

CW COOKE AND THE PROBLEMS OF PERFORMATIVE ALLYSHIP

FROM SAFETY PINS TO PRIDE FLAGS, allies have attempted many signals to identify them as safe spaces. It's all pretty well-intentioned—why not mark yourself as safe in case of an emergency?—but problems arise when the icons are misused by those who are not only unhelpful, but who may actively do harm. It's become so prevalent that members of marginalized groups are wary of someone who supports too loudly, especially online, where it's even more difficult to judge someone's motivations.

The concerns aren't unfounded. Many times, it doesn't take much digging to uncover skeletons in the closet, and there's a fine line between true altruism and self-service with marginalized people as props.

You may have heard it called “white knighting.”

COMIC BOOK CREATORS who are active on social media may be familiar with a writer named CW Cooke. He is ubiquitous in comment sections, either showering creators with compliments or lamenting the books he isn't on. There are spectacle posts about fleeting interactions with colleagues to let everyone know how many people he knows. He speaks boldly about social issues, like the industry's ousting of serial abusers Eric Esquivel and Jai Nitz.

That last example could be constructive. The industry needs voices of all types condemning that kind of behavior. But CW's approach is to call them “sacks of shit”, threaten violence, and ignore the victims.

At best, it's annoying. More critically, it's self-serving activism.

CW has a habit of tagging victims and the abusers' former collaborators in his posts (and arguments with naysayers), which needlessly re-exposes them to their trauma over and over and over. It is not uncommon to see him tag dozens of creators in the comments sections of his buzzworthy posts in an attempt to boost traffic on them. CW is not the first person to pull something like this, but the example below is particularly brazen, where he drags Esquivel's victim and former collaborators into an argument they didn't even start.



CW Cooke @CWCookeComix · Jul 25



Again, @RamonVillalobos & @TBonvillain can better explain why they quit the book that Eric was writing. Ask them. Ask @TenTimesATiger what happened to her.

An ally does not request victims re-explain their trauma and take questions on command. An ally does not expose victims to people who think they're just overreacting. An ally allows peace, privacy, and resources to process the horrible things they've experienced.

WHEN IT COMES TO BEING AN ALLY ONLINE, there is a fine line between support and exploitation. Thankfully, there are thousands of articles written by members of marginalized groups with advice on how to behave respectfully. Some of it's quite nebulous, like making sure you're doing things for the right reasons, and that takes a degree of self-awareness that no listicle can provide. Without that self-awareness, it can be easy to, for example, take advantage of others' vulnerabilities to feel needed.

For two professionals, CW inserted himself foremost as a "safe space" against their trauma as soon as they both broke news against their abusers. The first had connected with him on Facebook prior to that, but the initial message he sent them was in regard to their post about a (now-ousted) industry pro who had sexually harassed them.

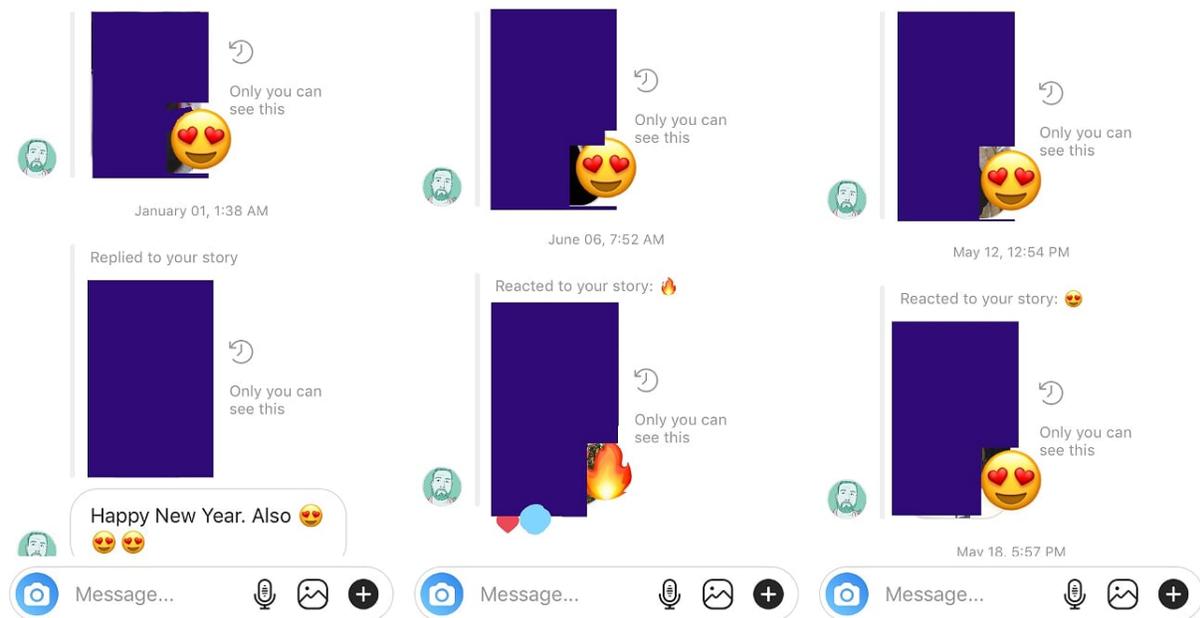


At the time, the victim was too overwhelmed with messages to realize how self-indulgent these were. Every point led back to how CW felt, how influential he was, and how valuable an ally he would be to them.

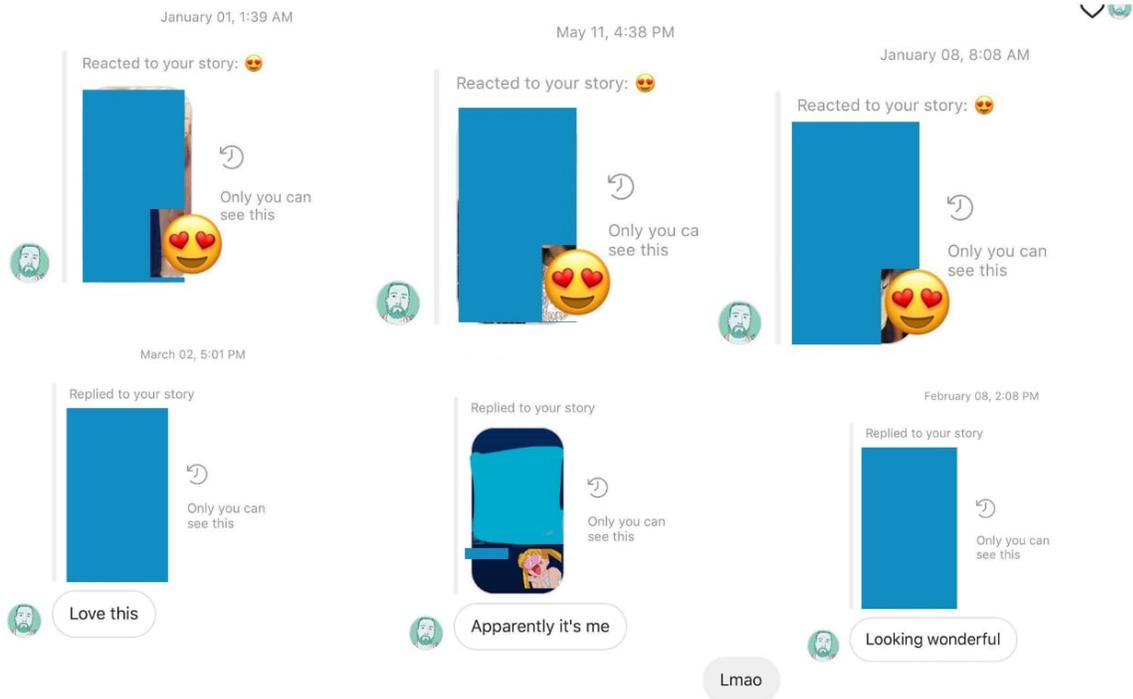
CW inserted himself just as aggressively into another victim's life after she went public about her abuser. He paid her an inordinate amount of attention and showered her with compliments until she asked him to cool it.

While it is important to support victims, especially after a public statement, the focus should always be on their needs. Are they okay and provided for? If not, is there anything you can do to help? And just as importantly, if they are okay and provided for—they deserve privacy. When an ally refuses to be forgotten, it may feel like they are exploiting a vulnerable person to stay relevant during a buzzworthy issue.

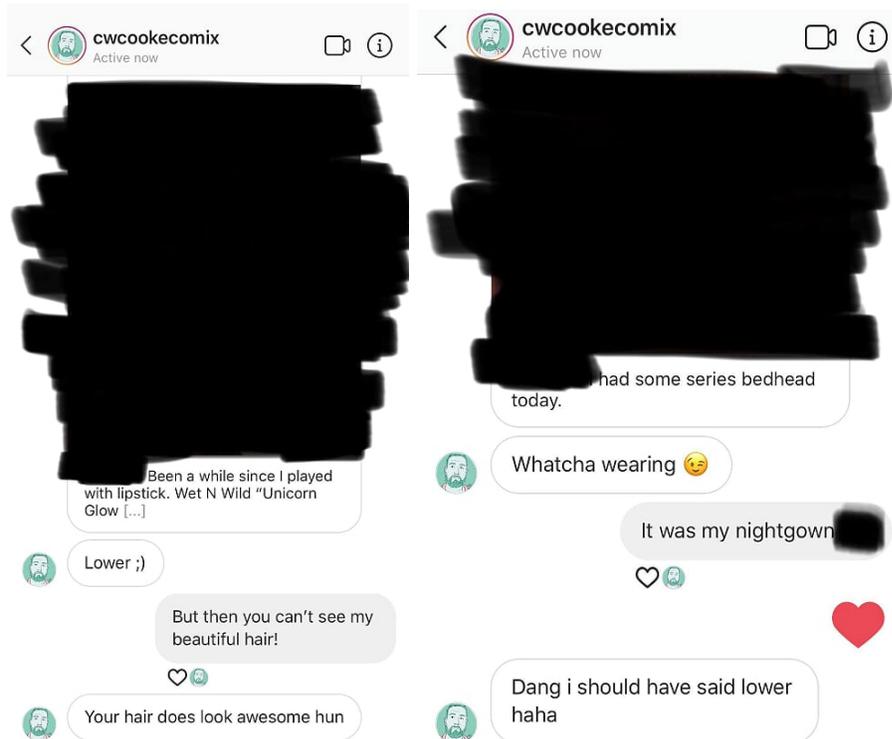
WITH ALL THE CHAMPIONING OF WOMEN'S EQUALITY, CW is remarkably predatory towards people he perceives as women. One cartoonist was subject to comments on their appearance, which they were fine with—who doesn't like a little flirting between friends? But it quickly escalated, as he'd react to selfies in seconds, and would DM them to confess attraction and insert himself into their romantic life. Long after they told him to back off, they would still receive constant "heart" reacts from CW on selfies as soon as they were posted.



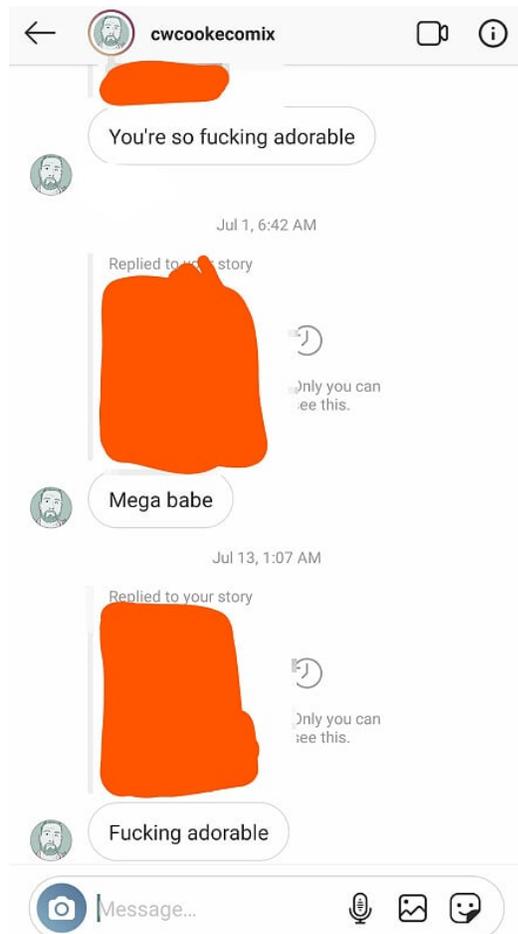
This was not an isolated instance, nor did the severity stop there. Another cartoonist, who hadn't encouraged flirty behavior, was subject to the same pattern.



Another professional was teased for a photo of her breasts. Although she was vocally dismissive, he returned with the same joke on another picture.



And for one creator who was in the hospital following a violent incident, CW took the opportunity to call her “fucking adorable” and a “mega babe.”



It's important to know that this was often CW's default behavior. It was not something worked up towards through friendship or courtship. They also were dealt out instantly and so frequently that every recipient came to dread posting photos of themselves. One professional admitted she held a bet with a friend to see how fast CW would like the selfie they posted together, and clocked it in at 15 seconds.

CW is aware of his flirtiness, as evidenced by this conversation with a friend. His tactic is to go for it and persevere until the subject is so uncomfortable, they force him to stop. It's inappropriate in a physical space—it's also inappropriate in a digital one.

I'll try and ignore today then and jusy hope nothing else ever comes up

I went and read the messages that could be construed badly and it was all flirting back and forth and then they said they were uncofomrotavle so I stopped



So my hope is it's over

(For what it's worth, that isn't true – many of them were not flirting back.)

This speaks to a larger issue of the way our culture has set up sexual boundaries across gender lines. A lot of the comic industry has wised up, instead valuing clear and enthusiastic consent from both parties at every turn. This is a core tenet of progressive thinking and extends to other areas in life. It is particularly helpful to the large community of autistic and other neuro-atypical people in comics who have a hard time reading nuanced social cues.

CW violated this core value by acting on impulse. And whether it was intended or not, the way he positioned himself as an influence made it scarier to say no.

IN EARLY AUGUST, an artist made a vague Facebook post lamenting how exhausted they were with a friend who'd received numerous talks about inappropriate allyship but hadn't made any steps to change. It was part of a sentiment that you don't have to keep friends around who don't listen to you.

Soon their DMs were full of colleagues asking if the person was CW Cooke. Upon communing, former acquaintances of CW realized a disturbing pattern of inserting himself into people's lives during delicate times, lying about his relationships with professionals, and flirting without consent.

What followed was a mass of professionals disconnecting with CW. In desperation, CW reached out to a former victim of a high-profile abuser, who tried to calm him down over the phone.

Immediately after that call, he texted another colleague to spin the story into something about his stance on Jai Nitz, which none of the victims had even suggested.

CW continued attempting contact with colleagues under the assumption it was about Jai Nitz. Despite being told by many colleagues and close friends not to reach out to anyone for a couple of weeks or months, he sent wave after wave of empty, clueless apologies.

A couple days later, after having blocked a friend, CW sent them such an apology. It addressed none of the behavior that the friend had spoken with him about, and received apologies for, many times before.

I had quite a few people
block me this week
because of my posts and
I'm sorry if I ever made you
feel uncomfortable or hurt
you with those posts or
with anything I've said or
done. I will do whatever it
takes for your forgiveness
and to keep showing you
that I'm working on
bettering me in every way I
can. I hope all is well with
you



THE HARASSMENT DIDN'T STOP. Even after family and friends told him to stop, CW continued calling, texting, emailing, and direct messaging people for information on why everyone was blocking him. If he was blocked on one platform, he'd move to email. If they didn't respond, he'd text. Victims were worried that if CW got a hold of the specifics, he'd use it to spin the story for his benefit before a public statement was made.

If it wasn't CW, it was friends asking for him. He began contacting victims' spouses. Copy-pasted DMs were sent out by a collaborator under the guise of needing a "writer reference." Victims couldn't get away even by blocking him. This continued for a week.

The worries about sharing information came from those who had tried to address CW in the past. CW was repeatedly approached about his anger, but would retaliate with public posts rallying that he "wears his heart on his sleeve." He was addressed about his sexual harassment,

but called it “being a flirt.” Harmful behavior was minimized in public to garner praise from colleagues.

BEING EMOTIONALLY VIOLATED is its own brand of hurt. CW contributed to a climate where many professionals were wary to post the essential life updates and humanizing interactions that help them garner an internet following. He inserted himself into vulnerabilities, asserted his presence as an ally, and was unwilling to let up even when addressed multiple times. He would be the first to like, love, comment, and DM to an obsessive level, especially regarding personal photos, and for many of these professionals, their digital lives were treated like “the CW show.” Even after blocking, CW continues to violate boundaries by contacting through other platforms and family members.

Victims deserve dignity and respect. When you find yourself manipulating someone else’s bad time into more comments, follows, and attention on your page, it may be time to take a step back and re-evaluate your priorities.

(All screenshots, and accounts herein have been used with the full consent of their owners. In the interest of their comfort, please do not disclose or attempt to contact anyone in this document.)