

Kelly Oliver

## **Hunting Girls: Sexual Violence from The Hunger Games to Campus Rape**

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Reviewed by Debra Jackson, 2017

In their 2013 collection, *Philosophical Feminism and Popular Culture*, co-editors Sharon Crasnow and Joanne Waugh encourage feminist philosophers to focus on popular culture given that it is a chief vehicle for the perpetuation of gender discrimination. They write, "If feminist philosophers do not examine popular culture, they fail to participate in the conversation about gender *where it is taking place*" (Crasnow and Waugh 2013, 6). Kelly Oliver has taken up the challenge presented by Crasnow and Waugh not only through her contribution to their edited collection, but also through her recent book, *Hunting Girls: Sexual Violence from The Hunger Games to Campus Rape*. In this relatively short volume, Oliver draws attention to elements of popular culture that converge to contribute to sexual violence against girls and women. These include contemporary popular films such as *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *Twilight*, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*; classic fairytale archetypes such as Sleeping Beauty, The Little Mermaid, Cinderella, and Beauty and the Beast; and high-profile cases of "party rape," in which unconscious young women are not only sexually assaulted, but photos and videos of their assaults are disseminated through social media.

The book's Introduction, "Girls as Trophies," draws the reader's attention to the ways that girls and young women are regarded as prey to be captured, abused, and displayed in popular culture, from the "dead girl" trope in advertising to the objectification of women in creepshots (that is, covertly taken photographs of a person's body parts) to sexual assault at college parties. Oliver claims that classic fairytales tend to support party rape culture, and throughout the book, she emphasizes both the rape of unconscious victims and the role of the camera in sexual assault. She focuses on recent films portraying adolescent female protagonists who at first glance seem to challenge the fairytale archetype of the damsel in distress by presenting tough, tomboyish young women who kick ass. However, Oliver argues that these storylines not only reproduce heteronormative roles for women, they ultimately normalize violence toward girls and women.

In chapter 1, "A Princess is Being Beaten and Raped," Oliver argues that although recent books and films produced for young-adult audiences often present strong female heroines, they nevertheless "perpetuate, justify, aestheticize, and normalize violence toward girls" (28). In particular, she draws attention to how the tale of Sleeping Beauty--a story about a princess who is sexually assaulted while unconscious--is echoed in recent films including *Maleficent*, *Divergent*, *Kick-Ass*, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and *Twilight*. These contemporary fairytales present the transition from girlhood to womanhood as dangerous, rife with the threat of sexual abuse and rape. She writes, "These coming-of-age stories about girls kicking ass and getting their asses kicked while giving or receiving their first kiss not only serve as cautionary fairytales warning girls of the dangers of womanhood but also as titillating fantasies of feminine sexuality as both dangerous and fascinating" (49).

Oliver turns to the complexities of consent under patriarchy in chapter 2, "Rape as Spectator Sport and Creepshot Entertainment," arguing that "lack of consent is valorized in popular culture to the point that sexual assault has become a spectator sport and creepshot entertainment on social media" (59). She examines contemporary attitudes toward consent, raising concerns about the classification of rape as "nonconsensual sex" on college campuses, the reliance on consent apps on cell phones, and the celebration of violating

consent through creepshots. Oliver also recognizes that standards for consensual sex reinforce gendered expectations of men as active and women as passive, and she emphasizes the unique harms to victims of "party rape." Highlighting the role of social media in relation to sexual violence, Oliver notes that photos and videos of sexual assault are used to publicly shame victims, yet they also serve as evidence that a crime occurred. Suggestively, she draws attention to the metaphors that reflect the relationship between the role of the camera and the rape of unconscious victims, writing, "girls and women are seen as unsuspecting 'targets,' prey to be 'shot' and 'captured' on film" (103).

In chapter 3, "Girls as Predators and Prey," Oliver proposes that four recent blockbuster films be viewed as contemporary retellings of classic fairytales: She reads *Hanna* as a version of The Little Mermaid, *The Hunger Games* as a version of Cinderella, *Twilight* as a version of Beauty and the Beast, and *Divergent* as a version of Sleeping Beauty. Although the protagonists in these films are tough girls who fight back and thus may be lauded as feminist role models, they simultaneously serve as warnings to feminists in that female independence is violently punished much like young women are retaliated against when they report rape. Ultimately, Oliver is ambivalent about these heroines. She writes, "The question remains, then, whether these equal-opportunity killers are new feminist role models or patriarchal fantasies of phallic girls with guns and arrows. I've argued that they are both" (142).

The ambivalence of chapter 3 is reflected in the book's conclusion, "The New Artemis, Title IX, and Taking Responsibility for Sexual Assault." Here, Oliver connects the Artemis/Atalanta myth to Title IX and recent representations of young women in film. She writes, "The strong independent goddesses can hold their own against men. Their bond empowers them in their struggles for freedom from sexual assault. Their survival is dependent upon their bonding together" (148). Oliver also criticizes the role of trigger warnings as a tool for shutting down conversations about sexual violence on college campuses. She concludes the book with a proposal for an alternative understanding of sexual consent. This approach is grounded in an ethics of response, an ethical orientation she introduces in her 2001 work, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Oliver 2001). She writes, "If consent is seen as a journey taken together rather than a legalistic protection to be gotten or given, then in a sense, we not only emphasize the intersubjectivity of feelings, and the possibility of sex as a form of communication but also mutual respect for, and sensitivity to, the response from the other" (161).

Two of Oliver's central claims in chapters 1 and 2 are that violence toward girls and women is normalized in contemporary film, and that we should be wary of identifying the young women in these films as feminist role models. Given that these claims are standard fare in feminist analyses of popular culture, it would have been helpful for Oliver to discuss the connections between her analysis and earlier scholarship in the area, particularly works that examine representations of violence against women and strong female protagonists who use violence to fight back. There is, of course, much to choose from, but there are at least two bodies of work that present compelling arguments for thinking about the contemporary films Oliver references. First, Carol J. Clover's groundbreaking 1987 essay "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film" and 1992 book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* investigate the representation of violence against women in the most notoriously gory genre, horror (Clover 1987; 1992). Unexpectedly, Clover challenges conventional interpretations of horror, arguing that although the camera lingers on the carnage resulting from violence, these films ultimately align the viewer with the female hero who survives rather than with the male perpetrator. In light of this, one might ask whether the contemporary films

Oliver analyzes invite viewers to identify with the female heroines or her aggressors, and how that identification affects the interpretation of the camera's attention to her suffering.

Additionally, in working through arguments concerning whether a particular female heroine qualifies as feminist given her use of violence and adherence to conventional norms of femininity, an obvious predecessor to Katniss Everdeen, Tris Prior, and other recent heroines is Buffy Summers (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). For seven seasons (1997-2003), television viewers followed the chronicles of a young woman who continually faced violence, including sexual violence, throughout her high school and college years, and kicked some serious ass along the way. There is a large body of scholarship focused on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, much of it interrogating the status of the show as feminist (for example, Bodger 2003; Symonds 2004). Engaging with this scholarship would have helped readers understand contemporary young female heroines as part of a legacy we have inherited from those of previous decades.

Importantly, in chapter 2 Oliver raises ethical and conceptual concerns about the category of "nonconsensual sex," namely that it "turns rape into a form of sex and reduces a felony crime into a mere honor code violation" (64-65) and that the term itself is an oxymoron (67). She also critiques affirmative-consent models for perpetuating heteronormative expectations of "active masculine agency and reactive feminine agency wherein the woman's power to choose is circumscribed within the very limited confines of consenting to let someone do something to her" (69). In light of these worries, I would have liked to have seen Oliver frame her criticisms in response to the profound changes in rape laws over the past few years--for example, the FBI's 2012 revision of the definition of rape and California's passage of "yes means yes" legislation in 2014--as well as the prevalence of young women's refusal to identify themselves as victims of rape in the face of evidence to the contrary (see Phillips 2000).

A discussion of how the vision of a model of sexual consent rooted in an ethics of response that Oliver proposes in the Conclusion differs from existing models of affirmative consent would also have been welcome. In particular, Oliver's advocacy for "a notion of consent as opening up the other's response in the context of intimate communication, even in cases where sex is just for pleasure within hookup culture" (70) is reminiscent of Lois Pineau's proposal for envisioning sexual consent in terms of communicative sexuality. In her award-winning 1989 essay, Pineau argues that actors have an epistemic responsibility to communicate with each other to discern the other's desires and limitations in order to reach a mutual agreement concerning sexual activity (Pineau 1989). Where there is no such communication, one cannot presume that one's sexual partner has consented to sex. This model was arguably put into practice at Antioch College in 1991, and heavily mocked in the media for several years afterward (see Francis 1996). When analyzing how college campuses are currently responding to sexual violence complaints and implementing the new federal rules established through the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination, or SaVE, Act, attention to similar efforts in the recent past is worthwhile.

The strength of *Hunting Girls* is that it draws our attention to important contemporary issues: the ongoing portrayal of young women as victims of violence in both film and through social media, the prevalence and widespread acceptance of sexual violence on college campuses, and the need to rethink the meaning of sexual consent. Nevertheless, the book would have been stronger if Oliver's arguments had been better contextualized within ongoing conversations in feminist pop culture studies and feminist legal philosophy. As a result, Oliver missed some opportunities for moving the conversation forward regarding both the representation of young women in popular culture and how sexual consent should be

regarded in the law.

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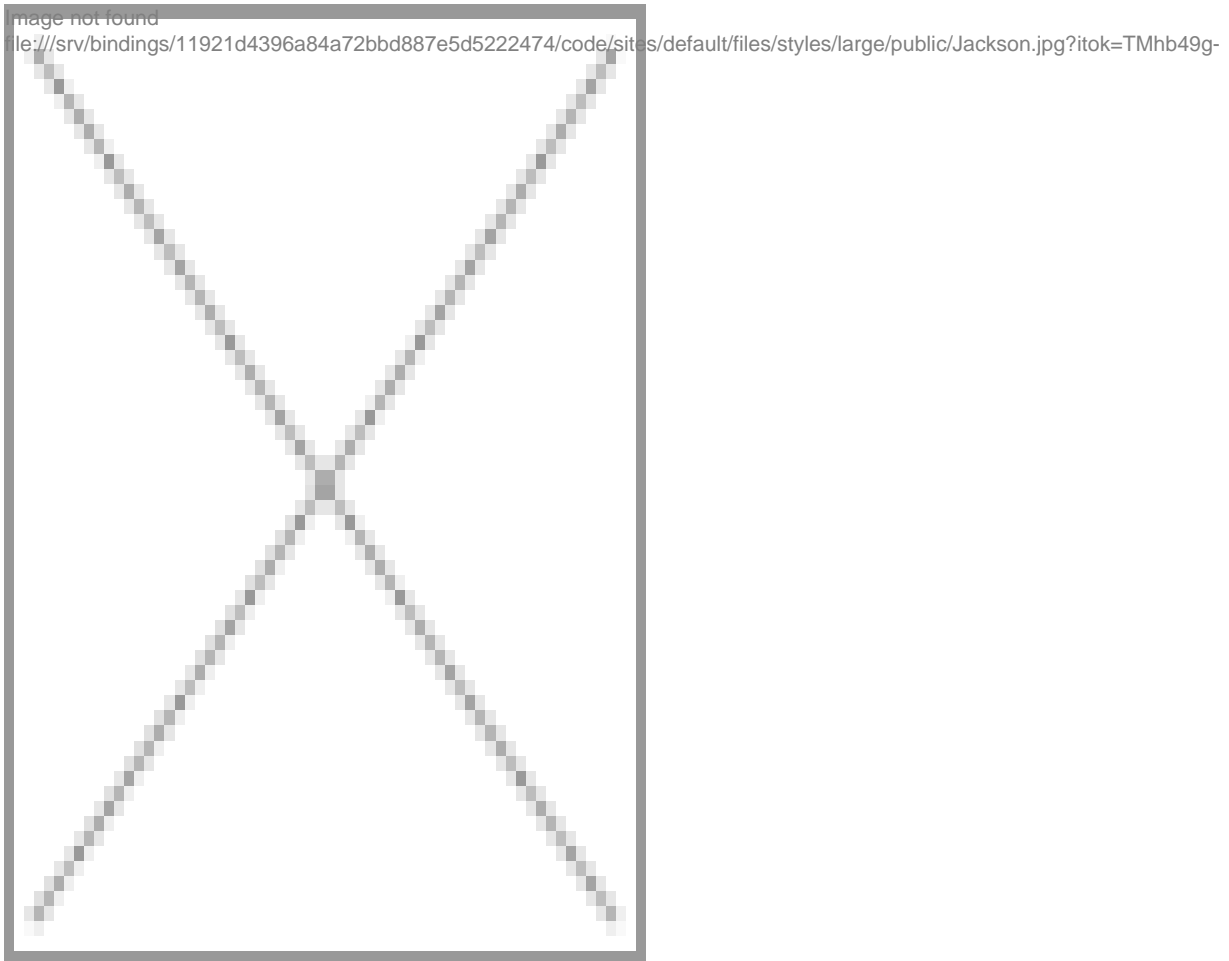
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