

Response

Congress 2017 AMC panel

With Shannon Dea, Jasper Heaton, Alice MachLachlan, and Patricia Marino

Chaired by Samantha Brennan

They say never meet your heroes. I don't know about that. But maybe don't invite your heroes to gather in a room and publicly critique your work?

OK. So first up, fuck mental health stigma: hi everyone, I am struggling with depression and I wasn't totally sure I was going to make it today. I'm not going to be able to pretend this is business as usual, or that anything about this book, or me being here for it (or with it, or in it) is "normal" philosophy.

I want to start by talking about that—about "normal" philosophy and the process of whatever it is we're doing right now. I guess a "normal" thing at a philosophy AMC panel is some sort of thrust and parry, objection and defense ... a robust batting around of all the ideas.

The problem is me, and the fact that this book just can't be business as usual for me. This book has been nothing like anything else I have ever done—it is deeply personal obviously, but also simultaneously extremely public. It—and I—have ended up much more in the public eye than I anticipated. And the public eye is not kind to women with ideas, never mind ones who are *doing life wrong*. The project of doing this book—and in a sense, being this book—has been about much more than putting words on a page. It's been about standing in arenas I am not familiar with and don't understand, and having everything I could and couldn't have imagined—good and bad—thrown in at me from every possible angle.

So I'm not going to lie: my emotional resources are depleted by the public aspects of this work, and especially by the hate and trolling—the misogyny, the racism, the homophobia, the violence of all of it. The emails and posts about how I'm disgusting, I'm not human, I'm a slut, a whore, a worthless piece of trash, a stupid, unqualified idiot who needs to shut up and die of diseases, being told to go choke myself. Let's not pretend this is anything other than what it is: a slow process of destroying me and my work. I can't (won't) erase the reality of that, nor the fact that when I come to this panel I come here scarred by these things.

Even the "good" stuff makes me feel like a deer in headlights. For example, the *Chronicle of Higher Education Review* ran a feature profile on me—a very lovely piece by Moira Weigel, who subsequently became a friend—and the headline, on the cover of the issue, was: **Can Carrie Jenkins make polyamory respectable?** Look, *everything* about that is terrifying. Not least the obvious implication that polyamory is *not* respectable—not deemed worthy of respect—right now, and that the question is whether I can *make* my life and relationships worthy of respect (oh and those of every other poly person) by doing enough work to bring about that change. Me, personally. Can I personally make polyamory respectable? You know, no pressure.

I knew there would be things like this coming, but I couldn't anticipate their extent or how they'd play out, nor how I'd feel. I still wrote the thing. And I knew my likely reactions would be various kinds of fragility and inability to "cope," whatever coping means. (And *there's* another whole conversation.) Anyway, here I am now, wishing I'd stuck to the philosophy of mathematics. But one time after a reading in a bookstore a young woman expressing gratitude burst into tears as I signed her book. At that moment, I felt something like sympathy gratitude to myself for doing this. It's very rare for me to feel that about this project, though, and very often (including right now) my overwhelming feeling is: **I've made a huge mistake.**

I think it's important to talk about this. Universities, granting agencies, and our own discipline of philosophy are encouraging us to do public work. How are we going to support people and make it possible for them? Once we get out there in public, if we do anything other than spout platitudes and reinforce orthodoxies—surely not philosophy's most laudable goal—we are liable to become "controversial public figures" with all that entails. I spoke to the President of my own university about this recently, though I haven't yet seen any changes at UBC.

Ok, enough background. I just wanted to mention all of this (1) because it is the truth and I'm done erasing the truth, and (2) as some of the background for understanding where I am as I listen to all these very helpful and interesting criticisms from these excellent, generous panelists.

I thought maybe at this point I could cut to the chase and make a summary of a few of the very true and justifiable criticisms of this book that I already believe:

1. It's so obviously right that there was no point writing it.
2. It's so obviously wrong that there was no point writing it.
3. It leaves out X and this is a major intellectual failing (for all X).
4. It leaves out X and this is a major moral failing.
5. It includes X and this is a major intellectual failing.
6. It includes X and this is a major moral failing.

I realize it's an accomplishment to believe all that, although depression is a major ally when it comes to believing a pile of highly inconsistent claims about how fucking awful everything is. In some ways I also worry that this might be the wrong forum for this book, and that I perhaps should've realized that when Samantha so generously agreed to set it up. I suppose a business-as-usual philosophy book tries to offer something like real answers, a finished theory. Whereas this book is more about trying to open conversations. And this book has multiple goals instead of one, whereas business as usual in philosophy is to have one main goal and do only what is in the service of that. By taking part in a forum like this, my book offers itself to be read as a business-as-usual philosophy book. But the fact is that with this book, and for me now, business as usual is a strange and difficult thing. A lot of the reasons this book is the way it is—for example why certain things are or aren't included—are no longer visible in the finished product: a book that made all of that visible would have been implausibly huge. Those invisible things at work behind the scenes are often personal and some of them are painful to talk about, but I can and will try.

That said, from here on in I will get to work and play the game. Because I'm a well-trained academic with many years of experience I *can* play the game, even with this. But my feeling

about it is like the feeling I had when I went into the meeting of my department's "merit committee" the other day. I just could not bring myself to pretend what we were measuring with the student evaluation scores and the publication numbers and so on was "merit." I can make all the measurements and rankings I am supposed to make, I just won't sit there and say that what's happening is something other than what it is. Not any more.

To play the game here is to engage some of these very interesting and helpful comments and criticisms, offering some "defenses" of my book where I can. But to be clear from the outset, I think the book is indefensible. *Of course it is*: look at the length of it, and look at what it's called. There's no way it could be anything other than hopelessly inadequate. I wrote something because the only other choice was to do nothing, and I thought that would be even worse. So, now, the game.

[[Me responding in an approximately normal way to the excellent comments of my panelists.]]

Coming back to what passes for normal in philosophy world, the other day I listened to an episode *This American Life* about a 9-year-old girl called Rosie and the philosophical questions she was asking her dad, including "What is love?" She made me think about my own practice of philosophy. (Seriously, never underestimate girls and young women.) I wrote a letter to Rosie. Here's an excerpt:

- In the interview, you mentioned you were asking these questions to get closer to your dad, although you thought that philosophers did really care about the answers. You know, a lot of us might not be as honest about it as you are, but I think philosophers often ask these questions for the same reasons as you. We want to connect. Sometimes we might care about the answers for their own sake and sometimes we might not, but either way these questions are a way of reaching out to other people, and learning how to think with them, talk with them, and be in the world with them. We are striving to be together with these questions rather than alone.

Right now, that's what I'm here for. FWIW, although I've played the game a bit, I'm not feeling invested in trying to defend this book as being *right* about everything or anything. But I do want to be part of this conversation, today, with the "we" in this room. As "we"s go, this is one of the pretty amazing ones and I want to belong.