

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Collateral Survivorship

by Arlene R. Keizer



FISH" GRAFFITI BY JAMES DE LA VEGA. 104TH STREET AND THIRD AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY. (2007). WIKIMEDIA

"Keep a watchful eye/over yourself/as if you were/your own enemy."

—James De La Vega, Nuyorican artist

A part of me is still in thrall to a part of Bill K*, the dazzling fiction writer recently denounced as a "skilled predator" in a report on the sexual harassment and abuse of high-school students at a private academy in New England. Let me be clear: I never took a class with Bill; I was his colleague for a decade in the English Department at a research university in the western US. I was a tenured faculty member when we met, and we had a flirtatious though never sexual relationship, the kind of relationship I've had with dozens of male mentors and colleagues during my years in graduate school and as a faculty member at three elite research universities.

I've been a committed feminist since adolescence. Throughout my undergraduate and graduate training and my years as a professor, I developed into a feminist scholar with, I believe, a reputation for supporting, even championing, the careers of other marginalized people in academia, especially other feminist scholars, especially other scholars of color. What drives this essay is not #MeToo, though I have been sexually and racially harassed at work on numerous occasions. Reading newspaper coverage of the prep-school scandal immediately gave me a stomach cramp because I was confronted, more powerfully than ever before, with my recognition of myself as a woman socialized to love the "skilled predator," to find herself pleurably desirable within his gaze.

This essay is an attempt to understand my status as a *collateral survivor* within rape culture. I didn't Google the term "collateral survivor" as I wrote this essay. I'm not aware that anyone else has used this term; for me it denotes an individual who has not directly suffered rape or sexual abuse or sustained sexual harassment, but upon whom the muted effects of these forms of psychic and physical violence have nevertheless made a mark. As a black, cisgender woman involved solely with cisgender men, I consider myself profoundly lucky to have never been a victim of sexual assault. Nevertheless, I have spent the past two decades trying to come to terms with a sexual consciousness formed through the collateral damage—the radioactive fallout—of other women's violation.

When I joined the English Department and met Bill, one of my first questions to a female colleague was, "What's he doing single?" I asked because, in my experience, the enormous egos of straight male writers render most of them incapable of living without supportive female companionship for any significant period of time. It was a knowing and contemptuous question, for I considered Bill too handsome, too traditionally masculine, and too privileged within white-supremacist culture to be of personal interest to me. (And he wasn't entirely single, but that's another story.)

Bill K's personal charm is like a force field. From my own response and my observation of the responses of many other straight women in his orbit, I feel comfortable saying

that, if you were the female object of his direct interest, you would experience that interest as a gravitational force, not metaphorically but physically. I immediately distrust my own responses to such men because I understand them to be the residue of my childhood as the daughter of a brilliant, handsome, profoundly charming and articulate Classics professor from Trinidad. In other words, my initial fascination with men like Bill is a lively form of transference, a compulsion to repeat the specifics of my family romance.

Perhaps not every woman drawn to older, glamorous male pedagogues can trace her attractions so clearly back to their source. But the heterosexual erotics of instruction, in which an older male teacher broadens the intellectual and sexual horizons of a younger female student, are so embedded in Western culture, both high and low, that they have become a form of cultural common sense, a taken-for-granted relationship structure. One needn't have a direct familial experience of such an emotional template to be affected. Moreover, only egregious violations of the laws or institutional rules governing sexual consent are now being subjected to negative scrutiny; the general structure of these relationships retains hegemonic force.

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What fascinates me about the development of my friendship with Bill is that, even knowing what I knew about myself, and guessing what I quickly guessed about him, I still came to feel profound affection for him and to enjoy his company whenever I found myself in the same room. I sought him out on more than one occasion. The sound of his smooth and flexible tenor voice, the relaxing quality of his presence, and his extraordinary sense of humor all found an answering *something* in me. As a weird, creative person, I often find myself in need of equally weird companions for creative research, and Bill did me the enormous favor of accompanying me to a local firing range when I decided that, for an essay I was writing, I needed to learn how to use a handgun. He promised to dedicate his eventual story about this experience to me, and I can't help smiling when I contemplate my anticipation of the moment when a situation I co-created for us will be acknowledged as a muse. *What do I call this feeling?*

Reading Bill's fiction was the act that opened the door I'd casually slammed upon first acquaintance. If you love well-crafted stories and novels, if imaginative literature has helped you to live your life, you will understand exactly what I'm saying. For intellectually oriented, straight women, knowledge and skill are aphrodisiacs; they function the way power and money do for many other women in capitalist patriarchy. My devotion to Freud's writing, despite its

obvious imperialism, racism, and sexism, is compelled by the structure of revelation he employed. Freud's best essays are a scholarly striptease; they offer riveting ideas, test those ideas, then offer deeper levels of revealed knowledge to those readers who, through their continued attention, self-identify as initiates. The adage "Curiosity killed the cat" was meant to spare women like me from the depths of fascination offered by intellectually gifted and verbally talented men. Such men offer their learning and their abilities like a feathered, multi-colored lure. The hook upon which women like me have been caught is our need for the recognition of our own talent and brilliance. I was at least 40 years old before I became capable of offering that recognition to myself.

De La Vega's graffito, which serves as an epigraph to this essay, was reproduced on a postcard I've had on display in my apartment for over a decade. I was drawn to its decolonial valence, but this saying is, of course, also deeply psychoanalytic. The insight it offers is what every analysis comes to know, even after a successful analysis. Ultimately, the injunction to view one's unconscious as one's own potential or probable enemy is (as a loving friend pointed out upon reading a draft of this essay) a radical acceptance of the kind of punitive self-surveillance Foucault identified and analyzed as the exemplary mode of modern and postmodern governance. To oversee one's own basic romantic and sexual impulses using the lens of this harsh dictum: this can define the life of a certain kind of survivor, even a collateral survivor. Might it also define the psychic life of some reformed perpetrators?

Here's the question I find most compelling, as yet another cluster of abuse in yet another elite educational environment is revealed: "Did Bill K come to understand the need to imagine himself as his own enemy?" I have to believe in the possibility that some who stand accused of abusing their power as teachers can and have learned other ways of inhabiting this role, turning away from the pleasures of the explicitly sexual seduction and domination of those within their professional care. The contemplation of projects of redemption and redress, whether successful or foiled or wholly misconceived, characterizes several major pieces of Bill K's fiction. I'm no recording angel; as long as his behavior changed, what authority can measure the transformation of conscience and consciousness?

I'm grateful that I was not a student at that New England prep school or one of its peer institutions in the 70s, 80s, or 90s. I'm grateful for the forms of difference that may have made me appear less receptive to the predatory behaviors of the socially privileged. (Once again, let me be clear: these differences did not wholly protect me. They simply constitute alternate forms of vulnerability.) I'm grateful that the male mentors I chose and those who chose me didn't violate my trust, and, when they considered doing so, I'm grateful that I was able to elect self-preservation over the illusion of their positive regard. I'm grateful for the still, small voice that tells me to "keep a watchful eye over

myself," a voice born within the resilient psyche of an abandoned black girl.



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