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The Invisible Woman in the Academy: Or, Murder Still Without a Text

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It seems like my public life these days mostly involves organizing or speaking at memorial conferences: some for famous folks I didn't know that well personally. And some, as with this paper, for friends so close to my head and heart that the loss of their voices is verging on incomprehensible:

—*Memorials for Naomi Schor, the feminist literary critic*—who at the time of her death in fall 2001 and for at least a couple of years before she died from the ravages of years of physical illness, during every one of our conversations, without exception, repeated her sense of herself as *invisible in the academy*, as *without a respected voice in university circles*.

—*Memorials for Teresa Brennan, the feminist philosopher*—who, before she descended into an irreversible coma in fall 2002, again for at least two or three years before she went silent, constantly repeated to me her sense of herself as *invisible in the academy*, *without a legitimate voice in university circles*.

And now—A *memorial for Carolyn Heilbrun*, my teacher, and, with the passing years, eventually my friend. Carolyn, who at the time of her death in fall 2003 was disillusioned with the work she had dedicated her life to. She was, I think, feeling more and more invisible, unheard, misunderstood. Like the protagonist of Doris Lessing's "To Room 19," a short story Carolyn very much admired, perhaps she felt that she no longer existed anyway, so why not disappear altogether. Perhaps she felt shushed by an academic conversation she perceived as too politically and philosophically complex for her more basic feminist insistence on patriarchy and its violence done to women and men of all persuasions. I honestly don't know . . .

A couple of days before her death, Carolyn and I were on email talking about friendship between women and its utter necessity. She described how she was looking up from her computer at the small ceramic bowl I had brought her from China when I went there to adopt my daughter, Anna, and, sitting next to it on the same shelf, at the Vietnamese figures brought back to her by her dear friend, Nancy Miller, from Vietnam. We continued about how Anna and I should come to New York very soon for a long conversation over tea about the future of feminism, well, "about almost every-

thing,” she said. “More anon, I hope”—“More anon, I hope”—those were her last words to me.

Schor, Brennan, Heilbrun. Three important feminist, intellectual women of three differently productive generations of feminist thought, three voices lost in three consecutive autumns. Three brilliant, accomplished women whose voices were cut short too early, too abruptly.

So what I have been trying to think about over the past few months is why the deaths of these three friends over three consecutive autumns have filled me with such beyond-the-personal anger. Not anger at any of these three women. Not at the universe. Not at any individual. But anger at academe. At the university. I keep asking myself: in what ways, with what means, and to what extent is what we euphemistically refer to as “the institution” responsible, at least in part, for all of their deaths—each so different, but with bone-chilling resonance one with the other?

And in so questioning myself, I was drawn back to these three friends’ common sense of “invisibility,” of having “disappeared” from some common conversation and just then, as if I were lost in a Kate Fansler mystery, I stumbled into a marvelous anecdote of my own invisibility. Since Harvard was such a favorite satirical target of Carolyn’s and since I have, after all, been at Harvard for twenty-two years, I will allow myself this short personal anecdote about how, a few weeks ago, at a meeting about the declining number of tenured women at Harvard, I walked up to the President of Harvard, Larry Summers, in order finally to introduce myself: “Hello, I’m Alice Jardine.” And he retorted “uh-huh,” stared past me at the person he really wanted to talk to, and then turned his back to me and walked away!¹

What I felt in response was some strange combination of amusement and rage. I thought of Adrienne Rich’s now classic essay, “Invisibility in Academe”: “When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you . . . there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.”²

And I thought of my friends, especially of Carolyn. Now I am not about to speculate uselessly and hopelessly on suicide and its reasons, but rather to try to focus on how even the best known, celebrated, adored—present—woman intellectual, teacher, and writer that was Carolyn Heilbrun can be made to feel so absent, so disappeared in the university that she so loved and so hated at the same time. Inevitably I have been drawn back ever closer to Carolyn’s famous alter-ego, Kate Fansler, and the fourteen published novels signed Amanda Cross. Dismissed as somehow unimportant by those who feel automatically entitled to presence in the university, the Amanda Cross mysteries have inspired, politicized, amused, and educated

women, especially young women, around the globe to a greater extent than most of the rest of us could ever dream of doing. One cannot, I think, emphasize too much the essential importance of these novels to several generations of women who have found in Kate Fansler a smart, feisty, feminist protagonist ready and willing to take on patriarchal pomposity and narcissism wherever and whenever they might show themselves—especially in the university.

But what is the core narrative fantasy displayed in these novels? You guessed it. The invisibility, when not outright disappearance, of women. Especially women professors. I went back to the novels and began to trace the way Amanda Cross's women characters—right through the novels—from 1964 to 2002—just go missing! go invisible, disappear! One after the other! Poof! Women graduate students; women professors; a few mothers. Most are murdered. Some just go away to do things like drive carriages in Central Park . . . One woman is banished. A few commit suicide.

I think I began to pick up on these disappearing, invisible women when I first read, around 1981, *Death in a Tenured Position*—my favorite Kate Fansler mystery for what I hope are obvious reasons. You will remember that in that novel, Professor Mandelbaum—the first woman tenured in the Harvard English Department—is found dead, not far from my current office in Warren House. Kate takes on the investigation of the death, noting along the way how she herself remained “simply invisible to those who still viewed Harvard as an all-male institution.”³ Kate as narrator began to conclude “that her presence at Harvard was to be without any consequence whatever—the fate, of course, of all women at Harvard” (p. 49), and she stated outright that, anyway, “one middle-aged woman looked remarkably like another” to all her male colleagues (p. 77). Even when it is discovered that Janet Mandelbaum committed suicide, Amanda Cross has Kate's friend admit that “**Janet was murdered all the same**” (p. 158, my bold). This theme of confusing disappearance is repeated again in her 1984 *Sweet Death, Kind Death*, except instead of everyone thinking it was murder when Professor Mandelbaum really committed suicide, here everyone thinks the “invisible,” “aging woman professor” committed suicide, when in fact she was brutally murdered by a jealous male colleague. This strange, fictional criss-crossing of invisibility and disappearance, of suicide and murder is more gently echoed in other texts Carolyn wrote in the early 1980s, and other readers of both Heilbrun and Cross have noticed this recurrent theme of disappearance and invisibility—readers such as Susan Kress who, in writing about Carolyn's resignation from Columbia in 1992, said: “She [Carolyn] was an invisible woman suffering a kind of death in a tenured position.”⁴

And what about the second part of my title: “Murder Still Without A

Text"? In my title, by "murder still without a text," I mean the kind of slow, tortuous murder of intellectual women that STILL doesn't have the words to say it, no story, no narrative, no theory, no text. The kind of "soul murder" of intellectual women that Carolyn described fictionally so well as Amanda Cross . . . particularly in her 1991 short story, "Murder Without A Text."⁵ In that story, the middle-aged woman professor is arrested for murdering one of her women's studies students. She didn't murder the student, of course. In the end it turns out that a male witness had confused her with a homeless bag lady who had become enraged at the self-entitled nosiness of the young, well-meaning woman student and killed her. But, by analogy, the point was made: the woman professor is homeless too. She has no place, is invisible. In the eyes of the system, she is without identity—confused with a homeless bag lady. For the young, female students, even the gender-conscious ones, she is hopeless and irrelevant, sold-out and barely to be tolerated. There is no text for this in the women's studies classroom she became so invisible in. No text. No theory. Not yet.

I am arguing that Carolyn's multiple, fictional, disappearing women, mostly women professors, are pieces of a larger, as yet untheorized, increasingly pandemic, here specifically academic puzzle of the "soul murder" of intellectual women—and probably a handful of gender-conscious men too—who refuse to play the patriarchal game: "projected murders"—"**but murders all the same**"—murders of different kinds, whether through *physical* self-destruction, for example, via nonself-care and even abuse of one's body; *psychological* self-destruction, for example, via naive assumptions about self-worth and what one thinks one deserves from the academy; or *emotional* self-destruction, for example, via self-splitting into utterly desolate, compartmentalized solitudes. I want to add: even *spiritual* self-destruction, via one's transformation into the best patriarch of all. "Self-destruction," yes, but in Cross's words, "**murder all the same.**"

A close friend of mine recently objected to my use of these three particular examples of "murder without a text." He objected that the American university had nothing to do with the deaths of these three middle-class, privileged, white women employed as tenured professors in large American universities. I differed with him in the strongest possible terms. It's exactly the fact that this kind of toxic soul murder can happen to these particular, brilliant, accomplished, heroic feminist women that should alarm us: for if it can happen to them, what must be happening to all those without their privilege—or their pluck—refusing to play the patriarchal game across the academic spectrum?

There is as yet no text, no theory, no accounting of this institutional form of murder. As yet no explanation, no accountability, no recognition. There is an emerging body of language, however, for talking about what we

might describe as murder through the repeatedly forced embodiment of invisibility.

For example, we find some helpful vocabulary in Donald Moss's essays on the deadly effects of accumulated humiliation and insult, so far best historically documented in the contexts of race, religious preference, and ethnicity. Moss describes brilliantly how repeated social insult "turns the activities of self-preservation, the impulses to find and preserve one's proper place, into activities of self-degradation."⁶

Another strong vocabulary for thinking about the accumulated damage of professionally toxic environments comes, in fact, from Teresa Brennan's last book, *The Transmission of Affect*,⁷ where she details the politics of the patriarchal ego and its drive to dominate psychic space, particularly as embodied by what she called the "sadodispassionate" man of letters.⁸ At the end of her life, Teresa was trying to *theorize* the ways in which the essence of patriarchal fantasy is to make its objects self-destruct and, in particular, to make empowered women self-destruct and disappear.

If I could, I would here even now begin to take some of these new conceptual vocabularies and spell out how a feminist intellectual in this culture can move, often silently but surely, from being the object of institutionalized insult to, first, personal depression, then, ultimately, outright self-destruction. I want to be clear that by focusing here on the politics of self-destruction, of "murders still without a text," I am not denying the first step, the forced consequences of the personal depression that precedes "self-destruction." I have no doubt that Carolyn—and Naomi and Teresa, for that matter—were depressed. In Carolyn's case, one obvious proof of that depression occurs in her essay on women and aging in the July 2003 issue of the *Women's Review of Books*:

Is the end of the journey now near? I fear living with the certainty that there is no further work demanding to be done. Margaret Atwood, at the beginning of *Negotiating with the Dead*, quotes Marguerite Duras: "Finding yourself in a hole, at the bottom of a hole, in almost total solitude, and discovering that only writing can save you. To be without the slightest subject for a book"—Duras perfectly describes the situation.⁹

EXCEPT: as my friend Nancy Miller has pointed out to me, Carolyn ends the Duras quote there, whereas Duras herself continues the sentence: "To be without the slightest subject for a book, the slightest idea for a book, is to *find yourself, once again, before a book*" (emphasis mine).¹⁰

For now, in closing, I want to imagine Carolyn, once again before a book. I want to think of Carolyn writing at her desk, fiercely and bravely fighting back for other women writers against insult, fighting back against the self-disappearing, the enforced invisibility of feminist intellectual women in this long journey of resistance we seem to be caught in. I prefer

to think of Carolyn at her desk gazing at my Chinese bowl, at Nancy's Vietnamese figures. I prefer, at least for now, to dwell upon one of her best known self-revelations: "Were I to mention the most important achievement of my career then, it would be the discovery of women's friendships, friendships which reverberate in the world of events. . . . It is that miracle I desire for women."¹¹ As we together continue the battles Carolyn fought so brilliantly and so bravely for so long; as we work harder to stop the insults, the invisibilities, the depressions, the disappearings, the murders-all-the-same before they happen:

May it be our *friendships*, newly energized, that honor Carolyn Heilbrun. Or as she might have preferred to put it: ***As friends, may we startle each other into vibrancy.***¹²

NOTES

I want to express my gratitude to Susan Gubar and Nancy Miller for inviting me to participate in the inspiring event of the 2004 MLA forum honoring Carolyn Heilbrun. I also want to thank my former student, Nico Carbellano, for introducing me to the work of Donald Moss.

¹ I could not possibly have imagined, as I related this anecdote to the December 2004 MLA audience, what President Summers would reveal about his attitudes towards women intellectuals in his own January 2005 conference remarks.

² Adrienne Rich, "Invisibility in Academe," *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1986), p. 199.

³ Amanda Cross, *Death in a Tenured Position* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), p. 48. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Susan Kress, *Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Feminist in a Tenured Position* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), p. 146.

⁵ Amanda Cross, "Murder Without A Text," *The Collected Stories* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), pp. 89-112.

⁶ Donald Moss, "Notes on Humiliation and Violence," unpublished paper presented at the Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society Conference, Columbia University, Union Theological Seminary, 15-17 October 2004.

⁷ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

⁸ Brennan, *History After Lacan* (London: Routledge Press, 1993), p. 72.

⁹ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, "Taking a U-Turn: The Aging Woman as Explorer of New Territory," *The Women's Review of Books*, July 2003, p. 19.

¹⁰ Marguerite Duras, *Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Lumen Editions, 1998), p. 7. Duras is quoted in Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating With the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. xiii.

¹¹ Heilbrun, "Silence and Women's Voices," in *Women's Voices*, ed. Lorna Duphiney Edmundson, Judith P. Saunders, and Ellen S. Silber (Littleton, MA: Copley Publishing Group, 1987), pp. 8-9.

¹² The last line of Carolyn's article on aging ("Taking a U-turn") in the July 2003 *Women's Review of Books* speaks of the "hope of startling oneself into vibrancy" (p. 19). I rewrite her words in honor of her commitment to women's friendship.