

# Resources for Gender and Women’s Studies

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CONTENTS

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<b>From the Editor .....</b>	<b>ii</b>	Reimagining the Phantoms of the Archives: Fatimah Tobing Rony on Visual Biopolitics <i>by Eva Hoffmann .....</i>	14
<b>Books</b>		The Mid-Section, Middle Age, and the (Disappearing) Middle Class: The Cost of Caring for “Lady Parts” <i>by Erika Gallagher .....</i>	15
Feminism (Should Be) for Everyone: Going beyond Performative Allyship <i>by Holly A. Smith .....</i>	1	Intimate Relations and the Complicated Workings of State Power <i>by Stephanie R. Rytilahti.....</i>	17
Mapping the Past and Present of American Democracy: Essential Reading for an Unprecedented Time <i>by Stephanie R. Rytilahti.....</i>	3	Clinic Defenders: In the Trenches for Abortion Access <i>by Pamela M. Salela .....</i>	19
<b>Beyond the Single-Story Narrative of Single Womanhood</b> <i>by Jamee N. Pritchard.....</i>	6	Reckoning with Violence, Inside and Out <i>by Emma Wathen .....</i>	21
Specter Lesbianism: The Potential of Death <i>by Julia Anderson .....</i>	8	Survival of the Fitness: The Morality of Exercise in 20th-Century America <i>by Keely Mruk .....</i>	22
Becoming Natural: Navigating Nonbinary Parenthood <i>by Kyle Miron .....</i>	9	<b>Online Resources.....</b>	<b>24</b>
Exploring the Somatic Archive: Indigenous Non-Cis Masculinities as Resistance <i>by Heidi Anoszko .....</i>	10	<b>Recently Received .....</b>	<b>25</b>
Rape: It’s Not Just One Victim <i>by Nancy Mace Kreml.....</i>	12		

## Beyond the Single-Story Narrative of Single Womanhood

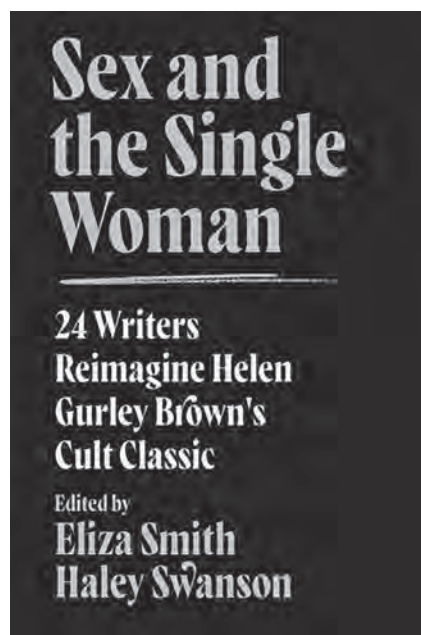
BY JAMEE N. PRITCHARD

Eliza Smith and Haley Swanson, eds., *Sex and the Single Woman: 24 Writers Reimagine Helen Gurley Brown's Cult Classic*. Harper Perennial, 2022. 272 pp. pap., \$16.99, ISBN 978-0063071339.

When it was published in 1962, Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* declared itself "the unmarried woman's guide to men, careers, the apartment, diet, fashion, money and men."<sup>1</sup> Though it was seen as radical in its time, Brown's guide certainly didn't address what we think of today as intersectional feminism; in fact, as Eliza Smith and Haley Swanson, the editors of this new anthology, point out, "Helen's language is...at times racist, homophobic, fatphobic, classist, and ableist," and her advice "fail[s] to acknowledge her own significant privileges" (p. 5). Smith and Swanson aim to remedy that deficiency here by considering sex, singlehood, and the modern woman within an intersectional context. The collection does not celebrate Brown's work; rather, it interrupts her single-story narrative of cisgender, straight, able-bodied, white womanhood. Through their personal stories, 24 writers critically examine how the intersections of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, religion, and disability impact the modern-day single woman.

Swanson and Smith use the term "singlehood," rather than "singledom," in this anthology, preferring it as a descriptor of a stage in life — like childhood and adulthood — and proposing that it is "a phase of life that each of us inhabits for an indeterminate length of time, entering and existing at intervals, occasionally straddling the line" (p. 2). The 24

writers not only examine how singlehood and loneliness impact their lives, but also interpret how joy is reclaimed by those who are routinely denied it.



Laura Bogart ("A New Kind of Heroine"), Keah Brown ("Loved Out Loud"), and Briallen Hopper ("Sex and the Single Frump"), for example, all explore body politics and its connection to joy and self-acceptance in singlehood. While Hopper looks at the connection of fashion politics to racial and class politics, both Bogart and Brown discuss their longing to be desired "out loud" in bodies that do not meet societal expectations

of conventional beauty. Fatness and disability, particularly when they intersect with race, impact the dating lives and psyches of both Bogart and Brown, as both writers admit to having settled for toxic relationships and sexual experiences they had believed were fitting parameters for undesirable bodies.

"A fat woman who dares to lust is a rebel," Bogart writes, "but not the cool kind. She's a deviant who must suffer humiliation" (p. 119). Bogart describes the pop-culture depictions of fat women that reinforce this idea as well as the body-positive media figures that counter it, creating a new kind of heroine who facilitates the healing of past wounds and negative thoughts about desirability. In her path to healing, Bogart maintains this hope for the "warmth of being claimed in the daylight" (p. 122). Similarly, Brown's healing is about being true to herself as a Black, queer, disabled woman. Like many of the writers in this collection, Brown came out as queer later in life, and each of her first queer relationships strengthened her self-worth. Ultimately, these two essays reflect the value of fat and disability studies within the discipline of gender and women's studies; they could facilitate important discussions about sexuality, desire, and pleasure within the context of intersectionality and body politics.

Another major theme in *Sex and the Single Woman* is moving beyond the traditional expectations of womanhood and celebrating singlehood as a choice. On this note, a great companion text for this anthology is Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*, particularly her chapter "On Being Directed," where Ahmed describes happiness as a form of pressure by which society directs and redirects women and girls through gender fatalism, for instance with the notion that women will be happiest when they get married, and so "happiness is often assumed to be an end point: as what we want to reach, as the point of life, the aim of life. The path we should follow is the path that would lead us to happiness."<sup>2</sup> Evette Dionne ("IVF and the Single Girl"), Giaae Kwon ("Girl Meets Purity Culture"), and Kate Crawford ("Second Coming"), as well as many of the other authors in the collection, resist such redirection.

Dionne writes about her IVF journey, the possibility of purposeful single motherhood, and creating

chosen family as a thirty-something, Black, single woman in a society that idealizes the institution of marriage and two-parent households. Kwon writes about purity culture and being celibate in her mid-thirties. A late bloomer by societal standards, Kwon has never been kissed, never dated, and never had sex. Growing up as Korean Presbyterian, she was taught that her body was not hers; it belonged to her future husband and children and, through them, to God (p. 152). As a result of this upbringing combined with the beauty standards of Korean culture, she develops body dysmorphia but learns to reclaim her body through self-pleasure.

From the other end of the age spectrum, Kate Crawford writes about seeking sexual pleasure in her sixties. From buying sexy lingerie to checking out library books authored by senior "sexperts" to purchasing a vibrator, she actively resuscitates what she calls her "sexy sixties campaign" (p. 191). This exploration of pleasure for Crawford is about diffusing her grief over the recent passing of her

mother and living all the life she has yet to live. These writers, women at different stages of single life, all attempt to dissect what it means to live outside of society's definition of the path to happiness.

The great pull of this collection is the diversity in story from 24 writers of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Each brings unique experiences that explore a range of issues, including queer identity, love after divorce, poly-amorous relationships, pleasurable sexuality and sexual exploration, desirability, romantic love, marriage, motherhood, and more. *Sex and the Single Woman* successfully examines the intersectional lives of modern-day women and is truly a text that represents the varied scholarly and non-scholarly conversations that should be happening within gender and women's studies. It makes a great addition to library collections and course syllabi that want to move beyond single-story narratives of womanhood.

#### Notes

1. The cover of the 1962 book was emblazoned with this claim, which Smith and Swanson quote on page 3 of their 2022 anthology.
2. Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), p. 48.

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