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**Author**

Rodriguez, Juana Maria

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*KEYWORD 6***Testimony**

*T*he #MeToo moment has brought us to a reckoning with testimony. In legal discourse, testimony, already tethered to racialized and gendered notions of rationality and consent, is part of a larger evidentiary process used to establish a set of facts. Judges and jurors are presented with evidence and asked to adjudicate a set of claims, positioning individual testimony within the larger context of other truth claims and interpretive framings. The veracity and value assigned to testimony, however, has always been predicated on who we are and how we are positioned in regimes of power. Because we must present ourselves to a law formed through colonial occupation, enslavement, and patriarchal control, the testimony of those who “speak from the position of the not supposed to speak,” to borrow from Fred Moten, has always been suspect, when it has been allowed at all (217). Outside of law, these same marginalized subjects have long turned to extrajudicial forms of testimony, using personal narratives to make public claims for collective human rights and recognition. These traditions have included the slave narratives of the African diaspora, the Latin American

tradition of *testimonio*, and the feminist tradition of using autobiography to theorize the messy conditions of our lives.

Social media, however, has changed almost everything we associate with testimony. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram determine the speed, scope, audience, and rhetorical contours of testimonial claims and the structures of available response. Once testimonies leave us, they get taken up and circulated by others, flung with care or abandoned to those far away and nearest to us, in the service of promoting both individual claims for redress and larger political demands for justice. We see how they land in the form of Likes, Comments, Retweets, because we are always being invited to Share. These forms of engagement on social media are seen as a way of offering our support for those that have been harmed, a kind of digital solidarity that can travel the world in a manner of minutes. Just as law determines what is admissible as a speech act that can enter into the public record, technology itself informs the linguistic possibilities of these affective responses. Today, emojis, memes, and character limits are used to impart shape to our engagement with the trauma of another, another who becomes increasingly removed from the scene of testimony. Once testimony enters the digital sphere, judgment is intended to be swift, rendered not by a judge, a jury, or an individual reader, but by a hive-mind of shared publics and the imagined possibilities of a shared politics. While law and autobiographical narrative rely on a slow deliberate use of evidence and rhetorical logic to build a compelling elucidation of a series of events, #MeToo carries the force of judgment, absent narrative complexity or calls for sustained interpretive analysis.

The feminist injunction to “believe women” is predicated on the assumption that the very act of testimony serves as evidence of the violence it speaks. This claim to the transparency and self-evidentiary claims of experience and the quick turn to punitive forms of justice should give us pause. Even as we understand how social media performs another proximity to the “real” through the imagined immediacy of an ever urgent present, like law, literature, and other forms of representation and self-representation, the testimonies that circulate around #MeToo are mediated by the social and political context in which they are delivered and received, molded through the very contours of language. When we narrate our experiences, particularly when what is being narrated is sex, violence, and the machinations of power, our testimony is received by diverse audiences with disparate frames of legibility that interpret these terms through their own archives of sexual and social experiences, breaking apart the imagined sameness of #MeToo.

In its public appeals, #MeToo functions as a form of collective and public recognition that depends on our willingness to *not* read for difference, subtlety, or nuance. Yet, as scholars we have long understood that recognition always takes place within a field of legibility that is always partial and contingent, producing both an absence and an excess of interpretation. In her foundational essay, “The Evidence of Experience,” Joan Scott warns us about assuming an underlying transparency in the recounting of experience. Her concern is that “[q]uestions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside” (399). What gets left aside in the discussions of #MeToo are precisely these more difficult underlying assumptions that construct our understanding of harm, violence, and, indeed, of justice (399).

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler wades through the treacherous terrain of language that circulates around forms of self-representation. In recounting the various ways that a subject enters into discourse, Butler writes, “[T]he very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our ‘singular’ stories are told” (21). In the #MeToo movement, the terms invoked—*victim*, *abuse*, *power*—are decidedly social, steeped in both complicated legal implications and varied social and cultural norms. Yet very often in the spaces of social media, terms such as *sexual violence* are vacated of these nuances, deployed to register unwelcome verbal sexual advances, the forcible violation of one’s corporeal edges, and the kinds of sustained, systemic sexual assaults associated with colonialism and slavery. While each kind of violation evidences harm, the extent and impact of these violations are decidedly different.

When these “singular stories” spring into the space of public discourse, each encounter forms a new moment of potential collective recognition and validation. In fact, the very syntax of #MeToo is predicated on a structure of sameness in search of recognition or substitutability. Discursively, it affirms that whatever violation happened to the one giving testimony is the same as the one who echoes back, #MeToo. It is precisely this collective chorus of #MeToo that has been effective in exposing the pervasiveness of diverse forms of sexual violation; the systemic ways gendered and sexual violence gets silenced, dismissed, or condoned; and the racialized historical antecedents that frame these contemporary acts of gendered violation. But that chorus and the cumulative psychic harm it carries has also been

activated to make demands for punitive action that can erase the complexity and nuance of specific events and individual actors in the service of larger, more compelling, and more expedient political agendas. While appeals for revenge and retribution for sexual assault have historically been organized around the protection of white female innocence and vulnerability, the same logic of punitive justice is at times selectively extended to nonwhite women and others, particularly when the accused perpetrator fits available scripts of pathologized racialized masculinity. Even as the originating narrators and narratives that have circulated around the hashtag have varied widely, the judgments offered have been disturbingly consistent: abusers need to pay, if not with juridical intervention, then with swift, speedy, and relentless public censure. “Abusers,” for surely by now they have become a genus, need to be exiled from our screens, our syllabi, our consumptive practices, and our communities.

These calls for “justice” are rarely interrogated. Within the #MeToo movement, we have seen how quickly testimony gets activated to demand punishment and more vigilant forms of state protection. At times, these calls go further to offer preventative measures that are perceived to offer protections against future harms, generally in the form of increased sexual prohibitions and surveillance offered under the guise of making potentially vulnerable parties “safer.” Yet, as people of color and stigmatized sexual minorities, many of us know all too well how demands for enhanced systems of sexual surveillance and control in the service of “safety” have been used against us. The sexuality of black and brown people of all genders has long been positioned as inherently dangerous in ways that have authorized debasing forms of state surveillance, criminalization, and punishment for perceived deviance from middle-class norms of white sexual comportment. We queers have our own visceral history of “sex panics,” of being marked as sexually deviant, hunted down, exposed, publicly ridiculed, and expelled from civil society. Furthermore, many queers and other people of color have known up close the punitive impulses of the carceral state and carceral feminism, whose only form of redress is dehumanization, incarceration, and exile. These corrective disciplinary measures foreclose social investments in probing the traumas around which harm festers or developing more sustainable forms of reparative justice. They are organized instead around creating a world in which only the unwounded are allowed to flourish.

In communities marked by the generational violences of settler colonialism, police occupation, state-enforced poverty, domestic abuse, and

immigrant despair, wounding abounds. These hurts are harder to name. Sometimes, even when the weight of evidence makes a compelling case for injury, different publics shaped by generation, social position, proximity, and personal experience can interpret the extent, impact, and possibility for redress of that injury quite differently. We have already witnessed how some cases, inside and outside of the academy, have divided diverse feminist and progressive communities, when, having been invited to sign on, share, or echo the response and judgment of those in our social spheres (digital and otherwise) failure to comply or, worse, open disagreement gets registered as betrayal. Even as these fissures reveal the varied ways that sexual and social experiences can impact our worldview, they also expose the very different visions of justice that undergird discussions of gendered violence and social harm.

At this historical juncture, we would do well to interrogate our individual attachments—political and psychic—in the testimony and circulation of another’s harm and our collective investments in public forms of punishment that erase possibilities for redemption, reparations, or amends, punishments that are always inflected through race, class, and social position. In his account of queer Latino *testimonio*, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé probes how the desires of readers, for either connection or distance, are implicated in interpretive accounts of narrative scenes of violation and trauma. He suggests, “If we gazed on that scene and searched there for the marked subject’s ontological difference or ‘truth,’ [ . . . ] we would end up not engaging with an interlocutor, but creating a subjected subject instead—a subject-for-us, that is, for us to know, to conquer, to possess” (113). Here, Cruz-Malavé asks us to interrogate the affective attachments to mastery and judgment that we bring to bear on the testimony of another. His words highlight the need to situate traumatized subjects within the fields of power that generate the conditions for trauma. But he also reminds us of the multiple ways that testimony can be instrumentalized in relation to readers’ desires for recognition, for difference, or for politics. Like other forms of testimony, #MeToo uses individual stories to make larger shared political claims, and while it is this move toward collective forms of representation that creates the conditions for mobilizing publics hailed by that injury, it is also what erases the particularities of difference that define each new #MeToo moment.

As politically engaged publics, we would all do well to slow down our consumptive and reactive practices, to be careful and cautious readers willing to situate each new testimony within its own complicated context and geopolitical field of reception. Reading for difference and recognizing

how we might also read differently requires that we think more honestly about our own desires and investments in the dispersal of testimonies of harm and in the social demands we make in their name, to think about how the dynamics of power, proximity, and precarity establish each of us as different kinds of vulnerable subjects. Too many of us have our own memories of #MeToo moments, small injustices and cruel violations; flashbacks poised to trigger a visceral response upon witnessing the testimony of another. Each of us brings our own histories of violence, of sex, of community to our encounters with the testimony of another. Harm, like pleasure, is corporeal. It can become lodged in our bodies, it can linger or evaporate, it can scar. Yet, we cannot assume that sharing the “same” experience or identity will amount to sharing the same political strategies and goals. The shape, force, and direction of how we might be activated by the testimony of another can never be fully knowable or predictable.

A harder question becomes what to make of those shades of difference, particularly and especially when the testimony that is being delivered is one not of violence, but of pleasure. Like experiences of sexual violence, representations of what might constitute sexual pleasure are never unmediated or transparent, but emerge within an ever changing interpretive field of intelligibility shaped by social forces but unique to each of us. How can we use this moment to listen with care to the complexities of claims of violence, as well as to the articulations of difficult pleasures, constrained enactments of agency, and the narrative refusals of facile tropes of female victimization that also surround accounts of sexual experience? Being vulnerable also means being vulnerable to one another, opening ourselves up to critique and censure because we have failed to fulfill someone else’s demands for representation, for solidarity, or for political action. If we understand experience and the testimony that aims to represent it as both “always already an interpretation, and something that needs to be interpreted,” it becomes easier to understand how political disagreements can arise about what might constitute sexual violence or sexual pleasure as both predictable and necessary (Scott 412). That as political activists, as scholars, as feminists, or as survivors of sexual assaults we might disagree on the interpretation or implications of corporeal experiences or the imagined strategies for addressing social harms seems the most basic foundation upon which to situate constructive dialogue and community engagement toward a world filled with less harm and greater care. And if we can understand how our vulnerability to abuse is shaped by currents of power and privilege, let us also ponder the ways that possibilities for joy, sexual and otherwise, are

also conditioned by these same forces. Let us not only linger on what might constitute injury; let us also dwell on what might constitute justice. Let us talk freely and openly about how to flirt, fuck, and feel passionately in a world seething with pain and suffering in order to imagine a sexual politics that reaches for a capacious justice that does more than merely punish and prohibit, a justice where pleasure might also thrive.

JUANA MARÍA RODRÍGUEZ is a professor of ethnic studies, performance studies, and gender and women's studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York University Press, 2014) and *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York University Press, 2003). She is currently working on a book on visual culture and Latina sexual labor and coediting a special issue of *TSQ* called *Trans Studies en las Américas*.

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