

Countering street harassment: online stories, offline resistance

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Personal stories play an important role in social movements. They bring to light that which is hidden, and make the taken-for-granted seem mutable. This paper analyses contemporary feminist storytelling practices, drawing on over 500 personal stories of street harassment, drawn from the website of the London branch of Hollaback! (a global organisation which seeks to document and challenge street harassment). Collectively, they challenge the discursive minimisation of street harassment as 'not serious' or just a 'joke' by revealing its persistent and serious nature. Indeed, around 1 in 4 accounts described physical forms of harassment, including unwanted touching and groping. They also challenge another important discourse: the powerful and pervasive story that positions men as strong and powerful agents of sexual violence, and women as doomed objects of victimisation. Drawing on the notion that stories motivate action, I examine how women were motivated by Hollaback to challenge their harassers. In particular, I examine satire as a genre that can offer a 'style' in which to produce and enact resistance counter-narratives. However, stories cannot be enacted except through bodies. As such, this paper seeks to also consider the limitations of narratives in countering street harassment. This paper draws on the notion of the narrative habitus to connect narratives with bodily practices, and to situate structure/agency in bodies rather than in discourse.