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Review. Breeze Harper. 2014. *Scars: A Black Lesbian Experience in Rural White New England*. Sense Publishers.

Corey Wrenn

Dr. Breeze Harper's 2014 novel *Scars: A Black Lesbian Experience in Rural White New England* is a fictional addition to her larger body of work in food justice and Black feminism. Harper is best known for *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society* (Lantern, 2010) and is the leading activist-academic on pro-intersectionality praxis in the American vegan movement. Readers will be pleased to find her work offered for the first time in a short, jargon-free, nonacademic style. Both personal and relatable, *Scars* is a semi-autobiographical account of a young Black girl grappling with family trauma, sexuality, and structural oppression.

Although intersectionality theory can be complex concept for young scholars, *Scars* is an engaging read that both entertains and educates. The leading character, Savannah (Savi), is a young college student of color coming of age in a world that seems abrasive and unwelcoming. Uncertain about her future, Savi struggles to understand her past and present through a lens that is gendered and racialized. She does not let this marginalization hold her back. Savi is a hero of critical thinking as she boldly challenges privileged hegemonies she encounters. She courageously speaks out against post-racial ideologies and the micro-aggressions adopted by her more privileged peers, even as her friends and classmates aggressively resist. Savi is a little radical, and readers cannot help but love her for it.

But Savi is not a perfect superhero. She faces many structural barriers regarding her race, class, and sexual orientation. While brave in some situations, she is afraid and vulnerable in others. Here, Harper pulls on her own experiences as a Black youth. A mother of four herself, Harper's fears and hopes for her own children, which she shares candidly on her blog, surface in her characters as well. Savi's experience with racial slurs as a small child (a biographical account of Harper's) is heartbreaking; her brush with a sexual harassment at work brings chills. The debilitating concern for her mother's failing health coupled with the constant burden of bills and cold temperatures of New England reminds readers of the stark realities of difference in America. Savi is a strong Black woman, but not impervious to struggle. This theme is key. Harper, a Buddhist, advocates in her work the need to practice compassion and extend empathy for those resisting and surviving inequality.



There is also something to be said of the tension Savi faces when confronted with her lived oppression. At times, she is scrappy and outspoken, tackling challenges head on. Other times, however, unavoidable confrontation renders her helpless and weak. These contradictions are explored in a relationship Savi navigates with a white male classmate who seeks her counsel as he works to come to terms with his privilege, which stretches Savi's patience across several chapters. Savi's humanity is also evidenced in her struggle to come to grips with her lesbianism and the looming pressure to come out. Rarely does she feel comfortable admitting weakness and accepting help, but sometimes help is forced upon her through conversations with a transgender performer, her disabled single mother, and the music of Nina Simone. Their hardships become Savi's guidance.

The book's primary strength relies in its ability to carefully tackle the intricacies of oppression. Her best friend Davis, who is hearing disabled, often engages his male privilege, and abuses their friendship with near constant pressure for a romantic relationship. Savi also finds difficulty in owning up to her own privilege as a nonvegan and as a Westerner. She learns that the foods she loves to eat are linked with serious social and environmental injustices. Unable to give up these comfort foods, she creates rationalizations to distance herself from culpability, even when the ill effects become personal. She is lactose-intolerant, for instance, but continues to eat animal flesh and balks at the thought of giving up fast food. Here, Harper's theory of food addiction and its relationship with racialized colonial oppression surfaces. In a cruel twist, survivors of colonialism find themselves agents in their own bodily violence, influenced as they are by ideologies of domination that normalize toxic consumption. So, too, do they become agents in systems that colonize others by protecting oppressive commodity chains that terrorize, maim, and kill Nonhuman Animals, immigrant field workers, and third world inhabitants.

No character in *Scars* is perfect as they journey toward a social justice consciousness. This is a hallmark of Harper's theory; she resists cynicism and maintains hope that everyone is a work in progress not regress. Everyone is still learning, and this process is likely without endpoint. Harper is compassionate with her characters and the readers in this regard. There is no judgement, as characters proceed by trial and error. Some errors are left unidentified, suggesting that perfection may not be achievable. For instance, Savi holds true to her heavy use of sexist and ableist language throughout the book, and animal bodies are fetishized as food or clothing by most of the characters with no authorial acknowledgement. Oppression



is never straight forward, and *Scars* pushes readers to embrace these contradictions and discomforts.

Theories of intersectionality can make for heavy or bleak reading, but Harper is careful to identify the goodness and hope alive in the discipline. The characters of *Scars* are willing to learn and teach. Many commit to disrupt violence as best they can within their limited means. No character lives unburdened from some sort of systemic barrier or personal tragedy. Everyone has scars, but everyone also has the potential to heal. *Scars* is appropriate for young people interested in intersectional theory; undergraduate students studying feminism, critical race, and other social justice issues; and seasoned advocates and educators who use fictional interpretations of feminist theory in the classroom. I have assigned this book to my undergraduate Introduction to Gender Studies students who find it much more relatable and comprehensible than the more advanced works of Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Gloria Anzaldúa, and the like, although these theorists heavily influence Harper's own praxis and mentions of seminal works are peppered throughout the novel.

Full of colloquialisms and even a bit of cursing, *Scars* reads quickly and is not bogged down by heavy theory or dense composition. It is Black feminist fan fiction, an initiatory novel that highlights the works of the authors, activists, and musicians that most influence Harper's own academic career. *Scars* is not written as abstract theory. It is written as real life, and it is palpable to the reader. It is intersectionality in praxis.