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## **'Every Woman Knows a Weinstein': Political Whiteness and White Woundedness in #MeToo and Public Feminisms Around Sexual Violence**

*Alison Phipps, Sussex University*

### **Abstract**

This article explores how whiteness shapes public feminisms around sexual violence, using #MeToo as a case study. Building on the work of Daniel Martinez HoSang (2010), Gurminder Bhambra (2017) and others, I theorize *political whiteness* as an orientation to/mode of politics which employs both symbolic tropes of woundability and interpersonal performances of fragility (DiAngelo 2011), and invokes state and institutional power to redress personal injury. Furthermore, I argue that the 'wounded attachments' (Brown 1995) of public sexual violence feminisms are met by an equally wounded whiteness in the right-wing backlash: acknowledging the central role of race exposes continuities between both progressive and reactionary politics dominated by white people. Political whiteness stands in contrast to the alternative politics long articulated by women of color, and black women in particular. However, these alternatives may encounter different problematics, for instance intersecting with neoliberal notions of resilience which are also racialized. Challenging political whiteness is therefore not simply a case of including more diverse narratives: this must be done while examining how sexual violence is experienced and politicized in the nexus of patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism, in which gender, race and class intersect with categories such as victims and survivors, woundedness and resilience.

### **Keywords**

MeToo / sexual violence / public feminisms / race / political whiteness / intersectionality / neoliberalism / Brown, Wendy

### **1. Introduction**

In 2006, black feminist Tarana Burke created an organization to help victims of sexual violence, particularly young women of color, find pathways to healing. Reflecting the key principle of empowerment through empathy, Burke named her movement 'Me Too' (Burke 2018). Eleven years later, this phrase went viral as a hashtag, following a tweet by white actress Alyssa Milano and the input of other white celebrities and politicians (Mendes et al. 2018). In December 2017, Burke and Milano participated in a joint interview on the US *Today* show. However, Milano was criticized for speaking over Burke, interrupting her answers to questions and taking up most of the airtime (Chavez 2017). This interview functions as a metaphor for the broader Western feminist movement against sexual violence. Public feminisms in this area, as in many others, have been demographically and politically dominated by white women, who have often ignored or co-opted the experiences and contributions of women of color.

The #MeToo hashtag had global reach, trending in at least 85 countries (Thorpe 2017). There were also allied hashtags such as #YoTambien in Spain and Latin America, #BalanceTonPorc (expose your pig) in France, and #RiceBunny in China where the original hashtag faced censorship (Devex Editor 2018). Google's repository *#MeToo Rising* contains information on various initiatives inspired by the movement, in countries across the world: for instance, in India it caused a resurgence of mainstream concern not seen since the gang-rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey in 2012 (Roy 2018). However, except for Burke, most key figures in the movement were Western, white and privileged (Harris 2017; Tambe 2018), reflecting the dominance of occidental feminisms that position themselves as both universal and neutral (Thapar-Björkert and Tlostanova 2018), and the dominance of white bourgeois women within these. This shaped the demographics of disclosure: as African-American actress and anti-sexual violence activist Gabrielle Union said on *Good Morning America*, 'I think the floodgates have opened for white women' (in Chavez 2017).

Analysis of over 600,000 Twitter and Facebook posts tagged with #MeToo showed they varied between sharing personal stories, re-posting articles, expressing support, discussing offenders, and offering general commentary (Manikonda et al. 2018). However, perhaps supported by the declarative nature of the hashtag and the testimonial media cultures in which it was shared, #MeToo was generally viewed as a movement of mass disclosure. Such 'speaking out' is central to feminist politics, from Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech to the Akron Women's Rights Convention, to the testimonial activism of black women in the US Civil Rights movement (McGuire 2010), to the phrase 'the personal is political' (Hanisch 1969) which illuminated the consciousness-raising sessions of Women's Liberation (Allen 2002, Baker 2007). The widely-held association of speech with freedom is amplified here, due to the many ways men have silenced women (Houston and Kramarae 1991): although the symbolic order itself has also been theorized as masculine (Hedley 1992, 40), which generates ongoing complexity and debate.

Testimony has been particularly fundamental to public feminisms around sexual violence (Serisier 2018), a form of information-sharing used to authorize social and legal interventions (Heberle 1996, 63). Such speech also has a deeper function: to share and legitimize feelings of violation (Baker 2007, 174) and avoid patriarchal oppressions solidifying into pathology. In other words, putting our trauma 'out there' is a means to escape being consumed by it 'in here.' In her autobiographical narrative about recovery from breast cancer, Audre Lorde famously asked, 'What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?' (in Desmoines and Nicholson 1978, 13). Lorde's words, recently republished in a collected volume of her works entitled *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, echo clinical principles situating narrative as central to recovery. Particularly in relation to sexual violence, telling one's own story and having this validated is a way of reclaiming subjectivity and control after it has been taken away (Kelland 2016, Serisier 2018). Sharing personal experience, then, is both political and therapeutic. It is also, increasingly, economic: in the testimonial cultures of neoliberalism (Ahmed and Stacey 2001), trauma narratives function as 'investment capital' (Phipps 2016, 304) in affective economies (Ahmed 2004), and especially the 'outrage economy' of the corporate media (Phipps 2018, 9).

However, there are on-going discussions within feminism around the status of experience as a foundational category and its signification within 'man made' (Spender 1980) and colonial (Spivak 1988) knowledge structures, influenced by the post-structuralist crisis of representation and ideas about the multiplicity of meaning and truth. These discussions have often been underpinned by Foucauldian notions of discourse which suggest that intelligibility is a result of specific social and cultural formations, and complicate the function of speech as a route to empowerment (Foucault 1972, Serisier 2018). Joan Scott's (1991) work has also been influential in shaping critiques of the *effects* of using experience as epistemology.

Although the ‘turn to experience’ has made a variety of stories and oppressions visible, Scott argues that this has reified the category, de-historicizing oppressions and essentializing identities. All this tells us that there is no ‘authentic’ experience unmarked by the political: a key premise for the analysis in this article.

## 2. The Politics of the Wound

As well as the relationship between experience and its signification, the relationship between signification and politics has prompted feminist debates about ‘speaking out’ as a strategy. There are continuing, and intense, contentions about the legitimacy of speaking for others, and the drawbacks of speaking for oneself (see Alcoff 1991, 2018, 203-26). There are also deeper discussions, again inspired by Michel Foucault (1978), who positions power and freedom as two sides of the same coin. His work poses a key question: in protesting against women’s oppression, can we potentially *produce* the sexual difference we seek to eliminate (Scott 1996)? This is particularly important in relation to sexual violence, due to its key role in the constitution of genders and (hetero)sexualities. There are on-going political and academic conversations about whether public discourse around women’s victimization (re)inscribes ideas of feminine oppression and masculine domination. The central dilemma, as Renee Heberle puts it, is whether ‘the ever-enlarged map of sexual suffering’ is ‘in effect, the social insignia of male power’ (1996, 63).

Wendy Brown’s *States of Injury* is a major text animating these discussions. Following Foucault, a major problematic in Brown’s book is that of creating a politics of resistance reliant on identity. ‘What kind of political recognition can identity-based claims seek,’ Brown asks, ‘that will not resubordinate a subject itself historically subjugated through identity (1995, 55)?’ For Brown, contemporary political identities also tend to foreground the *wounds* of marginalization, and she argues that claims made on this basis produce a ‘politics of recrimination and rancor’ due to the deep investments in victimization, pain and suffering they require (55). As the state is invoked to redress injury, this also produces dependency on institutions and masks the harms they create. For Brown, as for Foucault, speech is not necessarily freedom due to the subject’s entanglement in the web of discourse. In contrast to the original feminist positioning of ‘speaking out’ as a way to divest oneself of trauma, *States of Injury* suggests it may be a way to ontologize it.

Although she did not tackle sexual violence politics directly, Brown interpreted feminist consciousness-raising and the ‘speak out’ as akin to Foucault’s (1978) ‘modern confessional’ in the production of normalized and foundational narratives. Furthermore, she saw these narratives as ripe for colonization by the various modes of governmentality which characterize the punitive, and the therapeutic, state. Solidifying the ‘truth’ of women’s experience through ‘speaking out’ was misunderstood as liberating, she argued, when in fact it was ‘established as the secret to our souls by those who would discipline us through that truth’ (Brown, 42). This argument has not been without its critics: it has been contended that speaking one’s own ‘sins’ differs from naming those of others (Mardorossian 2002, 763) and it is certainly arguable that feminist speech between peers does not replicate (or even approximate) the context, process and relations of ‘modern confessionals’ such as the doctor’s surgery or psychiatrist’s office. Because of this, it has been argued that Brown underestimates the creative and resignifying possibilities of feminist political speech (Serisier 2018, 45-6). There are also strong links between critiques of the politics of victimhood and the ‘antivictimism’ (Rentschler 2011) of the right-wing backlash, as well as continuities with contemporary ideological dismissals of ‘identity politics’ which characterize both right- and centre-left perspectives (see Bhabra). Nevertheless, there is an important problematic here, highlighted by Jessie Kindig in relation to #MeToo: ‘writing and telling might be the opposite of trauma; it might not be’ (2018, 27).

### 3. #MeToo as Natural Disaster

#MeToo is arguably one of the biggest media and cultural moments in recent Western history, focused on sexual violence. An analysis carried out a year after Milano's intervention estimated that 19 million tweets had been posted: more than 55,000 tweets per day (Brown 2018). The movement was described as a 'flood' of stories of sexual assault by CNN (France 2017) and CBC (Bernstien 2017), an 'avalanche' in the Guardian (Guardian Editors, 2017) and a 'tsunami' on CNBC (Novak 2018) and in the US National Post (Blatchford 2018). Such metaphors for natural disaster were deployed by supporters and critics alike, and have also been used about other viral sexual violence feminisms such as #BeenRapedNeverReported (see Mendes et al.).

The spread of the hashtag followed closely upon allegations of sexual harassment, assault and rape made by more than a dozen women, including actress Ashley Judd, against film producer Harvey Weinstein. These allegations were quickly followed by similar ones from more than forty others, including a number of celebrities. As #MeToo progressed however, its founder Tarana Burke expressed frustration that the conversation was dwelling too much on individuals such as Weinstein (in Adetiba and Burke 2018). Indeed, one of the movement's most memorable media headlines was 'Every Woman knows a Weinstein' (Vice 2017), an assertion echoed, in a number of forms, in a variety of outlets.<sup>1</sup> Articles written under this title did not necessarily focus on Weinstein: most of them covered experiences of 'everyday' sexual harassment and boundary-crossing. However, the use of Weinstein as a cipher for a range of sexual violence experiences is significant.

Read through the lens provided by Foucault and Brown, #MeToo could be interpreted as a textbook spectacle of male power and female victimization. The natural disaster language used to describe it evokes Jungian archetypes and is interesting both in terms of the scale of trauma it insinuates, and the implicit construction of sexual violence as a 'force of nature', which taps patriarchal myths about rape as the inevitable outcome of uncontrollable male desire.<sup>2</sup> The use of individuals such as Weinstein (and other high-profile men such as Roy Moore and Larry Nassar) to frame discussion of a variety of behaviors is both symbolically and affectively meaningful. In symbolic terms, this created forms of equivalence, as the crimes of these high-profile men were evoked alongside other disclosures. This appeared to have deep affective resonance: as Rebecca Traister (2017) wrote in *The Cut*:

The rage that many of us are feeling doesn't necessarily correspond with the severity of the trespass: lots of us are on some level as incensed about the guy who looked down our shirt at a company retreat as we are about Weinstein, even if we can acknowledge that there's something nuts about that, a weird overreaction.'

As Tanya Serisier highlights, #MeToo and other hashtags encourage such equivalence, functioning as collective narratives which imply that 'the stories, whatever their particularities, share a sameness of content and meaning' (2018, 66). Indeed, in #MeToo in particular the hashtag on its own often acted as a synecdoche for the stories people wished to tell (Serisier, 66). At its best, Serisier argues, this creates powerful forms of solidarity: it could also be seen as cathartic, giving permission for those with sexual violence experiences dismissed as 'minor' to express their anger and grief. This brings to mind Liz Kelly's continuum of sexual violence, which posits that all forms share similar functions and effects, as elements of the 'abuse, intimidation, coercion, intrusion, threat and force men use to control women' (1988, 76). This continuum, now a staple of feminist theorizing, activism and service provision, has usefully challenged distinctions between 'more serious' and 'less serious' forms, and perhaps partially explains the emotional reaction Traister described.

However, it may be a misuse of the continuum to conflate the structural with the individual and imply that our experiences of ‘everyday’ sexual harassment mean that we all, in fact, know a violent serial rapist such as Harvey Weinstein. Indeed, speech acts such as ‘Every Woman Knows a Weinstein’ may inhibit discussion of how intersecting forms of power facilitate a range of behaviors, instead creating an individual logic which highlights the similarities between acts in order to expose a proliferation of ‘bad men.’ As Burke said, ‘no matter how much I keep talking about power and privilege, they keep bringing it back to individuals’ (Adetiba and Burke 2018, 32). The labeling of large numbers of men as ‘predators’ as part of the spectacle of #MeToo may, unintentionally, have worked to obscure the structural framings of sexual violence and its ‘everyday’, normalized nature.

#### **4. Backlash: Wounded as Wounding**

‘If the #MeToo revolution has proved anything,’ wrote Barbara Kingsolver in *the Guardian* (2018), ‘it’s that women live under threat. Not sometimes, but all the time.’ Statements such as this provided fertile ground for the backlash, which brought together conservative commentators with libertarian feminists such as Germaine Greer (Flood 2018), many of whom argued that #MeToo was perpetuating ‘victim culture’. This ‘antivictimism’ is a key orthodoxy on the political right (Rentschler) and often emerges in response to public feminisms around sexual violence (Phipps 2014). It co-opts ideas about women’s empowerment and sexual freedom within neoliberal frameworks emphasizing individual responsibility, repackages discourse as fiction and agency as ‘choice’. This turns nuanced analyses of how sexual trauma is socially constructed into accusations that it is made up (Phipps 2014, 38).

In these facile terms, women *feel* victimized because feminism has brainwashed them into renaming their unsatisfactory sexual experiences as rape (Mardorossian 2002, 748). They may also crave sympathy: critics of #MeToo interpreted it as ‘an unedifying clamor to be included in celebrity suffering’ (Williams 2017). The solution is easy: one can choose to be a victim or not. As Melanie Philips wrote in *the Times* (2017): ‘Female emancipation was all about giving women control over their own destinies. Now they have that control, they are presenting themselves once again as powerless victims of male oppression, even while benefiting from being presented as sexual objects.’

Despite its antivictimism and claims to repudiate ‘identity politics’ (Bhambra 2017, S217), the ‘wounded attachments’ (see Brown) of this backlash are strong. Indeed, the ‘wounds’ of the political right, exemplified in Donald Trump’s election as US President and the Brexit referendum in the UK, as well as other issues such as the debate about the ‘marginalization’ of conservatives on college campuses (Phipps 2017b), have come to dominate Anglo-American public discourse. In the backlash against #MeToo, there was a strong concern for the accused, those ‘overtaken by the #MeToo tsunami, [for whom] there [was] no recovery’ (Blatchford 2018). Worries were also expressed about critics of the movement, seen as subject to its ‘vengeful’ currents.

Katie Roiphe, whose book *The Morning After* was a key text in the backlash against activism around campus rape in the 1990s (see Phipps 2014, 37), penned an article in *Harper’s Magazine* entitled ‘The Other Whisper Network’ (Roiphe 2018). While objecting to #MeToo’s discourse of ‘overwhelming fear’ Roiphe simultaneously echoed it, claiming that the movement’s detractors were so afraid of recriminations they could not speak openly. This assertion is easily challenged by the variety of nuanced perspectives on #MeToo, some of

which are cited in this article, and by the high-profile platform she was afforded to write about being silenced. However, her ability to claim silencing from this platform speaks to the influence of declarations of ‘woundedness’ across the contemporary political spectrum, such that they can operate alongside evidence of significant political and cultural power and privilege.<sup>3</sup>

Critiques of ‘victim feminism’ share themes with, but vastly simplify, Brown’s work and similar work by others. The connections may expose what Alcoff calls the ‘Pandora’s Box of potential relativism’ that Foucault presents feminism with (2018, 16), and also reveal the slippage between attempts to appreciate the nuances of an issue and a denial of its existence, in a polarized political context. There may also be a shared conflation of victims and their representation: for Rentschler, Brown’s work comes perilously close to the backlash because her critique of victim discourse, which reflects what is sayable in the current political moment, can slip into a critique of victims themselves as stuck in ‘bad consciousness’ (216-17). In contrast, Rentschler argues that victims cannot be reduced to the discourses that concern them and through which they speak. This is an important point, though complexities arise because subjectivities, experience and discourse are not separate but intimately intertwined. In other words, what is sayable in the current political moment (which includes a *rejection* of victimhood as well as its appropriation by various modes of governmentality) constructs the experience as well as the politics of victimization. While acknowledging the space for resignification, it seems important to avoid reinstating experience as foundational and separating ‘victim discourse’ from victims themselves.

There is a difference between a general antipathy to ‘victims’ and a specific analysis of how the category of ‘victim’ is constructed and what it does. However, it is possible that the connections between attempts to appreciate the discursive framings of victimhood and the antivictimism of the backlash have been both politically and existentially limiting. When we can only attack victims or defend them, repudiate the wound or embrace it, to be successful in our politics *and* validated in our trauma we cannot allow uncertainty. This may frame contemporary defenses of victims, which are often *politico-affective* ones: for instance, victim identities can be emancipatory (Rentschler), victims have a right to be angry, and emotions (and especially anger) are politically useful and constructive (Ahmed 2015). I would not want to contest these points. However, there is a risk of situating emotion as the ‘pure’ counterpart of politics, when our emotional repertoires are also discursively and structurally shaped and interpreted (Ahmed 2004). There is also a risk of conflating politics and emotional needs, reducing the former to the latter. Most importantly for this article, both the critique and the defense of victims can be homogenizing, of victims as a group and ‘victim politics’ as a movement and a position. In any analysis of public feminisms around sexual violence, we must ask: whose wounds constitute politics, and what are the implications?

## 5. Me, Not You

This question is not easy to answer without making moves towards homogenization myself. I have already argued that the Western feminist movement around sexual violence is dominated by bourgeois white women: however, I am aware that defining ‘the movement’ as largely white and privileged risks (re)constituting it as such. In arguing that the wounds of particular women tend to constitute politics, my intention is not to (re)universalize those wounds, but to signal the much greater diversity of survivorship, scholarship and political action which tends to be erased. The fact of this diversity, as well as many of the insights contributed by feminists of color, sits at the root of my critique of Western public feminisms around sexual violence.

For instance, Ida B. Wells’ political work on the lynching of African-American men is

foundational to black feminist understandings of rape, and anti-rape activism, as inherently racialized. Postcolonial feminists have similarly exposed the central role of acts and allegations of sexual violence in terrorizing colonized populations, a theme also pertinent to sexual violence in contemporary conflict (see e.g. McClintock 1995, Lugones 2008). The scholarship and activism of prison abolitionists such as Angela Davis highlights how the carceral systems favoured by white feminists are grounded in, and perpetuate, racist and classist violence (see e.g. 1983). The principle of intersectionality, defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), provides an overarching framework for understanding how all these oppressions are co-constituted. My article is situated in two central insights of feminism(s) of color: that while white women may be positioned as victims of violence, we are also positioned as its perpetrators in relation to people of color; and that both acts *and allegations* of sexual violence can be used to uphold the intersecting systems of racial capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy.

Like Tarana Burke, black women and other women of color have also often been the first to put issues on the agenda, and #MeToo is the most recent in a long list of high-profile movements in which white bourgeois women have co-opted this work. The activism of black women against rape in the US Civil Rights movement (McGuire 2010) was built upon, usually without acknowledgement, by second-wave white feminists (Phipps 2016). Activism by women of color (and Professor Anita Hill in the US in particular) has been crucial in naming and fighting sexual harassment, but white academics and lawyers have tended to get the credit (Baker 2007). While the work of women of color is co-opted, white feminist outrage has tended to overlook them (Rentschler, 7). #MeToo was no different in this regard, with Anglo-American commentators noting a focus on the victimization of privileged white women in domestic contexts (Harris 2017) and an inattention to others such as the black girls and women abused by R Kelly (Tillet & Tillet 2019), or the Rohingya women raped in Myanmar (Ahmed 2017).

Indeed, #MeToo could largely be interpreted as a conversation between white people: the privileged white women ‘speaking out’ and the privileged white men with platforms to defend themselves, or those (white men *and* women) who led the backlash. Furthermore, while there are distinctions between the social media publics in which hashtags such as #MeToo circulate and the mainstream media in which they are reported, there is a tension between views of social media as a more democratic and diverse space and the acknowledgement that it continues to be structured by access to time and resources (especially for those in lower-income countries), as well as deeper ideas about whose voices count (Cottom 2016, Daniels 2016). These structural conditions mean that ‘speaking out’ can easily become speaking over in mainstream and social media publics. The tendency to speak over may even be magnified in public feminisms which coalesce around emotive issues such as sexual violence. While it is now acknowledged that ‘women’s experience’ is not universal (Crenshaw, Mohanty 1984), this is likely to be forgotten when politics bears the affective intensities of trauma.

## 6. Political Whiteness

The demographic whiteness of public feminisms around sexual violence shapes their political grammar (Hemmings 2011) in fundamental ways. Building on the work of Daniel Martinez HoSang (2010) and others, I propose the concept of *political whiteness* as a tool with which to better understand the ‘wounded attachments’ (see Brown) of sexual violence feminisms, and which can also be applied to the backlashes against them. My analysis begins from the premise that subjectivity is not foundational but discursive, and that white subjectivities (including my own) are shaped by our structural positions.<sup>4</sup> I also take the position that whiteness is fractured, but not erased, by gender and other social relations. Therefore, I refuse

to see supremacy and victimhood as opposed, but explore instead how they are related. I argue that the relation between the two produces a number of characteristics of political whiteness: narcissism; a will to power; and alertness to threat. All of these frame a symbolic positionality of woundedness and interpersonal performances of fragility.

Political whiteness has previously been used to denote a ‘color-blind’ but implicitly ethno-nationalist politics focused on ‘our’ rights, ‘our’ jobs, ‘our’ homes, ‘our’ kids and ‘our’ streets (HoSang).<sup>5</sup> Such dynamics are also present in Western public feminisms against sexual violence, to the extent that their universalizing claims about gendered victimhood are based on the experiences of white women. Critical theorists of whiteness have long highlighted the role of narcissism in white identity, which is evident politically in the belief that white experience can stand for that of all others (DiAngelo 2011), and the desire to center ourselves, even in anti-racist politics (Hook 2011, 25).<sup>6</sup> This is also key to Gurinder Bhambra’s concept of ‘methodological whiteness’, developed in response to academic analysis of and commentary on Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. Bhambra highlights how even in ‘progressive’ scholarship, there is a persistent focus on (and universalization of) the experiences and concerns of white people and a lack of acknowledgement of structures and histories of race and racism in shaping the world.

Taking these insights further, I argue that the centering of the self in whiteness also produces a focus on individual injuries rather than structural power, which is compatible with neoliberal values. In different ways, we can observe this in public feminisms around sexual violence and the backlashes against them, both of which are primarily framed around the experiences and injuries (or perceived injuries, in the case of backlash politics) of white individuals. In other words, the woundedness attached to whiteness can cross boundaries between more progressive and reactionary politics: it encompasses both the lost entitlements which drive the backlash *and* the deeply felt trauma of sexual violence. I am not suggesting for a moment that these wounds are equivalent. However, acknowledging the centrality of race can put us in the painful position of observing continuities between politics which may otherwise be diametrically opposed.

Whiteness is a position of structural power which is concerned with maintaining that power (Eddo Lodge 2017, 88): the figures of the settler and the master are emblems of conquest and subjugation (Ware 2013). This position creates a sense of victimhood when entitlements and powers are threatened, as articulated in backlash and ethno-nationalist forms of white politics. However, the will to power can also persist as whiteness intersects with gender inequalities and with individual experiences of victimization. Indeed, such experiences may intensify it. Rape represents a traumatic loss of power and control which is at least partly (re)constitutive of survivor subjectivity (Kelland 2016, Alcoff 2018, 12), so regaining this power and control is often crucial to recovery (Harrington 2018). In relation to #MeToo and other public feminisms around sexual violence, a focus on power and control is apparent in the emphasis on ‘taking down’ powerful men. Men such as Weinstein, or Larry Nassar, who was told by Judge Rosemarie Aquilina at sentencing that, if authorized, she would have ‘allow[ed] some or many people to do to him what he did to others’. Aquilina was celebrated as a feminist hero and icon of #MeToo (Phipps 2019).

The practice of ‘taking back’ subjectivity and control through ‘taking down’ powerful perpetrators (ironically) shapes a position of dependence on the state and its institutions, as they are summoned to redress injuries through criminalization and discipline. This point is not, of course, original: Brown and others have made it, although the intersections of gender and race have been less well explored. In #MeToo, as in similar movements, the role of the state both reflected and potentially exacerbated the whiteness of the movement, since to understand the state as protective, rather than oppressive, is a function of privilege (see



Davis). As Ashwini Tambe pointed out:

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 (2018, 200).

This understanding of the state also framed the movement's failure to focus on issues of police brutality and violence against criminalized groups such as sex workers, highlighted by a number of commentators (see e.g. Butler 2018, Gray 2018), which is characteristic of other sexual violence feminisms as well (Phipps 2017a). Indeed, calls for state protection by anti-sexual violence feminists have largely been focused on eradicating the sex industry (and thereby, sex workers' means of survival) in order to challenge male sexual entitlement and keep non-sex-working women safe. This has usually involved supporting policies which criminalize sex workers (or indirectly criminalize them, for instance via the Nordic Model of "ending demand").

Due to its investments in power, whiteness is highly alert to threat (Riggs and Augustinos 2004). Whether from indigenous populations, immigrants, 'political correctness' or 'social justice warriors', the idea of whiteness under threat has significant contemporary cultural influence, exemplified in Brexit and the election of President Trump (Phipps 2019). This also underpinned the backlash against #MeToo, which used the figure of the 'threatened' and 'reviled' white man to great effect (see e.g. Ferguson 2018). However, the #MeToo movement itself, like other white feminist activism and theory focused on sexual violence, can be read as shaped by an at-risk white femininity deeply embedded in colonial projects. The oppression of colonized populations has often involved attributing them with 'uncontrolled' sexuality, set against the privileged white woman who is depicted as fragile, weak and sexually vulnerable (Lugones, 12-14, see also McClintock). Imaginings of colonial uprising are inherently sexualized, and rape consciousness amongst colonizers is rooted in fear of the colonized's revenge (see e.g. Bumiller 2008, 21). The 'risk' posed to white women from the oversexualized Other has been the justification for racist community and state violence, both historically and now (Davis, McGuire 2018, Tambe).

This imperiled white woman, the embodiment of 'respectable' norms of white bourgeois gender, is constructed in opposition to the woman of color. The virgin/whore dichotomy was (and is) racialized: while white women are innocent victims of sexual violence, black women are blamed for causing such violence (McGuire 2018). This construction is also shaped by the always-willingness attributed to Black women through the rupture between blackness and consent in the context of slavery (Hartman 1997). These historical dynamics prevail in #MeToo and other public feminisms around sexual violence, which foreground a woundedness that is partially dependent on tropes of racist domination, even while articulating the gendered harm of sexual violence. Such dynamics both reflect and perpetuate the focus on white victims and erasure of black ones (Harris 2017): symbolically and materially, the spectacle of threat created by #MeToo should be seen as racialized. Indeed, the sense of ever-present threat which characterizes public feminisms around sexual violence may only be fully intelligible when articulated by and through bourgeois whiteness.

## **7. Whiteness, Woundedness and Fragility**

The co-constitution of supremacy and victimhood in political whiteness produces the symbolic positionality of woundedness, as well as interpersonal performances of fragility,

which underpin both public feminisms around sexual violence and the backlashes against them. These feminisms involve speaking out about deeply traumatic experiences, which can nevertheless be lived and politicized in ways marked by privilege. This is a difficult argument to make without undermining the validity and importance of experiences of victimization. But it is arguable that a sexual violence politics inflected by whiteness will emphasize personal pain rather than structural power.

Furthermore, the personal pain of white women is culturally intelligible in a way that black women's is not: in an article on #MeToo, Jamilah Lemieux (2017) commented, 'white women know how to be victims. They know just how to bleed and weep in the public square, they fundamentally understand that they are entitled to sympathy.' In contrast, Lemieux argued, black women 'know that [they] need to tuck that shit in and keep moving.' This robustness expected of black women reflects raced and classed histories: less privileged women have headed households, performed manual and agricultural labor and endured much harsher living conditions, including, of course, being enslaved (Lugones, 13, see also Hartman).

Black women's assumed ability to 'bear the lash' (to quote Sojourner Truth) contrasts with the symbolic woundability of white femininity. This woundability is inherently sexual, rooted in the sexualization of anti-colonial resistance, and ideas of 'purity' constructed and cherished in bourgeois white supremacist culture. The sexual woundability of white women is the foil to the black woman's status as unrapeable (Hartman), and can also be set against constructions of other women of color: for instance, that of the 'brown' (and usually Muslim) woman as eternal victim, often desexualized (Lugones, 13) or seen as sexually oppressed (Mohanty), which has been used to fortify the white saviorism of colonial and neo-colonial projects. These always-already wounded counterparts are *spoken for* by white women, while black women are expected to 'tuck that shit in and keep moving'.

The sexualized woundability of white women may shape an emphasis on sex rather than violence in public feminisms around sexual violence, which have been termed 'prudish' and 'anti-sex' by detractors both within and outside the feminist movement (Phipps 2014, 136, Alcoff 2018, 10).<sup>7</sup> Although this critique can be interpreted as a strategy of dismissal when deployed by political reactionaries, the existence and persistence (since the 'sex wars' of the late 1970s) of lively debates *between* feminists about the status of sex in analyses of women's oppression, and especially as they position more marginalized groups such as LGBT+ people and sex workers,<sup>8</sup> suggests that there are important ongoing issues at stake. Some feminist commentators on #MeToo remarked that sex appeared to have overshadowed harassment. As Melissa Gira Grant (2018, 321-2) argued, the increasingly popular term 'sexual misconduct' tended to evoke the interpersonal rather than the systemic and give the impression that women were asking to be insulated from sex rather than objecting to abuses of power. Others were concerned about the possibility of a 'moral panic' around sexual behavior which could disproportionately impact queer communities and/or sex workers, as had happened in the past (Berlant 2018, Cooney 2018).

On interpersonal levels, whiteness has been theorized as a performative enactment of power (Applebaum 2017). The tendency of this to produce wounds is evident in discussions of 'white fragility', which reflects the positionality of privilege (DiAngelo). Whiteness is a mode of being 'at home' in the world (Ahmed 2007, 158, 163) which raises our expectations for comfort and lowers our capacities to tolerate its opposite (DiAngelo). This has obvious connections with the backlash against #MeToo and other movements, driven by the discomfort of white bourgeois men with being held accountable. However, white fragility has also been noted *within* feminist politics, often becoming obvious in conversations about race. Lorde (1984) highlights how black women are often asked not to be 'too harsh' in these

conversations, to avoid upsetting their white peers (see also Applebaum). Feminists of color have also argued that white feminists use tears to deflect accountability in such conversations (see for example Accapadi 2007, Srivastava 2006). In these examples, white women's woundability is deployed to hide the harms we perpetrate through our involvement in white supremacy. We should also acknowledge that the racialized power of 'white tears' is still extant when those tears are shed over genuine experiences of victimization.

The notion of white fragility can also be used as a lens on the theme of discomfort conspicuous in the backlash against #MeToo. A significant amount of Western media coverage was devoted to the 'hand-on-knee trope': this has also characterized previous media moments, for instance the response to Naomi Wolf's sexual assault complaint against Yale University and Harold Bloom (Kipnis 2018). #MeToo prompted various interrogations of whether uninvited knee-touching was acceptable, provoked by the behaviors of public figures including Michael Fallon, Adam Sandler and Damian Green, but largely engaged in by critics such as Catherine Deneuve, Liam Neeson and Lionel Shriver who argued that a sense of proportion had been lost. Tropes such as 'knee-touching' and 'wolf-whistling' are often deployed to dismiss discussion of sexual violence, positioning women as 'over-sensitive' and unable to distinguish between the two. The prominence of the 'hand-on-knee' trope in #MeToo can also be juxtaposed with the marginality of issues such as the rape of Rohingya women or the sexualization and rape of black girls. Through this trope, the backlash especially foregrounded ideas about white women's discomfort, and more importantly, the discomfort of white men (and some white women) with the idea that 'everyday' entitlements to touch might be threatened.

## **8. Between Woundedness and Resilience**

In some ways, my argument mirrors Brown's: she similarly argues that injury can be politicized by marginalized groups, or by the privileged as charges of 'victimization' such as reverse racism (66-7). However, her framework is not intersectional: there is little space within it for the *co-existence* of marginality and privilege. Indeed, Brown herself could be charged with 'methodological whiteness' (see Bhambra) in her critique of 'identity politics' which fails to acknowledge the central role of race and elides all marginalized political discourse under what may mainly be a white grammar.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, my analysis of #MeToo suggests that in public feminisms around sexual violence, gendered oppression is articulated through a position of racialized and classed social and structural power. Furthermore, I argue that the emphasis on redress of individual injury by punitive state or institutional apparatuses, which is also highlighted by Brown, may only be fully intelligible in the context of this bourgeois whiteness. It is possible, then, that the 'wounded attachments' Brown exposes may in fact consist mainly of the attachments of whiteness, produced by the relationship between supremacy and victimhood.

But what of Tarana Burke? As suggested in this article, her position in #MeToo has been complex: she has been credited as the movement's founder but at times tokenized and spoken over, and has consistently acted as its conscience and critic (Rodino-Colocino 2018, 98). Other feminists of color, and black feminists especially, have also performed this function: for instance, using alternative hashtags such as #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen and calling for greater attention to the victimization of girls and women of color. In the US, important questions were raised about why the black girls abused by R Kelly, recently featured in the documentary *Surviving R Kelly*, were so long ignored (Tillet and Tillet). The Alianza Nacional de Campesinas (National Farmworkers Women's Alliance) wrote a letter of solidarity to the Hollywood actresses at the forefront of #MeToo, which sparked important discussions about power and privilege. These interventions, and others, were grounded in the long history of theory, activism and organization by feminists of color, which is situated at

the intersections of gender, class and race, interpersonal and state violence, and patriarchy, colonialism and racial capitalism.<sup>10</sup> These interventions should also be seen as part of #MeToo: in critiquing its political whiteness I do not intend to erase them, but to echo and support their calls for diversity at the center of the movement.

Some black feminists also countered #MeToo's emphasis on personal pain with narratives of resilience. In a speech at the Black Girls Rock awards in 2018, which urged black women not to 'opt out' of #MeToo because the media was not acknowledging their pain, Burke said: 'Black women are magic and we rock, mostly because we are resilient. We have a long history of taking what we have to make what we need. That's how this movement was born' (in Vagianos 2018). In various media interviews, she also characterized herself as grounded in joy rather than trauma (e.g. Vinopal 2018, Fessler 2018). Interviewed alongside Burke on Democracy Now! (2017), Black Lives Matter founder Alicia Garza similarly described #MeToo as being about 'empowering people to be survivors, to be resilient.' Statements such as this can be seen as an important antidote to the wounded whiteness of 'every woman knows a Weinstein.'

However, there is perhaps a distinction to be made between resilience and the resistance which has been central to black activism (Anderson and Samudzi 2018). Resistance is oppositional, while resilience tends to mean survival within the status quo (Sparke 2008). Resilience can also tap into neoliberal notions of personal responsibility, which demand that we 'rise above' trauma (Phipps 2014, 35) in the context of testimonial cultures, post-interventionist political debates (Schott 2013) and efforts to engage women with income generation in precarious global economic contexts (Harrington 2018, Gill and Orgad 2018). These notions have been particularly resonant in narratives of sexual violence, structuring the central victim/survivor opposition (Phipps 2014). They are also ripe for commodification. For instance, Carol Harrington highlights how on social media, the rape story has become part of personal branding projects in which survivors 'take back control' of their lives, often through neoliberal technologies or state-endorsed interventions (2018, 4).

In what Bay-Cheng calls the 'hegemonic institution of agency' which is part and parcel of neoliberalism (2015, 283), victimhood is rewritten as a result of personal shortcomings rather than structural oppressions, and overcoming trauma becomes the problem rather than the structures and cultures that produce it. Such 'resilience projects' intersect with ideas of the 'strong black woman' who is able to 'tuck that shit in and keep moving'. However, they are also deeply inflected by whiteness. As Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad argue, marginalized groups can be positioned both as inherently resilient, and thus able to cope with the shrinkage of Western welfare states, and not resilient enough as they 'lack the capacity' for self-reinvention (2018, 4). In contrast, resilience is a key quality of the 'future girl', 'can-do girl', 'alpha girl', 'together woman' or 'amazing bounce-backable woman', which is a new norm in neoliberal patriarchy and which is coded as white and middle class.<sup>11</sup> This figure is also associated with a sexual agency infused with ideas of the 'controlled' (white) self, while black women are positioned as over-sexualized and under-disciplined (Bay-Cheng, 287). This dynamic highlights a double bind for women of color within contemporary oppositions between survivorship and victimhood, woundedness and resilience. While white women are more able to successfully curate a politics based on our wounds, we can also claim ownership of 'overcoming' the wound through formulations of resilience as personal success.

## 9. Conclusion

This article has explored how political whiteness shapes public feminisms around sexual violence and the backlashes against them, circulating through narratives of personal pain which do not recognize intersecting structures, and foregrounding a concern with power and

control which is a continuation of colonial values. The fragility and woundability involved in political whiteness are similar but distinct: the former referring to an ontological state and mode of interpersonal behavior, and the latter to a symbolic position rooted in historical structures and dynamics. White woundability is also gendered, describing the threat of lost white male entitlement and the assumed purity and vulnerability of white women, both of which reflect and perpetuate white supremacy. Political whiteness is similar to the colloquial term ‘white feminism,’ used to denote feminism ignorant of the struggles, cultural output and politics of women of color (Ortega 2006, Ferreday 2017). However, political whiteness has a broader and deeper meaning, encompassing both progressive and reactionary politics and denoting specific politico-affective dynamics. Acknowledging the central role of race demands that we identify continuities between different forms of politics dominated by white people: it also demands that we understand racism as *foundational* to Western public feminisms around sexual violence, rather than as one of their unwanted effects.

Like other public feminisms before it, #MeToo authorizes the patriarchal, racist state through its claims to its protection and insistence that one can be a victim or a perpetrator, but not both (see e.g. Richie 2000, Duff 2018). Public feminisms around sexual violence (and the backlashes against them) also legitimate the individualizing imperatives of neoliberalism, as personal pain is commodified in testimonial cultures and the outrage economy of the media. However, both neoliberalism and political whiteness embrace and repudiate the wound simultaneously, constructing an opposition between woundedness and resilience which is seen in both neoliberal survivor culture and the anti-victimism of the backlash. The shaping of our political (and arguably, emotional and experiential) repertoires by this opposition can potentially produce a shuttling between positions rather than the formulation of more nuanced perspectives. This analysis also suggests that the conundrum presented to contemporary feminism more broadly, between victimhood that can be appropriated by neoconservative projects and agency which reflects neoliberal ones (Phipps 2014), is race- and class-specific. Bourgeois white women may have freedom of movement between these positions, while others may be fixed in place or excluded altogether.

In the contemporary Anglo-American political context, in which increased awareness of sexual violence sits alongside a rise in sanctioned racism perpetrated by both states and individuals, it is imperative to understand how race shapes the politics of sexual violence. If we do not, powerful feminist moments and movements such as #MeToo will continue to constitute conversations between white people about our wounds, which legitimize state and institutional governmentalities and impede an understanding of sexual violence as produced by the intersection of patriarchal, capitalist and colonial systems. Political whiteness is characterized by both the exclusion of women of color from Western public feminisms, and the erasure of violence against women in other parts of the world. The rape rampant in Export Processing Zones, conflict zones and peacekeeping operations, femicide in Central and South America, the ‘witch-hunts’ of elderly women dispossessed of land in Sub-Saharan Africa (see Federici 2018), and the abuse at the end of global care chains, have no place here except when commodified by the white savior narrative.

Tackling the political whiteness of public feminisms against sexual violence will not simply involve including more diverse narratives (although this would be a start). There is also a need to ask how sexual violence is lived and politicized in a nexus between intersecting systems, in which gender, race, class and other positionalities interact with opposing categories such as victims and survivors, victims and perpetrators, woundedness and resilience. This is not to deny the validity or gravity of individual experiences of sexual violence. However, it is to express doubts about the emancipatory potential of public feminisms which do not ask these critical questions. Neither is it to deny the power or necessity of #MeToo. However, as Tarana Burke has consistently said, we need a #MeToo in which the experiences and politics of more marginalized women are centered.

## Notes

1. See for example Hicks and Dixon 2017; Phinney and Ross 2017; Ryan 2017; Yates 2017.
2. What Adrienne Rich (1980, 646) famously called the 'penis with a life of its own' argument.
3. Roiphe's rhetoric here echoes that of other privileged feminists, for instance those with trans-exclusionary politics who have claimed to be silenced, from powerful media platforms (Phipps 2019).
4. In naming political whiteness I am not suggesting that I am able to step outside my own whiteness in order to fully critique it; nor do I intend to center myself by constructing an argument about 'white identity.' However, while critiquing whiteness does not absolve us from our complicity with white supremacy, the labor of deconstructing whiteness should not be left to people of color. Within the framework of what Marilyn Frye (1983) calls 'disloyalty to whiteness', I have attempted to make a contribution.
5. Political whiteness has also been used as a term to describe the politicization of white people in general, specifically in Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe (see Fox 2012; Ware 2013).
6. This latter is intensified by the fact that whiteness is a 'disappearing' category, designed to go unnoticed (Ahmed 2007): it is possible for me to be politically aware yet continue to reproduce my own whiteness in my politics (and I am sure I do).
7. Of course, there has been an important and influential strand of feminist theorizing and activism, inspired by Susan Brownmiller, which has instead emphasized the violence in sexual violence in order to argue for legal interventions (Cahill 2001). However, this can also be read as underpinned by political whiteness in its emphasis on sexual violence as a violent *crime*. Indeed, Serisier (2007) shows that Brownmiller's understanding of rape was shaped by an explicit and deliberate turning away from her previous understandings of its role in the constitution of race and legitimization of racism.
8. See for example Ferguson 1984; Chancer 2000; Phipps 2017a.
9. For Brown, identity politics is liberal in orientation: even though it understands liberalism's universal 'I' as constructed by power, it reiterates a sovereign and unified 'I' which is disenfranchised from the universal. I do not have space for a full exploration of this position. However, it does not seem to do justice to the spectrum of politics articulated by marginalized groups, especially those rooted in more collectivist frameworks (for a contemporary example, see Emejulu and Bassel 2018).
10. Organizations such as INCITE! and Survived and Punished in the US are excellent examples of this work in practice. Both organizations center the experiences and analysis of women and gender nonconforming people of color, focusing simultaneously on interpersonal, community and state violence. Both call for an end to both sexual and domestic violence *and* the criminal punishment system.
11. See Bay-Cheng 2015; Gilson 2016; Gill and Orgad 2018.

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