

#HerToo? Academic Exclusion in the Age of #MeToo

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This article began life as an essay about the difficulties and dangers women face at academic conferences. It was inspired by my own and my fellow female delegates' experiences of being threatened, followed, and groped in the neighborhood near our conference venue—classic #MeToo territory—and also by the realization that safety at conferences should be conceptualized in more capacious terms. Acutely aware of my own oversights and shortcomings when I had organized conferences in the past, the essay argued that safety should encompass issues like accessibility for disabled and neuro-diverse delegates; it stressed the need for pronoun badges for all delegates and restroom access that matches gender identity; it argued for sliding fees that reflect the pay gaps that exist not just between men and women but also between white women and women of color. But when I pitched the essay to four online higher education sites, two rejected the essay outright, one suggested it could be published if I focused on the sexual harassment that women faced (the implication being that I should not consider separately the issues of accessibility that different women experience depending on the intersection of their identities), and one published the article after removing all references to the impact of racial discrimination, transphobia, ableism, and poverty on conference-going women. The academy's apparent unwillingness to confront the ways in which it disadvantages certain women—even in this climate of increased awareness of pervasive sexism and sexual violence—inspired the piece published here. The point of this essay is that the academy is a hostile place for women, but it is more difficult for women who are not white, cis, and heterosexual.

The Me Too movement was founded thirteen years ago by Tarana Burke to support survivors of sexual violence. The women with whom she worked were primarily young black women and women of color living in low-wealth communities, and Me Too was intended to validate *their* experiences, promote healing, and provide survivors and allies with resources appropriate to *their* communities. But in the process of its transformation into the viral #MeToo hashtag, the traumas of black and marginalized women that underpin this movement were quickly forgotten. Burke voiced her dismay in a letter extracted in *Essence Magazine*:

I was pained to watch Black women, yet again, being erased from the narrative . . . I started doing this work because there were so few resources and recourses for us, which is why it cuts deep to hear sisters, who are largely responsible for my visibility, saying the current iteration of the #MeToo movement isn't for them.¹

#MeToo has now been co-opted by the academy, where the extent of sexual abuse, harassment, and bullying is coming to light in articles, blogs, and crowdsourced documents. Despite its potential to unite survivors, hold perpetrators accountable, and change abusive norms in higher education, there is a real risk that the academic iteration will become another tool of exclusion that erases the unique experiences of black and minority ethnic women, trans women, poor women, and disabled women—just as Burke herself was nearly erased from the movement she created when Alyssa Milano tweeted #MeToo in 2017.

If we in the academy choose to invoke #MeToo, we must remember that this movement has always been both educational and intersectional, with Burke developing a

culturally-informed curriculum to discuss sexual violence within the Black community and in society at large. Similarly, the 'me too' movement seeks to support folks working within their communities to attend to the specific needs of their community/communities, i.e. supporting disabled trans survivors of color working to lead and craft events/toolkits/etc. with other disabled trans survivors.²

#MeToo makes it possible to imagine real transformation within the academy by unifying survivors. However, we must not allow it to become a tool that only or primarily helps white, cis women by treating women as a monolith and failing to create adequate space for consideration of the unique ways in which women of color, trans women and nonbinary people, disabled women, and poor women experience abuses of power, sexual harassment, and discrimination.

Colleges and universities are, of course, microcosms of society. Those who work and study within them are subjected to the same racism, sexism, classism, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, and myriad other forms of discrimination that structure society at large despite the protections afforded by Title IX (for now) and the best intentions of many members of the community. The academy is an uncongenial place for women, but that uncongeniality is intensified for marginalized women. For instance, while women are overrepresented in short-term, part-time, low-wage positions, white women in the United States have a clear advantage, as they are much more likely than women of color to secure full-time work.³ According to the National Center for Education Statistics,

Of all full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in fall 2016, 41 percent were White males; 35 percent were White females; 6 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander males; 4 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander females; 3 percent each were Black males, Black females, and Hispanic males; and 2 percent were Hispanic females. Those who were American Indian/Alaska Native and those who were Two or more races each made up 1 percent or less of full-time faculty in these institutions.⁴

The lack of representation of women of color is cause for serious concern not just because it indicates racial bias in hiring, tenure, and promotion procedures but also because it creates an environment in which micro-aggressions, racial profiling, and other forms of abuse—including sexual abuse—can proliferate. When Lolade Siyonbola fell asleep in her common room at Yale University and a concerned student called the police, the pith of that encounter was that a black woman was perceived to be a threat and was unfairly forced to prove her right to occupy space in one of the most prestigious universities in the world.⁵ In the United States, where black bodies are policed, antagonized, and constantly made to account for themselves, it comes as no surprise that women of color are harassed in institutions of higher learning, where they make up a tiny percentage of the population. The fact that they are often perceived, whether consciously or unconsciously, as not belonging in these spaces means that their experiences of mistreatment are at risk of being disregarded.

Similarly, at this historical moment, when the civil rights of trans and nonbinary people are under attack in the United States, we must recognize that trans women are subjected to unique forms of abuse, erasure, and discrimination within the academy. In October 2018, the *New York Times* reported on the Trump administration's intention to revise the Department of Health and Human Services' legal definition of sex as "a person's status as male or female based on immutable biological traits identifiable by or before birth."⁶ Defining sex according to a person's genital assignment at birth or their genetic makeup effectively erases trans and nonbinary people and the protections to which they are entitled under Title IX. In addition to legal threats, trans and nonbinary scholars are subjected to insidious and pervasive forms of transphobia in the academy, often justified as freedom of speech. Grace Lavery's recent essay "Grad School As Conversion Therapy" had to state explicitly that "deadnaming and misgendering are not acceptable scholarly practices, and they are not covered by the principle of academic freedom," citing examples of senior academics justifying deadnaming (referring to a trans person by the name on their birth certificate), using the wrong pronouns to address students and colleagues, and inviting speakers who invalidate the existence of trans people to university campuses.⁷ Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, the United Kingdom's public

consultation to reform the Gender Recognition Act (the legal process by which people change their gender) inspired a series of editorials in the national press, many of them written by white, cis academic women expressing concern that self-identification would result in the admission of trans women into single-sex spaces, thereby jeopardizing the safety of cis women. Trans women are more likely to be victims of sexual violence than perpetrators, and excluding them from women's toilets and other spaces jeopardizes *their* safety. Their identities and experiences were and are validated by Burke, and any principled use of #MeToo in the academy must center their experiences of abuse.

As the #MeToo hashtag continues into its second year, we have seen efforts to promote diversity and inclusion within our classrooms and the wider university environment smeared as violations of academic freedom and free speech, as Lavery and others have observed. On 12 November 2018, the BBC announced the launch of a new academic journal—the Journal of Controversial Ideas—which would allow authors to publish pseudonymously, thereby circumventing the “culture of fear and self-censorship” that its founders believe is plaguing academia in the United Kingdom.⁸ Academics receive abuse and harassment from readers on both the right and the left of the political spectrum, but Jeff McMann, one of the journal's founders and professor of moral philosophy at the University of Oxford, expressed particular concern that “the threats to free speech and academic freedom that come from within the university tend to be more from the left.”⁹ Given that fellow founder, Peter Singer, has come under fire from disability rights activists for justifying the selective infanticide of disabled babies, critics of the proposed journal fear it will be used to disseminate inflammatory ideas that will cause real harm to already marginalized people.¹⁰

It seems clear that the academy is still a long way from achieving parity of treatment and opportunity for marginalized students and employees. #MeToo has the power to unify women in the academy and make their position stronger, but if we want to adopt #MeToo in any meaningful way, we must listen to what marginalized women tell us about their unique experiences of oppression, platform marginalized voices, and commit to working toward equality and changing our behaviors if they are harmful. If we want the privilege of using #MeToo, we have the responsibility to restructure the academy along more equitable lines.

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NOTES

¹ Marquita K. Harris, “Tarana Burke Guest Edits Special ‘Me Too’ Edition for *Essence*,” *Essence*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.essence.com/news/tarana-burke-guest-edits-the-november-2018-issue-of-essence>.

² “History and Vision,” me too., accessed 5 December 2018, <https://metoomvmt.org/about>.

³ For more on women being disproportionately represented among low-wage, short-term workers, see Jonah Newman, “There Is a Gender Pay Gap in Academe, but It May Not Be the Gap That Matters,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11 April 2014, <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/data/2014/04/11/there-is-a-gender-pay-gap-in-academe-but-it-may-not-be-the-gap-that-matters>.

⁴ “Race/ethnicity of college faculty,” National Center for Education Statistics, accessed 5 December 2018, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61>.

⁵ See Paula Rogo, “The Black Yale Student Who Was Racially Profiled For Napping Speaks, Says University ‘Has Not Done Enough,’” *Essence*, 16 May 2018, <https://www.essence.com/news/black-yale-student-lolade-siyonbola-napping-while-black>. Such incidents are widespread; Priyamvada Gopal, a Reader in Anglophone and Related Literature at Cambridge University, has been repeatedly racially profiled by porters at her college. Her concerns were dismissed by the university, and she has become an outspoken critic of their silence on matters of race. See Gopal, “Meet Priyamvada Gopal—The Academic Standing up to Racism at Cambridge University,” interview by Hanna Mirsky, *Cambridgeshire Live*, 21 October 2018, <https://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/news/cambridge-news/meet-priyamvada-gopal-academic-standing-15297444>.

⁶ Erica L. Green, Katie Benner, and Robert Pear, “‘Transgender’ Could Be Defined Out of Existence Under Trump Administration,” *New York Times*, 21 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/21/us/politics/transgender-trump-administration-sex-definition.html>.

⁷ Grace Lavery, “Grad School As Conversion Therapy,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (blog), 29 October 2018, <http://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/essays/grad-school-conversion-therapy>.

⁸ Martin Rosenbaum, “Pseudonyms to Protect Authors of Controversial Articles,” *BBC*, 12 November 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-46146766?fbclid=IwAR1Rb7sJOnECDU9iAtVZ6P3vLf1Tk15oqR1us-7qYEzBrGI4iIPuPvuIxyg>.

⁹ Quoted in Rosenbaum, “Pseudonyms to Protect Authors of Controversial Articles.”

¹⁰ See Harriet McBryde Johnson, “Unspeakable Conversations,” *New York Times*, 16 February 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/16/magazine/unspeakable->

conversations.html; Nesrine Malik, "A Journal for Anonymous 'Controversial' Ideas Will Only Fan the Flames," *The Guardian*, 13 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/13/journal-anonymous-controversial-ideas>; and Haixin Dang and Joshua Habgood-Coote, "The Journal of Controversial Ideas: It's Academic Freedom Without Responsibility, and That's Recklessness," *The Conversation*, 19 November 2018, <https://theconversation.com/the-journal-of-controversial-ideas-its-academic-freedom-without-responsibility-and-thats-recklessness-107106>.