

RUNNING HEAD: #METOO: AN INTERSECTIONAL INTERROGATION AND CENTERING OF
BLACK WOMEN

The University of California, Santa Cruz

**#MeToo: An Intersectional Interrogation and Centering of Black
Women**

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INTRODUCTION AND SITUATING

When I first started hearing about the MeToo movement through white, female celebrities on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, I was initially moved and excited by the widespread visibility of an issue long past due the attention it was starting to receive. My initial hope was that the movement would start the stigmatization process of sexual assault and harrasement, blending the private and the public and negating the norm that the two are inherently separate. Over time, however, I learned that the MeToo slogan and movement was founded by Tarana Burke, a Black, female grassroots organizer and activist a few years before the hashtag #MeToo became somewhat of an online sensation. This did not come as a surprise, as western feminism has a long history of denying Black women the credit they deserve as fundamental and revolutionary actors in the advancements of modern feminisms. I wanted to take a closer look at how, over and over again, the feminist movement in the U.S. largely ends up centering the voices of the white elite while simultaneously excluding the experiences and voices of those most impacted, often Women of Color, particularly Black women. I wanted to interrogate this trend of exclusion through looking specifically at the origins, frameworks, attempted cooptations, goals and progressions of the #MeToo movement, a movement founded and advanced by Black women. I hope to shine a light on the work that Black women have been doing historically to combat this trend and tie it into work being done in our current climate by Black feminist scholars and actavists contemporarily.

While the MeToo movement shows up sometimes as one, cohesive movement, there are multiple facets that call attention to and aim to address different kinds of issues and dynamics and these facets were developed out of various theoretical frameworks leading up to the birth of

MeToo. The main framework through which I am analyzing the MeToo movement is an intersectional one that stems from the work of Kimberle Crenshaw, an American lawyer, professor, civil rights activist, critical race theorist and more who, in 1989, founded the term intersectionality. In an interview at Columbia School of Law, Crenshaw explains her thinking behind intersectionality. She writes, "Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things" (Crenshaw, 1). Crenshaw's intersectional framework provides a way for us to critically examine the life experience of people living at the intersection of multiple identity markers that can, as Ta Nehisi Coates puts it, serve to inhibit life chances¹. Before Crenshaw's work on intersectionality, there was no framework within antidiscrimination law that was able to account for, in its entirety, people experiencing different kinds of oppression and therefore different kinds of discrimination at the same time. The life experience of a Black woman with a disability is not informed by each of these identity markers on their own, rather one's Blackness, femaleness and disabledness operate together to create the conditions of one's life². In *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, Crenshaw writes, "This focus on the most privileged members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination. I suggest further that this focus on otherwise privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the oppressive conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset

of a much more complex phenomenon” (Crenshaw, 140). What is sometimes lost but is a key part of Crenshaw’s analysis is negating the idea that the legal system that existed at the time was adequately equipped to address this reality. We cannot simply try to make a preexisting framework that has historically failed Black women somehow suddenly work for them, rather we must create a new framework through which to address intersectional identities.

In her podcast, *Intersectionality Matters*, Kimberle Crenshaw discusses real life manifestations of intersectionality by diving into the underlying implications of today’s most pressing issues. Crenshaw discusses politics, the law and social movements to help listeners understand their own lives, she says, in deeper, more nuanced ways³. In an episode called, “#MeToo and Black Women: from Hip Hop to Hollywood, Crenshaw interviews Dee Barnes, a rapper and TV personality who performed in the West Coast Hip Hop female duo Body & Soul and hosted a radio show on KDAY before becoming the host of Fox’s hip hop show Pump It Up!. In 1991, Dee Barnes survived a physical and sexual assault by Andre Young, otherwise known as Dr. Dre, who publicly attacked her at a record release party. There were dozens of witnesses to the attack, only one stepping in who subsequently got their teeth knocked out by a bodyguard who was holding people off with a gun. After publicly attacking her, Dr Dre followed Barnes into the bathroom where she was seeking safety, locked her in a stall, got on top of her and held her down while keeping the door closed with his foot.

In her interview with Kimberle Crenshaw, Barnes reports that, to this day, no one has asked her what exactly happened in the bathroom, assuming only physical and no sexual assault had taken place. Barnes eventually went to the police about her assault, sparking much backlash from the rapping community as her speaking up was considered “snitching” and to snitch was

seen as betraying your community. The only person to publicly come forward with their support for Barnes was Dream Hampton, the producer of the documentary *Surviving R Kelly*. In her interview with Crenshaw Barnes says, “For any woman who comes forward speaking her truth there’s always backlash, but there’s a special kind of animosity towards Black women” (Intersectionality Matters Podcast). Not only was Dee Barnes largely not believed or taken seriously because she was a woman in a less powerful industry position than her male abuser, Dr. Dre, but she faced another layer of discrimination that had to do with, as she describes it, backlash from the Black community, including Black women, for speaking out against a powerful Black man. Later on this paper will examine the same kind of intersectional dynamic in the context of Anita Hill’s senate judiciary committee hearing against Clarence Thompson as it is not an uncommon trend and speaks directly to the intersection of gender and race.

While Kimberle Crenshaw has laid an intersectional framework that has proven extremely useful and accurate in examining the complexities of peoples lived realities, more contemporarily intersectionality has been coined as a “pop term” of sorts, its meaning being diluted and used as racial alibi’s for people, companies, workplaces and more to absolve themselves of guilt or responsibility to do any meaningful work to address harm. Tossing the term “intersectionality” into a mission statement, public apology, college brochure and more at best allows companies and organizations to pat themselves on the back for doing the bare minimum and at worst fosters unsafe and predatory environments for people living intersectional lives. In this thesis, I will do my best to use a meaningful intersectional approach that holds true to Crenshaw’s intent to trace the roots, history and progression on the #MeToo movement. The framework through which I will do this interrogation has largely been laid out by her work on

intersectionality as it examines the complexities and nuances of the life experiences of people who are living at the intersection of various identity markers.

RACISM AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

One of the shortcomings of the mainstream #MeToo movement is the way it has largely ignored the foundational work that Black women have done on the intersection of race and sexual violence. Social media and PR platforms that represent the movement have engaged in surface level analyses of the intersection of race and sexual violence by engaging in different kinds of performative activism such as re posting infographics or highlighting Black feminist thinkers during Black history month. This surface level highlighting of Black voices does not account for the theoretical, practical and field work Black feminist scholars, writers, anthropologists and activists have been engaging in for decades. One piece of writing in particular stands out, Alice Walker's *Advancing Luna and Ida B. Wells*. Here, Alice Walker critically recalls and analyses the racial implications of her complex and nuanced relationship with a woman, Luna, with whom Walker worked for a period of time. Walker met Luna during the summer of 1965 in Atlanta while the two were attending a political conference and rally, both as civil rights workers. Both Walker and Luna were working at the polls registering voters during an inflection point in the Civil Rights movement and had been assigned to the same town. Walker and Luna quickly became friends, eventually becoming close enough to move in together and continue their work.

Walker notes that, since they were working with predominantly Black people in a predominantly Black community, there quickly arose a complex racial awkwardness between Walker, a Black woman and Luna, a white woman. One evening during their time living

together, Luna told Walker about her rape which she stated had happened that first summer while the two were working together in the South. When reciting the conversation the two had when Luna came out about the incident, Walker writes, “‘What did you do?’ ‘Nothing that required making a noise.’ ‘Why didn’t you scream?’ I felt I would have screamed my head off.’ ‘You know why.’ I did. I had seen a photograph of Emmett Till’s body just after it was pulled from the river. I have seen photos of white folks standing in a circle roasting something that had talked to them in their own language before they tore out his tongue. I knew why, alright” (Walker, 92-93). This conversation between Walker, a Black woman, and Luna, a white woman, highlights a compounded uncomfortableness that is produced at the intersection of race and gender. Luna’s rape was likely real. A simultaneous reality, however, was the rampant racially motivated persecution that Black men were experiencing at the time, and still are, for perceived advances towards white women. Whether or not Luna was raped, it would not be unlikely at the time for her rapist to be publically killed for his actions at a time when many innocent Black men were being killed over similar accusations.

In her piece, Walker writes to Ida B. Wells, who passed away in 1931, to help acquire advice on what she should do with this information of Luna’s rape through imagining a hypothetical conversation between the two. In Walker’s imaginary, Wells wrote “Write nothing. Nothing at all. It will be used against black men and therefore against all of us...but you remember. You are dealing with people who brought their children to witness the murder of black human beings, falsely accused of rape. People who handed out, as trophies, black fingers and toes. Deny! Deny! Deny!” (Walker, 94). Walker’s manifestation of advice from Wells is very much rooted in the political, social and racial reality that Black men live in. For many Black

women, it is not as simple as reporting a rape or instance of sexual violence. Unfortunately as we know, the actions of one Black person can serve to stand in as representative actions of the entire Black community, a kind of essentialism and reductionism that the white community has never and will never experience. When a white woman is thinking about reporting an assault by a white man, she does not have to grapple with knowing the system he will go through disproportionately incarcerates people of his race, the society in which he lives will view his actions as speaking to the the perceived inherent aggression of people of his race or the community in which they live may seek out independent violent action against him. This reality also speaks to a seemingly inescapable power dynamic between Black men, Black women and white people.

Luna then goes on to critique Walker for sleeping with white men while doing antiracist, political activism and work. Walker writes, “Luna had made it a rule to date black men almost exclusively. My insistence on dating, as she termed it, ‘anyone’ was incomprehensible to her, since in a politically diseased society to ‘sleep with the enemy’ was to become ‘infected’ with the enemy’s ‘political germs’ There is more than a grain of truth to this, of course, but I was having too much fun to stare at it for long. Still coming from Luna it was amusing, since she never took into account the risk her own black lovers ran by sleeping with ‘the white woman,’ and she had apparently been convinced that a summer of relatively innocuous political work in the South has cured her of any racial, economic, or sexual political disease” (Walker, 96-97). This quote is profoundly complex. Luna's claim to take moral and political offence to being sexually involved with white men I think rings true for many Women of Color and particularly Black women, but she fails to acknowledge, let alone interrogate, her own positionality when

making that claim. Walker touches on this failure when addressing the risk Black men were taking when being involved sexually with a white woman given the historical and contemporary contexts of white women accusing Black men of assault followed by violence and lynchings of Black men in the South. Black men would not run into this same kind of potentially dangerous and racialized dynamic in their relationships with Black women, for a host of reasons. This larger history complicates Luna's claim and largely speaks to the complexities and nuances of inter racial relations at the time. Luna, explaining to Walker, a Black woman doing the same work as Luna but with greater personal stake and potential consequence, the political issues with sleeping with white men doesn't land well as Walker has an entirely different political existence than Luna. Luna's claim also speaks to the tendency for white people to use their political and anti racism activism and involvement to absolve themselves of any kind of white guilt. This is not to say that there is anything productive or noble about individual expressions of guilt, in fact we know guilt to be a rather useless emotion, but Luna's stance exemplifies the historical pattern of white activists using their activism as a racial alibi. Additionally, Luna's assertion that she will only sleep with Black men, as a white woman, borders on fetishization as she once again fails to interrogate her positionality and the role white women have played in the history of creating and reinforcing the racist trope of the "hypersexual" Black man. Luna fails to understand and interrogate how her statement feeds into the media portrayal of Black men as somehow inherently more sexually dangerous or aggressive than other men.

Upon reflecting on this strange and illuminating conversation with Luna, Walker goes on to write, "Who knows what the black woman thinks of rape? Who has asked her? Who cares? Who has even properly acknowledged that she and not the white woman in this story is the most

likely victim of rape? Whenever interracial rape is mentioned, a black woman's first thought is to protect the lives of her brothers, her father, her sons, her lover. A history of lynching has bred this reflex in her. I feel it as strongly as anyone" (Walker, 93). The first part of Walker's statement speaks directly to the reality we can see today within the #MeToo movement, the exclusion of those most affected, Black women, from being given leading seats at the table in discussions around sexual and gender violence. The second part of Walker's statement highlights the embodied and historical collective trauma that the Black community may understandably experience as a result of lynchings and the sexual persecution of Black men. The tone deafness of Luna's comments to Walker and lack of positional appropriateness are reminiscent of the kinds of dynamics we can see today within the #MeToo movement when it comes to the centering of white women and selective inclusion of Black women and their lived experiences.

This historical trauma experienced by the Black community would be inadequately analyzed without looking at the historical trend of white women accusing Black men of sexual harassment, assault or rape, Black men getting sent to prison or being killed and then white women, near death and overcome with guilt, admit to lying about the encounter, admitting it either did not happen or it was a consensual situation. Two examples of this are, most famously, Emmett Till and William Offett, written about in *Southern Horrors*, by Ida B. Wells in which Wells discusses the lynchings of Black men in New Orleans from 1880 to 1930⁴. Offett, a married Black man living in the late 1800's, was accused by a minister's white wife, Mrs. Underwood, of rape. Offett's word stood no chance against that of a white minister and he was unsurprisingly sent to prison after a fairly short trial. After years spent in prison Mrs. Underwood, overcome with guilt, confessed to her husband that her repeated encounters with

Offett were completely consensual. Similarly yet more famously we have the case of Emmett Till. Carolyn Brandt, the woman who accused Till of speaking to her in the grocery store, on her death bed confessed to having fabricated and made up the entire encounter that resulted in Till's horrendous murder. In an article titled *The Reopening of Emmett Till's Murder Case Could Bring Us Closure, But Can It Accomplish Much Else?* Alysa Satara writes, "In Timothy Tyson's book 'The Blood of Emmett Till,' he recounts an interview he had with Carolyn. She stated that unlike her testimony in the trial, Emmett Till had never actually grabbed her or made inappropriate gestures to her. She confessed, 'Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him'" (Satara, 1). Even in Brandt's confession, she still insinuates that Till could have done something wrong, he just did not deserve to be brutally murdered for it. This kind of confession of white guilt was not uncommon. It is in this way that we see the most consequential examples of the danger of whiteness and utter uselessness of white guilt and the ways in which the two manifest to directly harm the lives of Black men, their relationships and families.

In her 2017 Bachelor's Thesis titled *Feminism In Late 20th Century American Literature: Black Feminism in Alice Walker's The Color Purple*, Dilara Isik discusses how Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* provides a beautiful and complex framework for examining the literary contributions of Black women to the understanding of the implications of the intersection of race, gender and how the two inform complex forms of violence. Isik introduces us to Culture of Dissemblance, a term coined by Darlene Clark Hine that describes how some Black women, largely during the era of Reconstruction, developed an intentional silence about their sexuality as a method of survival, a strategy that is evident throughout *The Color Purple*. Culture of Dissemblance provides a historical framework for understanding the ways in which Black

women during the early twentieth century were active agents in the resistance of their oppression. Culture of Dissemblance has largely been looked at as a way that Black women can create an intentionally crafted persona that protects them, to an extent, from physical and sexual violence⁵.

While Culture of Dissemblance is a valid and complex form of resisting oppression and self reservation, it has its shortcomings. An article written by the African Studies department at Brown University titled *The Culture of Dissemblance: Obsolete or Still Oppressive* reads, “However, the culture of dissemblance on its own has limits. The framework tends to ignore the interiority of black people and instead focuses on how they protected and concealed themselves (Quashie, 15). Although this isn’t necessarily bad, the discourse could be deepened by a discussion of what the concealed thoughts, feelings, and experiences of black women were rather than how and why they went about concealing them” (Brown, 1). Engaging with self preservation, in any form, is an extremely valid method of survival and resistance, especially in the face of unimaginable oppression, violence and pain. Sometimes it is not realistic for everyday to be a fight and scholars and academia can often lose sight of this reality in the pursuit of creating scholarship that highlights more romantic and revolutionary forms of resistance. We must remember that wherever there is oppression, there is resistance, even if it does not enter the scene fists up, ready to fight⁶. That being said, only focusing on Culture of Dissemblance can be a form of erasure as it fails to address the many ways in which Black women were and are still currently speaking and acting out about their experiences with sexual and physical violence. The article goes on to read, “When discussing what she calls the politics of silence, Evelyn Hammonds suggests that not all black women practiced the culture of dissemblance. In fact, the

blues singers of the 1920s were vocal about their sexuality and about sexual violence in their music (Hammonds, 97). Unlike black women who practiced the culture of dissemblance, blues women turned what others protected into performance. Their music makes up part of an archive surrounding black women's sexuality and what they said and thought about it" (Brown, 1). We can see the ways blues women spoke out about sexual violence as being in a historical conversation with the ways that, say, Tarana Burke chose to speak out about sexual violence by starting the #MeToo movement, Anita Hill spoke out in the Senate while the eyes of the nation watched, Dee Barnes spoke out about her violent attack by Dr. Dre and so many more. This long history of Black women speaking out about sexual violence through literature, song, academia and other platforms has paved the way for something like the #MeToo movement to take flight.

HISTORY OF CENTERING WHITE WOMEN

The MeToo movement, founded by Black civil rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006, is an international effort calling attention to the epidemic of sexual assault and sexual harassment across the world. While the hashtag was first used by Burke on Myspace to spark discussion about her experience as a survivor of sexual assault, the phrase gained momentum and popularity during the Harvey Weinstein trials in 2017 when elite, majority white celebrities started using it on social media in an effort to align themselves and their experiences with that of the movement. The phrase quickly swept all social media outlets, shifting the face of the movement to mainly elite, white celebrities and away from the experiences of those most impacted by sexual assault and harassment. The MeToo movement has brought an influx of international attention to the issue of sexual assault and harassment, empowering survivors across the world to come forward with their experiences and shining a light on the breath of the issue. However, the cooptation of

the movement by elite, white celebrities has served to shift the conversation away from Tarana Burke's original message. It is through this co-option that the movement has failed to center those most impacted, working class women of color, and has instead put its resources towards highlighting very specific experiences of the white elite. Where the MeToo movement has succeeded in raising general awareness about sexual assault and harassment, it has failed in centering the lived experiences, knowledge, concerns and ideas of those most impacted and least likely to be believed.

When comparing the impact of the MeToo movement within the western US to the impact it has had across the world, the difference is quite stark. While MeToo has encouraged women internationally to speak up, it has in no way liberated women across the world from sexual assault, although it may like to insinuate this effect. Lynsey Chutel from the Huffington Post writes, "African women are facing varying scales of discrimination all at once—from rape as a weapon of war in the hinterlands of some countries to jobs for sex within the urban skyscrapers. No single movement can solve all of these myriad challenges, but #MeToo can start by including their experiences and empowering women in these environments to speak up. It should apply the same principle to the women left behind everywhere" (Chutel, 1). Inclusion is not an end goal, but a step along the way. While politics of inclusion and representation can at best lack depth and at worst cause harm, they can sometimes be beneficial in providing role models and mentors for young girls of color. Some Women of Color may reject the idea of inclusion, calling into question the value in being part of a movement that has not had their interests in the forefront, and rather emphasize the importance of organizing by and within communities most affected.

Within the MeToo movement we can not only see yet more examples of white women taking credit for the work of Women of Color, but we can also see an example of how society and the media can accept this false narrative willingly and without much critical thought or intervention. Burke's voice was lost in the crowd of wealthy white women claiming #MeToo, something Burke started. Chetel writes, "The movement as it has played out since that moment has put white women front and centre. Women of colour, women with disability and trans women have not been allowed to play a central part of the narrative, despite the fact that belonging to each and any of these groups may, to varying degrees, [increase the likelihood](#) of being subjected to sexual harassment or gendered violence" (Chutel, 1). This exclusion and failure to center Women of Color speaks to the larger disregarding of WOC in the broader feminist movement and can be seen in connection with the way that feminist movements are claiming intersectionality. We all know what intersectionality means, and we can see how it has been turned into a "pop term" of sorts, its meaning being lost along the way. It has become "trendy" and "woke" to claim that a movement you are in is "intersectional", but oftentimes these movements are not centering people living intersectional lives, they are throwing a term on a website or brochure. Intersectionality has either been stripped of its meaning or has taken a back seat to the louder, white voices of the me too movement.

The MeToo movement has additionally failed to address that white women and Women of Color tend to have vastly different experiences with coming forward with sexual assault allegations. Many white women's socioeconomic status provides them with a level of protection when coming forward with sexual assault or harassment allegations. These women are receiving support and backing from an entire network of Hollywood elites with power, acclimation and

money, most of whom are not concerned in any meaningful way with the lived experience of women outside their exclusive circles. Many women who are living at the intersection of various identity markers do not have the same kind of security in terms of coming forward as wealthy, white women. Initially, Women Of Color have different kinds of racialized experiences with law enforcement that influence their ability or lack thereof to feel safe around police. Then, if Women of Color do report their assault to police, they are less likely to be believed. A study conducted in 2007 found that “college students perceived a black victim of sexual assault to be less believable and more responsible for her assault than a white victim”. This can be attributed to the tendency for white educators, law enforcement and counselors to view black girls as somehow inherently “more mature” or “sexually active” than their white, female peers who are viewed as “innocent” and “young”. It is through these false views that we see the justification and dismissal of sexual assault allegations made by women and girls of Color.

This is not to assert that it is solely the fault of white women that Women of Color are less likely to be believed. All women, no matter their race or class, who come forward with sexual assault and harassment allegations are extremely brave for doing so. Interacting with bureaucratic law enforcement and justice agencies, largely run by men, is an intimidating and scary process for women across the board, especially when your reason for being there is so personal. This is to say, however, that if wealthy, white, elite women are experiencing difficulty, push back and even more harassment for coming forward than we can only imagine the severity of difficulty that Women of Color and non-wealthy women are experiencing. This tendency can be largely attributed to the ways in which the media portrays white women and Women of Color

in terms of language, imaging, tone and the manipulation and representation of their experiences, and centers and focuses on the stories of white women rather than Women of Color.

ANITA HILL AND CHRISTINE BLASEY FORD

One striking indication of the way Black women are systemically not believed can be seen through the testimony of Anita Hill in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1991. Hill, a Black, female law professor testified that Clarence Thomas, her supervisor, had been sexually harassing her at work, creating an uncomfortable and unsafe working environment. Thomas was appointed by George W Bush, who at the time was looking to replace Thurgood Marshall on the Bench. Bush, in an attempt to find a conservative, Black appointee in the 1990's, picked Thomas, an under qualified, under accomplished candidate.

Hill described Thomas' crude language and behavior in front of an all white and all male senate judiciary committee. Throughout her testimony, Hill was questioned, berated, accused of being delusional and dragged through the mud to no ends by men including Joe Biden, President of the United States and Chuck Grassley, Orrin Hatch and Patrick Leahy who all currently still serve on the committee. While these three men do still serve on the committee, the worst of the questioning came from republican senators, creating an extremely hostile, partisan atmosphere. These senators were particularly cruel and insulting. Amongst many disturbing accusations, these men called her credibility into question, claimed to have no understanding of what sexual harassment was, accused her of lying, called her a "scorned woman", accused her of having a "militant attitude relative to the area of civil rights", asked her if she wanted to write a fantasy book, asked her if she was being bribed and much more. Her character and integrity were

repeatedly called into question as she held her ground, unwavering, for four days of brutal questioning.

Anita Hill's testimony was undeniably extremely gendered and racialized. Being a professional working Black woman, Hill was subject to what Kimberle Crenshaw coined as "double jeopardy", a unique, compounded form of discrimination that people living at the intersection of various identity markers disproportionately experience⁷. Hill found herself in a unique position as some women from the feminist movement were attempting to co-op her experience with gender discrimination while some anti racist movements were scapegoating her for speaking out against a Black male professional. What both groups failed to recognize was their inability to understand or address her experience as not just female and not just Black, but as a Black female. Hill was not interested in being a poster woman for feminism nor was she attempting to make a statement in opposition to anti racism. During her testimony, Thomas famously asserted that Hill was putting him through a "high-tech lynching". Thomas stated, "This is a circus. It is a national disgrace, as a black American, as far as I am concerned, it is a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves, to do for themselves, to have different ideas...It is a message that, unless you kowtow to an old order, this is what will happen to you, you will be lynched, destroyed, caricatured by a committee of the U.S. Senate, rather than hung from a tree." By making this statement, Thomas was playing into the racist stereotype of Black men being sexual predators, a stereotype that led to thousands of murders of Black men and boys from the aftermath of the Civil War to the second half of the twentieth century. This statement also implicitly accused Hill of being a "race traitor" for accusing such a high level Black man of sexual harassment. Additionally, while Thomas knew

the turmoil his statement would cause, he did not realize its implicit historical inaccuracy. There have been no cases of Black women lynching Black men, Black women were victims of their brothers, fathers, sons, family members and friends being murdered by lynchings at the hands of white people. For Thomas to compare Hill's testimony to a lynching is to cheapen the historical implications and reality of what lynchings did to Black families and communities in the U.S.

While the inability of an all white, all male senate judiciary committee to believe Hill's testimony ultimately landed Thomas a seat on the bench, Hill's experience and eloquence in speaking out caused thousands of women, of all classes and races, who had experienced similar forms of sexual harassment to mobilize and come forward as well. There were many informal testimonies across the nation at Universities where women shared stories and came together in community. Anita Hill opened up the floodgates for women across racial and class lines to come forward, something that had not yet started happening in the early 1990's, and she did it without the publicity and help of political leaders or the mass media.

Another, more recent accusation of sexual assault was Christine Blasey Ford's testimony against Brett Kavanaugh, Supreme Court Justice nominee in 2018, in front of a Senate Judiciary Committee in which all republican chairs were still, as with Hill, all male and all white. Ford, a white, female psychology professor, while still questioned unfairly by republican chairs, received much more support by democratic chairs, the greater public and the media. Hundreds of women showed up to her testimony in alignment with Ford, gathering outside, rallying together and confronting committee members to vote in her support. Ford received an overwhelming amount of solidarity from women of all races through her testimony. While Kavanaugh was ultimately still appointed to the Supreme Court and Ford was put through a grueling series of questioning,

she was commended for her bravery by many political leaders throughout the nation. Hill received no such national gesture in the same way, with the exception of an article published in the New York Times showing support for Hill's bravery and belief of her testimony. She rather received the opposite. It is no question that Ford's position as a white, well educated woman allowed leaders in politics to see her as honest and relatable. While Hill was also well educated, her race was overwhelmingly the leading factor in her believability.

While Hill's testimony did have racial implications that Ford's did not, it is important, when looking at the testimonies of both Hill and Ford, to take into consideration the historical context of both accusations. Hill came forward in the early 1990's, at a time when it was not common, if not unheard of for women, especially Black women, to accuse men of sexual harassment in such a public setting. The composition of the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1991 was quite indicative of who had the power at the time. Inversely, Ford testified in 2018, 27 years later, during the wake of the MeToo movement. While the Committee was still majority male and majority white, times had changed, it was more common for women to come forward and more common for them to be believed. However, even in 2018, the Senate Judiciary Committee hired a woman to question Kavanaugh and Ford in a hollow attempt to seem more relatable and diverse. Of course, this woman was still white.

COMPLICATING THE REASONABLE PERSON STANDARD

This systematic dismissal of testimony by Women of Color can be seen in conjunction with the "reasonable person standard", a supposedly "objective" standard used by judges to determine whether or not an alleged sexual misconduct claim will hold up in court. The reasonable person standard states, "In determining whether harassment is sufficiently severe or pervasive to create a

hostile environment, the harasser's conduct should be evaluated from the objective standpoint of a 'reasonable person.'" It goes on to assert, "The reasonable person standard aims to avoid the potential for parties to claim they suffered harassment when most people would not find such instances offensive if they themselves were the subject of such acts." Later in the wording of the standard, it is made clear that Title 9 is not supposed to be "a vehicle for vindicating the petty slights suffered by the hypersensitive." All of this language is severely problematic in that it serves to blanket over all survivors of sexual misconduct and negates the lived and embodied experiences of the women who are coming forward. While one woman may "not find such instances offensive", another woman who has had vastly different life experiences may find such instances to be extremely offensive and affect her ability to function in the workplace. Is this woman somehow unreasonable?

Additionally, we must consider the ways in which race influences who is seen as "reasonable". Women of Color are often seen as unreasonable or untrustworthy, rendering this standard insufficient in its ability to apply to them. In *What about #UsToo?: The Invisibility of Race in the #MeToo Movement*, Angela Onwuachi-Willig claims that "the law ignores the complexities of how gender and racial subordination, stereotype, and bias can shape a victim's vulnerability to harassment, her credibility in the eyes of factfinders, and others' perceptions about whether she is harmed by the undesired conduct. It also disregards how a complainant's own understanding of others' perceptions about her group or groups, whether based on race, sex, or other identity factors like religion and age, can shape her own response to the harassment she is enduring." If we are going to have such a standard, it must be complicated to account for

intersectional identities and various life experiences and encompass the broader concerns of WOC in harassment law.

It is interesting to look at the differences between harassment and racial discrimination law. While we can see that harassment law is insufficient in accounting for intersectional women, racial discrimination law, too, falls quite short. In order for a racial discrimination claim to hold in court, it must be proven that the defendant was intentionally discriminating based on race. It is extremely difficult to prove intent and therefore extremely difficult to successfully prosecute racial discrimination cases. The law falls grossly short of addressing the needs of Women of Color in both the realms of sexual and racial discrimination and harassment.

Another fundamental fallacy in the reasonable person standard is its reinforcement and reliance on the fiction of objectivity. It claims that if we can remove individual bias, the standard can be applied objectively, case by case. We need to deconstruct the idea of objectivity as it is held together by the idea that information and knowledge is able to be produced without bias. The production of unbiased information is in fact not possible when we inherently place value on knowledge and “fact” produced through academia and most academic institutions are products of and held together by colonialism, exploitation and subjugation. When Universities stop being seen as the only valid and credible sites of knowledge production and we can start to acknowledge other alternative, Indigenous, and community formats of education, we will be ever closer to this fiction of objectivity.

UNDOCUMENTED AND IMMIGRANT WOMEN

In addition to failing to encompass the needs of working class Women of Color, MeToo has also left out the experiences of undocumented women, a group that is also disproportionately

effected by sexual assault and harassment. Undocumented women may avoid going to police to make a report due to fear of inquiry about their citizenship status. Undocumented women may also be confined to jobs that don't require one to be a citizen, causing feelings of isolation and need to do whatever possible to keep that job. This can result in putting up with various forms of harassment in fear that reporting could cause even more harm. In her article, *When Will MeToo Become WeToo*, Charisse Jones writes, "What immigration enforcement (law) does, is it actually makes you afraid to seek services that you need when you're in danger...It really pushes back into the shadows thousands, and maybe millions, of survivors who we actually need to come forward in order to make our communities and our workplaces safe for everyone" (Jones, 1). In response to this feeling of isolation and dismissal, Time's up, an organization that grew out of the MeToo movement released a statement saying, "To every woman employed in agriculture who has had to fend off unwanted sexual advances from her boss," it read, "every housekeeper who has tried to escape an assaultive guest ... We stand with you. We support you." What is actually being done by the organization to intervene in the systems that are disproportionately affecting undocumented, working women? As far as we can tell, not much. Blanket statements absolving individual people or organizations in power of guilt do nothing to address issues that are systematic. These statements are hollow and meaningless until policy and structural change are brought into the equation in meaningful ways.

Another case we can look at is that of Nafissatou Diallo, a thirty two year old woman who immigrated legally from the West African nation of Guinea and mother of a fifteen year old daughter. In May of 2014, Diallo accused Dominique Strauss Kahn, the director of the International Monetary Fund, of sexually assaulting her in a hotel room in Manhattan where she

was working as a housekeeper at the time. Diallo recalls entering Kahn's room with warning to clean it, seeing him naked, and as she apologized and tried to excuse herself, he restrained and sexually assaulted her in his hotel room (Aptheker, 15). Kahn was arrested aboard a plane to Paris that afternoon, charged with rape, denied bail and set for trial. Initially, support and justice for Diallo seemed vigorous and promising while consequences for Kahn seemed fast approaching, however it was not long before the intersection of class, race, immigration status and privilege reared their heads in a rather familiar way.

The media very quickly started slandering Diallo's character, morals and personhood, inaccurately portraying her as a sex worker and drug dealer, broadcasting her immigration status, tracking her phone calls and even accusing her of lying in hopes of receiving money from Kahn. In fact The New York Times, one of the most well regarded and widely trusted papers in the country, ran an article viciously calling into question Diallo's character. (Aptheker, 18). This kind of intentional, racialized slandering of survivors of Color is not rare as it can also be seen in the brutal interrogations of Anita Hill during her senate judiciary committee hearings. It is crucial that we compare both Kahn and Diallo's class and racial status and interrogate the ways in which these identity markers largely contributed to this slandering portrayal of Diallo and unjust release of Kahn. Firstly, Khan was a white man who held arguably one of the most powerful positions in the world. He has virtually unlimited financial, familial and legal support and access to some of the "best" representation in the world. Diallo, a Black immigrant who worked a full time service job while being a single mom did not have the same status or access to whiteness and power and was subsequently not afforded nearly the same level of respect, dignity and believability. Furthermore, while Diallo received support both domestically and

internationally from feminists and her Hotel Workers Union, she did not receive the kind of outpouring of support, including from white celebrities and feminists with power, that could have helped her obtain a more just result in her case against Kahn.

In a lecture given by Professor Bettina Aptheker in 2018 titled, *From Anita Hill to Nafissatou Diallo: Sexual Harassment in Law and Practice*, Aptheker asserts that our societies inability to believe Diallo in any meaningful way is nothing new. She writes, “This is very deeply rooted in almost all cultures in the world, and it is profoundly symptomatic of an abiding misogyny...the woman is lying, the woman is out for revenge, the woman wants publicity, the woman is deranged, and/or she wants money. This is true even when multiple women come forward about the behavior of one man...In cases of sexual violence in the the United States when the woman is African American or an immigrant of color, or Latina or Native American or Asian American her voice is almost always challenged. In the collision of race, class, and gender her word is almost always suspect” (Aptheker, 24-25). We can see today how difficult it is for white, elite women to be believed when coming forward with their stories of sexual assault so we can only imagine how difficult it is for women living at the intersection of various identity markers to be believed. In this case, Diallo’s class and immigration identity markers speak directly to the kind of intersectionality that white feminism and the #MeToo movement is claiming to center yet where were they, where was the movement, when Diallo was in need of solidarity? Diallo was subject to an ever pervasive form of anti-immigrant racism, the same kind of anti immigrant racism that women today are experiencing, most pressingly, women at the U.S. Mexico border.

While, at best ironically and at worst deadly, we know the U.S. to be a settler colonial project created on stolen land, it has a long, ugly history of anti-immigrant practices and policies. These can be seen more historically in acts such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that barred Chinese immigrants, with the exception of a select few who the U.S. deemed qualified, from entering to, more presently, the Muslim Ban which prohibited Immigrants from Muslim countries from coming to the U.S. in light of islamophobic rhetoric pushed by Trump and perpetuated across the country. Most contemporarily, we can see one of the most violent and invasive forms of anti-immigrant racism taking place at the U.S. Mexico border in immigrant detention centers where undocumented women being sexually assaulted, abused and forcefully sterilized and, in response or lack thereof, the #MeToo movement has been rather silent (ACLU, 1).

Migrant incarcerated women live in some of the most subjugated margins of our society, their rights, humanity and bodies violated, largely by government officials in the name of the nation state. These abuses often go unreported and unaddressed in part due to the precarious position these women are in terms of citizenship status and in part due to the history of disregard for these kinds of abuses and subsequent reports. In July, a 23-year-old Honduran woman filed a report with the federal government stating that she had been sexually assaulted in a bedroom closet by a smuggler who had aided her and her sister in their journey into the South Texas city of Mission. Shortly after this report, a sheriff's deputy in San Antonio was charged with sexually abusing the 4-year-old daughter of an undocumented Guatemalan woman as well as threatening to have her deported if she reported the abuse. In 2017, a guide leading a group of migrants through the Tohono O'odham Nation's reservation in Arizona raped a woman who was from El

Salvador two times over the course of a seven-day hike, telling her he would leave her stranded and alone if she tried to resist (Fernandez, 1). Additionally, he told her “I hope I leave you pregnant so you have one of my kids” (Fernandez, 1). In another case, at least five women were restrained with duct tape, raped repeatedly and stabbed by official border patrol agents and custom officers (Fernandez, 1).

The power dynamic at play in these cases could not be more profound as undocumented people are not protected under the law while border officials seem to be immune to it. Similarly to the dynamic that exists between incarcerated women and prison guards, women in migrant detention centers are completely at the will of the people in power at the border including smugglers, I.C.E. agents, border patrol officers etc. This extreme power dynamic gives way to a disparity in likelihoods of each party’s believability as those in power are often viewed as trustworthy, reliable and deserving of our belief while those in subordinate positions are often framed as sneaky, conniving and more so needing to earn the same level of believability.

One of the most extreme and invasive forms of sexual violence that can be seen at the U.S. Mexico border are the forceful sterilizations being performed on undocumented women being held in these detention facilities. These instances of reproductive violence came to light when a whistleblower from I.C.E, identified as Dawn Wooten, came forward with concern about the medical practices she was witnessing on site. An article from BBC News reads, “It said Ms Wooten and other nurses were alarmed by the ‘rate at which the hysterectomies have occurred’”. Ms Wooten alleged that one doctor removed the wrong ovary from a young detainee and that ‘everybody he sees has a hysterectomy’. ‘We’ve questioned among ourselves like, goodness he’s taking everybody’s stuff out... That’s his speciality, he’s the uterus collector,’ she said in the

complaint. One detainee likened the centre to ‘an experimental concentration camp’, adding: ‘It was like they're experimenting with our bodies’” (BBC, 1). Not only is this an atrocious form of violence, it has a racial component that is quite alarmingly in line with a long history of eugenic practices, including the U.S. mass testing new forms of birth control on Puerto Rican women in the 1960’s. When looking at these kinds of nation sanctioned reproductive violences, we must negate ideas that tell us that social problems can be adequately fixed through biological means. Patricia Hill Collins writes, “Societies that embrace eugenic philosophies typically aim to transform social problems such as unemployment, increasing crime rates, childbearing by unmarried adolescents, and poverty into technical problems amenable to biological solutions” (Hill Collins, 267). This kind of thinking allows us to ignore any actual social reform and instead provides false rationale to justify horrifying practices. When discussing the treatment of Jewish people in Nazi Germany, Hill Collins goes on to write, “...these putative racial differences were linked to issues of national identity and prosperity. Jews were blamed for failed economic and political policies and characterized as outsiders in the homeland of the German national family who hindered the nation states prosperity” (Hill Collins, 268). Linking social problems to “biological differences” and then claiming race as biological difference enables us to falsely claim people instead of systems problematic, rendering us ill equipped to look critically at systemic institutional failures and the ways in which race and immigration status work to decrease the life chances of undocumented women.

INCARCERATED WOMEN

Another shortcoming of the MeToo movement is its blatant disregard for women who are incarcerated in prisons. We know that statistically, according to the Bureau of Justice,

approximately 80,000 women and men per year are sexually abused in American prisons and jails and over 85% of incarcerated women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime.

Because prisons were made to systematically harm, exploit, isolate and generate money, most of these abuses go unreported and unaddressed.

Female inmates told the stories of their sexual assaults to the Huffington Post in 2018. One woman reported, “Officer B. explicitly told me whenever we were alone how he would “fuck” me, and his harassment didn’t stop there. Once, while I was discarding food into a loud, giant compactor behind the mess hall, Officer B. came up behind me. He yanked down my pants and tried to penetrate me as my screams were drowned out by the loud compactor. He only stopped when the machine turned off.” Another survivor told about one of her assaults; “Sergeant P. asked me to sleep naked for him. I refused. The next morning he entered my cell and woke me up by roughly grabbing my breasts saying, “You didn’t do what I asked.” He woke me up every morning after that — sometimes with sexual advances and sometimes just to intimidate me. When he looked at me, I felt violated, as if bugs were crawling all over my body. And he knew there was nothing I could do about it.” Because of the extreme power dynamic between inmates and guards, inmates are legally not even able to consent to any kind of sexual interaction with a guard. Due to the same extreme power dynamic, reporting an assault or rape is virtually impossible. One female inmate told the Huffington Post that when she finally got a state investigator to come investigate a rape she witnessed, he told her she would have to bring him “physical proof in any way she could”, suggesting that she should subject herself to unwanted sexual relations with the guard in order to obtain evidence. If this is the only way that these women will be believed, it is long past due to re-evaluate the value placed on the bodies and

lives of incarcerated women. These reports are public knowledge and can be easily accessed by the public. They are also the exact type of encounters that the MeToo movement is claiming to be bringing to light and fighting to stop. Yet these stories are not going viral on social media, the white elite are not circling the wagons around these women, in fact their stories are not even being mentioned.

Not only are women in prison less likely to be believed when coming forward with sexual assault allegations, but we would be naive to not link the experience of sexual assault with their ending up in prison in the first place. Many women are in prison for fighting back against or killing their abusers and rapists. What is the MeToo movement doing to address the situations of these women? There have been national calls to action instigated by Black led organizations like Black Lives Matter and activists to try and free Cyntoia Brown, a young woman who, at the age of 16, was convicted of killing an adult man who paid her money to have sex with him. Brown claims she feared for her life during the encounter, causing her to shoot him in self defense. Cyntoia's case swept the news, but there are thousands of women who have similar stories and will be in prison for the rest of their lives. If the MeToo movement is outraged at the treatment of the very most privileged women in the country, where is the outrage and support of women whose rights have been stripped from them by the state and are most vulnerable to exploitation?

CONCLUSION

The process of coming forward with a story of sexual assault or abuse is a terrifying and grueling for the survivor regardless of race, gender or sexuality. The bravery required to put your story out into the world, knowing the way every corner of our society questions and de values stories of sexual assault and the people who have experienced it, is something one can only fully

grasp in its entirety if they are a survivor themselves. The #MeToo movement has created a platform and space for women to circle the wagons around other women who have had a similar experience with sexual assault and say, first and foremost, “we believe you”. We know how powerful collective solidarity can be, especially if this solidarity is built out of a collective traumatic memory, experience or story. The #MeToo movement continues to gain momentum and attention and, simultaneously, change the lives of women in the U.S. by creating a vast network of survivors. The importance of the impacts of #MeToo and the networks it has created cannot be overstated. I want to honor all women and people who have contributed their stories to the movement, in any capacity, you have paved the way for those to follow in your footsteps.

The purpose of this thesis was to look at the #MeToo movement critically through an intersectional lens. While the impacts of #MeToo have been wide reaching, what has largely been lost throughout the flashy, international attention the #MeToo movement has received are the voices and labor-emotional, physical and intellectual, of Black and Brown women. Kimberle Crenshaw has provided us a framework through which to examine how the #MeToo movement must take an intersectional leap in not only its inclusion but its centering and support of the lived experiences and contributions of women of Color if it wants to hold true to its goals and values. Moving forward, the #MeToo movement must be about pervasive forms of violence at the intersections of race, class and gender. Without this intersectional analysis, #MeToo will only be able to highlight and center the white elite while failing women living intersectional lives.

At the end of the day, it is not the job of women of Color to have to fight to hold #MeToo to account for their experiences, rather it is the responsibility of the movement and its leaders to actively and intentionally be accountable to women of Color and their experiences. Women of

Color, particularly Black women, have too long a history of having to fight for a seat at a table. If the #MeToo movement wants to be a movement for the people, they must do better, they must be intentional about this inclusion and centering.

While the brave voices of well educated, white and celebrity women have been amplified throughout the movement, the voices of Women of Color, incarcerated women, undocumented women and women living at the intersection of various identity markers have been pushed to the back, if included at all. In order to strengthen the #MeToo movement, we must see the crucial way that race and class disproportionately influence the marginalized position of many women. It is becoming increasingly vital that the #MeToo movement amplify and uplift women living intersectional lives and view these differences as not a burden but a source of strength and solidarity.

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1. In his novel *Between The World And Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates uses the term “life chances”. Through his explanations and analysis in *Between The World And Me*, I came to understand this term as describing the ways in which being Black in America causes people, institutions and society to interact with you in a more dangerous way, therefore decreasing your life chances.
2. Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term Intersectionality in her influential 1989 paper for the University of Chicago Legal Forum, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. I use her term, Intersectionality, as the main analytical framework throughout this paper. Without Crenshaw’s foundational work on intersectionality and the way it affects people’s lives, I would not have been able to do this analysis. Crenshaw’s work and theory plays a key, influential role throughout this paper.
3. Kimberle Crenshaw’s podcast, *Intersectionality Matters*, is something I listen to almost religiously. I find it to be an accessible way to think about serious issues through an intersectional framework. One of Crenshaw’s regular guests on the podcast is Congresswoman Barbara Lee, my representative! She frequents the podcast to discuss the intersection of politics, race and class as it pertains to her constituents and the country more broadly.
4. *Southern Horrors*, by Ida B. Wells was published in 1892 shortly following the lynching and death of a friend and two other Black men at the hands of a lynch mob. The book's title, *Southern Horrors*, is an intentional mockery as “southern honor” was often cited justification for lynchings.
5. In Darlene Clark’s article, *Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance*, Clark provides more context to the becoming of the term culture of dissemblance which has helped my understanding of the term. She writes “*Because black women did not have the social, political, or economic means to change or improve the dominant ideologies of the era, it was*

imperative that they collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self” (Clark).

6. Throughout my Feminist Studies classes I have heard the phrase “where there is oppression there will be resistance” in lectures and readings that discuss different forms resistance to different forms of oppression. I think about this phrase whenever I learn about instances of people experiencing oppression and try to root my understanding of this oppression in my understanding of communities' resistance to it. I was able to trace the phrase to Assata Shakur who, in her autobiography wrote, *“The idea came about because Black people are not free or equal in this country. Because 90 percent of the men and women in this country’s prisons are Black and Third World. Because 10-year-old children are shot down in our streets. Because dope has saturated our communities, preying on the disillusionment and frustration of our children. The concept of the BLA arose because of the political, social and economic oppression of Black people in this country. And where there is oppression, there will be resistance”* (Shakur).
7. Crenshaw discusses “double jeopardy” at greater length in her paper, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*. This term has helped equip me with the language to better understand the meaning of intersectionality.