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A Review of Brenda Cossman's *The New Sex Wars*

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Cossman, B. (2021). *The new sex wars: Sexual harm in the #MeToo era*. New York University Press. 280 pp. \$30.00 [e-book or hardcover] ISBN 9781479802708.

In *The New Sex Wars: Sexual Harm in the #MeToo Era*, Brenda Cossman unpacks the contemporary debates of the #MeToo movement through the lens of the 1970s and 1980s feminist sex wars. Cossman joins other recent scholarly publications (see, for example, Lorna Bracewell's *Why We Lost the Sex Wars*) in the call to deconstruct the binary conversation of the feminist sex wars to provide a more nuanced analysis of the feminist past and present. She notes, "The *New Sex Wars* makes space to think through sexuality, consent, and law, disarticulated from the binary antagonisms of the sex wars" (p. 4). She complicates the binary debates of the historic sex wars, building on "sex-positive feminism, queer theory, and anti-carceral feminism" (p. 4). Cossman's primary method is "reparative reading," citing Eve Sedgwick. Rather than affirming critical analysis rooted in paranoia, she demonstrates the significance of "embracing uncertainty...reading generously and keeping multiple perspectives in view" (p. 5). For Cossman, this often means "reading beside," meaning when a debate arises around a concept or #MeToo case, scholars and activists should allow for the possibilities of competing truths and not endorse legal terms of veracity (p. 144). Cossman's methodological intervention results in a nuanced analysis of the historic and current feminist debates on sexual harm. By bridging a feminist and queer theoretical divide and demonstrating alternative tools of repair beyond the law, Cossman's work contributes to the academic and activist conversation about sexual violence. For feminist educators, this text provides a primer for critical analytical thinking beyond reductive binary constructions of feminist debates in the past and present and the opportunity to demonstrate reparative justice beyond carceral solutions.

Importantly, Cossman begins her challenge to typical narratives of the sex wars by not approaching her analysis chronologically. Her first chapter explores the contemporary #MeToo movement. She discusses the range of accusations emerging from this movement, from the archetypal and "consensus villain" to the unclear cases that inspired feminist deliberations and divisions (p. 19). In chapter two, Cossman returns to the historic sex wars, using her reparative reading method to undermine the caricatures reified by a binary construction of feminist sexual harm debates. She focuses specifically on various approaches to the law in an effort to contextualize contemporary debates about regulation versus reparation. With this approach, Cossman then rethinks the contemporary #MeToo movement, demonstrating how various feminist participants have inherited the intellectual beliefs of 1970s and 1980s feminist activists in chapter three. Cossman further shows the tension of this movement with the law, unpacking social prosecution in non-legal forums, questions of due process, and tools for defining sexual harm.

By chapter four, Cossman's methodological intervention takes root. She demonstrates the need to reframe certain cases of the #MeToo movement and debates about those cases. She argues these disagreements could be read through the lens of "feminist versus queer frameworks," particularly exploring the "anti-normative" and "anti-regulatory" calls from queer theory (pp.120-121). Cossman uses reparative reading to recognize sexual harm even when criminal law cannot verify damages. This shift in perspective allows scholars and activists to sidestep debates about *proving* sexual harm occurred and instead, explore how sexual harm should be understood, contextualized, and dealt with via restorative justice principles. This approach allows activists to affirm the emotional violence of sexual harm and seek reparations apart from criminal law (pp.160-162).

Her final chapter suggests that reparative readings could lead to reparative justice. Cossman begins the chapter with the villainous specter of Harvey Weinstein and his conviction. She details the various responses of feminist activists. Some celebrate the conviction and others ask if there could be an alternative approach to reparations. She demonstrates how these contemporary responses reflect the fault lines of the historic sex wars. Cossman seeks “to displace the centrality of the criminal law and its binary corollary—criminal law or no law, criminal harm or no harm” in responses to sexual harm (p. 166). Instead, she provides four models of sexual harm regulation: transitional justice, restorative justice, transformative justice, and her own model, “regulating reparatively” (pp.172-175). Cossman argues that using non-criminal approaches to sexual harm could better serve survivors by recognizing the extent of the harm, validating survivor emotions, and offering a process of restoration while also avoiding the pitfalls of a racist, sexist, transphobic, and classist criminal system (pp.179-184). In this section, she attempts to primarily center the voices of scholars and activists of color, such as Angela Davis and members of INCITE! However, her citations could more robustly credit black feminist thought, most especially the foundational work of Patricia Hill-Collins. Still, this particular chapter is quite useful for activists, academics, and educators seeking anti-carceral approaches to critical analysis and social justice work.

Ultimately, Brenda Cossman brilliantly re-reads the historic and current sex war debates, providing nuanced and complicated analysis of these movements. Her analytical method translates into a method for social justice activism, making this an ideal text for feminist educators seeking a single text to explore intersectional research *and* activist methods. She closes with a call for her readers to imagine an alternative outcome from the feminist sex wars debates; rather than go down the same path of rage and retribution, we seek paths towards repair and restorative futures. This book is a must read for scholars, activists, and educators alike, as she provides innovative analytical approaches that transform feminist praxis inside and outside the classroom, the academic journal, the courtroom, and the online forum.

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