

The New Sex Wars: Sexual Harm in the #MeToo Era, Brenda Cossman [NYU Press, 2021, 280pp, £25.99 (hardback)]

Senthoran Raj¹

Sexual harm generates divisive debates amongst feminist activists and academics. #MeToo, for example, exemplifies how feminist campaigns to eliminate sexual abuse, harassment, and misconduct are mired in emotional contestations about the scope of defining sexual harm and the extent to which regulation is necessary to address such harms. Brenda Cossman's new book, *The New Sex Wars: Sexual Harm in the #MeToo Era*, tracks the affective and analytic reach of a range of competing feminist interventions aimed at addressing sexual harm. Rather than subscribe to a polarising polemic, Cossman persuasively encourages us (as feminist and/or queer scholars) to take seriously different feminist understandings of the relationship between danger, pleasure, agency, and harm without reducing each of them to caricatured critiques. In doing so, Cossman's text is an invitation to feminist/queer reparative approaches of addressing sexual harm.

The New Sex Wars begins with an exploration of feminist debates relating to #MeToo. Started by Tarana Burke in 2006, as a campaign to elevate the voices of women and girls who were survivors of sexual abuse, the hashtag gained global popularity following a tweet by Alyssa Milano in relation to sexual assault and harassment perpetrated by powerful men in Hollywood. The hashtag inspired millions of women to share their experiences online and, in doing so, prompted considerable critical debate about what counts as sexual harm and how we might address it. The debate about #MeToo was not simply a misogynistic "backlash" by men who felt threatened by shifting sexual norms that might undermine their entitlement to, or expectation of, women's bodies. Cossman carefully details how some "second wave" feminists like Germaine Greer and Catherine Deneuve were wary of #MeToo, believing it would undermine the seriousness of men's sexual abuse of women by stretching definitions of sexual harassment to the point where it included workplace flirtations, or sexual assault to include bad sex (p. 23). In response, other feminists passionately emphasised that sexual abuse is insidious and it is necessary to challenge it unequivocally (p. 24). While it may be tempting to read this debate in generational terms, Cossman's analysis points to the dangers of a narrative that dismissively frames the #MeToo debate as a "generational catfight" (pp. 39-40). For Cossman, caricaturing the debate as a generational conflict not only obscures the conflicts

¹ Senthoran Raj, School of Law, Manchester Metropolitan University. Email: s.raj@mmu.ac.uk.
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(relating to race, sexuality, class, disability) within different feminist “waves”, but it also ignores the nuances of feminist interventions within each “wave” of campaigning.

Cossman reverts historically to the “sex wars” of the 1970s and 80s to illustrate how feminist contestations in #MeToo track against historic conversations about pleasure, danger, and the utility of law. In the book’s second chapter, Cossman traces antagonisms between “sex radicals” (Gayle Rubin) who emphasised female sexual agency and pleasure in their pursuits to decriminalise non-normative sexual activities like sex work, and “radical feminists” (Andrea Dworkin) who emphasised the relationship between sexual harm and women’s oppression in their pursuits to regulate sexual representation like pornography (pp. 44-52). In setting out this history, Cossman shows how the differential feminist emphasis on either the pleasure or danger axis of concern led to hostilities within and between feminist groups. These hostilities materialised in debates about the desirability of using law as part of feminist campaigns to promote pleasure and regulate sexual expression (pp. 65-69). Yet, Cossman is also careful to note that sex radicals recognised patriarchal violence while anti-porn activists were not against women’s sexual pleasure (p. 69).

Reading #MeToo as a kind of “Sex Wars 2.0” is possible when questions of sexuality, agency, and law are contextualised within those earlier feminist histories about sexual harm. Reflecting on feminist advocates of #MeToo in Chapter 3, Cossman illustrates the influence of feminist legal scholars like Catharine MacKinnon who have argued that sexuality remains an insidious site of coercion for women and refracts gender inequalities (p. 90). Alternatively, Cossman notes how “sex positive feminists” also render female sexuality in more porous and playful terms by emphasising forms of agency that are not reducible to harm or exploitation (p. 101). Together, these feminist encounters – which emphasise different anxieties about sexuality and agency – throw into sharp relief the failures of law to address sexual harm and gender inequality more generally. For some feminists, law is underinclusive for failing to recognise the range of sexual harms inflicted by men on women. For other feminists, law is overinclusive in expanding the reach of a carceral systems that both objectify women’s trauma and victimisation (through criminal procedural bureaucracies) and entrench inequalities (through asymmetric policing and punishment of people who perpetrate sexual abuse). Both sets of feminist critique, however, point to the possibilities of bypassing (criminal-like) law to remedy sexual harm (p. 104).

It is in this shared space that Cossman invites those concerned about sexual harm to engage in a “reparative reading” of sexual harm and the regulatory impulses to address it. Taking Eve Sedgwick’s queer call to read texts affectively in ways open to surprise, Cossman

takes a reparative approach to reading the sexual harassment allegations against NYU Professor Avital Ronell and US Senator Al Franken in Chapter 4. Avital Ronell was a feminist scholar accused of sexual misconduct by a male graduate student. Al Franken was a progressive US Senator accused of inappropriate touching of women. In each of these cases, there is an ambivalence about the evidence (photographs, text messages) used to substantiate the allegations. For Cossman, this ambivalence is not about denying the sexual misconduct. Rather, tracking the emotionality of the situation, acknowledging the regrets present for the accused and those who judge them, “may allow us to recognize what we might have done differently, what we could still do differently, and acknowledge the ambiguity in our judgment” (p. 160).

Cossman’s text concludes in Chapter 5 with an articulation of what it might mean to think about the regulation of sexual harm in reparative terms. Holding space for both sexual harm and sexual agency alongside a critical disposition to law’s failures need not mean we abandon law. Feminist and queer interventions enable us to imagine sexual harm differently and appreciate the dangers of sexual regulation without dismissing either one (p. 175). While a reparative approach may turn us away from criminal law, we might turn towards restorative and transformative models (in alternative dispute resolution or tort claims) (p. 179).

The New Sex Wars is a bold and generous text. At a time when feminist debates on sex and sexuality are mired in a warring intransigence of caricatured positions, Cossman calls for more generous engagements of various feminist positions. Cossman suggests a shared feminist anger, at persisting sexual inequality and harm, might be an opportunity to bring us together to pursue responsibility and accountability rather than divide us along ideological lines (p. 202). While I admire Cossman’s generosity of spirit, I am left wondering about the stakes of this generosity. At what points might a reparative mode of engagement enable conversations that degrade others through the logic of “debate”? How might we temper reparative modes of reading and regulation with more “paranoid” approaches that confront power? I ask these questions not to dismiss the critical importance of Cossman’s a/effective interventions but rather to elaborate them.

Cossman has crafted a gripping and insightful book built on a queer feminist ethos of care, solidarity, critique, and accountability. *The New Sex Wars* is vital reading for scholars and activists interested in furthering feminist, queer, and abolitionist conversations about ending sexual harm and promoting social justice.