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Sex and the Single Feminist Science Fiction Scholar

Don't let them define you!

By Marleen S. Barr

Women discussing sex is all the rage. The august Christiane Amanpour responded to #MeToo by conducting worldwide interviews with women about their sex lives. During my career as a science-fiction writer and scholar, I have negotiated being a sexual “other” in relation to the academy.

Academia positions male biology as the norm and subordinates women in relation to this norm. The tenure clock is not set to accommodate motherhood. Heterosexual female professors do not have wives to follow their career paths—and to undertake the domestic work unfairly assigned to wives. I describe confronting the systemic obstacles faced by academic women in my novels *Oy Pioneer!* and *Oy Feminist Planets: A Fake Memoir*. Sondra Lear, my protagonist, has flying sex with a vampire and marries her gray male cat, who turns into a Cary Grant clone; I did not share Sondra’s experiences.

In light of #MeToo, it is time for me to speak about Marleen’s real life rather than Sondra’s fantasy life. It is wrong for men to commit sexual assault with impunity. It is not wrong for me to tell the truth about my experience as a sexual female human being. It is wrong for the president of the United States to brag about “grabbing pussy.” It is not wrong for me to tell the story of my sexuality and its relation to my professional ambitions within the patriarchal academy. This truth is not analogous to a box of Tampax that belies female biological truth by shrouding female reality in obscuring feminine modesty. This truth should not be “taboo.”

What Sondra and I have in common is that we both, as Rick Rojas wrote about Edna St. Vincent Millay in the *New York Times*, “subverted typical gender roles, casting women as pursuers of men they desired instead of the other way around.” When we had occasion to see a man as an object of desire, we said something. Sexual assault played no part in my novels or in my life. The #MeToo movement prompted me to reflect on my sexual experiences in the academy. I was lucky to have avoided sexual assault.

As a young assistant professor at a southern land-grant university—the school I called Blackhole State University in *Oy Pioneer!*—I saw, and described in my fiction, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia. The Blackhole English department was filled with many female assistant professors whom I knew well. Neither they nor other close female Baby Boomer colleagues have ever told me that they had been sexually abused in the academic workplace. This does not mean, however, that sexual abuse did not happen to academic women.

I did experience other forms of exploitation. All of the scholars who were Blackhole assistant professors of English together with me know that the department head made it clear that receiving tenure was contingent upon cleaning his swimming pool and removing the pool’s cover. I still resent being coerced into doing this hard and dirty work. But at least I was exploited together with my female and male untenured colleagues. This experience, of course, pales in comparison to sexual

assault. If I feel exploited by swimming-pool cleaning, I can't imagine the pain that a survivor of sexual abuse in the academy must feel. A brilliant science-fiction scholar who is a generation younger than I am is currently using social media to grapple with the fact that she was raped by one of her professors in graduate school. My heart goes out to her. Social media, a tool unavailable to young Baby Boomers, enables her to communicate her devastating experience widely.

How did I function as a biological other in relation to the patriarchal "academic tribe" (Hazard Adams's term)? I will haul out the way-back machine and start at the very beginning: I had a close relationship with a male high school English teacher. With the consent of my parents, I would routinely go to his apartment to discuss Shakespeare. These discussions formed the inception of my wish to become an English professor. Nothing sexual occurred.

During my first semester in college, when I was seventeen and devoid of sexual experience, I realized that I was sexually attracted to this teacher. Casting myself as a "pursuer of men instead of the other way around" for the first time, I appeared at his doorstep and announced that I wanted to have sex with him. Before I had the chance to sit down, he told me to leave immediately and said that I could never see or speak to him again. I did as I was told—until seven years ago, when I phoned him and told him that, owing to his influence, I had become a prolific English professor. He married one of my fellow high school students two years my junior. I am very glad that he did not marry me. If he had done so, I might have become a real housewife of Forest Hills, Queens.

As a science-fiction scholar, I see clearly that if I had married my high school teacher I would have become some sort of an alternative-universe Marleen, Mrs. X instead of Dr. Barr; Sondra might never have existed. When I walked out of his apartment and never returned, I was enacting an Ibsen's Nora scenario, entering the portal of my own independent professional life.

Exiting his apartment unscathed by attachment to a man might have led to my decision not to marry until I was forty-six. More specifically, I did not marry until I was the fully formed professional academic I was supposed to become. In order to be free to publish prolifically, to engage in extensive international travel, and to change the places I lived in accordance with my career demands, I had to be unencumbered by a man.

When I became upset because that southern state university was devoid of eligible Jewish men for me to marry, I dealt with the situation by becoming a Fulbright scholar in Germany. No man who was pursuing his own career would have accompanied me to two graduate schools, to one job in an out-of-the-way place and the visiting professorships I undertook to escape that job, and on my international forays. Rarely do the many male professors who have accompanying academic wives face this situation.

Since I was not going to become a forty-year-old virgin, I had sex for the first time during my sophomore year in college—with one of my professors. I was not in love with him. I merely thought that he was interesting because he was quirky and he took me antique shopping. I have no memory of how the relationship started. What I do remember is that it was consensual and that it occurred after I had received my grade. I like antiques—both home furnishings and older men.

When I began graduate school in my early twenties, I was besotted with a professor who was twenty years my senior. I was obsessed to the extent that, in the manner of Jay Gatsby focusing on the green light emanating from Daisy Buchanan's pier, I often sat in a university library chair that afforded me

a view of his office window and stared at his fluorescent ceiling light. Like the lovesick *My Fair Lady* character Freddy Eynsford-Hill responding to Eliza Doolittle by singing “On the Street Where You Live,” I was happy merely to be in his proximity. When “and oh the towering feeling just to know somehow you are near” became insufficient, I decided to take action. Reasoning that I had nothing to lose because he would respond by saying either “yes” or “no,” I resolved to tell him how I felt. I walked into his office, ostensibly to discuss a paper topic that I had formulated in a second:

Him: “That is not a very good topic. You can do better.”

Me: “True. But I didn’t really come here to talk about my paper.”

Him: “Why are you here?”

Me: “I love you. I want to sleep with you. Is your answer ‘yes’ or ‘no?’”

Him: “Maybe.”

Me: “‘Maybe?’ How can you say ‘maybe?’ Do you know how much courage it took for me to walk in here and say this? I really need you to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ so that I don’t have to feel bad anymore.”

Him: “I have to think about this. Come back in two days and I will give you a definite answer.”

He said “yes.” This was not a one-night stand; I still speak to him. He mentored me for years and ultimately became one of my closest friends. My father, who approved of the high school teacher, assisted me in this relationship. When I wanted to visit the professor while he changed planes in Kennedy Airport, my father drove me there and agreed to wait in a separate terminal.

Monica Lewinsky recently said, “Now, at forty-four, I’m beginning (just beginning) to consider the implications of the power differentials that were so vast between a president and a White House intern. In such a circumstance the idea of consent might well be rendered moot.” I disagree with Lewinsky. Like her, I was twenty-two when I became involved with a man who was much more powerful than I was. I knew exactly what I was doing. I absolutely consented to what happened. He had power over me only during the semester when I was his student. I began the relationship because I at once wanted to express my sexuality and still have all the time I needed to devote myself to my graduate school coursework. I reasoned that the person who had assigned the work to me would understand when I explained that I needed to do that work. My reasoning was logical.

It was perhaps a good thing that I did not try to become involved with someone my age who was also in that class. The son of William Masters—the William Masters of Masters and Johnson sex-research-team fame—was my classmate. I thankfully did not set out to become Marleen S. Masters. In 2012, my classmate pleaded guilty to masturbating in front of park-goers in Michigan and in Central Park. The fact that Masters’s son was my classmate when I was in love with our professor is more absurd than most of the fictitious scenarios I created for Sondra. Who could have predicted that so many years later he and I would both decide to expose ourselves? At least my chosen revelatory method—writing to communicate my experience—is legal.

Like so many of my fellow female professors who find jobs in far-flung locations, as a newly minted assistant professor, I encountered a dearth of men to marry. Many of the men were already married to

those aforementioned academic wives. I attended a Blackhole singles event and was the only person there. New York singles events are famous for their lack of men; at Blackhole, it was a lack of people. I began a relationship with an older divorced Protestant from another Blackhole department who attracted me because he, at least, knew what a Jew was. Since my mother called him “an old goat,” I named him “The Goat” in *Oy Pioneer!* Being rather indifferent to me, he routinely called me “Barr.” This relationship went nowhere. Unlike urban New York Jewish men, this man kept horses outside of his house, and I was merely sowing my wild oats. I cut my losses and ran on.

I looked beyond Blackhole to the wider world of science-fiction scholars. I became one of the first women in a field replete with liberal and intelligent men—exceedingly supportive, wonderful guys. So many attractive and interesting male science-fiction professors; so much time. Between becoming an assistant professor at twenty-six and getting married at forty-six, I was involved with several science-fiction scholars. Some of my present best friends are science-fiction scholars who were my former boyfriends.

This worked out well—with the exception of the scholar I turned into a vampire in *Oy Pioneer!* When he stated that he was going to sue me for defamation, I responded that the only things he could hope to win were a big pile of German clothes and the real cat who inspired the cat/husband who appears with the vampire. I insisted that I had the right to write about the truth of my life. If this man did not want to be written about, well, no one had put a gun to his head to make him fraternize with me.

In contrast, one of my favorite science-fiction scholars was happy to be included in my fiction. He told me to write that he has great sexual prowess. I was happy to comply.

I spent years husband hunting at national and international science-fiction conferences while presenting provocative papers about feminist-separatist lesbian planets. My time in South Africa, for example, resulted in my retrospective short story “Husband Hunting in Africa”—and no husband. Husband hunting in Austria did not yield better results. I spent a visiting-professor semester in Austria involved with a German on leave from his American university. When the semester ended, he announced that he was going to marry a German housewife who could cook apple strudel. Not one to throw in the dish towel, I asked the Austrian department secretary if she could teach me how to make apple strudel. She said my trying to become a Hausfrau was an endeavor bound to fail.

I responded by flying to Israel to have sex with a Jewish science-fiction colleague. Since, because of my professional commitments at an academic conference, I lacked time to spend with him when we first met, I wanted to make up for a lost opportunity. The experience was memorable: airline security personnel initially barred me from leaving the country because I was unable to answer when male interrogators asked what I had seen in Israel. Throughout my weekend stay, I had done nothing but remain inside having sex, and I did not want to lie. I finally told the truth to a newly arrived female questioner. I said, “I just had sex. I didn’t see or do anything else.” “I believe her,” she announced to her male colleagues.

When I left Blackhole and moved back to New York City, I attended a Municipal Arts Society reception held in a “palazzo-ish” Madison Avenue building whose courtyard was the site of the Tony Awards party for the cast and crew of Broadway’s *Cinderella*. The building has the words “The Lotte New York Palace” emblazoned above its main entrance. An attractive man who was attending the reception turned out to be my Prince Charming. He was awaiting me inside the “palace.” He is—wait

for this—an older professor. The fact that we had both lectured in South Africa drew us closer together. Soon after he proposed while standing beneath the tail of a large animal statue located in the park adjoining the United Nations, we got married. Twenty years later, we're still living happily and loyally together.

Being married to me is not easy. When I named my husband Pepe Le Pew in *Oy Feminist Planets* and he appeared on the cover cast as a skunk perched on a flying saucer, he took the situation in stride. (He responded by matter-of-factly saying, "I had no choice.") As he is a French Canadian and not an American citizen, I told my friends in the science-fiction scholarly community that I had married an alien. My mother, who had given up on insisting that I marry a Jew, was relieved that I had ended up marrying a human instead of a cat or a goat or an extraterrestrial. My beloved graduate school professor, who recognized that I was marrying someone of his ilk, met my new husband and announced that he approved.

Marrying at forty-six and not having children is not a viable solution for everyone. (This is a good thing. If all women acted in kind, colleges would eventually close because of a lack of students. Come to think of it, the human race would cease to exist.) My personal and professional choices as a female other in the academy worked for me. I was able at once to publish prolifically, travel extensively, and surround myself with interesting men who loyally acted as my lifelong role models, mentors, and friends.

Marriage ended my days of being able to devote myself to my career without the responsibility of taking care of someone else. I helped my husband to survive three serious health crises. While I am very proud to have won the Science Fiction Research Association Pilgrim Award for lifetime achievement in science-fiction studies, I am equally proud to deserve a Wonderful Wife Award. Both mean a great deal to me.

My version of combining personal and professional imperatives was not utopian. Being a groundbreaking feminist science-fiction scholar and author was not an easy academic career path. But that's another story.

My beloved husband is sitting next to me. He has just said that it is time for me to cook dinner. Before I undertake this mundane domestic chore, I will phone my graduate school professor to tell him that I am the author of the newly published *When Trump Changed: The Feminist Science Fiction Justice League Quashes the Orange Outrage Pussy Grabber*—the first single-authored Trump short story collection. I will tell him that the cover pictures a blue-eyed, blonde-haired, buxom superhero. He will agree that, once upon a time, this cover image looked like me.

Luckily, the heinous predatory male sexual behavior described in *When Trump Changed* does not reflect my real sexual experiences. My rendition of sex and the single feminist science-fiction scholar involves damning the patriarchal academy's otherness torpedoes and going full speed ahead personally and professionally.

Good luck prevented me from being quashed by outrageous pussy grabbers.

In accordance with Paul Anka's famous lyric, "I did it my way."

Marleen S. Barr, who received the Science Fiction Research Association Pilgrim Award for lifetime achievement in science-fiction criticism, teaches English at the City University of New York. Her latest book is the first single-authored Trump fiction anthology, When Trump Changed: The Feminist Science Fiction Justice League Quashes the Orange Outrage Pussy Grabber. Her Twitter handle is @marleenbarr.