

Sexual Violence Tells Stories

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“Me Too” are two simple but very powerful words, which brought the widespread practice of sexual harassment to public attention in 2017 after film producer, Harvey Weinstein, was accused of rape in a Twitter post. This was the first step of #MeToo quickly turning into a mass culture phenomenon, inciting women of all backgrounds to share their stories of sexual abuse. Considering the devastating and traumatizing impact that sexual assault has on victims, Dianna Taylor, a long-term co-editor of Michel Foucault’s works, offers in her latest book an insight into what goes on behind the sealed doors of sexual violence. After consecutively examining feminist identity constructions in political discourse in her previous works—*Feminism and the Final Foucault* (2004), *Feminist Politics: Identity, Difference, and Agency* (2007), *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts* (2014)—, Taylor’s latest book, *Sexual Violence and Humiliation* (2020) is a secure platform for the author, on the one hand, to correlate her own experience of sexual abuse with the danger of humiliation that women regularly encounter when they publicly declare they were subjected to sexual harassment, and, on the other, to build on Foucault’s philosophy of truth-telling (*parrhēsia*).

Using shame, a corollary to sexual abuse, as one of the running themes in her book, the author points out that the aim of her feminist discourse is to scrutinize the power of humiliation in generating silence in the victims/survivors, and to offer incisive philosophical readings of the disorder that speaking out produces. When referring to women who have experienced sexual violence, Taylor intentionally employs the dual term “victims/survivors”

to avoid their continuing societal victimization, and simultaneously, to reduce the diminishing potential these terms communicate. Although she refuses to turn her own experience of abuse into the book's main motivation, it is a striking detail that influences the reader to a great extent. Relying on the works of Foucault, the author further admits that shame instigates a deeply negative relation of the survivors to themselves since it portends their subhumanity (caused by the women's lack of power, their obedience, and sexual oppression). *Sexual Violence and Humiliation* not only promotes the cultivation of the victims' new ways of self-relation and a disruption of gendered power relations, but also aims at encouraging the female victims of sexual abuse to make silence unjustifiable.

In the introduction, while openly criticizing the perspicacity of privileged White male philosophers in undertheorizing feminist efforts to revitalize the study of sexual abuse, Taylor broadly refers to sexual violence as gender-based violence against women by men, and frames men as the ones reinforcing women's inferior status. Following Foucault's approach to the continuous conceptualization of women's sexual humiliation with the violation of self-respect, Taylor asserts that rape turns women into stigmatized subhumans by reducing their sexualized body as men's inferior in the interests of the patriarchal system. Therefore, women are only permitted the illusion of freedom because if they had full agency, the reproduction of their subordination would be undermined.

Using the growth of self-relation as its focus, *Sexual Violence and Humiliation* is arranged in four chapters. The first, "You Can't Critique the Subject," in addition to Foucault's philosophy, combines Friedrich Nietzsche's and Judith Butler's perspectives on subjectivity, which form the backbone of this chapter in questioning subjectivity's role as a mode of self-relation since "it [subjectivity] masks the relations of power" (13). In trying to define self-dependency and the ontological necessity of subjectivity, Taylor refers to the early Christian relation of self-to-self, including confession, fear, penance, and monastic self-

examination. What becomes apparent in this chapter is her claim that “subjectivity is implicated in reproducing sexual humiliation inflicted by sexual violence against women” (32).

“Subjectivity, Sexual Violence, and Sexual Humiliation” turns the readers’ attention to the ways sexual violence threatens the victims’ creative capacities by generating a deeply damaging self-relation. Through defining stigma, self-blame, and lack of self-respect, the author affirms that shame destroys the victims’ self-understanding and ostracizes them as sexually inferior subjects.

“Speaking Out, Countering Sexual Humiliation, Transforming Oneself” classifies self-relation, based on Foucault’s *parrhēsia*, as “the mode of constituting and understanding the self” (59). The chapter focuses on verbal feminist protests condemning sexual violence, and castigates the disempowerment coming from the speeches of the #MeToo speakers. The parallels Taylor draws between the abuse and humiliation survivors experience as a result of speaking out underscore Foucault’s point that “confronting normalizing power entails potentially devastating risks that one can never anticipate and for which one can therefore never sufficiently prepare” (79).

“Militant Bodies,” the closing chapter, for me, meant the climax of this book. It provides an enlightening analysis of the philosophy of cynicism and its connection with truth-telling. Sovereignty and true life are the key concepts of the author’s analysis in referring to modes of independency. In this chapter, Taylor establishes the prominence of ethical *parrhēsia*, and classifies it as a lesser political practice. For Foucault, the Cynics’ “otherness” stands for their being “militant,” brazenly resisting principles, and constantly establishing “new ways of constituting, understanding, and relating to oneself, others, and the world” (82). The Cynics’ ethical *parrhēsia* turns humiliation against its source by undermining the sexual stigmatization that accompanies women’s subhumanization. The author also considers

contemporary anti-sexual violence protests (for example, SlutWalks and Mattress Protest) in her analysis, and concludes that militancy exhibits courage, challenges oppression, disrupts the normalizing gendered response to sexual violence, and opens new platforms for articulating the conceptualizations of solidarity.

Taylor also disrupts the continuous manifestation of sexual humiliation within the relation of self-to-self, and anticipates new modes of self-relation which further women's freedom. Foucault's critique of truth-telling helped her overpower her sexual abuse, since the experience of sexual violence when shared with others (implying openness and exposure) has the potential to enhance the possibility of women's solidarity. She briefly refers to her abuse again in the last chapter in affirmative and transformative ways. By openly speaking about her past, the author seeks to inspire other female victims of sexual violence not to allow humiliation to undermine their self-to-self, and self-to-other relationships, but instead, to overcome the abuse through gestures of unity, which have the potential to boost women's power.

What is unique and convincing about *Sexual Violence and Humiliation* is its clear articulation of sexual humiliation in the form of a protest, which denounces the normalization of sexual abuse, and advocates women's liberation from the trauma, due to the author's marked ability to not only rely on the philosophy of Foucault, but to expand on it. The additional degradation that sexual abuse survivors experience because of speaking out highlights Foucault's point that by denouncing the assault, women face fears they were not prepared for. Yet, contrary to Foucault, Taylor anticipates that transformation and self-dependency become possible through the risk of exposure.

By stating that "men do not experience sexual violence at the same rates as women" (2), and focusing only on women's internalization of external humiliation, Taylor appears hesitant in exploring male sexual victimization; not entirely free from bias, she castigates

them as born offenders, with women as the sole sufferers of disgrace. Thus, the author unconsciously ignores the complexities surrounding sexual victimization and gender issues by reinforcing the stereotypical paradigm of sexual victimization, where men are the perpetrators and women the victims.

When strengthening the men's position as abusers, and introducing rape as a gendered crime, she additionally coerces to men's societal disfiguration and minimizes empathy towards them. This differentiation not only conditions men's confessions and discourages them from revealing being abused, but also emulates and expands women's subordination instead of challenging it. As such, Taylor denies the most fundamental understanding behind the feminism she advocates, namely, that the philosophy of truth-telling should be applied to everyone, and, alternatively, reinforces problematic gendered stereotypes about male sexuality.

In sum, Taylor's book is exceptional in the sense that it enhances support and unity for all sexually abused women by using her own personal experience of humiliation as the basis for a philosophical discussion. What makes it coherent is not only the constant correlation of its theme with #MeToo (empowering through empathy), but also the masterful invitation to broader trauma studies, women's studies, and more radical and progressive female philosophers. *Sexual Violence and Humiliation* clearly promotes collective and inclusive solidarity for female survivors of sexual abuse, and openly confronts the loosely contaminated societal prejudices they encounter. Although the book's reading can be challenging for those lacking some prior knowledge of Foucault's works, it is a captivating read for anyone interested in gender studies and Rape Trauma Syndrome. Those who will find the writing of Dianna Taylor truly life-changing are particularly the female survivors of sexual abuse in the academic community, who will finally hear their shared stories of sexual abuse voiced.

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