SPEAKING OUT ON TWITTER: #METOO AND HASHTAG SURVIVOR DISCOURSE

By

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To all the people fighting in solidarity against sexual violence, this is for you.
#MeToo.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..........................................................................................................................4

ABSTRACT...........................................................................................................................................6

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................................7

2 SPEAKING OUT – FROM CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING GROUPS TO HASHTAG FEMINISM............................................................17

   Rape Speak-Outs ..............................................................................................................................21
   Activism and Organizations ...........................................................................................................24
   TV Talk Shows ...............................................................................................................................27
   Digital Feminist Activism ................................................................................................................30
      Hashtag Feminism ..........................................................................................................................31
      Affective Publics ..........................................................................................................................36
      Responses to Rape Culture .........................................................................................................39

3 WHO GETS TO SPEAK? DEFINING SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND SURVIVOR DISCOURSE ..............................................................46

   Patriarchal Power and Rape Culture .............................................................................................48
   The Continuum of Violence Against Women ..............................................................................52
   Issues with “Victim” and “Survivor” ..............................................................................................54
      Victim-Survivor Dichotomy .........................................................................................................58
      The Process of Naming ...............................................................................................................60
   Neoliberalism, Postfeminism, and the New “Victim” and “Survivor” Narratives .......................63

4 SPEAKING OUT ONLINE – SAYING #METOO .................................................................................69

   Data and Method .............................................................................................................................70
   Tarana Burke and the Me Too Movement ....................................................................................71
   Alyssa Milano Responds to Harvey Weinstein Allegations ............................................................73
   Saying “Me Too” .............................................................................................................................76
   #MeToo and the Continuum of Violence Against Women .............................................................79
   “We Are Survivors” .......................................................................................................................84
   Discussion and Secondary Findings .............................................................................................87

5 CONCLUSION: #METOO ONE YEAR LATER ..................................................................................91

LIST OF REFERENCES ..........................................................................................................................93

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ....................................................................................................................100
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In this thesis, I examine feminist anti-rape discourses beginning with the women’s
movement in the 1970s and analyze the continuing overlap between speech-text and social
networking sites such as Twitter. By studying the discursive elements of the #MeToo hashtag, I
look at how hashtag feminism creates new potentials for understanding how women who
experience sexual violence construct victim and survivor discourse online. I conclude the thesis
with a qualitative content analysis of 113 tweets from the #MeToo hashtag which illuminate how
women disclose their experiences on social media platforms to define and reinterpret sexual
violence. Key concepts I use to bridge the material-virtual connection between online and offline
protest are the continuum of violence against women, the victim/survivor binary, and affective
networked embodiment. I conclude from the analysis that the semiotic process to name one’s
experience as violence is broader than what is currently constructed in discussions of sexual
violence.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

On October 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano published a tweet responding to reported sexual assault, harassment, and rape allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein. In the tweet, she asked her followers to reply “me too” if they were ever sexually harassed or assaulted. She stated in the tweet that a friend suggested the idea to her to “give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem” of sexual violence.¹ Within twenty-four hours of Milano’s tweet, more than 1.7 million tweets and twelve million Facebook posts were published and shared across eighty-five countries using the hashtag #MeToo, and millions more were posted in the months since (Park 2017).

The “me too” movement was founded in 2006 by African American women’s rights activist Tarana Burke to symbolize solidarity and promote empowerment through empathy between women of color who experienced sexual violence, and to fill the gap left by other antiviolence agencies regarding unaddressed issues in communities of color (Garcia 2017; Rodino-Colocino 2018). The movement caught widespread attention, however, after the Milano’s tweet went viral.² #MeToo became a platform for millions of women (and men) to document and share their experiences of sexual violence, build solidarity with other survivors, and became a touchstone for how we discuss sexual violence in the United States and abroad.³

¹ See Milano’s original tweet: https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/919659438700670976, October 15, 2017.
² Several individuals and organizations including Black Lives Matter called attention to Burke’s role in founding the Me Too movement and she was eventually recognized as its founder by both the media and Milano. See Black Lives Matter’s tweet: https://twitter.com/Blklivesmatter/status/920019175594233856 and Milano’s tweet: https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/920067975016624128, October 16, 2017.
³ #MeToo trended in over eight-five countries. Many nations developed their own language equivalencies including French Canadian’s #moiaussi, France’s #balancetonporc, Italy’s #quellavoltache, and China’s #woyeshi. See Donadio 2017; Goel, Venkataraman and Schultz 2018; Phillips 2018.


#MeToo and similar feminist hashtags that address sexual and gendered violence revitalize a long history of feminist discursive activism such as the antirape movement that originated in consciousness-raising groups and through rape speak-outs in the 1970s. During this time, women theorized that their subjugation was a consequence of men’s violence against them, and the formers’ roles in society were constructed within masculine definitions of power that were propagated and reinforced in the media, academia, the law, and other institutional structures. Consciousness-raising groups and speak-outs offered women a forum to draw comparisons between their experiences and recognize patterns between them, thereby discovering that their experiences were not individual or isolated, but part of a wider social structure of gender subordination through patriarchy. Through discursive activism, feminists examined how women’s subordination was secured through language and promoted new grammars and social paradigms by which women could challenge masculine definitions by defining it in their own words (Young 1997). Feminists recognized the material consequences of ideas and how ideas became constructed as “real” through language, and in doing so they were able to develop a language by which individuals, collectives, and institutions could name sexism and devise responses to it (Connell and Wison 1974; Kelly, Burton and Regan 1996; Shaw 2012a; Young 1997).

Digital feminism preserves this discursive history and reinterprets its methods to digital spaces. Feminist researchers including danah boyd, Anita Harris, Aristea Fotopoulou, Jessalyn Keller, and others, have noted over the last five years that advancements in online communication have aided in fostering renewed and widespread attention on feminist issues in public discourse and in building feminist communities. For instance, hashtags such as #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen and #LessToxicFeminism drew attention to the historic
marginalization of communities of color in mainstream feminist movements and promoted a more intersectional feminism both online and offline (Loza 2014; Thelandersson 2014). Further, because the internet can disseminate information faster and farther, it provides access to feminist ideas for a wider audience without necessitating organizational membership, thereby expanding exposure of feminism to a larger public, both within national borders and transnationally (Baer 2014; Clark 2016). However, emerging technologies have also raised new questions about accessibility and connectivity, communicative capitalism, biodigital vulnerability, online/offline embodiment, and privacy and visibility—particularly for members of marginalized or vulnerable communities (Fotopoulou 2017).\textsuperscript{4,5} Further, the temporality of the internet’s information dispersal—in other words, the speed at which information spreads online and at which it changes—raises concerns about digital feminist activism’s ability to produce long-term transformation.

For this thesis, I briefly look at feminist activism since the 1970’s women’s movement against rape culture to show how feminist consciousness-raising and meaning-making around the problem of sexual violence overlaps between the material and digital space. I draw on the research of Linda Alcoff, Laura Gray, Liz Kelly, Nancy Naples, and others, to analyze how individuals who participate in the #MeToo hashtag make meaning of their experiences, define them as sexual violence, whether and to what extent their definitions disrupt dominant definitions of sexual violence, and the barriers they face in negotiating these new interpretations.

\textsuperscript{4} Communicative capitalism is a concept developed by Jodi Dean (2009) which she defines as “rhetorics of access, participation, and democracy [that] work ideologically to secure the technological infrastructure of neoliberalism, an invidious and predatory politico-economic project that concentrates assets and power in the hands of the very, very rich, devastating the planet and destroying the lives of billions of people.” Cited in Fotopoulou 2017.

\textsuperscript{5} Biodigital vulnerability is a concept developed by Aristea Fotopoulou (2017) which she defines as “complex dynamics of content production and control that constitute online networks as contradictory spaces of both vulnerability and empowerment for feminist and queer politics.” See Fotopoulou 2017, 4.
of their experience. Further conceptual frameworks I use in this examination include considerations of online/offline embodiment, biodigital vulnerability, digital architectures of social networking platforms, and identity performance. In evaluating #MeToo, I want to understand how women are performing identity construction through their participation in the #MeToo movement. How do #MeToo participants define their experiences of sexual violence? How do their testimonies challenge, resist, or negotiate with popular definitions of sexual violence, victimhood, and survivorship? And how does #MeToo replicate and/or reinterpret the discourses developed during the 1970s anti-rape movement?

Here, I maintain that there is a gap in the literature that analyzes hashtag feminism. Previous research on survivor discourse has primarily focused on 1) how women do or do not come to identify as victims or survivors by naming their experiences of sexual violence as violence—meaning here any form of unwanted sexual contact, 2) how women’s experiences come to be mediated and/or interpreted by “experts,” and/or 3) the challenges women face in naming their experiences of violence in the face of anti-feminism, so-called postfeminism, and neoliberalism (See Alcoff and Gray 1993; Brownmiller 1975; Connell and Wilson 1974; Kelly 1988; Kelly, Burton, and Regan 1996; Kelly and Radford 1990; and Naples 2003a, 2003b).
Likewise, research on hashtag feminism’s response to rape culture have explored how hashtags are utilized to circulate feminist discourse, build communities, and challenge patriarchal definitions of power and have studied the proliferation and impact of hashtag movements on activism and popular discourse (See Baer 2016; Clark 2016; Dixon 2014; Fotopoulou 2017; Gleeson 2016, 2018; Horeck 2014; Keller 2012, 2016; Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2016; Lawrence and Ringrose 2018; Loza 2014; Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2018; Rentschler 2014, 2015; Rodino-Colocino 2014, 2018; Shaw 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, and
Cosby 2018; Tambe 2018; Thelandersson 2014; Thrift 2014; and Zaslow 2018). However, no research has yet been done to study how hashtag feminism is used to shape our definition of what constitutes sexual violence and how we name its aftereffects. This thesis seeks to fill that gap.

While other feminist hashtags such as #WhyIStayed and #BeenRapedNeverReported can be analyzed within the frameworks I outlined above, these hashtags focus on specific categories of sexual and gendered violence. I want to focus on #MeToo because it illustrates the multifaceted ways women experience sexual violence and the disputes about how sexual violence is defined. As Liz Kelly (1988) articulates in *Surviving Sexual Violence*, many women experience more than one form of sexual victimization and these experiences are connected along a continuum on which more common, normalized forms of male behavior are linked to more non-routine forms of violence. I will discuss Kelly’s concept of the continuum in more detail in Chapter 3. I also examine some of the definitional debates by detractors of #MeToo; these debates call forth a comparison to the backlash against feminist movement that occurred during the mid-to-late 1970s and 1980s when feminists worked to expand the definition of sexual violence to encompass the full range of women’s experiences.

My interest in #MeToo is also grounded in my desire to understand and articulate not only my own lived experience as a survivor of sexual assault, but how that experience is constructed in the culture and communities in which I am engaged. I first came into feminist consciousness after participating in the hashtag #YesAllWomen. The hashtag garnered mass media attention because it disrupted dominant discourses that denied the prevalence of misogynistic violence and offered a critical feminist intervention into “how we conceptualize and choose to narrate misogynist aggression and gender violence in American culture” (Thrift 2014,
Prior to engaging with hashtag feminism, I struggled to put my experience of victimization into words or to explain how the trauma affected my later adolescence and early adulthood. I felt ashamed and guilty because I did not say no. Reading posts on the #YesAllWomen thread was the first time I saw experiences like mine represented in mass discourse. Reading the tweets moved me to engage in discussions about male privilege and aggression and to adopt feminist principles.

My experience with #YesAllWomen can be understood as an affective response to the hashtag, meaning that I was affected through participating (Massumi 2015; Ringrose and Mendes 2018). Affect is most commonly understood as an embodied experience; to be affected is to be moved by contact with another subject or object and thereby to be shaped by encounters with others (Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion, 2nd. ed. 2015). This means, as Brian Massumi (2015) argues, that we are in a constant state of vulnerability to affect and transition in affect, as we are always open to being affected. The depth to which we are affected is called “affective intensity” and is experienced in the body as an intense feeling such as anger, joy, or pain before it is registered as a thought (Ahmed 2015; Massumi 2015). Sara Ahmed (2015) and Massumi assert that it is affective intensity that makes affect inherently political. Affective intensity brings a strong sense of “embeddedness” in one’s larger field of life. The body does not coincide with itself nor is it present to itself; it depends on relations with others, to being open to affectivng and being affected by encounters and events. This recognition has the potential to move one to become political because it can erase the separation between the self and others (Ahmed 2015, 174; Massumi 2015). I will explain in Chapter 2 how affect is related to feminist solidarity and in Chapter 3 I will show how, though affect is an embodied experience, it might be
transmitted between people through cyberspace, or the “space” where we imagine discourse happens on the internet and on social platforms.

Throughout this thesis, I will discuss the testimonies of women who experienced sexual violence. I want to acknowledge upfront that, while not all individuals who endure sexual victimization are female nor are all perpetrators male, persons who identify as women are disproportionately affected and perpetrators are disproportionately men.6 Further, I acknowledge that this analysis is not applicable to all who identify as women, nor to all who are victimized by sexual violence. Instead, it is about the predominance, still, of masculine hegemony in US society. My analysis is intended to be broad but does not attempt to speak to the experiences of all women.

Further, for lack of better terminology, I will often refer to individuals who experience sexual violence as “victims,” “survivors,” and “victim-survivors” throughout this thesis. These are the terms that are still used in institutional settings and by advocacy groups.7 However, I recognize that many women do not use these terms to define their experiences of abuse and that they reinforce a dichotomy that invalidates many instances of violence. Even as someone who chooses to identify as a survivor, my position on these terms is an unstable one. How women come to identify as either, both, or neither of these terms is complex. I try to be authentic to this ambivalence throughout my analysis. Throughout this thesis, I will try to follow the example set by Liz Kelly, Sheila Burton, and Linda Regan (1996) and refer to people who experience

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6 I use men here to make a distinction between male-born-males and female-born-males. While both might identify as men, to my knowledge there is no research to justify a claim that FBM commit sexual violence at the same, or even similar rates, to MBMs. Further, by saying “persons who identify as women,” I am pointing out that transgender, genderqueer, and non-binary individuals are also disproportionately affected by sexual violence.

7 “Victim” is most often used within the legal system and in educational settings whereas “survivor” is preferred within therapeutic, victim services, and advocacy settings. See Lamb 1999.
violence as women and use the words “victimization” and “survival” to differentiate between the event and the response to the event. However, I will use the terms victim and survivor when referring to, for instance, survivor discourse, or when women use the terms to describe themselves in this manner. I will discuss these definitions further in Chapter 3.

The chapters of this thesis are organized both chronologically and thematically in order to produce a coherent narrative that illustrates how #MeToo is situated at the intersection of feminist discursive activism and digital feminist activism as hashtag survivor discourse. Chapter 2 will provide a historical overview of the antirape movement beginning with consciousness-raising groups and ending with hashtag feminism. While I will discuss hashtag feminism as a resurgence of feminist activism, I am not arguing that activism against sexual violence ended at any one period. Rather I am stating that public and popular discourse shifted with the changing political and social landscape and as research has developed. The section on consciousness-raising will examine how women united through affective solidarity and developed theories about gendered violence through shared experiences. Next, the chapter will study the discourse of the New York Radical Feminists’ 1971 Rape Speak-Out to provide an object of comparison for how I will evaluate the testimonies posted in #MeToo. Then, I will provide a brief overview of the activism and organizations that developed to address sexual and gendered violence. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of the discourses presented by the TV talk shows of 1980s and 1990s, with special attention paid to Oprah, to illustrate how televised disclosures could be transgressive or recuperative (Alcoff and Gray 1993). I will end Chapter 1 with an overview of how digital feminist activism came forth to “redo” feminism in a neoliberal age to challenge rape culture once again, and how they build affective feminist communities through networked
publics (Baer 2016). The goal of this chapter is ascertaining where discourses about sexual violence were being produced and who was involved in their production and circulation.

In Chapter 3, I will take a closer look at what discourses were being shaped by the discursive events presented in Chapter 2. In other words, where Chapter 2 described the varying ways in which women spoke out about their experiences, Chapter 3 will explore what they said. First, I will explore how feminists got to the root of sexual violence against by developing concepts such as patriarchy and rape culture. Next, I will look at feminists’ work to broaden the definition of sexual violence to encapsulate the varied forms of violence that women experience. More specifically, I will review Liz Kelly’s concept of the continuum of violence against women to illustrate that women are not only affected by a wide array of violence, but that the forms of violence are connected. Next, I will move into a discussion about why feminists shifted from describing women as “victims” of violence to “survivors” and how this move unintentionally reinforced a dichotomy between the terms. Then, I will examine how the victim and survivor narratives were undermined and usurped within neoliberal postfeminism to depoliticize sexual violence. The goal of this chapter is to provide a historical framework to understand how feminist discursive activism and survivor discourse developed and evolved, as well as a theoretical framework that will be used to analyze the #MeToo hashtag.

In Chapter 4, I will analyze tweets from the #MeToo hashtag to examine how they can be interpreted as hashtag survivor discourse. This content analysis will be supplemented by an analysis of articles from mainstream news sources to provide the context for public discussion around #MeToo. Through this analysis, I will illustrate how the discourses constituting, and constituted by, #MeToo reproduce earlier social and cultural debates about how we define sexual violence, who gets to be a survivor, and how survivors speak their truths. I will conclude the
thesis with a brief look at where we are one year after #MeToo began to discuss where and whether it seems #MeToo has progressed our discourses about sexual violence and where work still needs to be done. In performing this analysis, it is my hope that identifying where we have been and where we are in terms of allowing women to define their experiences of sexual violence that we might find a new path forward for building a stronger survivors’ movement toward ending sexual violence against women.
bell hooks begins her chapter on consciousness-raising in the *Feminism is for Everybody* with the following statement: “Feminists are made, not born” (2015a, 7). She continues by saying that women are raised to believe in the same sexist thinking and values as men. To change systems of sexism and patriarchal suppression, first women would have to raise their consciousnesses and unlearn sexist thinking (Catha 2012; hooks 2015a). Kathie Sarachild, one of the founders of the New York Radical Women, defines consciousness-raising (CR) as a radical weapon that feminists use to get to the root of society’s problems. It is predicated on the belief that when women talk to one another it can transform our lives because we can study the situation of women through comparing our experiences to get to the root of our subjugation, to study patriarchal systems of domination and how they are perpetuated and maintained (Catha 2012; hooks 2015a). Therefore, by sharing our experiences, women can translate our knowledge for a wider audience and ourselves to understand and reframe our experiences within a larger social context (Dubriwny 2005; Young 1997).

CR groups were the first step to converting women to feminist thinking. They were small, intimate groups in which women would study their experiences as women to learn about patriarchal systems of power and how these systems are perpetuated and maintained (hooks 2015a). Tanya Dubriwny (2005) calls this “collective rhetoric,” or a collaboration of many voices to produce new meanings for individuals’ lived experiences. Collect rhetoric takes shape through validating women’s experiences and violating the “reality structure” of predefined

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1 Consciousness-raising was a tool the women’s movement adopted from earlier organized movements during the 1960s including the Civil Rights movement and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). See Catha 2012.
contexts (396-398). For instance, in feminist CR groups in the early 1970s, women began identifying how men used rape to subjugate women. Therefore, when women tell their stories of sexual violence to other women and have those experiences validated, they can begin to identify patterns in which their perceptions of said experiences are shaped by hegemonic patriarchal discourses. Then they can reframe their experiences to challenge male definitions and create alternative discursive approaches to convey how they were victimized.

CR is an affective process in which women experience what Dorothy Smith calls the “click phenomenon” (Kelly 1988; see also Ahmed 2017). By being in touch with one’s feelings, women are able to identify that there something from which we can learn, that is worth analyzing, and that is political. The women reach a point where their embodied knowledge and the dominant discourse conflict to such an extreme that they may come to challenge their previous beliefs and develop a new way of seeing and understanding her experiences (Kelly 1988; Sarachild 1968). Clare Hemmings (2016) refers to this moment as an “affective dissonance,” meaning that a woman recognizes how her experiences are incongruent with the social order. Through confronting the incongruity, or breaking through false consciousness, she might learn to see the world as something it does not have to be, but rather as something constructed over time, and can thus be transformed (Ahmed 2015; Dubriwny 2005; Hemmings 2016; Kelland 2016). Ahmed (2015) refers to this break through as experiencing a feminist “wonder,” as though we are seeing the world as it is for the first time. “Wonder,” she says, “energizes the hope of transformation, and the will for politics” (181). It is through wonder that pain and anger are activated, which becomes resistance or an “against-ness,” and in some ways breaks down the separation between an individual and others, forming an affective solidarity of experience (Ahmed 2015; Hemmings 2016). Sarachild further argues that CR is an ongoing
process in which women’s collective consciousness is “Our feelings will lead us to our theory,” she writes, “our theory to our action, our feelings about that action to new theory and then to new action” (Sarachild 1968, 78).

However, the intimate nature of consciousness-raising groups could also have drawbacks. From the beginning, women of color and low-income women were wary of feminist movement because of the limitations of the emphasis on sameness of experience and “common oppression” (hooks 2015b). It was not uncommon for CR groups to constitute women similarly situated along racial/class lines because the women knew each other either because they were friends, coworkers, etc. By focusing on the homogeneity of their experiences the groups were unlikely to question whether their perspective was representative of all women’s experiences. Women of color, low-income women, and lesbian women recognized that an emphasis on sameness would center the experiences of white, privileged women while only affecting their communities in marginal ways (hooks 2015a, 2015b).

Black feminists, marginalized by both the civil rights and women’s rights movements, organized separately and developed new theories based on their experiences. The Combahee River Collective called for a “multi-axis identity politics” which centers analysis of the intersections of race, class gender, and sexual orientation, a notion Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) expanded upon in her definition of intersectionality (1983, 217; 1989). Crenshaw argued that observing oppression from a single axis obscured the multidimensionality of women of color’s experiences of oppression and violence. “Through an awareness of intersectionality,” she asserts, “we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing gender politics” (1991,1299).
Consciousness-raising groups also began glimpsing the rift between liberal and radical feminists. Sarachild reveals that many topics of women’s lives were off-limits for discussion in some CR groups because they were deemed “petty” or “not political,” such as housework, childcare, and sex. While everyone in the groups agreed equal pay for equal work was a valid issue, discussing the root of these issues was “therapy” for women to work through individually. It was only after 1968 and the establishment of the National Organization of Women (NOW) that more radical groups formed and began performing public actions (Catha 2012).\(^2\) She says, “it suddenly became apparent that women could be doing on a mass scale what we were doing in our own group, that the next logical radical action would be to get the word out about what we’re doing” (Catha 2012, np).

Recently, feminist media scholars have studied how contemporary feminists use the internet to perform consciousness-raising on a wide scale, most notably through hashtag feminism (Fotopoulou 2017; Gleeson 2018; Keller 2012; Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019; Rentschler and Thrift 2015b). Jessamy Gleeson (2018), for instance, draws comparisons between “second-wave” CR with contemporary digital activism. She argues this comparison is in line with arguments about third-wave feminism’s use of popular culture as a forum to communicate feminist ideas and to address larger, more public audiences. She maintains this is possible because of the underlying practice of each form of CR: the emphasis on personal experience.

This chapter will survey the avenues through which radical feminists used the knowledge they gained through consciousness-raising to perform discursive activism, first through public

\(^2\) Sarachild argues that NOW would not discuss many of the root issues of oppression that radical feminists wanted to address. She also states that NOW did not organize consciousness-raising groups. See Catha 2012.

\(^3\) The first public action the radical feminists held was picketing the 1968 Miss America pageant. The protesters threw high heels, girdles, and “other objects of female torture” into trash cans. See Catha 2012.
rape speak-outs and then through the establishment of feminist organizations, publishing houses, and activist groups. Then, my attention will shift to how survivor discourse was produced through televised confessionals on talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and others. Finally, I will provide an overview of how activism against rape culture is now occurring in digital spaces, most prominently through hashtag feminism. The purpose of this discussion is to understand where discourses on sexual violence were happening, who was involved in their production, and how they changed through time and processes of mediation. How do the sites of activism shape the discourse that is produced and how have these processes changed over time, if they have at all? Further, how do the forms of feminist discursive activism in the 1970s and 1980s inform how we locate survivor discourse in hashtag feminism today?

**Rape Speak-Outs**

Speak-outs were born out of the CR process. While CR groups were kept small, speak-outs were held in public to engage with a wider audience. The Redstockings held the first public speak-out in 1969 to challenge the New York State legislature’s hearing on possible changes to the state’s abortion laws. The rhetoric of “experts” at the hearing painted illegal abortion as traumatizing and injurious to “innocent women” who, when faced with social circumstances, were led “into evil scenes and self-destruction” (Dubriwny 2005, 402). To counter this rhetoric, the Redstockings shared their personal experiences of abortion to shift the discourse from a “tale of illegal abortion” to a rhetoric of rights. By breaking the silence about how women come to have abortions, women were able to speak more freely about their experiences and their right to

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4 The New York State legislative hearing promoted a “reform rhetoric” about abortion advocated by male “experts,” including male doctors, lawyers, and judges, rather than the women themselves. The narrative they advanced allowed relatively conservative changes to abortion laws which allowed abortion only in cases women’s physical or mental health was in danger and left decisions as to when abortion was legal up to the “experts.” See Dubriwny 2005, 402.
make the choice they did, and they were able to redefine the event through their lived knowledge (Connell and Wilson 1974, Dubriwny 2005). “Self-definition is a crucial step, because as women we live in a world where we are defined by others…Speaking out, in many ways, is simply the act of speaking, of doing away with ‘interpreters’ and ‘translators’” (Connell and Wilson 1974, 27-8). The Redstockings’ speak-out lay the groundwork for many feminist discursive demonstrations to follow, including the New York Radical Feminists’ rape speak-out in 1971, the founding of Take Back the Night in 1976, and SlutWalk in 2011.

The 1971 rape speak-out, like the Redstockings’ abortion speak-out two years prior, sought to challenge hegemonic definitions of sexual violence by allowing women to define the events from themselves. They wanted to counter rape myths such as those that argued that women cannot be raped against their will, that women wanted to be raped, or, in some cases, that rape does not exist at all (Brownmiller 1975, Connell and Wilson 1974). Further, they argued these myths were propagated and reinforced by popular media, pornography, and by academic and professional institutions as well.

The speak-out consisted of forty women giving public testimony of their assaults. By giving voice to their experiences, the women came out as victims of sexual violence and rendered the previously “unspeakable” as speakable. For example:

Testimony 1: All the girls in my neighborhood went through a ritual between the first and third grades known as pantsing. It was a symbolic rape…We were grabbed and dragged into a vacant lot. The boys tore off our pants, spread our legs, and looked…We couldn’t tell our parents. We would be punished and it would be called protection. We would be kept in. Also the boys threatened to hurt us if we told.

Testimony 2: I was eleven…I was coming home from the dentist with my sister at four in the afternoon. I was aware of a man behind me; I was wary. He followed us into the building…Suddenly there was a knife at my sister’s throat. He said, “Pull up your dress and pull up your pants, or I’ll kill your sister…” I felt it was my fault. I thought my dress was enticing, or my walk. I had done something to make him follow me. I was ashamed for a long time.
Testimony 6: I was depressed and went to a bar for drinks. I knew the bartender, who knew two men and a woman at the bar. The woman invited me up for drinks. We were high and kissing. I got bored and got up to leave. The man said he would walk me to the elevator. He got on with me, but we got off on the wrong floor. He pushed me to the roof. He said, “Take off your clothes.” I didn’t fight because I was too scared…I kept telling him I was a virgin…Finally he stopped, and said that he believed me when I said I was a virgin…He said, “Women lie, but I believe you…” I felt guilty and ashamed and didn’t report it. (Connell and Wilson 1974, 31-44)

Their testimonies offer several important details to illustrate how sexual violence is perpetrated by men or, in some instances, by boys.

For instance, the language in the testimonies demonstrate the roles of the men and women in the assaults. The women use explicit terms such as grabbed, dragged, pushed, followed, tore, and looked; and the sentence structure – he pushed me, he followed us, they tore off our pants—places the man in the subject position, and therefore the perpetrator of the action, and woman as the object being acted upon. Secondly, the testimonies exhibit how the women practiced agency, even when they felt they had none, through resistance and coping. In the third testimony, for instance, the speaker describes how she did not fight because she was scared. She is deciding not to fight because she fears the consequences of what could happen if she did. However, she also told her assailter that she was a virgin in order to resist his advances. These two examples demonstrate how women practice resistance as survival mechanisms. All together, these statements demonstrate that each assault was committed against the wills of the women. Therefore, the women challenge previously conceived notions of that women and girls are to blame for sexual assault and define themselves as victims of men’s violence.

Further, in their testimonies, the women demonstrate the ways in which they are prevented from speaking out, not only by others, but by themselves. In the sixth testimony, the speaker explains that she felt too guilty and ashamed to report the assault to the police. In another example not listed above, the speaker did report, however, the police antagonized her. She says,
“The police did not believe me; they treated me like a criminal…There was no sympathy for my ordeal, my fear—only the questions pointing to accusations at me which I already felt” (Connell and Wilson 1974, 33-4). This example illustrates how survivors are discouraged from reporting to the police because they will experience victim-blaming practices. The speaker of the first testimony says that the boys threatened to hurt the girls if they told. This demonstrates that women are subordinated at least in part through shame, intimidation, and fear of violence (Brownmiller 1975; Griffin 1979).

**Activism and Organizations**

Prior to the 1970s, popular and psychoanalytic discourse of sexual violence was heavily influenced by the idea that rape was a rare occurrence that only had an impact on individual women, and that each must be analyzed on a case-by-case basis (Gilmartin 1994). Women who spoke out about their experiences or sought treatment were doubted, scrutinized, and disbelieved and were subject to public humiliation, ridicule, and blame. There were also few if any resources or services available to women to prevent or respond to sexual violence. For instance, even in the 1970s, emergency rooms sometimes refused to admit rape victims and often did not have a standardized protocol to treat them (Jacquet 2016). Women’s experiences were thus rendered “unspeakable” (Herman 1995, 8). As Judith Herman (1995) argues,

> The real conditions of women’s lives were hidden in the sphere of the personal, in private life. The cherished value of privacy created a powerful barrier to consciousness and rendered women’s reality practically invisible…Women were silenced by fear and shame, and the silence of women gave license to every form of sexual and domestic exploitation. (28)

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^5 Psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jean-Martin Charcot, among others, studied the symptoms of hysteria in women. Only Freud considered a connection between hysteria and sexual abuse, but quickly recanted this theory because hysteria was so common among women that the idea would force him to conclude sexual abuse was endemic. Freud denied the veracity of his patients’ accounts of abuse and argued instead that the memories were fantasies of the women’s sexual desires. Freud’s theory of sexual desire and fantasy helped to reinforce popular psychoanalytic discourse about sexual violence in the United States for over the next century. See Herman 1995.
It was not until the advent of the women’s movement of the 1970s that these discourses were disrupted.

Breaking the silence about sexual assaulted allowed women to create alternative definitions about their experiences, and, as a result, to develop alternative modes to tackle the roots of sexual violence. One of the ways they did this was through the founding of many feminist organizations including rape crisis centers, rape hotlines, and domestic violence shelters. The main purpose of these organizations was to shape the discourse around responding to sexual violence and to provide an institutional support for the women’s movement overall. Myra Ferree and Patricia Martin (1995), for instance, argue feminist organizations exist in a reciprocal relationship with the movement. The movement gives the organizations broad purpose, specific agenda, and activists, and in return, organizations offer a set of practices, political and material resource, and supportive context for advancing collective goals (7). For instance, New York’s chapter of NOW and the Massachusetts’ Women’s Political Caucus began developing effective lobbying strategies and programs to demand changes to rape statutes. They also demanded hospitals develop uniform, emergency medical procedures for rape victims (Connell and Wilson 1974). Feminist presses and publications, as well as mimeographed leaflets and pamphlets passed from hand to hand, were also important for circulating feminist discourse. The publications ensured women could communicate with each other outside of the confines of a CR group or speak-out and gave women control over the type of content they published and how long they stayed in print (Young 1997).

Beyond these institutions, some radical feminists organized Women Against Rape or “WAR” groups and antirape squads to avenge rapists. Such groups included the Kitty Genevesie
Memorial Anti-Rape Squad at Michigan State University, the Contra Costa Anti-Rape Squad no. 14 in the San Francisco Bay area, and the New York Women’s Anti-Rape Group (Jacquet 2016).

‘Any woman who is harassed or attacked by a man’ could report the incident to the squad, and ‘appropriate actions’ would be taken…Rather than rely on the state for justice, or male ‘protectors’ for revenge, these women sought to take matters into their own hands, organize in their own defense, and fight on their own behalf. (Jacquet 2016, 73)

These groups rejected and contested state-based solutions to sexual violence. They argued that equating anti-rape activism and law reform reinforced women’s victimization and instead advocated for individual deterrence strategies which would “change how women thought about themselves and the power they had in their own lives” by claiming the right to protect and defend themselves (Jacquet 73).

For instance, many WAR groups performed acts of vigilantism. On one occasion, the Contra Costa Anti-Rape Squad posted leaflets at a wedding claiming the groom raped a hired dancer at his bachelor party. In Los Angeles, another anti-rape squad practiced a “counter-harassing strategy” by which the members would follow harassers; on several occasions the members would track down alleged rapists, shave their heads, pour dye on them, and post pictures of them around the community with the caption “This man rapes women” (Jacquet 2016). Anti-rape squads also advocated for women to arm themselves and to practice self-defense. Women were taught how to kick and punch men, to break holds to effectively ward off or escape an attack, and how to utilize everyday objects as weapons. For instance, they were taught to use cigarettes to burn attackers or repurpose an umbrella as a bayonet (Jacquet 2016). By claiming this ability, feminists challenged patriarchal definitions of femininity as passive and submissive, and advocated women’s right to agency and self-determination.
TV Talk Shows

As the anti-rape and survivor movements moved into the 1980s and 1990s, women’s disclosures of sexual abuse moved into other arenas such as autobiographies by survivors and television talk shows. In their article on survivor discourse, Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray (1993) argue that the ability for women to talk about their experiences of violence on television can have a transgressive, empowering effect, while alternately making their speech vulnerable to recuperation. Televised survivor testimonies can both diversify conversations about sexual violence and act as a form of protofeminist consciousness-raising, or they can be exploited to sensationalize and eroticize women’s experiences to titillate the shows’ audiences and reestablish dominant definitions of sexual violence.

*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, for instance, tries to be “televised feminism” by hosting predominantly female guests and experts to address female-centered topics and race issues. The structure and production of the show is both transgressive and recuperative because, while some episodes depict content that is feminist, such as discussing women’s work/life balance or challenging dominant images of the female body and women’s sexuality (Squire 1994). However, the show also endorses “traditional notions of femaleness” in episodes discussing weight loss and childcare (Squire 1994, 66). For instance, in her analysis of *Oprah* episodes that discuss rape, Sujata Moorti (1998) finds that the show centers women’s experiences of violence rather than on legal and/or criminal processes in naming (83). Oprah also decentralizes herself as the ultimate authority, but rather as a moderator between guests, experts, the studio audience, and viewers and as an interlocutor in intimate conversation with the guests and audience. Moorti states that show’s stage is designed to resemble a living room to emphasize the intimacy of the conversation between Oprah and her guests. The audience is also encouraged to participate in the discussion by offer differing opinions or experiences or asking questions of the show’s guests.
and experts. The collective rhetoric of the *Oprah* show is in some ways reminiscent of a consciousness-raising meeting, in which the host invites women into her home to discuss sexism, but the discussions that can be had are undercut by the show’s need to appeal to the largest contingency of women as well as advertisers.

Moorti examines, for instance, how the plurality of the discussion that occurs on *Oprah* can dismantle preconstructed myths about sex and sexuality while reinforcing them in the same conversation. She analyzes one episode in which the women talk about women’s dress in relation to sexual violence. Winfrey categorically asserts that women’s dress is not a signal of sexual availability and then initiates a conversation in which the women looked at clothes rape victims were wearing when they were attacked to judge whether the outfits “advertised sex.” Moorti argues that the tone of the discussion “seemed to negate the feminist redefinitions of rape and female sexuality the show tended to promote otherwise” (1998, 93-4). In many of these episodes, both Winfrey and the audience reiterated essentialist and patriarchal understandings of male and female sexuality, such as that men are “innately” aggressors and therefore biologically, rather than socially, constituted to view women as sexual objects (Moorti 1998, 94).

Further, as Moorti argues, that while Winfrey attempts to decentralize herself as an authority, talk show discourses are “structured around the moral authority and knowledge of the host and experts” (84). For instance, Alcoff and Gray (1993) demonstrate that in the structure of talk show interviews, the survivor is expected to give elicit detail of her assault so that it might be translated by an expert for the survivor and the audience. Feminist movement against sexual assault was built on the belief that women should name and define sexual violence for themselves without interpreters or translators; therefore, the structure of talk show discourse undermines *Oprah’s* protofeminist goals. Further, while *Oprah* promotes discussion about
socially and politically relevant issues, the show addresses them in a problem/solution format that emphasizes approaches that individuals can take to prevent sexual violence or to cope with the aftermath, but rarely discusses political solutions (Moorti 1998). Therefore, while *Oprah* while be a feminist project in practice, it is a limited feminism in execution.

While *Oprah* used tools such as confessional structure of discourse to promote empowerment in women, these same tools in different hands can have a recuperative effect. Alcoff and Gray describe a 1990 episode from *The Home Show* in which the hosts, Gary Collins and Dana Fleming, interview two student activists fighting rape on college campuses. The hosts ask one of the students, who was a survivor, to give explicit detail about her assault to titillate the audience with the graphic imagery. The survivor is then asked questions to put her into a position to have to defend her actions in preventing her assault. This roleplay represents what Angela McRobbie (2009) calls the doing and undoing of feminism, a performative action consistent with postfeminism. I will discuss postfeminism more in Chapter 3, but it is evident here in that while the student is given space to testify to her experience and thus to practice agency, that same agency is simultaneously questioned. If she was truly agentic, she was partly responsible. She could be a blameless victim or an agent accountable to her actions, but not both.

Next the show’s hosts brought out an expert to translate the student’s narrative. In the example, the expert discusses the ways in which women have difficulty communicating their sexual desires and how sex can be more pleasurable for men when done with a willing partner. Thereby, the expert is blaming the female victim for not speaking out during the act and repositions her sexual desires in relation to pleasing her male partner (276). Moorti (1998) makes a similar point that even on *Oprah* discussions about rape could overemphasize the breakdown of communication between men and women. These conversations often lead to women being
blamed for sending out mixed signals rather than men’s failure to listen. The role of the expert, as Alcoff and Gray explain, is to explain to the audience the “nature, symptoms and possible therapies for such cries of violence” (277). Therefore, rather than articulating the social or institutional changes that can be made to stop campus violence, the expert is brought in to pathologize the woman’s behaviors before and after the event. In these cases, the woman’s testimony loses its transgressive potential because the “victim is reified purely as object, in need of expert interpretation, psychiatric help, and audience sympathy” and also derided for having “victim personalities” (278). Thus, while the television talk show does have the potential to offer discursive space to challenge sexual violence, it is a very limited potential. However, because many talk shows produce content within, and that appeals to, neoliberal concerns and incorporates the medicalization of sexual violence, they are more just as likely to recuperate survivor testimonies to reproduce hegemonic discourses and silence women. Therefore, what started in consciousness-raising as a freedom to speak, and then through activism a mandate to speak, becomes a “permission to speak” on television (271).

Digital Feminist Activism

While feminist activism against rape culture has continued in the decades following the anti-rape movement of the 1970s and 1980s, as in, for instance, the attention garnered by Anita Hill’s testimony at (then) Judge Clarence Thomas’s Supreme Court confirmation hearing, activism became less visible in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Several feminist scholars attribute this decline in public attention to the prominence of postfeminist ideals that discouraged collective action in favor of individual change, and cautioned women and girls from speaking out against patriarchal values lest they be ridiculed for “fighting for more than their share of rights” (Gill and Scharff 2011; McRobbie 2009; Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019). With increased access to the internet, however, and the rise in popularity of social networking sites in the late
2000s and 2010s, women found new avenues to explore feminism and to share their thoughts through blogs, vlogs (video blogs), and microblogs (character-limited posts) (Zappavigna 2013).

Twitter, a microblogging site developed in 2006, is the most commonly used platform to perform digital activism. It allows users to post microblogs or “tweets” consisting of no more than 140 characters—280 characters as of 2018. Within a tweet, the user can share their thoughts, share hyperlinks to other online content, photos, videos, etc. to their “followers.” Tweets also contain “metadata” which is used to make their content searchable including @ to indicate the user’s address or username and # to label content topics. The latter symbol is referred to as a hashtag. Michelle Zappavigna (2013) argues that the hashtag has metadiscursive and social semiotic properties that ascribe special textual status to the tagged material, but also gives meaning to the body of the posts and links it to other posts using the same tag. The hashtag “provides insight into what a user’s communication is ‘really about,’ thereby enabling users to indicate a meaning that might not be otherwise apparent,” and therefore, in some ways gives the social tag the status of a title (Zappavigna 2018, 3).

**Hashtag Feminism**

Hashtag feminism gained prominence in 2013 and 2014 with hashtags such as #FemFuture and #YesAllWomen. It is defined as hashtag activism specifically concerned with gender equity. It is an event-oriented discourse that reacts to and comments on public instances of sexism and misogyny as they happen (Clark 2016). Samantha Thrift (2014) defines feminist hashtag protests as feminist meme events, meaning that the hashtags become symbols of greater significance than their originating event, becoming reference points in and of themselves. For instance, #MeToo became a reference point for how we discuss sexual violence. Because hashtag feminism is event-oriented, it has become a critical tool for feminists to respond to rape culture events—both online and offline—in real time. The hashtag also functions to archive the
protest’s content and context. Feminists have used hashtag protests to challenge harmful
discursive practices such as rape jokes, catcalling, the policing of women’s bodies, dress, and
behaviors, victim-blaming, and impunity for perpetrators (Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2016, 2-
3). By impunity in this case, I am referring both to outrage concerning legal impunity for sexual
perpetrators and minimizing of the perpetrators’ actions by the public and media.\(^6\)

Digital feminism is part of a feminist genealogy that highlights the “old-in-the-new,”
meaning that it does not so much diverge from past discursive activism but is an extension of
feminist movement in online spaces (Rodino-Colocino 2014). Hester Baer (2016) argues that the
emergence of digital feminism is, in a sense, “redoing” feminism in a neoliberal “postfeminist”
age. Other feminist researchers, however, prefer to witness how feminists are doing feminism in
digital spaces (Fotopoulou 2017; Rentschler and Thrift 2015ab). Carrie Rentschler and Samantha
Thrift (2015b) define “doing feminism in the network” as an engagement of feminist subjectivity
based in social media networks of distribution (331). Aristea Fotopoulou (2017) expands on this
definition by suggesting that doing feminism and being feminist “implies enacting ourselves
primarily as embodied and social subjects through media practices and imaginaries of
 technologies and the internet, but also as citizens and users of these technologies” (2). Both
definitions highlight key factors of doing feminism online, namely, embodiment and subjectivity,
media production and distribution, and networked citizenship.

Much like consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s and 1970s, digital platforms offer
women and girls a space to connect with one another to develop an affective feminist

\(^6\) Researchers such as Bianca Fileborn (2016), Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry (2017), and Michael Salter
(2013) have studied digital feminists’ use of social media to conduct acts of informal justice or “digilantism” against
perpetrators of sexual violence such as posting the names of alleged perpetrators on social networking sites (Salter
2013). These acts seem, to some extent, to carry forward the historical vigilantism of the 1970s WAR groups to the
community. What makes digital CR different, however, is that the relative anonymity and accessibility afforded by digital spaces allow women to come into feminist conversation safely in an accepting virtual community no matter their physical location, as referred to as networked publics.

Networked publics, as defined by danah boyd (2010), are publics restructured by networked technologies that constitute the space constructed through networked technologies and the imagined communities that emerges at the intersection of people, technology, and practice. Boyd argues that while networked publics function in many of the same ways as regular publics—gathering people for social, cultural, and civic purposes and connecting people with others outside their friends and family—what differentiates networked publics is the distinct affordance technological structures have to shape how people engage with the environments because technology is shaped by bits rather than atoms (39).

Networked publics’ affordances do not dictate participants’ behavior, but they do configure the environment in a way that shapes participants’ engagement. In essence, the architecture of a particular environment matters and the architecture of networked publics is shaped by their affordances. (39-40)

For instance, Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr would each have different affordances because their environment designs are completely different, such as in Twitter’s character limit or in the different profile designs on each site. Boyd states further that because networked publics are shaped by the properties of and connections between bits and how they link together, “networked publics are not just publics networked together, but they are publics that have been transformed by networked media, its properties, and its potential” (2010, 42).

Network affordances affect, for instance, how a person navigates different communities in digital spaces. Apryl Williams, for instance, maintains that social networking sites “disrupt traditional boundary interactions, blurring the distinction between public and private spheres, and
broadening the lines of communication between the elite and the masses” (273). Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2010) relate this idea to how we communicate on social networking sites. They argue that while every communicative act has an imagined audience to help the speaker or writer present themselves appropriately, self-presentation becomes more complex on social networking sites. Real-world publics are often separated between contexts, such as family, friends, coworkers, clients, and so on. However, on sites such as Twitter or Facebook, those contexts collapse, which complicates the formation of an imagined audience. Apryl Williams (2017) further contends that within context collapse, our on- and offline lives often merge to “create an inseparable space for identity negotiation,” meaning that our offline identity influences what we do online, and our online personas can have an impact on who we are in the real-world. This is further complicated when we can capture what we are doing in the real-world and post it to social media almost instantaneously.

Marwick and boyd (2010) contend that because the audience on social media is “potentially limitless” we often limit our intended or imagined audience to choose how we want to present ourselves and to choose appropriate language, cultural referents, and style, which can also change depending on the affordances of the networking platform (115). For instance, the style of writing and language use maintained on a blog site would not work in a 280-character tweet, not only because the affordances of the platform different, but the imagined audience is different, as well. In reality, however, we have very little power over who will see our content—unless we make our profiles private or semi-private—because our imagined audience may be vastly different from who will actually see or read our posts (Marwick and boyd 2010).

Apryl Williams (2017) expands on the concept of imagined audiences in her analysis of how online communities are developed on Black Twitter. She defines community in terms of
“identity, solidarity, or shared interest,” and argues that it “is not confined by a singular place or space” but by “social support and social cohesion” (276). She argues that communities are socially constructed, and as such, can occupy many different spaces to create meaning on multiple platforms. Two advantages that online communication grants communities, she contends, are that individuals are not bound by space and time, and that individuals can engage with multiple people at varying levels of intimacy. Therefore, the affordances of connectivity are that they can foster a shared sense of community that can move offline with “little impediment” (A. Williams 2017, 276). This means that women can connect with a wider, more diverse community of women to build an intersectional, heterogeneous movement both nationally and transnationally (Dixon 2014; Keller 2012, 2016).

While some critics of digital feminism have derided it as “easy” activism, I would contend that while digital feminism is not always discursively or politically effective because it is relatively low-risk, when it does make an impact, that impact is usually strong, as in the examples I detail below. However, these criticisms also do not address the access and mobility that digital feminism can afford to communities that could not otherwise participate. Some communities are not able to be physically present at sites of protest either because of physical dis-ability, geographic and/or economic location, or risk to their body. Nor do they consider the emotional and mental labor that hashtag protests entail (Fotopoulou 2017; Halupka 2018). Digital feminism offers a way for these communities to participate in political activism from a position of accessibility and safety (Dixon 2014; Keller 2012, 2016).

Researchers of digital feminism have also called attention to the affordances that social networking platforms have offered historically marginalized communities to center themselves in
feminist organizing and activism and to gain exposure for their work. It has also offered a way for feminists to address issues of intersectionality as they happen. For instance, feminist hashtags such as #YesAllWhiteWomen, #LessToxicFeminism, and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen have called attention to the lack of inclusion of black women in historical and continued feminist movement, both online and offline. They call on white feminists to check their privilege and to work toward a more intersectional feminism, both online and offline. (Dixon 2014; Loza 2014; Rodino-Colocino 2014; Thelandersson 2014). I will touch on this again in my discussion of Tarana Burke and the Me Too movement in Chapter 4.

**Affective Publics**

Zizi Papacharissi (2015) draws on danah boyd’s concept of networked publics to explain how the technological affordances of social networking sites and hashtag feminism are affective and useful to performing political activism online. She argues that because affect is liquid and exists in marginal spaces that support the emergence of change, it can evolve concurrently with the technologically-facilitated events and can help explain emotional contagion and virality. “Empowerment,” she says, “lies in liminality, in pre-emergence and emergence, at the point at which new formations of the political are in the process of being imagined but not yet articulated” and that “affective power is pre-actualized” and “aligned with the practices networked publics develop” (19). She argues that social media can “activate latent ties that may be crucial to the mobilization of networked publics” and that the connective affordances of social media “not only activate the in-between bond of publics but enable expression and information sharing that liberates the individual and the collective imaginations” (19).

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7 See, for instance, Fotopoulou 2017; McMillan Cottom 2017; Thelandersson 2014; A. Williams 2017; S. Williams 2015.
Sara Ahmed (2015) argues that affect works as a form of capital, and that the circulation of emotion through signs and objects converts the emotion into affect. The more the object circulates, the more affective it becomes. Adi Kuntzman (2012) follows Ahmed’s concept of “affective economies” to explain how hashtags move through material-virtual spaces through the accumulation of affect. She argues that emotional objects reverberate in and out of cyberspace, through bodies, psyches, texts, and machines and are intensified through digital circulation and repetition. Therefore, the more a hashtag circulates, the more affective capital it accumulates; this means, for instance, that when a hashtag accumulates enough affective capital by being tweeted and retweeted, it goes viral.

For Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller (2019), this raises further questions about feminist labor helping Twitter to profit through our activism. When we engage with social media, they argue, even to perform activism, we are commodified to be sold to advertisers through monetized data. Christian Fuchs, for instance, suggests that social media platforms contain both an “ideological character and a commodity form” which operate to “advance capitalist individualization, accumulation, and legitimation… and the false pretense of social media as a democratic forum,” or what Jodi Dean refers to as “communicative capitalism” (cited in Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2019, 29). For instance, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller (2019) assert that when a feminist hashtag such as #MeToo goes viral, Twitter makes money; however, Twitter will also profit off online hate, which reinforces Dean’s assertion that the “fantasy” of online democratic participation forecloses on the prospect of real social change (cited in Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2019, 30) This certainly raises ethical questions for how affective solidarity is conducted in networked technology, however, it does not negate the real
discursive abilities that networked feminism has for initiating personal, if not social and cultural transformation.

The embodied experience of affect is afforded to us by what Kuntzman calls “cybertouch,” or the material-semiotic character of digital text to “touch us” through our computer or mobile phone screen (2012, 3). This concept is useful in understanding how digital texts such as blogs, emails, and comments can be affective. Texts have an emotionality to them; we are moved by texts, or the feelings we get from them stick with us (Ahmed 205, 13-4). Rebecca Coleman (2018) refers to this phenomenon as “texture,” as a way of “getting at” the infra-structures of feeling formed by our everyday media experiences (np).

Specific affects that may be produced through engagement with social media, and digital media more generally, include a compulsion to frequently check on our own or friends’ Facebook posts, or our emails; the lure of the Twitter flow; an anxiety if we are away from our mobile phone; nerves about our laptop running low on battery; boredom at agreeing to terms and conditions during online shopping; frustration when internet pages take a while to load, or when updates to applications interrupt what we’re doing; joy at speaking to a friend on Skype; distraction by working across different screens; or immersion in a Netflix box set. While some of these affective states might be articulable in/as language—frustration, anger, nerves, for instance—others may be vaguer, or not so easily expressed, and indeed might escape or exceed their expression in language. They hover ‘at the edge of semantic availability’. (Coleman 2018, np)

Papacharissi, however, argues that technology only mediates our discursive connection; it is narratives that make us feel invested (2015, 4-5). As Zizi Papacharissi (2015) demonstrates, the storytelling infrastructures of SNS allow users who are removed from events to experience them in real-time, to imagine what people experiencing the events might be feeling, and to feel like the user is there despite their distance from the action. Newer media permit meaning-making of situations unknown to us by evoking affective reactions, thereby making us invested, and by allowing us to contribute to the developing narratives through our own “affectively charged and digitally expressed endorsement, rejection, or views” (4).
In their research on the hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported, Jessalyn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes, and Jessica Ringrose (2016) interview women who participated to understand the motivations behind their posts. The authors emphasize how participants felt “moved” to post their stories or that their participation was “almost involuntary,” signaling an affective bodily experience. These affective responses are “intensified” after sharing their stories. “Becoming contributors,” the authors note, “allowed them to more deeply access the affective connectivities produced and circulated…participants were affected by speaking together about their experiences” (Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2016, 7, emphasis theirs). The intensities evident in their analysis of #BeenRapedNeverReported further suggest affective solidarity is generated through hashtag feminism in “multi-faceted, thick, and encompassing” way that prompts a bodily reaction (8). The authors suggest that rather than just being present in the disclosures, affective solidarities are doing something politically, including generating wider feminist consciousness. For instance, Susan, a hashtag participant interviewed by the authors, articulates how contributing to the thread compelled her to rethink her previous opinion about feminism and adopt the feminist identity. Susan’s new sense of confidence through feminism is evident, they note, in her tone of voice, smile and body language, illustrating an affective transformation (8).

**Responses to Rape Culture**

Hashtag responses to rape culture are used to challenge hegemonic “cultural supports” for male sexual privilege, definitions of sexuality, and sexual violence (Rentschler 2014, 66). They use what Carrie Rentschler (2014) calls the testimonial tradition of feminist discursive activism wherein women use personal narratives of their victimization to debunk rape-supportive myths and to construct counter-discourses to reclaim power over the representation of our experiences (Clark 2016). Further, as Megan Stubbs-Richardson, Nicole Rader, and Arthur Cosby (2018) demonstrate, feminists also use hashtags as a pedagogical tool to decrease rape myth acceptance
and victim-blaming and to increase support for rape survivors (see also Rentschler 2014). We can see through these examples how hashtag feminism reproduces discursive tactics originated at the 1970’s rape speak-outs to produce a collective rhetoric against sexual victimization.

For instance, Rosemary Clark (2016) found in her analysis of #WhyIStayed that women used the hashtag to deconstruct problematic interpretations of why women stay in abusive relationships and to form new definitional claims over domestic violence that called for new interventions. For example,

@user1: Because he separated me from all my friends and family and I had nowhere to turn. #WhyIStayed.

@user2: “You’re damaged goods. Who would want you?” #WhyIStayed

@user 3: #WhyIStayed Because I thought that each instance abuse would be the last. (cited in Clark 2016)

The tweets utilized three narrative strategies to share their stories: the first included first-person accounts responding to problematic questions posed by the media such as “Why did you stay with your abuser?” This narrative strategy, known as “media hijack,” reroutes the focus of typical antiviolence discourses that situate responsibility for violence prevention on the victim to focus on the actions of the perpetrator (Rentschler 2015). The second strategy was interpersonal dialogue between the victim and her abuser and between the victim and her social circle. The third presents intrapersonal dialogue in which the victim convinced herself to stay. “Before an audience,” Clark writes, “social movement actors interrupt normative frameworks shaping interpretations of social identities and phenomena to articulate new ones” (792). In other words, digital activists shape alternate discourses to drive the conversation forward. Hashtag posts took two forms: personal accounts of domestic violence and support for survivors; the latter tweets acted as the validating audience to the former. Tweets also connected survivors to material resources such as phone numbers for crisis hotlines and domestic abuse shelters (Clark 2016).
Clark (2016) explains that the storytelling prompt of #WhyIStayed was highly versatile easily circulated because it could unite a variety of abuse narratives under one personalized action frame (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). It also enabled a more intersectional discourse about domestic violence than previous generations’ protests. Citing Bess Rothenberg, Clark states that domestic violence activism in the 1960s and 1970s focused on violence against middle-to-upper class heterosexual white women and erased the experiences of women of color, poor women, and male and queer victims (2016, 797). #WhyIStayed could challenge conventional understandings of what domestic violence victims and abusers look like because social media does not have privileged gatekeepers controlling the protest’s counter-discourse (Clark 2016).

Carrie Rentschler (2015) demonstrates how feminists use media hijack through her analysis of #safetytipsforladies. Feminists took over an existing hashtag, #Safetytipsforwomen, to mock and challenge the traditional victim-blaming prevention tactics it espoused by repopulating the channel with different, humorous “peer-to-peer” advice. For example,

@user: stop being a woman in public. #safetytipsforladies

@user: Only hang out with losers with no skills so you don’t wreck someone’s bright future if they accidentally rape you. #safetytipsforladies

@user: If you hide your forearms in your sleeves, the rapist will mistake you for a T-Rex and carry on his way #safetytipsforladies

#Safetytipsforladies illustrates not only the use of media hijack to reinterpret and redirect victim-blaming rhetoric, but also the power of employing humor to nurture a politics of joy and resilience among feminist activists (Rentschler 2015). In another case of media hijack, feminist activists took over a Q&A hashtag called #AskThicke to ask singer Robin Thicke about the

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8 The second and third examples above are cited from a March 2013 Buzzfeed article titled “Women Take Over #safetytipsforladies and Make It 100 Times Better” by Madeleine Davies. See Davies 2013.
misogynist lyrics in his song “Blurred Lines” which intimated a gray zone of consent in sexual encounters (Horeck 2014). Hijack hashtags can also disrupt simultaneously occurring hashtags and respond to the same event as the preceding hashtag. #YesAllWomen, for instance, acted both as a response to a campus shooting at UC Santa Barbara in Isla Vista, CA and a counter to the meme #NotAllMen which sought to rebut feminist critiques of sexism and misogyny evident in the UC Santa Barbara shooting. They argued “Not all men” commit sexist behavior. #YesAllWomen countered by asserting that while not all men commit sexism, “yes, all women” are subject to men’s sexist behavior (Rodino-Colocino 2014; Thrift 2014).

#Safetytipsforladies and #YesAllWomen draw attention to the way self-actualization was coopted under neoliberal postfeminism and became a mandate for women to protect themselves. The original tweet thread #safetytipsforwomen shared self-defense tips that focused on regulating potential victims’ bodies and behaviors. #Safetytipsforladies, on the other hand, collectivized expressions of feminist “fed-upness” (Rentschler 2014). For instance, tweets posted in the #YesAllWomen thread challenged the idea that women have to protect themselves, such as actress Sophia Bush who wrote “I shouldn’t have to hold my car keys in hand like a weapon & check over my shoulder every few seconds when I walk at night #YesAllWomen.”

Further examples illustrate similar sentiments.

@user: Because when girls go to college they’re buying pepper spray and rape whistles while guys are buying condoms #yesallwomen

@user: “I have a boyfriend” is the easiest way to get a man to leave you alone. Because he respects another man more than you. #yesallwomen

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10 Tweets located using a Google Image search for “yesallwomentweets”
What these tweets illustrate is resistance to the neoliberal postfeminist ideology of self-regulation by asserting that women should not have to do these things because it puts the onus on survivors to prevent rape and sexual assault. Rather they shift the conversation to how to stop rape, or rather how rapists can stop themselves from raping (Renstschler 2015).

#BeenRapedNeverReported is another hashtag that employs the media hijack method. The hashtag directly responds to the victim-blaming strategy of questioning that if women were really assaulted, why did they not press charges? Responses were diverse, but all shared a common theme that it remains “professionally, emotionally, and even physically costly” to report sexual violence (Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2016). For instance,

@user: I’ve #BeenRapedNeverReported because I knew I would be blamed because I had been drinking.

@user: #BeenRapedNeverReported because I saw what happened to people who reported in the military (Clifton 2014)

This hashtag illustrates how silencing behaviors have continued despite feminist activism to expand the definition of sexual violence and make the unspeakable speakable.

Tanya Horeck (2014) remarks, however, that it is vital to recognize how social media is used not only as a feminist tool to challenge rape culture, but as a producer and supporter of rape culture, as well. Horeck recalls the story of Jada, a Texas girl who was drugged, raped, and photographed and the photos circulated on social media. Further, individuals began posting images of themselves mimicking the pose of her naked body with the hashtag #jadapose. She further notes a countermovement that rose almost as quickly to support Jada, hashtagging #standupforjada, #justiceforjada and #jadacounterpose (Horeck 2014, 1106).

Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, and Cosby (2018) study another example of media coverage of rape cases, in this instance the high-profile cases in Torrington, Connecticut, and Steubenville, Ohio. In their analysis of social media activity related to these news stories, three themes about
rape culture emerged from the data: 1) the virgin-whore binary and just world hypothesis, 2) informational tweets as subnews, and 3) rape myth debunking. The virgin-whore binary and “just world” hypothesis argue that, in a just world, rape only happens to women and girls who behave or dress inappropriately or in a deviant way. Tweets that express this belief use various formations of myths such as “she asked for it” and “she wanted it” to suggest the victim deserved to be raped; they also used “he didn’t mean to” to excuse the perpetrators behavior and insinuate he was seduced or provoked by the victim (Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, and Cosby 2018). Further, in their quantitative analysis of both victim-blaming and victim-supporting tweets following the suicide of Rehtaeh Parson, the researchers found victim-blaming tweets outnumbered victim-supporting tweets. Further, users posting victim-blaming tweets had more followers than victim supporters and were also more likely to be liked and re-tweeted by their followers (Stubbs-Richardson, Rader, and Cosby 2018). Therefore, while it is important to celebrate our victories, it is just as essential to recognize the work still ahead.

In Chapter 1, I have sought to provide a historical background to establish where feminist discourses about sexual violence were being produced during the anti-rape movement of the 1970s and 1980s, during the 1990s “postfeminist” age, and now in the digital era. I also sought to discover who was involved in the discourses’ production and circulation. This historical context sets a background against which we can understand #MeToo as a site for feminist discursive activism. As Gleeson (2018) argues, because #MeToo emphasizes the sharing of personal testimony, participants undertake visible consciousness-raising to highlight the prevalence of sexual violence online and offline. This action makes it possible for participants to redefine their experiences as violence. However, it is also important to understand how participants come to define their experiences as violence through consciousness-raising. Now that we know where
feminist discourses were and are shaped, and by whom, I turn next to the question of what discourses were constructed through feminist activism and what discourses were they challenging? Or, in other words, what concepts came out of feminist consciousness-raising and theory development and how did they challenge dominant discourses about sexual violence? I will examine these questions in Chapter 2.
CHAPTER 3
WHO GETS TO SPEAK? DEFINING SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND SURVIVOR DISCOURSE

As women began to speak out about sexism—first in consciousness-raising groups, then through public demonstrations and speak-outs, and so on—they used what they were learning to develop new theories to explain how sexism and patriarchy were established and then propagated, reinforced, and maintained through social and institutional structures such as the media, academia, and the law. One of the ways women’s subjugation was secured was through language which was used as a tool to “constrain, coerce, and represent women and men in oppressive ways” (Mills and Mullany 2011). Feminists recognized the material consequences of how language is used to construct ideas as “real.” They sought to transform how people contemplate gender, power, self-determination, sexuality, and so on, through discursive activism or the promotion of new grammars and paradigms to define their experiences in their own words. In doing so they were able to develop a new language by which individuals, collectives, and institutions could name sexism and devise responses to it (Connell and Wilson 1974; Kelly, Burton and Regan 1996; Young 1997).

The goal of many feminist researchers in the 1970s and 1980s was to challenge masculine definitions of sexual violence and to expand the definition to encapsulate the many forms of violence women experience in their everyday lives. This was done by focusing on the role of force and coercion in male-female relationships and analyzing the intersections of power, sexuality, and social control (Kelly 1988, Millett 2016). Kelly (1988) highlights that because our institutions have historically been exclusively male—and even now male-dominated—men have had the power to define the legal and social parameters for what constitutes sexual violence, and benefit the most from these limited definitions which function to distinguish a small “deviant” group of males from the “normal” majority. As such, legal and social definitions of sexual
violence focus on the most “extreme” or “non-routine” forms of violence such as rape and invalidate anything that is not “real” assault. In the 1980s, feminist researchers sought to challenge these definitions by shifting the emphasis from the more apparent forms of violence such as rape to more routine or “taken for granted” forms such as sexual harassment. As such, rape took on a less privileged place in analysis and more prominence was placed on how forms of male aggression are linked (Kelly 1988).

Feminists’ work to redefine sexual violence had a second purpose of validating experiences of women that might not fit the limited legal definitions of rape and assault. To do so, women needed to question the hegemonic definitions which reflect masculine ideas of male behavior and naturalize male aggression toward women. Without precise definitions that address our lived knowledge, women experience what Dorothy Smith refers to as a “bifurcation of consciousness,” in which the dominant discourse conflicts with women’s truths (Kelly 1988). Sharon Lamb (1999) suggests that as a result, women are in danger of accepting the dominant discourse as “real” and shaping our experiences to meet that “reality.” This is evident in several feminist studies in the 1980s which found that women did not identify as victims of rape or assault, but do describe having non-consensual or unwanted sex (Koss 1985; Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski 1987; Koss and Oros 1982; Warshaw 1988). Nicola Gavey (1999), for instance, cites that only about thirty to fifty percent of women who stated they had had an experience that met the definition of rape named it as “rape.” The same bifurcation was also evident in women not naming themselves as “victims” or “survivors”—or in some cases, being named as such by
experts—which was exacerbated with the rise of neoliberal postfeminism and the medicalization of feminist psychology.¹

In this chapter, I will elaborate on the discourses of sexual violence such as patriarchy, rape culture, and the continuum of violence against women that were being shaped through the events of the women’s and anti-rape movement in the 1960s and 1970s. and how these discourses came under attack in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of neoliberalism, postfeminism, and the recovery movement. The purpose of this discussion is to understand how discourses on sexual violence were developed and how they inform the discursive activism that occurred then in rape speak-outs and is occurring now on social media. How has survivor discourse evolved and how does it inform the conversation occurring in the #MeToo movement? How can these discourses help to locate issues of victimhood and survivorship in hashtag disclosures?

**Patriarchal Power and Rape Culture**

In their sourcebook for radical feminists in the anti-rape movement, Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson (1974) explain that the issue of rape did not come about as a top-down issue that feminist leaders wanted to discuss but came about as one of many topics discussed through consciousness-raising. As women talked about their lives and experiences of subjugation, a narrative pattern emerged that established that rape was not an individual or unique experience, but a systemic problem which had an impact on all women. Though not all women did or would experience rape, they all lived with the threat to violence in their lives.

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¹ See Anderson and Gold 1994; Gavey 1999; Koelsch 2014; Lamb 1999; Ovenden 2012; Spry 1995; Williamson and Serna 2017; and Young and Maguire 2003.
Kate Millet (2016) argues, citing Hannah Arendt, that women and men are socialized and conditioned to consent to patriarchal ideologies of temperament, role and status. Males were granted higher status because they were the first encouraged to develop dominance, which was the preferred state. The division of human behavior, labor, and status, Millett argues, were based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherished in themselves and find convenient in subordinates: aggression, intelligence, force and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, ‘virtue,’ and ineffectuality in the female…In terms of activity, sex roles assign domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition to the male…Therefore, nearly all that can be described as distinctly human rather than animal activity…is largely reserved for the male. (2016, 26)

Linguistically, for instance, the preference for the masculine is known as the “androcentric rule” in which male speech behaviors are considered standard, and therefore more desirable, and the speech patterns of women are perceived as deviant (Coates 2016). Adrienne Rich defined patriarchy as the assumed “power of the fathers” (cited in Kelly 1988, 21). It is a familial-social, ideological, and political system in which men control—either through direct force or through institutional structures—the role women play in society and in which women are subordinate to men. Further, as Millett points out, patriarchal domination is reinforced within the state, family, ideology, and culture, and is maintained through the threat of force when coercion is insufficient.

In her analysis of sexual violence, Liz Kelly (1988) contends that male sexual dominance is reliant on the control of female sexuality and on continued acceptance of male-centered definitions of (hetero)sexuality which legitimate the use of force and coercion in male-female relationships. She cites Nancy Hartsock who argues that sexuality is defined almost exclusively in masculine terms and that male sexuality is constructed upon notions of virility, hostility, aggression, and domination (Kelly 1988, 30). Kelly also cites Adrienne Rich’s conception of
heterosexuality as a social institution that ensures men’s sexual access to women. Kelly (1988) describes sexual access as a “range of processes through which women are defined as sexual objects available to men” and is determined by men’s biological sex drives (29). Men assume an entitlement to women’s bodies as sexual commodities—which is manifest, for instance, through sexual remarks made to both women men do not know or might have an acquaintance with—and guarantee sexual access, as Rich argues, through various forms of control, coercion, and force (Kelly 1988, 29-30).

Susan Brownmiller (1975) and Susan Griffin (1979) both maintain that rape—both in its use and threat of its use—is the most significant means by which men gain and maintain social control of women through force. Through the consistent use of rape to dominate women, men created a culture of fear and intimidation. Griffin asserts that this culture sets the foundation for a “protection racket” in which women seek the protection of men from other men. As such, women became dependent on their “protectors” while simultaneously becoming more vulnerable to abuse by them.

The idea of a culture of fear also underlies what feminists have come to call “rape culture.” Rape culture, which was first referenced in Connell and Wilson’s (1974) book Rape: the First Sourcebook for Women, is defined by Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth (2005) as a set of…complex beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women…In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm. (xi)

Kate Harding (2015) backs up the claim that sexual violence is “physical and emotional terrorism” because, like terrorism, the threat of sexual violence is omnipresent, meaning it could happen at anytime, anywhere. Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth go on to argue that within a rape culture, both men and women are socialized to assume sexual violence is a fact of life (xi). This
belief is reinforced through the propagation of rape myths which function to minimize assault and normalize more “minor” intrusions. The most common of these myths are that women either want or deserve to be raped, only certain types of women are raped—also known as the virgin-whore binary—that women can prevent or resist rape, and women lie about rape. These myths support the notion that no woman can be raped against her will, and therefore, a rape has not occurred, which absolves men from responsibility for sexual violence and denies women’s experiences (Brownmiller 1975; Kelly 1988; Stubbs-Richardson, Rader and Cosby 2018).

Such is the case, for example, in the belief that “‘no’ means ‘yes,’” which Gavey (1999) claims embodies and inscribes traditional, heterosexual norms that obscure rape within “legitimate” heterosexual relationships, such as in marriage and dating. Griffin argues that at the same time men assume sexual access to women, they also expect women to deny their sexual advances that they might woo them “down the primrose path to acquiescence” (1979, 8). For instance, in a 2014 blog post for the “neomasculine” website Return of Kings, writer Vincent Vinturi offered advice to men on how to “hone your sense about when ‘no’ means ‘yes.’” He asserts,

Women RESPECT this sexual insistence even if they aren’t acutely aware of it…Ask any guy who’s banged a lot of girls and has had a lot of same-night lays, and he will surely regale you with tales of seemingly insurmountable resistance, conquered and slain by his resolve and unwavering horniness. It’s in the nature of beautiful women to resist, test, protest, sabotage and make your job of fucking them difficult. And of course, by the time you wrestle their panties off, they’re dripping wet. (Vinturi 2014, np)

In this excerpt, Vinturi seems to validate Gavey and Griffin’s points. He claims that women “respect” sexually aggressive persistence and will perform “insurmountable resistance” before being “conquered and slain by his resolve.” He ends his description stating that that the woman will be “dripping wet.” Further, Vinturi argues in an earlier paragraph that women hold the power in sexual relationships so that they can “control sex” and “manipulate this most primal,
most productive urge to their benefit” (2014, np). It seems, then, that Vinturi believes that women actively refuse sexual advances to “manipulate” the sexual payoff. Pat Gilmartin (1994) calls this the perfect Catch-22:

If women are “passive” in their encounters with men and are raped, they are wrong because they should have been more forceful; on the other hand, if they are “active” and are raped, they can be viewed as having “asked for it.” Based on these criticisms, the consequences of this view of rape for its victims and survivors are likely to be devastating. (59)

Vinturi also appears in these two excerpts to make a biological argument for this arrangement. He states that it is “in the nature of beautiful women to resist” and that they are manipulating male’s “most primal urge;” thus he is reinforcing that men should be sexually active, and women should be (actively) sexually passive.

Brownmiller (1975) argues that it is in the interest of hegemonic masculinity that men and women believe women want to be raped because, as illustrated in the example above, the “no means yes” model of heterosexual dating practices ascribes an illusory sense of power over sexual contact to women and downplays men’s culpability in the assault. As I will also detail in a later section, this belief also advocates that any woman who cries rape is playing the victim or succumbs to a victim narrative. Therefore, when women tell our stories of sexual violence to other women, have those experiences not only validated but empathized with, and then recognize how our experiences are shaped by hegemonic patriarchal discourses, we may be empowered to unite to take control of that narrative. Then, by challenging androcentric definitions of sexuality and creating alternative discursive approaches to convey our experiences, there is potential for creating systemic social change.

The Continuum of Violence Against Women

Through the early-to-mid 1970s, rape was the central focus of theoretical research on sexual violence (Kelly 1988). However, by the late 1970s and into the 1980s, feminists began to
shift their focus to examine more taken-for-granted forms of violence such as harassment and forms of violence in the gray areas of pressured sex and coercive sex. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, many women did not name their experiences as sexual violence because they did not fit the narrow legal and social definition of assault despite experiencing the incidents as violations. Furthermore, if we look back at the testimonies from the New York Radical Feminists’ speak-out, the speaker in the first testimony describes how the girls in her class were subjected to “symbolic rape” by their male classmates through “pantsings” (Connell and Wilson 1974). Because of the limited definition of sexual assault, none of the boys would legally be charged with a crime; further, the incidents would be considered, within the context of rape culture, as boys being boys. By the late 1970s, however, feminist research would work not only to uncover the varying ways women experience sexual intrusions, but to draw connections between them to highlight the enduring effects of sexual violence against women and girls.

Liz Kelly (1988) draws on this body of literature to define sexual violence as the following:

Sexual violence includes any physical, visual, verbal, or sexual act that is experienced by the woman or girl, at the time or later, as a threat, invasion, or assault, that has the effect of hurting her or degrading her and/or taking away her ability to control intimate contact. (41)

This definition succinctly reflects the shift in feminist analysis of men’s violence from one focused on more readily apparent physical assaults to a broader interpretation of what women experience as sexual violence. This definition includes, for instance, acquaintance and date rape, marital rape, pressured and coerced sex, sexual harassment, rape jokes, catcalling, and so on.

Kelly makes a distinction, however, that varying forms of sexual violence cannot and should not be interpreted based on the seriousness of the act, nor should they be studied separately from one another. Doing so would only reinforce the idea that forms of sexual
violence are hierarchal, and therefore that some should be considered as more serious than others. Neither, she argues, should sexual intrusions be based on the level of harm done to the woman, as the ways women react to incidences of violence and how incidences impact them over time are complex. For instance, Lamb (1999) makes the point that many women who are emotionally or psychologically affected by sexual violations often recover quickly, while others take longer to heal. Further, women who endure prolonged verbal or mental abuse can be deeply impacted. Focusing on the degree of suffering seeks to pathologize the victim rather than to seek justice for the violation (Louise Armstrong 1996, as cited in Lamb 1999, 110). Further, most, if not all women, will experience sexual violence at some point in their life; and many women will experience multiple forms of violence and/or experience violence multiple times in their lifespan. She theorizes instead that acts of sexual violence should be considered as being situated on a continuum of male behavior that shade into one another—and therefore cannot be clearly defined in distinct analytic categories—and that share a common character. The common character that underlies varying forms of sexual violence include abuse, intimidation, coercion, intrusion, threat, and force that men use to control women (1988, 76).

**Issues with “Victim’ and “Survivor”**

Early in the 1970s anti-rape movement, women who experienced sexual violence were named as “victims” to emphasize that victimization was an act done to women and not something we asked for. A victim is also defined as someone who is injured, killed, or otherwise harmed by an individual, act or condition (Young and Maguire 2003). The role of victim also gained women access to legal recourse, sympathy the right to claim assistance, temporary relief from other responsibilities, and other services (Gavey 1999). Martha Burt and Rhoda Estep argued that victimization is political because
Power dictates who victimizes and who get victimized, and power dictates what will be viewed as victimization. A person recognized, legitimated, as a victim is recognized as some who has received a wrong, who has been treated unfairly and unjustly. (Gavey 1999, 59)

The term also acknowledged that many women do not survive sexual violence. Many women are killed during the attack, take their own lives in the aftermath, or develop mental illness as a result of the violence (Kelly 1988; Herman 1995). By the 1980s, however, feminists began to shift from calling women “victims” to “survivors” to disassociate from the negative connotations of victimhood, such as that victims are passive and/or powerless (Kelly 1988; Lamb 1999).

Lamb (1999) contends that this shift occurred because the focus on victimhood as a socio-political cause that discussed power and dominance turned to an emphasis on trauma, particularly in the media and by public and mental health professionals. The image of the victim that was put forward, she argues, is one of women who are pure, innocent, blameless, and free from problems prior to the abuse, but who “inevitably” and “overwhelmingly” experience psychological distress in the aftermath; the perpetrator of the abuse is juxtaposed as an evil monster (110). Gavey (1999) argues that this depiction has several consequences. The first is that it reinforces a model of women as being more vulnerable, and could uphold ideas of women as weak, passive, and asexual that make sexual coercion and rape more possible. Second, it depicts male perpetrators as “evil monsters” meaning they are sexually driven, unstoppable, and potentially dangerous, and “aberrant” from the “normal” male population (Kelly 1988). Therefore, this depiction of the victim is recuperative and supports hegemonic ideas about heterosexual practices and abuse as a non-typical event.

Kelly, Burton, and Regan (1996) argue that simplistic models of victimization neglect women’s ability to resist and cope with sexual violence. Here, coping refers the actions women take to avoid or control distress and resistance refers to how women actively oppose, fight, or
refuse to cooperate with, or submit to violation. Further, resistance implies that there is a force, power, or person in opposition (Kelly 1988). Kelly (1988) suggests that women’s coping is an active and constructive adaption to abuse that will affect the impact the abuse has on her. How she copes or resists depends how she defines the experience, the context in which the event occurs, and what resources are available to her before, during, and after the event. While her strategies may not prevent the assault, it can alter or minimize the event. For instance, Kelly found in the results of her interviews that not one of her interviewees passively accepted assault; they each used resistance or coping strategies to avoid or minimize the incident. She says, “They all refused to allow their rapists to control the event and, therefore, have total power over them” (1988, 170).

Survival, on the other hand, means “to continue living” or “continued existence after, or in spite of, a life-threatening experience…it is the positive outcome of coping and/or resistance” (Kelly 1988, 162). Kelly (1988) maintains that survival means both physically and emotionally surviving the assault. By physically surviving, she means both that she is not killed during the assault nor does she take her own life in the aftermath. Emotional survival refers to the extent to which women can reconstruct their lives to overcome the negative impact of the violence on their life (162-3). Kelly further contends that focusing on women’s ability to cope, resist, and survive calls attention to our strength in spite of our experiences. While the term “victim” connotes a loss while “survivor” points to the active and positive ways women cope and resist.

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2 According to Ann Burgess and Linda Holmstrom, women practice verbal, physical, and cognitive resistance and coping strategies before, during, and after the event. Verbal coping strategies include screaming, humor, and calm talking; physical includes fighting, running away, etc.; cognitive include submitting to avoid further injury or disassociating from the experience. They do not make a distinction between resistance and coping. See Kelly 1988, 169-170.
Hooks (2015b) asserts that focusing on women’s strength and survival skills should be the basis for women’s collective resistance. She states that bonding over shared victimization reflects male supremacist thinking that teaches women to be passive victims. Further, she argues, it deterred self-affirming women from joining feminist movement or lead many women to leave feminist movement when they no longer accepted the “victim identity” (2015b, 45).

Women who are exploited and oppressed daily cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives. They cannot afford to see themselves solely as “victims” because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess. This is the woman bonding feminist movement should encourage. It is the type of bonding that is the essence of Sisterhood. (hooks 2015b, 46)

To Laura Anderson and Karen Gold (1994), the “survivor” label connotes a part of one’s identity which “constructs women’s sense of self in relation to the effects of sexual abuse and history of sexual victimization” (6). The term also keeps with feminist attempts to develop language that aids in personal and political transformation. On the other hand, they also suggest that the term can be problematic for women who do not see their experiences as fitting a survivor framework, however, they argue that this problem is not associated with the term itself, but rather with therapeutic processes of labeling. I will speak more on this issue below. The limitation on the word survivor, they argue, is its connotation of strength. Anderson and Gold report that many of their patients did not believe they deserved to be called survivors because they have not yet attained that state of being, while others felt the label internalized their abuse and took control of their identity. The point of the first patient reflects what Kelly, Burton, and Regan (1996) call a survivor model that is often represented in stages of phases, or a journey from being a victim to becoming a survivor, which they find naïve and inappropriate. They argue that the journey metaphor presumes a notion of “healing” that offers a false hope that by
understanding and/or responding their abuse, that they can be cured, and their symptoms of trauma can be “got rid of” with the right treatment. However,

…it is impossible to change what has happened in the past…What is possible is to reach an understanding of those events and their consequences which explains feelings and responses…It is finding some kind of resolution at the level of meaning which is fundamental to being able to achieve more sense of control over one’s emotions and one’s life. (Kelly, Burton, and Regan 1996)

The point made by the second patient, on the other hand, reflect how the terms “victim” and “survivor” juxtapose while simultaneously reinforcing one another and recuperating hegemonic notions of victimhood.

**Victim-Survivor Dichotomy**

Kelly, Burton, and Regan (1996) maintain that the use of simplistic models of “victimhood” and “survivorship” serve to develop an oppositional dichotomy of static identities which only recuperates the two terms into hegemonic notions of victimization. To examine this point, they developed a word association exercise in which they asked participants to brainstorm words they think of when they hear the terms “victim” and “survivor.” The words the participants associated with “victim” included passive, helpless, vulnerable, shame, controlled, weak, and guilty. Words or phrases connected to “survivor” included active, resourceful, courageous, strong, gutsy, angry, fighting back, and not guilty. “Victim,” then, was associated with negative connotations while “survivor” was viewed as positive (Kelly, Burton, and Regan 1996, 90-1). I contend, however, that one word was not found in Kelly, Burton, and Regan’s study, and that was “healed.” As I related above, “healed” is a concept that fosters false hope of completely overcoming the impact of one’s abuse. Its absence supports Kelly, Burton, and Regan’s assessment that resistance, coping, and survival are an ongoing, active process that can span the rest of one’s life (1996).
Kelly, Burton and Regan (1996) contend that the oppositional positions of victims and survivors ignore the material and emotional reality for women who experience sexual violations. First, the construction of victimization and survival as either/or positions of identity obscures the reality that they relate to two different aspects of experience; victimization is what happened to the person and survival is what may or may not come after what happened. Second, positioning the two terms as oppositional and static identities also neglects an emphasis on how women resist, cope, and survive before, during, and after the abuse. Third, the victim/survivor dichotomy attributes “behaviors” to the two identities, which can reproduce notions that one does or must perform victimhood or survival. For instance, Lamb (1999) explains that when rape cases go to trial, the victim is expected to perform the role of the “convincing victim” to have her story be believed by a jury (116-8).

Lamb’s example also supports Kelly, Burton and Regan’s understanding that perceptions of “victimhood” are constructs currently subscribed to by our society based upon how others view the woman’s experience, not how she perceives it herself. However, the construct is co-constitutive, meaning that how others perceive her might influence how the woman views and shapes her own experience, which then influences others and so on. Lamb suggests further that even if a woman views herself as a survivor, others might still attribute victim behaviors to her, such as the expectation that she might break at any moment. Lamb (1999) and Ovenden (2012) argue that this perception is supported by the emphasis on symptomatology, syndromes, and disorders in psychiatric discourses of sexual violence which pathologize “victim behavior” (112-3; 941-2).

For instance, Judith Herman (1995) offers two different accounts for how women cope with sexual trauma. The first she asserts is the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in
which women encounter spontaneous flashbacks of victimization or reliving the event as though it were happening in the present. In the second, however, the woman will replay the event, either in a literal or disguised form, to fantasize how they might change the outcome to restore a sense of power and control over the event. It is evident in these two versions that women recover from or cope with trauma in different ways and at different rates. Georgia Ovenden (2012) maintains that the overreliance on trauma models undercut and denies women’s more agentic positions and offers only narrow pathways to heal from and speak out about their experiences.

Further, Lamb suggests that the victim/survivor dichotomy is reliant on the idea of the long-suffering victim. She maintains that this articulation of coping accentuates the most extreme outcomes of sexual violence. For victims of sexual abuse, she argues, while some were killed, the lives of most were rarely at stake. For instance, in Jessica Williamson and Kelly Serna’s (2017) study on self-labeling, one of their participants argued that the title “survivor” should be reserved from someone who had a life-threatening or life-altering experience (677). Therefore, within public understandings of victimhood, these incidences would not be considered “real” because the effects on them were not severe enough. “For abuse to count,” she says, “the suffering can never go away” (Lamb 1999, 113). Therefore, within the victim/survivor dichotomy, unless the event was life-threatening or extreme enough to cause long-standing suffering, the event is not serious enough to be labeled as abuse. These ideas uphold dominant discourses that abuse is rare, which can decrease visibility for survivors and limit action toward violence against women (Ovenden 2012).

**The Process of Naming**

One of the major issues of the victim/survivor dichotomy is its reliance on self-labeling. Gavey (1999) and Kelly, Burton, and Regan (1996), for instance, reference critiques by Neil Gilbert and Katie Roiphe of Mary Koss’ studies (see Koss 1985, 1988; Koss and Harvey 1991)
about acquaintance and date rape victims. In these studies, Koss and others categorized women’s
descriptions of unreported non-consensual sex as “unacknowledged” rape if the events’
descriptions fit the criteria of local rape statutes. Roiphe, for instance, following Gilbert, argued
that the women categorized were not “self-proclaimed victims” (cited in Gavey 1999, 65; Kelly,
Burton, and Regan 1996). However, as Kelly, Burton, Regan (1996) point out, had the women
called themselves victims, Roiphe would still take issue with their descriptions, because, as she
sees it, what constitutes rape is nothing less than stranger rape (89).

Several feminist researchers have found over the last two decades that many women are
refusing to label themselves as either victims or survivors.3 For instance, in Lori Koelsch’s
(2014) study of sexual discourses and agency, she found that her interview participants—all of
whom said they experienced unwanted sexual encounters but did not label the encounters as
sexual assault or rape—described themselves as agentic and hypothetical rape victims as lacking
agency, and therefore did not believe labels such as victim or survivor applied to them. Koelsch
(2014) concluded from her study that current constructions of sexual violence do not leave room
for considerations of agency by victim/survivors.

In their study on the effects of self-labeling, Williamson and Serna (2017) asked their
participants to self-identify as either a victim or a survivor. They found that some preferred one
or the other, while others chose to identify as neither. One of the participants they cite states the
following,

I’m alive, so technically I survived. I don’t consider myself a victim, but I was on
the receiving end, so technically I was the victim. I don’t care which term is used.
I think both terms can be a bit condescending. (Williamson and Serna 2017, 677).

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3 See, for instance, Anderson and Gold 1994; Koelsch 2014; Ovenden 2012; Williamson and Serna 2017; and
Young and Maguire 2003
However, they found there was no difference in the level of self-blame, victim-blame, or self-compassion (Williamson and Serna 2017).

Stacy Young and Katheryn Maguire (2003) found in their ethnographic study *Talking about Sexual Violence* that when women were asked whether they would name their experiences as rape or sexual assault—and themselves as victims or survivors—the women they interviewed avoided naming their experiences altogether. Instead, they preferred to detail the experiences and used descriptors such as “having sex,” “it,” “the incident,” “what happened to me,” and others (47). In their analysis of victim and survivor, Young and Maguire had similar results to Williamson and Serna. While some of their interviewees preferred victim, others preferred survivor, while others found utility in both. One interviewee, however, believed there was another step past survivor that we have not yet named. Young and Maguire suggest in their conclusions that avoidance of terms could be associated with levels of self-blame or women may not believe the terms fully encapsulate how they view their experiences.

Kelly (1988) maintains that before a person can label themselves as a victim, survivor or otherwise, she must first be able and willing to name her experience as abusive, meaning that she needs access to words that name her experience.

It is the lack of a *social definition* that is crucial. A social definition/name makes clear that others may share this experience, thereby undermining the isolation of feeling you are the only one. A social definition also suggests the possibility of a social cause. (141)

She argues that women must first be able to define the incident as being not normal, acceptable, or inevitable; second as abusive; and third as a particular form of abuse. Further, she maintains that women’s definitions can and do change over time; while she might not define an incident of

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4 “Thrivers” is one alternative that has been circulating. For instance, on Just Be, Inc.’s “Me Too” page, they state that “We want to turn victims into survivors and survivors into thrivers.” See Just Be, Inc., “The Movement.”
abuse as such when it first occurs, she might later. Lindsay Kelland (2016) further asserts, by drawing on Robert Neimeyer, that women need access to a willing and empathetic audience to validate their experience to construct a survivor narrative that facilitates healing and growth.

**Neoliberalism, Postfeminism, and the New “Victim” and “Survivor” Narratives**

Resistance to feminist redefinitions of sexual violence gained traction in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of neoliberalism during the Reagan administration and onward, and the concurrent development of postfeminist sensibilities (Gill 2007). David Harvey (2005) asserts that from the 1980s until now, neoliberalism has become the hegemonic mode of discourse when talking about social and political structures because it is now deeply embedded into what we consider “common-sense” ways to interpret, live in, and understand the world. It is predicated on the celebration of individualism, dismantling of the social welfare model of governance, and deregulation of industry. Fundamentally, it affirms that individuals must be reliant upon themselves and not the government to strengthen the social good, and that all human action and value must be located in the free market (Munshi and Willse 2016). Further, neoliberalism is a gendered construct which produces subjects that reaffirm normative gender, race, class, and sexual subjectivities (Gill and Scharff 2011; McRobbie 2009). It realigns femininity with emerging socio-economic arrangements by expecting women to perform active citizenship through consumerism. As a result, the gendered and racial effects of neoliberalism marginalize women who cannot perform consumer citizenship and blames them their own impoverished condition, such as in the black female archetype of the “welfare queen” (McRobbie 2009; Munshi and Willse 2016).

Neoliberalism has had a profound impact on feminist organizing and organizations. Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2017) argues that as the Reagan administration cut funding to social services, non-profit and social justice organizations had to expand their responsibilities to provide care for
persons abandoned by the state which hindered the time they could spend on progressive collective politics (45). Paradoxically, even though feminist organizations were born out of providing an alternative to state solutions, many were reliant on state funding and oversight to perform their work. As such, many feminist organizations became more invested in professionalization and legitimacy in order to gain funding by appealing to state priorities, becoming a “shadow state” in and of themselves (Gilmore 2017).

For instance, Seattle Rape Relief, one of the United States’ first rape crisis centers, was forced to close in 1999 in part because the anti-rape movement’s attempts to “streamline” sexual assault and domestic violence agencies into “becoming more professionalized and less grassroots oriented” (Bierrria 2017, 151). To appeal to the state, for example, antiviolence organizations referred to survivors they aided as “clients” rather than people (151). Alisa Bierrri (2017) argues that these efforts were an attempt to depoliticize feminist organizations. For instance, she describes how municipal funding her organization Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA) would be questioned because they identified rape as a political problem. Therefore, CARA had to create a “dual identity” to appeal to funders while still doing their activist work by creating two different sets of marketing material which created significant amounts of stress and consumed time and resources that could have been used organizing (158)

A similar shift occurred within women’s studies programs as well. bell hooks (2015) argues that as women’s studies became entrenched in universities’ conservative corporate structures, they became more separate from feminist movement. While academic legitimation was crucial to the advancement of feminist thought, feminist theory became inaccessible to the masses. Because women’s studies programs replaced the consciousness-raising group as the primary site where women were exposed to feminist ideas, feminist identity became a privileged
position. “Without the consciousness-raising group as a site where women confronted their own sexism towards other women, the direction could shift to a focus on equality in the workforce and confronting male domination” (hooks 2015a, 10).

Postfeminism came to prominence concurrent with neoliberalism. Angela McRobbie (2009) defines postfeminism as a simultaneous “doing” and “undoing” of feminism by which elements of feminism, such as the concepts of empowerment and choice, are taken up, but distorted to center individuality and positioned as a substitute for feminism. As a result, feminism is vilified, made unpalatable, and declared dead. In rejecting feminism, women are rewarded with the promise of independence and freedom through wage-earning and participation in consumer culture. Postfeminist discourse consists of themes such as self-surveillance and discipline, a marked sexualization of culture, and an emphasis on consumerism and commodification of difference that are coexist with and are structured by continuing inequalities and exclusions related to gender, race, class, age, sexuality, and ability (Gill 2007).

Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (2011) maintain that many of qualities of neoliberalism and postfeminism intersect. Both ideologies privilege individualism and self-regulation and center the image of the freely choosing agent unfettered by social, political, and economic constraints who is subject only to free market capitalism. Under this paradigm, they argue, women in particular are encouraged to partake in “self-improvement” and “self-discipline” activities to represent themselves as full, active citizens. McRobbie (2009) suggests this ideology constructs women as the primary demographic for self-help markets which coopt feminist conceptions of empowerment and choice and covert them to emphasize the power of the individual over victimhood on the path toward survivorship. Ovenden (2012) buttresses this argument. She maintains that the focus on individual rather than political change in the recovery
movement has contributed to a self-help rhetoric that depoliticizes sexual violence and constructs a modality of “survivorship” where survivors are responsible for their own healing. As such, sexual violence is located as an individualized problem that leans into trauma and denies women’s agency. She suggests this neoliberal turn in survivor discourse reinforces anti-feminist backlash that argues feminism, and not patriarchy, constructs women into inevitable victims (Ovenden 2012; see also Kelly, Burton, and Regan 1996).

Kelly, Burton, and Regan (1996) contend that the “power” feminism represented by Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, and Naomi Wolf that arose to counter “victimhood” feminism is neatly constructed to ignore or misrepresent feminist history. For instance, power feminism obscures feminist work to document women’s victimization and suggest instead that feminists invented the notion of victimhood. The authors argue that for power feminists, any attempt to redefine sexual violence beyond the scope of stranger rape is “an adoption of powerlessness” (Kelly, Burton, and Regan 1996; see also Gavey 1999). Further the “power” in power feminism adopts postfeminist sensibilities; individuals, they argue, should use their inner power to improve themselves by building self-esteem and self-discipline, further underscoring neoliberalism’s attention to decentralizing state power to individuals.

Commercialized feminism and “power feminism,” as extensions of postfeminism, further coopted feminist discourses of empowerment and self-determination to resist “victimhood” (Talbot 2007). For instance, feminists established self-defense courses with the intent of changing how women thought about themselves and the power they had in their own lives. The did this by claiming the right to protect and defend themselves. However, under postfeminism, this agency was coopted and stripped of its political intent. Self-defense became a “refusal to be a victim” in mandating that women protect themselves, and therefore arm themselves with
defensive tools and strategies. For instance, a self-defense market opened to target women to purchase pepper spray, hidden knives, date rape drug detecting nail polish, etc. Further, the NRA imitated the “Refuse to be a Victim” campaign which coopted both an anti-victimhood narrative and a pro-choice narrative to promote a power feminism that offered an illusory empowerment through firearm ownership (Talbot 2007). The onus for preventing rape was placed back on the victim rather than the perpetrator and reinforced the victim/survivor dichotomy; if a woman did not protect herself from rape, than she was asking for it. If she did, she was a courageous, agentic actor in deserve of praise (Spry 1995; see also Ovenden 2012).

The self-help and self-defense industries made it seem, as bell hooks (2015c) argues, that women could change everything in their lives through sheer force of will. They do no suggest that we need to organize politically to change society in conjunction with transforming ourselves. Hooks states that women do need to work on self-actualization because we cannot create effective social change movements if we are not self-actualized or working toward that end. “When wounded individuals come together in groups to make change our collective struggle is often undermined by all that has not been dealt with emotionally” (Kindle location 96). She argues for a context in which women can work on our individual efforts while remaining connected to collective struggle and advocates for a centering of black female self-recovery as an expression of liberatory political practice. “Without knowing what factors have created certain problems in the first place,” she writes, “we could not begin to develop meaningful strategies of personal and connective resistance” (hooks 2015c, location 218).

This chapter sought to provide a discursive context of the anti-rape movement that will inform my analysis of the #MeToo hashtag. Defining rape culture and challenging it has been and continues to be a defining characteristic of hashtag feminism. Studying the concepts of the
continuum of violence against women and the victim/survivor dichotomy adds an additional dimension to the discussion of rape culture because it highlights the continued struggle we face in our society to name violence and to find justice for victim-survivors. These concepts will be central to my analysis of the #MeToo hashtag. #MeToo is uniquely situated as a case study of survivor discourse because it not only challenges hegemonic discourses about male privilege, sexuality, and sexual violence, but also showcases the ongoing disputes about what constitutes sexual violence and how we define victimhood and survivorship. In Chapter 4, I will connect the historical and discursive contexts I discussed in Chapter 2 and 3 to analyze tweets from #MeToo to identify how these concepts are manifest.
CHAPTER 4
SPEAKING OUT ONLINE – SAYING #METOO

In this chapter, I draw on the historical, theoretical, and contextual frameworks I outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 to do a qualitative content analysis of tweets from the #MeToo hashtag in order to demonstrate how #MeToo tweets exhibit the characteristics of survivor discourse. I want to locate how #MeToo survivors are redefining their experiences of sexual violence and how they are negotiating, resisting, or challenging dominant beliefs about sexual violence through their tweets. Further, I will contextualize where Me Too is situated within wider discursive efforts to challenge rape culture. I will also briefly look at those events that had an impact on #MeToo’s proliferation in public discourse. To do so, I collected news stories about #MeToo and used them as a primary source to explain how the hashtag came about, as well as to examine how public conversations developed during the first weeks of the movement.

As I explained in Chapters 2 and 3, a central aspect of feminist discursive activism is its examination of unequal power, understanding many of the ways it sustains women’s subjugation. Feminist discursive activism shares many traits with critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA is a critical perspective that examines how unequal social structures are enacted, reproduced, and resisted through language use, with the goal of challenging social inequality and promoting social transformation (Lazar 2005; Van Dijk 2015). One aspect of CDA that is valuable for this study of #MeToo is the understanding that language is both socially-constituted and constitutive, meaning that language influences social institutions and institutions likewise influence discourse. This is especially true in media such as in news sources, television, and the internet. Therefore, studying how news media are framing their coverage of #MeToo is important to perceive how public discussion is shaping the news and vice versa.
I begin my analysis by outlining how I designed my research project and collected and coded my data. Then, I will briefly describe how the Me Too movement—both the original campaign founded by Tarana Burke and the hashtag initiated by Alyssa Milano—came to be. I will then provide the findings of my content analysis of the #MeToo tweets and news reports. I will conclude the chapter with an analysis of where I believe the characteristics of survivor discourse overlap with #MeToo and where I believe the discourse has or has not progressed.

**Data and Method**

For this research project, I collected #MeToo tweets published between October 15 and 18, 2017 for inclusion in the sample by completing a keyword search using Twitter’s Advanced Search tool. I selected tweets from this time because this period is what Rosemary Clark (2016), drawing on Daniel McFarland’s definition of collective action as a social drama, defines as a hashtag protest’s “crisis period,” or when movement actors stake their definitional claims over the discursive event. The protest’s outcome is then determined by the frames that resonate most with the public (793). More than 1.7 million tweets were published within the first twenty-four hours of Milano’s initiating tweet and this is also the period when reports on #MeToo saturated the news cycle (Park 2017). To limit my search to tweets detailing experiences of sexual violence, I used the following search terms: survivor, victim, harassed, felt, touched, raped, assaulted, rape culture, speak out, believe. A second search was also conducted to locate tweets critical of or minimizing the #MeToo hashtag or survivor experiences—whether it was an outsider minimizing said experiences or a participant minimizing her own experience—including the following terms and/or phrases: hierarchy, not as bad as, not as serious as, conflating(ed), and crime. These search terms were selected for two reasons. I chose to use the first set of search terms because they represented varying forms of sexual violence present in Liz Kelly’s description of the continuum of violence against women and mirrored many of the allegations
against Weinstein (1988). The second set of terms were selected because they represented many of the claims against #MeToo in news articles critical of the movement as well as in the language of women who downplayed their experiences of sexual victimization.

This query resulted in a sample of 113 tweets for analysis. To identify the discursive practices used in the #MeToo hashtag, I used a manual, thematic analysis to organize and code my tweet sample in two Excel spreadsheets. On the first spreadsheet, I used a color-block system to code the data based on the theme(s) of the tweets, which were then used as coding categories. Six overarching frame categories emerged from the data: 1) personal testimonies of experiences of sexual violence, 2) testimonies of or allusions to trauma, resistance, and coping, 3) expressions of support and/or solidarity with victims/survivors—some specifically noting hidden and/or marginalized survivors, 4) commentary on the proliferation of rape culture, 5) calls for male accountability for rape culture, and 6) tweets commenting on or critiquing the #MeToo hashtag. The second spreadsheet was used to code the various experiences of sexual violence described in the personal testimonies which included instances of rape, groping, assault, harassment, coercion, and cat-calling, among others. Several testimonial tweets merely used the words “me too” without giving an account of their experiences.

**Tarana Burke and the Me Too Movement**

Long before “me too” became an internationally recognized hashtag, it was a campaign started by Tarana Burke in 2006 as part of her non-profit organization Just Be, Inc. The project sought to fill a gap left by other antiviolence agencies by centering the experiences of, and healing from, sexual violence by young women of color (Just Be, Inc.). Burke explained in an

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1 Thirteen of the tweets collected were part of a “thread,” or a longer strand of tweets by the same author. Five of the tweets included an embedded image, two of which were typed testimony that, if posted as tweets, would have exceeded Twitter’s 140-character limitation.
interview with *The Nation*’s Elizabeth Adetiba that many of the victim services that exist are not accessible to communities of color, nor do communities of color seek therapy, counseling, or rape-crisis resources at the same rates as more privileged communities. Further, women of color face more barriers to reporting abuse because of their distrust of police and their fear of betraying their community. “There are nuances in our community around sexual violence that are informed by centuries of oppression and white supremacy, but we have to confront them. Across the board there’s shame, but in our community there’s shame on top of fear on top of ostracization” (Adetiba 2017). Ashwini Tambe (2018) argues that black women regularly feel pressured not to speak out about black men’s harassment and abuse to protect their community because of the historical unjust punishment against black men for allegedly assaulting white women. Burke buttressed this claim in an interview with *The New York Times* in which she acknowledged that even in our current climate, journalists could not get black women to go on the record against R. Kelly (Harris 2018).²

Burke’s Me Too movement was built upon three principles: first is to promote empowerment through empathy. By empathy, Burke is referring to a “transformative” empathy which promotes listening, requires self-reflexivity, and makes space for the anger survivors feel rather than “passive” empathy which enables people to project feelings of commonality without genuine engagement. It is the sharing of an experience to begin healing (Rodino-Colocino 2018). Burke states, for instance, that the idea for “me too” came to her after she met a girl at the youth camp where she worked in the late 1990s whose stepfather abused her. Burke directed the girl to another counselor who could help her because she could not muster the courage to connect with

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² As of this writing, R. Kelly was reportedly dropped from his recording label, RCA/Sony, following outcry after the release of the Lifetime documentary *Surviving R. Kelly*. [https://variety.com/2019/biz/news/r-kelly-dropped-sony-music-1203106180/](https://variety.com/2019/biz/news/r-kelly-dropped-sony-music-1203106180/)
the girl, to tell her she understood, or that she was not alone. From that encounter, she realized that “me too” could be used to release survivors from shame and empower us through empathy by reassuring us that we were not just not alone, but that we were normal (Adetiba 2017; Just Be, Inc., “The Movement”). “The power of empathy,” Just Be, Inc.’s webpage states, “is sorely undervalued…sometimes there is nothing as powerful as knowing that you are not alone” (Just Be Inc. “The Movement”). Burke emphasizes that young women who have been victimized, particularly young women of color from low-wealth backgrounds, often feel shame, isolation, and powerlessness and are at risk of being left voiceless when they do not feel represented by advocacy movements. The Me Too movement was designed specifically to give them the space to feel included, that their experiences warrant just as much attention as women with more privilege, and that they are entitled to full humanity (Just Be, Inc., “The Movement”).

The second principle is connection. Me too is designed to emphasize coalition building among women of all locations who can empathize with one another and have a vested interest in the survival and triumph of all women. The third principle is education. As well as the current programs and workshops Just Be, Inc. holds to guide girls of color to develop a strong senses of self-worth and to prepare them to transition into womanhood, the Me Too movement is developing an educational kit education kit that will provide school systems, community groups, and youth organizations with resources to facilitate conversations about sexual assault, abuse, and exploitation (SAAE) (Just Be, Inc.).

**Alyssa Milano Responds to Harvey Weinstein Allegations**

On October 5, 2017, *The New York Times* published an exposé by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey about previously undisclosed sexual harassment allegations against Harvey Weinstein that spanned over nearly three decades. The article outlined the toxic culture at Miramax and The Weinstein Company through interviews with current and former employees
and internal documents from the two film studios. Kantor and Twohey revealed at least eight settlements were reached with women between 1990 and 2015. Five days later, *The New Yorker* published a second article by Ronan Farrow which went further into the details of the allegations against Weinstein including interviews with thirteen women accusing him of sexual misconduct. The allegations levied against Weinstein in Farrow’s article ranged from sexual harassment, unwanted touching, non-consensual oral sex, and rape. Both articles allege that Weinstein’s misconduct was an open secret in film industry circles, but that previously no one had dared speak out for fear of retaliation. For instance, Asia Argento, one of Weinstein’s accusers, is quoted in the *New Yorker* article saying, “I know he has crushed a lot of people before. That is why this story…has never come out” (Farrow 2017). Over the next several days, several more women came forward to allege Weinstein harassed or assaulted them (Kantor and Abrams 2017).

#MeToo, however, was not merely a response to the Weinstein allegations. As Farrow points out, several of Weinstein’s former employees chose to speak out against Weinstein because they believed there was a “growing culture of accountability.” One former executive said the following: “I think a lot of us had thought—and hoped—over the years that it would come out sooner. But I think now is the right time, in this current climate, for the truth” (2017, np). The “climate” the executive is referring to is the groundswell of sexual harassment and rape accusations over the previous three years against other high-profile men including Bill Cosby, Roger Ailes, Bill O’Reilly, and others (Farrow 2017; Tambe 2018). Tambe (2018) argues that it was the election of Donald Trump in November 2016 that served as a trigger for the anger at the heart of #MeToo. She writes,

> For victims of sexual trauma, it is already painful to watch perpetrators roam free because of how high the burden of proof are in legal cases. When a person such as Trump is grandly affirmed by an election, it retraumatizes victims…The ballast provided by women’s feverish organizing and the instant power of social media
has facilitated a collective emboldening. Trump has made the comeuppance of all powerful men feel more urgent. (198)

Tambe argues, then, that Weinstein was merely the straw that broke the women’s backs.

On October 15, actress Alyssa Milano, who was friends with both Weinstein’s wife Georgina Chapman and actress Rose McGowan, one of Weinstein’s most vocal accusers, took to Twitter to ask sexual harassment and assault survivors to tweet “me too” (Desta 2017; Milano 2017; Ortiz 2017; Schmidt 2017). Milano’s tweet is what Clark refers to as the protest’s “breaching event,” in which a breach of social order or discourse initiates collective action (2016). In this case, by tweeting, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet,” Milano is directing her followers to breach a perceived social norm by speaking out about the proliferation of sexual violence. Further, she says that the purpose of saying “me too” is to “give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” This statement implies that there is still a belief in our society that sexual violence is not a wide-ranging issue but is still a rare occurrence. I will speak more about this issue later when I discuss the critiques of #MeToo, but I want to highlight this point here because by suggesting that sexual violence is not perceived as endemic, Milano is proposing #MeToo as a rape myth-debunking and consciousness-raising speech event, or as a digital rape speak-out (Connell and Wilson 1974; Stubbs-Richardson, Rader and Cosby 2018).

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3 Rose McGowan alluded several times in the years leading up to the Weinstein allegations about to a film producer who raped her, but could not say his name for legal reasons associated with the $100,000 settlement Weinstein paid her in 1997. However, after the New York Times and The New Yorker stories broke, McGowan published a series of tweets in which she called out Hollywood insiders including Matt Damon and Ben Affleck for knowing about Weinstein and remaining silent. She was briefly suspended from Twitter on October 12, 2017 for publishing a tweet with a phone number visible in the tweet. Twitter was accused of silencing McGowan for speaking out and was called out for not suspending Donald Trump for his threatening tweets, alluding to a double standard of what Twitter deemed “newsworthy.” The suspension prompted the #WomenBoycottTwitter hashtag on October 13 to show solidarity with McGowan. See Desta 2017 and Ortiz 2017.
The key differences here, however, from the rape speak-outs of the 1970s—or events such as Take Back the Night which still occur today—are the setting of the speech event and who is involved. When survivors and supporters hold public speak-outs, there is an unmistakable audience to whom speakers are addressing. However, in digital spaces, the audience is not so readily apparent. Therefore, when Milano tweets her directive, she is constructing an imagined audience who may or may not respond—or even see her tweet (Marwick and boyd 2010). By responding to Milano’s tweet, users are either commiserating with her—in other words, performing an act of solidarity with her—or, possibly, rejecting her worldview (Schiffrin 1994). I will go into further detail about the significance of using the #MeToo hashtag below.

**Saying “Me Too”**

By responding to Milano’s tweet with “me too,” Twitter users demonstrated the multifaceted capabilities the hashtag had to accommodate the needs of its participants. The hashtag could simultaneously be used to perform acts of solidarity, identity and community building, to provide personal testimony, or to challenge hegemonic myths about sexual violence. Sometimes, these aims could all occur within the same tweet. For instance,

@username5: me too. 

The words “me too” can be interpreted in many ways. First and foremost, the user is empathizing with Milano’s worldview that sexual violence is an endemic problem and is providing evidence to challenge the myth that sexual harassment and assault are not wide-ranging issues. Further, in saying “me too,” username5 is identifying herself/themself as a person who has experienced sexual violence. In other words, the user is stating in these two words “Yes, it happened to me,

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4 In accordance with the Association of Internet Researchers’ (2012) guidelines for ethical decision-making, I chose to remove the names and handles from tweets to maintain some privacy for the #MeToo participants. While Twitter is a public forum and users have consented to their tweets being publicly available on Twitter—to some extent the user can control access to their tweets by making their account private—but they have not consented to their identities and comments being publicized outside of this context, including in a research paper.
too.” Lastly, the user is building affective solidarity with Milano and other respondents by disclosing their experience (Hemmings 2016). Burke argues that the power of “me too” is to promote empowerment through empathy because it tells the person reading or hearing it that they are not alone. The sooner a young woman understands they are not an anomaly, she says, the sooner they can begin to heal from the abuse (Just Be, Inc. “The Movement”).

In fact, of the seventy-five tweets coded as personal testimonies, twenty chose not to disclose the details of their experiences. For instance:

This is the hardest thing for me to do but…#metoo

#MeToo At any convention ive been to. By so called ‘friends.’ At the grocery store. The list goes on so long it makes me sick to think of it.

I don’t feel ready to write down the details, but seeing all this love and support, maybe one day I will. For now, all I can say is #MeToo

However, one does not have to be a survivor to use the #MeToo hashtag. As Burke articulates, the power of “me too” is its ability to build affective and transformative solidarity with and between victim-survivors, meaning that non-survivors can still use the hashtag to build solidarity with survivors (Rodino-Colocino 2018). For instance, several tweets did not allude to being victim-survivors but used the hashtag to provide support to those who did, to raise awareness to the proliferation of violence, and to provide counter-arguments to hegemonic myths, such as in the following:

#MeToo isn’t just about rape. It’s all kinds of abuse, including harassment. One experience does not negate another. They’re all important.

This “what were u wearing” mentality has to stop! Society is concentrating more on “Don’t get raped” when we MUST teach “Don’t rape!” #MeToo

Further, many tweeters showed solidarity with groups that are typically marginalized in conversations about sexual assault such as the LGBTQ community and people of color.
Shout out to all the trans, two-spirit, non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid, and agender folks in the #MeToo tag. You are valid

Survivors who are black women, disabled, or part of the LGBTQ community who are excluded out these conversations your story matters #MeToo

Very few people acknowledge that our entire culture was built on sexual violence and rape, especially of black and indigenous women. #MeToo

Tweeting at these communities incorporates their experiences in wider public discourse which further emphasizes the “magnitude of the problem,” but also draws attention to the exclusion these communities experience because of unequal access to resources. Tarana Burke, for instance, asserts that cultures in which women of color live often encourage women to keep situations of assault or abuse hidden and that the prevalence of violence is so widespread that it has been normalized. Therefore, women from particularly low-wealth backgrounds risk being left voiceless because they are not represented (Just Be, Inc., “The Movement”).

Not saying “Me Too.” Further, seven of the tweets I collected for this study voiced support for survivors who either chose not to join the #MeToo hashtag or were not able to share their story. One tweet thread, in particular, was quite salient in how it discussed this trend. While she makes clear in her first tweet that survivors can share to #MeToo without disclosing the details of the violence they experienced, she goes on to say,

It’s okay not to want to add your name to that list – whether that’s just now, or forever. / It’s okay to have no idea what to say, and it’s okay to feel like “me too” isn’t what you want to say. / You might feel hopeless or useless or any number of bad things for not joining in, but you do not have to, that’s okay too. / Not joining in does not make you any less good, nor does it make you complicit. You can choose, and your ability to choose matters. / Being afraid is not the only reason not to tell your story. Whatever your reason, it’s okay. / I am sorry that the burden is placed on you, to have experienced it, to recover, and then to speak out. No one deserves that. / There are two sides here: the ones who can support & the ones who need support. It’s okay to be the latter. You need it. That’s okay.

This tweet, along with others in my sample, make clear the amount of emotional labor that is taken up by choosing whether to speak out about sexual violence. This author attempts to remove
the burden from those who cannot or will not speak out by reassuring them that there is no mandate for them to perform their trauma; that, like many similar tweets argue, they don’t “owe anyone their story,” and that not speaking out does not make them any less of a survivor nor make them “complicit.”

For instance, in an article for *Bustle*, Michelle Toglia (2017) interviewed twenty women who spoke about the reasons they chose not to share on the #MeToo hashtag. She also shared part of her own reasoning behind “pausing” before posting her tweet. She says,

Why should I have to do this? I’ve already dealt with far too many men who don’t treat women like people, who think women owe them something – and I’ve had to deal with the effects of it. So why is it our responsibility to open up about something difficult in efforts to educate men? What initially felt like catharsis quickly turned into frustration, and I decided not to post on principle alone. (np, emphasis hers)

Several of the women who shared their stories with Toglia had similar sentiments. Many felt that the labor for movements against sexual assault was always placed on women, and that women should not have to perform their trauma so that men care. I will touch on this topic further in my discussion of my secondary findings. Others stated that they used their social media accounts for work and did not feel comfortable sharing the details of their assault because they might be viewed differently by their coworkers or clients; other women said the same about the platforms by which they connect with family members. Many women also shared that they did not want to dilute the hashtag by posting what they felt were stories that were not serious enough. A few women also argued that they did not believe the hashtag would make a difference.

#MeToo and the Continuum of Violence Against Women

Of the 113 tweets sampled for this project, seventy-five tweets were coded as personal testimonies of sexual violence. By personal testimony, I mean the tweeter used identifiable language which situated them as a person who experienced at least one incidence of sexual
violence. For instance, by tweeting the words “me too,” the tweeter is disclosing their location as a survivor. Of the tweets coded as personal testimony, fifty-five tweets used specific terms to describe their abuse. These terms ranged from sexual harassment, stalking, flashing, catcalling or street harassment, threats of violence, physical or verbal assault, groping or touching, sexual assault, coercion, non-consensual sex, and rape. Some users also described an overall feeling of being unsafe.

As I discussed in Chapter 3, the experiences named above are situated along what Liz Kelly defines as a continuum of violence against women. The continuum is theorized in a way that enables women to make sense of their experiences of violence by illustrating how both routine (and therefore deemed acceptable) and non-routine (those forms we define as criminal) are colored by the same threat of force and shade into one another. This is apparent in several #MeToo tweets where the users name many of the same experiences but label them in different ways. For instance,

Date raped in 1970. Cornered and assaulted at work in 1971. #MeToo

It’s hard to speak out. I was sexually assaulted when I was 12. I was horrified, embarrassed, and couldn’t bear to tell my parents. #metoo

#MeToo Coercion is rape. Talking someone into it is rape. “If you love me you would” is rape. Threatening to cheat if told no is rape. / #MeToo Just as much as sobbing “no” is rape. All of these have happened to me. Only 1 was by physical force. I’m a survivor. We’re valid.5

In each of these tweets, the women use the terms rape or assault to describe the incidences they experienced. However, it is unclear in their statements what they might define as sexual assault. Young and Maguire (2003) state that the term sexual assault was created as an overarching term

5 The / symbol in this example is used to show that the author’s testimony was divided between two or more tweets, otherwise known as a thread.
for unwanted sexual contact which could include rape. Therefore, while each of the women may have experience similar events, what matters is how they choose to define it. For instance, in the first example, the author of the tweet clearly delineates her experience of rape from that of her sexual assault. However, the second author uses only sexual assault to define her encounter, while the third uses rape to define several incidences of coercive sex.

This practice is also evident in tweets where the authors describe various forms of unwanted sexual touching. For instance,

#MeToo, from a handsy teacher in high school to the man who raped me in college to the guy on the train yesterday who groped me as I exited.

I’m the 1 in 6 you hear about. He tried to shove a finger in me. In public. That’s how comfortable rapists are in our culture. (1/7) #MeToo

The first time I got groped was when I was in class 6. I was walking to school and a man groped my breasts. Yes. #MeToo

As in the examples of rape and assault, the authors in the above examples use different labels to define similar intrusions. The first tweeter, for instance, describes her teacher as “handsy.” It is unclear to the reader what handsy means to her, but it is evident that she understands the event as a violation. Further, both the first and the third tweets use the word “groped,” however, only the third author specifies that the man in question touched her breasts. This could also be true for the first author; however, she may mean groped in a different sense, such as in the second example where the man attempted to touch the author’s genitals, or in another way entirely.

Each of these examples illustrates how there is no distinct boundary that separates one form of violence from another. Whether the woman is sexually harassed, touched inappropriately, pressured into sex, or raped, what matters is that she was violated and that in

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6 The (1/7) in this example is used by the tweet’s author to show it is the first of seven tweets in a thread.
each of these cases, the man in question was assuming sexual access to the author and was intruding on her ability to control intimate contact (Kelly 1988).

This is an important distinction to make, particularly when we next consider tweets that detract from hashtag’s purpose by charging women who use the #MeToo hashtag to tell their stories of “conflating” non-serious forms of violence with criminal acts. For example,

Sorry to burst your bubble #metoo folks but harassment and assault are not the same. There is no comparison.

Linking sexual assault with sexual harassment in #metoo is a bad idea. Who hasn’t been sexually harassed? Not the same as assault.

Getting annoyed by #metoo hashtag. Women who have been flirted with are using it! Rape and sexual coercion are not the same as a risqué comment!

I see two points of contention in the above examples. First, each of these tweets makes a distinction between sexual harassment and sexual assault and places the latter on a higher level of seriousness than the former. The second two tweets also further downplay the impact of sexual harassment by equating it with flirting and risqué comments and classify it as a typical interaction. For instance, the second example declares “Who hasn’t been sexually harassed?” distinguishing the act as normalized behavior. Therefore, to “conflate” the two events, is to either make assault less serious or exaggerate the effect of harassment. Second, the tweets claim that not only are the two instances not the same, they cannot be linked or compared, which could be interpreted as arguing that there are no common denominators between the two practices.

These examples would appear to support hegemonic definitions of sexual violence in which the only “real” forms of harm are those that fit within the boundaries of what are deemed criminal acts. Anything outside of these parameters are not valid, and those who claim they are, are seeking attention or, as one Twitter user put it, “wanting to be included in a victim narrative.” That is not to say, however, that survivors may not also set boundaries between their experience
and others. For example, in one tweet, the author says, “To a victim of violent #rape, sexual #harassment is not the same thing. Both are wrong but please don’t equate them. #notmetoo, not #MeToo.” It is not altogether clear in this tweet whether the author is a victim of violent rape or whether they are making a generalized statement about rape survivors, but either way they are still differentiating between the two events and setting them in a hierarchal structure.

As we can see from the example above, survivors are also compelled to adhere to hegemonic definitions and can thereby downplay their experiences because they do not fit within the boundaries of that reality, such as in the tweets below.

I always wish I trusted my gut to go to the cops the next morning but I was told “not to ruin his life” and “rape is a strong word” #MeToo

How f*cked up it is that I feel grateful to have “only” been sexually harassed and not assaulted. This needs to stop. #MeToo

I find myself still minimizing what happened to me because "it wasn't major" and "nothing really happened" but it did. metoo

We can also see how adherence to limited definitions also has a silencing effect. For example, the first tweeter says that she knew she had been raped, but outside influence impeded her from reporting because they did not trust her instincts. Silencing was also apparent in the following examples, as well:

Harassment is so normalized that I’m sitting wondering if my stories are “bad” enough to justify they #MeToo hashtag. This makes me sick.

I have been sitting on my #MeToo contributions all day because dismissing my experiences of harassment as 'not that bad' is second nature

I was celebrating the 2012 election results and got followed home. Doctor's first question was if I'd been drinking. #MeToo #WomenWhoRoar / The 2nd time I was raped was my last yr of grad school. I never reported it, I just concealed my injuries & taught the next morning. #MeToo

One tweeter, on the other hand, encapsulates how adherence to hegemonic definitions can be detrimental to survivors. In a five-tweet thread, she counters negative reactions to the #MeToo
hashtag by debunking the prevailing belief that only rape counts as sexual violence, and illustrates the varying ways women experience sexual violence:

I’m starting to realize the ppl reacting negatively to #MeToo consider rape, and only rape, as sexual harassment/assault. / Not the inappropriate comments, not the groping in public, not the catcalls, not the man following you home, not the unsolicited dick pics... / Not the boss who stares at your tits, not the man who gets mad when you turn him down, not the drunk guy who kisses you against your will.. / Not the family friend who is too touchy for comfort, not the colleague who makes sexist jokes at your expense...Rape is not the only form. / And I’m not invalidating the incredibly traumatic event that rape is. But making people feel these other events don’t count is not okay.

What is apparent in these tweets is that while there seems to be improvement in how we define sexual violence and that all forms of violence are viewed by many as serious, there is still much disagreement about how “serious” some forms are as opposed to others. This shows that while #MeToo has captured the zeitgeist, there is still a substantial portion of society that still maintains the hegemonic ideology that underlies rape culture. Even proponents of feminism can still propagate the idea that forms of sexual violation are hierarchal based on seriousness. Noted feminist Roxane Gay, for instance, reiterated in a now-deleted tweeted that there is a hierarchy and that some forms of violence are more serious than others. Therefore, while much progress has been made in recognizing the wide-reaching threat of sexual violence and the redefinition process, more work needs to be done to transform social and institutional definitions of what constitutes sexual intrusions.

“We Are Survivors”

While only eleven of the tweets that I collected for this research referenced the terms “victim” or “survivor”—which by itself is significant—what the tweets say about the terms is interesting and relevant. For instance, seven of the tweeters refer to themselves and/or to the collective group of women as “survivors.” This occurred most common either in the statement “I am a survivor” or “we are survivors.” The women writing these tweets are signifying that by
“surviving,” they are continuing to live and cope in relation to, or in spite of, their experiences of violation (Kelly, Burton, and Regan 1996).

This can also be viewed in a way of “surviving” as continuing the process of recovery from trauma, as in the following example:

speaking as a survivor, seeing all the #MeToo posts are overwhelming. I also can’t escape social media since my profession requires it. / beyond just speaking about the magnitude of the problem, we need to talk about access to mental health care that can help heal trauma. / seeing these stories almost had me debilitated, and I imagine it did for others. Unfortunately, some people aren’t able to escape triggers.

The author goes on to say in further tweets that we need to better address rehabilitation and recovery, including the high cost of care, as well as barriers to recovery faced by communities of color, low-wealth communities, and others. What this author points out is that “surviving” is not always the same as “thriving.” In one of her follow-up tweets, for instance, she says that many women are too busy working, raising families, or battling mental illness to share their stories. In other words, some women are just trying to live their life day-by-day. Further, while some women can recover from their trauma, some will face devastating consequences from which they may or may not recover fully, if at all, particularly if barriers to rehabilitation remain in place.

She also speaks to her own experience of being triggered by the #MeToo hashtag. She reminds #MeToo users that while some women might be triggered in a way that empowers them to post to #MeToo, others will be triggered negatively so as to be re-traumatized. Women who spoke to Toglia (2017) gave similar explanations for why they chose not to share on the hashtag.

Further, three of the seven tweets mentioned above also used the term “victim,” but in opposition to their stance as survivors. For instance,

I’m not a victim, I’m a survivor. Not only #MeToo but #Ibelieveyou

My heart breaks for all of us who have been sexually assaulted. However, there is strength in us. We are survivors, not victims. #MeToo
It is evident in how the authors use the terms victim and survivor in the tweets that they are refusing to be identified by the event that victimized them. They also likely have high levels of resilience and coping skills, which is specifically evident in the second tweet’s claim that “there is strength in us.” There is an assumed amount of recovery in the illocutionary force behind the statements. However, the statements made in these tweets also reinforce the notion that victim is a negative identity, while survivor is positive. However, one tweeter did choose to identify as a victim in her tweet.

#MeToo – along with almost all other women, I am a victim of sexual assault and was told “I was being dramatic”

In this tweet, the author is not perceiving victim in a negative way. She is situating herself as a victim to make clear that she had been violated and that the experience of victimization is something she shared with other women. She is also demonstrating that her victimization was a serious event that was not taken seriously by her social group. It is not evident in the content of this tweet that the author views herself in a negative way, meaning as passive or to blame. On the contrary, she is actively resisting by not only surviving but telling her experience to others.

What was particularly interesting about this subsample was that the majority of tweets that used the term victim in a negative way were the women who identified as survivors. Only one detractor used victim as a pejorative by arguing that women sharing on #MeToo were wanting to be included in a victim narrative. The only other detractor who used victim in their tweet used the term to differentiate between rape victims and “people touched ‘inappropriately’” who they viewed as “NOT the same kind of victim.” It seems to me that the women who identified as survivors in the tweets above may have internalized the negative associations with the term victim and are actively trying to resist them.
What seems evident in these tweets, even though there are so few of them, is that there is still a high adherence to the victim-survivor dichotomy, even among women who identify with either/or/both terms. On the other hand, the small size of this subsample seems to indicate that many women may not readily identify with either of these terms without being asked directly; and even then, they still may not choose either of these terms to define themselves or may identify with both. Existing research on this topic supports this claim. It would appear, however, that women who choose to identify with one of these terms tend to favor the survivor identity.

**Discussion and Unexpected Findings**

The conclusions that can be made in this analysis are limited because of the size of the sample collected. The sample size was chosen to keep the dataset manageable for the purposes of this thesis. With more time to collect and analyze a larger sample, a more thorough investigation might construct a different narrative about what discourses took prominence in #MeToo or could support and expand on the account made in this thesis. Another limitation was that I was only looking at original posts, whereas if I had also analyzed responses to the tweets and observed the full context of the conversation, it may have given me a different outlook.

However, my initial analysis of the #MeToo hashtag yielded many themes that met my expectations for this project, and some also surprised me. For instance, while I expected to see some adherence to the victim-survivor dichotomy in the women’s personal testimonies, I was surprised to see that so few of the tweets I collected referenced the terms victim or survivor at all. The tweets overall showed a conversation in which women produced an understanding of sexual violence as a widespread issue that has an impact on all women and is manifest in various forms. It was evident that many women who negotiated with themselves about whether the

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7 See for example Anderson and Gold 1994; Gavey 1999; Koelsch 2014; Ovenden 2012; Spry 1995; Williamson and Serna; and Young and Maguire 2003.
violations they experienced constituted sexual violence or were serious enough to warrant posting in #MeToo. This was particularly true of women who “only” experienced sexual harassment. This trend makes clear that we still have much work to do to promote a broader definition of sexual violence and to demonstrate how forms of violence shade into one another (Kelly 1988).

Further, while I conducted this analysis in the hopes of understanding how women construct identities as sexual violence survivors, I find it necessary to reconsider this framing. Not all women find it appropriate or satisfactory to label themselves as victims or survivors. Many women do not feel these terms are applicable nor necessary to define their experiences. It might be more beneficial simply to help women recognize that their incidents of abuse happened and that they are valid, whether they choose to label themselves as victims, survivors, or not label at all. What matters, after all, is how the women choose to define their experiences, not me.

What was also apparent in this analysis was an overall tone of fed-upness. Many women articulated in their tweets that they felt the burden of fixing the problem of sexual violence is always placed on women and that it needs to stop. For instance,

#MeToo I was sexually harassed, physically and verbally attacked. But what about him though? Who decided it was women’s job to fix men?

I wanna see a #MeToo for men. #MeToo every time you laugh off a work bro sexualizing a colleague. Me too every time you laugh at rape jokes.

I don’t want men to apologize. You don’t need to be sorry. You need to work with us, we need to fight sexism together. #MeToo #quellavoltache

I mean #metoo. But I don’t owe you my story. And you shouldn’t have to see every woman you know post about it to believe us

These tweets illustrate that issues of male behavior are most often propagated and maintained by men, therefore, it should be men’s responsibility to fix it and women should not have to perform
their trauma repeatedly for men to take the baton. The third example, for instance, correlates with the sentiment in the tweet below.

How about instead of: 'woman claims she was assaulted' It's: 'woman states she was assaulted' #HowIWillChange #metoo #BelieveWomen

In this example, the tweet’s author suggests a way that men—and the news media—can transform the way they talk about sexual assault. What is also noteworthy in this tweet is the inclusion of two other hashtags, the first being #HowIWillChange. #HowIWillChange is a hashtag that developed in tandem with #MeToo as a way for male supporters to show solidarity. Men used the tweet to demonstrate the actions they promised to take to end rape culture and toxic masculinity.

Other tweets also took up the banner of suggesting ways that social institutions can work to end sexual violence through discursive change. Such as,

Sexual violence doesn’t start and end with rape, it starts in our book and behind our school gates #metoo

I was assaulted @ 15 by a friend. Went to the cops. Found out 10 other girls complained about his behaviour but nothing was done. #MeToo

Very few people acknowledge that our entire culture was built on sexual violence and rape, especially of black and indigenous women. #MeToo

Much like the tweet above that suggested a discursive approach that news media could take to ending sexual violence, the three examples here demonstrate issues in other social institutions including our schools, literature, and criminal justice systems. For instance, in the first and third tweets, the emphasis is placed on how we are taught and socialized to accept the world as it is and to comply with the dominant ideology, which includes ideas of white (male) supremacy and American exceptionalism. In other words, we need to get to the root of the issue to understand what needs to be fixed before we can understand how things need to change.
Therefore, I posit a different outlook on how #MeToo is approaching the subject of sexual violence: rather than suggesting that women are shaping identities as survivors, I would argue that #MeToo is reviving many of the anti-rape arguments put forward during the 1970’s women’s movement such as that women are subject to men’s sexual violence toward them. Further, women tweeting about their experiences are using a broader definition of sexual violence as can be found in Kelly’s conception of the continuum of violence; however, many people still contend that forms of violence should be considered in a hierarchy based on seriousness. As I have already mentioned, there is still a high adherence to the victim-survivor binary. In sum, I would argue that #MeToo is a consolidation of feminist discursive activism against rape culture, combining many themes that have consistently occurred in sexual violence discourses over the last fifty years. What all of these tweets suggest, is that ending rape culture is not only the responsibility of women, but society as a whole. If we are to make lasting change, it must be a holistic approach.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION: #METOO ONE YEAR LATER

As a result of #MeToo, a group of the celebrity women who helped to jumpstart the hashtag came together to establish the organization Time’s Up. According to the organization’s website, its mission is to “insist on safe, fair and dignified work for women of all kinds” by addressing systemic inequality and injustice in the workplace. They also developed the Time’s Up Legal Defense Fund to aid women who experience sexual misconduct at work with legal and public relations assistance. Many of the women involved in the movement, also known as the “Silence Breakers,” were named TIME Magazine’s 2017 Persons of the Year. Further, following #MeToo, a number of high-profile men in varying industries who were accused of sexual misconduct were asked to step down from their positions or were fired outright including Senator Al Franken, Today Show host Matt Lauer, CBS President Les Moonves, and others. Unlike many of the hashtags that preceded #MeToo which came and went rather quickly, #MeToo has had staying power in our public discourse. For instance, many commentators have consistently described the last year and a half as “the Me Too era” to describe how our industries are under further scrutiny for how they deal with sexual harassment and misconduct.

However, #MeToo has also faced several challenges. #MeToo met its greatest challenge in September 2018 with President Donald Trump’s nomination of Judge Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. After a letter she sent to Senator Diane Feinstein was leaked to the news media, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford reluctantly came forward to accuse Kavanaugh with attempted sexual assault. She stated that in high school, Kavanaugh and a friend pulled her into an empty bedroom, pinned her to the bed, covered her mouth, and attempted to tear off her clothes. After being denied a hearing with witnesses and expert testimonies, both Dr. Ford and Judge Kavanaugh testified in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee. The next day, the Senate
Judiciary voted to move Kavanaugh’s confirmation to a full Senate vote. Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed on October 6, 2018 by a vote of 50-48.

In a November 2018 Ted Talk, Tarana Burke discussed feeling “numb” in the wake of the Kavanaugh confirmation and the President boasting the win at one of his rallies. She said,

> It’s hard not to feel numb. I suspect some you may feel numb, too...[Numbness is] measuring the magnitude of this task ahead of you versus your own wavering fortitude. Numbness is not always the absence of feeling. Sometimes it’s an accumulation of feelings. And as survivors, we often have to hold the truth of what we experience. But now, we’re all holding something, whether we want to or not...Everybody is impacted (np)

She goes on to say that the women who came before us did not win every fight, but that the refused to let it kill their vision.

In this thesis, I endeavored to illustrate how feminist discursive activism against rape between the 1970s and 1980s overlaps with the discursive activism occurring in digital spaces today. I did this by analyzing how the #MeToo hashtag embodies what I call hashtag survivor discourse, or the semiotic process by which women who experienced sexual assault make sense of their violations and name them as violence through their participation in the #MeToo hashtag. Through this analysis, I concluded that in order to get to the heart of how women experience sexual intrusions, I need to reconsider my framing of survivor discourse, as many women do not identify as either victims or survivors. If we are ever going to get to a future free of sexual violence, as Tarana Burke aspires, we cannot get there if we continue to limit the definitions women have available to them to name their experiences. This includes the limitations of naming ourselves as victims and survivors. The power to name our experiences as sexual violence is a first step toward seeking justice and social change but is an essential one. Without that power, trauma will continue to halt possibility. With it, we can create movements.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Meaghan MacPherson received her Master of Arts in Women’s Studies at the University of Florida in 2019. Previously, she graduated from the University of South Florida with her Bachelor of Arts in English and Creative Writing in 2011 and from the University of Denver Publishing Institute with a Certificate in Publishing in 2013. Her research interests include feminist media studies, popular feminism, discourse studies, violence against women, and sexual education. In her spare time, Meaghan is a dog parent to her Australian Shepherd/Labrador Retriever mix, watches HGTV and political YouTube videos, and blogs about feminism, politics, and pop culture.