

INTRODUCTION

I dropped out of Big Tech. It was more than I could bear—a potent mix of sexism and harassment that corroded my health. Now, I work to understand how women and nonbinary people persist in computing to contribute their labor and hard-won expertise to one of the most influential fields on the planet. While I am concerned with justice in all science and technology fields, sexism in computing workspaces has proved most difficult to ameliorate, even though successful efforts for transformational change in this occupation would have wide impacts. One of my inspirations for leadership in this regard is Dr. Maria Klawe, former president of Harvey Mudd College. Klawe gave a distinguished lecture at the University of Washington in which she shared how she participated in a 2012 White House Forum on Women in the Economy. She was discussing gender politics in science with Valerie Jarrett, senior adviser to President Barack Obama, and believed a finer point needed to be made about calls to action. As Klawe tells it (Klawe 2012; Obama 2012), she said, “‘Valerie, you’ve got it wrong. We need more women in engineering and computer science, not in STEM fields. That’s just the wrong message.’ And she argued with me and I argued back. And then President Obama came in to address us, and I was so happy because he said, ‘We need more women in STEM fields. Especially in engineering and computer science where they’re really needed.’ And I’m going, ‘Yay!’”

Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) is too broad an aggregate these days, since many other STEM fields are having some success with representational parity. Big Tech companies now admit they need to hire and welcome more technologists of color and women. Feminist

activism like the #MeToo movement has galvanized public support for combating gender violence, and predators in computer science and engineering are under more scrutiny. Similar to President Obama, who welcomed senior women's expertise on complex scientific problems, some men in leadership positions are helping to advance the cause of justice in the computing labor force.

Has, however, #MeToo ended sexism and harassment in computing education and workplaces or, at least, significantly curbed it? My students' experiences and my own in recent years leave me doubtful. Every year, I teach an introductory course in cultural anthropology in which I assign mini-ethnographic projects on culture at our university. The good news is that white students and male students care about acts of racism and sexism and their systemic outcomes. The bad news is that, year after year, this assignment yields much evidence that opportunities are being denied to people who have faced steep barriers to technical education. Worse, while navigating these institutions, scholars of color, queer scholars, and women scholars are being harmed by bias, discrimination, and harassment.

The people you will meet in this ethnography also confirm that computer science and engineering has a serious cultural problem. From senior leaders in the field to undergraduates navigating their first year of college, the participants in this book's study will tell you how sexism and harassment manifest in computing through values, norms, behaviors, evaluations, and policies. While other STEM fields are making strides in recruiting, retaining, and respecting women workers, computing fails, year after year, to do so.

Just before the COVID pandemic and many years after leaving high-tech to pursue anthropology, I attended a professional dinner in honor of a renowned scholar who is doing cutting-edge work on ethics in computational machinery. The rock star guest and I were the only people at the table who were neither cisgender men nor in the fields of computing or philosophy. A sixth man joined late and sat next to me. I knew he was in computing but we had not yet met. "Hi, I'm Dick," he said, introducing himself. "You must be Jason's wife." "Hi, I'm Coleen," I responded. "I am a faculty member." An awkward silence descended on the table. Dick stammered an apology as I rearranged my silverware. "You were sitting next to Jason, so I assumed you were his wife." "Yes, because I am married to everyone I sit next to," I responded with a smile. Nervous laughter broke the tension.

Early in my career in Big Tech, at a company I will heretofore refer to as *Colossus*, I would not have had the experience or confidence to respond to a peer's sexism like this. Now that I have benefited from hearing similar stories from hundreds of other women and nonbinary technologists, this incident did not affect my confidence or my sense of belonging. It confirmed however, that there is still a pressing need to transform a culture that keeps technologists from imagining their women peers in roles other than those traditionally associated with providing goods and caring labor, like secretary, sex object, or wife.

Dick is not a bad apple. He is an adherent of the Bro Code, a cultural problem (not an individual one) in a field that flounders in efforts to welcome a critical mass of women (as opposed to mere tokenism) to ameliorate sexist divisions of labor in traditionally male-dominated fields (Carrigan, Quinn, and Riskin 2011). Anthropologists study the powerful process of enculturation, and here, I hold up to scrutiny a particular culture with much power to justify and enforce its values and worldview. The reach of computing science and engineering is vast and its coffers deep, which affords the field significant means by which to succeed in its bid for self-regulation and claim to know what is best for all of humanity, both present and future. I want to inoculate my students from the harms of the Bro Code. I want to repay my research participants' generosity by amplifying efforts to hold technological organizations accountable for fair and just workplaces. First, I must convince you, esteemed reader, to see the Bro Code as your problem, too. It everyone's problem—together, let's crack it.

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