

After #MeToo: How Visual Media Can Provide an Alternative to Cultural Scripts

BY SARALYN MCKINNON-CROWLEY

Kelly Wilz, *Resisting Rape Culture through Popular Culture: Sex after #MeToo*. Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, 2020. 202 pp. \$90.00, ISBN 978-1498588683; ebook, \$85.50, ISBN 978-1498588690.

This book accomplishes two goals: it provides a history of and justification for the #MeToo movement, and it suggests how certain visual media provide an alternative, healthy, and nuanced depiction of sexuality that undermines dominant cultural scripts. Wilz opens powerfully with a description of the anti-anxiety medications she was prescribed to help her cope with the effects of sexual assault; then she describes the assault itself, with reference to the social scripts that influenced her response to being raped. The author's personal experiences as a survivor explicitly and unapologetically influence the book.

In subsequent chapters, Wilz pairs an overview of feminist thinking about the chapter's topic with a model media depiction that counters dominant narratives. In Chapter 1, she combines a discussion of consent to sexual activity with a depiction of affirmative consent in the second season of the television show *13 Reasons Why*. Chapter 2 explains toxic and hegemonic masculinity and contrasts those narratives with the depictions of men characters in the television show *Queen Sugar*. In Chapter 3, Wilz talks about sexual assaults that do not fit the narrative of violent stranger rape, by focusing on a concept called intimate justice — the notion that all partners in a sexual encounter are human

and their pleasure should be taken seriously. Centering intimate justice, she provides the example of teenage women pursuing sexual pleasure in the film *Blockers*, showing how a conceptual shift in whose pleasure matters changes the conversation around coercive sexual behavior in a positive way. Chapter 4 tackles how sexual crimes are routinely ignored by the criminal justice system, as depicted by the documentary film *I Am Evidence*. Wilz offers a humanizing alternative to the frequently incompetent investigations and prosecutions of sexual assault, represented in this chapter by untested rape kits. The book concludes with policy suggestions for how to create better lives for survivors of assault.

The strengths of this book include its willingness to address what can be difficult, under-discussed topics in a frank and open manner. Its close attention to digital spaces shows how important these arenas are to critical sexuality studies, a field in which the book is situated. Wilz offers compact presentations of both the contemporary state of research and the national conversation around each of the issues covered. The discussions of theory and research in each chapter constitute an up-to-date feminist reader that addresses common arguments and assumptions undergirding discourse about sexual practices. For example, when discussing the un-



The discussions of theory and research constitute an up-to-date feminist reader that addresses common arguments and assumptions undergirding discourse about sexual practices.

BOOKS

substantiated narratives about false reporting of sexual assault in Chapter 4, Wilz refers to “‘man-ification’ or ‘mole-hilling’” as a way “to describe the rhetorical process whereby claims and fears of dominant groups subordinate claims of non-dominant groups, no matter the lack of evidence, data, or logic” (p. 100). Wilz presents evidence that false reporting of sexual assault is exceedingly rare and draws an analogy between fears of false reporting and fears of voter fraud, both issues whose existence is far less common than media narratives might have the public believe. This is the sort of book I would like to give to individuals who consider themselves anti-rape allies but still do not reckon with the social scripts that condition the bounds of their allyship.

Some areas of the book could have used improvement. First, I would have liked a more expanded rationale for the selection of these four texts. Wilz states in the introduction that she picked four non-independent

visual texts whose production post-dates #MeToo because each depicts “a disparate yet fundamental aspect of rape culture and provides audiences with discursive resources to make sense of these models of healthy intimacy” (p. 13), but it was unclear whether there were other media she considered but did not include. The inclusion of *I Am Evidence*, a documentary film, was jarring when the other three media examples under discussion were fiction. I found the arguments about how that text could be an alternative anti-rape culture model the least convincing, simply because of its genre. Although Wilz herself notes this as a limitation of her work, this book also foregrounds the cisgender and heterosexual experiences of women; a future study could center trans* and queer individuals instead. Wilz’s concluding call to action centers on political action — placing survivors in positions of political and policymaking power in order to change norms. To me, this presupposes a kind of universality

to all survivors and assumes that the current system is fixable. Survivors do not all have the same identities; if they are not already present in the halls of power, their entrée into those worlds will not lead to the same results. If rape culture is as baked into systems of power as Wilz argues it is, I am also skeptical that placing any survivor in a position of political power will lead to lasting change.

Overall, this book is a challenging but worthwhile read. I highly recommend it to anyone who would like to learn more about the #MeToo movement and some of the cultural norms the movement is reacting against. It is written in an informal, accessible manner. Wilz herself frequently appears in the narrative, offering her personal perspective as a survivor and an activist. I found the book difficult purely because of the subject matter under discussion. It is infuriating and saddening to read about the consequences of rape culture in so many people’s lives in a single text.

[Saralyn McKinnon-Crowley is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, College of Education, at the University of Texas at Austin. She is also a women’s and gender studies portfolio student.]