

# Of “Sluts” and “Arseholes”: Antagonistic Desire and the Production of Sexual Vigilance

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## Abstract

This article examines a contemporary antagonism in gendered safety discourses—the imperative to be free in public space against the obligation to be safe and “properly” feminine. We argue that this produces (and is produced by) contemporary rape culture, which might be contested through recourse to an agonistic ethic. Using qualitative interview data, we examine how participants contest victim-blaming discourses, while limiting how far they will accept the female body’s right to occupy public space. This article has significant implications for approaching social justice, in particular justice for women and their right to occupy public space.

## Keywords

sexual violence, agonism, safety

## Introduction

Woman is present in cities as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian, but also as virtuous woman in danger, as heroic womanhood who triumphs over temptation and tribulation. (Wilson, 1991, p. 6)

Jill Meagher was raped and murdered on the streets of Melbourne, Australia, on September 21, 2012. A few days later, once her body had been discovered and the events of the attack ascertained through the piecing together of Closed Circuit Television footage, a Reclaim the Night march took place on the street where Meagher’s image was last captured. The case—from Meagher’s disappearance to the detainment, trial, and eventual incarceration of her assailant, Adrian Ernest Bayley—received worldwide

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media attention and comment. Sasha Chambers, a woman in the crowd outside the court when Bayley was sentenced, explained how these events affected her:

What occurred to Jill, I thought that could happen to anyone . . . I wear flat shoes, I don't wear high heels, I make sure I'm in a group when I'm wearing them. I don't drink alcohol anymore . . . It has impacted my life. (Cited in "May U Rot," 2013)

These events, and the relationships between them, capture a contemporary antagonism concerning women's bodies in public space that we interrogate in this article: the tension between the imperative to be free—to reclaim the night—and the obligation to be safe in public spaces. We examine how this tension emerges through discourses of personal freedom and personal responsibility. We also situate this antagonism within a public sphere of political contestation characterized by an agonistic ethic. Within liberal democracies, at least, we suggest that one strategy for feminist challenges to the proper constitution of femininity lies in bringing these antagonisms into the public political sphere—not for debate, but for a more thorough transformation.

The attack of Jill Meagher confronts us with the actualization of a number of rape myths; a violent "stranger-rape" and murder of a woman in a public space, who was walking home alone, at night, after drinking some alcohol. We are then confronted by a feminist protest march about women's bodies that proclaims their right to occupy public space, to participate in its production, to transform what public space does, and to transform power relations therein (Lefebvre, 1996). However, in Chamber's response, above, we are equally confronted by the established tropes and techniques of safety that are addressed to women's bodies in public space (Brooks, 2011; Gardner, 1990; Stanko, 1996). These confrontations—as Elizabeth Wilson (1991) suggests above—inherit a 19th-century construction of women's bodies in urban public space as a problem without an easy solution.

In this article, we argue that the problematic body of the woman in public—too often discursively framed through idealized figures (the temptress, the whore, the virtuous)—is produced through various interlocking *dispositifs*<sup>1</sup> that construct appropriate femininity, anxiety about who has the right to occupy public space, and contemporary preoccupations with security that become enforced through "sexual vigilance." Sexual vigilance, we argue, is a mode of "active subjectification" that organizes how female bodies should appear, occupy, and travel in public spaces (Foucault, 1982). The form of sexual vigilance that is produced through these interlocking *dispositifs* is forged through discursive imperatives to be properly feminine, to adhere to established gender norms, to protect and safeguard the self and constructions of the self. Such sexual vigilance is, we suggest, one way in which the problem of the female body in public space is discursively "solved." The apparent antagonisms that accompany discourses about Meagher's death provide us with a lens through which to interrogate the work that this *dispositif* does and to consider what might be possible if this antagonism was to be conceptualized otherwise. As public responses to the Meagher murder demonstrate, one of the key ways in which control over women's bodies operates is through the mobilization of the imperative for safety and avoidance of risk in public spaces. Here, these imperatives emerge

through the production and reproduction of the female body as *out of place* in public space.

The virgin/whore dichotomy is a well-established and much-critiqued construct within contemporary discourses about (in)appropriate femininity (Brownmiller, 1975; Smith, 2013). However, the *dispositifs* that police femininity and that sustain this construct are themselves reliant, for their constitution, on the continued proliferation of this binary. Within this feedback loop, the female body becomes a site of scrutiny, the locus upon which judgments of appropriate femininity are made. In the aftermath of Meagher's rape and murder, much was made of what she was wearing and what she was doing prior to her attack. As CCTV film footage of the night of the attack demonstrates, Meagher can be seen walking alone on the pavement of a deserted street at 1:30 a.m.<sup>2</sup> In numerous news articles and online commentary, we are told she was on her way home; we are told she had been out drinking. We are also told she was married, professionally successful, young, and beautiful. Meagher's decision to walk alone, in high heels, late at night, and after drinking alcohol was strongly scrutinized by some members of the public who posted comments about these things on social network sites (Ford, 2012; Stockwell, 2012). Through discourses of the ideal victim (Christie, 1986; Walklate, 2011), the incident of the rape and murder comes to serve as an allegory for other women about the importance of avoiding risk, of staying safe, and of taking measures to secure their safety. Yet, both the discourses about how women secure their safety in public space and the scrutiny of Meagher's body and performance were also accompanied by counter discourses that pointed to Meagher's "right" to occupy public space at night—to dress and act freely in public. Indeed, the decision to hold a protest march on the site of her disappearance was intended to contest these victim-blaming discourses and to make claims for women and their right to occupy public space. It is the apparent antagonism and oscillation between these different positions—and their relation to how sexual vigilance polices women's bodies in public space—that interests us here.

To examine this, we draw on data collected in qualitative interview material acquired through fieldwork at two SlutWalk<sup>3</sup> antirape protest marches in the United Kingdom in 2011 and 2012. We sought to examine contemporary discourses regarding women's spatial practices, the imperative to avoid risk in public space, and the way in which women's bodies are figured in these discussions. The methodology is more comprehensively outlined in a previous discussion of these themes (Lim and Fanghanel, 2013). We interviewed 17 women and seven men. Purposive sampling of participants in feminist antirape protests was chosen because we are interested in the role of *feminist* claims to the freedom in public space in constituting the antagonism with imperatives to secure the self. Interviews took place in pairs or in groups, ranging in size from two to 10 people. The data that we cite here were from interviews lasting between 30 and 40 min. Interviewees were from a variety of racial and ethnic groups and ranged in age from 18 to mid-50s. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using an in-depth discourse analysis approach (Hook, 2001; Waitt, 2010).

Our analysis of these participant discourses extends beyond Boutellier's (2004) theorization of the "safety utopia" by showing how the antagonism between the

imperative to be free to occupy public space and the imperative to take responsibility for the avoidance of risk in such spaces needs to be understood as produced within the *dispositif* of sexual vigilance. Bringing a Foucaultian perspective to bear, we argue that the simultaneous appeals to freedom and to internalized self-control and responsabilization are not opposed, but are rather part of the same problem of governmentality within a broader apparatus of securitization. Not only does this argument have implications for social justice and the right to occupy public space, but it also has implications for how the production of appropriate femininities is understood as a governmental project. The latter parts of the article borrow from Mouffe's (2000) conceptualization of agonistic pluralism to think about how the antagonism between freedom and control relies upon the privatization of questions about the production of women's bodies, practice, and subjectivity. Mouffe's theorization of agonism also allows us to suggest how these questions can be admitted into the public sphere of political contestation and struggle—an important strategy for challenging the proper constitution of femininity in public space.

## **Governmentality and Sexual Vigilance**

Women, as Stanko (1996), Gardner (1990, 1995), and Campbell (2005), among others, have rightly noted, are more often than not the target of safekeeping advice than men. Although in recent years there has emerged a body of research which recognizes that men's relationships with fear of attack are present and complex, female bodies continue to be the locus of intervention for crime prevention advice (Day et al., 2003; Moore & Breeze, 2012). In Meagher's case, walking home alone, drinking alcohol, and wearing high heels were all highlighted as careless, risky practices. Brooks's (2011) study of women's attitudes to safety campaigns which target them demonstrates that whether safety advice is accepted or rejected by women, it forms part of a practice of subjectification in public spaces. The same might be said of the informal proliferation of safety advice. Even when crime-prevention discourses are problematized by women—even when they are contested through a Reclaim the Night March, or a SlutWalk—they still exert influence on subjectification in their negation. Indeed, as Gilchrist, Bannister, Ditton, and Farrall (1998) demonstrate, although women are not inherently more fearful of crime in public spaces than are men, women's fear is strongly associated with the performance of appropriate femininity. Normative discourses of femininity and masculinity dominate how men and women speak about experiences of violence in public spaces (Hollander, 2001; Fanghanel, 2015). This work has implications for our own research; after all, the type of crime that women are counseled to avoid through safety strategies is violent crime and sex crime. We argue that there is a sociocultural investment in producing and reproducing these normative gender discourses for these men and women. This finds its way into contemporary criminological attitudes to risk management and securitization in public spaces (Lee, 2007; Walklate, 1997), and beyond the criminological, into more everyday acts of occupying public space (see Scraton & Watson, 1998; Thomas, 2004).

The auto-policing and acts of governmentality that are implied by these iterations of “traditional gender ideology” (Hollander, 2001) reflect a shift in contemporary attitudes to understanding crime, crime control, and victimization from a focus on the individual deviant criminal toward criminogenic situations that might be tackled through risk-averse avoidance strategies (Garland, 1997; O’Malley, 1992). Risk, as Douglas (1992) suggests, is calculable and entwined with personal responsibility. Foucault (2007) argues that modern states—concerned as they are with managing the welfare of populations by analyzing threats to welfare in terms of calculable risks and probabilities—develop a series of techniques to make individuals take on this responsibility for assessing such risks and probabilities. This individualization of responsibility for managing one’s behavior to maximize safety and welfare—and to minimize risk—is what Foucault calls “governmentality.” Governmentality becomes especially organized around security within what Foucault (2008) understands as “neoliberalism,” in which capitalism produces a freedom to consume, enjoy, wander, and desire in *dispersed spaces*—a situation that requires internalized self-control as a counterpoint to this freedom (Deleuze, 1992). We argue that one of the ways that this governmentality operates is through the imperative toward sexual vigilance and avoiding risk. This practice is one of the techniques through which appropriate femininity might be constituted and sustained.

For risk is also a deeply gendered and subjective construct, and its cultural relationship to the policing of sexuality and vigilance over preserving appropriate femininity should not be underestimated (Lupton, 1999; Walklate, 1997). Here, taking risks by walking home alone at night, or drinking too much alcohol, for instance, are constructed as contributing to a flawed femininity. As we will discuss later in the article, the way in which some women discuss their ambivalent relationships with feminine sexuality, public space, and securitization can be understood as a form of internalized surveillance of (or vigilance over) the self (Foucault, 1978, pp. 100-102, 104; Stanko, 1997). This focus on “managing risk” as opposed to “enforcing social norms” (Merry, 2001, p. 16) within criminological approaches to dealing with crime shifts the focus of safekeeping advice away from perpetrators (who—either as “rational criminals” or, as we shall see, “arseholes”—cannot be expected to act otherwise) and onto potential victims. The governmentality at play here heightens the imperative to care for the self within a strictly risk-averse moral frame, using rape myths as allegories against a background of rape culture wherein the objectification of women-as-problems and permissiveness of violence against women is condoned and encouraged. The price of failing at this care is, as O’Byrne and Holmes (2007) suggest, shame and personal guilt.

Yet, as the responses to Meagher’s murder and as the responses from the participants at the SlutWalk marches suggest, the internalization of vigilance over risk figured through a constructed association between inappropriate femininity and the threat of violence is also antagonistically accompanied by a claim among women to a right and freedom to occupy public space. The tension between these positions can usefully be brought into a dialogue with Boutellier’s (2004) safety utopia. For Boutellier (2004, pp. 4, 8), the “safety utopia” is an impossible desire for a “vital society” in which

“liberal freedom is to be unreservedly celebrated” but around which boundaries of security are tightly set. In other words, Boutellier suggests that—partially through the capitalist, neoliberal imperative to self-determine—we exist in a state of perpetual (antagonistic) ambivalence, simultaneously desiring both absolute liberty (in a classically liberal sense) and the promise of absolute safety. This ambivalence needs to be understood as a project of governmentality, we would add. It gives rise to anxiety about security in the everyday, and also to the imperative to behave responsibly—appropriately—with this freedom.

Foucault (1984) understands freedom in relation to the care of the self, but the latter cannot be understood as only a practice of liberty. Like governmentality, it is also an example of a mode of governing the self; the conduct of conduct (Garland, 1997). Foucault’s understanding of the care of the self is a historical analysis of one mode of the broader question of governmentality in which liberty cannot be understood as separate from, or opposed to, control and power, but as *part of the conditions of that power* within particular *dispositifs*. How has this contemporary imperative to work on the self—co-opted insidiously by neoliberal politics—transformed our understanding of the project and practice of freedom?

## **Antagonisms of Freedom and Security**

It is not enough simply to suggest that safekeeping practices that target women as space users form part of a broader discourse of victim blaming. Feminist attempts to contest safekeeping and broader *dispositifs* of control, self-policing, and vigilance often run into the difficulty of how widespread and deep-seated investments in appropriate femininity as practiced and embodied through safekeeping seem to be. In our research, these difficulties are evident in the way participants negotiated the various antagonisms between the imperative to be safe and the right to freedom. Again and again, no sooner had a participant critiqued discourses associated with “victim blaming,” “rape culture,” appropriate femininity, or safekeeping than they—or one of their friends—would recapitulate some axiom about the dangers women face being by themselves in public space and about women’s responsibilities to keep themselves safe by dressing and behaving appropriately. Sometimes, these antagonisms were expressed as apparent contradictions in what the participants said, whereas at other times, participants attempted to account for the difficulties in reconciling their assertions within what discourse analysts (Stapleton, 2001, p. 471) call “contrastive structures.”

This dialogic shuttling between different positions in respect of safety and freedom demonstrates the antagonism of the position that women occupy in respect of their own sense of self and relationship with, and rights to, public space. We suggest that by approaching these dialogic tensions through a theorization of antagonism and agonism, we might better interrogate the role that imperatives toward sexual vigilance play in public space, and the implications thereof for the project of the self that is fostered through safekeeping discourses. We borrow some of our understanding of antagonism from Mouffe’s (2000) and Connolly’s (2005) radical democratic approaches to thinking about pluralism and the “relation of political adversaries.” The

investment of radical democrats such as Mouffe (2000), Laclau and Mouffe (1985), and Connolly (2005) in the mainstream political institution of democracy may seem at odds with the Foucaultian emphasis on critiquing the operation of governmental power. However, we demonstrate that Mouffe's work, in particular, provides rich conceptual resources for thinking about how antagonisms are constitutive of who is excluded from the space of the public and on what grounds.

### *Sexual Desire, Normativity, and the Limit to Freedom*

The antagonistic oscillation between making claims to the right to freely occupy public space and the desire for safety evokes the limit of how far the women and men to whom we spoke will allow women's freedom to go. Boutellier (2004, p. 8) makes the point that "risk culture" is marked by paradoxical tensions between yearning for "expressive uninhibitedness and indignation if it goes wrong, between a high level of tolerance and a call for the enforcement of the rules." We suggest that via the discourse of demanding both freedom and safety, the imperative for sexual vigilance marks, and is marked by, the appropriate and inappropriate performance of femininity and the continued proliferation of rape culture.

This becomes evident in the way that a movement like the SlutWalk organizes itself and the political terrain upon which it operates. SlutWalk describes itself as a "worldwide movement against victim-blaming, survivor shaming and rape culture" (SlutWalk Toronto, n.d.). "Whatever we wear, wherever we go! Yes means yes and no means no!" is the iconic chant that can be heard at this and other antirape protest in cities around the world. Such a chant is a direct response to the rape culture, the victim-blaming discourses, and the safekeeping advice that targets women's bodies in public space. Making claims both to the freedom to occupy public space ("wherever we go") and the right to dress freely ("whatever we wear") can be seen as an explicit rejection of an imperative to be sexually vigilant that emerges through safekeeping discourses. Yet, what also appears here, and what therefore marks the limit to this freedom, is the fettered expression of female sexual desire.

In the statement "yes means yes and no means no!" protesters are clearly referencing the problem of consent. But they are also referencing a dynamic more subtle than a straightforward affirmation of consent; the feminine response to a (presumably, given the heterosexist nature of rape culture and the dominant tone of SlutWalk's politics) masculine question. The answer "yes," which means yes, and "no," which means no, can only be given in response to a question from a silent interlocutor.<sup>4</sup> Certainly this emphasizes the importance of women's right to consent (or not) to sexual activity, but it also discursively, intrinsically, places women in the position of responder to the question posed by a faceless—amorphous—other. No space is afforded to the potentiality of active female sexual desire or autonomy; rather, women are always-already passive in this encounter, neither able to initiate sex nor preemptively refuse it. Holland et al. (1994) have identified how this reticence to express autonomous sexual desire saturates young women's accounts of their sexual practices. They argue that this constructs feminine sexual desire as something that is forbidden or taboo. It also

complexifies power relations within antirape and antirape culture politics, in part, by beginning to cast the discursive limit of freedom under a shadow of normative sexual vigilance, so what appears to be a call for emancipation operates instead within an economy where women are, in fact, not full actors in a heterosexual sexual encounter. It also begins to demonstrate how far men and women to whom we spoke are invested in the neoliberalized imperative to care for the self and to be free within a prescription of freedom through the operation of compulsory sexual vigilance:

I think women should obviously be allowed to wear what they want, when they want to wear it. But I also think you have a personal responsibility to protect yourself. And not putting yourself into situations that could be considered dangerous. Um . . . but yeah, so it's difficult. (Sophie, female, mid- to late 40s, White British, Interview 1, 2011)

Sophie's use of the auxiliary verb "should" to modify the term "be allowed to wear," here, not only connotes a political territory on which what is at stake is the control over—and freedom of—women's bodies but also shows how such antagonisms between political positions are managed. By deferring the effect of feminist activism into the future, present investments in particularly validated modes of subjectivity—such as appropriate femininity—can be left unexamined, and evidence that contradicts the problems with safekeeping messages can be ignored. For despite an apparent critique of victim-blaming discourses, Sophie's reasoning of what behavior is appropriate and inappropriate in public space is nonetheless curtailed by the expression of patriarchal norms. Who, for instance, gives permission for "women" to be "allowed" to dress as they want? Where does this ethic come from? This extract also places a neoliberalized emphasis on individualized freedom and responsibility for security and risk-avoidance. To be "allowed" to "wear what they want" alongside the "personal responsibility to protect yourself" illustrates the antagonism inherent in contemporary attitudes to safekeeping. It captures how the neoliberalization of the subject forms part of a governmental project of ordering, and gendering, public space:

What we've wanted to come along for today is to say that it's, it's about, you should be able to wear what you want to wear and you shouldn't be at risk . . . you should really be able to walk down the street naked. It doesn't mean that you want to be raped. And you shouldn't be judged on what you wear, which is what the policeman was doing. Whereas for me I always believe in a little bit of discretion and a little bit of dignity. And . . . I don't see a lot of dignity in a lot of what these people are wearing today. And to be quite honest, that is probably all that policeman in Canada was trying to say.<sup>5</sup> (Lucy, female, late 40s, White British, Interview 1, 2011)

Here, Lucy begins, as other participants in our research did, by articulating the imagined message of SlutWalk. She identifies that "it" is about a liberal feminist expression of agency and avoidance of risk; the ability (and right) to walk down the street—even naked. The second part of Lucy's statement, however, marks the limits of her own investment in the so-called liberatory message of the SlutWalk. Her appeal to "discretion" and "dignity," which are stereotypically feminine characteristics, could be said to be

particularly indicative of the work that these *dispositifs* do (see Hollander, 2001). To be discreet means, colloquially, to be unobtrusive. Discretion, from the Latin *discretio*, means having the power to make distinctions or the power to make a judgment. It also means having the ability to make decisions *without causing offense*; to be careful of other's sensibilities. Lucy, therefore, expresses a belief that women should be able to exercise discretion and control over the self—keeping within bounds of (good) judgment as it is delineated by *dispositifs* of appropriate femininity and of safety. Dignity, in contrast, from the Latin *dignitatum*, meaning “worthiness,” or the Old French meaning “honor,” has its root in the Proto-Indo European “dek-,” meaning to accept or to be suitable. To behave with dignity, therefore, means not only operating within a specific measure of value—worthiness—but also *to accept* that position for oneself.

It is precisely this imperative to take on board responsabilization discourses that the imperative to be sexually vigilant produces. Dignity and discretion are moralistic categories (as opposed to ethical practices) and certainly work within a *dispositif* of appropriate femininity. They are, therefore, integrally rooted within a sociocultural normativity that mutually composes, and is composed by, rape culture. Indeed, the invocation of “nakedness” and running “risks” alongside the imperative for “dignity” is suggestive of the undercurrent of shame that is the price of risky practices (Douglas, 1992; O’Byrne & Holmes, 2007). Lucy argues that women “shouldn’t be judged,” but the implication that “judging” may occur in the first place indicates the subordinate position of women’s bodies in respect of public space. Such shame thus works to mark the limit to freedom that these women’s bodies can expect in public space. Given that the espoused purpose of SlutWalk is to critique comments about “dressing like sluts” (which is also a moral category), this attempt to find value in Sanguinetti’s statement is a huge taking of distance from prevalent SlutWalk discourse, which seems to suggest how far investment in these *dispositifs* produce (certainly this participant’s) subjectivity.

In the quotations from Sophie and Lucy, we can see examples of the ways in which the participants often held together antagonistic arguments, asserting that women in general should be able to wear what they want in public without being victimized or being blamed when they are assaulted, while retaining an investment in appropriate femininity (Lucy’s invocation of “dignity”) and the idea that it is women’s responsibility to keep themselves safe (Sophie). Participation in feminist activism such as SlutWalk that contests the *dispositif* of sexual vigilance can be understood as part of a struggle between imperatives to regulate and secure the self—indeed, to desire and to internalize an external control over the self—and imperatives to be self-determining. Although both sets of imperatives might be taken as “neoliberal,” the attempt to elude technologies of control often appeals to a liberal ideal of freedom. Yet, rather than understand these antagonisms as a straightforward narrative of striving for freedom from control, we understand the appeal to freedom as mutually implicated with the imperatives to regulate and secure the self, and to be self-determining: It is an appeal to the “liberal” in “neoliberal.” As we have discussed elsewhere (Lim & Fanghanel, 2013), the appeal to liberalism is fraught with problems regarding its fantasies about the subject, the political agent, appropriate femininity, and its Others. We do not,

however, mean to suggest that any appeal to freedom within feminist activism is always-already a project of the privileged. Rather, we argue that the antagonisms between, on one hand, safekeeping, regulating the self, appropriate femininity, and security, and, on the other hand, a desire to be free from judgment and to be free to dress, act, and occupy space as one wants cannot be solved *within* feminist antirape discourses. Rather, what is required is a transformation of the production of female bodies, femininity, public space, techniques of safety, assessments of risk, modes of governmentality, and constructions of the self: a whole set of *dispositifs* that feminist antirape discourses address.

### *Of Arseholes and Lunatics*

Freedom and control are entwined in a complex set of relations of mutuality and antagonism. In our research, some of our participants sought not so much to resolve contradictions in their assertions by attempting to arrive at a coherent understanding with an agreed meaning, but rather to displace the underlying antagonism onto an inexplicable figure—the “lunatics” or “arseholes” who commit rape. Such figures work within a neoliberal context to position the participants as rational subjects in the face of the difficulties they encounter in making sense of the antagonisms between a *dispositif* of sexual vigilance and a feminist critique thereof. They also construct the amorphous perpetrator outside of the realm of rationality—a figure who, in a risk-averse criminological culture, cannot be reasoned with or rehabilitated:

Molly: I think you have got to make the distinction between when a behavior is dangerous for the person and when the behavior is not dangerous for anyone else, but you make a judgment on it and then . . . you think well why are you making that judgment, it's not hurting anybody, and it's not, you know it's not dangerous behavior.

Interviewer: And do you see that the SlutWalk is sort of about that? Sort of about people . . . people who've dressed up, who are sort of saying that um . . . dressing in a provocative way they erm . . . is about them sort of saying, is about them . . . it's not a dangerous behavior in itself . . .

Molly: Yeah, it shouldn't be. It shouldn't be. But the perception at the moment is that it is. You know, which is why there's negative . . .

James: Well the comment that started it all off was saying, you know, he [inaudible] in order to avoid rape, you need to do this, you need to behave to like that. Which is a policeman saying it.

Flora: [Inaudible] I do agree with the idea that, you know, it does exist and . . . whilst you shouldn't have to, you know, protect yourself against it, it is probably a good idea to do it because . . . it is harm[ful] at the moment, the attitude is still prevailing.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Flora: But . . . it shouldn't happen. That's the point. Like you can take steps to stop it happening to you, but you shouldn't have to take steps to stop it happening to you, which is . . .

Molly: Like, you know, some of the signs around that are saying that . . . I think as long as you are sensible about your behavior, you know that, you don't drink too much and put yourself in a dangerous situation, it shouldn't matter about the clothes that you wear.

Flora: But then, even drinking too much and putting yourself . . . drinking too much shouldn't be putting yourself in a dangerous situation. Because . . .

Molly: Well no, but I am just saying that . . .

Flora: Yeah it's, back to, when you are not in control of your . . . of yourself. Then . . . you just need to . . .

Molly: It does make you vulnerable.

Flora: Yeah it shouldn't . . .

Molly: . . . it shouldn't but . . .

Flora: . . . people are arseholes [laughs]. Yeah, that's our conclusion. [laughs] That's my motto in life, people are arseholes. (Molly, female, White British; Flora, female, White British; and James, male, White British, all early 20s, Interview 3, 2011)

In this extract, Molly starts by discussing the idea of judgments made about women's dress and comportment in public space. The indeterminate "it" of this exchange is the act (or threat) of rape or sexual assault. Molly's utterance situates the terms of debate in discourses of risk, security, and danger, and is suggestive of the highly moralized technologies of control characteristic of neoliberal governmentality: There are always judgments to be made—and to be contested—in relation to the purported harm that particular actions would do to the self or to others. Molly situates herself in relation to these judgments, arguing that how women dress is not a danger to others. This might be taken as an appeal to a liberal political position in which harm to others is a permissible ground for outside intervention into the actions of an individual, but harm to the self is not. At face value, this appeal to a liberal argument might appear to be an attempt to move away from a neoliberal imagination and toward a liberal position. However, that would overlook the context in which the appeal to a liberal position is made: a questioning of appropriate governmental techniques of the self in the dispersed spaces of the city. Our argument here is that liberalism is not in a position of exteriority to neoliberalism, for neoliberal modes of governmentality have appropriated the imperative to liberty and made it function in a codependent relation with modes of control; in other words, the conditions of possibility for an appeal to liberalism have been transformed.

In the extract above, after James has regrounded the discussion in the context of the particular safekeeping message that SlutWalk was established to contest, Flora and then Molly partake in a dialogical shuttling between antagonistic political positions. Twice Flora suggests that the risks of being raped that are purported within safekeeping discourses are real and that there are things that individuals can do to protect themselves; and twice she contrasts these statements with the assertion that this should not be the case. Molly responds by separating out judgments about women's dress and appearance from judgments about women's responsibility to behave in ways that keep themselves safe from the danger of being assaulted—aligning herself with the SlutWalk critique in respect of the former, but seeming to recuperate safekeeping discourses regarding the latter. Flora rejoins, countering not only Molly's investment in safekeeping but her own from moments before. The two sequentially perform a dialogical equivocation, ever more tightly holding together antagonistic positions before Flora brings the line of discussion to a close by invoking the figure of the "arsehole."

In some of the other interviews, similar figures are sometimes invoked. Lucy uses the term "lunatics" in such a way, for example. These figures are distinctive because they are excessive, beyond rational comprehension of the motivations for action. As such, they offer only temporary resolutions in the attempt to resolve this antagonism and become allegorical folk devils to absorb the anxiety over the inability to make some kind of sense. What they do is to produce merely the semblance of common ground. Of course, what these figures also do is to repeat the prominence given to stranger rape in popular (and SlutWalk) discourse—a prominence that enables the problem of security in public space to become an organizing principle for governmental techniques of the female body in public space. The whole problematic of judgments concerning appearance and comportment is one that regulates women's presence in public space; the "arsehole," then, names a relation to the figure of the strange and threatening man in public space:

There are assumptions made and its . . . there is almost an automatic assumption that, you know, men are stronger, and yes I fully appreciate that there are men that are raped as well, but at the end of the day, it is a much bigger issue for women, you have to be careful about where you go at night, you have to be careful about going places on your own, you have to think about stuff that most men don't need to think about. And that's frustrating, and it shouldn't have to be that way. I accept that, yes, there are things that I can do to keep myself safer, but why should I have to, just because there are arseholes out there? Who don't know how to relate to society properly [laughs]? (Karen, female, late 40s, White British, Interview 1, 2011)

Here, Karen repeats imperatives of safekeeping in which the crime of rape is understood in terms of women's responsibility to care for the self. Not only are both the nighttime and women's lone presence in public codified, once again, as dangerous, but the imperatives of safekeeping are understood in terms of what we might say is a governmental imperative for women to reflect upon one's own conduct in public space in ways that men do not. Even though such a governmental imperative is masculinist—indeed, phallogentric—it is women in general who are made to bear its burden. Karen

then goes on to demonstrate the same kind of shuttling back and forth between antagonistic positions that we have witnessed with other participants. First, she alludes to a utopian vision that critiques these safekeeping discourses (“it shouldn’t have to be that way”); then she expresses her own investment in techniques of safekeeping (“I accept that, yes, there are things that I can do to keep myself safer”), before again questioning the safekeeping imperative, and ending her turn of talking with an appeal to the figure of the “arsehole out there.”

Again, despite Karen attempting to question the imperative to keep oneself safe, her deployment of the figure of the “arsehole” maintains a governmental problematic defined in relation to questions of security and danger. More than this, as summoned up by both Karen and Flora, the figure of the “arsehole” suggests an individualized and inexplicable menace: someone whose motivation cannot be understood, unwittingly perhaps resonating with the very discourses that pathologize victims of sexual violence such as Jill Meagher. The resort to the abject figure of the “arsehole” positions these perpetrators beyond rationality (or rational within their own subjective—perverse—reality) and does the same work that pathologizing rape victims does. It creates an almost a premodern mythical figuration—a figure without an interior life, only surface actions, who is so Other to ourselves that we do not run the risk of becoming an “arsehole” or becoming prey to one (Douglas, 1992). Yet, here he appears in the midst of the formulation of a modern political settlement. His utility lies in the way that he allows the problem of risk to be externalized. The “arsehole,” like the “victim,” is a gendered, individual figure, and if it is positioned as the source of danger, then it functions to relieve “society” of its position as the level of abstraction in which problems of security, safekeeping, danger, and governmentality are produced. Being an inexplicable figure, the “arsehole” also fixes the paradox of antagonism—or, at least, creates the illusion of being able to explain the inability to construct a rational resolution of these antagonisms.

## **From Arseholes to Agonisms**

All I am saying is you can put yourself in situations where things are more likely to happen to you than maybe to happen to somebody else. Like, if you’ve got all the windows open in your house, there’s a chance you are going to get burgled. When you leave your car window open, there’s a chance that someone’s going to nick [steal] your stereo, so I think it’s about sensible measures. (Sophie, female, mid- to late 40s, White British, Interview 1, 2011)

The invocation of the figure of the “arsehole” is only necessary in a context where there is an assumption that a rational discursive solution to antagonisms must be reached. We might say that the context rests upon a particularly liberal fantasy of rationality. As Mouffe (2000) argues, such an idealization of rationality fails in practice because either it elides the political act of constituting legitimacy (as in Rawls’s, 1996, political liberalism) or it assumes the possibility of a rational dialogical situation (as in Habermas, 1995)—an assumption that erases antagonism and that erases any possibility for questioning

the grounds for debate. In a Foucaultian sense, we might consider that neoliberal governmentality attempts to construct all subjects as rational economic actors subject to the logics of the market (Foucault, 2008). Indeed, the rape myths, in which women dressing in public in ways that expose flesh to others' view is compared to leaving valuables on display in an unlocked car or house, such as those repeated by Sophie above, are an attempt to place perpetrators of rape in an economy of utility maximizing action. The dismissal of this rape myth as the fallacious act of violence that it is—a dismissal performed by several of our other participants—removes one way in which an accounting for the rationality of different actors might lead to the resolution of the antagonisms surrounding rape, freedom, and safety. If the antagonisms between freedom and safety in contemporary governmental discourse around sexual violence cannot be resolved rationally, the figure of the “arsehole,” at least, allows the participants to position themselves as rational subjects in common as opposed to the inexplicable motivations of the “arsehole.” Rationality becomes reproduced, not through the rational dialogical resolution of antagonisms, but rather through a differentiation that banishes perpetrators from the sphere of the rational.

What this leaves intact, though, is the very antagonism that the participants struggle with—often with considerable critical insight—throughout their discussion: the tension between the imperative to be free and the imperative to self-securitization (Bauman, 2000). This irreconcilability between the right in principle to the city (Lefebvre, 1996) and the desire *in fact* to be safe (Boutellier, 2004)—this oscillation between “you shouldn’t have to, but you have to”—resonates with what Chantal Mouffe (2000) has called, in the context of modern democracy, a paradox.

Many political philosophers have interrogated the apparent conflict in contemporary politics between liberal traditions that establish the limit to sovereignty in the name of freedom, on one hand, and democratic traditions that act to safeguard the collective “will of the people,” on the other (Mouffe, 2000, pp. 3-4, see also Connolly, 2004; Habermas, 1995; Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Rawls, 1996). The paradoxical tension between these competing ethics, is, according to Mouffe (2000, pp. 5-6), unsatisfactorily “solved” today by the uncontested rise of capitalism and the emergence of a hegemonic neoliberal ethic: an ethic that is open to plurality within limits but which seeks order, compromise, and a “misguided . . . search for a final rational resolution” to political contestations (Mouffe, 2000, p. 93). There are several elements to Mouffe’s thinking about such paradoxes that we think can be brought into productive conjunction with the largely Foucaultian perspective on the governmentality of sexual vigilance that we have deployed so far. Both thinkers offer a relational understanding of power as that which constitutes some kind of matter—or materiality—of “truth.” More specifically, however, we think there is a parallel between, on one hand, Mouffe’s understanding of the undecidability between liberalism and democracy and, on the other hand, the undecidability between freedom and control at the heart of the governmentality of the imperative to be vigilant.

Our participants shuttled back and forth between antagonistic positions in which an appeal to the imperative to freedom (to dress and behave as one likes in public unfettered by control by the police, by the state, or by others) was counterpoised against an

internalized imperative to safeguard the self through modified dress and behavior. The former part of this antagonism may be understood as a liberal appeal to freedom on the basis of universalistic human rights and of equality of rights to the city. As Mouffe (2000) details, however, liberal democracy is characterized by a paradoxical tension between liberal and democratic traditions in which *liberal* rights claims based on an appeal to a universalistic humanity do not sit easily alongside the *democratic* sovereignty of “the people.” After all, who are “the people,” and how is citizenship to be decided? Mouffe suggests that the drawing up of the common ground for democratic debate requires a certain homogeneity of the demos, which, in turn, requires that the demos be constituted through acts of exclusion. It is to address this problem that Rawls (1996) theorizes an underlying liberal rationality that serves as the consensual ground rules for liberal-democratic politics—a rationality that is sustained through excluding those who question liberal tenets and through relegating many substantial “moral” differences to the private sphere, stripping them of their political status (Mouffe, 2000, pp. 25, 28).

Here, Mouffe’s concerns about how certain tendencies within liberal-democratic thinking seek to delimit properly political concerns to the private sphere converge with Foucault’s (2008) concerns about the privatization of governmental questions. The *dispositif* of sexual vigilance can be understood as a mode of governmentality that puts into question women’s presence in public space in the city. As such, it depends upon a confining to the private sphere (although not to private space) all kinds of questions about women’s relationship to violence and women’s relationship to their own sexuality and to their own bodies. The consequences for a failure to abide by norms of appropriate femininity are often very public, but women’s decisions about how to dress or behave in public are produced within this *dispositif* as a privatized responsibility for managing “risks” under the rubric of “safety.”

What feminist contestation—such as SlutWalk or Reclaim the Night marches—does in this context is to open up the question of the demarcation of the boundaries of the *polis* and to put into a public political domain things that neoliberal governmental *dispositifs* of sexual vigilance tend to confine in the private domain. Here, Mouffe’s (2000) conception of *agonism* is useful in more than one sense. First, and crucial for our argument, it acknowledges the antagonisms between political positions and rather than seek an illusory rational consensus or reconciliation between them (*pace* Habermas and Rawls), seeks to engage this antagonism in productive becomings (see Connolly, 2004). Second, Mouffe’s concept of agonism allows for the demarcation of the limits of the demos—and what interests or subjects can be included therein—to come under scrutiny and challenge from time to time. It is suggestive, therefore, of how feminist activism seeks to place the *dispositif* of sexual vigilance into the sphere of public politics where it can be contested. Analytically, Mouffe’s understanding of agonism permits us to acknowledge the undecidability of the antagonisms faced by our participants and faced by responses to Meagher’s murder—the imperative to freedom versus the imperative to keep oneself safe—but also suggests the importance of how feminist activism places such antagonisms within a public political sphere wherein the very *dispositif* that produces these antagonisms can be contested.

Of course, it is not agonism itself that leads to a transformation of thought and action. Mouffe (2000) frames political processes in terms of given interests that are subject to reformulation only from time to time. It is an understanding that differs from a Foucaultian conception of how interests are products of the *dispositifs* that we might seek to question, a conception that implies that political struggle might do better to ignore given interests altogether, or at least to reformulate them. What it does do, though, is to enable an understanding of political antagonisms and the importance of placing them within a public sphere of political contestation. Thereafter, contesting the *dispositif* of sexual vigilance becomes a matter less of debate, and more of a “conversion” that entails a change of identity (Mouffe, 2000, p. 102) and of the relationship between power and knowledge. Here, there is some resonance between Mouffe’s (2000, p. 70) recourse to Wittgenstein’s understanding of the relationship between “truth” and common ways of life and Foucault’s understanding of regimes of truth (see Foucault, 2008, pp. 18-20). Crucially, contesting the imperative to be sexually vigilant entail an untying of feminine sexual subjectivity from neoliberal self-governance and a reformulation of the very terms that pose the female body in public space as a problem in the first place.

### **After Arseholes**

If the figure of the “arsehole” is offered as the antagonistic solution to explaining sexual violence against women in general, it is done so within a sociocultural setting where possible solutions to the problem of sexual violence must be reconciled within a democracy that values liberty, emancipation, self-actualization, and so on. It is the unsatisfactory offering that seeks to resolve the conundrum of how to live with rape culture. In this article, we have argued that the tension, outlined here, between being safe and being free composes a form of self-governance or auto-policing that is tied to an ethic of care for the self and of subjectification. We have argued that this form of subjectification operates through a *dispositif* of sexual vigilance. That is to say, the imperatives to be safe and to be free to occupy public space function in part through the normalization of specific femininities and the demonization of certain others. These imperatives are, we suggest, constructed in antagonistic tension with each other, highlighting the problem posed by, and to, the female body in public space.

The response to the murder of Jill Meagher shows one example of the antagonism that we have interrogated, but as our research at SlutWalk demonstrates, the oscillation between freedom and the obligation to secure the self is a pervasive, deeply seated antagonism (Boutellier, 2004). Even where participants to whom we spoke were refuting victim-blaming discourses that accompany the imperative to stay safe, they remained fettered by an imperative to occupy space within certain prescriptions, those features becoming a constituent feature of appropriate femininity (Fanghanel, 2015). What this suggests is that to undo the constitution of the female body in public space as a problem—and, moreover, to contest imperatives for sexual vigilance within a broader rape culture—it is not enough to appeal to freedom as if freedom is the opposite of control or of security. Sexual vigilance produces appropriate femininities

through making the antagonism between freedom and control the central object of the governmental relation of the self to the self. The usefulness of invoking the Foucaultian concept of the *dispositif* is that it shows that undoing imperatives of sexual vigilance requires the transformation of the conduct of conduct, the relation of the self to the self. Significantly, it shows that the struggle to transform the production of the female body and its relation to public space needs to contest the production of subjectivity, the techniques that set out appropriate modes of walking, gesturing, dressing, being in space, looking, and judging, and the knowledge of “femininity,” “danger,” “violence,” “risk,” “safety,” “propriety,” and so on. And, it shows that contesting the complex intertwining of the *dispositif* of sexual vigilance with the *dispositif* of security requires the refutation of how safety and appropriate femininity become privatized.

It is here that we build on Mouffe’s (2000) theorization of agonism to suggest how the antagonism between freedom and safety relies upon a delimiting of the *polis* in which the questions women face about how to act in relation to appropriate—and “safe”—femininity are restricted to the private sphere. If Mouffe’s conceptualization speaks of the undecidability between freedom and the bounding of the *polis* at the heart of neoliberal politics, then her appeal to agonism is perhaps suggestive of how such antagonisms are important in the opening up of spaces of contestation and perhaps offers an approach for what to do with these antagonisms. An appeal to agonism as a mode of political contestation suggests that the antagonism between freedom and safety cannot be neatly resolved. Rather, it is to suggest that a space for struggle can be opened within which the *dispositif* that produces the antagonism in the first place—and all the accompanying modes of embodiment and knowledge—can be contested and decomposed.

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1. The Foucaultian term *dispositif* can be understood as any apparatus that has “the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (Agamben, 2006/2009, p. 14).
2. Film available here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiBck13rpcA>
3. The SlutWalk protest movement is a feminist anti-rape protest that takes place in cities around the world. We focussed on protests in 2011 and 2012. SlutWalks are still

4. happening—especially in the United States—but the number of marches is far smaller than in 2011. In a SlutWalk, women and men march to contest victim-blaming discourses such as those espoused by Toronto police officer Michael Sanguinetti, whose advice to women to “avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized” (see Rush, 2011) prompted the SlutWalk protests. SlutWalks are so-called because participants are invited to dress “like sluts” (i.e., in ostensibly sexually provocative clothing) to draw attention, not only to the protest but also the falsity of the claim that there is a link between what women wear and the possibility of suffering a sexual assault.
5. We would like to thank Ludovic Coupaye for initially suggesting this idea to us.
6. The policeman in question is Michael Sanguinetti (see Note 1).

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