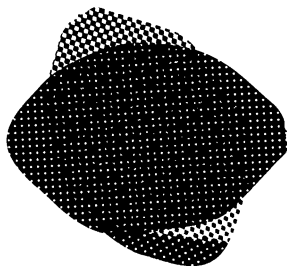
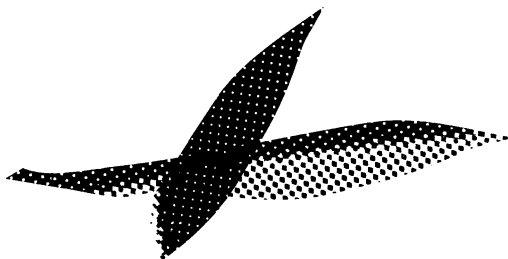


No Regrets

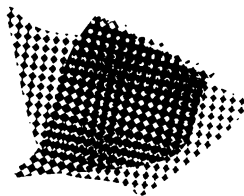


Three Discussions



EDITED BY DAYNA TORTORICI

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INTRODUCTION

An earlier book of conversations on this subject was called *What We Should Have Known*. It existed to give some guidance to college students—or roughly college-aged people—on what to read. The participants, all writers and editors close to *n+1* magazine, were asked: What books are worth reading? What did you read too late, or too soon? What changed your life?

The book turned out to be full of regrets. The speakers regretted their majors, what they read, what they didn't read. I read the book when I was still in college, and even I developed regrets after reading it. Here was an incredible list of books I'd never heard of, books I could have been reading instead of the ones I'd been assigned. I had already wasted two years reading the wrong things! This was the irony of the project. *What We Should Have Known* chronicled other people's regrets so that I might have none. And yet, as the book acknowledged,

this made no sense. No sane young person is capable of learning without error or regret. The idea that anyone could become herself more quickly, or less painfully, by not making the necessary mistakes, was a perfectionist's fantasy. Maybe for this reason, the parts of the book I liked best were those that rejected regret out of hand. "Why should we regret anything?" Marco Roth asked in the second panel. "You make mistakes, you're supposed to be allowed to make mistakes. . . . Why did [Proust] spend so much time with the Guermentes? Why did he hang out with the anti-Dreyfusard snobs? In order to become Proust."

Since *n+1* published *What We Should Have Known* in 2007, the community surrounding it has expanded. Six years isn't a long time, but it is long enough for the cast of characters around a small magazine to change, and this seemed reason enough to repeat the experiment of *What We Should Have Known*. When the time came, I decided to include only women. I had several reasons, none of them entirely satisfying. One was that I already knew what the men in my life had read. The women, by contrast, were harder to shake down for lists of influences, and I suspected their lists would be different. Another was that the word *should* has a special place in the lives of women, as it's been a tool of their subjection through social strictures ("women should be X") and their emancipation through feminism ("women should reject the authority of anyone who says they

should be X, or Y, or Z, or anything else"). *Should*, in other words, gives us both *The Rules* and the injunction to break them. I wanted to know how these pressures on women as women did or didn't intersect with their lives as readers, writers, artists, and thinkers; how the *shoulds* that stalk women through life influenced the *should* of what we should have known. Finally, I knew that women speak to one another differently in rooms without men. Not better, not more honestly, not more or less intelligently—just differently, and in a way one doesn't see portrayed as often as one might like.

The challenge posed by a book containing only women was well put by Susan Sontag (a figure surprisingly absent from the conversations that follow) in her introduction to Annie Leibovitz's monograph *Women*. "A book of photographs of women must, whether it intends to or not, raise the question of women—there is no equivalent 'question of men,'" she wrote. "Men, unlike women, are not a work in progress. . . . No book of photographs of men would be interrogated in the same way." Similarly, no book of conversations featuring only women will skate by without answering for itself in advance. That women are a "work in progress" means something different to this book than I think it did to Sontag, and perhaps more literal—*No Regrets* is, straightforwardly, a book of women talking about the processes of becoming themselves. But I take Sontag's point to heart. It might be unfortunate that these

conversations make a statement even before they begin to speak. On the other hand, if they must make a statement—an argument for more casual depictions of smart, interesting women; a refusal to represent smart women in a way that marks them out as supposed “exceptions” to women universally; a call for more written records of conversations between women that capture everything that’s unique to them, and everything that’s not—those are statements I’m happy for us to make.

Dayna Tortorici

November 5, 2013

GROUP ONE

July 6, 2013

Kristin Dombek (Philadelphia, PA, 1972)

Sara Marcus (Washington, DC, 1977)

Dawn Lundy Martin (Hartford, CT, 1972)

Sarah Resnick (Kitchener-Waterloo, ON, Canada, 1980)

Moderator: **Dayna Tortorici** (Santa Monica, CA, 1989)

DAYNA TORTORICI: I want to open with a question that I admit is a slanted question. It's also a yes-or-no question, so it's easy. Do you have regrets? Do you think there are things you should have read, or did you think there were things you should've been reading, between the ages of 17 and 25, roughly?

(A very long pause.)

DAWN LUNDY MARTIN: Did we feel then, or do we feel now?

DAYNA TORTORICI: Both. Then and now. So, two yes-or-no questions.

SARAH RESNICK: There were things I would have liked to have read, although I don't know that I would characterize this feeling as regret. It's a word laden with all kinds of heavy emotions, like sadness and mourning . . . I don't want to think about my reading or not-reading in that way. I think that this sense of having missed something, even the sense of failure, is important to experience at a young age.

DAWN LUNDY MARTIN: I wouldn't use the word *regret*. A sense of an absence is what I generally felt at that age, that there were categories of texts that were missing from my instruction but I did not necessarily know what they were. I guess in retrospect those missing categories of texts affected the way I saw myself, because those were often queer texts, or African American texts, or feminist texts.

KRISTIN DOMBEK: I definitely felt a strong sense of *should* all the time, of what I should be reading, during that whole period. But when I look back, the thing I regret more is *how* I read, probably because of the *should*. I wish that I had read differently.

SARA MARCUS: I have a lot of trouble with the idea of regret, because if there's one thing I was falling short on in those years it was trusting my own instincts. And so the only things I regret not reading back then are the things I had a vague wish for but didn't know how to find.

**Kerouac vs. Hemingway;
Kristeva, Butler, Irigaray**

DAYNA TORTORICI: On the subject of *should*. Can you describe when you first felt like you should be reading something, and why you thought you should be reading it?

I can give an example. When I was a teenager, I read with a sort of perverse determination to cure myself of two things. One was being from Los Angeles, and two was being a woman, because I didn't want to be either of those things. If I could pass as this other kind of person, I thought, I could go to college on the East Coast, and be a kind of, oh, I don't know . . .

KRISTIN DOMBEK: A man?

DAYNA TORTORICI: A man, yes. So I read things that were very "boy canon." I don't remember how exactly I knew to read them, there was definitely no one telling me to, at least not until later in high school. Though at some point Amazon started publishing these lists like, "So