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Reading Survivor Narratives: Literary Criticism as Feminist Solidarity

The outpouring of testimony around sexual harassment and violence in October 2017 was unprecedented in scale. The scope of the consequences and effects produced out of it are still being determined and contested. However, while the scale of #MeToo and its rapid dissemination on social media is hard to overstate, it arises out of long-standing feminist commitment to “speaking out” as a political practice in response to sexual violence. In my previous research, I argue that speaking out, the practice of telling personal stories of victimization and survival, is a form of “narrative politics,” mobilizing the literary force of narrative in order to produce cultural and political change (Serisier 2018). In other words, fighting sexual violence through personal testimony draws on long-standing feminist recognition of the cross-pollination of the literary and the political, and of the political significance of women’s autobiographical narratives particularly.

#MeToo is a contemporary manifestation of a longstanding truism within feminism: that “breaking the silence” by harnessing the power of women’s autobiographical narrative is key to ending sexual violence. This political practice is imagined as having at least three effects. Speaking out and reclaiming one’s story transforms a silenced victim of violence into a heroic survivor. This individual empowerment then opens cultural space for other survivors to tell their stories, creating a collective practice and a genre of stories. Finally, this genre changes understandings of sexual violence, replacing long-standing myths with truths drawn from experience. When community activist Tarana Burke founded her “Me Too” campaign to share stories between and with young women of color to let them know that they weren’t alone, she was taking part in this political tradition. Similarly, when Alyssa Milano composed her 2017 tweet, suggesting that if “all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote “Me too” as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem,” she was participating in a longstanding feminist political practice based on the transformative power of narrative.

I suggest, following feminist critics such as Rita Felski (1989), that criticism itself can be a form of solidarity. Equally, my approach is guided by Wendy Brown's (1995) political argument that feminist critique can be a form of love and care. In relation to individual authors and texts, I argue that it is important to think in dialogue with rather than theorize about. I then suggest that such "theorizing with" must remain attentive to the gaps and absences in the feminist canon and the ways in which stories that remain untellable intersect with lines of structural marginality. Finally, I suggest that attentiveness to relations of vulnerability and solidarity between authors and their readers is crucial to a feminist politics. This chapter considers these aspects of feminist theorizing in relation to #MeToo, while placing it in a broader framework of survivor writing, drawing on the critical bibliography I have compiled of English-language rape memoirs, book-length personal narratives centered around an experience of rape (Serisier 2018).

Survivor Narratives and the Politics of Making Meaning

Too often, the feminist response to survivor narratives reinforces experience as a category outside of politics, literature and discourse, marking these texts as beyond criticism (Scott 1992). However, as the feminist historian Joan W. Scott (1992) reminds us, experience is not a transparent window to reality. Our experiences are shaped through the discursive conditions that surround them. The communication of experience similarly cannot be transparently "recounted" but must be narrativized through a process of, in the words of survivor and memoirist Patricia Weaver Francisco (1999a), "giving truth the shape of a story." Survivors who tell their stories author their experience rather than simply recounting it, and this is no less true for those who tweet or tell their stories orally than for those who turn them into books. Authoring a story rather than recounting an experience allows authors to see their "memories as material to be shaped" (Francisco 1999a). In her memoir, Francisco, for instance, writes that her "most deeply held belief" about her experience of sexual assault is "that, by talking, I saved my life" (Francisco 1999b: 17). During her rape she decided that her only chance

of survival was to engage her rapist in conversation. Reflecting on this decision later in the book, she concedes that it would be possible to interpret it as an error rather than as her salvation: “The conversation that I believed saved my life may also have given him confidence. He’d sized me up, too, found me desperate to live, willing to bargain” (28). What is clear to Francisco, however, is that the meaning is hers to author, not a pre-existing truth to uncover, noting that she chooses her version not because it is more plausible but because, “I like this part of the story. In fact, I have become committed to it. In this part, I look cagey and victorious and well worth saving” (28). In telling stories of rape, survivors take an experience of being subjected to the will of another person and remake it, so that they are able to ask, in the words of another survivor-memoirist, Martha Ramsey (1995: 202), “In my story, what did I want to say the rape had really meant?”

Reading these accounts as experience can lead literary critics to adopt one of two binary positions: celebrating survivors for their courage, or adopting what Felski (2003) describes as the role of the paranoid “detective,” seeking to reveal that these narratives are not really what they claim to be. The dominant strand in feminist criticism is the former, whereby new stories or collective stories such as #MeToo are celebrated as powerful and their transgressive aspects are analyzed and elaborated (eg. Alcoff and Gray 1993, Alcoff 2018). There is, however, also a strong strand of the second type. Louise Armstrong (1978: 3), herself the author of a survivor memoir, came to decry what she described as “I-Stories” of sexual violence which, she said, reduced the “political to the merely personal” rather than politicizing the personal. Emphasizing the individualist aspects of autobiography, more suspicious forms of criticism describe these accounts as “neoliberal life narratives” (Gilmore 2017: 85) of individual overcoming in the face of structural violence, or “reverse conversion narratives where a perfectly good, intact life was destroyed, then painstakingly pieced back together again” (Brison 2002: 110). Rarely do theorists see these as complex texts that are shaped and constructed within dominant social and cultural discourses while retaining the possibility of contesting and exceeding them (Naples 2003).

Survivor accounts individually and collectively theorize or make meaning from experiences of rape--the relationship between sex and violence, the interaction between individual survival and recovery and social and cultural change, and the place of narrative in all of this. And they do so within discursive constraints so that they operate in a complex interplay with other types of feminist theorizing and writing. The meaning or moral of the story is not self-evident but constructed within available discourses, even as these discourses are shifted through the construction of new narratives. Much of feminist history references this process, including the famous "date rape" anthology, *I Never Called it Rape*, where survivors are able to rename an experience of "bad sex" by narrating it through newly available feminist discourses (Warshaw 1988). Narratives can exceed and bring into being new forms of cultural consciousness. Rebecca Solnit (2014) describes this process in the #YesAllWomen movement: "the term 'sexual entitlement' was suddenly everywhere, and blogs and commentary and conversations began to address it with brilliance and fury. I think that May 2014 marks the entry of the phrase into everyday speech. It will help people identify and discredit manifestations of this phenomenon. It will help change things." Many participants in #MeToo have recounted similar processes, including Monica Lewinsky (2018), who explicitly credits #MeToo with offering her a new narrative of her experience that allowed her to account for her own sexual agency while reconceptualizing the power relations between a President and an intern that make this far more than a story of a workplace affair.

These narratives also enable reflection on feminism itself, which may be experienced as liberating but may also be experienced as constricting and restrictive. The conflicts between feminism and individual authors draw attention to the discursive and political tensions in feminist responses to sexual violence and particularly between the goals of individual empowerment and collective liberation that are often assumed to be implicitly compatible. Author and survivor Alice Sebold (1999: 133), for instance, writes of her conflict with feminism in the form of Tricia, a representative of the rape crisis center who insisted on treating Sebold as

“one of a group” when her sense of survival was dependent on her own exceptionality. The tension between Sebold and Tricia can be read in different ways: Tricia can be seen as representing collective politics impinging on Sebold’s determination to construct a “neoliberal life narrative” or as Sebold representing a more authentic and embodied politics against what another survivor author calls “decades old” feminist rhetoric (Smith 2001: 190). Ultimately, the political point, I think, is in the tension itself, and its refusal of easy categorization or answers. As in individual survivor narratives, part of the ongoing narrative politics of feminism is to make meaning from these encounters rather than to uncover them, fully formed. To do this requires leaving behind the notion of experience as pure and authentic and the model of the critic as detective uncovering the ideological truth of the story.

Genre and the Collective Politics of Narrative

As Tanya Horeck (2004) argues in her book, *Public Rape*, feminist focus on the silences around sexual violence has resulted in neglecting the effects of the proliferation of discourse and speech about rape. In relation to survivor narratives, a focus on the silencing of survivors has led to a lack of attention to the history and effects of survivor narratives in the half century since the birth of the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This has also impacted understandings of outpourings of speech such as #MeToo where the public proliferation of survivor narratives is described as unprecedented despite the existence of prior cultural moments in which these accounts have achieved public significance (Gilmore 2017, Serisier 2018). The recognition of a genre of texts and a history to that genre is important for several reasons. It works against a historical pattern of cyclical episodes of speech and silence by holding onto and insisting on a context and history, and allows for and enables critical attention to and engagement with a history that includes patterns of speech, change, silencing, and backlash through what Leigh Gilmore (2017) describes as the historical legacies of “publicly doubting” women who speak about sexual violence.

It also enables a more considered appreciation of the relationship between individual texts and the genres and intertextual relations that enable and shape them. The dual role of enabling and constraining stories is famously described by Derrida (1992) as the law of genre, which both opens narrative space and operates through “authoritarian summons to a law of ‘do’ or ‘do not’” (224). To argue then that feminism has acted as a genre is to recognize the ways in which it enabled a new set of literary forms and social norms around sexual violence and survivor speech and to simultaneously recognize the constraining function of this speech. Equally, to argue that feminism sets limits on what stories can be told by women does not preclude acknowledging that feminism authorized the telling of these stories in the first place. There are no pure expressions of women’s experiences that have been silenced or forced into a feminist mode. Instead, the authorization and the limiting of speech occur simultaneously as part of the same operations of power. The difficulties in overwriting these generic conventions can be seen in the most basic of narrative practices, such as naming the event. Susan Brison, an American philosopher raped and beaten by a stranger while on sabbatical in a French village, writes of her unease with the implications of naming her experience as rape:

Using the word “rape” would have conventionalized what happened to me, denying the particularity of what I had experienced and invoking in others whatever rape scenario they had already constructed...People would think they knew what had happened if they labelled the assault that way. (2002: 90-91)

There are already powerful narratives of rape that pre-exist any individual attempt to tell its story and frustrate attempts to use the narrative to assert an individual subjectivity. However, an experience must be named if it is to be narrated at all. And any successful narrative must rely on its audience’s pre-existing understandings and socially established meanings. To refuse to label an experience as “rape” may deny the possibility of giving it any meaningful framework within the account of the author’s life.

Being attentive to this collection of texts as a genre that both enables and constrains certain types of narrative, and which might both reinforce and contest dominant discourses around sexual violence, enables a more attentive and nuanced form of critical appreciation. The genre of memoirs is as notable for the exclusions and gaps, the spaces that they do not open, as well as the spaces that they do. These gaps are most apparent in two areas: the types of stories told and who tells them. Survivor narratives are predominantly stories of stranger rape told by white, educated, heterosexual, able-bodied cis women. Reading the texts collectively thus illuminates an aspect of this politics about stories that remains untellable or more difficult to tell that reading any of the individual texts does not.

The predominance of narratives of stranger rape, told by white women, is central to understanding the genre and its political operation. It casts other traditions of storytelling around sexual violence as outside of the genre of rape autobiography and failing to acknowledge the variety of purposes that women's speech around rape may and have been used for. Stories of sexual violence were, for instance, key to foundational moments of the U.S. civil rights movement and to the activism of women such as Rosa Parks (McGuire 2010). They have also played a role in regressive political movements and moments such as Islamophobia in countries including Australia and France in the early 2000s (Grewal 2016). The predominance of stories told by white women in defining the collective meaning of survivor narratives has produced what I have elsewhere described as a reliance on the "epistemological primacy of gender" in these accounts and a blindness to the ways in which this works to erase the stories of women of color and over-investments in racially biased criminal justice systems (Richie 2012, Serisier 2018: 133). At its most extreme, it results in a generic boundary which is simultaneously a racialized boundary that constructs a genre of white women's writings.

Critics must both draw attention to these gaps and erasures and highlight the moments and movements that exceed and trouble these generic boundary-markings. Doing so requires recognizing the voices and stories of women of color particularly and finding ways to connect

stories marked as feminist to, for instance, the production of stories of sexual violence within the civil rights movement, without simply seeking to incorporate these stories. Tarana Burke has spoken extensively about the danger that “acknowledgement” and “erasure” may exist at the same time. She is clear that simply noting her foundational role in the story of “Me Too” is insufficient if it does not engage with her leadership and the history of her efforts and other community efforts to center the narratives of black and brown women and to make meaning from those narratives, rather than incorporating them within a genre of predominantly white stories while failing to complicate the overall meaning made from that genre (Serisier 2018: 102). Leigh Gilmore’s (2017) book *Tainted Witness*, which traces how women and their testimony become tainted socially and legally, similarly identifies and contests this tendency. Drawing throughout the book on narratives of black women, Gilmore enacts the lessons of writers such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1994) by centering the ways in which black women’s accounts are “tainted” in order to construct a general theory of how women’s testimony is disbelieved. Doing this leads Gilmore to make “Black Lives Matter” her concluding example of testimony against sexual and sexualized violence, destabilizing both standard generic boundaries and the political meanings that are produced from them.

Audience, Vulnerability and Solidarity

While much feminist work on speaking out has focused on the heroism of the speaking survivor and, in my case, her shaping of her story, perhaps the most fundamental contribution of feminism in constructing space for a genre of stories is in providing an audience willing to hear or read these stories and engage with them. The silencing of survivors is often represented in terms of force or the overt suppression of speech. A far more successful method of silencing is making the narrative itself unhearable, rendering the teller suspect and defining her speech automatically as lies or madness, a delegitimizing approach that has historically been used against survivors of sexual violence (Serisier 2018). In his famous essay on storytelling, Benjamin (2002:

149) also argues that modernity destroyed the figure of the storyteller by depriving him of a “community of listeners” able to offer time and attention to hear and respond to stories. Benjamin touches on the fact that listening is itself a form of work to enable storytelling; this work of listening and reading women’s narratives has been central to feminist activism and criticism. In the realm of social media, both the benefits and harms of listening have become even more evident. In her memoir *Know My Name*, Chanel Miller (2019), previously known as “Emily Doe”, attests to both forces. She writes of reading about her assault online and then of the effects of reading online comments minimizing her experience and defining her as the “nobody it happened to”: “The rage that had crackled and roared in my chest all morning had been reduced to a few dying embers in my throat... I wondered how in an instant my identity had been reduced to the blacked-out and raped woman” (45). In contrast, the response to her statement after it was published on *Buzzfeed* assisted her in constructing a new heroic version of herself: “I believe, out of the millions who knew I was brave and important, I was the last to know it” (250). Importantly, echoing Benjamin, Miller notes the significance of people “pausing” to read the statement. This is work that takes time.

The work involved in listening means that it is not always simply hostility or indifference that impacts one’s ability to fully listen. The story of surviving rape is a “hard story to hear” and harder to respond to, as survivor Migaél Scherer (1992: 84) writes of her attempts to talk to friends and family about her experience. This difficulty exists even for those of us with feminist commitments, as Tarana Burke (2013) eloquently testifies to when she locates the “inception” of the “Me Too” movement that preceded the hashtag in her own inability to listen to young woman of color who attempted to tell Burke her story of abuse: “She had a deep sadness and a yearning for confession that I read immediately and wanted no part of.” She writes that as Heaven began to tell her story, “I listened until I literally could not take it anymore...which turned out to be less than 5 minutes. Then, right in the middle of her sharing her pain with me, I

cut her off and immediately directed her to another female counselor who could “help her better.” Burke has said that she thinks about Heaven all the time because:

I could not muster the energy to tell her that I understood, that I connected, that I could feel her pain. I couldn't help her release her shame, or impress upon her that nothing that happened to her was her fault. I could not find the strength to say out loud the words that were ringing in my head over and over again as she tried to tell me what she had endured... I watched her walk away from me as she tried to recapture her secrets and tuck them back into their hiding place. I watched her put her mask back on and go back into the world like she was all alone and I couldn't even bring myself to whisper...me too.

As Burke makes clear here, the ability to say “Me Too” is based in part on a willingness to speak but perhaps in larger part on an ability to hear, to take the time and do the work of listening and providing an audience that can engage with another's story.

Burke's vignette also illustrates that even without listening we can know, or think we know, another's story. The stories of survivors sit within a genre that has created not only cultural space and rules but also audience expectations. Narrative is, as Susan Brison (2002: 62) writes in her memoir and philosophical reflection on her experience of rape, a “social interaction” where “what gets told is shaped by the (perceived) interests of the listeners, by what the listeners want to know, and by what they cannot or will not hear.” The effects of speaking out rely on this interaction, and on the efforts of the listener as well as of the speaker. And this interaction means that stories are never completely in the control of the one who tells them. As Alice Sebold (1999: 97) puts it in her memoir: “Magically I became story, not person, and story implies a kind of ownership by the storyteller”. To tell one's story is to insist that the author has the right to say who she is and tell her own story, a project that, as I make clear, is more complicated than it first appears. But it is also to participate in the broader cultural narrative that societies tell of rape, its realities, its meaning, and its significance, for both the individuals who

experience it and society. When the story is told by others, the victimized woman is placed solely in the position of character, trapped within the limitations of pre-existing narratives. As Sebold comments, this places the raped woman in a defensive position, attempting to counter the authority of others and their pre-existing stories. Writing of her struggle for control, Sebold (1999: 29) continues, “I was trying to prove to them and to myself that I was still who I had always been. I was beautiful, if fat. I was smart, if loud. I was good, if ruined.” The power of audience is particularly pertinent to the efforts of feminist literary critics who must be aware of the potential harms as well as benefits of positioning oneself as a particularly authoritative audience member. It is in this context that I turn to consider ethical criticism in the context of the narrative politics of speaking out.

Intertextuality is an inherent part of narration, and Lacy M. Johnson (2014) notes that for rape narratives, which are so saturated with social significance and contestation, there can never be a definitive account:

There’s the story I have, and the story he has, and there is a story the police have in Evidence. There’s the story the journalist wrote for the paper. There’s the story The Female Officer filed in her report; her story is not my story. There’s the story he must have told his mother when he called her on the phone; there’s the story she must have told herself. There’s the story you’ll have after you put down this book. It’s an endless network of stories. (177)

In telling her story, the survivor is uniquely vulnerable to other stories and to the rewriting or overwriting that is performed on her narrative. At the same time, the stakes of such narration are high: “This story tells me who I am. It gives me meaning. And I want to mean something so badly” (177). For survivors and for feminists, the narrative politics of speaking out does not come without risk. I argue that feminist politics cannot mitigate this risk by insisting on the purity or authenticity of women’s narratives or acting as though they do not take place within

generic rules and strictures. Rather, we must acknowledge that survivor narratives are not immune from literary tropes, intertextuality, and other rules of narrative.

Conclusion: Criticism as Narrative Political Solidarity

The narrative politics of speaking out recognizes that the experience of sexual violence can be used to generate knowledge and insight, which can be used to produce collective political analysis. As the feminist writer Susan Griffin (1979: 13) puts it:

[O]ne of the untold burdens of the survivor of rape is what she has come to know. She has been left holding the truth.... For her the world has changed. And in this understanding, she is isolated, because for us who have not been raped the world remains the same. We keep the fact of rape at the periphery of consciousness and do not let it bear on our vision.

To respect this means seeing the encounter between critic and author, both of whom may indeed share this “untold burden”, as a dialogue. Neither reifying the author’s narrated experience as an authentic artefact with assumed meaning nor seeking to uncover the potentially regressive discourses buried within it produces a dialogical encounter. As I have attempted to show here, these narratives, both singly and collectively, tell stories and engage in theoretical work, and as feminist politics has long acknowledged, at their best they may produce some of our most powerful conceptualizations of sexual violence and its structural role. A criticism that engages with these stories and authors on the levels of both narrative and theory is in the end the most effective way of engaging in critical solidarity.

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