

# rest

It would be so lovely to think that, if I were a man, I could explain the law and people would listen and say ‘OK.’ That would be so restful.

Laura, *Certain Women* (Kelly Reichardt, 2016)

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Today (International Women’s Day 2017) I am on strike.

I am on strike because I was struck.

Struck by the history of international women’s strikes.

Struck by debates about their effectiveness,<sup>1</sup> their inclusion and exclusion.<sup>2</sup>

And literally, physically struck: shoved aside hard while trying to buy food on Sunday, I defended myself verbally and then (running away from Mr. Pushy ‘I didn’t see you’) injured myself physically, some kind of proleptic self-harm: getting the blow in first by tripping over a bike frame and falling headlong into a muddy puddle.

Sara Ahmed says, throughout *Living a Feminist Life*, that coming up against racism and sexism is like coming up against a wall; that it can be palpable.

Trust me to somatise the literal shit out of that. And then treat it as a note to self to take the day off.

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A *rest*, in the sense of pause, is the distance between two resting points on a marked route, says the OED helpfully. It is also a measure, in music - or rather, a measure of silence in music.

It may possibly be cognate to the Indo-European root *ro*, and related to the Greek ἐρωή: cessation, rest.

Which is nothing to do with *rest*: that which remains or is left over - and interestingly, also a sum of money remaining to be paid. I never stop being amazed

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by how much of our language is indebted to capital.

Rest. From the classical Latin *restāre*, to remain where one is, to hold one's ground, resist, to be left unchanged, remain, to survive, to be left as a residue, to be left in a specified condition, to remain to be dealt with, to lie in store.

And then there's the rest that derives from, or abbreviates, *arrest*: a different etymology again. A form that stops some and not others; allows some to rest (or remain, or take a stand) and not others.

Three ways of stopping or being stopped, of leaving or being left behind, of pausing or being put on hold. To remain where one is (held) is different from pausing and then moving on.

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The homonyms (and homographs) offer a productive confusion: what if rest (from *ro*) - that which is restful - is or could be a form of resistance (remaining in place, holding one's ground)? Not just in the sense of Yoko Ono and John Lennon's Bed-In for Peace, which did after all bring the homely, everyday practices of sleeping, sexuality, intimate conversation, and mutual care into the public eye in order to protest the destructive results of the will to action.

*Resist*, from *re* + *sistere*.

Nothing to do with sisters, although @a\_treaclemine gives an example of the clever and needful slogan 'Resisters not Recisters,' which appeared at the recent Women's Marches.<sup>3</sup>

*stāre* and *sistere* are from related Greek roots meaning to stand or make to stand. So rest (from *restāre*) and resistance are deeply entangled.

Ono and Lennon's Bed-In was a salutary reminder, among other things, that to resist (be made to stand) effectively, we need to rest (gather the energy to enable ourselves to take a stand).

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I wear badges as a small act of resistance (to expectations of adult professionalism as much as anything).

On my coat lapel I have a badge, made by Dreamland Cinema, blazoned with the aubergine-haired head of French filmmaker Agnès Varda. People stop me in the

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street to ask about it, and I tell them about how she dressed as a potato, documented the Black Panthers, invented the Nouvelle Vague, made an abortion musical, and hung out with Mos Def (not simultaneously, although she could have done if she wanted).

But this week Varda is my protest symbol because she knows that rest is resistance.

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Here is film critic and programmer Kiva Reardon telling the story of her encounter with Varda:

TV: You Instagrammed a photo of [legendary filmmaker Agnès Varda] sleeping on a couch. What's the story behind that photo?

KR: Agnès cares a lot about the next generation of filmmakers. She's 88, and when she's around young people her energy level and aura change. And not in a cannibalistic way. She really wants to support and learn about young people. She was very honoured that this [naming of the TIFF filmmaker lounge after her] was happening. Happy that young people were seeing her films, but she was also a little embarrassed. We had this huge mural of her on the wall [in the lounge]. She gave a little speech and said, 'I'm really happy, and when I'm really happy, I always take a five-minute nap.' So, she took a five-minute nap and we shot it.<sup>4</sup>

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I read this and realise:

This is the aim of all my work, creative, critical and activist: to be so joyous in it, and because of its effects, that I can take a happy nap.

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But rest can also mean something different for (white middle-class) women (like Laura), as Sara Ahmed points out in *Living a Feminist Life*. She is discussing Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 novella 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' whose unnamed protagonist is diagnosed with neurasthenia and told to rest.

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Right from the beginning [the protagonist] exercises the faculties she is supposed to rest [by writing the story itself]: she is ‘absolutely forbidden to “work.”’ She counters, ‘Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.’ Indeed, this repetition of *personally* is cutting; making explicit that to speak personally is to rebel against the impersonality of a medical diagnosis.

Enforced rest is not restful: it is stressful.

It’s an order.

Rest so you can get (be) better. So you can be productive. So you can be normal. Sleep! Rest! Wake up and (go to) work.

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What about what Laura wants, in *Certain Women*? She doesn’t say:

It would be so lovely to think that, as a woman, I could explain the law and people would listen.

She knows that she would, under HPCC, have to be a man in order for people to listen, and for her to find rest.

She knows that only men can explain the law, because the law is made for men.

It is lovely to think of how restful it might be if one’s body were to fit into both the law, and into the social norms of being listened to.

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Laura’s story was adapted by Kelly Reichardt from Maile Meloy’s short story, ‘Tort.’

According to Wikipedia’s article on tort, sub-heading negligence:

Most Americans are under the impression that most people can sue for any type of negligence, but it is untrue in most US states ... It is a form of extra-contractual liability that is based upon a failure to comply with the duty of care of a reasonable person.

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Which raises many questions, including the legal definition of a 'reasonable person.' (The successor in legal theory to the term 'reasonable man,' itself the successor to the term 'the man on the Clapham omnibus.')

Isn't a reasonable person one who listens? One who is not negligent; that is, does not consider you negligible?

A reasonable person could be described as someone who makes things restful by recognising your right to exist.

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Respect our existence or expect our resistance.<sup>5</sup>

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It's not possible to rest if your existence is not respected.

Because to be at rest is to be vulnerable, possible, soft.

Classical Eurowestern images of women at rest are, therefore and of course, also images of rape culture: Sleeping Beauty is pregnant when she wakes up; Disney skips that bit. Titania on the riverbank is drugged into attraction to an ass-headed Bottom to satisfy her husband's cruel plans to steal her adopted child. Snow White, poisoned by her stepmother, is buried alive by seven men of small stature, and 'awakened' by a prince.

In Gilman's novella, the narrator's husband wants her to snap out of post-partum depression and focus back on servicing his needs.

Enforced rest and enforced sexual contact cross over with, and permit, each other. To rest is to be seen as receptive to male advances; consent disappears from the equation.

Because if she is resting, she is absent (she is, after all, female, and therefore largely absent). She is a vessel of emptiness (q.v.) waiting to be filled.

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It's not (just) a pretty picture: I was assaulted while sleeping on a night ferry back from Amsterdam in my early teens. Having dozed off (after three nights of non-stop non-sleeping in youth hostels), I (was?) awakened to find a man standing over me, with his hands on me.

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It's also true that I have been assaulted, in transit, while awake and in broad daylight: on an aeroplane and on the number 19 bus (Finsbury Park to Battersea South Side). None of these assaults have led to arrests or convictions.

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Laura can't be heard as a woman, because the law doesn't listen to women.

In the UK, the police are investigating whether they, the police, missed two decades of opportunities to stop a violent paedophile because the police do not listen to women.<sup>6</sup>

Black transgender women in the US face a murder rate of more than 10 times the national average because the law does not listen to women.<sup>7</sup>

How can you rest if you are not safe?

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The law doesn't listen and so there is the (the? my!) wayward, embarrassing, problematic, I've rewritten this section a hundred times, (is it?) feminist dream of the (Law)Man Who Listens.

I call it the softlaw, to recall for myself the danger of soft boys, the new New Men of the hipster/Tinder era who - as Melissa Kullman says - 'are just assholes in disguise.'<sup>8</sup>

It's not a common trope, the Man Who Listens to Women - who really listens. Not how he would listen to Laura if only she were a man. Not one who appears to listen, because listening gravely is a good look, and then goes off - generally on a high horse or other kind of fast vehicle - and takes action of and for himself.

Especially right now, in the middle of a global exercise in not-listening, I find myself compelled by the dream of this figure - and while there are men IRL who listen, the trope itself seems culturally impossible.

The Woman Who Listens (to Men) is everywhere (and nowhere, because in listening she disappears from her own story to become part of his), and the Man Who Listens (to Women) nowhere (and everywhere, as surveillant figure accruing all information to his own power).

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Jeremy Brett's Sherlock Holmes was not exactly my first TV crush: he was my first intimation of the Man Who Listens to Women - who is attuned, perhaps because

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of the queerness of his characterisation or performance of Holmes (as I've written elsewhere, describing him as empathising with, or even embodying, the women who bring so many cases to him<sup>9</sup>).

Holmes is and is not the Law, because he's a private detective. He contests the police and their implementation of the letter of the law through his insistence on intuition and deduction.

He steeple those fine, elegant fingers, holds his mobile face still, and listens - as his era's New Women tell him of predatory step-fathers, employers, husbands, brothers, and all the other men who assail them.

He believes them. He resolves the mystery, each time, by being a 'reasonable person,' one who sees and hears misogyny rather than ignoring it, or blaming women for what happens to them.

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Softlaw. It would be so lovely to think that Holmes was real; and that, were he real, it would be enough.

It's restless to want, or need, to be heard by the system that does not recognise your existence, and think that that would be restful. It doesn't feel reasonable to want, or need, the law - or maybe justice - to offer the protection that would allow you to sleep.

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I am on strike, but I am not at rest. I am watching. I am watching the softlaw at work (current edition: Inspector Jack Robinson) and thinking, hard: 'How can I be my own Man Who Listens?' First, to listen better and harder to those around me who are vulnerable; second, to listen better to myself.

It would be so restful to hear myself and believe myself. To have a happy nap floating on my own words, not needing some outside agency to listen and say 'OK.' So that falling (and we all fall) could be read as resistance; could be read as rest.

**So Mayer**

**So Mayer** is a writer, bookseller and activist. Recent projects include *Tender Questions* (with Preti Taneja, Peninsula Press, 2019) and <jacked a kaddish> (Litmus

# Soundings

Publishing, 2019). They work at Burley Fisher Books, and with queer feminist film curation collective Club des Femmes, and Raising Films, a campaign and community for parents and carers in the screen industries. Read more at [www.tinyletter.com/sophiemayer](http://www.tinyletter.com/sophiemayer).

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## Notes

1. <https://qz.com/924575/womens-strike-2017-a-day-without-a-woman-is-going-to-be-mostly-a-day-without-privileged-women/>.
2. <http://novaramedia.com/2017/03/06/the-impossibility-of-the-international-womens-strike-is-exactly-why-its-so-necessary/>.
3. [http://japgram.com/media/1452922738218222686\\_1189534220](http://japgram.com/media/1452922738218222686_1189534220).
4. [www.torontoverve.org/2017/02/diversity-in-film-white-privilege.html](http://www.torontoverve.org/2017/02/diversity-in-film-white-privilege.html).
5. Versions of this slogan appeared at anti-Trump rallies in 2017, but its usage appears to date back until at least 2011. Although I haven't been able to trace a source for its emergence into popular usage, I'm going to go with Diné musician Klee Benally's 2013 *Respect Existence or Expect Resistance*, an album of sacred site protection songs.
6. [www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/01/michael-dunn-redcar-paedophile-jailed-27-years](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/01/michael-dunn-redcar-paedophile-jailed-27-years).
7. [www.teenvogue.com/story/two-transgender-women-murdered-new-orleans](http://www.teenvogue.com/story/two-transgender-women-murdered-new-orleans).
8. <http://thoughtcatalog.com/melissa-kullman/2016/01/softboys-are-just-assholes-in-disguise/>.
9. <http://deliriumslibrary.blogspot.co.uk/2012/12/the-veiled-detective-sherlock-holmes.html>.