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# *Hen & God: Poems* by Amber West:

## A Book Review

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Journal of Research on  
Women and Gender  
Volume 8, Pages 3-4  
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**E**phemera Americana: Las Vegas, Wal-Mart, Black Friday, a dollar-store, and the 24-hour all-you-can-eat-buffet. *Hen & God* explores everyday experiences of working-class Americans. The collection of poems tells stories that feel raw and painful without the usual pity that accompanies the subjects of wretchedness. There are no victims in these tales. The book is organized in three sections discussing accounts of love, friendship, sex, abuse, parenting, hardship and disappointment. The poet's tone is clever and smug, yet a sense of compassion fills the pages. Imagine the cultural observations made by Alexis de Tocqueville and Jean Baudrillard about America, transcribed and arranged by the poetic hand of Charles Bukowski; Amber West adds the feminist voice.

The book opens with a satirical ballad as god, setting up the context of the poems in relation to a narcissist patriarch, which becomes a theme in the writing. Embodiments of this idea take place through the symbol of the overly confident flying fox, imageries of neglectful fathers, uncaring boyfriends, unfaithful, and lustful men. "For Six Months" epitomizes the denial entrenching that narcissism. "Bastard Blues," "He visits," "Daughter Eraser," and "Zebediah Loyd Skiles West," tap into the bad-fathering motif. These depictions contrast against representations of beat-down and tired women, although that is not to say vulnerable. The poems also expose wives, mothers, daughters, and the hen, as consumable life source. In these contexts, food and sex emerge intertwined.

The overall writing plays with understandings of the feminist abject. West accomplishes this, 1) by provoking visceral disgust in the form of corporal vulgarity and excess, 2) by blurring the distinctions between the subjects and objects of her poems, and 3) in the process of telling stories about us that are not about us. The poet engages grotesque elicitation by challenging our ideas of order, cleanliness, and taboo. "The Bump"—a sonnet about a pus-filled back cyst of "the size of a golf ball," stands as the apogee of repulsiveness in the collection. This poem in particular, flawlessly captures the manner of other less obviously repellent illustrations in the book, in addition to supplementing layers of commentary. West (re)constructs the expression "the bump"—more commonly used to indicate a pregnancy, to discuss an unwanted bodily growth that sickens her. Further portraits of excess are included in "24-Hour All-You-Can-Eat Buffet!" "Leaving Tijuana," and "Black Friday," where renderings of obesity, tourism, crowds, and overindulgence, stimulate tensions between pleasure and filth. West's depictions of sex often produce a similar effect.

The narratives problematize characterizations of subject and object. In the poems, shoppers are "wolves," crowds of people become "herds" of "cows," legs are "shanks," and humans are objectified through voyeurism, such as in "The Neighbor's Boy." In the same vein, inanimate things are personified through subjective identity—Las Vegas is a playboy, television shows become a faithful friend, and Black Friday gains a life of its own. The stories in the poems are

presented with uncanny familiarity. The experiences of the characters are separate from ours, and simultaneously cannot help but to be our own. We recognize the tales and engage empathetically, although still disavowing we too partake in the spectacle that is America.

Pure *jouissance*. The poetry of *Hen & God* asks us to celebrate ordinary realities with a sense of cynicism and joy. The poems keep giving with each read. The snarky expressions, grotesque portraitures, and relatedness of the tales look like, both, home and next door. The metaphors are rich, and the speech powerful. This book appeals to feminist sensibilities beyond reproach and condemnation by diversifying the frequent voices that critique patriarchal oppression. There are no winners or losers, only beauty and rousing thought.

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