
MeToo and the Problematic Valor of Truth

Sexual Violence, Consent, and Ambivalence in Public Pedagogy

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Introduction: The #MeToo Movement

THE PHRASE “ME TOO” was coined in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke as a way to signify the pervasiveness of sexual violence to other survivors, particularly young women of color living in poverty (Me Too, 2018). #MeToo became a viral social media phenomenon in 2017, when actress Alyssa Milano re-Tweeted a friend’s suggestion that “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, n.p.). The movement has precipitated ongoing public discourse highlighting the ubiquity of rape, assault, and sexual harassment of women, and some men, around the world. The revolutionary action of #MeToo is not necessarily a call to protest, but the “uncovering of the colossal scale of the problem” (Gilbert, 2017, n.p.). Burke (2017) insists that it not be reduced to simply a hashtag, but rather conceived of as “the start of a larger conversation and a movement for radical community healing” (n.p.).

In this paper, we theorize #MeToo as an educational movement, showing how the celebrity cache of the movement, its online, viral nature, and its mission of uncovering and exposing truth all position it as an example of public pedagogy. We argue that, by placing a premium on truth-telling, #MeToo presents a counternarrative to an era, associated in large part with the Trump presidency, when the believability of veneer matters more than facts in history or science.

At the same time, we argue that an analysis of #MeToo as an educational movement reveals certain challenges. For example, and perhaps foremost, #MeToo has shown, through its lack of palpable sequelae on the political stage, that sometimes truth does not lead to change. The confirmation to the U.S. Supreme Court of Brett Kavanaugh following accusations of sexual violence is one piece of evidence that truth, laid bare via public pedagogy, has limited reach when

it comes to the disruption of embedded power structures. We will argue that precisely these limits, combined with and sometimes facilitated by the celebrity and viral cache of #MeToo, reveal a disconnection between public pedagogy and legislative, political, and cultural change. There is only so much, in other words, that truth-telling can accomplish.

We further argue that #MeToo as a public pedagogical movement reveals the inevitably complex relationship between education and consent. Public pedagogy, and ultimately much of formal education as well, occurs absent the consent of the reader or student. It is nearly impossible to turn away from the headlines, and that is both the power and the paradox of the movement. We discuss the ways that #MeToo forces itself upon audiences, including how this might ultimately limit its uptake and power. We use this discussion to show that education actually has a precarious relationship with consent, since it actually relies on compulsory participation. A student might resist but cannot really say no. Recognizing that, in this way, both formalized education and public pedagogy subvert the primacy of consent, we assert that a public pedagogical movement oriented around consent is inevitably ambivalent in outcome and reach.

This paper begins with a more detailed overview of the #MeToo movement, including its history and its ongoing, shifting goals and implications. We discuss our own underlying assumptions about #MeToo and education, defining the terms most central to our argument and articulating our positionality. Next, we offer a brief literature review of scholarship about sexual violence, particularly related to consent, and we discuss the most central public pedagogy theory that we draw on. We go on to offer up two key texts linking #MeToo with education for analysis. Finally, we discuss our two overarching conclusions about the relationship between #MeToo and education. We show how the ambiguous power of #MeToo exemplifies some impotence to truth and public pedagogy in the face of monolithic extant power structures. We further argue for the need for educators—including public pedagogues—to examine our inevitable complicity in overriding consent, portraying, via the complex and problematic public pedagogy of #MeToo, the lack of a binary distinction between what is and what is not permitted entry to public consciousness.

An Overview of #MeToo

In this section, we offer an overview of the #MeToo movement and its predecessors. We also examine the celebrity dimension of the movement and consider the implications of the movement's digital presence and virality.

The #MeToo movement is described as being intended to catalyze cultural and legislative transformation around sexual dominance and violence (Me Too, 2018). The mission describes the power of speaking out and truth-telling in contributing to such a catalysis.

The me too movement has built a community of survivors from all walks of life. By bringing vital conversations about sexual violence to the mainstream, we're helping destigmatize survivors by highlighting the breadth and impact sexual violence has on thousands of women, and we're helping those who need it to find entry points to healing. Ultimately, with survivors at the forefront of this movement, we're aiding the fight to end sexual violence. We want to uplift radical community healing as a social justice issue and are committed to disrupting all systems that allow sexual violence to flourish. (CMSW, n.d., n.p.)

What begins as words of empathy and solidarity evolve here into a rallying cry for a radical anti-violence movement. By drawing public attention to the prevalence of violence against women, #MeToo works first toward destigmatizing survivorship, then creating pathways for individual healing, and only then, for some, undergirding radical, political change.

#MeToo has precedence in other online movements promoting solidarity around gender-based violence with similar political aims. In 2014, the hashtag #YesAllWomen began trending in response to the misogyny that motivated the mass shooting in Isla Vista, California (Lovett & Nagourney, 2014). In this incident, Elliot O. Rodger killed six people in a rage directed against women for rejecting him sexually. As some Twitter users distanced themselves from the systematic violence underpinning the killer's online rants and manifesto by suggesting that "not all men" participated in gendered violence, others used the hashtag #YesAllWomen to shed light on the ubiquity of misogyny and violence against women in their daily experiences. In her 2014 *New Yorker* article on the #YesAllWomen phenomenon, journalist Sasha Weiss shared the fear and anxiety she experienced when a man began to masturbate in front of her in a subway station. As she made sense of this experience while the hashtag began to trend, Weiss came to understand that the structure of a Tweet specifically makes it an impactful tool for activism. Weiss (2014) noted,

There is something about the fact that Twitter is primarily designed for speech—for short, strong, declarative utterance—that makes it an especially powerful vehicle for activism, a place for liberation. Reading #YesAllWomen, and participating in it, is the opposite of warily watching a man masturbate and being unable to confront him with language. #YesAllWomen is the vibrant revenge of women who have been gagged and silenced. (n.p.)

Weiss proposes that, if sexual violence silences women in the moment, online spaces create the conditions under which that silence and its concurrent shame can be overturned because they are, at least ostensibly, safe. If one cannot call out their assailant in the darkness of a subway station for legitimate fear of physical violence, one can do so publicly on social media, backed by a chorus of women who have lived through the same. The digital environment is anonymous enough to create a semblance of safety yet offers just enough exposure to allow for the formation of a meaningful community for many.

The prevalence of hashtag activism in response to sexual violence reinforces Weiss's theorization; strong, clear statements of the truth of sexual violence can now be read, and easily searched, in the hundreds of thousands on the internet. Communications scholar Lokot (2018) explains, "Affective resistance discourses...emerged in opposition to discursive silencing and normalization through frank, personal, lived stories shared freely" (p. 814). This line of thinking, reiterated in both popular and scholarly discourses, creates the sense that #MeToo and its corollary movements proliferate the truth— affective as well as event-based truths spoken openly and with a clear and meaningful purpose for speakers as well as audiences. In other words, the fact that #MeToo emerged and became strengthened specifically via the tools wrought by the digital age is not accidental. As Lokot (2018) points out, the digital environment allows for a particular kind of conversing: posts, reposts, comments both short and long, and quick branching off into peripherally related topics. Earl and Kimport (2013) have discussed the significance of online activism, pointing out that digital movements are often lower cost in both time and money than in-person organizing. They also describe the ways in which online movements can gain traction

quickly, even in the absence of physical proximity. This potential for physical remove, if not anonymity, has been especially important in #MeToo, as survivors may not want to be “seen” as they share traumatic stories. It has also enabled the movement to proliferate across geographic and, to some extent, racial and socioeconomic boundaries (Haynes & Hangyu, 2018; Soliiman, 2018).

In spite of this, of course, celebrity has been an undeniable part of #MeToo’s rise to prominence. As a well-known actress, Alyssa Milano was able to leverage her status and followership to make a decade-old message by an African American community organizer go viral. Her Tweet also came about a week after a litany of female celebrities publicly accused film producer Harvey Weinstein, creating an online buzz about sexual violence that informed the success of Milano’s tweet. The 80 women who came forward to accuse Weinstein of rape, harassment, and assault, while certainly victims, had louder, stronger, and more publicly honored voices than many precisely because of their celebrity status.

While online movements like #MeToo and #YesAllWomen have originated in the United States, they have both garnered international attention and echoed other international efforts, often also digital, towards solidarity among survivors of sexual violence. In the year after the #Me Too movement went viral, it was searched for on Google in 196 countries around the world (Langone, 2018). Other movements have originated elsewhere and echo the same shared truths. For example, in 2016, Russian activist and journalist Nastya Melnychenko started the Facebook hashtag #IAmNotAfraidToSayIt to share her own stories of sexual violence and to encourage others to speak up about theirs in an effort to make the problem more visible. Melnychenko wrote in her original post:

I want us, women, to talk today. To talk about the violence that most of us have lived through. I want us to stop making excuses and saying “I was wearing gym clothes during the day, and still got pawed.” We don’t need to make excuses. We’re not to blame, those who violate us are ALWAYS to blame. I am not afraid to speak out. And I do not feel guilty. (Melnychenko, 2016, n.p.)

#MeToo as a movement relies on the same ideology of “the personal is political” (Hanisch, 1969/2006) that has been fundamental to much late-20th and 21st century feminism, while also creating the conditions to move these conversations, albeit imperfectly and with a tremendous privileging of Western sensibilities, towards a more international, intersectional, and inclusive dialogue. Rodino-Colocino (2018) suggests that, rather than thinking of digital feminist activism as reflecting new issues in the lives of women, a new “wave” of feminist discourse, we might consider them as an opportunity to highlight sexual violence as a persistent, intersectional issue and, by extension, an opportunity to problematize “grounding feminist solidarity in white, middle-class, US-centric, heteronormative privilege” (p. 1113). This formulation echoes Earl and Kimport’s (2013) notion that, in some ways, digital movement building can be more accessible than other kinds of organizing and change.

So, is a #MeToo post an act of protest exactly? Social media can be a means by which individual experience bleeds into social experience. This tension is not only between the personal and the political, but between the personal and the collective. On these lines, Lokot (2018) would argue that the digital movement certainly has the power of protest. Her theoretical work takes up the belittling of social media or of personal experience stories as acts of resistance. She argues that conversations about the everyday reality of sexual violence, occurring in the networked, affective, and public space of social media “can emerge as viable forms of networked feminist activism and

can have a discernable impact on the discursive status quo of an issue, both in the digital sphere and in society at large” (Lokot, 2018, p. 803). Similar consideration of the transformative potential of social media for contending with sexual violence has found that these digital social spaces can be read as “counterpublics” that serve both an educative and a critical purpose for young women beginning to encounter the reality of rape culture (Sills et al., 2016).

#MeToo answers to many of these characteristics; testimonies of individual women have spiraled into a movement, one steeped in affective resonance that has arguably led to social, but not legislative and political, change. For example, power structures in Hollywood and in many American workplaces have been reexamined as a result of the movement, more women have gained positions of political power as male perpetrators have been ousted, and workplaces across the country have more seriously taken up the need for sexual harassment training (CNN Business, 2018). As Lokot (2018) points out,

everyday talk about politics and rights is powerful because it relies on framing political narratives around people’s own experiences, shaping how social media users might discuss political events or issues in highly personal ways. Crucially, citizens on social media are not only able to hear or see others’ stories, but to add their voices to those already present in these spaces. (p. 807)

#MeToo has functioned as an example of social media’s tremendous reach—and pull.

Clark (2016) and others in affect theory (e.g., Ahmed, 2013; Berlant, 2011) show that, for feminist activists and issues, narrative form and dramatic, affective performance and testimony are and always will be central to the practice of resistance. Thus, as feminist hashtag movements weave intimate truths into wider social stories, those who reflect on the impact of these movements see them as operating on two fronts. First, as acts of “vibrant revenge” against individual perpetrators of sexual violence, #MeToo has provided a space for public language in response to private acts where language may have been unavailable to a victim in the moment or rendered inaccessible in response to trauma (Salvio, 2017; Weiss, 2014). The impact of these public acknowledgements can be seen in the legal and social actions taken against those individuals accused of violence and the precipitous downfalls of celebrity perpetrators like Weinstein. Second, #MeToo as a broad movement creates conditions under which responsibility for sexual violence can be understood as a social and institutional problem.

The movement has the potential, as Rodino-Colocino (2018) reminds us, to work from the ground up to “challenge the systems of power that underlie harassment, discrimination, and assault” (p. 96) through the promotion of affective solidarity amongst survivors and a public truth-telling that “counters the othering, distancing, and ultimately the unequal relations of power that sexual assault symptomatizes and reinforces” (Rodino-Colocino, 2018, p. 99). Within this paper, we focus, as the #MeToo movement itself has focused, on violence against women and, specifically, sexual violence. At the same time, we acknowledge that the definition of “women” is utterly contestable (e.g., Butler, 1990) and that the kinds of power-laden violence exposed most vehemently by this movement affect people of varying genders and sexual identities.

Statement of Positionality: #UsToo

As feminists and as curriculum scholars, we believe in the significance of positionality, understanding where we fit in relation to our subjects or subject matter (e.g., Lather, 2001). Positionality is connected to but not synonymous with subjectivity; while both concepts underline the importance of personal experience and voice, positionality deals specifically with the need to render (albeit limitedly) conscious the ways personal subjecthood impacts scholarship, interpretation, and overall relationship to research materials. In addition to describing our positionality, we also use this section to clearly define some of the terms we use most often throughout the paper.

Neither of us quite remembers how we came to learn that the other was a survivor or if it was something we just always knew. Maybe this was because a pretty high percentage of women fits that description or maybe because of something about how we participated in discussions, held our bodies, played with ideas? We met as doctoral students in a curriculum theory course, and somewhere, buying snacks before class maybe, one of us might have mentioned it, casually, and the other might have smiled and said—about four years before the phrase went viral—“Oh yeah, me too.”

It is a dicey paragraph to write, though. “Rape survivor” is a tenuous identity for each of us. It calls so much into play and into question, and writing an article that publicizes it carries an intricate constellation of emotions and regrets. We write with a certain defensiveness, daring you to question our truths even as we work to critique the movement with which they have become associated. As we write, we long to show that we are not the identity we simultaneously claim. We also understand, based on statistics, that a certain percentage of our readers share this aspect of our positionality, and that may make our work either more or less frustrating to encounter. These contradictions frame our work.

In part because of our own survivorship and long journeys toward sharing our truth with any confidence, we start with the assumption that people who say they were raped are telling the truth. We make this statement explicitly because our discussion also takes up the difficulties and ambiguities of truth, its limitations, and, to some extent, its contradictions. None of these eventual arguments, though, belie our conviction that, in general, people do not lie outright about being raped or assaulted. In fact, we find it disturbing that in the current political climate—that associated with the post-truth era taken up in this special issue—this even requires careful explication.

Another assumption that we make is that, while all people can have aggressive feelings and commit acts of aggression against each other, those who rape and assault others and cannot admit this or even gesture toward reparation ought not to be in positions of ongoing, publicly-sanctioned power. Therefore, though this paper tries to make sense of the legislative impotence of #MeToo, we find it abidingly nonsensical, appalling, and traumatic that U.S. President Donald Trump and Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, among others, have attained and maintained positions of tremendous power even in the face of accusations against them and a refusal to accept their implications (Kavanaugh, 2018; Merica, 2018; Reilly, 2018).

The concept of post-truth in politics predates Trump’s election, and it initially implied a political era “in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation)” (Roberts, 2010, n.p.). Harsin (2015) further describes post-truth politics as associated with strategic application of rumors and emotive appeals to manage economic and political outcomes. Trump’s election, the Brexit vote in the UK, and the rise of right-wing and nationalist politicians globally have all been theorized as related to

post-truth politics (e.g., Cassidy, 2018). Many of Trump's arguments, for instance, are utterly disconnected from facts, so his appeal is based in capitalizing on emotional response and the human capacity to believe a person with power. *New Yorker* writer Cassidy (2018) sums it up succinctly, "Donald Trump has been lying for so long now, and on such a regular basis, that it is easy for people to get blasé about it" (n.p.). The post-truth era, then, is one where facts no longer matter, and we show how #MeToo has tried to re-center truth in public pedagogy while retaining the post-truth era's highlighting of emotions as their own sort of (highly compelling) truth.

Public Pedagogy and Bearing Witness

The literature on public pedagogy offers evidence for our reading of the #MeToo movement as an example of public pedagogy (Cassidy & Clarke-Vivier, 2016; Sandlin, Burdick, & Rich, 2017). In order to engage in this sort of analysis, though, it is first important to delineate precisely what public pedagogy is and why and how #MeToo is pedagogical.

The field of public pedagogy research has a long history, and the term public pedagogy has been applied to a wide range of educational research in curriculum studies, cultural studies, and feminist and other critiques of popular culture (Sandlin, O'Malley, & Burdick, 2011). In an effort to respond to calls for public pedagogy researchers to clearly define their use of the term, and to illuminate the theoretical underpinnings that inform that usage (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013; Sandlin et al., 2011), we begin by defining public pedagogy, situating it in the field of critical culture studies, and reviewing literature related to the understanding of online and other public pedagogical movements that contend with communicating systematic and institutional violence.

Public pedagogy is the educative work that operates in extrainstitutional spaces, sites of learning that operate "beyond formal schooling and...[are] distinct from hidden and explicit curricula operating within and through school sites" (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 338). We build our understanding of public pedagogy on a reading of the literature that frames popular culture and media as places where ideas about sexual violence are both reinscribed and challenged (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013; Giroux, 2000), acknowledging that media artifacts in particular can be linked to "processes of social domination" (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 343) and, conversely, may be used in counterhegemonic ways.

Cultural theorists like Henry Giroux understand that popular cultural spaces like the internet and magazines described here are sites of socialization, but that our encounters with them do not necessarily yield an acquiescence to the problematic or hegemonic ideas that may be depicted therein (Giroux, 2000). The potential for resistance occurs in both individual and mediated interactions with movements like #MeToo. Simon (1992) and others have described public pedagogy as indelibly political practice. In Simon's work, pedagogy is a deliberate attempt to organize, disorganize, and otherwise influence experience. Cassidy and Clarke-Vivier (2016) draw on Simon to further show how public pedagogy in online activist space can involve the telling of new stories to engage marginalized voices and the retelling of old stories to disturb and disrupt familiar narratives.

Narrative is an important part of public pedagogy, as "telling, retelling, and reflecting on stories in a critical way can help us determine who is excluded, who is implicated, and how we can situate others and ourselves and differently" (Cassidy & Clarke-Vivier, 2016, p. 14). By extending the concept of pedagogy into the public sphere and across cultural sites, individuals interested in social change might employ a wide variety of texts, including Tweets, in service of

political goals. Cassily and Clarke-Vivier (2016) juxtapose Simon's theory to Zembylas' (2014) work on "affective solidarity," arguing that vulnerability is what allows individual subjects to see ourselves in the other and have the courage to engage in a "collaborative struggle" (Simon, 1992, p. 63) within a "community of solidarity" (p. 65). Simon defines a community of solidarity as a mutual project of "something not yet but could be," in which participants live "as though the lives of others matter" (p. 65).

In order for encounters with disruptive, marginal, or difficult stories to be impactful, however, individuals must encounter them in a way that both preserves the individual narrative of the story and the potential for attention and concern towards the story. Simon (2014) argues that, when thoughtfully curated, public, educative experiences that contend with systemic violence create the possibility for moving individual feeling and thought away from a personal or reactive response towards one of "critical engagement, advent, and hope" (p. 9); the past impacts the present without collapsing in on it. When traces of the individual life persist through the difficulty and intensity of the disorienting encounter with publicly shared information, the possibility for shared transformational experience occurs.

The public nature of the #MeToo campaign creates the conditions for this sustained attention, which Simon (2014) calls "witnessing." The ubiquitous, digital, and ongoing nature of the movement make it near impossible to turn away from, even when witnessing it is difficult. Witnessing creates the potential for transformative change, allowing for the traces of individual lives to persist through what can be a troublesome encounter with their stories without becoming frozen in an emotional response that precludes connection and action. What Burke calls "affective solidarity," Simon might describe as witnessing's potential to acknowledge both individual suffering and the structural forces implicated. The challenge here, as in all places where difficult knowledge is taken up in public pedagogical space, lies in tension between personal experience—largely private, unseen, and heretofore unspoken—and public definitions of truth related to the crux of the issue of sexual violence: consent.

Sexual Violence, Consent, and Education

One trouble with consent as a concept is that it is simultaneously central to discussions of sexual violence and difficult to define. Fenner's 2017 review of definitions of consent in educational and social science literature found that, even amongst researchers drawing on theoretical frameworks in gender, feminist, and sexuality studies, there was little congruence in definitions of the term. In educational contexts, which we focus on here, consent is most frequently represented as a communicative act between partners that is socially mediated in ways that sometimes result in ambiguity resulting in miscommunications related to consent between partners (Fenner, 2017). This idea is the underpinning of many sexual assault intervention programs, where individuals are taught that unambiguous expressions of consent like "yes means yes" and "no means no" are central to preventing sexual violence.

Harris (2018), a communication scholar, contextualizes these communication-focused interventions as well-intentioned but seriously limited in the way they shape common consent discourses. By implying, directly or indirectly, that communication can and should be unambiguous during sexual encounters, Harris argues, anti-rape activists "lower the standard for communicative competence, disconnect it from its historical-cultural context, and miss opportunities to politicize consent" (Harris, 2018, p. 155). When direct communication of "yes"

or “no” is what is used to define consent, not only are women frequently positioned to bear the burden of being “gatekeepers and responsible for not being raped” (Garcia & Vemuri, 2017, p. 14), but problematic implications about how individuals will behave when clearly communicated to are smuggled in. That being said, the argument in favor of privileging a version of communication that emphasizes the simple, clear, and universally understood meaning of words like “yes” and “no” hinges on the fact that the subtlety and ambiguity of language is often used to justify sexual violence (Harris, 2018). The challenge of this view of consent—that words “reflect an unambiguous reality” (Harris, 2018, p. 165)—is that it suggests that words, and the interactions in which they are exchanged, exist absent broader personal, social, and historical contexts. A focus on individual communicative exchanges and sustained inattention to these contextual variables, in turn, contributes to the perpetuation of rape culture.

Definitions of consent that extend beyond the “yes” and “no” rhetoric are present, though less common, in educational literature. Fenner (2017) describes feminist research traditions that trouble the idea of consent by bringing it into conversation with concepts like desire and willingness to engage in sex, where “internal intention to engage in sexual activity is contrasted with consent as the external communication of consent to a partner” (p. 458). Similarly, she traces a tendency in social science research for discussions of consent to be framed largely in terms of nonconsent and violence. This focus on nonconsent as existing in exclusive relationship to rape has the potential to create conditions under which individuals are less likely to be able to identify ambiguous sexual experiences as sexual violence.

“Consent,” Harris (2018) argues, “is anything but simple. It is laden with the broad social context in which people utter ‘no’ and ‘yes.’ A person who refuses sexual activity navigates many cultural, historical, and personal complexities” (p. 159). How do we address the paradox of consent—its simultaneous centrality and ambiguity—through education? What do we do as educators doing work in this context when the issue of sexual violence is both so ubiquitous and so politically and culturally charged?

Educational research suggests that the answer to these questions is to present the concept of consent as a “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2011). First, work aimed at ending sexual violence should begin with the establishment of a definition of consent that acknowledges the range of contextual information required for understanding a consenting act. This may mean eschewing simple legalistic definitions in favor of those that privilege context (Brady, Lowe, Brown, Osmond, & Newman, 2018). For example, in order for consent to exist, feminist scholars argue, the concept of refusal must be possible (Pateman, 1980). To understand how, why, and under what circumstances refusal is or is not possible requires a historical knowledge of gender, power, consent, nonconsent, and coercion that highlights the ways these concepts have played out socially and politically (Harris, 2018; Fenner, 2017; Garcia & Vemuri, 2017). Fully understanding consent, particularly in relationship to educational contexts, requires that educators address sexual violence “as a cultural, political, and historical problem that pervades the same legal, social, and educational institutions that seek to eliminate it” (Garcia & Vemuri, 2017, p. 3).

Fenner (2017) reminds us that educational efforts intervening on sexual violence also require developing an understanding of consent as a “deeply personal and inter-personal” process (p. 468). She suggests that this work begins when students are encouraged to discuss a range of consent scenarios in contexts of consent, nonconsent, coercion, and desire. Harris (2018), too, suggests that, in addition to historical information on consent, educational efforts should address the complexities of interpersonal communication, particularly cultural variations on directness and the importance of metacommunication. Each of these emphases highlights the importance of

understanding both consent and sexual violence as existing not as binary or dichotomous variables, but as rather as continuums from choice through coercion and force (Coy, Kelly, Elvines, Garner, & Kanyeredzi, 2013) upon which individual acts are positioned through broader social and cultural forces (Brady et al., 2018).

As is so often the case, pressure for social change in relationship to complex issues is placed on the lap of K-12 education. Scholars who study issues with sexual violence in post-secondary contexts call on elementary and high school teachers to join forces in educating students early, and in the subtle and nuanced ways suggested above, in an understanding of the concept of consent (Garcia & Venmuri, 2017). This request is made with the acknowledgement that existing sex education programs are ill equipped to do this work, emphasizing instead a moralistic or clinical approach that does not leave space for the historical, contextual, or political conversations required to make full sense of what it means to be a consenting sexual being (Appleton & Stirtz, 2016; Garcia & Venmuri, 2017).

Interestingly, research suggests that, despite these shortcomings in sex education, adolescents understand the complexities of sexual consent, acknowledging that it is an embodied process “difficult to define, talk about, or practice uniformly” (Brady et al., 2018, p. 35). Educational efforts that take as a beginning place this understanding and its enactment are both meaningful to young people and impactful in relationship to their understanding of the complexities of consent and their agency as sexual decision makers (Carmody & Ovenden, 2013; Cense, 2018; Coy et al., 2013).

Documents of #MeToo

In this section, we describe two major public documents from the #MeToo era; we return to these pieces for deeper analysis in our discussion section. These are the 2017, *Time Magazine*, “Silence Breakers” article and documents from #MeTooK12. The first piece represents codified recognition of #MeToo as a movement with cultural cache. The second piece helps us think about the impact of a large-scale pedagogical movement on school curricula in ways that function as both politically progressive and simultaneously sanitizing, even occluding, of the “truth” of the social movement against sexual violence.

“The Silence Breakers”

On December 8, 2017, *Time Magazine* joined the conversation about #MeToo by publishing “The Silence Breakers” (Zacharek, Dockterman, & Edwards, 2017), an article naming many of the primary speakers in the movement as their 2017 “Person of the Year.” By grouping many different individuals together under the title “Person,” *Time* begins by making an implicit statement about what it means to be a collective voice. In their “How We Chose” explanation, the editors wrote, “The galvanizing actions of the women on our cover...along with those hundreds of others...have unleashed one of the highest-velocity shifts in our culture since the 1960s” (n.p.). They credit the speed of the movement to social media, imagining a hypothetical Rosa Parks Twitter account and how much this would have sped up the Civil Rights Movement.

The article is one of the key texts we draw on because it explains the #MeToo movement and stands as a representative of how the movement is understood, read, and explicated in

mainstream cultural publication. The article centers on the narratives of the celebrities involved in the movement, but also includes stories from other sexual assault survivors who spoke out on Twitter as part of #MeToo. Movie stars, the article explains, are important culture bearers in this movement insofar as they represent what we all wish to be (Zacharek et al., 2017). When celebrities don't know what to do, the article states, "what hope is there for the rest of us?" (n.p.). The article argues that, by speaking up against the egregious and repeated actions of Harvey Weinstein, for example, the Hollywood cadre involved has paved the way for women of all walks of life to tell their stories: "When a movie star says #MeToo, it becomes easier to believe the cook who's been quietly enduring for years" (n.p.). The article both assumes and explicitly states that telling these stories is, in and of itself, social change. It is a movement.

"The Silence Breakers" insistently paints #MeToo as a movement that transcends and even nullifies social boundaries (Zacharek et al., 2017). While it draws on the allure of celebrity so central to the movement's earliest spread, it describes the photo shoot for the Person of the Year article in terms of its diversity. A group of women "from different worlds" met up for the *Time* interview: actress Ashely Judd, Mexican farm-worker Isabel Pascual, an Uber engineer, a corporate lobbyist, and a hospital worker. Zacharek et al. (2017) describe the optics and the underlying economic realities of their meeting:

These women could not have looked more different. Their ages, their families, their religions, and their ethnicities were all a world apart. Their incomes differed not by degree but by universe: [the corporate lobbyist] pays more in rent each month than Pascual makes in two months. (n.p.)

In this way, the experience of sexual violence is portrayed as equalizing, and the differentials that remain between these women and how their experiences are read remain uncritiqued.

The article also describes some of the emotional commonalities widely believed to be associated with experiencing sexual violence. These include a sense of shame, a desire to hide, anxiety about sexuality overall, fear of retribution, and fear of being identified solely with the experience of victimization. Yet, as part of the movement, the article explains, "What had manifested as shame exploded into outrage. Fear became fury. This was the great unleashing that turned the #MeToo hashtag into a rallying cry" (n.p.). Again and again, the article references this cry itself as a form of action. By saying words, by speaking these "truths," women are ostensibly participating in a movement, and they are important. In this sense, the movement's primary accomplishment is the fact of its own existence. A pleasant side benefit is the infamous, highly-publicized downfall of many perpetrators.

At its close, "The Silence-Breakers" presages some of the arguments that have indeed been lodged in criticism of #MeToo. "While everyone wants to smoke out the serial predators and rapists, there is a risk that the net be cast too far,"(n.p.) it explains. The writers describe #MeToo as transitional, in the sense that it represents as much as it works to create a cultural shift. Overall, though, it is portrayed as a mutual and communal act of strength and bravery. "At least we've started asking the right questions...for the moment, the world is listening" (n.p.).

#MeTooK12

What does it look like when a public pedagogical movement turns toward the formal educational arena? How have schools and teachers begun to take up #MeToo? It was with these questions in mind that we turned toward #MeTooK12, a “campaign” represented on Facebook, Twitter, and via a website called Stop Sexual Assault in Schools (SAIS, 2019). The social media websites function basically as collection sites for media articles and testimonials about sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools. These include articles about employee harassment cases as well as about student experiences of harassment and assault. Commentators on these collected feeds note that such a clearinghouse is “long overdue,” implying repeatedly that there has been a historic absence of possibility for talking about sexual violence in the K-12 setting.

The slightly more comprehensive SAIS (2019) website is divided into sections like #MeTooK12 resources, media articles, action ideas, and videos by two different civil rights attorneys with expertise in school sexual violence. The website takes the strong stance that there is a “crisis in our schools” around ignored sexual harassment and assault and is pitched to an adult audience of teachers, administrators, and parents. SAIS also includes a great deal of information about sexual discrimination more broadly and the different ways that Title IX can be brought to bear in K-12 settings.

The #MeTooK12 resources vary from informational pieces about sexual harassment in schools to links to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curricula like Second Step, which claims to “reduce bullying, peer victimization, and other problem behaviors” (SAIS, 2019, n.p.). There is also a “Share My Lesson” link, where teachers have the opportunity to share lesson plans and resources they have used to work on issues relevant to “critical conversations...on issues of consent, sex education, relationships, and undoing a pervasive culture of silence” (Share My Lesson, 2019). Some of the lessons currently highlighted include, “Fostering Healthy Relationships,” “Combating Harassment,” and “Gender Equity.” The words rape and violence are absent from these pages, as are lessons pitched to students younger than the middle-school age.

A link to the “Toolkit” section of the SAIS site offers a pamphlet that can be downloaded, entitled “Ending K-12 Sexual Harassment: A Toolkit for Parents and Allies.” The pamphlet reviews the special relevance of Title IX to sexual violence and harassment in schools. It discusses the increased risk of sexual violence experienced by students of color and LGBTQ+ students, and it encourages parents to familiarize themselves with school and district procedures for complying with federal law. The pamphlet discusses sexual harassment and assault almost synonymously, suggesting that all of these crimes be treated as disruptions to students’ equal educational opportunities, based on sex.

Finally, a media page offers links to a variety of articles both about the #MeTooK12 campaign and about sexual harassment and violence in schools. For example, it includes articles about Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos’ alma mater’s noncompliance with Title IX but also about adults discussing their experiences of sexual violence as school children. One of the most salient messages from the articles linked from this page is that schools do not listen hard enough, or publicize the problem widely enough, when sexual assault occurs in schools. A secondary message is the continuing slant that sexual assault disrupts equal educational opportunity, particularly for girls, students of color, and LGBTQ+ students.

#MeToo, Education and Consent

“‘What if we did complain?’ proposes Megyn Kelly. ‘What if we didn’t whine, but we spoke our truth in our strongest voices and insisted that those around us did better? What if that worked to change reality right now?’” (Zacharek et al., 2017, n.p.). #MeToo claims to be a movement about truth. It is based on the idea that speaking truth—specifically, this “our truth,” a collective yet personalized truth Kelly names—will “change reality,” make the world better, lessen the reach of sexual assault, harassment, and violence. What were the mechanisms that allowed this movement, based very much on at least one conception of truth, to rise to the fore precisely during the onslaught of the post-truth era?

In part, #MeToo was lent credence by the very brashness of the comments about women’s bodies, and the normalizing of sexual violence, that came to the surface via the now infamous Access Hollywood video of Donald Trump. His “locker room talk” about what he can do to women because he is famous went viral, almost simultaneously sparking outrage and backlash against the outrage. “I just kiss,” the President said, “I don’t even wait.... And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.... Grab ‘em by the pussy. You can do anything.” These words, and their reveal, let people around the world bear witness to Trump’s “truth,” his way of perceiving women.

Months later, though, Americans elected him President, and that, too, remains a truth with which the world must continually contend. The same truth, we relearn, impacts different people quite differently, with some women proudly wearing t-shirts proclaiming, “He can grab my...” at Make America Great Again rallies (Ellefson, 2016). Here is one of the complexities of #MeToo as a movement of public pedagogy. On the one hand, it illustrates the ubiquity, emotional sequelae, and terror of sexual violence. On the other hand, it shows that, as a society, we can proceed largely undaunted, allowing extant power structures to continue, distributing punishment with the utmost inequity, and colluding in what could cynically be described as the illusion of a movement—one that elicits strong feelings of solidarity but results in very little by way of concrete transformation.

Women who began speaking up about their experiences in relation to Milano’s retweet of Burke’s (2007) concept for solidarity are praised, when they are praised, for being truth tellers. The definition of “truth” applied here is complex; it seems to have to do with confessing often very painful personal experience, telling the facts of what happened even when you feel like you might be lambasted for doing so, taking a major risk of both retraumatization and ostracization via your confession, and, finally, getting into the details of the matter. Truth in #MeToo is also about joining a community and enacting a pretense of indifference to other social identity categories that so often divide women. As the *Time* piece makes clear, to support #MeToo is to believe that the common experience of sexual victimization bridges otherwise potentially unraveling divides between, for example, the movie star and the hotel cleaning lady (Zacharek et al., 2017). Truth is ugly, but perhaps it can lead to a veneer of beautiful solidarity.

Skepticism aside, however, there are some important ways that #MeToo works to undercut the problematics of the post-truth movement. First, #MeToo insists that the victim does indeed have a truth and, in some ways, that her truth is all the more deserving of an audience because she is a victim. This flies in the face, for instance, of the narratives of climate change skeptics who repeatedly argue that, when a victim speaks, his subjectivity as victim, or loser, undermines his grasp on truth. Second, #MeToo makes use of some of the tools associated with the post-truth era, most specifically Twitter and other forms of social media, to undercut its power. Social media enabled #MeToo to achieve national and then global renown and for sexual assault survivors to

find each other and listen to one another's stories. Third, #MeToo reifies the significance of personal narrative as a route toward solidarity. In the post-truth era, it becomes very easy to rely heavily on neoliberal iterations of individualism that belie the significance of community and communal struggle. #MeToo is nothing if not a communal movement, though part of its tragedy is in speaking to the universality of the experiences it seeks to undermine. It is by raising so many individual voices that #MeToo becomes a movement, and the resulting stories and images we get are collective in struggle and truth.

Perhaps most importantly, #MeToo has been variously credited with opening the doors for truth-telling. Women in the #MeToo era are meant to have easier access to the spoken truth, with less shame surrounding our stories of either victimization or survival. In other words, #MeToo can be read as the truth amidst the post-truth, the storm amid the troubling calm.

Yet at the same time, #MeToo exposes some of the challenges inherent to this kind of public truth-telling. For one thing, the truth, once it is out there, becomes part of a public domain still mired in the same power structures that make sexual violence as ubiquitous as it is. Speaking of one's experiences of being raped suddenly makes a person part of a movement, whether or not that is her desire. The movement in turn makes itself available for commentary, critique, applause, and lewd humor by everyone from celebrities to politicians, from employers to daily interlocutors. To speak some kinds of truth necessitates a particular strength and a capacity to defend internally and collectively against this potentially painful mockery, even when this involves being drawn into a collective you never consented to join.

What really is the relationship between truth and consent? As a corollary question, what is the relationship among truth, consent, and education? Our reading of the #MeToo movement and particularly #MeTooK12 have helped us understand that education cannot claim to fully stand by the primacy of consensual participation without at least admitting to a degree of hypocrisy.

There is a difficult conceptual line to be drawn between consent and choice, but for the purposes of this argument, we will understand consent as the capacity to willfully opt into participation in a particular activity that will affect the course of a subject's life. Overall, in the United States, attending school is not a matter of consent, nor are children considered capable of providing legal consent in the first place. A young person may desire not to attend school, but short of convincing a well-resourced and amenable legal guardian, she does not have choice in the matter. This is generally accepted as part of an overall adult-oriented ethical system, one in which children, as future adults, are not thought to be cognitively or emotionally equipped to make such decisions for themselves (e.g., Silin, 2017). It is reinforced by the needs of an economic system that relies on children being outsourced for care, guidance, and a particular version of education for a good portion of each day. In fact, access to education is also a significant equity issue, so that children who, for reasons of geography, socioeconomics, and gender, do get by without attending school are generally believed to have been wronged, denied access, and, often, made—also without their consent—to play adult roles at too young a chronological age (Lesko, 2012).

Once a child is in the formal educational system, the extent to which she has the right to consent to how the education will play out is also questionable. For example, if a child refuses to consent to what is often called “learning,” either unconsciously, consciously, or, most often, via a complex interplay of these two kinds of processes, she is most likely to face diagnosis, punishment, and various kinds of treatment or discipline. Formal education is not, by and large, a consensual experience. (It may also be worth noting that, in the realm of research, children are not capable of providing consent; their parents can and should consent on their behalf.)

The #MeTooK12 curriculum, thus, becomes a way to explore the relationship between truth and consent. As the most explicit attempt to bring the #MeToo movement into the domain of formal education, #MeTooK12 is a hashtag designed to educate “students, families, and schools about the right to an equal education free from sexual harassment” (SAIS, 2019, n.p.). Sabrina Stevens, one of first to coin #MeTooK12, writes,

I know all too well that the K-12 space is overdue for a #MeToo reckoning of its own. After all, it’s hard to go to school every day...when someone is making you feel unsafe by snapping your bra, or if you can’t sleep at night as a result of PTSD, or if you’re forced to sit in a classroom with the person who raped you, or if you’re constantly surrounded by your attacker’s friends harassing you in the aftermath. (Stevens, 2018, n.p.)

Stevens argues that, while #MeToo made headway on college campuses almost immediately after the movement began, taboos around discussing sexuality with younger students have made it more difficult to ignite this kind of truth-telling in the K-12 environment. “We have both the power and the responsibility,” Stevens writes, “to keep our children safe.... Get started today by reading the resources and reflections shared on the #MeTooK12 hashtag.... Our children deserve safe spaces to learn” (n.p.). Some of the ideas in the action plan for #MeTooK12 include “spread the hashtag... Tweet your experiences of k-12 sexual harassment or assault...post your experiences on the new #MeTooK12 Facebook page” (SAIS, 2019, n.p.). Telling the truth, then, is a form of taking action, and becomes tied up in the discourse of ensuring that children have what they “deserve,” that schools become “safe spaces,” and that an adult sense of responsibility toward children is assuaged.

Issues of consent as they relate to education are more complex than educational literature has admitted. When it comes to childhood, this is especially true—and looking at #MeTooK12 as well as the movement overall through this lens reveals that pedagogy, which occurs constantly, unconsciously and consciously, and often contradictorily, will never really be able to sustain its identity as destabilizing while making the simultaneous logical claim privileging consent. As discussed, consent is not a simple prospect, and most children, people, and educators have more nuanced and complicating views of consent than those offered up by codified curricula and programming. Part of what makes consent such an elusive concept is the almost unacknowledgeable understanding that each of us violates its precepts sometimes, and it has to be possible to continue belief in an ethical construct privileging consent while simultaneously admitting our own vulnerability and power.

We do not mean to make the excessively provocative claim that there ought to be an opportunity for children to consent to go to school. However, we want to point out that formal education is basically premised on the overriding of consent for participation, because of an ideal that everyone ought to be educated, to participate, to be taught, and in that sense entered into. The extent to which a subject being educated has autonomy is dicey, in other words, and this has potentially profound implications for any “movement” oriented around keeping these subjects “safe” or encouraging them to speak their “truth.” If #MeToo reminds us of the importance of truth-telling for creating solidarity and disrupting problematic uses of power, then perhaps #MeTooK12 should remind us that there are some truths that will probably never be tolerated, some versions of aggression and force that we are all complicit in, and some dismantling of safety and consent that we rely on for the perpetuation of society.

It is difficult to argue against safety or even to claim that it is an entirely cultural norm. Safety in its most basic sense is necessary for survival, and by no means do we argue that the physical safety of children in schools should not be prioritized. We wonder whether calling on safety as part of the #MeTooK12 discourse might be little more than a way to bring an uncomfortable topic, like childhood sexuality, into a more mainstream and acceptable parlance. Further, there is a way in which telling ourselves that we are interested in keeping children safe in schools is a deceptive disavowal of what education does, both at its best and at its worst (Silin, 1995). Is not education there to disrupt a sense of safety? Even for Piaget, are not disequilibrium and discomfort necessary for the acquisition and assimilation of new concepts? If not for the lack of safety that led to #MeToo, would we not be missing a movement, an opportunity to truck with the truth?

At the very least, these paradoxes deserve acknowledgement. What, after all, of the child who does not want to know, who desires to look away, who wants nothing more than to remain ignorant of the sounds letters make on a page, of the ugliness of human history, and the complexities of science? As educators, we so often make the determination that this child does not have the capacity or right to make these determinations for himself. Though we, as authors, basically agree with this determination on an ethical level, we also think it contains a degree of aggression, and attendant guilt, that is too often left unacknowledged. Put simply, even in the ostensibly progressive and forward-moving traction of #MeToo, there are decisions being made about who gets to decide what can and cannot be forced onto another, and as long as education exists, this paradox will remain.

Concluding: A Complicated Conversation

Part of the #MeToo movement's power is in its visibility, its very public presence. It would be hard to exist as any kind of media consumer and not know about this movement on some level at this point, and it is fundamentally hard to exist in the world and not be a kind of media consumer. This is what makes #MeToo successful as public pedagogy—one cannot turn away from it.

The incapacity to turn away from horrid truths holds its own ethical power. It is uncomfortable, it is difficult, and it is educational. Faced with #MeToo, we came to the experience of not being able to turn away quite personally. We woke each morning to read the stories of another person's rape: in the newspaper, on our own social media feeds, sometimes in our inboxes. We were discomfited not in the ways we have felt when made to look at those our country has wounded in war, for example, but by being triggered into rehashing traumas, comparing our stories with those of other women, wondering how okay we really were, wondering if from now on we would have to begin every sentence, "as a rape survivor."

To some extent, this precise experience is the power of #MeToo. We were drawn via personal experience into a broader movement. It got us talking to each other just a little more about our stories. At the same time, we question this particular value. Often, at the peak of the movement's vitality, we found ourselves wishing to opt out for a while, to stop being quite so educated, to have a few days' respite. Often, we found ourselves talking about how much detail we really wanted to get into or how disgusted we were by our pride in the ways we felt we were "doing better" than some of the other women on our newsfeeds, or even, ultimately and still, by our wish to write this article. How good is truth, really?

#MeToo has functioned as a curriculum for the United States and then the world. As a curriculum, #MeToo brings politics and education into an impermeable and ongoing conversation about the ways human subjects can and ought to interact with each other. It is a powerful educational force that relentlessly requires its students, whether or not they are willing, to reckon with particular truths: women are raped; women are raped frequently; women who look all different ways, who come from all different places, and who occupy all different rungs of social ladders are raped; men are sometimes raped, too; as people, we misuse power flagrantly and constantly. Does the world now know this truth? Is this a truth that has in any way circumnavigated the complexities of the post-truth era?

If these are the main learning objectives, though, the #MeToo curriculum also comes with other curricular outcomes. It teaches, as we continue to watch, that truth only gets people so far and that some realms of power are so entrenched that truth cannot begin to bend them. #MeToo as a pedagogical movement represents the power of bearing witness and of bringing individual narratives together toward a communal end. The realpolitik of this power remains, in some ways, to be seen, though current analyses point to the possibility that it might be ultimately deceptive. From an educational standpoint, however, it is important to think about the conundrum of public pedagogy's relationship to truth exposed overall by this movement. If public pedagogy is definitionally something we cannot opt out of, then a public pedagogical movement about the pain, sorrow, and life-altering trauma that comes from experiences of not being able to opt out is inevitably problematic. As we bear witness, we are reminded of the problematics inherent to the requirement that we do so. This complexity is applicable to all pedagogical domains, carrying the humbling reminder that teaching, learning, and education can be violent, power-imbued endeavors, and that we constantly ask a lot—too much—of everyone who participates in these.

If #MeToo is a rally against the post-truth era, then, it is also and simultaneously a cautionary tale about truth. How can we ask for the truth if the truth is so painful? How can we ask for the truth when its very vicissitudes demand of us that we own up to our complicity in imposing our will upon others? Truth is transactional, complex, and easy to co-opt. Indeed, the post-truth era can only be resisted ambivalently, because truth is something humans have only ever had an ambivalent relationship to in the first place.

In a July 2018 editorial, Michelle Goldberg writes, “if Trump cared about the American people’s consent, he’d resign” (n.p.). Goldberg, a feminist writer and activist, is decrying backlash complaints against #MeToo, offering myriad evidence that the movement has not, as some critics would have it, “gone too far.” She shows how many politicians are continuing to rise to positions of power in spite or sometimes because of allegations of sexual violence against them, and she argues that the zeitgeist is primarily one of exhaustion. “At this point, who can get that worked up about each instance of White House sexism?” (Goldberg, 2018, n.p.). Goldberg (2018) describes how, just as the victims of sexual violence grow fatigued from fighting against their perpetrators, so too have Americans become too tired to become enraged each time a new scandal of sexual violence rises to the surface.

Whether or not her logic holds up completely, Goldberg (2018) raises crucial questions about what we do with truth. Our argument is that these questions are inherently educational in nature and that the only ethical response is to admit to the violence of each pedagogical encounter. In this paper, we have argued that #MeToo is fundamentally an educational movement, one that both highlights and exacerbates the complexities already associated with public pedagogy. Limitations of our argument include our choice to focus primarily on #MeToo within the United States and our conscious but inevitably problematic decision to keep our textual analysis narrow.

In spite of these limitations, we are able to conclude with the idea that #MeToo, specifically, and public pedagogy, more broadly, raise crucial questions about what it means to be an educator in the alleged “post-truth” era. #MeToo shows that valorization and degradation of truth are in fact both problematic and that to worry over the difficulties and ethical crises of “post-truth” is to inevitably disavow the often-traumatic nature of truth, which cannot be turned away from. Further, our examination of #MeToo and particularly the texts it aims at younger students raises necessary concerns about what it means to think about consent in the context of education. As an educational community, it becomes ever more important to take responsibility for the extent to which we work without our participants’ consent. Acknowledgement of this paradox is the only moral way forward, especially in the midst of a public, pedagogical movement that lambasts nonconsensual acts of a person in relative power upon another.

Curriculum theorizing has always been a “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2011), and contextualizing it in the Trump era is particularly knotty. Our work shows how necessary it is to see curriculum and pedagogy as ubiquitous in popular and political culture and to think seriously about the lesson plans all people are unwittingly imbibing. Future work might fruitfully analyze the power differentials, for instance around race, socioeconomics, ability, and age, within #MeToo, as well as considering the different emerging popular and educational programming around how to incorporate the lessons of #MeToo into sex education curricula.

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