

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

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