

Introduction to Focus: Harassment

Aimee Armande Wilson

Responding to the firing of Matt Lauer from the *Today* show, Lauer's former co-host Ann Curry said, "we clearly are waking up to a reality, an injustice that has been occurring for some time." Comments along these lines, often including the phrase "we are waking up" or "we are now realizing," became common in the weeks after #metoo and the Harvey Weinstein sexual harassment scandal. I support the Me Too Movement and applaud the people who go public with their stories. But my first reaction to the "we are waking up" commentary was derisive. Who's this "we"? Not feminists, not women of color, not gender non-conforming people. Large segments of the population were wide awake already. Indeed, civil rights activist Tarana Burke created the Me Too Movement in 2006. Despite the fact that Curry herself has endured harassment, her collective "we" seemed to reference only a small subset of the population, the most privileged subset. Left out of the "we," I thought, are those of us who have to organize our lives around harassment's ubiquity. I am aware of the potential for harassment every time I pick out an outfit for work, doubly so since I commute by bicycle. I didn't need a Twitter hashtag to wake me up.

And yet, I re-read *The Voyage Out* in January. When I originally read Virginia Woolf's 1915 novel, more than a decade ago as a graduate student, I barely registered Richard Dalloway's sexual assault of Rachel Vinrace. It's not that Woolf writes about it in a veiled manner. Rachel, a sheltered 24-year-old woman, travels to South America on her father's ship. Richard Dalloway is a middle-aged married man and a relative stranger to the other passengers. One afternoon he follows Rachel into her room and the two make small talk for a few minutes. The ship suddenly lurches and Rachel stumbles toward Richard. He grabs her around the waist, kissing her passionately. His embarrassed explanation is predictable: "You tempt me." Ten years ago, Richard Dalloway's assault barely made an impression on me. He seemed a disagreeable character, but not remarkably so. Reading the novel after #metoo, I had a different reaction. I felt more aware of the harassment and more affronted by his arrogant explanation. I was, in short, more awake to harassment and assault. What other novels would I see differently now? What other scenes have I glossed over?

In the weeks after #metoo, I, like many people, re-assessed my own experiences, cataloging and weighing them against the latest accusation. After several days, I was dumbfounded to realize I wasn't including in that catalog the years I spent waiting tables. I was unconsciously bracketing off that work precisely *because* sexual harassment is so pervasive in the food service industry. Doing so was a remnant of a mindset I developed during those years, one in which harassment was "just" part of the job. Comments and jokes (that I now recognize as harassment) came from the other waiters, the kitchen staff, the management, and the customers. Brushing off these comments allowed me to get through my shift. The mindset became part of my uniform, something I put on along with my non-skid shoes and half-apron. My bracketing of restaurant work continued, in the background of my mind, until #metoo made me aware of it.

This bracketing speaks to the kinds of harassment I dealt with (relatively innocuous), but it also speaks to the normalization of harassment. The coping mechanisms people cultivate to prevent and deal with harassment of all kinds become habitual, to the degree that Richard Dalloway's assault is no big deal. I didn't have to—nor did I want to—expend much energy thinking about the ways harassment forced me to change my behaviors

and develop coping mechanisms. Putting such concerns on autopilot, then and now, allows me to focus on other matters. #metoo woke me up to the insidiousness of this habitualization.

At the same time, habitualization of this kind reveals my privileges even as it expresses my difficulties. Trans women, for example, especially women of color, never get the luxury of settling into habit. The rules are so much more stringent and capricious, and the consequences so much more violent, that nothing short of constant vigilance will do (and often that is not enough). In this as in all things, race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect in complex ways, allowing some people to "sleep" on harassment, as it were, others to take occasional naps, and causing still others to suffer insomnia.

Harassment exists on a continuum with violence, and the books reviewed here reflect this reality. As Rebecca Solnit puts it, this continuum "stretches from minor social misery to violent silencing and violent death." While these reviews focus on sexual harassment, verbal, racial, online, and other forms of harassment appear throughout.

The intersection of racialized and sexualized harassment figure prominently in Khadijah Queen's *I'm So Fine: A List of Famous Men & What I Had On* (2017). As Caitlin Newcomer's review notes, "The book delivers exactly what its title promises—a catalog of encounters with famous men accompanied by a chronicle of what the narrator was wearing at the time. But it is also a chronicle of the daily harassment and threat that accompanies living

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in a woman's body, specifically a black woman's body coming of age in Los Angeles in the 1990s." As such, Queen's book provides important context to the #metoo movement. Much of the attention is focused on celebrities' experiences on their way to Hollywood fame; Queen provides a glimpse of what it's like to navigate the outskirts of fame.

Both Carmen Maria Machado and Lesley Nneka Arimah use magical realism and fantasy to explore harassment. But rather than distancing or exoticizing, Machado's and Arimah's short story collections bring the effects of harassment into sharp relief. The connection between the fictional and the real is particularly true with regard to Machado, who recently revealed that she was subject to harassment from Junot Díaz. In her review of Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017), Gabrielle Bellot observes, "a phantom need not be a stereotypical, blood-drenched spectacle to terrify; the right atmosphere—unnatural silence, things continuing to happen when they should not—can horrify just as well, if not better."

As several of the books reviewed here point out, even with widespread agreement that such things should not continue to happen, the solution to the problem is far from clear. In Sarah Deer's review of Allison Hargreaves's *Violence Against Indigenous Women: Literature, Activism, Resistance* (2017), Deer outlines Hargreaves's use of film, art, and literature by Indigenous women to critique "mainstream efforts to address the disproportionate rates of violence experienced by Indigenous women," arguing that some of these efforts are not only ineffective but "can actually be detrimental to the cause." While addressing very different contexts, Laura Kipnis, Sarah Schulman, and Angela Nagle all critique current attempts to curb assault and harassment as ineffective, at best. As the reviews of these books by Victoria Reynolds Farmer, Mat Wenzel, and Sarah Whitcomb Laiola,



respectively, point out, the solutions proposed by these authors have come in for quite a bit of critique themselves.

The final review in this issue considers an edited collection, Joanna C. Valente's *A Shadow Map: An Anthology of Survivors of Sexual Assault* (2017). Thematically and physically, this is a heavy book. Valente brought together more than fifty writers to produce a 364-page collection giving witness to the variety and ubiquity of sexual violence. Yet the numbers only hint at the scale of the problem. Of Valente's collection, Christopher Higgs says, "even after reading almost four hundred pages of this material I still have a hard time understanding rationally how such cruelty and horror exists in the world and how some people are so resilient to live through it and persist."

Comprehensive coverage of the various types and implications of harassment is impossible. A project such as this one is necessarily incomplete. Furthermore, books dealing with harassment and assault are coming out at a rapid pace, books such as Roxane Gay's collection *Not that Bad* (2018) and Kelly Sundberg's memoir *Goodbye, Sweet Girl* (2018). I suspect we are at the beginning of a boom in literature addressing harassment. The frequent revelations of yet another bad actor are dispiriting. The growing wave of writing about harassment is reason for hope. As usual, Audre Lorde was right. Fully cognizant of the dangers inherent in speaking truth to power, Lorde advocated speech:

I remind myself all the time now that if I were to have been born mute, or had maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die. It is very good for establishing perspective....For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.

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Repository of Feminine Memory

Caitlin Newcomer

I'M SO FINE: A LIST OF FAMOUS MEN & WHAT I HAD ON

Khadijah Queen

Yes Yes Books

www.yesyesbooks.com

96 Pages; Print, \$18.00

In the closing pages of Khadijah Queen's *I'm So Fine: A List of Famous Men & What I Had On*, the narrator asks, "& why couldn't all this only be about name-dropping & brand names." Or perhaps it is the narrator's anticipation of the reader's own question, since the section concludes, "ask me again I'll tell you the same." The lines prior to this recount the narrator's experience with "a famous poet" who, a few months after a seemingly pleasant day spent together in Manhattan, "would push me into a hotel closet at a writing conference & grab my breasts so hard it hurt & saying I liked it." The narrator, then, has answered her (and our) question before even asking it; to live in a female body means that one can never be "only" doing any one thing—going to the store, riding the bus, discussing the clothes one wore—without the constant threat of violence both psychic and physical.

The cover of *I'm So Fine* declares it to be "A Narrative," a collection of breathless prose poems stitched together through stream of consciousness narration (the close biographical overlap invites us to read it as that of Queen herself) which charts the protagonist's evolving relationship to fame, misogyny, beauty, and self-actualization. The book delivers exactly what its title promises—a catalog of encounters with famous men accompanied by a chronicle of what the narrator was wearing at the time. But it is also a chronicle of the daily harassment and threat that accompanies living in a woman's body, specifically a black woman's body coming of age in Los Angeles in the 1990s.

At a textual level, the writing creates an experience on the page that mirrors the sudden switches and turns, the lack of solid footing that accompanies the experience of a female body moving through a hostile world. Each prose poem has little to no punctuation except the ampersand which creates a fluid, quick-moving line that asks the reader to pay attention to the lack of division between moments of joy and moments of pain,

moments of safety and moments of threat. For example, take the third poem in the collection, which reads:

The Beverly Center Food Court is also where I met Devante's brother from Jodeci I forgot his name but we didn't really meet he was just looking at my eyes then looking at my ass as I kept walking I really liked red lipstick back then I got it that day with my saved allowance at Rexall across the street a blue-red in a gold case & we both had on white jeans I was 17 & I remember it was summer

Here, the casualness of the narrator's recounting of the objectification of the male gaze puts it on par with her past choice in lipstick and the fact that it was summer, an equivalence that is also created at

The lack of punctuation allows each incident to bleed into the next, an illustration of the fact that harassment and violence exist on a continuum.

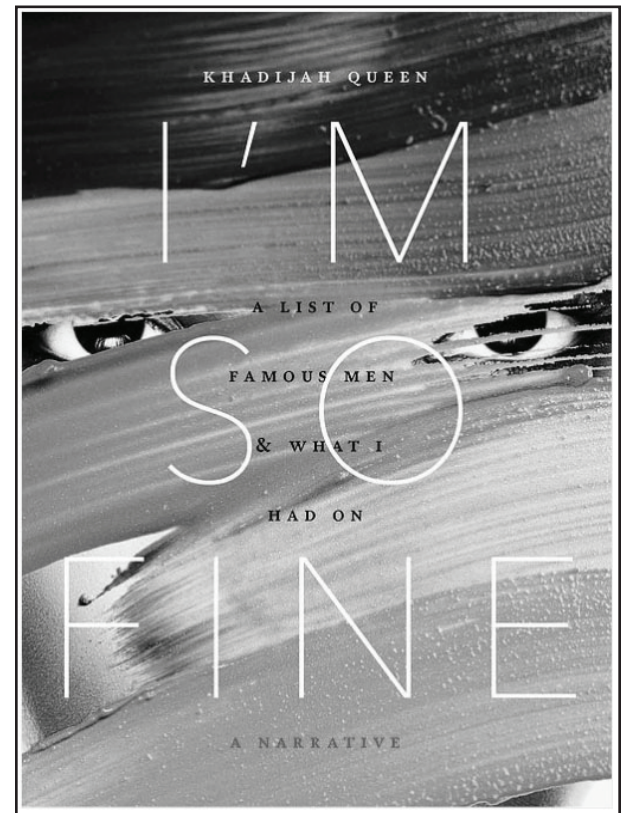
the sentence level where there is no punctuation to segment, separate, or differentiate between the layers of event. Such incidents are so mundane, so everyday that they shock neither us nor the narrator, and this lack of shock, this false equivalence, is paradoxically jarring.

Even more jarring is the way in which many of the poems reveal the web of constant and sometimes unavoidable threat that surrounds the narrator and her female friends and relatives:

Chris Tucker and Faizon Love came to Musicland where I worked & pretended to buy a polka tape he made me ring it up & everything which got on my nerves because I had to void the ticket he said what the hell would I look like bumping polka & the way he was looking at me like I was a plate of chicken & got too close & asked if I had a boyfriend which I did actually that boyfriend would rape me later that week right behind my apartment in an old Toyota Corona & wearing his Crenshaw High letter jacket he was the quarterback neighborhood famous.

Here, the narrator comes up against the ubiquitous forces of daily class and gender-based harassment as she must perform unnecessary labor (ringing up and then voiding a purchase to keep a customer happy) and contend with the objectification of the male gaze that turns her into a consumable object ("a plate of chicken"). But the pivot of the narrative then swings us from perceived safety into even greater threat—she is protected in the first instance by having a boyfriend, the only "no" which a culture of toxic masculinity will easily accept—but this is a false protection: "actually that boyfriend would rape me later that week." Again, the lack of punctuation allows each incident to bleed into the next, becoming inseparable, an illustration of the fact that harassment and violence exist on a continuum. In both instances, layers of fame protect the perpetrators. And yet the collection fights back through its unflinching gaze, its unabashed coupling of names and actions, its anticipation of and disdain for the perennial question asked in the face of street harassment or sexual assault—"what was she wearing?"

As seen in the passages above, the famous men invoked tend to be the pop stars, rappers,



comedians, and A-Listers of the 1980s and 1990s, making the volume an archive of celebrity nostalgia, although its glossiness is tarnished by the human nastiness of many of the anecdotes. Nevertheless, the collection's conceit creates a constant tabloid thrill—who will we encounter next, what secrets will be revealed? This in itself becomes a commentary on the ways in which our media consumption fetishizes and gobbles up human misery. However, what is ultimately most intriguing about the book's celebrity encounters is the way in which the specific rapidly becomes the general. Dave Chappelle looking at the narrator's ass "in the frozen food section at Ralph's in North Hollywood" is any man looking, anywhere. For the most part, celebrity encounters take place in the realm of the daily and the unexceptional—the sidewalk, the grocery store, the fast food drive through. The majority of the poems also take place in Los Angeles, a particularly fertile ground for Queen's focus on the nexus of fame, power, and male entitlement. Celebrities are both ubiquitous and often engaged in decidedly mundane activities. While fame affords certain opportunities, as seen in Queen's descriptions of the line of young women waiting to meet Tupac ("yes there were that many chicks in there all lined up"), the poems are most remarkable for showing how such encounters feel familiar, even if we ourselves have had little to no experience with actual famous men. For example, in a poem that begins, "I never met Donald Trump but I sure have been grabbed by the you-know-what," the narrator notes how "when you're a star they let you do it and actually when you're a man in general."

The collection's focus is not uniformly negative, however. There are oases, moments of unabashed joy and sisterly solidarity, moments where celebrity and fashion become the tools of talking back to the forces of institutionalized sexism and racism and daily harassment. For example, The Rock's "trash talk & independent eyebrow" (in his WWE incarnation) motivate the narrator to "boss up & get through dealing with the monumental bullshit women in general & women in the military have to slog through." There are also moments of straight-up humor, as when the narrator recounts how one of her favorite childhood outfits "consisted of pink corduroy stirrup pants with a matching checked shirt & low-slung purple belt with a silver buckle plus black Karate shoes & Oh God there are pictures."

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Ultimately, what allows this book to fully earn its titular status as “a narrative” is the slow build of the narrator’s understanding of her younger self and sense of how to gain agency in a world that is constantly trying to strip it away from her. Just over halfway through the book the narrator recounts how “Edward Norton just stared he was on his cell phone going up the escalator at Port Authority I was going down & when we met in the middle he said you are gorgeous I was 36 & so NYC in a black turtleneck and salt and pepper curls & just starting not to be sad or afraid.” This process—constantly challenged and tested—achieves its full realization at the end of the book. In the penultimate poem, the narrator, back in Los Angeles for her fortieth birthday celebrations, states, “40 is so cool 40 is seeing & knowing not seeing & wanting 40 holds beauty as the accumulation of bliss and survival.”

Part repository of feminine memory, part call out of the forces of institutionalized and internalized gender, race, and class discrimination, *I’m So Fine* is also a coming of age narrative that culminates in the narrator’s refusal to cede power to any of the men she has encountered, famous or otherwise. In the closing section of the book, titled “Any Other Name: A Postscript,” Queen writes, “Some men can’t stop telling me who I am or what exactly is so incredible about me.” While this fact remains, unavoidable, irrevocable, it does not overpower. “I cut off my hair,” Queen relates, “because I wanted to begin again with something on my body no man has ever touched.” Perhaps such a cleansing can only ever be temporary, but there is nonetheless a sense of something gained. Despite the anger and the pain, the closing lines of the book vibrate with possibility:

The first time I drew a rose I couldn’t stop layering in new petals. My small right hand filled the flimsy newsprint with red Crayola spirals, the lines unbroken, the endless making as sweet as being out of the order other people like to think you are born to.

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Specter of Oppression

Gabrielle Bellot

HER BODY AND OTHER PARTIES

Carmen Maria Machado

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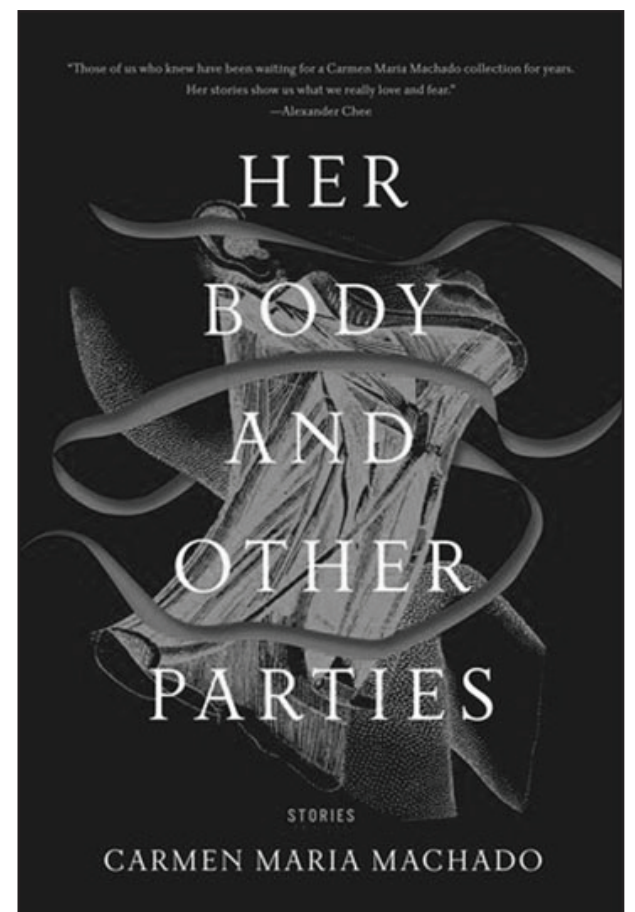
Near the end of “The Resident,” a long, disquieting, existential horror story in Carmen Maria Machado’s debut collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*, the narrator begins to speculate as to what other readers think of her extraordinary tale. “[P]erhaps you’re thinking,” she muses, “that I’m a cliché—a weak, trembling thing with a silly root of adolescent trauma, straight out of a gothic novel.” Her allusion to being a character out of a gothic novel—even if she later disputes this self-reading—is apt, and many of the collection’s stories similarly display, if faintly and not without authorial awareness, the tropes of figures in both low and high gothic fiction. Yet her protagonists—almost uniformly women, and as often as not queer women—are tormented less by the spooks of horror texts than by something perhaps scarier still: abuse. Machado’s women are haunted by harassment, be it from men, unstoppable apocalyptic threats from the world at large, or even, simply, from themselves, whereby their own choices or experiences traumatically haunt them. Her women rarely get to rest; they are haunted, hunted. Yet for all this, they also find and fight for moments of love and sexual fulfillment. Machado’s stories achieve this atmosphere of constant, internal and external, existential, and sometimes preternatural harassment by virtue of their invocation of the gothic as a narrative mode, yet her stories avoid the tropes—often sexist—so frequent in the best-known gothic fiction, partly by virtue of her stories’ great corporeality and sensuality. In these stories, harassment becomes haunting, and haunting, harassment.

Her Body and Other Parties makes its focus on women’s bodies clear from its title. In a January 2018 interview with Stephanie Cross for *The Guardian*, Machado argued that women’s “bodies have been oppressed for all of human history.” The idea of women’s bodies as sites of oppression is echoed in the title, as “and other parties” appears to equate women—parties—with their bodies, creating a nod—even before one gets to the first story—to the idea of women’s bodies being objectified. The dispassionate detachment of

referring to people as “parties” pointedly reinforces a trope of so much male harassment, whereby women’s personhood flattens and falls away to men objectifying us; we seem simply bodies, parties, things. Yet the other, more positive sense of “party” also holds. For all the gothic traumas women and their bodies undergo in Machado’s stories, they also often experience moments of ecstasy. The body can become a party—a designation bereft of any individuality—but it can also be a festival site, a place where we invite others for frenzied, even orgasmic, interpersonal joy.

And this cornucopia of rapturous sex scenes—as opposed to solely featuring sex scenes representing failure or sadness—is intentional, Machado revealed in the *Guardian* interview. The “secret” to her compelling, credible sex scenes, she said, was “[l]etting some sex scenes be pleasurable, letting bodies be real.” Her women are not solely victims of their pain, not solely maps leading nowhere but to old and new isles of trauma; instead, their body-maps are complicated. Their bodies are allowed, and willingly seek out, pleasure, despite the pains. That “parties” is pluralized, unlike bodies, might additionally imply that Machado’s characters have multiple selves, multiple layers to their identities. To be an individual is, as Whitman famously noted, to also contain multitudes; to be a woman, Machado suggests, is to exist in a space of multiplicity, whereby the body can be many things all at once.

In many of the stories, women—and, sometimes, also men—frequently find themselves under quiet siege. And—as with the dangers that we learn, through male harassment and abuse, can never be underestimated—Machado’s women profess the importance of being cognizant of this siege, this threat. “Scoffing is the first mistake a woman can make,” the protagonist of the first story, “The Husband Stitch,” says early on. In that story, women possess a ribbon somewhere on their body that holds them together; to allow a woman the privacy to keep her ribbon tied—which, for most of the story, simply represents an undefined secret—becomes a recurring tension in the story. The protagonist contends with and fends off multiple men who reach for her ribbon—most notably her husband and son, neither of whom fully understand why she must keep something of herself from them, and both of whom chill towards her when they realize there is a part of her they cannot fully explore, understand, and, perhaps for the husband, conquer. “I feel like I know so many parts of you,” her then-fiancé says before their marriage, and, after



marriage, he thinks he “will know all of them;” his phrasing suggests that he believes he has a right to fully know, to conquer the unconquered parts of, her body. Soon after they are married, he “startles” her by touching her bow as if he means to undo it against her will, despite her saying “Please don’t,” and she acknowledges that “[h]e could have done it then, untied the bow, if he’d chosen to. But he releases me and rolls on his back as if nothing has happened.” At this point, quietly horrified by her own husband, she realizes that he wishes to have power over her—and yet does not seem to comprehend, as his rolling on his back as if all is fine shows, how abusive his actions are. Another siege appears in “Real Women Have Bodies,” wherein a strange, contagious affliction with no known cause forces women to fade and spectralize like ghosts; they begin to inhabit inanimate objects, living in them, and people are frequently afraid of them on sight. A similarly inexplicable lethal “virus” with no apparent hope of a vaccine wreaks havoc on America in “Inventory.”

In all of these stories, harassment—physical, environmental—becomes a theme, subtly or saliently. In “Husband Stitch,” men try to force a woman to reveal a secret, not allowing her to have something to herself, which results, finally, in her

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death when untying the ribbon around her neck makes her head fall, decapitated, to the floor. In “Real Women Have Bodies,” women become at once an object of great visibility through their fading and also nearly invisible, a contradictory state of being that echoes what it feels like to be objectified and harassed, then ignored—as if invisible—when one tries to speak up. “Inventory,” which is structured as a list of vignettes of sexual encounters as the virus spreads, describes a male National Guard officer who tries to rape the narrator at knifepoint; she only escapes by telling him “I couldn’t have sex with him lying down as I was” with the knife at her throat, and, when they stand, she “shoved him into the bookcase, knocking him unconscious.” She deposits his body into the sea and tells him, now holding the knife, to keep walking into the water “and if he even looked back, I would end him.” In gothic fiction, death is often ubiquitous, and the quiet morbidity of Machado’s tales reflects this: the ribbon is a barrier between life and death, and the fading women resemble ghosts.

Machado’s fiction is cloaked in a thickening, gothic dread—perhaps most notable in the atmosphere of “The Resident,” even the title of which suggests something haunting: the idea of someone, or something, residing, perhaps where and when it should not, like a revenant. At the end of “The Resident,” Machado’s narrator even goes so far as to assure readers that she is not, as aforementioned, a character “straight out of a gothic novel.” In “Eight Bites,” a presence haunts the narrator post-bariatric surgery—an unnerving, “body-shaped, [p]repubescent, boneless” thing that moves on its own, resembling both her daughter and “the clothes stuffed with straw on Halloween,” a kind of grotesque phantom limb of herself, which represents what the narrator has cut away by giving up some of her stomach to the voluntary surgical procedure her “suddenly svelte” sisters encourage. Stitched to the supernatural horror motif is a more quotidian concern: women’s bodily ideals. The eldritch presence appears because the narrator gives into societal pressures to be skinnier, a gendered social edict reinforced by her mother’s commitment to eating only “eight bites” of any meal. Ironically,

her sisters imply that this cast-off, tormenting presence is her “joy,” “inner beauty,” and “former shame;” by denying her body its hunger, the narrator has lost the things she wanted to preserve. Yet in the end, the narrator has an end-of-life vision of the presence “loving me when I did not love her” and becoming “immortal;” her tormenter has become Christlike, teaching her, in her final moments, that love will live on even if she failed to love herself. Harassment, for all its horrors, becomes an ironic pedagogy.

Machado’s phantoms are by turns playful and petrifying, recalling, in some stories, the darkly ludic marvelous realism of Karen Russell’s *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* (2013) and Kelly Link’s *Magic for Beginners* (2005), while other stories evoke the briefly glimpsed existential frights of Edith Wharton or M. R. James’s ghost tales, and the blurring of the fantastical with erotica inevitably evokes Angela

Machado’s women are not solely victims of their pain, not solely maps leading nowhere but to old and new isles of trauma.

Carter, particularly *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). To be sure, it would be a mistake to characterize *Her Body and Other Parties* as purely a collection of ghost stories. Yet they seem to conform to Wharton’s dictum of what a ghost story should be, which Wharton expressed in the preface to her little-known collection of ghost tales. “What the ghost really needs,” she argued, “is not echoing passages and hidden doors behind tapestry, but only silence and continuity.” In other words, a phantom need not be a stereotypical, blood-drenched spectacle to terrify; the right *atmosphere*—unnatural silence, things continuing to happen when they should not—can horrify just as well, if not better.

This idea of silence as itself as a chilling, supernatural-seeming visitation is alluded to in Wharton’s “The Lady Maid’s Bell,” in which the protagonist, listening for the mysterious ringing of a bell he had heard before, ceases to hear it, and

notes that “the silence began to be more dreadful to me than the most mysterious sounds.” Some stories of Wharton’s—like “The Pomegranate Seed,” in which a man inexplicably receives letters from his late wife inviting him to come see her—focus less on hauntings than on the human experience of *being* haunted, which is very in line with the atmospherics of Machado’s collection, in which how women deal with horror is more important than the horrors—often relegated to the background—themselves. In James’s stories, the supernatural often only appears momentarily in an “infinitesimal flash” as James described the brief vision of a phantom in his first ghost tale, “Canon Alberic’s Scrapbook” (1895), and without great embellishment. “There was a kind of intelligence in [its eyes],” James writes, “intelligence beyond that of a beast, below that of a man.” This blurred, not-quite-human identity echoes the similarly ephemeral vision of the seeming-supernatural in Machado’s “The Resident”: “Something pushed through the underbrush, coming toward me. Not a girl, not an animal, but something in between.”

Still, Machado is less concerned with the “real” spirits that populate Wharton’s or James’s fiction than with the existential dread that manifests in and through women’s bodies. And Machado, too, does not always make terrors from the past bad things in the present. In “The Resident,” after all, the narrator is even convinced that her traumatic encounter with herself—in a sense—was ultimately a “gift,” a hard-won trophy in a contest she did not know, at the time, she was even involved in. In “Eight Bites,” the self the narrator gives up ultimately becomes the greater version of her, a vision of an immortal, self-loving woman. Even as the narrator knows she will soon perish, she comes to acknowledge, in a kind of prepared self-eulogy, that she has finally learnt that what she lost was greater than who she has become through a non-medically-necessary procedure—and her story becomes a paean to not making the same mistake she did of abandoning her desires so (literally) surgically.

These subtle gothic atmospherics engender a deep, shadowing dread, the kind of dread that echoes the oppressive environment harassment creates for many women. Harassment, so banal for many harassers, frequently creates a claustrophobic space for the harassed, whereby you begin to feel as if every stranger, male strangers in particular, may bring danger to your world. From its title to its final story, *Her Body and Other Parties* centers the experience of women and their bodies, and what this partly means is that the specter of oppression—real ghost or no—always hovers in the background of her collection, until it chillingly enters the foreground—and yet sometimes, the appearance of this harrowing specter becomes an ironic bridge to attempting, through seeking pleasure and the empowering proximity of other bodies, to overcome that seemingly unending pain, if but for a moment.

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While writing this review, I read the news of a Nigerian-American graduate student at Yale who fell asleep in a common room while writing a paper and awoke to a white student calling the police on her. When she protested this assault on her freedom of movement, the police told her, “You’re not being harassed.” This incident and its normalization by authorities resonates with Lesley Nneka Arimah’s presentation of Nigerian-American lives in her stunning 2017 debut collection of short stories *What It Means When a Man Falls From the Sky*. These characters navigate between familial expectations of success and the scrutiny that comes with being a minority in America. In Arimah’s story “Second Chances,” the consequences of something so harmless as falling asleep have reverberating consequences. When Uche oversleeps and forgets to pick up her little sister at the airport, the airport police call, thinking her sister has been abandoned. Her mother is furious. “I had violated her cardinal immigrant rule. Live quietly and above the law.” Uche’s sleep and her mother’s anxiety result in devastating consequences on the entire family. In this story like many others in the collection Arimah points to the personal suffering that comes out of a larger climate of injustice.

Arimah herself was born in the UK and grew up between Nigeria and the United States, and this experience of living between two places, two norms, is an integral part of her story telling. Arimah’s stories, which have garnered honours such as the African Commonwealth Short Story Prize, and an O. Henry Award, not only move physically between two continents but also range from kitchen-sink realism to the wildly speculative. In this she joins a cohort of recent Nigerian diaspora authors like Nnedi Okorafor, Helen Oyeyemi, or Chikodili Emelumadu (also shortlisted for the Caine Prize for African Literature in 2017) who build on a tradition of literature that pushes beyond conventional realism to mythologize about the postcolonial world. Arimah borrows vampires from the African literary canon and the popular imagination, where consumption becomes a metaphor for exploitation. In pioneering Nigerian author Amos Tutuola’s novel *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952), for example, a “half-bodied” baby born of his mother’s thumb eats everything in its path, even resurrecting after his parents burn him to ashes, and in Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o surreal novel *Devil on the Cross* (1982), a contestant in a competition for “Modern Thieves and Robbers” proposes to build a pipeline of blood from Kenya to Europe and America. In Arimah’s collection, she focuses on family relationships and individual choices, but, like Ngugi, she also links personal harassment to wider structural forms of exploitation and consumption.

The title story of the collection imagines a future world where mathematics explains everything. Mathematicians map out the body and human emotions in code, theorizing a formula they believe to be infinite “like the universe.” They use this formula for flight, “a man levitating like a monk...before shooting into the air,” as well as for healing. Mathematicians like Nneoma and her lover Kioni see grief in human beings, and, like

good vampires drawing out venom, they “eat” the pain, draw it into themselves “like poison from a wound.” Arimah’s use of mathematics to plot out the universe reminds me of Nnedi Okorafor’s science fiction novel *Binti* (2015) where the plucky heroine Binti “trees,” using equations to create technology and make peace between warring peoples. But, in Arimah’s story, there is something of the hubris of Icarus in the mathematicians’ assumption that the formula is infallible, the belief that the “Formula was God, misunderstood for so long. They believed that it was only a matter of time before someone discovered the formula to create life, rather than to just manipulate it.” It turns out, however, that the formula might be finite, “beginning to unravel around the edges,” and that human attempts to make themselves into gods are doomed to failure. A man falls from the sky, and healers begin to consume themselves.

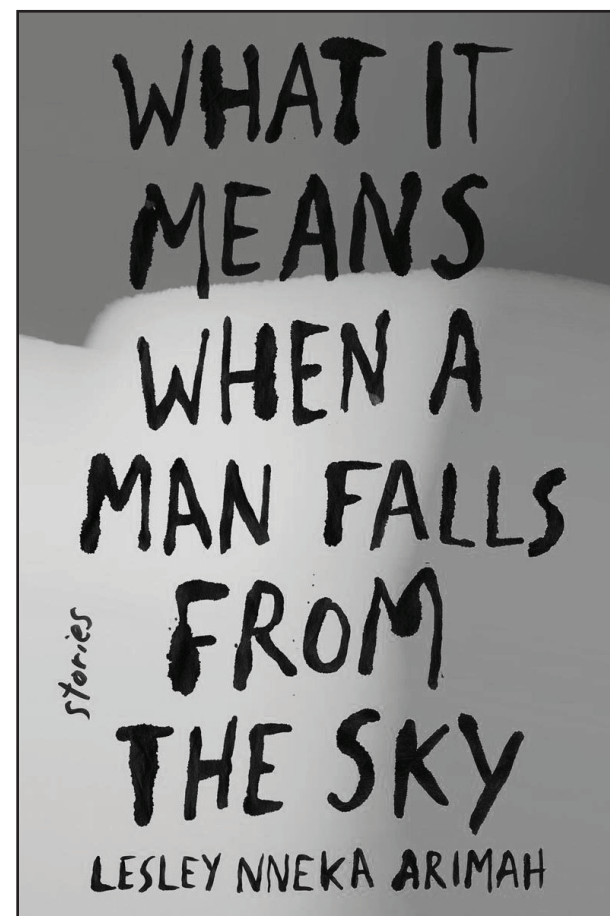
In naming the entire collection *What It Means When a Man Falls From the Sky*, Arimah invokes a war between humanity and their gods, as well as the fallibility of colonial and patriarchal systems. There is tension between a nurturing consumption of the sort practiced by the grief workers who absorb other people’s pain, and an exploitive consumption that takes and gives nothing, practiced by the settlers in

Arimah’s stories range from kitchen-sink realism to the wildly speculative.

Nneoma’s land. Some African speculative fiction, like Djiboutian novelist Abdourahman Waberi’s *In the United States of Africa* (2006/2009) or the Kenyan TV series *Usoni*, reverses the power dynamic of the contemporary world: after Europe and America are destroyed by natural disasters, refugees from former colonial powers clamour to get in to Africa. The world system Arimah imagines, however, does not reverse but instead continues colonialism. Although the mathematicians believe they have found the secret to the universe, this secret does not yield a utopia. History repeats itself in new locations. Pre-existing structures of abuse are exacerbated in the extremes of the future. When most of America and Europe is lost to the ocean, powerful northern nations move south with their war machines. The French commit genocide in Senegal so that they can settle their land, the Americans decimate Mexico, while the British create an apartheid state in the territory of Biafra-Britannia.

Arimah takes the unsuccessful bid for Igbo independence from Nigeria remembered by the traumatized father in “War Stories” and imagines here that Biafra finally succeeds in gaining independence in 2030, only for the British re-colonize the space. Biafrans are once again “third class” citizens who cannot live alongside the new white “refugees” or other privileged first-class citizens like Nneoma, who uses her healing power only for those who can pay. Like Ngugi’s imagined pipeline of blood, the privileged suck away the life and land of those they once despised to resurrect themselves. Although one of the bright parts of the story is the power that women wield and their seeming freedom to love each other, the stories set closer to our own time point to systems not only of political and racial but also gendered dominance, where patriarchy is inextricably linked to other forms of injustice.

Arimah imagines the mythic beginning of male entitlement in her creation story “What is a Volcano,” when the powerful but careless goddess



River thinks of her small antagonist Ant as a “fun diversion” but does not realize that “you do not take small things from small men.” Ant takes revenge on her for flooding his ant colonies by kidnapping her children and engaging in a larger pattern of abuse against women he marries and then abandons, killing their children to cover his trail. Ant realizes that “one could ask almost anything of a girl,” and he asks a girl to carry his secret, with a “certainty that she must never, ever tell.” Girls pass secrets of abuse down through the generations: “when she is no longer a girl, she will give it to another girl, and this sorrow stone will be stolen away in uniform pockets and hidden under the pillows of marriage beds, secreted in diaries, guarded closely by the types of girls who, above all else, obey.” This story becomes a mythic explanation for what girls suffer in the rest of the stories as well.

In the ironically titled story “The Future Looks Good,” which begins the collection, a wealthy man seduces his lover with cars and spending money, but he views these gifts as payment for ownership. “Godwin, so unused to hearing no it hits him like a wave of acid, dissolving the superficial decency of a person who always gets his way.” In “Buchi’s Girls,” Dickson, Buchi’s brother-in-law is “the sort of man people pretended to like because they couldn’t afford not to.” He and his wife exploit their recently widowed sister-in-law expecting her to “cook, clean, manage the house help,” while refusing to pay for her children’s education. Buchi discovers that “the consequences of disrespecting a man like Dickson are always disproportionate to the sin. A grenade in retaliation for a slap. A world undone for a girl’s mistake.” In the final story of the collection, “Redemption,” a church youth leader preys on young girls and, like Ant in “What is a Volcano?” tells them to keep his secret. No one believes the narrator’s story about him, until the rebellious housegirl next door violently exposes the man. In each of these stories, women revolt, quietly or otherwise, against men who assume god-like authority and find redemption in their love for each other.

Yet if there is a critique here of the patriarchal system, Arimah does not excuse women from participating in and sometimes even creating abusive systems. Indeed, in the one story that does away with men all together, “Who Will Greet You at

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Home,” first published by *The New Yorker* and later shortlisted for the 2017 Caine Prize, the character “Mama,” landlady, employer and exploiter of the young mother Ogechi, sucks away at her joy and empathy. Here women need no man to procreate but instead make their babies out of materials they can find around them and then seek the blessing of their mother to bring their babies to life. If the mathematicians of the title story nurture people by taking in their pain, Mama does the opposite, performing the blessing in exchange for preying on their emotions. Ogechi reflects on “all that empathy and joy and who knows what else Mama took from her and the other desperate girls who visited her back room” in exchange for animating their children. Indeed, a child born of this kind of blessing, Ogechi discovers, will only continue the vampirism of her godmother. Like the half-bodied baby of Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, her baby is never satiated. The story “Windfalls” is the prosaic but no less horrifying parallel to Ogechi’s story. A mother pimps out her teenage daughter to help fund their peripatetic lifestyle, staging injuries as precedent for lawsuits. When the teenage Amara becomes pregnant, she begins to resist her mother’s abusive lifestyle. Like Ogechi, she dreams of giving her child the nurture and home she never had.

And while abuse and harassment is rampant in these stories, the sort of tenderness Amara feels for her unborn child lingers in other tales of families as well. If the stories deal with vampires, symbolic and real, who consume the “sorrow, tears, and blood” of those dependent on them, they also deal with the nurture of parents, the love between sisters, cousins, and friends, and the fire in the bellies of girls who refuse to let their souls be crushed. In the midst of suffering, there is also fierce love. In “Wild” the narrator holds close her humiliated and abandoned cousin and her illegitimate child. In “War Stories,” the narrator recounts how her mother fights her father’s traumatic stories of war with happy stories of her own childhood: “I listened with every atom and she animated the story with everything she had.” In “Light,” which won Arimah the 2015 regional short story Commonwealth Prize, a father raises his daughter alone while her mother travels to America to earn a degree. He nurtures her noisy laughter and spares her all the proprieties her mother tries to teach her over Skype. In his daughter, he sees a “streak of fire. He only knows that it keeps the wolves of the world at bay and he must never let it die out.”

“Light” and other stories show how difficult it is to keep that fire alive. In the final story, “Redemption,” the narrator realizes that “Girls with

fire in their bellies will be forced to drink from a well of correction till the flames die out.” Yet while the stories in Arimah’s collection are rarely optimistic, they are not without hope. Stubborn mud girls born of ash and sorrow re-emerge in story after story. Individually, these women have only their own fire to keep them going, but together they take inspiration from each other, even if it is only to spit on the path of their oppressor. In the mythic story “What is a Volcano,” the wandering Bereaver eternally seeks the lost children of her sister River. Finally, when the “god-child cries” and her mother’s body responds, a volcano forms. In the midst of despair, the fire still rumbles beneath the ground.

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Seek to Trouble

Sarah Deer

VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS WOMEN: LITERATURE, ACTIVISM, RESISTANCE

Allison Hargreaves

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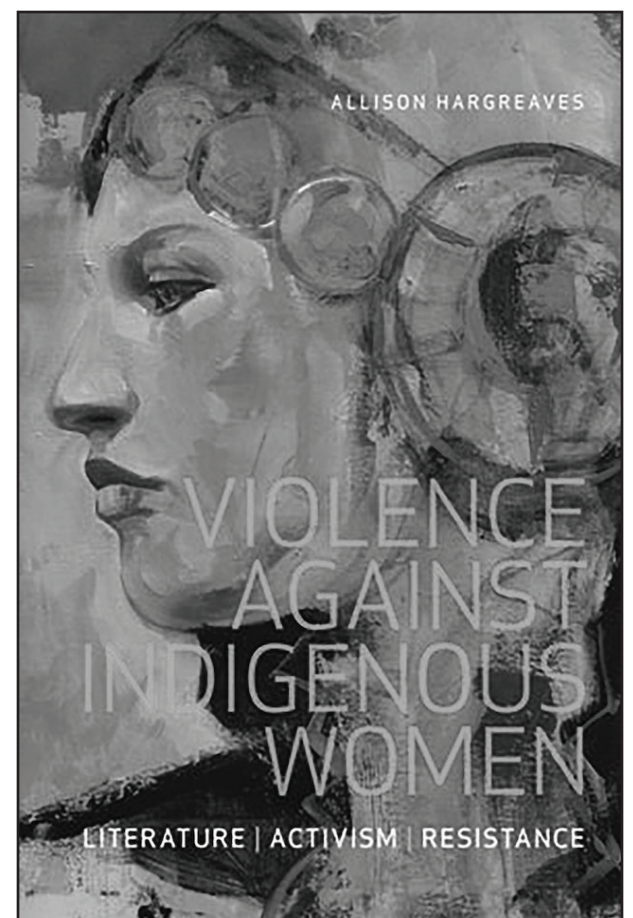
“I seek to trouble” is a common refrain in Allison Hargreaves’s monograph about violence against Indigenous women in Canada. And “trouble” she does—providing hard hitting but thoughtful critiques of several common, contemporary activist efforts to address the tragedy of widespread violence in the lives of Indigenous women. A self-described “settler-scholar,” Hargreaves analyzes how some mainstream efforts to address the disproportionate rates of violence experienced by Indigenous women can actually be detrimental to the cause. She repeatedly problematizes many well-known activist efforts by consulting and analyzing the perspectives of Indigenous women as expressed in film, art, and literature. As such, this volume is highly recommended for Indigenous studies and gender studies scholars. Moreover, it offers significant insight for activist communities of any stripe, who will benefit from Hargreaves’ interrogation of common activist tactics.

In the Introduction, Hargreaves establishes a bold proposition—that the most widely-recognized strategies for addressing violence against Indigenous women in Canada are deeply problematic and potentially counter-productive. Seeking to understand how activism “can bring about the social and political transformation required to end violence,” she begins by questioning the mainstream “awareness” campaigns that have come to be the hallmarks of anti-violence activism in Canada. As a literature scholar, Hargreaves proposes that the creative works of Indigenous women offer insights into the limitations of these

mainstream projects. Thus, the book is structured by juxtaposing a strategy of anti-violence activism with a corresponding perspective as voiced through film, poetry, or fiction produced by Indigenous women. Hargreaves uses Indigenous film and literature as the window to critique and question the value of the liberal nation-state’s most well-known efforts to acknowledge and resolve the historical oppression and colonial violence experienced by Indigenous women today.

In Chapter One, Hargreaves critiques the British Columbia Missing Women Commission of Inquiry (MWCI), a 2010-2012 government effort to solicit testimonies from families, activists, service providers, and law enforcement agencies about missing and murdered Indigenous women, with a narrow focus on Vancouver’s notorious Downtown Eastside, a common site of disappearance. Hargreaves critiques the MWCI efforts through the lens of Metis filmmaker Christine Welch’s 2006 documentary *Finding Dawn*. Because the official MWCI activities were artificially conscribed and constrained as to scope and depth, many observers, including Hargreaves, saw the efforts as being a “missed opportunity to link the specific circumstances...to broader colonial patterns of systemic displacement and violence.” *Finding Dawn*, on the other hand, offers an expansive perspective on the nature of missing and murdered Indigenous women. The film tells the story of three missing indigenous women by exploring themes of “hope, resilience, and transformation.” By critiquing MWCI through the lens of an Indigenous filmmaker, Hargreaves is able to see a much larger and expansive project, one that focuses on the interrelationships between Indigenous women and the violent history of settler colonialism.

One of the most important aspects of *Violence Against Indigenous Women* is that Hargreaves’s critiques transcend the Canadian experience and become applicable in other settler nation-states. Several subjects explored by Hargreaves have striking parallels in the American context. Beginning in Chapter Two, she describes and critiques the



Canadian *Stolen Sisters* report from Amnesty International issued in 2004. Amnesty International released a similar report in the United States (*Maze of Injustice*) in 2007, which explored the failure of the United States to adequately respond to sexual violence in Indian country. (In the interests of full disclosure, it should be noted that this reviewer collaborated with Amnesty International to research and write *Maze of Injustice*.) Hargreaves’s criticism of the *Stolen Sisters* human rights report is cogent and much of her insight can be applied to *Maze*. For example, both reports assume “the legitimacy of the colonial nation-state to protect Indigenous women’s rights” and utilize the stories of individual Indigenous women in a “certain narrative mould” that requires the primacy of victimhood to achieve reform. While not categorically condemning

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Amnesty International's approach, Hargreaves encourages the reader to contrast the international human rights framework with "Indigenous methods of remembrance and of storytelling" deployed by the Native Women's Association of Canada. She then explores Marilyn Dumont's commemorative anti-violence poem "Helen Betty Osbourne." Understanding poetry as a "powerful and subversive tool of activism," Hargreaves explores how Dumont's poem stands as an intervention to the "life narratives" doctrine of human rights work, because it provides a much larger context of settler colonialism that transcends individual narratives. Notably, this chapter challenges the widely-assumed connection between "the telling of a story and the hopeful outcome of social change." Hargreaves is cautious when it comes to symbolic "awareness" campaigns because they cannot guarantee lasting social change.

Chapter Three focuses on the consumption of Indigenous women's stories and narratives by non-Indigenous people. Here, Hargreaves offers a critique of the way in which white feminists often seek to expand their knowledge of racism and colonialism by having women of colour testify as to their experiences. Challenging what she sees as the "culture of redress," she explores the limits of "storytelling" that mainstream anti-violence feminist activists use. In particular, she is concerned about the trend to invite a woman of color to a training event to share their personal knowledge, which Hargreaves argues is centering white staff needs while requiring Indigenous women to create a spectacle of their own experiences. She also explores the defensiveness with which some white feminists have responded to such narratives in an attempt to deflect and deny the experiences of Indigenous women and women of color. Another United States corollary in Chapter Three is found in Hargreaves's telling of Nellie's domestic violence shelter in Toronto, where controversy about racism erupted in the early 1990s. When Indigenous women and women of color began to raise significant concerns about discriminatory treatment at Nellie's, they were met with hostility and defensiveness by the founding board member, leading to a highly publicized conflict in which women of color found

their testimonies to be diminished and marginalized. During the same time, in the United States, the South Dakota Coalition Against Domestic Violence found itself mired in a similar controversy. In 1990, at a zoning meeting for a new Native-run battered women's shelter, racist commentary from the State's Attorney about a proposed Native women's shelter was met with strong reaction by Native women, who then insisted that the Coalition to begin addressing systemic racism as a key component of violence. Many of the white Coalition members objected to the inclusion of race in their efforts to end domestic violence. As a result, these white members left the Coalition and created the independent South Dakota Network to End Domestic Violence, where presumably they would not need to address the uncomfortable issues of white supremacy, racism, and colonial violence. Today, the two organizations continue operating separately. This is a prime example of how some white feminists deflect and deny the experiences of Indigenous women.

In Chapter Three, Hargreaves echoes a theme from previous chapters as to the tendency of non-Indigenous listeners to individualize conflict rather than acknowledge the ongoing struggles of

This volume is highly recommended for Indigenous studies and gender studies scholars.

colonialism in Canada and their own complicity in it. As part of this critique, she also frames formal settler-state apologies to Indigenous people as intrinsically problematic, particularly when accompanied by a sense of closure and reconciliation. Hargreaves closes the chapter on consumption of Indigenous narratives by considering the reception of a 2006 autobiographical memoir by Dene writer Morningstar Mercredi (*Morningstar: A Warrior's Spirit*). While Mercredi's memoir can be understood as inherently political, many non-Indigenous readers and reviewers tended to depoliticize the book, framing it as an individual story of abuse committed against a single person. Indeed, non-Indigenous

reviewers of the book tended to focus on themes of healing and forgiveness rather than acknowledging the ongoing systems of colonial violence presented in the text. Invoking important work by Rachel Flowers, Hargreaves concludes that righteous anger of Indigenous women is minimized and deflected by the structures of the settler-state. The reception of Mercredi's memoir troubles Hargreaves, for it seemed to recast a resistive text as an "individualized spectacle" which allows the reader to avoid uncomfortable truths about their own participation in Canada's ongoing colonial violence.

In Chapter Four, Hargreaves tackles the difficult question of "awareness" campaigns as developed by the mainstream anti-violence movement. She takes issue with the repetitive use of certain "emblematic figures" in which particular Native women's stories are elevated above others. By scrutinizing the way in which

the life stories of Indigenous murder victims Helen Betty Osbourne and Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash are both repeated and exploited for the purposes of commemorative anti-violence work, she offers a critique of the tendency to characterize some women's lives as more "worthy" than others, given rhetoric about youth, innocence, and dignity. She makes a compelling argument that using particular stories to the exclusion of others allows for the listener/reader to minimize the wide-spread harm done to ALL Indigenous women victims, and even feeds into the belief that these stories are in the past—not relevant to contemporary life.

The conclusion of *Violence Against Native Women* focuses on an eleven-minute revenge-drama film, *A Red Girl's Reasoning* (2012) created by Blackfoot-Sami filmmaker Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers. The film offers a counterpoint to the activist methods critiqued throughout the book. *A Red Girl's Reasoning* features a Native character, Delia, who works as a contract killer for Indigenous women "when the justice system fails them." Hargreaves is particularly interested in the way in which the film frames the culpability of predatory men in the context of ongoing colonial violence. Delia's character does not rely on non-Indigenous solidarity as part of her efforts to achieve justice for Native women. Instead, the film relies on the metaphor of vigilante action to strengthen the conception of Indigenous women building justice within and among one another—whether the settler-colonial state offers an avenue for reconciliation at all.

By the end of the book, Hargreaves has exposed some difficult truths about the anti-violence movement in Canada and its struggles to adequately address the high rates of violence experienced by Indigenous women. The insights she draws from the artistic endeavors of Indigenous women not only provide a lens through which to critique the settler-state's anti-violence work, but also offers theoretical frameworks that could be used when considering efforts to address other injustices to Indigenous people through the lens of artistic endeavors. Although the text can be unnecessarily dense at times, this book offers a fresh critique of colonial power, using the vision of wisdom gleaned through Indigenous women's artistic contributions.

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Sexual Ethics

Victoria Reynolds Farmer

UNWANTED ADVANCES: SEXUAL PARANOIA COMES TO CAMPUS

Laura Kipnis

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On January 13, 2014, Northwestern University issued a statement banning consensual sexual relationships between faculty and students, citing “the potential for a conflict of interest, favoritism, and exploitation” stemming from “positions of unequal power” occupied by the individuals involved. This policy—namely its central assertion that “positions of unequal power” automatically negate the consent of adults of legal age—inspired Laura Kipnis, a film studies professor there, to write the essay “Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe,” published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in February of the following year. Kipnis is no stranger to analyzing how the enforcement of gender norms relates to lived experience; her past books have covered topics such as socially constructed gender as it affects both men and women, pornography and eroticism, and the ups and downs of romance in a postfeminist age. Her *Chronicle* essay argues that her University’s “Great Prohibition,” as she calls the ban cited above, is characteristic of a “feminism hijacked by melodrama” that infantilizes college women by assuming that nuanced sexual decisions are so difficult for them to navigate that they need paternalistic administrative edicts to reduce the likelihood of consent altogether.

Unwanted Advances exists to expand the ideas introduced in that essay—indeed, the statement “If this is feminism, it’s feminism hijacked by melodrama” appears on its cover in block letters, declaring the book’s immediate opposition to such faux-feminism. It also responds to the Title IX complaints brought against Kipnis as a result of the essay’s publication, the existence of which she uses as proof of students’ increased fragility. Like its title, the book’s central argument has two layers that work in concert with one another. First, it analyzes the recent increase in sexual assault allegations on college campuses, concluding that the issue is not actually that more assaults have occurred recently, but instead that the problem is due to a reliance on flawed and inflated assault statistics that work to reinforce this era’s “dominant [sexual] narrative, [which], on the nation’s campuses, anyway, is all about *hazard*.” Second, it explores the legal, political, and social ramifications of the collegiate culture that results when “a set of incomprehensible directives, issued by a branch of the federal government, are being wielded in wildly idiosyncratic ways, according to the whims and biases of individual Title IX officers operating with no public scrutiny or accountability.” If the reader expects to finish the book with a distinct sense of whether the accused or the complainant in each case profiled is telling the truth, she is likely to be disappointed. Instead, Kipnis’s book offers a personal and engaging—if at times frustratingly subjective—look at how those individual cases might be acting as a microcosm of disturbing legal trends that suggest a reductive view of female agency on campus.

The greatest strength of the book’s first three chapters, which aim to indict current Title IX proceedings as biased mechanisms of interdepartmental feuds, is also their most limiting weakness. Their incredibly personal point of view

makes them read more like a personal narrative than the academic exploration of a systemic social problem a reader familiar with the reasons for Kipnis’s notoriety might expect. Thus, these chapters are endearing and disappointing by turns. They center around two cases. The first charges explored are those filed against Peter Ludlow, who resigned from an endowed Philosophy position at Northwestern after two students (an undergraduate in a different department and a graduate student in his own) claimed he sexually assaulted them. The second is against Kipnis herself. In these chapters, Ludlow and Kipnis operate as affable protagonists who are ultimately well-meaning people wronged by a capricious and unfair system for trying to engage with their students in emotionally complex ways (Ludlow physically and Kipnis intellectually). Ultimately, the specifics of the cases are less important to the book’s overall goals than how Kipnis frames herself—both as a Title IX defendant and as someone in opposition to her students’ overall views of the nature of sexual acts and relationships.

Paratextual and linguistic features of the book reinforce the anti-organizational ethos of its primary narrative thrust; while there are occasional clarifying footnotes, there are few in-text citations, and the bibliographic entries that do appear at the book’s end do so under the heading “Selected Sources.” The trial documents, text messages, and e-mail exchanges that Ludlow allows Kipnis to use are quoted from but not cited, and the book’s reader has no way of accessing them to check the validity of the arguments they are used to support. In this way,

Feminism can be found if we stop pretending regulation will solve the problem of assault, and instead, focus on solving the underlying conditions that contribute to circumstances in which assault becomes more likely.

the reader, like Kipnis, Ludlow, and the other Title IX defendants mentioned in *Unwanted Advances*, occupies a liminal space between improvable hearsay and verifiable fact—s/he has only partial information and must take the author of the narrative at her word. Perhaps that liminality is the entire point, meant to underline the idea that our current conception of the way truth is publically proven on campuses across the country is irrevocably broken. If so, it succeeds less in convincing the reader logically than it does in creating a frustration that acts as an empathetic link between reader and protagonists.

Chapter Five is the book’s most compelling for two reasons. First, it attempts to formulate a solution to the twin problems of student infantilization and administrative overreach. Second, it speaks profoundly (and perhaps a bit prophetically, given its composition timeline) to our current moment of post-#metoo reckoning and the resulting cultural conversation regarding who bears the emotional and legal responsibility for unsatisfying sexual encounters, and why. The chapter’s subtitle is “A Plea for Grownup Feminism,” and it argues that such a feminism can be found if we stop pretending regulation will solve the problem of assault, and instead, focus on solving the underlying conditions that contribute to circumstances in which assault becomes more likely. The underlying condition on which Kipnis spends the most time in the chapter is increased alcohol consumption. Her frank discussion of how college drinking culture rooted in a flawed vision of gender equality (that women can or should be able to drink at the same level as men

“If this is feminism, it’s feminism hijacked by melodrama.”

Unwanted Advances

Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus

Laura Kipnis

without regard for physical difference) contributes to a rise in the kind of “sexual ambivalence” at the center of most Title IX cases is perhaps the book’s bravest assertion. It is also the one that goes the most against the current feminist orthodoxy that she maintains robs women of active agency by letting legalities do their decision-making for them. She argues that criminalizing all sex under the influence of alcohol (which is an overwhelming percentage of college sex) allows the University-based legal system to sidestep a deeper and more important question regarding the college student’s transition to a fully socially and emotionally developed member of society: “How do we know what we want in sexual situations?...It’s a question that, for women, requires introspection. Some self-knowledge is a useful starting point, a quality that unfortunately, most college kids are only beginning to acquire.”

This argument is not altogether unconvincing. The small number of sources she does quote from do seem to bear out an active attempt by colleges to avoid directly engaging the ways alcohol influences campus sex; however, her argument that the generation of students differs from her generation because they see sex primarily in terms of threat and danger suffers from an omission of a discussion of the enthusiastic consent movement (also called the Yes Means Yes movement, as in the title of Jessica Valenti and Jaclyn Friedman’s 2008 essay collection). This movement prioritizes the presence of positive consent—that is, a vocal affirmation from a participant in a sexual act frames the act differently and better than a vocal refusal. This omission is detrimental to Kipnis’s overall argument not only because it deprives the book of a more nuanced look at the sexual politics of a younger generation, but also because the resources of the enthusiastic consent movement have a direct relationship to the evolving Title IX policies and procedures that are the subject of Kipnis’s general complaint. For example, the Affirmative Consent Project sells Consent Kits that include the following: an affirmative consent contract to be signed by participants in a given sexual act, condoms, and breath mints (ACP founder Allison Burke Marano says these are included to encourage people to “take a minute, take a breath” and discuss consent before having sex). The kit also includes information taken from the ACP’s Campus Policy Report, which “is a

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cross referenced list of state colleges and the types of Affirmative Consent Policy they've adopted, or not adopted, in their campus safety guides. The report tracks more than 450 colleges, and provides links to each school's Title IX policy." The fact that this group includes Title IX information in its kits speaks to the relationship between the policy and the affirmative consent movement, thus Kipnis's argument would have been enriched by at least mentioning the movement itself, as it is contributing to the evolving sexual self-knowledge of college students. Additionally, though the framing of consent as affirmative seems less hazard-focused on the surface, the inclusion of consent contracts certainly suggests at least a partial link to the fear-filled, hyper-legalized ethos Kipnis is against.

The question of how to know what we want sexually is the book's most prescient in terms of our current post-#metoo moment, in which feminist battle lines are being drawn in discussions about sexual responsibility. Take, for example, the ongoing debates around the Babe.com exposé in which actor Aziz Ansari was accused of assaulting a woman he was on a date with. The woman involved maintains that Ansari misread "clear non-verbal cues" that telegraphed lack of consent. Far more interesting than the stark divide between liberal commentators who expressed disappointment in Ansari's apparent lack of awareness of the situation despite his social position as a male feminist ally (Nehmat Kaur for

The Wire's website) and conservative ones who wondered why the accuser did not exercise agency and leave (see Caitlin Flanagan in *The Atlantic*) are more moderate takes like Megan Garber's (also in *The Atlantic*). Garber injects some complexity into her discussion of what revocation of consent means: "No" is, in theory, available to anyone, at any time; in practice, however, it is a word of last resort—a word of legality. A word of transaction. A word in which progress collides with reticence: Everyone should be able to say it, but no one really wants to." Still, all three responses ultimately lose sight of the human interaction involved in favor of turning it into a lesson for the rest of us.

Because of the potential for such third-party disagreement to impede progress in dealing with the very real effects of assault on the people directly affected by it, it's time we thought more of the inverse of the second-wave cry to make the personal political. The hyper-legalized landscape that Kipnis rightly criticizes should prompt us to remember anew that the political is personal—that our political actions, and especially our sexual ones, primarily happen with other human beings, and thus cannot be anything other than human: complex, physically and emotionally messy, and unfit to be dealt with merely in legal ways. But because our society's only publicly accepted sexual ethic is legal consent, we will never make the political more personal unless we start to prioritize other kinds of sexual ethics.

Washington Post columnist Elizabeth Bruenig (also writing on the Ansari allegations) asserts that we have lost something by treating sex as just another interaction, and by thinking that we can solve sexual problems or disagreements the way we solve nonsexual ones. "In all domains of life," Bruenig argues, "but especially where it comes to sex, we must insist that people consider one another's interior lives, feelings, personhood, dignity." Such considerations must happen on a person-to-person, interaction-to-interaction level unsuited to broad legislative means. Unless we as a society recognize the necessity of these complex considerations, and teach our college students to perform them themselves with the acknowledgment of others' dignity foremost in their minds, we will never progress beyond the limits that purely legal discourse places on our personal interactions.

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A Timely Voice

Mat Wenzel

CONFLICT IS NOT ABUSE: OVERSTATING HARM, COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE DUTY OF REPAIR

Sarah Schulman

Arsenal Pulp Press
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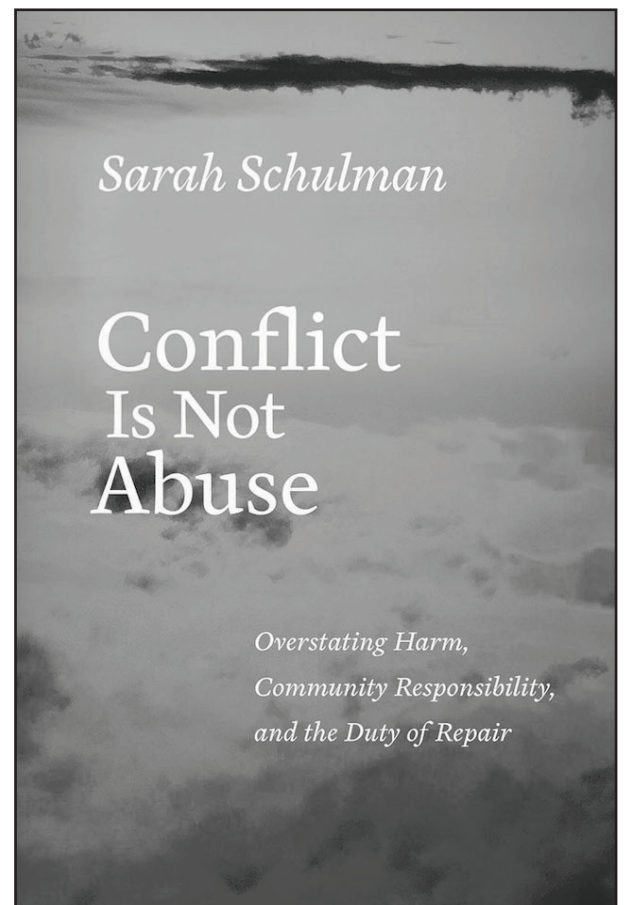
Sarah Schulman's *Conflict Is Not Abuse* has been praised for its timeliness by many, and it was first published in 2016. It was written before Pulse, before the 2016 election, before Charlottesville, before #metoo, before Parkland. That it remains timely isn't just commentary on the consistency of abuse, violence, harassment, and conflict in this country, but also to the validity of Schulman's argument: Conflict is not the same as abuse, that "at many levels of human interaction there is the opportunity to conflate discomfort with threat...to escalate rather than resolve." Her argument calls readers to engage with conflict through face-to-face communication, personal responsibility (self

critique), and with community accountability—to move away from familial "us" vs "them" interaction and move toward friendship.

If her thesis seems naïve and/or unscholarly, it is intentional. Schulman certainly finds her "undisciplined" approach an asset. Naïveté, too, is an asset under Jack Halberstam's theory of the "subversive intellectual" in his book *Queer Art of Failure* (2011). The subversive intellectual, according to Halberstam, privileges conversation over mastery and embraces naïveté. For them, "The naive or the ignorant may in fact lead to a different set of knowledge practices." Setting aside the systems of knowledge and power that have never worked may be seen as naive, but they offer new hope. This Queer hope is also in conversation with José Esteban Muñoz's *Queer Utopia*—a "forward dawning," not a dream but a way of engaging in futurity. "Utopia," Muñoz explains in *Cruising Utopia* (2009), "is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema." Schulman brings this forth and calls for a community of friends that are able both to discuss, in person, difficult and complex conflicts, and also to reshape their own thinking about themselves.

"Wouldn't it be amazing," she writes, "if we could turn to our friends and say, I felt anxious and so I exaggerated, and instead of them using it as a reason to ignore us, disparage us, or punish us, whenever we say I feel anxious and so I exaggerated, our friends would put their arms around us, hug us and kiss us and thank us and praise us for telling the truth?" This model for friendship isn't just on a one-on-one basis but also for change in larger communities, including whole nations. Her focus is on how to prevent real abuse from happening, how to prevent cruelty, revenge, and, ultimately, genocide.

Schulman's Queer subversion of expectations, genre, and "Theory" in the delivery of her argument make this book a vital read or



reread. Schulman asserts her explicitly Queer perspective early in the first chapter: "I use queer examples, I cite queer authors, I am rooted in queer points of view, I address and investigate concerns and trends in queer discourse." She cites Audre Lorde as a forerunner in her own Queer subversion, and Lorde's "biomythographical" book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) as a way of considering her own non-fiction book that weaves together "observations, feelings, contexts, histories, visions, memories, and dreams." Her Queerly "undisciplined" writing creates a new kind of book—one not meant to be fully agreed with or rejected, but one that creates space for a conversation, an opportunity for de-escalation

Wenzel continued on next page

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instead of a continuation of the current culture of overreaction—a kind of theatrical play the reader watches as it “reveals human nuance.” These nuances make the book an essential read.

Schulman’s opening scene enacts her argument on the micro-level of friendship and flirtation. She gives a personal example of being at a table in a semi-professional setting in which a woman she finds attractive is using sexualized language. The woman uses the word G-spot. For some it could be a problem, but at this point things are very ambiguous between the two women. Some sort of desire on the part of one or both parties may be at play. Self-awareness of that desire could be ambiguous. This comfort with ambiguity in these kinds of situations may be complicated by individuals who have been victims of sexual abuse. Queerness also complicates the stakes involved in this situation. Schulman, on the one hand, writes, “Queer people have a sexualized vocabulary in professional spaces that many straight people might find inappropriate.” For many Queer people, the stakes involved in using this kind of language in the workplace could be low. But on the other hand she asserts that the stakes can be very high: “seeing and imagining queer desire in another has and can cost us our lives.” This inflation, she writes, is “central to the queer experience.” While these statements make broad generalities about Queer people and Queer experience, it does remind us that there is a type of overreaction that is particular to Queer bodies, especially Queer bodies of color: an “overkill” that is discussed at length in Calvin Warren’s recent and related GLQ article, “Onticide.” Even if unreturned desire doesn’t end up in violence, it is often construed as harassment. Scenes like the one Schulman described can be escalated without discussion between the parties involved and be brought to Human Resources which may lead to professional discipline for harassment when there was only desire.

But Schulman makes a very important statement: “Being desired is not the same as being harassed.” Just because someone may have revealed a level of desire, (they are flirting, they “hit on me”) “we do not have to punish or shun the person” who has expressed this desire. “Uneven desire is not a crime,” she writes, “but we have to talk.” This

open, face-to-face conversation is the ground on which de-escalation can happen, and the heart of Schulman’s possible solution for the escalation surrounding us. And there is a lot to talk about, especially considering, as Schulman does, the racist, sexist, and homophobic structures at play now and historically. And these influences often work against the privilege of having complex conversations. “In a world based on blame,” she writes, “women have to be clear to be clean, unfortunately, so avoiding blame means avoiding complexity, contradictions, and ambivalences.” If a woman doesn’t clearly say “no,” or is uncertain or changes her mind about mutual desire, the patriarchal systems that are in place can shut down the conversation, the case, and any hope for resolution or justice. At the same time, she argues, the desired individuals need to engage in their own self-critique: “refuting male Supremacy does not mean pretending that we all understand ourselves completely.”

White privilege and power are also working against these conversations. Schulman reminds us that a justification by white men for racial violence

Schulman is serious about using conversation not just in interpersonal relationships but also in creating national and global change.

was that black men desired white women. Some parties of the conversation may be completely blind to the reality of the other, such as the phenomenon of “Driving While Black”—an issue Schulman discusses in Chapter 5. This blindness doesn’t just extend to the reality of the other but can prohibit from understanding one’s own experience—one’s privilege, for example, of being white in a world where “Driving While White” just isn’t a concept—and therefore prevent one of the key elements of these conversations: self-critique.

Schulman develops what these conversations could look like, and what happens when they don’t take place, in the subsequent chapters of the book—first through the larger communities of domestic abuse and abuse advocacy, and intersections of these communities with Queer individuals in homophobic families, then through the US police force and intersections of poverty, race, gender, and through communities in and around HIV criminalization, mental illness, marriage equality, and finally the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. This is no small task. Schulman is serious about using conversation not just in interpersonal relationships but also in creating national and global change. So she is dedicated to playing it out in larger and larger communities, keeping it nuanced through to the end. The unfolding of the play, of course, comes with Schulman’s characteristic openness. She uses examples of contentions she has had in her own life, times she lost friends, etc. Her openness and strong convictions will certainly be read by some to be too much. Her sarcastic generalizations will have some readers chuckling and others rolling their eyes—like when she calls the internalization of guilt “a national pastime.”

And the large scope of her work obviously leaves room for a great deal of discussion—a fact she seems well aware of even inviting more conversation and study. The last chapter, “Watching Genocide Unfold in Real Time,” invites new ways of conversation and new ideas about what is worth discussing by subverting the reader’s expectations for what is to be found in a scholarly work. She uses a journal format, a kind of social media log, excerpting tweets and Facebook posts with small commentary between longer digital conversations. These posts, copied and pasted onto the page, recreate her journey of understanding the progression of violence in Gaza, and how the Israeli government has overstated harm and become a violent abuser. Not only does this queer academic genres, but emphasizes that technologies can also enhance solidarity and the reach of conversations beyond physical location.

Schulman’s idea of solidarity is not blind acceptance without accountability. She asserts that this solidarity must also be self-critical. “If we are in groups that cannot be self-critical and therefore punish difference, we will join in on the shunning, excluding, and cold-shouldering. But if we are in groups that promote acceptance, intervene to create communication, and recognize that people have contradictions, we will be able to face and deal with the true nature of Conflict: that it is participatory.”

These types of conversations need to happen within a community of friendship—beyond the family structure or national borders. She writes, “We have an enormous challenge now that the community of queer friends is facing profound transformation by queer pro-family ideology, an ideology that constructs the idea that people are bound together as a central legal and social structure of ‘protection’ against outsiders, who are a ‘threat.’” Recently, in a *Harper’s Magazine* essay, Fenton Johnson has called for the same thing—models of Queer friendship like “the LGBT community established in the darkest years of AIDS, before any conception of treatment, before state-sanctioned marriage.” He continues, “I seek communities grounded not in marriage but in friendship.” Emily K. Hobson, too, calls for a look at the history of Queer friendship as a model for the present in her thoroughly researched book *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (2016). Schulman dedicates chapter seven, “Queer Families, Compensatory Motherhood, and the Political Culture of Escalation,” to this rethinking of family.

In our examinations of discourse of conflict and harassment, we would do well to carefully consider Queerer models, like Schulman’s. Her Queer examples shed light on harassment that is often seen as only straight men against straight white women. And, her work, along with other Queer writers and scholars, offers us a view that more than complicates an “us” vs “them” tradition. It also calls for more writing that is “undisciplined,” timely, trans-genre, and Queer.

Mat Wenzel is an English PhD student at Florida State University studying Creative Writing and Queer Studies. He received an MFA from Ashland University, Ohio, and an MEd from Lesley University, Massachusetts. His work has been published in Puerto Del Sol, and other literary magazines and is forthcoming in Southeast Review and Feminist Theory.



Online Culture Wars

Sarah Whitcomb Laiola

**KILL ALL NORMIES:
ONLINE CULTURE WARS FROM
4CHAN AND TUMBLR TO
TRUMP AND THE ALT-RIGHT**

Angela Nagle

Zero Books

www.zero-books.net/books/kill-all-normies

136 Pages; Print, \$16.95

Since Barack Obama's 2008 election, the influence that both the mainstream social web and digital networked media hold over political elections has become undeniable. In 2008, we saw the rise of a "millennial president," as Obama demonstrated his social media savvy, using Facebook, Twitter, and similar sites to connect with his voters. Obama's own use of these, young, "hip" technologies was bolstered by the vitality of his iconic "HOPE" poster that, originally designed by street artist Shepard Fairey, was soon distributed all over the web as an internet meme. As with any meme, the poster was parodied with a wide range of subjects: from figures like the Pope and Hillary Clinton promoting HOPE, to *Star Wars*'s R2D2 promoting NEW HOPE, *Batman*'s The Joker (as portrayed by Heath Ledger) promoting JOKE, and the web's own Trollface promoting TROLL. In 2016, we saw much of this play out again, as a presidential candidate rose to prominence through the shared power of his own social media savvy, and a viral media army of internet memes. This time, however, the drama played out in distortion. Where Obama impressed with his engaging, humanizing use of Facebook, Donald Trump shocked with his crass, inflammatory use of Twitter. Where the 2008-9's social web was earnestly peppered with the HOPE poster, the 2016 web was awash with Pepe the Frog memes that featured the character transformed from his original role as an "everyman" into a white nationalist decked out with Nazi insignia and unapologetically promoting inflammatory, racist, homophobic, xenophobic, and misogynist ideas.

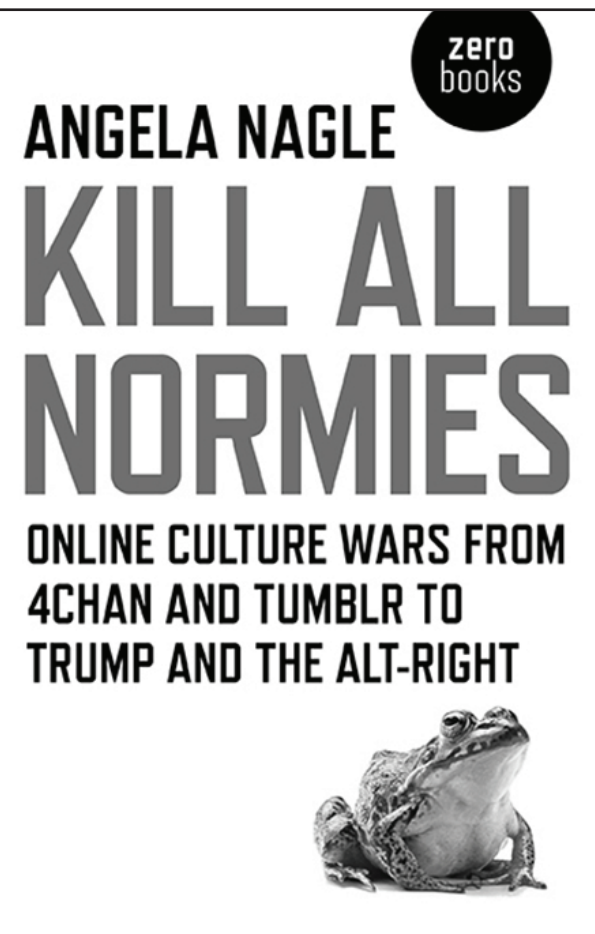
So what happened? "How did we get from those earnest hopeful days broadcast across the media mainstream to where we are now?"

Having spent eight years closely watching rightist forums on the web, and in 2015 earning a PhD from Dublin City College following the successful completion of her thesis, "An Investigation into Contemporary Online Anti-Feminist Movements," Angela Nagle is acutely well-positioned to answer this question. In *Kill All Normies*, she aims to do just this by "map[ping] the online cultural wars that formed the political sensibilities of a generation," while providing "understand[ing] and [keeping] an account of the online battles that may otherwise be forgotten but have nevertheless shaped culture and ideas in a profound way." Finally, in what may be its most ambitious goal, the text "place[s] contemporary culture wars in some historical context and attempts

to untangle the real from the performance, the material from the abstract and the ironic from the faux-ironic." This account ultimately offers a short, critical history of the ways the overt misogyny, unchecked harassment, and anti-feminism of the rightist social web—illustrated in the text through the anonymous forum, 4chan—became normalized and entered mainstream culture as the alt-right. As Nagle chronicles, the alt-right will rise in direct opposition to the sensitivity and identity politics of the leftist, mainstream social web—illustrated in the text through the microblogging network, Tumblr.

As it provides a critical history of the online culture wars from 2008 to 2016, *Kill All Normies* makes an important contribution to two growing bodies of work: that which attempts to understand the 2016 election, and that which focuses on the rising toxicity, harassment, and anti-feminism of online and other media spheres. To the first area, Nagle's text provides a necessary divergence from a preoccupation with the role that back-end algorithms and data-manipulation played in the election, as it focuses instead on the role played by user-generated content and user communities at the web's front-end. Through this focus, her text offers an important alternative to the idea that the entire 2016 election was the result of web-based media running rampant, uncontrolled, and beyond its people. To the second area, Nagle's history of the anti-feminism and misogyny of the alt-right provides a useful complement to texts like Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett's *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (2017), and the recent special issue of *Communication, Culture, and Critique* on "Media and the Extreme Right" (eds. Laurie Ouellette and Sarah Banet-Weiser).

Before turning to a discussion of the text's content, it is worth noting that by Nagle's own admission, she is writing from a left-leaning position of feminism. This position, however, does not release her text from being critical of the leftist web and the role that these communities have played in the recent online culture wars. Her criticism of the leftist web has earned the text quite a bit of critique from popular left-leaning publications, with some reviewers going so far as to claim that the book makes the left look worse than the alt-right, and, as Jordy Cummings says, that it is "not a book about the alt-right. It is an anti-left polemic." I do not read her text as one that is anti-left as much as one that is critical of the ways identity politics, call-out culture, virtue signaling, trigger warnings, and similar practices have come to dominate contemporary, mainstream liberalism. Further, Nagle does not shy away from describing the ways these practices can be (and often are) deployed as if to grant the user a free-pass for activity that is effectively harassment and bullying, or in her words to effect "simultaneous victimhood and callousness." One of the most salient examples of this that she offers are the following responses by Twitter user "Brienne



of Snarth" to a two-year-old's death at a Disney resort when he was dragged into the lagoon by an alligator: "'I'm so finished with this white privilege lately that I'm not even sad about a 2yo being eaten by a gator because his daddy ignored signs,' and 'You really think there are no fucking consequences to anything. A goddam sign told you to stay out of the water in Florida. FUCK A SIGN.'"

These critiques, combined with her notes early in the text that many of the 4chan users who make up the alt-right, imagined themselves victimized by what they saw as an increasingly anti-male, anti-white, anti-heterosexual, and anti-cisgender mainstream, are likely responsible for readings of her text as "anti-left." However, though she certainly calls out these left-leaning spaces for fostering their own cultures of intolerance, she is careful not to let this critique fall into a logic that would posit the alt-right's rise as somehow inevitable or the fault of the left. Indeed, the bulk of her critique of the leftist web is confined to one chapter. The remaining six chapters detail the cyber-bullying, harassment, and off-line violence perpetuated by members of rightist web cultures that, despite claims to victimization by the left, is clearly motivated by overt misogyny, anti-feminism, racism, and white supremacy. The sheer weight of this content, combined with the degree of harassment and violence perpetuated by the rightist web—Brienne of Snarth's tweets, though certainly callous and insensitive to the death of a two-year-old, are in no way equivalent to Elliot Rodger's shooting spree against women at the University of California, Santa Barbara which was both planned through rightist 4chan forums and continues to be hailed as heroic there—makes it clear that this is in no way an apologist or celebratory account of the alt-right, but a critical, cultural history of their rise to mainstream prominence.

Opening with an introductory reflection on the web's tonal shifts from 2008 to 2016, *Kill All Normies*' first half provides historical perspectives to ground the rise of the alt-right. The first of these chapters offers a recent history of what Nagle calls the "digital counterrevolution" of the 2010s: A leaderless, networked movement rooted in the deplorable cultures and shock aesthetics of the anonymous forum 4chan by users who found themselves both left out of and (in their words)

Laiola continued on next page

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victimized by the mainstream liberalism of the web. This leaderless counterrevolution sought to bring down these mainstream web spaces and provide a corrective to the politics and cultures of linguistic inclusivity, intersectional identity politics, trigger warnings and other features of “liberal snowflake” user-cultures. One of the most illustrative examples of this counterrevolution’s politics and tactics can be found in the 2014 Gamergate Controversy. Ostensibly about maintaining ethics in games journalism, the Gamergate Controversy was a months-long “geeks vs. feminists” battle wherein (primarily) male gamer communities organized on 4chan to launch a series of cyberattacks on female gamers, game critics, and game designers for the “intolerable crime” of publicly examining and/or criticizing—however benignly or accurately—the treatment of women in games and gaming cultures. Major figures who found themselves under attack include Anita Sarkessian, Zoe Quinn, Brianna Wu, Felicia Day, and Jennifer Allway, and the attacks ranged from posting explicitly violent comments online, to falsifying and circulating nude or pornographic images, to doxxing, a practice of exposing someone’s personal details to user forums to enable mass harassment that can, and in many cases did, go offline. Besides highlighting both the geeks vs. feminists theme and tactics of cyber-harassment that will characterize the rightist culture wars, this event is notable within the history of the alt-right’s rise for the ways it brought “gamers, rightist chan culture, anti-feminism, and the online far right closer to mainstream discussion” while “politiciz[ing] a broad group of young people, mostly boys, who organized tactics around the idea of fighting back against the culture war being waged by the cultural left.”

“Geeks vs. feminists” is a theme that runs throughout the book, accompanied by a second thematic thread that Nagle introduces in the second chapter: transgression. This chapter provides a history of transgression’s cultural shift from a socially

liberal virtue to a conservative one. As she notes, one-time alt-right champion Milo Yiannopoulos’ “favorite description of the unifying ‘troll-y’ sensibility across the new wave of the online right is ‘transgressive.’” Yiannopoulos appears throughout the text, joining a cadre of transgressive, rightist figures that Nagle identifies as the “alt-light” in order to differentiate them from the alt-right groups of 4chan. In chapter three, Nagle analyzes the ways these “alt-light” figures, who include Steve Bannon, Mike Cernovich, Richard Spencer, and The Rebel Media’s Gavin McInnes and Lauren Southern, adopted the Gramscian position that “political change follows cultural and social change” to create the web-based, counter-cultural media sphere that was highly influential in garnering Trump’s success. In the last of these historically focused chapters,

This text does not shy away from exposing the deep-seated, even normatively accepted positions of Western culture that have contributed to alt-right’s rise to the mainstream.

Nagle connects today’s conservative culture wars to those of the 1990s, highlighting the ways the alt-right’s embrace of transgression that toes—and very often crosses—the line into violence and harassment radically differentiates it from the conservatism of the 1990s exemplified by figures like Pat Buchanan.

Over the book’s final three chapters, Nagle looks to contemporary web cultures as they relate to and diverge from the transgressive, conservative counter-culture of the alt-right. It is in the first of these chapters that Nagle turns her attention to Tumblr and the leftist web to offer a critical view of a platform that typifies the alt-right’s “enemy online culture.” As noted, she brings particular focus to the effects of “call-out culture” and the “currency of virtue” that characterize these social media spaces, noting both the ways these behaviors have normalized a different kind of intolerance to that of the alt-right, and the ways these cultures have resulted in the left turning on itself for not being sensitive, intersectional, and progressive enough. Complementing this chapter’s deep dive into left-leaning spaces like Tumblr is the following chapter’s deep dive into the “manosphere”: chan and “geek” cultures’ response to Tumblr’s liberalism, and a term that “has been used to describe everything from progressive men’s issues activists dealing with real neglect of male health, suicide and unequal social services to the nastier corners of the Internet, filled with involuntary celibacy-obsessed, hate-filled, resentment-fueled cultures of quite chilling levels of misogyny.” Though one of the most important chapters for understanding such toxic forms of masculinity, this is one of the harder chapters of the text to read given its increasingly unsavory subject matter. The chapter includes unflinching discussions of Reddit’s “Red Pill” subforum, Roosh V’s supposedly satirical piece arguing for the legalization of rape, vigilante doxxing sites like Paul Elam’s register-her.com, and Elliot Rodger’s videos detailing his day of retribution against women that would culminate in his shooting at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 2014.

In the final chapter of the text, Nagle looks away from the counter-cultural spaces of 4chan and Tumblr to focus on the titular normies. “Normie” is a term originating in chan cultures as a derogatory, disdainful way to describe normal, “agreeable, mainstream members of society who have no knowingly abhorrent political views or unsavory hobbies.” In this chapter, Nagle reconciles the ways the alt-right was able to grow out of a community that “had long been characterized by an extreme subcultural snobbishness toward the masses and

mass culture” and yet now holds up the rhetoric of Trump as “the populist president” who represents ordinary folks left behind by mainstream liberalism. Her analysis of this apparent disconnect will culminate in a call echoed in her conclusion for a wider cultural recalibration, that turns away from both valorizing the transgressive and the counter-cultural as such, and from celebrating the web as the ideal space for fostering the transgressive and counter-cultural. As she notes, our cultural delight in and valorization of such values has resulted in an ugliness “beyond anything we could have possibly imagined.” Though she does not propose a way out of this mess, she does close with the “hope that the online world can contain rather than further enable the festering undergrowth of dehumanizing reactionary online politics now edging closer to the mainstream but unthinkable in the public arena just a few short years ago.” While this specter of hope is certainly comforting, such containment of the online world does not seem likely until policy makers begin seriously challenging and holding accountable those who make and design our online technologies—a moment that, if Mark Zuckerberg’s April 2018 hearing is any indication, is not likely to describe US policy any time soon. What might bring this moment closer, however, is moving the critical work being done in digital humanities and science and technology studies from academic spheres into greater mainstream circulation to influence the making of both policy and technology. This work includes texts like Safiya Noble’s *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018), Cathy O’Neil’s *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016), and Stanford University Press’s forthcoming collection *Your Computer Is On Fire*.

Despite the weakly grounded hope of its conclusion, *Kill All Normies* is necessary critical reading for understanding the alt-right, its rise to prominence, and the cultures of the social web. Nagle’s style and the book’s overall brevity mark it as an accessible read within this growing field of cultural studies work. That said, the text is limited by its almost exclusive focus on the gendered politics of the alt-right. That is, the text acknowledges but does not critically engage with the alt-right’s racism, nativism, anti-immigrant, homophobic, and transphobic stances, so the reader who is interested in these aspects of the alt-right would need to look beyond Nagle’s book. As well, the reader who is completely unfamiliar with web spaces like 4chan and Tumblr, or the phenomenon of trolling might find the text challenging and even inaccessible at times, despite Nagle’s glosses and introductions. Overall, though, the text deserves a wide readership, for its exquisitely detailed history and analysis of social media’s counter-cultures that does not shy away from exposing the deep-seated, even normatively accepted positions of Western culture that have contributed to alt-right’s rise to the mainstream.

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A Brutal Reality

Christopher Higgs

A SHADOW MAP: AN ANTHOLOGY OF SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Joanna C. Valente, ed.

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Nothing could have prepared me for the overwhelming intensity of the writing in this powerful collection of over fifty diverse writers on the topic of surviving sexual assault. In an interview with *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, editor Joanna C. Valente, a New York based poet whose work often grapples with issues surrounding violence and its aftermath, described the project as, “[S]ome of the most important work I’ll ever do. Being able to create a safe space, a space where survivors could share their stories and fight stigma and raise awareness not only on what sexual assault is, but how the aftermath stays with you forever, was paramount to me as a survivor myself.” Indeed, from the opening cluster of three previously published poems by Lynn Melnick—with the lines, “At night I hallucinate the grunting discord / which leapt from a human body as he destroyed mine”—which sets the tone by thrusting the horror of rape directly in the reader’s face, to the final piece by Corinne Manning where she writes, “To heal is to bring into words what once existed as non-verbal,” *A Shadow Map* never flinches, never backs away, never shies away, never defers. Women get raped repeatedly. Men, too. Trans and nonbinary people, too. And children, so many children raped and left to deal with the aftermath.



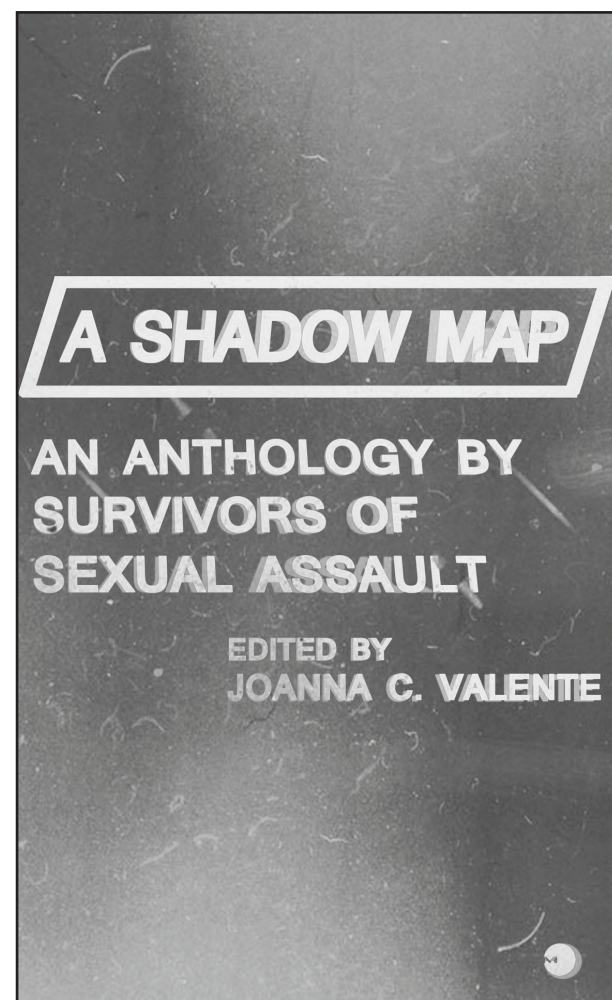
Incest, pedophilia, torture. It’s brutal and gruesome and unspeakable, but yet, as Manning says, we must bring the unspeakable into the speakable if healing can ever occur. Because these are real people with real stories and our job as the reader must include listening to and believing them.

That said, the overall reading experience for me recalled that memorably uncomfortable scene in Stanley Kubrick’s film adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange* (1972) where the main character is subjected to an aversion therapy tactic called the Ludovico Technique, whereby he’s forced to watch violent images for extended periods of time while his eyes are held open with specula. In fact, I found myself reading a page or two and then hastily putting it down and grasping for something else, anything else, to occupy my attention in order to try and flush the images from my mind, to escape the reality the text presented me. After reading the opening pages I quite honestly did not want to continue reading this book. I did not want to inhabit this world, did not want to confront these true stories of sexual violence and trauma, and instead I wanted to retreat into the privilege of my own experience devoid of sexual harassment and assault. I wanted to look away and pretend these things don’t happen or if they did I wanted to ignore them and presume they happen

***A Shadow Map never
flinches, never backs away,
never shies away, never defers.***

only rarely and thankfully not to me. And I write this not as a prude, for so easily I confront these issues in fictive narratives: I routinely teach brutal books by Kathy Acker and William Burroughs and Pierre Guyotat, disturbing films by Takashi Miike and Gaspar Noe and other torture porn auteurs, without a blink of the eye. However, the nonfictive quality of the material in this collection demands a different type of engagement. Again I feel compelled to say these writers are real people, not functions of an imagination. Real people who suffered real trauma. For me, this realization made it nearly intolerable to read. I have a four year old son, and all I could think about while reading this text was that although I had somehow made it to my forties without suffering in the ways these writers suffered, he could so easily become a victim. And obviously each of these writers is someone’s child. Even trying to compose this response to the book right now, I’m having a hard time holding back tears.

I share my personal thoughts with you to demonstrate the supremely personal power of this text. I could’ve easily taken a more academic approach where I brought into the conversation theorists like Nicola Gavey, whose important and influential theory of “the cultural scaffolding of rape” presents a compelling argument for the systemic problems engendered by dominant culture’s insistence on centering male heterosexuality at the forefront of discourse. Or the theorist Cathy Caruth whose foundational work in Trauma Studies gives us a method for discussing and understanding the impact of trauma on the individual and society. To name but two. However, in retrospect, I decided a more personal reflection better served the primary text, because it hit me at the level of pathos so much stronger than on the level of logos. Or to borrow a line from Shannon Elizabeth Hardwick’s entry in *A Shadow Map*, “No matter how much I try to intellectually rationalize the situation, my body will always react in a certain way.” Indeed, even after reading almost four hundred pages of this material I



still have a hard time understanding rationally how such cruelty and horror exists in the world and how some people are so resilient to live through it and persist.

Speaking of persisting, a few of the standout pieces for me include Corinne Manning’s absolutely masterful lyric essay “Primary Sources,” where she weaves the story of a comic book superhero into her own harrowing experience by exploring the possibilities of dissociation as a superpower. C. A. Conrad’s twenty-nine line poem “For My Boyfriend Earth Who Was Raped And Murdered,” which deftly travels across sorrow and heartache through revenge fantasy and finally settles on love. Jason Phoebe Rusche’s short hybrid piece “Manhood,” which upends easily categorical identity markers to present the trauma of a non-binary survivor. Claudia Cortese’s powerfully succinct four line poem “Girlhood,” which offers an ugly but supremely relatable confession of joy at the news of her rapist’s death.

While I found the text extraordinarily difficult to read, nonetheless I believe it’s also absolutely necessary. For if these stories became more ubiquitous, perhaps as a culture we could collectively rise up against the perpetuation of this behavior. To reach that level of impact, however, it would require more readers like myself who cannot relate to these horrific events to resist looking away, resist putting the book down, resist escaping and ignoring any longer. We all must confront the horror of sexual assault, we all must become more accountable, and this collection does an outstanding job carving out the necessary space for the beginning of this much needed conversation.

Christopher Higgs lives in Los Angeles where he teaches narrative theory and technique at California State University Northridge. He’s the author of three books, two chapbooks, and numerous shorter works for venues such as AGNI, Denver Quarterly, and The Paris Review Daily.