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Me Too, Feminist Theory, and Surviving Sexual Violence in the Academy

Laura A. Gray-Rosendale, ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020. 268 pages. $95 hardcover.

Caroline Dadas

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BOOK REVIEWS

Laura A. Gray-Rosendale, ed. **Me Too, Feminist Theory, and Surviving Sexual Violence in the Academy**. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020. 268 pages. $95 hardcover.

In a recent interview promoting the release of her memoir, *Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement*, Tarana Burke, the founder of Me Too, reframes the question of what the movement has accomplished. "People ask, 'In four years, what has MeToo done?' What people mean by that is they're taking score. 'Oh, well, you had Cuomo. That's, you know, one for you. Oh, Cosby got let out. That's one you lost.' The MeToo tennis match. And I'm like, 'The question is: What has MeToo made possible?'" (Jodi Kantor, "The Surprising Origins of #MeToo," *The New York Times*, 10 Sept. 2021).

Over the course of thirteen chapters, the edited collection *Me Too, Feminist Theory, and Surviving Sexual Violence in the Academy* offers insight into what the Me Too movement has made possible. The experiences laid bare in these chapters stand as a testament to the importance of sharing survivors' stories of sexual assault and violence. In her introduction to the collection, editor Laura Gray-Rosendale argues that as a result of the Me Too movement, "survivors' voices are being heard more often on television shows, at protest rallies and speak outs, as well as at academic conferences across the country" (1). Gray-Rosendale cites a "turn in public discourse" made possible by Me Too, as evidenced by the significant number of popular and academic books addressing sexual violence that have seen publication in recent years (1).

The collection complicates several salient concepts that are often invoked with Me Too, including consent, coercion, and trigger warnings. Although the notion of consent is often presented as a mechanism for ensuring both parties are comfortable with a sexual act, Lena Ziegler argues that in practice, consent is not straightforward. As she writes, "problems come with the assumption that *yes* always means *yes* and does not account for the fact that there are many reasons, beyond those involving her own sexual desire, for why a woman might say yes" (57). Among the reasons Ziegler mentions, coercion and emotional manipulation represent two ways that partners can use social pressure to gain an insincere form of consent. In her chapter, Donna Potts uses her own experience with an abusive partner to highlight the dangers of "coercive control," a term that refers to instances where a woman is not physically harmed, but her partner attempts to control aspects of her life in order to keep her in the relationship. Recently, Congresswoman Cori Bush has spoken about the role coercive control has played in her life (Melena Ryxik and Katie Benner, "What Defines Domestic Abuse? Survivors Say It's More Than Assault," *The New York Times*, 22 Jan. 2021). In using this term, both Bush and Potts are helping to normalize public conversations about experiences that often are not given the attention they deserve because they do not meet the threshold of physical violence. Finally, a familiar concept to most readers, trigger or content warnings have become standard on course syllabi in recent years, used by faculty as an acknowledgment that students arrive in their classrooms with trauma. In an appendix to her chapter, Lynn Z. Bloom advocates against the use of trigger warnings, arguing that they are too "reductive, restrictive, and simplistic" (145). While I found Bloom's rationale to be overly concerned with the logistics of offering alternative readings to students should they opt out of course material, I concur that trigger warnings warrant increased attention in scholarly literature. I was pleased to see the collection taking up these particular issues and believe this volume will prove a useful resource for further theorizing these and other pertinent concepts.

Several chapters address one of the more common criticisms of Me Too: that it places occurrences such as street harassment on the same plane with physically violent acts such as rape. In a beautifully structured chapter, Sally J. Kenney argues: "Those who theorize about violence against women urge us not to disaggregate the effects of multiple incidents of sexual harassment (Schultz 1997) or separate women's experience of domestic violence from their experience of street harassment and violence perpetrated by paramilitaries (Menjivar 2011). We need to contextualize such events as neither individualized nor private but mutually constitutive—more than cumulative but synergistic" (108). Kenney's urging that we view harassment and violence as synergistic offers us important direction for how we might negotiate the criticism that Me Too loses its force when addressing anything short of physical violence. Given that most women have experienced some degree of harassment, we need to further theorize how the most mundane instances of harassment prop up and feed into a complex system of misogynistic attitudes, only some of which result in physically violent acts. Echoing this perspective, Katrina M. Powell's fine chapter "Layers: Academia, Autobiography, and Narrative as Refuge and Struggle" focuses on her experience of being raped by a classmate at the United States Air Force Academy; she concludes with a section titled "End Matter," where she generates a list of assaults—not all of them physical—she has experienced during her life. Her list powerfully demonstrates the accumulation of trauma over the years, the "layers" of occurrences ranging from physical violence to suggestive gestures to lewd comments. It is a reality that resonates with many women. Powell's choice of a simple list format illustrates the cumulative nature of harassment, where one incident is layered upon the previous one, compounding trauma upon trauma over the course of a lifetime.

Two recent historical events loom large in this volume: the election of the 45th President of the United States in 2016 and the elevation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court in 2018. Although the former President's name is not often invoked, his destructive influence hangs heavy in the air. The frequent mention of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testimony at Kavanaugh's confirmation hearing emphasizes the impact both of Ford's courage and of the crushing final result: credible accusations against Kavanaugh that did not prevent him from being elevated to a position of extreme influence. Many contributors write about Ford's and Kavanaugh's testimonies triggering memories of past trauma. Ford's memorable line about certain details of her assault remaining "indelible in the hippocampus" is invoked by multiple chapter authors as a powerful example of how trauma and memory function (that is, some details are forgotten while others remain "indelible"). Ari Burford's urgent chapter title, "My Grandfather Is Dying, Kavanaugh Just Got Appointed Supreme Court Justice, and I Should Probably Not Tell You These Stories" reflects the gravity of the current moment. While multiple high-profile men have faced repercussions due to their predatory behavior since 2017 (the year Me Too gained widespread attention), a candidate who was recorded snarling "grab 'em by the pussy" won the presidency only five years ago.

This book represents a strong addition to the literature around sexual violence and how it exists within contexts of race, sexuality, and class. The title of the collection refers to the contributors' collective reflections on how their traumatic experiences affected their futures in the academy. However, not all of the sexual violence mentioned takes place within the academy. (Though chapters by Donna Potts and Melinda Mills devastatingly highlight how the academy has long harbored men with predatory intentions, allowing them to remain shielded behind scholarly reputation, tenure, and political influence within their respective fields.)

So, what *has* Me Too made possible? As demonstrated by this collection, the movement offers survivors new avenues and language for discussing their sexual trauma. While the long-term effects and resilience of the movement will be debated in the coming years, the discourse around the impact of misogyny on women's lives is finding increased scrutiny. As this edited collection illustrates, sharing stories of past trauma is an act of political courage. If women's experiences are to be given epistemological weight, women's stories must be present in the public sphere.

In solidarity with the authors of these chapters, and inspired by Powell's chapter, I conclude by offering this incomplete list of my own "layers" of harassment:

- Age 7, kissed on the mouth by the dinner host three successive nights while on a Disney cruise (before I asked my dad to tell him to stop).
- Age 13, told by a middle-aged man in the foursome I was caddying for that the standard caddy shorts I was wearing showed off my legs.
- Age 17, accosted by a man who passed me in Chicago's Loop and started yelling about my breasts.
- Age 20, whistled at by a car full of men while walking on campus with my roommate. When we shared the incident with her mom, who was in town visiting, she responded that we were lucky because some women "never get that."
- Age 33, told by a senior male colleague as he passed me in the hall that I was one of the prettiest women in my department.
- Age 41, leered at by a male doctor who made comments about the appearance of my body.

Caroline Dadas
Montclair State University

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Rosanne Carlo. ***Transforming Ethos: Place and the Material in Rhetoric and Writing***. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2020. 216 pages. $24.95 paperback.

Rhetorician Jim W. Corder spent a considerable portion of his lifetime developing a way of writing that was both scholarly and personal at the same time. Corder's style evolved over the decades from very conventional prose to a carefully crafted theory of generative ethos that was both embodied and enacted throughout his later works—he quite literally practiced what he preached. Corder believed the short answer to rhetoric's most basic question—Why do we listen to some people and not to others?—is *ethos*, and he spent the majority of his professional career grappling with ethos and writing about and practicing varieties of ethical argument. Ultimately, Corder believed it was impossible to fully separate or exclude the personal from any writing. Instead, he argued that ethos is revealed in the blessed particulars of our lives and that our capacity to persuade or, more importantly, to transform both ourselves and others rests in the ability to explore and talk about those particulars.

In *Transforming Ethos*, Rosanne Carlo uses Corder's perspective as the jumping-off point as she seeks a (re)examination of ethos and discusses how its revival "can begin to shape our thinking about writing and its teaching" (4). However, she expands Corder's perspective significantly, drawing on a range of contemporary voices within and beyond the discipline. Carlo argues that engagement in the material realities surrounding our lives and our students' lives affords the opportunity to (re)consider the educational experience and (re)explore "the