Reimagining Gender and Sexual Violence Education from the Margins to the Centre
Margot Francis, Jennica Giesbrecht, Kattawe Henry, and Jessica Turgeon

Based on qualitative research with students and expert informants this article explores the perspectives of Indigenous people, racialized women, those with mental health challenges, and LGBTQ2+ people in university. We found that racialized stereotypes about sexualization, state/police brutality, hetero-patriarchy, and support services that are not culturally competent, all affect the experience of students and staff. Overall, we argue that the struggle to name sexual violence happens in the context of structural violence – which is shaped at the intersection of colonial, racial, neoliberal, ableist, and gendered power. We explore how activists could navigate the intersection of personal and structural violence.

In 1984, the Black feminist writer bell hooks published Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre where she developed theory, in part, based on insights gained from a childhood in a segregated poor Black town in Kentucky where people live, literally, on the “wrong” side of the railway tracks from the richer white community (2000). While people in her neighbourhood worked as domestic servants, labourers, or sex workers in the white sections of town, they could not live there. These racial, spatial, economic, gendered, and sexual divisions gave Black people a particular standpoint for developing insights into the workings of both communities. As hooks notes in the 2nd edition (2000) of her book:

Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked from both the outside in and the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. (xvi)

In the research that follows we argue that hooks’ analysis for seeing the operation of power, from “the outside in and the inside out,” has continuing relevance for assessing the arena of gender violence today. On March 8th, 2016, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne’s government passed Bill 132, Sexual Violence and Harassment Action Plan Act (Supporting Survivors and Challenging Sexual Violence and Harassment), 2016, an initiative to tackle sexual violence and harassment throughout Ontario, including at universities. In the aftermath of the bill’s passing, many institutions—including Brock University where we work and study—have been allocating increased resources to educational initiatives in this area. Our research emerges from a concern that many of the widespread educational efforts are shaped by the kinds of white feminist movements that hooks critiqued several decades ago. Despite this, as Farrah Khan, the Sexual Violence Response Coordinator at Ryerson University has noted, this new legislative environment marks a clearly “feminist moment” where some activists and scholars are trying to carve out de-colonial and intersectional approaches to these same projects (Francis, pers.)
The purpose of this research is to foreground the insights of several groups who are usually an afterthought in sexual violence research in universities: Indigenous women, racialized women, women with mental health challenges and gender and sexual minority students.

We interviewed twenty-seven students from Brock University and eight key informants from the region (St. Catharines, Kitchener-Waterloo, Toronto) for a study on gender and sexual violence education in May 2016. By moving those usually on the periphery to the centre of our analysis we explored how interpersonal and structural violence intersect in the lives of students. This focus seems particularly crucial given that widely promoted campus consent workshops, like Culture of Respect’s “Bringing in the Bystander” program (an American program now used in most universities across Ontario), do not incorporate intersectional analysis in their guiding principles or workshop strategies (Allison Cadwallader, pers. comm. with Francis, June 2016). We argue that if universities were to take the insights of those disproportionately affected by sexual and gender violence seriously; this standpoint would enable us to “look from the outside in and the inside out”, and reimagine the stakes involved and the strategies that might be used in sexual violence education.

Setting the Scene

Feminist scholarship has, for many decades, documented the pervasive nature of gender and sexual violence. Rebecca Godderis notes, that in the context of universities, “empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that [...] between one in four to one in five women will experience sexual assault while completing their postsecondary studies” (2016, n.p.), and Bill 132 notes that overall, one in three women will experience some form of sexual assault in her lifetime (Government of Ontario 2015, 6). The normalization of sexual violence is connected to the inequitable distribution of resources (including wealth, status and power) which sustains the gender binary, and legitimates male power creating an environment in which physical acts of sexual violence are more likely to occur (Godderis 2016, n.p.). Often, victims of sexual assault know the perpetrator; furthermore, certain groups of people are more likely to experience sexual assault than others (Federal-Provincial-Territorial (FPT) Forum of Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women 2013). For example: young women under 35 are five times more likely to be assaulted than others; with women 12-19 at the highest risk (Government of Ontario 2015, 9; RAINN 2018, n.p.). Indigenous women are twice as likely to experience sexual violence as all other women and more likely to be targeted by strangers (RAINN 2018, n.p.). Sexual minority youth reported significantly higher rates of physical victimization than their heterosexual peers, with transgender and gender non-conforming students having the highest risks for sexual violence (RAINN 2018, n.p.; Williams, 2005, 478). Women with disabilities (including mental health challenges) are three times more likely to be coerced into sexual activity through the use of force or threats (Government of Ontario 2015, 15). Women of colour are more likely to be targets of sexual violence, and less likely than white women to gain the support of the justice system when reporting a sexual assault (Pietsch 2009/2010, 57; Amar 2008, 40). Finally, men constitute approximately 12 per cent of police-reported sexual assault and abuse cases, with the majority occurring when they are children (Godderis 2016, n.p.).

Kimberlé Crenshaw has described intersectional feminist approaches to gendered violence as a mode of analysis that explores how processes of racialization, class, sexuality and
other axes of power overlap with gender to shape individual experience and social structures. Sexual violence and harassment happen at these intersections, and this complicates the experience of oppression and the legal and institutional responses to it (qtd in Adewumi 2014, n.p.). Sherene Razack (1998) encourages us to explore what is at stake through examining these interlocking relations of power. She suggests that it is only when we investigate how white supremacy is gendered that we can begin to understand the impact of gendered racism, and the importance of interlocking strategies of resistance within white dominant institutions. Intersectional feminist theories and approaches have been invaluable in our efforts to better understand gender and sexual violence (Razack 1998, 14).

Who We Spoke With

In this project we consulted students through organizing eight focus groups and eight interviews with academics and service providers who have expertise in working with these same groups. We met with Indigenous, racialized, and gender and sexual minority students and those with mental health challenges—some students saw themselves in multiple locations—to explore the common experiences of each group. Our focus was to facilitate discussion without pressuring any one individual to make their experiences speak on behalf of an entire marginalized community. We hoped this approach would allow us to benefit from the in-depth information available through listening to interactions between group members. The focus groups were led by three research assistants who were themselves from the communities being consulted, and thus were most likely to have the skills, knowledge, and connections needed to engage their peers. Familiarity with the subject ensured that the research assistants contributed to minimizing emotional risk in light of the difficult subject matter. These same research assistants contributed to analyzing the data and are co-authors, and collaborators in this paper. Participants represented many different social, economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds and included those from every Faculty in the university. It became clear during the focus groups that many participants were sexual violence survivors, although we did not make this a condition for participation and asked no questions to elicit personal experiences of sexual violence. Instead, the research assistants invited students to discuss their experiences of educational initiatives on sexual violence, the particular challenges faced by their respective communities, potential impacts of violence and harassment on their university experience, and their ideas for effective sexual violence education, support and prevention. In the interviews with the eight key informants we reached out to academics, health promotion staff, sexual violence response coordinators, equity and diversity staff, Indigenous support workers, and the Elder-in-Residence from Six Nations at Brock University.

Decolonial Approaches to Gender Violence

A core concept driving our understanding of sexual and gender violence is that interpersonal violence and structural violence are interconnected (Stanko 2003). In a white dominant settler society such as Canada, colonial violence is foundational to all other forms of interpersonal and structural violence that non-Indigenous and Indigenous people experience and must be central to any efforts to eliminate it (Razack 2015). This is particularly important to recognize in
universities, as Kwagiulth scholar Sarah Hunt (2016) argues, that because “academic space is not neutral [...] we need to consider the role of educational spaces in settler colonialism, [and] in attempting to dispossess Indigenous peoples of our lands, cultures, kinship networks and bodies” (5). In particular, Hunt (2016) highlights that any analysis of “consent” must start with the non-consensual renaming, regendering, and racializing of Indigenous children, through for example, residential schools where sexual abuse was endemic. In a related vein, Anishinaabec scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) also notes: “Many of our [Indigenous] societies normalized gender variance, variance in sexual orientation and all different kinds of relationships as long as they were consistent with our basic values of consent, transparency, respect and reciprocity” (n.p.). For example, Alex Wilson (2016), from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation charts the important connections between language, land sovereignty, and body sovereignty, and notes that the Cree dialect does not include gender-distinct pronouns. Instead, the language is ‘gendered’ on the basis of whether or not something is animate (that is, whether or not it has a spiritual purpose and energy) (n.p.) It is important to note that women have been integral to decision-making and leadership in most Indigenous nations (Anderson and Lawrence 2006). In this context we can see that Indigenous languages and epistemologies threatened the colonial project and in particular that women, two-spirit, trans, and gender-variant Indigenous people threatened white heteropatriarchy (Hunt 2016, 6). As Simpson notes: “Heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity and cis-normativity attack the fabric of Indigenous political traditions and in asymmetrical ways [...] and impact all genders in Indigenous nations” (Simpson 2014, n.p.).

Colonial stereotypes of Indigenous women as animalistic, savage and the embodiment of sexual sin contributed to widespread ideas that sexual violence against them did not “count” as they were already “impure” (Smith 2005, 10). While sexual violence was used as a tool to colonize Indigenous populations, it was also used against Black women to “reproduce an exploitable labor force” who were often the property of white men under chattel slavery, and hence were “inherently rapable” (Smith 2005, 16). Smith (2005) connects this to the contemporary prevalence of violence against racialized women who also endure higher rates of gender-based violence and are (like Indigenous women) less likely to be believed or taken seriously (10).

Simpson, referencing Chris Findley, also notes that heteropatriarchy affects cis-gender men and women by shrinking Indigenous ‘masculinity’ into the confines of white masculinity in ways that legitimize patriarchy and domestic violence. Heteronormativity can also restrict Indigenous ‘femininity’ to the confines of white femininity so that Indigenous women are “more easily controlled through the policing of our bodies and sexuality by settler society” (Simpson 2014, n.p.). Importantly, Simpson (2014) notes that transgender and gender non-conforming people “experience the most brutal forms of oppression as a mechanism to disappear them all together” (n.p.). Qwo-Li Driskill (2016), a two-spirit Cherokee scholar, highlights that: we cannot reduce intimate violence to simply individual acts, but instead must consider it as a part of historically and socially situated networks of violence (10-11). Thus, the overall problem is not simply providing decolonial and multicultural services to survivors of violence. Rather, in theorizing gender violence we must recognize that “rape culture” is not simply a tool of patriarchal control, but that sexual and gender violence intersects with and is shaped by colonial gender regimes, displacement, racism and forced migration.
Students and their Allies Define the Intersections of Violence and Harassment

**Indigenous Perspectives**

As a settler colonial state, Canada profoundly shapes both Indigenous peoples’ exercise of sovereignty over their land and the possibilities for bodily integrity and safety. Consequently, it is not surprising that Indigenous women, queer, trans and two spirit people endure the highest rates of sexual violence of any group in North America (RAINN 2018, n.p.). Hayley Moody (Métis) the Sexual Violence Counsellor and Advocate at Wilfrid Laurier University highlighted the impact of this legacy explaining that while the mainstream anti-violence movement is focused on defining a “baseline for consent” Indigenous activists question the very definition of these terms. Indeed, Moody argues that if we focus only on sex when defining a “baseline” then “what you really mean is white consent.” Instead, groups like the *Native Youth Sexual Health Network* are exploring how terms like “survivor” and “consent” can be used to re-think the impact of colonization on Indigenous people’s relationship to their bodies, the land, economic survival and environmental destruction.

Key informant Sherri Vansickle (Haudenosaunee), a faculty member at the *Tecumseh Centre for Aboriginal Research and Education*, notes in her interview that this analysis suggests it is difficult to “separate sexual violence and gender based violence away from the larger structural problems [...].” (Francis, pers. comm., June 2016). The result, Vansickle suggests, is that “when we look at people who are in our communities, it’s hard to find someone who hasn’t experienced some type of violence. Like, really hard. Because, unfortunately, it’s the norm. And obviously that relates back to the continued colonization to this day.”

The Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen (2011) argues that colonial ideas of male dominance and the inter-generational legacies of dispossession, displacement and impoverishment have all contributed to Indigenous women facing increased levels of interpersonal gendered violence (273). This violence comes, in-part, from non-Indigenous men who understand that Indigenous women can be harassed, assaulted, and often killed with impunity, as well as from Indigenous men, who are also dealing with the aftermath of colonial violence, sexual abuse and trauma.

In light of this legacy, Vansickle suggests: that “We’re easy targets for a lot of things, and with that comes shame [...] [and the need to] re-evaluate how we look at ourselves, because we’re so used to getting these awful messages about what it’s like to be a Native woman” (Francis, pers. comm., June 2016). In her interview, Vansickle recounted conversations with Indigenous women who described instances of violence, but who were “struggling to identify what happened to them as sexual assault.” This struggle to name sexual coercion is echoed by many women who experience a significant mismatch between what is usually considered “real rape”, and the continuum of actual occurrences of sexual violence that include coercion, harassment and assault, often by those who are known to us including friends, partners, family and kin, as well as strangers. In this context, Indigenous interviewees stressed that sexual violence occurs within a framework of high levels of intergenerational trauma and violence overall. As Phil, a Brock undergraduate student noted, “I see intergenerational trauma, [and] the effects of it, not only on myself, but for my friends, and where they are, and how they proceeded through the post-secondary process. But I really see how that cycle continues [...] [and there are issues of] trust that stem from that” (Francis, pers. comm., April 2016). Sandra Wong (Six Nations), the Aboriginal Academic Support Coordinator/Instructor, added that this reality is also shaped by the history of disproportionate levels of abuse within residential
schools, which is “going to take years to get over” (Francis, pers. comm., April 2016). Similarly, the Six Nations Elder-in-Residence, Carol Jacobs, also reflected on that legacy, suggesting that “trust is hard to come to for students [...] we face that racism every day” (Francis, pers. comm., April 2016). This context has real and tangible effects, decreasing the likelihood of Indigenous women disclosing violence in white dominant institutions, and affecting their ability to gain appropriate supports, achieve academic success and find “just responses” to the violence they face on multiple levels.

**People of Colour (POC)**

Racialized women also highlighted the intersection of racism with their experience of sexual violence, especially the ways historically dominant ideas about Black sexuality fetishize their bodies as “animalistic” and “exotic.” For example, Alise, who grew up in the Niagara region noted “the guy I lost my virginity to in high school later told his friends that he got his ‘Black belt,” and similarly, other interviewees described men boasting about getting their “yellow belt” (Henry, pers. comm., May 2016). These racist references highlight how white men consume Black and Asian women as fetishized sexual objects. Variations on this experience were shared by all our racialized interviewees and would consume a considerable portion of this article if they were to be narrated in full. Kattawe Henry, the research assistant for these focus groups, astutely observed that this theme illustrated the “simultaneous hyper-sexualization and de-sexualization” of racialized women, who were supposedly desired because of their race, and at the same time de-sexualized as they could be replaced by any other woman who fit that racial category. As another interviewee, Khaleesi elaborated:

> Especially on campus, so many people want to f*** Black girls; Black women’s bodies are always seen as ready for consumption. If you go to a party they assume that a) you can dance, b) you want to dance with everybody, and c) you want to do sexual things with them... And it’s like, no, just because I’m Black and I’m dancing does not mean that I want to go and ride your d*** in the back [...] So nobody is addressing how as a Black woman, sexism and racism are never mutually exclusive. The sexism that you face is racially motivated. And the racism that you face is usually sexist. (Henry, pers. comm., May 2016)

This gendered racism (or misogynoir) is especially frustrating given the ways it erases racialized women’s levels of school achievement. In analysis of data from its 2011 National Household Survey, Statistics Canada reports that: “as a group, all visible minority women of core working age were more likely than women who were (white) to have obtained a university degree. The comparison is 40 per cent versus 27 per cent” (Todd 2016, n.p.). As interviewee April noted: “it’s so frustrating the idea that no matter what we’ve been through [...] no matter our achievements, no matter how independent [...] our perseverance [...] you’re going to focus on sexualization” (Henry, pers. comm., May 2016). This experience crossed racial lines and had distinctive features for mixed-race women. April explained that “not only is it common, it’s common in our community, and it’s common at Brock. At the drop of a hat you’re supposed to be doing everything and anything and if you’re not, you’re not Black enough. Just that idea that you’re going to tell me how Black I’m supposed to be?”

Another interviewee, Zawadi, highlighted the difficult mix of alcohol and drugs, which “just hypes it up to a whole new level” and often left women feeling fearful (Henry, pers. comm.,
May 2016). For example, Azad illustrated how her attempts to assert sexual limits in the context of the bar scene in St. Catharines were frequently ignored:

I do raise my voice, I do say no to guys, when they want to dance, and I don’t want to, or I don’t want to be touched, but I was already touched. And I raise my voice to that. And I decided to walk away, and the guy pulled my hair by my ponytail [...] I was so mad, I turned around, and there was like a circle of guys, and his friend started touching my butt, while I’m yelling to his face. And I’m like, “Okay, I’m done” (Henry, pers. comm., May 2016).

Several of the interviewees shared similar stories of being sexually harassed and touched without consent. Azad reflected on the implications of this: “That’s really traumatizing, because even your refusal is taken as a joke. And it’s also sexualized. It’s like, ‘Oh, I like that! You’re confident!’ It’s like, No. I am saying No.” Azad’s narrative highlights Asian Canadian women’s distinctive experiences, where stereotypes about them as passive and compliant playthings that are “easy to have sex with” serve to erase their agency and can mock their efforts at sexual self-determination (Cho 1997, 165).

All of these students also talked about the ways male students deflected any critique of this behavior, highlighting the potentially important role of men as allies in any movement to challenge rape culture, as well as their frequent disappointment in men’s unwillingness to step into that task. As Alise noted:

You always hear, “well I’m a nice guy, I’m not like that.” Okay, nice guy, when your friend was making rape jokes and you were laughing, [this makes you] just as bad in my eyes. So, I mean when your friend’s talking about how he had sex with a girl who was drunk and he was sober, and you say “Oh good job!” Just because you didn’t do it doesn’t mean that it’s okay. So, I think if men were able to just not feel so awkward actually sticking up for women, especially Black women [...] It doesn’t have to be the long lecture [...] you need to just say, ‘Dude that’s not funny, that’s disrespectful, don’t say that.’ But they still laugh [...] So I think that’s huge (Henry, pers. comm., May 2016).

Finally, just as sexual violence is shaped by gendered racism, these students also highlighted the ways racialized men also face-troubling assumptions regarding masculinity. In Azad’s words:

[…] at the core of most of these issues is masculinity […] they should be able to openly talk about... how they are implicated in masculinity in this culture. Cause it’s also an issue for racialized men [who are] trying to live up to this masculine stereotype that is also placed on them, just as it’s placed on racialized women [...] it’s a complicated intersection of hegemonic masculinity, and how they have to live up to that image (Henry, pers. comm., May 2016).

In the absence of real conversations with men about masculinities, Azad stressed that women of colour are left in a no-win situation when they consider their options:

It’s like, do I approach the white man to save me from other racialized men? Do I want to do that? Or should I stand up for my racialized man, who assaulted me [...] And you’re stuck in that really complicated space, and you don’t know whether you want to seek out help from a white man [...] just because he has that privilege of being security, you know? It’s really,
really complicated. But this just goes to show that there are different needs for racialized women, and when they experience sexual assault […] we have to take that extra step, to think “Okay, who’s going to be on my side? And what will happen if I do take it to the authority that is predominately white? What will happen to them?”

Farrah Khan, the Sexual Violence Response Coordinator at Ryerson, also emphasized this point, arguing that use of security and police is viewed very differently by communities of colour: “[T]he solutions that come from [the feminist] movement, have been built on very specific ideas of whose bodies we’re protecting […] for racialized students [one thing] that doesn’t get talked about enough, is the fact that they are asked to implicate men in their communities” (Francis, pers. comm., June 2016). Kattawe elaborated on this problematic context, in light of police murders of Black men in the United States and Canada, and the disproportionate criminalization of Indigenous and Black men. Consequently, as she commented, many women ask themselves: “Do I want to rat them out […] because I’m like, ‘What if this bouncer is really racist […], and he decides that he wants to take it out on this guy ’cause I brought it to his attention that he was harassing me? And then another hashtag, you know’” (Francis, pers. comm., June 2016).

LGBTQ2S+
Gender and sexual minority student interviewees focused on the climate of heteronormativity and transphobia they experienced at Brock. Kara, for example, surveyed the Brock website when choosing a university and was persuaded that “this is my place. I am going to find my niche here, it’s going to be amazing, it’s going to be great. And then I came here, and it was like […] not” (Giesbrecht, pers. comm., May 2016).

In particular, LGBTQ2S+ students talked about the problems associated with being alienated from or rejected by their families precisely because they identify as a gender or sexual minority, with the consequence that they often cannot “go home” like other students. This is a common concern amongst gender and sexual minority youth (Peter, Taylor and Chamberland 2015). As Tiffany noted, “my Mom hasn’t talked to me in two years now […] [and] my Dad and his family don’t want me around” (Giesbrecht, pers. comm., May 2016).

This widespread context of familial rejection and the related experiences of poverty and housing insecurity make gender and sexual minority students more vulnerable to sexual and gender violence from a young age. Hence, it is particularly important that these students are connected to appropriate student peers and knowledgeable mental health resources. However, many students felt this didn’t happen for them until very late in their university career. As Tiffany said:

I needed to find something to keep me here and make me feel something […] finding one resource, one place that you can go to, someone who understands, makes all the difference in the world […] But I didn’t find it until 3rd year, and that was after taking a year off school for personal reasons.

Here, Tiffany is commenting on the lack of information geared specifically to gender and sexual minority students who are “deep in the closet” and struggling to find their way. She did not think that Orientation events and residence staff provided an open discussion and support for
students from a range of sexual and gender identities; instead the conversation was limited to “being given a free condom and told to use protection.”

Perhaps even more of a concern was residence staff whose religious beliefs seemed to take priority over student safety. Prior to finding the peer connections noted above, Tiffany struggled with suicide. In her first year she reached out to her residence Don for LGBTQ2S+ specific supports and was told, “Oh, you could have just as much fun if you come to church on Sunday, we have a huge community of people, you can be involved. And I was like, ‘Okay, that’s great, but that’s not what I asked you [...]’.” As with Indigenous and racialized students, the alienation noted above frequently resulted in students feeling like they were on the margins and “not part of the school.” Indeed, LGBTQ2S+ students believe their perspectives are not integrated into services and staffing, particularly those dealing with the aftermath of sexual violence. While research assistants did not ask students to share their experiences with sexual violence several students did talk about being sexually assaulted, both prior to coming to university as well as while they were at Brock. In the example below, this student’s narrative illustrated the intersection of violence with the isolation of living in a deeply heteronormative society:

So my experience with sexual violence wasn’t at Brock, it was when I was nine. I was raped when I was living at my Mom’s restaurant. As a result of being nine, I was terrified, and I didn’t tell anybody. I didn’t tell my Mom, and I didn’t tell my Dad. And they just all really thought I was weird growing up, like really quiet and stuff. And then, add on being queer. So it was pretty overwhelming [...] I’ve experienced youth, child homelessness. You know, things get taken from you, and you get really used to that (Giesbrecht, pers. comm., May 2016).

Students who get used to having “things taken” from them are students who will likely not find it easy to reach out for resources or support. Given, as noted above, that youth aged 12-19 are at the highest risk of being assaulted, many students arrive at university having already dealt with sexual and gender violence. In addition to being heteronormative, many university sexual violence prevention campaigns and resources focus on university-specific situations, and this can leave students who have experienced violence prior to university with the understanding that those services are not meant for them. This minimizes the often unremitting effects of trauma that have the potential to impact students’ university experiences. As Brock University has taken little visible leadership to ensure safer spaces for gender and sexual minority and racialized students this work falls to student-run groups who have few resources and who may be struggling with various internal tensions—Jenny highlights some of the problems with this:

You can’t just expect everyone who isn’t straight or cis to hang out in one group and have the same priorities, culture, and everything [...] but that’s how it feels here. Like, “oh all the not-straight people can hang out together cause you’re all the same.” That’s been my experience at Brock Pride as well. I tried it [...], but I heard some racist, homonormative, transfemine and transphobic things [...] so I just dropped it (Giesbrecht, pers. comm., May 2016).

As noted above, all universities operate in a broader context of “rape culture” or the pervasive belief that gendered violence and harassment, and gendered, racialized and colonial racism are ‘just the way things are’ so that violence is ignored, trivialized, normalized or made into jokes.
The testimony by students in the previous sections highlighted numerous illustrations of “rape culture” at Brock University.

**Institutional Silence/Student activism**

In the interviews, students discussed institutional silence about sexual violence and the lack of pro-active educational campaigns supported by the university administration as key themes. Student groups lead most non-classroom educational initiatives on sexual violence. For example, in 2015-2016, a group called Students Against Sexual Assault hosted film screenings, workshops, and special events and A Safer Brock provided training, peer support and counselling. However, students are well aware that these initiatives are primarily organized through voluntary student labour that is only partially funded by their ancillary fees. Hence, they conclude that the primary people taking leadership to challenge “rape culture” at Brock are students. A variety of interviewees took up this theme, contending that leadership should come from the top. Lyla, an Indigenous student, furthered that sentiment saying: “I think it’s ridiculous that students pay a levy to an organization in order to get access to services related to sexual violence. To me, the institution should be providing those services. Especially because [...] that the burden should not be passed on to students” (Turgeon, pers. comm., May 2016).

While the impact of institutional silence and erasure is significant for all students, Azad sharply articulated the multiple levels of struggle in relationship to racialized women’s experience:

> For women of colour, I think it’s different because when they do experience sexual assault, they’re already experiencing day-to-day aggressions from the system that’s set up on campus, [...] it becomes very internalized and you start to feel like you don’t belong here. “Cause like I said, if you are from a different country or a different cultural background it might be harder for you to approach your own family and best friends and talk openly about these issues [...] so the burden and those thoughts will continue to stay in your head, and will rot you, slowly. Because you feel that fear, and you feel that invisibility when you’re walking around campus and seeing that there’s nobody that you can really connect with and open up to. And when your experiences are not dealt with, then they will eat you, internally, you know?” (Henry, pers. comm., May 2016)

When Azad speaks about there being “nobody you can really connect to,” she is drawing attention to the perception that the residence staff, counseling, health, security and student services for survivors on campus are not racially and culturally diverse, nor are they knowledgeable about the situations faced by racialized communities. Her comments about the internalization of silence, “which rots you, slowly” also highlights the mental health impacts of this erasure on students in a white dominant institution.

Indigenous students also spoke about the additional barriers they face breaking the silence about this topic, but stressed their unique history and context:

> If you’ve listened to family members talking about what they’ve gone through, and you’ve seen the pain that puts them through, then if you go through something yourself [an experience of sexual violence], you’re not going to want to share it with them and put them through that pain again, right? So I think it kind of compounds the problem and makes it even worse. And often times you don’t trust people from outside your communities (Turgeon, pers. comm., May 2016).
Thus, both Indigenous and racialized women face a multi-layered set of experiences, which intensify silence and invisibility. This names the increased difficulties they face in a white dominant educational institution where there may be very little knowledge about gendered racism, and the impact of the violence implicit in transnational migration, colonization and intergenerational trauma.

Gender and sexual minority students added to this analysis with a critique of faculty pedagogical practices that seem to assume that students who deal with transphobia, racism and gendered violence are not already in the classroom. For example:

I think it’s B.S. that for me and many of my friends, our lived experience has essentially been presented as a thought experiment in lecture [...] [The professor] did this thing where he created a thought experiment using Storm [...] whose parents chose to raise them without imposing any gender norms on them. And then, having my cisgendered classmates tear apart why that’s terrible [...] and being the only trans person in the room [...] (Giesbrecht, pers. comm., May 2016).

Danny reinforced this point, saying that faculty and teaching assistants should be mindful that: “there are going to be trans people in class [...] There’s going to be sex workers in their class. So many people in university do sex work. And our lives are not hypothetical discussions. We’re not rhetoric. And casually debating violence against us is really, really hurtful” (Giesbrecht, pers. comm., May 2016). Kara gave a similar example of a professor teaching about multiculturalism and failing to field racist comments from students:

I remember just leaving that classroom wanting to cry and being really upset [...] It was another moment where I was really aware of people just not understanding [...] If she [the professor] said something during that seminar, I would not have felt as isolated [...] especially being the only person of colour [...] (Henry, pers. comm., May 2016).

Mental Health and Accommodations
Finally, our interviews with students who are dealing with mental health issues across a wide spectrum highlighted key insights which foregrounded themes of vulnerability, stigma, and isolation. Consistent with the research, students who deal with mental health issues are more likely to be vulnerable to perpetrators; or as Valerie put it: “I think knowing that [you] are specifically targeted by perpetrators because you [have these issues] is terrifying. And that’s something that you live with every day” (Giesbrecht, pers. comm., May 2016). Ginger highlights the stigma associated with a wide spectrum of mental health challenges by contrasting PTSD with other illnesses, which do not carry the same social judgments: “We don’t have to explain what a broken leg looks like why should we have to explain this? [...] [but] the shame of being molested, it’s always ‘you’re the one that’s got the problem,’ you know?” (Giesbrecht, pers. comm., May 2016). Finally, students who struggle with mental health issues are also less likely to talk to fellow students, making them more isolated. In the words of another student: “Part of the reason I don’t want my classmates to know about my personal struggles is because I know that it would be used against me [...] and when the violence does occur there is that stigma, and you’re less likely to be believed [...]” (Giesbrecht, pers. comm., May 2016). As a result, students with mental health concerns are less likely to report incidents of sexual violence to any university authority.
One issue of particular concern is students’ ability to gain appropriate supports and accommodations in the aftermath of sexual trauma to ensure they can complete course assignments. The current process of registering as a “student with a disability” in order to obtain accommodations is also more difficult for those dealing with mental health struggles. Jennica highlighted some of these double binds:

You need a certain level of ability in order to access disability services. It can be very difficult because they have a lot of assumptions on your ability to go through these motions [...] I know a lot of people who aren’t registered with a disability precisely because of their disability, and their inability to go through that whole process (Giesbrecht, pers. comm., May 2016).

To contextualize this discussion, we highlight feedback from Equity staff in our expert interviews. They noted that there is a widespread belief amongst faculty across different universities that requests for student accommodation indicate students are “taking advantage of the system.” As one Equity staff person outside of Brock, who wished to remain anonymous, put it:

I would say that accommodations across the board are a problem, in that they are our number one complaint in the Human Rights Office. Lack of accommodations, or teachers not wanting to accommodate students because that’s not how it is in the “real world” [...] It’s a very broad problem where teachers feel that accommodations are a form of special treatment [...]. (Francis, pers. comm., June 2016)

Assuming that the whole area of accommodations is undergoing considerable change across universities as a result of a new Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) policy, which recognizes a duty to accommodate “mental health and other non-evident disabilities”, we offer a summary of student commentary in relation to accommodations for sexual violence (Accessible Brock University (AODA) Policy, draft, communicated to Francis by email, August 2016). We start with feedback from students about the reasons why so few talk directly to their teaching assistant or professor to informally ask for accommodation. Aside from the lack of any policy framework that would provide a context for this conversation, our interviewees also highlighted a raft of related problems.

First, students in virtually all focus groups were unaware that they could ask for extensions and consequently they were frightened to make this request. For example, Nicole, an Indigenous undergraduate noted, “there was nothing advertised for that [...] I just went and took zeros for class “cause I was scared to go back to school” (Turgeon, pers. comm., May 2016). Racialized students also mentioned that if an assault had not happened on campus, they feared it would not be seen as an “acceptable” reason for requesting an extension. While this was a common perception, Kattawe also argued that university policy should recognize that the aftermath of sexual violence – wherever and whenever it happens – will affect student’s ability to learn. As she put it:

The repercussions are going to happen on campus. And having a panic attack is probably going to happen on campus. When you’re having flashbacks, it’s going to be on campus, when you can’t complete your exam, it’s on campus, you know what I mean? So they need to
make those steps available [...] ‘cause it wouldn’t have happened if we weren’t both students at your school [...]. (Henry, pers. comm., May 2016)

Secondly, students spoke about their sense of shame that they didn’t fit the profile of a “regular student”, and the consequent difficulties in having to expose themselves in making a request for an extension. As Jennica put it: “it’s like shame on top of shame. You’re already feeling a certain way, then you have to expose yourself again, and risk additional shame [...]. This produces so much anxiety” (Giesbrecht, pers. comm., May 2016).

Third, students have sometimes attempted to talk to their professors about the aftermath of sexual violence and received troubling responses. Kara described an example that brought together many of the issues highlighted by students above, but also highlighted new problems:

Basically I figured out a bunch of stuff happened to me when I was a kid [...] Still I had to finish my assignments, and deal with all these things while feeling like [...] no, knowing that I wasn’t okay [...] I remember going to my professor, trying to explain the situation without explaining the situation. And I distinctly remember him saying, “I can’t help you unless you tell me what it is that stopped you [from completing the assignment].” And I remember thinking, do I say this and try and save my grade? Or do I sacrifice the grade, because this is too hard to talk about? And I remember being in his office, and he shared an office with someone else, and [...] [that person was] right there. And I’m thinking, [do I] have both these people know? Or, I get zero for this assignment that was worth 25%? And I chose to get a zero, because I didn’t want to deal with that (Giesbrecht, pers. comm., May 2016).

All of these examples highlight the importance of attending to the power dynamics at play between professors and students – and the ways these interact with rape myths. Professors are seen as “gatekeepers” to knowledge, grades, and accommodations, which puts them in a position of considerable power. As the research on sexual violence reminds us, students may be unsure if what they’ve experienced is “real rape” or may not feel confident speaking to anyone. Indeed, most survivors only tell a friend, family member, or peer about the experience, not professionals. Alternatively, some students are confident naming their experience to themselves, but be aware that many others blame victims, and misunderstand what constitutes sexual violence, and consequently they don’t want to risk having to explain and justify their experience – indeed, this was the sentiment of most of our interviewees.

In sum, students highlighted that they did not ask for accommodations because, in the absence of a policy framework, they were afraid, felt shamed, had internalized that sexual violence was not a ‘legitimate’ reason to ask for extra time, or they tried to talk with a professor and found the process unsafe.

What do We Learn from Working from Margin to Center?

As we learned from our interviews, when our analysis starts with students who are generally an afterthought in sexual violence research it is clear that interpersonal violence happens in the context of structural violence – which is inherently colonial, racialized, intergenerational, economic, embodied, ableist, and gendered. Consequently, any attempts towards institutional
transformation, including leadership for gender and sexual violence educational campaigns and support services, must navigate the intersection of personal and structural violence.

Current approaches to sexuality and consent education on university and college campus rarely address the needs of the people who are most vulnerable to interpersonal violence, such as sexual assault, intimate partner violence and homicide, as these intersect with structural violence, such as white settler colonialism, global migration/displacement, neoliberalism, and ableism (Heberle and Grace 2009, 1-13). Legislative efforts, consent campaigns and the media largely view sexual violence as exclusively gendered violence (Volpp 2001, 1190), thereby obscuring how; for example, colonial violence and white heteropatriarchal supremacy are pivotal to all forms of sexual violence, especially that experienced by Indigenous and racialized people (Smith 2005).

As our interviewees so eloquently suggested, the categories of race, sexuality, and the colonial state have a huge impact on things like the likelihood of assault, due to, stereotypes about sexualization; survivors’ feelings about reporting, as marginalized populations are already subject to over-policing and police brutality; as well as access to support services, many of which are not culturally competent and so alienate the very people who are most in need, and who face multiple barriers.

In particular, Indigenous students, staff and faculty invited us to recognize that gendered violence starts with our relationship to the territory that Brock University is located on and asked us to re-think “consent” within a land-based framework. Indigenous interviewees challenged the racial and colonial hierarchies that remain unspoken in virtually all mainstream sexual violence programming, not just at Brock, but also throughout Canada. The inter-generational legacy of multiple forms of violence (historic, systemic, inter-personal, and environmental) has been so normalized that sexual violence is just one element of a broader experience of surviving contemporary colonial rule in Canada.

Racialized and gender and sexual minority students emphasized the impact of gendered racism and hetero-patriarchal forms of power in their everyday experiences at Brock. From the racist fetishization of Black and Asian women’s bodies, to the difficulties that gender and sexual minority students had finding spaces where they could get queer-knowledgeable supports, they all emphasized significant challenges in “feeling part of the school”. Indeed, while racialized students recognized that they might be featured prominently on Brock’s masthead, they did not see themselves represented in the faculty and staff complement at Brock. Consequently, it is much more difficult for them to imagine they will find safer spaces in which to talk about sexual and gendered violence or harassment, or to trust that they could seek and obtain just resolution for a complaint.

In the area of mental health, there was a widespread perception that sexual violence is not a legitimate reason for accommodation. In this context, the demand by professors for student disclosures in order to justify accommodations left some students feeling triggered and unsafe, while others did not want to their personal struggles used as a form of currency to convince their instructor that their circumstances are “bad enough” to warrant an extension. The power dynamics at play in these exchanges, and the widely believed notion that requests for accommodation are a form of “special treatment”, suggest that it is critical that professors receive sexual violence training, as they are important “gatekeepers” who can facilitate, or block, students’ access to options for success.
We conclude, then, that efforts to address gender and sexual violence must include thinking through a broader set of questions, from Indigenizing the university, to employment equity across all groups from front-line service providers to faculty, to addressing issues of equity and justice for gender and sexual minority students, to rethinking the requirements for accommodations in ways that do not further stigmatize students dealing with the aftermath of trauma. This analysis highlights the difficult stakes in debates on sexual and gender violence and invites us to consider how decolonial and intersectional solidarities must be core practices in future activism, education and policy change aimed at sexual and gender justice.

Notes

1. I want to acknowledge Sarah Mann, a former MA student in Geography at Brock, who was critical to articulating this methodology.

2. The research assistants (RAs) reached out to students through Facebook invitations and within their respective networks. None of the RAs for this project were part of the team of student activists who lead the protests against the university’s handling of sexual violence in March 2016. Instead, the RAs were leaders within their own communities, i.e. with Indigenous, racialized, LGBTQ2+ people, and each had informal connections with students who both crossed these categories and who struggle with mental health concerns. All RAs received a full day of training in sexual violence response from the Sexual Assault Centre of Hamilton (SACHA) prior to hosting the focus groups.

3. While the majority of participants were from Social Sciences, Humanities and the Faculty of Graduate Studies, there was at least one participant from each other faculty.

4. All interviewees chose their own pseudonym and were sent a draft copy of the final report for review to ensure they were comfortable with how they were represented This study was reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University’s Research Ethics Board file number 15-242. For a copy of the full final report see: http://dr.library.brocku.ca/handle/10464/12729

5. Hayley is employed by the Sexual Assault Centre of Brant to work at Wilfrid Laurier University. Personal communication with Francis, June 2016.

Works Cited


Hunt, Sarah. 2016. “Decolonizing the Roots of Rape Culture: Reflections on Consent, Sexual Violence and University Campuses.” The initial version of this talk was delivered on September 30, 2016 on Musqueam territories, UBC, at a two-day forum called The Power of Our Collective Voices: Changing the Conversation on Sexual Violence at Post-Secondary Institutions. It was then adapted and recorded for an EMMA Talks podcast. It is available online here: https://www.academia.edu/30006930/Decolonizing_the_Roots_of_Rape_Culture_reflections_on_consent_sexual_violence_and_university_campuses?fbclid=IwARoTaCjcZ9LMVP_uX5ugVnr7SMUNINMrIfxTiUDHwbWc5j3cQlCAQ1v.


MARGOT FRANCIS is a white settler scholar and an Associate Professor at the Centre for Women’s and Gender Studies, cross appointed to the Department of Sociology at Brock University. The co-authors and collaborators on this research are recent graduates of Brock University and are leaders in activist feminist, anti-racist, Indigenous and LGBTQ2+ student movements on campus.