography of sexism, we attend to the force of sexism in interaction without losing sight of its openness to reformulation. My discussion does not extend to more static, structural forms of sexism less likely to be amenable to the choreographic lens I propose. Consequently, from here I use the term ‘sexism’ in this limited sense, as shorthand for “sexism in interaction”.

Choreography encompasses what is said, but also what is done, felt and registered. Thinking choreographically alerts us to the spaciousness of an encounter, the range of movement that appears possible within it. Choreography highlights the *embodied*, *relational* and *routinised* elements of interactional sexism. These elements are

fundamental to the doing – and the undoing – of sexism, and they merit a little elaboration.

Direct encounters with sexism register in bodies and on their surfaces: we know sexism through the effects that some bodies can elicit in others. Think, for example, of the exclamation ‘nice tits!’ This instance of sexism is rendered rather ineffectual if considered as words alone. The texture of the encounter, its success and intelligibility as sexism, is evidenced in bodily, affective responses: anger (eyes narrow, muscles tight), shame (face burns, eyes down), fear (hands sweat, pulse runs, pace quickens) or indifference (bodily and affective stasis). A choreographic analysis of sexism makes room for what is spoken *and* what is felt as part of the same movement, the same practice of power.

Sexism is also routinised. Like other social practices, it becomes meaningful (and powerful) through rehearsal, through particular chains of association that have come together over time. Likening the ‘doing’ of sexism to choreography helps us to conceptualise why sexism can be easy to critique in one’s head, and yet difficult to challenge in the intensity of the moment. As we encounter sexism we learn its flow, its moves and counter-moves. We get a feel for the choreography and our place within it. In time this familiarity settles into a kind of muscle-memory, pulling us towards particular lines of embodied response.²⁵

Finally, conceptualising sexism as a choreography makes room for the relational nature of sexism, particularly sexism in face-to-face interactions. Like any social practice, sexism depends on recognition in order to function. Attempts at sexism break down if an intended target is not affected in the desired way, or fails to recognise the choreography and move accordingly. Thus, the efficacy of sexism is never secured in advance, leaving space for improvisation and redirection.

In what follows I examine interview participants’ accounts of coming up against sexism with my eye on the choreography of these encounters. What possible steps do participants see for countering sexism? And how do their interactional movements play with (and into) the choreography of sexism? I attend in particular to interviewees’ efforts to make resistance to sexism possible and palatable, considering the potential their manoeuvres hold for unravelling the choreography of sexism – and their contradictory effects.

Gentle Challenge, Calm Critique

Surveying my interviewees’ accounts of challenging sexism, I observed two prevailing counter-choreographies, two preferred avenues for critique that work to protect participants from others’ censure and dismissal. One favoured avenue was to raise sexism as an issue – but to do so *gently*, calmly and without losing one’s cool. Many young women, but none of the young men, described taking this approach. They explained in detail how to frame up a gentle challenge, how to question someone’s actions without appearing aggressive, forceful or reproachful. Rather than challenging a sexist claim directly, Rose talked of delicately implying her disagreement by

offering ‘another opinion’. Mia, too, described formulating her challenges to sexism carefully and casually as an invitation to ‘check [...] out’ another perspective:

I don’t want to force it on anybody else. Like I might be like “oh you should check this out” or something but I won’t be like “this is what you should think”

So long as they appeared emotionally unaffected by sexism – and emotionally uninvested in challenging it – the young women I interviewed could not be accused of responding inappropriately: being too angry or taking things too seriously. This strategy opened up some opportunities for countering sexism, though the nonchalance required was not always easy to enact. Many of the young women I interviewed spoke about the difficulties of staying calm when faced with ‘frustrating’ (Paige) or ‘humiliating [...] embarrassing’ (Holly) sexist treatment from others. Maintaining the appearance of calm and composure in these conditions required considerable emotional labour – a capacity which young women actively cultivated. Phoebe’s description of her increasingly unflappable demeanour suggested a kind of an affective progress narrative. She used to ‘react to [sexism], blow up and make a big deal out of it’; back then, Phoebe ‘just hadn’t learnt enough to have a more educated response’. Now, self-disciplined, she knows better.

A gentle approach to sexism allows participants to avoid the negativity that sticks to those who are seen to force opinions onto others. Keeping calm also shores up a positioning that interviewees desire: that of a rational and reasonable speaker who ought to be listened to. Outlining the advantages of this strategy, Georgia explained that approaching sexism gently gave her ‘a chance to explain’ her position to others – a chance not guaranteed should she take a more direct approach:

it sort of gets through to them more. When they feel like it’s being shoved down their throat or sort of you know, if they can’t get a word in maybe they feel less inclined to accept it or at least pay attention

One wonders, of course, what exactly it is that ‘gets through’ – and what is left behind. In advancing the mildest of critiques, interviewees demand nothing from those they address. They can mention sexism once, perhaps twice, so long as their manner is unthreatening, but they are cut off from insisting on its presence or persisting in argument. To do so would be to open themselves to the censure this strategy works to avoid. The limitation of this approach to challenging sexism, then, is that interviewees are out of moves should others choose to ignore – or indeed fail to notice – their sensitively-presented critique. Paige described getting ‘stuck’ in this way:

you’re kind of stuck, you hit a kind of wall where you’re like okay if I say any more I’m just going to have to disagree with you

The injunction to agree – and to remain agreeable – that accompanies this strategy sharply curtails participants’ capacity to challenge sexism. Any discursive middle ground for assertive action against sexism collapses, leaving a dichotomy between the

reasonable, gentle passivity of this strategy and a forceful, unreasonable aggression many interviewees found ‘awful’ (Rose) and unimaginable. Instead of insisting on a fair hearing, young women using this strategy were relying on others to be persuaded by their polite critiques. Persuasion is seldom an efficient tool for effecting cultural and political change; were this the sole avenue open to us for ending sexism, we would have a considerable wait ahead of us. Of even greater concern, however, is the way that this strategy schools the young women who adopt it into responding to sexist treatment with ‘polite feminine speech’.²⁶ In doing so, this strategy plays into a construction of passive, acquiescent femininity that feminist scholars have strenuously opposed for decades as being clearly implicated in the cultural scaffolding of rape and sexist oppression.²⁷

Laughing Sexism Off

Those I interviewed also used humour to evade and undo sexism in interaction. Responding to sexism with joking rebuttal rather than overt remonstrance allowed some interviewees to reject sexism without appearing to take it too seriously. As a strategy, making fun of sexism offers the same positioning advantages as delivering a gentle challenge: one cannot be accused of an aggressive overreaction, or, in this case, of failing to get the joke. A playful approach to critique hijacks the plausible deniability of sexism: feminists, too, can claim to be “only joking”, turning the tables on anyone who objects to their talk.

Interviewees described using humour to counter to the flood of sexist jokes around them – jokes that diminished women or trivialised violence against women. Particularly common among those I interviewed were ‘sandwich’ jokes, in which a girl or woman is dismissively instructed to ‘go make me a sandwich’, the implication being that women belong in the kitchen and ought to stay there. At home, Georgia’s brother ‘always talks about, you know, women are in the kitchen where they belong’. Her male friends too ‘joke about it all the time’:

like my guy friends. They come into my house and I’m like I’ll make some lunch, and then they’ll ask, like I’ll make some lunch and then they’ll be like “woman [get] in the kitchen”

Interviewees anticipated dismissal as humourless or uptight if they made a direct, serious challenge to sexist jokes such as these. Joking back, in contrast, was described as an effective way to counteract sexism. Thomas gleefully recalled a friend’s joking riposte to her boyfriend’s incessant sandwich jokes: ‘I’ll make you a sandwich – if you make me a table’. Here, this young woman dodges the manoeuvre the joke attempts to achieve (pushing her into place as a servile sandwich-maker) without leaving her vulnerable to accusations of humourlessness or reactivity. Claudia described this advantage too. Using humour allowed her to resist her brother’s sexist comments without appearing to confront him with a ‘serious comment about why that’s sexism’:

It is sexism but I don't want to make it sound like I'm kind of confronting him. So I guess I will phrase it as a joke

When phrased as jokes, Claudia's critiques of sexism pass unchallenged because others 'accept the humour' regardless of whether they perceive and accept her message:

I think some people are more comfortable with it when they, it's not so serious, or when they are not expected to agree with it.

Others may laugh, but they are 'not expected to agree'. Once again, those I interviewed were under pressure to act in ways that would be 'comfortable' for others, so as to avoid positioning as aggressive, or as the oversensitive one taking things too seriously. While a well-crafted joke may spoil some sexist manoeuvres, it leaves no room to articulate the kind of wholesale challenge to sexist joking Phoebe imagined:

there are plenty of other things that you can laugh about instead of inequality or women not being able to do something

Instead, by 'taking it lightly' and avoiding getting 'too worked up' (Claudia), those who adopt this strategy are drawn into a choreography that ultimately lets sexist jokers off the hook.

Killjoys, Critique and Co-optation

Over the course of workshops and interviews, it was young women who described approaching sexist interactions with care and forethought. Perhaps this is because it is young women who have the most at stake. In challenging sexism, young women risk appearing as the *wrong* kind of woman: humourless, ball-breaking, unfeminine, feminist.

The figure Sara Ahmed names the 'feminist killjoy' is a container for an array of pejorative caricatures and about women and feminists.²⁸ The feminist killjoy ruins things. She finds fault. She is oversensitive, PC, and bitter. She is irrationally, inappropriately angry. Her body is object, her manner unfeminine. In short, the killjoy dwells at the intersection of a range of punitive discourses that address women. Women speakers are not simply ignored when they talk about sexism; they are heard loud and clear as feminist killjoys, as abominable (un)feminine subjects. The killjoy does not threaten all women equally. The pressures of heteronormative femininity and the punishments associated with deviation fall unevenly along lines of "respectability".²⁹ It is those with least privilege who have the most to prove – and the most to lose in appearing unfeminine.³⁰

The figure of the feminist killjoy fleshes out the claim that feminism and feminists hurt men. In appearing to threaten men, this figure protects male privilege by making women's challenges to sexism appear vindictive and unfounded. This funnels attention away from sexism and gendered power and towards sites of masculine injury and the harms allegedly inflicted by feminism and anti-sexist organising.³¹ The

feminist killjoy is also despicable in the light of individualising, meritocratic discourses associated with neoliberalism.³² If gender equality has been achieved, and we are indeed the unfettered authors of our own successes and failures, then women who complain about sexism are simply looking for someone else to blame for their failure and discontent. Thus, the shamefulness of claiming disadvantage “sticks” to the feminist killjoy and to those she attaches to.³³ She is not simply a harbinger of nightmarish PC-ism, but also rather pathetic in her transparent attempts to pin her woes onto other people. Just as the figure of the killjoy is gendered, the shame of speaking about hurt, injury and disadvantage attracts a gendered dimension.

The feminist killjoy haunts my interviews with young women, constricting their capacity to name and problematise sexism. I see her shadow in their desire not to be a ‘buzz-kill’ (Jade) or get ‘too worked up’ and ‘confirm their stereotypes’ (Claudia); I detect her presence as the young women I interviewed worked to distance themselves from those who ‘think that sexism is more prominent towards women’ (Paige) and who ‘only care about female people’ (Emily). The feminist killjoy not only haunts interactions, she is brought to life within them. Paige described how peers interpret her critiques of sexism as evidence, not of sexism, but of her dogmatic tendency to ‘react as a feminist’:

[they say] there’s no kind of logic to your choice [...] because you agree with all feminist ideas obviously because that’s what you are. You’re a feminist, you’re not a person, you’re a feminist.

Thomas, too, explained how boys at his school use the accusation of being feminist to ‘attack’ and silence young women:

[guys] could easily just like attack a female with feminism and she couldn’t really respond

The feminist killjoy is ‘that person’ (Georgia), that ‘over-reacting moody woman’ (Holly), who no one wants to be. When calling out sexism in interaction, women and girls are easily positioned as oversensitive, humourless and/or misandrist – as many I interviewed found out. The very real interactional and social costs of being named a feminist (killjoy) can hold critique of sexism in check.

Furthermore, the killjoy brings the choreography of sexism into conversation with another set of ingrained moves, affects and attachments: the conventions of polite, nurturing femininity many young women acquire (and some resist) over a lifetime’s worth of interactions. Proximity to the killjoy jeopardises women’s niceness; overt resistance to sexism is at odds with femininity. In this regard, too, the figure of the feminist killjoy plays a lead role in the interactional choreography of sexism. She is part of a heteronormative structure that discourages women from feminist feelings and from articulating the effects of sexist oppression. She is part of what holds sexism in place.

Young women’s defensive, strategic approaches to challenging sexism take shape in response to the figure of the feminist killjoy. Calm critique and laughing it off could

be usefully understood as attempts to short-circuit the choreography of sexism by ensuring the speaker cannot be positioned as a killjoy, or in a way that undermines their critique. These strategies made sexism tentatively articulable for interviewees, opening (limited) space for resisting sexism without making others feel under attack. Inevitably, however, confining challenge to strategies that will sit comfortably with others has its costs. Both gentle and joking approaches function discursively to secure sexism as *not a real problem*: an irritation, perhaps, but not a practice of power. By investing in strategies that underplay the seriousness of sexism, participants give oxygen to postfeminist claims that real sexism is extinguished – even as they come up against it.

What's more, to enact these strategies successfully, interviewees must embody the very arguments and affects that sustain the choreography of sexism: that sexism is not serious (laugh it off!), that sexism does not warrant a forceful response (keep calm, speak gently!). I wonder about the broader consequences of this strategic rehearsal, particularly for young women who opt to approach sexism *gently*. Downplaying sexism dulls feminist feeling; it counteracts the processes of attunement that made sexism stand out. Those I interviewed often prefaced their talk about sexism with qualifiers or minimising flourishes: examples of sexism were 'little things' (Phoebe) and sexist treatment was 'careless' (Rose) rather than intentional. Over time, these strategic rehearsals may outgrow their status as strategy to become a kind of default manoeuvre – one that undercuts forceful resistance to sexism when such responses may be vital. Recounting a serious instance of sexual harassment, Emily wondered aloud why she was 'so polite [...] when I should have just been like you fucking creep, what the hell is wrong with you':

I just like brushed it off and moved on, cause I sort of felt like when you're presented with, I guess at the time I felt like when you're, I felt like I was obliged to be polite for some stupid strange reason. Like super polite.

The threat of misrecognition as a feminist killjoy appears to be part of what binds young women to the choreography of sexism and to lines of response that are 'super polite'. Certainly, the killjoy holds a prominent place in interactional sexism, asserting her force through the strategies participants devise to dodge her. Without altogether disregarding their potential to trouble sexism in interaction, these strategies held those I interviewed into a pattern of response that, on the whole, lets sexism flow. Here, it seems, the killjoy does not represent feminism's "murderous" intent, but rather the death (or at least, the dampening) of feminist feeling.

Feminist Feeling

So far I have examined how gentle and joking forms of resistance to sexism tend to reaffirm the interactional choreography they set out to destabilise. In this final section, I explore an alternative approach to unsettling sexism. Thinking choreographically reminds us that interactional sexism works by drawing its target into a relation of power. However concrete it feels, the capacity to move others into subordinate

positions is an effect of discourse; mutual recognition precedes and enables recruitment.

How then, might we grow and sustain feminist feeling in ways that impinge on the practice of sexism? One way forward is to relinquish approaches that revolve around the feelings of sexist others, as gentle and joking ripostes do. As we have seen, these strategies dull the feelings that most imperil the choreography of sexism: a felt entitlement to freedom from sexism and the will to resist it. In their place, we might substitute structures of feeling that refuse to be contained by the feminist killjoy or to be bound by pressures of politeness or femininity.

Like many of the young women I interviewed, Charlotte recalled several experiences of sexual harassment. On one occasion, she was walking home from school and found herself passing a group of young men. An exchange began with a question shouted at Charlotte as she approached: “Are you a virgin?” Charlotte, a vegan, misheard. She thought he was ‘just saying vegan funny’:

I thought they said “are you a vegan?”, so I was excited, I was like “yes!”

For a moment, the speakers’ efforts to recruit Charlotte into a sexualised relation of power fell flat. This interactional trouble is significant. It alerts us to the potential of mishearings and affective misalignments to create a hesitation in the choreography of sexism, to open up an awkward, self-conscious pause that is felt, not by the target of sexism, but by whoever is trying to enact it.³⁴ Here, sexism becomes recognisable for what it is: a process, a choreography, not an inevitable relation. One imagines, with some relish, the harasser’s uncertainty, even panic, as he finds himself wrong-footed and wonders which move to make next.

Lines of response that inject this kind of pause into the performance of sexism are, of course, not guaranteed to stop sexism in its tracks. In Charlotte’s case, the choreographic fracture was recuperated when the harassers repeated themselves and, this time, Charlotte heard. Just as the effects of sexist speech can never be fully determined by a speaker, we cannot fully determine how others’ sexism strikes us. Part of sexism’s power resides in how readily it gets under the skin. The encounter Charlotte described was certainly an uncomfortable and painful one: she hadn’t told anyone else ‘exactly what he said’ and described feeling ‘a tad shameful’ about it. It may be that (temporarily) destructive enthusiasm like Charlotte’s is only possible as a consequence of genuine mishearing. Nevertheless, Charlotte’s anecdote suggests that there is something inherently disruptive about feminist feelings and attunements insofar as they make interactional sexism feel different and provoke us to feel sexism differently. Whether mistaken or intentional, misalignments and interpretative hesitations can make sexist speech and acts flounder because they fail to smoothly entrain the expected embodied responses. They make the performance of sexism a little more self-conscious. What’s more, they have the potential to rebound the vulnerability of experiencing sexism back onto the sexist actor.

We might think usefully, then, about expanding our capacity to *feel* sexism in ways that create these interactional hesitations. Rather than trying to talk others out of their attachments to sexism (or relying purely on serendipitous mishearings), we might focus instead on tuning into feminist feelings that exceed and undo what sexism is designed to secure. In this regard, we have more to learn from Charlotte. In the shared space of the interview, she made her experience into something more than ‘shameful’ and silenced. What was previously unspeakable passed into speech, repurposed as advice for her twelve-year-old self to ‘show’ others, not tell them:

I ended up just walking away, which I, and really politely [...] I would tell my twelve-year-old self to show people like that that they can’t just do that to people

Charlotte’s talk is at once past- present- and future-oriented. Re-imagining the past, she kindles feminist feelings in the present and lays the affective foundations for future feminist footwork. Others, like Claudia, described similar affective rehearsals, similar body-pedagogies with potential to wrong-foot sexism:

it’s sometimes okay to put your like, my feeling over others, like when I feel uncomfortable but I don’t want to say it because I feel like I would make the other person feel angry or something, I would say like sometimes that’s okay, sometimes you can speak up, “I don’t like this”, yeah

Feminist Footwork

Understanding everyday, interactional sexism as choreography orients us to sexism as a process hinging on what is done *and* what is felt, a process open to transformation. To fight sexism, we might tune in to feminist feelings that give sexism pause and, in doing so, we might uncramp ourselves from footwork that does not serve us. Where such moves are rehearsed and enacted they wrong-foot sexist others, making sexist practices more precarious. Feminist feelings flourish in feminist spaces and the feeling of feminist spaces often remain even when we have passed out of them, as the feeling of the workshops stayed with Max:

I just feel like, if at any time that I do get kind of, sort of, I don’t know, uncomfortable with sharing that [anti-sexist] view, I always can kind of harp back to that [workshop] and remember

I wager it is when we find shared space to feel and move with others that our manoeuvres against sexism are most potent, most disruptive – and most fun. This is something to remember as we rehearse our own feminist footwork personally and professionally: a truly disruptive act is to share feminist feelings with others. I conclude then, with a gift.

Olivia A Cole (@RantingOwl) tweeted this story of her morning commute in New York.³⁵

... This dude was aggressively hitting on this woman, who was about my age. She was ignoring him. Everyone else was too.

He kept after her. I could hear him saying, “Come on. I want your number. You’re so pretty. You don’t want my number?”

She finally says, loudly, “NO, I don’t want your number!” And what happened next was amazing.

This young woman a few seats away, looks up and she says, also loudly, “AND NO, I DON’T WANNA GIVE YOU MINE.”

And there was this awkward silence. Like, at first people just stared at her, myself include [sic]. But then I realized, and slowly so did others.

The second woman’s friend started laughing and she said (not as loud, but still audible) “NO, I DON’T WANNA MEET YOU NO WHERE.”

And together they sang, really loudly (and off key) “NO, I DON’T WANT NONE OF YOUR TIIIIIME”

The dude trying to get the first woman’s number just stared at them, and the woman he was harassing was just LAUGHING. He was done.

Those, like me, immersed in the pop music of the late 1990s will recognise (with some delight) this sequence of sentences as the chorus of girl-band TLC’s ‘No Scrubs’.³⁶ One imagines the atmosphere in the train shifting as the choreography of sexism is seized and bent into something else before commuters’ eyes: something joyful and defiant. This is feminist feeling. Do you feel it?

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Notes

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- ¹⁷ Ministry of Education, 'Decile Change 2014 to 2015 for State & State-Integrated Schools', Ministry of Education, 2014. The national decile system ranks state-funded and state-integrated schools according to the socio-economic indicators of the school community. The scale runs from decile 1

(roughly the 10% of schools with the lowest socioeconomic indicators) to decile 10 (roughly the 10% of schools with the highest socioeconomic indicators). Privately-funded schools are not decile-ranked.

¹⁸ We explore this point in more detail in Octavia Calder-Dawe and Nicola Gavey, 'Making Sense of Sexism: Young people's talk about everyday sexism in Aotearoa New Zealand', (under review).

¹⁹ Where I quote directly from interviews, I substitute pseudonyms for participants' real names to protect the anonymity of the speaker. After some deliberation, I have elected to use unmatched pseudonyms, which reveal nothing of the cultural or social background of the speaker. This protects confidentiality by making interviewees less readily identifiable to one another.

²⁰ For the concept of a 'matrix of sexism', see Sophie Sills and colleagues, 'Rape Culture and Social Media: Young Critics and a Feminist Counterpublic', (under review).

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³² Joanne Baker, 'The Ideology of Choice. Overstating Progress and Hiding Injustice in the Lives of Young Women: Findings from a Study in North Queensland, Australia', *Women's Studies International Forum* 31, 1 (2008), 53–64.

³³ For the concept of a 'sticky sign', see Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

³⁴ This pause recalls the 'almost but not quite' of Bhabha's mimicry; Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October*, 28 (1984), 125-133.

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³⁶ TLC, 'No Scrubs', Atlanta, Georgia, D.A.R.P. Studios, 1999. The official music video is available through YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrLequ6dUdM>