

# RECLAIM OR LET GO?

*The Joy of Consent: A Philosophy of Good Sex* by Manon Garcia (Harvard University Press, 2023) and *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way* by Sara Ahmed (Seal Press, 2023)  
**reviewed by Isabelle Laurenzi**

---

**Isabelle Laurenzi** is a Ph.D. candidate in political theory at Yale University and a 2023-2024 Charlotte W. Newcombe Fellow. Her dissertation explores the ethics and politics of breaking up. More broadly, her research considers political philosophy and critical thought, with special attention to questions of political consciousness, responsibility, and relationality. She has taught courses in political science and women, gender, and sexuality studies. Website: [isabellelaurenzi.com](http://isabellelaurenzi.com)

Sometime in college, I saw a student production of Eve Ensler's show, *The Vagina Monologues*. In one of the monologues, a woman reclaims a slur (starts with c, rhymes with Bundt) by sounding out the word letter by letter and listing alliterative adjectives, as if extending an acrostic poem. I was entranced. This was in the early 2010s: crop tops were just beginning their comeback, and with them the social acceptability of bearing one's midriff, but Emma Watson hadn't yet endorsed OMGYES, an educational platform devoted to female orgasms. Feminist-identifying undergrads may have been advocating for "enthusiastic consent," but vulva talk was infrequent. As I sat in the college black-box theater, something inside me lifted. A word that had always seemed both irredeemable and inescapable (I have one, after all) was no longer a harsh, monosyllabic onomatopoeia for the brute blow that slurs are intended to strike. It had curves and a soft belly between its snappy, muscular, bookending consonants. I liked it.

Later, in my twenties, I wanted to experience that elation again. So I used the word myself. It certainly liberated the man whose bed I was sharing in his dim garden-level apartment. He was a friend of mine, sweet-natured, considerate, and someone I generally trusted. But at that moment, he became unusually aggressive. The emphasis swerved back to his own anatomy, his own pleasure, as if the word itself were permission. It surprised me. I had used the word to name what I was liking, neither expressing a desire nor giving instruction. He was turned on, and I became turned off. If, after the monologue, the slur had become a rosy emblem of a feminist sexual awakening, after that sex it became a reminder that audience matters. Words can be reclaimed, but not their reception.

Anyone who has tried to use or reclaim words for emancipatory purposes soon finds that things can easily go awry. Artists, activists, and theorists do it anyway because changing the significance of words can create openings for alternative ways of living. It can also help revise norms and practices. By repurposing a narrowly used word, one may begin to make space for those who are unjustly constrained. For instance, the definition of "rape" was once narrow enough such that marital rape was an oxymoron. Or, take a word with a derogatory history, like "queer." To defang an insult by claiming it for oneself is often thought to be its own kind of ordinary resistance.

One feminist project is to rename and reclaim words; another is to weaken the hold that words have on us and others, especially when they represent misogynist or otherwise bigoted ideas. Two recent books by feminist philosophers deal with this dynamic: Manon Garcia's *The Joy of Consent* and Sara Ahmed's *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*, both published in the fall of last year. As the titles indicate, Garcia makes the case for redefining "sexual consent" as "erotic conversation," and Ahmed reclaims "feminist killjoy." "Consent" and "feminist killjoy" are different kinds of words to reclaim—"killjoy" is a stereotype, whereas "consent" is itself a word that feminists repurposed for sex politics—but both have abetted the proliferation of misogynist ideas. "Killjoy" speaks to the more overtly misogynist stereotype that feminists are miserable creatures who aim to make everyone's lives miserable, too. "Consent" debates, on the other hand, have evoked both explicit misogyny ("women are out to ruin men's lives") and more benevolent, but no less insidious, forms of sexism ("at last men will learn they should be in monogamous long-term relationships, showering their girlfriends with affection, so they won't have to worry about consent," in other words, "men who dote on their partners can expect sex," and also, "men shouldn't have sex with promiscuous uncommitted women, anyway"). That these words are tied up with misogynist ideas makes them available for reclaiming, yet it may also be one reason that it is difficult to weaken their hold.

## ANYONE WHO HAS TRIED TO USE OR RECLAIM WORDS FOR EMANCIPATORY PURPOSES SOON FINDS THAT THINGS CAN EASILY GO AWRY.

In this way, the stakes of the differences between *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* and *The Joy of Consent* are much greater than a debate about whether feminists should be finding joy or killing it. Furthermore, the stakes cannot simply be explained by methodological differences, as important as they are: Ahmed's approach is phenomenological, in conversation with a wide array of Black and non-Western literary writers,

whereas Garcia's is a mainly analytic one that draws most heavily on the Western philosophical canon. Instead, their differing approaches signal that the kinds of reclamations which have the power to keep emancipatory feminist movements alive are those that invite us to loosen our attachments to words, whether those words are ones we consider oppressive, liberating, or simply necessary.

\*\*\*

A trade book for general readers, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* is a mash-up of Sara Ahmed's hard-earned insights from her consistently groundbreaking work. (Those who are curious about earlier appearances of Ahmed's "feminist killjoy" might look at *The Promise of Happiness* or *Living a Feminist Life*. Readers familiar with Ahmed will also recognize insights from her books on emotions, willfulness, diversity work, and processes for redressing harassment at universities.) In the opening pages, Ahmed makes it clear why she is attached to "feminist killjoy": it is a judgment that has followed her around. Growing up, when Ahmed spoke up against her father's sexist comments at the dinner table, her mother would accuse: "Sara, another dinner ruined." She ruined family photographs, too: "I think of all the times I was told I had ruined the photograph because I did not smile enough or because I looked how I probably felt: grumpy."

The feminist killjoy continued to appear across her professional life. When she proposed a class on gender, race, and colonialism as a young professor, another professor lectured her on the goodness of colonialism, "that happy story of railways, language and law." In that moment, Ahmed understood that he saw her as "a sad, brown relative, an ungrateful recipient of the gift of modernity." In 2016, a little over a year before #MeToo, Ahmed resigned from her position at Goldsmiths, a prominent UK university, because of its failure to adequately respond to complaints of sexual harassment. When she made the reasons for her departure public, some of her feminist colleagues called her "rash" and said that what she had done was not only "damaging" but "against the interest of many long-standing feminist colleagues who have worked to ensure a happy and stimulating environment." "If I had been publicly identified as a feminist killjoy," Ahmed writes, "I was here identified by another feminist as killing feminist joy."

By the time of her resignation, Ahmed had long accepted that she was a feminist killjoy to others and embraced the designation, recognizing a truth in it. Ahmed takes the “feminist killjoy” designation as her assignment: it is both a label and a “project.” She has gone so far as to print “#feministkilljoy” on a t-shirt, add it to her social media handle, and name a blog “feministkilljoys.” But rather than taking the voice as always and inevitably her own, Ahmed gives the feminist killjoy a voice so that she can hear it. When does this “feminist killjoy” speak up, and what does she tell us? What can we learn from her about ourselves, and about how the world works? How does she help us know and create, as well as break things? These are Ahmed’s motivating questions. They exemplify how Ahmed externalizes the voice of the feminist killjoy.

In other words, Ahmed became a feminist killjoy, but not to possess or leverage it as a subject position. One “becomes” a feminist killjoy in a loose sense, the way we might become friends with another person—unevenly, and not necessarily by our own designs. The feminist killjoy requires that we keep in the foreground our historical and social contexts, as well as our relations to others. In Ahmed’s words,

By using the word become, I want to stress the dynamic and social nature of that process. To become a feminist killjoy is not a private, individual affair. When you name yourself a feminist killjoy, you are relating yourself to others, hearing in a term that comes from elsewhere, that has its own history, something of yourself. In other words, the exteriority of the feminist killjoy matters; to become her, you take her on by taking her in... Even when we become her, the feminist killjoy remains exterior to us.

With a voice, the figure of the feminist killjoy becomes Ahmed’s “companion.” If feminism is a frame for critical analysis, not a fixed set of beliefs and prescriptions, then the feminist killjoy is not a subject position or fixed identity: she’s a friend, a sister, a teacher. She notices injustice, points it out, and invites others in solidarity. Some of the women Ahmed most admired as a young person were feminist killjoys, like her beloved Auntie Gulzar Bano, a feminist Muslim poet who, rather than start a family of her own, worked to “create a less harsh and hostile world” for poor women in Pakistan; and Sissie, the protagonist from Ama Ata Aidoo’s novel *Our Sister Killjoy*, whose encounters with whiteness as she travels from Ghana to Germany to

England sharpen her refusal and critique of it. Being labeled as a feminist killjoy has led Ahmed to become connected with other killjoys, past and present. In turn, these relationships have given her the courage to become a feminist killjoy herself.

## **ONE “BECOMES” A FEMINIST KILLJOY IN A LOOSE SENSE, THE WAY WE MIGHT BECOME FRIENDS WITH ANOTHER PERSON—UNEVENLY, AND NOT NECESSARILY BY OUR OWN DESIGNS.**

What does becoming a feminist killjoy allow us to do? Or, more pointedly, how does she help us pursue feminist goals? Ahmed acknowledges that the label itself can make it “tempting to try to appear happy and positive in order to counter the myth of feminist misery, to make feminism less frightening, more appealing.” Some might worry that exacerbating myths with talk of “killjoys” will prevent more people from becoming feminists. One of Ahmed’s killjoy maxims rejects this logic: “Be maladjusted; don’t adjust to injustice,” she instructs readers. By recognizing the truth in the feminist killjoy, Ahmed refuses to repress the undesirable or uncomfortable feelings feminist killjoys bring up. Such feelings might surface while watching a movie that demonizes a woman who strays from the norm (for Ahmed, *Kramer vs. Kramer*). Or they might come up after one comes out as queer and one’s parents express disappointment with the wish, “I just want you to be happy.” The wish for another’s happiness can, at times, be a wish for them to be protected from rejection and pain. Yet Ahmed notes that “to be protected from unhappiness does not lead to happiness.” It merely obscures the conditions which prompt a feminist killjoy’s unhappiness. Acknowledging unhappiness can lead one to critique oppression. It can “turn the judgment into a project.” Such a project is not necessarily joyless. When “happiness” is narrowly understood as reproducing the heterosexual family of one’s origin, for example, then

many queer people would happily be “unhappy.” There is joy, relief, and solidarity to be found in “turning the judgement into a project” with and alongside others.

Turning “feminist killjoy” into a project doesn’t necessarily mean easily winning freedom. But Ahmed believes, as many feminists before her have, that understanding the patriarchal ways of the world can lead to change. For the feminist killjoy, noticing is a “hammer,” tapping away at the injustice of the world bit by bit. Noticing can also build solidarity. We can feel kinship with those who see what we see, especially when what we see is so familiar to others, so normal, that they can’t even notice it. This is why Ahmed’s book draws not only on her own experiences, but also on the many, if not more, examples of feminist killjoy experiences from conversations she has had with colleagues, students, and friends, as well as those who’ve written to her over the years to share their stories about sexual harassment, anti-Black comments from work superiors, the inaccessibility of ableist university spaces, and racialized discrimination from mentors, to name a few.

A feminist killjoy companion might make us feel “less weighed down by history,” but she also allows us to recover histories. We recover histories when we snap. For Ahmed, “a snap is a moment with a history.” Though it seems to come from nowhere, it is the result of accumulated pressure—of mistreatment, injustice, or provocation. Attaching to the feminist killjoy may help us “snap” by noticing that pressure and being unwilling to accommodate it.

## **IF AHMED’S SOURCES OF KILLJOY INSPIRATION DISLODGE A READER’S SENSE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FEMINIST THINKERS, ALL THE BETTER.**

The feminist killjoy also recovers lineages of Black, brown, and Indigenous feminism. Liberal varieties

of feminism have buried these lineages in favor of a simplified (at times victorious) history of white feminism, in which rights were won, more white women entered the workforce, and women’s studies departments earned their place at universities. Becoming a feminist killjoy can connect us to the work of authors and activists who might give us a richer understanding of how histories of sexism, racism, empire, and colonialism are not over. Ahmed’s feminist killjoy remains attached to these histories because she is “oversensitive” or, in Ahmed’s re-writing of that charge, “sensitive to what is not over.” These histories guide Ahmed’s centering of Black and brown authors. Ahmed lists a few favorites in a stellar appendix of reading suggestions, some of which will be familiar to many readers (Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Gloria Anzaldúa), and some of whom may be new (Alexis Pauline Gumbs). The list is more than a mere list: it is a feminist-killjoy way of putting readers in contact with a wealth of feminist thought beyond traditional genres and dominant academic disciplines.

If Ahmed’s sources of killjoy inspiration dislodge a reader’s sense of the most important feminist thinkers, all the better. Having a feminist killjoy companion (like Ahmed) may help us to loosen our attachments. Ahmed is keenly aware of how attachments of all sorts can constrain feminist critique and threaten the survival of feminism itself. Such attachments may include harmful relationships, beloved convictions, or expected styles and forms of expression. Ahmed writes about her own experiences “snapping bonds,” not only with her university but also with her father; shifting her view in response to another feminist killjoy’s perspective; and loosening her writing style over the course of her career. The point is not to become emotionally detached or removed from social contexts but rather to learn when and how to step back or let go. This capacity is critical not only for one’s own healing but also so that one can remain open to criticism.

Ahmed takes this argument one step further in a stunning subversion of feminist hope. The survival of feminism as a movement requires sometimes letting go of the ideas that give us “confidence” and “strength.” “For feminism to survive,” Ahmed explains, “we need to let the feminist killjoy go... Feminist survival might depend on *loosening* our attachments to our terms, including those that help make sense of our struggle.”

Transphobic and racist varieties of liberal feminism remain too firmly attached to narrowly construed terms such as “woman” or “gender” or even “feminism.” Clinging to discriminatory and exclusionary notions of what it means to be a woman, or to advocate on women’s behalf, is not only a way of “deflecting critique” but also “positioning other feminists as killjoys, getting in the way [of] happiness.” No feminist killjoy may claim immunity from critique. Being a feminist killjoy requires loosening attachments to terms and the convictions they represent. By no means is this an easy task, Ahmed acknowledges, but it is a necessary one.

Rather than prescribing a fixed feeling or viewpoint for a feminist movement, reclaiming “feminist killjoy” articulates a method for engaging an unjust world. Listening for the voice of the feminist killjoy might guide one to think about what words can be reclaimed, with whom and in which contexts.

\*\*\*

How do concepts shape our lives, and how should they? This is the broader question, drawn from the scholarship of feminist philosopher Sally Haslanger, that scaffolds Manon Garcia’s *The Joy of Consent*. When it comes to how “sexual consent” shapes sex, Garcia jokes, French and Americans seem to disagree. Americans think that the French have too much sex and don’t talk about it enough, while the French think Americans would do well to talk less about sex and actually have some. Garcia cracks the joke to frame her position as an avowedly French-Anglo philosopher. She moves gracefully from funny to thoughtful as she explains how she will “embrace the broad ambition of the French” philosophers and their literary and historical tendencies, “while committing to the precision, clarity, and argumentative efficiency of the Anglophone” philosophers.

Garcia also foregrounds her philosophical and political commitments about sex: she wants to distinguish between permissible and impermissible sex, but not exclusively; she wants to advance sexual justice and believes that considering what makes sex good, perhaps even “emancipatory,” is critical for justice; she believes in the potential for legal and policy solutions to redress sexual violence but wants to stand against mass incarceration and racial injustice; she asserts that “the

problem of consent is particularly acute in heterosexual relationships, and [that] this justifies particular attention to these relationships,” but acknowledges that patriarchy affects queer relationships, too; she wants to combat the effects of gendered domination and patriarchal structures in our intimate lives.

Like most people who’ve had sex (and perhaps especially women who have sex with men, Garcia knows that not all consensual sex is pleasurable. So, she distinguishes between the question of what kinds of sexual relations are “wrong” (i.e. morally impermissible) and the question of what “good sex looks like.” Several books in recent years address the latter (for examples, see Becca Rothfeld’s “Pleasure and Justice”, *Boston Review*, 2021). For some advocates of sexual justice, asking what “good sex looks like” involves a desire to trouble the dominance of “consent” and propose alternative concepts, at least when it comes to the pursuit of pleasure for all. By contrast, Garcia’s book uses a fine-grained moral analysis of “consent” to examine both questions—to wonder how consent might curb sexual violence and what role consent might play in creating both egalitarian and pleasurable sexual encounters. She asserts her project is evaluative, not merely descriptive. “Because my goal is... to pursue justice,” she writes, “I aim not only to analyze what consent is but also to determine whether, and under which conditions, it can effectively be an emancipatory tool.” Garcia takes herself to be following Haslanger’s method of “ameliorative conceptual analysis.” The “ameliorative” here is more capacious than typical uses: Haslanger wants not only to improve concepts that shape our interactions but also to determine whether they are worth using at all.

The questions that set the stage for Garcia’s analysis of consent are accordingly open-ended—“Why hold onto consent to promote sexual emancipation and why write about it?”; “Can consent help us achieve good sex lives?”; “Why is it that we attribute such power to the concept of consent?” Garcia first approaches these questions from a definitional perspective. Her first chapter details how sexual consent differs from political consent and from contract; her second distinguishes a liberal notion of consent (inherited from John Stuart Mill) from a more substantive one (inherited from Immanuel Kant) and shows how our use of consent is mismatched with our aims for it.

Liberalism's version of consent is too normatively paltry and too individualistic to establish morally good sex on its own, Garcia argues. She suggests that we infuse consent with Kantianism's capacity for "recognizing dignity and respecting humanity," notwithstanding Kant's view that almost all sex is demeaning. The rest of the book follows from this argument. Later chapters examine case studies and criticisms in light of the view that "consent" can be more than its liberal iteration. "Even before examining the criticisms that can be made of consent from a legal or feminist point of view," Garcia writes, "it is essential to clarify what can be reasonably expected of this concept." We can hold onto consent if we adjust our expectations for it.

## **LIBERALISM'S VERSION OF CONSENT IS TOO NORMATIVELY PALTRY AND TOO INDIVIDUALISTIC TO ESTABLISH MORALLY GOOD SEX ON ITS OWN, GARCIA ARGUES.**

From this perspective, critiques of consent primarily help to refine how one might redefine "consent" rather than to question whether it should be reclaimed. Garcia suggests as much when she writes, "If we want, as I do, to salvage consent, we need to carefully evaluate the arguments of its feminist critics." She acknowledges, for example, that consent "is the product of an intellectual universe" that is historically and persistently sexist, and that "our intuitive liberal view of consent disguises the inequalities of a patriarchal world." These criticisms are to be taken into account, but for her they do not disrupt an attachment to the promise of consent. For Garcia, consent remains "the best tool we think we have for claiming the sexual agency that patriarchy has denied to women." Rather than contributing to the process of evaluating "whether and under which conditions" consent can be salvaged, the "feminist critics" of consent (such as Catharine MacKinnon and Carole Pateman, among others) instead serve as counterpoints for Garcia to "carefully evaluate" and

overcome in the process of salvaging.

But if Garcia agrees with the critiques she precisely articulates, why shouldn't we use another word altogether? The most emphatic case for salvaging consent appears in the introduction, where she writes:

Consent, we are made to understand, is at the heart of living a good sexual life and a good life more broadly. Consent orients us in our action toward each other and in constructing our sense of self... If we are to affirm that consent is the key to egalitarian and free intimacy, then we must go beyond our simplistic intuitions and propose a more rigorous analysis.

Garcia does not disagree with what we are "made to understand" about consent. So she begins from the assumption that consent can and should be affirmed as "the key to egalitarian and free intimacy." I think many people would be hard-pressed to concur that consent "orients us... in constructing our sense of self." So much of what shapes one's sense of self is circumstantial and cultural: where we were born, who raised us and how, what kinds of people and things we encountered, what kinds of resources were available to us, what abilities and concerns were encouraged or curtailed, and what we decided to do in the face of all these things. None of these considerations are ones in which consent carries much meaning. We can say that we don't consent to who raises us, or to the cultures that surround us, but that statement doesn't ultimately communicate much about the quality of these relationships or that culture, or why they might critically inform our sense of self. Garcia's project, then, not only recovers or salvages but also firmly reattaches to consent.

*The Joy of Consent's* conclusion returns to Sally Haslanger. Garcia quotes the three questions Haslanger poses for "ameliorative conceptual analysis": "What is the point of having these concepts? What cognitive or practical task do they (or should they) enable us to accomplish? Are they effective tools to accomplish our (legitimate) purposes?" But the last of these has a second part, and Garcia omits it: "If not, what concepts would serve these purposes better?" My point here is not so much that Garcia clipped the quotation (it does appear in a footnote in the introduction), but rather that the omission indicates an unaccounted-for attachment to "consent" itself.

Perhaps this attachment to consent becomes most apparent in the fact that *The Joy of Consent* proposes “erotic conversation” not as a new concept for sexual justice, but rather as “consent” revamped. Garcia rightly attempts to shift the focus of consent from what is given or said to “the conditions that enable consent.” “Erotic conversation” as consent holds promise for Garcia precisely because it includes mutual attentiveness and respect. While she clarifies that such conversation may include both verbal and non-verbal elements, she seems to emphasize the former. “Here is our solution,” she writes, “talk to each other.” This seems too neat, too elegant, to capture the messiness of intimate conversations, let alone sex. Garcia aptly acknowledges that “the consent framework personalizes what is in fact a social and political problem” by making “sexual violence a problem of communication.” So it’s hard to reconcile the idea that a problem which uses “communication” as a scapegoat can be remedied by more “conversation.” Several contemporary social theorists and philosophers have dedicated their work to the injustices that mar conversation. Garcia cites some of them (Kristie Dotson, José Medina, Miranda Fricker) in the final chapter, “Sex as a Conversation.” By then, she’s already fastened firmly to consent.

Garcia wants to rediscover the joy of consent, or otherwise make consent itself joyful. What if, instead, she took Ahmed’s cue and considered consent to be not a joy, but a killjoy? Good liberals and many good feminists want to believe that consent is only a killjoy for rapists and misogynists. Everyone else finds consent sexy, right? Yet we know that, #MeToo notwithstanding, a lot of sex gets its charge from the unspoken and the unexpected. Men aren’t the only ones who complain that talk is a turn-off. To say so doesn’t justify prioritizing a turn-on—or joyfulness—at all costs. But allowing consent to be a killjoy might teach us more about the current dynamics of sexual politics while urging us to imagine more capacious visions of sexual justice.

\*\*\*

Whether one wants to reclaim a word, loosen its hold, or try to do both, it’s wise to be aware of the ideas and contexts that cluster around the word. The more important—and more difficult—task is to become familiar with one’s own relationship to that cluster. A

question about a word’s history in philosophical and public discourse might become a question about how one relates to such discourses or their histories of inequality. The looseness of Ahmed’s attachment to “feminist killjoy” contrasts Garcia’s firm embrace of “consent.” My sense is that this contrast has something to do with their different attachments to the discourse and profession of philosophy, too.

Ahmed notes that “feminists often have *killjoy relationships* to academic disciplines”—that they “are not quite at home in them.” She once asked Judith Butler how they related to philosophy, and Butler replied: “The way philosophers tried to exclude one another from the definition of philosophy was actually part of their professional practice and should enter into any sociological description of the field. There was always something grave and authoritative about the claim that someone else was not ‘really’ a philosopher.”

## **ALLOWING CONSENT TO BE A KILLJOY MIGHT TEACH US MORE ABOUT THE CURRENT DYNAMICS OF SEXUAL POLITICS WHILE URGING US TO IMAGINE MORE CAPACIOUS VISIONS OF SEXUAL JUSTICE.**

Ahmed reimagines what philosophy is and what it does by thinking about the feminist killjoy “as” a philosopher. “If philosophers withdraw from something *in order* to inspect it,” Ahmed writes, “the killjoy as philosopher inspects something *because* we are withdrawn from it.” Ahmed observes that sometimes we become engaged in an activity, like philosophy, because we are withdrawn from it—whether because others tell us that we are not doing philosophy properly, or because they assume we aren’t capable of thinking hard, or because we are “alienated” by the conversation that is happening among the philosophers at the table. Some who experience this alienation try to counteract the feeling by mastering the requirements of a discipline, by

adopting the research interests of “real” philosophers, or by writing as if one were a “real” philosopher. For Ahmed, the feminist killjoy as a philosopher instead studies her own alienation, like Claudia tearing apart her white doll in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* to understand white standards of beauty. This orientation towards philosophy, as well as a looser, more accessible writing style, are two ways that Ahmed invites readers into an otherwise exclusionary world.

My own feminist killjoy companion wrinkles her nose at “the joy of consent.” Reading the philosophical case for consent as erotic conversation, I’m reminded of the alienation I’ve felt in philosophy seminar rooms, in affirmative consent workshops for undergraduates, in high school sex education classes, and yes, in bed with men. Each of those spaces, despite what the people in them avow, tend to dissuade critical questions or open-ended discussion. When I say that “consent” is a killjoy, I don’t simply mean that talk is a turn-off. I mean that “consent” points to a gap between what the consent paradigm can do, practically, and what I want to aspire towards in an emancipatory culture and politics of sex. I worry that Garcia’s “erotic conversation” is a conversation that, no matter how hard it tries, ends up being a negotiation. When it comes to sex and relationships, if we are going to attach even more to conversation, then we need to detach from directing it. Whether “erotic conversation” can do that remains unclear.

**FOR AHMED, THE  
FEMINIST KILLJOY AS A  
PHILOSOPHER STUDIES  
HER OWN ALIENATION, LIKE  
CLAUDIA TEARING APART  
HER WHITE DOLL IN TONI  
MORRISON’S THE BLUEST  
EYE TO UNDERSTAND WHITE  
STANDARDS OF BEAUTY.**

I can’t help but wonder whether a loosened attachment to the profession of philosophy might allow Garcia to do what *The Joy of Consent* suggests she may like to do: change the subject. Why not make “erotic conversation” its own concept? It is a concept wrought with tensions, which may be worth exploring at length: What are the conditions for having honest and not-always-joyful conversations, and how do we create them? How would such conversations take seriously the fact that we are never fully transparent to each other, let alone ourselves? And why is it that, for all our supposed talk about sex, most Americans still don’t seem to know how to talk about sex well?