

# The #MeToo Movement by Committee

Kate Krueger

*University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*

## *The Research Talk*

The on-campus interview had been going well. The department had not had a new hire in over a decade, so the members of the department were invested in whoever would get the position. I had practiced my talk on British women writers several times and was comfortable behind the podium, gesturing for emphasis (I have always been a hand-talker). At the end of the day, a faculty member shared that my research talk was well received except that my “midriff” had shown during my presentation. I was wearing a pantsuit with a crewneck sweater shell top. Apparently my sweater had risen slightly as I gestured during my thirty-minute discussion of my years-long research project. This person also disclosed that they felt that I was one of their girls—like their daughter. I do not recall how (or whether) I responded in the moment.

The offhand comment about my body during a job interview was startling, but I was also offered the position, so I decided I could absorb this minor comment. I was finishing up a one-year visiting assistant professor position and this was my only on-campus interview. If I decided not to take the job, I had no idea what I would do. The expectation was that to work in academia, you had to get your foot in the door and never take it out. To leave academia, even for a year, meant that you would never be taken seriously as an applicant for an academic position again. I could take this tenure-track job and work my way up. I could do what I was trained to do and be a mentor to my students. I could make the best of it.

## *The On-Campus Interview Invitation*

After I had been working for several years as an assistant professor, I went back on the job market. My experience coordinating an interdisciplinary minor, my forthcoming book, and my two teaching awards sparked some interest at a liberal arts institution offering my dream job. When I received an invitation for an on-campus interview, my instincts were confirmed. The search committee was “unanimously impressed” with my application and phone interview. There was only one problem: I was eight-and-a-half months pregnant, and I could not travel on the dates they suggested.

I responded by expressing my excitement and disclosing that I was unable to travel during the week they had chosen due to my advanced pregnancy. I suggested two possible accommodations: I could either do a virtual campus visit on the original date they suggested through Skype, or we could postpone an in-person visit for two weeks until immediately after the birth of my child. The university chose instead to withdraw their invitation. Citing regulations, they refused a virtual interview, and because “the committee has been charged with completing the work by late January . . . even an early February visit, given your due date and our timeline, will not work.” In all aspects of my professional life, I had diligently kept to the typical timeline. I finished my degree in seven years; I received a visiting assistantship and then a tenure-track assistant professorship; I published a book within my first four years on the tenure track. And I met an amazing partner, and we were starting a family. The conception of our child occurred just a couple of months too late. Fifteen years of work had come down to a two-week window, and I missed it. The committee member’s rejection ended with these words: “I wish you well on your delivery and know your new baby will bring much joy.” This expression of sentiment did not have the effect the writer intended.

I later discovered that I could have called the hiring institution’s Title IX department, who would have worked with me to find an “acceptable resolution” to this violation of the Pregnancy Discrimination Act. I could perhaps have insisted that they adhere to the law and accommodate me, but I would have been policing future colleagues who could potentially pass judgment in the tenure process, assuming they would be willing to hire me at all. Perhaps institutional practices might have been changed if I had made a report. However, in reality each hiring committee is comprised of different faculty, and each committee makes autonomous decisions. The individuals who serve on these committees have immense power; it is their responsibility to know the law and to speak out when it is violated. My experience would therefore not necessarily improve the future experiences of others. The system is unjust as long as those who are victimized are required to be the ones who police behavior. I was two weeks away from a difficult birth and long physical recovery, emotionally devastated, and unwilling to disclose to my home institution that I was on the job market. Shortly after this experience, I received tenure at my current institution. This gave me security and a voice that I had not previously had. I resolved to continue to try to make positive change.

### *Tenure, Promotion, and Performance Evaluation*

In order to create more equity in my department, I worked with the chair to create a new, more transparent system for performance evaluations. Pre-tenure faculty had been overloaded with service activities that they were

unable to decline while select members of the tenured faculty simply opted out of service work. This type of unequal service load tends to fall upon faculty members who are women and/or people of color. We updated our rubric to assess service, teaching, and research contributions. Several of the pre-tenure faculty scored higher than the tenured faculty on their annual performance reviews. One tenured faculty member began to challenge my authority and that of the chair—we are both female administrators—while also critiquing what they perceived as favoritism toward pre-tenure faculty. I also served with this professor on our promotion and tenure committee. The professor's behavior was most egregious during a debate about the tenure and promotion of a highly successful junior colleague when I openly challenged commentary that I argued was an unethical breach of protocol. The other faculty members in that meeting were largely silent. Afterward, a series of events made it clear to me that I was being targeted for retaliation. The committee revising the college promotion and tenure guidelines inserted language to bar people holding certain administrative roles from serving on promotion and tenure committees (which effectively removed me from the committee where I had critiqued my colleague's actions). When working on other unrelated committees, this faculty member met my proposals with questions about my ethics, my authority to be doing that work, and my expertise.

Because of the #MeToo movement and my tenured position, I felt as though I had a voice. I filed a complaint alleging harassment on the basis of gender with Title IX. I listed the ways in which my colleague in clearly gendered ways regularly attacked my reputation, devalued my contributions, and retaliated against me after I spoke up in defense of another female faculty member. I wrote down—week by week, month by month—each incident. It helped to see all of the times in which I was required to deflect these hostilities. Harassment on the basis of gender is insidious. The people who are targeted are worn down by relentless microaggressions. Often, colleagues do not recognize such treatment because they do not suffer it themselves, or they dismiss what they witness as one isolated incident, not realizing that it is part of a larger pattern. Others do recognize this behavior but remain silent because they do not want to become targets, which enables such actions to continue. In my report, I made a record. I acted in the hope that it would strengthen the case of the next person who came forward.

### *On Service Work*

I wonder at the cost of repetitive messages that tell me my body makes me unfit for this position; my contributions are unseen; and my pursuit of ethical community building is antithetical to academic hierarchies. Reporting harassment takes a toll. I have since left my faculty position and

am now the director of an honors program at another university. I miss teaching and the impact I made as a faculty member, but in this new environment, I can continue to work on behalf of students to promote ethical and enriching academic experiences.

Hiring and tenure committees have profound power in academics' lives. They are autonomous and largely self-policed. Those who serve in these roles must be willing to speak on behalf of others. Until more do, academics will continue to suffer harassment and discrimination. The first step is to share these stories. Tarana Burke began #MeToo in 2006 in order to create a community and elevate the voices of black women and girls who suffer from harassment and abuse. Burke has consistently emphasized the importance of community building and the solidarity that comes from telling our stories to one another. Burke promotes "empowerment through empathy."<sup>1</sup> I enact this philosophy when I write my story here.

KATE KRUEGER is currently Director of Honors for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Formerly an Associate Professor of English, she authored *British Women Writers and the Short Story, 1850-1930: Reclaiming Social Space* (2014) and has published articles in *Victorian Periodicals Review*, *Women's Writing*, *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, and *Journal of the Short Story in English*. Her most recent work is the chapter "Decadence, Parody, and New Woman's Writing" in *Decadence and Literature*, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Empowerment Through Empathy," Just Be Inc., 2013, accessed 21 October 2018, <http://justbeinc.wixsite.com/justbeinc/the-me-too-movement-c7cf>.