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Calling Out Street Harassment of Women and LGBTQ People: A Review of Kolysh's Everyday Violence

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Abstract

Street harassment often impacts people whose identities and presentations of self-intersect with femininity in any way. Yet, despite this frequent unwelcome scrutiny of our bodies and selves, few scholars have turned their own appraising gazes on street harassment in kind. Fewer still have centered queer and trans people in their inquiry. In *Everyday Violence: The Public Harassment of Women & LGBTQ People*, Dr. Simone Kolysh (2021) critically investigates street harassment from intersectional queer and nonbinary feminist perspectives. Their research both amplifies voices from survivors of harassment and directly explores perspectives from perpetrators of harassment. Per Kolysh's own reflections, this balance of information proved immensely difficult to strike. It also distinguishes *Everyday Violence* as uniquely impactful for understanding and responding to street harassment of feminine, queer, and trans people. Kolysh enhances these impacts by writing concisely and clearly about complex nuances of harassment. Their monograph expansively covers street harassment origins and dynamics while remaining immensely accessible for readers of diverse cultural backgrounds and educational stages.

Keywords

sexual violence, street harassment, women, LGBTQ, intersectional feminism, sociology

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Calling Out Street Harassment of Women and LGBTQ People: A Review of Kolysh's *Everyday Violence*

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Street harassment often impacts people whose identities and presentations of self-intersect with femininity in any way. Yet, despite this frequent unwelcome scrutiny of our bodies and selves, few scholars have turned their own appraising gazes on street harassment in kind. Fewer still have centered queer and trans people in their inquiry. In *Everyday Violence: The Public Harassment of Women & LGBTQ People*, Dr. Simone Kolysh (2021) critically investigates street harassment from intersectional queer and nonbinary feminist perspectives. Their research both amplifies voices from survivors of harassment and directly explores perspectives from perpetrators of harassment. Per Kolysh's own reflections, this balance of information proved immensely difficult to strike. It also distinguishes *Everyday Violence* as uniquely impactful for understanding and responding to street harassment of feminine, queer, and trans people. Kolysh enhances these impacts by writing concisely and clearly about complex nuances of harassment. Their monograph expansively covers street harassment origins and dynamics while remaining immensely accessible for readers of diverse cultural backgrounds and educational stages.

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Introduction

Street harassment often impacts people whose identities and presentations of self-intersect with femininity in any way. Yet despite this frequent unwelcome scrutiny of our bodies and selves, few scholars have turned their own appraising gazes on street harassment in kind. Fewer still have centered queer and trans people in their inquiry. In *Everyday Violence: The Public Harassment of Women & LGBTQ People*, Dr. Simone Kolysh (2021) critically investigates street harassment from intersectional queer and nonbinary feminist perspectives. Their research both amplifies voices from survivors of harassment and directly explores perspectives from perpetrators of harassment. Per Kolysh's own reflections, this balance of information proved immensely difficult to strike. It also distinguishes *Everyday Violence* as uniquely impactful for understanding and responding to street harassment of feminine, queer, and trans people. Kolysh enhances these impacts by writing concisely and clearly about complex nuances of harassment. Their monograph expansively covers street harassment origins and dynamics while remaining immensely accessible for readers of diverse cultural backgrounds and educational stages.

The monograph synthesizes 10 years' worth of reflection, preparation, and interviewing with people in New York City who have experienced street harassment—as well as some who have perpetrated it. Kolysh (2021) describes this work as “scholarly rage” in the official summary for *Everyday Violence* released by Rutgers University Press. To introduce the book, they describe channeling anger about their own harassment experiences into inquiry about

those of others. Their training as an intersectional, multidisciplinary feminist queer sociologist enabled them to illuminate how street harassment operates as a generic process (Schwalbe et al., 2000) reproducing gendered and sexualized violence in everyday life. It also allowed them to connect street harassment with other forms of carceral violence such as police brutality and the gentrification that fosters it. Emphasizing restorative rather than punitive approaches to justice, Kolysh (2021) draws on these perspectives to advocate for transformational approaches to accountability. The book's concluding passages reflect this spirit of resiliency and evolution by envisioning a future in which feminine, queer, and trans people can thrive without fear of violence.

Having dialogued with Kolysh (2021) often during the research and writing process for *Everyday Violence*, I understood early how their agender identity shaped their unique insights into street harassment. I saw clearly how their own continued discovery and negotiation of themselves as an agender person enabled them to describe complexities of harassment that might go unnoticed by scholars without these lived experiences. As an agender person myself, I also resonate deeply with Kolysh's nuanced attention to subtle differences in harassment experiences for survivors with liminal relationships to femininity. Their own reflections throughout the monograph on expressing their increasingly salient agender self via intentional choices in style and embodiment—and how these changes shaped the specific ways in which masculine people harassed them—add valuable insight into how people undergoing social transitions often experience new forms of violence. And I see how Kolysh's expansive approach to feminine lived experience enables all people within that broad category to find specific resonance in their work.

I also value the inclusive disciplinary lens Kolysh (2021) brings to examining street harassment. We share a background in both sociology and public health, which invites consideration of both fundamental social causes and behavioral risk factors in understanding the origins of harmful behavior. This consciousness shows clearly in their analyses of feedback from both survivors and perpetrators. Their deconstruction of the "benevolent sexism" (p. 46) expressed by some harassers reflects the complex acculturation of masculine perpetrators as authentic and even good men in their respective communities, and how these contextual influences then become reinforced by repeating learned behaviors over time. In exploring the origins of these habitual behaviors, Kolysh consistently exposes the systemic underpinnings of individual actions, and calls for accountability at both levels.

This specific example illustrates a general horizontal integration of justice principles across all content elements in the monograph. Kolysh (2021) intentionally and clearly rejects notions of criminalization as constructive, instead exploring how carceral systems both worsen existing patterns of violence and do unique harm to survivors. They explain how policing itself is "a form of racist sexist speech" (p. 62). Their analyses illustrate how policing occurs both informally by catcallers sanctioning what they perceive as inappropriately gendered behavior by their victims and formally by law enforcement officers punishing both the initiators and recipients of harassment. Kolysh spotlights systemic abuse of feminine, queer, and trans people of color—especially Black women—who have retaliated against harassment. They also actively uplift survivor perspectives on what justice would mean for them. Their consistent emphasis on restorative approaches both centers individual survivors and amplifies robust evidence. They also explicitly note the inherent complexities of seeking restorative justice in systems that actively devalue survivor priorities. Kolysh's repeated reflection that they offer no easy answers because there are none to offer rings completely true for me as a survivor of sexual violence. I have reread *Everyday Violence* twice already because it makes me feel heard and affirmed in my own rage while getting empowered to channel it impactfully.

Beyond the specific content of the monograph, Kolysh (2021) also intentionally nurtures transparency and accountability in feminist research practice. In a prior review of Dr.

Patricia Leavy and Dr. Anne Harris’s primer on this precise topic, I noted that “TQR readers generally know that to make a positive impact in storytelling, you need to explore your own standpoint as part of the narrative. Critical inquiry into how we produce and canonize knowledge lies at the heart of justice in research. Often qualitative methods of exploration help us understand these processes in depth—and offer prescriptions for amplifying voices historically left out of the development of scholarly canon” (Nowakowski, 2019). I echo these thoughts in championing *Everyday Violence* as a resource for justice in qualitative inquiry. How Kolysh (2021) generally centers and celebrates the voices of racially and ethnically oppressed survivors within the feminine and LGBTQ communities proves as instructive as any specific analysis from the book.

After reading the monograph I found myself wishing for an appendix containing full narratives from participants. Books centering feminist practices—especially queer, trans, and Black perspectives in these traditions—increasingly include such supplements. Helping readers explore respondents’ lived experiences in their own words can uplift the voices of individual participants and their unique contexts. To the extent that an appendix could be provided without compromising participant confidentiality, doing so would greatly enhance future editions of this monograph. Creating a story archive to complement the monograph would also offer the opportunity to center survivor voices in additional impactful ways. Getting to read survivors’ full narratives while only seeing selected portions of perpetrator input would “flip the script” both functionally and sociologically (Fine, 2005; Goffman, 1967) on public discourse about harassment.

Having a data supplement available online where readers could explore the individual stories of participants would also enhance the educational value of the monograph. *Everyday Violence* already seems ideal for use in undergraduate courses at the intersection of feminism, justice, psychology, sociology, health, urbanism, and methods. It holds ample promise for introductory courses because of its engaging and visceral narrative approach, as well as its concise wording and technical accessibility. I would likewise recommend it as a methods primer for graduate and professional courses as well as advanced undergraduate classes. Kolysh (2021) offers superb examples of critical thinking, standpoint engagement, and critical reflection in ethnographic research. And if a story bank of individual participant narratives were provided in the future, I would strongly recommend its content for case studies in social psychology and related disciplines.

Overall, *Everyday Violence* offers a powerful and haunting orientation to street harassment as both a sociocultural phenomenon and an individual battleground whose only victories are pyrrhic. On a broader level, it also inspires caution and humility in considering complex topics through qualitative inquiry. Kolysh’s (2021) transparency in describing the evolution and conduct of their research—and their frustrations and uncertainties throughout that process—proves just as instructive as the content itself. I universally recommend this book for both established and emerging scholars across all areas of feminist research and practice. I consider it essential reading, both for its thoughtful intellectual contributions and for its verbalization of screams that have echoed silently across generations of intersectionally oppressed people in response to systemic violence. The value of Kolysh’s labor in collecting, analyzing, and curating these narratives of street harassment cannot be overstated. *Everyday Violence* testifies potently to the transformational potential in qualitative inquiry, capturing the core spirit of our advocacy at TQR.

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