

Requirement Politics

Poetry as Feminist Response to Institutional Reluctance and Dismissal

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Article abstract

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REQUIREMENT POLITICS: POETRY AS FEMINIST RESPONSE TO INSTITUTIONAL RELUCTANCE AND DISMISSAL

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Dr. Bernadette “bird” Bowen (She/they/Dr.) is a Visiting Assistant Professor, content creator, poet, and critical media ecologist at Miami University. Alongside a handful of colleagues, since 2019 Dr. bird has helped spearhead a critical feminist wave of media ecology that incorporates cultural studies. Since finishing their PhD, Dr. bird rapidly gained followers on TikTok (@bbiirdbPhD), and continues sharing their experiences, serving as a resource for folks struggling to exist in a colonial capitalist system.

Abstract: In this article, which includes a feminist micro-chapbook, the author has chosen poems written both prior to and following their recollection of and subsequent therapeutic struggle to work through their lifelong experiences of sexual harassment and assault. Situated within the neoliberally co-opted #MeToo campaign, Betsy Devos’s 2020 Title IX cross-examination mandate, and post-Trumpian, ongoing COVID U.S. landscape, this work performs an ethnographic autopsy on the body politic: displaying the fleshy lived consequences of an unjust legal system. By continuing Faulkner’s work on poetic inquiry as feminist methodology, this piece contributes to the tradition of poetic praxis as a means of clapping back to structures of oppression. At its core, this article reveals relived experiences and words spoken by institutional figures reluctant to fulfill mandatory reporting requirements. By playing off Higginbotham’s (1993) term *respectability politics*, “Requirement Politics” blurs lines of academic and poetic writing to deliberately collapse a fabricated line between public and private lived experiences.

Keywords: micro-chapbook; requirement politics; media ecology; poetic inquiry; feminist methodologies

Trigger warning for general discussions of normalized sexual harassment and violence. As I struggled throughout my twenties, a slew of academic books, articles, and personal memoirs were written on the topic of feminine folks' mounting, but dismissed, rage (see, for example, Bitch Media, 2018; Chemaly, 2018; Chu, 2019; Doyle, 2019; Flowers, 2015; and West, 2019, to name a few). These recent works all speak to differently situated accumulations of lived feminine rage. I argue these expressions have been a long time coming. I mean that both figuratively and literally, considering one major focus of feminine rage and anger revolves around lived experiences of sexual violence, in which harassment and rape have been used as weaponized tools of systemic violence. Throughout our lives we have been told our feelings are ugly, we have been told we feel them too much and are crazy for daring to feel at all (Ngai, 2005). For this, I argue the sexually violent U.S. society decided we must be punished.

In this article, "Requirement Politics," in which I include a micro-chapbook of feminist poetry, I revisit my book chapter "#WhatNext: Some Political Implications of the #MeToo Campaign Aftermath" (Bowen, 2021) for the purpose of putting my #MeToo academic findings into conversation with personal poems I wrote between 2016 and 2021. The creative works that are included represent distinct aspects (institutional politics, laws and everyday discourses, and rage as a means of cathartic expression) and expressions of my own experiences of sexual harassment, violence, and dismissal. In the following poem I linguistically frame experiences of sexual violence as old tales of war that surviving soldiers traded.

Old War Tales

we
traded
our stories
of addiction
and abuse

like
Pokémon cards;

fondly,

comparing
their worth
to us
and strength

of attack.

"that one

He

was

-always

my favorite"

"that one,

he trained

-me

the most."

As Faulkner (2020) argued, poetic accounts such as those included here, when contextualized within national and institutional decision-making, express a form of feminist methodology that bear fruitful insights about the contemporary U.S. (in)justice system. To ethnographically demonstrate the everyday occurrence that anything becomes normal in repetition, and in the style of socially critical poetic inquirers (PIs) before me, I enact a meaningful (Anthym, 2018), culturally relevant (Redman-MacLaren, 2020), and positioned (Davis, 2021) inquiry.

To begin, I present an overview of statistics which detail the current epidemic of sexual violence, followed by disclosures of various lived experiences of institutionally dismissed acts of violence, to bare the fleshy human consequences of the late-stage neoliberal capitalistic U.S. body politic.

To concretely name intersecting and otherwise nameless institutional faces, I offer the term *requirement politics*, elucidating these phenomena within the sexually violent ecology of the contemporary U.S. landscape. By playing off Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's (1993) term *respectability politics*, this piece constructively blurs lines of academic and poetic writing through poetic inquiry to deliberately collapse what Faulkner (2020) referred to as ". . . the false divide between the private and the public, as a form of embodied inquiry, and as a feminist political response" (p. 1). In doing so, I follow Faulkner's (2018) critical feminist methodological footsteps to speak truth to power, rehumanizing accounts of violence, and centering feminine insights ". . . to tell a story about fieldwork through the telling, retelling, and framing of embodied experiences with a poetic sensibility" (p. 112).

Contextually, in light of the perpetually unjust procedures of the pre- and present-COVID U.S. legal system, as well as the Title IX mandate finalized by prior U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, in 2020, this manuscript contributes to critical literature on poetic inquiry, feminist methodologies, and gender and media ecology. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2021), the Title IX federal civil rights law in the United States states that, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (para. 1). As such, Title IX offices are required on federally aided campuses across the country to handle reported cases of sexual violence and discrimination (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Years before the revoking of *Roe v. Wade*, Betsy DeVos mandated a requirement that both accusers and their accused are to be cross-examined in sexual violence cases (Grayer & Stracqualursi, 2020).

Before proceeding, it is essential I provide another trigger warning to readers for depictions of everyday and taken-for-granted sexual harassment and assault. As a millennial, raised by boomers in the 1990s and early 2000s, I was one of the lucky ones. My parents were the second generation to assimilate into United States concepts of whiteness after our ancestors fled from what is now called Czechoslovakia (mostly my mother, who, during her life, used the word ‘gypsy’ to describe us endearingly) were open with me early on about puberty, anatomy, and sexuality writ large. I had questions, and they were met with realistically progressive answers, unlike the silence (at worst) or abstinence-only sex education my peers received (at best). I was the friend people went to with sex questions. But I also lived a darker Internet backstory.

Sex Ed

Ironically,
Was the
One thing
My parents
Did right,

But they
were just
..too Late.

—

I was a single

Digit human
In the age
When Online
Pedophiles were
Still wearing
Training Wheels.

I was there
When they
First learned
to fashion
“A/S/L?” Like
A Lock-pick;

breaking
Into my
Innocence.

—

Once they
Keyed into
My Family
Computer,

From
Miles
Away

They Smelled
My Fresh meat.

—

These
Anonymous
Animals,

Hungry for
young Blood,

Wasted no
Time sinking
Cybernetic
Teeth into me.

—

This little
baby bird

Prey-
telling
You now,

Didn't
Even
Leave
Her nest

To be
Gnawed
On as
Such.

—

Early online
Chat rooms

Were black
Holes full of
Effervescent
Dragon fish.

Luring me,
HeadLights,
& Waiting
Mouths;

They hunted
[Instantly and

Messaging-ly]
In Deep Dark
Pools of
Internet
Anonymity.

—

Adults

[Old enough
——To know
——Better]
Behind
Screens &
No Names,

Used their

Canine &
Wisdom
Teeth to

Savor the
Flesh of
My naivety.

—

“Little
birds
Don’t
Belong
In deep
Waters.”

They
Might
Think,

“I must
Have

Asked
for it[?].”

—

In the
digital
Feeding
Frenzy,

Apex
Predators
Made Quick

-Meal of my
Prepubescent
Boundaries.

Saw me,
As child,
Too Supple
A Delicacy
to leave
Digitally
Untouched.

—

Behind
Cover of
Windows,

It didn't
Compute
For you.

You didn't
See adult
Creatures
Eating live
children,

Like me

Everyday,

Spread-eagle
& Face Down.

The phrase “anything becomes normal in repetition” is the theme of this manuscript because these are stories of sexual violence I lived repeatedly. Telling them now, in this context, reveals a lifetime of rich evidence, demonstrating how these violences happen and become normalized. As I grew from single digits into my teens, I only knew what I knew.

Bane

i don't
remember you
most of the time.

It was
2005, or 6

& you worked
at S*****.

I didn't
remember
your name,
but you
knew mine.

--

you messaged me
on AIM, like
we did back then.

I was
inexperienced,

and you knew
just
what to say.

i didn't
especially
like you,

but you had
a strong jaw
and my
expectations
were low

-if not,
nonexistent.

you invited
me over
to go in
your hot tub
late at night.

--

i arrived,
and you said
your father
was away
on business

but your
grandmother
was asleep,

so we'd,

"have to
be quiet."

i didn't know

what I wanted,

I was
only 15.

--

between
pleasureless
probing,

gasps
for air,

and tears

i thought,

"is this what
boys want?"

i learned how
to leave myself
that night;

revert my
consciousness
back into
safe headspace,

"this is what
boys want."

When you are raised into a society that has the rates of sexual violence and the lack of formal comprehensive sex education that the United States of America does, such experiences are framed as normal socio-sexual relations. The repetition of socialized violence is a sense-making process. Growing from my teens into my 20s, a romanticization of abuse was normal.

Toxicity Didn't Kill Me

i remember

it looked
like a
smashed
strawberry

when the
gynecologist
pried the
tampon
out of me.

I was a
20-year-old

Raped
in my
childhood
bedroom

by a boy who
used "i love yous"
like a
trojan horse.

—

three days
later,
I didn't
remember.

trauma does
that to you
[even though
for some,
sexual assault

is a punchline
these days].

—

lying back
Stirruped feet,

i was just
as surprised
as the doctor

who gutted
the rotten
tissue-soaked
cotton from me.

they told me,

“you should
have been
dead of
toxic shock.”

they couldn't
see it, but,
a part
of me
was dead.

—

He ended
up cheating
on me

because I
withheld sex
from him.
[after the fact]

“Boys will be boys,”

Right?

Serendipitously enough, during the revision process of publishing this piece, the (now) man in this poem contacted me, apologizing for his unfaithfulness. I told him I wrote a poem about him and recounted this instance of violence. He read it and quickly brushed his act of violence away, as if it was normal. Because it was normal. The remainder of this article is a rigorous disclosure of other accounts of sexual violences I experienced, in both narrative and poetic forms, to elucidate how and why they were. In everyday conversation, an account such as mine is frequently dismissed and/or discredited. Regardless of these dismissals, evidence of these sexual violences bleeds from in-person into social media spaces (Sagredos & Nikolova, 2021; Simmons, 2017).

I envision tactics of dissent, such as this work, as contributing media ecology; a critical framework with a liberatory feminist edge, informed by the media ecological tenet of breakdown as breakthrough. Specifically, Marshall McLuhan (1970) is known for reminding readers of the functionality of learning how media works by experiencing how it breaks. My critical media ecological approach of requirement politics extends this idea further, documenting narratives of how, when experienced by / from different positionalities, these trace evidences reveal identity, relational, and institutional breaks.

Institutional Politics

...there's beauty in the breakdown. (Heap & Sigsworth, 2002, para. 3)

According to Smith et al. (2018), the most widely referenced statistic regarding the violence college women experience has been “one in five” (p.1). A recent study by the World Health Organization ([WHO], 2021) found that “1 in 3 women (sic), around 736 million, are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner” (para. 1), and “1 in 4 young women (aged 15-24 years) who have been in a relationship will have already experienced violence by an intimate partner by the time they reach their mid-twenties” (para. 2). These numbers vary depending on one’s demographic breakdown, but the more marginalized a person is, the more likely they are to experience these violences (California Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2017). To begin illuminating the systemic response to these traumas, the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network ([RAINN], n.d.a) reported that “the vast majority of perpetrators will not go to jail or prison” (para. 1). Also, according to the WHO (n.d.), the vast majority of perpetrators are cis men (Summary section). And yet, these gendered socio-historical crimes continue to go unpunished.

In Kolysh's (2021) recent work, *Everyday Violence: The Public Harassment of Women & LGBTQ People*, the author concluded by recommending "a deeper exploration of citizenship status and everyday violence in the United States and abroad because everyday violence is a global problem, but it cannot be solved via colonial or imperialist means" (p. 166). I argue that no group demonstrates this more than U.S. elected officials.

In the United States there are two major political parties that dominate the electoral politics: Democrats and Republicans. For context, during the late 1970s, the United States shifted from a philosophical and economic model of Keynesian capitalism, which prioritized people over profit, into one of neoliberalism, which runs like a business, prioritizing profit over people, through gross deregulation (Artz, 2015). As such, over the course of the last 40 years, corporatized logics have infiltrated virtually every sphere imaginable, bleeding out from government into everything from K-12 and higher education to all aspects of personal life (Ritzer, 1993; Weber, 1968). What allows it to continue unabated is its accepted co-opting of liberalism for profit (Artz, 2015). "The road to hell is paved with good intentions" as it is said.

This is the maddening backstory that explains how the election of reality-show mogul and multi-accused sexual predator, Donald J. Trump, occurred in 2016 (Relman, 2020; So, 2021). And, since that time, I assert that it explains why I experienced more breakdown than beauty. As someone who had voted Democrat in every major election, I became disillusioned with the Democratic Party while working for them between June and August 2016. On the surface, I was thrilled to be canvassing, phone banking, recruiting and managing volunteers, and working toward a cause bigger than myself. In the background, however, I was being abusively, verbally berated by a neoliberal candidate who joked about not wearing her Rolex to union meetings.

To make matters worse, I was repeatedly propositioned by a local precinct member. His advances began "small" when, during a fundraiser I organized, he "Joe Bided" me. Out of nowhere, he smelled and proceeded to kiss the top of my head goodbye, as the now U.S. President, Joe Biden, has been criticized for doing to children and adult women (Deng, 2019). Furthermore, the precinct member did this to me as I sat at a picnic table full of people, none of whom said anything. As his advances escalated, he would send me random emails, at one point offering to buy me a \$100 ticket to attend a fundraiser with him. I did not.

Over the course of a few months, the precinct member repeatedly emailed me while apparently drunk. "Hey, you're missing a good bar" and "Were you busy today? You need a break. Maybe I czn [sic] take you out for a drink? If you wznt [sic]."

Eventually, I reported his advances to my district manager who told me that this kind of sexual harassment was part of my job as an AFAB (Assigned Female At Birth) campaign manager (who has since come out as non-binary). She shared her own stories, laughed, and told me that I should just deal with it. In other words, my experience was dismissed, and I was told, by my boss, that dealing with sexual harassment was a job requirement in politics.

As the Fall 2016 semester began, and after a week of campus recruiting, I was given an ultimatum by the Democratic House Caucus. I was to either give up my beloved graduate teaching assistantship or be fired. Begrudgingly, I gave up the assistantship to work for the Democratic Party. They fired me anyway, and with no explanation, despite having documented proof that I was not only succeeding in the position but was the top grossing campaign manager on my team. Within one week, the Democratic Party decimated both my graduate teaching dreams and my means of financial stability in one fell swoop.

To add insult to injury, a few weeks after the 2016 election results, one of my former Democratic Party colleagues contacted me. They said, “now that the election is over” they wanted to disclose that their direct superior in Washington DC spread the word that I was fired for not wearing a bra. I immediately knew she was telling the truth because of the aforementioned, but also because, at one point, an email had been sent out to my team generally reminding us of “professional attire,” which, according to the Democratic Party, included mandatory bras for females. You might be thinking, “The Democratic Party couldn’t have fired a successful person for having a female body. That would be sex discrimination.” And yet, I have the screenshots to prove it.

Almost exactly a year later, one of the former union volunteers who had canvassed and phone-banked for me, also messaged me out of the blue, this time trying to solicit me for sex. His attempts included sending me a picture of hundreds of dollars in cash and saying, “When i saw you i was like damn i wanna [sic] fuck with her.” At this point, how could I be surprised? As my Democratic Party direct superior told me, these predatory interactions are the kind of harassments that women professionals are required to deal with in the public arena. And, yes, I also have these screenshots.

On a more macro scale, after 45’s (referring to Trump as the 45th President of the United States) election win, I watched the national mass horror about what his win said about the U.S. psyche, and wondered what sort of white supremacist, caged kid, ableist, trans- / homophobic, deportation terrors his administration might catalyze. Relatedly, hopeless tragedy and outrage shook the lives of those close to me in Northwest Indiana. One response to his inauguration was the Women’s March (History.com Editors, 2018). As a graduate student in communication at the time, with a

focus in critical media studies and interpersonal communication, I had an opportunity to analyze the organizational efforts behind the demonstration.

At the start of this research, in 2017, the Women's March organization looked promising, with sponsors like Planned Parenthood and the National Resources Defense Council. If one searched for it in the Wayback Machine (an Internet archive), they would find that WomensMarch.com (2017a) listed Emily's List and the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League as partners (Social Justice Partners section), and that the organization displayed a segment which included the American Civil Liberties Union, Human Rights Campaign, United Healthcare Workers East, American Federation of Teachers, Peace is Loud, and MoveOn.org (Movement Friends section). Additionally, WomensMarch.com (2017b) organizers self-avowed themselves as a "proactive international movement, not a U.S. election-specific protest per se" (para. 3) which claimed to have "galvanized people to defend women's rights and those of others in response to the rising rhetoric of far-right populism around the world" (para. 3).

This response sounded great, at the time. Subsequently, however, after the organization's initial pussy-hat donned march, many, especially low-income Black and Brown feminine folks, have argued that their efforts steadily fizzled out (Dalmia, 2017; Hu, 2017). My evaluation foresaw the deflation. Specifically, my findings and subsequent studies demonstrated that, behind the hollow neoliberal diversity and inclusion rhetoric, the Women's March was a Democratic candidate funnel site to get citizens (mainly White straight middle-class cis women, and gay White men [Robinson, 2021]) to run as homo-nationalist candidates for their party (Khalid, 2019; Murillo, 2017; Puar, 2013; Puar, 2017). Linguistically, the late bell hooks (1997) referred to these systems of domination defining our realities as the "imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (p. 7). With all this said, the Women's March organization claimed to be progressive; however, when looking through a political economic lens at the organization's neoliberal capitalist funding sources, the reformist solutions make sense. Business as usual.

The advocated changes were reformist ones, utilizing powers approved by the inequitable U.S. system. In other words, although in the forefront, the early Women's March organizers branded themselves as an inclusive organization that accepted everyone; in reality, they made many people (who saw through their neoliberal rhetoric) feel ostracized (Dejean, 2016). In my view, this was another reason why the group lost momentum after the initial march on January 21, 2017.

Re-Form-ism Fem-I [s] n ['t-Good-Enough-] ism

The neoliberal establishment
breathed deeply,
and exhaled: “You go, girl.”

Laws and Everyday Discourse

From the military-industrial complex to the Oval Office, rape has been systematically rationalized and excused to the fullest extent of the law through the election of a sexual perpetrator to POTUS (President of the United States) (Dastagir, 2020; Griffin, 2015; Herman, 1989; Neumeister, 2022; Peltola, 2018; Relman, 2020; Rubin & Reiter, 1975;). This is evidenced by the use of rape as a dehumanizing practice of terrorism, excused away by the system—both on U.S. soil and overseas—as a justifiable weapon of war (Peltola, 2018). Despite this, in everyday conversation (beyond the vile anonymous perspectives that litter online spaces like Reddit and 4chan), I doubt anyone would disagree that rape is one of the most gruesome acts of violence committable against another living being outside of murder. I argue these accounts of sexual violence shed light on the foundations of U.S. culture. Gender scholars Gayle Rubin and Rayna R. Reiter (1975) spoke to this in their piece, *The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex*, when they said, “It can be deduced that the world historical defeat of women occurred within the origin of culture, and is a prerequisite of culture” (p. 176). Again, beyond surface-level surprise, when considering events occurring worldwide, many already know this about the world.

Yet, in everyday conversation, an account such as Rubin and Reiter’s or my own numerous earlier examples are frequently dismissed and/or discredited. Regardless of these dismissals, the U.S. sociocultural foundation and digital spaces glaringly evidence this in everything from incel manifesto-writing, socio-sexual rejects and mass murderers, such as Elliot Rodger, to the comment section of any feminist YouTube channel (BBC, 2018; Chemaly, 2014; Futrelle, 2018). As morally repugnant as these spaces and the ideologies which inhabit them are, I echo those who have argued that it is in these places that is found trace evidence of the core pathology of a *rape culture* (Cernik, 2021; Herman, 1989; Lee, 2021; Worthington, 2015; Zaleski et al. , 2016).

In a rape culture, the social functions of rape are the results of sexual offenders’ weaponization of their internalized notions of devalued vulvic anatomy and pleasure (Irigaray, 1991; Mintz, 2018; Washington, 2008), concurrent with cis male dominance and a prioritization of their self-pleasure (Herman, 1989). As such, this egotistical

pathology serves as a functionally internalized and externally masked means through which to hide both subtle and overt self-entitlement, to enact disciplinary power and punishment.

Specifically, in contemporary U.S. society, I argue this foundation rears its ugly patriarchal and phallogocentric head in every discourse and rhetoric (Gibson, 2008; Jensen, 2010; Rhodes, 2018). For instance, a discourse of innocence still normatively prevails (Baldwin, 1963; Carter, 2007; Simson, 2019). Linguistically, when stripped to its bare bones, infantilization of women, and their resulting innocence, is the embodied fetishization of ignorance (Huot, 2013). Said directly, those deemed innocent are therein perceived as being inexperienced, unaware, and unknowing about the world, others, and especially themselves (Kincaid, 1998). The cousin concept of innocence is purity: the romanticization, pedestaling, and objectified sexualization of the White cishet female (Cottom, 2018; Ngu, 2021), upholding intersections of anti-Blackness (hooks, 2014) and the structures of power as they manifest in the lives of especially disabled AFAB Black and Brown individuals and all other intentionally targeted groups.

Recently, critical feminist rhetoricians have continued to argue a necessity of contextualizing objects of study (Condit, 2019; Kroløkke, 2018; Rhodes, 2018). Thus, when one classifies terms, such as “innocence” or “purity,” naming them requires a background to serve as a context to typologize social sense-making (De Hertogh, 2018). Without such a context, or socio-legal discourse, expressive repercussions toward those who act otherwise cannot be upheld (Bowen, 2021; Higginbotham, 1993). In other words, as social change theorists Bowers et al. (2009) extensively detailed in *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control*, a status quo requires coercion and punishment of those who dissent.

Thus, in the case of innocence and purity-fueled requirement politics, although times have somewhat changed, non-men who threaten the status quo by seeking out goals of attaining their own sexual self-gratification (for and in themselves), and/or experiences of non-consensual violences, are often dealt with shame and/or blame (Brown, 2019; Clark, 2017; DomesticShelters.org, 2015; Hitti, 2019; Ingersoll, 2019; National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2017; Shaw, 2017). Said more directly, in our post-Roe v. Wade *envirusment*, if and when a feminine person considers themselves to be their own situationally knowledgeable, embodied authority figure regarding their own lived experiences, it is still often a socially, and now again legally (with some states criminalizing abortion, as well as sometimes unpreventable miscarriages) punishable offense (ACLU.org, 2022; Bowen, 2022; Orenstein, 2016; Riley et al., 2020). We know this is true because, without such constraints, there would be no incentive for the praised inaction of innocence, upon which a *purity culture* depends as a foundation (Kincaid, 1998; Ngu, 2021). According to Ingersoll (2019), a purity culture promotes

“sexual abstinence prior to marriage” (para. 3) and expectations that “‘pure’ young women (sic) will remain under the authority of their fathers until they trade it for the authority of their husbands—in marriages arranged by their fathers” (para. 8).

Consequently, to construct and maintain a normative social order such as this, blame must be cast. And thus, like sleeper agents, ancestors of those who had the self-determined and birthright authority to cast such blame, created certain socio-legal rules that ensured they (and those they approve) are almost never prosecuted for the sexually violent crimes they commit (Bowen, 2022; Mystal, 2022; RAINN, n.d.b).

This leads me to the final means through which I have witnessed requirement politics take shape: the reluctance of mandatory reporters on college campuses to perform required Title IX procedures. While researching for my #MeToo chapter, I learned about taken-for-granted power imbalances pervasive in academe, such as those revealed in the initially anonymous letter written by one of masculinity scholar Michael Kimmel’s mentees, in which Kimmel was revealed as a sexual predator (Flaherty, 2018). . Additionally, as someone with six years of college-level teaching experience as an instructor of record, I have been institutionally required to complete many Title IX trainings, ensuring I am well-informed on how to support students if they disclosed to me that they (or someone they know) have been discriminated against or violently wronged.

With that said, in the first year of my PhD program, during one such training session, and in a lecture hall packed full of hundreds of faculty members, the events turned sour. Explicitly, once the Title IX coordinator’s presentation was over, the floor was open for attendees to ask questions about their responsibilities. As this question-and-answer period unfolded, I became increasingly discouraged by witnessing professors reluctantly ask questions akin to, “Am I required to report if my student discloses their rape to me?” I say this not to shame any particular faculty asking when and how they might do their due diligence, but to point out that in the sexually violent U. S. ecology, even mandatory reporters reluctantly assist in these matters. When this instance is contextualized more broadly, a rape culture is revealed.

One silver-lining of this, reminiscent of the lyrics sung by band Frou Frou (Heap & Sigsworth, quoted at the beginning of “Institutional Politics,” above, is that beauty can be found in the breakdown. In other words, as McLuhan (1970) asserted, when a medium falls apart, or malfunctions, how it works is most clearly revealed.

In the case of U.S. sexual harassment and assault, I offer the term “requirement politics” as a means through which to elucidate this sexually violent ecology that reveals itself as working for some, at the cost of others. According to RAINN (n.d.b), “8

out of 10 rapes are committed by someone known to the victim” (para. 1). I argue what is most socio-historically interesting about this breakdown is the resulting revelation that it is dependent upon one’s demographic social location (Harding, 1995), meaning that often, one White cis het man’s systemic beauty has been another person’s breakdown.

Linguistically, I argue this ecology of sexual violences also manifests in the *systemic insurance* of requirement politics. For instance, this is exemplified in everyday phrases such as “Boys will be boys,” and dismissals such as “It was just locker room talk!” or “Can’t you take a joke?” In this way, socio-logics of requirement politics are co-constituted through articulations of either: (a) dismissals and discreditations of victims and/or survivors’ accounts and lifestyle choices; or (b) the reputational exoneration of the accused through phrases such as, “He couldn’t have harassed and/or raped anyone, he’s a good Christian man. . .” (McElvaine, 2009). In other words, normalized phrases, such as those above, co-constitute our socio-historical realities, culminating in real socio-legal consequences of those deemed unworthy victims.

Institutionally, the vast majority of U.S. judges are, or have been legitimized by, White cis men (The Democracy and Government Reform Team, 2020). Beyond that, I argue this is evidenced by their legal decisions to slap sexual harassers and rapists on the wrist, as they did with the rapist Brock Turner who was caught in the act. In Turner’s case, they empathized with him as a Stanford swimmer whose father attested that Turner no longer enjoyed steak dinners as much as he did before the rape, ultimately deciding Turner shouldn’t have his college experiences ruined just because he raped an unconscious woman (Crimesider Staff, 2016). This framing of his sexual violences makes sense when one subscribes to the tenets of requirement politics.

Likewise, requirement politics makes further sense when put into conversation with Marilyn Frye’s bird cage metaphor (1983). As she explained in *The Politics of Reality*, when seen in isolation, moments such as the Brock Turner case may appear insignificant, and to some, even justly rationalized. Upon closer examination, however, when situated within the U.S. context of staggering rates of sexual harassment and assault, a continued reluctance to criminalize offenders, and the collective demographic breakdown of U.S. politicians (Villarreal, 2021), the ideologically and sexually violent ecology of requirement politics reveals itself.

Furthermore, the ideological foundations of requirement politics are solidified via legal iterations which serve as systemic insurance. For instance, according to the Guttmacher Institute (2022), anti-choice TRAP (Targeted Restrictions on Abortion Providers) laws invoke whatever means necessary “to impose strict regulations on abortion clinics” (para. 1) and “restrict access to abortion, such as limitations on public

funding” (para. 1), further disregarding the autonomy of those who are pregnant. Another example of systemic insurance laws was Devos’s 2020 Title IX mandate.

Before proceeding, it must be noted that, much like an algorithmic black box (or the challengingly complex innerworkings of machine-learning algorithms, often unknown to users and designers (Gryz & Rojszczak, 2021)), it is difficult to see the full socio-legal landscape of the sexually violent U.S. ecology. As Faulkner (2020) has argued, however, through the utilization of critical feminist methodologies and methods such as poetic inquiry, we are enabled to parse out the “false divide more aptly between public and private” (p. 1).

I would also argue that poetic inquiry reveals (in ineffable ways only poetry can, in tandem with activist and academic insights) the colonially founded and capitalist-funded sociosexually violent U.S. body politic, bearing even more fruitful insights when combined with media ecological insights. In my dissertation, I subversively argued how humans (Enlightenment subjects: White able-bodied cis men) have acted as media in society-building processes, while dehumanizing many of us (Bowen, 2022). By extending those critical media ecological insights with poetic inquiry, this interdisciplinary approach enabled an elucidation of the liminal interplay between feminist and mediated insights that these individually situated perspectives afford. As such, my critical media ecological approach revealed the ugly state of the modern United States and beyond. Said directly, the U.S. legal system has ordained a gross absence of criminalization for sexually violent crimes. Regardless of decisionmaker intention, when viewed from a gender and media ecological approach, it becomes clear that, because of normalized requirement politics, rape is socio-legal in the US.

As I stated in Bowen (2021), do not let the #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns, or the temporary career and reputational cancellation of a handful of high-profile celebrities (and lesser idolized sexual offenders) fool you. We have yet to see any socio-legal repercussions that do not ultimately result in the systemic insurance tactics of gaslighting, victim-shaming, and victim blaming, and/or that have provided justice for everyday victims. Again, as the founder of “Me Too,” Tarana Burke herself said—in a lecture series visit to Bowling Green State University—the demonstrable and inexcusable lapses in human rights and justices hold especially true for the most historically targeted groups, such as Indigenous peoples, Black and Brown AFABs, sex workers, and the trans community (personal communication, April 30, 2019).

To conclude this section, while I was completing this manuscript, the rate of COVID-19 unemployment (Tappe, 2020) became equivalent to the 1 in 5 statistic of U.S. AFABs who have reported their assaults. I mention the statistical similarities as both dehumanizations are colonially-founded and capitalist-funded, and are

noncoincidental within sociosexually violent U.S. landscapes that naturalize harm against folks' bodies, especially those of the disabled (Russell, 2019). In April 2022, only a few months before I wrote this article, a study was published reporting that 9 out of 10 autistic AFAB folks experience sexual violence (Cazalis et al., 2022). It is clear that the unmet promises of sexual justice have been neglectfully stacked upon a pile of hollow patriotic myths of meritocracy and neoliberal capitalist trick[le]-down economics (Artz, 2015; Mark, 2020). Substantial forms of justice have yet to be seen because U.S. laws were designed to protect rich White cishet males (and those they approve of), thus socio-legalizing the systemic insurance of requirement politics, which prioritizes the protection of the accused over the victims and survivors of their violences (Fanon, 1963; Mystal, 2022). Again, we see traces of this in the vast majority of U.S. judges being White cis men (The Democracy and Government Reform Team, 2020), the vast majority of perpetrators of the violence being cis men, the gaslighting and victim blaming of victims/survivors, the vast majority of those violences never being criminalized, and the Western legacy of canonical authorities being built in the perpetrators' image, legitimizing them as above these laws.

In summation, I argue the U.S. (in)justice system presupposes the ideological propagation of White cishet AFAB innocence as a state of mind and embodiment, reserved solely for White cishet women who enact traditional roles of femininity (Carter, 2007; Jones-Rogers, 2020; Simson, 2018). Through this authority gap, able-bodied White cis men who "own land", held and hold the salient power to ordain those who have and own knowledge, ensuring that mainly White cis men and/or those groomed by them will uphold their logics and legitimized authority (Sieghart, 2022). By birthright, ordained authority figures are then free men, dispersing rules as they see fit (Fanon, 1963; Mystal, 2022). Depicting this, in this next piece, I poetically parsed out these complex phenomena via an analogy of undercover spies, or *sleeper agents*.

Sleeper Agents

We live in
the
self-replenishing
self-sustaining
ideological
HR machine.

If you
voice
marginalized

upset

interchangeable

unpaid

pawn arrives,

a gaslight specialist:

“here’s why

your

experiences

are

invalid...

...why

your

reactions

to your

Own world

---*wrong.*

your emotional

processors

are

failures

you,

silly girl.”

“Don’t

Ever

forget,

your

mind’s eye

is

not

to be

trusted.

you are

incapable

of substantial
thought and
contribution
here."

--

This Pawn
knows
All the
rules;

ancestrally
passed down:

How to
break down
the resistance
born into
empowered
AFAB's
spirit.

How to
push
narrative
back
into
ideological
marginalization.

Elder Pawns
know
no one
can identify
with you
there
in the
background.

—

It's compulsive
for *them*.

Presence of
subaltern ideology
activates these
sleeper agents.

it awakens
their
guttural
reactionary
orders,

as natural
as
breathing
for *them*.

Triggered,
they Try

administering
antidote

to quell
"sick"
societal
empowerment
everywhere.

We,
the AFAB
hivemind,
see you.

Our double agents
have infiltrated
and stolen
your only

pathetic
blueprints;

your end
is *imminent*
now.

Rage as a Means of Cathartic Expression

During November 2017, after existing through a blurred year of soul-crushing defeat, I was tasked with writing my master's project. The findings of my #MeToo manuscript served as a foundation for this project, which I further strengthened with insights from PIs, namely Anthym (2018) who argued that "critical arts-based inquiry is a meaningful response to the crisis of representation" (pp.183-184). Building off their sentiment, if assertions from PIs such as Redman-MacLaren (2020; positionality) and Davis (2021; cultural relevance) hold true, the poetic inquiry herein aptly revealed critical findings about rage as catharsis.

In doing so, I echo notions about the foundational and enraging U.S. dehumanization that Indigenous, Black, and Brown feminists have posed for decades (Flowers, 2015; Jackson, 2020; Walker, 1983). Specifically, in Bowen (2021) I observed, "traditional notions of legitimacy and credibility result in marginalized people being continuously taken-for-granted, and thus, omitted as unworthy victims because the system treats them as implicitly disposable" (p. 22). In hindsight, after a lifetime of traumas, the #MeToo campaign was the inspiringly cathartic and ragefully empowering social moment that I needed to start my own recovery journey.

Outside of memoirs of anger and rage, however, the momentum and stoked urgency of the #MeToo campaign's initial surge has been steadily lost. Moreover, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has shifted organizational priorities, and understandably so. Correspondingly, the #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns have both been co-opted by the ongoing Post-Roe v Wade, late-stage neoliberal (colonially-founded transnational) capitalist-funded, increasingly Christo-fascist two-party system (Grim, 2020; The Representation Project, 2020). This was exemplified in an article by Reslen (2020) regarding two actresses involved in #MeToo, in which one, Rose McGowan, labeled another, silence breaker Alyssa Milano, a fraud for endorsing one of the two White neoliberals (and multiple-accused sex offenders) who ran as frontrunner presidential candidates in the 2020 U.S. election (para. 2).

Social change is not linear; it ebbs and flows (Bowers et al., 2009). It is time for the U.S. socio-legal system to start acting like, especially Black and Brown, AFAB folks' worth and embodied knowledge cannot be dismissed by the vast majority of neoliberal capitalist White cis men decision makers. This is how I see requirement politics aiding critical feminist scholars and laypeople alike.

The theoretical framework of requirement politics, elucidated through feminist methodology and the method of poetic inquiry, offers anyone interested in grappling with messy, and often volatile, norms an applicable reprieve, highlighting lived experiences as liberatory embodied evidences and, when further triangulated, forms of knowledge. Requirement politics, at its best, could be a critique of higher education, and any other corporatized institutions in the neoliberal United States or beyond, adding to rich interdisciplinary literatures on the topic that already exist (Deetz, 1992; Dowd, 2010; 2016; 2018; Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2015; Lefebvre, 1996). It capably dissects the body politic via slice-of-life experiences, revealing the grotesque and dehumanizing logics of neoliberal late-stage, now COVID-19 *envirusement*, capitalism.

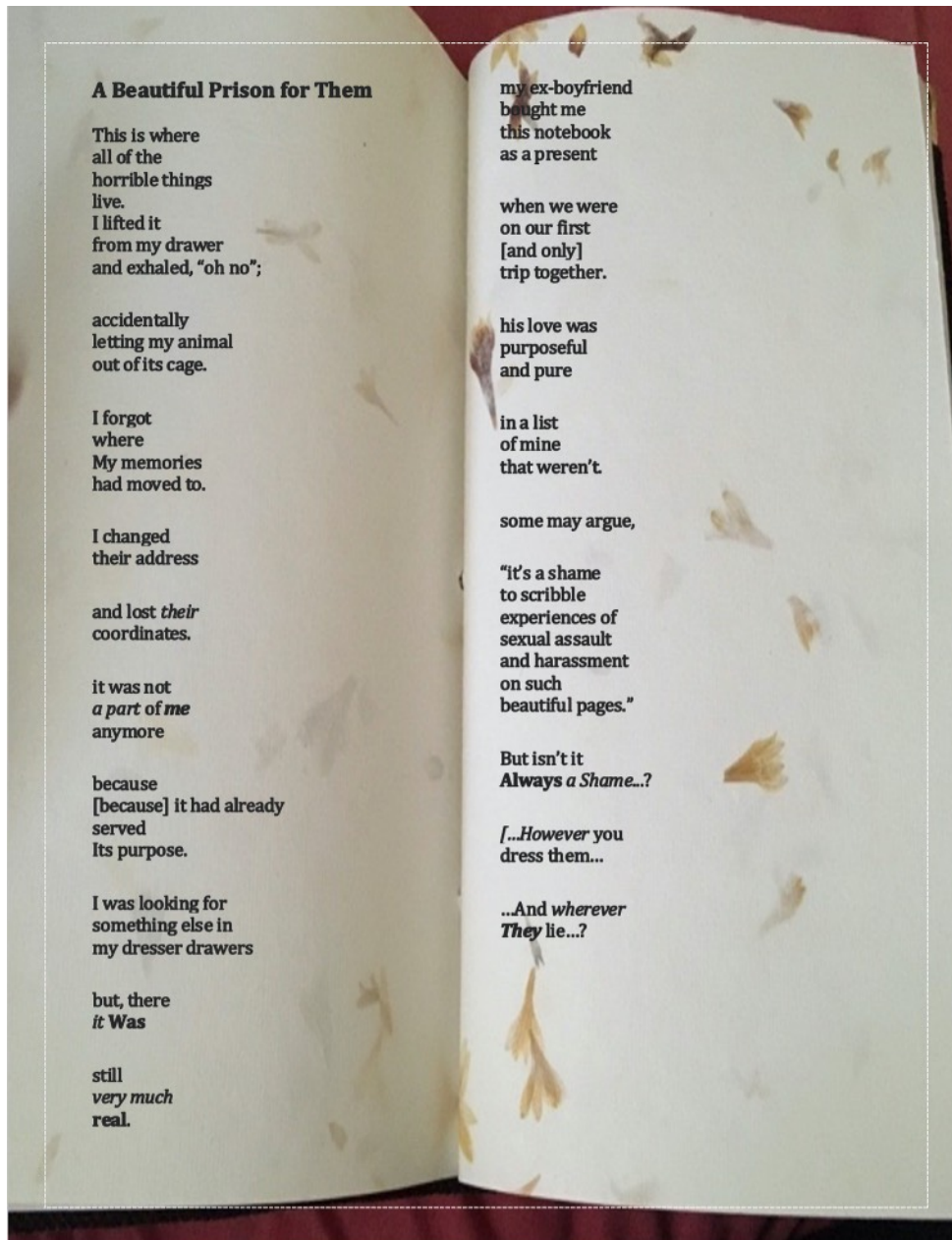
In conclusion, I envision tactics of dissent, such as this work, as contributing to a gender and media ecological framework by providing a feminist edge to the media ecological tenet of breakdown as breakthrough. Said otherwise, McLuhan (1970) is famous for arguing the functionality of learning how any medium truly works, by deconstructing it, unpacking it, or breaking it. Whether motivated by rage or some other means, the people must begin regenerating this late-stage neoliberal colonial capitalist system. First, we must accept these colonially-founded capitalist-funded unjust circumstances, in all their challenges and opportunities, and use our collective power to create just definitions of human-centered legitimacy and inherent value.

About a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, Faulkner and Adams (2021) published their own collaborative autoethnography in the *International Review of Qualitative Research* entitled “#YouToo: Notes on Sexual Harassment and Assault in the Academy,” which reads similar to the experiences I detailed herein. Additionally, the sheer existence of that piece—and this one—illustrate the critical timeliness, usefulness, and boundary-blurring potentials of innovative art-based works. If we continue down paths of critical poetic inquiries, new normals are bound to emerge.

For final consideration, I offer one last poem demonstrating beauty in the breakdown, and documenting AFAB trauma on what might seem at first glance to be an unlikely medium.

Figure 1

A Beautiful Prison for Them; poem by the author



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