

Big Reputations: Who Has the Power to Speak #MeToo?

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THE #METOO MOVEMENT TOOK A NEW TURN IN AUGUST 2018, WHEN *THE NEW YORK Times* published an article about a Title IX investigation into the conduct of New York University Professor Avital Ronell (Greenberg). As the article detailed, allegations of sexual assault and harassment were raised against Ronell—a queer-identifying woman and highly respected philosopher—by Nimrod Reitman—a gay-identifying man and former PhD student of Ronell’s. Intensifying the notoriety of the case was the circulation of a letter defending Ronell signed by established feminist thinkers including Judith Butler, Joan W. Scott, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among other high-profile academics.

In providing a character reference for Ronell that called upon her intellectual regard, the letter echoed testimonies of ‘reputation’ often provided in cases of alleged sexual harassment or assault. That such a method is frequently used *against* women, and was in this case being *deployed* by feminists, deepened the distress circulating in discussion of the case in the media/online. The case raises questions around whose voices can be heard in unfolding #MeToo activism.

Keeping this new #MeToo backdrop in mind, informs how we might engage with Rosalind Smith’s reflections on ‘cultures of complaint’ and Laura Kipnis’ work *Unwanted Advances*. Smith clearly outlines the expert rhetorical strategies utilised by Kipnis to sway the reader’s judgment of Title IX cases in favour of

those male Professors accused of harm. As Smith outlines, also with reference to Helen Garner's work *The First Stone*, the techniques ordinarily utilised in true crime writing help to establish a narrow identification with the defendants of these stories.

Smith reflects on the tales told by Kipnis and Garner as 'genre fiction' rather than 'fact', to highlight the pathos mobilised by the texts that distorts readings of the cases. As Smith suggests, *Unwanted Advances* 'exemplifies how effective Kipnis is as a rhetorician' (2). Smith also notes how Kipnis and Garner shift the concern for victimhood onto the accused, 'In these contemporary complaints, the gender of the weeping plainant is reversed' (6). Smith is pointed to note that these interventions flip the feminist script by defending (accused) men rather than (victimised) women. We might understand this in terms of what Sara Ahmed (Ahmed) has called the 'feminist killjoy', that is: those who point out the problem, become the problem.

Yet, in the wake of the Ronell case, we are called to rethink our emphasis on gender in the first place: perhaps what needs greater attention is who has the power to speak? Who has the power to mobilise accounts of the 'truth'—whether that be the accused, Kipnis and Garner, Ronell's defenders, or otherwise—and who does not?

That Ronell and Reitman both identity as queer/gay, adds a stickiness to the story of sexual assault and harassment that does not map easily onto many of the narratives around #MeToo offered since its inception. Among the many responses to the Ronell case, feminist theorist Lisa Duggan controversially suggested:

My hypothesis is that queers are disproportionately charged [under Title IX], often by homophobic or sexually confused students, sometimes by queer students whose demands for 'special' treatment are disappointed. (Duggan)

Along these lines Duggan argued that the harassment Reitman accused Ronell of, was merely symptomatic of a form of queer intimacy. Duggan's argument bolsters the vilification of the victimised here. Yet we might also note her point about the ways debates around sexual assault and harassment play out, which give hyper-focus to the misdeeds of women, queer persons, persons of colour, and other marginalised individuals. Duggan suggests that the letter defending Ronell was not feminist hypocrisy, so much as an indication that not all feminists have the same response to how #MeToo-type accusations should be adjudicated and resolved.

If we read Duggan alongside Kipnis and Garner, we may see that the very same rhetorical dynamics play out that skew toward defending the accused who *already* occupies a position of power. It seems that *power* is the missing ingredient in much of these discussions and analyses, that is often called upon but remains under-theorised at best. Smith acknowledges that Kipnis overlooks institutional power, and instead emphasises the erotic possibilities of power. According to Kipnis, that there might be a power differential between professor and student may be part of the excitement of the encounter. Yet, as Smith points out, Kipnis and Garner paradoxically invest accusers with the greatest amount of power—the power to both seduce and to accuse.

While power is distributed in gendered ways, responding to stories of sexual assault and harassment via the lens of gender alone does not do justice to the dynamics at play. We may want to take on board Duggan's point that punishment is distributed in ways that skew toward vilifying queer persons, but we should question her approach to the Ronell case specifically for the erasure of power dynamics between Professor and student that it implies. Like Kipnis and Garner, Duggan and defenders of Ronell reverse the script of the 'weeping plainant', yet, in the latter case this is not about gender but rather preserving existing lines of power. Some of the reactions to the Ronell case have argued it demonstrates 'it's still possible for women to oppress men' (Goldhill). But these reactions too do not manage to break with the narrative set up by Kipnis and Garner, where the emphasis remains on gender and the power women might wield, rather than unpacking the institutional dynamics that might lead to questionable and uneven relations in the first place.

While Duggan suggests an intersectional approach is needed, how might we extend her critique in ways that also account for the forms of power that defenders of Ronell (and Kipnis and Garner alike) seem unwilling to address? How then must we rethink #MeToo? Importantly, Smith suggests that #MeToo is a powerful movement because:

Rather than narratives of woe that dramatise betrayal and impotence, complaints against sexual harassment have become effective grounds for change, ending the careers of powerful men across a range of industries by exposing their histories of sexual offence. (1)

Smith's generous reading of the possibilities of #MeToo emphasises the impact of the movement on 'powerful men', yet perhaps this needs revisiting as 'the powerful'. This would be to reconsider what the structure is behind the accused misdeeds in question, rather than locating the issue in *masculinity* itself, as is often tacitly (or overtly) suggested.

This doesn't mean we should ignore the gender dynamics that have revealed themselves en masse through #MeToo discourse. As feminist sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters suggested in her controversial piece for *The Washington Post* 'Why can't we hate men?':

For all the power of #MeToo and #TimesUp and the women's marches, only a relatively few men have been called to task, and I've yet to see a mass wave of prosecutions or even serious recognition of wrongdoing. (Walters)

Walters' point here is that although we may take intersectional and/or transnational feminist views that seek to understand the subtleties of sexual assault and harassment, incontrovertibly the majority of violence and harassment is committed by men. Intriguingly Walters is now the subject of a Title IX complaint because of expressing these views. As an opinion piece in *The Washington Times* reported: 'Man-hating professor slapped with sex discrimination complaint' (Chumley). Such characterisations merely reinforce the figure of the 'man-hating' feminist killjoy, who is made into a scapegoat for sexism. As Ahmed asks,

Does the feminist kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy? (582)

All of this goes to say that we ought not shy away from pointing out moments of sexism in fear of becoming the 'killjoy'. Yet, it is also to say that to truly 'expose the bad feelings that get hidden', we may need to dig deeper than our current two-dimensional gender mappings of sexual assault and harassment allow.

As Smith rightly points out Kipnis and Garner, as master rhetoricians, create narrow visions of the 'facts' and work to create 'communities of sympathy' (7). Yet, these speakers also hold the power to speak with authority, to have their voices heard, and indeed use this to defend men who also have the authority and platforms to tell their stories. That the #MeToo movement online has opened space for more people to take a platform and have their voice heard, is one thing. To acknowledge the institutions and structures that inform who has the power to abuse their position in the first place, is another.

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