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Reivew of Sarah Schulman's *Conflict is Not Abuse* and *The Cosmopolitans*

Kevin Shaw

*CONFLICT IS NOT ABUSE: OVERSTAT-
ING HARM, COMMUNITY RESPONSIBIL-
ITY, AND THE DUTY OF REPAIR.* by Sarah
Schulman. Arsenal Pulp, 2016. 299 pp. \$19.95
CAD.

THE COSMOPOLITANS. by Sarah Schulman.
The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2016. 296 pp.
\$22.50 CAD.

Sarah Schulman is “undisciplined” (19). In the introduction to *Conflict is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair*—what Schulman calls her “reparative manifesto”—the playwright, novelist, filmmaker, and feminist and queer activist observes, “I do not practice the ‘one long, slow idea’ school of thought. Instead ... I have evolved a style of offering the reader many, many new ideas at once” (18). Informed by queer studies but standing decidedly apart from its academic methodology—the “one, long slow idea” (18)—Schulman considers the discourse of harm across a wide range of fields and issues, from intimate relationships and HIV criminalization in Canada to pop psychology, trigger warnings, and Middle Eastern geo-politics.

Schulman argues that the narratives and

rhetoric of victimization, which often invoke the past in dramatic and convincing ways, might occlude understanding and reparation in the present. Similarly, she demonstrates how those in positions of power (whom she terms “supremacists”) can too easily appropriate the position of victim to serve their own ends. While Schulman wrote and published *Conflict* before Donald Trump entered the White House, her critique of those who claim victimhood from a position of authority is particularly well timed.

But what might a narcissistic world leader and a bad friend have in common? Schulman’s book offers several “tiers” of conflict mistaken for abuse, progressing from the private sphere (awkward flirtations, poorly worded emails), to the state (police intervention in domestic violence, HIV prosecutions), and conflict between states (focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2014). Elaborating on her central thesis that the rhetoric which escalates conflict to abuse makes reparation impossible, Schulman offers a much-needed corrective to how we argue now—that is, our tendency to lean on personal history and trauma rather than to consider the personhood, or arguments, of the Other. At each tier, Schulman admirably interjects the kind of nuance that results from a willingness to deeply en-

gage in a personal or ideological dispute rather than to diminish it through reductive snark and hashtags, or outright dismissal.

Yet, as much as I admire Schulman's interdisciplinarity and willingness to express what may be sometimes unpopular opinions, the book's structure—moving from the personal to the globally political—does not always succeed at making the leap from here to there. Schulman observes that “simple shifts[,] in personal behavior and their expressions in political structures of power, produce changing public norms which can make huge differences in individual and collective experiences” (27); however, while the conflict in an intimate relationship and the conflict between nations may similarly stem from attempts at shunning the other, surely there is more at cause and at stake in the latter than in the actions of individual actors? For a book that makes a bold and necessary argument for wrestling with complexity in our politics, such a telescopic structure threatens to flatten, rather than deepen, the debate.

At times, the book lacks an argumentative cohesion that its interdisciplinarity and formal dexterity cannot fully excuse. For example, in Chapter One, Schulman makes the convincing argument that the “unidirectional” nature of email and text messaging is “often the source for tragic separations of potentially enriching relationships” (42). Yet she composes Chapter Eight, regarding violence in Gaza in 2014, as an assemblage of Facebook and Twitter posts. Here, Schulman praises online communication

for how it allows a “genealogy” of witnessing, and demonstrates how political events—and our conversations around them—unfold in real time (210). But can't social media be just as “unidirectional” as email or text messaging? After all, Twitter and Facebook users have the ability to “Block,” “Unfollow,” or “Mute” others. Are the social media posts collected in Schulman's book a kind of evidence to make their writers accountable over the long term in a way that the fleeting nature of social media often disallows? The answer remains unclear, as does Schulman's shifting opinion regarding various forms of online communication.

Despite its flaws, I took as much pleasure in disagreeing, adamantly, with some arguments made in *Conflict is Not Abuse* as I did from the passages that had me scribbling “Yes!” in the book's margins. Schulman's manifesto satisfies a hunger for progressive political discourse that does not cease with the necessary task of calling out offensive speech or ideas. Too often, such calling out results in merely “shunning” speech, in Schulman's terms, so that we presume we have reached the solution to the problem when we have merely diagnosed and disavowed its symptomatic language. On the other hand, aren't there moments in our intimate or public lives where we must shun another person—even temporarily and even if they are not directly at fault—because their words or presence are just too painful for our psychic survival? Can such moments be simultaneously necessary and not morally “right”? If I felt of two or more minds when

reading *Conflict*, then such an effect was likely intentional. Schulman invites divisive responses to her work when she warns, “This is not a book to be agreed with, an exhibition of evidence or display of proof. ... Like authentic, conscious relationships, truly progressive communities, responsible citizenship, and real friendship, and like the peace-making that all these require, it asks you to be interactive” (19). *Conflict is Not Abuse* offers a necessary discomfort.

Schulman continues unsettling readers’ generic and narrative expectations in her second 2016 release, a novel titled *The Cosmopolitans*. Throughout *Conflict*, Schulman argues that fictional works make us aware of human motivation around the impulse to escalate conflict to abuse in ways that daily life (and, presumably, nonfiction) cannot. *The Cosmopolitans* makes a convenient case study to test Schulman’s thesis. A retelling of Honoré de Balzac’s 1846 novel *Cousin Bette*, Schulman’s narrative is set in the Greenwich Village of the late 1950s, a neighbourhood waking up to its queer and creative heyday. The novel focuses on the long friendship between Bette, a white middle-aged secretary, and Earl, a black, gay actor who lives across the hall. When Bette’s cousin Hortense arrives from the Midwest, she sets in motion a series of events that causes a seemingly irreparable tear in the precarious domesticity Bette and Earl have managed to make for themselves. The rise of television advertising provides an integral backdrop to the personal melodrama; that is, if people are wont to escalate conflict to abuse, then the new marketing transforms want into need.

The novel benefits from Schulman’s obviously deep love and knowledge of New York history, and it recalls her earlier writing on the city’s architectural memory in *The Gentrification of the Mind*. Throughout the novel, but particularly in its early chapters, the reader gathers vivid details like interlocking puzzle pieces. For example, in the first chapter we learn, along with other facts, that Bette prefers watching movies at “the art cinema near Sixth Avenue, down the block from Nedick’s hot dogs and orange drink” (1), that Willem de Kooning will get into a pre-dawn fight at the Cedar Tavern (9), and “a brownstone built in 1880 is for sale for \$30, 000” on Tenth Street (11). The desire to show the diverse and complex forms of community she defends in *Conflict is Not Abuse* extends to her depiction of Bette and Earl. These are the kinds of characters rarely given any space at all in fiction, never mind the central roles, and Schulman’s depiction of their attempts at forming a chosen family is surely, in contemporary writing, one of the more original explorations of friendship between gay men and straight women. (Although, it must be noted, Bette’s sexuality in regards to Valerie, the dazzling advertising whiz at her office, remains as richly queer as Earl’s, if more elusive.)

In *The Cosmopolitans*’ concluding (and, frankly, unnecessary) “A Note on Style,” Schulman observes that she was inspired not only by Balzac’s nineteenth-century realism and James Baldwin’s *Another Country*, but also by the “kitchen-sink realism” of 1950s theatre (374). Her characters also speak with the affected diction of the era’s Hollywood films, which reminded me

of Todd Haynes' mimicry of the period in his 2002 film *Far From Heaven*. At times, the characters become merely ideological stand-ins for the arguments on morality that Schulman explores; however, if this is a fault of *The Cosmopolitans*, it may be an unavoidable fault of all realist literature. At one point, Bette even tells Hortense that she has come to "believe in ... the duty of repair," quoting the subtitle of Schulman's *Conflict is Not Abuse* (155). The two books form a diptych exploring the need not only for repair, but recognition in the face of dismissal.

Perhaps no one understands the desire to capture queer history better than Schulman, who was both a witness to and warrior against the devastation of the AIDS epidemic. Schulman, alongside Jim Hubbard, co-ordinates the ACT UP Oral History Project and co-produced the 2012 film *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*. Both *Conflict is Not Abuse* and *The Cosmopolitans* are calls-to-arms of a different sort. In her novel, Schulman reminds us of all we stand to lose—an intellectually rich, creatively vibrant, messy, queer, and collaborative community—if we do not choose to engage in the difficult questions and conversations like those found in *Conflict is Not Abuse*.