

on conflict and abuse

or, accountability is triggering

rosza daniel lang/levitsky

this is a collection of a series of pieces i wrote in 2016-18 and posted on tumblr, responding to the beginning of the ongoing series of attacks by supposed progressives on grassroots collective responses to sexual and gendered abuse and harassment.

i'm collecting them because they seem useful now that these attacks have coalesced as a supposedly 'left' part of the moral panic about so-called 'cancel culture', often invoking sarah schulman's slogan and book title "conflict is not abuse".

these were written in honor of bryn kelly
and everyone else who has gotten very little from efforts to spark accountability
and kept on trying.

This Is Not A Eulogy [8/16/2016] p.3

is a critique of schulman - not through her book (which was not out when i wrote it), but through facebook posts and other online writings that she described as containing the core of its argument.

Still Not A Eulogy [9/1/2016] p.11

is a clarification of some of the points in the first, partly in response to questions and criticism i received afterwards.

response history (or, conflict? abuse?) [3/1/2017] p.14

is an account of the response to the first post, in particular the harassment-by-proxy that schulman directed at friends, colleagues, and acquaintances of mine after the first piece appeared.

just when you (i) thought it was safe to go back in the water... [2/12/2018] p.18

is a look at the close match between schulman's rhetoric and a white house statement.

reMIX to stagnation [2/24/2018] p.19

is an appendix of sorts; commentary on an article from the mid-00s illustrating how organizational refusal to deal with structures that enable abuse lets them persist through time.

postscript p.21

some thoughts on "never talking shit in public about another trans person".

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this is not a eulogy

8/16/2016

so much for anonymity. it's been fun. this would be obnoxious to post without my name attached, though, so here it is. feel free to quote from this, or repost it, but please leave my name attached.

rosza daniel lang/levitsky

this is not a eulogy.

i'm still not ready to memorialize, to praise, to honor, to do much of anything besides sit with my rage at bryn's absence. to talk quietly with it, cry on its shoulder, see how much of it is about her (*the burning knowledge that i never get to collaborate with her again, the disquieting itch of half-conversations and unresolved questions, the sharp conviction that she knew exactly what she is putting us through*) and how much about the world (*the large world that wants us both dead, the pocket-sized world that we shared many parts of over many years*)...

i'm writing this as part of all that - as a way of continuing a conversation that i began with bryn more than a year ago and looked forward to carrying on.

it's partly sparked by a eulogy for bryn that i did not hear delivered and do not intend to read, written by sarah schulman. now, as far as i know, schulman was a good friend to bryn (and certainly in some ways a closer one than me over the past year or two). i'm going to say nothing - because i know nothing - about their relationship.

what i am going to talk about, however, is the ways in which schulman's recent and current intellectual project is a direct attack on models for dealing with intimate partner violence and sexual assault outside the police/court/prison system. models which current feminist organizers (many of them dykes and trans women) have developed on the groundwork laid by feminist organizing in the 1960s-80s (black & latina feminist organizing in particular) and the transformative justice projects that began after the cooptation of earlier 'anti-violence' efforts.

models which bryn turned to for support in her life - with imperfect success, but far more effect than she could have achieved through turning to the police and courts.

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(note: what follows will include talking pretty bluntly about abusive relationships, physically violent and otherwise, though no detailed descriptions of their results.)

(also note: i'm not including anything here that has not been in fairly wide online or gossip circulation at one time or another; how much will be new or surprising to you depends more than anything else on how long you've been in certain spaces.)

(also also note: i write long; the sting is usually in the tail. there are notes at the bottom; they're expansions and comments, not trails to sources, which are cited in the text.)

(also also also note: just in case, here's a tl;dr: collective action in resistance to violence is not the same thing as state violence. to erase that distinction, to condemn responses to violence as attacks, or to reframe abuse as 'conflict' "pretends that there are two equal sides, with equal power and equal legitimacy who can engage in equal debate" as if the past has not happened. and, really, can we white folks just stop with the carceral fake-feminism already?)

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in bryn's words, "on July 19th, 2009, Scott Loren Moore, one of the lead editors of Trans Bodies/Trans Selves, smacked me around pretty bad. At the time he was my boyfriend, and what occurred on this night was part of a larger pattern of intimate partner abuse." [i've removed the link to the post and photos of bryn's injuries that was here] friends of hers tried, in not particularly coordinated ways, to communicate with moore and encourage others who knew him to as well. the aim (as one of us put it) was: "to call him out, to dialogue with him, to let him know how domestic violence is hurtful. ...send the message that he is not welcome in your community until he has dealt with the fact that he has been violent with this romantic partners and until he is no longer a threat to anyone." and, ultimately, to push him to serve as model of changing behavior "so that other people in your community can learn that violence against women is unacceptable." [\[source\]](#)

as usually happens in these situations, moore did not respond with any change in his behavior; he simply shifted his social group of (mainly) trans men and cis women a few degrees to avoid any social consequences for his violence. i don't know whether his decision to change his last name from krywaczyk to moore was part of that evasive maneuver as well; it happened at about the same time.

bryn wrote the post i quoted in response to moore putting himself forth as the public face of Trans Bodies, Trans Selves during a major fundraising campaign for the book in 2013. bryn's post, understated as it was, inspired a great deal of pressure on the board of directors at Trans Bodies, Trans Selves to not have a known abuser as their fundraising figurehead. in two days, the board announced that moore (who was given the protection of anonymity in their statement) was "stepping down from his role in the fundraising campaign" because they "stand with victims of abuse". [\[source\]](#)¹

this is a bigger success than it may seem. moore still claims on his facebook page and various websites to be "the editor" (not co-editor, mind you - on a massive project with 27 text editors and a trans woman as the credited primary editor on amazon) and even the "author" of TBTS. but googling his name and the title gets you bryn's original post on the first results page, and eight supporting posts in the 22 total results shown. he is, like few other responsible parties, clearly and publicly attached to the results of his violence.

¹ this note is just to say that i am not going to even get into all the problems with TBTS. that would be a whole other roomful of cans of worms: the economic decisions massively at odds with the model set by their alleged model, the Boston Women's Health Collective who created Our Bodies, Our Selves (including accepting the hideously extortionate deal oxford university press offered them, necessitating the fundraising moore was brought on to lead); the lack of sections on violence (from strangers, from blood-relatives, from partners, from clients, from co-workers, from bosses, from police, from correctional officers, from healthcare workers...) or on sex work (i mean, really?!?!); the board's overwhelmingly cis membership... [edit: the person who wrote the post i linked to here describing how a lot of this played out during her brief connection to the project asked me to take out the citation, so i have. suffice it to say: these problems were pointed out long before publication, and the responses involved all the usual kinds of demands for unpaid labor to fill gaps that shouldn't have existed.]

if moore should decide to “deal with the fact that he has been violent with his romantic partners”, to alter his behavior, to serve as a visible model of change for others responsible for past abuse, he will no longer find this part of his past to hamper his social and professional life - if it even does so now. there are of course exceptions - i myself, having seen bryn’s injuries firsthand, am not likely to be willing either to share space with moore or to allow him to leave a room quietly - but non-profit organizations are notoriously more forgiving of bloody hands than trans dykes.

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so why am i telling this long and not exactly cheerful story?

because a prominent person with whom i share circles of involvement in political and cultural work, as well as some social landscapes, has made it her main intellectual project for quite some time now to attack exactly this approach to dealing with violence (especially intimate partner violence and sexual assault) within our communities. because that person’s work is pretty broadly accepted with uncritical adulation by a surprisingly wide swathe of queer, trans, and feminist folks in my various worlds. because i’m not hearing a lot of actual examination of the implications of this intellectual project for the important ongoing work of developing and refining practices for responding to violence and other forms of harassment, attack, and abuse without resorting to the police/court/prison system.

because that person has made much of her close ties to bryn, and this story illustrates perfectly precisely what and who this intellectual project sets out to attack.

in case it isn’t clear, i’m talking about sarah schulman here. schulman is a writer whose novels were (and remain) very important to me as a queer new yorker deeply shaped by ACT UP and the Lesbian Avengers, as a jewish radical from a left family, as a dyke who started spending time on the lower east side in the early 1990s.² i’m kinda surprised to find myself aiming some pretty sharp criticism at her current work. to give credit where it’s due, my analysis here is rooted in a number of conversations with my friend and comrade malcolm

2 i’ve been far less impressed, i should say, by schulman’s recent foray into queer palestine solidarity politics. not by her commitment, or her enthusiasm, both of which are obvious and substantial, but by her approach of turning up late for the party and loudly deciding that it only began when she arrived. the book, *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International*, in which she chronicles her shift, beginning in 2006, into active participation in this work, barely hints at the decades of organizing that created the path she walked in that rather belated conversion, and developed the analysis which she relays and summarizes.

schulman makes passing mention of Kvisa Shchora / Black Laundry, the israeli queer anti-occupation group, but gives no indication of the work it did in the five years prior to her contact with one of its members. she gives even less credit - none - to the u.s. based solidarity and BDS organizing of Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism (QUIT) in the bay area since 2000, and her own home city’s majority-queer Jews Against the Occupation/NYC (active 2000-2008), both groups involving ACT UP and Lesbian Avengers veterans. and that’s not to mention the many informal coalitions that have brought No Pride In Occupation and BDS contingents to pride parades across the country every year since 2000 (in nyc, frequently to both the manhattan and brooklyn parades).

nor is there mention of the consistent dyke-led opposition to israeli colonialism that has been a very visible part of the u.s. palestine solidarity movement since the 1970s. off the top of my head, limiting myself strictly to nyc-based groups with members still active in palestine solidarity organizing in nyc since schulman’s conversion (the set most easily available to schulman), i can name Di Vilde Chaya, the Jewish Women’s Committee to End the Occupation, the Human Rights Rapid Response Network supporting palestinian women held as political prisoners, the networks that enabled the palestinian gay women of Aswat to visit the u.s. in the early 00s, and the currently active affinity groups known as We Will Not Be Silent and Jews Say No.

rehberger, who pushed me to think more and harder about schulman's current project and its relationships to other attacks on collective resistance to violence.³

the part of schulman's work that has come in for some (mainly indirect) critique has been her participation in the current professorial moral panic around the mythic figures of the "over-sensitive student", the "complaining student", and the "censoring student". schulman has aligned herself strongly with the fomentors of that panic - the set of allegedly progressive tenured professors in the u.s. (jack halberstam, most vocally) who believe that students may only have needs and make critiques within the limits of the syllabi their instructors create. the best concise analysis of this whole vein of thinking comes about halfway through sara ahmed's essay [Against Students](#) (where my list of mythic evil student-types comes from), which goes on to point out how this anti-student position fits in perfectly with administrators' and faculty members' refusal of accountability for (male) faculty or students around sexual harassment. i'm going to focus on the other side of that coin.

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not long after bryn and her friends' efforts around moore's role at Trans Bodies, Trans Selves, in a series of conversations on facebook in 2014 (i'll cite them by date) schulman repeatedly returns to a few sentences from her 2009 book on familial homophobia. she presents it as the key seed of her analysis around community responses to sexual assault and sexual harassment, calling it "my favorite line" [4/22/14].

the line reads: "Group shunning is an active form of harassment. ...And it's at the core of all kinds of negative groups, and the founding principle of fascism." [6/14/14] schulman makes it clear that this analysis is at the heart of her current project in a later post on her forthcoming book: "It's about how intolerance of difference, overreaction and overstatement of harm are used to justify gross injustices ranging from group bullying and shunning to incarceration and occupation. I show how bad groups (couples, friends, communities, families, nations, peoples) employ bonding by bullying as a shallow definition of loyalty instead of helping each other negotiate and resolve conflict through authentic relationships of depth." [7/20/14]

now, this may sound sensible enough on first read. who doesn't want authentic, deep relationships? and who doesn't want to condemn bullying? but notice how "friends" and "communities" "shunning" an individual person swiftly slide into "nations" incarcerating millions and occupying colonized territories by military force. and looking at how schulman describes what she means in more practical ways makes it very clear that she does equate collective action taken against concrete situations of interpersonal violence - the kind of support which bryn received - with state violence from above against all manner of targets.

schulman writes: "next time I hear a terrible thing about someone, I will ask them first. Guaranteed there is much more to it, more than I can possibly imagine without asking." [3/29/14] not only must whatever explanation someone like moore offers be taken seriously, they must be provided "a forum where accused people can address their specificities and express how they experience and understand events - and even more importantly, confirm what those events actually are." [11/1/14]

³ malcolm has, among other things, been my link to conversations about schulman's recent work that have been taking place in the past few years (on tumblr and elsewhere, as well as offline) among organizers, writers, and academics. some of the folks involved who've been willing to have their names used in public are LJ Kadey, Rikki Reynolds, Beatrix L. McBride, and Gina de Vries. for one of the more formal results of these conversations, see sarah orem & neil simpkins' article on trigger warnings, which is available [here](#).

i - like many friends of bryn's - spoke with moore in the days and weeks after he injured her. he used all the usual rhetorical tactics of abusive partners and sexual assaulters. in sara ahmed's words (from the same facebook thread in which schulman described her book project), he "narrated [his abuse] as being about conflict between parties... presented [himself] as 'in conflict' with existing or prevailing social norms... presenting [himself] as having to defend [his] right to exist." [7/21/14] this attempt to do exactly as schulman insists he should, to redefine "what those events [his assault on bryn] actually are", was not surprising. it was hugely predictable. and it is precisely what schulman's approach - like that of the u.s. court system - is structured to invite: a reframing of abuse (in this case, physical attack) as "conflict".

that redefinition - the key first step in discrediting women who report sexualized violence - is precisely what a collective response like the one that began after moore's attack on bryn is structured to avoid. this approach (a standard one for decades in these kinds of accountability processes, and in the transformative/reparative/restorative justice movements) combines a call for active communication with the responsible person with a refusal to allow him to reframe the discussion. as the open letter to moore i quoted earlier puts it, his "regrets", "emotional wounds", and explanations for his violently abusive behavior do not change or justify that behavior. and that behavior means he should have "no place in any anti-oppression communities... until he has dealt with the fact that he has been violent with his romantic partners" and taken "some public accountability for the escalating abusive behavior" of the previous two years.

this is the "group shunning" that schulman describes as "vigilanteism, rumor mills, group psychosis, group bullying, scapegoating" [11/1/14] and more recently as "brutality" [11/16/2015] and calls "the founding principle of fascism": a group of friends relying on the weak tools of moral suasion to pressure someone to "become capable of dealing with [his] emotions in a way that doesn't involve violence or verbal assaults", and inviting others to "dialogue with him" with that goal. and, after four years, making this history of abuse and refusal to take responsibility known to people who placed him in a position of prestige within a supposedly community-oriented project. this is the "active harassment" that schulman equates with mass incarceration and colonial occupations.

* * * * *

let me step back a moment, and consider the possibility that schulman might make an exception to her condemnation of collective action, and consider the "friends, communities" around bryn somehow not a "bad group" using "a shallow definition of loyalty". if so, what does schulman suggest we ought to have done? she's very explicit: "when there is a real actual crime that should be a crime, and a person goes to the state so that there will be fair and open adjudication, then justice is better served than through rumor and whisper." [11/1/14]

this is where i find schulman's whole line of thinking most mind-boggling. when on earth - in what single moment - would justice have been served at all, let alone well, had bryn gone to the NYPD?

when she was harassed and misgendered while making a complaint?

when she was arrested alongside (or instead of) moore, since the NYPD has a mandatory arrest policy for 'domestic violence' calls, and his claims of mutual assault would have been heard and honored?

when an anonymous, unaccountable grand jury under the control of a district attorney decided whether moore should even be prosecuted?

when her entire sexual history, HIV status, trans identity, and whatever other aspects of her life moore's lawyer chose to dig into were repeatedly dragged through court?

when moore's ivy league education, wealthy background, nonprofit-consultant entrepreneurship, and male privilege were deployed in a he-said she-said presentation against her working-class background, interrupted formal education, DASA-supported personal economy, and life as a trans woman artist?

or, in the so-called 'best case' result, if moore was actually convicted and became one more trans body engulfed by the u.s. prison system? without, of course, having in any way to admit responsibility for his actions or take any steps to change his future behavior.

alongside schulman's embrace of the carceral model⁴, i'll take the results of "rumor and whisper" any day, if we're talking about serving justice.

to be clear: schulman's account of what to do "when there is a real actual crime that should be a crime" came in the context of a conversation not about intimate partner violence, but about rape and sexual assault, where the effects of "going to the state" are even worse for the women involved, and even less likely to result in the carceral 'best case' scenario. in that conversation, her next comment was that "the perfect McCarthyite example"⁵, "could easily be extrapolated" from the public attention given to jian gomeshi when the open secret of his many sexual assaults on and routine sexual harassment of the women around him became fully public.

here, again, the "rumor and whisper" that schulman condemns are clearly visible for what they are in so many similar cases, from capitol hill to the faculty lounge: a usually uncoordinated strategy women (and queers and trans folks of all genders) use to keep each other safe from rape, sexual assault, and other forms of violence. for the gomeshi case, melissa martin describes the workings of this beautifully (and in disturbing detail, for anyone who has been part of something similar) in her article "Do You Know About Jian" (originally posted [here](#), but now seemingly purged from the internet).

it is when that uncoordinated approach shifts, generally through individual bravery (as in the gomeshi and cosby cases, and with bryn), and becomes visible as active, collective, strategic action that for schulman it becomes "McCarthyite". that is: when what women do to protect themselves and other women starts to work, even on the minimal level of holding one man accountable for many years of sexual assaults, it becomes identical to a decade-long reign of terror that cost thousands their livelihoods, hundreds their freedom, and a still unknown number their lives.

through all the conversations i've cited and more, schulman erases the difference between the violent exercise of state power and collective action from below (even at its least coordinated) in response to violence. ever since

4 my phrase here condenses a whole body of analysis, largely by feminists of color. for one key recent overview, see victoria law's [Against Carceral Feminism](#).

5 interestingly, schulman cites lillian hellman's 1934 play *The Children's Hour*, whose success long pre-dated joe mccarthy's rise to power. while a 1952 revival was seen as a critique of mccarthy and his HUAC allies, the play actually deals with homophobic false gossip and a failed attempt to get justice through the courts, rather than the repressive use of state power and violence that we associate with "mccarthyism". using hellman's play as "the perfect [fictional] mccarthyite example" (rather than, say, arthur miller's 1953 *The Crucible*, or margarete steffin & bertold brecht's 1947 *Galileo*) is yet another moment where schulman erases the difference between collective action and state power. further, hellman's play depicts the impossibility of relying on state power to bring justice - the opposite of schulman's recommendation.

the very explicit equation of the two in the posts i've already quoted, she's continued to do this quite directly - for example, by using the north carolina anti-trans 'bathroom bill' and the recent laws aimed at suppressing the black vote as illustrations of "false accusations" and "scapegoating" [4/19/2016]. more subtle versions also appear, however. for instance, when schulman rejects the validity of criticizing germaine greer's insistence that trans women are not women, calling the critiques "shunning" and associating them with "despise of difference... blame and false accusation" [10/29/2015]. here, the thing to be condemned is not a prominent media figure's endorsement of the justification for state policies attacking trans women, but criticisms of that stance made by those directly affected by the policies her words support.

schulman manages this conflation of grassroots collective action and the actions of the state, somehow, while both endorsing the use of state violence as the only ethical solution to interpersonal violence **and** encouraging us to prioritize the voices, feelings, and explanations of those responsible for interpersonal violence. aside from 'serving justice by going to the state', her only suggestion of what to do in response to harm is the rather patronizing suggestion to "pick up the phone and talk to them about it. You will learn something!" [9/19/2015]. in her account of the world, people only make accusations of harm because "they don't understand what is going on" [11/16/2015], or because "many people mischaracterize what is happening, and then respond to things that never took place." [9/18/2015]. and, of course, the person responsible for harming them can clear everything up, if they're only allowed the space to "sit down and communicate" [2/19/2016].

this approach is (to adopt schulman's words on a different subject) "a theater of subjection that pretends that there are two equal sides, with equal power and equal legitimacy who can engage in equal debate." [4/27/2016] the palestinian critique of 'dialogue' in the context of state and social violence that schulman so eloquently summarizes here is a perfect description of the deep problems with this side of her current project.

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similarly, the story of bryn's friends' failed attempt to get scott moore to take responsibility for his abusive actions, and her communities' successful attempt to make his actions have (fairly minimal) consequences for his life, to me illustrates perfectly what's wrong with schulman's overall view - precisely because of its absolute ordinariness and lack of large-scale impact.

this isn't a story of the stunning success of an accountability process, or of a transformative justice project (though those stories do exist). it's a story of the everyday reality of this work, in which things kinda go okay, in a limited way, and no one is really satisfied. but in which the person responsible for abusive violence is not handed a 'dialogue' platform from which to rewrite his actions, a nonprofit organization belatedly does the right thing, the police are given no opportunity to harass a woman targeted for violence, and the prison system doesn't claim another trans body.

and i'll take that everyday reality - the one that comes from collective action - over the moral panic schulman seems bent on igniting. i don't pretend to know why she's pursuing this project of delegitimizing decades of movement work.⁶ i do know that it uses the same logic and rhetoric as the right-wing ("anti-PC") side of the

⁶ i don't know, but i can guess, which i'll do by spreading some open secrets.

first, though: i don't write from a politics of purity, or a claim of purity. i'm writing this piece, as i said, because i think the ideas schulman's project promotes are dead wrong and undermine important movement work. and similarly, you should agree with me because of what i'm saying, not because of who i am. which is, for clarity, someone who has crossed other people's lines of consent as well as done work responding to these kinds of harm.

1980s and 90s culture wars ('this is oversensitivity! it's fascism! it's mccarthyism! you're silencing me! there's more to the story!'), against the same targets (young women, trans women, queers, youth of color) - and that alone should make any schulman fan start to worry.

and more than anything else, i know that i want to live in a world without police, courts, or prisons, where when someone is attacked by their lover in my community, we respond together to support the person targeted for violence and to help the person responsible to never do such a thing again. and i know that my communities' traditions of "deep gossip" and collective action are crucial tools for that, not the seeds of fascism.

#bryn kelly #sarah schulman #conflict and abuse #state violence #intimate partner violence #triggers and warnings #transformative justice #accountability is triggering #feminism #fuck carceral feminism #moral panics for the whole tenured family #accountability processes

it's pretty well-known among dykes of a certain age and social set in nyc that schulman has a pattern of stalking and harassing former lovers. i haven't myself heard an account from someone directly targeted, but i've recently heard this again from a friend and organizing comrade who was told a direct account. similarly, schulman is known as one of the better living examples of the "tyranny of structurelessness" for her history of using collective processes and informal pressure to remove those not living up to her standards of lesbian purity from the Avengers and other groups.

with that history, it's not surprising that schulman would be deeply committed to an approach that defines all abuse as 'conflict', insists on prioritizing the accounts and views of those responsible for harassment and violence, and allows prestige and social power to do their work in obscurity. and, further, that when challenged on the ideas she vigorously promotes in her non-fiction work, she would fall back on the oldest right-wing gaslighting argument around: "I'm an artist... when I write something, I'm not claiming that it's right." [interview in The Guardian, 3/29/2016]

and, of course, schulman's well-known willingness to talk to anyone who disagrees with her - but exclusively in a one-on-one setting - is a textbook strategy for avoiding public conflict and argument in which genuine challenges might emerge and need to be dealt with.

it also may be meaningful that a project schulman co-founded and in many ways still sets the tone for, the MIX Queer Experimental Film & Video Festival, has repeatedly faced crises over exactly these issues: the abuse of prestige and social power; the entanglement of the sexual and money economy within the organization; an inability to respond to sexual assaults within festival spaces. and that it has not yet developed any collective mechanisms for dealing with patterns of abuse (it remains to be seen whether current responses to the most recent such crisis will break this pattern). [note: it did not; see *reMIX to stagnation*, below.]

still not a eulogy; a few notes

9/1/2016

a few notes of clarification, since some of the responses to “this is not a eulogy” seem to want them...

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the piece is not a review or analysis of “Conflict Is Not Abuse”. i’m not part of the charmed circle who’ve apparently had pre-publication access to the manuscript. when the book comes out, i might read it.

the piece is an analysis and critique of lines of argument that schulman has laid out publicly over the past few years, online and in published interviews. she’s described these ideas as the core of the book; i’ve got no reason to doubt her, which is why i describe them as part of the same intellectual project as the book. but in my writing, i’m dealing with - and taking seriously - those arguments and positions as they stand.

* * *

i use the account of bryn’s attempt to bring a degree of accountability to scott moore as part of that critique for a number of reasons.

one is that it’s a particularly good example (out of the many similar attempts that i’ve been part of or close to) of the ordinary not-quite-success that can result from the kinds of collective action that schulman and i disagree about.

another is that unlike many efforts for accountability, it was one which remained to a great extent in bryn’s hands - she made very clear decisions about how to describe her experience and how to make parts of it public, and her friends and community basically honored those decisions. i’ve continued to do so in my account, limiting what i describe to what bryn made public and using her words and those of her closest support crew.

and another is that i do not believe in abstraction. in analysis and critique that goes beyond a single situation or example, absolutely. but not in approaches that separate ideas from the sweat and smells of our bodies.⁷ i don’t see any value in contrasting straw men – throwing hypothetical “people seeking accountability” or “targets of intimate partner violence” against schulman’s “bad groups”, “group psychosis”, and “fascism” - when talking about actual people and their actual lives. i believe it is precisely a move towards abstraction that makes possible the slippage by which schulman can equate responses to sexual violence with bigoted legislation, incarceration, and colonial occupation. i don’t think abstraction can be combatted by abstraction - i think it’s best deflated by specific examples.

⁷ yes, this is partly my marxist sensibility (call it dialectical materialism if that makes it easier to hear it coming from an anarchist). and also one of the many things i’ve learned from black feminists (claudia jones to kimberlé crenshaw to mariame kaba) and from dis/ability justice thinkers (eli clare to aurora levins morales to aj withers).

* * *

in many ways, at the heart of my critique is a queer, feminist view of gossip as a lifesaving resource and as a mode of collective analysis of the world.⁸ i take quite seriously the critiques of the liberatory power of gossip, articulated recently by b. binaohan [with particular clarity](#). one part of this, as they point out, is that for gossip to be even potentially useful, it has to reach folks. and that depends on its circulation through informal networks which often reproduce the patterns of exclusion found everywhere in our white supremacist, misogynist, capitalist, colonialist, disableizing (this is not a complete list) society.

i'm interested in exploring what a consciously justice-oriented practice of gossip can look like. to me, part of that is trying to break the bounds of the informal networks that i'm part of in various ways. bringing things from the pile of dirty laundry (especially the old stuff that 'everybody' knows), including about myself, to places where they haven't been permitted to appear without a protective layer of deodorant.

to me, this is entwined with a way of thinking about, and talking about the relationship between people's creative work (including their political thought) and the conduct of their lives. as i've said, i have no interest in a politics of purity, or a rejection of those found to be 'tainted' in some way. to use one of the classic examples, i adore ezra pound's exquisite "stations of the metro" just as much as i detest his anti-semitic, anti-black, libertarian-capitalist, pro-fascist beliefs. and, on the other side, a virtuous life guarantees nothing about creative work or political ideas; one of the most ethical folks i've ever organized with was also a firm partisan of a sectarian socialist group that has had an incredibly destructive effect on movements for justice in the u.s. during the years of their involvement.

i don't, however, think our work and our lives are separable. and i believe we can think best about either when we think about the two together – which we can only do when we're able to know something about the lives that the work comes out of. and informal knowledge – gossip, dish, rumor - is key to that, because it's one of the few things that can (though of course it doesn't always) evade the official account of a life, whether that version is created by its subject or by others, whether it's hagiographic or demonizing, whether it's newly-coalescing or long-sedimented.

further, one of the ways out of the calvinist bind that a politics of purity creates is to understand how deeply people can change. and we're also only able to do that if we can glimpse both the before and the after. in a different world, perhaps i'd've been able to write about scott moore as an example of someone who did an awful

⁸ some sources of inspiration, from the theoretical side, to give credit where it's due:

henry abelove, glossing ginsburg on o'hara: "Our deep gossip. Here gossip is illicit speculation, information, knowledge. It is an indispensable resource for those who are in any sense of measure disempowered, as those who experience funny emotions may be, and it is deep whenever it circulates in subterranean ways and touches on matters hard to grasp and of crucial concern." ("Deep Gossip", Introduction)

eve kosofsky sedgwick: "I take the precious, devalued arts of gossip, immemorially associated in European thought with servants, with effeminate and gay men, with all women, to have to do not even so much with the transmission of necessary news as with the refinement of necessary skills for making, testing, and using unrationalized and provisional hypotheses about what kinds of people there are to be found in one's world." ("Epistemology of the Closet", Introduction: Axiomatic)

andrea dworkin: "While gossip among women is universally ridiculed as low and trivial, gossip among men, especially if it is about women, is called theory, or idea, or fact." ("Right-Wing Women")

and in various ways the work of poets like frank o'hara, judy grahn, kay gabriel, alta, and muriel rukeyser.

thing, and then changed how he moves through the world as a result of the pressure and support offered by those close to him - but a description of who he became would be meaningless without the story of who he had been before. again, gossip, which ties us to our pasts (especially the ones we'd rather jettison), is key.

* * *

and finally, @highmasc⁹:

my conversations with bryn are between me and bryn. i'm not going to try to represent her thoughts about any of this, and i'd mistrust any attempt by anyone (including myself) to do that.

because i think it's quite clear in her writing that's available online, i do feel comfortable saying that your second paragraph is very much my understanding of how bryn felt about the results of the efforts to bring some accountability to scott moore. which is exactly why i don't describe it as a victory, or make any claims for it having "empowered" anyone. like almost all of the similar things i've been around, it mostly failed; like some of them, it had a certain limited success. and that's exactly why i think it stands as such an important example of what's wrong with attacks on these kinds of collective action, which both massively overstate their effects and deeply misunderstand their aims and weaknesses alike.

and, finally, as i say in the piece, i know nothing about the inside of bryn and schulman's friendship, nor do i need to. i think schulman's visible support for bryn's work, and both of their words about each other, speak for themselves.

#conflict and abuse #gossip dish and rumor #feminism #accountability processes #transformative justice #fuck carceral feminism #deep gossip #sarah schulman #fuck abstraction

9 [added for this version: @highmasc was the tumblr handle of bryn's lover at the time of her suicide, gaines blasdel. i think his comments to me are clear from my responses.]

response history (or, conflict? abuse?)

3/1/2017

a while after posting [“this is not a eulogy”](#) and my [follow-up](#) to it, and with “Conflict Is Not Abuse” out for a bit, it seems worth making visible an account of what i’ve seen & heard of the response to the post.

the *what i’ve seen & heard of* part is important: i’m not on facebook, so quite a bit of this is second-hand. i’m trying to be as comprehensive about what i’ve heard as i can, precisely because it’s not coming to me directly.

partly because i think doing so is important to the argument on gossip that’s involved here. and also because it points to the differences between what circulates visibly (on social media in particular) and what circulates based on ties of trust and friendship, and may indicate a bit about what the different stakes are for different people in that circulation. (which goes back to the points that b. binaohan made in the piece i cited [here](#). i’m not including here two responses that happened via tumblr, which are already visible: one is in the notes, and my reply is in the follow-up post; the other is reflected in an edit to the posts’s first footnote.

i should also preface this by saying that i’ve had exactly two interactions with schulman herself since posting the piece. one over email, at the beginning of september, after a friend wrote us offering to broker some kind of conversation between us: she said she’d be open to a moderated public conversation; i said i’d lean towards an exchange in writing. neither of us has followed up. and one in person, at the beginning of last october, while waiting for the house to open at a play: she gave me a copy of the book and offered her usual openness to one-on-one private conversation.

what follows is what’s been happening alongside that.

so: i posted the piece on this tumblr on august 16. after a few weeks, it had perhaps 8 notes - a few more than the 3-6 average i get on an original post; much lower than the 40ish i’ve gotten once or twice.

on august 30 i started to get calls from friends who’d been cold-called by schulman; that’s continued pretty steadily (and i don’t assume it’s stopped since the last one i know of). the calls i’ve heard about have mainly been to folks who’ve had far less contact with her than i have - some who’d **never** had a conversation with her before - but who’re seen as being influential players in one or another white queer arts/culture scene. mostly, the folks she’s called hadn’t read, or even been aware of, my piece at the time they were cold-called.

the framings used in the calls have varied, from ‘i’m told you know who this person is’ to ‘can you explain this person’, but the content has been consistent: extended venting about the footnotes in which i air widely known dirty laundry; minimal engagement with the political critique of her work. there’s also been a fair amount of active misrepresentation of what i wrote: attribution of specific politically-charged phrases that i did not use, etcetera. the implication (from the choice of targets and the tone of the conversations) has been pretty clear: these folks are supposed to be reining me in, and are on notice that they’re associated with me. if my memory

serves, nearly everyone who's spoken to me has said that they suggested that schulman respond directly to me if she has arguments with what i wrote. she hasn't.

around then i also started to hear about approaches made to folks (some of them friends of mine) who had linked to the post from facebook, or mentioned it elsewhere online, mainly by schulman, later also by other people. again, the message was very consistent: they were told that the piece was inaccurate, that it misquoted schulman, that she "would never" have written certain things, and that they should take down the link. some of this, especially from schulman's proxies, also included active misrepresentations of what i wrote - the most entertainingly inept being the out-of-context quoting of the word "obnoxious" (which i used in the first line of the piece to characterize anonymous - and thus unaccountable - critiques) as my supposed rubric for the whole piece.

some of the more rigorous targets of this sort of thing made their posts private while they went over my footnotes; upon finding my citations accurate, they were rather pissed off at the line they'd been fed, and reposted. others kept their posts up throughout, or took them down and kept them down - the difference depending mostly, as far as i can tell, on how much of their paid employment depends on the goodwill of social circles in which schulman and her proxies hold influence.

now, in the past two months, i've shared a certain amount of social space with several of the more diligent folks who've acted as schulman's proxies in this. none of them has said a single word to my face about any of it (unless i'm misremembering about one person's (non)involvement in the online hassling of re-posters, which would give the traditional rule-proving exception).

by contrast, at various points i've been approached by friends and acquaintances (if you're reading this and aren't sure which applies, to me it's the former /grin/) who've had disagreements with, questions about, or strong reactions to the piece. we've had long and interesting conversations about it, which haven't necessarily led to agreement, but definitely to better understanding between us. and for me, to clearer articulations of things i wrote and things that were left between the lines of the piece. i'm incredibly grateful for those exchanges.

also in the realm of direct communication, i've been thanked by a number of folks for writing the piece, specifically because they felt they couldn't have safely done so. that making this kind of political critique of a prominent figure would have led to retribution and cold-shouldering that would have cost them paid work and social access they need to survive as queer and trans cultural workers. to be clear about what i mean by "prominent": we're talking about 'world-famous in poland', as we say in yidishland - but if you live and work in warsaw, that means a lot.

i've also been told about more personal online smear efforts directed at me. again being carried out by folks at zero to one degree of social distance from me, with no attempt to make any kind of personal contact. the most direct of these that i've heard about was by someone whose response to the rape of a friend/close acquaintance was to try to shut her up, going so far as to contact her partner to try to get **him** to silence her. [note: the previous sentence has been edited for stricter accuracy] which, i would say, illustrates very clearly both who has

a stake in schulman's arguments going uncriticized, and how directly her arguments lend themselves to encouraging online attacks of the kind they claim to deplore.

finally, in mid-october, i was told that someone had been posting links to the piece in schulman's book tour facebook events. i'd be interested to hear what conversations have come out of that - especially among folks who've read the book, and can see how it stays with and how it moves away from the underpinnings that schulman laid out while writing it. feel free to drop me a line and let me know (in the comments, or in my asks - if i write any further follow-up, i won't quote private notes without asking, of course¹⁰). the copy schulman gave me is in my to-read pile (under a martha rosler collection, some jo clayton, beth elliot's autobiography-a-clef, most of "The Warmth of Other Suns", and a few other things). i may have more things to say after i read it; i may say them here.

the notes count on the post has hovered in the 40s for several months now.¹¹ most hedgehog photos do better by several orders of magnitude. i don't take notes as a reflection of readership numbers; on posts that air political critiques, especially outside of a politics of purity, i do take them as a sign of how comfortable folks feel making agreement visible.

all in all, i think it's been an interesting set of responses, especially in light of schulman's ideas. i wasn't really expecting this kind of illustration of how they play out in practice, but there it is. a critique from slightly below (and reasonably close by), leads not to the person criticized "pick[ing] up the phone and talk[ing] to them about it", but to a classic process of triangulation, aimed at discrediting and isolating the source of the critique. the political substance of the critique is ignored, and not even token responses to it are made. this is a pretty minor form of what sarah ahmed has talked about as "how you become a problem when you expose a problem", but even so it highlights the basic thing missing from schulman's account: power.

some of what schulman talks about in the writing my piece analyzed is real: the israeli government does use false claims of victimhood to justify ongoing attempted genocide, and propagates them through astroturf hasbara strategies; mob harassment online does exist, with rapists and sexual harassers deploying it to try to silence their victims, and pseudo-feminists using it to cut trans women and sex workers off from survival resources.

but what a formalistic and psychological account cannot do is distinguish between these tactics used in defense of entrenched power, and collective efforts from below to challenge structures of power and prestige and those who benefit from them (and to enact alternatives to existing institutional structures). to stretch a metaphor, the approach schulman argues for can't distinguish between a power-drill hole that eases the passage of a screw strengthening the master's house, and a termite hole inching towards its collapse: all it can see is a hole, and its impulse is to fill it, strengthening the structure.

and what losing that distinction - refusing a basic analysis of power - enables, at the most basic level, is the uncritical embrace of the pattern of response i've just described, by people claiming to defend the utility of open, acknowledged conflict. the mobilization of something that looks a lot like "group shunning", "overreaction",

10 [sadly, i haven't heard from anyone on this.]

11 [As of 1/18/2021, the count stands at 193.]

and “bonding by bullying as a shallow definition of loyalty”. a willingness to attack in spaces presumed to be unseen, and smile in public sight, assuming that the gap would never be seen or named.

a misunderstanding of the power of gossip, rumor, and whisper so complete that they can be simultaneously condemned as all-powerful and dismissed as insignificant. this post could not exist if either of those things were true.

#gossip dish and rumor #deep gossip #feminism #fuck carceral feminism #feminist killjoy #accountability is triggering #transformative justice #reader response theory #sarah schulman #conflict and abuse

just when you (i) thought it was safe to go back in the water...

2/12/2018

this is just a not particularly friendly reminder that the latest white house tweet defending domestic abusers and sexual assaulters uses pretty much exactly the rhetoric and arguments that sarah schulman's been promoting for years. it's even more visibly the same than betsy de vos' various statements explaining why she was rolling back the previous administration's (kinda lackluster) attempts to address rape and sexual assault on college campuses. i mean, take a look:

here's the real estate scamlord, on twitter:

Peoples lives are being shattered and destroyed by a mere allegation. Some are true and some are false. Some are old and some are new. There is no recovery for someone falsely accused - life and career are gone. Is there no such thing any longer as Due Process? |2/10/2018|

and here's the novelist, on facebook:

overreaction and overstatement of harm are used to justify gross injustices... |7/20/14| many people mischaracterize what is happening, and then respond to things that never took place. |9/18/2015| [there ought to be] a forum where accused people can address their specificities and express how they experience and understand events - and even more importantly, confirm what those events actually are. [...] when there is a real actual crime that should be a crime, and a person goes to the state so that there will be fair and open adjudication, then justice is better served than through rumor and whisper. |11/1/14|

i like *after dolores* every bit as much as the next dyke old enough to have come out in the 90s, but if i were going to the anniversary reading this week, that's what i'd be asking about.

#fuck carceral feminism #sarah schulman #saltiness #my long grey hair #transformative justice #when you say what the far right says you are the far right #this is not the prefigurative politics i ordered #whotoo? #accountability is triggering #feminist killjoy #conflict and abuse

reMIX to stagnation

2/24/18

partly because i've been meaning to for months, partly it came up in conversation and a friend asked me to, partly because i was already having some blasts from the (recent) past...

here's an article¹² from more than a decade ago about the 17th annual MIX Queer Experimental Film & Video Festival (this year's will be the 29th), written by felix endara, who was part of the festival from the mid-90s to the mid-00s. it focuses on the marginalization of work by filmmakers of color (and the creation of a space unwelcoming to audience members of color, women, and trans folks), but makes it very clear that what's behind that is the structure of the organization itself. i'm putting it back into circulation because it's such a good illustration of the ways that the same structural problems in an organization can be brought up every few years for decades, but remain essentially unchanged when no **structural** changes are made.

in particular, endara's piece ends with a set of recommendations made in a collective letter to the MIX board. they are largely identical to the ones made in another letter to the MIX board in 2016, written by folks who did not even know this earlier round had happened. the first two recommendations are fairly traditional demographic ones, calling for more women and folks of color on the board and in the staff, but it was already clear that those weren't real answers. at the time, one of the co-executive directors (whose dismissal of criticism of the festival's white-gay-men focus is quoted in the piece) was a gay man of color, and as MIX still loves to mention, sarah schulman is one of its co-founders¹³.

the other two recommendations from the letter get to the heart of things:

3. MIX should establish a structure that includes job descriptions, decision-making policies, and grievance procedures.
4. All MIX staff should exhibit a high degree of professionalism and respect for fellow staff, volunteers, interns, and funders.

neither of these things has been done. still.

there have been shufflings of personnel, and a more 'diverse' set of faces put on the outside of the organization. but during the last round of drama, neither board nor staff would even bother to answer a question about how decisions would be made about shifts to policy and structure. and even the cosmetic changes have seemingly been calculated to make as little difference as possible.

why, for instance, after taking credit for the departure of a notoriously dicey staff member actively unwilling to do anything about sexual assaults and harassment in the festival space, would the board decide it's sensible to

12 [from the *transgressions* zine; the barnard college zine library has a copy. images of the article are on the original post: <https://umruik.tumblr.com/post/171225420922/partly-because-ive-been-meaning-to-for-months>]

13 [schulman has remained a constant presence at MIX throughout my nearly two decades as an audience member, volunteer, and occasional performer. she was, for instance, visible as a respected elder figure of the festival during the late-2010s attempt to rebrand the organization without meaningful structural change, after sexual and gendered harassment and assaults at the festival's parties became harder to keep quiet. those efforts, predictably, failed; the festival's future existence is uncertain.]

hire another person who fits exactly that description (with all the same conflicts of interest) for a key staff role? perhaps because there's still no grievance procedure or expectation of professionalism or respect? or maybe they're just making sure to have another person with glaring ethical problems around so that attention will focus there, not on their continuation of decades of inaction.

#medium-end theory #accountability is triggering #you can't consultant your way out of this #first as tragedy then as tragedy #by their works shall ye know them #Board Now #bored now #reMIX to stagnation #i just want to watch some goddamn experimental films and have a nice time dammit is that too much to ask? #the nonprofit industrial complex is the (white supremacist capitalist cishetero)patriarchy #fire to the NGOs

postscript

unposted tweets from 2020, responding to a thread advocating the "never talk shit in public about another trans person" principle, publicized by morgan page (who i'm naming here to give credit for its spread, not to make her responsible for all the ways it is used).

i appreciate this thread (& our past conversations on this).

and yet, this is the principle that leads to vicious attacks and blackballing of folks who express criticism of specific (generally white & very platformed) people - done in particular by folks who "never talk shit".

the reframing of public criticism as "talking shit" is basically inseparable from the "no talking shit" principle.

and doing it on an identity basis is the theorized expression of letting folks identify their way out of accountability and consequences for their actions.

it's also the community-specific way to make the (usually trans) person who names the problem into The Problem (as sarah ahmed writes).

and in ignoring power, it goes hand in glove w the reframing of grassroots accountability efforts as 'witch hunts' equivalent to state violence.

and i can say from direct personal experience that it's kept rapists and abusers in our shared cmtly spaces protected from taking accountability, while the folks they've harmed have been effectively cast out.

(it's also a very specifically christian model. jewish tradition (for example) has entirely other categories to work with, that i find far more compatible w accountability/transformation-based approaches to harm - which are not rooted in the xian punishment/forgiveness paradigm.)