

When Students are Consumers: Reflections on Teaching a First-Year Gender Course (That is Not a Gender Studies Course)¹

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Abstract

This paper considers my experiences teaching a first-year course, *Gender and the Law*, at York University. I situate these experiences in the context of the corporatization of universities under neoliberalism, and the scholarly literature on gender, race, and course evaluations. I contend that many students are disengaged and alienated, viewing themselves as consumers and me as a service provider. I outline some of my pedagogical strategies that attempt to disrupt student mindsets and promote engagement.
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Résumé

Cet article examine mes expériences de l'enseignement d'un cours de première année, *Gender and the Law* (Le genre et le droit), à l'Université York. Je situe ces expériences dans le contexte de la privatisation des universités sous le néo-libéralisme, de la littérature scientifique sur le genre, la race et des évaluations de cours. Je soutiens que beaucoup d'étudiants sont désengagés et aliénés, se considérant comme des consommateurs et me considérant comme un prestataire de services. Je décris quelques-unes des stratégies pédagogiques que j'utilise pour tenter de bousculer la façon de voir les choses des étudiants et promouvoir l'engagement.
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Introduction

Many professors speak of the mall mentality, arguing that the more campuses act and look like malls, the more students behave like consumers. They tell stories of students filling out their course-evaluation forms with all the smug self-righteousness of a tourist responding to a customer-satisfaction form at a large hotel chain...A professor at Toronto's York University, where there is a full-fledged mall on campus, tells me that his students slip into class slurping grande lattes, chat in the back and slip out. They're cruising, shopping, disengaged. (Klein 2002, 98)

In her now-classic book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein (2002) critiques the pervasiveness of the "mall mentality" among students on university campuses. She reads this as an extension of the widespread "branding" (or commodification) of every aspect of life. Today, over a decade since this book was published, many of my students exhibit this consumer-like behaviour. In the large first-year course I taught as contract faculty at York University from 2010-2015, I often received anonymous course evaluations adopting the tone of the customer satisfaction surveys Klein describes. For example, I received complaints about the "tasteless" food in the student centre (2011-2012), the "uncomfortable" seating (2012-2013) and weak wireless internet signal (2010-2011) in the lecture hall, and the insufficient number of films shown during lectures (2010-2011, 2011-2012, 2012-2013, 2013-2014, 2014-2015).² (*This theatre uses fake butter on the popcorn and the seats do not recline.*) The language of the market was also regularly employed. One student wrote that, in comparison to their other courses, "this one was definitely tolerable and even enjoyable"; they concluded with "the bottom line is that I learned a lot so it was definitely worth the money" (2012-2013; emphasis mine). (*I have to buy an air conditioner anyway; this one is decent and does the job.*) Every year, a small but vocal group of students complained that the course title, *Gender and the Law*, was

misleading: they objected to having to study feminist perspectives on Canadian law, suggested that teaching feminist perspectives is indicative of my “bias,” and/or indicated that an equal amount of course time should be spent on (presumably cis) men as is spent on women. One student wrote on their course evaluation: “I only got half the knowledge I paid to receive” (2011-2012). (*This product was falsely advertised.*)

Yet, in universities, unlike in malls, the “customer” is not always right. Indeed, the idea that it is somehow possible to study gender *without* reference to feminist perspectives is rather odd. As Michelle Tracy Berger and Cheryl Randeloff (2011) note, feminist scholarship “made gender a lens with which to understand the world” (132). In addition, my course encouraged students to question and challenge binary sex classifications and to think through the ways in which Canadian law can be implicated in maintaining these classifications. For example, we explored a variety of topics including trans lives and the limitations of trans jurisprudence, family law and its (hetero)gendered assumptions, the differences in treatment between male and female violent offenders (with female violent offenders often being tried both for the crime and “gender betrayal”), and media representations of violent crime (which emphasized the supposed “threat” of Black, Islamic, and other racialized masculinities). As such, the idea that a study of gender should involve an “equal” amount of time on (cis) men as women not only re-inscribes binary sex classifications, but also disregards the course focus on intersectionality and ignores the complexities of people’s gendered experiences with the law.

I read course evaluations using the language of the market to critique the “misleading” nature of the course title in two ways. First, these evaluations are a symptom of the broader corporatization of universities under neoliberalism. Janice Newson and Claire Polster (2010) describe this corporatization trend as a process whereby universities move away from their role as “public-serving institutions dedicated to meeting a wide range of citizens’ needs” and towards “operating more and more as businesses...dedicated to generating income by meeting the needs of customers who pay for their services” (5). This shift has several facets, including broad cuts to public funding for post-secondary education, increased dependency on corporate funding, a

focus on research with the potential to generate profit, and a move away from equity and social justice concerns (Henry and Tator 2009, 6-7; Newson and Polster 2010, 5-6; Côté and Allahar 2011, 16-18). The customers who pay for the “services” of the university-cum-business are not only the corporate funders, but also the students themselves. Given that students are paying higher tuition fees to sit in increasingly larger classes—while taking on more debt and more hours of paid work—it is not surprising that many understand themselves as consumers and their degrees as purchasable commodities. Second, in addition to being a symptom of the corporatization of universities, I read these course evaluations as emblematic of the challenges of teaching a gender course that is not housed in (or affiliated in any way with) the Gender and Women’s Studies program at my institution. It is the word *law* in the course title that attracts most students to this course, not the word *gender*.³ When students are consumers whose degrees are linked to the promise of jobs, law-related courses are seen as a valuable commodity associated with a (potentially) highly lucrative career.

This paper reflects on teaching a first-year gender course (that is not a gender studies course) when students are consumers. My purpose is not to complain about anti-feminist or disrespectful students. Indeed, I do not wish to replicate increasingly commonplace—and in my view, misguided—media discussions of supposedly lazy, spoiled, entitled “millennials” with “helicopter” parents.⁴ Rather, I seek to explore the gendered, racial, and other power dynamics involved in the university/corporation and student/consumer nexuses and to think through my own embodied pedagogy and its effects on student perceptions and classroom dynamics. In the latter case, I reflect on both the ways in which I have privilege (white, normative gender expression) and the ways in which I do not (woman, contract faculty). Overall, my reflections aim to shed light not only on the specific challenges of teaching a first-year gender course (which is not a gender studies course) at a corporatized university, but also on the possibilities for disrupting the “cruising, shopping, disengaged” mindset of students as described by Klein.

The University as Corporation and the Student as Consumer

Under contemporary neoliberalism in Canada,

universities are increasingly run like corporations. Most notably, there has been a centralization of power in the upper echelons of university administrations. This has significantly reduced the input of faculty, students, staff, and community members in agenda-setting and decision-making (Polster and Newson 2009, 32). For example, academic senates, in which faculty are supposed to sit down as “equals” to shape the scholarly policies and priorities of the university, are increasingly serving more as “a rubber stamp for administration” (Turk 2008, 301). Along with this centralization of power, presidents and other upper administrators increasingly act—and are compensated—in a manner akin to CEOs and vice-presidents of corporations. This has been attributed to the increasing number of administrators with a background in business methods and the “new managerialism” ethos currently pervading university administration (Deem 2008; Côté and Allahar 2011, 17). As a neoliberal approach to public service organizations, new managerialism is characterized by a hierarchical organizational structure, prioritizing management above all other functions, and “doing more with less” (Deem 2008, 257-259). In other words, as more and more well-paid positions in upper administration are created, resources for core academic functions (such as teaching and research) are eroded (Polster and Newson 2009, 32).

Neoliberal values such as large income disparities, individualism, and competition are reflected in the corporatized university. In June 2014, the increasingly bloated salaries of university presidents became the subject of national discussion when four professors from Halifax applied together to share the work, salary (starting at \$400,000), and benefits of one position—the President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Alberta. In their application letter, the professors called attention to the large income disparities between academic workers at Canadian universities. They wrote: “we believe that our commitment to higher education is evident in our willingness to job-share and to each take only a fair and reasonable salary, rather than one which is four or five times that of a tenured academic and at least ten times that of a sessional” (Kathy Cawsey et al. cited in Magi 2014, A2). The job was advertised to replace the retiring President and Vice-Chancellor who made close to \$1.2 million in salary and benefits in 2013 (Magi 2014, A2). New managerialism encourag-

es individualism and competition between universities, between departments within a single university, and between individual professors within a single department (Deem 2008, 257-259). In other words, just as un- and under-employed academics compete with each other for fewer and fewer full-time jobs and research funds, full-time academics (as individuals or representing their departments or universities) compete with each other for funds, students, and at times even their very professional survival. Universities are rewarded for putting “bums on seats” and are treated like private institutions requiring “marketability” (Côté and Allahar 2011, 87) instead of like public institutions working for the public good.

“Branding” is important at the corporatized university, with increasing amounts of money being spent on both in-house public relations and outside corporate marketing firms. This is a major shift. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century, Canadian university administrators did not consider marketing to be part of the university’s mandate (Brownlee 2015). Consider the money spent by York University on the outside marketing firm *dougserge+partners inc.* in recent years. York has used this firm since 2007, paying it an annual average of \$1.25 million between 2009 and 2013. In April 2014, York’s Board of Governors authorized the signing of another contract with the same firm for three years with an optional two-year renewal. This contract involves a \$6,250 (plus tax) monthly retainer fee—required even if no work is done that month—for an estimated total cost of \$6.23 million over five years (Ibrahim 2014; York University Senate 2014). This trend invites comparison between York University and the corporations discussed by Klein (2002) in *No Logo*. In a similar manner to Nike—which famously shifted from product-focus to brand-focus, completely leaving the production business altogether (365)—York University spends millions on marketing while relying on contract faculty (including myself) to do the majority of its production/teaching. Teaching *Gender and the Law* at a corporatized university posed several challenges, not least of which were the “demands” of the student/consumer who have been sold a brand. In the next section, I explore the gendered and racial politics underpinning these demands through an interpretation of my own teaching evaluations.

(Hetero)Gendered Evaluations, Or, the Consumer Demands a Nice White Lady with Long Hair

The student evaluations I analyze in this section are from the five academic years I taught *Gender and the Law* (2010-2011, 2011-2012, 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015) at York University. The number of students enrolled ranged from 212-244 each year and the evaluations were completed in class in the middle of the last class of the winter term. Every year response rates hovered around 50 percent of the total number of students enrolled,⁵ with the exception of 2014-2015 which had a lower response rate of 34 percent. This anomaly can be explained by the winter 2015 strike of contract faculty, teaching assistants, and graduate student research assistants at York.⁶ I did not provide any incentives, such as bonus marks, to encourage students to complete the evaluations. York policy (quite justifiably) forbids the professor and teaching assistants from being in the classroom when the evaluations are distributed, written, and collected. As such, I have no way of knowing which students filled out the evaluations and which students opted to leave for the break early. In analyzing my teaching evaluations for *Gender and the Law*, I draw on the scholarly literature on gender, race, and course evaluations.

It has long been established that gender and race play a role in the ways in which students respond to their professors. Various studies have demonstrated that racialized professors and white women are held to higher standards of teaching than white men. Male professors are more likely to be seen by students as knowledgeable, professional, effective, objective, and unbiased (Laube et al. 2007, 89-91; Flood 2011, 146-147). Racialized faculty and white women faculty are far more likely to be challenged by their students on the basis of assumptions about their classroom authority or level of expertise (Laube et al. 2007, 93; Young, Furhman, and Chesler 2013, 46). In discussing the different criteria applied to male and female professors—and white professors and racialized professors—Michael Flood (2011) describes the process as one in which professors with privilege are “graded up” while others are “graded down” (146). Although the scholarly literature tends to focus on gender and race, discussions with colleagues who are visibly queer, have a disability, or whose first language is not English report being “graded down” in a similar fashion.

A recent and highly publicized study from *Innovative Higher Education* measured gender bias in course evaluations by separating the impact of gender from other factors. The researchers examined the course evaluations of four sections of a first-year (non-feminist) social sciences course; two were taught by a man and two were taught by a woman (MacNell, Driscoll, and Hunt 2015, 291-292). The students had no face-to-face contact with their instructors as everything was done online. The male instructor’s two sections were assigned two different instructor names—one associated with women and one associated with men—as were the female instructor’s sections with two different names than her colleague. Gender identity was assumed by students based exclusively on the first name assigned to the instructor.⁷ This study is important because it is the first to control for almost all possible variables that affect student evaluations; for example, the syllabus, online materials, grading criteria, and length of time to receive grades and feedback were all identical (292, 296-297). Across the board, the research findings indicated that the instructors thought to be male received significantly higher evaluations than instructors thought to be female, regardless of the actual gender identity of the instructors. For example:

When the actual male and female instructors posted grades after two days as a male, this was considered by students to be a 4.35 out of 5 level of promptness, but when the same two instructors posted grades at the same time as a female, it was considered to be a 3.55 out of 5 level of promptness. In each case, the same instructor, grading under two different identities, was given lower ratings half the time with the only difference being the perceived gender of the instructor. Similarly, students rated the perceived female instructors an average of 0.75 points lower on the question regarding fairness, despite both instructors utilizing the same grading rubrics and there being no significant differences in the average grades of any of the groups. (MacNell, Driscoll and Hunt 2015, 300)

Over the course of my five years teaching *Gender and the Law*, my numerical scores increased every year in each of the five categories measured; that is, “all aspects of the course,” “ability to present ideas and concepts clearly,” “ability to create an atmosphere conducive to learning,” “ability to present material in an interesting

way,” and “overall rating of lecturer.”⁸ This was undoubtedly due to the significant growth in my teaching experience as well as my continued efforts to improve both my teaching and the course content.⁹ In light of Lillian MacNell, Adam Driscoll, and Andrea N. Hunt’s (2015) study, I wonder how much higher my numerical scores could have risen in the various categories if I were not “graded down” for my gender identity.

These “grading down” problems are compounded when the professor teaches courses that focus on feminist, anti-racist, and other equity issues. As George J. Sefa Dei (2010) notes, “there is a cost in doing this work, namely, that the person doing it is perceived to be always criticizing, angry, and at times not intellectually credible” (171). In each of the five years I taught *Gender and the Law*, I received several evaluations that suggested that I was biased, angry, irrational, and/or hate men. On average, 12 percent of the student evaluations I received annually employed this type of language. This ranged from a low of 4 percent in 2014-2015 (which may or may not be significant due to the low response rate that year) to a high of 24 percent in 2011-2012.¹⁰ This is common in course evaluations of women who teach gender-related courses and to a lesser extent gender and women’s studies courses (Laube et al. 2007, 95). Men who teach gender-related courses (and gender and women’s studies courses) tend to be evaluated by students as less biased and more open minded (Flood 2011, 147). Such evaluations relate to cultural stereotypes of the angry, male-bashing (female) feminist as well as to hegemonic femininity being associated with hysteria, excesses of emotion, and irrationality.

When I received evaluations that advised me to “work on [my] tantrums/rants about certain topics” (2012-2013) or to “not freak out when someone comes in late” (2011-2012), I felt like how I imagine Ida Bauer (the “Dora” of Freud’s famous 1905 case study) felt when Freud attempted to “cure” her of “hysteria.” Of course, there is no way to know if all students who complain about my supposed hysterical tendencies are men (that is, the male Freud to my female Bauer). Indeed, female students can be just as misogynistic and anti-feminist as male students. The student complaining about my “tantrums/rants” responded to the question “what did you value most about this course?” with a comment about the “pretty girls in lecture”; this suggests, but does not necessarily determine, that the student identifies as

a man.¹¹ Whereas most students seem to understand that feminist research (at least in socio-legal studies) “emerged in part to counter truth claims by researchers who, on the face, seemed ‘unbiased,’ but systematically ignored or distorted women’s experiences” (Berger and Randeloff 2011, 138), a vocal minority do not. I also suspect that I receive course evaluations like this because, as noted above, students generally take the course because of the word *law* in the title, not the word *gender*. As one student noted, “I signed up to learn about *Gender and the Law*; instead I was suckered into a feminist course which was very good at degrading men” (2012-2013). Men and women who take gender and women’s studies courses—that is, people who *intentionally* take feminist courses—are generally self-selecting and more likely to be sympathetic to feminist scholarship (Flood 2011, 138).

In addition to being more critical of the teaching abilities of their female professors, students are also more likely to call attention to their bodies and clothing (Laube et al. 2007, 95). Although I was very well aware of this, the year I decided cut off my long hair for a shorter, darker, more androgynous style, I was shocked by the number of students that felt compelled to criticize (or simply comment on) my new hairstyle in their course evaluations. The only advice one student had in response to a question concerning how the course could be improved was the following: “Don’t cut your hair. Stop making corny jokes” (2011-2012). Is my value in the classroom, then, primarily determined by me having long blond hair and not cracking jokes? (Clearly the short, darker hairstyle was not working for some students.) Why is my perceived attractiveness—which is linked to me adhering or not adhering to hegemonic forms of femininity—even an issue? It might have something to do with the popular website *ratemyprofessors.com*, where students can rate their professors’ “hotness” by granting them a chili pepper. As the late Barbara Godard (2010) noted, “with the prize of a chili pepper... pleasure in the classroom is heavily eroticized” (28). I am not sure if my current lack of a chili pepper on *ratemyprofessors.com* has anything to do with my apparently highly unpopular short hairstyle. As for the critique of my “corny jokes”—which I have received on a few other occasions in teaching *Gender and the Law* (although interestingly never in courses taught in gender and women’s studies)—should I improve my jokes

or leave the attempts at levity to male professors? This particular evaluation was done the year of several popular culture firestorms suggesting “women aren’t funny.” But then again, perhaps my jokes really are just bad.

Beyond the question of my attractiveness and comedic talents (or lack thereof), underpinning such comments is not only sexism, but also the idea that, as a professor in a corporatized university, I am in the business of what Claire Polster (2010) calls “edutainment.” Large courses tend to get better course evaluations when the professor lowers teaching standards in favour of being “edutaining” (13). This evaluation is a case in point: “Lecture slides need to be more colourful. And the class needs to be more entertaining” (2014-2015). Admittedly, I have only ever received one other *Gender and the Law* evaluation that actually contains a variation of the word “entertain”; a student suggested that “more entertainment for the students should occur” (2012-2013). However, as noted above, I received complaints that not enough films were shown every year I taught the course. Student evaluations of my inadequacies in terms of attractiveness and attempts at comedy, combined with the supposed shortage of films in my course, suggest that my edutainment factor is lower than the students/consumers expect.

Although anti-feminism and sexism have clearly negatively impacted some students’ perceptions of the quality of my teaching, my course evaluations have also been boosted by the multiple ways in which I have privilege. I am privileged as a cis woman who generally performs hegemonic femininity (hair length notwithstanding), I am usually (but not always) read by students as heterosexual, and I am white. For one student, it seemed that my performance of hegemonic femininity was the sole redeeming quality in a course, the content of which they otherwise found offensive:

I was DEEPLY offended by the content as a conservative... and I would not recommend this course to any of my conservative friends. The prof was actually quite enjoyable and a delight despite the content she was teaching. Nice lady and engaging speaker. (2012-2013)

It was not clear from this particular student’s evaluation what exactly they found “deeply offensive” from a conservative perspective. The year that evaluation was written, Stephen Harper’s federal Conservative Party

had a new mandate, forming a majority government for the first time. That year, I remember critiquing Harper’s omnibus crime bill (passed in March 2012) more than once for favouring incarceration over rehabilitation and for its potential to contribute to the over-incarceration of Indigenous peoples. In a course entitled *Gender and the Law*, critique of laws passed by any governing federal or provincial parties (past or present) should be expected. If the student meant *socially* conservative (rather than Conservative in the partisan sense), potentially anything in the course could be understood as “offensive”—from discussions of inadequate access to reproductive justice (including abortion) to the paucity of protections for trans people in most provincial human rights codes. Despite the “offensive” course content, the student had almost entirely positive comments in response to the other questions about my teaching. I suspect that if I was trans, butch, and/or a racialized woman, I would have received a significantly harsher evaluation from this student. I am also fairly certain that I would *not* been read as enjoyable, delightful, nice, and/or a lady.

Studies have demonstrated that students of all genders are more likely to evaluate their professors using sexist stereotypes if they have traditional views about gender (Flood 2011, 146). However, I found that even students who found the course enlightening feel compelled to praise me for my performance of hegemonic femininity. For example, one student wrote:

One of my favourites of York! As a student who has never taken a law course, I found the material presented in a way that I could comprehend and it never felt as if I was missing info. I loved the discussions of homosexuality [*sic*], violent fem[initie]s, and trans issues! Julie really engages with the material and she is adorable, but commands attention as well. (2012-2013)

The term “adorable” is not necessarily gendered feminine; however, it is infantilizing as the term is commonly used as a synonym for cuddly and cute (such as “adorable baby” or “adorable kitten”). At the same time, the context in which the term was used in the last sentence is highly gendered, insofar as adult women are more likely to be infantilized than adult men and being “adorable” is set up in opposition to “commanding attention.” Indeed, as Flood (2011) notes, “it is easier

for men to live up to the expectations attached to their statuses as ‘man’ and ‘professor’ than for women to live up to those attached to ‘woman’ and ‘professor’” (146-147). I read this evaluation, therefore, as praise for my supposedly difficult negotiation of both (hegemonic feminine) “woman” and “professor.”

My privilege as a white, cis, able-bodied person assumed to be heterosexual also manifests itself in the fact that I have never once read a course evaluation suggesting that I have an “axe to grind” or an “agenda” with respect to anti-racism or trans rights. Only once (2013-2014) in five years did I receive a complaint about the course focus on critiques of heteronormativity and queer rights. I have also never received a single complaint about course content critiquing Islamophobia, the phrasing of an essay topic on Muslim masculinities and femininities in Canadian law and society, my varied critiques of classism, or course content on the criminalization of poverty. Only once did I receive a complaint about course material on ableism; one student felt that I did not acknowledge the “good” aspects of eugenics laws in Canada (2011-2012). Yet, in *Gender and the Law*, the coverage of most of these issues—particularly race and racism, heteronormativity, queer and trans rights, homophobia and transphobia, Islamophobia, Indigenous issues, class and classism—is substantial. Not a week passes without the course touching on the plethora of ways in which Canadian law participates in processes of racialization. Flood (2011) suggests that white anti-racist and heterosexual anti-homophobic standpoints are possible for the same reason that male feminist standpoints are possible; that is, “the experience of privileged groups generally is not so determining that the production of alternative forms of knowledge is impossible” (149). The idea that white people (such as myself) have no “stake” or are “unbiased” in discussions of race and racism undoubtedly helps my course evaluations. I have received exclusively positive comments about the strong emphasis of my course on race, racism, and the effects of white privilege in the Canadian legal system with one exception (in 2014-2015, one student felt the discussion of Indigenous peoples was excessive). As such, I am almost certainly “graded up” in my course evaluations for my “alibi” of the “good” white scholar whose teaching about groups underrepresented in the academy is easily assimilated by students.

Disrupting the “Cruising, Shopping, Disengaged” Student Mindset

I understand contemporary first-year students at large corporatized universities (such as York) as both disengaged and alienated. As members of the largest commuter university in Canada, York students are particularly disengaged as most live and work far from campus. Yet Canadian university students as a whole are enrolled full-time but study part-time (Côté and Allahar 2011, 118). Such a situation hardly encourages the transformative potential of higher education. Students are alienated in the Marxist sense; that is, alienated from their life activities (namely their academic and paid labour) and their institutional environment. Thus, I read course evaluations that were petty or sexist as—at least partially—akin to the person who yells at the customer service representative because the students in question feel wronged by a large and impersonal corporation. That is not to suggest that the people writing such evaluations (or yelling at a customer service representative) would not be sexist if they were more engaged or less alienated; indeed, it is likely that the sexism would simply take different forms. In addition to an expression of disengagement and alienation, I read these troubling course evaluations as an expression of discomfort – in response to having one’s worldview challenged and to facing one’s own privilege. Yet discomfort can be productive. Although some degree of disengagement and alienation at the corporatized university is inevitable, I believe discomfort can be used productively to disrupt (at least in part) the “cruising, shopping, disengaged” mindset of students described by Klein (2002) in the epigraph to this article.

Part of my pedagogical approach to teaching *Gender and the Law* was to name privilege in its various manifestations. For the second lecture of the course, I had the students read Peggy McIntosh’s (2001) classic piece on white privilege and male privilege as well as Barbara Perry’s (2011) application of McIntosh’s work to Canadian socio-legal studies. Perry’s article—which extends beyond white and male privilege to include the operations of heterosexual, Christian, class, and citizenship privilege in Canadian law and society—is foundational to the course. We returned to Perry’s discussion of privilege and the “mythical norm” multiple times. For example, in winter term discussions of multiculturalism policy and immigration law, we used Perry as a starting

point for a deeper analysis of citizenship and class privilege among groups who share some of the advantages outlined but may not be racialized “white.” Perhaps in part due to the incredible diversity among undergraduates at York, most students have little difficulty with the idea of privilege as “unearned advantages” and the “mythical norm” as a process through which Canadian law treats whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, and other identities as “normal.”

I try to disrupt my status as an alibi by calling attention to my own privilege (that is, privilege that is often covered up in the alibi of a “good” white scholar). I talk about how systems of privilege have impacted interactions I have had with the law. For example, I tell a story about being stopped by two white police officers at an anti-poverty protest I attended with two friends from graduate school. My two friends, both of whom are brown men, had the contents of their small bags spilled on the grass. I was simply asked about the contents of my considerably larger bag and, when I told them school books, they smiled and told me I needed new friends and should be studying. I ask the students what assumptions about brown masculinity and white femininity might have underpinned this interaction with the police and how this fairly tame encounter (which my friends found mostly annoying) could have been far worse. In class discussions and assignments, students are encouraged to reflect upon personal and familial interactions with the law; many have their own stories about immigration and other forms of law.

In naming my own privilege, I link the past to the present. For example, I discuss my family’s involvement in the British colonial project and its lasting legacy on my own life. I tell the students about my great-great-grandfather, Philip Dowsett, who came to what is now called Canada from England in the early 1800s. He arrived to protect “British interests” by fighting in the War of 1812 on the promise of land; he was eventually “granted” several acres of Haudenosaunee land in eastern Ontario. I contrast the relative ease with which Philip was granted land (which was contingent on him not getting killed in war) and citizenship and voting rights (which were automatic despite his illiteracy) with an Indigenous man of Philip’s generation. The *Act for the Gradual Civilization of the Indian Tribes* enacted in Upper and Lower Canada in 1857 did not provide any

rights to land and granted the Indigenous man citizenship and voting rights only if he could prove he was “civilized” (that is, read, write, and speak either English or French, choose a surname approved by the state, have no debt, and be monitored by a Christian clergyman for three years who would attest to his “sound moral character”). Later in the term, I ask the students to consider what laws from two hundred years ago would mean for contemporary descendants of Philip and his Indigenous contemporary. I tell them that the year I graduated from high school was the same year the last residential school closed. As such, if I was a descendent of Philip’s Indigenous contemporary instead of Philip himself, my education (insofar as residential schools offered any education) and opportunities in life would have been very different.

Although I strongly hold the view that discomfort and facing up to privilege can promote student engagement and be a useful remedy against alienation, I often wonder how my concerns about my own precarity have impacted my pedagogy. Clearly, my course evaluations have been dragged down by some students thinking I am “anti-men.” In the five years I taught *Gender and the Law*, I gradually increased course content coming out of critical masculinity studies as more readings became available and particularly readings that were accessible to first-year students and relevant to Canadian socio-legal studies. (I always showed Jackson Katz’s classic film *Tough Guise* (1999), which I substituted with the updated and improved *Tough Guise 2* after it was released in 2013.) Increasing the critical masculinity studies content undoubtedly improved the course. However, if I am honest, part of my motivation for these changes was my perceived need to shield myself from an “anti-men” charge. When I discussed sexual assault (or other forms of violence perpetrated largely by men against women), I would always remind students that there are multiple masculinities, only some of which justify violence against women. In repeating the “multiple masculinities” line, I wonder if I was legitimating the “not all men” discourse, in which discussions of rape culture (or other issues disproportionately affecting women) are redirected to be about how this is not the fault of individual men. While I know students who believe I am “anti-men” are incorrect in their reading—and that I can safely ignore their course evaluations—the reality is that hiring committees for the full-time,

tenure stream jobs for which I am applying will see all of my teaching scores, not just my scores from feminist students.

Conclusion

This paper has reflected on the challenges of teaching a first-year gender course (that is not a gender studies course) at a large corporatized university. Yet, despite these challenges, there are many rewards. Students may not necessarily have known what they were getting into, but they often find that the course content helps them make sense of their own life experiences. Every year, I have students tell me (in my office hours or on their course evaluations) that they grew up in a household with domestic violence, that they are survivors of intimate partner violence and/or sexual assault, or that they are rethinking masculinity and what it means to their own identity. It is also common for me to get thank you e-mails from students a month or a year or longer after the course ended, saying how much it meant to them personally. And course evaluations such as this one make me temporarily forget about the problems of contract faculty at corporatized universities: “it got me to question everything I believed in; re-evaluate those beliefs and to see things from a different perspective” (2012-2013).

Today, universities are supposed to be concerned with neoliberal values such as “maximizing global competitiveness” and “meeting the demands of the knowledge-based economy” (Newson, Polster, and Woodhouse 2013, 53). Yet as James Côté and Anton Alahar (2011) note, the more “universities sell themselves as purveyors of marketable credentials, the more they encourage the student-as-consumer model, setting in motion myriad problems associated with entitled disengagement” (90). I have read many of the students at York University as disengaged and alienated, causing them to view themselves as consumers and me as a service provider. Part of my service provision is the expectation that I am there to “edutain,” which can take the form of showing more films or putting a happier spin on social justice issues. Indeed, one student suggested that “some of the topics were a little too negative; the course needs to have a few more positive aspects to it” (2014-2015). For some students, my service provision is lacking due to my supposed hysteria, inappropriate hair length, and lack of comedic talent. Given the increasing-

ly important role of course evaluations in hiring, tenure, promotion, and salary decisions, faculty with marginalized identities are put at a significant disadvantage. Indeed, I feel particularly compelled to be responsive to course evaluations, even those that are underpinned by sexism or anti-feminism, due to my own precarious employment as contract faculty. My paper suggests that course evaluations require considerably more feminist attention, particularly with respect to contract faculty (such as myself) at corporatized universities.

Endnotes

¹ I wish to thank my colleagues who employ feminist and anti-oppression pedagogies both past and present and who have supported me and pushed me in directions I needed to be pushed. Discussions with Lykke de la Cour, reese simpkins, Healy Thompson, and Emily van der Meulen have been particularly fruitful. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers at *Atlantis* for their helpful comments. Any shortcomings with this article or my pedagogy are mine alone.

² In this paper, bracketed date ranges indicate the academic year in which the evaluations were conducted.

³ *Gender and the Law* is cross-listed with the undergraduate Law and Society program and the first-year interdisciplinary General Education program at York. As such, students tend to be either Law and Society majors or students from a variety of departments—primarily in the liberal arts and less often the sciences and fine arts—looking to fulfill their first-year General Education requirement.

⁴ This thinking was exemplified in a *Time* magazine cover story, entitled “The Me Me Me Generation: Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents” and published on May 20, 2013.

⁵ The response rate was 47 percent in 2010-2011, 48 percent in 2011-2012, 50 percent in 2012-2013, and 51 percent in 2013-2014. The slight annual increase in the response rate might be attributed to my concerted effort to improve my pre-evaluation discussion on the importance of student evaluations. For example, in recent years, I have provided concrete reasons that illustrate how evaluations can be useful in my understanding of what did and did not work and why.

⁶ As a result of the strike, most classes at York were suspended. In many classes, including my own, attendance rates declined significantly after the strike was settled and classes resumed.

⁷ The authors do not discuss race or other forms of identity. Presumably, with simply a name and no photograph, other aspects of their instructor’s (fictional) identity remained ambiguous for the students.

⁸ There was one minor exception to this trend: “all aspects of the course” in 2014-2015, which at 3.70/5 was a drop of 0.12 from 3.82/5 in 2013-2014. This drop may or may not have been strike-related.

⁹ The first year I taught *Gender and the Law* (2010-2011), I had only taught one other course, a third-year seminar course comprised

of 15 students, in addition to the usual graduate school TA experience. I had no experience lecturing to a large class or managing TAs. Since 2010, I have participated in a variety of teaching development workshops and encouraged feedback and constructive criticism from my TAs.

¹⁰ The percentages were as follows: 6 percent in 2010-2011, 24 percent in 2011-2012, 15 percent in 2012-2013, 9 percent in 2014-2015, and 4 percent in 2014-2015.

¹¹ It also suggests that the primary value (for heterosexual men) of a course like *Gender and the Law* is the high number of women in the course. This is similar logic to the varied reasons given for admitting women to formerly men's colleges and universities in the United States—for example, as a retention strategy for male students or to “civilize” male students' behaviour. In short, it hinges on what women can do for men (Poulson and Miller-Bernal 2004).

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