

CONFLICT IS NOT ABUSE

Overstating Harm, Community Response, and the Duty of Repair

By Sarah Schulman

288 pp. Arsenal Pulp Press. 2016.

Sarah Schulman (1958–) is an ACT UP historian, activist, author, and a humanities professor at the College of Staten Island CUNY. In [*Conflict Is Not Abuse*](#), which received the [Judy Grahn Award for Lesbian Non-Fiction](#) in 2017, Schulman charts a slippery slope from dis-ease to destruction, and throws a graspable lifeline. Her thesis is that we can misconstrue our internal anxiety as an external threat and even as abuse that then justifies meting out punishment. Incapable of self-reflection and intolerant of difference, we recast the victim as the abuser and shun, exclude, bully, and incarcerate. Schulman's examples include flirting (was she or wasn't she?) and ghosting; false loyalty, scapegoating, and the family; HIV criminalization in Canada; and civilian casualties in Gaza. Today, the ordinary continues to escalate to the extraordinary . . . for 9 minutes and 29 seconds in Minneapolis. Amy Cooper calls 9-1-1 on a Black birder in Central Park. The US Soccer Foundation refuses equal pay to women athletes. "There is no correlation between having the ability to punish and being right" (134). According to Schulman, this freefall galvanizes the power of the state and institutions with unilateral, supremacy ideologies—in other words, zero-sum thinking—and resolves nothing. Schulman's answer is bilateral accountability and communication. In selected third-party crises, learn what happened, show empathy, and intervene. In the interpersonal realm, acknowledge one's role, pursue self-knowledge, and recognize the other person's anguish and humanity. Schulman's refrain is to refuse cruelty, else we "ultimately stand for nothing" (279). —Lisa Thaler, author of *Look Up: The Life and Art of Sacha Kolin*, 8 July 2021