

both the value and the limitations of a perspective that suggests that “black women are especially vulnerable to the harms of pornography because they must contend with both its sexual and its racial politics—sexism and racism.”

That mainstream porn has been guilty of both sexism and racism is made clear by Mireille Miller-Young (“Interventions: the Deviant and Defiant Art of Black Women Porn Directors”), who reports: “black-cast pornography tends to be organized around a view of black sexual deviance and pathology... presenting pimps and players trolling the ‘hood for hoers and hookers.” This reality has led black porn performers such as Sinnamon Love (“A Question of Feminism”), who has appeared in more than 200 adult films, to move beyond the “debased images of black culture” by making her own porn. This is especially important, she argues, because

the patriarchal image of the hypersexual black female leaves more and more black women on the outside looking in on the sex-positive movement. I want to be a voice for a sex-positive black feminism that is eager to transform pornography into a space where we can have our images and fantasies reflected too.

Feminist pornographers transform pornography both by challenging stereotypical representations through the respectful embrace of more diverse bodies and desires, and by insisting on ethical labor practices including safe working conditions, explicit and meaningful consent, and fair and equal

pay (Miller-Young reports that, in mainstream porn, black actors are typically paid only half to three-quarters of what white actors earn).

There is also a role for the feminist consumer in transforming pornography, as porn performer and producer Danny Wylde (“Our Pornography”) reminds us. Purchasing any commercial product “includes the choice to financially support its mode of production. ... It’s time for consumers who want more ethical porn to educate themselves about who’s producing it, and to use their dollars to support it.”

In fact, as I read through this anthology, I kept wishing that the book included a resource list of ethically produced, hot feminist porn, in a variety of genres—and information on how best to access it. A list like that would facilitate Wylde’s suggestion that “if consumers want to see more movies that get them off and leave them with a clear conscience, it is their responsibility to seek those films out.”

Surprisingly, one of the least developed areas in this otherwise excellent collection is a discussion of whether feminist porn is here to stay. Given such ubiquitous access to porn online, are questions of state policing, disciplining, and even prohibition of sexual exploration and representation things of the past? With the exception of an essay by media studies scholar Kevin Heffernan (“It Could Happen to Someone You Love”), the history of legal battles over sexual representation are suggested only in brief anecdotes.

In some ways, perhaps, feminist disregard for, or ignorance of, the power of the state has been

enabling, as Susie Bright reports (“The Birth of the Blue Movie Critic”). She notes that during the early years of *On Our Backs* in the 1980s, many of the risks the magazine took—such as depicting lesbian fist-fucking—were undertaken not so much out of sense of defiance and courage but because “we were innocent of what ‘was’ and ‘wasn’t’ outside the law.” They soon discovered that “[e]verything women actually did to get off seemed to be against the blue laws.... Women’s orgasms, real orgasms, real female bodily fluids, were a no-no every time we tried to sell our magazine or videos in conservative states.” Bright also reminds us that “you can see those ideas today, in places like Alabama that make vibrators a crime.” Heffernan also points with alarm to escalating prohibitions in the twenty-first century related to sex, with more than 162 new legal restrictions policing women’s bodies and sexuality enacted in 2011 alone.

As Bright and Heffernan suggest, we need thoughtful, provocative, enthusiastic collections like this partly because we can’t take for granted either the availability of feminist porn or the right of women to access pleasure without punishing consequences. This is still no small thing.

Wendy Chapkis is a professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Sociology at the University of Southern Maine. She is the author of several books including *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor* (1997) and *Dying to Get High: Marijuana as Medicine* (2008).



Bough Down

By Karen Green

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Reviewed by Ana Isabel Keilson

led me to thinking about Absolute Identity vs. Accidental Identity, and the word “widow” and widowhood as a kind of club nobody chooses to join—and my own arrogance in thinking I am/was special in my resistance to the word or its imposed meaning.

“Tiny Stampede,” in the most literal sense, was proof of her predicament.

Green is also a poet. Her literary debut, *Bough Down*, documents the passage of time from just before Wallace’s suicide through the following year, combining visual art and text to excavate the relationship of grief to personal identity. This past May, the book was awarded the *Believer* magazine’s 2013 prize for poetry. Since the book’s publication, debates have also circulated among its readers about whether Wallace’s name should be invoked. (In the book, Green does not.) Some argue that specifically referencing Wallace threatens an appreciation of Green on her own terms.

Wallace was one of America’s most famous authors when he died; Green was—and remains—one of the most famous new members of a club she

In a 2011 interview with the *Huffington Post*, the poet and visual artist Karen Green reflected on the relationship between art and the grieving process. “I don’t think beauty heals grief, nor do I believe that love conquers all, but both of them help.” Green was speaking about her most recent gallery show, “Tiny Stampede,” which had just opened in Pasadena, and which featured a collection of sixty miniature collages exploring the theme of widowhood. A series of small drawings, watercolors,

sketches, fragments of text, and other images printed on antique postage stamps, the show documented her own experience of loss. Three years earlier, Green’s husband, the author David Foster Wallace, had committed suicide in their home. The miniatures, stamped with her fingerprints, thus became a record of her new identity as a widow—which was marked by feelings of insignificance, fracture, and confusion. About the show, Green commented that losing Wallace

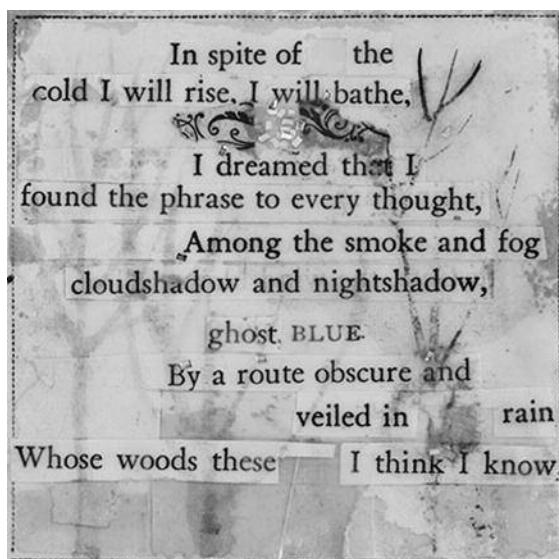
“Green’s miniature collages, like her prose passages, make you squint to see them: the longer you look, the more their qualities come into focus, and the less sense they seem to make.”

didn’t choose to join. Other people know Green’s story, whether she wants them to or not. Fully exposed to the public, with *Bough Down*, Green shifts the discussion inward, invoking the philosophy of German Idealism in her description of identity—in her own case, as a widow—as located in a “no-man’s land” between others (or “the Other”) and the self. Piecing her identity together, she asks us: is the grieving self a feature of chance, or is it fundamental to who we are as humans?

While she gives no definitive answer, she bravely exposes the moments when her struggles with this question are most intimate, and most acute. Tackling head-on the complexity of being the widow of Famous Person Who Killed Himself, in one passage she notes, “Strangers feel free to email: / *Nobody knew you before your husband took his life.* / Nobody knew me, nobody knew me. I think this may be true.” Here Green turns a devastating insult into an insight about the self: her identity is as unknown to her as it is to others. Elsewhere, in the third person, Green casts herself as a figure in the story of her life. At a funeral service, “She does not totter in heels; she branches out with the graceful invulnerability of a coastal cypress. Her fingers, her hair, the irresistible shapes of her are scenic. People take the long way round to look.” As a “coastal cypress,” Green is something nonhuman, undulating and spreading out past the borders of her own body. She is not coherent; her movements are left up to chance. And she is being watched.

Bough Down has been placed alongside major works by female authors excavating their personal experiences of bereavement, such as Anne Carson’s *Nox* (2010), about the disappearance and death of her brother, and Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), about the year following the death of her husband, the author John Gregory Dunne, and the catastrophic illness of their only daughter, Quintana. Like Carson and Didion, Green has written an account of her grief, which, if it cannot make sense of what happened to her husband, tries to make sense of herself.

Bough Down reads like a cross between a journal and a collector’s album, and each page contains an “entry” addressed to no one in particular. Gradually a series of characters emerge and reemerge: Wallace, his parents, nameless doctors, nurses, pets, and “support people”—possibly a reference to Wallace’s own writing, in particular, his short story “the Depressed Person” (published in his 1999 collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*). This is combined with descriptions of the mundane tasks of daily life, which after death often seem Sisyphean in scale. The book is filled with reproductions of small collages, presumably from the “Tiny Stampede” series. There are short, two-sentence descriptions of memories, of objects, of encounters with people; there are longer, two-to-three-paragraph impressions of the world around her. Some explicitly describe the logistics of death—



of funerals, wakes, and packing up stuff. Others describe death as a veil through which one can’t help but see the world. Green muses,

A bloom of contaminates in the ocean is called a red tide. Before I knew better, I swam in one. The sea was a chowder the color of dried blood. I got out when I saw the fish, bobbing like croutons. This is the consistency and hue of the sky as I drive north, using my windshield wipers to clear falling ash. Singed animals come down from the hills and run alongside the freeway.

There are descriptions of the couple’s life together before Wallace’s suicide. Green describes the garden they planted, Wallace smoking and telling her “you look lovely,” and watching him drive off in a car—presumably the last time she saw him. “It’s hard to remember tender things tenderly,” she writes of these experiences. There are objects left behind after his death: his clothes, his medications, and his body, which Green finds in their house. “I worry I broke your kneecaps when I cut you down,” she writes. “I keep hearing that sound. We fly from the world, right, like shrapnel angels, but why is everything so laden around here?” Green describes their house, in which she continues to live for a while, as a kind of memory echo-chamber: it is both a source of comfort and a symbol of the violence of his death and the unanswered questions it leaves her with.

Home is where I take up such a tiny portion of the memory foam; home is a splintered word. His pillow is a sweat-stained map of an escape-plot, also a map of love’s dear abandon. (When did he give way, at which breath?)

Bough Down is not a book you can simply pick up and read. It is an experience of a different order, and reading it takes work. Green’s miniature collages, like her prose passages, make you squint to see them: the longer you look, the more their qualities come into focus, and the less sense they seem to make. Yet Green provides no key to these coded messages. One page is filled with thick description, the next is blank, the next three pages contain seemingly unrelated images. You have no choice but to slow down and give yourself up to Green’s prose. All of this seems to say that life under the shadow of grief moves at its own pace: it adheres to its own rules and offers no clues to its behavior. *Bough Down* disorients the reader, much as death disorients the living. As you work to make



sense of the book, you identify with Green, who, meanwhile, works hard to make sense of the world around her. Grief is exhausting.

Despite her story, Green has a sense of humor. In some cases, it tethers her, who at times seems in free-fall from shock and sadness, to the realm of the living. Just after Green describes untying Wallace, she quickly transitions from a detached, almost clinical description of her actions to a poetic, and funny, description of his physical mannerisms. “Your legs were elegant, and you crossed them elegantly, not like a boy pretending his jewels were too big.” Green describes the police arriving at their house—all reported cases of suicide require legal investigation—an experience that, for some, heightens the trauma of finding a body. Green sits in her house just after reporting her husband’s death. “The police in this village, they employ a shrink, or a therapist, whose job it is to show up in a crisis. He has the first name of a vacuum cleaner or a stain remover: Hoover, Kirby, Comet.” Like other passages throughout the book, these episodes show the devastating wit that only the bereaved is capable of conjuring.

When my father committed suicide in 2009, he and my mother had been married for almost forty years. Shortly after his funeral, someone—a friend, another suicide survivor—said to my mother that while she might spend years trying to figure out what happened, eventually she would find an explanation that she felt comfortable with. The thing this person didn’t tell my mother was that to actually find an explanation requires silencing the noise that comes along with grief. For Green, it’s the feeling of Wallace’s weight, and kneecaps, bowing down on her; it’s also the voices of stigma, guilt, sadness, and memory that provide the context in which we must find ourselves. When will it all stop? Green knows better than to ask this question, but her book compels us to ask it anyway. “I can’t help but root for all this perishable animal behavior. *I* is perishable, *can’t* is perishable, *help* is perishable, *roots* are perishable. I can’t wrap this up,” she writes. Green articulates the search for quiet better than anyone. In her poetry and her visual art, she has carved from the noise a space for herself—whether or not her identity is absolute or a function of chance. Speaking in October 2010 to the *New York Times*, Green remarked that her art-making stemmed from her need to find some way out of the noise. “There’s been so much chaotic conversation in my head ... I’ve been thinking, thinking so much. I wanted to take all the chaotic stuff and make it quiet.” With *Bough Down*, Green has taken the chaos and shown that, if only for a moment, quiet is possible. 

Ana Isabel Keilson is a PhD candidate in History at Columbia University. She is also a choreographer.