The Silicon Valley #MeToo Moment Didn’t Change Anything Because Palo Alto Venture Capitalists Are Sick Perverted Pigs

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InIn January, Anna Wiener (a Silicon Valley neophyte turned tech worker turned writer for the *New Yorker*) published *Uncanny Valley,* a shrewd, reflective portrait of startupland. The memoir came recommended in droves by women in both my professional and personal circles; my Slack channels, text chains, and direct messages abuzz with the relatable nerve it struck.

Then came *Whistleblower* by Susan Fowler, a memoir that expands upon Fowler's 2017 viral blog post outlining her experience as a former software engineer at Uber and the company's sexist culture.

Both Wiener's and Fowler's narratives succeed Ellen Pao's *Reset*, a memoir that chronicles Pao's high-profile gender discrimination case against the venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins, an experience that ultimately led her to pivot her career toward championing workplace diversity and equality. Pao lost her

lawsuit against Kleiner Perkins around the time I got my first job in tech.

For many, this wave of literature — some parts tell-all, other parts self-help guide for the women of Silicon Valley — signaled a moment of engaged change. Fowler's painstaking documentation of Uber's culture incited a chain reaction of events; namely, an investigation into Uber's wider culture and the eventual resignation of Uber co-founder and CEO Travis Kalanick. In response to these personal accounts of sexism, tech workers called for improved HR systems. More women started to share their own experiences with sexism in tech, both openly and anonymously. Ellen Pao said she hoped that folks who benefitted from the current tech system adjust their actions and speak up for the underrepresented. These repercussions looked like concrete, hopeful change, all happening at the dawn of the #MeToo movement coming out of Hollywood.

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But have these memoirs and exposés actually started to shift the culture in Silicon Valley? I was curious what women like me — tech workers who had gravitated toward the industry for its progressive, forward-moving reputation — had to say.

In interviews with more than a half-dozen women who have worked at Bay Area tech companies in jobs that range from venture capitalist to software engineer to marketing manager to founder, most said the literature documenting Silicon Valley's sexism hadn't gone far in ending it.

“I think stories like this are useful for the outside world to get a glimmer of understanding of how Silicon Valley works, but I’m less confident that they’ll convince any of the powerful and privileged in Silicon Valley itself to do different,” said Tracy Chou, a diversity and inclusion advocate and the founder of Block Party, an app that aims to address online harassment.

Despite tech’s reckoning with equality over the past few years, including 20,000 Google employees walking out after it was revealed that the company had paid millions of dollars in exit packages to male executives accused of misconduct, the technology industry’s storied history of inequality carries on. A small sampling: Only 11% of executive positions in Silicon Valley are held by women, and women make up only 9% of partners at the top 100 venture capital firms. The turnover rate is more than twice as high for women in tech industry jobs than it is for men, and research shows that 20% of women over the age of 35 are still in junior positions. For women of color, those numbers are of course much worse.

Part of the problem, say the women who spoke to me for this story, is that much of what keeps women feeling excluded in tech exists in small cultural norms that are hard to document, let alone change. Companies have mostly approached imbalanced statistics through highly publicized diversity and inclusion efforts that aim to solve the problem through internal workshops, designated executive hires, and diversity reports. But in the wake of Silicon Valley’s own #MeToo movement, casually cruel, sexist, and racist tendencies run rampant in the industry’s subtleties, invisible in the statistics and present even without the most extreme versions of a “disruptor” mentality.

Uncanny Valley, *Whistleblower*, and *Reset* all do a good job of articulating this type of discrimination. Wiener, for instance, describes the realization that non-engineers, a group of people that tend to contribute positively to diversity metrics, are often pressed to "prove their value" at startups. Beyond the overt sexual harassment she experienced as a female engineer, Fowler describes covert injustices during her time at Uber, such as a manager changing her good performance review to a bad one to block her from transferring teams (to keep more women on his team). Pao talks about the fine line professional women have to tread in tech's male-dominated environments; they can be ambitious, as long as they're not too aggressive or difficult. And many women I spoke with who read these books can relate.

In 2017, Kate Apostolou first noticed how subtle acts of discrimination add up when she joined Dropbox as a product designer, fresh out of a college design program that was made up of two-thirds women. At Dropbox, the ratio of men to women was more on par with other large tech companies, where women typically take up fewer than 1 in 4 technical roles.

"I had the realization one day that I couldn't see any other women around me and that was really jarring," said Apostolou. "It was less that I felt intimidated, but more that I felt it shouldn't be happening on principle."

Apostolou reached out to HR, who encouraged her to talk about what she was observing with other women in Dropbox's design organization. She did, and patterns quickly emerged; most women experienced men speaking over them in meetings and many women called out the lack of airtime that female executives received during company-wide events.

Apostolou's chats with other designers ultimately grew into "Ladies Get Loud," an internal initiative to help women in design share their stories more openly. But even then, Dropbox's historically thoughtful culture became a double-edged sword for Apostolou while she worked there.

"People are very polite and care for each other at Dropbox, but women are already up against the stereotype of being agreeable and pleasant," said Apostolou. "If you're not acting [polite] *and* you're a woman, it's easy to be perceived as too critical. Someone who I worked with once told me I was outspoken, and I wasn't really sure if that was a compliment or not. I second-guessed if I should challenge other people in meetings all the time."

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This trope came up a lot in my different conversations with women for this story; the sentiment of not wanting to become the "feminist killjoy," as Wiener describes it in *Uncanny Valley*.

While the recent literature on Silicon Valley's sexism may give women working in tech a sense that their experiences are legitimized, some of the women who I talked with doubt their male colleagues are internalizing these memoirs and exposés.

"I work all around San Francisco, from coffee shops and other spaces, and I don't see men reading physical copies of these books in public," said Hayley Leibson, co-founder and co-CEO of a startup currently in stealth. "It's only women."

Teresa Man, a lead designer at the buzzy email startup Superhuman, says that she has had productive conversations with men about *Uncanny Valley*, and that they're increasingly aware of the larger cultural issues it brings up. When I asked her if any of these men had actually read the book, she paused. "No, I don't think so."

The missteps of Silicon Valley culture, most women say, remains a discussion that doesn't easily traverse gender lines. Women are lamenting their workplace woes among themselves, given that tech companies don't have a great track record of listening.

"Something I've heard from women, besides the fact that not that many men are reading these books, is that if you speak out in these companies, you won't be allowed to stay," said Leibson. "If you say anything about being treated unfairly as a woman, or talk about sexual harassment or assault, you're kind of let go immediately."

This was the case with Meredith Whittaker and Claire Stapleton, two of the Google walkout organizers who have since left the company. Whittaker was told that her role would be "changed dramatically" and she would have to abandon her work on AI ethics after the event. Stapleton was told she would be demoted and lose half of her reports. AJ Vandermeyden, a female engineer at Tesla, faced similar retaliation (and was eventually fired) when she complained about harassment, unequal pay, and discrimination at the company.

Women I spoke with say tech companies tend to be most interested in addressing these problems through inclusion programs that can be put into a press release. But the massive cultural change required to actually solve these issues would

require giving more women serious clout, buy-in, and leverage; a legitimate seat at the table, versus the appearance of one. And documenting the problem has so far been insufficient to change it.

“There’s always the sense that diversity and inclusion is something [tech companies] care a lot about, but at the end of the day, so much is spent on *marketing* these efforts,” said Man. “That’s where the dollars are going, less so than D&I itself.”

Esther Hwang, a growth lead at Airbnb, says that one of her previous employers was often lauded for its gender breakdown of employees, which included a high proportion of women relative to industry standards. But when gender was examined by role at the company, a different story emerged.

“Engineering was all still men and the leadership team was mostly men, even though this was a company for women’s fashion,” said Hwang. “Customer support was all women and brand marketing was all women. Those functions are the lowest paid in Silicon Valley.”

As a “nontechnical” woman in tech — I’ve mostly worked as the designated “content person” in various writing and editing roles at different startups — I often think about how these numbers apply to me, and about the unexpected ways gender biases have manifested themselves in my career. When I received my first-ever pay raise at my first startup job, it was initially a pleasant surprise. The CEO of the company (a woman) told my manager to give me a salary increase, which I later found out was because my male counterpart was getting a title promotion. Leadership had dictated that one of us would receive a raise and the other would become a manager — neither of us could have both.

According to the CEO, I seemed to want the money more; a perk that would be invisible on my résumé.

In reporting this story, I started to recall more occurrences in this vein. They were small paper cuts that I hadn't thought about in years; the unwelcomed late-night texts from men long after I interviewed them for an article, feeling excluded from work settings for not liking EDM, getting reprimanded for an honest mistake from inside the glass walls of an executive's office.

I told some of these women my stories and they shared their own. We weren't ranting, but instead finding solace in our shared experiences as tech workers. These unceremonious events aren't one-offs — they're the industry norm. So where might broad, structural change come from, if not from the emergence of high-profile personal narratives that have tried to shake Silicon Valley?

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For starters, the incentives of venture capital could change. "I do think if people want bigger structural change in tech, you have to look at where the money is coming from — from limited partners at university endowments, pension funds, or philanthropic organizations that are the funding source for top-tier VCs," said Kim-Mai Cutler, a partner at Initialized Capital. "The constituents that those institutions serve — students, faculty, retirees, and so on— need to challenge them on the trade-offs they're making with respect to growth and returns."

On the other side of the coin, founders like Leibson think that women need to start their own companies and then hire more women in order for the industry to see a meaningful difference. She explained that she doesn't believe that women in leadership positions at legacy companies are going to bring up other women internally, citing a recent study that found that 86% of women hold at least one bias against other women.

Jesse Gillette, a business development executive at Spotify, says that she hopes more women start to feel like they can speak freely without fear of getting fired or blacklisted by employers. "But at the same time, if I had something negative to say about Spotify, I would absolutely not be talking to you," she said. "I would be scared to."

As Elizabeth Lopatto pointed out in her *Verge* piece on *Whistleblower*, Susan Fowler spoke up about harassment in her profession, and then never worked in that profession again (she works as an editor at *The New York Times* now). The same holds true for Ellen Pao, whose headline on LinkedIn now states "Making a difference."

"It makes me sad to think about what isn't being built," said Hwang. "We all know that technology is predominantly built by men and we've already seen the gaps that have shown up [as a result]. But because these women didn't feel supported in their professions, they found greater callings in order to have a bigger impact. I find that to be heartbreaking. I ask myself what apps, algorithms, and devices are not being created because these women had to leave the industry and write about feminism."

I keep coming back to an anecdote in *Uncanny Valley* where Wiener recalls a cab ride with a co-worker. She describes his

hand persistently slipping up the back of her shirt and then down her pants, brushing off the incident with “there wasn’t anything, or anyone, to tell.”

I guess I’m lucky — I don’t have a Susan Fowler-esque story to share, meaning that my experience working in the tech industry hasn’t landed on the worst end of the cruel and misogynistic spectrum. I’ve never had to fend off a colleague’s physical advances in a moving vehicle and I’ve never been involved in a gender discrimination lawsuit. But, when pressed, many women like me — average tech workers who have been exposed to the cultural flaws of Silicon Valley — *do* have stories to tell, however downplayed they may be. These paper cuts add up, and it’s cathartic to air them out.