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What Does It Mean to #BelieveWomen? Survivor Narratives, Audience and the Autobiographical Pact

Abstract:

The hashtag #BelieveWomen emerged on Twitter in the aftermath of #MeToo and the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court confirmation in 2018. I argue that the hashtag can be read as an attempt to counter the historical denial of women's narratives of sexual violence by restoring the autobiographical pact between a narrator who tells the truth and an audience who believes them. I contest criticisms of the hashtag as promoting unqualified belief and threatening due process to argue instead that an orientation towards belief is a necessary step towards offering survivor narratives a fair hearing and the possibility of a just outcome.

The hashtag #BelieveWomen emerged on Twitter in the aftermath of the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court confirmation hearings and the testimony of Christine Blasey Ford in 2018. The phrase was prominent at women's marches, on social media platforms, and in mainstream media, with the dating app, "Bumble" even publishing a full-page advertisement of the slogan in the *New York Times* (Gstalter 2018). In this chapter, I explore its significance, suggesting that if, in the current moment, #MeToo has become a dominant generic marker for survivor narratives, a signal, online and off, that a story of sexual violence is being recounted, #BelieveWomen has become an important marker of receptivity to these narratives, both individually and collectively. I consider the meaning of the phrase, locating it within understandings of autobiographical narratives, and examining the cultural contestations that surround it.

In my book, *Speaking Out: Rape, Feminism and Narrative Politics*, I outline the emergence of "speaking out" as a core feminist strategy to combat sexual violence, from the 1970s onwards (Serisier 2018; 2020). My argument in *Speaking Out* is that Anglo-American feminist campaigns against sexual violence rely on a distinctly "narrative politics". As the popular slogan, "break the silence, end the violence" implies, women's narratives of experience, told to shatter the taboos, mythologies and silences that surround the reality of endemic sexual violence, are seen as capable of transforming the social conditions that enable this violence to continue. This widely held belief in the transformative potential of experiential narratives of victimisation and recovery is what I refer to as the "narrative politics" that defines contemporary feminist approaches to sexual violence. In recent years, these narratives have become fundamental to the public and popular politics of feminism, and to social understandings of sexual violence.

While much feminist work to date, including my own, has focused primarily on the production and dissemination of these narratives, here I consider the narrative transaction as a whole, or what Lejeune (1989) refers to as the "autobiographical pact" engaged in by tellers of life narratives and their audiences. In return for autobiographical narrators undertaking to tell a "true" story they are offered belief and validation by their audiences. In the case of political narratives like those of the "speaking out" genre, "belief" becomes symbolic of a commitment to adopting certain values or even actions, a response that might be described as "witnessing" rather than simply hearing. In other words, if "#MeToo" signals the ongoing feminist priority of recounting and disseminating survivor narratives, "#BelieveWomen" draws attention to the fact that an autobiographical narrative must be heard and validated in order to achieve political effects. The phrase recognises that "breaking the silence" can only "end the violence" if narratives are heard, believed, and responded to.

I suggest, therefore, that using narrative theory to think about #BelieveWomen offers a useful insight into the politics of speaking out and the controversies that surround it. I attempt to draw out what is at stake in the exhortation to believe women, first through thinking through the framework of the autobiographical pact and its reorientation. In the second section, I make use of Gilmore's (2017) concept of the "adequate witness" to think about the kinds of demands and claims to identity involved in belief. I finish by considering the implications of two key contestations or objections to this politics. The first is the distinction that is drawn between "#BelieveWomen" and "#BelieveAllWomen", a dispute focused on the necessity of political and generic boundaries around the types of survivor narratives that should be believed. The second is the recurrent fear that granting authority and belief to women's narratives will have dire consequences, or that the exhortation to believe women goes too far, a classic backlash narrative, here projected as a fear of the power of women's stories of sexual harm. Throughout I use the lens of narrative theory, asking how it might help us to understand the cultural and political contestations that surround speaking out and contemporary feminist politics.

#BelieveWomen: Reorienting the Autobiographical Pact

Feminist analysis of speaking out focuses on the figure of the survivor-storyteller; her individual empowerment, and the social change that she produces. However, this change is equally reliant on an audience that is willing to hear and validate her story as true and meaningful. In work on autobiography, the narrative transaction between the storyteller and their audience is referred as an autobiographical pact (Lejeune 1989). Truth judgements, or the conferral of belief, are a key part of this pact. While external verifiability or "evidence" is often cited in discussions about truth, in most autobiographical transactions the audience does not have direct access to, nor do they seek, external verification. Instead, narrators make a truth-claim for their story by generically framing it as an autobiographical account, and in a successful telling, this claim is accepted by the audience. This pact lasts up to and until the

point that they judge the narrator to be unreliable or the story to be incredible, generally because it does not fit with what they believe they know of the narrator, or of the world, or of what "someone like the narrator" would do in their position.

Truth judgements are influenced by what Nünning (2008, 95) describes as "normative presumptions" of how the world is or how it should be. These presumptions operate within and enact the set of shared norms or beliefs that Roland Barthes (1977) referred to as *doxa*. Such beliefs structure our understanding of everyday happenings and our judgements of the reliability, both referential and normative, of autobiographical and other factual texts. Applied to rape, these beliefs include both common sense understandings of how and under what circumstances rape occurs and gendered beliefs about how women and men should and do behave. They are often referred to by feminists as "rape myths" because they bear little direct relation to the realities of rape (Medea and Thompson 1974). Rape myths are, in essence, archetypal cultural narratives that constrain the limits of what is hearable and the extent to which audiences and listeners are willing and able to find survivor narratives credible by seeing them as consistent with their understanding of the world. For instance, there is a strong cultural belief that rape is generally committed by violent strangers, whereas most sexual assaults occur between partners, acquaintances, and family members (Estrich 1987). Many of these myths enact victim-blaming narratives, focusing on the responsibility of women for inciting or provoking sexual violence, or on a supposed tendency for women to subsequently rewrite consensual sex as violence for reasons ranging from revenge for rejection to an unwillingness to accept the reality of their own desires. These *doxa* were also codified into law through, for instance, the famous warning by seventeenth century jurist Matthew Hale that rape is "an accusation easily to be made and hard to be proved, and harder to be defended by the party accused, tho never so innocent" (Ferguson 1987, 89). Versions of this warning were given to juries in many jurisdictions up to the 1980s.

In most cases of rape, the basic facts, who was where and with whom and even whether sex occurred, are not at issue. There are generally no eyewitnesses and forensic evidence cannot in itself determine if sexual activity was or was not consensual. Rather, in the majority of trials the law must differentiate between two different constructions of the "facts" into a story, in essence deciding whose narrative is most believable. Historically, this has meant that the law relies on existing gendered *doxa* to make this determination, and women's stories of rape have been greeted with suspicion rather than with the standard presumption of belief that structures the autobiographical pact.

As can be seen in Hale's warning, in autobiographical accounts, truth judgements have multiple dimensions. Belief is a matter of internal narrative plausibility, the narrative's consistency, the reader's understanding of extratextual realities, and, crucially, narrator credibility (Shen and Xu 2007). Each of these elements are intertwined, meaning that they can work to either bolster or undermine the other. In other words, judgements of autobiographical narratives always involve evaluations of the persons who tell them (Trinch 2003). In accepting the story as true, the audience both grants the factual veracity of the narrative and the reliability of the narrator as someone who is trusted to tell a true story of her life. To doubt the story, on the other hand, is to doubt the narrator and deny her authority to tell a story of her life that will be accepted by others. The refusal to grant truth status to an autobiographical narrative, therefore, does not merely enact the breaking of an autobiographical pact. It labels the author-narrator as unreliable and denies her construction of both reality and her self.

Autobiography is thus a site of vulnerability as much as authority, particularly for those subjects, like women and survivors of sexual violence, who have lacked historical access to the authoritative "I" of autobiography (Gilmore 1994). In narratives of trauma this vulnerability is enhanced both by the difficulty of telling and the potential for the original trauma to be compounded if a narrative is disbelieved or rejected (Smith and Watson 2008, 364). So, while

autobiographical narratives of trauma may be used by survivors as part of a project of reconstituting their subjectivity after a desubjectifying event, this relies on audiences responding ethically and "witnessing" the narrative, rather than subjecting it to evaluative scrutiny (365). Some narrators find that readers refuse to legitimate their narratives because they are too difficult to hear, because they are unwilling to take on the responsibility of witnessing or simply due to suspicion of the teller (Smith and Watson 2008, 366). This makes such autobiographical narration inherently risky, rendering "untellable" the stories of those for whom the risk of lack of recognition is too great (Norrick 2005, 136). If assessments of narrative reliability in fiction are always a "subjectively tinged value judgement projection governed by the normative presumptions and moral convictions" of the reader (Nünning 2008, 95), then this is especially true for autobiographical narrative of trauma where dis/belief may arise from a reader's broader political convictions rather than any inherent property of the narrative text. These risks are exacerbated for rape narratives which are both highly ideologically marked and often lacking external markers of verifiability.

It is for these reasons that contesting orientations of suspicion towards rape narratives has been a priority for feminist campaigners since the 1960s. As Gilmore (2017) writes, the "tainting" of survivor narratives with doubt is frequently achieved through impugning survivors and vice versa. To confront these processes, feminists, beginning in the 1960s, attempted to challenge the *doxa* or common-sense understandings that have surrounded sexual violence, and their perpetuation in legal and social discourses and institutions. "Rape shield laws", for instance, seek to restrict the types of questions that can be asked during cross-examination, targeting questions about clothing, previous sexual history, and other factors with little direct bearing on evidence but which exist almost solely to construct a narrative of the complainant as an unreliable narrator, through casting her as promiscuous, vengeful or in other ways untrustworthy (Bevacqua 2000). More broadly, feminists have worked to document and

evidence the barriers faced by women who seek to tell their stories, to strengthen their case for the urgent ethical need to grant a presumption of belief to these narratives, or indeed to reinstate them as part of bringing complainants within the wider norms of narrative (Serisier 2007).

There is a sense in which feminist efforts to compel belief are consistent with wider conventions of autobiographical storytelling and the efforts that narrators make to secure the autobiographical pact with their audience. Autobiographical narrators are generally cognizant of the criteria by which their narratives will be assessed and attempt to construct narratives that will be viewed as internally consistent, corresponding to an audience's perception of external reality and consistent with other accounts given by the author or by people like her. As autobiographical theorists note, this is commonly done by through recourse to referential truth, such as incorporating details of externally verifiable events or locations (Smith and Watson 2008, 359).

Narrators may also focus on experiential truth, expressed through recognisable affective, bodily and emotional responses. Here, narrators' sincerity, enacted through embodied symptoms of harm, can be more important in audience judgements of truth, particularly for narratives of trauma (Assmann 2006, 269-70). Feminists have used psychological evidence to document and assert the reality of rape trauma, making this form of truth increasingly important in judgements of survivor narratives (Gavey and Schmidt 2011). Feminist collective practice has also attempted to lessen the burden on individual speakers by asserting these truths collectively. From mass speak outs to hashtags such as #MeToo, one purpose and effect of multiple survivors telling similar stories is to shift audience expectations around for instance, what a typical experience of rape and its aftermath might look like. As Dawson (2020) notes, the sheer scale of #MeToo particularly, and the mass affective resonance it produced, bolstered the experiential truth status of both the individual and collective narratives produced.

These efforts by feminists have had effects on the reception of survivor narratives, with Leigh Gilmore (2017) locating a key shift in the early 1990s, marked by social contestation around the Hill-Thomas hearings in the US. Gilmore compellingly argues that the overt disbelief and victim-blaming which feminists had documented in the 1970s and 1980s became less tenable in the face of feminist assertion of the experiential truth of rape trauma and increasing cognizance among audiences of the systemic ways in which women's narratives of sexual violence were denied and dismissed. In short, overtly "disbelieving women" came to seem a form of narrative or epistemic injustice, leading notably to mass declarations, led by black feminists, that "I believe Anita Hill". In response, Gilmore (2017, 17) argues, new modes for "tainting" women and their narratives came into being, chief among them being the ascription of a form of radical indeterminacy encapsulated in the phrases "he said, she said" and "nobody knows what really happened". While these tropes enact a veneer of impartiality, it is only, argues Gilmore, in cases of sexual violence that "people feel virtuous, objective and fair" when they claim that the conditions that generally initiate investigations render them moot from the outset. The formulation places women's narrative outside of the domain of justice by refusing to bear witness to the experiential truth of harm and trauma contained in these stories.

The call to #BelieveWomen echoes the assertion of belief in Anita Hill, and the events surrounding #MeToo in 2017 equally mark an important moment of change and contestation in the reception of survivor narratives. A key element of this contestation, seen in the case of Christine Blasey Ford's testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee, was a rejection of attempts, primarily by the Republican party, to mobilise "he said, she said" and "nobody really knows" tropes. The epistemic injustice of these tropes was highlighted, despite Kavanaugh's confirmation, by events such as the rallies in support of Ford, the #BelieveWomen hashtag and even the placing of the full-page ad by a dating app.

A further illustration of the shifting attitudes to the "he said, she said" trope as a mode of discounting testimony can be seen in changing responses to Dylan Farrow' allegation of sexual abuse by her stepfather Woody Allen. In response to a 2014 open letter published by Farrow (2014) on a *New York Times* blog, the trope was repeatedly mobilised by actors who continued to work with Allen. Kate Winslet, for instance, declared "I don't know anything, really, and whether any of it is true or false", while Cate Blanchett referred to it as a private family conflict and not public business (Farrow 2017). In this period, Allen faced little in the form of direct professional consequences from Farrow's narrative. In 2017, however, Farrow (2017) published another column in the *LA Times* asking why her story had not been taken up as part of the #MeToo movement sweeping Hollywood. The response from celebrities over the next 12 months gradually shifted with increasing numbers affirming their "belief" of Farrow, including some like Winslet who admitted to having made "mistakes" previously (Miller 2020). For most, in contrast to the inaction or support of the status quo encouraged by the "he said, she said" trope, declaring a belief in Farrow led to commitments to no longer work with the director alongside gestures of reparation such as donating income from projects with Allen to sexual violence charities.

This shift did not emerge from changes in Farrow's narrative or new evidence or external verification. Rather, the emergence of the #MeToo movement had important implications for the reception of Farrow's narrative. Farrow's rhetorical strategy moved from a direct call to belief to locating her story within the newly emergent genre of #MeToo narratives and their amplification and validation of the experiential truth of individual accounts. If other stories were to be believed, and if this belief was to have consequences, she asked, why not hers. Because of their public commitment to "believing" and valorising the women who spoke about Harvey Weinstein and other related stories, actors such as Winslet were positioned as having a more active responsibility in relation to the narrative Farrow told. In 2014, these actors enacted

Gilmore's "he said, she said" response, positioning themselves as "fair-minded" and disinterested evaluators. In 2017, by contrast, they positioned themselves as witnesses, with an ethical obligation to hear and respond to the narrative. Actors like Winslet did not speak of having become convinced by evidence but of their previous response to the story as a "mistake" or failing on their part. The distribution of responsibility within the autobiographical pact had shifted away from an emphasis on the speaker to compel belief to a responsibility by the audience, particularly a directly interpellated audience, to grant belief and undertake meaningful action in response. To the extent that Farrow's story was accepted within the #MeToo genre it had to be granted consequential belief, and vice versa. This change was contingent on changes to both the identity work undertaken by the audience in relation to belief and to the classification of survivor narratives as part of the wider #MeToo genre. I address each of these elements in the subsequent sections.

From Audience to Witness: The Identity Work of Belief

If the #MeToo hashtag reflects a focus in feminist thought and activism on the speaking survivor and her story, the #BelieveWomen hashtag can be seen as a shift in focus onto the ethical responsibilities of the audience. It shifts the focus of the autobiographical pact away from the responsibility of the speaker or writer to compel belief to the need for an ethical orientation in the audience, which is characterised both by a subjective state of openness to belief and the need for that believe to be consequential. This form of audience response is often referred to as witnessing, where recipients of traumatic narratives are called by narrators to engage in a complex ethical act that recognises the harm done to the narrator, acknowledges the risks and significance of the narrative, and legitimates the narrator as a rational and truthful subject (Oliver 2001).

The exhortation to witnessing demonstrates that cognizance is not a neutral or innocent state divided between easily definable states of knowing and not-knowing. It challenges traditional

categorisations of autobiographical theorists such as Shen and Xu (2007, 47) who have divided readers into two categories: an "uncognizant reader" who "is not cognizant of the discrepancies between the textual story and the real personal experiences it is supposed to represent", and a "cognizant reader" who compares the textual world created by the author-narrator with their knowledge of the extratextual world. In this understanding, uncognizant readers have few resources with which to judge a narrative or narrator unreliable while cognizant readers engage consistently in judgements of reliability based on the narrative's consistency with intertexts by the same author and extratextual reality. Cognizance is in part a function of the reader's familiarity, culturally, geographically, and historically, with the world of the author-narrator. As Chambers (2002) argues, such familiarity leads readers to believe that they can imagine themselves in the story, and know how they would act, and thus, how an authentic protagonist would act.

Readings of survivor narratives are, however, more accurately based on competing claims to cognizance, with suspicious readings "tainting" women through claims to knowledge of women's tendency to lie, or, alternately, the knowledge that "he said, she said" situations are inherently unresolvable. For audiences sympathetic to survivor narratives, this is false cognizance based on *doxa* or rape myths that do not allow these narratives to be heard. The claim to #BelieveWomen thus asserts a cognizance *both* of the realities and reliability of survivor narratives and of the myths that underlie hostile reception. As I discuss in the final section, there are also more recent claims to yet another competing cognizance that asserts the political and legal impossibility of the #BelieveWomen stance, casting it as misguided while well-intended.

Belief, like doubt, is not a passive state for the audience. Credibility is constructed, or not, through the autobiographical interaction. To doubt or believe a narrative both require work, but often this work is done by reflexively drawing on and making use of existing *doxa* or "common

sense". As Tamar Yacobi (2008, 110) writes in relation to fictional texts, all narratives necessarily present "textual problems" for the reader, in the form of gaps, disruptions internal contradictions, or inconsistencies with the audience's extratextual understanding of the world. No narrative can contain everything within it or indeed answer every possible objection to it. The reader may use these problems to construct the narrator as unreliable and her story as uncredible. Or they may deploy "integration mechanisms" such as filling in gaps, reconsidering their own preconceptions, or focusing on the affective or subjective truth of the narrator. These processes and practices are different in autobiographical texts, but for accounts of rape particularly, the concept offers a useful way of thinking of the work done in believing or disbelieving an account.

This work is not performed solely in relation to the text or narrator, but, particularly in the case of intensely contested narratives like survivor narratives, becomes a kind of "identity work", constructing the reader or listener as a certain type of person (Cohen and Taylor 1992). To be the kind of cognitive reader who deploys integration mechanisms in relation to survivor narratives that facilitate belief is to cast oneself as part of a progressive or feminist counter-public working to change the conditions of reception for women's narratives (Salter 2013). It constructs the reader or listener as the kind of person who believes women. Gilmore (2017) describes as an 'adequate witness' who is listens to the survivor's story without "deforming" it by doubt or "substituting different terms of value" than those offered by the survivor herself. It is posited as a corrective or reparative response based in extratextual knowledge about the traditions of suspicion and belief that have confronted survivor narratives, basing belief in cognizance rather than credulousness. So, while the phrase #BelieveWomen argues that women should be listened to with the presumption of belief granted to most autobiographical narrators, it also suggests that we, collectively, should be different kinds of audiences, asserting an individual and collective responsibility to be "adequate witnesses".

This responsibility is seen in Kate Winslet's acknowledgement that she made a "mistake" in relation to Dylan Farrow's story. It was also evident in the case of another Hollywood actor, and vocally self-identified feminist and survivor, Lena Dunham. In November 2017, actor Aurora Perrineau, accused a writer on Dunham's show of sexual assault. Dunham immediately issued a public statement celebrating #MeToo but claiming that "insider knowledge" made her confident the allegation was one of the 3 percent of "misreported" cases, implicitly castigating Perrineau for making it harder for other women to be believed. Her statement garnered significant public criticism, particularly because of Dunham's previously stated commitment to believing survivors, and in December of 2018, Dunham wrote an opinion piece apologising for her "mistake" and appeared on stage with Perrineau's mother, publicly apologising for her "greatest regret" but also, her "greatest moment of evolution and education", stating that she had "learned to listen" (Dunham 2018). Dunham, in other words, reflected on the work she had done to become an "adequate witness" in order to perform her role in an ethical autobiographical transaction and maintain her identity as a feminist believer of survivor narratives.

Believing All Women and Generic Boundaries

Both the examples of Dylan Farrow and Lena Dunham raise questions about the boundaries and limits of belief. These questions have been perhaps most explicit in debates over the difference between #BelieveWomen and #BelieveAllWomen. The hashtag #BelieveAllWomen appears to be primarily used ironically by conservative and Republican critics of #MeToo seeking to label feminist, and especially Democratic, opponents hypocritical. It was widely used in 2020, following coverage of the allegations of sexual harassment and assault against then-Presidential candidate Joe Biden by his former staffer, Tara Reade. Numerous uses of the hashtag were variants on this tweet by author and columnist, Tim Young (@TimRunsHisMouth) '#BelieveAllWomen ... unless the accusation is against Joe Biden' (28

April 2020), while others such as journalist Mary Margaret Olahan (@MaryMargOlahan) used the hashtag to accuse feminist organisations of 'radio silence' on the Reade allegations (15 April 2020).

These allegations were by no means unsubstantiated. For example, conservative podcaster and journalist Steve Krakauer (@SteveKrak) tweeted an image of an opinion piece by Ruth Marcus (2020), author of a supportive book about Christine Blasey Ford, in which she concluded: 'My gut says that what Reade alleges did not happen. My head instructs that it is within the realm of possibility, and fairness requires acknowledging that' (16 April 2020). In the article Marcus (2020) focused on evaluations of the referential accuracy and consistency over time of Reade's account in ways that were clearly distinct from their response to Ford. Significantly, Marcus described 'credibility' as the 'biggest hurdle' for her believing Reade, describing Reade as a 'much different and less reliable figure' than Ford. In Krakauer's words: 'Ruth Marcus wrote an entire book about Christine Blasey Ford's allegations against Brett Kavanaugh, but it took an allegation against Joe Biden for her to conclude "I don't think what Reade claimed happened" and "#BelieveAllWomen was a dumb hashtag." Wow!'

Discussing the controversy, feminist author Susan Faludi (2020) described the slippage from #BelieveWomen to #BelieveAllWomen as a "right-wing trap". In contrast, I suggest that #BelieveAllWomen is indeed an impossible demand and the hashtag as used by Conservatives points to real questions about the boundaries and limits of belief, even if it is intended primarily as a trap. Discussions of belief and reliability are often framed in terms of an individual reader or listener approaching an individual text. However, as I suggest above, for autobiographical texts that, among other things, claim to be true and seek to compel belief, these judgements are based on wider understandings of the world and how we act within it. Ultimately, these understandings are built intertextually through other narratives and the expectations that they collectively establish in readers. So, when readers judge if a survivor's story of her experiences

and how she reacted to them sounds plausible they are judging this based on their understanding of its relationship to similar narratives. Ultimately, then, credibility and believability rely on generic conventions and expectations, and, as I have argued elsewhere, it was these generic conventions and expectations that feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s sought to intervene in (Serisier 2018). Rather than focusing on the obvious point that some women lie about some things some of the time, I suggest that thinking in terms of genre and generic boundaries not only helps to understand boundary-setting but opens the possibility of contesting the ways in which generic boundaries are established and maintained.

As Derrida (1992) has explained, however, genres are constituted both through the space that they create for certain stories and the boundaries that exclude others. Genres can neither be completely open nor closed but must always operate through processes of inclusion and exclusion. In other words, while the feminist claim is often that every survivor narrative opens further space for survivors to speak, these narratives also build up a set of expectations about what rape stories look like that cast some narratives as outside the genre. Feminist interventions did not, therefore remove generic constraints around credible rape narratives. They changed the criteria for inclusion and exclusion in ways that continue to privilege certain types of stories told by certain types of tellers. In my research on published "rape memoirs", for instance, I found that the genre of texts consists almost exclusively of narratives of stranger rape told by white, heterosexual women (Serisier 2018). This is not because of an absence of written accounts of sexual violence by women of colour, but rather because these accounts tend to be told as part of a broader life story which situates sexual violence within broader contexts of systemic sexism and racism rather than a uniquely terrible event within an otherwise good life, or what Susan Brison (2002, 111) describes as the "reverse conversion narrative" that dominates published accounts of rape. Similar patterns can be seen in the generic framing of #MeToo and other hashtag campaigns. Much of the attention to collective narration through

#MeToo has focused on what Yang (2016) describes as the primary narrative function of hashtags; the way in which the mass of stories function to authorise the meaning and value of individual narratives, making them harder to dismiss. However, most stories known and included under the hashtag are by relatively privileged white women, despite the origin of the phrase in community activism with young women and girls of colour. The generic boundaries of believable narratives continue to tightly mirror racial boundaries between women so that, for instance, in the initial wave of allegations against Harvey Weinstein, the only narratives he and his legal team directly contested were those of Lupita Nyong'o and Penelope Cruz, the first two women of colour to make allegations against him, while Aurora Perrineau, whose story was initially discredited by Lena Dunham, is also biracial (Wang 2017).

These generic boundaries are also drawn and maintained by those who claim to be protecting the genre or speaking on behalf of feminism. The commentators above, particularly Marcus and Faludi, sought to recuperate feminists from charges of hypocrisy by reasserting the necessity of maintaining generic boundaries based on legal criteria such as consistency and verifiability. In noting Reade's support at different points for Bernie Sanders and Putin, Marcus also implicitly raises the possibility of bad faith narrators using rape stories to pursue other ends. As noted above, in her original statement Dunham also castigated Perrineau for making what she saw as a vexatious claim because "women outside of Hollywood still struggle to be believed".

Feminist writers such as Hadley Freeman (2020) from the *Guardian* defend Woody Allen on different generic grounds. He is unlike Harvey Weinstein or Bill Cosby because there is only one unproven allegation against him and therefore his inclusion risks trivialising or contaminating the genre. This claim relies both on a lack of acknowledgement of the systemic failings of criminal law in this area and on widely held misconceptions about sex offenders as pathologically driven to repeatedly offend. In perhaps the most contested of public #MeToo

moments, the anonymous story published about comedian Aziz Ansari was dismissed, again by avowedly feminist commentators such as CNN news anchor, Ashleigh Banfield, who claimed this was not a story of harassment or assault but a "bad date", noting that the appropriate location for such stories is private. She allows that the anonymous woman known as Grace should "warn" her friends about Ansari but not speak publicly. Indeed, she declares that, in telling a generically inappropriate story publicly, Grace has "chiselled away at a movement that I, along with all of my sisters in the workplace, have been dreaming of for decades" (CNN 2018).

What is significant in each of these instances, is that the stories which are deemed "outside" of the genre on the grounds of changing over time, being unsubstantiated, a single private allegation, or a blurry area of consent, are in fact, more representative of women's stories of non-consensual sex than those that are allowed within the generic confines. #BelieveWomen can only ever be an attempt to shift rather than erase generic boundaries, but the terms on which those boundaries are erected and maintained is an important site for critical scrutiny. When conservative critics accuse feminists of engaging in an insupportable erasure of generic boundaries the ensuing debate may obscure the fact that far too frequently, the generic boundaries imposed in the #MeToo era replicate those of earlier eras that were more overtly dismissive of survivor narratives. In the final section, however, I consider conservative critiques in more detail, suggesting that debates about believing too many women sit within a wider anxiety about the reordering of autobiographical pacts around survivor narratives. Particularly, this anxiety focuses on the consequences of belief and particularly of granting excessive authority to the stories that women tell about sexual violence.

Going too Far? Backlash and the Shifting Terrain of Narrative Politics

Writing about the early 1990s, Leigh Gilmore (2017, 10) examines how a new politics of women's speech around date rape and sexual harassment led to the production of "new forms

of doubting women in public" that sit alongside older modes of doubt and disbelief. These new modes eschewed older overt disbelief in favour of a performative even-handedness that continued to refuse women the authority to tell stories that would be believed and acted upon. Here, I suggest that the post-#MeToo era has similarly produced a new form of doubt which allows that women's stories reveal a real, historical problem, but that the balance of power has shifted too far. This position accepts monstrous figures like Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby, with multiple "credible" allegations against them, as legitimate targets for speech and consequences. Whilst acknowledging that a limited set of valid and legitimate stories of violence should be responded to, those who contest the exhortation to #BelieveWomen also argue that the generic boundaries of believable stories are overly capacious, and that women's narratives have been granted excessive punitive power. In other words, if society used to be marked by unwarranted doubt and suspicion, it is argued, it now faces the consequences of untrammelled belief.

Perhaps the most common critique made is that narratives are labelled as stories of sexual violence when they are really stories of romance and flirting, or, in the case of Aziz Ansari, "bad dates". A notable example of this was the open letter sent in January 2018 to the French newspaper *Le Monde*. In it, a group of 100 prominent French women defended the "right to pester" and accused American feminists of reinscribing stories of heterosexual romance as stories of violation with women rendered victims and men criminals (Chiche et al. 2018). These attempts to reinscribe generic boundaries between sex and violence or harassment frequently rely, as Laura Kipnis (2018) has noted, on the "hand-on-knee" trope. In this allegory, the knee signifies a minor anecdote of flirtation or harmless attention, with the marker of a significant story resting somewhere between the lower and upper thigh, but often with even further caveats. For instance, tthe upper thigh must be touched by a stranger not in a venue such as a bar or nightclub to pass the generic threshold from legitimate flirtation to illegitimate

harassment. The sense that there may be positives to rethinking our stories of heterosexual romance is generally absent from such critiques. Narratives of male pursuit and female gatekeeping are instead rendered sacrosanct, with the only imaginable alternative being a ban on stories of sexual or romantic frisson.

The claim that romance itself is under threat resonates with long histories of warning against the danger posed by granting disproportionate credence to survivor narratives, represented most clearly in the Hale warning cited above. Wendy Larcombe (2002) argues that warnings against women lying about sexual violence hide a more fundamental fear. She notes that both legal and social narrative judgements recognise the possibility of lies and other forms of untruth. This is why judgements of credibility, reliability and verifiability play a role in the reception of narratives that claim to tell a "true" story and ask the audience to believe that story. Rather than a fear of lying, Larcombe argues, the cautions around women's speech about sexual violence speak to a fear of their persuasive power and the consequences of belief. Because legally and socially, sexual violence is considered an abhorrent act requiring significant redress, women's stories of sexual violence are seen to be powerful affective weapons. The spectre of the lying woman is not, therefore, a threat simply because she lies, but because her lies are seen to demand an affective and legal response. They are, in both the #MeToo era and before, seen to pose an immediate danger to individual men, but, more broadly, and collectively to the functioning of society as normal.

In the post-#MeToo era, this punitive power is often cast as exercised not only against alleged perpetrators of violence, but against men as a class. Exhortations to perform an adequate witness to these narratives are also recast as disciplinary and potentially punitive to anyone who questions them, including feminists. Self-described dissident feminist writers such as Laura Kipnis (2017) portray themselves as saying the "unsayable" against the power of "inquisitions" and "witch hunts", only slightly more able to speak than men who are completely

silenced. Katie Roiphe (2018) similarly speaks of "whisper networks" of frightened feminists who worry that feminist activism around #MeToo has gone too far but fear the consequences of saying so publicly. #BelieveWomen is redefined from an ethical imperative to counter the doubt that has accompanied women's narratives to a punitive interdiction against public discussion and debate about survivor speech and its consequences. In essence, this framing reinforces the need to check and inhibit the exorbitant power of women's narratives, often referred to in allusions to due process. The implicit message behind these critiques is one that is supportive then of the status quo, insisting that the dangers of shifting orientations of belief to women's narratives far outweigh any benefits.

In contrast, some feminist commentators have raised questions about the consequences of belief in ways that seek to engage with the call for adequate witnessing. Commentator Rebecca Traister (2020), for instance has argued that #BelieveWomen is a "compelling but flawed" slogan because the inference that women should always be believed has "enfeebled the far more important argument that we should encourage them to speak more and listen to them more seriously when they talk". This can be read as another way of calling for the enactment of the autobiographical pact in relation to survivor stories and, indeed, for more adequate witnessing of women's speech generally.

In the lead-up to the 2020 Presidential election, feminist writer Linda Hirshman (2020) framed the issues at stake differently in an opinion column for the *New York Times* which declared: 'I believe Tara Reade. I'm voting for Joe Biden anyway.' She argued that a focus on a binary of belief and disbelief forced those who wanted to support Biden to cast 'a reasonably credible complainant as a liar'. Instead, she argued that she, and others like her, should accept the 'ugly moral choice' of believing Reade and voting for Biden anyway: 'Compared with the good Mr. Biden can do, the cost of dismissing Tara Reade — and, worse, weakening the voices of future survivors — is worth it.' In explaining her choice, Hirshman herself engaged in selective

narration, referencing Biden's role in drafting the *Violence Against Women Act* but not his complicity in discrediting Anita Hill in his role as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee which ultimately confirmed Clarence Thomas (Gilmore 2017). Her contribution can still, however, be read as a recognition that recasting the autobiographical pact away from an attitude of suspicion to women's narratives of rape still leaves open the ethical and political question of precisely what the consequences of that belief should be. That is a question, I suggest, that can only be adequately posed and answered after giving a just and fair hearing to women's narratives.

Conclusion

In this chapter I suggest that any engagement with the narrative politics of survivor discourse must focus on the transactional nature of the autobiographical pact and the conditions under which survivor narratives are heard and granted or refused belief. Belief in this context is not an "objective" assessment of factual validity and subjective veracity. Rather it encompasses an orientation to narratives that eschews automatic suspicion and engages with the ethical and political obligations that belief places on the reader or listener. It is in this sense that the hashtag #BelieveWomen offers an important case study, highlighting the complexity of a politics of belief, its impacts on the identity and role of the audience, and the impossibility of a universal project of belief. Proper attention to belief also, I suggest requires consideration of these consequences in terms of individual ethics and public politics. All of these elements, I argue, play a role in the narrative transactions that surround and structure contemporary survivor stories and their reception.

I suggest that, at its best the project of #BelieveWomen raises questions about the necessary preconditions for justice and a just hearing of narratives of violence. The concerns that critics raise about due process and the rights of those about whom stories are told are not irrelevant to this investigation. It is, however, only if and when the legitimacy of shifting the

autobiographical pact away from automatic doubt and tainting of women's narratives is accepted that the concerns and questions raised by critics can be addressed in good faith. To call for a return to the status quo is to accept a reality where narratives of sexual violence are systemically denied adequate witness. As Gilmore (2017) rightly insists, we cannot accept this as being labelled "just and fair" in the case of sexual violence when we refuse to do so elsewhere. Neither are questions of justice fully answered through a call to belief. Bearing witness may sometimes entail a grappling with the systemic nature of injustice and a lack of easy or simple solutions. Resolving the epistemic injustices of disbelief that surround survivor narratives is best seen as a step in the project of an adequate witnessing of survivor narratives.

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