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He Said/She Said: Truth-Telling and #MeToo

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"He Said/She Said: Truth-Telling and #MeToo" analyses how the conversation about sexual violence changed when millions of women worldwide raised their voices to say "Me Too." It historicizes the #MeToo movement within feminist activism in communities of colour around sexual assault advocacy and in relation to Anita Hill's testimony in 1991 that Clarence Thomas sexually harassed her. The #MeToo moment offers a clear representation of the scale of sexual violence and presents a vivid example of the power of testimony to conjure a scene of witness through the power of truth-telling. Leigh Gilmore argues that truth-telling is dynamic and that survivor speech in the form of #MeToo has disrupted the routine minimization of women's accounts of harm into the "He said/She said" pattern.

In the middle of October 2017, the conversation about sexual violence changed when millions of women worldwide raised their voices to say "Me Too." In response to allegations of sexual abuse in Hollywood, including serial predatory behaviour by producer Harvey Weinstein, actor Alyssa Milano reawakened the power of a simple phrase: "Me Too." The #MeToo movement did not come out of nowhere. In 2007 African American activist Tarana Burke started the #MeToo movement as part of a grassroots organization supporting women and girls of colour who are victims of sexual assault.¹ This simple phrase has previously been shared privately between survivors of sexual assault and their advocates.² #MeToo acknowledges the power of shared experience and the identification it fosters as the basis for empathy. #MeToo, with and without the hashtag, was shared by 12 million Facebook users in the first 24 hours after Alyssa Milano's October 15th tweet.³ For many, this was the first time they had ever spoken out about sexual violence in a public forum. It represented the first time others realized the sheer number of those whose life histories included sexual violence. The #MeToo moment represents a vivid example of the power of testimony to conjure a scene of witness. Those who speak and those who hear are transformed into a new relation through the power of truth telling. Those who were silenced spoke, witnessing their voices amplified by the collective force of millions. Those who had not previously been aware became witnesses not only to sexual violence, but also to the ways in which they contribute to systems that enable sexual violence to persist.

I have been writing about self-representation and vulnerable subjects for long enough to suspect that the new openness to survivor testimony represented in the #MeToo moment might be brief. Previous episodes of tolerance to survivor testimony, as with incest survivors in the 1980s, established a pattern of initial curiosity mixed with the possibility of empathy that quickly led to skepticism. Too soon, scandal arises along with cries of false accusation and worries about due process, hastening the collapse of further widespread conversation. Testimonial moments are always vulnerable to being derailed when new subjects encounter old judgments in the arena of truth-telling. Longstanding patterns of doubt and discrediting are easily revived, so I gave it a week, maybe two, before the window

would slam shut. I hoped that would be long enough to raise new awareness about the pervasiveness of sexual violence in women's lives, to move the conversation beyond Hollywood, to catalyse a widespread discussion about power, gender, work, and race that started and then stalled in 1991 in the U.S. when Clarence Thomas was seated on the Supreme Court and Anita Hill's powerful testimony of how he had sexually harassed her when she worked at the EEOC was silenced.⁴ Instead, the conversation is continuing. From Hollywood to Washington to Silicon Valley, from academia to athletics and the media, powerful men are losing prestige, jobs, and the air of impunity that previously encircled them. Women and men in the U.S. are learning to speak in new ways about sexual violence and abuses of power.

In any testimonial moment, it is essential to ask: How are the dynamics of truth-telling and gender shifting? Men have long been able to invoke the 'He said/She said' tactic when accused of sexual abuse or harassment. Doing so places the thumb of doubt on every woman's side of the scale of justice. It worked for Clarence Thomas against Anita Hill. He said/She said gives any man an outsized ability to smear any particular woman's credibility, because women are routinely doubted in a way that is not true of plaintiffs in other kinds of criminal cases. In part that's because people believe that they simply want to give both sides of an argument equal weight and that such even-handedness is a hallmark of justice. But as salutary as such a belief is, it does not square with the application of justice to victims of sexual harassment in virtually every kind of work place and to victims of sexual assault, especially the most vulnerable: Indigenous women, women of colour, young people, and trans people. Scales of justice tip toward the empowered, not only in the outcomes produced, but also in the attribution of doubt to victims of sexual violence. Woven into the application of justice is a cultural bias that says women are not as reliable as men, that they lie about sexual violence, "cry rape" when they regret sex, or just don't understand that boys have to be boys sometimes. He said/She said thrives in the presence of unequal power, unequal credibility, and unequal doubt. Importantly — and this accounts for some of the staying power of this public conversation — by amplifying the collective power of survivor speech, the "Me Too" movement dilutes the threat of retaliation against any individual woman.

#MeToo disrupts He said/She said. The pattern of centring the discussion on a single act of sexual assault or harassment has been replaced by a flow of allegations against numerous perpetrators. The scale has altered. Even when one man is the focus, there are many, many other men who have been accused in reliable and verifiably sourced stories in credible journalism. We do not see the pattern of an array of attorneys and other enablers of an accused man facing off against a single woman, as we did with Anita Hill, where a lone woman is isolated in her accusation and suffers additional abuse in the form of reputational destruction. Instead, as more women come forward to offer highly credible accounts against specific men, women's voices are amplified. The massive number of women sharing #MeToo certainly exposed the scale of women's experiences of sexual abuse, but the generic quality of the hashtag also enabled participation by offering safety in numbers. Given the ubiquity of how women are trolled and shamed online, the ability to participate without naming any particular victimizer meant that specific women were not silenced. The powerful act of affiliating as a survivor opened a door for longer, specific accounts to emerge. A few days after Alyssa Milano's October 15 #MeToo tweet, I was invited onto a call-in radio program to discuss sexual harassment. As women called in with their stories, I was struck by how many of them began, "The *first* time I was sexually abused ..." There was so much

pain, carried over a lifetime, exacerbated by silencing, that poured into the public square. From youth to maturity, from school to work and home, from entry level to high level management jobs, on swim teams, at church, and just walking home, it is clear that women's lives are marked by the persistent threat and experience of sexual abuse, as well as retaliation or disbelief if they come forward. The personal stories bear witness to the chronic trauma women carry from the actions of abusers and from the doubt expressed by the people they tell, including the people charged with pursuing justice.

The #MeToo movement has also made its way into popular culture. For example, the chronic exposure to the pervasive presence of sexual violence in women's everyday lives was recently highlighted in a Saturday Night Live skit entitled "Welcome to Hell," that depicted the façade of femininity as a candy-coloured fantasy scape in which women look permanently girlish with their lip gloss, ponytails, and blank stares, but sing about the ubiquity of sexual violence in the "hell" that men are now shocked to learn about in the #MeToo moment. In a sing-song voice, host Saoirse Ronan ventriloquizes the male complaint about having the truth of sexual violence unmasked — "Now *House of Cards* is ruined/And that really sucks" — and introduces in the collective voice of "us" what is ruined for women: "Well, here's a list of stuff that's ruined for us" — as the female cast sings this list: "Parking/And walking/And Uber/And ponytails/Bathrobes/And night-time/And drinking/And hotels/And vans." The litany of what is ruined for women is a list of triggers so interwoven into daily life that literally no place is free from reference to the pervasiveness of risk and inclusive of women's required and habitual adjustment to it. As this skit suggests, the #MeToo movement paved the way for exposing and articulating everyday sexual violence in the lives of women.

It is hardly an accident that the persistence of "me too" is rooted within the current political climate in the U.S. We can't underestimate the impact of the election of President Trump, a man who had bragged about sexual assault, and whose stalking of Hillary Clinton in the "Nasty Woman" debate shook many. The Women's March and the scale of global, voluntary assembly the day after his inauguration were signs of how angry women are about a culture that allows sexual abuse to continue without holding perpetrators accountable. Along with providing a forum to voice women's anger, the #MeToo moment has initiated a new moment of accountability. One wonders if it will reach the White House.

Abuse interrupts women's careers, harms our health, and shatters our faith in institutions. As I argue in *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives*, having survivor speech ruled permanently under suspicion, permanently at odds with the truth creates a pervasive and persistent culture of doubt. The blunting of He said/She said is a powerful step forward for women. But it is a movement with more to do. Many of the people in the spotlight, both abusers and victims, have been white celebrities or public figures. He said/She said must be disrupted for women of colour, too, with histories of feminist advocacy and organising centred in discussions of sexual violence. Further, the environments in which male abuse of power flourishes must be exposed as the same environments in which racism and homophobia persist.

As the #MeToo movement makes clear, truth-telling is dynamic. It often arises within some enabling constraint related to rules of evidence or judgment, or comes into view as a social relation tied

to an institution, like the law or a work culture with its own norms of behaviour. Rather than standing alone and apart, confirmable in its accuracy, observable by all, truth also often takes the form of ethical promise. Truth is what we pledge to another and, in this way, creates a bond through its performance. Truth-telling entails doing, but it creates the possibilities of undoing, including undoing those who speak truth to power and the grounds of credibility on which they stand. To tell the truth is to profess a fidelity on which one can rely. But as a matter of law, truth-telling requires interpretation of the person giving testimony. When evidence is presented — a weapon, for example, a photograph of a scene, or of bodily injury — it cannot speak in its own voice. But when testimony is evidence, when the witness speaks in their own voice, interpretation is informed by bias about who can tell the truth, who is prone to lie, and about what. The millions of survivors are showing how those denied access to the self-possession of the first person can enter the social field of representation to bear witness to sexual violence.

New witnesses emerge as credible in new configurations of power and within shifting forums of judgment. Social media has democratized survivor speech and because news and entertainment media are so fully enmeshed, celebrity reporters are now covering sexual violence and raising consciousness about power and coercion. Currently, we are all tasked with understanding MeToo as a form of witness. I wonder how much truth we will allow ourselves to hear.

Notes

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>

² <https://thewalrus.ca/after-metoo-the-fear-of-failure/>

³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/metoo-more-than-12-million-facebook-posts-comments-reactions-24-hours/>

⁴ In *Tainted Witness* (2017), I argue that Anita Hill's testimony in 1991 inaugurated a new era of doubting women in public.

Author Biography

Leigh Gilmore is the author of *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (Columbia UP 2017); *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Cornell UP 2001); *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Cornell UP 1994); and a co-editor of *Autobiography and Postmodernism* (U Mass P 1994). Her articles on life writing, feminist theory, law, trauma, testimony, and graphic narrative appear in *SIGNS*, *Feminist Studies*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *Biography*, *a/b: Auto/biography Studies*, *Profession*, *Prose Studies*, *Law & Literature*, and *American Imago*, among others, and in numerous collections. Along with Elizabeth Marshall, she is co-author of *Girls in Crisis: Girlhoods and Social Justice in Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (Fordham UP forthcoming). She has been Professor of English at The Ohio State University and Dorothy Cruikshank Backstrand Chair of Women's and Gender Studies at Scripps College, and has held visiting appointments at UC Berkeley, UC Santa Cruz, Northeastern University, Harvard Divinity School, and Brown University. She is currently Distinguished Visiting Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Wellesley College. She writes for the online journalism platform *The Conversation* and has appeared as a guest analyst on sexual harassment and the #MeToo campaign on the PBS News Hour, National Public Radio, and *Boston Globe*, among other outlets.