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(Mis)Believing Women: Genre Classification, Metaphor, and Consent in Contemporary Female-Identified Authorship

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Abstract

With a consideration of the function of metaphor and the recently-popularized hybrid narrative modes, this paper delves into the theme of consent in relation to female-authored fictional texts written in the wake of the #MeToo movement, focusing on Kristen Roupenian's short story "Cat Person" as a case study. Central to the critical reception of Roupenian's story are many discourses, whose authors conflate Roupenian with the female-identified character in her story, that disregard the story as fiction despite its genre classification. I explore how the acknowledgement of author as artist and the politics of consent are necessary for readerships who don't want to further oppress female-identified authorial voices.

Key words: Autofiction, "Cat Person," Consent, Female Authorship, Fiction, Genre Classification, Metaphor, Women Writers

Introduction

A strange phenomenon is occurring: overtly fictional and female-authored texts are frequently becoming subject to often heated and abusive debates that conflate character/narrator with writer. Such literary blurring of fact and fiction is understandable in forms such as autofiction and fictocriticism, but the phenomenon creates new questions and obstacles for female-identified writers who, in fact, want to keep themselves separate from the lives of their characters. Equally disturbing, the trend also perpetuates the ever-distressing misbelief of women and women's stories. As a creative writer and scholar, my own interest in this topic is personal; I've experienced countless instances, when asked about a work of fiction I've authored, where well-intentioned interviewers and readers have assumed details to be autobiographical fact instead of overt narrative construction. While one or two instances of such conflation could be considered annoying at worst, these assumptions—which I've seen abound in other contemporary female-identified writers—are partic-

ularly insidious in a time when women (especially as victims and survivors) are telling the true, difficult stories of their lives, only to have the validity of those non-fictional narratives questioned on the public stage. The irony of this inversion is not lost on me; why, I ask, are our stories being taken as fact when—in at least one specific instance—we demand they be seen as fiction?

Consent is key. If an author publishes fiction, readers need to find it in themselves to respect this genre classification. I wonder whether the desire some readers have to conflate the personal lives of authors with their fictional writings has something to do with a desire for power; sanctimonious positions are easier to uphold when these lines are blurred, allowing non-consenting readers to take the moral high ground by mistaking craft (the development of character, for example) with personal flaw (the actual interiority of author). What follows is a reflection on the #MeToo movement and its relationship to readerly consent, with a specific consideration of Kristen Roupenian's short story "Cat Person," the critical reception of which instantiates the kinds of problematic discourses that can arise when this form of consent is overlooked. I also consider the insidious heteropatriarchal power tactics of language cooption aimed at invalidating the agency of women-identifying subjects by rhetorically minimizing the role of metaphor in stories and clouding distinctions between fiction and hybrid narrative. I suggest that one way in which disempowerment through misperception might be avoided is through an open, considerate approach that allows readers to take stock of *author as artist*, rather than assuming authors are their protagonists. I attempt to get at the heart of why readers seem to increasingly crave an intimate lens into female authors' personal lives as the key to understanding meaning in their narratives, and I explore lateral possibilities for authorial agency within oppressive contexts.

Context: #MeToo and Metaphor

It is important to consider the possibilities of language cooption under the heteropatriarchal and capitalist frameworks that have never been more threatened than in the wake of #MeToo, the social movement that brought predominantly female victim narratives to the foreground and offered them, in the most impactful cases, more socially-perceived validity than ever before. Further, the complications of language use in the literary world are acute in the case of metaphor. Linda Berger's essay, "The Lady, or the Tiger? A Field Guide to Metaphor and Narrative" is a helpful guide to the function of metaphor in all of its generative confusion, recalling that, without the "metaphorical process that allows us to gather [things] up, group them together, and contain them, our perceptions would scatter like marbles thrown at the ground" (2011, 275). People need metaphor for context—that gathering, grouping, and containing—not only for context within the singularity of experience, but also as a tool for empathy, allowing individuals to see their lives in relation to those of others, to experience the comfort of similarity alongside the awe-inspiring symbolism of difference in the same moment. A complicating factor is the necessary opacity of metaphor: a fertile ground for possible misinterpretation in the readerly moment. As Berger notes, the metaphorical space "invites the reader to fill in

the blanks” and to offer predictions on the ending based on “what we already know rather than what the story reveals” (276). Within the specific context of consent culture, the very opacity needed for metaphor can be dangerous in terms of victim narratives. Who is filling in the blanks, and how? In this moment when oppressive power structures repeatedly challenge the believability and authenticity of female-written narratives, and given that empathy is often made possible through metaphor, the boundary between metaphor’s ability to enable empathy across difference and to promote obfuscating opacity, creates problems.

#MeToo conversations have revealed that the idea of interpretation can also be a threat. For example, in cases where male-identified persons have mistakenly interpreted ambivalence or unspoken resistance as a sexual “green light” from predominantly female-identified subjects. In the realm of fiction and metaphor, questions arise: Is the opacity needed for metaphorical interpretation something that can be weaponized against victims, as it relies on a logic that prioritizes not *mis*-direction per se, but *in*-direction, for its efficacy? How much trust must readers grant writers to tell stories authentically given their own experiences? When is it responsible to allow the singular to speak for the universal and vice versa? A robust discussion about identity politics in relation to narrative is a topic that can’t be fully explored here, but it is one that’s important to keep in mind while contemplating metaphor and narrative in autofiction and fictocriticism, forms that depend, in part, on the recognized limitations of linear fictional narrative to convey contradictory realities and complicated truths.

Callback: Lorde and the Master’s Toolbox

I turn to two of Audre Lorde’s essays in *Sister Outsider*, first published in 1984, to consider the threat that autofiction and fictocriticism pose to oppressive power structures. The worst-case scenario for misunderstanding fiction as non-fiction/fact can arguably be traced back to the threat of writing forms that promote personal truth through fragmentation, discursion, and narrative realism. In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Lorde reminds readers of patriarchal usurpation of language (at the level of definition) to stigmatize oppressed subjects. In “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” she emphasizes the fact that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” and that one must move laterally in attempts to reclaim oppressed voices at the level of language and narrative. Lorde starts by arguing that oppressive forces of power work to “corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change” (1984, 53), and goes on to argue that the notion of the erotic was altered from an embodied, energizing, and spiritual female resource “firmly rooted in unexpressed or unrecognized feeling,” to one that dredges up societal connections to pornography (objectification of the female-identified subject), and shame (a self-denying emotion that prioritizes the obfuscation of desire) (52-55). Lorde reminds us of the difficult fact that, historically, sexist and racist status-quo power structures willingly disseminate misinformation on the level of the word and its etymology in ways

that quickly become so ubiquitous that they often evade the scrutiny of public skepticism.

The “big picture problem” that Lorde illustrates is relevant today and autofiction and fictocriticism embody its issues, as they are both “highly individual, anecdotal form[s] of writing” that often hybridize literary forms moving in a non-linear fashion “between positions” and refusing “an ordered account” (Pearl 2019, 163). Autofiction finds some of its roots in *écriture* feminine, a strand of feminist theory that originated in France in the early 1970s, where writers including Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, among others, interwove the personal and the political, using a “mix of registers to convey the phenomenology of the lived female experience,” and seeking to “expose binarism and patriarchy by juxtaposing multiple ways of speaking in a singular text” (164). By rejecting linearity, the lateral and fragmented attempts at truth-telling inherent in autofictional and fictocritical texts reflect instances where writers are able to reveal many truths at once, which challenges “either/or” binaries in writing and, as a result, makes it harder for hetero-patriarchal voices to easily usurp and rewrite these ideas to their own benefit. In “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” Lorde returns again to their oft-stated thesis regarding the master’s toolbox, and ends the essay with an unpublished poem, arguing how it’s important to recognize difference by not conflating experience across identity politics and by figuring out how to relate through an acknowledgement of difference that promotes a form of non-essentializing inclusion. 40 years after the publication of Lorde’s essays, in a time where literary forms have been blown wide open and often confused for one another, one might ask how the “master’s toolbox” agenda is also working insidiously against the growing agency of oppressed voices today.

Particularly with the advent of #MeToo, a disavowal of moral complexity within female narratives has been undermined by oppressive forces in ways that negatively impact both non-fictional victim narratives and literary works by female-identified writers alike. Consider the lack of trauma-informed negotiations when victims of sexual assault are brought to the stand and asked to relate in perfect detail a series of harrowing lived experiences, oftentimes invalidated when instances of gas lighting undermine a victim’s confidence in their own memories, and the subsequent difficulty presented to a speaker to clearly move lived experience into the realm of public narrative when cause and effect are not always rhetorical moves that are readily available to a subject who has undergone unjust and irrational abuse. In many such cases, the possibility for moral complexity is lost. Victimized subjects, often women, are expected not only to convey relatable (and thus empathy-promoting) truths in order to relate injustices enacted against them, but are also expected to be fully “reliable narrators” in the conservative literary sense: void of moral complexity or ambiguity. This rhetorical expectation has complicated the way people read and consider female-conveyed narratives in ways that reveal assumptions that are deeply damaging to female-identified voices in a number of ways, including the collapse of metaphorical validity. As Zach Pearl argues, the advent of autofiction and fictocriticism has partially inverted the logic of metaphor as “the

personal and the anecdotal are elevated as legitimate rhetorical modes that contend with objective and collective stances” (163). Metaphor, for all of its opaque capacity, has no place in validating real victim narratives, and yet it often plays an important role in literary narrative. Perhaps this difficulty can help pave the way towards an understanding of the strange phenomenon that is currently playing out in the literary world, where a collapse between fiction, non-fiction, and anything in between, is causing such heated debates amongst readers, and garnering strange and loaded attention on social media platforms, where readers have been equating predominantly assumed experiences of female authors to those of their fictional protagonists to a troubling degree that is, quite frankly, weird and unsettling.

Kristen Roupenian’s “Cat Person”: A Case of Conflated Fact and Fiction

Conflating a character with an author in literary works is not new. One can trace this tendency back to the beginnings of documented female authorship in canonical Western literature. Reflections on Greek poet Sappho’s poetry fragments as direct instances of autobiography are one example. Most people I know haven’t actually read Sappho, but they have read clickbait articles with titles like “How Gay was Sappho?” that reference her poetry as evidence in an attempt to answer this question. Scholar Judith P. Hallett reflects on this misguided approach noting that “[r]ecent scholars even assume that Sappho’s homosexuality is an ascertained, or at least ascertainable, fact and try to come to terms with her homoeroticism instead of analyzing and appreciating her poetry” (1979, 125). It is troubling how such confluations between writer—as craftsperson capable of structuring a narrative voice—and writer as opaque memoirist abound in scholarship and often eclipse the artistic merit of a given work. Now, this conflation is being *weaponized* against women writers under the guise of moral imperative. Jessica Winter outlines that this double bind is further problematized by the threat of appropriation. “If she is forced to confirm that her material is autobiographical,” Winter argues, “then she risks forfeiting both the privacy and the power of transfiguration that fiction promises. If she denies it, then she surrenders a badge of authenticity that she may never have wished to claim in the first place, and lays herself open to accusations that she is appropriating the pain of others” (2021, 1). Expectations of authors in such cases point to a standard that, at best, misdirects readers from the literary merit of the author’s work and, at worst, sets up an impossible double bind for these writers.

As a creative writer, reader, and English professor, my interest in the conflation of fact and fiction in creative writing is complex and dates back to before the publication of Roupenian’s “Cat Person,” which sparked such a strange series of obsessive debates surrounding Roupenian’s personal life. As an anecdotal aside, the first poetry competition I ever won was one where (at age 10) I fictionalized a difficult homelife situation in a poem and had to read the poem to a room full of people. The purpose of the assignment was to promote the importance of a shelter for women and children in need by having students

write about contexts where such a shelter might be needed (a now-problematic scenario that seemed pretty standard in the 90s). And so, my deranged little aspiring-writer mind went to work inventing a fictional scenario, whereas I personally had nothing in the way of experience with which to speak, having grown up in a very safe and stable home with deeply supportive and gentle parents. My three-page long poem, which detailed the experience of a child with a dangerous and alcoholic father, won the competition, to my parents' deep chagrin. This was my first experience of a troubling misunderstanding, where many adults tried to take me aside to see if I was okay at home. I didn't understand what they were getting on with, given the nature of the poetry competition, and wish I could have anticipated then that any future writing I did would garner this same sort of brow-furrowed attention, even when most things I'd written clearly resided in the genre of fiction or poetry. These misunderstandings continued to happen in grad school and elsewhere, and seemed to be happening to several of my female-identified writer friends; whereas they seldom came up with any of my male writer friends, and people generally seemed to care less whether those men were writing their own truths or spinning full-formed fictions. It felt gendered, and intrusive, and off-putting as if, as a writer, I was being objectified in some way, put on display, to reveal myself in ways that seemed unnecessary to the thing I was making. I felt the contours of this double standard, but otherwise didn't have much to say about it for a long time.

When "Cat Person" was published in *The New Yorker* in 2017, the heights of this problematic and unwarranted coalescence of fact and fiction had never been more obvious. Not only was this story, which details a problematic and difficult courtship between a young university student named Margot and her older suitor Robert, anomalous because Roupenian wasn't yet an established name in the literary world, but also it seemed to encapsulate one of the first instances of #MeToo literature, where Roupenian deals with the theme of consent in a realistic, confusing way from the perspective of young Margot in real time. Roupenian uses narrative realism to convey Margot's often ambivalent thoughts, not with the authority of hindsight, as is often deployed in narrative, but in uncomfortable, moment-to-moment, shifting detail. The story starts with an encounter where Robert asks Margot out while she's working concession at a movie theatre and, although her initial perception of him is hardly romantic, she agrees. After a couple of weeks of texting back and forth leading up to the date, the two go out. While on the date, Margot moves between anxieties that Robert might be a serial killer, to moments of tenderness where she feels drawn to him, to instances of overt disgust where she makes up an imaginary future boyfriend in her head with whom she takes comfort in laughing at the absurdity of her date with Robert. She soon learns Robert is 14-years her senior, that he is insecure and takes it out on her in small but notable ways and that, by the end, he is cruel and perhaps predatory. While an interpretation shared by many is that the story is less about a hero and a villain than it is about the various hoops a woman will jump through (at her own expense) to avoid making a man uncomfortable, the narrative realism of the story that brings Margot's shifting thoughts and feelings into sharp relief conveys a hidden interiority

that resists clear instances of consensual communication. At one particularly distressing moment in the story, right before the two characters have sex, Roupenian compares Margot's trepidation about speaking up for herself to a clinical interaction at a restaurant:

The thought of what it would take to stop what she had set in motion was overwhelming; it would require an amount of tact and gentleness that she felt was impossible to summon. It wasn't that she was scared he would try to force her to do something against her will but that insisting that they stop now, after everything she'd done to push this forward, would make her seem spoiled and capricious, as if she'd ordered something at a restaurant and then, once the food arrived, had changed her mind and sent it back. (2017, 1)

Here, Roupenian gets to the heart of power plays and gendered dynamics, revealing the "lengths women go to in order to manage men's feelings" (Khazan, ctd in Lopes 2021, 705). As a character, Lopes posits, Margot then "became emblematic of a hidden reality of victimization that women pervasively endure" (706), evidenced by the metaphorical conflation that Margot makes between the agency of her own body and a minor culinary inconvenience at a restaurant. It is not until the end of the story, following a text rejection from Margot and moderately long silence, that Robert sees her at a bar with another man and sends her a slew of texts that move from friendly to judgmental to crude and cruel. The final word of the story and last text that Robert sends Margot simply reads "Whore" (1). As Kelly Walsh posits, this ending deviates from "the text's dominant code," as it retroactively blunts the more opaque transactions between them, an opacity that until the end seems central to the nuance and impact of the story (2019, 89).

In "Cat Person," Roupenian delves into the theme of consent regarding the personal (of her characters) and the political (of the sociopolitical contexts that inform these characters). Although clearly published as fiction, many people took to Twitter (now X) and other social media platforms to discuss the work as if Margot was in fact Roupenian, a detail made all the more surprising for the fact that Roupenian was 10 years Margot's senior when the story came out, and was in a long-term relationship at the time with another woman. Many have latterly reflected on this classification of the story as part of the emerging #MeToo, non-consensual genre. Elisabeth de Mariaffi writes on how "Cat Person" was often referred to as an essay or a piece, noting how not only did readers believe that this story was one of Roupenian's own life, but that "there is a particular eagerness to decide that when women write, they are really writing memoir, or *confessional*, as it used to be called in poetry" (2021, 1). Walsh adds in the element of how (despite the story employing many "recognizable devices of narrative fiction" including omniscient narration, free-indirect discourse for dialogue, and a structured plot), many interpretations "involve[d] rather polarized, explicitly moral judgments" concerning whether one character was justified in their action towards the other (90). Online arguments ensued in such a way as to completely lose the plot (pardon the pun), devolving into a series of conversations not about "Cat Person" *as a story*, but instead about how "Cat

Person” offered insight into a dynamic between two actual people, and whether they were good people or not. Another key debate that circulated concerned Margot’s waffling, inner-monologue of critique and shallowness, a general unease towards Robert (despite no overt actions on his part to suggest that he was deeply problematic until the end of the story), as details that worked against her credibility. This particular debate reflected a larger concern in the wake of the #MeToo movement: the problematic expectation that women must be steadfast, benevolent, and relatable on all fronts if they are to garner sympathy and support when it comes to circumstances devoid of consent, sexual or otherwise.

Readers claimed to experience discomfort reading “Cat Person,” sometimes leading to a criticism that the story was “unliterary,” a criticism that shines a light on a profoundly misogynist cultural underpinning. One Twitter account, “Men React to Cat Person,” speaks volumes of some readers’ sexism toward the story, Margot, and Roupenian. Many of these Tweets call “her” (Margot? Roupenian? It’s unclear) a sociopath for her secret criticisms of Robert and how much they veer from her actions. Others point to Margot’s shallowness and emphasis on Robert’s physique, and angrily attest to how any instance of non-consensual intimacy was completely her fault for her *inability to communicate clearly*. Other Tweets attest to Robert’s full-blown sexual assault of Margot. Thousands of Tweets fall somewhere between these two sides. Very few contributors seem to be aware of the story as, well, a fictional story.

In keeping with de Mariaffi’s concern, Constance Grady points out how trivialization of women’s stories “also plays into one of the persistent oddities surrounding ‘Cat Person’; namely, the frequency with which readers have called it an ‘article’ or an ‘essay,’” a perception that Grady links to a pervasive argument of others’ that women’s literature is not serious literary fiction (2017, 1). Grady goes further to link this dismissive criticism about “Cat Person”’s lack of literary merit as one that unveils a common patronizing—indeed violent—response to confessional women’s writing more generally, pointing out how the #MeToo movement came from the fact that Western society at large has never taken women’s narratives seriously to begin with (1).

The collapse of any distinction between author and narrator or character, of fact and fiction, moves stories like “Cat Person” away from creative works with literary merit and into the realm of binary-based ethical debates where the depiction of flawed human beings in fiction is projected onto a flawed nature of authors, effectively perpetuating the ability and power of heteropatriarchal institutions to silence female voices by deeming them irrational, inconsistent, or morally dubious. The social reception of “Cat Person” catches red-handed the very culprits who attempt to undermine female-identified-authored narratives by revealing that in many cases, it doesn’t matter which woman is telling what story or how they’re telling it; they will not be believed, and deliberate misbelief is weaponized by oppressive agents. When women are asking to be “misbelieved” through their writing of fiction, the conflation of author and character exposes how patriarchal power structures refuse legitimacy to any such story, regardless of the content being refused.

Memoir or Fiction? The Catch-22 for Female-Identified Authors

Unfortunately, a lack of nuance in cultural perceptions of female subjects abounds, and so it is important to crudely ask the questions: Are those intent on furthering a patriarchal agenda trafficking in Madonna-Whore-complexing female writers? Why is it so threatening that women are both ethically and morally complex? When will female writers be able to *both* tell their own stories *and* invent whole universes that have little to do with their day-to-day lives?

Naoise Dolan, an Irish writer who has been exhausted by the same line of questioning Roupenian and many others have endured regarding her fiction, points to the expectation of personal exposure from women writers that is not expected of their male counterparts. She writes: “Women existing in any kind of public capacity are seen as having forfeited our privacy; if I agree to an interview about my work, I am not allowed to mind being asked about my sex life” (2020, 1). Further to this, and citing the “scandal” of Italian novelist Elena Ferrante’s pseudonym and concealed identity, writer Pearl Andrews-Horrigan notes how “[e]ven when a woman entirely removes herself from the equation by writing behind a pseudonym, her identity is relentlessly pursued in search of the similarities between her own biography and that of the characters she has created, as if to catch her out” (2020, 1). Andrews-Horrigan conflates the double bind of imagination/personal privacy for female authors, arguing how the latter most often find themselves in a Catch-22. To link her own personal experience to a written account is to “resign herself ... to defending its status as fiction,” even when men writing similar things are praised for playing with form (1). Any denial of a personal relation to a written account causes many female authors to “face increasingly invasive interviewers” (1). Female authors are largely being objectified, taxonomized, and confined in ways that are not enforced on male authors.

Narrative realism is said to reflect the temporal structure inherent in our way of living and acting, a form that creates space for the messier reality of human interiority meeting external circumstances. Narrative realism, then, is one of the few spaces where victim narratives can fictionally exist, as the logic of abuse and oppression resists any form of traditional “happily-ever-after” linearity, thereby bringing to light the fact that any oppressive system of power is easily threatened by perspectives that deny tidy black and white instances of heroes and villains, and gendered expectations. It is no surprise, then, that a fictional story so acutely outlining the messiness of a gendered power structure has sparked outrage in so many who don’t know how to label it, where to put it, or how to understand it.

Misuse of Metaphor: Heteropatriarchal Weaponizing of Symbolic Structures

Metaphor is therefore as central as consent because the rhetorical expectation of metaphorical language within narrative is critical when approaching different

forms of texts, particularly, in this case, fictional ones. The collapse of the fact that the characters and events in “Cat Person” were constructed symbolically/metaphorically because they exist in fiction, and the replacement of that readerly understanding with an expectation or obsession to find out exactly what is “true,” are both problematic elements of readership that distract readers from what a story is trying to do all on its own. Instead of approaching a story with curiosity and openness, some readers are objectifying writers by turning them into symbolic characters rather than allowing the characters to maintain their own symbolism. This readerly move is one that abdicates a kind of responsibility for the reader and places it on the author. There is certainly a case here for the importance of identity politics and sociopolitical contexts of given writers in relation to their works, but none of the female writers discussed here are writing so far outside of their own sociopolitical contexts that this obsession with truth and abdication of fiction should be so heavily foregrounded. The expectation that a female-identified writer must explain herself so exhaustively in relation to her work echoes several of Lorde’s points discussed earlier; namely, the idea that the old patterns of patriarchal subjugation “no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recrimination, lamentation, and suspicion” (123). Lateral moves towards autofiction and ficto-criticism have demonstrated viable methods to stray from the master’s toolbox, but the conflation of these forms, such as seen with Roupenian’s story, speak to an attempted return to a totalizing heteropatriarchal agenda that has never been more threatened.

Finally, a note on form that draws attention to not only narrative structure but also truth telling in narrative. Anyone who’s ever written a story knows that symbolism is key, even when working below the surface. Narrative conflicts are written to shift dynamics and foster realizations. Character development requires a starting point that often reveals unreliability. The details that a writer includes often speak to the broader themes of the story in ways that real life details of an anecdotal experience are highly unlikely to accomplish. Anyone who has ever told the truth also knows that the selective requirement of narrative—any narrative—forces one to leave things out. Yes, you can say what happened and how it felt, but a totalizing truth that includes your visual perception of the wallpaper in your memory and encapsulates every thought flitting through your mind in the moment of any given memory is very seldom possible, let alone inviting. Expecting or demanding linearity in a narrative is oppressive. Further, fiction with tidy cause-and-effect is a rhetorical tool often used by systems of power to veil the acts of violence that effectively gave power to these systems to begin with. As Zach Pearl notes in “Ghost Writing the Self,” hybrid forms of writing such as autofiction and fictocriticism draw attention to the complexity of what it means to write in the first place, to “bifurcate the self into the material I of the body and the literary I of the writing,” where said bifurcation of the personal and anecdotal are “elevated as legitimate rhetorical modes that contend with objective and collective stances” (163). To contend with a stance that speaks to the individual and the collective at once is a

mode that offers an alternate avenue towards honesty and empathy in lieu of metaphorical symbolism; opacity caused by competing selves is unlike the opacity of metaphorical negative capability because it reminds us that many things can be true at once, that a person can hold contradictions and occupy different registers for different reasons, that a woman's ability to invent an entire fictional context does not undermine her ability to exist in a separate and lived truth. Here, Pearl recalls Donna Haraway's technoscientific advocacy to stay "with the trouble," or, in other words, to embrace messiness as a form of resistance against the increasingly corporate logic of social institutions.

If readers want to honour and model consensual frameworks, we need to start trusting that the genre or mode that a female-identified author gives to her creative work is one that must inform our reading. In order to do this, we need to start interrogating culturally-saturated moments where these readerly contracts are overlooked in ways that objectify or dismiss female writers, as seen in the instance of "Cat Person." Hybrid forms of writing, like autofiction and fictocriticism, challenge the status quo because they defy the containment and easy taxonomy of authorial voices, allowing authors the opportunity to tell their own truths with the same discursive, fragmented imperfection that reflects the messiness of lived reality. The growing popularity of these hybrid forms, however, seems to have caused attempts at disempowerment through the conflation of author and character in other forms of writing, like fiction. A more ethically-informed reading starts by paying attention to how to responsibly approach texts, and to consider how forms, genres, and definitions are being misperceived in texts by women. Lorde reminds us of how easily insidious motives can move through ubiquitous ideology, and how we must stop to really consider how language is used and who chooses and disseminates this usage. Perhaps, then, to "stay with the trouble" is to remain ever mindful of the status-quo's appropriation of language in an attempt to defy female agency, and to stop long enough to consider one's own limitations when approaching the words of another person, and ask: *What do I already know? What do I already think I know but could be wrong about? What parts of another person's interiority am I entitled to? Why do I feel entitled to begin with?*

Biography

Aley Waterman is a creative writer and English Literature instructor at Grenfell Campus, Memorial University in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. Her first novel, *Mudflowers*, was published by the Dundurn Press Literary Imprint *Rare Machines* in the Fall of 2023. She also published reviews, poetry, short fiction, and non-fiction in *The Brooklyn Review*, *Trampoline Hall Podcast*, *Border Crossings Magazine*, *Riddle Fence*, *Bad Nudes*, *Horseshoe Literary Magazine*, *The Secret Sex Anthology*, *Hart House Review*, *NLS*, and elsewhere. She is currently working on her first novella and her second novel with funding from ArtsNL.

Notes

1. Autofiction is a literary form that combines autobiography and fiction.

2. Carl Rhodes defines fictocriticism as “writing engaged in genre-bending as a literary and theoretical engagement with existence and selfhood” (2015, 289).

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