

Surviving Becky(s): Pedagogies for Deconstructing Whiteness and Gender, edited by Cheryl E. Matias. Lexington Books, 2019. 326 pp.

Reviewed by Loretta Ramirez, California State University—Long Beach

In *Surviving Becky(s): Pedagogies for Deconstructing Whiteness and Gender*, editor Cheryl Matias and volume contributors apply counterstory (see Martinez) to flesh out the characteristics of a tropic figure of white women in academia: Becky. While the term's origin remains undetermined (perhaps stemming from literature's Becky Sharp of William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and/or Becky Thatcher of Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*), in pop culture Becky refers to a white woman who performs racial innocence and white guilt to benefit her social standing (see Negra and Leyda). Matias analyzes the impact of Becky in academia by organizing an all-short-story collection from twenty-six contributors. In her introduction, Matias describes Becky as donning innocence, benevolence, and alliance while weaponizing racial systems (based on colonizing methods) to negatively impact diversity and equity in academia. Matias perceives Becky as stomping the potential of (particularly women) educators and students of color to refortify white women's hierarchical positioning. Matias defines this space as a crossroad of white privilege and patriarchal oppression, wherein Becky—as privileged-oppressed—"need only to cry out and society falls to its knees" (2). The privileged-oppressed phenomenon assumes an almost neo-mythical narrative quality wherein patterns of race performance illuminate the constancy of microaggressions. Referencing Derrick Bell's notion of the permanency of race, Matias makes visible these patterns to foster "an arsenal of tools to disarm" whiteness (3).

Specifically, Matias structures *Surviving Becky(s)* into eight sections to disarm the privileged-oppressed positioning that permits Becky to control academic spaces undetectably. These sections expose Becky as colonizer, as weaponized emotion, as entitlement, as terror, as presumed expert, as ally, as violence, and as manipulator and gaslighter in education. In addition, Matias engages Critical Race Theory (CRT) to disrupt this form of racial microaggression and its normalized performances on campuses. As Daniel Solórzano and Lindsay Pérez Huber explain elsewhere, racial academic microaggressions are symptomatic of institutional racism that subordinates people of color. *Surviving Becky(s)* makes clear that, in academia, the results are constraints on mobility and opportunity for faculty and students of color, which contribute to perpetuation of racial injustice in society at large.

Surviving Becky(s) is timely in a moment when the national spotlight is turned to encounters of Karens, Becky's mainstream sisters. We might recall "Central Park Karen," who alleged that a bird-watching Black man threatened

her and her dog; this example captures the potentially lethal impact of a white woman's accusations through exaggerated fear, tears, feigned innocence, and fabricated helplessness (see Nir). These are everyday examples of white women who have militarized white innocence to foster visceral reactions in audiences of color.

Becky, like Karen, is still a neo-mythical figure who ravages real academic worlds, and the short-story contributors illustrate this by focusing each chapter on a particular Becky device. The book offers an assortment of encounters with campus monsters: a tenure-track Godzilla who demands excessive accommodations in "Attack of the 50-ft Becky" by Kakali Bhattacharya and Paul Maxfield; a dreadful Freddy Kruger slasher who haunts promising students of color in "Nightmare on Black Magic Street" by author Rebecca George and Alexandria Smith; and a body-snatching parasite who colonizes the minds of CRT specialists in Socorro Morales's "Facing the Becky Within."

A chief strength of *Surviving Becky(s)* is its use of CRT methodology in the form of storytelling (see Bell; Delgado). Although sometimes bizarre—as in the aforementioned telling of Beckzilla, Becky Krueger, and Becky the body-snatcher, as well as Becky relocated from Kansas to an Oz-like reality ruled by black women academics (G. L. Sarcedo's "This Ain't No 'Wizard of Oz,' Becky!") and Becky as Super-student in conflict with black and brown Mutant-students ("The Ultimate Superpower" by Erica Wallace and Rachel Kline)—the stories in this volume serve as therapeutic laughter for Matias's contributors and primary audience who relate to campus conflicts using the neo-mythical trope. *Surviving Becky(s)* also counters racial microaggressions through micro-affirmations that acknowledge shared grievances and validate collective fantasies of vanquishing the beast (see Pérez Huber on micro-affirmation).

As affirmation, *Surviving Becky(s)* features recurrent spirit guides as various protagonists navigate Becky strongholds. We see this in "The Makeover not the Takeover" by Darryl Brice and Derrick Brooms, as a time-traveler directs a contemporary professor to prevent a future wherein space invaders appoint Becky(s) as their indigenous-Earth ally in planet colonization. In "The Battle of the Elders: Queen Becky and the Table of Elders" by Eligio Martinez, Jr., an ancestor spirit counsels a warrior-leader to usurp the wicked queen Becky. In Melva Grant's "Surviving Becky in Space," an intergalactic team supervisor channels her female lineage to manage her new recruits' devolution into fragility syndrome; in "A Southern Gothic of Schooling" by Kevin Lawrence Henry, Jr., voodoo queen Marie Laveau reveals a looming return to school segregation to a teacher. These spiritual visitors reaffirm that *Surviving Becky(s)* contributors and primary audiences share perceptions of injustice but are supported by generations of perseverance and progress.

Surviving Becky(s) attends to a secondary audience, as well—Becky, herself. Matias organizes each section with introductions and concluding study questions that invite Becky(s) into conversation. Yet it is difficult to imagine any but the bravest of white woman academics will survive *Surviving Becky(s)*. The introduction to the “Becky(s) as Colonizer” section says it all: that Becky(s) are nothing more than a usurper who aligns with whiteness, “knowing that her participation in racial supremacy grants her a piece of the American apple pie” (13). Meanwhile, Becky manipulates people of color to think her an ally in oppression, “like the sly elderly witch convincing a potential victim to satiate their burning appetite with a bite of shiny red apple” (13). Matias concludes her introduction with a reminder that Becky reiterates innocence in victimhood, “like white females who teach in urban schools, make false claims of sexual harassment against Black boys, or characterize themselves as victims of ‘aggressive’ women of color” (13). Though these characterizations are harsh, Matias deems discomfort a necessary rite of passage to move one from Beckyness to alliance, adding that this discomfort is minor when contrasted with centuries of colonization, enslavement, and ongoing racial injustice perpetuated by Becky(s).

This necessary discomfort arrives through a disproportionate number of narratives that fantastically present one-dimensional villainesses whose sole purpose is to weaponize white tears, feign innocence in faux victimhood, gaslight and usurp women of color, refuse to substantially discuss race, win their conflict, and then repeat in the next story—as a Beckzilla, Becky Krueger, Becky in Oz, Becky body-snatcher. This raises the question: Do these fantastical depictions engender dialogue and/or cultivate distinction? Indeed, the stories, while varied in genre, begin to muddle as elements of Beckyness overlap across the eight sections. Furthermore, the nuanced micro of microaggressions is overshadowed by often-exaggerated mythmaking—a concern for those looking to take action, because microaggressions are daily, subtle, and yet still-stunning hostilities more frequent and real than threats of a 50-foot Beckzilla. Still, Matias’ collection grounds fiction in truths that are more unfathomable than their fictional counterparts.

Accordingly, I close in the spirit of counterstory by reflecting on the anger I felt as a Latina academic when I slowly recognized, in reading *Surviving Becky(s)*, that Beckzilla had already stomped my campus. I realized that a poison-apple giver and supposed ally had gaslighted me, leading me to doubt my truths and feel guilt every time I encountered her—the person I had supposedly hurt with my insistence to collaborate rather than follow. I even recalled white men who thanked her for leading and thereby nullified my teamwork. Time has passed, yet I still pause before joining each new collaboration opportunity, wondering if my contributions will be equitably acknowledged. The memory of Beckzilla

continues to constrain my mobility, if only for those short pauses. In this way, Becky has gained definition and flesh in my reality, allowing me to take up Matias's call to challenge our disbelief that this neo-mythical figure exists.

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