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Torn: A Social Media Drama over the Aziz Ansari Scandal

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Abstract:
This is a work of fiction that addresses social media platforms and communication channels that are intimately entangled with contemporary movements related to empowerment, oppression, and sexual violence. We created a video that is composed solely of screen recordings from our protagonist's computer and smart phone. Within a Canadian context and from the perspective of a graduate student, our narrative explores fear, ambivalence, identity, pressure, performance, and image management through the lens of the recent scandal that surrounded celebrity-comedian Aziz Ansari and the broader relationship to the #MeToo movement.

Torn: A Social Media Drama over the Aziz Ansari Scandal / by Rena Bivens and Ummni Khan

from **Rena Bivens**

When we received *Ada*'s "Call for Papers" for this issue, we knew we wanted to submit. We have been friends and colleagues for several years and have both tackled the

central themes of this special issue — "sexual violence, social movements and social media" — in our scholarship and activism. The call thus provided a good opportunity for collaboration based on our mutual interests and expertise. But at the same time, as we brainstormed about the possibility of producing a creative-critical intervention into these issues, we realized that a core feeling emerged for both of us: fear.

This special issue draws attention to two themes: 1) the ways social media has facilitated sexual violence through new platforms and technologies; and 2) how social media can assist sexual assault survivors and allies to share experiences and expose patterns of sexual violence. While these are, of course, urgent issues, we wanted to tackle *Ada*'s theme from a different angle, based on some of our own experiences and research. Specifically, we wanted to engage in feminist self-critique to consider how social media platforms and communication channels can sometimes be sites of pressure, performance, image management, and inner conflict. We believe that fear colors all these sites. To illustrate this, we sought to create a narrative dramatizing how social media can exert pressure to espouse particular viewpoints because we fear being on the wrong side of a sexual violence debate. We may also feel compelled to perform particular stances on various platforms because we fear being "called out" for what we say or fail to say. We may fear that our image as 'woke' feminists will be tarnished because we cite or associate with people who are considered problematic. We may struggle with inner conflict, but feel we must quash one rogue part of ourselves -— at least publicly — for fear of being shamed for our ambivalence. In the current moment unfolding in North America, we fear feminist responses that may reject our focus on these less visible characteristics because of the broader strategic ingredient that undergirds #MeToo.

It is this question of ambivalence, this feeling of being torn between identities, perspectives, political affiliations, and inchoate feelings, that is central to our story. We ask, how might nuance be suppressed, and uncertainty disavowed, within the current imperative for progressives to be feminist "AF"?

We are equally interested in exploring how the digital channels we now use to mediate so much of our sociality can build community, while also polarizing politics and exacerbating conflicts. How do the material and semiotic opportunities and constraints of texts, twitter, email, blogs, emoticons, acronyms, GIFs, etc., shape how meaning is made, relationships are formed, and selves are constructed?

We explore these themes and questions through the lens of the recent scandal that surrounded celebrity-comedian and out-feminist man Aziz Ansari. In January 2018, the youth-focused website Babe.net (tagline: "babe is for girls who don't give a fuck") published **an article** (https://babe.net/2018/01/13/aziz-ansari-28355) entitled, "I went on a date with Aziz Ansari. It turned into the worst night of my life" (Way 2018). The story is a first-hand account from a 23-year-old woman (writing under the pseudonym "Grace") who believes that Ansari pressured her into unwanted sexual activity after ignoring her "non-verbal cues." At the end of the article, Grace firmly categorizes the incident as one of "sexual assault." The web article ignited a fierce controversy, both within and outside the feminist community, regarding the merits and ethics of the publication, and whether Ansari's alleged conduct — which is described in grotesque detail — should be included as part of the "#MeToo" moment. Some saw the article as an important (if flawed) "**reckoning** (https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/1/17/16897440/aziz-ansari-allegations-babe-me-too) " (Framke 2018) that exposed the everyday sexual coercion of hetero-dating. Others saw it as a vicious example of "**revenge porn** (https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/01/the-humiliation-of-aziz-ansari/550541/) " (Flanagan 2018) by a woman who was disappointed by a date.

The rich, often vitriolic debate that followed the article took place not only on mainstream news channels, but also on social media platforms. We therefore found it was a perfect case-study upon which to creatively engage with the issues and tensions relevant to this special issue.

After brainstorming a number of questions and conflicted feelings about the anti-sexual violence discourse in general, and the Ansari story in particular, we decided to create a fictional story that dramatized these issues. Our methodology thus falls within the category of "critical storytelling" (Gough 1994) because it invites identification and disidentification, evokes affective responses, and eschews rational and linear argument. We want to present the story of our protagonist, Rumer, as a dilemma, one that we all face and that has no easy answer. Given the contexts of both white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, it is not self-evident how one should navigate between conflicting feelings, identities and outside expectations. The form we chose performs the very site — the digital stage — upon which we are most focused. We emphasize speed and conflict in both content and form. This approach intentionally mimics the ways in which we can never fully access what someone is thinking about a situation, especially when we are relying on digital expressions on social media to try to do so. Thus, as a viewer you are not meant to know everything or process everything.

This confusion — and even frustration — is intended as an outcome of watching this video.

Our process in producing the video was collaborative and spontaneous storytelling. That is, we did not go into the process with any prior theoretical commitments or definitive take-home messages. However, now that the project is complete, it is clear that our own background in critical scholarship and political activism informs the piece. In particular, intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) is key to "Torn," as Rumer is indeed torn by different aspects of her identity. In trying to figure out how to respond to the Ansari scandal, her South Asian heritage, Brown identity and personal experience with anti-Brown racism are put at odds with her commitment to call out culture, the anti-sexual violence movement, and survivor-centrism. Critical race feminism thus helps us understand the problem with the false binary that is presented to Rumer — either she condemns Aziz or she is an apologist for sexual violence.

We draw from our knowledge of theoretical concepts developed in critical communication studies including the politics of representation to consider the implications of silencing an important episode of *Master of None* (Warner 2017); context collapse, impression management, and reputational economies in relation to how Rumer and her best friend, Maddie, draw on their knowledge of, and assumptions about, an imagined audience while trying to protect their online image (Marwick and boyd 2011, Duguay 2016, Hearn 2010); and how meaning is created online and simplified (Langlois 2014, Lim 2013). Overall, a sociotechnical perspective informed by science and technology studies helped us consider how the technical architecture of the social media platforms and messaging systems that Rumer and Maddie use and navigate shapes the speed of their interactions, while in turn their own use of these technical spaces shapes the communities that continue to flourish online (McPherson 2014, Kitchin & Dodge 2011, Balsamo 2011).

Our story's central characters are: 1) Rumer, a graduate student and feminist activist of South Asian origin living in Canada; 2) Rumer's best friend, Maddie, a graduate student and passionate feminist activist whose origins are not made clear; 3) Rumer's brother, a South Asian man; 4) Rumer's professor and TA supervisor, Valentina Kent, whose origins (and tenure status) remain unclear; and 5) the virtual followers and commentators on social media who engage with Rumer in direct and indirect ways.

As the story begins, Rumer is preparing to watch Ansari's show, *Master of None*, as part of her weekly television-watching date with Maddie. The two friends have created a

blog entitled “Divest from Whiteness,” which advocates for people to unlearn White-centric ways of living in the world and make conscious efforts to support and engage with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) priorities, businesses, communities, concerns, and cultural productions. One of their strategies is to watch TV shows that star and/or are produced by a Person of Color, then post analysis about them afterwards. They encourage their blog followers to join in the TV-watching in their own homes, and then contribute to the discussion on their open comment forum.

The first plot point begins with Rumer being informed by Maddie that Ansari has been “MeTooed.” The drama unfolds as Rumer tries to grapple with her mixed feelings in response to the scandal, while simultaneously navigating conflicting viewpoints from Maddie (who demands she publicly condemn Ansari), her brother (who defends Ansari), her professor (who comes to be publicly shamed for refusing to expunge excerpts of Ansari’s book, *Modern Romance*, from her syllabus), and her social media followers (who begin to assume that her initial “silence” on social media indicates faulty politics), some of whom become her ex-followers (when they determine she has failed to “call out” Ansari quickly enough).

The entire story is told through Rumer’s computer and phone screens, where she interacts with other characters through various platforms, searches the internet, creates documents to store quotes she finds online (that she will later, presumably, think and write with), watches videos, and peruses multiple sites. We chose this narrative method for various, overlapping reasons. First, it demonstrates the extent to which identity politics and the characters’ lives, relationships, and communicative strategies are mediated through technology and various platforms.

Second, by focusing on Rumer’s screens, the audience is privy to Rumer’s private research, her struggles with her multiple identities and relationships, and her careful editing, curation, self-censorship, and presentation of her public self to friends, family and followers. By demonstrating the importance of Rumer’s deletions and hesitations for the plot, we are also calling attention to the ways in which these ‘drafts’ and decisions are rendered invisible if we focus our attention only on the ‘final version’ posted on social media.

Third, the screens and sites show the ways we can survey others, while always also being under surveillance (including how we are reviewed, ranked, rated, praised or shamed), engaging both panoptic and synoptic dynamics. Furthermore, the screens illustrate the increasing importance of image management strategies, such as the

practice of 'social media hygiene' (that is, being vigilant to clean up any posts or publicly available personal information that may jeopardize one's reputation with peers and potential employers).

Fourth, we are also witness to the collateral damage that is buried in the midst of Maddie's insistence that Divest from Whiteness cancel Aziz. That is, the specific episode that Rumer and Maddie were planning to watch ("The Thanksgiving Episode," S02 E08) centers an identity that is rarely represented: a Black woman's experience of coming out. The episode has been celebrated due to the fact that the central actor, Lena Waithe, co-wrote the episode, helping to create multidimensional characters that are "unapologetically black and female" (Kai 2017).

Finally, through these screens and our editing of them, we hope to convey the manic speed at which we are increasingly bombarded with issues and information, emphasizing that these temporal dynamics — and our resulting confusion — are ultimately embedded within our responses.

As a South Asian woman and a white woman, we see ourselves in both Rumer and Maddie, have undergone comparable challenges in our own lives, and are still struggling to navigate the paradoxical way social media both opens up, and suppresses, dialogue. In our first submission to *Ada*, we did not disclose personal details regarding our backgrounds and identifications. Later, during the review process we received requests to reveal our identities or positionalities. Receiving this feedback sparked a number of reactions. On one level, we could have predicted this request given legitimate concerns around appropriation, authenticity, and power dynamics. On a gut reaction, we felt some resentment and hesitation. That is, can't the piece stand on its own without having to cater to identity politics? But the truth is, we know that in our own research, when we are evaluating other texts, we too have wanted to know the identity of the authors, to the extent that we have even resorted to online searches to glean some clues about their background.

In our narrative, identity politics also play an important role in several ways: accusations are being made against a brown man (Aziz Ansari); Rumer's brother appeals to Rumer's commitment to her South Asian heritage and community; and Lena Waithe's story of coming out as a Black woman is suppressed. Ultimately, these complexities are trumped by the strategic alliances and single-issue politics that dominate the sociotechnical space that Rumer's particular community thrives in.

It is this quagmire of ambivalence that we grapple with in our lives and in our fictional story. How do we reconcile our understanding of the unequal power dynamics between whiteness and racialization; the inevitable reductionism and reification that is produced by identity politics; the epistemic insights that can only be gained from experience with oppression; and the need to be strategic in bringing about social transformation?

While we don't have any definitive answers to these questions, we hope our project inspires self-reflection while creating more space for uncertainty, ambivalence, different viewpoints, and difficult conversations.

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