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## #MeToo and Literary Studies: Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture

Gabrielle Stecher  
*Indiana University - Bloomington*, [gstecher@iu.edu](mailto:gstecher@iu.edu)

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Holland, M.K. and Hewett, H. (Eds.). (2021). *#MeToo and Literary Studies: Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture*. Bloomsbury Academic. 432 pp. \$31.45 eBook. ISBN: 978-1-501372-74-2.

Gabrielle Stecher

Through *#MeToo and Literary Studies: Reading, Writing, and Teaching About Sexual Violence and Rape Culture*, editors Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewett have not just created a useful primer on the #MeToo movement's impact on the various domains of literary studies. They have also provided a timely and necessary toolkit for learning how to use literature to bravely confront, inside and outside of these classrooms, the steady if not unceasing proliferation of sexual violence in our world. Behind this volume is an urgent desire to "connect our individual efforts to a collective endeavor" as the authors, through the acts of reading, writing, and teaching, interrogate and attempt to dismantle the institutions that have for so long allowed, if not encouraged, such devastation (p. 3). Most importantly, across twenty-eight chapters, *#MeToo and Literary Studies* demonstrates the possibilities for centralizing the texts, knowledge, and experiences of women, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and otherwise marginalized persons and communities who most frequently experience sexual assault (p. 15). In this review, I seek to highlight the topical range of this impressive volume while underscoring that its pedagogical merit is not only applicable to those who call literary studies home.

What Sara V. Torres and Rebecca F. McNamara say of the medieval literature classroom rings true for all of the classrooms and texts discussed in this collection: each "provides a venue to explore representations of sexual violence, to historicize languages of consent and coercion, and to support student dialogue on issues of gendered violence" (p. 333). The periods, genres, and authors of the literature discussed by the collection's authors vary broadly including, to name just a few, the 1947 Partition of India (Nidhi Shrivastava), contemporary Black street lit (Jacinta R. Saffold), and the Western canon's long beloved Jane Austen (Douglas Murray). This range is evidence of how "literature everywhere is and always has been a site for exposing and resisting misogyny and cultures of sexual violence" (p. 8). Additionally, authors such as Hewett, Carlyn Ferrari, Kasey Jones-Matrona, and Nafeesa T. Nichols encourage us to consider intersectionality and the ways in which these narratives are often linked to and shaped by additional forces of colonial and racial violence.

While, as the title suggests, this volume surveys how ongoing and evolving conversations about sexual violence shape literary studies as a field, many of the essays' pedagogical practices are not only appropriate for literature classrooms. Sarah Goldbert, for instance, discusses the power of restorative

justice circles, a practice “based on indigenous traditions that emphasize the interconnectivity of all living creatures by gathering in a circle to share and heal” as a means of publicly embracing vulnerability (p. 290). Additionally, Namrata Mitra and Katherine Conner unpack the economics of credibility post #MeToo, arguing that “certainty of one’s desire is strategically necessary to the #MeToo movement” (p. 107). The issue, however, is “our cultural scripts of desire that are predominantly written by rich, white, straight, cisgender men have been internalized by most people, even if they are at odds with their own desires” (p. 107). Mitra’s and Conner’s framework can guide students to reflect on and analyze a diverse array of literary *and* non-literary cultural productions that have conditioned them to behave as objects of another’s desire. This chapter, then, can encourage more productive conversations about agency and how our understandings of desire and consent are massively influenced by cultural representations of romance.

Of particular note is Beth Walker’s chapter “Trigger Warnings: An Ethics for Tutoring #MeToo Content and Rape Narratives in Writing Centers,” an essay I argue should be required reading for all writing center consultants, as well as writing teachers across the curriculum. In this insightful essay, Walker reminds us that “#MeToo material characteristically subverts the rules of content, structure, style, and mechanics as a way of artistically exerting resistance, control, agency, and choice. The genre is filled with fragmentation and experimental techniques” (p. 241). As such, we must be mindful of *how* we demonstrate we are truly listening to (rather than attempting to speak over) students brave enough to bare their soul, in writing and even in person; after all, we must “work with the text rather than against it” (p. 241). This holds true for writing assignments of all genres, as does the fact that students often perceive our markup, especially on sensitive or otherwise highly personal material, as “punishing” or “butchering” (p. 238).

Ultimately, no matter how much trauma-informed training we educators have and no matter how thoughtful and purposeful our curriculum is, it is never a small feat to discuss, soundly and compassionately, sexual violence in all its forms in the classroom. In making choices on what texts to teach in the pursuit of asking students to not just inquire about but push back against rape culture, we have to read widely, digesting accounts that, necessarily, unsettle and prompt us to (re)examine our own experiences. To put it mildly, the process of reading such texts as Roxane Gay’s memoir *Hunger* (Amanda Spallacci; Elif S. Armbruster) and Hanya Yanagihara’s novel *A Little Life* (Robin E. Field) can be intellectually and emotionally challenging. While one might expect Holland and Hewett’s 400-odd page tome to be overwhelming in this regard, what is abundantly clear is the volume’s compassionate and empathetic ethos. It is a reminder that we, fortunately, do not have to undertake this reflective and pedagogical labor alone.

For these reasons, *#MeToo and Literary Studies* is an indispensable volume for both new and veteran instructors.

#### References

- Gay, Roxane (2017). *Hunger: A memoir of (my) body*. HarperCollins.  
Yanagihara, Hanya. (2015). *A little life*. Doubleday.