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Rigor mortis

On the hetero-patriarchal trappings of “academic rigor” at Purdue.

If you are thinking of building a bridge, be careful if your engineer went to Purdue University. Donna Riley, the head of the engineering department at Purdue [Correction: her actual title is Kamyar Haghghi Head of the School of Engineering Education], has put the world on notice that “rigor” is a dirty word. In an article for *Engineering Education* called “Rigor/Us: Building Boundaries and Disciplining Diversity with Standards of Merit,” Professor Riley, who is also the author of *Engineering and Social Justice*, argues that academic “rigor” is merely a blind for “white male heterosexual privilege.” Yes, really. “The term,” she writes, “has a historical lineage of being about hardness, stiffness, and erectness; its sexual connotations—and links to masculinity in particular—are undeniable.” There follows a truly surreal meditation on the existential and sexist depredations of slide rules—those hard, straight instruments that have traditionally been deployed by men—and periodic eructations like this: Rigor may be a defining tool, revealing how structural forces of power and privilege operate to exclude men of color and women, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ [love the plus sign!] people, first-generation and low-income students, and non-traditionally-aged students.

Things are always worse than they seem.

Of course, it is not just rigor that upsets Professor Riley. There is also “Scientific knowledge itself,” which, according to Professor Riley, “is gendered, raced, and colonizing.” What should we do about this outrageous behavior on the part of nature? Judging from Professor Riley’s example, one thing we should do is whine about how unfair life is for women and other “marginalized” groups, preferably in rebarbative, jargon-ridden language. “[D]ecades of ethnographic research,” she sobs, “document a climate of microaggressions and cultures of whiteness and masculinity in engineering.” We also, it almost goes without saying, must abandon the whole machinery of rigorous analysis for something freer, more “creative.” Engineering programs, Professor Riley suggests, should “do away with” the ideal of academic rigor. “This is not about reinventing rigor for everyone, it is about doing away with

the concept altogether so we can welcome other ways of knowing. Other ways of being. It is about criticality and reflexivity.” Back in 1996, Alan Sokal gulled the editors of the trendy lit-crit journal *Social Text* into publishing an article called “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity.” It was deliberate, delicious nonsense, arguing in a horrible patois of academic doublespeak that “physical ‘reality,’ no less than social ‘reality,’ is at bottom a social and linguistic construct” and that “scientific ‘knowledge,’ so far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it.” When Alan Sokal revealed his hoax, it was the occasion of great hilarity for the public, shame for the editors of *Social Text*, and, one might have hoped, a salutary admonition for susceptible academics. But Professor Riley’s gibberish is meant in earnest. Her essay appears not in a science fiction journal or a publication intended for the denizens of a sanatorium but a journal concerned with science. This woman is the head of a department of engineering in an institution of higher education. The moral is, we suppose, that things are always worse than they seem.

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