

Preface

I first heard about #MeToo from a friend who, in mid October of 2017, had seen actress Alyssa Milano's blog post and tweet encouraging women to 'shout' their own experiences of harassment and assault using the hashtag 'MeToo'. Milano wrote, 'If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write "me too" as a reply to this tweet . . . 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' (Milano 2017).

The disclosures came hard and fast. They began with a simple retweeting of #MeToo, but then transmuted into more detailed confessions ranging from the specific, in which women named particular workplaces as well as their assailants, to the more general, which tended to describe the incident(s) but leave other details out. Experiences ranged from quotidian – e.g. being accosted on a bus or catcalled – to ones that were more severe, such as rape, stalking and sexual assault. The widely publicised and shocking cases of actor Bill Cosby and Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein had propelled Milano to do this (she notes the idea came from a friend of hers and later credits activist Tarana Burke for starting the hashtag years earlier – more on this later):

I thought, you know what? This is an amazing way to get some idea of the magnitude of how big this problem is . . . It was also a way to get the focus off these horrible men and to put the focus back on the victims and survivors . . . That was basically it . . . I looked down at my daughter, sent the tweet, and went to sleep not knowing it was going to snowball. (Sayej 2017)

This snowballing produced what was initially referred to as a moment (i.e. the #MeToo moment) and later a movement. While I provide more details about the impact and scale of #MeToo further on, it bears signposting here that the #MeToo Twitter space quickly became a locus through which women felt able to dismantle the silence and stigma that surrounded their experience of gender-based violence, challenge the impunity of their assailants, draw attention to the ways in which the criminal justice system had failed them, and cultivate a sense of solidarity with women who had experienced similar violations (Alaggia and Wang 2020; Clarke 2019). Sarah Miller refers to this as a form of 'epistemic refusal', wherein women are

encouraged to craft their own 'space for epistemic, ethical, and political community between survivors of sexual violence by denying hegemonic epistemic discourses of contemporary rape culture' and, in doing so, subvert more formal modes of disclosure while also calling for the criminal justice system to do more and do better (Miller 2019: 13).

As the months went on, I followed the movement's progress and grappled with whether or not to disclose my own #MeToo story. I then began to think more carefully about the trends towards consensus on a number of issues relevant to the movement, two of which are particularly relevant to this book – namely, agreement on what constitutes permissible sex and conformity on the ideal outcome of any disclosure. For #MeToo advocates, consent is the primary barometer of sexual permissibility. As I argue throughout the book, consent norms have shaped cultural beliefs and legal standards governing women's sexuality for decades. They see the female body as the site on which the yes and no of consent is inscribed, fought over and maintained. This organising dichotomy, I argue, is at the heart of contemporary approaches to sexual relations as well as #MeToo. While there have been attempts to contextualise and complexify consent, I maintain that it is a rather impoverished model of sexuality – one that fails to leave sufficient room for a more robust, capacious and representative understanding of how sex occurs in practice. I argue that sex is full of greyness, is contextual and norm-busting, and challenges hegemonic assumptions around liberal subjectivity, rational communication, symmetrical power relations and transparent desire (Murray 2018; Baer 2018).

However, consent discourse has never been static either. It has morphed over the decades to include affirmative consent, enthusiastic consent and communicative consent and has given rise to related concepts like sexual autonomy, sexual integrity and sexual citizenship. It was from the study of these divergences that I then began to construct what I believe is a more commodious approach. From these frameworks, the following assumptions became evident: first, that sex is not a discrete act but one that reflects an assemblage of values and norms, discourses, relations, bodies, laws and affects; second, that any analysis of sex must account for power differentials vis-à-vis gender, race, class and sexuality; third, that we need to identify the structures that continue to oppress 'women's everyday lives' and constrain 'their sexual desire[s]' (Calogero and Siegel 2019: 1,697); and fourth, that sex is a boundary-breaking act that is difficult to litigate due to its merging of performance, risk, danger, vulnerability and pleasure (Kitrosser 1996). I call this new approach the 'pleasure and care-centred ethic of embodied and relational sexual Otherness'.

The second observation I made from closely following the #MeToo movement was with respect to how carceral forms of punishment constitute the preferred outcome for most #MeToo advocates (Mack and McCann 2018; Gruber 2019). I found this to be particularly curious given #MeToo's purported objectives such as consciousness raising, social transformation, repair and justice (Gilbert 2017). I felt uneasy about the carceral turn #MeToo had taken (as did Tarana Burke, I return to this later): one that is focused on individual perpetrators rather than structures; punitive punishment instead of understanding and transformation; and state-led processes over grassroots initiatives. Even more confusing was that the very same women who supported #MeToo also purported to support Black Lives Matter (#BLM) even though their visions of justice were often diametrically opposed (i.e. incarceration versus prison abolition). Alison Phipps describes some of what we see emerging from #MeToo as a form of 'white feminism' – one that focuses on sexual violence and patriarchy at the expense of racial capitalism, colonialism and 'alternative forms of accountability and governance that are not based on domination, hierarchy and control' (Phipps 2020: 163).

From these frustrations, I constructed an alternative approach – one that incorporates the 'pleasure and care-centred ethic of embodied and relational sexual Otherness' model of sexual ethics I mentioned above into a robust practice of restorative justice. Restorative justice is an approach to justice that brings survivors and offenders together in order to repair harm. Taken together, I contend that these two frameworks bring us closer to fulfilling the objectives of #MeToo while also allowing an anti-racist and anti-heteronormative conception of justice and sexual ethics to take hold.