

'Ruined' lives: Mediated white male victimhood

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Sarah Banet-Weiser**

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Abstract

When the hashtag #metoo began to circulate in digital and social media, it challenged a familiar interpretation of those who are raped or sexually harassed as victims, positioning women as embodied agents. Yet, almost exactly a year after the #metoo movement shot to visible prominence, a different, though eerily similar, story began to circulate on the same multi-media platforms as #metoo: a story about white male victimhood. Powerful men in positions of privilege (almost always white) began to take up the mantle of victimhood as their own, often claiming to be victims of false accusations of sexual harassment and assault by women. Through the analysis of five public statements by highly visible, powerful men who have been accused of sexual violence, I argue that the discourse of victimhood is appropriated not by those who have historically suffered but by those in positions of patriarchal power. Almost all of the statements contain some sentiment about how the accusation (occasionally acknowledging the actual violence) 'ruined their life', and all of the statements analyzed here center the author, the accused white man, as the key subject in peril and the authors position themselves as truth-tellers about the incidents. These statements underscore certain shifts in the public perception of sexual violence; the very success of the #metoo movement in shifting the narrative has meant that men have had to defend themselves more explicitly in public. In order to wrestle back a hegemonic gender stability, these men take on the mantle of victimhood themselves.

Keywords

Male victimhood, networked misogyny, postrace, public statements, sexual violence

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In 2016, when Stanford University student Brock Turner was found guilty of sexually assaulting an unconscious woman, his father wrote a letter to the judge presiding over his son's trial, pleading for him to not be sent to jail. In part, Dan Turner's letter said,

These verdicts have broken and shattered him and our family in so many ways. His life will never be the one that he dreamed about and worked so hard to achieve. That is a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action out of his 20 plus years of life. The fact that he now has to register as a sexual offender for the rest of his life forever alters where he can live, visit, work, and how he will be able to interact with people and organizations. (Xu, 2016)

Turner was sentenced to 6 months of prison, and was released after 3 months for 'good behavior'. His case was decided a little over a year before the social movement #metoo gained spectacular visibility, when thousands of women around the world took to media platforms to tell their stories of sexual violence (Boyle, 2020; Mason-Deese, 2018; Phipps, 2019, 2020, and others).

Indeed, among the effects of #metoo, one important factor is the way in which the public act of women coming forward (in highly mediated forms, from public performances to tweets) as embodied *agents* works to confront the perceived passive vulnerability of victimhood. But as the Turner example demonstrates, stories about white *male* victimhood became highly visible, even before the #metoo movement shot to visible prominence. Powerful and (almost always) white men in positions of privilege took up the mantle of victimhood as their own in earnest, often claiming to be victims of false accusations of sexual harassment and assault by women.¹ While people in positions of privilege have historically claimed to be aggrieved or injured by those who threaten their dominance, we have witnessed a significant shift in the contemporary moment, where individual men publicly and assertively claim to be *victims*, an identity category that, as Alyson Cole has argued, has often been used as a derogatory identification by groups in power, as in 'victim feminism' or 'victimology' (see Cole, 2006, also Banet-Weiser, 2018).

How do we make sense of these different stories of victimhood – a global media movement for sexual harassment and assault survivors, and narratives of white male victimhood – that circulated on mainstream and social media only a few years apart? One way is by examining the public statements made by accused white men in the midst of investigations which purport to offer the 'truth' of events. These public statements circulated and achieved heightened visibility in both mainstream media sites and on social media, and are deliberate strategies to create a familiar binary of 'he said/she said'. In this article, I examine highly visible public statements made by five white men (most in extreme positions of privilege) after they were accused of sexual harassment and assault: the aforementioned Stanford University student Brock Turner; Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein; NBC network news anchor Matt Lauer; US Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh; and Fox News media commentator Bill O'Reilly. The statements range from letters written by the accused about their accusers and then posted on mainstream and social media (Turner, Weinstein, Lauer, O'Reilly), to statements read by the accused in public (Kavanaugh), to statements made through lawyers (Weinstein), to public statements made about the accused by their relatives and colleagues (Turner,

Kavanaugh). These statements find a heightened purchase in a national and global context where, in 2017, US president Donald Trump said to the mainstream media (in the context of the Kavanaugh hearings),

My whole life I've heard, 'you're innocent until proven guilty', but now you're guilty until proven innocent. That's a very, very difficult standard . . . It's a very scary time for young men in America when you can be guilty of something that you may not be guilty of. (Diamond, 2018)

The #himtoo movement, which also emerged in the Kavanaugh hearings, created public service announcements such as, 'Mothers of sons should be scared. It is terrifying that at any time, any girl can make up any story about any boy that can neither be proved or disproved, and ruin any boy's life' (Ellis, 2018).

Through such highly visible discourse, which circulated on social media as well as in the mainstream media, the stage is well set for individual men to make public statements about their innocence. It is this broader national discourse, then, that has provided the justification for individual denials; claims to victimhood cannot be wholly secured by the accused statements, but rather are buttressed by the discourse of powerful others (such as the then President of the United States) that render a kind of authoritative judgment. And, while there are key differences in the language of the statements I examine here, they typically fall on an affective continuum ranging from 'she misunderstood', to 'I'm sorry she *feels* this way' to 'I categorically deny all accusations'. Almost all contain some sentiment about how the accusation (occasionally acknowledging the actual violence) 'ruined their life'. Without exception, all of the statements analyzed here center the author, the accused white man, as the key subject in peril and the authors position themselves as truth-tellers about the incidents. In some ways, these statements underscore certain shifts in the public perception of sexual violence; the very success of the #metoo movement in shifting the narrative has meant that men have had to defend themselves more explicitly in public. In order to wrestle back a hegemonic gender stability, these men take on the mantle of victimhood themselves. Indeed, the very fact that high profile men feel compelled to defend themselves suggests that women's accounts of sexual violence have become more legible through the #metoo movement.

Thus, a further question here is the following: How can we think about these two different methods of publicly coming forward, one that secures a productive vulnerability as in the #metoo movement, and the other a forced public statement by accused men (forced by precisely the women who come forward), but that nonetheless attempts to secure power relations and privilege? In the following pages, I argue that this specific moment is not necessarily new (although it has taken on novel forms), but relies upon a series of historical conjunctures: the political logics of neoliberalism, networked misogyny, and the post-racial moment. These historical conjunctures are not independent from each other but rather rely on shared logics, such as those political theorist Wendy Brown describes as 'conjoin[ing] moral righteousness with nearly celebratory amoral and uncivil conduct . . . endor[s] authority while featuring unprecedented public social disinhibition and aggression' (Brown, 2019). As a way to parse out these dynamics, I use the public statements and letters from the accused men and argue that the statements are symptoms of this conjuncture and help to illuminate some of the shifting practices of

white male subjectivity in this historical moment. But first, we need to consider what comprises the genre of the public statement.

The public statement, confession, and the private

Although, of course, they have a long history, public statements of apology or denial have become a staple in the age of celebrity and social media (Kampf, 2009). When a person who is highly visible in public life is accused of wrongdoing, it seems inevitable that some kind of statement addressing the act will follow, to be circulated across media platforms. Without a doubt, these public statements are part of the public relations and publicity machines that strategically chronicle the lives of the wealthy and powerful as a way to generate ever-more visibility. Yet, aside from functioning as public relations mechanisms, there are clear elements that comprise the genre of the public statements I examine here: they are part of *public* discourse (manifest in the media economy in which they are expressed and circulated); they are formulated within *legal* discourse (where inevitably the statements are informed by lawyers and often expressed through legal channels); and both of these discourses are embedded within a specific masculinist *domestic* context (where the author's defense often summons his obligatory protection of not only his own reputation but his family). These elements – the public, legal, and the domestic – have long been key components of hegemonic masculinity, and as such, the statements I examine here draw on already existing forms of gendered authority.

These statements are public in that they circulate on multiple media platforms, on what could be called a networked public (boyd, 2010). The publicness of the statements, however, is not only about the media contexts on which they circulate, but also about the normative publicness of the masculine subject. Here, it is useful to analyze contemporary public statements of apology or denial within a Foucauldian frame of truth and confession. In his work on discourse and truth, Foucault writes that he is interested not in truth as an epistemological concept, but rather 'with the problem of the truth-teller, or of truth-telling as an activity: . . . who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relations of power . . .' (Foucault, 2001). The subject, according to Foucault, is *constituted* through the injunction to tell the truth, and the subsequent telling the truth about oneself to another (through confession).

While this notion of the logic of the confession is useful, it also focuses on a Western subject, where the truth-teller is assumed to be capable of 'telling the truth'. Indeed, as many scholars have persuasively argued, those who can claim to be a truth-teller are often those in positions of power, including racial, economic, gendered, and colonialist power (Chouliaraki, 2013; Fanon, 2008; Lorenzini and Tazzioli, 2017). For example, as Lorenzini and Tazzioli (2017) point out in the context of refugees and asylum seekers who position themselves as victims, 'Asylum seekers are usually seen as *suspect subjects* who have to demonstrate that they really are in need of protection; yet, at the same time, they are considered as subjects incapable of telling the truth'. Similarly, within the context of an accusation of rape or sexual assault, if a woman is involved she is invariably cast as a 'suspect subject', a subject who historically has been socially constituted not only as someone *who* lies but indeed as someone who *is* a liar at her core, as many feminist scholars have theorized (Brownmiller, 2013; Federici, 2004; Hill Collins, 2008;

Smith, 1998, among others). As lawyer Susan Estrich has argued, ‘the myth of the lying woman is the most powerful myth in the tradition of rape law’ (cited in Cannold, 2011). Thus, in the public statements by men who have been accused, this myth of the lying woman is a constant specter, not only framing every word but also justifying every denial. Indeed, part of what was so powerful about the initial momentum of the #metoo movement is that it was a context in which the ‘myth of the lying woman’ was itself denied, where stories told by women were believed, if even for a moment.

But of course, the moment had particular ramifications. The cascade of stories of women being sexually harassed, assaulted, and raped that circulated on social media not only bolstered and mobilized women to go public with their stories, it also bolstered and mobilized powerful men who became fearful about the potential loss of their entitlement, which in the current moment translates into occupying the position of victim (Phipps, 2020, see also Banet-Weiser, 2018). This mobilization functions to sustain the reputational and privileged status of the men accused; the ‘confession’ here is not one of guilt, but one of acting according to established norms and standards of white masculinity – acting in *expected* ways. That is, the defensive posture by many powerful men who are accused of sexual harassment implies a deeply sedimented level of entitlement of their masculine privilege. As philosopher Kate Manne (2017) has pointed out, the moral narratives that frame privileged male victimhood will ‘tend to further privilege those already unjustly privileged over others. And this may come at the expense of unfairly impugning, blaming, shaming, further endangering, and erasing the less privileged among their victims’ (pp. 200–201).

As I will argue, the public statements I analyze here are not asking for forgiveness (although some do contain a kind of ‘apology’) but rather are attempts to shore up dominant dynamics of power – even as they render power differences between the accused and the accuser completely invisible, whether that be because the woman is unconscious, in the case of Turner, or a low-level co-worker in the case of Lauer and O’Reilly, or a woman dependent on the blessing of Weinstein in order to not be blacklisted from the film industry.² Indeed, this is why the Foucauldian framework is useful, as the authors of these public statements unequivocally use the language of ‘truth’ to authoritatively say *what* happened, thus re-establishing those authors as commanding truth-tellers. Because of the context in which these statements are articulated, their subject positions as the bearers of the truth are secured. And if *they* are the truth-tellers, they can occupy the position of being victims and reclaim privilege when their reputations, ‘good names’, and careers are threatened.

The public statements are also positioned within legal discourse; even when they are not explicitly articulated through lawyers, they all are clearly vetted through lawyers and rely on dominant legal assumptions about truth, evidence, and guilt. As such, they function as a particular kind of *testimony*, as Leigh Gilmore (2017) has argued; the authors position themselves as ‘targets’ of manipulative women or they ‘categorically deny’ the accusations, or they argue that the accusations are a defamation of character and reputation. The statements then function as both testimony and judgment, as both defendant and jury.

These public statements thus rely on an already established logic about the certainty of the law, and are positioned in different ways than the testimonies that comprise the #metoo movement. The law, as scholars such as Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Williams, Gilmore, and others have noted, ‘disproportionately affects the vulnerable’ (Crenshaw,

1989; Gilmore, 2017; Williams, 1992). #metoo testimonies predominantly circulate in what feminist scholar Carrie Rentschler calls ‘feminist protocols’, those mechanisms outside the law and the state, often circulated on social media, and thus have a valence that is already understood as less than legitimate (Rentschler, 2014). Aside from circulating on social media, #metoo testimonies also encompass accountability processes, whisper networks, and deliberately anti-carceral mechanisms. These different testimonies move across publics, and even if #metoo offered a rupture in the discourse of ‘the myth of the lying woman’, their force as testimony is juxtaposed against a normative, and masculine, discourse of legal authority; indeed, ‘testimonial truth is indexed not to facts but to power’ (Gilmore, 2017). Accused men intervene in this ‘testimonial network’ with their own claims to victimhood, and they perform a reversal of blame through their public statements, placing blame on the women (or even the culture) who apparently encouraged, indeed even compelled, them to sexually harass and assault. In this way, these public statements function as a ritual that returns the ‘sanctioned status quo of structural oppression’ (Pearl, 2020).

Finally, these public statements not only rely on, but resecure, a historical, social, and cultural masculine domestic context. In these statements, we see an iteration of the gendered public/private divide, but as many scholars have shown, the public/private division is not one that remains in one place, but rather moves across borders of identity and power (Berlant, 2008; Gilmore, 2017; Williams, 1992, and others). Again, the statements are *public*, reinforcing that truth ‘belongs’ to the public sphere which is controlled by men. Yet, they also articulate a personal ‘truth’ of the masculine self as a domestic protector (most often explicitly of the family). As I will discuss later, both Lauer and O’Reilly specifically reference their identities as fathers and their role in protecting their family in their statements. Like all of these statements, this draws on the notion of traditional morality, where male dominance is part and parcel of the landscape. These statements are, in other words, *strategically* personal. However, the women who accuse them struggle to appropriate public space through their accusations, which makes their claims both difficult and more vulnerable to challenge. The public statements by the accused precisely work as this challenge, bringing into play a version of the private sphere, where the women’s own ulterior motives – selfishness, financial greed, shame for their own benefit, and publicity – are contrasted with the reputation and ‘character’ of the men they accuse. The women who accuse *do* make the personal political by publicly accusing men. Yet, because they represent the ‘private’ or the space of apparent intimacy, when they come forward with accusations, they do not remain in the shadows; rather the women who accuse these men transgress and seek to interrupt the public, masculine sphere, demonstrating in the process their seeming self-interest and inherent non-trustworthiness. As we will see, this transgression forms the central logic of the denials proffered in the public statements by the men accused.

Neoliberal freedoms

When Stanford University student Brock Turner was found guilty of raping an unconscious woman in 2016, he put forward a public statement that quickly circulated in digital media (Levin and Wong, 2016). Blaming alcohol consumption for his behavior, he said,

I've been shattered by the party culture and risk taking behavior that I briefly experienced in my four months at school. I've lost my chance to swim in the Olympics. I've lost my ability to obtain a Stanford degree. I've lost employment opportunity, my reputation and most of all, my life.

His statement, like all of the others, centers *his* losses – sports success, future employment, reputation, and his 'life' – as the key tragedy of this event. In this move, he positions himself as more the victim than the woman he assaulted (although she would make her own powerful statement later). The transitivity of the statement also positions him as a passive victim of even his own actions; he uses passive verbs, saying that he is shattered by behavior he *experienced* during college, rather than that he *partook* in. He reserves active language for statements about his victimization: '*I've* lost . . .'. In the case of powerful men who are accused of sexual violence, victimhood is a claim made within an ideology of privilege, and as a specific blockage of capacities – the things that Turner 'lost' (see Littler, 2017). And, ideologies of victimhood change their valence, force, and direction depending on the historical and political-economic contexts in which they take hold. In this section, I offer a brief view of some of these contexts as a way to understand the seeming ease with which powerful white men claim victimhood in the contemporary moment.

There is an enormous body of scholarship that theorizes neoliberalism, from a range of vantage points – its voracious appetite for ever-new markets, economic precarity, loss of social structures and networks of care, relentless individualism (see Brown, 2019; Duggan, 2012; Harvey, 2007; Rottenberg, 2018 and others). Here, I focus on aspects of neoliberalism that have encouraged and enabled a shift in how we understand victimhood; more specifically, I focus on the political logics of neoliberalism that authorize privileged white men – precisely those who benefit the most from neoliberal capitalism – to claim that they are victims of those who benefit the least: women and people of color. Political theorist Wendy Brown's *The Ruins of Neoliberalism* is especially useful here, as this work focuses

on how neoliberal formulations of freedom animate and legitimate the hard Right and how the Right mobilizes a discourse of freedom for its sometimes violent exclusions and assaults, for resecuring white, male, and Christian hegemony, and not only for building the power of capital. (Brown, 2019: 2)

Her argument that neoliberalism and traditional morality (i.e. white male privilege and the traditional sexual division of labor) have a certain affinity frames the cases of the privileged white men discussed in this article. As Brown, Lisa Duggan, Catherine Rottenberg, Daniel HoSang and Joseph Lowndes and others have pointed out, the political-economic discourse of neoliberalism has appropriated the rhetoric of the Civil Rights, liberal feminism, and other social movements that usher in a shifted definition of 'freedom', decidedly against the downward redistribution justice of anti-capitalist movements, fomenting instead a form of distributive justice 'where capitalism reigns supreme and the market identifies who should get what' (Duggan, 2012: 107; HoSang and Lowndes, 2019; Rottenberg, 2018).

In Turner's public statement about *his* losses, the losses and trauma of the woman he raped are not mentioned at all. Again, Turner claims himself to be a victim – of party 'culture' and the apparent 'risk taking behavior' that emerges from this *culture* (rather than from him) – and wants to secure his privilege. And indeed, the judge who presided over his case made his decision based on the apparent inevitability of this privilege: sentencing him to only 6 months in prison after his guilty verdict and the prosecution's recommendation of 6 years, the judge (Aaron Persky) said, 'A prison sentence would have a severe impact on him . . . I think he will not be a danger to others'. As discussed earlier, Turner's father, in a court statement, argued that imprisonment was not the right punishment for his son, who he said had already paid 'a steep price . . . for 20 minutes of action' (Xu, 2016).³ Using the rhetoric of the loss of entitlement, Turner, his father, and the judge worked to shore up the privileges of class and race. In other words, the severity of Turner's 'punishment' is measured against his naturalized status and entitlements, rather than against the suffering of the woman he harmed or some other standard of justice.

These neoliberal definitions of privilege have a history, of course. The current manifestation of victimhood is entangled in a history of neoliberalism and anti-identity politics. As Duggan and others have argued, neoliberalism in the United States in the late 1990s saw a 'multicultural' diversity embraced, a narrow, nonredistributive form of 'equality' politics, where a particular version of 'difference' was repurposed for a new era, and those who benefited from progressive policies and social welfare were seen as exploiting and capitalizing on their 'difference', and claiming a spurious 'victimhood' (Cole, 2006; Duggan, 2012).

The meritocratic rhetoric that fits so well within neoliberal logics is one that does not challenge structural inequalities due to racism or patriarchy, but instead embraces a palatable form of individualist anti-racism and feminism that redefines what a 'victim' is (Orgad, 2009). This is an important foundation for the contemporary era; since the neoliberal context does not challenge the structural logics of inequities, it becomes possible for those in positions of privilege to use the same rhetoric of discrimination and equality and apply it to themselves. In the contemporary moment, this context also operates on what Ruth Wodak (2015) has called 'the politics of fear', where, in her words,

we observe a normalization of nationalistic, xenophobic, racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric, which primarily works with 'fear': fear of change, of globalization, of loss of welfare, of climate change, of changing gender roles; in principle, almost anything can be constructed as a threat to 'Us', an imagined homogeneous people inside a well-protected territory. (p. 5)

Partly due to this discourse of fear, there is a readiness for white male privilege to reassert itself in a variety of ways. Yet, while it is important to consider how the politics of fear frame the contemporary Western context (indeed, Donald Trump exploits and capitalizes on these politics of fear, as many have documented), it is also important to understand this context not only through affective registers but also through structural politics of racism and sexism. The underlying context of networked misogyny, especially the central focus on the idea that most rape allegations are false, strategically intended to 'ruin the lives' of men, is a crucial factor in defending the 'truth' of public statements by men who are accused.

Networked misogyny and the culture of ‘false rape allegations’

Today, nearly two years after I was fired by NBC, old stories are being recycled, titillating details are being added, and a dangerous and defamatory new allegation is being made. All are being spread as part of a promotional effort to sell a book. It’s outrageous. So, after not speaking out to protect my children, it is now with their full support I say ‘enough’.

In a new book, it is alleged that an extramarital, but consensual, sexual encounter I have previously admitted having, was in fact an assault. It is categorically false, ignores the facts, and defies common sense.

Matt Lauer, October 8, 2019 (Khatchaturian, 2019)

Neoliberal culture has not only ushered in a general sense of the privileged taking up the mantle of victimhood. As much as a universal whiteness is an unmarked standard within this context, a polarized and divisive gender politics find a home within the ravages of neoliberalism. Scholars have recently pointed out that the current decade is one in which a networked misogyny has taken hold, described as ‘a basic anti-female violent expression that circulates to wide audiences on popular media platforms’ (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2015; Marwick and Lewis, 2015; see Chouliaraki, 2013); the logics and affordances of media platforms allow for an amplification of what Manne (2017) has described as ‘the system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance’. The emergence and heightened visibility of networked misogyny, often centered around a space in online culture called the ‘manosphere’, offer yet another plane in the conjunctural logic of contemporary white male victimhood (Ging, 2017; Jane, 2016; Marwick and Lewis, 2015).

While there are many facets to networked misogyny, here I would like to focus on a central issue for many contemporary Men’s Rights Organizations (MROs): false accusations of rape. In November 2017, the well-known television anchor for the US morning news show *Today*, Matt Lauer, was fired after a sexual misconduct investigation involving at least three female co-workers who accused Lauer of sexually harassing and assaulting them. In 2019, journalist Ronan Farrow in his book *Catch and Kill*, which detailed his investigations into Harvey Weinstein and others, alleged that Lauer raped a young co-worker, Brooke Nevils in 2014 (Farrow, 2019). Although Lauer owned up to some of the allegations in the initial investigations, he insisted that all acts were consensual, and he categorically denied raping Nevils.

The notion that rape accusations are false, put forward by vindictive or spurned women as a way to deflect personal responsibility, or as an ‘outrageous’ claim intended for profit (such as selling a book), is not a new phenomenon within misogynistic structures: the idea that women fabricate rape as a way to deal with rejection has long been a trope of misogyny, emerging with great visibility in the 1980s and 1990s with what Christina Hoff Sommers and Katie Roiphe deemed ‘victim feminism’ in the context of college date rape awareness (Roiphe, 1994; Hoff Sommers, 1995). As Alyson Cole (2020, this volume) has argued, victimhood as a derogatory affiliation

can be traced to the 1980s, when a new and cynical conception of ‘victim’ was used to dismantle the welfare state and challenge multiculturalism, identity politics and progressive policies such as affirmative action. Other disdainful victim idioms surfaced in tandem . . . and ‘victim’ itself became a term of derision deployed to condemn the character of sufferers irrespective of their condition and to chastise them for enfeebling and effeminizing the nation.

Victimhood in the era of social media and online vigilantism, specifically the claim that women capriciously occupy this subject position through routinely and falsely accusing men of rape, has been a newly important justification for white privileged men claiming victimhood. In turn, this has helped to mobilize what Manne (2017) calls ‘himpathy’, an affective and moral stance regarding how female accusers have ‘ruined’ the lives of men they have accused, which have been taken up with relish by men’s rights organization, online misogyny, and in courtrooms.

The idea that feminists are enmeshed in what anti-feminist communities call ‘victimology’ and what conservative communities routinely call liberal ‘snowflakes’ has become a key element of networked misogyny, which Lise Gotell and Emily Dutton (2016) argue bolsters claims that ‘a feminist-inspired political correctness has taken hold, producing an ideological ban on victim-blaming that prevents reasonable advice about behaviours that increase the risk of rape’. Not surprisingly, there is a total lack of reflexivity within networked misogyny, where an ‘ideological ban on victim-blaming’ has ironically encouraged men who are accused to occupy *themselves* the subject position of victim; apparently when powerful men like television personalities Matt Lauer and Bill O’Reilly claim their brand of victimhood, it does not threaten to ‘enfeeble or effeminize a nation’ (Cole, 2020).

Indeed, quite the opposite. Consider another part of Lauer’s public statement:

Anyone who knows me will tell you I am a very private person. I had no desire to write this, but I had no choice. The details I have written about here open deep wounds for my family. But they also lead to the truth. For two years, the women with whom I had extramarital relationships have abandoned shared responsibility, and instead, shielded themselves from blame behind false allegations. They have avoided having to look a boyfriend, husband, or a child in the eye and say, ‘I cheated’. They have done enormous damage in the process. And I will no longer provide them the shelter of my silence. (Khatchatourian, 2019)

Lauer proclaims that he had ‘no choice’ to go public, because his words will ‘lead to the truth’, and apparently demonstrate that the allegations against him (again, by several women) are ‘false’. These allegations have done ‘enormous damage’ to Lauer, who for his entire career has traded in on his identity as an authentic, ‘nice’ guy – and he clearly feels he is certainly not the monster the women who accused him claim he is. In this moment, authenticity means both more and less: Lauer presents himself as a nice guy, a move which for him exonerates him from committing sexual violence. His performance of authenticity is reinforced through his confession: he confesses to infidelity but not to non-consensual sex. Indeed, his statement is in some ways a discourse of a kind of *disempowerment* – he speaks of being *forced* to talk against his will, of having no choice, of ‘sheltering’ others through his own suffering. Here, there is a role reversal which ties in directly with and mimics feminist discourses: being forced against your will, abandoning

shared responsibilities, being ‘silenced’ in the service of power, having the responsibility to speak out. Through this statement, Lauer is actually *performing* the #metoo speech genre. In so doing, he turns the accusation against him to one against his accusers for ‘abandoning shared responsibility’.

This move is a familiar one in sexual assault and rape cases, where consent is frequently posed as a slippery slope, apparently a matter of interpretation, and often relies on a social construction of women as inherently untrustworthy: no means yes, she came on to me, she asked for it. Of course, authenticity also means less in this context: the fact that there are extreme power differences between the powerful star of a network and young co-workers, and how these power differences will frame every interaction between Lauer and his less powerful co-workers, renders a claim of ‘authenticity’ of the encounters suspect at best.

This strategy is even more pronounced with conservative television anchor Bill O’Reilly, who was fired from the Fox News network in 2017 after multiple accusations of sexually harassing co-workers. Relying on the tried and true formula of women who manipulate men for money, O’Reilly’s public statement after his firing was the following:

Just like other prominent and controversial people, I’m vulnerable to lawsuits from individuals who want me to pay them to avoid negative publicity. In my more than 20 years at Fox News Channel, no one has ever filed a complaint about me with the Human Resources Department, even on the anonymous hotline.

But most importantly, I’m a father who cares deeply for my children and who would do anything to avoid hurting them in any way. And so I have put to rest any controversies to spare my children.

The worst part of my job is being a target for those who would harm me and my employer, the Fox News Channel. Those of us in the arena are constantly at risk, as are our families and children. My primary efforts will continue to be to put forth an honest TV program and to protect those close to me. (Steel, 2018)

O’Reilly unambiguously claims himself to be a ‘target’ and ‘constantly at risk’ because of his public visibility as a ‘prominent and controversial’ figure, denying all allegations by shifting the blame to his accusers who are apparently motivated by money. O’Reilly, like other conservative media pundits in recent years, constructs his subjectivity as authentic, someone who, like Trump, ‘tells it like it is’. And, similar to Lauer, for O’Reilly evading responsibility is rearticulated as an act of domestic protection – he is protecting those close to him, neatly constructing his subjectivity as *selfless*, rather than *selfish*.

To return to the ways in which networked misogyny mobilizes around ‘false rape accusations’, we need to understand Lauer’s and O’Reilly’s responses as capitalizing on the current ethos. At least in the United States, the notion that women routinely make false rape accusations as a way to benefit themselves (absolve them of a regretful decision, attract the attention of another man, narcissism – the list of justifications supplied by the manosphere is long) has had a heightened visibility since at least 2014, when

MROs began to shift their attention from fathers and divorcees (where the focus was on paternity and custody rights, as well as domestic violence against men) to young men and rape culture. Again, this context relies on a familiar understanding of the public and private; the mansphere has increasingly occupied the public sphere, with apparent rationality and the 'truth', where women are associated with issues of the private sphere, consumed by a lack of personal responsibility, narcissism, and petty revenge.

Like so much of media culture, MROs often focus on specific individuals and their crimes as emblematic of an entire demographic or culture. In the early-21st century, stories about individual cases on college campuses circulated widely in the media, giving a sense to various publics that false accusations of rape were far more common than actual rapes.⁴ In this move, college campuses were highlighted as a place where young men's lives were 'ruined' because of the apparently rampant problem of women falsely accusing them of rape. Thus, despite the widely known gap in the numbers of women who have been raped and those of women who falsely accuse men of rape, the few women who have admitted to fabricating a rape become so highly visible in the media so that the issue of false accusations becomes over-exaggerated and even normalized.⁵ MROs have embraced false rape accusations as one of their major causes; Paul Elam, the founder of what is often considered the flagship website of the Men's Rights Movement, *A Voice for Men*, stated in 2014 about college rape culture: 'We have a problem with feminists hyper-inflating rape statistics, creating a kind of hysteria on campus over a problem that needs due attention from law enforcement' (Matchar, 2014). Another Men's Rights website, *The Other McCain*, stated that

campus 'rape culture' [is] hysteria ginned up by the Obama administration and its feminist allies. A major factor in that hysteria was the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) using Title IX to threaten universities for allegedly failing to punish sexual assault. This witch-hunt frenzy resulted in male students being falsely accused of rape and denied their due-process rights in campus kangaroo-court disciplinary proceedings. (McCain, 2017)

The rhetoric of 'hysteria', 'witch-hunts', and 'kangaroo-court' underlies much of the anti-rape culture discourse, often focusing on the apparent fallacy of 'date rape'.⁶ As is now well-known, Trump has liberally used the concept of the 'witch-hunt' to apply to himself, with the mainstream media as the frequent culprit, though he has also claimed to be a victim of a witch-hunt in the context of the various women who have accused him of sexual harassment and assault. And, in a more subtle way, the discourse of hysteria and witch-hunts justifies the claims in the statements of Lauer and O'Reilly, where the latter complains of being 'vulnerable to lawsuits from individuals who want me to pay them to avoid negative publicity', and Lauer claiming that the accusations are borne from women who 'have avoided having to look a boyfriend, husband, or a child in the eye and say, "I cheated" . . . They have done enormous damage in the process'.

Aside from deflecting blame away from themselves through the use of such terms, this language also trades in on an MRO-inspired narrative of 'social justice warriors' and identity politics, where women and people of color ostensibly occupy the mantle of victimhood based on a fabricated oppression. This move does a kind of double duty: on one hand, MROs claim false accusations are a widespread problem in US culture, basing this claim on a very few individual women who captured media attention. On the other hand,

they create an individualistic narrative about social justice warriors, thus also deflecting blame away from structural capitalism or patriarchy. Indeed, just like the individualism of the men accused detracts attention from structural issues, focusing on individual women, making them national media stories, makes the same move.

The artificial furor over false accusations does not remain as widely circulated media stories, however, but finds its way into US federal policy. US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, appointed by Trump in the first months of his administration, almost immediately revamped clauses in Title XI, the bill that addresses gender discrimination on US college campuses, including sexual assault (Green and Stolberg, 2017; Kingkade, 2017). The new DeVos version of Title XI allows for a much more lenient policy toward *accused* students, with advocates claiming that Title XI did not protect persecuted male students; the acting director of Education Department's Office for Civil Rights, Candice Jackson, has said that campuses have mishandled assault cases, and men who have been accused have, in a familiar phrasing, had 'their lives ruined'. She claimed that

the accusations – 90 percent of them – fall into the category of 'we were both drunk', 'we broke up, and six months later I found myself under a Title IX investigation because she just decided that our last sleeping together was not quite right'. (Green and Stolberg, 2017)

Changes in US federal policy about sexual assault rely on the neoliberal definition of 'freedom' discussed earlier, a freedom of choice in an apparently unlimited and unfettered field of choices, where structural limitations such as deeply sedimented gender discriminations are not understood to distort this field in any way. Neoliberal definitions of freedom are also racially based; the privileges of whiteness, along with the privileges of hegemonic masculinity, do not play any part in the outrage expressed in the public statements of the men accused. To the contrary, whiteness is rarely mentioned except as a new category of victimhood; as conservative media pundit Piers Morgan claimed when asked why men need an International Men's Day, 'Yes, we do need a day, we are now the most downtrodden group of men in the world. Especially white, middle class men like me. Endangered species' (Soteriou, 2019).

Whiteness and neoliberal post-racism

The statements made during the Brett Kavanaugh Senate hearings (by Trump, Kavanaugh, and others) couch the privileges of white masculinity within the rhetoric of fear and loss of entitlement. As is well known by now (and is detailed by others in this volume), Christine Blasey Ford accused Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her in high school, and this became the subject of a Senate hearing because Kavanaugh was a US Supreme Court nominee. In his testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Kavanaugh tearfully said he would persevere in the hearings (*New York Times*, 2017). His statement reads in part:

Eleven days ago, Dr. Ford publicly accused me of committing a serious wrong more than 36 years ago when we were both in high school. I denied the allegation immediately, unequivocally, and categorically. The next day, I told this Committee that I wanted to testify as soon as possible, under oath, to clear my name.

Over the past few days, other false and uncorroborated accusations have been aired. There has been a frenzy to come up with something – anything, no matter how far-fetched or odious – that will block a vote on my nomination. These are last-minute smears, pure and simple. They debase our public discourse. And the consequences extend beyond any one nomination. Such grotesque and obvious character assassination – if allowed to succeed – will dissuade competent and good people of all political persuasions from serving our country. I will not be intimidated into withdrawing from this process. This effort to destroy my good name will not drive me out.

Kavanaugh's use of 'good people', obviously referencing himself, relies on a neoliberal rhetoric that is deliberately vague and overly ambitious, what Daniel HoSang has called 'political whiteness', 'a complex inner landscape involving attachments to the self (often the wounded self) and to power (often in the form of the state)' (HoSang, cited in Phipps, 2020). This 'inner landscape' positions neoliberalism as an anti-racist freedom, one in which accusations against a 'good person' is easily explained away as frenzied 'smears' that 'debase our public discourse'. This 'public discourse' is not actually so public in this case; it is clearly dedicated to Kavanaugh's reputation management and 'clearing' his own name. So who is the 'our' in 'our public discourse' here? What public discourse is Kavanaugh referring to? Clearly, it is one that is bounded by 'freedoms' – but these are neoliberal freedoms, where particular subject positions are 'free' where others are seen as unfairly capitalizing on difference.

Kavanaugh's statement also calls into play what Sara Ahmed has called an 'orientation' of whiteness, where the 'world of whiteness coheres as a world' (Ahmed, 2007). This orientation relies precisely on the idea that culture is somehow unshaped by racial dynamics, and is 'objective'. In the cases I examine here, political whiteness is coupled with the unmarked, 'objectivity' of masculinity that has framed US politics historically, as Brown, HoSang, and others have noted; in other words, the (primarily) white women who accused Kavanaugh and the others do not have the same kind of access to defending whiteness as objective (although, as Alison Phipps points out, white women in general have relied on precisely this kind of whiteness, Phipps, 2020). Therefore, Kavanaugh's passionate defense of public discourse and the 'competent and good people' who serve the United States is framed as if the privilege of whiteness and masculinity not only shapes what kind of public discourse is understood as legitimate but also comprises 'competent and good people'. Again, this is what Ahmed (2007) calls the orientation of whiteness, where 'whiteness could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they "take up" space' (p. 150). White powerful men often feel entitled to take up space, precisely because it is understood to be theirs in the first place; whiteness orientates white male bodies in the direction of objectivity, of that of the unmarked, toward a specific definition of 'freedom'. While Ahmed importantly focuses on the orientation of bodies, I also see the orientation of whiteness as relying on, and reproducing, a *discursive* orientation; the 'world of whiteness coheres in a world' through and within speech, represented in public statements.

Thus, whiteness is positioned within neoliberal culture as entitled to a particular kind of freedom, one that ironically does not register racial politics at all. The context of neoliberalism has, among other things, ushered in the 'post-racial' moment in the United States (whose most visible expression was the election of the first Black president). As

Sumi Cho argues, the logic of the post-racial insists that ‘the state need not engage in race- based decision making or adopt race- based remedies’ (cited in HoSang and Lowndes, 2018). This 21st century post-racism has its roots in the mid- to late-20th century social movements, where anti-racist organizations insisted on pointing out that not only is race an element in social action, it is a key contingency of capitalism itself. Both acknowledging and challenging this racial capitalism was understood by radical activists in the 1960s and 1970s as the way to achieve an anti-racist and redistributive society (Ferguson, 2019; Robinson, 2019).

Yet, as many scholars have shown, the radical anti-capitalist and anti-racist movements of the 20th century gave way to the idea (now manifest in post-racial discourses) that capitalism could forge a ‘color-blind’ society, one that does not ‘see’ race as a factor in achievement or failure (Mukherjee et al., 2019, and others). Within this frame, if a non-white person performed ‘victimhood’ it was *not* because of structural racism, but rather because of their own doing. In other words, the responsibility for their victimization was indexed to an individual rather than to a structural force. Perhaps most importantly, if Black or Brown people were victims of the economic ravages of neoliberalism, structural racism or institutional sexism, it was a *personal* issue, not a national one, where myths about belonging and rights are preserved for white communities. When white communities, however, also suffer from the ravages of neoliberal economic policies and practices, this suffering is frequently articulated as ‘lost pride of place in America or the West’ (Brown 2020). This loss of ‘pride of place’ is not only about whiteness but also historical constructions of masculinity, and does considerable work in the public statements of men accused of sexual harassment – Turner’s stated loss of opportunities that he ‘earned’ through his own talents and hard work, Kavanaugh’s claim that the accusations amounted to ‘coordinated character assassination’, Lauer’s and O’Reilly’s claims that the accusations were motivated by manipulative women who were seeking to damage their reputations. And, while the accused men analyzed here are in positions of cultural, racial, and economic privilege, the sentiment of loss that these men express implicitly capitalizes on the loss that has come to be associated with (indeed, almost the trademark of) the US white working class men ‘left behind’, whose loss and pain Trump promised to revenge and remedy. In other words, these powerful elite men claim victimhood partly through appropriating the discourse of loss and mourning of the disenfranchised, emasculated working class ‘forgotten men’ of the United States.

Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, who has been accused by 111 women of sexual assault (and has been arrested and convicted for two of the assaults at the time of writing), wrote a different public statement than Lauer, O’Reilly, and Kavanaugh, all of whom denied any wrongdoing. Weinstein does actually apologize for ‘his behavior’, though he makes no mention of the fact that his lawyers were busy suing some of the women who accused Weinstein for defamation at the time he was expressing his remorse in a public statement (*New York Times*, 2017). Weinstein does, however, like Brock Turner, blame *culture*, rather than himself, for his actions. He laments that he ‘came of age in the 60’s and 70’s, when all the rules about behavior were different. That was the culture then’. As many have pointed out, while the rules of some behavior may have been different in the 1960s and 1970s, sexual assault was decidedly *not* an accepted norm of the time. Weinstein is clearly lamenting a loss of entitlement, where perhaps *his* own

violent behavior was rarely questioned. He also, like the others, made a point of acknowledging that he was not a bad guy, especially when it came to women, using his apparent commitment to women in the industry as validation for this:

One year ago, I began organizing a \$5 million foundation to give scholarships to women directors at USC. While this might seem coincidental, it has been in the works for a year. It will be named after my mom and I won't disappoint her. (*New York Times*, 2017)

Not surprisingly, the only specific women that Weinstein explicitly denied assaulting were actors Lupita N'yongo and Salma Hayek, both women of color. As Hayek has stated, 'We are the easiest to get discredited . . . It is a well-known fact. So he went back, attacking the two women of color, in hopes that if he could discredit us' (Oldham, 2018). Weinstein's statements, like the others, describe a loss of entitlement of white masculine privilege, a loss that is easily translated into victimhood.

Conclusion: ruined lives

'My family and my name have been totally and permanently destroyed'. Brett Kavanaugh

'I've lost employment opportunity, my reputation and most of all, my life'. Brock Turner

'Those of us in the arena are constantly at risk, as are our families and children'. Bill O'Reilly

'They have done enormous damage in the process'. Matt Lauer

' . . . he never gets to be Harvey Weinstein ever again'. Harvey Weinstein's lawyer, Donna Rotunno (Stolworthy, 2019)

As I have demonstrated in this article, there are a number of conjunctures at play in the contemporary moment that authorizes a shift in subjectivity for privileged white men, from a position of derisively accusing women and people of color of 'playing the victim' to the position of claiming aggrieved victimhood themselves. The #metoo movement challenges historical narratives about rape culture, and specifically, questions a familiar interpretation of those who are raped as victims, as well as confronts the vulnerability of rape survivors. Indeed, one of the important social and cultural changes emerging from the #metoo movement is that, by making accusations visible and widely circulated, men who are accused of sexual harassment and assault have to now address these accusations. This challenge, however, is met with another: the historical conjuncture of neoliberal culture, networked misogyny, and post-racial politics enables the men who are accused of sexual violence to draw on already existing forms of authority and claim themselves to be victims. These forms of authority form the logics of their public statements, where discourses of the public, the legal, and the domestic shore up hegemonic masculinity. Through reading the public statements of highly visible and powerful men who are accused of sexual violence as symptoms of this conjuncture, we can illuminate shifting practices of white male subjectivity in this historical moment.

And while there are a range of reasons for white privileged men to feel a loss of entitlement in the current context, it is women, especially when accusing these men of sexual violence, who become the central vector in this victimhood; women who transgress the boundaries kept so vigilantly by powerful men become the perpetrators, the ones responsible for ‘ruining’ their lives, their good names, their reputations. One of the key successes of the #metoo movement has been that men who are accused of sexual assault now have to address these accusations, but the differences in the publicness of women coming forward with accounts of sexual harassment and assault and the publicness of accused men’s claim of victimhood need to be acknowledged. The claims made by powerful men who are accused are often amplified and authorized through official, governmental channels, in ways women’s reports of sexual violence are not. Because of deeply sedimented social constructions of gender, the credibility and the epistemological veracity of women’s reports – and the challenges to their believability – situate and authorize them as public statements differently than the statements powerful white men make about being victimized by being accused of sexual violence.

The hyperbolic claims of ruination by the accused men – made in the midst of, for example, an incredibly lenient sentence after being found guilty (Turner), or after a confirmation to arguably the most powerful political position in the United States (Kavanaugh), or Lauer and O’Reilly being fired from their jobs but not charged with any kind of crime – are crucially important to the logic of contemporary victimhood. The idea that lives have been *ruined* works as an attempt to mask or downplay the material and social status of all of these men, who are all overwhelmingly successful in all definitions of the concept. This, in turn, lends legitimacy to their claims of victimhood by obliterating a key counter-argument before it has even been deployed: The evidence one sees of a ‘good life’ of the men accused is framed as just the *trace* of a good life destroyed. This is what the public statements tell us about white male victimhood: this subject position shores up hegemonic masculinity by drawing on the authority of discourses about masculine protection and a legal system that was designed to privilege them above all others.

The public statements issued by powerful men who are accused of sexual violence are not, it should be clear, equivalent to the women who come forward with stories of sexual violence that have been the core of the #metoo movement. The statements by the accused are made only after accusations have gone ‘public’, that is, only after women have transgressed the boundaries of a public sphere that historically and presently privileges white men over all others. It is within this context that claims that men’s lives have been ‘ruined’ by the women who accuse them find purchase; it is the logic of neoliberalism, networked misogyny, and post-racial discourse that not only authorizes but encourages white male victimhood. To be clear, #metoo has forced a visibility to the normalization and ubiquity of sexual harassment and assault across all industries and contexts, and it is because of this crucial visibility that powerful men who are accused attempt to defend themselves, and in the process secure white masculine hegemony.

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Notes

1. While there have been famous men of color accused of sexual assault, most notably Bill Cosby and comedian Aziz Ansari, the majority of the highly visible cases have been white men.
2. An interesting perspective about public forgiveness is what Sharrona Pearl calls ‘racialized forgiveness’. Writing about violence (especially police violence) in Black communities in the United States, Pearl analyzes media interviews with the families (mainly Black women) of these victims, focusing on the various ways in which Black women are expected to ‘forgive’ those who murdered their loved ones. As she argues, ‘racialized forgiveness requests are designed to benefit the perpetrators rather than the victims and their families, framing the shooters as individual exceptions to the state system that they represent’. This works, argues Pearl, to delegitimize Black rage and anger, and is a ritual that has as its goal ‘to return to the sanctioned status quo of structural oppression’. While Pearl is discussing specific cases of racialized violence, similar dynamics frame the cases of sexual violence I examine here.
3. After the verdict, many called attention to the disparity between the white Stanford student athlete and a Black Vanderbilt student athlete, also accused of rape, who received a maximum sentence.
4. For example, see Duke University’s LaCrosse team scandal, a case at the University of Virginia exposed as fabricated by *Rolling Stone* magazine, or the case of Nikki Yovini at Sacred Heart University who admitted to lying about being gang-raped at a party, among others.
5. According to the National Sexual Violence Research Centre (2012), studies show a lower extreme of 2.1 percent and an upper extreme of 7.1 percent of false reporting. https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/Publications_NSVRC_Overview_False-Reporting.pdf
6. And, it is interesting that ‘witch hunt’ references a specific historical phenomenon in which women were harmed and murdered on the basis of being suspect, unbelievable, untrustworthy, and uncompliant with patriarchal expectations. Discursively, it taps into an anxiety about truth, believability and authenticity that is deeply gendered.

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Biographical note

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