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Reckoning with the Silences of #MeToo

THE PAST SIX MONTHS have been an important time for US feminism. For women's studies professors, it's been heartening to find the world outside our classrooms taking up conversations about sex and power that we've been having for decades. In this piece, I will reflect on three questions: What is going on? Why is it happening now? And what forms of feminism have been overlooked in the coverage of the #MeToo movement? I spend the longest time on the third question, because I'm concerned about how #MeToo has advanced a version of public feminism that is, in some ways, out of step with currents in academic feminism.

WHAT'S GOING ON?

Although feminists have long championed public speak-outs for survivors of sexual violence — whether in Take Back the Night open mics since the 1980s or the workshops also called “MeToo” that Tarana Burke started in Alabama in 2007 — the viral force of the hashtag #MeToo in mid-October 2017 took most people by surprise. Within the first twenty-four hours, it had been retweeted half a million times. According to Facebook, nearly 50 percent of US users are friends with someone who posted a message about experiences of assault or harassment. #MeToo was by no means just a US phenomenon: Facebook and Twitter feeds in various parts of the world, notably Sweden, India, and Japan, were rocked for days by this hashtag. Then came the slew of powerful cis-men, largely in the US

media and entertainment industries, who were forced to swiftly resign after allegations of sexual misconduct. This toppling continues and has expanded beyond the media to other industries where reputations matter: politics, music, architecture, and, somewhat belatedly, higher education. In an important way, the ground beneath us has shifted. #MeToo has tilted public sympathy in favor of survivors by changing the default response to belief, rather than suspicion; the hashtag has revealed how widespread sexual coercion is.

WHY NOW?

We need to theorize, on a cultural scale, why this movement against sexual harassment and violence in the United States has happened now rather than, say, three years ago, when Bill Cosby was accused by multiple women, or after Roger Ailes, CEO of Fox News, was deposed. #MeToo's impact may seem sudden, but it is a part of a groundswell in women's activism since the November 2016 elections. The Women's March was the largest globally coordinated public gathering in history. The 3-million strong Facebook group Pantsuit Nation saw hundreds of thousands of posts about experiences of misogyny. Unprecedented numbers of women are running for US political office this year. The signature affective note running through this political moment is a fierce rage about the election of Donald Trump.

Trump's impunity, I suggest, serves as a trigger provoking the fury at the heart of #MeToo. There are many reasons to find fault with Trump, but it is distinctly galling that he faced no consequences after acknowledging being a sexual predator. For victims of sexual trauma, it is already painful to watch perpetrators roam free because of how high the burdens of proof are in legal cases. When a person such as Trump is grandly affirmed by an election, it retraumatizes victims. Right after the election, therapists and counseling centers were flooded with patients seeking help with processing past events. The ballast provided by women's feverish organizing and the instant power of social media has facilitated a collective emboldening. Trump has made the comeuppance of all powerful men feel more urgent.

But from the inception of #MeToo, I have also watched its racial and class politics with some wariness: whose pain was being centered, I wondered? A colleague recently asked aloud: is #MeToo a white women's movement? Another wondered, is this a moral panic? These questions

underline the importance of feminist insights that are overlooked in dominant coverage of the movement.

WHAT'S LEFT OUT?

Critical race feminism offers important insights when exploring the question of whether this is a white women's movement. The answer is complicated—both yes and no. Obviously, sexual violence and harassment are not white women's problems alone. They have been a pervasive workplace experience for women of color—whether we are talking about enslaved women or the vast majority of women in low-wage service professions. The viral reach of the hashtag around the globe—driving changes in laws in places such as Sweden and shaking up the elite professoriate in the Indian academy—makes clear that sexual violence is not only a US white women's issue.¹ But if we look at US media coverage of the movement and the most striking spokespersons as well as casualties in recent scandals, it is certainly white women's pain that is centered in popular media coverage. There are a few exceptions, such as the *New York Times* December 2017 feature on Ford's Chicago auto assembly plant and Oprah Winfrey's Golden Globes speech about Recy Taylor, but by and large, it is young white women's complaints, such as those by victims of Roy Moore or Larry Nassar, that have the most visibility.² This is a familiar problem in a racist society. It has been commented on for a long time—including in Kimberlé Crenshaw's classic article about how to understand intersectionality in domestic violence cases.³ Black women are regularly also pressured by black men not to speak publicly about

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1. Rick Noack, "Sweden Proposes Tough Sexual Assault Law," *Washington Post*, December 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/12/20/amid-metoo-movement-and-fear-of-immigrants-sweden-proposes-tough-sexual-assault-law/?utm_term=.edfo2570c5b4; Elizabeth Cassin and Ritu Prasad, "Student's 'Sexual Predator' List Names Professors," *BBC*, November 6, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-41862615>.
 2. Susan Chira and Catrin Einhorn, "How Tough Is It to Change a Culture of Harassment? Ask Women at Ford," *New York Times*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/19/us/ford-chicago-sexual-harassment.html>; Madison Park, "Recy Taylor Is 'A Name I Know... You Should Know, Too,'" Oprah says," *CNN*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/08/us/recy-taylor-oprah-winfrey-golden-globes-speech/index.html>.
 3. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–99.

harassment. Apart from the logic of protecting a community's image — the logic that dramatically shaped the Clarence Thomas hearings and the vilification of Anita Hill — it is worth keeping in mind that the primary instrument of redress in #MeToo is public shaming and criminalization of the perpetrator. This is already too familiar a problem for black men. We know the history of how black men have been lynched based on unfounded allegations that they sexually violated white women. We know how many black men are unjustly incarcerated. The dynamics of #MeToo, in which due process has been reversed — with accusers' words taken more seriously than those of the accused — is a familiar problem in black communities. Maybe some black women want no part of this dynamic.

#MeToo's affective focus on pain is also out of step with currents in contemporary academic feminism that center pleasure, play, and healing. Many lessons from feminist debates over sex and sexuality in the past few decades have not been absorbed, as #MeToo displays.

The rapid series of scandals have produced a conflation in the public imagination of different types of problem behaviors. It is pretty clear that what Larry Nassar and Roy Moore did, trapping unsuspecting younger women and girls, is predatory. But predatory sex is not the same thing as transactional sex. Charlie Rose and Harvey Weinstein's wrongs are more complicated because they involve trading promotions or film roles in exchange for sexual favors. These kinds of transactions happen frequently.

In many contexts — both within and outside marriage — sex is exchanged for security, affection, and money. So, a crucial point to keep in mind is that not all transactional sex is coerced. As sex positive feminists would argue, we need to guard against casting all transactions as coercion. The question is, how to discern coercion within contexts of transaction.

Not all seemingly consensual transactions are free of coercion, of course. A common mistake of philosophical liberalism (and some sex positive feminism) is to presume that any exchange arises out of, and generates, symmetry between two actors. But transacting in sex, or getting something in exchange for sex, does not mean that coercion is absent. In fact, coercion can also work in seemingly consensual ways.

We need, in this moment, a broader lens to understand coercion beyond the liberal understanding of verbal consent. Many of the scandals in the news involve women who went along with sex without saying no — but who would have preferred not to. Men such as Charlie Rose should

have asked themselves: under what conditions could women have said no to their advances? Was it difficult for women to refuse? Was the men's institutional position, or age, or wealth, tilting their decision? Coercion, in other words, should be defined by more than just whether someone says yes or no. It hinges on whether one has power over that other person such that they might interpret a request as force — or even as a threat. If s/he faces negative consequences for saying no to a sexual advance, then that sexual advance is coercive.

This broad definition of coercion extends beyond contexts of sexual harassment to other abuses of power. In fact, if we take sex out of the picture for a moment, it becomes much easier for most people to recognize such coercion: most people relate to the problem of being forced to do something that they really don't want to do.

So why is it hard to take sex out of the picture? Perhaps it is not a surprise that a movement against sexual coercion, rather than, say, domestic violence, has received this level of news attention; sexual harassment stories gain traction because the details make for sensational copy. Many powerful people ask for inappropriate personal favors — such as John Conyers asking his subordinates to babysit for him — but the infractions that really seem to exercise our attention are related to sex. This predilection is not simply an outgrowth of a repressed interest in sex; it is because readers conflate sex and selfhood — many people see any experience of sexual coercion as eroding a woman's core sense of self.

We need not view sex this way, of course: equating sex with selfhood is a historically specific mandate connected to norms of middle-class respectability. Many sex workers express different understandings of their sexual activity — they don't treat their sexual encounters as signaling their virtue (or lack of it). Asexual people also protest that we give sex undue centrality in the way we define ourselves.

So, if we are to ask, what makes coercion in workplaces so common, we will need to do more than just fire those who are accused of forcing sex. We will need to look at the factors that generate cis-male dominance in the workplace: historical wage discrimination, childcare policies, and the way skills are defined and valued in masculinist ways. When men are systematically privileged by workplace policies and practices, they regularly ascend to powerful positions. This is why when we see the words "coach" or "boss" or "director" or "executive," we imagine male figures first. Our goal shouldn't only be to unseat coaches, bosses, directors, and

executives who have abused their power. We need to re-script misogynistic practices that make it difficult for women to inhabit these roles in the first place. And we need to create alternatives to a politics of retribution that only focuses on punishment rather than transforming workplace hierarchies.