

Sweating in Public: Some Thoughts About Writing on the Internet While Being a Woman

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Abstract

This paper uses auto-theory and affect to think through the repercussions of writing from a gendered perspective in public spaces and on social media.

Résumé

Cet article se sert de la théorie de l'auteur et de la théorie des affects pour réfléchir aux répercussions du fait d'écrire selon une perspective sexospécifique dans les espaces publics et sur les médias sociaux.

I think surely some percentage of women hasn't been raped. I don't know though, really. Perhaps this is the kind of thing I could find out on Google. (Rankine 2004, 72)

When I use the concept of 'sweaty concepts' I am also trying to say we can generate new understandings by describing the difficulty of inhabiting a body that is not at home in a world. (Ahmed 2014)

I remember the first time I received a rape threat on Twitter. I was at a conference on the past and future of avant-gardism in Canadian literary culture and I was sitting in the back row with a colleague. We were waiting for the keynote panel to begin and, being the modern multi-tasker that I am, I checked my phone. There it was in 140 characters or less. A tweet from a stranger saying something to the effect of *I hope you get raped, or you deserve to get raped*.

My first response was to think *lol, already happened. Get a new angle?*

My second response was to start sweating.

I can't remember now what the precise wording of the tweet. I didn't even bother to take a screen shot (rookie mistake). I do remember showing my colleague who was sitting beside me. She was more upset and shocked than I was. I also remember posting the following on Facebook: *I just got my first rape threat on Twitter. So there's that.*

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Why can I remember the feeling of resignation—aha, it has finally happened—and not the text of the threat itself?

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Sarah Ahmed's notion of "sweaty concepts" is my guide here, as I try to think being a woman who writes about feminism and social justice in public forums. For Ahmed, the phrase "sweaty concepts" is a way of

demonstrating how the work of description and exploration is labour.

Here is Ahmed:

A concept is worldly but it is also a reorientation to a world, a way of turning things around, a different slant on the same thing. More specifically a ‘sweaty concept’ is one that comes out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world. By this I mean description as angle or point of view: a description of how it feels not to be at home in the world, or a description of the world from the point of view of not being at home in it...

When I use the concept of ‘sweaty concepts’ I am also trying to say we can generate new understandings by describing the difficulty of inhabiting a body that is not at home in a world.

Sweat is bodily; we might sweat more during more strenuous activity. A ‘sweaty concept’ might be one that comes out of a bodily experience that is difficult, one that is ‘trying,’ and where the aim is to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty, which means also aiming not to eliminate the effort or labour from the writing... (Ahmed 2014)

Trying to write about living in rape culture is exhausting. It makes me sweat and shake. Trying to write in public—especially on digital platforms—as a way of witnessing is, as Ahmed articulates, *difficult*. For every brilliant piece of writing about rape culture I read, I wonder what it cost the person who wrote it.

How much sweat?

How much shaking?

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I received a lot of responses to my post about receiving a rape threat online. The ones I remember best, though, were from women who had *also* received online rape threats. Their advice was often two-pronged: they acknowledged how awful it was to receive these threats, and then they offered concrete advice for how to deal with it.

I was comforted by how many women I know who have received rape threats or other misogynistic attacks online.

Comforted. What a word.

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The Internet is a complicated space for women. That’s obvious, right? As Catherine Buni and Soraya Chemaly (2014) detail in “The Unsafety Net: How Social Media Turned Against Women,” while the net is ideally a series of neutral platforms for interacting and sharing information, it is in fact not neutral at all. “If, as the communications philosopher Marshall McLuhan famously said, television brought the brutality of war into people’s living rooms, the Internet today is bringing violence against women out of it,” write Buni and Chemaly. What concerns them most is not the proliferation of violence against women on social media, but the fact that violence is a symptom of the larger, more pervasive effects of rape culture and patriarchy. In 2013, the World Health Organization (WHO) wrote a report that stated violence against women was at an all-time high (WHO 2013). For Buni and Chemaly, the WHO brief gives concrete numbers to anecdotal evidence: women are experiencing more violence, and the Internet—especially social media—is facilitating a great deal of that violence.

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It’s tempting to think about that song from childhood, isn’t it? You know the one I mean: *sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me*.

But here’s the thing: verbal abuse *does* hurt. It hurts a lot. And it can do real damage. Moreover, verbal abuse and harassment are outlines as methods of discrimination that can be punishable offences (Canadian Human Rights Commission 2017). We have too many specific examples of how verbal harassment of women in digital space has devastating effects in real life. After showing her breasts to a man masquerading as her peer on line Amanda Todd was harassed relentlessly. She eventually took her own life. After photos circulated of her being sexually assaulted while incapacitated, Rethelah Parsons also took her own life. After starting a Kickstarter campaign to fund her web series *Tropes vs. Women*, which unpacks gender stereotypes in video games, Anita Sarkeesian received such voracious abuse that she has to leave her house with police escorts as well as cancel a public talk at a university in Utah because of credible threats of gun violence against her. And in August of 2016, renowned feminist activist and educator Jessica

Valenti deactivated all her social media accounts after receiving multiple rape threats against her five-year-old daughter.

These are just a few examples.

This kind of gendered online harassment is on the rise according to the Pew Research Centre. According to their findings, young women between the ages of 18 and 24 “experience certain severe types of harassment at disproportionately high levels: 26% of these young women have been stalked online, and 25% were the target of online sexual harassment. In addition, they do not escape the heightened rates of physical threats and sustained harassment common to their male peers and young people in general” (Duggan 2014).

I’m struck by that language of evasion and escape. Young women are being harassed, stalked, and threatened with physical and sexual assault *as well as* not being able to escape “heightened rates of physical threats and sustained harassment common to their male peers and young people in general.”

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Still tempted to suggest that *names will never hurt me?*

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Despite what we know about how gender (not to mention race, sexuality, and ability) are taken up in digital space, many of us still do it. Further, many of us do it under our own names.

Why?

When Heather Zwicker, Aimée Morrison, and I first started the feminist academic blog *Hook & Eye: Fast Feminism, Slow Academe*, we made a conscious decision to blog under our own names. No pseudonyms, no anonymity, we agreed. Not from us, not from guest bloggers. Our reasoning here was careful and deliberate: we were trying to create a space on the Internet for women and women-identified people to talk about feminist work and living in gendered bodies while laboring in academic institutions. It was important, we agreed, to have real live people talking from identifiable places and spaces about our own experiences. Some of the blogs we liked best—*Tenured Radical, Tenure, She Wrote*—were written with care to conceal the author.

We felt that knowing who we were and where we were located mattered. A lot.

I still believe it matters that I sign my own name to my blog posts. I believe it matters because I have experienced how powerful it can be for people to identify with me. I know it matters because I have experienced how being public on the Internet can (has) been used against me.

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I get heart palpitations every time I hit “post.”

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Does everyone? I doubt it (though the numbers from the Pew Research Centre suggest many of us *do*).

What does it cost me physically to have those heart palpitations? I think about that. I think about whether writing publicly as a woman is bad for my health. I think about whether the risks are necessary. Usually, I decide they are. Still, it is exhausting sometimes. So exhausting.

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An Open Letter to Rex Murphy and the *National Post*

Dear Mr. Murphy:

I am an assistant professor at [redacted] where I teach in the Department of English. Some of my colleagues are trained as Shakespeareans or Victorianists. Others are trained in Modernist literatures, or American literatures, or post-colonial literatures. I myself am a Canadianist, which means I study, research, and teach literatures of Canada. I also teach my students about Canada’s colonial legacy, about the violences of Canada’s historic and contemporary relationships with First Peoples. For example, I strive to teach my students about what an ongoing national failure to meaningfully acknowledge and address the ongoing crisis of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women has to do with early narrative representations of First Nations peoples in settler-colonial literature. Oh yes, and I teach my students from a feminist and anti-racist perspective.

I wanted to tell you some of the places from which I teach so that you can be very clear about my deep concern with your article “Institutes of Lower Education.”

Here’s the thing: it is easy to the point of being banal

and boring to take uncritical potshots at university curriculums and especially at the arts and humanities. Moreover, given that this country is in the midst of an election campaign, taking cheap shots at the humanities is a thinly veiled partisan trick at best. And you can bet that students who have been taught to close read and think critically will have seen this. It irks me that another national newspaper is willing to thoughtlessly toss humanities education out the window, but that isn't what has enraged me enough to take time away from preparing my lectures to write to you here.

No. What enrages me, Mr. Murphy, is your seemingly blithe attitude towards gender inequity, rape culture, violence against women, and, frankly, real rape. Add to that your willingness to dismiss outright creative modes of consciousness-raising, analysis, and collaborative learning and you have me not only angry, you have me deeply concerned. If you haven't noticed, Canada is in crisis. There are many facets of this crisis, but the one I want to draw your attention to is our national crisis of violence against women. Let me explain how your article undermines the severity of this crisis.

You begin your article asking "Who can be considered a highly educated person in today's world?" After making reference to a few touchstone pop culture icons you quickly move from sounding like an angry old man shaking his fist at the clouds to simply being hateful. You poke fun at crucial interventions into heteronormative language as a means of undermining university education. Just in case we're not clear, what you've done is denigrate linguistic attempts to make space for trans identities and denigrate the spaces and classrooms where some of those discussions take place. All in the name of suggesting that university education isn't what it used to be back in the day with Mr. Darcy.

Are you kidding me, Mr. Murphy?

And then, despite your attempts to hinge your hateful tirade on a public figure's woeful historic ignorance, you slut shame a young woman who was allegedly raped. In fact, you more than slut shame her. You put Emma Sulkowicz's rape in quotation marks. You make her experience of physical violation ironic and mockable. And then you take her thesis project which, by the way, oper-

ates in a genre called endurance performance, and you mock her. You mock this young woman, her bravery, and her attempt to translate her experience of violence into both art and activism. You mock her in a national newspaper. Shame on you.

Let me tell you a bit about Ms. Sulkowicz's project, because it isn't clear to me that you did your research.

In the fall of 2014, an art student at Columbia University by the name of Emma Sulkowicz began carrying her mattress with her to class. This act of endurance performance entitled *Carry That Weight* was her senior thesis project for her Fine Arts Degree. It was also a public acknowledgement of her experience of sexual assault on campus. Sulkowicz was sexually assaulted in her dorm room at the beginning of her second year of university. She began carrying her fifty-pound mattress with her around campus—to class, to lunch, to study—as a visual and physical statement both of her assault and of the fact that her rapist was still a student at Columbia. He was unpunished despite several complaints of assault from Sulkowicz and other women. She, meanwhile, was carrying the weight of her assault as she moved through the same space as her assailant.

Here's the thing, Mr. Murphy: we—by which I mean culture at large—don't know how to talk about rape. We don't know how to differentiate between different experiences of rape which, by the way, can require a shifting use of pronouns. We don't know how to address the perniciousness of rape in history as a calculated tool for violence and subordination any more than we know how to discuss rape as a sometimes-facet of consensual sexual relationships. And we *certainly* do not know how, as a culture, to talk about rape culture on campuses.

You wrote this article nearly a year to the day that the Jian Ghomeshi scandal broke. You published this article nearly a year after the Dalhousie Dentistry Scandal Broke. And let's not forget that nearly a year ago the hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported trended to such a degree that it became the opening page of the *Huffington Post*. You published this article less than a week after three women were murdered in Ontario by a man they all knew. And you pretended that this article was about the failure of humanities classrooms specif-

ically and university curriculums more generally. That is not just reprehensible journalism, it is faulty rhetoric.

There will be some readers, I'm sure, who will tell me I shouldn't have read your opinion, that I should have known what I was in for. But here's the thing: when a national newspaper chooses to publish openly misogynistic opinions, it tells us something about our cultural climate. As my students and I discuss in our classes the historical and cultural context out of which a text is produced can tell us as much about a cultural moment as the text itself. We have incredible discussions about how language reveals systemic injustice and inequity. You're welcome to join us if you'd like to do some research for your next article on what actually happens in humanities classrooms.

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In the fall of 2015, I wrote that open letter to Rex Murphy and the *National Post*. It was in response to Murphy's (2015) editorial "Institutes of Lower Education," which was a diatribe on the ways that cultural studies and other critical sites of inquiry have lowered the value of formerly prestigious institutions. Murphy is a Canadian media personality known, I think it is fair to say, for favouring polarizing viewpoints. In this particular editorial, he laments the devaluing of university degrees from institutions because institutions, *and, in particular, some humanities departments—have, over the last few decades, wandered far from the primary purpose of what these institutions were designed for: to teach what is worth knowing; to train the intellect; to acquaint students with, and help them appreciate, the glories of the human mind and its finest achievements.* Putting aside for the moment the tired argument that a degree in the humanities has no value, let's instead think about how Murphy unfolds his argument. What examples does a national figure in Canadian social and political news use to make his point?

Emma Sulkowicz's final project.

Furthermore, Murphy uses Sulkowicz's rape as a theoretical point from which to speculate about her intellectual capabilities.

Let's think about that for a moment. Older white man with (presumably) a well-paying job mocks young ra-

cialized woman for enduring rape. Older white man builds his entire argument on this mockery of young, racialized woman who—wait for it—had the gall to want to study Fine Arts. For credit! And just in case you're thinking, *hey, [redacted], calm down. It's just Rex Murphy. You should know what you're in for*, please pause with me for a moment.

His editors approved this.

The newspaper published it.

Further, the newspaper published it nearly a year to the day that the Jian Ghomeshi scandal *and* the Dalhousie Dentistry Scandal broke. The Dalhousie Dentistry Scandal became a public scandal because a young man decided to blow the whistle on his fellow colleagues who had built a long-standing, private social media "club" where they discussed sexually assaulting their female colleagues as well as future patients. Using anesthesia. Because they will be dentists. Oh yes, and the Dalhousie Dentistry Scandal? The so-called "Dalhousie Gentlemen's Club" started on the anniversary of the Montreal Polytechnique Massacre of fourteen women (Halsall 2015). And it started with this question to its members: *who would you hate fuck?*

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Over a hundred people commented on Murphy's editorial, most to say some horrifying version of *hear, hear!* Why? Because we live in a rape culture where women's experiences of violence are mocked for an editorial point. Further, the ease and anonymity with which people can comment in online forums facilitates the ease and speed with which hate can proliferate. We know this. Even the *Toronto Star* has acknowledged the hot mess of hate that is the comments section. The *Star* has closed online commenting sections "partly because of the negative tone of many comments" (Bradshaw 2016).

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So I wrote this open letter and published it on the feminist academic blog *Hook & Eye: Fast Feminism, Slow Academe*. I wanted to put it in a public place, because that's part of being a feminist killjoy. We have to call out the so-called joys of patriarchal culture to people who exist outside of our circles of shared politics.

The result of my letter was not wholly unexpected, I sup-

pose. I was written up in *Frank Magazine* as “Halifax’s newest lunatic feminist.” In the quintessentially *Frank* piece, the writer relies on classic *ad hominam* attacks to sketch out his “satiric” engagement with my writing (Douglas 2016).

And why mention the *Frank* piece, really, save for the fact it illustrates a few points I am trying to make: women have to fight to have their experiences of sexualized violence recognized as such. This is especially true for women of colour, Indigenous women, queer, trans, or differently abled women. Women’s experiences are made strange, again and again, in mainstream media, in small “satiric” publications, and, indeed, in everyday life.

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Have you seen the advertisement created by the podcast Just Not Sports? In it, men—presumably sports fans, but it is never explicit—are paired with women who work in sports journalism. The point of the interaction is to get men to read aloud comments that have been made about the women on social media. It’s an uncomfortable, kind of funny, highly orchestrated environment. The viewer can tell right away that these men and women don’t know each other, and we are told that the men have not read the tweets prior to this interaction. The women, on the other hand, have.

The women and men face each other for this staged reading. The women stare straight ahead as the men read from their scripts of hate-tweets. The interactions between these two strangers start out awkward and joky. They shake hands. Some of the men ask if they are just meant to read everything on the paper out loud.

The first few tweets are subtle in their misogyny seeming, at first listen, to be critiquing the women’s abilities as sports reporters.

“She’s not good, not bad, just mediocre, just there,” reads one.

“She’s just a scrub-muffin,” reads another. “What’s a scrub-muffin?” the man asks, “I love muffins.”

The atmosphere palpably changes when the tweets become more violent.

“I hope you get raped again,” one male participant whispers, holding back tears.

“I hope your boyfriend beats you,” another says, struggling to keep eye contact with the woman across from him.

“I hope your dog dies.”

As the men read the increasingly violent texts, they become shaken. Some resist reading until they are told they must, and then they do it in a rush, or with shaking voices, or with tones of disbelief.

Each one of them apologizes to the women when they finish.

The advertisement ends with the statement that “we wouldn’t say this to them in real life, so why say it on the Internet?” and flashes the hashtag #MoreThanMean (Just Not Sports 2016).

While I do know that these kinds of statements get uttered to women in real life, I still genuinely appreciate this ad. It makes me sad. It makes me uncomfortable. It makes me angry. It reminds me of the depth of vitriol and hate that anonymity facilitates.

It makes me wonder why any woman would take to the Internet and try to speak to issues of inequity at all, much less under her own name.

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It makes me wonder why I write under my own name.

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My first book was published in November 2016. It is a collection of non-fiction essays about the importance of feminism. Specifically, it is about the importance of Sara Ahmed’s figure of the feminist killjoy: the feminist who kills the so-called “joys” of patriarchal culture. In the collection, I talk about rape culture, among other things.

In preparation for the book’s release I started scrubbing my online presence. Photos of me and my daughter? Gone, or untagged. Photos of me and my partner? Ditto. And I shifted the settings on my Twitter account to require that followers request permission.

Is this paranoia or self-preservation?

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“When I use the concept of ‘sweaty concepts,’” writes Ahmed (2014), “I am also trying to say we can generate new understandings by describing the difficulty of inhabiting a body that is not at home in a world.”

I’m still writing under my own name and in public spaces and places because for me there’s still generative possibility in using my own vulnerabilities as a site from which to think about how we understand the ways that heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions about gender structure how a body is able to be, at home in the world. It is uncomfortable work. It is difficult work. It is work I don’t want to do forever.

But I am doing it, for now. For you. With you, whomever you may be.

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