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# The Reproduction of Male Violence Through Female Secret-Keeping

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The Reproduction of Male Violence Through Female Secret-Keeping

by

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## Part I: Introduction

The college classroom where I teach is tucked down a dimly-lit hallway; it is windowless, and I can hear the high pitch hum of the fluorescent lights; it's cramped and can just barely hold twenty-five college students at a time. The walls are stark, with only some dingy posters of class work we've done to mask the coldness of the room; the work includes quotation analysis exercises from selections of Malcolm X's autobiography, and character portraits of the fictional family members in Junot Diaz's short story "Fiesta, 1980." These artifacts give the room life. I recently peeled them down after the end of a long semester. I slowly removed the character portrait of "Mami," the quiet and compassionate mother in Diaz's story who conceals her inner-pain from her abusive husband because she fears retribution; perhaps she fears economic instability; some students offered that she wants to protect her kids from the extent of their father's abuse; she gives blessings to her young children, "Que Dios te bendiga," before every car trip, but does not always intervene when the father is abusive (Diaz 3).

As I removed the poster of "Mami" from the wall, I stared into the fist-sized hole in the wall behind it. This is real life now. This is not the work of the fiction texts we are reading in class, though Mami's ability to transcend fiction to conceal the very real remnants of an act of male violence has amazed me, or at least made me shake my head in wonderment. Only two weeks earlier, in the middle of a quiet writing session in my classroom, a male student had punched that hole in the wall inches away from his ex-girlfriend's face, as she sat in her seat, revising her essay. He then proceeded to throw her papers onto the ground, then her phone, before she screamed: "You're an asshole," and bolted out of the room. When I ran over to intervene, I saw his fist bleeding, and asked him to leave the classroom with me. When I stood

outside in the hallway, I asked him what had happened, and he said: “She said something that upset me.”

By the end of the day, we had dismissed the young man from our pre-college program. I sat with the teary-eyed young woman after class, and she told me that she had wanted to break up with him and he wouldn’t accept it. In her narration of the events, she blamed his sense of entitlement and domination on him and then on herself. The next day before class, when the room was empty, I shifted the portrait of “Mami” down to cover the hole so the young female student wouldn’t have to look at it.

I am aware that violence arrives in many forms, though from my own place of privilege as a white middle-class American, I know that I don’t feel much of that violence directly. I realize that violence touches my students in a multitude of ways, as a larger systemic violence bears down heavily on people of color in this country and beyond its borders. I am certain that violence has enacted itself on this young man and this young woman before that day in my classroom. And I know that studying one Junot Diaz short story and analyzing the way Papi’s power is upheld because of his masculine aggression and hearing the condemnations of his character from my students cannot actually undo the violence so deeply imprinted upon and embedded within us all, though we hope and imagine literature has this transformative power to instantly awaken and transform us.

But what is truly disturbing is seeing how a range of people respond to violence when it happens in the flesh, in real life, and not in a book or even miles away. In fact, after this classroom incident, no one asked about the young woman’s condition, no one said, “Poor girl,” though many did sympathize with the young man when they heard that he had cried after we dismissed him from the program. “Poor guy; he couldn’t control himself,” some said.

In fact, when I saw my 50-year old student, Andrew, the next day before class, he talked to me about the incident, and said: “It’s like the story we read in class, ‘One Holy Night.’” I was pleased he was citing literature in the hallway outside of the classroom, particularly this Sandra Cisneros story about a murderous man who victimizes an 8th grader (Cisneros). But Andrew went on to say: “Women have to be careful. That boy was quiet, but you knew there was something weird about him, waiting to crack.” Somehow, despite the character’s status as a serial killer in the text, and despite the ample in-class discussion we’d had about the character’s methods of manipulation, Andrew still blamed the young girl in the story for her own victimization, for her own naivety, and here he was putting the onus on a real life young woman for the violence of her ex-partner.

Women do have to be careful. This is true, I thought. But why so often are these the first words out of our mouths. Why is it not: “Men have to stop abusing women”? Then women wouldn’t have to be so vigilant; women wouldn’t have to tip-toe around men, managing and avoiding their brimming rage.

When we read a book together in class, when I talk with my friends in a bar after hours, when my mom and I read the newspaper together at home at the kitchen table, we all agree that the abstracted forms of violence against women, against each other, are not acceptable, are cruel. We use words like “disgusting,” “horrifying,” “abusive” to label this male violence, and yet, when we look at it in the face, when we see a man’s hand bleeding from hitting a wall, we feel bad for him when he cries after the fact. We somehow accept that his violence is a natural part of his maleness, and we resort to jokes or excuses when faced with the discomfort of being so close to this violence. We are complicit, and in our complicity, we are violent, too. As Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Life of the Mind*: “The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make

up their minds to be good or evil,” suggesting that we do not necessarily make the active decision to do something wrong; rather, it happens subconsciously (Arendt 438). When we do not speak up when something is wrong, when we stay silent, we are participating in this violence, in the wrongdoing, whether we intended to or not on a conscious level.

I am complicit, if partly because I’m scared of retribution.

I was born into a family of mostly men. Two older brothers, the stoic Irish father, and the gaggle of cousins were mostly male, too. I’ve watched as my mother endured the depth of my father’s anger and now my brothers’ rage as they get older and turn to alcohol to heal them, too. I get mad at her for standing by them, for accommodating their rage. I think it is how women are sometimes trained to behave, whether we are fully aware of it or not, and so it’s difficult to undo this sidestepping and silence.

My father was an alcoholic who drank every morning in the basement. I can hear the beer can opening to this day, and yet, my mother cannot. At times, when talking about his alcoholism, she has even said: “Well, at least he never drank in the morning,” as if that’s the ultimate indicator of having an alcohol abuse problem. I then wonder if she *did* hear the morning beer cans, or if she has so denied hearing that sound that she’s altered her memory to help herself.

When I was in high school, my college-aged brother and I got into a fight; he slapped me across the face and made my nose bleed. He wept and apologized right afterwards, and I forgave him immediately. I’d never been hit so hard in my life that I had bled. When I brought up the incident weeks later, he scolded me for talking about it, so I never mentioned it again. I only quietly told my mother.

And years later, when I mentioned the incident again to her, she expressed shock: “Your brother hit you? I don’t remember that.”

This is a female project, I have observed. We are trained to not notice their neglect, their poor behavior, their violence. We don't even realize how much side-stepping, tip-toeing, managing of their emotions we are doing, but it has been our ongoing project. The feminist theorist bell hooks explains this phenomenon in her text *The Will to Change*, writing:

To be true to patriarchy we are all taught that we must keep men's secrets...the fundamental secret we share is that we will remain silent: "When girls are inducted into womanhood, what is it exactly that they have to say that must be silenced. What is the truth women carry that cannot be spoken. The answer is simple and chilling. Girls, women--and also young boys-- all share this in common. None may speak the truth about men." One of the truths cannot be spoken is the daily violence enacted by men of all classes and races in our society -- the violence of emotional abuse. (hooks 57)

I have found myself to be a participator in this project out of fear, of not wanting to take on the task of outing these men or training them to be better; I have been guilty of wanting to extricate myself because silence in some circumstances is easier for me to endure.

But I am beginning to interrogate how my silence functions and when it functions, who it actually serves to protect, and the ways in which it propagates the cycle of male violence.

So it is interesting then to consider this larger project of female silence, and in particular, the ways in which women are complicit in the secret-keeping of male violence. Certainly this is not a new exploration. Women's movements of the 20th century have interrogated the silencing of women through various forms -- in the political, legal, and cultural realms -- and have explored and articulated these demands for silence as a means of maintaining male domination in American society, particularly white male power (Sandoval 81).

Indeed, recent feminist movements have pushed back on this hegemonic power and challenged the whiteness of culture, demanding a space for greater female participation (Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues" 39). The feminist movements by women of color, those excluded from mainstream feminism, have been essential to asserting the intersectionality and

multifaceted goals of feminism as well as the varying ways in which patriarchy affects women across different racial, ethnic, and class lines. As the feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa wrote in “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers” in May of 1980: “The dangers we face as women writers of color are not the same as those of white women though we have many in common. We don’t have as much to lose—we never had any privileges,” pointing to the idea that white women have privileges and alliances with power based on racial and class lines that other women do not have, and in fearing a greater loss of power, they may be more likely to reproduce existing power dynamics (Anzaldúa, “Speaking in Tongues” 26).

For much of the 20th century, feminist movements have faced criticism for prioritizing the oppression of white women and not including all forms of femaleness, particularly the most disenfranchised (Lorde 60). In fact, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited with developing the term “intersectionality,” which helped to clarify the ways in which women across differing lines of race and class experience patriarchal oppression in varying ways (Crenshaw 1244). Crenshaw explains: “...many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately” (1244). Rather than approaching feminist concerns from what Crenshaw would call a “single-axis,” feminist activism must be understood in an intersectional way, for feminist movements have continued to privilege the stories of white women and prioritize the ways in which white women’s oppression could be countered systemically without accounting for the fact that oppression affects women differently based on race and class (1244). Even now, in the early 21st century, as feminism is re-emerging into a wider popular cultural context, with the

Women's March in early 2017 becoming one of the largest protests in American history, and with pop culture figures like Beyoncé asserting her feminist identity to her fans, the movement certainly faces some of the same challenges -- the dangers of essentializing female oppression, the flattening of complex feminist issues, and even the commodification and commercialization of feminism (hooks, "Moving Beyond Pain").

Indeed, this paper will explore some of the current cultural conversations around feminist movements, and in particular, issues of female secret-keeping that continue to empower men, especially white men, as well as new evolutions in female secret-sharing. It is clear that the silencing of women is a means to propagate male power, specifically white male power, but the ways in which women perform silence around male expressions of violence -- whether explicit or implicit -- need to be investigated further. Though silence can certainly be a means of keeping oneself immediately safe from a very real violence, in certain important cultural and political spaces, this project of silence is not purely innocent but can be an act of complicity in protecting one's own sense of power or connection to power. While at times silence and the enduring of male violence in its varied forms has been valorized as an exercise in female strength, this is not a useful or helpful way of viewing female power in order to productively begin dismantling male hegemony; indeed, it is this secret-keeping that needs deeper exploration and reflection.

In particular, I will argue here that when women maintain the secret-keeping of male violence they may be preserving their own association with power, protecting the privileges that patriarchal compliance bestows upon them, and at times, protecting their own association with power -- whether in the form of a workplace position or benefits, societal status, or in particular, their whiteness -- at times even oppressing or attacking *femaleness* as a means of becoming more male, elevating and re-aligning themselves with the benefits that patriarchal power presumes to

provide them. Indeed, this silence of women is a re-affirmation of female inferiority and an assertion of male superiority, particularly white male power.

In order to explore this phenomenon of female secret-keeping, I will look through both a literary and personal lens into the domestic realm as well as the work environment, which I will read as a secondary domestic space, for its hierarchical structures reflect a similar domestic hierarchal organization. My readings, informed by feminist scholars -- including Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Susan Bordo, and Elaine Scarry -- will consider multiple popular culture texts that can provide insight into how our current culture regards male hegemonic power and depends on female oppression of the self. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall explains in his text "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," the concept of cultural studies as an academic practice at one point evolved to include feminism, and indeed Hall points to the ways in which feminism entered into these studies, explaining: "As the thief in the night, it broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies...Now that's where I really discovered about the gendered nature of power. Long, long after I was able to pronounce the words, I encountered the reality of Foucault's profound insight into the individual reciprocity of knowledge and power. Talking about giving up power is a radically different experience from being silenced" (Hall 2269-2270). Here, Hall points to the very important notion that experiencing oppressive silence is much different than reading about it and identifying it, and indeed, his observation about feminism's role within cultural studies seems to demand a deeper cultural reflection on the ways in which we are complicit in the existing power structures that tend to silence women. Thus, to advance this cultural exploration, my primary texts are current television shows and literary works; in fact, they are what I might call more female-oriented texts -- those written by and consumed mostly by women, for these

texts can help highlight particular methods of female secret-keeping and new modes of secret-sharing.

More specifically, I will begin by looking at the critically acclaimed Neapolitan novels -- a four-part series written by Elena Ferrante that has earned numerous critical accolades. These novels, the first of which was published in 2012, focus on a problematic female friendship, narrated by a young woman named Elena who both values her close relationship with her friend Lila but also simultaneously helps to reinforce male violence against her. By exploring Elena's narration, we can investigate the dimensions of female complicity in reproducing domestic violence against women, as Lila represents a sort of "willful subject" that her surrounding community is constantly attempting to subdue, even the women (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 2). Even more, I will consider how the final text of the series shows that Elena's efforts at secret-sharing are really a process in co-opting Lila's story, demonstrating how secret-sharing can be problematic in the sense that it can steal female identity rather than empower it. While these texts focus primarily on white women in post-war Italy, they nevertheless elucidate the ways in which women oppress other women in order to keep a grasp on some sense of patriarchal power.

Further, I will consider two other popular culture texts, the television series *Mad Men* and *Girls*, the latter considered another female-oriented text, viewed by a largely female audience. These texts explore the reproduction of male violence within the workspace, particularly in the form of sexual harassment. An analysis of episodes from both series demonstrates how fictionalized depictions of sexual harassment can depart from real-life incidents of harassment, which reveal how our visions of female empowerment diverge from the reality of female silencing and subduing. An analysis of these texts allows us to better understand how male power and domination depend upon a complicit female silence within the work realm, while also

exploring how the pattern of female silencing is now being challenged more and more often by rising digital advancements.

In particular, I will use the work of the feminist theorist Sara Ahmed, whose very recent text *Living a Feminist Life*, published in early 2017, considers the role of the “feminist killjoy” in the work environment as essential to interrupting patriarchal order, even if it equates to feelings of isolation. I will apply Ahmed’s observations about feminist identity within the domestic realm and worksphere to these popular culture texts of *Girls*, *Mad Men*, and the Neapolitan novels, to help assert the ways in which these texts have or have not captured the very real articulations of male violence against women -- in the forms of sexual harassment, physical abuse, and exploitation -- and to explore how this new feminist consciousness is expanding within online spaces.

It is certainly problematic that these particular popular culture texts focus on a largely white female experience of white male oppression, thus eclipsing a bigger analysis of the ways in which women of color experience this violence. Yet, an analysis of these particular texts can reveal very important ideas about how white women experience oppression in order to understand how they then replicate it and project it onto other women, including other white women and women of color, preserving their own perceived closeness to power while ultimately maintaining the existing power structures. Thus, these cultural texts do allow us to access one layer of oppression and consider the ways in which the oppressed can do the work of the oppressor, particularly towards those who do not have as much cultural clout.

In fact, the final section of my paper will explore how women with traditionally less cultural power are finding new modes to resist this reinforcement of white male power. I will discuss how the rise of a new digital feminist identity over the past decade has helped give voice

to more disenfranchised groups of women, for the ways in which we resist power deserve consideration as well. These emerging online spaces are new modes of communication for women who can share seemingly isolated instances of white patriarchal violence in a potentially safer public platform, allowing for greater connectivity and a stronger role in shaping culture, particularly for women of color who have had limited access to positions of power in the development of culture.

Certainly, this new digital identity allows women, particularly women of color, to begin to “repossess identity and culture,” providing them with a new cultural citizenship, replete with feminist digital strategies, that allows for the promulgation of secret revelation across class, race, and gender lines (Sandoval 34). Yet, this new digital identity that gives voice to new culture-makers has prompted an emerging identity crisis for white men in America that I will also explore, as these new digital feminist spaces are indeed a threat to white men, whose varied articulations of violence are being more explicitly documented and dissected in the digital realm. Now more than ever before, the secret-keeping of and complicity with white male power is being challenged more publicly in these digital realms and creating larger cultural conversations about hegemonic power structures, giving rise to an ever-growing sentiment that the contemporary white male in America is indeed under attack.

Part II: The Subduing of Lila - The Reinforcement of Male Violence in Elena Ferrante's  
Neapolitan Novels

In 2012, the first of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels was published, but it wasn't until 2014, when the sequels had appeared on the market that readership took off, in particular, female readership. When the third book of the series was published, entitled *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* declared:

Elena Ferrante is one of the great novelists of our time. Her voice is passionate, her view sweeping and her gaze basilisk. Her subject is the domestic world, and part of her genius lies in her capacity to turn this sphere into an infernal region, full of rage and violence, unlimited in its intellectual and emotional reach. (Robinson, *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*)

The novels, set in postwar Italy, explore the effects of poverty, the disillusionment of war, and the rise of labor concerns and leftist opposition parties. At the center of each of these sprawling novels is the story of a relationship between two women, Elena (Lenu) Greco and Lila (Lina) Cerullo. Throughout, Elena, the narrator, describes her wavering friendship with Lila, her ever-beautiful and incredibly creative counterpart, and in her exploration of her friendship with Lila, Elena exposes the normalization of violence in their society, which touches every character's life. As she describes, "The women fought among themselves more than the men, they pulled each other's hair, they hurt each other... They were more severely infected than the men, because while men were always getting furious, they calmed down in the end; women, who appeared to be silent, acquiescent, when they were angry they flew into a rage that had no end" (Ferrante 80). This is a moment in Ferrante's first novel that demonstrates how men's constant violence afflicts the women around them with a never-ending rage; this rage is apparent in the two main characters who consistently come up against male violence in forms of sexual harassment, sexual

assault, physical abuse, the exploitation of female labor, and in forced marriages and motherhood.

In particular, the figure who seems to most embody this sort of female rage is Lila, for she is so often the object of male violence. Her overly moody brother Rino exploits her labor and creativity in their family's shoe shop; her husband Stefano Carracci tries to control and tame his wife by beating and raping her, and forcing her into motherhood; and the wealthy Solaras brothers pine after her sexually and also exploit her immense range of talents for their own financial gain. Yet, when Lila expresses this internalized violence in acts of rebellion and refusal, she is deemed crazy, chaotic, and full of rage, and for this, the people in her life, both men and women, often try to punish her, for "male violence is deemed 'natural' by the psychology of patriarchy, which insists there is a biological connection between having a penis and the will to do violence," whereas female responses to male violence are read as irrational, as in Lila's case (hooks, *The Will to Change* 55).

Even as Elena narrates the abuses Lila faces on a regular basis, she simultaneously expresses jealousies of her dear friend's power rather than consistently supporting her. Certainly, at times Elena sympathizes with Lila, but very often, we see from Elena's point of view both a concern for and a complicity in the violence that Lila is made to endure at the hands of multiple men throughout the texts. From Elena's viewpoint we see how she can embody some of the violent perspectives of the men in their lives, as she has absorbed their violence and in moments replicates it, even though she too is an object of male violence and in moments acknowledges these violations.

For instance, by the end of the first book, entitled *My Brilliant Friend*, Lila, at the age of seventeen, has hastily decided to marry Stefano Carracci, a somewhat successful grocer from

their Naples neighborhood; this marriage elevates her social status in their community, and in this moment, Elena is jealous of Lila's beauty, her quick entrance into adulthood, her marriage, her intelligence. However, it is already clear that Lila has been shut out of the academic avenues that Elena has been given access to, which is especially difficult considering both young women demonstrated such high intelligence and talent since they were school children together. But Elena is allowed, though reluctantly, by her parents to continue her education whereas Lila is told by her family that she cannot pursue this path, thus shutting down the greatest opportunity Lila might have had to excel on her own.

The second book, *The Story of a New Name*, picks up right where the first leaves off, as we see Lila in the midst of her new marriage to Stefano while helping her brother, Rino, run the family's shoe company. In just a short time, Lila achieves amazing success in shoe design, one of the many talents she exercises over the course of all four stories, and her initial designs are well-received by the public, earning a large profit for Rino and their partners, the Solaras brothers, Marcello and Michele, who have so often pursued Lila. In fact, when the Solaras brothers ask to hang Lila's wedding portrait in their store, at first Lila refuses, feeling objectified by the men who seem to chase after her even when she's married. But Elena responds to her friend:

“Forget it, Lila. Ultimately, it's a nice thing, think about it: they only put actresses on billboards.”

“And am I an actress?”

“No.”

“So? If my husband has decided to sell himself to the Solaras, do you think he can sell me as well?” (Ferrante 115)

In this moment, Lila points to her own commodification; she has been converted into an image that the Solaras brother want to own and display, reflecting their deeper efforts to obtain and thus contain Lila. Elena, rather than supporting Lila's refusal, anticipates the wrath of these men. This

is very much a common exchange that persists throughout the stories: Lila feels overrun, used by the men around her, and attempts to create her own rules or subvert the ones pushed upon her; meanwhile, Elena tries to calm her rather than support her in her obstinacy and begs her to play by the rules, for she is so often anticipating the violent reactions of men that she has come to reinforce their standards and expectations as well, and in this particular case, Lila's own commodification.

In her book *Femininity and Domination*, feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky points to the preoccupation of the woman's body in patriarchal society, which can result in this kind of commodification of the woman, as in Lila's case. In this process, when a woman is turned into a commodity with her appearance on display, she is fragmented -- her body and mind are separated, and her body is prioritized. Bartky explains that fragmentation is the "...splintering of human nature into a number of misbegotten parts," and this happens when women are "too closely identified with [their body]...[their] entire being is identified with the body, a thing which...has been regarded as less inherently human than the mind or personality" (Bartky 130). For Lila, whose mind is so incredibly strong, the men around her, as well as Elena, constantly prioritize her body, with the Solaras brothers even trying to put Lila's body on public display; this preoccupation with the body is not something Lila ever feels comfortable with, but it is clearly a mechanism of fragmentation, and thus a way of controlling Lila while subduing the force of her mind.

Indeed, the fragmenting of Lila's mind from her body is not just exhibited in the Solaras' desire to make Lila into a poster for display but is also demonstrated in the persistent act of staring at Lila's body (Bartky 130). Everyone around Lila is constantly watching her, gazing at and remarking on her beauty, and this form of intrusive staring is another way of fragmenting

Lila, cutting her beauty from the rest of her. In the theorist Elaine Scarry's text, *On Beauty and Being Just*, she writes about the propensity and desire for people to replicate beautiful objects and personages, not simply through sexual or artistic reproduction, but even through the act of staring. Scarry explains, "Beauty brings copies of itself into being. It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people...Staring, as we earlier saw, is a version of the wish to create; it is directly connected to acts of drawing, describing, composing, lovemaking," and so the act of staring is aligned with the replication of a beautiful image or being (Scarry 3, 49). These replications are a way of almost copying the image, but disconnecting it from other aspects of its origin; thus, as Lila is stared at, her image is disconnected from the rest of herself, and in a sense, possessed by those around her.

Even Elena seems to be so incredibly preoccupied with Lila's physique, for it would seem that she has internalized this violent male gaze, as she often narrates how she stares at her friend Lila much in the same manner that the men around her do. At the end of the first book of the series, when Elena sees Lila naked for the first time, she has an intense reaction as she thinks to herself:

...It was just a tumultuous sensation of necessary awkwardness, a state in which you cannot avert the gaze or take away the hand without recognizing your own turmoil, without, by that retreat, declaring it, hence without coming into conflict with the undisturbed innocence of the one who is the cause of the turmoil, without expressing by that rejection the violent emotion that overwhelms you, so that it forces you to stay, to rest your gaze on the childish shoulders, on the breasts and stiffly cold nipples, on the narrow hips and the tense buttocks, on the black sex, on the long legs, on the tender knees, on the curved ankles, on the elegant feet; and to act as if it's nothing, when instead everything is there, present, in the poor dim room, amid the worn furniture, on the uneven, water-stained floor, and your heart is agitated, your veins inflamed. (Ferrante 312-313)

It is clear that Elena is overcome by a strong sensation to stare at Lila's beauty though she wants to turn away, for Lila's appearance and demeanor seem to beckon people to stop and stare at her,

particularly men, as if they are replicating her beauty, much like the wedding portrait of Lila is a reproduction of her image that Marcello wants to own and display for his own use. But ultimately, this act of staring and replicating Lila is another way of dominating and controlling her, as it demands a preoccupation with her body rather than an acknowledgement of her full mental brilliance (Scarry 49).

Lila can sense this constant staring from those all around her, and their desire to reproduce and contain her image; she fights so hard to resist it, even seeking her own invisibility in order to protect herself. Indeed, Lila is what the feminist theorist Sara Ahmed might call a “willful woman,” a “feminist killjoy,” -- a woman who willfully disrupts the order of happiness around her in order to convey her full persona (Ahmed 2). And indeed she possesses what Gloria Anzaldúa might name a “Shadow-Beast” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 38). As Anzaldúa writes: “There is a rebel in me -- the Shadow-Beast. It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership” (Anzaldúa 38). These formations of womanhood that Ahmed and Anzaldúa identify are reflections of a sort of rage and rebellion that women feel as the result of imposing male violence, a rebellion that Lila so often expresses throughout the text as she feels her own fragmentation, her own oppression from the outside. And while men are permitted their own rage -- the violent beatings Stefano gives Lila, Rino’s verbal assaults of his sister, and in the backdrop men throwing their wives out of windows -- the emotion of women is always questioned and reined in, even by other women. When Elena and Lila venture to a party together, for example, Elena remarks: “I was afraid that, whatever she wore, her beauty would explode like a star and everyone would be eager to grab a fragment of it... I was afraid that, if she merely opened her mouth, everyone would be hypnotized by her intelligence” (Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name*

151). Elena, too, wants Lila to contain herself, if only so that she can have space to be seen; Lila, in her very rebellious existence, has an incredible power that all those around her either seek to use or to diffuse, but she is a woman who wants “to make full use of [her] faculties,” and so she is in constant rebellion mode with those around her, particularly the men in her life (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 43).

Because the men around her realize Lila’s power, they appear to grant her some form of authority in decision-making but only because they realize they can prosper from her brilliant abilities. In fact, Marcello Solara gives Lila permission to do whatever she wants with her wedding portrait, so long as he can still display it in his store. Lila decides to rework the portrait to her own liking. What is interesting is that Lila actually tears up the image of the poster into small pieces and repurposes them together, as if openly acknowledging her state of fragmentation (Bartky 130). Indeed, she has subsumed control over her own fragmentation.

When Lila finishes cutting and re-gluing the pieces of the portrait, Marcello responds:

I like it signo. You’ve erased yourself deliberately and I see why: to show the thigh, to show how well a woman’s thigh goes with those shoes. Excellent. You’re a pain in the ass, but when you do a thing you do it right. (Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name* 121)

Lila is often so highly visible to the men around her, so exploited, sexualized, and abused, that she becomes preoccupied with her own erasure and disappearance throughout the texts. In this moment, Marcello even recognizes that Lila is trying to escape his gaze, his misuse of her, yet he persists. Elena, too, begins to recognize the ways in which Lila is becoming erased and even trying to erase herself. Reflecting on the traditions of marriage and the act of Lila Cerullo taking Stefano Carracci’s name, Elena thinks to herself:

But Lila, as usual, hadn’t stopped there, she had soon gone further. As we worked with brushes and paints, she told me that she had begun to see in that formula an indirect object of place to which, as if Cerullo Carracci somehow indicated that Cerullo goes toward Carracci, falls into it, sucked up by it, is dissolved in it. And, from the abrupt

assignment of the role of speech maker at her wedding to Silvio Solara, from the entrance into the restaurant of Marcello Solara, wearing on his feet, no less, the shoes that Stefano had led her to believe he considered a sacred relic, from their honeymoon and the beatings, up until that installation -- in the void that she felt inside, the living thing determined by Stefano -- she had been increasingly oppressed by an unbearable sensation, a force pushing down harder and harder, crushing her. That impression had been getting stronger, had prevailed. Raffaella [Lila] Cerullo, overpowered, had lost her shape and had dissolved inside the outlines of Stefano, becoming a subsidiary emanation of him: Signora Carracci. It was then that I began to see in the panel the traces of what she was saying: 'It's a thing that's still going on,' she said in a whisper. And meanwhile we pasted paper, laid on color. But what were we really doing, what was I helping her do? (Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name* 124)

On a basic level, Lila's marriage to Stefano has erased her name, as she has cast off her own for his of Carracci. But on a deeper level, Lila was discovering that marriage involved too much compromise for a woman; too much of her time was spent managing Stefano's anger and needs; he had raped her and impregnated her against her will, and her violent discomfort with being a mother was so strong that she hoped the fetus inside of her would vanish. She felt disgusted that her body could be controlled by other forces, insisting that with pregnancy: "Men insert their thingy in you and you become a box of flesh with a living doll inside" (Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name* 112). For Lila, marriage and pregnancy are not beautiful acts but acts of dehumanizing and corporal violence that she has been forced to endure. While Elena can recognize Lila's desire to erase herself, to escape from the men all around her who oppress her, she also expresses a simultaneous envy of her friend's marriage and pregnancy, as if these statuses elevate Lila, thus supporting the abuse she has endured at the hands of Stefano.

When Lila is struggling to get pregnant and maintain a pregnancy, everyone in the text is highly concerned, for a woman who cannot perform motherhood is not truly a woman, according to the community. Lila is told to get rest, and Elena accompanies her and some other friends and family members to a beach town that summer so that Lila can become ready for pregnancy. In

fact, when the two visit the doctor together, the doctor tells Lila she needs to get stronger, and Elena thinks to herself:

Get stronger. I don't know if the doctor used exactly that verb, yet that was reported to me and it made an impression. It meant that Lila, in spite of the strength she displayed at all times, was weak. It meant that children didn't come or didn't last in her womb, not because she possessed a mysterious power that annihilated them but because, on the contrary, she was an inadequate woman. My resentment faded. ” (Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name* 178)

So much of Elena's own resentment towards Lila is based on her friend's unyielding power, yet she reflects the attitudes of the men around her. Elena recognizes that for the people in their community, a woman's value is based on this kind of violent dynamic, for “educated or not, the onus is still on the woman to be a wife/mother -- only the nun can escape motherhood. Women are made to feel like total failures if they don't marry and have children,” and when Lila is initially not able to become pregnant, Elena is pleased because her friend will be seen as less than and lose some of her power; she will be seen as an incomplete woman, and so Elena can begin to believe that this is indeed true of her friend (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 39). Elena can rest assured that Lila is not somehow magically stronger but indeed weaker, for women who pose a threat to others' power need to be weakened.

In fact, in the first book of the series, Elena makes reference to this unreal power that Lila seems to possess. Lila, at a very young age, describes to Elena a feeling of “dissolving margins,” that those around her that she loves are dissolving their boundaries, and that this sensation applies to her as well (Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* 112). Elena is confused by Lila's description of this sensation, but what is interesting is that Lila seems to have developed some sort of psychic ability to recognize the dangers around her, to recognize the boundaries that are applied to her, and yet, she desires to be free of them, even if that amounts to her own invisibility. Lila's experience with these “dissolving margins” is intimidating and scary to those around her, but it

would seem that she has developed a “spiritual alternative,” another way of seeing, an intuition that arrives because “the most marginalized are the most in danger, and so they do need a 6th sense” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 61). This is what Anzaldúa would call “la facultad,” an innate, even psychic ability to see into the deeper structures of reality; “la facultad” gives women who are the most vulnerable an ability to protect themselves, for it allows them to sense the multiple ways by which they may be oppressed by others (Anzaldúa 60). Lila seems acutely tuned into her own “facultad,” often refusing to abnegate her powers, which constantly makes those around her feel threatened, particularly the men who are close to her who continuously try to oppress and marginalize Lila.

And indeed, Lila is consistently marginalized; even if she does reach a certain level of fame and fortune because of her own independent successes in shoe design, and later in computers, she lives at the edge of society -- outside of the realm of academia that Elena moves through so easily, but alongside the low-level laborers with whom she works at a sausage factory in later texts. And her refusal to follow the rules of womanhood are met with disdain by the other women around her, from Rino’s wife, to her old schoolyard friends. It is clear that “...the perpetuation of male violence through the teaching of a dominator model of relationships comes to boy children through both women and men. Patriarchy breeds maternal sadism in women who embrace its logic,” and though Elena in particular does recognize the violence of men, she doesn’t fully acknowledge just how abused Lila is by those around her; in fact, she reinforces the dominator model for Lila, reminding her of her place within the hierarchy and punishing her for upsetting the order (hooks, *The Will to Change* 61).

For instance, when Elena accompanies Lila to the beach so that she can rest her body, Lila is itching to escape the careful watch of her mother and her husband. While her husband

moves around freely, traveling during the week, Lila is supposed to have limited movement, to arrive home at a certain hour, to behave herself, and when she resists these restrictions, desiring to go out and meet with another problematic male figure, the intellectual Nino, Elena starts to reinforce this dominator mode. She says to her friend:

“You can’t make my life unhappy, Lenu.” I answered, “If Stefano finds out that we went alone to their house, he’ll be angry not just at you but also at me.” And I didn’t stop there. At home I stirred up Nunzia’s displeasure and used it to urge her to reproach her daughter for too much sun, too much sea, staying out till midnight. I even went so far as to say, as if I wished to make peace between mother and daughter...Lila became furious, she said that she had had a miserable life all year, always shut up in the grocery, and now she had the right to a little freedom. Nunzia also lost her temper: “Lina, what are you saying? Freedom? What freedom? You are married, you must be accountable to your husband. Lenuccia can want a little freedom, you can’t.” (Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name* 270)

This is not the only occasion where Elena helps to reinforce certain parameters on Lila’s existence, but it is clear here that she is fearful of Lila existing in her full force, of expressing her full womanhood, and of attracting the object of Elena’s own desire, Nino. Fearing some encroachment from Lila and a loss of her own power, Elena starts to remind Lila of her boundaries as a married woman; she even notifies Lila’s mother Nunzia so that she too will remind Lila of her place as a married woman; here, marriage is a sort of prison that does not grant Lila the freedom to move around, and though Lila is “to be accountable to [her] husband,” Nunzia never says he must be accountable to her (270). Though Lila ultimately ends up lying and manipulating the situation so as to gain her own freedom, Elena and Lila’s own mother embrace the logic of what hooks calls “maternal sadism,” which emphasizes that mothers and mother figures too can enforce patriarchal modes upon their children (hooks, *The Will to Change* 61). In fact, this “maternal sadism” is an effect of patriarchy, for mothers like Nunzia who are so often oppressed and violated by men begin to internalize male practices of violence against women so that they produce this violence and inflict it against their own children as well,

reinforcing the hegemonic notions of power (hooks 61). Thus, even if women enact violence against their children, it can be a consequence of patriarchal order, not separate from it. Nunzia and Elena enforce this violence against Lila and derive a sort of pleasure from controlling her because it gives them a sense of power in recreating a similar power dynamic that they are normally at the other end of.

But Lila can only push back for so long against the oppressive forces that try to contain her until she is so exhausted that by the end of the four-part series, she has indeed made herself vanish, much to Elena's displeasure. Though Elena states in early in the first book that "Lila wanted to disappear without leaving a trace, and I'm the only one who knows what she means," it is only by reading all four books that we come to see when Lila can no longer withstand life's conditions (Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* 20). As older women, the two talk sparingly on the phone, and in one of their final conversations together, Lila says to Elena: "If I could eliminate myself right now, while we're speaking, I'd be more than happy...One can't go on anymore, she said, electronics seems so clean and yet it dirties, dirties tremendously, and it obliges you to leave traces of yourself everywhere as if you were shitting and peeing on yourself continuously: I want to leave nothing, my favorite key is the one that deletes" (Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child* 455). In these final moments of the Neapolitan novels, Lila recognizes the terrifying power of technological advancements emerging in the late 20th century, particularly computer technology. Lila even begins to work in and excel in the computer world in the final novel of the series, but discovers that computer technology is anathema to the invisibility she craves, for she seeks to escape the male gaze and force that have weighed on her for so long.

But instead of allowing her friend to cleanly disappear, as she so desires, Elena insists that Lila does not get to do that, that Lila is a part of her life, and therefore Elena has the right to

insist upon Lila's existence; she will do so by writing about her, for Elena has established a strong literary career for herself over the course of the four novels. We can see in this conclusion of the Neapolitan texts that Elena will not cede to her dearest friend's desires for self-erasure, which would grant Lila a final totaling power; rather, through the act of writing and through these new emerging technologies, the history of Elena's friendship with Lila will be documented, may even be expelled into a virtual sphere, "dirtying" the world, as Lila imagines. Though it is clear that throughout their friendship together Elena has taken part in the reinforcement of male violence against Lila, she has also borne witness to it, and thus she seeks to document her friend, and indeed her friend's suffering, even if against Lila's own will. But soon after publication of Elena's novel (within the novel) entitled *A Friendship*, Lila finally disappears; Elena thinks to herself:

At those moments I took it for granted that there was not and never would be a manuscript of Lila's. I had always overestimated her, nothing memorable would emerge from her -- something that reassured me and yet truly upset me. I loved Lila. I wanted her to last. But I wanted it to be I who made her last. I thought it was my task. I was convinced that she herself, as a girl, had assigned it to me. (Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child* 463)

While Elena's text points to a potential power to share the secrets of Lila's suffering, what makes it so problematic is that Elena still takes ownership over Lila's story; rather than helping Lila to publish her own text, which Elena ultimately fears will overshadow her own, for Lila at such a young age demonstrated an amazing literary power, she hopes that Lila's own work will never actually come to fruition; she hopes her friend will not find the power to write and thus disrupt her own status. As Elena explains: "I who have written for months and months and months to give her a form whose boundaries won't dissolve and defeat her, and calm her, and so in turn calm myself" (466). Thus, her text within this larger text points to a female desire to share the secrets of suffering, and yet also underlines the problems with co-opting these stories of

suffering. Indeed, what this dynamic underlines is a very common problem: when women who have higher power and status take the stories of those beneath them and present them as their own, thus robbing the oppressed of an opportunity to reclaim a voice for themselves. In fact, Elena, in her consistent behavior towards Lila over the course of the four texts and in her with publication of *A Friendship* is actually suppressing the voice she thinks she is uplifting, for she ultimately fears the raging feminine power of Lila and hopes it will exist only within certain boundaries, on her own terms, or disappear completely.

### Part III: Noticing and *Not* Noticing Sexual Harassment in *Mad Men* and *Girls*

I recently sat in an after-school meeting in my colleague Jonathan's classroom. As the English team met to discuss pedagogy and approaches to classroom behavior, I looked around his room and noticed a sign hanging on his wall; the sign included a handwritten list of basic classroom expectations for his students, but the one that seemed to jump out at me the most, the one that seemed both important but suspiciously out of place read: "Women have the right to their own bodies." While I certainly agree with this statement, it startled me to see this assertion included in a standard list of classroom expectations. But it didn't surprise me that this was in this particular colleague's classroom.

Jonathan was a co-worker I had come to view as a sort of *performative* feminist: he had recently informed the entire English department that he was editing an academic book on feminist issues in comic books; he constantly asserted his identity as an intersectional feminist out loud in office small talk; he spoke often about his inclusion of diverse female authors, like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* or Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, in his teachings; and here he had clearly asserted women's rights to their bodies on his classroom wall (Satrapi, Morrison).

But Jonathan was simply a performer of feminism, for as cultural theorist Stuart Hall explains, just recognizing oppression, particularly in an abstract form, does not absolve you of enacting it (Hall 2269-2270). Jonathan didn't seem to notice or care about the difference between asserting feminist ideals and actually practicing them. In a sense, he had conflated assertion of an action with the action itself, particularly because at this point three women, including myself, had collectively spoken to our directors to report his pattern of poor behavior, including the exploitation of our labor, his aggression when we challenged this exploitation, inappropriate text

messages he'd sent us, and other behaviors he had exhibited over the past few semesters while working closely with each of us.

Indeed, in this very same classroom, months before, Jonathan had invited me to a private meeting with him to discuss how I was no longer that friendly towards him. In the meeting, he actually imitated my body language, showing me how exactly how I looked when I wouldn't make eye contact with him or how I turned my body away from him when we spoke, and then he demanded that I treat him with friendliness, essentially asking me to hold myself in a way that corresponded with his desires. When I refused, he responded by complaining to the same higher-ups that he felt "unsafe" now; he had reacted to our collective complaints about him by appropriating the language of harm, accusing us of harming him, of threatening his own sense of safety and security in his position because this is exactly what we had attempted to do -- confront him about his behavior and challenge his immunity as a white male in the office, only now our complaints were "mischaracterized as harm" (Shulman 92).

In fact, the two directors, both women, simply took notes about our collective complaints and asked us to keep the peace, as if suggesting that complaining about labor issues was a disruption, reinforcing the idea that the status quo was easier to maintain than any challenge to it. Thus, Jonathan went on teaching *Persepolis* to his students, analyzing with them how Marjane felt oppressed by her government, asking his students to record in their journals about their own moments of feeling powerless so that he could listen and discuss these concepts of oppression without ever noticing his own enactments of power (Satrapi). It amazed me that as teachers of feminist theory and ideals we could live so outside of it. Didn't reading and teaching these concepts actually affect change within ourselves or call for meaningful reflection?

In her new text *Living a Feminist Life*, feminist theorist Sara Ahmed asks: “What do we learn not to notice” (Ahmed 33)? Ahmed, whose work I frequently cite here, recently resigned from her position at Goldsmiths, University of London due to issues of pervasive sexual harassment within academia. She wrote on her “feministkilljoy” blog that these incidents of harassment were not singular, rather: “We are talking about how sexual harassment becomes normalized and generalized – as part of academic culture” (Ahmed, “feministkilljoy”). In deciding that she could no longer be part of an institution that was not taking sexual harassment claims seriously, Ahmed determined that she had to resign as a way of noticing, as a way of not accepting the existing power dynamics in academia.

In considering my own work position in higher education, I can ask myself the same question Ahmed asks about noticing, for certainly there are things I choose to see and not to see, and I must begin asking myself what the consequences of *not* noticing might be, particularly as a white woman choosing not to notice certain workplace problems. In my experience these past ten years, I have come to observe that even in a female-dominated work realm like education, men are still often treated better than women in these environments, allowed more privileges, scrutinized less frequently, expected to perform less labor; in fact, men are making more money than their female counterparts and performing less emotional labor at the same time, as women are expected to step up in these ways (Hu, “What’s The Best Way”). I have noticed that when the few men in my field skip the important meetings, arrive late, or speak up to protest new policies during meetings, they are not reprimanded as frequently, they are not monitored as closely, they are not seen as disrupting the aura of an otherwise happy environment; it would seem that it is more often than not the woman’s duty to maintain this vibe of pleasantry. I have noticed all of this, but I am certain I have also chosen to *not* notice, at times, perhaps because it can be

exhausting to see it all, but perhaps to protect my own place of power as a white woman in the system, for complaining about issues can problematize how others view you (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 4).

Certainly, I have encountered just the tip of the iceberg in terms of misogynistic behavior in my workplace environment, and indeed these smaller aggressions and support for male power are easy to dismiss as inconsequential, for at times I even convince myself of my own silliness as I question my own reactions to and readings of power dynamics, particularly those that challenge male power. I feel like a child questioning her parents, evaluating my right to do so, and as such, I feel that at times the workplace reflects an extension of the domestic sphere; in fact, it is a sort of domestic realm where often the hierarchy of the nuclear family remains intact with even the maternal figures of the work environment helping to reinforce and reproduce male violence. It is as if power and violence are all expected of men, and often the “family unit” within the workplace helps to sustain this behavior, to forgive it, to not notice it as a means of maintaining a certain sense of order, which is not in fact a viable order but just a replication of the patriarchal system already in place. For women such as my two directors -- and certainly myself at times -- maintaining this sense of order also protects their positions; they were not willing to risk losing anything, even just a sense of peace and status quo, even as some of us had begun the necessary secret-sharing that can help interrupt this existing order.

So, when I was recently binge-watching the television series *Mad Men*, I was surprised when an incident of blatant sexual harassment in an episode in season four entitled “The Summer Man” was so quickly resolved by the conclusion of the episode. How could sexual harassment be so immediately recognized for what it is? How could the harasser lose his job in a matter of a few (fictional) hours? Certainly, *Mad Men* is a television show that regularly focuses on the

inequalities of men and women in New York City's advertising industry in the 1960s and makes obvious the incessant belittling and degradation of women in the ad agency, but this seemed like a sort of wish-fulfillment episode, particularly for the time period, asserting a message of female empowerment, as if suggesting: if you speak up about harassment and violence, we *will* listen and respond immediately (Freud 20).

In this particular episode, Joan, the strong-willed secretary who wields a lot of power within the office, is the subject of sexual harassment. The episode centers upon the antics of three young male employees who are seen goofing around in the office rather than working throughout the episode. When Joan reprimands them for their childish behavior at the beginning of the episode, the newest member of the team, Joey, resists her authority: "What do you do around here besides walking around like you're trying to get raped." He continues, "I'm not some young girl from off the bus. I don't need some Madam from a Shanghai Whorehouse to show me the ropes," before walking out of the office with a lit cigarette in his mouth ("The Summer Man"). As a sort of revenge, Joey goes so far as to draw a pornographic image of Joan performing oral sex on a male colleague and hangs it in her office window. She scolds the team, saying to them: "I can't wait until next year when all of you are in Viet Nam. You will be pining for the day when someone was trying to make your life easier. And when you're over there and you're in the jungle and they're shooting you. Remember you're not dying for me, because I never liked you" ("The Summer Man").

Up until this point, the episode reveals what was likely a realistic display of male sexism in the workplace, particularly in a corporate environment in the 1960s before issues of sexual harassment had really entered the American collective consciousness in a critical way (though this is really just beginning to happen on a more public and larger scale in America now)

(Sandoval 81). Joan is seen as a maternal figure in the office space with no threatening sense of authority who Joey condescendingly even refers to as “mom” when she scolds him, and later refers to his mother and Joan as both having an overt sexuality that needed containing; thus, Joey too reads the workspace as another extension of the domestic realm, and Joan as an extension of his mother.

Don, the head of the agency, is of course the patriarch. But rather than subdue Joan and Peggy when they reveal Joey’s behavior, Don says: “Boys will be boys,” before giving Peggy permission to fire Joey. And in the next scene, Peggy actually fires Joey. This exchange, while empowering on some levels to see, is also problematic, for it suggests that women who are harassed will be supported by both female and male higher-ups, and their status as victims of harassment will not be questioned or manipulated; instead, the perpetrator of the sexual harassment will be fired and asked to leave the work space. This is indeed fiction for it shows a totally different reality than what most often happens to women working in corporate America, and other realms like academia, when they complain about sexual harassment and male violence. And rarely in American society do we see women from different levels of an industry unifying to battle sexist harassment and having their complaints immediately validated and responded to, as when Peggy witnesses Joan’s degradation and steps in to assist her, without thinking what consequences she might face as a result for speaking up. Rather, the pattern is more often one in which higher-ups work to ignore or cover up the sexual harassment cases. Thus, while *Mad Men* as a series does not hide the issues of sexual harassment and assault that women face, this particular episode provides an uncommon resolution to this sort of very common problem.

While the storyline is problematic for its unrealistically quick resolution, the final exchange between both female characters is important because it complicates the nice and neat

message of female solidarity emerging from the episode. As the two step into the elevator together, Joan expresses her lack of appreciation for Peggy's intervention on her behalf. Joan suggests that she had already handled the situation, and that their dual reaction to Joey's behavior will be interpreted poorly by those in the office. Joan explains that her independent authority will be questioned more deeply while Peggy will be read as a "bitch." Thus, the writers of the episode do express an awareness that when women complain about men or when they attempt to act unfriendly towards harassers, their reactions and defenses are seen as offensive to the male perpetrators and they are often ignored, punished, or reprimanded for asserting their boundaries, as their behavior is read as mean or bitchy. Women like Peggy and Joan in this episode are doomed to become the "killjoys" of the office work environment, and though this episode of *Mad Men* does not necessarily explore these repercussions in much depth after this episode, Peggy's eventual rise to the top of the ad agency by the series finale suggests that she will be rewarded for her behavior, that her bitchiness will serve her (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 3). Yet, so often, as Ahmed explains, those who try to reprimand men are not rewarded for their behavior, but instead isolated. Indeed, "when you expose a problem you pose a problem," and historically, women who complain about harassment are more likely to leave their positions than the men accused of harassment (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 37).

Soon after my *Mad Men* binge sessions, I started watching another critically acclaimed television show, *Girls*, which premiered around the same time as *Mad Men* and has received much critical acclaim. Similarly, *Girls* takes on this issue of sexual harassment in the corporate realm as well, though through the use of a type of comedy that borders on absurdity at times. Lena Dunham, the creator, director, and writer of the series, shows in a few specific episodes how sexual harassers are often protected and go unpunished in these industries, and even more,

the role that women can sometimes play in reproducing this form of sexual violence. Dunham confronts a plethora of gender-based issues in her six-season series. Much like the readership of the Neapolitan novels, *Girls* has a largely female viewership, as Dunham's episodes delve into the intricacies that women, though mainly young white middle class women, as this is how her characters identify, have to deal with on a regular basis -- dating woes, electronic miscommunications, sexuality, and issues of inequality in work environments, as well as sexual harassment. However, it is worth emphasizing, as the writer Roxane Gay notes, the series excludes a lot of formations of female identity and "the stark whiteness of the cast, their upper-middle-class milieu" does little to reflect the diversity of female experiences in New York. Indeed, even in the title of the series there is a usage of womanhood that becomes universal and the fact that the characters are white gets elided (Gay 57). Thus, the series is problematic in that it does not interrogate the concerns of harassment and violence across race and class lines, as these experiences should be more deeply explored and understood, for women of color and queer identities are more often victims of violence. Yet as Gay points out, the series does still explore on some dimension how patriarchal power rubs against even the most "privileged" of feminine forms, and how these women might respond, providing viewers with an insight into how harassment is sustained (Gay 57). Indeed, by investigating a television show that reveals how white women experience white male power, it can reveal how these same women then internalize and propagate these same power dynamics.

In the first season of *Girls*, the protagonist Hannah, played by the show's creator, Dunham, is the ultimate millennial struggling to find a meaningful career as a writer. In this episode she lands herself a part-time job at a law firm, assisting in administrative duties, though she very willingly admits to her own lack of experience in this type of work. Her boss is the

gregarious Rich, an older white man who has a sort of teddy bear quality to his essence. He is kind, forgiving, easy to laugh, but Hannah and the audience come to find out that he also sexually harasses the women he works with in exchange for light supervision of work duties and low employee expectations. Hannah is first exposed to Rich's sexual harassment when she apologizes for not understanding how to use a computer system. Rich, walking over to her desk, responds:

“I'm just giving you a hard time...I know you'll get there.” And then adds, “You look tense.”

Hannah says: “Oh no, I'm just a hunchy person.”

Rich approaches her from behind as she sits at the desk facing a computer screen and begins massaging her, telling her to lean into the pain. He says: “Open up the solar plexus” as he rubs her chest with his entire palm; the camera cuts to a shot of another female worker walking by and looking on with perhaps an expectant disgust (“Hannah's Diary”). In this scene, Rich, the harasser, uses certain language to guise the fact that he is actually inappropriately touching Hannah in order to deny any sort of wrongdoing and detach himself from the sexual inappropriateness of the matter. Rather, he is someone who is simply trying to help Hannah, perhaps trying to warp her own perception of what is happening, though Hannah seems to recognize that he has crossed a line. In fact, later in the women's bathroom, Hannah encounters two of her new female co-workers, Leslie and Chastity, and indirectly asks them about Rich's behavior.

Leslie says: “Look, I know it's gross but he's really nice. And he got Tommy health insurance.”

Chastity says: “He doesn’t complain if I come in or if I don’t. And he paid for my sister to go to camp. Oh and he got me an iPod for my birthday...”

“So you’ve never said anything to him about it?” Hannah asks.

“Why?” Both women ask.

While the tone of the episode remains funny but uncomfortable, here Lena Dunham’s show reveals how women do habitually encounter sexual harassment and from seemingly benevolent employers, particularly white men, who no one necessarily wants to punish for their transgressions (“Hannah’s Diary”). Further, Dunham’s script points to a sort of female secret-sharing in the feminine space of the ladies’ bathroom; the two women have agreed to keep the white male harasser’s behavior a secret, even when they know his sexual transgressions are a pattern that have affected other women at the office, even newer members of the team. The women even go so far as to imply that Hannah should keep this a secret so that their “benefits” are not threatened, suggesting that there is even a sort of strength in enduring this harassment. The women claim to be satisfied that they get something in return, but what they are pointing to is the lack of benefits that they actually receive in their job -- health insurance, schedule flexibility, high pay. Indeed, these benefits are only on the table if in exchange for sexual allowances by their boss. By not taking part in this silencing, Hannah might upend the order that has been established, and as Ahmed explains:

Not participating can be judged as disapproval whether or not you make the judgment. You are judged as taking something the wrong way when you object to something. When we give an account of something as sexist or racist, we are often dismissed as having a faulty perception, as not receiving the intentions or actions of others fairly or properly” (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 35).

So, if Hannah opts out of the cycle of secrecy and thus the reproduction of Rich’s sexual transgressions, she might be seen as the disruptor, the wrongdoer, for harming a certain order

that has been decided upon, a structure that perpetuates male sexual advancements and aggressions by offering certain rights to health care and time off that are re-named as privileges in exchange for their complicity. The women's synchronized "whys" after Hannah asks if they have ever spoken about Rich's behavior suggest that she too should not question Rich's behavior and she too should keep her mouth shut. To return again to Ahmed's text, she explains how in these kinds of situations where women become silent in the face of male harassment and violence, women discover that:

...You can receive some benefits by adapting yourself to a system that is, at another level, compromising your capacity to inhabit a world on more equal terms. I think for many women, becoming willing to participate in sexist culture is a compromise, even if it is not registered as such, because we have been taught (from past experience, from what we come up against) that being unwilling to participate can be dangerous. You risk becoming alienated from all the existing structures that enable survival within an institution, let alone a progression. Here we can say: resistance to recognizing something might be a way of coping with or living with that thing. Resistance to recognition can be a form or manner of recognition; recognition as a form of resignation, even. (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 36)

In this episode, Hannah grapples with this issue -- whether she should adapt to the system in order to benefit from it or risk alienating herself. Ultimately, she leans towards adapting, trying to determine what it is that she too can gain in exchange for his sexual advances. In the following episode, entitled "Hard Being Easy," Hannah decides that the biggest thing she can gain is a story, which she can get by sleeping with her older boss. So, she attempts to gain something from her boss by saying: "Be honest with me, Rich. Drop the sandwich stuff. I know you want to fuck me. I've been able to tell since I started working here. And at first it was repulsive to me, but now I'm game, so I think we should just do this before I change my mind." However, he responds in a way Hannah had not anticipated: "I'm a married man, Hannah... We work together. This is an inappropriate way to talk to your employer" ("Hard Being Easy").

It is clear that Hannah's form of adapting to the situation is problematic for Rich because she is confrontational in her approach; while she seems set on participating in the sexist culture, she also points it out in the process, announcing what it is he is doing, which is clearly not permitted by Rich. In fact, as Hannah attempts to gain power in the sexual exchange, Rich actually appropriates the language of victimization; he uses the language that Hannah and her coworkers could have used to point out his own bad behavior by calling her "inappropriate," though his own sexual advances had precipitated hers. Hannah then insists: "I could sue you. Chastity, Leslie, me, Whole office. Class action. We go Erin Brockovich on your ass in a way you would distinctly dis-enjoy." Rich, still in a tone of utter kindness, responds that she has "potential" and doesn't want her to leave, but what Dunham's script suggests is that Rich purposely hires unqualified staff who are grateful to have a job and therefore more lenient when he makes moves on them ("Hard Being Easy").

The sexual harasser in this case, as opposed to the *Mad Men* episode, is in some ways a more ambiguously bad man, for Rich is a soft-spoken and mild-mannered figure, and his harassment begins with the assertion that he is helping; he is massaging and soothing the women's tension, though any type of non-consensual touching in this situation is definitively boundary-crossing. In some ways, it is difficult for the characters and even viewers to regard Rich as a threatening force because he utilizes gaslighting techniques to hide his abuse, but it is important to recognize how these tactics work, for "...gaslighting is happening culturally and interpersonally on an unprecedented scale, and that this is the result of a societal framework where we pretend everyone is equal while trying simultaneously to preserve inequality" (Fett, "Gaslighting as an Abuse"). Because the overt ways of oppressing women, like those demonstrated in the *Mad Men* episode are more quickly detected, they are sometimes substituted

with subtler techniques. Yet Dunham's writing portrays Rich's manners in such an overtly ridiculous way that what could be an otherwise ambiguous situation of sexual harassment is exacerbated for the audience to better see and understand; indeed, there is a tone of absurdity to these scenes, with each character almost over-stating their acceptance of Rich's sexual harassment. Almost by playing up the absurdity of this kind of dynamic, the viewer is forced to really observe what might be an otherwise subtle, but certainly uncomfortable, interaction between male boss and female worker. What she seems to be pronouncing is that this type of treatment is sexual harassment; however, it can quite difficult to confront because so often other people in the environment, including other women, support it and support the harasser, who asserts his own innocence by espousing benevolent qualities that seem to outweigh any wrongdoing.

In fact, when Hannah threatens to report him, he responds: "Hannah, you barely have the wherewithal to get to work by 10am let alone sue someone. There's no suing app on your iPhone," simultaneously belittling her but also implying that she should practice some sort of reciprocity: he sees her lack of job qualifications but chooses to ignore these inadequacies, and thus, she should do the same for him with regards to his sexual inappropriateness ("Hard Being Easy"). But even more, Rich's comments point to an even graver concern: the fact that punishing someone for sexual harassment is actually quite a difficult process, much more difficult than the *Mad Men* episode reveals. Rich's comment also points to the lack of technological devices or virtual spaces that could help women to report and punish this type of behavior; rather, it is a cumbersome process that often allows harassers to get away with their deeds and requires women to become quiet, to even normalize the assaults, and as this episode proves, to become co-conspirators in reproducing it with each other. The voices of these women reverberate in the

ladies' room stalls where they confront one another with Rich's behavior, but they never travel beyond the walls, demonstrating that these women are participating in the secret-keeping, their voices resigned to private spaces ("Hard Being Easy").

Cultural theorist Susan Bordo asserts in her text *The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity*: "Particularly in the realm of femininity, where so much depends on the seemingly willing acceptance of various norms and practices, we need an analysis of power 'from below,' as Foucault puts it; for example, of the mechanisms that shape and proliferate -- rather than repress -- desire, generate and focus our energies, construct our conceptions of normalcy and deviance" (Bordo 167). What Bordo suggests, while drawing up Foucault, is that in addition to studying how women are repressed from above, we have to analyze how oppression also comes from those who are part of the larger network of the oppressed and even generate oppression themselves. In this case, it is clear that the women in "Hard Being Easy" have reproduced the power dynamic of their boss so much so that this practice of secret-keeping amongst the women has become culturally accepted in their workplace environment.

Interestingly, Dunham returns to this issue of sexual harassment in the workplace again in the sixth and final season of her show, focusing on how a white male authority figure uses his power to make sexual advances on women, but with season six elevating the issue by solely focusing on it for an entire episode. In this particular episode entitled "American Bitch," which premiered in February of 2017, Hannah, who now works for an online feminist journal, meets a (fictional) prominent middle-aged white male author, Chuck Palmer, for an interview. In fact, Palmer invites Hannah to his apartment after she writes a condemning article about him on an internet website. In her online columns, Hannah has supposedly condemned the author's treatment of multiple college-aged women as a form of sexual assault, for he purportedly uses his

power as an esteemed author to pressure the young college women he encounters on his book tours into performing sexual acts with him. The entire episode, rather than cutting between multiple storylines, stays with this story the entire 30-plus minutes; only one other episode of *Girls* does this, designating a certain degree of importance to the subject matter.

From the beginning of the episode, viewers might feel a slight discomfort that the seemingly nice but overly defensive Palmer has invited Hannah into his expansive New York apartment where the two will be talking alone. His reasons for contacting Hannah are so that he can offer her his “side of the story,” for she has not even considered it, he complains. When the two finally sit down together in the living room, after the camera cuts to several still shots of his literary awards on display throughout the home, Hannah explains that she wrote the article because some of the women he had met felt their sexual interactions had not been consensual. Palmer immediately interrupts Hannah, not allowing her to complete her thought, saying: “Okay, hold up, because that’s where this all gets pretty fucking messy when words like ‘consensual’ thrown round. That’s why I’m not sleeping...That is definitely why I lost 20 pounds...” (“American Bitch”).

It is clear in this moment that Palmer has labeled himself as the victim in these scenarios, much like Rich did, by suggesting that he has lost weight due to the stress of this situation, again re-appropriating the language of victimization. Further, he adds that he has even had to go on medication for the problem, saying:

Yeah I’m fine...thing is I’m not because I’ve been taking pills to fall asleep and guess what, they don’t fucking work. I started therapy, and for the first time in ten years thought I was done with all that shit. Tried everything -- different types of meditation, I tried learning Spanish...I’m now having nightmares that my daughter’s friends will Google and find out about whatever the fuck this thing is and that will hurt her. Understand? It will hurt my daughter. So I’m wondering, why am I being punished? (“American Bitch”)

In fact, throughout the course of their conversation, Palmer uses a sort of manipulation on Hannah to try to humanize himself, to make himself a more sympathetic and seemingly complicated figure who has become the victim of female complaints of non-consensual sex, even saying that he is the target of a “witch hunt,” so that eventually Hannah will change her mind about him (“American Bitch”). Palmer isn’t even trying to get Hannah to write a new column, but he sees her as someone who he needs to control, even if it’s just her own opinion of him, for he does not seem concerned about her writing a new article about him that revalidates him. Rather, he just wants to occupy her mental territory, in a strange way trying to overpower and erase her own personal critiques of him. By inviting her into his home, he has personalized himself; Hannah looks at photos of his family and hears him on the phone with his ex-wife, discussing their young daughter. It is as if he has arranged it so that Hannah can see all of this and believe that a critically acclaimed author could not stoop to such levels of degradation and that a father of a young girl cannot be a predator; indeed, he seems to believe that his multiple reference to his daughter’s existence are enough to exonerate him from any wrongdoing to women (“American Bitch”).

His modes of manipulating Hannah creep into the scenes as well. Palmer, throughout the story, charms Hannah by complimenting her writing ability, something that the viewers know is of great importance to her; hearing an esteemed author speak well of her work appears to have a seductive quality -- seductive in the sense of seducing Hannah into seeing him as a multifaceted man who is undeserving of punishment, and perhaps seducing her on a sexual level as well. In fact, Palmer punctuates the conversation with compliments directed at Hannah so as to elevate her own sense of self-worth and the feelings that somehow this important figure is in fact seeing

her. As they move from room to room, they eventually find themselves sitting on the same couch, where Palmer changes his tone from defensive to endearing. He asks her:

Do you want to know why I think I really wanted to meet you? To fix that...but I can ask you where you're from, what you want, who you are I can show you're more to me than just a pretty face...Where are you from?

He proceeds to ask her about her own goals with writing and then even gets her to repeat that she didn't understand the full story of his life, and the same could ultimately happen to her as she aspires towards fame, and thus, the spotlight:

You listened to one source, and then you flapped your lips. Your funny lips. But all the same you made me the face of this epidemic about literary man attacking industrious innocent young women. That's what two bit journalists do, and you're not a journalist, Hannah. You're a fucking writer. ("American Bitch")

In this exchange, Palmer seeks to devalue journalism and heighten literary writing, as if to say that she should not concern herself with truth-seeking, with writing reports on men like himself, but on composing stories, pitting these two forms of writing against each other. By insisting on the idea that she is "a fucking writer," he is simultaneously trying to disassociate being a writer from the type of writing she has been doing, as if to suggest that it has no value. For Palmer, what does have value are literary stories, literary texts, and he even asks Hannah to read from one of his own, which suggests another attempt at personalizing himself for her. At this point in the episode, they are in his bedroom, and he has allowed her into his private literary space. He eventually lies down on his bed before asking her to lie down next to him. Hannah, seemingly uncomfortable, complies, and within a few seconds, he exposes himself to her and then puts his penis against her leg. Over the course of the episode, culminating in this moment, it would seem that Palmer has tried to reveal to Hannah how the seduction process works, and that there is actually nothing wrong with what he does. But ultimately, he misses the notion that Hannah was

seduced by his power, which marks every wall in prestigious literary awards, and that the sexual act he initiates was clearly by no means consensual.

Yet, when Palmer makes a sexual advance on her, Hannah actually pulls herself up from the bed to leave him. This harkens back to Hannah's previous methods for approaching her harasser, the ever gregarious Rich, in season one, when Hannah had insisted that she would turn his harassment into a story by actually sleeping with him, giving her a means of empowering herself. She had even gone so far as to offer to sleep with Rich in the pursuit of a story.

Similarly, in season six, Palmer insists that the college women he has slept with who have come forth to report his nonconsensual behavior were all pursuing a story. Palmer explains how he meets the women:

I invite them back to my hotel. We may drink teeny tiny bottles of booze if the place is fucking nice enough to have a minibar. A couple of them might stay, and then, voila, they have something to write about...Because what do writers need...stories. They need stories. ("American Bitch")

In this moment of refusal, we can see that Hannah has pivoted from season one; she is no longer wanting to comply with the sexual desires of a man in order to pursue a story, as are the women Palmer meets, or so he claims. Rather, by the sixth season, the stories Hannah is more concerned with writing about are "the voices of women who have historically been pushed aside and silenced..." Hannah even asserts to Palmer:

I'm a writer. And I may not be a famous writer...But I am a writer, and as such, I think I'm obligated to use my voice to talk about things that are meaningful to me. I read something about you that troubled me, troubled me greatly, mainly that you were using your power and your influence to involve yourself sexually with college students on your book tour. ("American Bitch")

By the final season, Hannah has discovered the importance of actually talking aloud about these issues rather than quietly enduring them. While the women in season one had complied with one another to keep Rich's inappropriate sexual advances a secret so as to protect his white male

power and their own statuses and well-being, here Hannah refuses to keep things a secret. As Ahmed explains: “To become feminist can often mean looking for company, looking for other girls, other women, who share in that becoming. This search for feminist companionship began for me through books; I withdrew into my room with books. It was willful girls who caught my attention,” and by this season, Hannah has clearly been reading the works of other women online, searching for a sort of “feminist companionship” (Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* 66). In this episode she has transformed into a “willful girl,” one who wants to choose to not only confront but expose male violence, even if she seems taken aback by what she has just experienced in Palmer’s apartment (66).

The six-year lapse of time between seasons one and six also reveals the evolution of technologies that have helped with the secret sharing of women who are under attack. Rather than focusing on the secret-keeping of women in bathroom stalls, here Hannah is doing the secret-sharing of these women, helping to push their marginalized voices to the forefront so that people like Palmer begin to take notice. In season one, Rich had commented to Hannah that there is “no app for suing,” as if suggesting that for the Millennials who are glued to their phones that they won’t find power there. Yet, for Palmer, it is exactly the technological advances over those six years that have helped to bring to light his own predatory behavior. In the “American Bitch” episode, Hannah explains that she came across the Tumblr post of one of his victims, and Palmer responds: “Isn’t that the crazy part about all of this, about being alive right now -- that so much of your life, your world, can be destroyed by something called Tumblr without an e” (“American Bitch”).

In this moment, Palmer attempts in the most deprecating and condescending of tones to dismiss Tumblr, and perhaps other Internet spaces, as somehow inferior platforms for writing

and reporting. In this exchange, Palmer, whose literary acclaim literally adorns the walls of his home, has elevated his own writerly status above Hannah's because he works in the realm of literature, dismissing these other evolving spaces where Hannah does her work, just as he dismissed journalism as a lesser form of writing. His comments to Hannah suggest that these spaces are illegitimate, with their misspellings and all, thus implicitly suggesting that the content of these spaces must also be illegitimate, particularly when it attacks *his* character.

Indeed, we learn early in the episode that it is Hannah's own blog post that Palmer has come across that instigates their entire meeting. Hannah explains: "I was surprised you found the article the article I wrote. You must have an ass deep Google alert on yourself. This was like a niche feminist website. It's not the front page of the *Times*." Here Hannah acknowledges that women, particularly women who have not earned themselves a certain reputation in order to occupy elevated literary spaces, have created smaller sites in order to find ways of expressing themselves. Thus, Tumblr and the "niche feminist website" become platforms for women whose voices might otherwise go unheard, and allow women to actually connect with one another and help promote one another's voices, as Hannah did when she came across "Denise's Tumblr," helping to re-tell the story of Denise's victimization rather than keep it enshrined in secret ("American Bitch"). As Ahmed explains: "I think we have in recent years witnessed the buildup of a momentum around feminism, in global protests against violence against women; in the increasing number of popular books on feminism; in the high visibility of feminist activism on social media; in how the word feminism can set the stage on fire for women artists and celebrities such as Beyoncé" (Ahmed 3).

In fact, it is interesting that in this particular episode of *Girls*, Dunham actually explores a moment of surreality, a genre that the show rarely enters into. In the closing scene, Hannah exits

the building after being forced to watch Palmer's daughter play the violin for the two of them, even after Palmer made an inappropriate sexual advance on her. As Hannah walks away from his apartment building toward the camera, Rihanna's song "Desperado" plays into the closing credits, but before the episode cuts away, several women are seen walking onto the scene, passing by Hannah, their backs to the camera; as the viewer looks closely, over a dozen women manage to pass Hannah as she advances forward, and as the camera retreats, each of the dozen women walks into Chuck's building. As the television critic Emily Nussbaum points out in *The New Yorker*, Palmer has complicated Hannah's mission by seducing her and turning her into yet another woman he has lured into his trap, for Nussbaum asserts that: "There's no way she could ever tell this story about a famous man without the story becoming about her" (Nussbaum, "The Cunning"). While this might be true -- for indeed Palmer has had a sort of victory over Hannah that she feels visibly discomforted by -- the ending does not necessarily suggest that she is just another faceless woman who Palmer has victimized or even someone who has willfully tried to co-opt their stories; rather, this very surreal closing to the episode enforces the notion that Hannah, who faces the camera and walks towards it, has been trying to speak up, to empower the voices of the faceless women that the camera does not see. This is a complicated path, as proven by the transpiring of events in the episode, but each of these women seems to represent a victim or a potential victim of Palmer or other men who refuse to recognize the role their power plays in their everyday interactions and the violence they enact on women. Hannah walks toward the camera in the final moments, not totally certain what has just happened, but she is aware that these women's stories are part of her story as well, not in the sense that she seeks to steal them, but in the sense that she is part of a continued pattern of men trying to harm and subdue women.

#### Part IV: Men Under Attack - Signs of an Emerging Digital Feminist Identity

My mother recently visited me in New York City a few months ago, and my oldest brother accompanied us to dinner. He showed up already two sheets to the wind, and then proceeded to explain how he can sort of understand the Trump voters, the white males in society who have suddenly been victimized by women and people of color, and that there is a new narrative being pushed onto white men, and it is difficult for them to deal with. I attempted to speak up, and he immediately dismissed my comments, with aggression. I cried quietly at the dinner table, and my mother said, apologetically: “She’s sensitive. You know, we Keefes are sensitive,” as if I had inherited this quality only from her and nothing else had produced my reaction.

I was aware of what was happening. My mother was managing this moment, trying to keep my brother from breaking into a mood that he tends to get, but at the same time, she was dismissing a protest I had, even if it came out in the form of tears.

But what I wanted to say to my brother was: For thousands of years, the other half, the female half has been forced into the shadows. The female has been forced to submit to the male half. We are emerging now, we are fighting against your violence, and you immediately take on the narrative of victimization because you fear us, you fear us taking away your power because that is exactly what we are trying to do. Gloria Anzaldúa points to this power of the female:

The female, by virtue of creating entities of flesh and blood in her stomach (she bleeds every month but does not die), by virtue of being in tune with nature’s cycles, is feared. (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 39)

It would seem that the rise of the female is feared, for it seems to produce this ever-growing white male anxiety or sense of victimization. More specifically, there is an increasing insistence

on a white male victimization as intersectional feminist theory pronounces itself more strongly in the American consciousness.

Indeed, during the recent presidential campaign, one of the narratives on the Trump campaign trail, and a narrative that too often found its way into multiple mainstream media headlines, was that America had forgotten the white male, particularly the working class white male. A *New York Times* article published in May 2016 showed that Hilary Clinton was leading in the polls, but at the same time suggested, “the polls offer a way of framing the election: as a referendum on how white men see their place in a changing country; and, one layer beneath, on whether they perceive themselves as being joined by women and minorities or rather as being replaced by them” (Giridharadas, “Trump Taps”). What this reveals is that white American men are starting to see themselves losing traction in a country where they have for so long maintained power despite the fact that, at least across gender and race lines, they still very much maintain the most political and economic clout in the country. Yet, this white male anxiety in America has been viewed as fuel for the Trump campaign, with 53% of white women absorbing this anxiety for their male counterparts (Lett, “White Women Voted”). These results reveal that white women are certainly complicit in supporting and voting for white male hegemony, ultimately elevating Trump to president, for they want to preserve their own sense of power in terms of racial identity even if it simultaneously means they belittle their gender; clearly, white femininity serves as an ally to white male hegemony. Indeed, Susan Bordo points to this complicit oppression in her text in *The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity*:

The pathologies of female protest function, paradoxically, as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produce them, reproducing rather than transforming precisely that which is being protested. In this connection, the fact that hysteria and anorexia have peaked during historical periods of cultural backlash against attempts at reorganization and redefinition of male and female roles is significant. Female pathology reveals itself here as an extremely interesting social formation through which one source of potential

for resistance and rebellion is pressed into the service of maintaining the established order. (Bordo 177)

What Bordo suggests here is that with strong feminist movements, female pathology is such that women actually subvert these rising forms of power and reinforce cultural norms and ideology even more strongly. Bordo points to hysteria and anorexia as examples, but similarly, this could be extended to the fall of the first viable female U.S. presidential candidate, and the recent rise of Donald Trump, as white women voted firmly against a rising notion of female power -- at the very least a white female power -- in favor of reinforcing ideologies of white male dominance that Donald Trump overtly articulated.

Certainly, there are poor and working class white males who are struggling to find jobs and pay their bills and who are seeing their communities fall into depression and disrepair; these are very real concerns. But what is problematic is the sense that somehow because women and people of color are gaining more ground in society that white men are therefore becoming victims as a result. In order for women to actually gain real equality in society, those who have historically held power need to give up the impunity they have had for so very long -- impunity from criticism, accusations, scrutiny -- that so many have supported, not only white men. They must also realize that in order to achieve equality, they have to give something up, at the very least, their sense of privilege and entitlement to the same very basic human rights that women and people of color also seek to gain.

In fact, a post-election *New York Times* poll done in January 2017 of white male Republicans revealed that many men thought women were now treated equally to men, with one poll participant even saying: "Everything in general is in favor of a woman. No matter what happens in life, it seems like the man's always at fault" (Miller, "Republican Men"). While this is not an entirely incorrect observation that men may be feeling in the recent Internet age and in

this age of Trump, that does not make it a wrong feeling. Rather, this feeling among men, particularly white men, is a symptom of the growing practice of reporting on men's behavior. This sentiment reveals that men are no longer going to be allowed to get away with the forms of violence they have been executing; therefore, they *will* feel under pressure, they *will* feel under attack, they *will* feel observed, watched, recorded, written about, magnified, for current patriarchal ideology is under attack. As the literary theorist Terry Eagleton explains, writing on Althusser's concept of ideology: "Ideology, for Althusser, is the set of beliefs and practices which does this centering. It is far more subtly, pervasive and unconscious than a set of explicit doctrines: it is the very medium in which I 'live out' my relation to society, the realm of the signs and social practices which binds me to the social structure and lends me a sense of coherent purpose and identity" (Eagleton 149). What is happening now is that as women challenge the ideology of patriarchy that is so embedded in our culture, white men are losing a grasp of this "coherent purpose and identity" that is so ingrained in their lived experiences, throwing them into an identity crisis that is indeed necessary for true ideological change (149).

So, while men might argue that it's a better time to be a woman than a man, this statement is still not true, and in need of editing; rather: it is a better time to be a woman than it ever has been. But as the writer Roxane Gay asks in her critique of Hanna Rosin's recent best-selling book *The End of Men*: "What does it even mean to suggest that the end of men is explicitly connected to the rise of women? There's no denying women are doing better than they ever have, but is that really saying much?" (Gay 97). Gay makes a good point that simply because conditions are better for women than they were in the past does not mean women should then be satisfied with the gains they have made. Indeed, in the same critique, Gay points out how *The New York Times* had a recent headline that was more sympathetic to a group of male rapists

than the pre-teen female victim they had sexually assaulted (Gay 98). Thus, it is clear the permission to violate women still deeply permeates cultural ideology, and the sympathies for male attackers who have been caught are still as strong as ever; patriarchy is certainly not dead, Gay asserts, and it's not helpful to think in those terms if we want to continue on a path of meaningful change (98).

But it is clear that with the rise of Internet spaces in the past decade, like the “niche feminist websites” mentioned in the “American Bitch” episode of *Girls*, or Tumblr accounts, blogs, Instagram posts, or Twitter feeds, women -- particularly women of color -- are finding alternative platforms for voicing their concerns. Rather than having their voices and stories co-opted by those with greater access to power (as Ferrante's Elena did to Lila), these women are elbowing themselves into media spaces to counter those hegemonic white male voices. In *Black Feminist Thought*, the feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins explains that reconfiguring what we consider “intellectual,” is a way of “recovering the silenced and marginalized voices of women of color in the United States and worldwide, whose radical voices attempted to unsettle hegemonic systems of racism, sexism and classism” (Collins xvi). Collins explains that if women of color, particularly Black women, do not have clear access to higher education, then their arguments, their voices, have the potential to be de-prioritized and even silenced. Internet spaces, like those that *Girls* points to, help in this redefining of the intellectual; they become accessible spaces of intellectual engagement, especially for those who may not have clear access to powerhouse publications. In fact, mainstream publications like *The New York Times* do not always offer vital spaces for alternative voices or do enough to challenge white male culture -- a culture enforced by the majority of white women voters. Yet the rise of these digital sites offers an alternative space for a new discourse, allowing for an increasing “call-out” culture that

demands other publications and the men they support to take responsibility rather than skirt it (Schulman 92). And it's working.

As Bordo explains, "We need a discourse that will enable us to account for the subversion of potential rebellion, a discourse that, while insisting on the necessity of objective analysis of power relations, social hierarchy, political backlash, and so forth, will nonetheless allow us to confront the mechanisms by which the subject at times becomes enmeshed in collusion with forces that sustain her own oppression" (167). What Bordo calls for here is a language that comes face to face with the power structures surrounding women, perhaps one that helps to elucidate and make public instances of male violence and oppression so as to avoid the replication of male violence. Indeed, this new digital discourse of calling-out male violence is also allowing women to see and understand the ways in which they participate in male violence, but more importantly, *why* they might be supporting male hegemony, particularly if it means protecting their own sense of power, for women too must investigate the ways in which they support patriarchy and interrogate why they support it -- what do they have to gain or maintain by reinforcing male power?

In her famous essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," the theorist Donna Haraway wrote: "We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism...they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism" (Haraway 151). It is clear that feminism and the practice of feminism is spreading, from popular literature to these social media spaces, and this evolution points to a new digital/human consciousness, what we might even call a "cyborg" state of being, as our existence begins to meld the corporeal body with cell phone, with computer screen, with constant digital access. This new mental awareness and existence is dependent on virtual networks that are imprinted with data that, as the

character Lila points out in the Neapolitan novels, is permanent and cannot be erased. What this can mean in terms of feminist movements is that women can compile a new digital identity, a sort of alternative digital identity, their stories reaching one another and compounding upon one another in this digital arena. The digital space, although not immune from danger, allows women to connect with one another globally -- to like, to “up vote,” to comment upon, to share, to collect one another’s stories and piece together a collective consciousness and trace a larger pattern of male violence and female complicity. Consider women like Laura Bates, an online journalist, created the “Everyday Sexism Project,” a website where women can write the daily incidences of sexual harassment or prejudices they have encountered (Bates). Or, the organization, Fronterizas en Resistencia, which actually teaches young women how to use social media as self-defense, showing them apps that help to record abuse and assault, and connecting them to other young women to start bigger collectives. And there is the popular Tumblr account “WhenWomenRefuse,” which allows women to share and collect stories of their own protests and refusals to succumb to male harassment and the subsequent punishments they face at the hands of men, including assault and murder. With digital projects like these, women are cataloguing their experiences with male violence so as to digitize and make public the systemic pattern and deeper culture of male violence so that it cannot be denied, for “...the removal of evidence of something is evidence of something. And so: our evidence is often evidence of the removal of evidence,” suggesting that a compilation of seeing this removal, from multiple virtual strands can shed new light on the problem (Ahmed, *Feminist Killjoys*).

As women, particularly white women, especially women in positions of power, begin to recognize their complicity in male violence, and as they begin to take to the digital realm to document it, the white male hegemonic power can be dismantled. As Haraway suggests,

“...illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential,” making clear that our new digital feminist statuses do not require male participation or validation but a refusal to replicate our origins (151). When compiled together, these voices can become compounded and make essential the multiple feminists voice. These digital networks can help develop a new sort of cultural citizenship, one dependent on a digital feminist identity, an identity that has really begun emerging in the past decade to challenge the comfort levels and status of white men in our global society by sharing and making public and permanent the histories of violence that women have quietly endured for so long.

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