How Trump helped make Andrea Dworkin relevant again.

By Michelle Goldberg
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For decades now, Andrea Dworkin has existed in the feminist imagination mostly as a negative example, the woman no one wanted to be.

An anti-porn, anti-prostitution militant in the feminist sex wars of the late 1970s and 1980s, she sometimes seemed like a misogynist caricature of a women’s rights activist, a puritanical battle ax in overalls out to smite men for their appetites. Dworkin never actually wrote that all sex is rape, a claim often attributed to her, but she did see heterosexual intercourse as almost metaphysically degrading, calling it, in her 1987 book “Intercourse,” “the pure, sterile, formal expression of men’s contempt for women.” Feminism would spend decades defining itself against her bleak, dogmatic vision.

So it’s been striking to see that recently, feminists have started invoking Dworkin, who died in 2005, in a spirit of respect and rediscovery. The cultural critic Jessa Crispin castigated contemporary feminists for their wholesale abandonment of Dworkin’s work in her 2017 book “Why I Am Not a Feminist: A Feminist Manifesto.” Rebecca Traister listed Dworkin’s “Intercourse” as one of the books that inspired her 2018 best seller “Good and Mad.” The Wing, the network of fashionable women’s co-working spaces and social clubs, sells enameled pins of Dworkin’s face.

A new anthology of Dworkin’s work, “Last Days at Hot Slit,” is out this month, edited by Johanna Fateman and Amy Scholder. (“Last Days at Hot Slit” was a working title for a version of the manuscript that became Dworkin’s first book, “Woman Hating.”) Reading Dworkin now, Fateman wrote in a recent essay in The New York Review of Books, “beyond the anti-porn intransigence she’s both reviled and revered for, one feels a prescient apocalyptic urgency, one perfectly calibrated, it seems, to the high stakes of our time.” (Fateman, an art critic who used to be in a band, Le Tigre, with Riot Grrrl icon Kathleen Hanna, is also working on an experimental nonfiction book based on Dworkin’s life.)
SO WHAT IS IT IN DWORIN’S LONG-NEGLECTED OEUVRE THAT HAS
SUDDENLY BECOME RESONANT? PERHAPS IT’S SIMPLY BECAUSE WE’RE IN A
MOMENT OF CRISIS, WHEN PEOPLE SEEKING SOLUTIONS ARE DUSTING OFF
ALL SORTS OF RADICAL IDEAS. BUT I THINK IT’S MORE THAN THAT. DWORIN
WAS ENGAGED, AS MANY WOMEN TODAY ARE ENGAGED, IN A PITCHED
CULTURAL BATTLE OVER WHOSE EXPERIENCES AND ASSUMPTIONS DEFINE
OUR COMMON REALITY. AS SHE WROTE OF SEVERAL ESTEEMED MALE
WRITERS IN A 1995 PREFACE TO “INTERCOURSE,” “I LOVE THE LITERATURE
THESE MEN CREATED; BUT I WILL NOT LIVE MY LIFE AS IF THEY ARE REAL
AND I AM NOT.”

DWORIN WAS UNAPOLOGETICALLY ANGRY, AS SO MANY WOMEN TODAY
ARE. EVEN BEFORE 2016, YOU COULD SEE THIS ANGER BUILDING IN THE
EMERGENCE OF NEW WORDS TO DESCRIBE MADDENING MALE BEHAVIORS
THAT HAD ONCE GONE UNNAMED — MANSPREADING, MANSPLAINING. THEN
CAME THE OBSCENE INSULT OF DONALD TRUMP’S VICTORY. IT SEEMS LIKE
SOMETHING SPRUNG FROM DWORIN’S CATAclySMic IMAGINATION, THAT
AMERICA’S MOST OVERTLY FASCISTIC PRESIDENT WOULD ALSO BE THE
FIRST, AS FAR AS WE KNOW, TO HAVE APPEARED IN SOFT-CORE PORN FILMS.
I THINK TRUMP’S VICTORY MARKED A SHIFT IN FEMINISM’S RELATIONSHIP
TO SEXUAL LIBERATION; AS LONG AS HE’S IN POWER, IT’S HARD TO
ASSOCIATE LIBERTINISM WITH PROGRESS.

AND SO DWORIN, SO PROFUNDLY OUT OF FASHION JUST A FEW YEARS
AGO, SUDDENLY SEEMS PROPHETIC. “OUR ENEMIES — RAPISTS AND THEIR
DEFENDERS — NOT ONLY GO UNPUNISHED; THEY REMAIN INFLUENTIAL
ARBITERS OF MORALITY; THEY HAVE HIGH AND ESTEEMED PLACES IN THE
SOCIETY; THEY ARE PRIESTS, LAWYERS, JUDGES, LAWMAKERS, POLITICIANS,
DOCTORS, ARTISTS, CORPORATION EXECUTIVES, PSYCHIATRISTS AND
TEACHERS,” DWORIN SAID IN A LECTURE SHE WROTE IN 1975, INCLUDED IN
“LAST DAYS AT HOT SLIT.” MAYBE THIS ONCE SOUNDED PARANOID. AFTER
TRUMP’S ELECTION, THE BRETT KAVANAUGH HEARINGS, AND REVELATIONS
OF PREDATION BY MEN INCLUDING ROGER AILES, HARVEY WEINSTEIN, LES
MOONVES, LARRY NASSAR AND COUNTLESS FIGURES IN THE CATHOLIC
CHURCH, HER WORDS SEEM FRIGHTENINGLY PERCEPTIVE.

DWORIN SHOWED FORESIGHT IN OTHER WAYS. SHE DEFENDED MONICA
LEWINSKY WHEN THE YOUNG WOMAN WAS BEING TREATED LIKE A JOKE,
AND SHE WAS UNSPARING IN HER DISGUST FOR BILL CLINTON. SHE WAS
INTERSECTONAL BEFORE THE WORD WAS COINED. THE “CLOSELY INTERWOVEN FABRIC OF OPPRESSION” IN AMERICA, SHE WROTE IN “WOMAN HATING,” MEANT THAT “WHEREVER ONE STOOD, IT WAS WITH AT LEAST ONE FOOT HEAVY ON THE BELLY OF ANOTHER HUMAN BEING.”

Still, the resurrection of Dworkin’s work and reputation is in some ways quite strange, because her contemporary admirers tend to reject her central political commitments. Dworkin, who’d turned tricks as a broke, bohemian young woman, wanted to outlaw prostitution and pornography, and in the 1980s she made an alliance with the religious right to push anti-pornography legislation. There is no sympathy for such a bargain in feminist circles today, where it’s mostly taboo to treat sex work as distinct from any other kind of labor.

Yet the renewed interest in Dworkin is a sign that for many women, our libidinous culture feels neither pleasurable nor liberating. “Me and my peers, we believed in this sort of fairy tale, that there was a line of demarcation that was very clear between rape and nonconsensual acts, and consent,” said Fateman. “We knew where the line was, and everything on the side of consent was great, and it was an expression of our freedom. But that’s not the experience of sex that a lot of people are having.”

Moira Donegan, the writer best known for creating an online list of alleged sexual abusers and harassers in media, recently wrote an appreciative reappraisal of Dworkin occasioned by “Last Days at Hot Slit.” “It should not be hard to say that heterosexuality as it is practiced is a raw deal for women and that much pornography eroticizes the contempt of women,” she wrote. “It should not be hard to say any of this. But it has become hard.”

Seen from a certain angle, the #MeToo movement — or at least those offshoots of the movement that question the unequal power dynamics behind seemingly consensual encounters — looks like a way of saying those hard things. Indeed, some of Dworkin’s ideas have been reincarnated in #MeToo, and not just because she also sought to challenge oppression by going public with her own stories of sexual abuse.

Think of the woman who told a reporter, last year, about an encounter with the actor Aziz Ansari that she’d come to understand as sexual assault, though she didn’t describe force or threat. Decades earlier, Dworkin created a political framework for viewing such an experience — one most would probably write off as bad sex — as a violation. In that 1975 lecture, she described “presumptive rape” as one in which “the constraint on the victim’s will is in the circumstance itself; there has been no mutuality of choice and understanding.” Consent, she insisted, had to mean more than just acquiescence.
Taken literally, much of Dworkin’s writing dead ends in despair. She insisted on being credited for her hard-earned knowledge of the world, but would dismiss other women’s testimonies — particularly about their enjoyment of sex — that contradicted her ideology. “The quality of the sensation or the need for a man or the desire for love: These are not answers to questions of freedom; they are diversions into complicity and ignorance,” she wrote.

Yet Fateman suggests that it’s precisely because Dworkin lost the sex wars so decisively that we can now see beyond her most extreme rhetoric. “You don’t have to be afraid that Andrea Dworkin is going to take your pornography away,” Fateman said. That opens up space to consider the rest of her work, and the price she paid for refusing so categorically to make herself appealing to men.

“For a woman writer to thrive (or, arguably, to survive) in these current hard times, forgiveness and love must be subtext,” Dworkin wrote in the “Intercourse” preface. “No. I say no.” It’s in part this “no” that women are celebrating when they celebrate Dworkin. To treat her writing with curiosity and respect is itself a way of demonstrating indifference to male opinion. “I’m a radical feminist,” she once said. “Not the fun kind.” She’s back because these aren’t fun times.

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