

## "I felt scared the whole time": On emotional responses to sexual assault narratives

Amber Moore

Simon Fraser University, [amberjanellemoore@gmail.com](mailto:amberjanellemoore@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Commons](#), [Secondary Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education and Teaching Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Moore, Amber () "I felt scared the whole time": On emotional responses to sexual assault narratives," *Feminist Pedagogy*. Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/feministpedagogy/vol2/iss2/4>

This Critical Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Feminist Pedagogy by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@calpoly.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@calpoly.edu).

---

## **"I felt scared the whole time": On emotional responses to sexual assault narratives**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

This scholarship is generously supported by The University of British Columbia's Department of Language and Literacy Education in the Faculty of Education (4YF Scholarship), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship), the Killam Trusts (Killam Doctoral Scholarship), as well as UBC Endowed Awards (the Mary Elizabeth Scholarship, the LOMCIRA Harold Covell Memorial Scholarship, the Dean of Education Scholarship, and the Donald & Ellen Poulter Scholarship).

## "I felt scared the whole time": On emotional responses to sexual assault narratives

As a feminist teacher, I have long privileged teaching trauma literature because it unsettles us, forcing us to reconsider our learning and lived experiences (Caruth, 1995). I especially focus on teaching sexual assault narratives to create space for resisting the insidiousness of rape culture, that is, a violent cultural consequence of patriarchy, in educational contexts. Most recently, I investigated how secondary English teacher candidates who would eventually become literature educators responded to teaching and learning about a diverse text set of seven pieces including essays, poetry, short stories, and memoir excerpts about experiences with sexual trauma. I ran a two-day workshop (see: Moore, 2020) in two sections of a mandatory Bachelor of Education (BEd) program's literacy course to explore this pedagogy and these texts where several participants reflected on and/or exhibited many emotions including concern, conflict, fear, frustration, gratitude, guilt, and surprise; after all, feminist classrooms can be intense (do Mar Pereira, 2012). From these classes, 23 teacher candidates participated in the study, which included individual interviews and two focus groups to explore their responses to the learning. They were a diverse group with complex intersectional identities; for example, 8% were Black, 13% East Asian, 13% South Asian, 66% white, 52% were women, 39% men, 9% nonbinary or transgender, and 50% identified as queer in some way. My hope is that, by sharing how some responded with fear, surprise, and uncertainty in particular, feminist pedagogies might glean a sense of what can arise if they too address sexual violence, Tarana Burke's MeToo/#MeToo movement, and rape culture in their teaching.

Fear arose with several students. First, Becca<sup>1</sup>, a queer and Jewish femme, felt fearful anticipation while reading *Speak: The Graphic Novel* (Anderson & Carroll, 2018). She read with "nervous" trepidation because she "knew the serious thing was coming" and because she "didn't know how they'd portray [the violence]." However, her fear extended beyond herself as she also thought about her future secondary English students "the whole time," their potential responses, and how she might, as she phrased it, "hold that space" in a care-ful (Jones et al., 2019) manner. Alon too, a Filipino and Christian bisexual man, felt fear as he read from *I Am Nobody: Confronting the Sexually Abusive Coach who Stole my Life* (Gilhooly, 2018), about being groomed in childhood for ongoing sexual abuse. Alon shared, "the lead-up to that moment is kind of... scary" and, like Becca, thought about his future students and how such literature might muddy their understanding of adolescent-adult relationships with adults such as coaches and teachers. Alon was willing to tackle teaching sexual assault narratives but would "decide for sure after getting to know the class" and spoke to the importance of building a strong community. As well, like Alon, Grace, a straight mother from Hong Kong, also "felt scared the whole time" while reading and was struck by the way in which "every step [of the sexual violence] was so well-planned." Fear indeed cropped up in their responses to sexual assault narratives; however, it also prompted pedagogical pondering for how they might encounter fear from their future students and exercise a particular ethic of care.

Next, feelings of surprise came up with Felix, who is a straight, white father of two, during one small group's spontaneous read-aloud during the workshop. Although he had already read "Charm" (Block, 2000), his small group read it aloud again before discussing it. As Felix listened, he was struck by how hearing a female peer read it altered his witnessing of the story; indeed, "reading with others expands the self" (Gilbert, 2010, p. 236). Because "Charm" is from the perspective of a sex-trafficked female adolescent, Felix felt it "was *really* [emphasis added]

---

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

like... oh my goodness, *very* [emphasis added] different to hear a real voice... [it was] very, very strange for me.” This strangeness and surprise then produced another response: “It made me more uncomfortable, actually.” However, this is perhaps indicative of how Felix took up the challenge of turning discomfort into productive learning (Zembylas, 2018) because he went on to confront a particularly difficult issue in his family history through his explorations of this text: his mother’s childhood experiences with incest and rape. In our interview, Felix shared that his mother disclosed her abuse to him when he became an adult. As a result, “when he reads these things,” he “sees his mom.” In fact, during the workshop, he confided in a peer that he felt emotional because the content reminded him of her painful testimony. However, this emotional confrontation of difficult history prompted Felix to critically reflect on his pedagogy; he went on to say, “I really wanted to think about, as a male, what it would be like if I read [“Charm”] out loud to my students.” This precautionary measure demonstrated that Felix’s emotional, fearful response(s) during the read-aloud inspired important pedagogical musing. After all, read-alouds are one of the most highly recommended literacy activities (Beck & McKeown, 2001) and listening is so pedagogically valuable (hooks, 2010).

Finally, several shared their conflicting emotions due to concerns that teaching trauma texts might be too difficult, precarious, risky, or unsafe. Particularly, many worried about rape not being taken seriously (e.g. rape jokes), triggering or upsetting students, as well as problems with students’ parents and/or guardians. With feminist teaching, you “must be comfortable with a degree of chaos” (Martin, 2017, p. 10) and this might be especially concerning for emerging educators. For example, Mia, Milo, and Norah felt conflicted about this pedagogy because of how students’ families might react. In one respect, this was no surprise: students’ families are frequently cited as a major concern for new teachers; sometimes emotional geographies stretch between these groups, potentially stemming from differences in teachers’ and students’ families’ lived experiences, politics, and positionalities (Dotger et al., 2011). Milo, a straight white male, had a cautious and conflicted response, especially informed by his educator father. His Dad’s attitude was that he could “do without” connecting with learners’ families and so, Milo admitted: “That’s a fear for me.” Elaborating, he felt that dealing with students’ family dynamics might already be “difficult” enough without adding rape culture into the mix; he was “scared of repercussions.” Norah, a straight white female, and Mia, a pansexual white female, echoed similar concerns. Norah described taking precautionary measures to “flag” sexual assault content to avoid familial upset in advance of teaching and while discussing possible drawbacks of this pedagogy, Mia cited “backlash from parents, *of course* [emphasis added].” As such, several experienced conflicting emotions about this pedagogy largely because their future students’ families might balk, challenge and/or complain in response. However, although this was a shared concern, returning to Alon, he also importantly noted how parent/guardian perspectives could be illuminating. For example, after listening to one teacher in training who is also a parent voice her worries during the workshop, he reflected that she significantly “got [him] thinking”, especially about “boundaries” in education. Additionally, many participants enthusiastically spoke about their commitments to building trusting relationships with students first; as Becca said, this would be her primary focus and something she is already “really good at.”

It can certainly be daunting and difficult to teach trauma literature and sexual violence. As this reflection demonstrates, it can be an emotional, “difficult” (Marshall, 2009, p. 230) undertaking. And yet, although participants encountered tricky experiences such as fear, surprise, and feeling conflicted, being unsettled by sexual violence and rape culture prompted informed critical and considerate pedagogical musing about how to uniquely guide such learning. To be

clear, I do not understand them as pursuing a kind of “siren’s call of best practice” (Madden, 2019, p. 295), but rather, their worries and wonderings might signal their commitment to nuanced approaches to pedagogy that necessarily recognize sexual assault stories as unique because one never represents all (Ahmed, 2017; Fowles & Sookfong Lee, 2019; Hilborn & Schminkey, 2013). Ultimately, each participant discussed went on to express willingness and/or excitement to eventually teach sexual assault narratives.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.
- Anderson, L. H. & Carroll, E. (2018). *Speak: The graphic novel*. Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Beck, I. L., & McKeown, M. G. (2001). Text talk: Capturing the benefits of read-aloud experiences for young children. *The Reading Teacher*, 55(1), 10-20.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20205005>
- Block, F. L. (2000). *The rose and beast: Fairy tales retold*. HarperCollins.
- Button Poetry. (2013, September 2). *Neil Hilborn & Ollie Schminkey - One Color* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnSuR3bFWcQ>
- Caruth, C. (Ed.). (1995). *Trauma: Explorations in memory*. John Hopkins University Press
- do Mar Pereira, M. (2012). Uncomfortable classrooms: Rethinking the role of student discomfort in feminist teaching. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 19(1), 128-135.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506811426237c>
- Dotger, B. H., Harris, S., Maher, M., & Hansel, A. (2011). Exploring the emotional geographies of parent-teacher candidate interactions: An emergent signature pedagogy. *The Teacher Educator*, 46(3), 208-230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730.2011.581882>
- Fowles, S. M. & Sookfong Lee, J. (2019). *Whatever gets you through: Twelve survivors on life after sexual assault*. Greystone Books.
- Gilbert, J. (2010). Literature as sex education. *Changing English*, 11(12), 233-241.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250042000252677>
- Gilhooly, G. (2018). *I am nobody: Confronting the sexually abusive coach who stole my life*. Greystone Books.
- hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*. Routledge.
- Jones, C., Chappell, A., & Alldred, P. (2019). Feminist education for university staff responding to disclosures of sexual violence: A critique of the dominant model of staff development, *Gender and Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1649639>
- Marshall, E. (2009). Girlhood, sexual violence, and agency in Francesca Lia Block's "Wolf." *Children's Literature in Education*, 40, 217-234.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-008-9083-7>
- Moore, A. (2020). "Why don't we always see her face?": The significance of gallery walks as an engagement strategy in teaching trauma literature. *English Practice*, 61(1), 43-47.  
<https://bctela.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-BCTELA-English-Practice.pdf>
- Zembylas, M. (2018). Teacher resistance towards difficult histories: The centrality of affect in disrupting teacher learning. In T. Epstein & C.L. Peck (Eds.), *Teaching and learning difficult histories in international contexts: A critical sociocultural approach* (pp. 189-202). Routledge.