



## Sex and Power on Campus

Elizabeth A. Armstrong,<sup>1</sup> Kamaria B. Porter,<sup>2</sup> and Katelyn Kennon<sup>3</sup>

**Sexual Citizens: A Landmark Study of Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus.** Jennifer Hirsch and Shamus Khan, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019.

In 2014, Columbia University had a problem with campus sexual assault. So did other universities, but Columbia was the site of a visible protest. To highlight university failure to respond to her sexual assault and those of others, undergraduate art student Emma Sulkowicz carried a 50-pound mattress everywhere she went on campus during her senior year.<sup>4</sup> The compelling symbolism of the campaign (and likely its Ivy League context) generated coverage in the *New York Times* and other high-profile venues.<sup>5</sup> Columbia is far from the only university to experience a public relations crisis related to its handling of sexual violence, but it may be unique in its response. In 2015, it enlisted—and funded—an interdisciplinary team of faculty members to engage in a multi-method study of undergraduate social life at Columbia and Barnard—the Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation (SHIFT). *Sexual Citizens*, co-authored by anthropologist Jennifer Hirsch and sociologist Shamus Khan, is a product of this multiyear effort. Based on extensive ethnographic and interview research, the book offers a new framework for thinking about campus sexual assault. Taking a public health approach, Hirsch and Khan focus on context—offering a refreshing contrast to the tendency of sexual violence research to zero in on the characteristics of individual victims and perpetrators.

The support of Columbia University—in the form of both research funding and access—enabled this talented team to delve deeply into university culture and organization. They engaged a bevy of research assistants and tackled the issue with multiple methods. Between 2015 and 2017 they collected over 150 interviews, “eliciting young people’s broad accounts of their lives and how sex fit into them” (p. x). They also conducted group interviews and ethnographic observation through spending “time with students in dorms, the bus to the athletic fields, fraternity basements, and spaces of worship” (p. x). The project also included a survey of over 1,600 under-

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, 500 S. State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109; e-mail: elarmstr@umich.edu

<sup>2</sup> Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, School of Education, University of Michigan, 610 East University Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48109; e-mail: porterkp@umich.edu

<sup>3</sup> School of Social Work, University of Michigan, 1080 S. University Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109; e-mail: kkennon@umich.edu

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/20/nyregion/mattress-protest-at-columbia-university-continues-into-graduation-event.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/arts/design/in-a-mattress-a-fulcrum-of-art-and-political-protest.html>, and <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/how-carry-that-weight-is-changing-the-conversation-on-campus-sexual-assault-77543/>

graduates and a daily diary of nearly 500 students, tracking them for 60 days, “asking them about stress, sleep, socializing, sex, sexual assault and substance use in the prior twenty-four hours” (p. xi). The research team consulted with three advisory boards—one composed of administrators, one of a diverse group of students and student leaders, and the third of faculty. The research required careful deliberation about ethical issues, as the study of sexuality, sexual violence, and undergraduate cultures generates complex ethical quandaries. This large endeavor produced an intimidating volume of data—over 20,000 pages of interview transcripts alone. From these data, Hirsch and Khan distill a painful portrait of sex on campus—one that captures variation and complexity in ways that go beyond previous scholarship.

In many studies of sexual assault, researchers separate assault from sex, arguing that rape has nothing to do with desire or pleasure, as it is about power and control. Hirsch and Khan reject that simple dichotomy. Through description of the diverse ways that campus sexual assault occurs, they show that consensual and nonconsensual sex are often inextricably interconnected. Most interactions they describe did not involve the use of force. Instead, they offer detailed examples of coercion in action, through accounts of dates, socializing at bars, interactions between romantic partners, and hookups that began as consensual sexual interactions. Sexual assault cannot, they argue, be understood without attention to student *sexual projects*. Sexual projects encompass “the reasons why anyone might seek particular sexual interactions or experiences” (p. xiv). Students most commonly look to sex for experience, pleasure, emotional connection, identity, and status.

Sex in pursuit of status, they argue, is at particular risk of leading to assault. They illustrate this through examples that uncomfortably straddle consensual and nonconsensual sex. For example, Diana, a white woman, described a sexual interaction that occurred during her first year on campus at a party in a senior dorm with a group of white male athletes. Well into the party, her friends drifted into another room, leaving her and a “really hot guy” alone for sex (p. 104). She was taken by surprise that the group was “gonna, like, let him have sex with me” (p. 104). The encounter was mechanical: he undressed her wordlessly and she performed oral sex that he did not reciprocate. When he was done, he handed her clothes back and she left. Diana labeled the incident as “really kind of messed up” (p. 104) but she communicated to the interviewer that “the using was mutual” (p. 105) as she “scored some rare bragging rights” (p. 105). This “messed up” sexual interaction could have been experienced by Diana as assault. It was not. Hirsch and Khan use it, and other similar accounts, to build the case that individualistic sexual projects lay the “groundwork for assault” (p. 112). Assault often occurred when students pursued sexual projects without regard for the other person’s comfort, desire, physical pain, enjoyment, or connection to the experience. They further explain, “what consistently separated interactions that verged on or constituted assault from those that did not was this moment of recognition about the other person’s equivalent humanity” (p. 111). This brings us to their second core concept: sexual citizenship.

They define *sexual citizenship* as “the recognition of one’s own right to sexual self-determination” and respecting “the equivalent right in others” (p. xvi). Hirsch and Khan emphasize that the ability to know what we want sexually and to feel entitled to it is “socially produced” (p. xvi). They explain that “sexual citizenship focuses

attention on how some people feel entitled to others' bodies, and others do not feel entitled to their own bodies" (p. xvi). Sexual citizenship involves not only the right to bodily autonomy, but to pleasure and joy in sex. Throughout the book, they emphasize that sexual citizenship needs to be developed through childhood and adulthood, and that as a society we do not do a good job cultivating it—even or particularly in those who find themselves at one of the most elite universities in the country.

The concept of sexual citizenship assisted Hirsch and Khan in arriving at an analysis more attentive to intersectionality than much previous work on campus sexual assault. They focus on the complex ways in which race, sexual orientation, social class, age, and year in school, along with gender, shaped the power relations with provided some students a sense of entitlement to others' bodies—and that left others with heightened vulnerability. For example, they showed that black students experienced pervasive violations of their sexual citizenship. *All* the black women reported unwanted sexual touching, not only in sexual encounters, but routinely as they navigated the campus and parties. Often lacking opportunities to develop sexual citizenship before college, queer students often arrive both eager and inexperienced. Hirsch and Khan share a devastating account of a queer student who arrived on campus excited to finally be in a place safe enough explore sexuality, only to experience an assault within the queer community. The authors weave accounts of students with varying gender and sexual identities—including trans and nonbinary identities—throughout the text, a refreshing change from research that attends only to cis heterosexual white students, or that discusses queer experiences in a separate section. Refusing a simple narrative, Hirsch and Khan also describe sexual assaults experienced by cisgender heterosexual men and perpetration by cisgender heterosexual women. They share a number of accounts of perpetration—a rarity in campus sexual assault research. They extend to these students the same compassion they offer to students sharing accounts of victimization. They show that students who experience victimization also perpetrate, and vice versa. And that some students who have perpetrated recognize what they did, feel regret and remorse, and change how they approach sexuality going forward.

Hirsch and Khan suggest that preexisting vulnerabilities—such as loneliness or isolation—can exacerbate the harm of a sexual assault, while status—particularly as a cis white man—can be protective. This suggests that the meaning and harm of particular kinds of interactions are variable and contingent. The meaning of particular sexual interactions are constituted in part by the reactions and interpretations of peers. These interpretations can transform initial interpretations, reenforcing, ameliorating, or generating harm. A legalistic, adversarial approach leads to a desire to pin down whether an interaction was consensual or not, labeling it definitively for once for all. Hirsch and Khan's work suggests that the harm that does—or does not—emanate from sexual interactions does not correspond neatly to whether the incident was technically consensual (see Fischel 2019).

Hirsch and Khan's intersectional analysis extends beyond attention to student identities to the ways in which space itself is shaped by intersectional inequalities. They develop the concept of *sexual geographies* to “encompass the spatial contexts through which people move, and the peer networks that can regulate access to those spaces” (p. xix). Older students and those in their final years of college had privileged

access to space and more reliable access to alcohol. The most attractive places to party were controlled by wealthy, white, heterosexual, cis men. Fraternity parties offered students the chance to blow off steam, make friends, and find sex. But unlike much prior research, Hirsch and Khan's analysis of sexual geographies extends beyond Greek life. They explore the dynamics of a range of different extracurricular groups and sports teams. They detail the frustrations of students of color when white students crashed their parties, ruining contexts they labored to create. And, importantly, they show the pervasive dangers associated with the social organization of residence life—referring to its organization as “a sexual assault opportunity structure” (p. 259). The campus rewards older students with nicer and private single rooms, whereas new students trying to navigate a foreign geography and intimidating social scene are required to live on campus with roommates. These policies exacerbate inequalities and advantage some students in the pursuit of their sexual projects.

The whiteness of campus social life sometimes pushed students of color to socialize off campus in unsafe contexts. Charisma, a black Latina woman, recalled an incident from her first year when she hung out with a guy at his apartment in Brooklyn. The encounter started well: talking, laughing, and making out. The guy wanted sex and began to initiate, but she kept expressing her disinterest by moving his hand. When that strategy did not work and the guy persisted, Charisma verbally expressed her physical discomfort and even said “no,” but continued to be ignored. His refusal to recognize her sexual citizenship and her struggle to assert it could have happened on campus. But Hirsch and Khan capture the heightened sense of vulnerability and risk she felt being trapped in this guy's apartment far from campus, unable to pay the \$60 for a safe ride back to campus at night.

The concepts of sexual projects, sexual citizenship, and sexual geographies offer not only an analysis of the sources of campus sexual assault, but also a roadmap for prevention. Hirsch and Khan suggest that schools focus on “modifiable dimensions of the campus environment, layered together with interventions to influence individual attitudes and beliefs” (p. 256). They suggest that schools “design safety into campus life” (p. 259) by rethinking the organization of residence life and enabling party spaces to be controlled by women, queer students, younger students, and students of color. They suggest that universities guide “young people to think about their sexual projects and how they fit into their broader life projects” (p. 256) and cultivate sexual citizenship and respect of it in others. They are skeptical of adjudication processes, both because victims found them unhelpful and because they are based on an adversarial logic of evil and innocence that does not correspond to their observations. They suggest rejecting the term “perpetrator” and its bad apple rhetoric altogether and focusing instead on public health strategies to reduce sexual harm.

*Sexual Citizens* is a major advance in our understanding of campus sexual assault—and of student cultures more generally. It is deeply informed by previous literature and scholarship. It is compassionate and accessibly written. This will make the book a great (albeit painful) teaching resource, as students will be able to see themselves in the complexity, diversity, and nuance of the situations described. It also suggests directions for future research. The intersectional, multilevel framework lends itself to 1) application to other organizational contexts, 2) deeper interrogation

of sexual projects and meaning making, and 3) connection to the political and historical contexts making possible the sexual projects, sexual citizens, and sexual geographies they describe.

Columbia and Barnard are wealthy, historically white institutions. We need similarly well-funded and institutionally supported research on a more diverse range of institutions—such as historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs), military academies, religious schools, women's colleges, and community colleges. And, of course, we need to investigate how the pandemic is reorganizing sexual geographies of students and other young people.

Hirsch and Khan's attention to student voices highlights how much can be learned about sexual violence by careful ethnographic scholarship. We need to listen even more carefully to why and how people make sense of their embodied and interactional experiences. We need even more voices and experiences represented: Students with disabilities or chronic illnesses were not well-represented, and intimate partner violence received little attention. At times, Hirsch and Khan label incidents as assault or as harmful that participants do not label in this way, implying denial on the part of these participants. Is it possible that an incident of nonconsensual sex was truly not experienced as harmful? Why? Should we still label it as assault? When researchers (or practitioners especially) label something as rape or assault when the individual is not sure or rejects these labels, this can be traumatic in itself. Hirsch and Khan's finding that the meanings of sexual interactions are unstable, evolving, and collectively produced suggests the need for more scholarship on the transformation and implications of sexual meanings.

And, finally, the concept of "sexual citizenship" begs to be connected to the larger historical, political, and national context. In *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (2013), Estelle Freedman argues that the bodily autonomy of African Americans and women in the United States is intimately connected to citizenship: "The way we understand rape helps determine who is entitled to sexual and political sovereignty and who may exercise fully the rights of American citizenship" (p. 11). The pervasive rejection of the sexual citizenship of black women on campus occurs in a context where black women's legal right to bodily autonomy is historically recent and often violently disrespected (Richie 2012). Hirsch and Khan are to be credited for placing power at the center of the analysis, but if one links their analysis of power relations on campus to the larger political context shaping these relations, the modest solutions they propose seem less satisfying. If sexual violence emerges out of—and reproduces—intersectional inequalities (Collins 1998), reducing it will require a lot more than addressing furniture arrangements and party spaces. But we have got to start somewhere. Hirsch and Khan are to be commended for offering a framework that can be applied to many contexts, and which assists in arriving at concrete interventions likely to have an impact.

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## Why Are Old Binary Descriptions of Race So Misleading in the Twenty-first Century?

Dowell Myers<sup>1</sup>

**The Great Demographic Illusion: Majority, Minority, and the Expanding American Mainstream.** *Richard Alba*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

In his major new work, Richard Alba offers us a sweeping view of social transformation in the United States, spanning the centuries preceding and following the millennium. Changes underway are deeply profound, incorporating racial and immigrant integration, constancy and change in racial identity, and stubborn problems of social and economic inequality, especially for African Americans. The “illusion” in the book’s title is not merely the social construction, the fiction, that is race. Rather, the illusion is the attribution of certainty and meaning to changes in *hard* data collected by government about fixed ethno-racial categories, formulated to resemble restricted categories from the past, but then using those constructed divisions to spotlight the future in ways that heedlessly enlarge fears in the minds of the public.

This is a terrific, highly ambitious, and significant book. The story presented is comprehensive, intersecting several layers of topics as they unfold across generations, and clarifying nuanced linkages that previously eluded us. Fortunately, Alba writes with a beautiful pen, mostly jargon free, and inviting a generous inclusion of the reader in this voyage of discovery. While the author deeply challenges some little discussed conventions, his voice extends an acceptance and inclusion of disparate view holders rather than promoting a critical superiority. Deeply researched in its ties to supporting and competing scholarship, Alba allows room for readers to initially draw their own conclusions. The book is very well organized, progressing through a logical sequence of steps, while reserving its deepest theoretical discussion for later chapters. Yet the book challenges us from the outset as it confronts the great illusion. The excellent introduction provides a rewarding overview and can stand on its own for the general reader, as might the concluding chapter as well.

The well-known coming of a “white minority” serves as the popular entry point and central foil for exposition in the book. What is the basis and interpretation of this commonly accepted narrative and what alternative may exist? The notion of a coming white minority only first came to popular recognition in 2008, when the

<sup>1</sup> Price School of Public Policy, University of Southern California, 650 Childs Way, RGL 301, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0626; e-mail: dowell@usc.edu