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Molly Robson

Politics, Affect and Intimacy:  
The mediated sentencing of  
Metiria Turei



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MOLLY ROBSON

POLITICS, AFFECT AND INTIMACY:  
THE MEDIATED SENTENCING OF  
METIRIA TUREI

Abstract

This essay shifts current discussions of political analysis from the informative to the affective, using intimacy as a conceptual lens through which to consider matters of the public sphere and their mediated repercussions. Earlier this year, in the lead-up to the 2017 general election, Metiria Turei (the former co-leader of the Green Party) publicly admitted having committed benefit fraud in the early 1990s. Although the statement was made strategically – in the hopes of eliciting a political conversation about the failings of the welfare state – Turei was soon after met with a tsunami of vicious scrutiny from mainstream media outlets, which eventually led to her resignation as co-leader of the party. Using the Turei scandal as a case study, this essay examines the myriad functions that ‘private’ matters can have in the public realm, from the transformative to the destructive; the formative to the divisive. Robson unpacks the discursive frameworks through which Turei’s loudest critics cast their sentences, considering the ways in which they illuminate the pedagogies of privilege (whiteness, masculinity, class) that continue to overwhelm and inform ‘objective’ journalism in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ultimately, this essay showcases the vast complexities of public intimacies, inviting the reader to reflect on both the transformative potential of affective politics and the persisting power structures that continue to contort their enactment.

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We are now inhabiting an epoch in which distinctions between public and private matters are increasingly blurred. Experiences that have historically been considered intimate affairs – gender, sexuality, race – are now readily appropriated goods that carry cultural value for matters of the public domain: be it social, political or economic. In July 2017, this symbiosis unfolded on the national stage when Metiria Turei (former co-leader of the Green Party of Aotearoa) publicly admitted committing beneficiary fraud in the 1990s while raising her daughter as a single mother. Her announcement was met with prolific scrutiny and criticism from media outlets, political officials and a large proportion of the New Zealand population, eventually leading to her resignation as co-leader. This set of events richly illustrates the transformative, often contradictory role that the intimate plays in the public sphere. By operating as a *subject in* rather than *object of* public discourse, Turei's admission generated powerful waves of affective intimacy between strangers, which in turn elicited important discussion about the obligations and limitations of the welfare state in New Zealand. However, at the same time, the mediated reaction to Turei's admission throws into stark relief the persisting parameters by which “the sanctity and limits of the intimate” are patrolled, constructed and evaluated in public spaces (Lee, 2016, p. 221). If Turei's resignation signals anything, it is that not all public intimacies are treated equally – particularly if the subject asserting the personal is socially marked at the intersection of race, class and gender.

Before embarking on any analyses of the Turei scandal and the media spectacle that followed, it is first important to clarify what is meant by the intimate. Katja Lee describes the intimate as “the personal, private, and emotional conditions of being an individual” (2016, p. 217). In popular culture, this condition connotes feelings of emotional intimacy (shared sentimental and affective attachments) or physical intimacy (the literal contact between bodies such as kissing, hugging, touching, intercourse, and so on). In academic terms, the intimate can be more broadly encapsulated by anything relating to the domestic, private or the personal: that which takes place, or rather is expected to take place, behind closed doors. The public, on the other hand, commonly denotes groups, collectives and communities of anonymous strangers and the social, physical and discursive spaces in which they assemble (Lee, 2016).

While these binary constructions remain pervasive in popular discourse, concrete distinctions between private and public are, according to Katja Lee, “increasingly fraught by their continuous and escalating sites of overlap” (2016, p. 217). In an age of media ‘supersaturation,’ where the experience of social reality matters less than its mediated representation, the ready expression of the intimate in public forums is now a defining feature of our time (Kavka, 2008). Kavka argues that contemporary intimacy is itself a product of technological advancements that have collapsed temporal and geographic distance, and allowed for the mass distribution of private moments to anonymous audiences (2008). She further postulates that publics are produced and sustained through the transmission of such affects. The public sphere, then, is less a universal space of collective debate than it is an affective *mood*.

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Indeed, the 2017 New Zealand election has been marked by increasingly desperate appeals to the personal; with many politicians wielding intimate parts of the self as tools of political leverage. In recent years, a number of academics have attributed this growing trend of public intimacies to both technology and late-capitalist neoliberal attitudes, which champion individual subjectivity and the meaningfulness of the individual (Lee, 2016). In such a world, public intimacies can become fertile for exploitation by the powerful: "... when available for individuals and corporate and bureaucratic bodies to mobilise them for particular effect, commodified public intimacies can become, ironically, (re)privatised" (Lee, 2016, p. 225). For example, Prime Minister Bill English made headlines last week when he 'opened up' about his teenage struggle with acne, throughout which he somberly reflected on his firsthand knowledge of how it *felt* to be an outsider (Bridge, 2017). The next day, new Labour leader Jacinda Arden spoke candidly with the same reporter about the childhood bullying she received for her teeth: the intimate proximity of which was literally figured by the interview's location in the privacy of her Auckland home (Bridge, 2017). However, of all the personal anecdotes that have come to light this election, Metiria Turei's story undoubtedly claimed the most attention from politicians, news media and everyday citizens alike.

Turei first made her announcement by speech at the Green Party's AGM, in the hopes of starting a debate about poverty while drawing support for the party's new benefit reform plan, "Mending the Safety Net". In the speech, Turei detailed how as a young solo mother in the 1990s she lied to WINZ about the number of flatmates she was living with, to prevent her benefit allowance from being cut. It is necessary here to note that the intimacy – and thus vulnerability – of such a revelation of illicit behaviour was certainly not lost on Turei, nor the party at large. In fact, she explicitly acknowledged this fact in her speech: "I know that by sharing my story here today, I am opening myself up to criticism. It may hurt me personally and may hurt us as a party" (The Green Party, 14 August 2017). Instead, it was precisely this discursive utterance of vulnerability – this emotional appeal to the sentient human subject – which formed Turei's strategy in this moment: "But I also know that if I don't talk about what life is really like for beneficiaries, if the Green Party doesn't, then who will?" (2017). Moreover, the topic at stake here makes Turei's case even more salient, as there is perhaps no other issue that embodies the fusion of private and public more than the topic of social welfare. In fact, the mere conception of social welfare epitomises the public relevance of private life, and further underscores the notion that "social arrangements structuring private life, domestic households, intimacy, gender, and sexuality are neither neutral nor immutable, that they can be seen as relations of power and as subject to transformation" (Warner, cited in Stimpson & Herdt, 2015, para. 7).

Immediately following Turei's announcement, the story quickly made national headlines and sparked a furious tsunami of online debate from the New Zealand public, with a diverse range of New Zealanders all passionately weighing in on the ethical defence (or lack thereof) behind Turei's decision. Following in the emotive climate of the election at large, the vast majority of discourse surrounding the case –

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both negative and positive – was of a markedly ideological nature, steeped in affective and emotional attachments between participants. Journalists, politicians, citizens and commentators all displayed a palpable willingness to offer up their *feelings* about the matter, and groups quickly became divided by the extent to which they sympathised with Turei. The sentimentality of this climate serves to illustrate how the public sphere can constitute a ‘mood’ or a set of affective transmissions. As Misha Kavka asserts in *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy: Reality Matters* (2008): “... the content of public-sphere discourse matters less than its affective particularity – indeed, that the public sphere only matters when affective particularity is taken into account” (p. 55).

This hysteria exploded when further investigations revealed that Turei had not only committed benefit fraud, but also election fraud, having lied about her living situation in order to vote in another electorate, for a local MP who was a friend of hers around the same time. The cultural and journalistic imperative to ‘uncover the truth’ in this instance is symptomatic of the powerful anxieties underlying public intimacies, and the “cultural and/or public-specific limitations” to the ways such narratives play out in the hands of the fourth estate (Lee, 2016, p. 225). Lee extends this point to emphasise how some intimacies – “particularly those that are idealised and whose boundaries are ruthlessly patrolled” – are often fraught with contradiction: a product of both “the ease with which intimacy can now be rendered public” and the angst that this inspires in a world that evaluates the moral virtue of its public figures via mediation (2016, p. 225).

The mediated response to Turei’s electoral fraud perfectly illustrates these anxieties and contradictions in practice, serving as evidence of how the intimacy that is acted out in public is not the same as the intimacy *brought into* the public. While the individual who “authorises the movement of the private into the public” can safely “enter the realm of image management and public relations”, the individual who is ‘caught out’ by way of journalistic investigation or scandal receives a much harsher sentence (Lee, 2016, p. 220). Such is the paradox of the public intimacy. Public intimacies, especially those in politics, frequently invite questions about the authenticity of the intimate: “... has it been produced as a part of the activities of the private realm and repurposed, or has this private moment been manufactured for distribution into the public realm?” (Lee, 2016, p. 220). It is not uncommon for an audience to feel emotionally compelled by a personal story while, simultaneously, hyper-aware of its artificial execution. Our feelings are further troubled if the sanctity of the initial public intimacy is compromised, or the subject is revealed to be less ‘pure’ than we initially believed. On the other hand, those who conceal certain intimacies, or fail to keep them hidden, are vilified for their attempts at privacy. Though Turei’s electorate crime likely made no difference to the outcome of the election at the time – and would certainly have no bearing on the future of New Zealand in the election year and beyond – the story was pitched by mainstream outlets as a matter of national importance, and journalists framed their relentless pursuit of the answers as the necessary undertaking of noble, investigative journalism. Such strategies work to conceal a more unsettling truth about our

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mainstream news industry: specifically, that “... the fourth estate is just that: an estate, that is to say a seat of power, and that this power is implicated in everyday forms of social repression and in entrenching the dominant ideology” (Tiso, 2017).

In the Turei scandal, these anxieties found form in the rhetoric by which notions of purity and victimhood were fiercely constructed and patrolled in dominant media discourses covering the event. Lee argues that every culture has a “range of shifting taboos” which “prevent, discourage, or punish attempts to render some intimacies public and/or profit off them” (2016, p. 224). Indeed, Turei’s public intimacy, and the ferocity of the debates surrounding it, shed an unforgiving light on the hegemonies of whiteness, class and gender that continue to contour the character of the news provided to us. The voices most devoted to vilifying Turei for her decision came predominantly from journalists of mainstream media outlets – overwhelmingly those of Pākehā men. Finlay Macdonald of RNZ claimed that “Victims deserve better”, called Turei “plain pathetic” and derided the “hurt mewling” of Green supporters (2017, paras. 18, 16). *New Zealand Herald*’s John Roughan demanded that Turei name the father of her child and outright dismissed the severity of the poverty she laid claim to, writing: “If Metiria Turei is typical the system sounds not so bad” (2017). Even John Campbell, in an emotionally tense interview on *Checkpoint*, uncomfortably forced Turei to admit that her situation was not ‘as dire’ as that of many other beneficiaries.

These discursive strategies, though seemingly neutral, serve to insidiously enforce the boundaries of the public intimacy in accordance with pervasive myths about poverty. As Lee succinctly argues: “To have one’s specific (or general) intimacies made a topic of public debate is to find one’s subject/public legitimated and yet, perhaps, simultaneously affirmed unequal” (2016, p. 222). While many journalists strategically avoided explicitly addressing the conditions of Turei’s subjecthood (Indigenous; woman of colour; solo mother), ostensibly to paint an objective portrait of her plight, it was precisely this restraint that laid bare the dominant Western pedagogies that overwhelmingly inform the news industry and its most prominent mouthpieces. It is important to emphasise here that access to the mainstream public sphere is not a universal right, but rather, a privilege directly determined by such social markers, which precede and form the subject’s involvement and legitimacy in spaces of public debate (Kavka, 2008). As Kavka plainly puts it: “... the ability to erase one’s particularities is a differential resource, available only to those who are ‘unmarked’ by gender, race, class and sexuality” (2008, p. 55). Thus, the racial, gendered, classist lines upon which the critics based their attacks were not powered by their explicit acknowledgment, but inversely, the assumption that they did not need be acknowledged; that they were irrelevant to Turei’s predicament; and finally, that the only distinguishing factor between Turei and any other struggling Kiwi subject was her ultimate decision to cheat. This ideology was aptly illustrated by Campbell’s obsessive return to Turei’s relative poverty in comparison to other beneficiaries, reminding us that a greater standard of morality is required of the Māori victim. As Giovanni Tiso powerfully argues in his article “Speaking Power to the Truth: The Political Assassination of Metiria Turei”, the Māori criminal is often subject to



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disproportionately higher scrutiny than their Pākehā counterpart, especially when appealing to human empathy: "... when they are poor they must not only be deserving, but the most deserving of all" (Tiso, 2017, para. 8).

However, at the same time, an alternative movement was gaining traction on social media. Thousands of Twitter and Instagram users, personally compelled by the heartbreak of Turei's plight, offered up their own deeply intimate, personal stories of poverty, struggle, disadvantage, disability, survival and difference under the hashtag #IamMetiria, to show solidarity with Turei and challenge the mainstream Pākehā narrative that vilified her. Lauren Berlant calls this hybrid movement an intimate public; "... a mediated/mediating space in which the personal is refracted through the general, and members of the public sense common emotional attachment and thus belonging." (Berlant, cited in Lee, 2016, p. 22). The #IamMetiria hashtag, and its growing popularity, speaks to the democratic power of social media in collapsing spatial and temporal boundaries to facilitate affective intimacy with distant spectators and participants. Here, compassion functions as intimacy, intimacy transmits as identification, and identification becomes resistance. Despite Turei's eventual resignation, #IamMetiria constituted an opportunity, enabled by affective transmission, "... for the disenfranchised to participate as subjects in rather than objects of 'official' public discourses" (Lee, 2016, p. 221). #IamMetiria let thousands of marginalised subjectivities substantiate their public identities through the practices and performances of their own personal lives, hence legitimising both. Here, the intimate transcended its dominant role in this election as a tool of political leverage, and was reclaimed as a grassroots mechanism for the disenfranchised to transform publics, "... their composition, and the issues with which they concerned themselves" (Lee, 2016, p. 221).

Metiria Turei's revelations, the allegations that followed, and the media storm that surrounded her case were a rich illustration of the transformative, symbiotic, contradictory role that the intimate plays in the public sphere. While, on the one hand, Turei's story opened up a mediated channel for mobilising intimate publics and eliciting debates about the rights of the disenfranchised, much of this discussion was overshadowed by the racialised, gendered and classist implications of the story's coverage in mainstream media, which insidiously served to reify pervasive myths about poverty and social welfare. There is much more yet to be explored on the subject, but at bare minimum, this essay aims to serve as an examination of the power of affective politics, and the escalating, often antagonistic, relevance of private matters in the public realm. As Lee eloquently concludes of this paradox: "To have one's specific (or general) intimacies made a topic of public debate is to find one's subject/public legitimated and yet, perhaps, simultaneously affirmed unequal" (2016, p. 222).

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Molly Robson is a media studies honours student at Victoria University of Wellington. Her areas of interest span representations of gender, race and sexuality in the media; the role of media in shaping society and politics; how media contribute to understandings of place and culture; mediated representations of crises and war; and everyday media's relationship to structures of power. In her spare time Molly partakes in personal photography and filmmaking projects. She has a BA in media studies and film from Victoria University of Wellington, with a minor in political science. On having completed honours, she hopes to continue postgraduate study in media studies or visual communication abroad.

## Course information

This essay was produced for Cherie Lacey's course MDIA403: Mass Media and Popular Culture at Victoria University of Wellington. The course explores the politics of emotion as they emerge and circulate in popular media, examining closely and critically the myriad functions of feeling in contemporary culture. This paper was submitted in August 2017.