

UBC (un)accountable: On public shaming, CanLit, and the Steven Galloway controversy

REFUSING CANLIT: THE UTILITY AND LIMIT OF PUBLIC SHAME

Public shaming, as a tool used in the collection *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins* (2018), is to some degree effective in creating awareness of systemic and institutional issues regarding the Steven Galloway controversy and other cases of alleged sexual assault. However, public shaming has its limitations in that it merely brings about an awareness of the issue without offering concrete ways of supporting sexual assault survivors and ending rape culture. Although I appreciate and applaud the activist work that has accompanied this movement, we—as a collective—must imagine and create avenues of support for sexual assault survivors that do not end with the public shaming of their attackers.

Steven Galloway, the chair of the creative writing program at the University of British Columbia, was accused of several transgressions (including sexual assault) in November 2015 and was ultimately fired in June 2016. In response to this decision and the public disclosure of these allegations, Canadian writer Joseph Boyden penned the “UBC Accountable” letter defending Galloway’s right to due process. Many notable Canadian writers subsequently signed the document, with supporters including Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, David Cronenberg, Susan Swan, Madeline Thien, and Ravi Hage. The letter sought to pressure UBC into establishing “an independent investigation into how this matter has been handled by the Creative Writing Program, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and the senior administration at UBC” (Boyden, 2016, para. 9). In turn, a “counter-letter” condemning the “UBC Accountable” sig-

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natories and speaking in favour of the complainants was produced and supported mainly by academics and writers who belonged to marginalized groups and minorities (Rak, 2016).

The *Refuse* collection picks up on the tensions that became clear within CanLit as a discipline and institution after the occurrence of the UBC Accountable debacle and other CanLit controversies. What is notable about *Refuse* is that, rather than being directed at any specific individual or select group of individuals, the collection has the express purpose of shaming not just those involved in these scandals but CanLit readership as a whole. Quoting (and then rebutting) Nick Mount, the editors argue that he is “restating a commonly believed proposition that a few 1970s literary celebrities built a literature where there was none before, and then became global successes, just as Canada (at last!) stepped on to the world stage” (McGregor et al., 2018, pp. 21–22). Here they link the Canadian national imaginary with the emergence of CanLit as a “cultural field.” They suggest that several decades onward, “CanLit has gone global and actively participates in the circulation of cultural and economic capital” (McGregor et al., 2018, p. 22). They argue that antithetical to what they call the “gentle liberalism, polite consensus, and attractively packaged moderate progressiveness” that appears to define modern-day Canada and contemporary Canadian culture

are movements like #MeToo (McGregor et al., 2018, p. 23). These movements “position their demands for radical transformation of the ongoing workings of colonization, systemic racism, and rape culture” (McGregor et al., 2018, p. 23). But who is being addressed in this call to action? The answer is *you*, the reader of *Refuse* and other Canadian texts.

PUBLIC SHAME AND YOU

Although the public shaming of the CanLit readership is consistent throughout *Refuse*, I will be focusing on a single piece from the collection. Zoe Todd’s essay, for instance, invokes public shaming of the CanLit readership immediately in its title, “Rape Culture, CanLit, and You.” The “you” here is ambiguous, implying that the essay is intended for all of us as readers who participate in the consumption of Canadian literature as a cultural product. “As *you* well know,” Todd addresses the reader in her discussion about the UBC Accountable letter, “the burden of proof in cases like [the Steven Galloway case] is very high. All Canadians learned this this spring with the [Jian] Ghomeshi trial” (Todd, 2018, p. 38; emphasis added). By using an unspecified “you” throughout most of the piece, Todd is suggesting that readers are somehow complicit in being indifferent toward, if not actually encouraging, rape culture. It is not until near the end of her essay that the “you” becomes more specific when she states, “I turn here to addressing the person who spearheaded [the UBC Accountable] letter, Mr. [Joseph] Boyden” (Todd, 2018, p. 41). Was she speaking to Boyden throughout

UBC (un)accountable, page 26

the entirety of the essay before she directly addressed him? Or was she addressing us as readers? Who is the intended audience of her piece? These questions I am asking are directly elicited by the ambiguity with which she deploys this “you.” In a sense, by having readers believe that they are the ones to whom this piece is addressed, at least initially, and then only later turning her attention to Boyden, Todd is also directly conflating the reader with Boyden. We *are* Joseph Boyden in the sense that we are complicit in the “white supremacist, heteropatriarchal ... settler-colonial ... system” (Todd, 2018, p. 42). Although this shaming of a broad “you” and of CanLit readership as a whole is an effective rhetorical strategy, this decision also has the effect of absolving individualized guilt.

Sara Ahmed notes that “declarations of shame can bring ‘the nation’ into existence as a felt community” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 101). While I know that Ahmed is speaking particularly of the acknowledgment of colonial-settler violence, I argue that the public shaming of CanLit readership in Todd’s piece and indeed throughout much of *Refuse* has the unintended consequence of working as a similar “form of nation building” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 102). If our identity as Canadians and as a readership becomes centred on this

shame, then we experience this feeling as a collective whole and not on an individual level. We are thus not compelled to face what it is exactly we are being told we should feel ashamed about. We already *know* that sexual assault is a rampant issue and that perhaps we are complicit in rape culture in the sense that we all are because it is a systemic issue. But what can we, on an individual level, do? This is the limit of shame.

Public shaming is effective in having us acknowledge there is an issue that brings about this shame. Acknowledgment because of public shaming, however, is not enough to change an entire culture. In the aftermath of the #MeToo movement and various CanLit controversies, we must learn to move beyond shame and begin thinking of concrete ways to fix a system that is clearly broken. 🍁

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