Towards a language of sexual gray zones: feminist collective knowledge building through autobiographical multimedia storytelling

Lena Karlsson
Department of Gender Studies, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This article examines the narrative and discursive feminist labor of the Swedish 2010 Twitter-initiated #talkaboutit campaign focusing on sexual “gray areas.” The campaign sought to lessen the perceived gap between experience and discourse and work towards an adequate language encompassing difficult sexual situations presented as residing in the gray area between choice and coercion. Autobiographical narratives of negative sexual situations amounting to something less than rape were summoned, produced, and intensively disseminated online and in print media. I mainly analyze the autobiographical stories produced by what could be called the core members of the campaign as they signal the purpose of collective autobiographical storytelling as well as what is sayable and culturally exigent. I analyze how new grounds of contention in between sex and violence are staked out focusing equally on the feminist act of personal/political storytelling and on the story told about sexual “gray areas.” The article discusses the tension between the feminist collective, side-by-side, mode of storytelling and knowledge building and the equally present neoliberal narrative arc which culminates in a subject personally responsible for acting differently next time.

I don’t feel like a victim, but I would have the right to. To be guaranteed, the guy I slept with didn’t feel like a perpetrator. This is something we really need to talk about so that there is a language in place in the future when it really matters. (Johanna Koljosen 2010)

Big and small matters: been a victim, done harm myself, seen others suffer, everyone ought to #talkaboutit. So much sex everywhere, yet we are mute, why? (#talkaboutit Twitter archive Dec. 16, 2010)

This last decade has witnessed a profusion of autobiographical stories online as part of various feminist campaigns challenging sexism and violence (i.e., #hollaback!, #aufschrei, #beenrapedneverreported,#prataomdet/talkaboutit, and most recently #metoo). As has been broadly recognized, the internet provides ample room for both autobiographical storytelling (see, for instance Ricarda Drüeke and Elke Zobl 2016; Zizi Papacharissi 2015; Lena Wånggren 2016), as well as the severe discrediting of feminist stories and enunciations.
Autobiographical narratives have been in long use in feminist politics, and especially in certain tenets of second wave political organization (i.e., consciousness-raising), but how are they used in the current political campaigns? What feminist work are the autobiographical stories assembled around a hashtag set out to accomplish? What stories of gender, sexuality, consent and coercion are tellable in the various campaigns organized around a specific lexicon: a key phrase/slogan/hashtag? In this article, I will exclusively focus on the autobiographical stories assembled around the hashtag #talkaboutit (in Swedish, #prataomdet), initiated in Sweden in December 2010. The campaign summoned autobiographical stories around the concept of “gray areas”: framed as indeterminate, negative, predominantly (hetero)sexual situations residing in a continuum from consent to assault. In a first joint blog, the campaign agenda is described as follows:

In this blog we will publish links and texts where we talk about what we don’t talk about much—the gray zones, the experiences of sex which reside in between “nice,” socially sanctioned sex and violence, assault. We need a language, we need to think about our own and others’ boundaries, about respect, about desire, lust and fear. (#prataomdet blog 2010)

The campaign sought to call attention to the perceived misfit between lived experience and discourse (Lena Gunnarsson 2018) and work towards a language capacious enough to hold the gray area in between sexuality and violence. The #talkaboutit campaign initially began as a response to the victim blaming media portrayal of the two Swedish women whom in August 2010 accused the new media activist Julian Assange of sexual assault and rape in situations that started out as consensual sexual situations. However, apart from this point of departure connected to the legal arena, the campaign initiators repeatedly stated that the intervention they sought was on a cultural rather than legal level.

Online media has frequently been heralded as offering a platform for marginal voices that otherwise would not find a media outlet (Nick Couldry 2010; Papacharissi 2015). However, the #talkaboutit campaign was given ample mainstream media attention. Not until the fall of 2017 and #metoo has a crossmedia campaign focusing on sexual violence seized mainstream media’s attention in a way similar to the 2010 #talkaboutit campaign.TV, radio, major newspapers, women’s magazines, and political magazines not only covered the campaign, but provided a platform for the publishing of autobiographical stories related to the campaign. The loose network of well-established journalists who initiate #talkaboutit cannot be said to fill the criteria for “marginal voices.” However, the story they tell and implore others to tell about ambiguous sexual situations in the border area between sexual consent and assault is a marginalized story both within feminist activism against sexual violence and in the mainstream media (Nicola Gavey 2005; Suzanne McKenzie Mohr 2014).

The article has a dual storytelling focus. In part, it explores the stories told around sexual gray areas and the conceptual and political implications of framing the discussion around sex, rather than rape. In part, it explores the feminist act of telling this story. It traces the ways in which the gray area is framed through the feminist act of personal/political knowledge building by autobiographical side-by-side cross media narration. #talkaboutit emerges as a joint knowledge-building process reminiscent of earlier feminist modes of consciousness-raising. Notwithstanding, the article illuminates and discusses the tension between the feminist collective, side-by-side, mode of storytelling and an equally present neoliberal narrative drive which culminates in a subject personally responsible for acting differently next time.
Sex, rape, gray zones

The #talkaboutit campaign attempts to work towards a more capacious language around negative sexual situations amounting to something else, something lesser than rape. The initial presentation of the hashtag #talkaboutit places what one wants to talk about as sex, not violence, by declaring that following the tweets, there will be “sex stories in the papers next week” (#talkaboutit Twitter archive, Dec. 16, 2010). This framing of the hashtag must be seen as a striking feminist move move, as what instigated the discussion was the accusation of Assange, which involves rape, sexual molestation and unlawful coercion. In the main, feminists have for decades attempted to move rape from the domain of sex to the domain of violence and power (Ken Plummer 1995). The main campaign initiator, the journalist Johanna Koljonen, recognizes that in the name of the law, the situation she describes could be recognized as rape. Several other narratives contain incidents that legally would have been recognized as rape. How can this campaign move to sexuality be understood? What avenues of political contention are opened up by this attempt to create a discursive space for something less than rape and something else than mere sex and what are closed out? The following section seeks to map central feminist dialogues on sex vs. rape and will serve as a backdrop to the discussion of the campaign’s attempt to work towards a more capacious language around the “gray area.”

Sex, rape, narratives: key feminist debates

Ever since sexual violence began to be a topic of serious feminist theoretical contention, there have been intense debates around whether rape ought to be understood as different in kind or scale to heterosexual sex in patriarchal society. Prominent among those seeking to oust rape from the realm of sex in the social and political imagination is Susan Brownmiller. In her very influential Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape, Brownmiller deflated rape myths (misunderstandings concerning the prevalence of rape, who gets raped, how rape happens, etc.) and construed a new political rape plot which framed rape as a matter of violence, not sexuality, of the victim not being responsible for the situation but overarching patriarchal transnational structures, of rape as every day and common, not aberrant acts, of rape causing long term trauma. This feminist narrative of rape inverted rape myths and politicized the rape plot (Susan Brownmiller 1975; Susan Griffin 1971; Plummer 1995). This culturally dominant feminist narrative of rape was developed in the 1970s, but remains vigorous (see Soraya Chermaly 2014, for instance). However, concomitant to these calls to remove rape conceptually and politically from the sphere of sex to the sphere of violence are theoretical efforts to frame rape as different in scale to heterosex in patriarchal society. Feminist scholar of law Catherine MacKinnon has famously argued for a heteronormative sex-rape continuum pointing to political and conceptual links between rape and heterosex. MacKinnon illuminates how female sexuality is construed in patriarchy “a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered, or exchanged by others. But women never own or possess it” (1989, 72). Within these patriarchal conditions, MacKinnon argues, both knowing and communicating consent in impossible. In a series of contributions, feminist psychology scholar Nicola Gavey (1999, 2005) has proposed that we need to understand a gray area of heterosexual interactions being something less than rape and something else than “just sex”. In Just Sex: The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape, Gavey argues that stereotypical images of an active forceful
male sexuality and feminine passivity constitute “the cultural scaffolding for rape” (Gavey 2005, 72). In Just Sex, Gavey partly discusses how prevalent it is among the women she interviews to not recognize or term what has happened to oneself as rape even when the act is congruent with legal definitions of rape (Gavey 2005). This is particularly the case when the event occurs in relationships and no physical force is employed.

Was she really raped, despite disowning that label for her experience? Or, does her refusal of that label suggest that her interpretation of that experience as other than rape made it so? And, what does it say about our culture(s) that there can be so much ambiguity over the differential diagnosis of rape versus sex? How should we conceptualize and judge the myriad of coercive sexual acts that lie somewhere between rape and consensual sex? (Gavey 2005, 169)

Gavey suggests that the stark division between rape and sex that has been established by Brownmiller et al. has rendered heterosexual sex “in its ‘mutually consenting’ form as the good Other to sexual victimization. This implicit construal of an innocent heterosexuality renders it as something which can exist untarnished by the ever-present possibility of sex and violence being fused” (Gavey 2005, 189). In a recent article, Ann Cahill (2016) develops a theoretical framework around Gavey’s gray area propositions in order to trace conceptual and political differences between sexual gray areas and sexual assault. Cahill comes to the conclusion that the role of women’s sexual agency (presented as always circumscribed, intersubjective and structurally regulated) differs in rape and unjust sex situations. In gray area situations, Cahill argues, the woman’s sexual agency is to a certain extent pursued, in assault situations the woman’s sexual agency is negated (Cahill 2016, 758).

This brief delineation of feminist theoretical interventions around questions of rape vs. sex is replete with metaphors of storytelling: scaffolding, dominant narratives, framing. “Rape is always historically and culturally specific, and how it is understood depends upon a framework of storytelling,” as Ken Plummer writes (1995, 63). In various ways, feminist theoretical interventions around sexual assault have illuminated the power of narrative in recognizing, politicizing, and accounting for sexual violence. In her 2002 article, Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention, Sharon Marcus takes a linguistic and individualistic stance in her suggestion that viewing rape as part of a linguistic script can enable rape prevention in the moment: “to speak of rape script implies a narrative of rape, a series of steps and signals whose typical initial moments we can learn to recognize and whose final outcome we can learn to stave off” (390). Marcus has been criticized for individualizing rape and lifting the offender out of the rape prevention frame. In her Framing the Rape Victim, for instance, Carine Mardorossian heavily criticizes Marcus’s proposition for the individual to recognize and resist discursive pathways in the situation and revise it, which assigns responsibility to the victim.

Marcus sees each individual rape as comprised of various stages such as verbal threats and other forms of action and harassment and argues that the time and space between these threats and rape constitute ‘the gap in which women can try to intervene, overpower and deflect the threatened action’ (2014, 49).

Thus, the feminist conceptual exploration of sex/rape has often been grounded in narrative analysis, pointing to societal structures and the subject’s navigation within these scripts. However, the varying feminist analytical emphasis on the narrative before, during or after has, as shown, considerable political and theoretical implications.
Campaign background

The #talkabout campaign did not begin as a collectively organized campaign, but rather as a random Twitter conversation between the well-established journalist Johanna Koljonen and her friends in response to the highly mediated accusation of international new media activist Julian Assange. The Assange case stirred and continues to stir considerable national and international debate even after the chief investigator in May 2017 dropped the attempt to extradite Assange from Ecuador’s embassy in London where he has resided since the accusations were made in late summer 2010 (Steven Erlanger and Christina Andersson 2017). As is often the case in highly medialized medial of rape cases (Dustin Harp, Jamie Loke, and Ingrid Bachmann 2014; Mardorossian 2014; Rebecca Stringer 2014), the media portrayal of the women filing the complaint contained a heavy portion of victim blaming. The plaintiffs credibility and assumed sexual licentiousness were in focus, and an adhering strand of reverse victimology. In the media, the women were accused of inappropriate behavior both before and after the alleged assault. In the eyes of the public, they did not display signs of trauma. They did not report to the police directly. And, further, one of them posted blogposts on other matters on the day after the assault is reported to have occurred. The victims were thus cast as “non-credible victimizers” (Stringer 2014, 10) of the activist hero.

In the fall of 2010, Swedish rape law was heavily debated in both national and international press. In contemporary Swedish law, the main principle in the provisions on rape is force (Ulrika Andersson 2004; SOU 2016: 60). Since 2005, force is supplemented by the victim’s helpless state (intoxication, sleep, and illness). During the two past decades, the need for a new sexual offences legislation based on consent has been heavily debated. In October 2016 a consent-based legal structure was proposed by an official report of the Swedish government and is presently circulated for consultation (SOU 2016: 60).

In response to the debates around sexual consent and Swedish rape law that the Assange case stirred, Koljonen tweets a personal experience that resonates with aspects of the Assange case in that it involves a situation of sexual consent turning into a situation of violation and non-consensual non-condom usage during sleep. Two days after the initial spontaneous tweet posting aimed at known friends, on December 16, 2010, Koljonen urges others to tell their stories under the hashtag #talkaboutit created by fellow journalist Sofia Mirjamsdotter, and also have them published in print media. A year later, in November 2011, Koljonen reflects upon the moment of her first tweet:

What interested me that evening was … how predictably the culture of victim blaming closed its noose on the women who raised charges. It seemed from all the talk that the case was far from clear-cut, and it struck me as rather heroic to even report a case so apparently vague and so unlikely to be given a fair hearing (since the judicial system seems to struggle even with straightforward sexual assault cases). (Johanna Koljonen 2011)

The first few days of the hashtag saw an explosion of autobiographical storytelling in Twitter format or tweets leading readers to longer autobiographical blog posts and autobiographical stories linked to the hashtag published in major Swedish newspapers and journals. Almost concomitantly with the initiation of the hashtag a first joint blog was set up to make collective room for longer blog posts as well as links to the presence of the campaign in news media, and a link to the #talkaboutit Twitter archive. The blog was curated by what by then had emerged as the core network behind what then had become a campaign, the majority of whom were professional media people. In the spring of 2011, #talkaboutit
reached the theatre stage as autobiographical stories were read on the theatre stages in major national cities. In November 2011, the main figures of the campaign, Koljonen and Mirjamsdotter, were awarded a major national journalism prize “as innovators of the year” for the hashtag campaign. In 2011, Koljonen was also awarded “the women’s deed” price by ROKS, the national organization of women’s aid groups providing shelter and counseling for women. In 2012, a print book with a selecton of #talkaboutit narratives was published Gustav Almestad and Annika Beijbom. There is thus considerable multimedia movement and comparative longevity of this Twitter originated campaign. The initiators of the campaign are established journalists with a wide media network and large number of Twitter followers that made the immediate cross-media storytelling activity possible. Editors of print journals and newspapers were contacted early on to make room for autobiographical stories in the gray areas between violence and sexuality, between choice and coercion.

Notes on methodology, method, ethics

Genre and the scenes of storytelling

Many contextual forces are involved in any production of an autobiographical story, online or offline, the story is never simply “there” to begin with (Plummer 1995; Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith 2004). I see the stated intentions of the initiators, the specific digital genres Twitter and blog, as well as the intended and real audience, as particularly significant productive forces in the narration of “one’s own story” around sexual gray areas. As I have been exploring a number of Swedish campaigns against sexual violence 2010–2015, it has become my contention that the lexicon of the campaign slogans and the authoritative early users’ employment of the slogan in connection to an autobiographical micro story shape the other stories told. The first autobiographical stories also suggest the usage of the stories put forward. To account for the productive force of the hashtag across social media sites, media scholars Martin Gibbs et al. have developed the concept of “platform vernacular.”

Platform vernacular draws attention to how particular genres and stylistic conventions emerge within social networks and how—through the context and process of reading—registers of meaning and affect are produced. … The affordances and performances that constitute a vernacular are not necessarily specific to a platform, as can be clearly seen through the use of hashtags across a wide variety of online platforms. (Martin Gibbs, James Meese, Michael Arnold, Bjorn Nansen and Marcus Carter 2014, 257–258; see also the usage of this concept in Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, Jessalynn Keller forthcoming).

Similarly, my approach to genre/platform vernacular is socio-pragmatic. It involves viewing genre as a productive frame to action. This take on genre emphasizes roles, expectations, function and purpose rather than form (Carolyn Miller 1984). What are the expectations around experiential stories in this medium, for instance, when it comes to matters of authenticity, credibility and possibilities of political change involved in the act of collective narration of individual experiences? The specific affordances of Twitter, allow you to produce a 140-character text for a specific set of followers even if the majority of Twitter sites are public and can thus be reached through a Twitter search, clearly frames what could be said. The microblog format shapes the form of the narrative not only in scope, but in the cultural conceptualization of the micro blog. Several tweets contain laudatory comments on the possibilities of the specific internet social media genre, Twitter. Twitter is recurrently deemed
capable of working towards change and other genres of social media not. Facebook, on the other hand, is often degraded as a political medium: “on facebook you lie to people you know, on Twitter you tell the truth to outright strangers” (#talkaboutit Twitter archive Dec. 16, 2010). Frequently, the #talkaboutit initiators point to the spontaneity and unplanned sense of urgency archived in the hashtag's Twitter stream as mark of the organic development and authenticity of the movement of the campaign as the campaign was frequently accused of being an elite project involving established journalists with powerful multimedia connections and therefore deemed far removed from feminist grassroots (see both the trolls within the hashtag stream and Ann Heberlein 2011).

Method

In this article, I mainly explore the first campaign leadoff #talkaboutit stories published in major Swedish papers (Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet, Expressen, Aftonbladet) and the first few stories published in blogs. I centrally explore the stories produced by the core members of the fledging campaign as they signal the purpose of collective autobiographical storytelling under the hasthtag as well as what is sayable and culturally exigent. I am thus interested in the early conceptual staking out of the campaign and in particular the stories that move between media platforms. The tweets that form a smaller part of the empirical material here have all been accessed through searching the Twitter archive for posts under the hashtag #talkaboutit. The hashtag's Twitter archive has been saved and manually read and coded for prominent themes and thereafter manually identified prominent themes/phrases have been amplified through a search engine. In this article, the tweets form secondary material and are mainly analyzed in the way they provide meta commentary to the campaign: i.e., I analyze tweets that seek to explore what the campaign is about. Mostly, the material here consists of blogs linked from the Twitter archive and tweet/blogs that were turned into print texts, one of them being Koljonen's initial story which traveled from tweet to blog to newspaper to book format.

I employ a mix of discursive textual analysis and narrative analysis. Narratives, according to Foucault, strategically arrange the flow of various discourses (Michel Foucault 1984). Twitter has been amply analyzed as a political tool, mostly by investigating big data and the establishments of networks. I, along with a strand of qualitative researchers (Francine Banner 2016; Alice Marwick 2013), employ close reading techniques and manually coded data in order to “illuminate … specific patterns of use that would [be] difficult to ascertain with a more automated method” (Marwick 2013, 109).

All the material analyzed is public material. The Twitter stream #talkaboutit is readily available, albeit with several dead links and links to blogs that now have become password protected. All material that has become password protected has been left out of the study. The default public nature of Twitter is underlined by the service own privacy polity: “Tip: What you say on the Twitter Services may be viewed by all around the world instantly. You are what you tweet” (Twitter Inc. 2016). However, many users may not have been aware of the nature of the publicity and replicability of tweets at the moment of tweeting. To protect the general users’ anonymity I do not describe any identifying handle when I quote, nor do I quote experiential tweets of negative sexual situations if the tweeter is not one of the campaign initiators for whom tweeting and blogging is intimately linked to their journalistic practice.
Reframing past events, learning, making meaning

Temporality and gendered narrative personae

The recognition of the need for a language that would work in the next negative sexual situation is at the heart of the campaign. Countless tweets and blogs start their narrations declaring that they do not know which incident from the past to narrate as there are so many that could be used to make sense of. Quite a few early pieces published in major Swedish newspapers and blogs under the hashtag share similar narrative arcs, ways of connecting past, present and future and similar narrative learning impetus and temporally distinct narrative personae. As has been established, Koljonen begins to explore negative sexual experiences as a reaction to the media portrayal of the Assange case, and in particular certain segments of social media’s stereotypical portrayal of the plaintiffs. She describes how she coincidentally comes to think of one instance a decade back when she had sex with an older colleague. The event changed from an act of consensual sex to non-consensual non-condom using sex during sleep which left her emotionally at a loss. Koljonen herself describes her feeling at the time of the event and in the moment of narration in the following words: “The unease I felt for this man was so vague in its contours that it took then years to chisel out its form: a creep” (Koljonen 2010). The raw event of sexual discomfort brought forward for transformational learning purposes is intertwined with a considerably younger self, as self that the narrator actively links to a discursively constructed persona, “the willing girl,” that the mature “together self” writing is able to discern. The campaign initiators were well into their 30s at the moment of narration and the considerable distance between the sexual gray area event and the moment of narration is underlined. To analytically approach the construal of a past confused self and a present self capable of reframing the event I employ the term “audit self” via Liz Stanley (2000) and the term “together self” via Lynn Phillips (2000). The discursive persona in the texts are examples of Stanley’s concept “audit selves,” “publicly created profiles of what a range of “types” of selves are and can be” (2000, 56). In particular, two culturally dominant femininity “types,” the “willing girl” and the “together woman,” mingle and clash in many of the narratives. In Koljonen’s narrative, jarring femininities make strange bedfellows:

What happened in my head? Banalities. I didn’t want to be troublesome. The harm was already done. I had already shown my pleasure; wouldn’t it be childish to interrupt? And I felt gratitude over the fact that as he moved against my body he called me wonderful. Somewhere, in the disarray of sexual acts I had participated in but didn’t wholly endorse, was the feeling that my right to draw boundaries had been exhausted. I had been too willing. It had been too much fun to be she, the girl who enjoys sex in an uncomplicated manner. (Koljonen 2010)

Thus, similar to the public denouncement of the women accusing Assange, Koljonen’s younger autobiographical persona cannot align sexual willingness with the drawing of boundaries. “The willing girl” has no currency to opt out from a sexual situation. In the Twitter stream, the idea of having exhausted one’s chance to say no by the façade of the willing girl (and occasionally, the willing guy) is repeated as well. Again and again in these autobiographical narratives, what jars the most is not described as the event itself, but the subject’s gendered inability to voice her resistance in the situation. Koljonen ponders over the fact that she in the instance she describes was so lost despite the fact that she had been a feminist since her early teens. Similarly, journalist Sonja Schwarzenberger speaks of rights being
exhausted and a feeling that even at that time in her youth she, as a fledging feminist, should have known better.

Embarrassingly, I knew better, as I had heard that this was exactly how women had reacted, but then I had thought: I won’t be one of those who keeps quiet. How sad to be so small and so ordinary. (Sonja Schwarzenberger 2010)

Thus, what is described as the most pressing problem is the way the earlier self in the negative situation cannot help but behave in line with stereotypical femininities denounced even at the time of the event. Several tweets voice this sentiment. “Get sad when I read #talkaboutit. Is reminded of the times when I haven’t respected my own needs and boundaries” (#talkaboutit Twitter archive Dec. 20, 2010). This turn to previous incidents and previously inhabited femininity types and what these were unable to recognize, do, and say, on an everyday basis opens up for an invigorated explorative investigation of compulsory heterosexuality (Adrienne Rich [1980] 2003). Concurrently, however, the narrative focus on the lack of communicative ability on the side of the partner experiencing unease and violation, leaves the perpetrator out of focus and makes the victim the one whom needs to learn how to communicate in situations to come. A blogging feminist skeptical of the campaign blogs her concern under the blog entry rubric, “Whom should learn?” (Wonderkarin 2010).

Categorical unease

As established, the narratives bring to the fore a perceived misfit between existing language and experience. In particular the categories “victim,” “rapist” and “rape” are shunned and ambiguous events and multiple positionalities are explored. In her #talkaboutit story published on the 20 December 2010 in the evening paper Aftonbladet, journalist Lisa Magnusson not only departs from a considerably earlier autobiographical event of unease in a sexual situation, she also offers an understanding of why she at that point lacked a language that would have enabled her to act differently in the moment. She declares that she now knows why she at the time could not voice her non-consent:

More often than I would like to think of I have wandered about in this shady area between what’s OK and what’s completely wrong. I know exactly why I ended up there. In the popular imagination, the one who assaults is a psychopath monster who leaves nothing but a crying wreck behind. This collective image is so strong that when we come close to someone else’s boundaries, or our own, we are unable to understand what is happening. There’s a blind spot for all that which is every day, out of sync, and emotionally muddy. (Lisa Magnusson 2010)

Magnusson argues that the available language of rape refers to stranger attack rapes in public settings where the actors are clear cut offenders and victims and that this limited language has left her with no means to voice her boundaries in a sexual situation within a relationship which started with consent. This sentiment of unsafe intimate environments is underlined in the following sentence: “The only circumstance where I am safe enough to make a scene is in the subway” (Magnusson 2010). Further, she asks: “what happens if you really say no and the other does not stop? To remain silent is to avoid making the other into the psychopath monster, and the situation to an evident case of rape?” (Magnusson 2010).

Thus, using the current language of rape transforms the participants into the categories victim and offender which the writer cannot align neither the situation nor the actors with. Following a similar line of reasoning, Schwarzenberger’s story involves a situation,
“half-a-life-ago,” of non-consensual sex the emotional and linguistic confusion and silence and loneliness which follows.

I feel anger and fear, but at the same time an inner caution not to confront him. What could I say? Excuse me, are you raping me now? Afterwards, I didn't know what to call the event that had taken place. As I hadn’t screamed, physically fought back, or verbally refrained I thought it definitely was not something that should be reported. Besides, I had been curious about what he did, which had made me even more ashamed. So, I didn't say anything, neither to him nor others.

Many pieces focus on events where the narrator’s boundaries have been trespassed. To a lesser extent, yet noticeably present, the stories explore traces of events where the narrator has trespassed others’ sexual boundaries and at times the narrator occupies both positions within one story. In the book published in 2012, there are two autobiographical narratives by Koljonen included, an opening one which is a reprint of autobiographical narrative first published in Dagens Nyheter in December 2010 where the autobiographical narrator is a victim and a final chapter where the narrator trespasses the boundaries of another. There is thus the refusal of any stable identity of as well victim as perpetrator as well as stable conceptions the consequences of negative sexual incidences as a life changing causing long term trauma. In her main autobiographical narrative, Koljonen states that “she didn’t feel like a victim of abuse” and that “to be guaranteed, the guy she slept with didn’t feel like a perpetrator” (Koljonen 2010). Needless to say, the terms victim and perpetrator are politically loaded terms (Erinn Cuniff Gilson 2016; Mardorossian 2014; Stringer 2014). As Rebecca Stringer poignantly writes, “The language of victimhood appears to call forth a reviled subject: woman as a powerless victim of domination” (Stringer 5). #Talkaboutit narratives are carefully crafted around and away from the victimhood concept. Under the #talkaboutit banner, the victim category does not breathe life into stories of negative sexual experiences. On the contrary, the victim position surfaces as that which one cannot speak from or learn from. In part the term rape is avoided because of its connection to a dominant understanding of the victim as passive and powerless. In her main autobiographical contribution, Koljonen writes further: “in situations of sexual violation the victim is oftentimes helpless. I was not. I could probably have ended the situation in one single word” (2010). This interpretive line does several things. It firmly aligns the category victim with helplessness and non-agency. It further suggests that the feminine position she occupies, or at least should occupy, is a position of agency and choice, albeit not employed in the situation. It also makes her ultimately responsible for the violation. It also suggests that as she was not a victim, there are “true” victims, other women, truly helpless, unable to speak and true perpetrators as well. In passing, Koljonen invokes Swedish exceptionalism, “Even we here in Sweden are extremely bad at talking about sexual situations where communication fails” (2010). However, the focus on “no clear victims” and gray zones inadvertently risks reinforcing a “real” rape and “real” victims script. Stories and voices that do not fit the conceptual gray area opened up by the campaign risk being further marginalized and discredited as belonging to Othered “true victims,” incapable of learning, acting, and taking responsibility which come out as the favored result of participating in the campaign. It follows that the campaign logic risks blaming victims (see the critique of Anna Svensson 2013; Wonderkarin 2010, for instance). Ironically, despite this careful steering away from the categories victim and perpetrator, when the trolls start to appear under the hashtag, the hashtag is derogated as “victim feminism.” Thus, in the same stream, a chorus of very different voices makes victim the position one cannot speak or learn from. When confronted with a reading of the campaign as
condoning offenders and furthering a binary between “real rape” and ordinary bad communication in sexual situations (Svensson 2013), Koljonen together with one of the editors of the book publication, Gustav Almestad, point to the educational value of placing negative sexual situations with clear offenders and those lacking clear offenders side by side (Johanna Koljonen 2013). Through its insistence on unstable identities and ambiguous events from years past, the campaign points to ongoing sense-making in contrast to a culturally dominant frame of trauma and recovery (McKenzie Mohr 2014; Nicola Gavey and Johanna Schmidt 2011). The often-recurring statement that there are so many uncomfortable gray area situations from the past that could be illuminated and made sense of in the campaign context speaks against the insistence on the one life changing event so dominant within the trauma of rape narrative (McKenzie Mohr 2014).

So common! So brave! Collective sense-making in neoliberal times

To an overwhelming extent, the stories of negative sexual experiences are responded to not by emotional support, but by the comments “brave” and “smart,” in the Twitter stream further suggesting that the telling above all involves a joint knowledge process. “Read and become smarter,” (#talkaboutit Twitter archive Dec. 19, 2010) a tweet leading to a blog post suggests, for instance. Under the hashtag we find an emancipatory, joint learning process, where transformational learning is central to the narrative sequencing of events in the individual story, but more so when this individual story is framed and reframed by others’ experiential stories.

Consciousness-raising in a second wave format sought to link the personal story to a societal structure which in part enabled a vision that diminished the sense of personal responsibility and focused on illuminating and changing societal structures. The joint process of reading about and autobiographically representing indeterminate negative sexual events under the #talkaboutit banner is not presented as diminishing a sense of personal responsibility, on the contrary. Koljonen announces how she because of all this telling and reading will be individually able to act differently next time. To a large extent, the offender is out of focus. These acts of collective sense-making stem and participate in a broadly neoliberal framework that valorizes individual development, personal responsibility and risk management (Rachel Hall 2004; Stringer 2014). In many ways, the campaign initiators can be figured as hovering closely to the figure of the ideal neoliberal citizen who “avoids ‘victim mentality’ … who assumes personal responsibility for guarding against the risk of victimization, instead of focusing on their right not to be victimized” (Stringer, 2). Responsible learning subjects are indeed at the heart of the campaign, but so is the almost simultaneous side by side narration enabled by the multimedia platforms, a collective telling that confounds the neoliberal fit. What understanding can arise when the individual story is placed next to others’ stories in the hashtag re-arrangement where the writer cannot control the context of her own story?

I am not writing in to make anyone responsible, but to show how enormously difficult it is to speak about sexual violations and boundaries. I write because I am not alone. Behind my story is another hundred stories. It is with the feeling of deep gratitude that I hold your hand today. (Schwarzenberger 2010)

The narrative impetus, as suggested by this passage, is no to “make anyone responsible”, but to, individually and collectively, point towards difficulties in communicating sexual
boundaries. Even if the individual story often ends with a better knowing, responsible subject, capable of knowing and communicating boundaries next time, the means of getting there, the campaign modus demonstrates, is through collectively narrativizing and learning.

**Blurring boundaries, crafting new lines of contention?**

Departing from a felt dissonance between what has been experienced and what can be told and heard, the hashtag campaign #talkaboutit sought to find discursive room for ambiguous sexual experiences in between choice and coercion. The writers shed light on and reframe earlier predominantly (hetero)sexual events within relationships that are described as ambiguous and negative, but not life-changing events. In #talkaboutit, gendered (im)possibilities to voice discomfort in situations that often started out with consent are under prime investigation. Through its insistence on unstable identities and ambiguous events from years past, the campaign points to ongoing everyday sense-making in contrast to a culturally dominant frame of trauma and recovery (Gavey and Schmidt 2011; McKenzie Mohr 2014). Campaign contributors show how the current discourse around sex and violence is dichotomous and stereotypical and does not allow for ways in which to recognize and problematize experiences felt as belonging to the gray zone. Through the campaign less polarized positions in a continuous scale of sex/violence are brought to the fore. The campaign “make[s] room for discomfort, anger, disgust, etc. also when no clear victims are in the picture,” as a tweet claims. (#talkaboutit Twitter archive Dec. 20, 2010). As argued, the campaign partakes in a victim shunning zeitgeist, and, can be said to further a dichotomy between “true victims” and others who need to learn how recognize and communicate boundaries.

On several grounds, the campaign stands out in relation to both national and international internet based anti-rape campaigns during the past decade (#mörkertalet, #beenrapedneverreported, #fatta, #metoo). In contrast to other national campaigns in the past decade (in particular #fatta) advocating for consent based legal regulation, #talkaboutit it does not seek to make a legal intervention. Notwithstanding, the campaign’s linguistic and conceptual focus is reflected in the national report of 2016 suggesting major legal changes (SOU 2016: 60). For instance, the 2016 report proposes to legally discontinue using the term rape as it is so imbued with notions of physical violence and public settings in the popular imagination and therefore violations outside of this framework are not recognized and not reported. In light of the #metoo campaign with its politics of shaming, documenting, and allocating responsibility to the Other, the one that violates, it becomes evident how #talkaboutit makes different kinds of demands on the receiver. In the main, the receiver is not called on to give witness to harm nor provide emotional support. In #talkaboutit, the receiver is called to contribute by unearthing incidents from the past and use them to jointly produce knowledge.

As this article argues, the intervention is framed by a learning imperative. The narrators investigate their own participation in detrimental structures. Through autobiographical side-by-side storytelling the gendered ambiguities between wanting and not wanting, between choice and coercion are investigated in order to work towards a lexicon that would allow for communication in the next situation. At large, perpetrators disappear from the scene if the perpetrator is not also the narrator, which does happen under the hashtag banner, but infrequently.
The narrative act is grounded in a communal feminist pedagogy of joint storytelling as an avenue to feminist consciousness and knowledge. The storytelling mode is persistently collective and this collective mode is celebrated in the Twitter stream, in the stories printed in the media, as well as in media’s coverage of the campaign. Structures are made visible as my story is placed next that story as stories are automatically re-contextualized in the Twitter stream. This is thus a mode of feminist telling that conventionally has been used to diminish the sense of personal responsibility by pointing to overarching patriarchal structures. Here, however, this collective mode of knowledge building is confounded by the frequent individualizing narrative arc of learning to behave differently next time.

Notes

1. All translations from Swedish to English have been made by the article author. Inevitably, dimensions of meaning are both gained and lost in the process of translation. I have tried to stay true to the original and in instances when it is particularly difficult to find equivalent words and expressions, I have included the Swedish original in an endnote. A major difference between the Swedish and English language related to the subject at hand, concerns the word “rape”; Swedish “våldtäkt.” The Swedish term for rape, “våldtäkt,” is in part constructed from the basis of the Swedish word for violence.

2. The original in Swedish reads: I den här bloggen kommer vi publicera länkar och texter där vi pratar om det som vi ofta inte pratar om—gråzonerna, erfarenheterna av sex som är mellan det ”fina” accepterade sexet och våldet, övergreppen. Vi behöver ett språk, vi behöver fundera kring våra egna och andras gränser, om respekt, vilja, lust och rädsla.

3. As of February 16, 2016, Johanna Koljonen’s Twitter account had 47,492 followers.

4. This article forms part of a larger research project where I investigate autobiographical stories of sexual violence that have been published mainly online in connection to various Swedish campaigns against sexual violence between 2010–2015, which in turn forms a part of the larger interdisciplinary project Rape in Sweden: Historical Intersectional Perspectives on Rape Narratives in Different Genres, funded by the Swedish Research Council (2014–732) where the other members of the research team explore narratives of rape in court proceedings as well as rape genres in major print media newspapers during the time period 1990–2015.

5. The original in Swedish reads: “Olusten jag kände för den här mannen var så vag i konturerna att det krävdes tio års distans för att urskilja dess form: ett as” (Koljonen 2010).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Vetenskapsrådet [grant number 421-2014-732].

Notes on contributor

Lena Karlsson is an associate professor of Gender Studies at Lund University, Sweden. Her research can be situated in the field of feminist cultural studies; she has written extensively in the field of life writing, reception and genre studies. She is continually interested in the genres and politics of life writing in different media. E-mail: lena.karlsson@genus.lu.se
References

Almestad, Gustav, and Annika Beijbom. 2012. *#prataomdet: berättelser från gråzonen*. Stockholm: Kalla Klor Förlag.

Andersson, Ulrika. 2004. *Hans (Ord) eller Hennes? En Könsteoretisk Analys av Straffrättsligt Skydd mot Sexuella övergrepp*. Lund: Bokbox.

Banner, Francine. 2016. “Honest Victim Scripting in the Twitterverse.” *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 22 (3): 495–549.

Brownmiller, Susan. 1975. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York, NY: Fawcett Books.

Cahill, Ann. 2016. “Unjust Sex, Versus Rape.” *Hypatia* 31 (4): 746–761.

Chermaly, Soraya. 2014. “Why Rape Euphemisms and Myths Are Dangerous.” *Role Reboot: Life, off Script*, July 7. Accessed June 10, 2017. http://www ролереboot.org/ culture-and-politics/detai ls/2014-07-danger-rape-euphemisms-myths-classic-rapists-defiled-women-unpleasantness/.

Couldry, Nick. 2010. *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism*. London: Sage.

Drüeke, Ricarda, and Elke Zobl. 2016. “Online Feminist Protest against Sexism: The German-Language Hashtag #Aufschrei.” *Feminist Media Studies* 16 (1): 35–54.

Erlanger, Steven, and Christina Andersson. 2017. “Julian Assange Rape Inquiry is Dropped but His Legal Problems Remain Daunting.” *New York Times*, May 19. Accessed August 8, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/19/world/europe/julian-assange-sweden-rape.html.

Foucault, Michel. 1984. “What is an Author?” In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by P. Rabinow, 101–120. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Fotopoulou, Aristea. 2016. *Feminist Activism and Digital Networks: Between Empowerment and Vulnerability*. London: Palgrave.

Foster, Nicola. 1999. “I Wasn’t Raped, But…” Revisiting Definitional Problems in Sexual Victimization.” In *New Versions of Victims: Feminists Struggle with the Concept*, edited by Sharon Lamb, 57–81. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Gavey, Nicola. 2005. *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*. London: Routledge.

Gavey, Nicola, and Johanna Schmidt. 2011. “Trauma of Rape’ Discourse: A Double-Edged Template for Everyday Understandings of the Impact of Rape?” *Violence against Women* 17 (4): 433–456.

Gibbs, Martin, James Meese, Michael Arnold, Bjorn Nansen, and Marcus Carter. 2014. “#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular.” *Information, Communication & Society* 18 (3): 255–268.

Gilson, Erinn Cuniff. 2016. “Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42 (1): 71–98.

Griffin, Susan. 1971. “Rape: The All-American Crime.” *Ramparts* 10: 26–35.

Gunnarsson, Lena. 2018. “Excuse Me, but Are You Raping Me Now?” Discourse and Experience in (the Grey Areas of) Sexual Violence.” *NORA — Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 26 (1): 4–18.

Hall, Rachel. 2004. “It Can Happen to You: Rape Prevention in the Age of Risk Management.” *Hypatia* 19 (3): 1–19.

Harp, Dustin, Jaime Loke, and Ingrid Bachmann. 2014. “Spaces for Feminist (Re) Articulations: The Blogosphere and the Sexual Attack on Journalist Lara Logan.” *Feminist Media Studies* 14 (1): 5–21.

Heberlein, Ann. 2011. “#Vemprataromdet?” *Sydsvenskan*, December 3. Accessed June 14, 2017. https://www.sydsvenskan.se/2011-12-03/vemprataromdet.

Koljonen, Johanna. 2010. “Dags att prata om det.” December 18. Accessed January 5, 2017. http://www. dn.se/kultur-noje/kulturdebbatt/dags-att-prata-om-det/.

Koljonen, Johanna. *Blog*. 2011. Accessed June 20, 2017. https://johannakoljonen.wordpress.com/2011/11/04/once-more-with-feeling-prataomdet/.

Koljonen, Johanna. 2013. “Vi måste fortsätta tala om nyansen.” January 30. Accessed January 5, 2017. http://www.ottar.se/artiklar/koljonen-och-almostad-svarar-om-prataomdet.

MacKinnon, Catherine. 1989. *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.

Magnusson, Lisa. 2010. “Jag har själv gått över gränsen flera gånger.” *Aftonbladet*, December 20. Accessed January 5, 2017. http://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/kronikorer/lisamagnusson/article12712303.ab.
Marcus, Sharon. 2002. “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention.” In Feminists Theorize the Political, edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, 385–404. New York, NY: Routledge.

Mardorossian, Carine. 2014. Framing the Rape Victim: Gender and Agency Reconsidered. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.

Marwick, Alice. 2013. “Ethnographic and Qualitative Research on Twitter.” In Twitter and Society, edited by Katrin Weller, Axel Bruns, Jean Burgess, Merja Mahrt, and Cornelius Puschmann, 109–122. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

McKenzie-Mohr, Suzanne. 2014. “Counter-Storying Rape: Women’s Efforts toward Liberatory Meaning Making.” In Women Voicing Resistance: Discursive and Narrative Explorations, edited by Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr and Michelle N. Lafrance, 64–83. New York, NY: Routledge.

Mendes, Kaitlynn, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller. Forthcoming. Digital Feminist Activism: Women and Girls Fight Back against Rape Culture. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mendes, Kaitlynn. 2015. SlutWalk: Feminism, Activism and Media. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Miller, Carolyn. 1984. “Genre as Social Action.” Quarterly Journal of Speech 70: 151–167.

Papacharissi, Zizi. 2015. Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Phillips, Lynn. 2000. Flirting with Danger: Young Women’s Reflections on Sexuality and Domination. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Plummer, Ken. 1995. Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds. London: Routledge.

#prataomdet/#talkaboutit. Twitter Archive. Accessed April 19, 2016. https://twitter.com/prataomdet.

#Prataomdet. Blog. 2010. “Prata om det.” Accessed December 19, 2016. https://prataomdet.wordpress.com/.

Rentschler, Carrie. 2014. “Rape Culture and the Feminist Politics of Social Media.” Girlhood Studies 7 (1): 65–82.

Rich, Adrienne. (1980) 2003. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”. Journal of Women’s History 15(3): 11–48.

Schaffer, Kay, and Sidonie Smith. 2004. Human Rights and Narrated Lives. New York, NY: Palgrave.

Schwarzenberger, Sonja. 2010. “Vi förlorar på att inte tala.” Svenska Dagbladet, December 19. Accessed January 5, 2017. http://www.svd.se/vi-forlorar-pa-att-inte-tala/om/kultur.

SOU 2016: 60. Ett Starkare Skydd för den Sexuella Integriteten. Stockholm: Statens Offentliga Utredningar.

Stanley, Liz. 2000. “From ‘Self-Made Women’ to ‘Women’s Made-Selves’? Audit Selves, Simulation and Surveillance in the Rise of Public Woman.” In Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods, edited by Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield, 40–60. London: Routledge.

Stringer, Rebecca. 2014. Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neo–Liberal times. London: Routledge.

Svensson, Anna. 2013. “Det räcker inte att prata om det.” Ottar, January 30. accessed January 5, 2017. http://www.ottom.se/artiklar/det-r-cker-inte-att-prataomdet.

Wonderkarin. Blog. 2010. Accessed February 2, 2018. http://wonderkarin.blogspot.no/2010/12/prataomdet.html.

Wånggren, Lena. 2016. “Our Stories Matter: Storytelling and Social Justice in the Hollaback! Movement.” Gender and Education 28 (3): 401–415.