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Catherine MacLennan
catherine.maclennan@trincoll.edu

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**#MeToo?: The Intersectional Reach and Limits of a
Movement in the Digital Age**



Catherine MacLennan
American Studies Thesis
Advisor: Davarian Baldwin
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movements and for #MeToo. You are the voices that will hopefully continue to encourage all young women, everywhere to continue to say Me Too, without any barriers.

When MeToo Hijacked the Red Carpet

On the evening of January 7th, 2018, the red carpet offered everyone watching a landscape of celebrity and elegance. It was the night of the 75th annual Golden Globes. Expensive gowns and stiletto heels were framed by the iconic red fabric that has become synonymous with Hollywood. Actors and actresses, directors and designers strolled from interview to interview with brief pauses to acknowledge and stoke the roaring crowd of onlookers. Invisible crews set up elaborate media stations in just the right places to catch the stars at every angle, in the perfect lighting.

Appearances on the red carpet are everything. The evening sunlight caught actresses' powdered highlighter on their stiff cheek bones and recently whitened teeth while the cameras congruently flashed for the next editions of "Who Wore it Better" in *People* or "The Best and Worst Dressed" in *Cosmopolitan*.¹ The red carpet presented a landscape of elegance similar to the 74 preceding shows. The red fabric had served as its own stage to spotlight and to sell ideas of glamour, to accentuate celebrities wrapped in fashion, television, and film, but one thing was very different about this night. On this January night in 2018 Hollywood met a social movement.² Meryl Streep wasn't wearing her classic, elegant, red gown, singed at the waist made just for her. Reese Witherspoon didn't show off her bright, pale skin by wearing a deep purple or sky-blue dress. These celebrities, amongst many, chose to signal political solidarity over the classic couture, by creating a sea of black ensembles, and by bringing activists as their guests, (see Image 1).



Image 1. Actresses and Activists at the 2018 Golden Globes Awards show.

Me Too³ founder Tarana Burke walked with Michelle Williams, activist and tennis great Billie Jean King with Emma Stone, feminist advocates stood with their Hollywood escorts. That night the red carpet got hijacked by the Me Too movement. While this pairing of activist and actress was a wonderful showcase of political solidarity; it was just as orchestrated as the red-carpet display of elegance itself. This was an apology tour; Hollywood feeling the need to step in and acknowledge they didn't actually invent #MeToo. The actresses brought those activists with them, attached at the hip on that red carpet as accessories, to justify their celebrity outrage as legitimate activism.

Despite the efforts of actresses on the red carpet that night, famous Hollywood host Ryan Seacrest still found ways to overshadow the #MeToo movement and the primary role Burke played. He started the interview, "Tarana Burke and Michelle Williams are here tonight" and turned to face the two women, "nice to see you two standing together. So, tell me why the two of you are here together in this moment this evening, Michelle." Already, when he asked the most basic question, he turned to Michelle for the first word. Burke, as the founder of Me Too a decade before this moment, remained slightly muted in an interview about her own movement. Michelle responded, "you know why we're here? We're here because of Tarana. You might

think that we're here because I was nominated for something but that's really not the case. We're here because Tarana started a movement, she planted a seed years ago and its grown on and caught fire. She started the Me Too movement.”⁴

Seacrest quickly followed up with Tarana, asking her what it meant for her to see Me Too grow. Tarana started off expressing her gratitude and amazement with how the red carpet had helped accelerate her movement. She also had to be strategic in taking advantage of the stage that Michelle Williams had set up for bringing #MeToo on the red carpet. Burke didn't have the luxury to be mad about getting less credit. Instead, she took the apology game and played with it; “we're seeing a collision of these two worlds, a collaboration, between these two worlds that people don't usually put together and would most likely have us pitted against each other so it's really powerful to be on the red carpet tonight and for people like Michelle to be selfless enough to give up their time so we can talk about our causes.”⁵

Briefly asking Burke her thoughts about the night and about the movement, Seacrest withdrew from the subject and turned back to Williams, “Well I know the message is the most important, but I do want to say congratulations for your work, it is a night of celebration, you always do such great work, you're so graceful when you do work and you're graceful here as always.”⁶ Michelle thanked him but then quickly turned the discussion back to the movement and the work that #MeToo had done for future generations. Seacrest again attempted to engage with the movement, but the seriousness of the moment got veiled by his clumsy efforts to again steer the conversation back to the glamour of the awards show and the Hollywood nominee.⁷ In the process, Seacrest dulled the potential edginess of the conversation perfectly by engaging slightly with #MeToo and sexual harassment but simultaneously weaving in a discussion of stars

and awards. He kept the attention of the red carpet viewers, while underscoring the novelty of a #MeToo presence.

Michelle Williams, along with other white actresses, were celebrated for “sharing their platform” with Burke and for “giving up their time” to the movement. The gatekeepers of this Hollywood machine struggled with how to acknowledge the introduction of the #MeToo movement in this highly orchestrated public sphere of celebrity and glamour. If only for one very awkward moment, the red carpet had become something else, but at what cost. With this red carpet in mind, my thesis will use intersectional analysis to examine the reach and limits of the MeToo hashtag as a feminist movement in our digital age. As Me Too moved from Tarana Burke’s modest advocacy group for young black girls to become a hashtag symbol of digital activism, how did it expand our notions of feminism? But at the same time, how did the new digitized focus on Hollywood casting couches, corporate boardrooms, or tweets and “likes,” also limit the very meaning of sexual harassment and gender more broadly?

When #MeToo emerged as a popular hashtag, it came to almost singularly reflect the particular interests and experiences of the privileged groups that had the power to control the discourse in the digital sphere. Here, I will place the spotlight of Hollywood harassment in conversation with the shadow spaces where women endured daily sexual indignities in ways that didn’t fit what became the #MeToo profile. These working-class, underage, undocumented, and even celebrity women of color reclaimed #MeToo and, in the process, forced a rethinking of feminist activism in today’s digital world.

In the chapters that follow I highlight three critical areas of Me Too— the origins of the movement, the movement’s limits and blind spots, and where the movement is going. I take readers on a journey to explore #MeToo’s emergence as a modern movement against sexual

assault in the workplace, and its capacity for sparking millions to speak up against sexual assault and harassment, to stand together in solidarity, and to fight for feminist ideals. But, while there is power in these loud voices, there are many voices still unheard; people unable to speak up due to their marginalized social status. In the last chapter, I look at the most recent activism that has ridden the wave of #MeToo popularity to ironically bring the movement back to its original aims of fighting for the experiences of marginalized communities; specifically, women of color.

In each chapter, my assessment of Me Too is guided by an intersectional analysis of it's Me Too's feminist claims within the digital age. I work to understand what happened when Me Too moved into the digital sphere and asses the consequences of turning social advocacy into a hashtag. This thesis does not offer solutions but exposes how a modern movement, with all of its successes and power, can still be guided by critical silences. Fissures remain about who can legitimately claim "Me Too" and whether they are actually heard. Interrogating both the limits and possibilities that emerged when Me Too went digital will shape any blueprint for a truly substantive, feminist social transformation.

Created in 2006 by Tarana Burke, Me Too had always attempted to address the realities of sexual harassment. But the rallying cry was part of Burke's broader non-profit programming and activism for young women of color to gain confidence through various workshops and trainings, and to provide support for those young women who were victims of sexual violence. But in 2017, Hollywood grabbed on to the phrase when allegations of sexual assault against famous director and industry mogul Harvey Weinstein came to surface. One tweet turned into millions. In just 24 hours after the first hashtag went out, over 12 million #MeToo tweets were posted.⁸ Soon enough, those millions of people were telling their own stories as victims of sexual abuse. But as the hashtag circulated the digital sphere, early advocates noted that Tarana Burke,

and the community she represented, was nowhere to be found. Hollywood actresses attempted to rectify the oversight on the red carpet that night, but the efforts of reconciliation offered mixed results. To their credit, those beautiful actresses worked to use their recognition and publicity for social change, but it all failed to transmit the full depth and complexity of Me Too. The message of a political movement shown on the red carpet, while powerful, can get lost in that beauty and glamour. No amount of expensive, black formal wear, worn by famous, white women, is going to demonstrate the struggles, complexities and silence within a much broader vision of justice for marginalized women that this movement represented a decade before.

As the Me Too hashtag jumped from the digital sphere to the picket line it has revealed gender inequalities and issues of sexual violence against women across many domains but has also brought into question the meaning of feminism in the current moment. Social media is a new space for feminist activism to live, one that is cast in a different landscape compared to previous feminist movements because of both the speed and soundbite nature of today's digital platforms. Karen Boyle, author of *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism*, pays careful attention to the difference between a "moment" and a "movement" as it pertains to #MeToo and works to understand feminist politics in today's political landscape.

Boy #MeToo "networked feminism: a feminism made possible by the affordances of the social media platforms on which it circulates."⁹ I want to also be clear; these digital campaigns only became a movement when they jumped off of the screen. Social media served as a tool for political mobilization. None of these hashtags had the possibility to enact social change until the message moved off of the screen and onto the streets protesting. In fact, the stories here show that the power of various feminist hashtag's related to #MeToo gained the most political momentum or structural impact when they were part of larger organizing missions. By living in the digital

sphere and in media, in some ways #MeToo has become more accessible, because of the mass amounts of users on social media sites. But it can forget many voices trying to break through the barriers of the celebrity tweet.

In this thesis, I try to reconstruct the history of the #MeToo movement with the voices of various activists, scholars, reporters, bloggers and social media influencers. Ideas from Black Feminist Thought and intersectionality provide a way to understand where feminist ideals reside within the digital sphere and the limits of that soundbite, media world, because we know twitter is not always “glamorous” for everyone. My work engages a wider feminist approach by looking at the ways in which certain subgroups have been marginalized within the #MeToo movement, and how the digital sphere does or does not play a role in that marginalization. Inequalities linger for so many marginalized communities, undocumented people, low-wage workers, women forced into sex trafficking. For those communities, sexual violence is more about being assaulted by a family member than losing your high-class job, it’s more about getting deported than losing your reputation as an actress, or its struggling to even have the right to claim sexual assault because someone is engaging in sexual labor to supplement their income as a professor. These are all very different conditions that the story of the sexually harassed Hollywood actresses can’t fully capture. These are the stories that can’t be easily “liked” in social media campaigns or captured in twitter’s 280-character limit.

The surface-level representation on social media encourages a pre-existing facade of certain experiences. We think we know the life of a Hollywood actress because it has been manicured, packaged, and streamed into our most prized possession: the little black screen that sits in our hands. Consequently, when we hear of their pain, we tend to recognize it as our own. We rally around their plight, because we desire to be like them and to know them, even in their

pain. Their lives become “our” lives. But what does this kind of digital universalism mean for those who toil and suffer in the shadows of the media spotlight? I want to be clear that I will never know the exact experiences of these marginalized groups, but I hope to expose how the limits of a purely digitized feminism doesn’t necessarily help them. The digital sphere can serve as a powerful tool, but we have to bring radically democratic and intersectional expectations to that platform. And so, forging a conversation around those that #MeToo has forgotten, is my beginning.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

This work on #MeToo brings together the major scholarly fields of intersectional feminism and digital activism. Intersectionality focuses on the idea that gender is not a singular axis of existence and experience, but different identities—like class, race, and sexual orientation—add critical specificity to help make sense of the various ways in which we all experience gender. For example, being black and a woman shapes one’s gender differently than being identified as white and a woman. Works, like *Intersectionality* by Patricia Hill Collins, lay out the full story of intersectionality as a concept and social position that broaden the analytic frame of feminism and gender more broadly. The significant body of scholarship that has emerged here requires a rigorous deconstruction of the single category of gender and is central to my assessment of feminist engagement.¹⁰ But there is very little of the more theoretical work on intersectionality that takes digital activism as its site of analysis.

Conversely, a much smaller body of digital activism scholarship explores the powerful use of social media and technology for various types of political mobilization.¹¹ Placing activism in the digital sphere allows for campaigns and movements to spread and targets a large audience using the ease of their phone or computer. But this work rarely deploys an intersectional analysis

to engage contemporary cases of digital activism. I build on the small but growing body of work that includes *Digital Feminist Activism* by Kaitlyn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Kelly and *#HashtagActivism* by Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey and Brooke Foucault Welles to think about ways to bring together a complete intersectional analysis of feminism with scholarship on digital activism.¹²

With the above books in mind, I deploy an intersectional feminist analysis of #MeToo to explore the uneven terrain of social movement building in the digital age, especially for socially marginalized communities. In the current moment, there has been an uncomplicated celebration of feminist activism online, especially #MeToo. But as the tense world sitting right under the red carpet reveals, there has been a significant rupture between the builders of the movement and those who profit from its benefits.

METHODOLOGY:

Methodologically, I combine interviews and digital media content analysis guided by an intersectional theoretical framework. I use the primary source testimonies of survivors associated with #MeToo and the voices of survivors that are not associated with the movement to try to understand why they haven't associated their stories with #MeToo. This work will be contextualized with the writings of movement activists, commentators, and bloggers alongside television clips and interviews. This work will also include the discussions, listeners' reactions, and individual blog reactions of various individuals on social media platforms. These primary sources speak within the gap of silencing marginalized women that I want to engage, the story I want to reconstruct; by looking at the evolution of Me Too from its founding in 2006 to the 2017 mainstream spark and its continued transformation.

Secondary sources include scholarship surrounding feminist movements, intersectional theory, and sexual assault cases. I will also rely on feminist history in order to understand what feminism has already done and the ways in which some feminist scholars or theories work to bring marginalized subgroups into the conversation.¹³ Furthermore, I will use secondary scholarship that focuses on the advancements of hashtags and the powerful usage of social media towards advancing social change. These materials give me the appropriate context for my insights and help me extract meaning from the social events surrounding #MeToo.

This thesis offers a contemporary analysis of the #MeToo movement, its evolution, and how it continues to fuel the conversation around sexual assault and gendered inequities. My research highlights the immense power of recent digital activism and the both continuous evolution and contested meaning of feminist advocacy in the social media sphere. I hope this brings awareness to the specific capacity of digital platforms by looking at the people left unheard or pushed away from the spotlight in focusing my attention on the intersectional limits of the #MeToo movement. We must always remain aware that the internet is still shaped by the pre-existing hierarchies of class inequality and racism that loom over society and its social movements. Social media cannot stop at the interests of glamorous Hollywood but must match the complexities of an intersectional feminist social movement.

Chapter One: The Rise of the Hashtag Landscape

Heaven in Hell

On her website, Tarana Burke conveys to her readers the harrowing moment that spawned Me Too. It was nowhere near a casting couch or a dressing room, but at a summer camp. She was working for the 21st Century Youth Leadership movement, in Alabama after her college graduation from Auburn University in the late 1990s. Burke was sitting in a circle at the youth camp program surrounded by young girls, feeling a piece of her heart break off as she listened to one story after another of broken homes, bullies at school, self-hate; struggles these young girls faced on a daily basis. She consoled as best she could, hugging them for that one second before they went back to grappling with those experiences alone. Burke was forced to sit with the pain of hearing those stories and knowing that's what they were going back to; that the summer camp was only a momentary escape from enduring trauma-filled realities.

The next day a young girl, Heaven, chased Burke down to talk privately. She had a sickening feeling that Heaven's story would rock her to her core and had avoided it all week. But Heaven persisted and finally caught up with her. Burke wrote her testimony on the website, "The me too Movement started in the deepest, darkest place in my soul."¹⁴ That little girl, sweet-faced, hyperactive, and sad-eyed, choked out her story of her "stepdaddy" and the painful advances of an abusive stepfather who preyed on Heaven's growing teenage body at home. The emotions welled inside Burke as she watched this little girl, confused, angry, scared, finally tell someone, anyone, about what she was going through. Burke struggled to listen and after five minutes of listening, cut Heaven's story short. She directed Heaven to a different female counselor, who Burke thought was a better person to offer counsel. She couldn't bear to hear about an innocent child, like Heaven being abused in that way, "I watched her walk away from me as she tried to recapture her secrets and tuck them back into their hiding place. I watched her put her mask back

on and go back into the world like she was all alone and I couldn't even bring myself to whisper... me too."¹⁵ Tarana acknowledged her mistakes in handling Heaven's situation, expressing the despair, unease, and worry she felt for Heaven. Burke, a survivor of sexual assault herself, wouldn't let another Heaven, another girl brave enough to share her story, not be heard.

In this chapter I examine the original, iconic moments that serve as the transformation from Tarana Burke's grassroots movement to the more popular hashtag #MeToo. I open with a history of Me Too before discussing the accusations against Harvey Weinstein and actress Alyssa Milano's tweet in 2017. Me Too had long existed but the celebrity retweet of the digital hashtag effectively mobilized millions of people in a campaign against sexual assault. I argue that the media and press that celebrities received were useful in bringing Me Too to the broader public. The hashtag would also spark a feminist response to Donald Trump at the Women's March, where millions of people around the world participated in the protest. But it was also at that march where black feminists started to critique the racial blind spots of the hashtag's momentum; suggesting that the interests and concerns of this new feminism had become "white's only."

Origins of the movement

Tarana Burke founded the Me Too movement, in 2006, to help survivors of sexual assault and harassment, specifically young women of color, reclaim power and find solidarity in their pain and experiences.¹⁶ Burke first created a non-profit organization called Just Be Inc. focused on the health and wellness of black teenage women living in lower income communities.¹⁷ The Just Be website chronicles that exact moment with Heaven, that motivated her to launch the programming called "Me Too" as part of the larger non-profit organization. At this early stage, Me Too was not a hashtag. Tarana Burke initiated Me Too programming to help young girls that

came from experiences of abuse and hurt, girls that were told that their voice was insignificant. She hopes to give them the courage that Heaven had that day when telling Burke her story.

For those young girls, it wasn't a movie executive dangling a job in front of an aspiring actress, it wasn't the businessman cornering a young associate hoping for a promotion; it was a family member, a mom's boyfriend, in a place meant for safety and security, a home. That feeling of tucking secrets back inside are still so often experienced, especially by young women of color. Young black women were, and still are, underrepresented in society and often silenced because society has told them that their experiences and encounters with sexual violence will likely be dismissed. A history of gendered racism deems women of color oversexualized¹⁸ and hence largely incapable of being raped.¹⁹ By creating Just Be Inc. and Me Too, Burke hoped to reconcile that personal concern she experienced with Heaven, by changing the narrative, and by helping the next young women of color get equipped with courage; providing them with confidence tools and mentorship programs (see Image 2).

The mission and the establishment of these programs were just the beginning of Burke's efforts to help sexual assault survivors and young women of color.²⁰ Specifically, the Me Too program "focused on young women who have endured sexual abuse, assault or exploitation (S.A.A.E) and was founded to fill what we see as a void."²¹ There are other programs, such as JEWELS, that emphasized leadership and the cultivation of strengths for middle school and high school girls.²² She included three main goals for Me too programming: Empowerment through empathy, connection, and education. From this conceptual foundation came pillars of programming specific to certain situations. The website explains the specific use of Me Too:

Even as traumatic as sexual abuse, assault, or exploitation is, sometimes there is nothing as powerful as knowing that you are not alone. The sooner young women understand that they are not

an anomaly, the sooner they can begin their healing process. This is at the heart of The me too Movement.²³

Me Too is about getting ahead of the trauma, of feeling alone, and standing with other survivors living in the trauma of experiencing S.A.A.E in the first place. This small, grassroots organization, with the trade-marked phrase “Me Too,” provided modest programming for young women of color in 2006. It was never meant to create a hashtag or to bring activist women to the red carpet. At its core, Me Too wanted to stand with young women experiencing sexual trauma when no one else seemed to care. And then came Harvey Weinstein.



Image 2, Tarana Burke pictured speaking at a rally in Hollywood, California in 2017.

On October 5th, 2017, *The New York Times* (NYT) released an article titled “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades.” The reportage here exposed the many stories detailing this Hollywood powerbroker’s countless exploits of sexually preying on young actresses. The public exposure of these inappropriate interactions—Weinstein pressuring women into touching him naked, forcing them to watch him undress and having them do the same—triggered women to react. The news report allowed many women, who thought they were alone, to see a shared experience of exploitation at the hands of powerful men claiming to advance their careers by requesting sexual acts. *NYT* reporters Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey wrote, “Two decades ago, the Hollywood producer invited Ashley Judd to the Peninsula Beverly

Hills Hotel for what the young actress expected to be a business breakfast meeting. Instead, he had her sent up to his room, where he appeared in a bathrobe and asked if he could give her a massage or she could watch him shower.”²⁴ This initial report encouraged women to collectively exclaim “no more.” After the initial story broke, accusations piled on with additional testimonies of Weinstein offering career help in exchange for sexual favors. An ex-employee of Weinstein, Lauren O’Connor, wrote a memo describing her sentiments after enduring inappropriate experiences with her boss, “I am a 28-year-old woman trying to make a living and a career. Harvey Weinstein is a 64-year-old, world famous man and this is his company. The balance of power is me: 0, Weinstein:10.”²⁵ Speaking up against Weinstein was risky, he was powerful, rich, charming, and influential in the Hollywood industry. The fear of repercussions was high. He was supported by a powerful male business culture that had normalized sexual advances toward women as merely a condition for entrance into the business. Resistant young actresses would be deemed a problem in the workplace and untrustworthy, or they may have lost their jobs; blacklisted and reputations ruined amongst the powerful male network.

Weinstein held those women’s careers in his hands and dangled his power over their heads in doing so. Actresses just starting out in their careers work hard for each opportunity and when that person of power, who controls your next move and your future, makes you feel uncomfortable and coerces you sexually, there is often no way out. Weinstein used his privileged position to reportedly manipulate over eighty women by playing the decision-making role in their initial careers. *The New York Times* described Weinstein through the testimonies they received from women like Judd and O’Connor, “He could be charming and generous: gift baskets, flowers, personal or career help and cash. At the Cannes Film Festival, according to several former colleagues, he sometimes handed out thousands of dollars as impromptu

bonuses.”²⁶ It took many years for women to speak out against Weinstein, but the new digital sphere played a key role in changing that history. This article didn’t mention Me Too, but instead became the ground on which it exploded onto the media sphere.

The Instant Blow Up

Ten days after *The New York Times* article came out, actress Alyssa Milano was sitting in her California mansion scrolling through the long list of articles, videos, posts; flipping from Google to Twitter to Facebook, seeing all of the stories of sexual assault charges against Weinstein when a notification popped up on the top of her screen. She clicked on the little red text bubble bringing her to a conversation with Charlotte Clymer, writer and Human Rights activist. Clymer had sent her a screenshot, “Suggested by a friend: if all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘me too’ as a status, we might give people the sense of the magnitude of the problem.”²⁷

Milano, feeling empowered by the wave of stories, copied the screenshot and added her own sentence, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted, write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.”²⁸ In that initial tweet, she did not mention Tarana Burke or any programming under Just Be. As a woman of power in Hollywood, she was certainly not aware of the trademarked, grassroots phrase that Burke created a decade earlier. Milano said about the night her tweet was sent out, “I thought, you know what? This is an amazing way to get some idea of the magnitude of how big the problem is.”²⁹ The next morning she woke up to 55,000 replies and the hashtag trending No.1 on Twitter. Milano added, “It was the perfect storm to happen and I feel really blessed I was the vessel, the messenger... I think the fact that it turned into a true movement was surprising. That was never my intention.”³⁰ Milano’s tweet was the original spark of the flame that helped drive the popularity and viral social media presence of #MeToo.

While she popularized the phrase, giving her the credit of turning it into a “true” social movement puts her in unfair equal positioning with Burke. Milano made #MeToo a campaign over social media, it caught people’s attention and people started to engage. But it became a social movement when women started protesting and started getting powerful men fired. Me Too, as a movement, emerged through clear targets of attack, a list of goals and demands, and direct action. It took a white, well-known actress tweeting about Tarana Burke’s, decade old, relatively unknown program to catch the public’s attention. A week before the *NYT* article, the only conversation going on about Me Too was in a small organization for young women of color, but now, it was at the frontline of every media cover. One simple phrase had completely reconstructed the gender dynamics in various halls of power and influence.

When Alyssa Milano’s tweet took off, some women of color noted that Burke had not received the same press and representation. Burke herself said she was shocked after seeing Milano’s tweet, “I panicked, I felt a sense of dread, because something that was part of my life’s work was going to be co-opted and taken from me and used for a purpose that I hadn’t originally intended.”³¹ Milano is one example of how women in Hollywood and women of power can get their faces on the screen and can easily stamp their name on a movement, when they want. By giving the movements’ grassroots a simple “nod”, the full story of Me Too remains unknown.

It was not until a few days later that Milano, on *Good Morning America*, gave a partial credit of her tweet to Burke’s Me Too efforts. Milano made it clear she was willing to be the vessel and “blow horn” for those #MeToo voices, while Burke remained relatively silent sitting on that exact same tv set, in that same interview.³² During that television segment, Burke stayed neutral, drawing the discussion back to the real reason why she started the movement in the first place, “this is not about me this is about survivors, and it’s about what survivors need to be

healthy and whole.”³³ Milano highlighted herself as the “blowhorn” while Burke focused on the movement, the original goals. But Burke still took advantage of the social media platform that this white actress provided.

Many activists who are women of color argued that Black women were being left out of the story. April Reign, a digital media strategist spoke out, “If there is support for Rose McGowan, which is great, you need to be consistent across the board...women of color are demanded to be silent and are erased. Like with Tarana.”³⁴ This lack of credit did not go unnoticed during the unfolding of Me Too’s popularity. Along with the broad social media celebration of Milano’s tweet came critiques from scholars. They noted that “the longtime effort by Ms. Burke, who is black, had not received support over the years from prominent white feminists.”³⁵ Burke has always emphasized that what matters in the movement is the impact and voices of sexual assault survivors. But the process by which the movement ignited, the appeal of white Hollywood actresses, is one example of how Black women and other marginalized groups have been silenced within the #MeToo movement, from the beginning. However, this is not just an issue of recognition.

The Public Presentation of the Movement

The #MeToo hashtag exploded into a firestorm of victims speaking out about their experience with rape and sexual assault. As more Americans, predominantly white women, shared their own stories of survival, an extensive conversation around sexual assault, accountability, sexism, and violence against women emerged.³⁶ The movement had a ripple effect, soon enough more high-profile men were exposed for their abusive behavior. State Senators, CEO’s, actors, editors, got fired for the accusations of sexual misconduct. After Weinstein it was Lockhart Steele, Editorial Director at Vox Media, fired after admitting to sexual

harassment of at least one person. Then, Roy Prince, Head of Amazon Studios, resigned after a Hollywood producer accused him of unwanted sexual behaviors. Kevin Spacey, famous Hollywood actor was accused of forcing himself on a minor. And many other men came forward confirming more of Spacey's inappropriate advances.³⁷ Survivors were not only tweeting but going to Human Resources, telling their own managers, calling reporters, and openly pointing out the men that harassed or abused them. Companies were firing these men more quickly because they didn't want to tarnish their brand. The digital sphere served as an effective weapon for #MeToo because it got the accusations out quick, it gave women the leverage they didn't have before, and forced companies to make decisions about how to react to accusations of sexual assault in their work environment. The year before the *New York Times* article, less than 30 high-profile people had made the news for being fired on accusations of sexual assault. After the October article specific to Weinstein, at least 200 prominent men lost their jobs based on sexual assault allegations.³⁸ Companies couldn't ignore the millions of women writing #MeToo on social media, using the specific names of those men in television interviews, threatening to boycott brands with corporate leaders accused of sexual harassment, protesting outside office buildings; The digital sphere allowed them to undermine the brand value of companies at a much faster pace when associated with sexual assault.

For so long, women had gone to work at big banks or law firms in their high heels and suit skirts, hoping they could get into that meeting with the top lawyers, the top investment bankers. They were just as smart, just as qualified, but just not male. But even once they got in the room, they weren't prepared for what happened when the door closed. Ashley Judd recalls her experience with Weinstein in an ABC Exclusive interview shortly after her story came to light, "He asked me to pick out his suit for the day and steered me into the closet."³⁹ These

women were sharing, in detail, the traumatic moments they lived with in silence for so long. The firing of these powerful men demonstrated the impact of the hashtag and the disruption of the sexism and harassment that thrived in traditional workplace environments. The fear; of repercussions, of never sitting in on the board meeting or having rumors spread across the office, has historically kept women silent. #MeToo became a new space in the digital sphere where people could share their experiences, while finding solidarity with other victims and survivors. And still, not all testimonies of sexual assault, guaranteed positive outcomes.

Locker Room Talk

In 2005, Donald Trump was a real estate tycoon turned reality television star. No one imagined that, eleven years later, he would become the 45th President of the United States. Sitting in a tour bus with *Access Hollywood* host Billy Bush, he bragged about trying to have sex with a woman and about making sexual advances against many other women. And his comments were caught on microphone. “I moved on her and I failed. I’ll admit it. I did try and fuck her. She was married.”⁴⁰ The woman’s full name was cut out of the video, but Trump’s comments did not stop there. He continued on about his attempt at seducing this woman, mentioning her “big phony tits.” When Trump and Bush noticed Arianne Zucker, the actress who escorted the men to the set of “Days of Our Lives” to tape a segment about Trump on the soap opera, he steered his nasty observations to Zucker.⁴¹ “It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I can’t wait” he said about beautiful women like Zucker, “when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything.” By the time this video footage got released, Trump was in the middle of his campaign for U.S. president. The media erupted, denouncing Trump’s “locker room talk.” Planned Parenthood Executive Vice President, Dawn Laguens, said “What Trump describes in these tapes amounts to sexual assault.”⁴² Others called his comments “sickening”

“repugnant” and “unacceptable.” *The Washington Post* released those tapes in 2016, right before Donald Trump was elected into office. The list goes on of comments made by President Trump. One comment made in 2015 about Journalist Megyn Kelly was particularly graphic and derogatory, “You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes. Blood coming out of her wherever.”⁴³ Kelly came back at Trump calling his comment “misogynistic and sexist.”⁴⁴ Many women picked up on his reference to women being out of control and tying it to their menstrual cycle. Even during the spotlight created by the #MeToo moment, none of this controversy derailed Trump’s push to the White House.

But on January 21, 2017, the recent presidential inauguration of Donald Trump helped instigate a major U.S. Women’s March with global implications. The march became a worldwide protest against sexism, rooted in the “locker room talk” comments and inappropriate physical interactions with women now given legitimacy by the highest political office in the land.⁴⁵ A sea of pink hats, signs with Trump’s face, drawings of women’s reproductive systems with the direct Trump quote, “grab them by the pussy;” all flooded the streets of the nation’s capital, (see Image 3). The scene was replicated in hundreds of other cities around the world from Los Angeles, California to Paris, France. Hollywood actress America Ferrera spoke at the Women’s March in Washington D.C. saying, “but the president is not America. His cabinet is not America. Congress is not America. We are America! And we are here to stay.”⁴⁶ On that day in January 2017, two million participants around the globe showed up to a Women’s March in their distinctive cities, listened as advocates and celebrities talked about President Trump, about sexual assault, and about #MeToo.⁴⁷ This turnout, along with the concern for Donald Trump’s presence in the White House, was largely attributed to the extended communication and organizing capacity afforded by social media.

Using the #WomensMarch hashtag, participants saw exactly where others were marching, they could meet up with people they had communicated with over social media platforms, and thanks to Facebook or Instagram live, followers watched from afar as the march took place. With a shaky hand camera, reporters filmed, zooming in on the performances, on the speakers, on the signs. Media outlets opened their sites up for those live video streams and for people to use their forums where they posted comments, thoughts, stories. Hashtags, and the mass amounts of people participating in the digital sphere, changed the scope of communication for activists and their organizing capacity. One user wrote, “The number of people participating in #WomensMarch around the world reminds me that there is always good in the world. No matter what; good.”⁴⁸ That tweet alone had 1,198 likes. Another user wrote, “Men of quality don’t fear equality #WomensMarch.”⁴⁹ People were using their social media accounts, the ease of sending out a tweet, to stand together in this feminist moment in fear, in rage, and in solidarity.



Image 3, a sea of pink hats and signs at the 2017 Women’s March in Washington, D.C.

ABC News covered the Washington D.C Women’s March, asking women questions, walking with the crowds, using their camera man and journalists to get in the thick of the fray. Making comments on the march, the reporters observed the density, the volume, the rally signs, the route they were walking. One journalist remarked, “Massive crowd of women marching

behind me, this is the front line, and they're pretty amped.”⁵⁰ Reporters observed every detail, giving the viewers watching from afar a full picture of the march. The reporters also stopped participants to ask them questions such as “why are you here?” or “do you think protests like this are going to happen over the next four years?” One woman responded saying, “We work hard, hard, hard every day to move it forward and we don't want to go backwards, we're not going to go backwards.” Another young woman added, “It's not appropriate for someone who thinks it's okay to talk like that to be our president.”⁵¹

People that day were experiencing a modern movement that thrived as both live protests and simultaneously in the digital sphere, not only by having a hashtag for collaboration, but through those live streams of imperfect audio, handheld camera shots, loud chants in the background of women screaming “hey hey, ho ho, Donald Trump has got to go.” People were able to engage with the movement in a different way using technology by tweeting the hashtags, and then coming together that day with signs and color coordination; forging a new path in Washington that digitally remixed the meaning of Women's activism.

(White) Women's March?

While organizers formed a new feminist path in Washington, women of color reminded the rallygoers that this universal call was not experienced equally. They called on white women to step back and understand their privilege, and to look at broader social justice issues that had held the silenced corners of the broader womanhood back, long before the election of President Trump.⁵² Signs held by women of color read, “Being scared since 2016 is a Privilege” and “I'll see you nice white ladies at the next #BlackLivesMatter march, right?”⁵³ By contrast, white women's signs had phrases such as “Who Run the World? Girls” and “Women's Rights are Human Rights.”⁵⁴ Inevitably, there was overlap in the phrases put on signs, held by all types of

women, because there was a common goal in creating the Women's March. Yet there were clearly other topics being brought up by women of color, beyond the scope of white women's current awareness.

White feminists have historically lacked a substantive understanding of the specific issues effecting female communities also facing racial inequalities, even from within feminist movements. General calls for gender justice maintain deep blind spots around histories of racism amongst other inequalities. Women's March co-chair Tamika Mallory put it best: "If I see that white folks are concerned, then people of color need to be terrified."⁵⁵ Far too many white women have an inadequate understanding of intersectional feminism and still fail to see the racial or class privileges white women can hold from within the feminist sphere.

On the day of the 2017 Women's March, Sierra Brewer and Lauren Dundes, sociologists at McDaniel College, asked the simple question on Facebook, "What do you think of the Women's March?" A few women responded with experiences at the march as women of color. One woman who attended the march expressed what the march meant to her in the feminist conversation:

I'm a big advocate for women's rights, so I was extremely happy as an African American woman to speak up about my oppression not only as a woman but as an African American woman. We are looked down upon most of the time by society. This march gave me a voice...As an African American woman, we need to stand up for ourselves. The white, Hispanic, or Asian race isn't going to help us for our own fight.⁵⁶

Another participant was far less optimistic; "I feel like it's pointless. They wouldn't have had the Women's March if Trump hadn't been elected president. So, is that real feminism? Um, no- that's not real feminism. That was white feminism trying to take over the media spotlight."⁵⁷

While white women's experiences with sexism are still crucial for the feminist conversation at

large, they could never speak for all women. Marginal women can't just be present, but their experiences must shape the vision of anything that claims to be feminist.

Those women of color calling out the discrepancies between white versus intersectional feminism were pushing to broaden the scope of the march. The fact that women of color had to use their signs to call out white women shows that there was a lack of intersectionality at the center of this movement. In the social hierarchy, white women have always sat with greater racial, and many times socio-economic privilege, compared to women considered marginalized. It is what Brewer and Dundes call a "lack of cross-racial unity"⁵⁸ and further emphasizes differences in feminism. Racism and feminism go hand in hand, and even through efforts and strides in the feminist community that address issues such as sexual violence, an intersectional understanding and lens is not inferred. ShiShi Rose, a 27-year old activist and blogger who volunteered at the Women's March on Washington, called out the inadequate understanding that white women have about intersectionality, and the discrepancy in the plans and topics at the 2017 Women's March. Rose posted in a Facebook Group writing, "You don't get to join because now you're scared, too. I was born scared."⁵⁹ ShiShi Rose, along with other black feminist activists at the march, wondered whether a diverse group of women could prioritize the same goals, and fight for the same injustices that day by calling out their personal encounters with gender inequality well before Donald Trump's election.

These current feminist movements do not exclusively live in the digital sphere, but the creation and use of hashtags keep it there and allow for conversations and connections across technology. Me Too changed drastically from its 2006 creation by Tarana Burke, into an internet phenomenon, a movement, and a call to action. Hollywood grabbed it, and it has had a rippling effect across many domains, spreading the discussions, and the confrontations with stories of

sexual assault. But just as the women of color in D.C. explained, the conditions of sexual assault and gender inequality were not experienced or discussed equally, especially across race and class lines.

The presence of women of color highlighted the persistent and clear fault lines at the Women's March. Representing mere visible diversity is not enough for building a successful and equal social movement, especially in the digital sphere. Those raw discussions in D.C. further confirmed that there are distinct experiences of sexual assault. A broad range of stories must serve as building blocks in reaching the larger goal of gender-based justice for all women. As #MeToo continued to spread across America's public culture and take new shape, the experiences of privileged white women continued to dominate the spotlight. But the critiques seen at the Washington Mall also began to take hold; forcing a powerful reconsideration of who was actually included under the umbrella of Me Too. It's to that story that we now turn.

Chapter 2: Harassment Beyond Hollywood

Shiny brown wood frames the luxury leather chairs lined up, side by side, hidden behind the moon shaped table at the front of the high ceiling room. Crystal lights sit two by two on each of the four walls, lighting up the bleak brown fabric. Gold trimmings detail the heavy doors that open to the room where senators, family, Justice Brett Kavanaugh, Doctor Christine Blasey Ford, and lawyers all file in for a historic and iconic hearing in September 2018. One important letter, originally anonymously written, sent to Senator Dianne Feinstein of California, would bring all of those people to the powerful, judicial room that day: “Brett Kavanaugh physically and sexually assaulted me during high school in the early 1980s... It is upsetting to discuss sexual assault and its repercussions, yet I felt guilty and compelled as a citizen about the idea of not saying anything.”⁶⁰ Feinstein read those words herself, just as Brett Kavanaugh was considered for a position on the US Supreme Court, one of the highest positions in U.S. government, a position that determines the most important, difficult, and influential legal decisions for the country.

Christine Blasey Ford worked as a professor of psychology at Palo Alto University and a research psychologist at Stanford University. And very quickly, her written allegations of sexual assault against Justice Kavanaugh sparked a hearing with interested eyes and ears spanning the globe. On September 27, 2018, eleven days after the letter first became public, Dr. Ford and Justice Kavanaugh stood in front of the United States senate. 17 men and 4 women sat in those leather chairs, as the two held up their right hand promising to tell the truth, as millions of viewers watched (see Image 4).⁶¹

Dr. Ford began her opening statement, thanking the senators in front of her and summarizing her qualifications. With a quivering voice she started, “I am here not because I

want to be, I am here because I believe it is my civic duty to tell you what happened to me while Brett Kavanaugh and I were in high school.”⁶² She then explained how the events played out after the letter went public to ranking member Feinstein and further to Chairman Grassley, and the effects that talking about this alleged sexual assault had on her life.



Image 4, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford prepares to give her statement in front of the senate in September of 2018.

All across the country, people gathered to watch on their phones, on TV, in their offices, and in restaurants. Elaina Plott, a former reporter for *The Atlantic* and a current reporter for the *New York Times*, covered the Kavanaugh hearings. She put out a tweet saying, “Outside of the hearing, there are groups of women huddled over their phones streaming Dr. Ford’s testimony, crying.”⁶³ Not only were women emotional watching Dr. Ford testify, they were commenting on the details, interactions, and words delivered in the court room that day. Supporters tweeted “#IBelieveChristineBlaseyFord” while listening intently to her brave testimony. As Dr. Ford shared her painful story, one that continued to fuel the conversation around sexual assault and #MeToo, she sat in front of skeptical men, all supporting the induction of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. The gendered expectations of what was deemed appropriate behavior during a testimony, permeated the entire proceeding. She had to remain accommodating and polite, while Kavanaugh was allowed to be “emotional”.⁶⁴ The trauma of sexual assault is undoubtedly emotional, but she had to maintain a strict composure in order to present believability to the men

sitting in judgment. She somehow had to find a way to please those men without compromising the full truth about what happened that night thirty years prior.

Chris Wallace, a Fox News reporter, described Ford's testimony that day as, "extremely emotional, extremely raw, and extremely credible, and nobody could listen to her deliver those words and talk about the assault and the impact it had had on her life, and not have your heart go out to her."⁶⁵ Senior political reporter for *CNN* Nia-Malika Henderson also wrote about the connections between #MeToo and the Kavanaugh hearing, "For Republicans, this was supposed to be a done deal. Now, because of a decade's old allegation of sexual assault, Judge Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court nomination is very much in flux... Women are the reason. The GOP, led by President Donald Trump, who has faced allegations of sexual misconduct, doesn't speak the language of #MeToo."⁶⁶ In 2018, Ford's testimony pushed forward the momentum generated by #MeToo; ultimately taking to trial the highest court in the land. Still, not even a month later, Brett Kavanaugh was appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States.

The whole process and outcome of the Kavanaugh hearing put on display an elite, white world that holds power over our political system. Both Dr. Ford and Justice Kavanaugh represented the white, preppy prestige factory of wealthy families, private schools, and exclusive clubs, where marginalized groups cannot break through. Kavanaugh spent most of his testimony referring to his perfect high school record at the elite, Jesuit Georgetown Preparatory school in Maryland and how he enjoyed drinking beers with his friends in suburban neighborhoods.⁶⁷ President Trump has nominated three alumni from this all-male school. He has nominated both Justice Kavanaugh and Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, and appointed Jerome Powell as the chairman of the federal reserve.⁶⁸ There was never suspicion or concern for Kavanaugh, his life reflected the experiences of all the other men in the room.

John Cassidy's *The New Yorker* article, "The other Problem with Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court Nomination: Privilege" addresses the advantages that Justice Kavanaugh had during the hearing, and during his Supreme Court confirmation due to his social class and elite "grooming."⁶⁹ He writes, "If the Senate Republicans go ahead and confirm him next week, or shortly thereafter, it will be the second time in eighteen months that a graduate of Georgetown Preparatory School, one of the most exclusive private prep schools in the country, has been elevated to the Supreme Court."⁷⁰ The prerogative held true for him and many other white men of power; that their status and privileged upbringing could mask violence and could give them a leg up when telling their side of the story in front of a governing body.

Cassidy confronts the power structure that seemed to ignore such detailed and horrific accusations when Justice Kavanaugh was considered for the highest position in the judicial system. He continues, "Stop for a moment to consider the sheer numerical effrontery of these selections. The fact that Kavanaugh, Gorsuch, and Powell are all white and male is almost too obvious. Instead of Kavanaugh, Trump could have picked Amy Coney Barrett, a Notre Dame law professor who serves on the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals; instead of naming Powell to the Fed, he could have re-appointed Janet Yellen, whose performance he had praised."⁷¹ Cassidy revealed how Kavanaugh's life and education encompassed everything that is America's social élite: prep-school, upper-class neighborhood, and most importantly, white, and put his nomination ahead of others.⁷² He exposes how this world and the reputation of the men of Georgetown Prep had allowed him to linger in President Trump's nominating radar. Those men shared the same assumptions as Kavanaugh of what is legitimate. Since they share the same experiences and position, an attack on Kavanaugh is an attack on their way of life. While he may be good at what he does, bloggers, reporters and activists for #MeToo were exposing how men,

like Kavanaugh, use their background and their elite upbringing as a shield. In Kavanaugh's case, it worked.

While Dr. Ford brought #MeToo in the court room, her own life of white, preppy privilege is one of the reasons why the case was even heard. Her education and social status were crucial in getting her there. She too, grew up in the suburbs of Washington D.C. She attended the all-girls Holton-Arms Academy in Bethesda, Maryland and holds multiple degrees from elite institutions, including Pepperdine University, USC, and Stanford.⁷³ Dr. Ford's status didn't protect her from sexual harassment, but it did give her a chance to be heard in ways that more marginalized women never would. Therefore, this Kavanaugh story reinforces both the promise and limits of #MeToo. While fully embedded, her background still failed to protect her from predators like Kavanaugh. In fact, it's exclusivity may have further encouraged her victimhood and silence. The Kavanaugh controversy pushed the Me Too campaign beyond the casting couch but it also reinforced the limited social sphere of its reach; failing to fully explore the range of ways sexual assault happens.

In this chapter I examine key incidents that expanded the political imagination of #MeToo because of where and how sexual assault took place. I open with a discussion of the hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported to consider how racial stereotypes shape even the capacity for women to make a case of sexual assault. From here I focus on two critical case studies that identify the limits of the Weinstein and Kavanaugh controversies. Both the anonymous testimonies of undocumented, women domestics and the more vocal MeToo McDonalds campaign of women at fast food restaurants, shed light on those who endure sexual assault while laboring in the shadows.

“UNRapeable”

Emma, a 19-year old college student, sits in a dorm covered in string lights and concert posters. The florescent luminescence of her phone frames her face as the picture of her twitter page reflects in her eyes. Two weeks prior, she had been assaulted by her best friend. As she scrolled through her twitter feed, something she did often, Emma began to read the stories of #BeenRapedNeverReported, which people used to share their own stories of sexual assault and the reasoning behind keeping it silent.⁷⁴ As a recent victim of an assault, she felt a sense of comfort and solidarity after seeing other women showing bravery with speaking up about their experience.⁷⁵

Emma said “I feel like a lot of people had never actually talked about what had happened to them or labelled it a sexual assault. And so, it felt comfortable online, which I think is a new concept, that you have this idea of comfort and solidarity and support.”⁷⁶ Emma soon shared her own story. She said claiming ownership of her assault for the first time caused nervousness, but ironically, the public atmosphere of sharing stories was comforting and exciting after two weeks of staying silent about her abuse.⁷⁷ That piece of humanity can sometimes shine through in those 280 characters and helps bring forward feelings of hope and community.

#BeenRapedNeverReported resurfaced from its first use in 2014 and worked in conversation with the spark of #MeToo. #BeenRapedNeverReported was aimed at women who had been raped or were victims of sexual violence and stayed silent for so long, or those who didn’t get the press coverage that women in #MeToo had received. Scholars, Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller have explored the usage of the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag. Out of the many tweets, the researchers took special note of the message from one user, ““Black women rarely report rape because this nation has been taught

that we are UnRapeable #BeenRapedNeverReported.”⁷⁸ The tweet was shared and liked over 100 times.

The authors analyzed how this tweet and a hashtag in general, could, in fact, do the work of intersectional analysis by connecting important hierarchal themes and discourse, “In 15 words this Twitter user draws a clear connection between racist discursive constructions about black women’s sexuality, the history of racism in the US/ Canada, and contemporary rape culture, and in doing so points out the distinctiveness about Black women’s experience with rape.”⁷⁹ The authors emphasize that the women associated with #BeenRapedNeverReported were using the hashtag to “connect the conversation about rape culture with other forms of oppression.”⁸⁰ There are unique stereotypes against Black women related to sexuality. And scholars have studied terms used to describe Black women’s sexuality dating back to slavery. For example, “the sapphire” refers to a Black woman who is “aggressive, dominating, angry, emasculating.”⁸¹ Another example, “the jezebel,” is an image of a sexually promiscuous and sexually available Black woman.⁸² These stereotypes are not applied to White women, and by instilling these images of Black women into the American imagination, pre-conceived ideals and expectations about how Black women experience their sexuality shapes their capacity to make claims about rape or assault.

Lisa Rosenthal and Marci Lobel, who studied the effect of sexualized stereotypes on Black women, report that Black women are aware of the stereotypes about their sexuality and that “Black female academics report stories of people mistaking them for waitresses, administrative staff, or prostitutes.”⁸³ These perceptions of Black women’s hypersexuality, make it more difficult for Black women to make viable cases about rape and to be heard in the same light as White women. #BeenRapedNeverReported speaks directly to the limits of what became

#MeToo. These hashtags could provide the link in sharing the details of sexual harassment and hearing other victims in a way that hadn't happened before. Nevertheless, it's not just about hearing other victims but incorporating different sexual experiences into the vision of resistance that grows from the hashtag. This less visible hashtag, #BeenRapedNeverReported, just begins to push up the thousands of stories that remain invisible from their inability to fit the #MeToo profile.

Inconceivable Silence: Undocumented

Georgina Hernández was a young immigrant woman working as a janitor at a hotel in Los Angeles. She had been on the job for just a week when her boss started raping her. She had nowhere to go and couldn't complain. "As an illegal immigrant dependent on her income from the hotel to care for herself and her children, Hernández was terrified to come forward. And so, began a series of alleged rapes... the reported rapes concluded a few weeks later when Hernández told her boss she refused to have sex with him, even if it meant losing her job. Which it did."⁸⁴ It's odd to say it, but Hernández can be considered one of the lucky ones. After filing a police report and a sexual harassment lawsuit, her story was featured in the book, *In a Day's Work: The Fight to End Sexual Violence Against America's Most Vulnerable Workers* by Bernice Yeung. But this storytelling is not always possible for women with a life similar to Hernández. Undocumented women have no standing in society. Unless they can find an advocate like Yeung, their citizenship status cripples the already difficult task of speaking up about a traumatizing event. There is little room in the legal and employment system for these women's experiences and #MeToo often falls short in seeing them as part of their feminist story.

For those that endure, the struggles to testify are more complicated than getting asked to stand in front of the senate or taking time off of work; speaking out can mean losing your green

card or being separated from your children at a detention center. Women who are working low-wage jobs with an undocumented or immigrant status are left even more vulnerable to the mercy of their harasser. The #MeToo stories for this population are few and far between because they have no pathway to citizenship, no pathway to the courts, and few pathways to tweet #MeToo in the public, digital sphere. One can only imagine the dark office building where the executive manager waits to prey on the woman pushing the janitor cart after others have clocked out. Or think about the woman cleaning hotel rooms who gets cornered by a co-worker in the small closet where she takes a 30 minute break. For undocumented women, their risk-reward equation is incredibly complicated because if they were to say #MeToo and expose their harasser, that person could also expose them to deportation. It's an irreconcilable conundrum. They can leave, but they can't complain because for them, it could mean jail. It's the ultimate lever that an abuser can hold and pull at any time.

A PBS segment, "How can they say #MeToo?"⁸⁵ also focuses on sexual assault in the workplace and highlights the particular stakes and challenges faced by low-wage service workers. Judy Woodruff, Broadcast Journalist for PBS, interviewed two women who are experts on the issue of sexual harassment and assault against low-wage service workers. Alejandra Valles is the secretary-treasurer of United Service Workers West in California and author Bernice Yeung. These women both speak to the issues of sexual violence against women working low-wage jobs with an immigrant or undocumented status. Specifically, most of these women are immigrants working "invisible jobs"⁸⁶ such as cleaning office buildings, picking fruits and vegetables in fields, cleaning hotel rooms, or serving as domestic care workers.⁸⁷

Valles called out this space of low-wage, undocumented work where the #MeToo movement fails to incorporate a broader vision of feminist digital activism. Valles said, "We

know what we're seeing right now with the #MeToo movement, but unless you really speak to a workplace and the culture of that workplace, you are not going to have the impact you want to ensure that you could start changing culture."⁸⁸ Those women survive in the invisible workplaces that no one wants to discuss; the laundry room of a hotel, the small chair in the factory back office. And migrant women are often silenced from the moment they cross the border, even when seeking refuge from violence.

In a 2019 *NYT* article titled, "'You Have to Pay With Your Body': The Hidden Nightmare of Sexual Violence on the Border" writer Manny Fernandez reported many stories of sexual violence happening on the southern border. He writes, "On America's southern border, migrant women and girls are victims of sexual assaults that most often go unreported, uninvestigated and unprosecuted... migrant women on the border live in the shadows of the #MeToo movement."⁸⁹ While some of those migrant women used their names in their stories, most of the women remained anonymous. Those remaining silent can't participate in the #MeToo movement as freely because the stakes are higher. They can't put out the hashtag "Me Too" as easily without wondering and fearing what may come next; getting their green card taken away, getting sent back to the country they fled for safety, losing their kids to Child Protective Services. Furthermore, marginalized women's stories don't have the same effect of disrupting a company's brand or the reputation of some elite man. Even if sexual assault wasn't the main issue, our inattention to these women's role in society and their experience with sexual violence diminishes the power of #MeToo by exposing its intersectional limits.

Both Valles and Yeung have found the work lives of the undocumented make them more vulnerable to sexual abuse.⁹⁰ In fact, no actual testimonies from the women were included in the PBS series because they live in fear of the repercussions, including deportation. Even in standing

up, these women had to trust the intentions of sympathetic advocates speaking on their behalf. It makes sense that undocumented working women don't feel comfortable speaking out directly. Thankfully some low-wage working women, with the precarious security of citizenship, pushed through their fears.

Me Too McDonald's

Three years ago, Brittany Hoyos was 16 when she started her job at McDonald's. That was also the same year her manager began making sexual advances: touching her when he walked behind her in the kitchen, or even attempting to kiss her. And when Hoyos reported the harassment, she was demoted. To the consumer's eye, the giant golden arches of McDonald's, represents the warm salty fries, the cold fountain coke, and toys hidden in "happy meals" for kids to find. But to a female employee like Hoyos, there was little gold at the end of those arches, only daily terror. For far too many, the McDonald's sign symbolizes a small paycheck but a huge gut check. Hoyos told *NYT* reporter, Melena Ryzik "I was embarrassed. I felt like I was at fault. I didn't want to be the person making noise" she recalls after being named employee of the month when first starting out.⁹¹

Hoyos and her mother, who also worked at the same McDonald's location, were eventually fired and left unemployed. But their stories helped galvanize a powerful legal campaign against McDonald's as a breeding ground for sexual assault and harassment. Ryzik noted that Hoyos and her mother "accused McDonald's of gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment in the workplace and retaliation for speaking up."⁹² Hoyos' accusations, and the many other complaints against McDonald's that followed, tested the true power and meaning of #MeToo. Ryzik explains, "the company's dominant role in the economy makes the campaign a major test of the legal and labor power of the #MeToo movement."⁹³

The National Women's Law Center, which has a Time's Up Legal Defense Fund, gave the most money to the McDonald's cases.⁹⁴ Director of the fund Sharyn Tajani told *NYT*, "What we're seeing over and over again in these claims- for these workers, they're put in a position where you have to put up with the harassment, or you lose the paycheck that's keeping you in a house or keeping groceries on your table."⁹⁵ Low-income, marginalized women workers represented a broader community beyond Hollywood and the courtroom. If these women achieve promotions or employee of the month, there's strong reluctance to rock the boat and advocate. They are working minimum wage, maybe they are just trying to meet their needs, maybe they are trying to work themselves into a better life. There is little margin for error here. And yet they spoke.

In 2019, McDonald's faced multiple accusations from employees about the sexual assault they had experienced while working. They have the privilege of citizenship, but they shared the same class condition as those immigrant women who labored in silence cleaning hotels and picking fruit. And in May of that year, a group of protesters even marched to the McDonald's corporate building in Chicago, Illinois (see Image 5). Participants walked with their arms linked together; placing blue tape across their mouths reading "#MeToo." Another employee, Jamelia Fairley, spoke about her complaints in front of the office, with large banners behind her reading "Me Too McDonalds." She announced, "Trying to raise a 2-year-old on a \$67-dollar paycheck a week is hard."⁹⁶ Fairley, who was touched inappropriately several times by a male coworker, reported the harassment. She then had her hours cut by her managers.⁹⁷



Image 5, McDonald's employees walk in protest with "Me Too" written on tape across their lips in 2018.

Working at McDonald's, either at the cash register taking people's orders or in the kitchen making customers meals, is a public space where workers are always in the public eye. If a coworker grabs a body part or says something sexual, you can't scream or make a scene, you can't become emotional or walk out. Those women know better than anyone how they'll be labeled if they react: trouble and unfit to work. They had to fight through the painful and uncomfortable sexual violence they were experiencing, knowing deep down that they needed to risk being harassed in order to bring that small paycheck home from that week. There was nowhere to go, no HR person watching the manager handle their individual franchise or addressing the silencing of employees.

There are a wide range of experiences, spaces, and conditions where sexual assault happens, it does not stop at Weinstein or Kavanaugh for the #MeToo story. These marginalized stories bring #MeToo back to what Tarana Burke created it to be; a movement for all survivors of sexual assault, everywhere, of all identities, not just the elite white world. Bringing Me Too into the digital sphere has allowed people to organize direct actions, for media outlets to pick up and report stories professionally, and to call out unique injustices within supportive communities. Me Too has changed drastically from its 2006 grassroots moment to the 2017 Hollywood take over. We must also remain critical of the way this spotlight came with key silences about the full

story of sexual assault. But the story doesn't stop with a critique of silences. New voices and new terrains have also emerged in the #MeToo landscape.

Original and prominent figures like Tarana Burke and Oprah Winfrey have prompted feminist activists to step into even more "taboo" terrains where sexual justice confronts racial inequality. Historically, there has been a danger of talking about sexual assault in black communities; facing an American history of painting black men as rapists and black women as sexually promiscuous. Wouldn't reports of sexual impropriety simply reinforce stereotypes about black people as an inferior or a highly promiscuous race? Therefore, those that speak up about the realities of their own sexual abuse can get labeled "traitors" to their own race.

White supremacy's use of sexuality to demonize the African American community is real. But what about those who are both black and rape victims? Now with the added dangers of the media spotlight, #MeToo was faced with doing the work for which it was always intended: helping the most marginalized. But because of such a racial history, people like R&B singer R. Kelly, Record Executive Russel Simmons, and other figures in the African American music industry, had been deemed untouchable. The music industry is riddled with fame and fortune and has opened the debate about the harassers hiding behind the Weinstein spotlight. Still, Tarana Burke and other activists have forged ahead because they understood that #MeToo was only as good as its ability to protect all women, in all places. Going beyond mere critique, marginal women have found ways to seize the spotlight and take #MeToo back from Hollywood.

Chapter 3: Say Her Name

In 1995, Rochell Washington and Latresa Scaff, were at a Baltimore after party for music legend R. Kelly. The strong smell of marijuana and alcohol filled their noses as the door of the hotel room swung open. Musicians, back-up singers, and other fans circled the infamous R. Kelly; all experimenting with drugs and drinking together. Later in the night, Kelly invited the teenage girls, just 15 and 16 years old, to join him in his hotel suit. Infatuated with the artist's invitation, they accepted. After consuming both marijuana and alcohol, Kelly reportedly exposed his naked body to the young girls and asked them to perform sexual acts with him, taking advantage of their intoxicated state and impressionable young minds.

NPR reported these women's testimonies about the night of Kelly's performance almost 30 years after it happened. Scaff said, "When Kelly was alone with me he asked me to perform oral sex on him. I was under the influence of marijuana and alcohol and did it. He then had sexual intercourse with me even though I did not have the capacity to consent."⁹⁸ Washington and Scaff were two of many women and families that came forward with traumatic stories of sexual assault at the hands of this music powerhouse. But hardly anyone listened to these stories when it all happened. Their black lives didn't matter to the wider public the way white women did. Their female stories posed a threat to the hard fought success of a black icon.

It wasn't until #MeToo emerged and black women seized the spotlight back from Hollywood, that a wider audience could slowly listen to the horrors these black girls faced in the music industry. After white women were attacked, the #MeToo spotlight helped expose major record labels as spaces now known to be graveyards for women's sovereignty, hot spots for sexual harassment. Danger zones included tour buses; where body-guards, backup singers and

musicians spent numerous, intimate weeks in close quarters away from home and recording studios; where talented producers and music makers spent late hours on the low-rise couches; where assistants brought them coffee, booze, or more. There's a blurring of physical boundaries in those tight spaces where music is made. These became the hunting grounds for male predators with little censure and little consent.

With a new focus on the Black music industry, for example, Tarana Burke has taken #MeToo back from Hollywood; using the media spotlight offered by white women to shed light on a wider range of sexual assault experiences. In this chapter I will look at the ways in which women of color have picked up the torch and reclaimed the conversation that Burke started in other spheres, beyond Hollywood and beyond the courtroom. This conversation takes us back to the 2015 hashtag #SayHerName campaign within the larger #BlackLivesMatter movement. Then we return to a detailed analysis of the #MuteRKelly initiative, that resulted in the powerful *Surviving R Kelly* docuseries produced by *Lifetime*. The chapter ends with a discussion of the backlash Oprah Winfrey received after she agreed to sponsor a docuseries tracking the sexual harassment claims against hip hop icon Russell Simmons. I finish with thoughts from Tarana Burke and her continuous effort to keep the focus on the most marginal women.

#BlackWomenMatter

Sandra Bland: Arrested for an alleged assault against a police officer during a traffic stop, later found dead in her jail cell in 2015. Miriam Carey: Killed by a federal agent in 2013, her one-year-old baby was with her when she died. Tanisha Anderson: Killed by a police officer after they slammed her head against a cement sidewalk in 2014. Long before #MeToo, the stories of these black women, killed at the hands of police violence, barely registered beyond the black community and sometimes not even within that community. Created to address the

constant attacks inflicted on Black women by police officers, the “Say Her Name” campaign investigates how race and gender intersect, and the disproportionate mistreatment of Black women. There is a major groundswell of activism through the Say Her Name Campaign, as a response to the gendered blind spots of the more well-known #BlackLivesMatter movement. Like Me Too, the campaign became a hashtag: #SayHerName. Authors Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Wells described the #SayHerName initiative, “the result of overzealous police officers sparked activism that led activists and scholars to insist we ‘say her name’ to prevent the erasure of women of color victims to violence.”⁹⁹

#SayHerName and its ability to build on #BlackLivesMatter sheds intersectional light on the ways Black women, who are victims of assault and violence, are forgotten in the larger activist story, (see Image 6). The hashtag is described as “focusing on the extrajudicial murders of Black women by police but evolved to shed light on all state and communal violence faced by Black women.”¹⁰⁰ Say Her Name and the entire campaign and hashtag are all connected to the broad experiences of Black women and the intersectional discriminations they experience by living with those identities historically riddled with gender inequality, racism, and hypersexualization.



Image 6, protesters in 2017 hold signs with the faces of the victims of police brutality at the heart of the #SayHerName campaign.

It's not surprising that Kimberlé Crenshaw, professor at the Columbia Law School and early architect of Intersectional Feminism, helped found the Say Her Name Campaign to bring awareness to the violence and vulnerability that Black women endure. She says, "inclusion of Black women's experiences in social movements, media narrative and policy demands around policing and police brutality is critical to effectively combatting racialized state violence for Black communities and other communities of color."¹⁰¹ Crenshaw specifically fought to call out the lack of Black women's voices in the conversation about racial violence that emerged after #BlackLivesMatter. The Say Her Name campaign brings to light those experiences.

One tweet posted by the "Color of Change" account combined #SayHerName with #BlackWomenMatter and #BlackTransWomenMatter.¹⁰² This tweet was sent shortly after a vigil had taken place to remember Black women and girls killed by police.¹⁰³ There is a merging of Black feminism and Black women's oppression that these hashtags and campaigns bring forward. They create a digital campaign calling out all types of violence against the vulnerable population of Black women; sexual violence, police violence, all experiences.

Say Her Name shows that even Black women's digital activism long preceded the mainstream appeal of #MeToo. And these activists have also had to grapple with the ways white supremacy shaped discussions of sexual violence. In many cases, black communities remain silent about sexual assault because of the racial demonization of black men as rapists but then this silence forces actual Black women victims to suffer, in the name of race pride. Historically, black men have been accused, prosecuted, and persecuted for being rapists, many times, simply for being Black. In "The Intersection of Race and Rape Viewed through the Prism of a Modern-Day Emmett Till" by Chelsea Hale and Meghan Matt, this history of racist incrimination is laid out, dating back to the late 19th and well into the 20th century. The authors write, "the most

common reason for public lynching was the perception that white women needed to be protected from African American rapists. Black men were painted as sexually deviant monsters.”¹⁰⁴ This history shapes discussions of sex and sexual violence up to the present.

While white men have played a dominant force in the perpetration of rape and sexual violence, their race hasn’t been at the forefront of convictions or public perception. Hale and Matt continue, “During the Jim Crow era, white men used rape and rumors of rape not only to justify violence against African American men but also to remind African American women that their bodies were not their own.”¹⁰⁵ It is important to understand this history of racial demonization because in recent cases of sexual assault, some Black men have used this racist history to accuse Black women of “going against their own” or “not protecting the Black community” when speaking their truth about harassment. But an uncomplicated protection of Black manhood also creates an additional layer of vulnerability, danger, and silence for Black women. The insinuation that all Black men are rapists and violent speaks to the systematic racism against the Black community as a whole. It also leaves little space for Black women in the #MeToo conversation. They are faced with a false choice between protecting the Black community or protecting themselves. But they *are* the black community. And so, this is where racism meets gender inequality and forces #MeToo to do the hard work of feminist activism that Hollywood never imagined. For this story, we turn to #MuteRKelly.

#MuteRKelly

R. Kelly, known to “embody the best traditions of American music as a vocalist, songwriter, and producer,” has also been at the front line of horrific sexual abuse allegations for years.¹⁰⁶ BBC News reports, “accusations including sexual assault, abuse of a minor, making indecent images of minors, racketeering and obstruction of justice.”¹⁰⁷ These charges date back

to when Kelly's career first began. The complaints and stories are endless. His audacity knew few bounds: from marrying 15 year old music sensation, Aliyah, in 1994 and lying on the marriage certificate, to videotaping sexual interactions with minors without their consent, to even creating a "sex cult."¹⁰⁸

In response, Black women created and joined in support of the hashtag #MuteRKelly. On the MuteRKelly website, it says, "By playing him on the radio, R Kelly stays in our collective consciousness. We think of him when we're making out playlists or planning weddings or getting ready for a cookout. That lets concert promoters know that he's a viable artist with a fan base that will pay for his tickets. That gets him a paycheck... That's what helps continue his serial sexual abuse against young black women."¹⁰⁹ Co-founders Kenyette Barnes, Oronike Odeleye and Tracy Fornston tried to bring Kelly's acts to the public, how the acts and the specific demographic that was experiencing them were being ignored. In "muting" R. Kelly, they wanted to get him out of people's minds, get him off of the stage and off of iTunes.

The results didn't come easy. The #MuteRKelly participants had to protest many times in front of recording studios, calling ticket offices to stop selling tickets to his concerts, asking DJ's to stop playing his music at parties (see Image 7). It was a long fight for the women of the #MuteRKelly rally. The press didn't pick up on the story to the same degree as it did #MeToo. The organizers struggled to get the coverage they needed and deserved. A video of R. Kelly responding to the protests and campaign was secretly captured and posted on twitter in May of 2018. In a video addressing his many supporters he had the audacity to say, "They should have done this shit 30 years ago. It's too late."¹¹⁰ R. Kelley's support was hard to break. But slowly, people started to listen. The evidence continued to pile up and artists, activists, and even some fans started to respond by saying enough is enough.



Image 7, women stand in protest with #MuteRKelly posters in January of 2019.

Eventually, people in the entertainment industry joining the #MuteRKelly campaign and expressed their open commitment and support of muting the R&B abuser. They vowed to cut ties with R. Kelly and to support the full investigation of the long lived abuse put forth by the Grammy winning artist.¹¹¹ Tom Joyner, a retired radio host and former host of the nationally-syndicated “Tom Joyner Morning Show” listened to the activists who called on his radio stations to stop playing R. Kelly’s music. Joyner told Tarana Burke in an interview on his show, “I’ll do that right now. I won’t play anymore R. Kelly music.”¹¹² Pop star Lady Gaga, apologized for working with R. Kelly on Twitter, “I stand behind these women 1000%, believe them, know they are suffering and in pain, and feel strongly that their voices should be heard and taken seriously. I’m sorry, both for my poor judgement when I was young, and for not speaking out sooner.”¹¹³ Gaga’s statement comes after collaborating on Kelly’s very suggestive 2013 song titled “Do What U Want (With My Body).” She promised it would be taken down from all streaming platforms.¹¹⁴ Those stars and others that finally listened to the #MuteRKelly appeal gave the many black women victims the big exhale they had been waiting for. The campaign demonstrates the power of the digital world: hashtags, websites and documentary series got the message out quickly and effectively.

Tarana Burke, the familiar face in the fight against sexual violence, advocated for the #MuteRKelly campaign and activism. Burke told NPR, “What we are looking for, in our community and out, is some accountability from the corporations that support this person who has a 24-year history of sexual violence perpetrated against black and brown girls around the country.”¹¹⁵ Burke has always kept the focus of her activism on women of color. At a town hall called “Keeping Black Girls at the Center of #MeToo” she was critical. Burke pointed out that #MeToo doesn’t have space for marginalized people: black women, queer folk, differently-abled women, but rather #MeToo had become about the spectacle of what other white, powerful man the media could take down.¹¹⁶

#MeToo had started to be perceived as a high-profile witch hunt, praising the celebrity “allies” while doing little to address the far less glamorous and daily realities of sexual violence. In commenting on the #MuteRKelly campaign Burke maintained the simple need for accountability for Black women’s allegations; “I think at the very least we need to see corporations step away until we have satisfactory investigation into these allegations.”¹¹⁷ The campaign and action against R. Kelly was a way for women of color to find their vocal space when #MeToo kept them at the margins.

These various campaigns, interviews, and tweets powerfully converged in the 6-part *Lifetime* docuseries titled “Surviving R. Kelly;” finally bringing the acts of this brazen sexual predator to a wider public. In a January 2019 PBS interview, Tarana Burke again joined the conversation, “What the documentary has done has brought into the mainstream what we’ve been talking about on social media and our private lives in various journalistic efforts for [the] 2 decades and its finally brought to light these allegations all in a consolidated way so people can see them.”¹¹⁸ Burke considers the television series to be a shift in the minds of the viewer, that

it's surprising and disturbing that those women, who have been brave enough to come forward with the allegations, haven't had more attention.

When discussing why the abuse was allowed to happen and why there weren't any repercussions earlier, Burke notes that the silence is the product of a multi-layered system of fame and apathy to the stories of women of color. She mentions, "people are invested in a bottom line, and more in money and fame and proximity to fame than they are people's lives and the lives of Black women and girls."¹¹⁹ Burke has always tried to incorporate how marginalized communities, specifically Black communities, fit into sexual assault activism and #MeToo. One hundred percent of R. Kelly's accusers are women of color. Therefore, it cannot be denied that those marginalized communities are experiencing sexual assault in their own ways. Their voices contribute an intersectional voice to show how not only fame and money can blur the lines of what is heard, but race and gender identities as well.

Burke went on to make an appearance on an episode of "Love & Hip Hop: Miami," the reality series juggernaut on the VH1 channel, that follows the journey of artists trying to make it big in the music industry. Burke spoke to a room full of women of color with some members of the "Love & Hip Hop" cast, who had also been victims of sexual assault. She emphasizes the power of #MeToo, "it's empowerment through empathy, the little bit of empathy that she gets from saying [Me Too] says I see you, this happened to me too."¹²⁰ One member of "Love and Hip Hop: Miami," known as Jessie Woo, gets emotional while Burke talks. Woo spoke out in that room full of survivors about her own assault, "I was raped by someone in the music industry. My question is, that person is living an abundant life, touring, working with artists I would love to work with. How do I live with that? How do you really feel free when you don't see some type of punishment for that person?"¹²¹

The invisible testimonies in the #MeToo story embody the intersectional feminist experiences that do not quite benefit from the social movement. Consequently, when #MeToo became a digital platform, that broader reach did not equate to a broader understanding of sexual assault. Those marginalized groups are still fighting to get their voices heard in other top notch industries, while more mainstream white women continue to get press and gratification from #MeToo's mainstream popularity. It's not just about demographic inclusion but about having a political vision that addresses the various and wide-ranging ways women face harassment and are silenced. #MuteRKelly demonstrates how women of color also have to continually navigate between the false binary of racial solidarity and gender justice.

Oprah on the “Wrong Side”

Burke is not the only Black public figure experiencing the struggle that women of color continue to have in sharing their voices. Others have spoken up about the prolonged injustices within #MeToo and more specifically within the music industry. Media mogul, Oprah Winfrey, also worked to play a large role in the conversation. In 2018, Apple announced a documentary series that focused on sexual assault allegations against record executive and hip hop icon, Russell Simmons. When Oprah announced that she was joining the project as an executive producer, some people in the Black community suggested she had betrayed the race.

50 Cent, a well-known rapper and businessman, posted various messages on his social media platforms, calling Oprah out for taking the “wrong side” by calling out a Black man. “I just want to know why she’s going after one of her own, when it is clear the penalties have been far more extreme for African American men.”¹²² In his tweet, he included a collage of photos of black men and white men who faced allegations of sexual misconduct. On the photos of the white men, including President Trump and Harvey Weinstein, 50 Cent wrote “Walk.” On the

photos of the black men, including R. Kelly, he wrote “Jail.” He legitimately pointed to the clear racial disparity in the way black men were treated versus white men. But did that mean, in the name of the race, black women should literally just lie down and take it?

The *Vox* journalist, Shanita Hubbard, reported on 50 Cents’ reaction to Oprah joining the Russell Simmons series and added her own personal attitudes about the post. As a Black woman, she says she has become painfully aware of how hip hop, a music genre she loved and valued, could operate with sexual violence against women of color while simultaneously silencing its most vulnerable community, women of color.¹²³ She wrote, “By painting Oprah as the harmful party in the community, 50 Cent is sending a dangerous message: publicly aligning with those who seek accountability from powerful Black men will face consequences- as though the Black men who allegedly perpetuated the violence are worth greater protection.”¹²⁴ What Oprah, Hubbard, and Burke notice and call out are the criticisms, silencing, backlash they face, as women of color, from within their own communities and from the larger white world.

Even when they wrangle through the layers of racism and sexualization, they still face unique silencing. Hubbard writes:

I would argue that this specific form of silencing is unique to Black women. The world watched as Dr. Christine Blasey Ford was attacked for coming forward with allegations of sexual violence against now Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh... for Black women who come forward with their truth about sexual violence, and apparently for women like Winfrey who support them, speaking out is suddenly presented as a large scale accusation of race betrayal.¹²⁵

She highlights the different degree of silencing faced by Christine Blasey Ford and women of color to underscore the intersectionality of silencing. Different standpoints—race, sexuality and class, shaped the degree to which women are not heard. If you add being a victim of sexual violence, perhaps by someone who also faces marginalization from just one of the same

identities you hold, the difficulty becomes even more daunting. Young women who are racialized as other and stand as victims of sexual abuse have multiple obstacles to climb before their story of abuse is heard. Even Oprah Winfrey, one of the most powerful women in the entertainment industry, found pushback in reporting the story of Russell Simmons' survivors.

A year after Winfrey announced her commitment to work with the Simmons documentary, "On The Record", which was "primed to be the next high-profile media moment of the #MeToo era,"¹²⁶ she withdrew. Winfrey claimed creative differences with the other producers. She told the filmmakers, "We need to pull from Sundance until we can give ourselves a chance to retool this film, or I am going to have to take my name off."¹²⁷ To be fair, documentarians have historically failed to address the sordid racial history of demonizing black sexuality with any nuance or complexity. But it also came to light that Russell Simmons contacted Winfrey multiple times, trying to pressure her into ending the documentary. According to *NYT* reporters Ben Sisario and Nicole Sperling, the intimidating campaign plot of Mr. Simmons "also targeted some of the women in the film on social media, and in at least one case, through direct contact with a family member."¹²⁸ While Winfrey claims that the calls from Simmons had nothing to do with her pulling out of the documentary production, other women of color were frustrated with the attempts to intimidate Winfrey, as one of the most powerful Black women in entertainment.

Dream Hampton, the activist and filmmaker of the R. Kelly docuseries said the backlash against Oprah, "is a way of shutting down black women, that the victimhood of black men in the criminal justice system supersedes all other harm."¹²⁹ Drew Dixon, the woman at the center of the Simmons documentary added greater insight to the frustration Black woman feel, after facing the community backlash. She told *The New York Times*, "This is the ultimate double bind that

black women face, where there is nowhere for us to go. There is no one to protect us. There is no one to help us. And our own community turns against us when you dare to speak out.”¹³⁰ Both stories here, people that align with Dream Hampton and people that align with 50 Cent, have degrees of legitimacy. They both speak to racial hierarchy more broadly but in terms of sexual assault, the debate speaks to where power lies. Women of color are still being scrutinized for speaking out. But their victimhood is not about attacking Black manhood, it’s about protecting themselves. In these discussions, the sexual predators are rarely targeted as traitors to the race. The R. Kelly controversy, and ones like it, merely reinforce the need for an intersectional analysis even within a marginalized community.

“When you say Black people, you mean Black Men”:

Tarana Burke has tried to refocus the #MeToo narrative, instead of attacking and taking down high-profile white men, it should draw attention to the lives and value of black women. The plight of the most victimized, the most vulnerable population, should be a rallying cry for all feminists, not just for the Black community. In a TEDWomen event in 2018, Burke expressed her concerns about where the movement had gone, (see Image 8). She stands on that red dot speaking about #MeToo, not knowing how or why her small movement had morphed so much over the decade, “All across the world where Me Too has taken off, survivors of sexual assault are being heard, and then vilified... this moment is constantly being called a watershed moment, or a reckoning, but I wake up some days feeling like all evidence points to the contrary. It’s hard not to feel numb.”¹³¹ She frustratingly reports to her audience the backlash; of those calling Me Too a “witch hunt” for white men or dismissing it as a “gender war.” The critics and “right wing pundits” have further shifted the focus away from the survivors. Burke explains, “the media has been consistent with headline after headline that frames this movement, that make it difficult to

move our work forward.”¹³² She remains concerned about the ways #MeToo has been spun into stories of targeting white men. The convergence between feminist politics and the hashtag sphere can create fabricated and manipulated headlines that do not capture the full picture of a social media movement.



Image 8, Tarana Burke speaks on TEDWomen in 2018 about where Me Too has gone.

Burke’s concern lies heavily with women of color and how their experiences continue to fall away from the story of #MeToo, as equal survivors of sexual assault. She has also looked deep into the abyss of sexual violence and exposed the dangerous linkage between race pride and masculine dominance. Still her focus remains on the liberation of women. On January 20, 2019, Burke posted on twitter, “I’m exhausted and frustrated watching Black folks accuse me of being a traitor for wanting to protect Black girls. I just wish some of y’all would admit that when you say Black ppl you mean Black men.”¹³³ While there is a clear history of Black men being stereotyped as rapists, this cannot require a silencing of Black women. If Black men are demonized, then Black women are deemed worthless, because their stories and voices depend on keeping Black manhood safe. Burke remains steadfast in her intersectional analysis. Saving Black women, saves us all.

Through #MeToo, the unholy horrors of sexual violence have been pushed to the public spotlight. And despite its various mutations, from Tarana Burke's 2006 initiative to the 2017 hashtag, the emphasis must remain on the diversity of survivors' stories. But the movement continues to struggle with an intersectional sense of inclusion, both in the mainstream and at the margins. Bringing the Me Too movement to the digital sphere allowed people to organize, call out unique injustices, to form supportive communities and action plans. When hashtags such as Me Too began trending, it allowed some survivors to bring their stories into the public domain, even if that public domain meant their small group of followers. In that way, this feminist movement changed the game. It tells the story of feminism, of activism against sexual assault in ways rarely seen.

While powerful, that story has not built a comprehensive movement. This digital activism still lacks intersectionality, it maintains the face and concerns of an elite white world. But its founder had a broader vision than just the narrow story of Hollywood. It was meant for all women: undocumented women, women of color, women with disabilities. Now that feminism has broken into the digital landscape, it requires a robust cultural analysis to become a truly effective movement. My cultural analysis of #MeToo begins to point out the grassroots of this movement and engage the many frames of reference—racial history, digital access, citizenship status—always lingering in the background. In a world that can be lonely for victims of sexual assault and violence, we can't deny that social media has opened a space for vulnerability and support. But it needs to be about all victims, not just about the white women and Weinstein; especially those "invisible" and struggling just below the backlit veneer of our digital screens.

Epilogue: Me...Too?

Harvey Weinstein, dressed in an elegant black suit, hunched over his silver walker as he slowly made his way into the court room in Manhattan on January 6, 2020. The cameras follow his crouched body with an unkept beard as he entered the building. NBC Nightly News reporter Stephanie Gosk updated the public on new charges against Harvey Weinstein, as his trial in New York began. Breaking News reported that four new criminal charges had been filed against the famous movie producer, now in a New York jail cell. Jackie Lacey, L.A District Attorney, spoke to the charges at a press conference; “The defendant used his power and influence to gain access to his victims and then committed violent crimes against them.”¹³⁴

The camera switched to the crowd gathered outside of the courtroom on that cold, January day. Actress Rose McGowen, wearing a beautiful cashmere sweater and red coat, one of his accusers who is recognized by the media in the trials, thanked the women testifying against Weinstein, “I thank those testifying, for standing, not just for themselves, but for all of us that will never have even one day in court.”¹³⁵ The women caught on camera during that breaking news segment are, not surprisingly, all white. Even on the picket line, these women are draped in high end clothing and makeup. One woman is wearing a Gucci couture hat, with her blond hair curled and her makeup perfectly done up. Another woman wears a flashy cheetah print coat and nods along with McGowen’s statement.

Needless to say, these white women’s voices and experiences are significant, and hold importance in justice against Weinstein, but they also point to the continued lack of intersectional understanding in the mainstream #MeToo conversation. There were no young black girls, food service workers, or domestics; no one representing that more dominant side of

sexual assault were anywhere to be found that day at the courthouse. I watched this spectacle frustrated and confused. It seems like we still haven't learned.

As a white woman, before doing this research and reading the stories of these marginalized women and communities, I would have sat in front of the TV shaking my head in agreement with McGowen. Focusing only on her story, feeling only for her pain, and naively following along as she mentioned, "but for all of us who will never have even one day in court" not thinking about the women I had just read about that will truly, never have a day in court.

I am, thankfully, not a victim of sexual violence or assault the way the stories I've read have portrayed. I can, however, remember many times being cat called while running on a sidewalk in workout clothing or having my butt grabbed at sporting events or stadiums in middle school, putting my head down or laughing uncomfortably when those things happened. I have immediate friends and close family members that have all been victims of sexual violence in disturbing ways, some have stayed silent, some have told their stories. Even in talking about these things that I've experienced; I talk about them as inconsequential, as smaller in the larger story. The Me Too profile still doesn't necessarily allow me to see my small part in it. Me Too is supposed to be a rallying cry for all women and all cases. But what does that mean for most of the women in the world if I can't even see myself in it? How do they feel when they have no one who looks like them or talks like them speaking at the press conference?

Without an intersectional understanding of sexual violence and of feminism as a whole, the full story of #MeToo and any other hashtag that associates itself with the fight against sexual violence cannot become a fully emancipatory feminist movement, digitally or anywhere else. Most importantly, we need white women to see feminism in all ways, and to consider

intersectionality in all feminist visions and campaigns going forward. White women need to see how their experience is unique and important, but not singular and special.

Still, I see Alyssa Milano and other white women using the hashtag “Me Too” and I see them and feel their pain because their stories resonate with me. I know that an intersectional understanding is complicated and can be uncomfortable at times, because it takes my story out of the center. But I also now know that those invisible experiences that are so clearly at the forefront of what Tarana Burke has tried to design; those muted cries, are what give me the privilege of voice to call out...Me Too for all women, everywhere.

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