

Creepers, Flirts, Heroes and Allies: Four Theses on Men and Sexual Harassmentⁱ

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In this essay I provide a phenomenological account of four “roles” men might play in relation to sexual harassment. First, I describe the harms associated with the most subtle forms of sexual harassment, those forms which are most often dismissed as innocent flirtation. These dismissals, which even very well intentioned people are prone to, undermine women’s epistemic authority, obscure the harms of this kind of sexual harassment, and fail to recognize how those same harms also undergird more blatant forms of harassment. I take seriously the epistemic authority of women and girls who, in their everyday conversations, name such behavior as “creepy,” and give a reflective description of the pre-reflective knowledge that is incipient in such expressions. I distinguish these forms of sexual harassment from flirtation by paying particular attention to the temporality and spatiality of the modes of intentional engagement that are named by words like “creeper” and “flirt”. I analyze the roles of men as “heroes” and “allies” of women who are victimized by sexual harassment or violence, and conclude that the heroes are more like the creepers than they would care to admit. The task of being an ally, on the other hand, is not an easy one, requiring as it does both epistemic humility and courage.

What does “creepy” mean?

“Wow! What a creeper!” My 16-year-old daughter often says, breezing through the door, referring to some encounter she’s just had taking the city bus home from school, or walking through the park down the street. Her three teenage sisters say it too. When they have occasion to remind each other of the unpleasant experiences they’ve already started to collect

walking down the streets, standing at the bus-stop, in the cars of boys they have dated, and with one or two of their male teachers, the reminder starts, as often as not, with “Remember that creeper who....” When I ask, “What do you mean by that?” they just say, “You know, a creeper....as in *creepy*,” and roll their eyes at their philosopher-mother’s efforts to get them to think more about something so self-evident. And the truth is, I *do* know what they mean. In fact, I’ve taken to calling out to them in their very own vernacular, “Watch out for creepers!” as they head out of the house on some teenage errand.

But perhaps they resist my efforts to get them to talk about what they mean in part because it isn’t so easy to *say* what “creeper” means, when you really sit down to do it. Even for me, after years working in organizations for battered women, managing the crisis hotline, training hundreds of volunteers and staff members to work the crisis hotline, advocating for women and training others to advocate for women in the counseling room and in courts of law—I really need my philosophical training in order to say what “creeper” means. After all, a creeper doesn’t necessarily engage in the blatant and (for the most part) more easily-defined behavior that we have in mind when we say “battery” or “rape” or “sexual assault,” and the words change if he does. He’s no longer just a “creeper” but something even worse. Feminists had to fight long and hard to get the more overt forms of abuse recognized by the police and the courts (and even more importantly to recognize them ourselves), and that battle still isn’t over. But while the creeper’s behavior seems to carry the threat or possibility of these other forms of abuse,ⁱⁱ he needn’t ever cross those lines to earn the name “creeper”.

The behavior of a “creeper” seems to fall instead, or sometimes only *almost* fall, under what we categorize as “sexual harassment.” But even here, the “classic” form of sexual harassment in which: 1) it happens in an institutional context in which the harasser and the

harassee have some professional relationship with one another, usually with the harasser in a position of greater power, and 2) the harasser avails himself of that power, as when he uses grades or job security, promotion or demotion, his control over someone's professional reputation, etc., to back up his sexual approach to the victim—already goes beyond the kinds of things that we mean when we say someone is “a real creeper”. (Though of course, someone who did those things *would be* a creeper, just like those who batter or sexually assault women are creepers; it's just that what we mean by “creepy” definitely doesn't require that the test of *quid pro quo* sexual harassment be met.)

“Mere” creepiness is sexual harassment, when it is, of another kind. In policy and law, feminists have tried to codify it with the term “hostile work environment”.ⁱⁱⁱ At my institution, for example, creepiness becomes harassment of this sort when the behavior in question, “interferes with work or academic performance because it has created an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working or academic environment for the individual who is the object of such conduct, and where the conduct would have such an effect on a reasonable person of that person's gender.”^{iv} Of course this means that not all creepy behavior is going to rise to the level of sexual harassment, in policy, though a lot of it will. But for a philosopher, this definition is remarkably unsatisfying. “Hostile, intimidating, or offensive” helps delineate a policy, but it isn't a very rich, detailed or subtle analysis of what is creepy about the behavior of creepers. It seems to me that we need a *phenomenology* of the experience of creepiness, if we are to understand the nature of the harms it causes.^v

My readers may be wondering why I would start an inquiry of this sort with the kind of behavior that is hardest to define. Why not start from the most blatant forms of harassment and analyze them, then try to get at how the supposedly least blatant kinds of harassment are similar?

The problem is, they may not be so similar in their basic structures; the operation of power in *quid pro quo* harassment, for example, is different from that exercised by a “mere” creeper, though both result in harm—and the harms themselves are different.^{vi} *Quid pro quo* sexual harassment is *also* creepy, which is to say it also involves the operation of power and the harm that we find in “mere” creepiness. By starting with “mere” creepiness, we get at the hardest to identify wrongs, those that aren’t necessarily captured in the language of policy and rules.

Another obvious objection to what I’ve written so far is that I am writing as if harassers are always male and the harassed are always female, when we all know that there are times when the situation is reversed, or when men are creepers with other men, or women with other women—and there are times and situations in which the very language of “male” and “female” or “men” and “women” doesn’t adequately speak to the identities or experiences of those who are harmed.^{vii} I take this objection to heart, and know that anything that I say about those situations in which it is a person who comfortably identifies as a man, harassing a person who comfortably identifies as a woman—which is the sole topic of this essay—will need to be re-thought for situations in which this is not the case. In my daughters’ lives, in my own younger life, and my professional life now, it has almost always been the more stereotypical, and perhaps statistically most common situation that I have been called on to understand, so I limit the scope of this essay accordingly, but with apologies.

I begin with the assumption that when my daughter exclaims “What a creeper!” she says this because she knows something. Behind the declaration is a knowledge claim, in other words. I am witnessing her *assuming epistemic authority* over a situation and an experience. What she claims to know is something about the man or boy in question, something about his motivations, his character, and the way that he sees her. She knows something about the world in which this

way-of-seeing claims or tries to claim her, and something about how it harms her, or threatens to. What is it that she knows? My urging her to talk about it more is a way of trying to convince her that experience needs reflection *in order to know what it knows*. The first level of interpretation, expressed in the very exclamation “*What a creeper!*” isn’t enough; it knows *that* it knows without quite knowing *what* it knows.

Let’s start by paying attention to the words: “creepy,” “creeper.” Something that creeps sneaks up on you, threatens to catch you unawares. In the garden, bindweed is the clear example. It is actually a rather pretty plant, even delicate, with triangular leaves and seductive, cone-shaped white flowers. It looks like a morning glory. It camouflages itself against the green leaves of the host plant. Yet bindweed is viciously invasive. If you don’t stop it, it wraps itself around the host plant again and again. Its tendrils get thicker and stronger. If you pull it out of the ground, any bit of root left will bring it back to life, and the roots are actually invigorated by your resistance. If you allow it to seed, the seeds stay viable for 30 years. If it were to choose you as its host, you can imagine it wrapping you up while you were napping, and waking up unable to move.

Keeping the bindweed in mind, let’s consider Sartre’s famous (and creepy) example of a woman on a date, whose bad faith dictates her response to her date’s sexual overtures.

She knows very well the intentions which the man who is speaking to her cherishes regarding her. She knows also that it will be necessary sooner or later for her to make a decision. But she does not want to realize the urgency... She does not apprehend [her date’s] conduct as an attempt to achieve what we call “the first approach”; ...she does not wish to read in the phrases which he

addresses to her anything other than their explicit meaning. If he says to her, “I find you so attractive!” she disarms this phrase of its sexual background... The man who is speaking to her appears to her sincere and respectful as the table is round or square... This is because she is not quite sure what she wants... she refuses to apprehend the desire for what it is; she does not even give it a name; she recognizes it only to the extent that it transcends itself toward admiration, esteem, respect... But then suppose he takes her hand. This act of her companion risks changing the situation by calling for an immediate decision. To leave the hand there is to consent to flirt, to engage herself... To withdraw it is to break the troubled and unstable harmony which gives the hour its charm... We know what happens next, the young woman leaves her hand there, but she does not notice that she is leaving it...she is at this moment all intellect. She draws her companion up to the most lofty regions of sentimental speculation... the hand rests inert between the warm hands of her companion—neither consenting nor resisting—a thing.^{viii}

What makes this an example of “bad faith” for Sartre is that the woman “has disarmed the actions of her companion by reducing them to being only what they are,” rather than recognizing that these actions point beyond themselves. When he says, “I find you so attractive!” for example, she recognizes this phrase only in its immanence (only as being what it is), and refuses to “know” that this means he wants to have sex with her. On the other hand, she recognizes his desire only in its mode of transcendence (only as not being what it is), in other words, the brute bodily desire *to fuck* is only apprehended as a kind of admiration or esteem. She doesn’t hold

transcendence and immanence together in her responses, but is continually fragmenting them—thus refusing to assume her freedom. When her date presses the moment of decision by taking her hand, Sartre complains, she refuses to be forced into a decision. Leaving her hand alive and animated in his would be to consent. Withdrawing it would be to refuse.

Of course this scenario might not happen on a date. A feminist consciously misreading this scene as autobiographical, (and knowing Sartre’s particular history, such a misreading is too tempting to resist) might well wonder whether the young woman—no doubt one of Sartre’s philosophy students—even thought she was on a date. Maybe she thought she had been presented with the opportunity to discuss existentialism with one of the great minds of her time because she had impressed the professor with her intelligence in class. Or maybe she had just approached him with a question about Brentano’s notion of intentionality; walked boldly up to his table at the café and been asked to sit down. And maybe she was so shocked to find that *for him*, even such student-like behavior was apprehended as “a date,” she froze—needing time to formulate a response, but finding that he had already stolen time from her.

And this is one characteristic of creepers. They steal your time. They are already in the mode of “I-regard-you-as-fuckable” by the time you’ve taken your seat or walked by on the street, before you’ve even properly introduced yourself. If your sense is that *any* human relation—erotic or not—is an open structure, the very first requirement of which is curiosity, and the very second requirement of which is a certain humility, which in turn demands hesitation, approach, retreat, listening, playfulness, responsiveness, self-protection, self-disclosure, etc.; in other words, if any human relation requires *time*, then one knows one has encountered a creeper when one experiences the sexualized theft of time. The approach of the creeper reduces this whole complex temporality of the encounter by *already* having decided its meaning, by already

having framed it exclusively in terms of his own needs and desires, by already knowing who-you-are-for-him before you get your coffee.

But then again, maybe the young woman *did* think it was a date, naively hoping that the old professor's sexual interest in her was an opening toward full-fledged curiosity and fascination, rather than just another effort to get laid. Maybe she was open to the possibility that he would encounter her as a living value in a complex erotic situation, as an end-in-herself (to throw in the relevant Kantian language)—rather than as a mere use value, a means to the old professor's narcissistic, urgent ends. Maybe she discovers, and is disappointed to discover, that he's really just another creeper. Or maybe she's not sure, or not sure yet.

When I imagine one of my daughters sitting in the café with the old professor, though, or even sharing a bottle of wine, I don't interpret the lifeless hand in the same way Sartre (who has a hard time being curious about what women know) does. Instead, I read her lifeless hand as evidence of a kind of knowledge. What this young woman-on-a-date knows, at least what her hand knows, even if she couldn't articulate this to you, is that she is with someone whose epistemic arrogance poses a threat. The creeper has already started to wrap her up in the tendrils of his intentionality—which in phenomenology isn't about conscious intentions. Intentionality is understood as the *of* in consciousness—of, or the *about* in knowing-about, or the *for* in wishing-for. It is a directedness toward an object of consciousness. This directedness is always shaded by a certain mood—one can be *conscious-of* someone in a mood of curiosity, or fear, or love; and one can be *conscious-of* someone in a mood of contempt. The intentional mood saturates the whole interaction. The creeper's dominant intentional mood, when he is in the presence of certain women, is entitlement to acquisition. (Picture the bindweed.) He has already embarked on

a kind of *capture*. His *way* of having a world is relentlessly acquisitive, in other words he seeks to seduce or compel certain others into a relation characterized primarily by use.

On the other side of the table, the young woman finds herself reduced to a feature of his having-a-world. This is not to say that he is merely objectifying her, relating to her as if she were a thing, although feminists have often used this language to try and express the harm of what is happening. It is, more significantly, that the expansiveness of his own agency demands that the agency of certain others be *annexed* to and consumed in his—it is not that her body is put to use as an object, though it well might be, but that the woman as body-*subject* is put to use.^{ix}

His creepiness is a kind of demand expressed in the mood of entitlement. When a demand is expressed in this mood, the possibility of real refusal or consent is effectively short-circuited, since both will be read through the fog of entitlement. He demands that she employ her agency (through flirtation, or feeling flattered, or expressing outrage) in the project of his sexual self-aggrandizement, but he communicates in the demand his *entitlement* to the demand. She discovers that the use *is already underway* in the demand, since he already confirms his entitlement by acting as one who is in a position to make such demands. His whole approach to her is saturated by a mood of sexual entitlement, so that *before she can even respond*, his enactment of the approach has already confirmed his status as entitled. Her blistering refusal feeds his way of having a world as much as her active acquiescence, since both confirm his authority to compel her subjective capacities to be-in-relation to him in a field whose possibilities he effectively controls.

We now see that leaving one's hand dead and numb on the table is a refusal, though not likely a consciously chosen one.^x She refuses not just the demand, but the whole *scene* in which

the world gets structured as a place where he demands and she responds, in which the possibilities of her agency are reduced to a response to his demand. She resists the creeping vines wrapping round her ankles and her wrists, so that every motion is a confirmation of the creeper's power, by remaining completely still. It may seem as though she will be strangled if she moves. If he is going to grasp her hand, as an expression of his entitlement to annex her agency, then she will refuse to manifest freedom in her hand. In other words, she resists a world in which her own world-shaping capacity is preempted, by refusing to participate.

If the first harm of creepiness is the theft of time, the second harm is the pre-emption of her very way-of-having-a-world. This is why encounters with creepers, especially if they hold positions of respect or power or authority, have the potential to derail a woman's sense of self, to disrupt her ability to act. And indeed, the actions of creepers seem to be designed for this purpose, more than for the purposes of sexual titillation (except insofar as seeing a woman so derailed is titillating.) Susan Bordo describes the retributive response of a professor who had asked her out, and whom she had refused, as having begun with her challenge to his power—she had responded to his advances as if to a peer, and simply said she wasn't interested. On one occasion, she reports, he “jovially instructed me that it was ‘time for class, dear’ and patted me on my rear end at the open doorway of a classroom full of other students, mostly male. My impulse, after I had run down the hall in humiliation, was to tell him how degrading that gesture had been to me, with what economy and precision he had reduced me, in front of my colleagues, from fellow philosopher-in-training to...to what?”^{xi} While Bordo is not certain what he has reduced her to, she is certain about what she has been reduced from, i.e. from fellow-philosopher-in-training. As a philosopher-in-training, in a philosophy classroom, her *way of having a world* has been preempted.

Of course it is important to remind ourselves why it is that creepers seem to have such power, before they actually do anything to hurt you in the material sense of the word. Again, if the creeper starts threatening your grade or your employment or your professional reputation—that's already beyond creepy and mostly, there are remedies for that. But certainly, not every other who approaches me in a mood of entitlement or acquisition undermines me so effectively as the creeper does, at least sometimes.

What makes creepiness so *effectively* creepy is that the mood of entitlement and acquisition that characterizes creepers is backed up by and taps into a whole world of imagery, language, and material relations that echo and amplify the creeper's demands.^{xii} A creeper in a context not saturated with images and stories of women as use-values for men, in a language which did not provide terms for referring to women as use-values for men, or in a material context in which women were not systematically disadvantaged, would simply be an annoyance—like a mosquito in a place where the fear of mosquito-borne illnesses has been eliminated. This whole complex is shored up by the fact that men often carry with them, “a sense of implicit (and often unconscious) ownership of public space and its definitions and values—a sense of ownership that women typically do not feel.”^{xiii} This sense of ownership is backed up by the structure of material relations as well as the content of dominant cultural narratives. It is the total concrete situation, to use Beauvoir's important phrase, in which the creeper creeps that makes his creepiness so efficacious.

Creepiness, then, is not something teenage girls make up, nor something that a young woman philosophy student just imagines, sitting across from her old professor. Creepers pose an epistemic threat that closes time and pre-empts—with the collusion of an entire culture, with the complicity of social power arrangements—young women's world-making capacities. It is the

enactment of a creepy kind of capture; it's already wrapped around your throat before you can start paying attention and threatens to close off your airway entirely if you dare to move.

Thesis #1: "Creepy" names an entitled and acquisitive mood of intentionality, nourished by broader misogynist social arrangements, through which a narcissistic subject steals your time, annexes your subjective powers and pre-empts your world-making capacities.

What about flirtation?

It is important to distinguish creepiness from flirtation, as some will object that my analysis is taking the fun out of everything. Flirtation, of course, has its proper place, though I will say that I think it is best left out of most hierarchical relationships most of the time—especially those characterized by significant imbalances of power—as between professors and their students, or supervisors and their employees, or adults and children. In these relations it is mostly not possible to flirt without being creepy. But it would be a sad mistake to misread all erotically-charged interactions, even in contexts of unequal power, as “creepy,” and I am not advocating anything of the sort. One of the crucial preconditions for flirtation will be power that is *equal enough*, taking into consideration the total concrete situation, so that the vulnerability of the two parties stands a chance of being more or less the same, at least at the start.

One of my favorite examples of flirtation is that scene in the old feminist film *Thelma and Louise*, where the cowboy-hitchhiker-robber played by Brad Pitt flirts with Thelma (Geena Davis) in the car, and later in her hotel room. For those who don't know the story, Thelma and Louise are two friends on the lam, after the innocent Thelma (whose long marriage to her high school sweetheart has been a disaster) encounters a real creeper, who turns out to be a rapist, in a

bar. Louise (Susan Sarandon) rescues Thelma from rape at gunpoint, then shoots the would-be rapist in the parking lot. Convinced they will never be believed, the two women head for the border in Louise's old convertible. On the way they meet J.D. (Brad Pitt), and Thelma is smitten. Even though J.D. turns out to be quite a jerk, stealing Louise's life savings, which was to finance their escape—you couldn't call him a creeper *sexually*. His compliments to and playfulness with Thelma enact a kind of delighted, respectful invitation. When Thelma hesitates, he backs off and waits for her approach, clearly open to the possibility that her hesitation is the final word on the encounter. He waits to see if her *desire* is there to meet his. After hours of playful flirtation infused with intense mutual curiosity in Thelma's hotel room, the two have wildly passionate sex. But even here, when Thelma says "wait" he listens. She emerges from the encounter having experienced herself as a sexual agent for the first time. When they discover their money is gone, she borrows a narrative J.D. recounted to her when he told her about his chosen profession, and robs a convenience store at gunpoint. The film is, in large part, the story of Thelma's transformation from victim (of her abusive husband, of the rapist) to a woman conscious of her own world-shaping capacities, even in the context of a broader misogyny that she can't completely undo. Her empowerment is symbolized by her handiness with a gun, her ability to make things happen—as in one dramatic scene in which she and Louise blow the oil-tanker truck of another creeper sky high.

What one notices is that the structure of time is different, in flirtation, than in an encounter with a creeper. Her hesitation is met by his giving-space to that hesitation; his urgency is put out of play (by him) if not met by her responding urgency. In other words, a field of possibility is kept wide *open* in flirtation, at least insofar as I must leave open the possibility that you will respond, or you won't, that you will desire, or you won't, or that we will desire

differently. Flirtation is acute curiosity about such possibilities, which doesn't, therefore, immediately close them all up; it is intensified attention to the details and particularities of a unique existent with an ability to enjoy surprises. In flirtation time opens, stretches out, luxuriates. Flirtation, especially if it is welcome, is a gift of time.

In flirtation, the mood of intentionality that saturates the encounter implies a way of having a world that has an open structure as well, so that I invite you to curiosity about my way of having a world, to enter in, but I refuse to make any assumptions about who you will be to me, even as my wonder or hope about the question infuses the whole encounter with a kind of intensity. There is no threat of unwilling capture before I've even had time to let myself wonder, so there is no threat of being locked into a world where my-meaning-for-you is already sealed up and decided, without my having played an active part in it. My world-shaping capacities are not pre-empted, but attended to intensively at the very heart of the encounter. This attention is reciprocal if the flirtation is.

The mood of intentionality in flirtation is nearly the opposite of the mood of intentionality in entitled acquisition. It is the animation of curiosity in an intensified, erotically charged field. It is invitation and appeal, not demand. It requires vigilance against acquisitiveness and entitlement. What distinguishes flirtation from creepiness is this open structure of time in an opened-up world, a sensitivity to refusal and consent, a willingness to retreat or approach. Frankly, the world we live in stacks the cards against flirtation, in favor of creepiness—which is why we need to think about the difference.

Thesis #2: Flirtation is a kind of erotic attention which opens the structure of time and intensifies wonder and curiosity between two subjects, in an opened-up world, in which one appeals to the world-making capacities of the other.

Beware of male heroes!

It bothers me a great deal that those same teenage daughters of mine who, I've just suggested, take epistemic charge of a situation that is stacked against them by declaring, "What a creeper!" are also addicted to stories of male heroes. It hit me hardest when the older three, a few years ago, passed around the *Twilight* novels, huge, fat, 700-page monsters—and read each of them with a kind of breathless urgency. Wondering what all the fuss was about, I spent a few weeks reading the whole four-volume set myself.^{xiv} I met Bella, the teenaged protagonist, and watched her be rescued—again and again and again. Edward Cullen, the vampire hero of the series, is the main rescuer, and his rival Jacob, is rescuer number two. Bella's world-shaping capacities are reduced to choosing between them on occasion, though just as often they collaborate to save her despite their animosity to one another, or her half-hearted resistance, passing her back and forth like a rag doll. Though finally, at the end of volume four, she is actually able to effect a major rescue herself, the tone and tenor of the texts is dominated by images of Bella threatened by some really over-the-top creepers, then whisked away, draped over Edward's overly developed forearms as he carries her to safety.

Stephanie Meyer, the author of the series, made her fortune on a wager that girls today would fall for a new damsel-in-distress story, like generations of girls before them. She couldn't have hit it better. In 2009, *USA Today*, reporting on their best seller list, announced that "the

Twilight books have stayed in the list's top 10 for 52 consecutive weeks. They held the first four spots a total of 13 weeks in the past year.”^{xv}

Meyer spiced her fairy tale up for a new millennium, even being fairly up front about the troubling fact that Bella's blood-sucking-vampire-hero can barely control his urges to kill her, a symbolic allusion, on a feminist reading, to the tendency exhibited by male heroes to strip women of their agential powers. Yet heroes are, it seems, overwhelmingly seductive to the current generation of young women. One teenage girl I know flushes with pride when she reports that her (well-meaning) boyfriend has just told her, for example, that she is “not allowed to walk alone in that area anymore.” His urgency to protect her somehow disguises the fact that he takes it upon himself to “allow” or “not allow” certain actions—and this girl who is not generally fond of people's authority to allow or not allow her things, virtually melts with delight as she recounts the story.

It's not only a problem in the fairy tales or in teenage romance. When the United States invaded Afghanistan in October of 2001, one of the justifications chosen by the Bush administration was that we needed to rescue the women. In fact, Afghan women's organizations had been calling for international aid for decades. The human rights situation for women in Afghanistan was absolutely abysmal, and organizations like the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) had been resisting the Taliban and paying the price of imprisonment, torture, and execution for years.^{xvi} When the Bush administration decided to invade, suddenly feminist organizers in the U.S. who had been lobbying unsuccessfully for attention to the human rights situation for Afghan women had the ear of the president. Feminist organizers who hadn't been able to get anywhere with the Bush administration before, were invited into the White House as consultants.

In the U.S., the feminist movement split over the issue, with some supporting the invasion as the long overdue opportunity to change things on the ground for Afghan women. Others spoke out against the war, convinced that feminist demands were being opportunistically folded into efforts to justify an unjust, pre-emptive war of aggression on another sovereign nation, and that the war effort was likely to make things even worse for Afghan women. From Afghanistan, RAWA vehemently opposed the U.S. invasion, while intensifying their efforts to get and keep women's human rights for Afghan women on the international agenda. And when it came time to put together a provisional government in Afghanistan, not surprisingly, the women who had been organizing for years within the country on behalf of women, who had risked everything to resist the Taliban, who had seen their sisters-in-struggle tortured and executed, were not at the table; their voices were systematically excluded from any official efforts to reconstruct the country. While the Bush administration was very comfortable relating to Afghan women as victims, and relating to those U.S. feminist organizations which were willing to define the situation exclusively as a situation of victimization, they aggressively excluded those women who had organized resistance, who demanded a voice in shaping their world, from the negotiating table.^{xvii}

While this example might seem out of place in an essay about sexual harassment, I think it is an important cautionary tale. The problem is, there is a long patriarchal tradition of protectionism that is easily re-animated when women are victimized. The notion that men need to protect women from other men is, after all, an integral part of masculinist thinking. Just as girls grow up with stories and images of Prince Charming, or Edward Cullen, running around kissing them back to life or scooping them, in the nick of time, out of danger-- boys grow up with stories and images of such rescues saturating their cultural space. Even cognitive scientists

say that the rescue narrative is deeply culturally entrenched.^{xviii} Rescuing women is, in fact, a necessary part of the life-story a manly man imagines for himself in a masculinist culture. It's part of what makes you a manly man, if you think you are one. And in a world in which women really *are* in danger of being victims of sexual violence, and also grow up with the rescue narrative all around them, this kind of chivalry can seem friendly, welcome, even necessary.

But what's going on, upon philosophical reflection, in the relation between the hero and the victim he sets out to rescue? First, as in any encounter, this meeting is characterized by a particular mood. We might call the mood, at first glance, before reflection, hyperbolic responsibility. I mean by this that he feels himself to be responsible for her in the way that a parent necessarily feels herself to be responsible for an infant or young child. This is an extreme existential responsibility, in that the very life or death of the child is in the parent's hands. In fact a parent who brings a child into the world gives the child both life and *time*, in that the life-story of an individual starts at birth. Similarly, the hero imagines himself to occupy a certain position and to enjoy a certain status in the victim's world. He is the one without whom she ceases to exist. He is the one whom she waits for. He imagines the victim to exist in a state of *temporal suspension* in anticipation of his arrival, and that his arrival will bring her (as with Prince Charming and Snow White) back to life. He is the one who gives her back *time*, in other words. The hero thinks he restarts the life story of the victim at the moment of rescue, which he tends to mistakenly believe actually makes him the *author* of her story.

The problem with this impassioned fantasy is that it actually requires the victim's passivity, the victim's vulnerability, in order to keep itself up. There is only one agent in the rescue narrative, and it's not the victim. The hero can be recognized, in fact, by his tendency toward obsessive and hyperbolic displays of agency. Wherever women are victimized, if male

heroes appear, they speak very loudly and flail around a lot. Their form of rescue tends to leave a great deal of destruction in its wake. Sometimes male heroes even appear in the absence of victims, as when white supremacists set out to save white womanhood from black rapists by lynching, though in the vast majority of lynching cases based on an accusation of insult to or assault on a white woman, no victim had come forward or was even named.^{xix} When there *are* victims, heroes constantly make the mistake of replacing the victim's agency with their own, violating a central principle of victim advocacy. As stated by the National Organization for Victim Assistance in their crisis intervention protocols, those who work with victims should “respond to the need for nurturing — but be wary of becoming a ‘rescuer’ on whom the victim becomes dependent. The ‘rescuer’ who ends up months later making decisions for the victim has subverted the primary goal of crisis intervention; that is, to help the victim restore control over his or her life.”^{xx} Victim advocates at the *Justice Solutions* website agree, under a list of “DON'TS” we find this item: Don't “be ‘over-helpful’ by making decisions and choices for victims. Since no victim *chooses* to be victimized or has control over a violent act committed against him or her, the ability for victims to *regain control* over their lives, and *make decisions* affecting their lives, becomes very important.”^{xxi} The worst hero will capture the entire story of a victim of harassment or abuse to animate his own agenda, whether that agenda consists of simple self-aggrandizement, a destructive war of aggression, or some other passionate mission to which he has linked his identity.

Commonly, this is more or less unconsciously motivated—and comes with a certain epistemic incapacity; the narcissistically driven personality cannot get enough distance from itself to recognize that it is self-obsessed, after all. While heroes claim to be knowers of women, they enjoy the hero-role to such an extent, and are so committed to their status as heroes, that

they end up being aggressively ignorant about women's experiences and perspectives. In fact, that women might *have* perspectives that differ from theirs, might actually interpret or resist abuse rather than merely suffer it, is in itself a threat to the hero's status as the sole agent of the scene. What we first interpreted as an intentional mood of hyperbolic responsibility now shows itself to be something else: obsessive self-aggrandizement disguised as selfless devotion. Just as the devoted parent becomes the weight which holds a maturing child captive, the hero's heroism becomes an obsession which pins the victim to her victimization.

This is why male heroes are unable to accept leadership from women. They are very comfortable with women who are victimized, who are vulnerable—but they get very uncomfortable when women gain power. Just as the Bush administration *had to* exclude those Afghan women who were organized, knowledgeable, and strong from the table, the hero will not ally himself with women who are likely to challenge his version of events, or who are perhaps more qualified for leadership when it comes to redressing the victimization of women than he is. More than this, as in Afghanistan where the Bush administration set out to systematically discredit RAWA as a representative of women's interests, the male hero will need to systematically discredit those feminists who have been doing the work in the trenches all along, in order to present himself as the sole savior of vulnerable women. He will forget to mention the years of work that feminists have done to redress the harm in question. The work that women have done fighting for and writing sexual harassment policies and law, for example, may be entirely erased. The hero takes credit where he can, as if he's done all the work that mattered all by himself—women who are or have been world-shaping agents pose a danger to his ego. He will warn victims to stay away from those women whose self-definition is not heavily focused on victimization, because if the victims who feed his ego cease to see themselves primarily as such,

and instead understand themselves to be capable of world-shaping activity, his status as the savior of vulnerable women will be punctured like an oversized hot-air balloon.

In relation to other men, the hero operates on the principle that the bigger and meaner the dragon-to-be-slayed, the more valiant will be the charming prince. The fact is, *the hero needs the creeper*, in order to tell his story. He is as committed to a world in which women are victimized as the creeper is. His wish to exaggerate the differences between himself and other men creates the need to portray men who harass or abuse women as pathological monsters, rather than simply as men whose behavior is “an expression of the norms of the culture, not violations of those norms.”^{xxii} Heroes tend to exaggerate stories of abuse in order to add glory to their own heroism. Even men who stand against the abuse of women, but in a quieter, less dramatic way, are in for a slaying. The paradigm of hyperbolic manhood doesn’t have room for sissies, whose agency is not obsessively on display.

The problem is, of course, that men who harass and abuse women are not, by and large, pathological. They simply take the entitlements offered to them in a misogynist culture quite seriously. Portraying them as monsters lets the culture of masculinism, which includes the very dynamic of protectionism the hero enacts, off the hook. It also lets the hero off the hook—he needn’t ever reflect on how he benefits from the arrangements as they are. A focus on individual monsters who need to be slayed distorts the truth of sexual harassment, which is rooted in a total concrete situation that is structured to pre-empt women’s world-making capacities, through masculinist violence *and* masculinist protectionism.

And here it becomes clear that heroes and creepers have something in common. Both are epistemically arrogant. Both live their relations to women in a posture of entitlement, in which they relate to the women around them primarily as players-of-parts in their own stories. They are

incapable of recognizing women as authors or potential authors of perception and meaning. Their posture toward women is, in other words, acquisitive. They are “creepy” in the way that certain invasive vines are creepy, in that the intentional threads that anchor their actions in the world, which their female interlocutors also inhabit, perform a kind of capture. Both the creeper’s and the hero’s way of having a world, pre-empts women’s world-making capacities. These capacities are already siphoned off and harnessed to the hero’s grand narrative before she sits down across the table from him, opening a conversation, or looking for help.

Thesis #3: A hero is a narcissistic subject, whose hero story, nourished by broader misogynist social arrangements, requires victims to rescue; the hero’s obsessive displays of agency pre-empt and undermine the world-making capacities of the ones he sets out to save.

How to Know an Ally when You See One

Allies are very different sorts of men, and I’m happy to say I’ve had the opportunity to know and work with a good number them. They aren’t loud or flashy. They don’t obsessively display their self-sacrifice, and they don’t talk endlessly about their heroic efforts on behalf of women. In fact, on subjects like this one, they do more listening than talking. They are aware that in the world we have inherited, their voices will tend to command some authority, at least in their own communities, just because they are men, and they are circumspect about this—thinking hard about when it is appropriate to deploy that authority strategically, and when it is not. Allies tend to *work* more than they talk. They are the ones who support women’s events by taking over the child-care or volunteering to be on the clean-up team, rather than appointing themselves to be

key-note speaker. To put the point more philosophically, an ally is someone who respects the epistemic authority of women in relation to women's experiences and concerns.

More than this, an ally remains cognizant of the ways that he is implicated in the very culture and structures of power that are the backdrop for and the animating force for individual acts of abuse or harassment. In encounters with an ally one is immediately aware of an intentional mood that might best be described as *circumspect*. He practices epistemic humility in relation to women and women's concerns, without giving up his responsibility to know and to act. He understands that self-reflection, when one holds power, can be both painful and difficult, even as it is necessary. Here, the temporal mood is one of hesitation first, then care. When confronted with a feminist criticism or demand, he will not necessarily accept it, but he will respond first with curiosity, wondering what he might have missed, or what he is not understanding yet.

When women are victimized, allies don't sit on their hands, but neither do they rush to seal up a definition of the situation, the agenda, or the path out—knowing that space needs to be left, and created, for women to do those things. When advocating for victims of male violence or exploitation, they are very careful not to replace the victims' voices with their own. They are very careful not to replace the victims' agendas with their own. Allies are aware of the need to *create space* for women to come to a definition of the situation, to set agendas, and to decide on strategies for redress. They will employ their privilege or institutional power, if they have it, to make such space. In addition to exercising epistemic humility then, allies are space-makers.

One clear difference between a hero and an ally is that while heroes demonize male perpetrators of harassment or abuse in order to exalt themselves, allies challenge the behavior of other men, often forcefully, as *peers*.^{xxiii} Allies do not shy away from face-to-face conversations

in which they challenge their male peers to behave better. They recognize that exaggerating stories of harassment or abuse by portraying the men who practice these things as “crazed rapists,” even if they know that the public at large will have a hard time recognizing the harms in more “subtle” forms of harassment, serves no one’s interest but their own. In fact such portrayals serve to distort the reality of sexual harassment and other abuses, including rape, which are enacted most often by men who *comply* with dominant cultural norms, rather than deviating from them. Understanding that portraying certain men (often racially coded) as monsters, amounts to engaging in a kind of public relations campaign for masculinism as a whole, allies avoid such portrayals. Instead, they are careful to point out how the most subtle sexist behavior, often unconsciously enacted, plays its part in the whole cultural scene, in which harassment and abuse emerge as intensified moments of the same structure. They will not approach the harasser as an individual monster, then, but as a co-beneficiary of a system that is not of their own, individual, making –knowing that they, too, have to be vigilant against enacting its privileges. While allies will not hesitate to avail themselves of policy and law to assist women who seek redress from particular harms, their sense of responsibility will be much broader, extending most importantly to the constitution of male peer culture. Allies are not princes in shining armor, they are culture critics.

Allies are not threatened by women who have power, though they may not always agree with them. They understand how important it is for women who have been harmed to find and talk with other women who have experienced similar harms. They understand that sexual harassment and other abuses that fall along traditional gender lines nourish themselves on a world that is saturated with messages and images of women as use-values for men, and that is often structured materially to women’s collective disadvantage relative to men of their race and

social class. They realize that feminism is the emancipatory movement that has undertaken resistance to these arrangements, and that consequently, *the promotion of feminism is itself a form of resistance to the harms of sexual harassment or abuse.*

Thesis #4: An ally is a hard-working and epistemically humble culture critic, who is circumspect about his unwilling or unwitting participation in misogynist social arrangements, without being immobilized by his own circumspection.

Conclusion

The real men in our lives are not always so neatly divided up, of course—either creepers or flirts, heroes or allies. One man might be any or all of these characters over the course of a lifetime, and the boundaries between them, even in a single moment, are not always clear cut. Creepiness, flirtation, heroism and alliance are all, ultimately, modes of intersubjective engagement rather than typologies of character. While some men will so wholeheartedly affirm and so passionately commit themselves to one of these modes that the character of the person becomes dominated and saturated by the mode of engagement, mostly, things will be more confusing than that. All of us know that, often enough, we discover ourselves to be in the grip of a certain intentional mood when already in the midst of an encounter, *before* having made a reflective commitment to it.

By teasing these four modes apart, we see more clearly the possibilities of harm and the potential goods that come with different modes of intentional engagement. For those who are men of good will, reflecting on the intentional structures of the kinds of intersubjective engagement that are enacted by creepers, flirts, heroes, and allies, might make it possible to

change the direction of an encounter, or change the tone of one's dominant mode of engagement with certain women, so that women's world-shaping capacities are engaged rather than undermined. It might also make it possible to challenge male peers on the less overtly coercive forms of sexual harassment, to recognize the harms of those forms of harassment, without having to resort to the slash-and-burn strategies deployed by heroes.

In fact, taking responsibility for male peer culture would entail challenging both creepers and heroes, where creepers invigorate the backdrop of fear and the threat of sexual violence that allows heroes to come to the rescue. The distance provided by critical reflection allows us to recognize that both postures implicitly affirm and rely on a culture in which facing sexual harm and depending on rescue are rigidified as necessary facets of the condition of being female. Both postures pre-empt women's world-making capacities by reifying these conditions. The only way out of this "male protection racket," as feminists called it in the 70s, is for women collectively, in the company of allies, to reshape the social and material world so that it is not structured in terms of these two possibilities. This is, and always has been, the task of feminism.

For those of us who are women, if we are to live our way through the complex dynamics we encounter in the work place, at the mall, or on the street, we need to be aware of and skilled at recognizing the signs of each of these intentional modes. Naming creepers, flirts, heroes and allies, is part of assuming epistemic authority over a situation. Reflecting on what it is that we know when we use such names, is one task of feminist criticism. What is at stake, in the daily gifts and thefts of space and time, in our ability to accept the gifts and resist the thefts in each case, is the status of our world-shaping capacities. What is at stake is our ability to insist on a world in which those capacities might flourish.

ⁱ In the form of this essay I am referencing and playing with the forms of two of my favorite works in philosophy. In enumerating and describing a cast of characters, I'm playing with the form of the essay that makes up the second chapter of Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1976). In laying out several "theses" I am referencing Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by Robert C. Tucker, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), pp.143-145.

ⁱⁱ Especially, but not only in the case of street harassment, many feminists have noted how the threat of sexual violence is evoked by and backgrounds the harassment, so that such harassment, in the words of June Larkin, "contributes to the moulding of young women's subordinate status...because so much of their energy is geared to securing their own safety. When a young woman is continually reminded of the risks that accompany her developing body, when she is constantly under the scrutiny and surveillance of males, and when she lives in a state of constant vigilance, it's unlikely that she'll ever develop a sense of herself as a powerful and autonomous person." See June Larkin, "Sexual Terrorism on the Streets: The Moulding of Young Women into Subordination," in *Sexual Harassment: Contemporary Feminist Perspectives*, edited by Alison M. Thomas and Celia Kitzinger (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1997) pp. 115-130.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a thorough overview of the development of the concept of "hostile work environment sexual harassment," see Margaret A. Crouch, *Thinking About Sexual Harassment: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) pp. 54-69.

^{iv} See *Office of Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity: An Overview of Services and Complaint-Grievance procedures*, published by the Office of Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity, University of Oregon, <http://aaeo.uoregon.edu/AAEO%20Booklet%20Color.pdf>, pp. 11. Last accessed October 31, 2011.

^v Crouch argues that it is, in fact, a philosopher's job to pose the question of harm in relation to sexual harassment. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

^{vi} Though they may not remain so. Catharine MacKinnon insists that hostile work environment sexual harassment ends up imposing *quid pro quo* conditions on women's employment. See *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 40-47. My point is not that the harms of hostile work environment harassment never resemble those of *quid pro quo* harassment, i.e. one finds that one's job is at stake in both, but that there is a harm that is prior to that which arises from the necessity of putting up with the harassment as a condition of keeping one's job, or other material harms.

^{vii} For a critical survey of the empirical data see Crouch, pp. 101-138.

^{viii} Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992) pp. 96-97.

^{ix} Beauvoir was the first to understand this structure of acquisition, which she called "inessential otherness" in *The Second Sex*. For a more contemporary exploration, see Ann Cahill, *Overcoming Objectification: A Carnal Ethics* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2010).

^x Kathleen Cairns wonders, "How can we explain the frequency with which otherwise assertive and self-confident women experience this paralysis of the will that makes it impossible for them to say no to unwanted sexual activity?" "'Femininity' and Women's Silence in Response to Sexual Harassment and Coercion," in *Sexual Harassment: Contemporary Feminist Perspectives*, op. cit., p. 92. She argues, citing Kaschak, that "Masculine meanings organize social and personal experience, so that women are constantly imbued with meanings, not of their own making," p. 95.

^{xi} Susan Bordo, "The Sexual Harasser is a Bully, Not a Sex Fiend," in *Gender Struggles: Practical Approaches to Contemporary Feminism*, ed. by Constance L. Mui and Julien S. Murphy, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), pp. 230.

^{xii} I am accepting, here, what MacKinnon calls the "social" position on sexual harassment, described by Crouch as the idea that "sexual harassment is a manifestation of the basic inequality of men and women as 'men' and 'women' are constructed in our society" Crouch, p 10.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 232.

^{xiv} An article resulted from this exercise. See my "Vampire Love: The Second Sex Negotiates the 21st Century," in *Twilight and Philosophy: Vampires, Vegetarians, and the Pursuit of Immortality*, edited by Rebecca Housel and Jeremy Wisniewski (Blackwell Press, 2009). Excerpted in *The Philosopher's Magazine*, Issue 47, 4th Quarter, 2009. Reprinted in *Introducing Philosophy through Popular Culture*, ed. by William Irwin and David Kyle Johnson, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

^{xv} "Twilight Series Eclipses Potter Records on Best Selling List." *USA Today*, http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2009-08-03-twilight-series_N.htm, accessed 11/1/11.

^{xvi} See Ann Brodsky, *With All Our Strength: The Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

^{xvii} “The image of Afghan women, silent under the shroud of the burqa, does not tell the truth of our lives nor our resistance,” writes a spokeswoman for RAWA in the foreword to Brodsky’s book. RAWA praises Brodsky’s book for using “firsthand experience to accurately portray Afghan women not as silent victims under their *burqas* but warriors who have bravely resisted all oppressive regimes and have changed their lives and the lives of many others” (p. xi).

^{xviii} 2008. Lakoff, George. *The Political Mind: Why You Can’t Understand 21st Century Politics with an 18th Century Brain*. New York: Viking Press.

^{xix} Angela Davis, “Rape, Racism and the Myth of the Black Rapist,” in *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983).

^{xx} The National Organization for Victim Assistance, “An Introduction to Crisis Intervention Protocols.”

<http://www.trynova.org/victiminfo/readings/CrisisIntervention.pdf>. Accessed November 4, 2011.

^{xxi} Justice Solutions: A Website by Crime Victim Professionals for Crime Victim Professionals

http://www.justicesolutions.org/art_pub_communicating_with_victims.pdf. Accessed November 4, 2011

^{xxii} Jackson Katz, *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help*, (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2006), 149. Jackson Katz gives a convincing account of why both men and women are reassured by images of men who harm women as “crazed rapists” rather than as regular guys, whose behavior is broadly supported by the culture. See his analysis of this phenomenon beginning on p. 149.

^{xxiii} Katz proposes that men take responsibility for building a male peer culture that is intolerant of the abuse of women generally, rather than dividing men into the “good guys” and the “bad guys” (i.e. the “crazed rapists”), a strategy which means, “men who do not rape can easily distance themselves from the problem” (150).