Telling Stories from #MeToo, Telling the Story of #MeToo

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#MeToo is the most recent, and potentially most significant, example in a long feminist tradition of ‘speaking out’, collectively narrating personal experiences of sexual violence in order to ‘break the silence’ and, ultimately, ‘end the violence’. As I have written about previously, as a form of feminist politics, speaking out has at least three elements. Individual women break the silence surrounding sexual violence to tell their stories; these stories collectively form the basis of a political movement; and this movement produces a new over-arching story of the political reality of sexual violence, contesting existing dominant narratives (Serisier, 2018). Therefore, as these books show, when we talk about #MeToo we are often talking about at least three things: a collection of personal narratives of sexual violence and harassment shared on social media; a movement built through and in response to these stories; and an overarching and highly contested political story of the meaning of those narratives. The focus of the books discussed here can be read through these aspects.

*#MeToo: Stories from the Australian Movement*, edited by Natalie Kon-yu, Christie Nieman, Maggie Scott and Miriam Sved, positions itself as an archive of stories, reflections and responses. The thirty-five contributions, encompassing personal narratives, poetry, fiction, essays and even a comic, offer, in the words of the editors, a ‘map of the world’ of responses to #MeToo, which are united in asserting ‘lines that have been crossed and should not be crossed again’ (p. xi). Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes’ (eds.) *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, is an interdisciplinary collection focused on the potential and limitations of #MeToo as a political movement. Despite their different takes, the twenty-one primarily academic contributions, divided into sections on speaking and consciousness-raising, inclusion, media engagement and ethic, collective offer what the editors describe as a ‘cautiously optimistic’ assessment of #MeToo’s potential to lead to lasting change (p. 335). In *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism*, Karen Boyle offers an analysis and critique of dominant media framings of #MeToo. She insists on the necessity of reading #MeToo through the lens of feminist politics in the face of media narratives that consistently focus on the consequences faced by men of accused of sexual misconduct rather than the systemic violence exposed by women’s speech.

Despite their difference in focus, each of these texts also draws our attention to the necessity of, in Boyle’s words, ‘understanding #MeToo historically and contextually’ through placing it within a longer feminist history (p. 17). And, I would suggest, they don’t only discuss this history but each of the books, written less than two years after the outpouring of speech around #MeToo is part of this ongoing history. As Clare Hemmings (2011) argues, the stories we tell about feminist politics function through a ‘political grammar’ that is both formed out of and helps to shape the future possibilities of that politics. In that sense, each of these texts grapples with the central political difficulties of ‘speaking out’ as a political project. The most fundamental of these is the tension between building an overall story of sexual violence, a ‘me too’ that does not become what Alison Phipps (2020) describes in her recent book as a ‘me not you’, a white feminist project that reproduces racial and other power dynamics within feminism while obscuring them under claims to universality.

In presenting itself as a set of stories ‘from’ #MeToo rather than telling a singular story ‘of’ #MeToo, the Kon-yu et al collection offers a set of diverse reflections on contemporary feminism and sexual violence that treats #MeToo as a catalyst for reflection. Rather than always speaking ‘about’ #MeToo the contributors revisit long-standing debates and conflicts around the boundaries, limits and unintended consequences of speaking out within and alongside feminism, in thought-provoking and interesting ways, from Kath Kenny’s reflections on Melbourne’s ‘Ormond College’ affair of the 1990s to Eleanor Jackson’s insightful discussion of her dilemma about sharing a platform with Germaine Greer. Where #MeToo is directly discussed it is often in ways that contest or complicate dominant framings. Eugenia Flynn, for instance, offers an eloquent indictment of the violent effects of white society and white feminism on Indigenous women while Greta Parry explores the experience of being the partner of an accused man. Rebecca Lim’s contribution on the peripherality of #MeToo to the lives of many marginalised women helped to crystallise my own experience of teaching about #MeToo to a diverse classroom of working class Londoners, who were only distantly familiar with #MeToo, but who spoke animatedly about the politics of, for instance, the Ched Evans rape trial. I was reminded of this too by the prominence of Eurydice Dixon, a young woman raped and murdered in Melbourne in 2018, who appeared far more frequently in this collection than Alyssa Milano or Harvey Weinstein. The discussions of the cultural impacts of her death gave me greater and different understandings of the specificity of the event while speaking to local and wider connections between gender, heteronormativity and violence. Kaya Wilson’s chapter on his reactions to the murder as a transgender man was particularly compelling in this regard.

In thinking about politics and strategy, the Loney-Howes and Fileborn piece raises the question of what it means to talk about #MeToo as a ‘movement’, both in the sense of whether a coherent identity exists and whether it is desirable. The perspectives on this range from contributors such as Lauren Rosewarne who offers a cautionary contribution about the limits of #MeToo’s current formulation in relation to producing lasting policy change. For Rosewarne, #MeToo is a movement, albeit one that is ‘problematically diffuse’ in ways that limit its ability to achieve concrete change rather than air a set of grievances. The points raised by Rosewarne are important, even as other contributions lead us to question who is imagined as capable of producing this change, and how such a process would interact with the uneven ownership of the ‘movement’ and its politics. In contributions which ask us to think about #MeToo not simply as being exported but transformed in its international movements, Maria Cecilia Garibotti and Cecilia Marcela Hopp write of the ‘substitution’ of reproductive freedom as the central political question of #MeToo in Argentina while Jing Zeng provides an account of the #MiTu campaign around sexual harassment in China’s universities. In more direct contestations of this ownership, Tess Ryan offers a compelling critique of the erasure of Indigenous women’s voices in the Australian #MeToo movement, offering the example of the phrase #MeToo literally erasing the Indigenous word *Meanjin* on the cover of the literary magazine’s special issue on the topic. Neha Kagal, Leah Cowan and Huda Jawad also offer a provocative exploration of whether ‘minoritized women outside the spotlight’, such as Muslim women in Europe, are able to say #MeToo, or if, indeed, the negative consequences of doing so may outweigh the positive (p. 133). In their conclusion, the editors address the complexity of their project directly, writing: ‘Rather than aiming to reach some kind of consensus as to the impact, influence and shortcomings of the movement, we instead sought to embrace the (perhaps uncomfortable, messy, and less satisfying) position of resisting ‘easy’ answers and neat, fully resolved conclusions’ (p. 335). For me, however, the desire here was less for ‘easy’ answers than it was a fuller exploration of some of the paradoxes and tensions between the different papers and their conception of what #MeToo is and what it might be.

Of the three books, Boyle’s adopts the most consciously universalist perspective, framing #MeToo within Liz Kelly’s model of the ‘continuum’ of sexual violence alongside Susan Browmiller’s assertion that rape is a ‘conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear’ (p. 52). This framing allows Boyle to offer a clear account of power dynamics and erasure of women’s voices and feminist perspectives in media constructions of #MeToo. But it also demonstrates the limitations of this framing in fully considering questions of power within feminist movements. Boyle’s analysis of the ‘himpathetic’ media treatment of perpetrators such as Brett Kavanaugh offers important insight into gender and racial dynamics. She traces the racial appropriation of the #HimToo hashtag that emerged during the Kavanaugh hearings and the way in which users of this hashtag consistently mobilise African American men ‘as warnings of feminism gone too far’. The most egregious example of this are references to Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old murdered in 1955 for allegedly wolf-whistling at a white woman, and Boyle is right to point to the staggering distortion involved in comparing Till’s violent death to Kavanaugh’s potential job loss. It is notable, however, that in drawing on Brownmiller’s work, Boyle doesn’t discuss her problematic distortion of the violence perpetrated against Emmett Till. In her important critique of Brownmiller’s book, Angela Davis notes that Brownmiller presents Till not as a murdered child but a ‘guilty sexist – almost as guilty as his white perpetrators’ by describing the fourteen-year-old’s whistle as an act of possession ‘just short of a physical assault’. In her failure to interrogate racial power, Davis shows that Brownmiller reproduces racist tropes hidden under a veneer of universal gender politics, and this legacy is also important for analysing and understanding #MeToo.

In differentiating feminists from sexual violence apologists. Boyle offers a depiction of feminism as recognising that ‘sexuality, morality, power and violence are inextricably linked’ (p. 70). If this linkage is to reach its full analytic and political potential, however, gender must be thought in relation to race and other vectors of power. It felt like a missed opportunity, therefore, not to include a discussion of Bill Cosby in the final two chapters on perpetrators. While Boyle has a lengthy account of Savile, Cosby is a more obvious and immediate antecedent to Weinstein and Boyle’s discussion. Both are powerful Hollywood men exposed by women on social media and the discussion Boyle includes of Seth McFarlane’s jokes about Weinstein at the 2013 Oscars have a clear parallel in Tina Fey and Amy Poehler’s jokes about Cosby at the 2015 Golden Globes. Boyle makes clear that media ‘himpathy’ for perpetrators is inflected by race and discussing Cosby would have enabled this discussion to be more strongly developed.

Michael Salter’s final chapter in Fileborn and Loney-Howes’ collection also left me wondering about the absence of racial analysis. Salter offers a critique of the commodification of social media narratives in what he describes as three moments of political failure in #MeToo: responses to allegations against Aziz Ansari, Junot Diaz and Cory Booker. While Salter’s points about ethics, commodification and the outrage economy are important, the fact that these are perhaps the three most prominent men of colour to be subject to #MeToo allegations is not mentioned. In the conclusion which follows, Loney-Howes and Fileborn identify three ‘issues that future activist and violence work must navigate’ (p. 340): discursive representations of sexual violence; sexual ethics and consent; and work on gendered norms. A reckoning with these issues requires us to think of gender in the context of race, class and other forms of power.

No one book can hope to address all of the questions raised by #MeToo. But reading these texts together challenged and changed my thinking on #MeToo. They reminded me of the diversity of practice and thought that is essential for feminist work, and the need to ask difficult questions and question taken-for-granted assumptions. While #MeToo may be accurately described as a ‘watershed’ or even a ‘revolution’, it will not, as each of these texts shows in different ways, automatically or easily solve the problem of sexual violence or provide a short-cut to grappling with the silences imposed within feminist movements as well as upon them. That is a project that each of these texts contributes to and which we must continue to navigate.

Davis, A. (1983) *Women, Race and Class*, New York: Vintage Books.

Hemmings, C. (2011) *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Phipps, A. (2020) *Me Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Serisier, T. (2018) *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.