

F. Vera-Gray

Men's Intrusion, Women's Embodiment: A Critical Analysis of Street Harassment

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Reviewed by Debra L. Jackson, 2018

In *Men's Intrusion, Women's Embodiment: A Critical Analysis of Street Harassment*, F. Vera-Gray blends feminist social-science research methodology with existential phenomenology to develop a feminist phenomenological approach to studying violence against women and girls. Building on Liz Kelly's influential book, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (Kelly 1988), she focuses on men's stranger intrusions on women in public spaces and situates these intrusions on a continuum with other forms of violence against women. The empirical findings of the book are based upon the author's conversations with fifty women as well as their own recordings and reflections on their everyday public encounters with unknown men. Vera-Gray's analysis of these testimonies is informed by several core concepts from the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, most prominently the former's conception of the self as situated and the latter's work on habituated embodiment.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Following the introduction, Vera-Gray devotes two chapters to describing her methodology and theoretical frame, two chapters to presenting her findings, and two chapters to unpacking her analysis. The final chapter offers a discussion of the implications of her work on policy-making, future research, and feminist activism. Most compellingly, a poetic transcription of the participants' verbatim descriptions of men's practices and the women's responses is woven in between the chapters, serving as "a way to connect women's voices across their commonalities without collapsing the ways in which every particular woman experiences men's violence differently based on social and personal locations and histories" (viii). The poetic transcription is a particularly powerful feature of the book, as it keeps the reader's focus on women's lived experiences *as they describe them*. I can easily imagine this transcription being performed live on stage much like Eve Ensler's award-winning *Vagina Monologues* (Ensler 1998).

If for no other reason than that it fills a void in the literature, Vera-Gray's book offers a significant contribution to feminist philosophy as well as a timely scholarly addition to the burgeoning public attention to violence against women.[1] According to a study conducted by Cornell University and *Hollaback!*, eighty-five percent of women in the US will have experienced some form of street harassment by the time they turn seventeen (Cornell 2014), and yet there has been virtually no philosophical attention to the phenomenon. One notable exception is Margaret Crouch's essay "Sexual Harassment in Public Places" (Crouch 2009). Like Vera-Gray, Crouch expresses frustration that when philosophers address sexual harassment, they focus exclusively on workplaces or academic settings, which neglects its occurrence in public spaces. At the same time, the scholarship outside of philosophy--in legal theory, for example--focuses on whether and how laws on workplace harassment could be extended to address public harassment. In this case, the legal questions eclipse the larger social and political questions. By attending to one of the most pervasive yet least theorized forms of violence against women, Vera-Gray addresses how men's stranger intrusions on women and girls in public spaces affects female agency and embodiment. As a result, her book offers an original contribution in that it moves beyond existing conversations in moral and legal philosophy.

Vera-Gray's approach begins with her naming the phenomenon under investigation "men's stranger intrusions on women in public spaces" rather than "street harassment." This move accomplishes several important theoretical goals. First, it expands the arena in which the phenomenon is recognized since many women experience stranger intrusions in public spaces other than on the street, such as when using public transportation, when inside public buildings, and online. Second, it situates the phenomenon as a social and political problem rather than an individual problem, by specifying "who is the actor (and why), who is acted upon (and why) and how the meanings for both are located within a wider system of structural gender inequality" (11). Finally, in foregrounding men's presumption of entitlement to act on women and emphasizing the actions of the perpetrators, not just the responses of the targets, her analysis resists the trivialization and normalization that all too frequently works to excuse men's intrusions.

Vera-Gray categorizes men's intrusions on women in public spaces into six kinds: ordinary interruptions, verbal intrusions, the gaze, physical intrusions, flashing and public masturbation, and being followed. Importantly, the population sample underlying Vera-Gray's study is rather diverse for the United Kingdom: among the fifty participants who used notebooks to record their experiences over a period of two weeks to two months, 72% of them identified as white; their ages varied from eighteen to sixty-three; and nearly 25% of the participants identified as LBQ. Unfortunately, the small size of the sample prevents inquiry into the intersection of racist and sexist forms of men's intrusions, an obvious next step in this line of research. Nevertheless, Vera-Gray's findings are telling. Ordinary interruptions, verbal intrusions, and the gaze were the most frequently experienced, yet were the most likely to be minimized and forgotten. The other three kinds of intrusion--physical intrusions, flashing and public masturbation, and being followed--were less frequently experienced, but because of their physicality, they acutely draw women's attention to their gendered vulnerability.

One of Vera-Gray's central goals is "to resist removing women's agency in responding to men's violence and/or intrusion, without claiming that actions made within unequal conditions are expressions of absolute freedom" (46). This goal is realized throughout her analysis of the empirical findings. In chapter 6, "It's All Part of Growing Up," and chapter 7, "Embodying Intrusion," Vera-Gray unpacks how the experience of men's intrusions become a constitutive

part of woman's situation, and how women's "safety work" becomes embedded into their embodiment. She takes as instructive Beauvoir's understanding of women's situation as distinctly marked by ambiguity: the developing female body is both the source of a woman's oppression and the vehicle for her freedom. On the one hand, men's violence against women constitutes the horizon upon which girls become women. On the other hand, women adapt their behavior, movement, and bodily posture in order to avoid and/or cope with men's intrusions. Vera-Gray convincingly characterizes this "safety work" as a strategy of resistance that develops into habitual modes of embodiment.

A good example of how Vera-Gray captures women's agency as situated is her discussion of women's deployments of bodily alienation. She challenges Jean-Paul Sartre's interpretation of this form of alienation as "bad faith." In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre presents an example of a first date in which a man takes a woman's hand in his, and the woman passively leaves her hand there (Sartre 1993). Whereas Sartre views the woman's passivity as a form of "bad faith," Vera-Gray interprets the man's action as a form of intrusion and the woman's passivity as a type of resistance. She writes, "Caught by the need to not escalate the man's behaviour by either encouraging or challenging his behaviour (what is seen by Sartre as consenting or resisting), and unable to physically remove the bodily-self, the young woman protects herself by enacting a mode of embodiment whereby she lives 'herself as *not being* her own body'" (156). Because she is caught in a double bind, any active response threatens to escalate the risk. As a result, the woman deploys bodily alienation as a strategic response to men's routine intrusions.

The final chapter, "Inhabiting Ourselves," focuses on the implications of the book's insights, including directions for policy-making, future research, and feminist activism. Vera-Gray's policy suggestions include understanding the relationship between criminal and noncriminal forms of men's violence against women and developing campaigns for prevention and intervention that recognize this relationship. Her research suggestions include using feminist phenomenological methods for understanding female embodiment in a variety of other contexts such as sex work and in the home. Finally, her activist suggestions include recognizing women's "safety work" as a practice of resistance, not merely a defensive limitation to women's freedom, and promoting different modes of embodiment that emphasize women's strength, not just women's vulnerability.

In the opening line to the book's preface, Gray warns readers, "This book will not be an easy read," and she explains that she hopes those of us who have experienced men's stranger intrusions will find the book validating (xiii). Within the first few pages, I discovered what she meant as my earliest memory of a man's stranger intrusion in a public space flooded my consciousness and continually scratched at its surface while I was reading the book.^[2] So much of Gray's findings resonate with this and subsequent encounters that I have experienced: the fact that men's stranger intrusions begin at an early age and thus are a part of growing up female, informing the situation in which girls become women; the experience of men's stranger intrusions as on a continuum with men's violence against women, with the threat of rape shaping the horizon of women's being-in-the-world; and the invisibility of "safety work" that infuses women's embodiment in public spaces, establishing women's agency as a mode of resistance to men's violence. If the test of a work in existential phenomenology is its ability to awaken in others recognition of the structures of their own experience, Vera-Gray has undoubtedly succeeded. I highly recommend this book for those studying violence against women and for anyone interested in feminist phenomenology.

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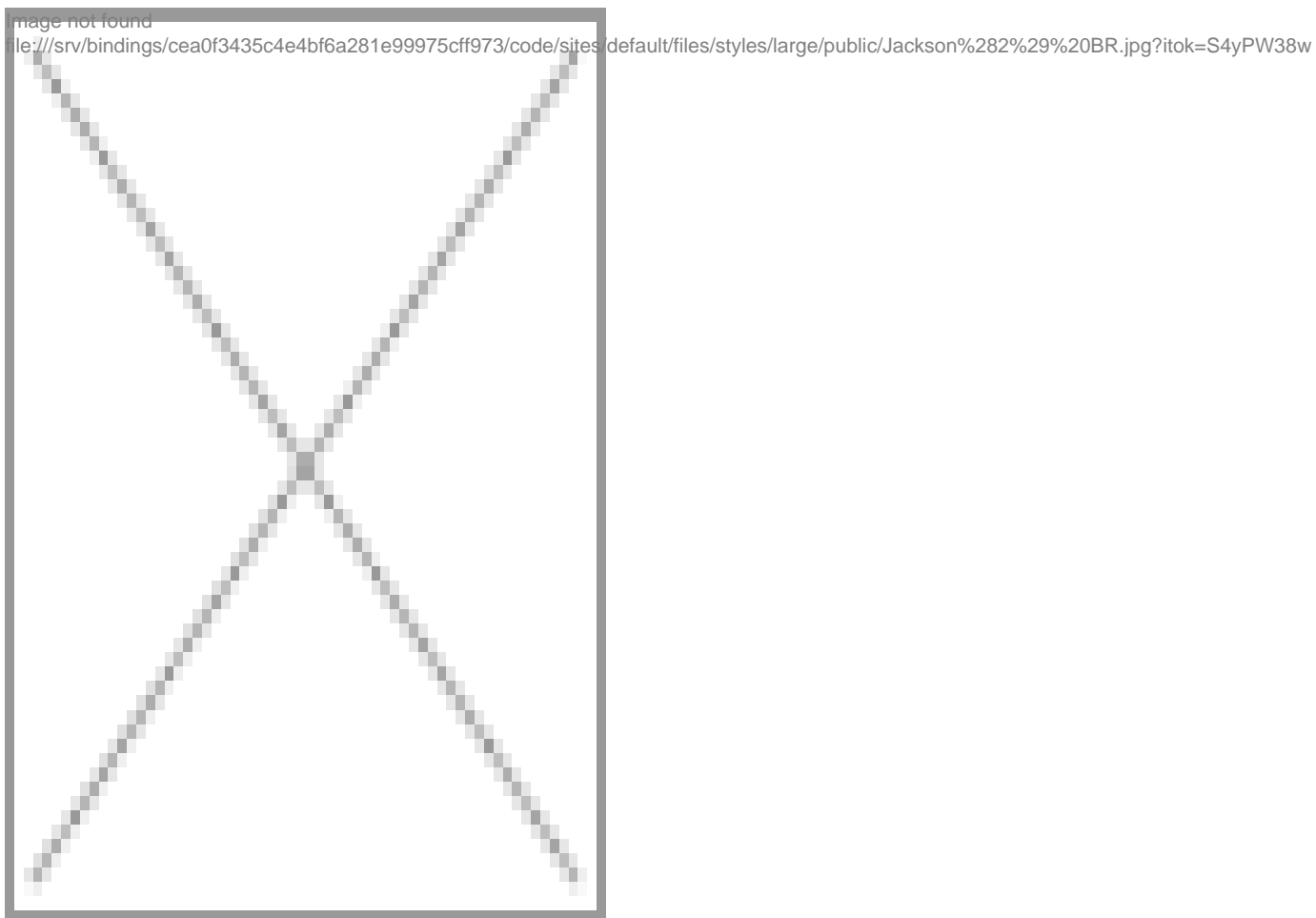
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[1] Feminist activists have over the past few years harnessed social media to draw attention to sexual harassment, sexual assault, and sexual abuse through hashtags such as #MeToo, #EverydaySexism, #YesAllWomen, #NotOkay; public art projects such as Blank Noise and Project Unbreakable; global educational programs such as *Hollaback!*; and films such as the 2014 YouTube video *10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman*, directed by Rob Bliss, and Sofie Peeter's 2012 film, *Femme de la Rue*, both of which echo Maggie Hadleigh-West's 1998 documentary *War Zone*.

[2] I grew up in a suburb of a large metropolitan city in the southern United States as a classic "latchkey kid." One afternoon, when walking home from elementary school, a car stopped near me after having circled the neighborhood a few times. The man in the car called out to me asking for help finding his lost cat. As I approached the vehicle, I discovered that the man was naked and masturbating. The threat of kidnapping and child molestation washed over me, but at the same time, my mother's repeated lessons on safety were immediately triggered. I spat out, "You're fucking sick," and walked away with my chest puffed up and my head held high, conscious that I needed to get away from him quickly yet determined to appear confident not afraid. I walked past my house and up to a neighbor's door at the end of the block. As she was not home, I hid in her alcove waiting to see if the car had followed me. After several minutes, I braved the walk back to my empty house. I greatly appreciate the opportunity Vera-Gray's book has afforded me to consider how this experience in pre-adolescence has shaped my understanding of my own vulnerability and resilience.

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