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## **The shifting terrain of sex and power: From the ‘sexualization of culture’ to #MeToo**

**Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad**

It is an honour to be part of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations for *Sexualities* and to have the opportunity to express appreciation for the space the journal has opened up. It has become a key site for interesting, critical and challenging work; indeed, it is hard to imagine what sexuality studies, queer theory, examinations of sex in the media and popular culture, and studies of intimate life would look like without the journal. We would like to express our gratitude to the editors over the last two decades – and to staff and assistants – for all their work in developing this vibrant and crucial space.

In this short article we will aim to do three things. First, we want to use this opportunity to reflect on some of the changes we have seen in the scholarly field of gender, sexuality, and intimacy over this period, and on new emerging directions. Second, we want to discuss the move away from discussions of ‘sexualization’ to a more critical and political register interested in a variety of ways in which sex and power intersect. Thirdly, we will discuss MeToo as an example of this shifted form of engagement, and raise some questions about its possibilities and limitations.

### *Gender, media, sexuality and intimacy*

As media scholars who work around questions of gender, sexuality, and intimacy this has been an exciting time. One of the changes we have observed is the increasing interest in the way that sexual identities and practices are constructed in media, with the take-off of terms such as mediated sex (McNair, 1996) mediated sexual citizenship (Brady et al, 2017), intimate publics (Berlant, 2000), media sex (Attwood, 2017) and mediated intimacy (Andreasson et al, 207; Barker et al, 2018), indicating a growing understanding of the ways in which media are implicated in intimate life. Social media in particular have become a major focus of interest with work on feminist and queer digital activism opening up new questions about social movements, practices of critique and ‘call out’ and new affective ties and solidarities (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015; Ryan & Keller, 2018; Keller et al, 2018). There has been also a growing body of work examining the role of self-representations in the construction of sexualities and sexual identities and the affordances of social media for curating a digital self (e.g. Connell 2013; Dobson 2014, 2016; Fink and Miller, 2013; Kanai, 2015; O’Neill 2014), situated within the broader interest in self-representation (Thumim, 2012), and wider shifts in which the clear-cut distinction between (media) producers and consumers or audiences is breaking down. Our own work (Barker, Gill and Harvey, 2018; Elias & Gill, 2017; Gill and Orgad, 2015, 2018) also looks at the importance of smartphone apps (e.g. for health, appearance or sex) in intimate life as a relatively underexplored area that contributes to discussions about the quantified self (Lupton, 2016; Ajana, 2017), datafied self and new forms of surveillance (see Gill, in press for longer discussion).

Another profoundly important set of shifts has been the opening up of questions about intersectional, postcolonial and decolonial critique within the field, generating a rich, critical vocabulary for scholars. The multiplication of terms for thinking about gender is having a major effect on the field- moving scholars beyond a taken-for-granted cisgender binary, and in the process introducing radically new ways of thinking about both gendered and sexual

experience. Trans studies in particular has a significant new visibility, with new journals (e.g. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*) research and introductory texts (e.g. Haeftle-Thomas, 2019). Beyond this, it is hopeful to see the flourishing of intersectional research agendas that foreground not simply gender and sexuality but also race, disability, age and body size as well. Alongside critical race scholarship, disability studies and fat studies are having a very important effect on the field (McRuer, 2006; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). The significance of place and cultural context is also increasingly important. The dominance of Anglo-American theorising, especially in queer studies, has given way to far greater geographical diversity- with large numbers of studies from Latin America and East Asia in particular. Such research does not simply 'add in' new countries or cultures, but, more critically, offers ex-centric or decolonial perspectives that displace the hegemony of white, urban Western theorising (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; Willems, 2014; Giraldo, 2016).

Early work on 'transformations of intimacy' has also been taken up in multiple directions that explore the many and varied ways we live our intimate lives. Alongside ongoing interest in the experiences and practices of intimacy in heterosexual households and how they serve to sustain power relations (Orgad, 2019; van Hooff 2013), the agenda has significantly expanded to examine questions around intimacy in queer family forms. Polyamory and non-monogamy, increasing numbers of single person households and the 'gayby boom' are all topics of research (Ryan-Flood, 2009; Lahad, 2018). Much attention has also been paid to how digital media are changing our ways of meeting intimate partners (e.g. Hobbs et. Al) and sustaining intimate relationships (e.g. Wilson Chivers and Yochim, 2017), with considerable work on internet and mobile dating, including the ways this may be striated by power e.g. trolling and harassment of heterosexual women on Tinder (Albury et. Al., 2017; Thompson, 2018).

Theorising of the wider cultural formation via the critical terms postfeminism and neoliberalism (e.g. Evans & Riley, 2014; Gill, 2007; McRobbie 2009) has also generated increasing interest. It is becoming more common to see neoliberalism understood not simply as a political and economic rationality, but as one that is profoundly connected to intimate life and subjectivity. Notions of intimate governance and affective governance are key here, as well as the body of work - our own included - that looks critically at the way that sex is frequently framed in terms of entrepreneurship (Harvey & Gill, 2011). Barker et al's (2018) research on smartphone apps for tracking, measuring and monitoring is a good example: showing how such apps exhort us to quantify and evaluate our sex lives, inculcating a tracking mentality. Such apps are part of a much wider regime based around framing sex in terms of imperatives (Frith, 2015; Tyler, 2004). More hopefully, it is also exciting to see increasing resistance to such framings including 'anti' self-help books like 'Rewriting the Rules' (Barker, 2012) and 'Enjoy Sex (how, when and if you want to)' (Barker & Hancock, 2017) as well as critical blogs such as Crunk Collective (2013; 2017). It is good to see also new dialogues developing - for example between postfeminism and queer studies (McCann, 2017; McNicholas Smith & Tyler, 2017).

One of the main ways the impact of activism has been felt within academic debates about sexuality has been in relation to the contested term of 'sexualization' and it is to this we turn next.

### *Sexualization: from moral panic to political engagement*

At one point in the early part of this century, concerns about 'sexualization' were ubiquitous. Anxieties and concerns about 'sexualization' came to prominence in reports from think tanks (e.g. Rush & La Nauze, 2006; APA's Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; Fawcett Society, 2009), government reports (e.g. Papadopoulos, 2010; Buckingham, 2010; Bailey, 2011) activist campaigns (for example to change the licensing laws for lapdancing clubs), as well as a variety of well-publicised popular books (eg Paul, 2005; Durham, 2009). News reporting in the period was preoccupied with questions of 'porno chic', the 'premature sexualisation of children' as well as wider concerns with the impact of what many agreed was a distinctly more 'sexualized' culture.

Academic debate – including in the pages of this journal – also focussed on 'sexualization', with divergent positions, including those that welcomed the multiplication of discourses and images of sex as a positive or democratizing shift (McNair, 1996; McKee et al, 2008); those who approached the question from a 'public morals' or 'responsible right wing' (see Duchinsky, 2013) perspective; and a range of very different feminist positions- ranging from radical feminist perspectives (e.g. Jeffreys, 2009; Dines, 2010) to 'third wave' 'sex positive' positions (Johnson 2002; Church-Gibson, 2003). The topic of sexualisation has always been contested and fights about sexuality have long divided feminism – whether that be about pornography, genital cutting or sex work. These debates have been painful for many, and silencing for many more. Too often they have taken place along deep enduring lines of stratification – between feminists of North and South, secular or religious, heterosexual or queer. They have also been marked by battle lines that seemed to have been established 20 years earlier during feminism's 'sex wars'.

Much work has tried hard to avoid being pulled into the polarizations of the 'sexualization of culture' debate. Feona Attwood's work has been crucially important in resisting this (false) binary, and in complicating or unpacking what 'sexualization' means. Back in 2006 she argued that the term denotes many things which are often collapsed together: 'a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; [and the] fondness the scandals, controversies and panics around sex' (p. 2). This reading helped to open space for a range of more nuanced engagements with 'sexualized' culture including seeing it as a neoliberal capitalist phenomenon linked to consumerism and discourses of celebrity, choice, and empowerment (Gill, 2008; Coleman, 2008; Ringrose and Renold, 2011; Wood 2017).

This latter tradition of work has been critical of the exclusionary nature of many concerns about 'sexualization', and in particular its imagined figure of a vulnerable, white, middle-class, North American, assumed-to-be-heterosexual 13-year-old girl who is the privileged subject of panics about sexualisation (Gill, 2012). Some (Egan, 2013; Gill, 2009) have interrogated the classed, racialized and heterosexualized nature of the framing of sexualisation concerns. A second critique highlighted by Gill focuses on the way sexualization concerns frame the issue in moral rather than political terms – focusing on how much flesh is shown, how explicit it is, without making distinctions between the kinds

of material being discussed. As activist Rowan Ellis<sup>i</sup> has shown, sex education material for LGBTQ young people on YouTube is almost always categorised as ‘restricted’ – therefore not easily accessible to view – almost as if not being heterosexual makes one automatically ‘too sexualized’. The issue has also been divisive for many women who work in the sex industry, as well as for trans people and others who live outside a rigid gender binary. A third area of critique has challenged the individualistic focus of many proposed interventions to challenge ‘sexualisation’ with their emphasis upon media literacy – as if the best we can hope for is to train young women to deconstruct or see through ‘harmful’ images or practices, not actually change them. Not only does this seem timid, inward-looking and part of a long-standing tradition that seeks to ‘change the woman rather than change the world’, but also research shows that it simply doesn’t work (Gill, 2012).

Overall – and again with many others, including as part of the germinal ESRC seminar series ‘Pornified? Complicating the sexualisation of culture’ - we have sought to fashion a position that is ‘sex positive but anti-sexism’, whilst also attending to the differences in the way that bodies may be ‘sexualized’. Many of us have chosen to use the term ‘sexualized’ in scare quotes to distance from its assumed meanings. We have also sought to interrogate the fear and shame that sometimes animates discussions of ‘sexualization’ (Ringrose et al, 2013), arguing that this feeds into the difficulty for girls and young women to explore their own desires (Fine, 1988). Above all, we have emphasised the need to challenge sexism (and racism, classism, disablism, heterosexism, etc) rather than ‘sexualisation’ *per se*. This means having a political rather than a moral sensibility about sex. It is to be concerned with power, consent and justice rather than exposure of flesh.

From this perspective recent feminist activism such as the #MeToo movement represents an exciting development- and it is to this that we turn in our final section.

#### *#MeToo: A new day on the horizon?*

The exponential visibility of MeToo in the contemporary moment illustrates in interesting ways the shifted engagement we describe, from a concern with ‘sexualization’ to a more critical and political register interested in how sex and power intersect, and the implications of this shift. The movement’s emergence on social media and its subsequent remarkable visibility are situated within many of the various shifts we described above: in particular, the intensifying incorporation of media and especially social media into intimate lives, the explosion of self-representation in the articulation of sexual identities, as well as the popularity of feminism and the important work of preceding feminist and social movements and mobilisations such as SlutWalk, Black Lives Matter, The Women’s Room and Everyday Sexism.

The MeToo hashtag has been circulating in 85 countries, and, significantly, beyond the global North, from South Korea, to Japan, Indonesia,<sup>ii</sup> to Palestine<sup>iii</sup> (see <https://metoorising.withgoogle.com/>). The movement’s global uptake is arguably due, at least in part, to its broad and inclusive appeal, and its ability to cross lines of stratification. While the #MeToo campaign was sparked by the exposure of the experiences of white heterosexual women in the US, it has quickly expanded, with more and more stories of queer women and men, women of colour and women and men in other countries coming into the limelight. Also, although the #MeToo discussion has focused largely on secular

women's experience, it triggered critical discussion of silenced sexist and sexual violence also in religious institutions.<sup>iv</sup> At the same time that #MeToo has been criticized by many for centring the experiences of white western women, some important non-white figures have spearheaded the movement and contributed to its significant visibility. These include, for example, Oprah Winfrey whose inspirational Golden Globes speech in January 2018 about a 'a new day on the horizon' attracted huge attention, Mexican Hollywood actress Salma Hayek, and African-American civil rights activist Tarana Burke, who founded the original MeToo movement in 2006, and endorsed the 2017 hashtag movement. Indeed, many see #Metoo as a hopeful platform for building feminist solidarity across lines of class, race, and sexuality.

MeToo seems to also represent a challenge to the highly individualised nature of many current discussions and proposals to tackle gender inequality and sexism by 'fixing' women's psyches – a critique we develop in our account of the rise of the confidence culture (Gill and Orgad, 2015) and made by other feminist scholars in relation to postfeminism (Gill, 2017) popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018a) and/or neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2018). As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018b) notes, "one of the most hopeful manifestations of #metoo has been the focus on the sheer numbers of women coming forward, forcing people to deal with the collectivity of it all." The campaign has provided important spaces for a wider range of women to participate in public debate on sexual harassment, sexism and rape culture (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2018). These are, of course, still early days, however, there is already encouraging evidence of organizational, legal, policy and cultural changes triggered by #MeToo. Most notably, many powerful men are being held accountable for abuse and harassment. Another visible development has been Time's Up, a programme launched by women in Hollywood that will raise funds for working-class women facing workplace sexual abuse to file lawsuits. The #MeToo movement has also generated discussion around "zero tolerance" harassment policies, and many organizations (e.g. Microsoft, New York City Council) have already changed their sexual harassment policies in its wake.<sup>v</sup>

More broadly, #MeToo is fundamentally concerned with the intersection of sex and power and has framed its concerns in terms of justice. This concern has vividly crystallized in Harvey Weinstein's indictments in June 2018, and in particular the highly circulated image of him in handcuffs. Consent is a focal point of the #MeToo-inspired debate, surfaced by stories such as that initially reported in January 2018 on Babe.net, by an anonymous 23-year-old woman writing about being coerced by comedian Aziz Ansari into a sexual encounter.

At the same time, and despite the optimism that has surrounded the movement – which, as feminists, we partly share – the trajectory it has taken thus far suggests some profound limitations. Notwithstanding the shift from moral panic to political engagement, it seems that many of the fundamental problems identified in relation to the sexualisation debate persist in the context of #MeToo, and are manifest in old as well as new and troubling ways.

Firstly, despite the excitement about MeToo's wide appeal and cross-class, cross-ethnicity and cross-race character, its politics and aesthetics are exclusionary in various problematic ways, echoing similar critiques about previous feminist movements such as SlutWalk (see

Black Women's Blueprint, 2011; Mendes 2015). Writing in *Feministing* on her experience as an LGBTQ person and survivor of multiple forms of sexual violence perpetrated within her own community, Jess Fournier criticized MeToo's 'footnoting' of queer experiences, that is, their relegation to the margins of a conversation about pervasive sexual violence that definitely concerns us.<sup>vi</sup> The rapper Cardi B spoke powerfully about MeToo's favouring of a particular femininity that is 'respectable' (Skeggs, 1997) and 'believable', leaving out women like herself (woman of colour, previously a stripper, hip hop artist) who 'do not matter'. The overwhelming exclusion of disabled women from the MeToo movement has been another important criticism (Flores, 2018; Wafula Strike, 2018). Clare Hemmings (2018) argues that #MeToo promotes an understanding of sexual gendered violence as primarily experienced through a binary between men and women, thus undermining broader coalitions of those facing harassment in the face of masculinist dominance, including cis-women, trans\* men and women and gender non-conforming subjects and queer subjects of colour.

Highlighting the question of who is able to speak out, Dubravka Zarkov and Kathy Davis (2018) note that powerful and privileged women are at the centre of MeToo. Many others do not have access or could not take the risk of speaking out as the 'sanctions would be too great'. In this context, Zarkov and Davis note the contrast between contemporary MeToo stories and the fate of Nafissatou Diallo, the New York maid who stood out against Dominique Strauss-Kahn in 2011.

Secondly, it is not only sexual identities and subjectivities that have been excluded, marginalised and occluded by #MeToo. The primary context within which MeToo emerged and with which its cause has been associated is almost exclusively sexual violence. Furthermore, within this focus, the #MeToo-inspired discussion has foregrounded one particular domain, namely the workplace. Following the Harvey Weinstein exposé and the pouring of stories of (mainly celebrity) women in the media and cultural industries, MeToo has come to be preoccupied with sexual violence in paid work contexts. Even within these contexts, it has focused predominantly on women in certain roles and certain workplaces; women in sectors such as health and social work, wholesale and retail, administration, accommodation and food services, manufacturing and hospitality— in which female employment is concentrated—have been conspicuously absent from the majority of the discussion. Domestic violence has been notably missing from the discussions. Domestic violence organizations and activists are trying to capitalize on the visibility of #MeToo to advocate their causes<sup>vii</sup> – an effort that demonstrates their exclusion from (or at least marginalisation within) the movement.

The critique of MeToo's narrow focus on gendered sexual violence connects to a third limitation. It concerns the question of whether the movement's popularity and visibility are indeed due to its call for justice, or due to the salacious content of the stories it has brought to light. To put it somewhat crudely, is it sexism or sex that 'sell'? How should we understand the role of a mainstream media that suddenly seems to believe (some) women, after decades of trivialising and undermining us? Does this represent a genuine shift? Is a backlash coming? What is more, as research has shown, the proliferation and repetition of sexual violence stories, especially on social media, may make the distribution of online vitriol easy, persistent and vicious, creating a toxic and less safe, not safer, space for women's expressions of their voices (Jane, 2017; Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2018).

Finally, for all the celebration of #MeToo's challenge to sexual violence and harassment, so far it seems that a significant part of the debate remains framed in terms 'bad apples' and 'monsters' who did horrible things, not about the monstrous capitalist, patriarchal and sexist system that has produced, sustained and rewarded these 'bad apples' over decades. In this context, it is striking to note that the discussion about the sexist and violent abuse of female actresses by some Hollywood senior men's – dominated and exemplified by the case of Harvey Weinstein– has been mostly divorced from critical discussion of the huge role played by films (the commodity produced and distributed by this capitalist industry) in naturalizing and normalizing violence against women. Thus, as Shelley Cobb & Tanya Horeck (2018: 490) warn, although the current moment "feels like a watershed moment, it is important to proceed with caution and determination... so far, the emphasis on charitable legal funds, changing the face of those in power (e.g. more women CEOs etc.), and better corporate policies remains contained by a postfeminist sensibility that 'is not disruptive' and is 'capitalism, neoliberalism and patriarchy friendly' (Gill 2017, 618)".

While welcoming #MeToo for its more politicised engagement with matters of sexual politics, then, we remain ambivalent – hopeful, yet also troubled - by the type of discourses, themes, sexual identities and experiences that it foregrounds, and crucially, by those it renders invisible and unintelligible. We embrace Davis and Zarkov's (2018) productive insistence on thinking about #MeToo, and more broadly about the intersection of sex and power in the contemporary moment, in terms of dilemmas and ambiguities. #MeToo seems to represent a decisive shift away from moral panics about 'sexualization', to more politicized understandings that foreground power relations. Nevertheless, an entirely 'new day' of gendered and sexual relations still seems some way off.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/20/lgbt-community-anger-over-youtube-restrictions-which-make-their-videos-invisible>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.globeasia.com/columnists/metoo-paternalistic-indonesia/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/palestinian-metoo-yasmeen-mjalli-not-your-habibti-woman-west-bank-palestine-israel-a8192841.html>

<sup>iv</sup> See for example, <http://time.com/5034546/me-too-church-too-sexual-abuse/>

<sup>v</sup> In April 2018, the New York City Council passed the Stop Sexual Harassment in New York City Act, which would require employers with 15 or more employees to conduct mandatory annual anti-sexual harassment training for all employees <https://www.withersworldwide.com/en-gb/new-york-announces-changes-to-harassment-laws-following-metoo-movement>

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<sup>vi</sup> <http://feministing.com/2017/10/31/metoo-dont-make-trans-and-queer-survivors-a-footnote/> See also:  
<https://medium.com/@lauramdorwart/the-hidden-metoo-epidemic-sexual-assault-against-bisexual-women-95fe76c3330a>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/20/health/metoo-domestic-violence-screening-tool/index.html>

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