

Sexism and Sexual Assault in Literary Communities

EDITORS' STATEMENT

Beginning in August of last year, the Alternative Literature (or Alt-Lit) communities in Brooklyn and the Bay Area were convulsed first by provocative instances of sexist and misogynistic writing from prominent male figures and then, more alarmingly, by allegations of sexual assault from women writers in these communities. Amid a much broader public reckoning in the US with a culture of rampant harassment and assault extending from university campuses to the halls of the Senate, harrowing reports of serial sexual assault in late summer identified San Francisco writer Steven Trull (aka Janey Smith) and Brooklyn editor Stephen Tully Dierks as alleged perpetrators.

At first these reports of assault circulated on the same blogs and social-media sites where the identity of Alt-Lit had coalesced as a movement of young, tech-savvy writers trading on the idioms and the mechanics of internet culture. The allegations against Smith were galvanized by the publication of his book *We're Fucked*, coauthored with Alt-Lit writer “peterbd,” which in turn had issued from a document that Smith published a year earlier on the blog *HTMLGiant*, “Fuck List: A List of Writers I Want to Fuck (Or Get Fucked By),” widely denounced for its misogynistic rhetoric. In August, a group of writers in the Bay Area published an anonymous letter that included Smith in a short list of assault perpetrators in the area’s various writing communities, and soon after, the Toronto-based writer Sophia Katz published an account of her alleged assault at the hands of Dierks while she spent a weekend networking in Brooklyn’s Alt-Lit scene. Then the allegations began receiving wide national attention, as high-circulation outlets from *Gawker* to *New York Magazine* covered the story online. Sexual assault in the bicoastal epicenters of American innovative writing commanded such attention because, as one commentator after another remarked, the radical and forward-thinking

culture of progressive, hip young literary artists, living in the hippest and most progressive places in America, had proven itself to be all too typical in its antagonism toward women's rights.

The media buzz around the Alt-Lit story obscured its real importance as symptomatic of much broader patterns of alleged assault and activist response within much more varied communities of writers. The August 2014 letter that named Steven Trull as a perpetrator, known as the "Pastebin document" for the media hosting site on which it first appeared, spoke on behalf of "some cis and trans women and non-binary poets" from across the various institutional and non-institutional "creative and intellectual spaces" of the Bay Area. The Pastebin document set a precedent that quickly saw literary communities internationally undertake a kind of internal review of the gendered power dynamics among their ranks—dynamics that seemed, in some cases, to incubate a culture of misogyny and predation and, in other cases, to privilege white male voices in the discourse around these visceral threats. For instance, in a September 2014 email, one member of the UK Poetry Listserv shared her own personal history of suffering sexual assault, and the response in some instances arrogated this testimony to a line of inquiry where male commentators can easily sound like apologists—the increasing spectrum of coercive actions that many feminists argue perpetuate a pervasive rape culture in liberal democracies—and in doing so erred by misplacing the emphasis on the ambiguity of the sexual encounter. The fallout on the UK Poetry Listserv was severe: a majority of women withdrew from the community, seeking other venues where they might share viewpoints on sexual assault on their own terms. By now a common pattern has developed, where contributions from male writers to the discourse around sexual assault seems, perhaps unintentionally, to replicate aspects of the sexism at the root of the revelations that sparked the conversation in the first place.

For this forum on gender relations and sexual assault in literary communities, we reached out to approximately twenty women writers and asked what recent revelations about sexual predation and assault in some writing communities, and the gendered fault lines that have developed within the ensuing discussions, might tell us about the unequal distribution of power and authority in literary institutions

large and small. What internal pressures are causing writers to reckon so forcefully inside their own communities with a problem ubiquitous and far-reaching enough that it has earned the name of rape culture? In a literary culture that still often shouts “identity politics!” in the face of practical claims for personal autonomy and sovereignty, especially among women and minority groups, how have discussions surrounding revelations of assault been shaped by more general attitudes toward the legitimacy of testimony, grievance, and protest? Have the recent demands among woman-identified writers for safer communities in which to share their writing, and for safer discursive spaces in which to discuss the experience of assault, been compromised by the underrepresentation of women in literary journals and reading series? What might be the outcome of a new discourse that has come to see bias and assault as twin crises of the power available to women in literary communities? As woman-identified writers ask us not only to recognize the rape and assault that occur in their communities and ours, but also to rethink what it is that rape and assault look like, from psychological coercion to physical violence, are these writers and their interlocutors bearing witness to the emergence of new definitions of personal autonomy and sovereignty, or even to a new era of personal rights?

When we distributed this headnote and questionnaire in December 2014, we expected responses from individuals that would take the events of the previous several months as a reason for more general reckonings with the pervasive sexism and misogyny that woman-identified writers are facing in their communities. Some of the statements below move in this direction, offering critiques and assessments based on facts on the ground. Others push back against our framing of the problems or against our request for something like cool and dispassionate discussions of those problems. Still others move in their own direction, drawing from events and experiences left out of what we had written, or adopting modes other than the brief discursive statements we had requested, and in these ways pointing to different, better discussions than the one we had set up. For about a month after our initial dispatch, several of the writers we contacted—not all of whom are represented here—helped spread our communiqué through listservs and other online channels, and our project became controversial.

We had reached out initially only to individuals, which read as an affront to the activism around sexism and sexual assault undertaken by feminist collectives in the Bay Area, New York, and abroad. We were asking for contributions to a *forum*, which seemed wrong given the questions we were asking: as if a discursive space modeled on the ideals of a liberal public sphere—rationality, objectivity, deliberative consensus-building—could do anything but a disservice to problems experienced viscerally by real bodies. So on the one hand the contributions we have included in the present feature are more various than we had at first imagined. In response to an outpouring of material, we accepted statements on behalf of activist organizations, public documents previously circulated among feminist cadres and those in solidarity with them, and an anonymous multi-authored manifesto that came to us from many cities globally. On the other hand this feature remains a forum—now loosely mediated enough to allow plenty of room for dissensus to emerge and not resolve itself. Given their prior life in circulation among many writers and activists, our foregoing remarks are simply part of the ongoing discussion we document here, coeval with the other statements that follow. This is a forum for a discussion that started well before we showed up to it.

We encourage readers to send us their reactions or further contributions to this forum. The “Letterbox” section of our next issue will be devoted to your responses. Letter-writers should note that the views expressed in the following statements are their authors’ own and do not necessarily reflect the views of *Chicago Review*’s editorial board. In the case of assault and other allegations, we have made exhaustive efforts at independent verification; but in the absence of official reports, we have stood behind the rights of our contributors to speak publically about what they have experienced and witnessed.

Andrew Peart & Chalcey Wilding

I WANT THIS FOR US:

that when we're asked as
poets for a statement, that you read our poems.
To say I am or am not, to stand
beside experience, when all I know and love
is in revolt against empiricism,
makes every poet a victim. Fundamentalism
takes poetry at its word, and fails to read
beyond the letter, taking possession as given.
This is the great secret of the myth of Orpheus
which every one forgets. Notwithstanding the
five hundred a year and a room of his own,
the hot baths (as might befit a prince of Thrace)
required for Orpheus to *get that good*:
closed lips mean nothing in the court of the gods.
A force so strong it must have come from far
outside his power of movement, a going out
of our own nature, rent his length from the bar
to the mast. Orpheus knew what it is to be in love.
Where she went, he sailed after, changing shape
as she changed, borrowing every chance to wake
in him her footsteps: if I am for myself
and not another, if we are for each other
not ourselves, then I am never quite myself.
Then Orpheus fell silent, remembering himself,
when Orpheus knew what it is to be possessed.

Laura Kilbride

Author's Note: "What if we sought to supplant the language of 'I am'—with its defensive closure on identity, its insistence on the fixity of positions, its equation of social with moral positioning—with the language of 'I want this for us?'"—Wendy Brown

ON/TO COMMUNITY: A STATEMENT IN QUESTION

The problem resides precisely in the fact that no one will come to save us and that our disappearance, though certain, is only relatively imminent.

—Beatriz Preciado (tr. Bruce Benderson, modified)

In the extension of selves toward an ideal of coherence, might the voices that have abandoned themselves in favor of something that calls itself—wishes to call itself—community, have ransomed thought in a way that permanently disallows addressing a thorough crisis in (sexed) bodies? Might a recognition of the body's (relational) isolatedness open the vexed question of sexual accountability in a manner that is not jointly and respectively reducible to homogeneous categories of sex and presumed consensual commonality?

What I mean to ask is: what is this name community out of which so many speak? And is it possible to speak of violences committed against genred bodies without recourse to language strangled by both history and a desire to be done with it.

Nathanaël

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SEND LETTERS

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THE COMMUNICATIVE COMMUNITY

...only here speech still evades quantification, escapes the enumerating sign, and follows language towards its ear, toward natality, which is anybody's.

—Lisa Robertson, *Nilling*

...in the spectacle our own linguistic nature comes back to us inverted.

—Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*

What we attempted was an impossible task and it disassembled our community. It pointed us back to the arbitrary category “women,” to the impossibility of communal support under current structural conditions, and finally to the misidentification of what we do here in the Bay Area together, pretty much weekly, in private living rooms and nonprofit spaces, at summits and on softball fields, and in tiny afterparties, at formal lectures, at self-organized conferences or university ones, what happens at our private desks or propped up in bed or during stolen time at work, on transit, or whilst ignoring the kid, what happens at a cafe as every American subject with a laptop also ignores the humans around them, what gets transmitted or performed or whispered or sung or given as a gift to the rest of us—it pointed us toward our misidentification of that as “community.” This is deeply emotional. Insofar as the history of poetry suggests interiority, each week we visited each other’s phantasmagorical living rooms—and with Bay Area real estate, most living rooms double as bedrooms. But our over-intimacy was also doing capitalism’s dirty work, over-caring for each other verbally in a way which never actually approached a lived enmeshment, but was more like an administrative check-in in an exceedingly couch- and pillow-lined social space. And not just us. New Yorkers do it, too. Probably others all over the US. This is what social life looks like between a collection of subjects.

M. M. Bakhtin writes about the carnival as the festival in which the people turn power on its head one day each year, when they burn an effigy of the king. If some of us imagined this is what poetry’s reordering

of language—the very material of law—was doing already, the East Bay Poetry Summit would ramp up this possibility and invite guests. So the summit is when the details of a series of recent assaults came out: a handful of rapes, a push, a hairpull, some domestic violence, a slap. Some of the perpetrators were lesser known to some of us, but some were good friends. Some were known latches who we'd been getting consistent misogynist vibes from, but some organized in the center of our community.¹

Our address to each other took place on a register so direct and activated I am not sure it can be called “conversation.” It was infused with disturbing amounts of sunlight, wavering thickly in a potent combination of clarified information, lament, fury, reception, debate and militance. More kept coming and more. It spilled over to nonstop email and texts, and so overtook the lives of several Bay area poets in the summer of 2014. Many of us spent the summer physiologically transformed. The season preceeding, Dia exhibited a Carl Andre retrospective with no mention of Ana Mendieta’s death and Elliot Roger massacred several Santa Barbara students in accordance with his misogynist and racist manifesto. Thus, it certainly could not have been a “bad summer” as many began to call it, like the prostitute euphemism “bad date.” Rather, it was the summer that an active, political, emotional, experimental, critical, deeply serious poetics scene, with anti-capitalist, anti-racist, feminist commitments looked directly at untouched, entrenched patriarchy.

I have been reading all day about communication, reading around it for months, actually, in order to make a case for a de-sublimated, non-language driven politics which exceeds the horizon of a social justice under current contexts of power: Politics beyond representation. When we posted our statement to Pastebin and disseminated it by Facebook and email I might have quoted Alphonso Lingis from *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, when he states, “the technology that eliminates the noise also eliminates the communication.”

1/ Editors’ Note: The East Bay Poetry Summit was a collaboration of several small reading series in Oakland and Berkeley, CA, whose organizers staged a weekend of jointly programmed live poetry events first in May 2013 and again in July 2014. With a few exceptions, these programs encompassed private house reading series without official institutional affiliation. “While the East Bay Poetry Summit may have a party vibe to it,” wrote one local Oakland newspaper in May 2013, “it will also be a serious event for poetry.”

I might have uttered, “Communication theory identifies the background hum as a multitude of irrelevant or conflicting signals. To designate it thus as noise is to conceive it from the point of view of the individual teleologically destined to citizenship in an ideal republic maximally purged of the noise of life and of the empirical domain.” I might have repeated Jodi Dean from “Communicative Capitalism,” “it is precisely this same communicativity, this same generic essence (language), that is constituted as an autonomous sphere to the extent to which it becomes the essential factor of the production cycle. What hinders communication, therefore, is communicability itself: human beings are being separated by what unites them.”

Then, I might have cocked my head to one side, taken the hand of another poet, let her watch my tears well, and murmured Lisa Robertson’s words from *Nilling*, “The vernacular is the movement for which language is not the state, but the condition of emergence of the subject to and for others. It is grammarless rhythm, a mobile, patterned regime of compromise: Something infinitely vulnerable.” I might have gone back into the streets, returned to the reading, then after chatted excitedly about everything and nothing, and said, “As a generator of temporality, the vernacular overdetermines any bounded circulation concept or singularity of origin—it moves every-which-way continuously, so an excess or an innovation may erupt at any point, initiating various kinds of intensities and political consequences that can never be predetermined.”

The summer changed our rhythm inexorably and we cannot be the same community. That there was a rhythm to have been changed. That there could be a rhythm between us. That there could be a vernacular life to our open, language-based community, even when the universality of language is what keeps it open, and even though to persist, its life must precede language, or form a language which is specific. That, despite our names, and also necessarily through them, there could be an “us.”

Anne Lesley Selcer

For me these conversations happen best in small units, in person and often. That it takes a forum makes you wonder if it's not being talked about often enough—why quarantine the conversation to such a setting once every several years? But more talking is more talking regardless and I know to say something over nothing. What's the space between not responding to hearsay—however believable—and not being a misconduct sympathizer? What are the implications of participating in this discussion, or even of simply having been asked to do so? I am uncomfortable with a document naming people and their actions without clarity concerning the use (or non-use) of the legal system. Inappropriate conduct did not begin in August and September of last year, in Brooklyn and the Bay Area in particular. The specificity of literary communities, or pockets (genre, geography) of that community, and the specificity of naming individuals here, or, as it happened this summer, on the internet, feels inappropriate. It's too easy for a community's directive to be fueled by gossip. Poets are not a legal system. Are literary communities shocked because as writers *We Are Immune To Such Behavior* or *All Of Us Must Be Feminists And How Could Feminists Do Such Things?* I have experienced misogyny and inappropriate conduct even from feminists (all genders) and it doesn't make the conversation any less complicated.

A first stab at inclusiveness: more than talking about what we see as writers, it is imperative we talk about what we see as people. I have felt or witnessed the exclusion of women from the conversation in a variety of settings. Most of the time all it takes is a huddle, whether that's in a classroom or at a bar or on a sidewalk before a gathering. Some changes to be made are small and some will take significant effort. How many different kinds of people exist in a literary community and why might we assume that we all think or will behave alike? Gender bias, sexual assault and misogyny are, infuriatingly, widespread in the society at large and it's dangerous to forget that we take our cues from that very place. (Facebook was not created by poets however much they like to use it.) People do terrible things. Sometimes people we know do terrible things or have terrible things done to them. Each experience is a

separate universe and there is no catchall way to handle the impacts or subsequent responses. Why should this conversation be divorced from ones we must continue to have on race and bigotry, which require many of the same tools of discussion? It's easier, at least for me, to extend into the specificity of an experience in the space that pairs and smaller groups provide. I recognize, too, that my working and living outside of academia lets me sometimes forget I am a poet (this is a good thing). And in the way that this discussion's concerns are not linear, it's the juxtaposition found in my total experience that has illuminated past incidents and behaviors that have felt inappropriate both in and out of the subset of the literary fields. My own specifics matter less to me in this context than that their very accumulation encourages me to initiate conversations with colleagues and neighbors and friends, to move forward, to practice better actions and reactions when unacceptable things are said and done, to defend my own person and the people in my communities, to maintain the conversation, to speak it onward.

Amanda Nadelberg

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On October 26, 2014, Enough is Enough held its first meeting at Berl's Poetry Shop in Brooklyn. Around thirty-five women attended, sharing stories of misogyny and gendered violence experienced in poetry communities in New York, the Bay Area, and beyond, concluding with a decision to bring the conversation into a public sphere.

Over the following weeks, the group collaboratively wrote and edited a detailed agenda of the shared stories and grievances illustrating points of concern for us in relation to the poetry community as we were seeing and experiencing it; we continued to talk in person, meeting again at a member's home on November 3.

On November 6, Enough is Enough held its first public meeting, to function as a town hall of sorts, at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church. After the meeting, we shared the following document and our email address as a call for transparency and a hope for dialogue with poets, event organizers, administrators, editors, and anyone else interested and invested in how poetry communities can work toward safer and more rigorously inclusive spaces.

Enough is Enough

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

OUR ASK:

We ask that friends, allies, and NYC poetry stakeholders (editors, venue managers, magazine contributors, series curators, etc.) committed to change send us their immediate concrete steps towards making our spaces safer, more equitable, and more liberatory.

We are interested in the actions you plan to take as individuals but are particularly interested in changes on a systemic/organizational level that will have broad and long-lasting impact.

Please send your notes to: enoughisenoughpoets@gmail.com

QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO CONSIDER:

1. How will you as a curator/editor/venue manager/writer respond to reports of assault, abuse, and harassment from members of the poetry community moving forward? How will you express support for and solidarity with survivors who have experienced harm?
2. How will you define and support safe(r) spaces within the spaces venues/magazines you manage? How will you make this information public?
3. How can we, as an organizing body, support you in bringing your action steps to life?

WE HOPE THIS GATHERING INSPIRES YOU TO:

- *ASK MORE QUESTIONS.*
- *HOLD MEETINGS* amongst yourselves to further your thinking and continue building community around these issues.
- *REFLECT* on how you listen and respond to allegations of abuse and harassment in the poetry community and whose voices you privilege.
- *MAKE A PLAN* about how you will join or be an ally in our efforts.
- *WRITE* about what you heard tonight and share information with others not present.
- *READ* and educate yourself on these issues.

Above and facing page: "Call to Action" handout from the Enough is Enough collective, distributed to participants in a town-hall meeting held at St. Mark's Poetry Project, New York City, on November 6, 2014.

PRELIMINARY suggestions for making our spaces safer, more equitable, and more liberatory:

- As curators, implement a standard for achieving a balance of genders and sexualities among your readers. This means making an effort to include female-identified, gay, lesbian, queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming people, among others.
- As curators, implement a standard for achieving racial diversity among your readers. At the same time, challenge yourselves to avoid tokenism. This may require you to broaden your literary and social horizons significantly.
- As organizers, take responsibility for what happens at your events. This includes monitoring your drinks table, having non-alcoholic beverage options, and staying sober or appointing trusted people to stay sober and be vigilant. If someone seems extremely intoxicated, take care of them or find someone who can be trusted to take care of them and make sure they get home safe.
- If you see someone at an event behaving in a way that compromises the safety or well-being of one or more people there, let them know that you're not okay with it by directly addressing that person's behavior both with them and with event organizers. Keeping lines of communication open in this manner is one key tactic for intervening in a culture of permissibility. Another tactic is having an ally present when directly addressing an offender--someone with you to bear witness to the exchange. This allows for mediation (if necessary), protection, and support, and could be useful in preventing future miscommunication (he said / she said).
- If you hear of an incident of sexual assault in your space, address it publicly and in a timely fashion, expressing genuine concern and soliciting feedback about how to ensure it doesn't happen again. Use all of the platforms on which you typically advertise your events and activities to spread information and seek suggestions from the community.
- If you are in a position of hiring or promoting and you are made aware of wrongdoing (assault, harassment, discrimination, etc.), be prepared to take steps that could be publicly messy in order to make change. There are people who abuse positions of power, who still get invited to do readings, to teach, to publish, to mentor, who still have careers, because of a status quo silence or worse, fear or passivity. Are you willing to fire someone or otherwise refuse to bolster the career or legacy of an abuser? If not, consider whom and what you are protecting.
- Consider your relationships with people who have been accused of sexual assault, abuse, and/or misogyny. Do you want to continue curating them into your series and allowing them into your spaces? If so, why? Whom might you be excluding by working with and supporting these individuals?
- Consider your relationships with the people you organize events with. Are they committed to creating spaces that are safe(r), equitable, and liberatory? If not, why are you continuing to organize with them?
- Consider your friendships. Have any of your friends been accused of assault, abuse, or misogyny? Have you spoken with them in depth about these accusations? Did their responses seem appropriate to you? Can you trust that they won't commit similar acts in the future? If not, ask yourself why you are still invested in these relationships. Where is the line between friendship and apologism?
- Consider doing the right thing. Consider saying something. Consider being true to yourself. Consider being true to others. Consider burning bridges. Consider the possibility that it doesn't have to be this way forever.

RAPACITY CULTURE AND THE BODY

Western institutional imaginaries, including arts, have endured a business retooling that has normalized rapacity. In rapacity culture, power (*prizes, money, centrality, prestige*) looks around to trump competition and build capital, and the body is violently available as product and object. The acceptability of power-seeking in rapacity culture renders more acceptable, more ordinary, the power violation of rape.

I imagine being part of a “we” that wants to change rapacity culture in order to change rape culture, to *undo rapism* as many cultures have sought to undo racism. In dismantling the rapacity gaze, body rights disperses its focus into communities—regional groups with shared devotions—and their encounters. In these encounters, each person has rights to integrity and self-identity; bodies should be permitted to differ with safety and without suffering violation.

Resist imagining that there is any center of any world. A person seeking an imagined center called “most hip” or “*the community*” is a vulnerable body pursuing ideological chimeras. Arts have neither Vatican nor Mecca. Distributed cognition is, by definition, not univocal, and the *digitas* now has no central servers.

Rapacity culture controls the body by rendering its symbols abstract, separating ideas about holdings, values, and violence from what happens with real bodies. Put an idea into the bloodstream of distributed cognition and it will evanesce into diffractions that feel abstract. Put bodies there and we can focus on our acts.

The body is the perfect symbol because it is not abstract. All its ideas and actualities are immediately present and connectable.

I imagine being part of a “we” that’s not so much “post-human” as *transhuman*: we are language animals in the wet heat of thinking electric blood, living in linked conditions. Let’s imagine we can improve: refusing narratives of progress in rapacity history should not keep us from improving our relations with each other. “To know” does not have to mean “to possess,” and “progress” does not have to name a power delusion.

The end of privacy includes the possibility of envisioning the self as a set of shared identities and dreams; this vision can free raped persons from feeling alone. They can turn around and point at the rape and the rapist and separate their bodies from the inflicted violence. Such turnaround shaming helps to empty shame out of the violated body and to restore bodily integrity. This is a positive result of the end of privacy and the rise of the transhuman: the end of the isolated individual who hides from either shame or discovery.

Let's go further. Are there moves we can make beyond a clear agreement to forbid bodily violation? Let's imagine we don't wish only to turn the shame mirror toward the violater's face. I don't want people to avoid rapacity out of fear. I want people not to *want* rape.

We need body rights that help articulate non-rapacious desire, desire that is free up to the penumbra of the other's bodily integrity. Such freedom is contingent and particular: it can happen in communities that speak and listen to their internal differences and hopes. What is our relation to desire in arts, to performances and works that inspire our embodied ideation? Can we have a desire gaze that is not predatory? How do we find delight in renewing permission toward otherness and in fostering process and experience over dominance and acquisition? How can we inhabit interest without wanting the *telos* of "mastery"? As we move in and among communities, we act out our answers to these questions in every encounter.

Each person comes to us one at a time, and we to others. Let's continually release the floor from rapacity culture and support each other. Let's compete only with ourselves when making the forms we love. Let's connect these acts so that bodies are not experienced as severed. Palm to palm and face to interface, the body is a tender mass of absolute presence and being refreshed in encounter. The transhuman ideals of the body rights movement are already demanding that we make these recognitions. Bodily integrity is not, foremost, an idea; it's a constantly renewed *act*.

Lisa Samuels

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THE PROBLEM & PROPOSITION FOR A SOLUTION

The gender violence recently manifest in literary scenes is neither new nor surprising. A public debate about it might be. But the issue should not be seen in isolation, rather as part of wider power structures. Large-scale power is always backed by a “law of force,” i.e., a monopoly on violence. Within a *patriarchy*, the power of men as-a-group is backed by the threat of violence towards women as-a-group. Many locate the origin of patriarchy in political economy. Sexual violence is thus linked to the eco-political dimensions of gender domination, and these must be dismantled if it is to cease.

Patriarchy is first the father’s law, and then the man’s. Gerda Lerner proposes that it begins when women’s capacity to produce children is conceived as a commodity regulated by fathers and husbands. The imbalance and hierarchization of male and female sexuality is a secondary effect of commodifying child-production. David Graeber argues that even in civil societies, women were relatively equal until two comparatively recent innovations, around 1500 BC: 1) economies became *monetized*, and 2) it became legal for men to hire/sell their wives and children to cover debts. Here control of women arises simply because they are defined as property. (Lerner’s view might explain why wives and mothers become “property” rather than husbands and fathers.) However, patriarchy could not survive without an enforcing threat. As in all hierarchies, this takes many shapes—impoverishment, institutionalization, assault, and death. Power based on gender simply adds the threat of *sexual* violence. This is a structural feature of patriarchy, not individual pathology.

Men can also be subject to sexual assault, in prisons, war-zones, and colonies. In everyday life bullies sexually aggress weaker males. But, as the main aim of such acts is often simply to fill victims with a sense of their *being-feminized*, male-on-male sexual violation may be just another way of keeping “women” in their place, even the biologically male ones. And because this threat is systemic it affects us all, whatever our ideals. This does not mean that all men are rapists, but that all men—like all women—are bound in an unequal dynamic in

which, because the threat of sexual assault always circulates, *it will manifest constantly*, as realized acts, somewhere...or everywhere.

Some on the left believe progressive views insulate us from becoming perpetrators. Another aspect of patriarchy demonstrates the myth of this. The intimate relationships of many ideologically progressive couples, including same-sexed and queer, display power inequalities at odds with their expressed views, because such behavior is not conscious, but stems from deeply ingrained psycho-social structures, to which we are all subject, long before making any choices, let alone aesthetic ones. Writer-artists are not immune.

The longevity of patriarchy does not mean that nothing changes, but rather that transformation does not come from conscious beliefs, no matter how innovative the statement of these. Change will come, in literary scenes, as elsewhere, when the system of structurally instituted inequalities between *men as-a-class* and *women as-a-class* changes as a whole.

Occidental society having tried many things—giving(!) women voting and property rights, (theoretical) equal pay, the right to express ourselves sexually—and gender violence still subsisting, even in literary scenes, I argue that the core problem lies where it always has—in the praxis of treating women, *as a class*, as society’s main child-producers, i.e., in our collectively, unconsciously, behaving *as if* the “value” of women *as a class* was still predominantly determined by its role as the engine of child-production.

The issue here is *not* that women’s bodies gestate fetuses, and hence that the problem could be solved by engineering male bodies to sustain pre-natal infants. The issue is *not* the labor of gestation and birth, but that of *nursing and nurturing* children into adults, whatever their color or sex. And it takes a community. Until *all* sexes are equally involved in *this* labor. Until *we all*, as a multi-gendered, multi-colored, locoglobal collective, value and participate in *this* activity, nothing will change but the forms of the words in which we (spl)-utter our beliefs.

There is a name for the labor of shifting social-unconscious ideas. *Consciousness-raising*. And it is a collective, discursive, emotional, difficult, and time-consuming work that can try the patience of a saint. To be effective it needs to happen in every part of society, at every level. Can we do it?

Can *you* do it? Can *I* do it? God knows. But it's that, or...well, read Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* for a world in outright gender war. Between where we are today and Piercy's vision, the distance is short, the time is now.

Christine Wertheim

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It is encouraging that *Chicago Review* is facilitating this forum to look at misogyny, bias and outright sexual predation and assault against women writers in our alternative writing communities. I remember the early 1970s, just after the second wave of feminism exploded across several continents, when many women involved in alternative publications were forced to withdraw from mixed collectives in order to publish women-only papers and magazines. They had struggled long and hard against the male chauvinism of the day, and gotten nowhere; a temporary separatism was necessary to provide room for equal participation.

A lot has happened in the past more-than forty years. Feminism gained ground for women and raised consciousness at least in the more sophisticated sectors of overall society. Today more women publish, win grants, are taught in college literature classes, and are invited to perform publicly. The numbers and opportunities, though, remain heavily weighted toward men. It doesn't surprise me that women in alternative writing communities, from the Bay Area to Brooklyn and from Canada to the UK, have lately exposed personal sexual assault as well as ugly in-print diatribes. Our communities reflect society at large. At a time when we record an outrageous uptick in males attacking their women colleagues in the military, in religious communities, in prisons, at every level of higher education, in the streets and even in Congress, it is no surprise that poets and writers are not immune.

Those with power too often find ways to abuse those without. Women and children have always been targets. When societies solve their problems with violence (endless wars, might makes right), no rhetoric to the contrary keeps ordinary citizens from doing the same; tacit permission is a given. And perpetrators have a long history of trying to justify their behavior through a discourse meant to trivialize their victims and discredit their allegations. In my lifetime these mostly male abusers have used everything from the Bible to the so-called

False Memory Syndrome to charges of identity politics (used as a disparagement) to outright taunt. Every assault is wrong, but assaults embodied in published form carry additional weight: words on the page (or on the air or TV screen) are presumed authoritative by a population that is less and less taught critical thinking. And literature is supposed to embody moral values.

Many women writers, myself included, have taken refuge from time to time in all-women workshops. I am grateful that the overlapping poetry communities in Albuquerque, where I live, have not descended of late into this state that most women know all too well. Where women writers, who should be treated as national treasures, are instead ignored, slighted, abused in flesh or in print, overlooked by publishers and in literature courses and reading series, there is no other term that more aptly describes the situation than a culture of rape.

Margaret Randall

§

ON BEHALF OF VIDA: WOMEN IN LITERARY ARTS

VIDA has taken a two-pronged approach to the bias and systemic sexism that has plagued the literary publishing world in its practices and communities. First, we have been working for five years now to shine a light on the gender imbalances among publications and are now working to identify racial disparities in those same magazines and journals with our first forthcoming 2014 Women of Color VIDA Count. Along with revealing those imbalances, we have initiated and fostered conversations that have moved beyond the denial stages of such imbalances into territory where many are now exposing and exploring the details of publishing practices, reading and reviewing practices, submissions and solicitation practices, and more.

The response, support, and development of these efforts has been exceptionally heartening, despite continued resistance to the call for awareness and change. It is a clarion call that is beginning to drown out the passive, silent old guards, and one whose echoes keep motivating us to action. Do not underestimate the reach and strength of that call.

The second prong to our approach has been to provide online and in-person platforms such as panels and sponsored readings to those underrepresented voices in an effort to garner more visibility,

especially for issues from bias to violence that writers contend with within the publishing world. One has to look no further than our website, VIDAweb.org, to see work ranging from “Twenty ‘Gypsy’ Women You Should Be Reading” to “White People Love Me: Dispatches from the Token” to “MFA Rape Culture.” At this point, our goal is not simply to state that such underrepresented voices and issues exist, though that cannot be amplified enough right now, but also to include varying experiences in order to explore the subtleties and nuances used to shelter bias.

As well, we are dedicated to exploring the intersectionality of bias, how biases and discriminatory practices work together to divide, silence and maintain the status quo, and to consider the simple fact that the proliferation of related terminology has become broadly known now. Terms such as “micro-aggressions,” “trigger warnings,” “intersectionality,” etc., illustrate an increasing awareness of underrepresented peoples’ experiences and a willingness to acknowledge that the system is rigged in ways that must be addressed. With that awareness, respectful respondents are invited to query, support and challenge the views shared on VIDA’s platforms and offer their own.

We value these exchanges especially because through such communication, realities become known and minds change. In fact, since the Alt-Lit and UK Listserv abuses, denials, and in a few cases, confessions came to light, we have witnessed a much larger number of male writers joining online conversations, asking questions, acknowledging their own limitations in understanding, offering enthusiastic support and learning. Some have openly spoken out against the perpetrators and declared that they would not be quiet nor support those presses and editors. We mentioned enthusiasm before because knowing the support and hunger for change is there, far beyond VIDA, is integral to us to keep at it, to be consistent in the work that we do, to foster conversations and inspire others to listen, to become aware and participate in constructive exchanges—and to be inspired by the changes we see in the culture that writers are at the forefront of creating.

We could focus on the negatives, the “this keeps happening” aspect and become downtrodden, or we can work to help others see what is actually happening, how rape culture is perpetuated and enacted, even on writers by other writers, and assume that the responsible and more increasingly aware writers will also speak out and no longer tolerate it.

We hope that, just as we suggest you withdraw your subscription support from magazines and journals that maintain gender imbalances, that writers and readers will no longer subscribe to or disseminate the work of presses and publishing houses that proliferate and perpetuate a sexist and racist rape culture.

There is shame in silent denial and passivity. Voices that publically query and acknowledge wrongs, consistently, are the ones that are heard, empathized with and supported. VIDA asks those who feel shame to examine and discuss it. Those who feel anger, express it. Those who seek social justice are welcome to help us make room for voices denied and to actively support those who have been shouted down.

Amy King and Lynn Melnick

§

FOUR MEN

Hello, America!—is Bill Cosby’s one-line-chant at the end of a 1991 interview for CNN’s Larry King Live. And the fodder for his jolt of patriotism: a moment of reminiscence between host and guest, on the mythic *Spanish Fly*, a vintage drug that men used to slip into women’s cocktails in order to have their way with them sexually while the women slept off the effects. There was a whimsical nostalgia in Cosby’s tone, as if he was discussing one of his most prized and rare jazz LPs. Over two decades later, droves of women are coming forth with accounts of having been drugged and raped by Mister Cosby aka Heathcliff Huxtable aka one of the founders of the Playboy Jazz Festival aka Black American Male who grew up in the Philadelphia projects and started his career in standup to help fund his college education, similar to the way Nina Simone began her singing career in Atlantic City one summer, where she was playing piano in a bar to help fund her education at Juilliard and the proprietor told her this was no instrumental gig, that she needed to sing or plan her departure—and she decided to sing.

Cosby retired his political jokes after a *New York Times* review pegged him for just another negro militant. Embittered by the get-in-line treatment of black entertainers, Cosby then and there refashioned himself around the myth of uppityness and well-to-do blackness so

well that he became the mascot for the luxuries that he had never experienced. And all the while he managed suave, severe, and funny simultaneously: in an ongoing pilgrimage between opposing forces within the Black American and American psyches, he arrived at his destination downright debonair, both accessible and aloof, bold and stable, an easy hero.

As a brown child with a white mother and a deceased black entertainer father, growing up in Los Angeles in the 80s, *The Cosby Show* helped raise me, was the brave new myth we all sort of craved, the liminal space between minstrelsy and pleasantville, reoccupied by an image of well-adjusted blackness in these maladjusted United States, an image that almost didn't seem like a gimmick even as it preyed on and implicated our shadow world with its didactic beauty. As I soaked in a bath after a run earlier this evening, I queued up *Cosby Show* reruns on my iPad, and listened, didn't even need to watch, and I laughed like it was the 80s again. I wonder if the first step to inoculating a violation is forgiveness and if forgiveness requires an element of denial and if denial is some nuance of transcendence and if Heathcliff Huxtable is still as possible and impossible as Bill Cosby himself and if the obnoxious innocence of our hero-worship is to blame for the hero's meltdown and if he really drugged and raped all those women.

When all the water was drained and each element of the bath ritual neatly achieved, I checked my phone and found a message from the man I've been seeing for years, something about how well we relate sexually and some pornographic photo, half joke half mating call. I replied with a smile, colon, parentheses, and turned on some Miles Davis, "Fran-Dance," a song Miles composed for his first wife Frances Taylor, world-renowned Alvin Ailey principal dancer turned devoted housewife and confidant. One night when the beatings had become too much for her to bear, Frances ran from their home naked and bloodied and their marriage dissolved into the music I still listen to daily, still depend on for sustenance. *As the legends ride their heroes through the dark to found great cities where all life is possible to maintain as long as time which wants us to remain for cocktails in a bar and after dinner let's us live with it—*

In what is deemed the *suicide letter* Hoover warns Martin Luther King that unless he stops front-running the civil rights efforts, proof of his clandestine sexual deviancy and many affairs will be leaked to

the American public, his image annihilated. Said letter was mailed to his wife, Coretta, along with a cassette tape brimming with recordings of MLK having sex with women who were not her. Martin's closest confidant Ralph Abernathy claims that King enjoyed hiring white prostitutes to beat and fuck interchangeably. Preach! Preach? Transcend, transcend. We love him. *The King of Love is dead*—

In 1965 Malcolm X was assassinated at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem. At the time poet Amiri Baraka was married to Hettie Jones, a white woman with whom he had a daughter. Upon news of the assassination of Malcolm, Amiri left that family and their home on Manhattan's Lower East Side, and moved to Harlem to start the Black Arts Movement. He ended up marrying poet Amina Baraka with whom he lived until the end of his beautiful life on this planet, at least that round of it. While they were married he had a child with another woman, conceived in their home. (*shhh, peaceful*) Amina raised this child as her own. I read and listen to Amiri's work, every day. It raises the stakes and drives them in.

Power and sex are inextricably linked, and it's possible that we have eroticized violation, deviancy, and so-called *rape culture* (such a torrid phrase) by turning their incidence into gossip before we fully comprehend any of it. It's possible that we have invented a dialectic wherein scandal is a rite of passage—or is it naturally thus, that *riders, drivers, and men of letters* feed on corruption in the service of virtue? I wonder. I also believe we often overmoralize and turn ourselves into hypocrites on the flipside, for it.

Violation happens when you harbor an antagonistic relationship with your own desire, so you turn it criminal (or borderline criminal) almost as an act of preemptive repentance. So you take the erotic and turn it pornographic (or you turn it perverse or scandalous) in order to decompress its many layers, to try and make it uncomplicated. To play muse against muse.

I'd say it's fairly easy and common for two writers to fall in love, or at least deep infatuation, even in breach of all sorts of contracts from the social to the marital. The erotic is the fuel of the arts; we cannibalize it willfully. And yet when the erotic is improperly integrated into the male psyche as a license to exploit and violate and undervalue or even override femininity, as women we must use the erotic in us as

power as well—power for good and joy and transcendence. We must emerge more beautiful and seductive and self-aware and united as such: if we're going to be objectified, we can at least be objectified as subjects, wielding our idiosyncrasies and our femininity as tools in our resistance to patriarchy.

And yet I must admit, I value gender roles in some respects. I would not accept a world wherein having to defend ourselves against predatory men made us crass and cold and remote from our deepest urges and intuitions as women. Or worse: so defensive as to be meek and diminutive. What I notice most acutely within the power dynamics between men and women across the arts and entertainment, is that many men have mastered the art of a behind-the-scenes transparency, wherein women, even and especially female colleagues, are blatantly accessories to a kind of ruthlessly ambitious male success, a voracious productivity predicated on the casual exploitation of the feminine energy in their lives. In light of this it seems to me that our best bet at rising above is our own ruthless productivity. We as women are quick to admire ourselves for making sacrifices, and we often lack the skill of not making them, a skill that men consistently hone. We too can be ruthlessly productive to the extent that the public and the private, the ambivalent and the explicit, are no longer at odds, to the extent that we are always telling our stories as they occur, not waiting years or even days in abject silence, to overcome them, not letting them become our destiny. I think if we master ourselves in this way, master this type of turnaround, men may find it exceedingly difficult to treat us as playmates to the patriarch, and may be forced to face the complexity of their own desires for female accompaniment, unable to reduce them to power plays.

I was at a book party once on Manhattan's Upper West Side, having a conversation with a male poet and a female fiction writer about how the iconic accolades are distributed to black artists, about the quieting of the militant in the service of the accessible, and the underrecognition of writers like Amiri Baraka and Fred Moten, etc. I was defending men I care about, and the black male poet in the conversation halted for a moment of shock and awe to exclaim, *Wow, you have a lot of opinions!* I've had ample experience playing playmate to the patriarch, both through violation and deliberately, thinking it was a badge or something I wanted or needed from men, that kind

of attention, but it always comes back to the attitude that produces an absent-minded, second-nature comment like, *Wow, you have a lot of opinions*. That's the root we need to radicalize away from for a tender eternity if gender dynamics are to be healed. I don't think it's a matter of turning away from the work or ideas of the perpetrators of these events, however. I think it's a matter of facing them and engaging with them fully, more deeply, and responding with our own impossible-to-turn-away-from material.

Important Texts:

Audre Lorde : "Uses of the Erotic as Power"

Carrie Mae Weems : *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*

Nina Simone : "Four Women"

June Jordan : "Poem About My Rights"

Amiri Baraka : *Dutchman*

Nikki Giovanni : "Think"

Harmony Holiday

§

ECOLOGY: CREATURES OF MEMORY DIE INTO THE WILD PRESENT

"If you want to realize yourselves all your pet illusions must be unmasked." —Mina Loy

"The only reason we don't open our hearts and minds to other people is that they trigger confusion in us that we don't feel brave enough or sane enough to deal with. To the degree that we look clearly and compassionately at ourselves, we feel confident and fearless about looking into someone else's eyes." —Pema Chödrön

"Equality is not a concept. Equality is like gravity." —Joss Whedon

"Wild doesn't even begin to explain the present." —Ivy Rae Jackson

*

Thank you for asking me to take part in this. I begin in answer to some of your questions. Bias is assault. Underrepresentation is suppression.

Sexualized and gendered violence takes many, many forms. Violence is not sex. Consumption is not desire. Privilege is not perception.

Our habits must cease or destroy us. There are new ways to be a-tune, which are also constant.

It is only through taking our hearts more seriously that justice may fully come into being.

Because yes, we are, finally, birthing a new time. The potentiality is available to all. Love is inevitable.

*

I write as a survivor, a witness, a mother, an aunt, a mentor, a peer, a friend, a sister, a cousin, a student, a daughter, a niece, a granddaughter, an inheritor of the works of women writers who came before, and of those whose works and methods of discernment were lost, suppressed, destroyed, or never articulated. This list describes some of my relationships, not my limits.

I am self-made. I'm a rogue, lol. I inhabit gorgon poetics.

Here is what I have to offer, and it resides in ongoing conversations with many poets and other loves, some of whom feel they have less of a voice than I do, or are less inclined to speak.

*

It can be more spacious, now. It already is.

We all must discern and define ourselves from the deepest, most interior and core places. This is some of the difficult and necessary work of our time.

This work might allow us to truly know, and tend, ourselves, each other, other life forms, our earth.

*

Misogyny is a mental illness; it is a cursive disease.

The negation and suppression of the feminine has happened at every level and in every crevice. It is heartless and it is incorrect.

*

As to the matters at hand in several poetry communities of which I feel peripheral at best.

I've often said the things academics and others invested in the status quo won't say. This willingness to be brave and to thus be the scapegoat began in childhood. I'm kinda done with the latter. The former is of a piece with my life's work, apparently.

Btw, where are the feminist men? Or are they pretend like the ancient matriarchies? Also, you don't have to be a feminist to attempt basic human decency. That's called being a human.

*

Men thinking that they own, school, and define us (in this instance by "us" I mean women); putting everything they don't want to acknowledge in themselves on to us; taking everything they don't want to acknowledge in us from us; this is extreme and it is unbalanced. It is dis-ease. It's untenable and it has already ceased, truthfully. It's fake, corrupt, an illusion.

These actions we women object to are not tender and are imprecise; **they are not poetic.**

Men, their work, their reading lists, their versions, their ideas, their desires, their "radicality," are not more important than women. They never have been in a million years.

I'll share two minor instances. As an already established poet, a community leader, and a mother (all achieved despite the apparently requisite wading through debilitating patriarchal quicksand), overhearing a young man (at the release party for the anthology *Bay Poetics*) telling an even younger woman what "radical" male-authored classic to read (to really

understand the world and possibly appeal to him) and seeing her (possibly feigned) polite interest. The exhaustion of this tiny tiny tiny passing moment. The utter weariness. Holding my young girlchild in my arms.

Again having reached this far into my thirties (at least a decade ago now), being slightly embroiled online as two men of the generation above me (the be-all end-all baby boomers) claimed they had been more radical activists, less compromised creatures, during their student days in the 1960s, than one of their contemporaries, a woman. No matter that she was far more talented, far more visionary, and far more generous to other writers and far less self-aggrandizing than them... blah blah blah: the egotism and irrelevance of their statements was bizarre. These were and are 'respected' men. I objected online (back in listserv days) both to their false overblown notions of their own glamorized historicized—showy—radicality (don't get me started on how some of my contemporaries serve this baloney to their tenure committees) and, more importantly, to their lack of respect for her being, her experience, and her life's work. One wrote to me privately in a patrician tone claiming surprised disappointment with my supposed lack of professionalism. This email contained judgment and threat of the kinds parents and teachers often use with children, cheaply relying on false and unfair power dynamics at the expense of human understanding. That's not rad, dude. The other at another time called me "shrill" publicly rather than actually engage with my critique of his sloppy comprehension of literary history.

This kind of clinging to patriarchy's supposed benefits, to men's own inherited (and false) sense of dominance and entitlement, to men's judgments, positioning and categorizing of women, is so freaking exhausting. It is pervasive and it is destructive (not in a good way). **It lessens and distorts men's real contributions as well as women's.** It is inhumane.

[NB. I don't see women as monolithic or without error, nor do I experience or regard gender as a polarity; however these seem rather minor points at present, or at least beyond the scope of this space, the limits of which I am already pushing against.]

*

The harsh and demeaning questioning of women who have survived assault and found voice and strength to speak is a disservice to us all (in this instance by “us” I mean earthlings). Their courage helps us all. It is a hard-won gift, motherfuckers. Try listening.

The harsh and demeaning judgment of women, both internal and external, who have lived under patriarchy and with misogyny so overlong...is not useful. It is not discernment.

Perpetrators need to face themselves. Men need to face themselves. Fathers need to face themselves. Professors need to face themselves. Administrators need to face themselves. Critics need to face themselves. Publishers need to face themselves. “Flirts.” [There can be no true flirtation without liberation, without a deep comprehension of equality.] And on and on and on. Let the crucial questioning begin within. Wake up. Get real.

*

Females are not born here on earth to have our energies depleted and negated and used in this way. **We really exist** and we really really really really have better things to do with our imaginations and our bodies and our time and our stories and our poetries and our institutions and our agency and our relationships and our breath and our precious, holy being.

As to our precious, holy being: I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours.

*

The illusion of separation is painful and has only been an unfortunate side effect of our experience of differentiation, not of it.

I am not interested in condemnation, although some condemn themselves through fear. (And in doing so condemn us all.)

I am calling for personal and collective accountability and transparency.

For a world of actual trust.

*

Here is our cardinal signature; now is our languageless phrase.

Degraded binaries and hierarchies wilt and transform. **We are all clergy now.**

There is room for truth and reconciliation, for healing and integrity, for fairness and recompense, for redemption, for alignment and for joy, for all of us in this world.

#yesallwomen #yesallchildren #yesalldaughters #blacklivesmatter
#earthabides

December 26, 2014–February 5, 2015

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Elizabeth Treadwell

§



NO MANIFESTO FOR POETRY READINGS AND LISTSERVS AND
MAGAZINES AND "OPEN VERSATILE SPACES WHERE CULTURAL
PRODUCTION FLOURISHES"²

after Yvonne Rainer

No to rape
No to denying rape
No to gaslighting
No to drugging people at readings
No to sexual violence
No to relentlessly sexualizing
No to relentlessly gendering
No to misgendering
No to gender
No to decorum
No to forums
No to allies
No to enemies
No to individuals aren't the institution
No to individuals are the institution
No to gossip shaming
No to not speaking up
No to not naming names
No to blaming those who speak and those who name
No to not realizing that when naming names things might go wrong
No to neglecting racial politics as you name names
No to neglecting sexual and/or gender politics as you name names

2/ Editors' Note: The quotation in the title of this manifesto comes from the "About" page on the website of Wendy's Subway (Brooklyn, NY), the former host venue of the now-defunct Copula poetry reading series. Copula is identified later in the text as the scene of alleged predatory druggings in March 2014. The manifesto refers to several other small, independent poetry reading series: Greetings (Brooklyn, NY); Poetry Orgy (Fayetteville, AR); and 851 (San Francisco, CA). 851 is now defunct.

No to using identity politics to shut down the naming of names
No to social norms and justice systems that don't keep people safe so
that naming names is a necessary resource
No to talking about rape as if it's hypothetical
No to calling these moments when people name names a "witch hunt"
No to not remembering actual witch hunts killed hundreds of thousands
of women
No to calling this manifesto "community policing"
No to not remembering who the police are, who they work for
No to "bros before hos," sincerely or ironically
No to presuming every opposition here is between men and women
No to presuming that we can respond to an essentializing sexist, racist
poetry scene without using the language of its binaries
No to this paradox of abolition
No to saying things so softly that no one can hear them
No to saying things so loudly that no one else can speak
No to Cambridge Poetry
No to saying your Cambridge School authority figure is "not a misogynist
but just prefers the company of men"
No to the *Claudius App*, it deliberately used a rape joke and mocked
women, their work, and their bodies for institutional critique
No to missing the *Claudius App*, its editors made jokes about their
fascination with publishing "hot young women"
No to not missing the *Claudius App*, it published lots of great work by
young women who found friendship and solidarity in each other
No to the East Bay Poetry Summit, the parties after the readings were
unsafe even though the readings were more interesting and
diverse than usual
No to the East Bay Poetry Summit, tolerant of presumptive and
unwanted fondling and grabbing and shoving
No to rapists hosting parties and readings at the East Bay Poetry Summit
No to no East Bay Poetry Summit
No to being sad if the East Bay Poetry Summit self-abolishes
No to the Copula reading series, women were drugged at it
No to Wendy's Subway, it hosted Copula
No to Wendy's Subway presuming that the druggings were mainly
Copula's issue
No to not asking the victim, or survivor, what sort of response they
might want from your space, your series

No to letting the victims, or survivors, think that they were alone and the only victim, or survivor, for many months

No to not recognizing that the victims, or survivors, might gain support from each other if they were put in touch and this would result in a better of chance identifying the perpetrator

No to presuming someone else is speaking for the victim, or survivor, and thus not contacting the victim, or survivor, on your own

No to presuming the victim, or survivor, should be the educator, your educator

No to not taking action until called out

No to then writing “we have truly felt the efforts of all organizers and readers to be moving in the direction of positive, healing, and reparative work” after doing nothing for months

No to statements

No to statements that are non-statements

No to event spaces where the bathroom is away from the main “party” area and where it’s possible to get from the bathroom to the outdoor exit without going through the main area, an ideal setup for predatory drugging

No to expecting or assuming event organizers know such a setup is ideal for predatory drugging

No to not taking precautions if you know this setup is ideal for predatory drugging

No to presuming that if someone had trouble with someone at a reading that they would want someone from your organization to intervene on their behalf, that they would trust you

No to being sad about Copula self-abolishing

No to the Greetings Reading Series at Unnameable Books, it belittles in introductions

No to no Greetings Reading Series at Unnameable Books

No to images of sexualized women on the cover of your publication; what are you selling?

No to the cover of *Hot Gun* issue #1

No to the bro-fest of *Hot Gun* issue #2

No to *HTML Giant*, it published Steven Trull/Janey Smith’s “Fuck List”

No to missing *HTML Giant*, even though Jackie Wang and Lily Hoang and Roxane Gay and Janice Lee and so many others wrote some great things there

No to Melville House, it published Tao Lin's *Statutory Rape* knowing it was about statutory rape and all it did was ask Lin to retitile the book
Richard Yates

No to no Melville House

No to Poetry Orgy, no to calling your reading an orgy

No to using a naked woman in a bathtub of blood to advertise a reading

No to employing sexual or verbal harassers in mentorship and other teaching positions

No to the Poetry Project, it didn't adequately deal with harassment complaints

No to presuming that the Poetry Project is a legacy institution above discussion

No to no Poetry Project

No to 851 A Reading Series, it introduced readers by who they were fucking

No to naming yourself after a Kathy Acker character who is endlessly raped and molested and then trying to rape and molest people endlessly yourself

No to remembering 851 A Reading Series as a great thing that happened at a "squat"

No to calling an empty apartment in your building that you use for poetry events a "squat"

No to the UK Poetry List

No to missing the UK Poetry List

No to being told that as a rape survivor you are just like Lucrece or Proserpine or Helen of Troy

No to sending Elizabeth Ellen's "Open Letter to the Internet" to the UK Poetry List and calling it an "intervention"

No to cross-examining a woman on her account of rape, to replicating the discourse and modes of the legal system that regularly fails women

No to a culture that discounts women's statements about their experience

No to assuming that rape exists only when it is recognized by the law

No to quoting a Robert Duncan poem about rape when someone has just shared their experience of rape with you and saying "there is no topic that's off-topic: poetry is touched by and touches it all"

No to appropriating a listserv as if it served as a playground for only your poetics

- No to no UK Poetry List, we learned things there and its contributors reached out to us when we were broke and depressed or wanting to talk about poems
- No to protecting your friends who shove or rape or call someone a cunt
- No to valuing friendship with people who shove or rape or call someone a cunt over the requests of those who got shoved or raped or cuntcalled
- No to demeaning someone who decides to sustain a friendship or a relationship with someone who has shoved or raped or called someone a cunt and who is trying to work on these issues with their friend
- No to thinking rape is something that can be privately “worked through” within friendship
- No to excluding the partners and friends of people we are mad at
- No to feeling guilty about excising someone from your life when needed, woman or not
- No to forgetting the emotional labor undertaken by lovers or friends when lovers or friends have done wrong
- No to blaming the victim, or survivor, because you love your wrongdoing lover or friend
- No to not acknowledging the effects talking about violence has on our mental health
- No to having to endure abusive relationships with partners socially and professionally entrenched
- No to raising Poetry above all else as you mentally abuse your partner
- No to ignoring, much less encouraging, mental illness and abuse for the sake of Great Poetry
- No to telling other young women that they’re not real poets because editors only like their cute *jeune-fille* asses and it will all be over for them soon
- No to being oblivious to the double bind of the *jeune-fille*, how she is objectified, but also how her objectification is at the expense of the *vieille-fille*, how it forces them out of alliance
- No to being a *vieille-fille* and perpetuating this by dismissing the *jeune-fille*
- No to being a *jeune-fille* and perpetuating this by dismissing the *vieille-fille*

No to not understanding that the *jeune-fille* and the *vieille-fille* are dialectical products of scene misogyny
No to forgetting these problems have histories
No to forgetting to ask about those histories
No to passively watching younger people inherit those histories
No to being a woman-identified poet and not helping younger w-identified writers like the countless people who did this for us
No to expecting that people will want to mentor or do other caring labor because they identify as women
No to being a woman-identified poet and feeling obligated to do as men ask or demand or assume you should because you are a “fellow” (ha) poet
No to prioritizing the careers of men over the claims and voices of non-men
No to sexual harassment policies without any teeth
No to male academics who think female students are their property, or their daughters
No to the equation of “daughter” with “property”
No to institutional amnesia
No to using your academic standing to put pressure on people so they won’t disagree with you
No to abusive professors against whom one is helpless
No to the academy as safe haven for them
No to tenure as safeguard for them
No to critical theory and insurrectionary discourse as hiding place for these same men
No to marxism without feminism
No to email as a viaduct for mental abuse
No to having to tell our rape stories
No to having to tell our harassment stories
No to being asked for the details
No to being asked for the details in order to support someone’s theoretical argument
No to not acting and then complaining that someone has hurt your feelings when they call you out
No to a “feminist” paternalism that is chivalrous and gallant and still opens doors for us, especially those of us who dress femme or look white or hetero

No to the idea that open doors should be entered
No to the closing of doors
No to saying it was “unfortunate, so unfortunate,” but “who knows what to do”
No to responding with a poem when asked to address criticisms of your reading series
No to claiming there is nothing that can be done when there are a thousand blog posts and pamphlets and resources with a thousand possible ways of responding
No to readings that are almost always two men and one woman
No to readings that almost always host readers who identify as white
No to believing that poetry readings are automatically a force for good
No to believing that poetry is inherently a force for good
No to men presuming they know what should be done
No to men presuming they should just hang back because this is not a men’s issue
No to men presuming women know what should be done
No to presuming it is mainly a women’s issue
No to presuming there are only male perpetrators
No to the argument that “men are subject to sexual violence too” as a way to dismiss that we live in a patriarchy
No to survivors, or victims, claiming they know what should be done because they are survivors, or victims
No to making the women added to the board or the curatorial role afterward do all the work
No to complaining about the work that the women added to the board or curatorial role do because they are doing it
No to working for a really long time on putting something together in response but not ever actually responding
No to defending not ever doing anything by saying you don’t want to falsely accuse anyone, you want to do it right
No to presuming that what the victim, or survivor, wants is necessarily right for the community
No to presuming that if the victim, or survivor, said it was okay or nothing should be done, that it was ok and nothing should be done
No to not figuring out what the community might want or need independent of the victim, or survivor
No to marginalizing trans and non-binary people

No to trying to get a young woman fired because she has called out
your mistreatment of women
No to kissing a woman's ass after threatening such professional
damage in order to maintain your reputation and position of power
No to hosting, promoting, or publishing those who have abused positions
of power, even if not yet made public
No to the times when one of us was the individual at an institution who
didn't listen to our friend's complaints, who didn't make it our
responsibility to change the location of an event so that our friend
felt safe to attend
No to making this problem any one individual's responsibility or fault
No to making it about yourself
No to seeing physical and sexual violence as only private issues
No to not knowing whether or not to use "victim" or "survivor" and
getting shamed for using one or the other instead of the other
No to allowing abusers to claim victimhood
No to forgetting that everyone fucks up, including you
No to forgetting that everyone has hurt someone, including you
No to reproducing the cycle of abuse
No to turning on other women without trying to be tender
No to treating other women terribly in the first place
No to judging another woman for self-banishment or withdrawal
No to not knowing the preferred pronoun of the poet you are introducing
No to presumptively racializing someone
No to the white privilege of some of us who are writing this
No to the cis privilege of some of us who are writing this
No to presuming that everyone who is writing this is white, privileged,
and cisgender
No to tokens
No to having to explain tokenism over and over again, especially when
you are often the token
No to writing any more of those poems, you know the ones we mean here
No to the degradation of non-men and non-whites in poems
No to explaining the degradation of non-men and non-whites in the arts
as aesthetics
No to writing a hyper-masculinist poem about how lesbians may or may
not have sex
No to conflating a poem's content with its author's politics

No to not understanding that there is a difference between violence in texts and violence to real bodies
No to not understanding that the two are related
No to boring “sexy” violence against women in poems about frenetic capitalist and internet culture
No to just letting misogyny play out because it might be satire, even when women are walking out
No to no satire
No to rape as a metaphor for capitalism
No to rape as a metaphor for your revolutionary sentiments
No to butt-fucking as a metaphor for imperialism
No to wholesale bans on the troping of rape, especially in the writings of non-men
No to art that sees only itself
No to a politic that moves only its art
No to forgetting who you are performing with and for
No to “but they did it to themselves”
No to “but they went home with them”
No to “they love it really”
No to “but you know what they’re like”
No to “let me liberate you”
No to claiming to hold a reading when you really just want to hold a drunken party
No to no parties
No to parties that aren’t safe for everyone to get drunk or otherwise fucked up if they want to
No to saying that the victims, or survivors, should just call the pigs if there is a problem
No to relying on curators or organizers to be like the pigs and police people
No to curators
No to not curating
No to not running the #s on your magazine or reading series
No to only running the #s after something fucking awful happens
No to assuming that if the #s are good, you are off the hook
No to magazines which blame their #s on women being “frightened to assert themselves” and “too anxious to please”

- No to shaming a community for dealing with this stuff and presuming some other community doesn't have to deal with it
- No to making it about whether or not you got invited to the meeting
- No to making it about whether you've been doing "this work" the longest, but also no to forgetting who's been doing "this work"
- No to leaving "this work" in the hands of those who have done "this work" before
- No to leaving "this work" at the feet of those whom white-supremacist-cis-hetero-capitalist-patriarchy hurts the most
- No to not knowing when the cis-hetero-capitalist-white-supremacist patriarchy helps you the most
- No to thinking that sexual violence is a problem exclusive to upper-middle-class mostly-white poetry communities
- No to imagining that the underrepresentation of non-white non-men in publishing is unrelated to power dynamics that result in harm to non-white non-men's bodies
- No to forgetting that the people who have named perps' names in this community have lots of social power and support and that this is not true in all communities
- No to *Chicago Review's* only inviting individuals to participate in this forum
- No to *Chicago Review's* not inviting NYC's Enough is Enough
- No to *Chicago Review's* not inviting the collective of women who shut down the UK poetry listserv
- No to *Chicago Review's* not inviting the UK feminist poets group proto-form
- No to *Chicago Review* publishing, alongside a forum on sexual violence, an essay by Kent Johnson, who on the UK poetry listserv asked a woman who had shared her experience of multiple rapes—including an instance when she had been incapable of any kind of consent—whether the evening hadn't just been drunken fun
- No to ignoring *Chicago Review's* history of sexist and racist and classist editorial practices and history of mostly male editors and history of special issues with ten white men over many years, and just recently three white women
- No to not writing this because of it
- No to non-apologies, apologies full of excuses, apologies blaming others, apologies all about yourself or your own guilt-driven need to explain at length
- No to defensiveness

No to decorum
No to forums
No to panels
No to roundtables
No to any forum, panel, or roundtable that does not discuss these issues
No to being a man who just wants to “move on”
No to not dealing with the mess after
No to feeling really bad about it but going on with your series or space anyway because your series or space is so important to the community
No to assuming that everyone in poetry communities has the same commitments
No to using the concept of solidarity as a way to shame other women
No to calling men by their last names and women by their first names in reviews, talks, and introductions
No to introducing someone at poetry readings with sexualized references to their appearance, clothing choices, or body parts
No to introducing someone at poetry readings with emphasized or judgmental references to their age
No to introducing someone at poetry readings with references to how much of an influence you or seminal male poets have had on their work
No to suggesting students of seminal male poets would be nothing without them
No to thinking “we” can speak as one and no to assuming “we” know what “you” think
No to your undergraduate tutor asking you who you are fucking and why aren’t you fucking him, suggesting ways you might instead fuck him
No to no complaining about these things
No to blaming those who complain
No to all the hours spent collectively writing and editing this when we could have been dedicating our time to writing radical man-poems to bolster our minute stakes in the eternal cultural capital accumulation game
No to presuming discussion will fix everything when we’ve been talking about these issues for so long and things just seem to keep getting worse

No to not celebrating the victories, they happen
No to saying we have reached the end of our thinking in identity politics
No to believing contradiction can be eradicated
No to not trying, despite ongoing contradictions, to think ourselves out
of chaos
No to allies who say they are allies but do not act
No to allies who say they are allies and leave it at that
No to enemies
No to refusing conciliation: the spaces we share (commercial, institutional,
private, public) are everybody's to be safe in and to keep each other safe in
No to the production of "safe spaces" that reproduce familiar exclusions
along lines of race and class
No to white bourgeois feminists obviously and insensitively hijacking
these feminist spaces
No to safe spaces which insist on one kind of language to talk about
violence
No to safe spaces which forget that standards of safety are also determined
by race and class
No to exploiting the language of "safe spaces" to set rules that suit
individuals, or power-as-usual
No to not doing anything for fear of doing it wrong
No to not admitting that you did it wrong
No to not admitting you may continue to do it wrong
No to not self-abolishing
No to using the language of abolishment as a placeholder instead of doing
actual work
No to reading these statements as personal insults instead of attempts to
undermine larger patriarchal structures
No to deciding when this conversation is over
No to the need to write this

Signed: a crowd of feminists based in

Baltimore, MD, US
Berkeley, CA, US
Brighton, United Kingdom
Hamilton, ON, Canada
London, United Kingdom
Melbourne, Australia
New York, NY, US
Oxford, OH, US
Oakland, CA, U.S.
San Francisco, CA, US
Vancouver, BC, Canada

lacking consensus and okay with that

§

THE INTERNAL PRESSURE IS DEATH

I had a nightmare when writing this talk in which I was opening for Chris Rock at the Manhattan venue Le Poisson Rouge. He was late. A poet who was there to see me was getting married the next day and I was not invited.

A poetry reading is public in that anyone who wants to attend can be an audience member. In that way, it differs from a wedding. In fact, it's much more like a funeral.

The first event I attended at the Poetry Project was Leslie Scalapino's memorial in the Parish Hall on June 21, 2010. I'd only recently started to read her work, beginning with *Considering How Exaggerated Music Is* and *it's go in horizontal*. I was renting a room from Rachel Levitsky. I had insomnia.

Almost exactly a year later, the memorial reading for Akilah Oliver was held in the same room. The lights went out. Laura Meyers rode in on her bicycle naked, the bike covered in white lights, as she'd done years ago in the Sacred Naked Nature Girls with Akilah. She made a few laps around the room and then spoke at the podium. She said, "Akilah, I miss the future."

Author's Note: This text is a revised excerpt of a talk delivered at the Poetry Project in New York City on January 7, 2015.

Earlier that spring, on March 3, 2011, Akilah's memorial service took place at Middle Collegiate Church. I kept my composure pretty well until Julie Patton sang a revised version of Leonard Cohen's "Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye." I'd only met Akilah once in life, but I lost my shit during that song because it was so clear that she was loved and her work was important. These memorials honored each dead woman, and their open-door nature meant that anyone curious about the poet and her work (her network, her life!) could walk in. Due to the presence of powerful grief, anyone could walk out, too, with empathy from the audience instead of judgment. I was practically a stranger to that environment, and while I felt embarrassed for crying in public I otherwise felt warmly embraced by the mix of family, friends, West Coast and East Coast artists, young and old, with small children crawling under the pews as they do.

Why do we reserve this mood, this ethos, for funerals?

Who is the event put on to benefit? Who is it friendly for? Who is invited, encouraged, expected to attend? Is it for friends? Is it for socializing? Is it a party? Is it social or performance or an elaborate performance of social? **Because if social is primary, or if an opaque performance of social is primary, the open door is slammed shut to strangers.** What is safe for one or one group might be quite dangerous for others.

In fall 2014, I was invited to read at a Brooklyn series with about two weeks' notice. One of my editors had suggested the curators reach out to me. Simone White's essay at Harriet, "Flibbertigibbet in a White Room / Competencies," despite having been published six months prior, was coming up frequently in online discussions of reading series and when I responded to the invitation to ask a few questions, I included a link. I asked about parity in terms of gender, race, and class. I was, I thought, gentle and tentative in my probing, balanced with enthusiasm about the invitation while trying to perform due diligence as an anti-racist ally. Surely, I thought, the curators who'd ended their initial message with "Any questions, just ask!" wouldn't mind. But a week later, they wrote back to inform me that they'd replaced me with someone else, and included a mocking jab that they weren't sure "what **if anything at all** is meant by aesthetics and parity" (emphasis mine). The consequence of my questioning was to be disinvited—so much for this attempt to encourage and maintain safe spaces for diverse voices!

As Simone writes, “It is total bullshit to enjoy being in a social or creative community that is segregated the way poetry is segregated.” I checked the series’ website. The reading I would have been part of was indeed an all-white event.

At readings and performances anyone should be able to wander in (or wander out) of their own volition, to witness the work, the human being behind it. This is what safe space looks like to me. One factor that makes a person comfortable enough to wander into a literary event where they know no one is the presence of someone (one or more people!) who looks like them. This comes in up grant writing; a funder will ask how exactly you plan to reach new audiences; what are you going to do to get new people in the seats? Diverse performers is one way.

As a poet who publishes and performs, I think the poetry reading exists as a phenomenon in order for poets to document new work and make a public, legible gesture against the inevitable grip of death. Before it’s time for the funeral, I want to facilitate other people, especially women, walking into the text and event. It is a risky but necessary action in opposition to hierarchy, which is to say in favor of greater cooperation and collaboration, even if we’re not friends yet.

Krystal Languell

IN THE NEXT ISSUE:

LETTERS IN RESPONSE TO THIS FORUM

SEND LETTERS:



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