

candidacy and gender and demonstrates the value of asking relevant questions about the factors that give women a good reason to run for office.

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Book Review: Feminist Criticism and the Joy of Democracy

***Shell-Shocked: Feminist Criticism after Trump.* By Bonnie Honig. New York: Fordham University Press, 2021. 272 pp. \$90.00 (Hardcover).**

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Bonnie Honig's *Shell-Shocked* provides a much-needed space of *active* refuge for those who have suffered under Donald Trump's presidency and multiple campaign seasons. Far from a calm read, this book ignites your senses, provokes your passions, and encourages the rapid intellectual unraveling necessary to keep pace with the hourly onslaught of Trump's abusive shock politics. And yet, bearing witness to Honig's brilliant unraveling (her skill of connecting the dots within the chaos) is deeply satisfying, nourishing even.

The purpose of *Shell-Shocked* is to analyze "Trumpism" — the name Honig gives to America's "pre-existing conditions" of misogyny, xenophobia, and racism (xiii) — and its reliance on "shock politics." The power of shock, Honig notes, lies in its "seeming implacability" (xvi). She invites us to consider how the American public was quite literally thrown into a state of "shellshock" by Trump's deliberate and unrelenting flooding of the airwaves. As she explains it, "shock politics" functions as a "disorientation" and "desensitization" "two-step" (14). This "assault on the senses" begins with sensory deprivation, followed by sensory saturation. The isolation typical of sensory deprivation was achieved by Trump's constant tweeting, which "diminishes the space of refuge" by forcing us

into his constant company. The incessant and unrelenting torrent of controversies, personal attacks, and dissemination of disinformation is the hallmark of sensory saturation. Together, they “work to deprive the public of fixed or stable points of orientation and then flood the public’s senses with stimuli such that we are overwhelmed, desensitized, and disoriented, left nearly incapable of response or action because we are confused, exhausted, or fatigued” (13). It leaves no space, let alone wherewithal, for the “quiet of critical reflection” necessary for public deliberation and a healthy functioning democracy (xvi).

Honig’s tantalizing, witty, and trenchant collection of short essays analyzes a wide range of political events orbiting Trump’s presidency, convincingly demonstrating that Trump’s shock politics two-step effectively gaslighted the American public. Indeed, Honig’s frequent return to George Cukor’s 1944 film *Gaslight*, across the 27 short essays that make up this incisive critique of not only Trumpism but also its connection to neoliberalism, provides a brilliant anchor for the richest of her conceptual offerings. Other literary and cinematic anchors include Homer’s *Odyssey*, the Duffer brothers’ *Stranger Things*, and Susannah Grant, Ayelet Waldman, and Michael Chabon’s *Unbelievable*. In *Gaslight*, a deceitful and nefarious husband, Gregory Anton, isolates his bride, Paula, and manipulates her sense of reality to the point that she doubts (most of) her own senses, so that he can get away with stealing her family treasures stored in the attic. Honig uses *Gaslight* to reveal how Trump’s incessant tweeting is not just indicative of his narcissistic tendencies, but also “works as a *device of disorientation*” (17), exposing the fragility of Truth and the danger this poses for democracy. In one of numerous appeals to Hannah Arendt, who is the major theoretical anchor of this text, Honig argues that *Gaslight* reveals something many of us intuitively already know: that Truth “depends on the corroboration of others — what Hannah Arendt called ‘plurality’ (hence we sometimes ask, ‘Do you see what I see?’) — and on the facticity of material evidence” (24).

Just as *Gaslight*’s Paula finds her own creative way to keep her bearings amid Gregory’s two-step onslaught — she remains focused on the singular material detail of the gaslight in her room that flickers at night, when, she will later discover, Gregory turns the gaslight up in the attic as he rummages through her family possessions — Honig alerts us to the ways in which women and people of color have carved out their own stable moorings in the storms of misogyny and white supremacy. Relying both on the *common sense* that comes from community (Paula develops this with Brian Cameron, a Scotland Yard inspector who finds his way into the

house and shares her sensory experience of the flickering gaslight and the noises in the attic) and the “facticity” that “depends on and secures shared experience among plural others” (the gaslight *is* flickering; unarmed Black people *are* disproportionately killed by police officers), many gaslighted parties have succeeded in creating the epistemic certainty needed to break the spell of the shock-politics two-step (Gregory *is* up to no good in the attic; Black lives *do* matter). The ability to share epistemic certainty, Honig argues across the book, is crucial to the functioning of democracy.

Thus emerges the principal lesson of Honig’s text, and the basis for her choice to write in the form of *feminist criticism*: democracy, much like Truth, requires a robust infrastructure to support it, and feminist criticism, we might say, acts as one of the load-bearing beams in the house of democracy. As Honig puts it in the final chapter of the text, this infrastructure boils down to “collective sustenance” — achieved through the many *public things* (schools, health care, transportation) that neoliberalism has diligently worked to dismantle — and “shared sensation” — achieved through *stories* that unravel the loose threads of “rationality, exceptionalism, mastery, empire, progress, masculinity, white supremacy, heteronormativity” (190) — while offering examples of political action in concert. Such an infrastructure, Honig argues, supports what we might understand as a new kind of two-step rooted in “exposé,” followed by “joy” (193). This is the joy we share in witnessing or partaking in the bold actions of our “Naked Athenas” (170), including Stephanie Wilkinson’s refusal to seat Sarah Huckabee Sanders (65) and Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony at Brett Kavanaugh’s hearing (96), among many others. Such examples bring joy by demonstrating the collective mutuality capable of standing up to shock politics and reclaiming democracy.

Much like Penelope’s nightly unraveling of her day’s work of weaving a shroud (the completion of which would grant Penelope’s eager suitors permission to pursue her in her husband’s absence) in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Honig summons feminist criticism as our own “skill of the skein” (186) capable of the close reading, attention to detail, and ability to find patterns in the chaos that is needed to bring “discernment to the disarray” (xvi) of the more nefarious two-step practiced by the Antons, Trumps, and Weinsteins of the world. The satisfaction this exposure brings is accompanied by the sheer joy of mutuality, political action, and collectivity — in short, by the joy (and hope) of democracy.

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