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The Last of the Long Takes: Feminism, Sexual Harassment, and the Action of Change

Allison Ruth Craven

Abstract

The advent of the #MeToo movement and the scale of participation in 85 countries (Gill and Orgad; see [Google Trends](#)) has greatly expanded debate about the revival of feminism (Winch Littler and Keeler) and the contribution of digital media to a "reconfiguration" of feminism (Jouet). Insofar as these campaigns are concerned with sexual harassment and related forms of sexual abuse, the longer history of sexual harassment in which this practice was named by women's movement activists in the 1970s has gone largely unremarked except in the broad sense of the recharging or "techno-echo[es]" (Jouet) of earlier "waves" of feminism. However, #MeToo and its companion movement #TimesUp, and its fighting fund [timesupnow.org](#), stemmed directly from the allegations in 2017 against the media mogul Harvey Weinstein by Hollywood professionals and celebrities. The naming of prominent, powerful men as harassers and the celebrity sphere of activism have become features of #MeToo that warrant comparison with the naming of sexual harassment in the earlier era of feminism.

While the practices it named were not new, the term "sexual harassment" was new, and it became a defining issue in second wave feminism that was conceptualised within the continuum of sexual violence. I outline this history, and how it transformed the private, individual experiences of many women into a shared public consciousness about sexual coercion in the workplace, and some of the debate that this generated within the women's movement at the time. It offers scope to compare the threshold politics of naming names in the 21st century, and its celebrity vanguard which has led to some ambivalence about the lasting impact. For Kathy Davis (in Zarkov and Davis), for instance, it is atypical of the collective goals of second wave feminism.

In comparing the two eras, Anita Hill's claims against Clarence Thomas in the early 1990s is a bridging incident. It dates from closer to the time in which sexual harassment was named, and Hill's testimony is now recognised as a prototype of the kinds of claims made against powerful men in the #MeToo era. Lauren Berlant's account of "Diva Citizenship", formulated in response to Hill's testimony to the US Senate, now seems prescient of the unfolding spectacle of feminist subjectivities in the digital public sphere and speaks directly to the relation between individual and collective action in making lasting change. The possibility of change, however, descends from the intervention of the women's movement in naming sexual harassment.

The Name Is All

I found my boss in a room He was alone He greeted me ... touched my hair and ... said ... "Come, Ruth, sit down here." He motioned to his knee. I felt my face flush. I backed away towards the door Then he rose ... and ... put his hand into his pocket, took out a roll of bills, counted off three dollars, and brought it over to me at the door. "Tell your father," he said, "to find you a new shop for tomorrow morning." (Cohen 129)

Sexual coercion in the workplace, such as referred to in this workplace novel published in 1918, was spoken about among women in subcultures and gossip long before it was named as sexual harassment. But it had no place in public discourse. Women's knowledge of sexual harassment coalesced in an act of naming that is reputed to have occurred in a consciousness raising group in New York at the height of the second wave women's movement. Lin Farley lays claim to it in her book, *Sexual Shakedown*, first published in 1978, in describing the coinage of the term from a workshop on women and work in 1974 at Cornell University. The group of participants was made up, she says, of near equal numbers of black and white women with "economic backgrounds ranging from very affluent to poor" (11). She describes how, "when we had finished, there was an unmistakable pattern to our employment Each one of us had already quit or been fired from a job at least once because we had been made too uncomfortable by the behaviour of men" (11-12). She claims to have later devised the term "sexual harassment" in collaboration with others from this group (12).

The naming of sexual harassment has been described as a kind of "discovery" (Leeds TUCRIC 1) and possibly "the only concept of sexual violence to be labelled by women themselves" (Hearn et al. 20). Not everyone agrees that Farley's group first coined the term (see Herbert 1989) and there is some evidence that it was in use from the early 1970s. Catherine Mackinnon accredits its first use to the Working Women United Institute in New York in connection with the case of Carmita Wood in 1975 (25). Yet Farley's account gained authority and is cited in several other contemporary radical feminist works (for instance, see Storrie and Dykstra 26; Wise and Stanley 48), and *Sexual Shakedown* can now be listed among the iconic feminist manifestoes of the second wave era.

The key insight of Farley's book was that sexual coercion in the workplace was more than aberrant behaviour by individual men but was systemic and organised. She suggests how the phrase sexual harassment "is the first verbal description of women's feelings about this behaviour and it unstintingly conveys a negative perception of male aggression in the workplace" (32). Others followed in seeing it as organised expression of male power that functions "to keep women out of non-traditional occupations and to reinforce their secondary status in the workplace" (Pringle 93), a wisdom that is now widely accepted but seemed radical at the time.

A theoretical literature on sexual harassment grew rapidly from the 1970s in which the definition of sexual harassment was a key element. In *Sexual Shakedown*, Farley defines it with specific connection to the workplace and a woman's "function as worker" (33). Some definitions attempted to cover a range of practices that "might threaten a woman's job security or create a stressful or intimidating working environment" ranging from touching to rape (Sedley and Benn 6). In the wider radical feminist discussion, sexual harassment was located within the "continuum of sexual violence", a paradigm that highlighted the links between "every day abuses" and "less common experiences labelled as crimes" (Kelly 59). Accordingly, it was seen as a diminished category of rape, termed "little rape" (Bularzik 26), or a means whereby women are "reminded" of the "ever present threat of rape" (Rubinstein 165).

The upsurge of research and writing served to document the prevalence and history of sexual harassment. Radical feminist accounts situated the origins in the long-standing patriarchal assumption that economic responsibility for women is ultimately held by men, and how "women forced to earn their own living in the past were believed to be defenceless and possibly immoral" (Rubinstein 166). Various accounts highlighted the intersecting effects of racism and sexism in the experience of black women, and women of colour, in a way that would be now termed intersectional. Jo Dixon discussed black women's "least advantaged position in the economy coupled with the legacy of slavery" (164), while, in Australia, Linda Rubinstein describes the "sexual exploitation of aboriginal women employed as domestic servants on outback stations" which was "as common as the better documented abuse of slaves in the American South" (166).

In *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women*, Catherine Mackinnon provided a pioneering legal argument that sexual harassment was a form of sex discrimination. She defined two types: the *quid pro quo*, when "sexual compliance is exchanged, or proposed to be exchanged, for an employment opportunity" (32); and sexual harassment as a "persistent condition of work" that "simply makes the work environment unbearable" (40). Thus the feminist histories of sexual harassment became detailed and strategic. The naming of sexual harassment was a moment of relinquishing women's experience to the gaze of feminism and the bureaucratic gaze of the state, and, in the legal interventions that followed, it ceased to be exclusively a feminist issue.

In Australia, a period of bureaucratisation and state intervention commenced in the late 1970s that corresponded with similar legislative responses abroad. The federal Sex Discrimination Act was amended in 1984 to include a definition of sexual harassment, and State and Territory jurisdictions also framed legislation pertaining to sexual harassment (see [Law Council of Australia](#)). The regimes of redress were linked with Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action frameworks and were of a civil order. Under the law, there was potential for employers to be found [vicariously liable](#) for sexual harassment.

In the women's movement, legislative strategies were deemed reformist. Radical and socialist feminists perceived the de-gendering effects of these policies in the workplace that risked collusion with the state. Some argued that naming and defining sexual harassment denies that women constantly deal with a range of harassment anywhere, not only in the workplace (Wise and Stanley 10); while others argued that reformist approaches effectively legitimate other forms of sex discrimination not covered by legislation (Game and Pringle 290). However, in feminism and in the policy realm, the debate concerned sexual harassment in the general workplace. In contrast to #MeToo, it was not led by celebrity voices, nor galvanised by incidents in the sphere of entertainment, nor, by and large, among figures of public office, except for a couple of notable exceptions, including Anita Hill.

The "Spectacle of Subjectivity" in the "Scene of Public Life"

Through the early 1990s as an MA candidate at the University of Queensland, I studied media coverage of sexual harassment cases, clipping newspapers and noting electronic media reports on a daily basis. These mainly concerned incidents in government sector workplaces or small commercial enterprises. While the public prominence of the parties involved was not generally a factor in reportage, occasionally, prominent individuals were affected, such as the harassment of the athlete Michelle Baumgartner at the Commonwealth Games in 1990 which received extensive coverage but the offenders were never publicly named or disciplined. Two other incidents stand out: the Ormond College case at the University of Melbourne, about which much has been written; and Anita Hill's claims against Clarence Thomas during his nomination to the US Supreme Court in 1991.

The spectacle of Hill's testimony to the US Senate is now an archetype of claims against powerful men, although, at the time, her credibility was attacked and her dignified presentation was criticised as "too composed. Too cool. Too censorious" (Legge 31). Hill was also seen to counterpose the struggles of race and gender, and Thomas himself famously described it as "a hi-tech lynching of an uppity black" (qtd in Stephens 1). By "hi-tech", Thomas alluded to the occasion of the first-ever

live national broadcast of the United States Senate hearings in which Hill's claims were aired directly to the national public, and re-broadcast internationally in news coverage. Thus, it was not only the claims but the scale and medium of delivery to a global audience that set it apart from other sexual harassment stories.

Recent events have since prompted revisiting of the inequity of Hill's treatment at the Senate hearings. But well before this, in an epic and polemical study of American public culture, Berlant reflected at length on the heroism of Hill's "witnessing" as paradigmatic of citizenship in post-Reaganite America's "shrinking" public sphere. It forms part of her much wider thesis regarding the "intimate public sphere" and the form of citizenship "produced by personal acts and values" (5) in the absence of a context that "makes ordinary citizens feel they have a common public culture, or influence on a state" (3), and in which the fundamental inequality of minority cultures is assumed. For Berlant, Hill's testimony becomes the model of "Diva Citizenship"; the "strange intimacy" in which the Citizen Diva, "the subordinated person", believes in the capacity of the privileged ones "to learn and to change" and "trust[s] ... their innocence of ... their obliviousness" of the system that has supported her subjugation (222–223). While Berlant's thesis pertains to profound social inequalities, there is no mistaking the comparison to the digital feminist in the #MeToo era in the call to identify with her suffering and courage.

Of Hill's testimony, Berlant describes how: "a member of a stigmatised population testifies reluctantly to a hostile public the muted and anxious history of her imperiled citizenship" (222). It is an "act of heroic pedagogy" (223) which occurs when "a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege" (223). In such settings, "acts of language can feel like explosives" and put "the dominant story into suspended animation" (223). The Diva Citizen cannot "change the world" but "challenges her audience" to identify with her "suffering" and the "courage she has had to produce" in "calling on people to change the practices of citizenship into which they currently consent" (223). But Berlant cautions that the strongest of Divas cannot alone achieve change because "remaking the scene of public life into a spectacle of subjectivity" can lead to "a confusion of ... memorable rhetorical performance with sustained social change itself" (223). Instead, she argues that the Diva's act is a call; the political obligation for the action of change lies with the collective, the greater body politic.

The Echo

If Acts of Diva Citizenship abound in the #MeToo movement, relations between the individual and the collective are in question in a number of ways. This suggests a basis of comparison between past and present feminisms which have come full circle in the renewed recognition of sexual harassment in the continuum of sexual violence. Compared with the past, the voices of #MeToo are arguably empowered by a genuine, if gradual, change in the symbolic status of women, and a corresponding destabilization of the images of male power since the second wave era of feminism. The one who names an abuser on Twitter symbolises a power of individual courage, backed by a responding collective voice of supporters. Yet there are concerns about who can "speak out" without access to social media or with the constraint that "the sanctions would be too great" (Zarkov and Davis). Conversely, the "spreadability" — as Jenkins, Ford and Green term the travelling properties of digital media — and the apparent relative ease of online activism might belie the challenge and courage of those who make the claims and those who respond.

The collective voice is also allied with other grassroots movements like SlutWalk (Jouet), the women's marches in the US against the Trump presidency, and the several national campaigns — in India and Egypt, for instance (Zarkov and Davis) — that contest sexual violence and gender inequality. The "sheer numbers" of participation in #MeToo testify to "the collectivity of it all" and the diversity of the movement (Gill and Orgad). If the #MeToo hashtag gained traction with the "experiences of white heterosexual women in the US", it "quickly expanded" due to "broad and inclusive appeal" with stories of queer women and men and people of colour well beyond the Global North. Even so, Tarana Burke, who founded the #MeToo hashtag in 2006 in her campaign of social justice for working class women and girls of colour, and endorsed its adoption by Hollywood, highlights the many "[untold stories](#)".

More strikingly, #MeToo participants name the names of the alleged harassers. The naming of names, famous names, is threshold-crossing and as much the public-startling power of the disclosures as the allegations and stimulates newsworthiness in conventional media. The resonance is amplified in the context of the American crisis over the Trump presidency in the sense that the powerful men called out become echoes or avatars of Trump's monstrous manhood and the urgency of denouncing it. In the case of Harvey Weinstein, the name is all. A figure of immense power who symbolised an industry, naming Weinstein blew away the defensive old Hollywood myths of "casting couches" and promised, perhaps idealistically, the possibility for changing a culture and an industrial system.

The Hollywood setting for activism is the most striking comparison with second wave feminism. A sense of contradiction emerges in this new "visibility" of sexual harassment in a culture that remains predominantly "voyeuristic" and "sexist" (Karkov and Davis), and not least in the realm of Hollywood where the sexualisation of women workers has long been a notorious open secret. A barrage of Hollywood feminism has accompanied #MeToo and #TimesUp in the campaign for diversity at the Oscars, and the stream of film remakes of formerly all-male narrative films that star all-female casts (*Ghostbusters*; *Oceans 11*; *Dirty, Rotten Scoundrels*). Cynically, this trend to make popular cinema a public sphere for gender equality in the film industry seems more glorifying than subversive of Hollywood masculinities. Uneasily, it does not overcome those lingering questions about why these conditions were uncontested openly for so long, and why it took so long for someone to go public, as Rose McGowan did, with claims about Harvey Weinstein.

However, a reading of *She Said*, by Jodie Kantor and Megan Tuohey, the journalists who broke the Weinstein story in the *New York Times* — following their three year efforts to produce a legally water-tight report — makes clear that it was not for want of stories, but firm evidence and, more importantly, on-the-record testimony. If not for their (and others') fastidious journalism and trust-building and the Citizen Divas prepared to disclose their experiences publicly, Weinstein might not be convicted today. Yet without the naming of the problem of sexual harassment in the women's movement all those years ago, none of this may have come to pass. Lin Farley can now be [found on YouTube retelling the story](#). (see "New Mexico in Focus").

It places the debate about digital activism and Hollywood feminism in some perspective and, like the work of journalists, it is testament to the symbiosis of individual and collective effort in the action of change. The tweeting activism of #MeToo supplements the plenum of knowledge and action about sexual harassment across time: the workplace novels, the consciousness raising, the legislation and the poster campaigns. In different ways, in both eras, this literature demonstrates that names matter in calling for change on sexual harassment. But, if #MeToo is to become the last long take on sexual harassment, then, as Berlant advocates, the responsibility lies with the body politic who must act collectively for change in ways that will last well beyond the courage of the Citizen Divas who so bravely call it on.

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