

# **Triggered by the Kavanaugh Hearings**

## **Unraveling Trauma Together and Interweaving Empathy into Teacher Education through Dialogic Personal Writing**

Monica Taylor & Emily J. Klein

In this self-study, we, two feminist teacher educators who are colleagues and close friends, use our personal writing exchanges to explain how we made sense of our embodied reactions to the Kavanaugh hearings in the United States and how these conversations influenced our teacher education practice to incorporate more empathy as a way of knowing, learning, and teaching. In July 2018, Trump nominated Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court to succeed a retiring justice. Right before the nomination was sent to the Senate, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford shared that Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her 36 years prior in high school. His immediate response was: "I categorically and unequivocally deny this allegation." The hearings that emerged served as the trigger and context for our study. Although our research is U.S. centered, we acknowledge that misogyny and sexism pervade politics worldwide. Our dialogic narratives broke from the confines of traditional academic writing, enabling us to grapple with and unravel our past traumas and begin to interweave and identify more empathy into our teaching.

### **Objectives**

We explored the following question: How can dialogically writing about our own traumas and real-world experiences of sexism and misogyny influence our work as teacher educators?

In this paper, we provide the backdrop of our feminist friendship and the ways in which we make meaning together through personal and professional terrains of trauma, sexism, and emotions. We connect our own epistemology with those of other feminist self-studies. We then explain our self-study methodology of co/autoethnography and how it enabled us to both process the trauma that was triggered and re-imagine our teaching practices to more deliberately strive toward empathetic pedagogy. Next, we share pieces of our co/autoethnography to illustrate our collaborative experience. Finally, we highlight the ways in which our teaching has been changed by these exchanges and how empathy can be used in teacher education to disrupt the patriarchy and why it is essential in these sexist and troubled times.

### **Feminist Friendship and How We Make Meaning Together**

Our friendship may have begun at the university fourteen years ago through collaboratively designing a teacher leadership program, but it certainly has not remained there. It grew organically as we recognized shared professional and personal passions, creatively designed curriculum, co-taught courses, and established a research and writing partnership. We considered one another work wives and on more than one occasion have noted that we spend more time together than we do with anyone else, whether in person or virtually via text, email, and Facebook.

Our feminist relationship is built on three tenets. We actively listen to one another and acknowledge the other's experience, often by saying "I hear you." We do not judge or critique one another. We confirm that the other person is not alone in how she is feeling. We are well aware of how academia rarely allows for "I hear you"—academics typically live in isolation, whether because of structural hierarchies or evaluative procedures like tenure and promotion which usually focus on individual accomplishment. There is no way to share emotions or be vulnerable. We are pushed to produce, produce, and produce.

Second, tending to our personal friendship within the context of our everyday lives always comes before our academic responsibilities. We are curious about who the other is outside of work. We find time to go to the theater, hear music, see ballet together. We recommend books and articles to one another, we meet to enjoy a good meal, we take each other to our favorite clothing stores to shop. We are sister-friends. Our personal friendship fuels our professional partnership. There would be no research and writing without it.

Third, our friendship is grounded in the ethic of care and self-care, for us, is not "self-indulgence" but "self-preservation" or as Lorde (1988) wrote, "an act of political warfare" (p. 130). We consider self-care both nurturing our well-being, and mental, physical, and emotional health but also how we care for each other, our colleagues, and our students. We strive to reduce anxiety and stress and live in balance. We know that being grounded and centered allows us to be emotionally and intellectually supportive of our students. We also take seriously our responsibility as feminist role models to have compassion for the self and prioritize boundaries. Insisting on self-care for ourselves and others disrupts the academic structures which constantly promote production over thoughtfulness (Mounts et al, 2015). As Lorde (1984) wrote, "For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive Those dreams are made realizable through our poems that give us strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare" (p. 39).

Our feminist friendship has helped us to construct ways of knowing and making meaning that blur the personal and professional and arm us to tackle life at the university. We make meaning in relationships, through caring, connection, cooperation, and collaboration (Belenky et al., 1986; Maher & Tetreault, 1994). We often joke that we have "one brain," implying that together we are smarter and more willing to invent and take risks. We are aware that to really allow for multiple truths our meaning-making can be messy, uncertain, "contradictory, partial, and irreducible" (Ellsworth, 1994, p. 320). Our insistence on this feminist paradigm better equips us to resist the patriarchal academy which continually positions us as gendered subjects in a hierarchy (Gore, 1993). Much like our foremothers in self-study (Arizona Group, 1996, 2000; Manke, 2000; Perselli, 1998, 2004; Skerrett, 2007), we recognized the need to explore issues of gender, privilege, and power. We hoped that writing vulnerably would help to disrupt sexist and misogynistic norms, and replace them with new opportunities for ourselves as well as our students.

## **Method**

We used co/autoethnography as a self-study feminist research methodology that took autoethnography, "a form of self-representation that complicates cultural norms by seeing autobiography as implicated in larger cultural processes" (Taylor & Coia, 2006, p. 278) and moved it beyond the singular to the plural. Our methodology relied on our constructing knowledge together through allowing our stories to be dialogically interwoven. We investigated our own storied selves

within the social context of our relationship as well as the larger society through the Kavanaugh hearings. Our approach was critical yet we did not critique one another's experiences. Rather it was in the listening and hearing of the other's story, not the acting or telling, where we found meaning and connection. As we interacted through our personal communications, reading our past descriptive stories, and considering our present reflections, we looked for insights and attempted to make sense of what we read and heard. Sometimes the meaning of our stories changed as we mirrored what was there and dialogued.

Specifically, our data were generated organically and entailed texts, emails, and Facebook posts and messages. Using "nomadic jamming" (Coia & Taylor, 2014) as our collaborative writing process, we juxtaposed reported chronological details of the Kavanaugh hearing in fall 2018, alongside our own narratives and dialogic exchanges. Ours was a messy process and involved several iterations. Eventually, we crafted a co/autoethnography that broke from traditional academic writing and instead shared our deep emotions and detailed descriptions of personal anecdotes. The style of our piece resembled an article by Middleton (1995), where she combined academic writing with retellings of everyday experiences to show how "lived reality" led to the construction of feminist theory. We tried to do the same, chronologically retelling the Kavanaugh hearings, and interspersing excerpts from our shared sense-making.

Our self-study methodology of co/autoethnography demonstrated trustworthiness using the criteria Richardson (2000) provided for writing as a means of inquiry. These included contributing to the field of teacher education substantially, engaging and connecting with the reader, having esthetic merit, resonating for others, exemplifying reflexivity in both the process and the product, and encouraging other ideas. We selected these criteria because it allowed us to acknowledge the fluid and dynamic nature of our feminist identities.

## **Snapshots of Our Co/Autoethnography**

### ***One***

From September 4-7, 2018, The Senate Judiciary Committee questioned Judge Kavanaugh and heard witness testimonies concerning his nomination to the Supreme Court. A few days later, as the committee was getting closer to a vote on sending the nomination to the full Senate for approval, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, a professor at Palo Alto University, came forward and courageously brought to light that Judge Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her 36 years prior, while they were both in high school in 1982. She felt her "civic responsibility" began "outweighing [her] anguish and terror about retaliation."

Blasey-Ford shared that during a house party in the summer of 1982, when she was 15 and Kavanaugh was 17, Kavanaugh and one of his friends, Mark Judge, pushed her into a bedroom, pinned her down, groped her, and tried to take off her clothes while drunk. She said that when she attempted to scream, Kavanaugh put his hand over her mouth. She remembered that she thought he might kill her and stated, "he was trying to attack me and remove my clothing." Kavanaugh's friend then jumped on top of them and knocked them to the ground, enabling Ford to escape. Ford had not told anyone about the incident until 2012, when she was working with a couple's therapist with her husband. Kavanaugh's immediate response was: "I categorically and unequivocally deny this allegation. I did not do this back in high school or at any time." The Senate Judiciary Committee postponed its vote and invited both Kavanaugh and Blasey Ford to appear at the public hearing

<https://edtechbooks.org/-oyQJ>).

Monica: This could have been my high school experience. I went to a private school in Texas that was a lot like Georgetown Prep. There were lots of parties like the one Blasey- Ford described, drunken nights at someone's home with the parents away. High school and college were all about entering the danger zone with men, in their rooms, in my room, in the park, walking on the street, getting into my car at night and never knowing if I would actually have control. But men rarely feel this way—they have no idea what it feels like to always be on the lookout for danger. We feel unsafe all of the time.

Emily: It's intense to think how little oversight there was overall and how many of my friends are nodding their heads right now. We all have a story and we all remember the anxiety so well of having to always be on your guard. Even now I feel it—that I have to make sure I'm always alert and aware. Does it ever go away? It's bringing up so much for me about issues of safety and vulnerability—thinking back to my own sexual abuse in high school, how totally unprotected I felt from the adults, but also how much I didn't feel I could even reach out to my peers. We had no language for talking about what happened to us.

Monica: Why do we always have to feel so incredibly vulnerable? I always tell my students how uncomfortable I feel after my summer evening doctoral class. I never feel safe parking below our building and walking to my car. It is dark back there and I feel nervous about being attacked. Why can we never feel safe? Here I am a full professor, who has worked hard to be in this position, and yet I am physically unsafe on my own campus at night. Why is that permissible? And when I have said that to male colleagues, they offer to walk me to my car any time—but why do I have to rely on men for my own safety?

Emily: Yes and, of course, it's the men who make us unsafe. I was one of the "lucky" ones—in that I got to see my abuser go to jail eventually—even if it wasn't for what he did to me. I think about the level of validation I have gotten from that and how very few women get it.

Monica: For me this fear is deeply lodged in my body and I have been carrying it around feeling like at any moment I could be unsafe or unprotected. From the time I was little until about 6, I watched my father rage at my mother. And there were so many injuries that she felt compelled to cover them up. There was her broken ankle from his kicking her that she told people was from tripping and falling. There was the perforated ear drum that she had because of a smack to the head. When my brother was only two years old, my father got tired of his crying and slammed him against the wall and broke his shoulder. We told people that he fell off the bed and even my brother thinks that is what happened to him. On their honeymoon, he was high on valium and driving and they had a horrible car accident. My mother's leg was broken and even more scary was that she had to have a tracheotomy because she couldn't breathe. And those were only the injuries I can remember. Just writing this to you makes me feel so sick to my stomach. My heart is racing and I catch myself holding my breath. I remember being that vulnerable little girl, hiding behind the couch terrified that one day he would go too far. I became my mother's care-giver too—caring for her in the aftermath—it was almost as if a double layer of fear resides in me, for my mother and then for myself. Thankfully she

mustered up the courage to leave him but she often doubted her decision and what would become of her life.

Emily: Oh honey it's just so intense and so much. I think about the level of trauma and how deeply ingrained it is. I think the violence and abuse—and watching this as a child is something that we don't talk enough about at all. (Facebook Messenger, 9/16/18)

We were struck by the degree to which everyone we know seems to have such a story.

We have been deeply aware of how institutions have perpetuated our own and others' abuse and how we are complicit in a system that protects rapists and abusers. We considered how our own work in teacher education contributes to a society that privileges certain ways of being that are disembodied and rational. We have actively sought to develop different, slower research and writing habits that disrupt these traditional academic ways of being. We also wondered about the physical and emotional toll that this continual clampdown has taken on our bodies and our minds.

The early revelations by Dr. Blasey-Ford triggered our own painful memories. Our writing served as a way to document, but also to provide empathy for one another. We thought about how to share our own experiences of violence and abuse with our students. We had discussed how our student teachers might face their students' trauma in the classroom, but what might it look like for us as trauma survivors to help support preservice teachers in this work.

Where do our students have space to process their own traumas that could so easily be triggered in their classrooms? How do they learn to manage their emotional responses? How do we model these strategies for our students?

For example, when Emily went to observe two talented male physical education teachers and noticed that they called only on the boys in the class, her reaction was strong and angry—almost visceral. Worried that she might be overly sensitive to their actions, she texted with Monica to think through how to raise the issues and process the emotions that emerged. Being heard empathetically and making connections to how Kavanaugh was raising issues about how women are treated in society, she was able to find a less charged angle when she debriefed with them. She relied on the observational data she gathered rather than the feelings that were evoked. The narratives around the hearings pushed us to think about how the patriarchy continually dictates how women and especially young women are encountered in public spaces like schools. Examining our personal responses and dialoguing privately increased our confidence in calling out these societal practices with our students.

## **Two**

In the interim before the hearing, two other women, Deborah Ramirez and Julie Swetnick, accused Kavanaugh of separate past instances of sexual assault. Kavanaugh's response was: "This alleged event from 35 years ago did not happen. The people who knew me then know that this did not happen, and have said so. This is a smear, plain and simple" (<https://edtechbooks.org/-tjVd>). Later that day, Julie Swetnick released a sworn declaration that Kavanaugh targeted girls for sexual assault, spiking drinks with drugs to make girls more vulnerable to sexual assault (<https://www.cnbc.com/2018/09/26/michael-avenatti-identifies-kavanaugh-accuser-as-julie-swetnick.html>). Kavanaugh denied the allegations.

As more details about Kavanaugh and Blasey-Ford unfolded, Emily began to consider sharing her own story of sexual abuse more widely through her social media networks. Although she had recounted the incidents for years with close friends and spoke at *Take Back the Night* in college, she had not spoken publicly about what happened to her in a long time. She recognized that her feed included professional colleagues and former students, as well as parents of her son's friends, and even her husband's professional colleagues. She worried about the fallout for others and turned to Monica to think through the implications and possibilities.

Emily: Ok so I'm thinking about sharing publicly for the first time about my dance coach and the sexual abuse. On Facebook. I'm really scared.

Monica: I cannot even imagine how terrifying this could be for you but I also understand why you are considering doing it. Blasey-Ford is a role model to us all.

Emily: I just keep thinking that if she can do this in front of the entire world, certainly I can make a step forward as well. It feels important. Maybe because I'm an academic in as safe a position professionally and personally as I can be in. If it's terrifying to me, imagine what it is for others? I feel like people will take me seriously, that people who know me will believe me and that might open spaces to believe other women.

Monica: Yes. You have a platform, a position of authority, some sort of power from which you can speak and others or at least some people will listen.

Emily: I mean in our work we talk about social justice all the time. Isn't this part of my responsibility—giving voice, telling my story, when there are so many women who can't? Ugh. I worry about the fallout—like parents of Sam's friends who know me.

Monica: But your bravery is also important for Sam—to see what it looks like for women to speak truth to power. We talk about that all the time but you sharing your own story is really walking the talk. (Text, 9/20/18)

Emily eventually shared the following post:

I understand it is very hard to understand the experience of a teen who has been sexually abused or assaulted. I can barely understand it myself—let me say that I too was 15. It was 3 years until I told someone, 5 years before I went to the police. Even then I only did because other women I loved came to me and asked me if I too had gone through what they went through—had nobody else come forward I don't think I ever would have sought legal recourse. Even then when I went to the police I would find out years later my statement never made it to the Virginia DA (although I have a copy of it). The DA would eventually decide not to prosecute because the testimony of at least five girls was not enough. Later this man would go to jail for years. I was "lucky" and it only took maybe 20 girls. . . We told adults. Nobody believed us. Or none of the right people. And let me say in the years I didn't speak of this it was a struggle to breathe, to get up every day, to keep from drowning in shame and terror. I was afraid to write about it in my journal. The fact that I have spoken of it so much is a testament to the power of the women and men who supported me- themselves children. You can't imagine the psychological and emotional damage of a statement like the President's today. Edited to say: Most people wouldn't know it but I actually don't share a lot of very real stuff on fb. But I think it's time. When the most powerful person in the nation says that it "can't be

that bad" if people don't come forward then it is incumbent upon us all to push back against this insanely inaccurate and harmful narrative. [#ibelievechristine](#) [#dearchristine](#) #whydidntreport (Facebook, 9/21/18)

After years of private grappling with a history of violence and abuse, we wanted to move beyond the private to a more public space of sharing and reflection. Having the support of one another helped us to find the courage to speak out, giving voice to our experiences, a kind of initial step in activism work. Going public alongside one another began to influence how and what we shared with our students.

As we reflected on instances of childhood shame, we examined how we experience shame and even shame ourselves in academic work. Our friendship, developed as a means to counter traditional academic isolation, has allowed us to navigate this feeling through empathy, "the antidote to shame" (Brown, 2012, p. 74). These insights have encouraged us to design empathetic teaching practices, focused on the body and our emotions as a way of knowing. For example, one semester, Monica observed that some of her male student teachers were overwhelmed with sadness, anger, and frustration and worried about how to manage their emotions. To address this, she designed a modified Theatre of the Oppressed paired activity where one person as a pilot described how they felt in their bodies during a critical classroom incident and the other person as actor mirrored those feelings. Seeing a mirror of their feelings offered some new insights and also helped them to think through how to use those feelings. So rather than feel guilty about their anger, for instance, they began to think about anger as a tool for defending what is moral and just. Allowing for emotions in the classroom invited a new way of knowing. In their culminating reflections, one student said that he felt like he had "gotten more in touch with feelings" while another student said that "it's important not to repress your feelings." They also commented about how the activity made them think of their own students' emotional experiences. Both honoring our bodies and using feelings as a way to make meaning has helped us to strengthen our voices as well as those of our students.

We continue to think about how crafting this co/autoethnography influenced our work as teacher educators. We realize how valuable it has been for us to have this personal empathetic space to reveal our authentic selves, be vulnerable, and theorize about the work we are doing in a feminist way--emerging from the lived experience. We have grown in our conviction that our best work is that which speaks to the deeply held beliefs and passions that inspire and move us. We have begun thinking about how to hold space for our preservice teachers, where they can explore their own traumas and sit with the emotions raised. What began as dialogue, emerging from friendship, has become a means to break the boundaries of traditional academic work, the roots of new ways of being in our careers and selves. We are "living a feminist life" (Ahmed, 2017) and teaching as feminists with love and empathy.

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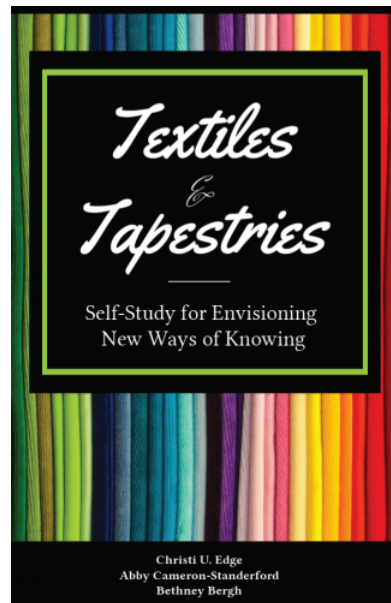
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