

Complexity, complicity, and consent:  
Sexual violence in contemporary English  
and French literature and film

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## Abstract

In this thesis I explore literature and film in English and French that features sexual violence. The primary examples here are contemporary, ranging from 2014 to 2022. I identify these texts as emerging from a ‘long’ 2010s characterised by media discourse about sexual violence. In this long decade, discourses which positioned Anglo-American and French sexual cultures as in fundamental tension also circulated. Literature and film are understood here as key sites in which ideas about sexual violence and cultural difference are (re)produced. Applying an intermedial and intercultural lens, the research uses feminist scholarship on literature, film, media, sexual violence and #MeToo to contribute to the field of feminist cultural studies.

I argue that the discourses associated with #MeToo have existed in literature and film before *and* after the chronological touchpoints of 2017 and 18. There are 14 texts here that represent a range of concerns. All engage with ideas about complexity, complicity, consent, and speaking out that dominated the long 2010s, as well as #MeToo and its backlash. The cultural tensions exemplified by the 100-women tribune (2018) are engendered – and, importantly, dispelled – in several of the examples. In this sense, many of the text’s ‘anticipate’ #MeToo, and its backlash, in a way that undercuts claims to primacy or newness. Similarly, the comparison between English and French texts reveals that cultural products respond in a less polarised way to sexual violence than a text like the 100-women tribune initially suggests. However, French texts *do* frequently engage anglicised, as well as specifically French, discourses. Two chapters are devoted to texts that respond directly to #MeToo, and two explore texts where it is not a direct referent.

The work here contributes to an understanding of #MeToo as an accumulation of feminist theorising and scholarship on sexual violence. Using textual examples as case studies facilitates a view of #MeToo as part of a wider moment with regards to sexual violence and culture.

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As I write these acknowledgments in December 2023, over 20,000 Palestinians have been killed in acts of unconscionable violence.<sup>1</sup> Every university in Gaza has been bombed. Thousands of Palestinian students have had their right to education disrupted, and Palestinian university staff their employment stripped away. That I submit this thesis, studying in and working at a university, while this genocide unfolds cannot go unacknowledged. An end to this senseless brutality through an immediate ceasefire is a matter of urgency. I hope profoundly that university institutions in the UK and across the world, as well as staff and students, will continue to reflect on our role in these atrocities. We must never be silent observers. A free Palestine in our lifetime.

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<sup>1</sup> Upon submitting the final version of this thesis in April 2024, over 34,000 Palestinians have been killed, more than 77,000 have been injured and over 8,000 are missing.

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## Introduction

### Research Origins

In 2018, I was given a translation exercise in French class. Our tutor warned us that it was a controversial piece, having been published in *Le Monde* the previous week and the subject of widespread public debate. I recognised some of the names attached from my interest in French film and literature: there were Catherines Deneuve and Millet, the latter of whom had intrigued me with *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001) as an undergraduate. The piece was what I will call herein the ‘100-women tribune’. Its contents were somewhat shocking: entitled ‘Nous défendons une liberté d’importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle’ [We defend a freedom to bother, essential to sexual freedom],<sup>2</sup> it was hostile to #MeToo, which was likened to ‘the good-old witchhunt days’ (Worldcrunch 2018). Prior to this, Millet had seemed to me a core member of the French feminist literary scene in which I had become interested. The discourse of the 100-women tribune seemed distant to the feminism of Virginie Despentes and *King Kong Théorie* (2006), another early French literary obsession. In fact, the letter seemed to call for a re-silencing of speech in the name of sexual liberation; the derisory view of ‘*this* freedom of speech’ in its particular form was palpable. It could not have been further from the promotion of feminist speech, however controversial or divisive, that I had come to associate with French figures like Despentes. Active on social media, I was acutely aware of #MeToo and its associated discourses. As a committee member of the university feminist society when Alyssa Milano’s (2017) ‘#MeToo’ tweet that read ‘[i]f you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet’ was published, I had spent hours debating the utility of hashtag and celebrity feminism.

Was the tweet and the discourse surrounding it another mutation of neoliberal feminism? The mediated version of these events certainly suggested so. #MeToo and its associated moments had never seemed to me uncomplicated. The 100-women tribune had produced another layer of complexity and, with its signatories, drew up

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<sup>2</sup> From herein, when quoting from the 100-women tribune, I will use its widely circulated English translation. See Appendix 1. (Worldcrunch 2018).

further connections between the worlds of literature and cinema. Crucially, it stoked an interest in the comparison between French and English responses to sexual violence and feminism that set the stage for my Masters dissertation in Comparative Literature and this subsequent PhD project. Was the French response to sexual violence really as exceptional the 100-women tribune suggested? Did literature and film reflect this supposed cultural polarity?

Studies in Comparative Literature led me time and time again to representations of sexual violence. From Shakespeare's *Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus* with their classical origins, to *Clarissa* (1747) by Samuel Richardson, and on to *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, the development of English literature is imbued with representations of rape. Of course, it is not only English, or literature, that has been punctuated by these narratives. Paul Verhoeven's rape-revenge *Elle* (2016) had both gripped and troubled me in the cinema, as had the luridly feminist potentials of Despentes's much earlier *Baise-moi* (in novel and film form). These representations were everywhere, heightened in significance in the context of the cultural moment – a moment of mass disclosure of, and public conversation about, sexual violence. It seemed urgent to consider what types of representations were being produced, and how exactly this moment was being responded to culturally. In the public sphere, perhaps more than ever, discussions of sexual violence were moving from the shadows to the spotlight. The last ten years have produced a huge volume of texts which feature sexual violence, with feminist understandings increasingly articulated in their narratives. TV series such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017) and *I May Destroy You* (2020) attracted solid viewership and positive critical attention, both offering feminist treatments of rape and men's violence. Alongside fiction and the work of investigative journalism, prominent documentary films and series have tackled sexual violence, sometimes with transformative effect; Tanya Horeck (2023) categorises these as the 'celebrity #MeToo documentary'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In her chapter on the celebrity #MeToo documentary, Horeck (2023) explores: *Surviving R. Kelly* and *Surviving R. Kelly Part II: The Reckoning* (2019 and 2020, producer, Dream Hampton, dirs., Nigel Bellis and Astral Finnie); *At the Heart of Gold: Inside the USA Gymnastics Scandal* (2019, dir. Erin Lee Carr); *Untouchable: The Rise and Fall of Harvey Weinstein* (2019, dir. Ursula MacFarlane); *Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich* (2020, dir. Lisa Bryant); *Athlete A* (2020, dir. Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk); *On the Record* (2020, dir. Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering); and *Allen v. Farrow* (2021, dir. Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering).

In many ways, the contemporary landscape of cultural production might well be defined by sexual violence narratives. Taking stock of the sheer number of cultural products about sexual violence that have emerged from the 2010s into the 2020s necessitates an understanding of the period itself. Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver define the task of exploring rape narratives as the need to ‘recuperate what has too often been left out; the physical violation and the women who find ways to speak it’ (1991, p. 3). This thesis will explore the regeneration of these recuperative attempts, asking what has changed in the 30 years since Higgins and Silver’s influential contribution. It is no longer silence that demands corrective attention, but a response that takes into consideration an explosion of speech.

### **Research Context**

This thesis focuses on texts from 2014 to 2022. The long decade that surrounds this saw the proliferation of discourse around sexual violence in English and French contexts. In a forthcoming work, Karen Boyle (2024) identifies the ‘long #MeToo’ moment,<sup>4</sup> in which the discourse of #MeToo stretches around 2017 in both directions. In this thesis, when I refer to English and French, I am referring to Anglo-American and French-Belgian contexts. I see these sites – of transatlantic and European exchange – as the loci of the cultural comparisons articulated in texts like the 100-women tribune. In my timeline, this period is bookended by two events that draw these contexts together: the arrest of Dominique Strauss-Kahn in 2011, and the Johnny Depp vs. Amber Heard trial of 2022. The context stretches slightly further back than Strauss-Kahn, with Roman Polanski’s arrest in Zurich in 2009 an important precursor to the moment.

Of course, public discourse about sexual violence in elite culture also does not appear from nowhere in 2009. There were ripples in the previous decade, that foregrounded tensions between the US and France, particularly in relation to two men who were to become key figures of the #MeToo moment: Roman Polanski and Harvey Weinstein. Polanski was awarded the 2002 Academy Award for Best Director but could not attend the ceremony due to the US warrant for his arrest, relating to his 1977

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<sup>4</sup> Boyle conceptualised this term in a discussion we shared during supervision for this thesis.

conviction for statutory rape (after which he fled the US to avoid sentencing). He has lived in France since 1978. Harrison Ford presented Polanski with the Oscar in Deauville several months after the 2003 ceremony. In 2019, and facing a post #MeToo backlash against another award nomination, Polanski blamed his position on Harvey Weinstein, claiming that the producer was the one who had branded him a ‘child rapist’ in 2003 and that this had been in an attempt to thwart his Oscar success (Agence France-Presse 2019). In 2009, over 100 filmmakers, actors, and producers signed a petition in support of Polanski after he was arrested in Switzerland. The petition was coordinated by the SACD (Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques) in France and read: ‘We demand the immediate release of Roman Polanski,’ stating that ‘[f]ilm-makers in France, in Europe, in the United States and around the world are dismayed by this decision’ (Knegt 2009). Weinstein signed this petition, and in 2017 published a supportive letter in *Independent* entitled ‘Polanski has served his time and must be freed’ (Weinstein 2017). Weinstein’s relationship with France stretches beyond Polanski. He was, for many years, strongly associated with Cannes; using the opportunity to buy and sell films, as well as engaging with the press and public, the festival has been described as his ‘personal fiefdom’ and ‘playground’ (Pulver 2018). A darker side to this association was revealed in 2017-2018 when a number of women – including Asia Argento and Zoe Brock – described being raped and sexually assaulted by Weinstein at previous Cannes festivals (Brock 2017). The French and US film industries intertwine as sites where men abuse women with impunity.

Never more did the relationship between the US and France with regards to sex and violence capture media attention than with Dominique Strauss-Kahn's arrest in 2011. As Alessia Tranchese notes, through looking at media events like #MeToo and Strauss-Kahn as historical processes ‘we can see that it was cases like the latter [...] that may have paved the way for the popularity of the former a few years later’ (2023, p. 232). For this thesis, the Strauss-Kahn case is a particularly resonant catalyst as it mediates with English and French contexts in tandem. Not every event in this chronology brings together English and French cultural contexts – in fact, some are firmly rooted to geographical location. This, too, will give an insight into culturally specific backdrops that are frequently reflected in this thesis’ texts.

In 2011, Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK) – the then managing director of the IMF and frontrunner to challenge Sarkozy in the 2012 French election – was accused of sexual assault by Nafissatou Diallo. Diallo, a Guinean immigrant, was a maid at the Sofitel Hotel New York, where Strauss-Kahn had been staying. She alleged that Strauss-Kahn ‘ran at her naked, molested her and forced her to perform oral sex on him’ (Williams 2012) as she cleaned his room in May 2011. Strauss-Kahn fled the hotel but was apprehended by authorities as he attempted to board a flight to Paris. He was placed under house arrest but ultimately freed two months later. A judge dismissed the charges due to concerns about the credibility of Diallo’s testimony in August 2011. Strauss-Kahn denied the encounter involved violence but conceded that it ‘was not only an inappropriate relationship, but more than that, it was an error’ (in Erlanger and de la Baume 2011). In France, Strauss-Kahn received the support of numerous politicians and commentators. A 2011 poll showed that 57% of respondents in France believed that he had been the victim of a smear campaign (Harris 2011). The case drew on pre-existing tensions between the US and France. In the midst of its media coverage, *The New York Times* published a debate entitled ‘Are French Women More Tolerant?’. It opened with the question ‘[a]re women in France more forgiving of male misbehavior, whether it is brazen infidelity or sexual harassment of co-workers? Or is this an unfair stereotype?’ (*New York Times* 2011). Philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy (2011), in defense of Strauss-Kahn, described him in the American context as ‘the symbol of arrogant France’, with Diallo an ‘allegory of all women who are not only battered and humiliated but also poor and immigrant—their words, silenced too long, finally expressed through hers’. It is important to note, however, as Kathy Davis asserts, already at this time French feminists staged protests and engaged in public debates about sexual violence in the workplace (2012, p. 4). Strauss-Kahn's defenders as well as his critics seemed to agree that the case highlighted axes of not only gender, but of race, class, and power.

Race and class were also structuring forces in the media events that characterised British public discourse on sexual violence in this period. In May 2012, nine men were convicted of sex trafficking and other sexual offenses following their involvement in the Rochdale child sexual abuse ring. The men’s race dominated media coverage of the ring: they were British Pakistani, while their victims were primarily

white, working-class British girls. Salter and Dagistanli posit that the term ‘sex grooming’, that emerged prominently in the British press throughout the case, is a ‘specifically ethnic phenomenon’ (2015, p. 50). The other central media event in the UK in 2012 was Operation Yewtree, a British police investigation into sexual violence perpetrated by Jimmy Savile and other media figures. It began in October 2012 after a documentary named *Exposure: The Other Side of Jimmy Savile* (2012) aired on ITV. The documentary featured three women who were sexually abused by Savile as teenagers. Following the airing of the documentary, many more victims came forward. The victims – of which it was discovered numbered in their hundreds – were described as being particularly vulnerable (Halliday 2014). Entertainer Rolf Harris was also convicted as part of the operation, with other British public figures convicted in concurrent investigations. These concurrent investigations were linked by the media and consequently became connected in the public imaginary (Smith 2014). In the same year in the US, campus rape cultures emerged as a key site of interest for the media. On August 12 2012, two high school students from Steubenville, Ohio – Trent Mays and Ma’lik Richmond – raped their classmate at a party. Dozens of people documented the rape, taking photographs and videos which were then exchanged and posted on social media. The case was picked up by *Rolling Stone* in November 2013, with a long investigative piece detailing Anonymous’s role in bringing the case into the media spotlight and, in turn, putting pressure on local authorities (Kushner 2013).

The campus remained in the media spotlight when Emma Sulkowicz began the performance artwork *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)* (2014-2015) at Columbia University in September 2014. Sulkowicz began the performance in response to the university’s decision not to take action against Paul Nungesser, who she says raped her in her dorm room in 2012. This focus continued in the US context in the reporting that surrounded Brock Turner. Turner raped fellow student Chanel Miller at Stanford University in January 2015. Turner was sentenced to six months incarceration by Judge Aaron Persky in June 2016. He served only three months of the sentence. Turner’s father gave a statement in court claiming his son should not go to prison ‘for 20 minutes of action’. Miller’s victim impact statement went viral; she addressed Turner and the justice system directly, speaking powerfully of sexual violence, its aftermath, and, crucially, campus rape culture (Baker 2016). As I will

argue in this thesis, the campus looms as a backdrop in not only American texts about sexual violence, but French examples too.

2016 saw the increased exposure of powerful men for abuse in the US. The previous year, *New York* magazine published a confronting cover story featuring the women who spoke out against Bill Cosby. The cover picture featured 35 women abused by Cosby and one empty chair. The chair symbolised those women who are unable to speak out after sexual violence, or silenced when they do. This commentary on silence and violence set the stage for the reporting on powerful and violent men that characterised much of 2016 in the US. Roger Ailes, then CEO of Fox News, was accused of sexual harassment by anchors Gretchen Carlson and Megyn Kelly. Carlson detailed Ailes's abuse in a *TIME* cover story entitled 'Gretchen Carlson's next fight' (Luscombe 2016). Media and entertainment industries were placed under the spotlight, and a complex political dimension – Kelly and Carlson were right-wing women accusing a right-wing man – emerged. On October 7 2016, one month before the US presidential election and one year before Milano's #MeToo tweet, *The Washington Post* published a video that showed Donald Trump making misogynistic comments about women on the way to film an episode of Access Hollywood in 2005. Trump is heard saying 'I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. ... Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything'. Shortly after, he was elected President of the United States. The 2017 Women's March took place the day after Trump's inauguration, mobilising around issues of misogyny, racism, and homo/transphobia. These events set the stage for what was to come in 2017, a cornerstone within this period: the year of Weinstein, #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc.

On October 5<sup>th</sup> 2017, *The New York Times* published an investigative piece entitled 'Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades' (Kantor and Twohey 2017). The article contained the testimonies of several women who had been sexually violated by Weinstein. Five days later, *The New Yorker* published several more testimonies (Farrow 2017). These testimonies pressured the authorities to open an investigation into Weinstein, leading to his subsequent arrest in May 2018 and convictions in 2020. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of October, French journalist Sandra Muller recounted her own experience of harassment at the hands of former television executive Eric Brion, whom she quoted as telling her '[y]ou have big breasts. You are

my type of woman. I will make you orgasm all night' (Breedon 2018).<sup>5</sup> She tweeted: '[#BalanceTonPorc](#) !! toi aussi raconte en donnant le nom et les détails un harcèlement sexuel que tu as connu dans ton boulot' – [#OutYourPig !! Share (your experience) too by giving the name and details of sexual harassment you've encountered in your job] (Muller 2017).<sup>6</sup> Muller currently lives in the US, and was residing there at the time of the tweet. Although Muller's tweet is frequently described proximate to #MeToo, Alyssa Milano's 'Me Too' tweet was in fact published two days later. At the time of writing, it has 34.9k retweets and 44.5k likes. By October 2018, one year on from the original tweet, a Pew Research study showed #MeToo had been tweeted over 19 million times (Anderson and Toor 2018). The vast majority of articles that detail the origins of the French hashtag mention #MeToo alongside it, and it is certainly possible that without the viral success of the latter, #BalanceTonPorc might have faded into obscurity. It is important, however, to identify their culturally distinct geneses.

Although Milano is widely credited as kick starting #MeToo as viral movement, it is essential to note that she was not the term's originator. Activist Tarana Burke 'first started doing this work [of Me Too] in 2005, 2006 in Alabama' (in Harris 2018). Burke states that she used the phrase as early as 2006, firstly as part of a MySpace page intended to create a space of empathy and solidarity for survivors of sexual violence (in Ohlheiser 2017). Having been involved in youth centred support and activism for some time, Burke traces Me Too's genesis to an encounter she had with a young woman named Heaven, an attendee at a youth camp she supervised. Heaven, widely considered to be 'trouble' among the volunteers, approached Burke privately and disclosed information about sexual abuse to which she had been subject. Burke, who admittedly was 'not ready' to deal with such a disclosure, rejected Heaven, suggesting she spoke instead to a more appropriate person. She never saw Heaven again (ibid.). This event affected Burke profoundly,

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<sup>5</sup> That Brion said this to Muller at a party is not disputed. Nevertheless, she was ordered to pay €20,000 in damages and fees in September 2019 after Brion successfully won a defamation case against her (BBC, 2019). He accepts that he flirted 'clumsily' but denies harassing Muller as suggested in the tweet. In 2021, Muller successfully appealed the defamation conviction in a Parisian court.

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise stated, as with the 100-women tribune, all translations from the French in this thesis are my own.

and she recalls her grief as she ‘watched her [Heaven] put her mask back on and go back into the world like she was all alone and I couldn’t even bring myself to whisper...me too’ (Burke n.d). Boyle helpfully distinguishes between #MeToo as a moment (which can be seen to begin with Milano’s tweet in the English context, and is linked to Milano *and* Muller’s in the French) and Me Too as a movement based in Tarana Burke’s activism around men’s violence against women and girls. For Boyle, because it is ‘difficult to identify the core characteristics of #MeToo’, it is more accurate to define it as a moment and as a discourse (2019, p. 8). The idea of a series of heterogeneous activities and positions rather than a unified political movement is central to this thesis’ conceptualisation of the tension between #MeToo’s mediatised components, and its material function. These events: Weinstein, #BalanceTonPorc, and #MeToo, form part of a lynchpin chronological moment that crystallised pre-existing conversations about sexual violence, elite culture, and the media. They also form part of an ecosystem that situates English and French discursive contexts as culturally proximate.

These cultural contexts were further put in conversation and, importantly, in tension with the publication of the 100-women tribune on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 2018. The piece was authored by Catherine Millet, Sarah Chiche, Catherine Robbe-Grillet, Peggy Sastre and Abnousse Shalmani, and signed by 100 women active in French cultural life. The now habitual reference to this piece as the *Tribune de Deneuve* demonstrates the cultural hyper-focus on the celebrity of certain women involved – Deneuve was merely a signatory of the letter, rather than one of the five core authors, yet her involvement has been repeatedly centred. The letter is perhaps an ur-text for this thesis, emblematic of what Christine Bard calls a ‘desire to distance ourselves [as French people]’ from a ‘puritanism’ which is ‘Protestant,’ ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and ‘feminist’ that ‘plays well notably in intellectual milieus, [as] anti-Americanism has been a constant dimension of anti-feminism in France for more than a century’ (in Rubin 2017). The 100-women tribune was not therefore not unique in its hostility to Anglo-American sexual norms, nor in its critique of the discourse ‘following the Weinstein affair’ (Worldcrunch 2018). In an interview with Austrian newspaper *Kurier*, director Michael Haneke insisted that ‘the witch hunt [of #MeToo] should be left in the Middle Ages’ (Mumford 2018). Liam Neeson and Terry Gilliam have also employed the

euphemism in interviews, with the latter describing Weinstein's victims as 'adults who made choices' (Helmore 2020). There is a certain irony in mobilising 'witch-hunt' as a rhetorical tool in this respect, considering witch-hunts historically targeted women based on misogynist ideas about sexuality and gender. #MeToo is mentioned by name in the 100-women tribune only once, slated as a social media and press-led campaign that has ultimately led to a scourge of public accusations against individuals who, without the means to defend themselves, have been treated akin to sex offenders. It moves in the next paragraph to denigrating an apparently novel frenzy for sending 'pigs to the slaughter'. This reads as a clear reference to #BalanceTonPorc, and directly links it to the 'expedited justice' afforded to #MeToo in the previous paragraph. Ultimately, we are told, harassment from men is a small price to pay for a liberating, seemingly agendered, sexual freedom. The 100-women tribune has become symbolic of an apparent French hostility to the cultural moment of mass disclosure that circulated around 2017, as well as an Anglicised feminism. Contemporary feminist discourses are depicted as man-hating and fundamentally anti-sex, concepts which fit neatly alongside the already pre-conceived threat of Anglo-American sexual conservatism on French life. This tension can be traced to the mediated response to Strauss-Kahn's arrest in 2011. It is important to note, however, that there was pushback to the 100-women tribune in France from the start. Just one day after its publication, a reply signed by 30 feminist activists appeared in *France Info* and refuted each of the 100-women's arguments in turn. Caroline De Haas, speaking to *FranceInfo* about the letter, stated that '[l]es signataires de la tribune du Monde sont pour la plupart des récidivistes en matière de défense de pédocriminels ou d'apologie du viol' [the signatories of the *Le Monde* tribune are for the most part repeat offenders when it comes to defending child molesters or advocating rape apologism] (*FranceInfo* 2018).

2020 was another significant year for the proliferation of discourse in sexual violence in both the English and French world. French elite culture was shaken by the publication of Vanessa Springora's *Le consentement* (2020) in January 2020. In the memoir, Springora recounts her abuse as a teenager at the hands of writer Gabriel Matzneff, then 50. Memoir, gaining contemporary prominence with Springora's intervention, has become a key site through which public conversations around sexual violence in the #MeToo moment in France are mediated. The publication of *La familia*

*grande* (2021) by Camille Kouchner contributes to this conversation, detailing the childhood abuse of Kouchner's twin brother by their stepfather Olivier Duhamel. Duhamel, like Biden, was a nominally left-wing politician; like Strauss-Kahn, he was a member of the French Socialist Party. At the César awards in February, French actor Adèle Haenel walked out in protest over the awarding of Best Director to Roman Polanski. As the award was announced, Haenel left the room, sarcastically clapping and chanting 'bravo la pédophilie'. Ahead of the ceremony, nine French feminist groups published a letter in *Le Parisien* calling on voting members of the Académie des Arts et Techniques du Cinéma to abstain from voting for Polanski. At the letter's close, they 'demandent instamment aux professionnel·les de voter #METOO !' [urge professionals to vote #MeToo!] (Balle 2020). Shortly after the ceremony, Desportes published a tribune in defense of Haenel in *Libération* entitled 'Désormais on se lève et on se barre' [from now on we get up and we split] (Desportes 2020). The following month, during the US presidential election campaign, the Democratic nominee Joe Biden was accused of sexual assault by Tara Reade. Reade said that Biden sexually assaulted her in the Capitol Hill building in 1993.

2022, the end of this period, sees English and French contexts once again in dialogue. In April 2022, a trial involving Johnny Depp and Amber Heard began in the United States. Depp filed a claim of defamation against his former partner, alleging that a 2018 op-ed she authored in *The Washington Post* caused damage to his career and reputation. Heard did not name Depp in the piece, but referenced her experience of sexual violence and domestic abuse; Depp claimed that these references implicated him as perpetrator. Heard entered counterclaims of defamation. She was found liable in all matters of defamation raised against her, while Depp was found liable for one out of three counterclaims. The trial generated a great deal of media attention, as well as social media commentary. Depp's first film following the trial was *Jeanne du Barry* (2023, dir. Maiwenn), which premiered at Cannes in 2023 to a seven-minute standing ovation. This is not Depp's sole connection to France: he lived in the country with then-wife Vanessa Paradis for many years, although he never gained French citizenship. His return to cinema at Cannes, as part of a French film, draws together again the complex relationship between English and French contexts when it comes to sexual violence, elite culture, and the media that we see exemplified by the Strauss-

Kahn arrest in 2011. The story of sexual violence that circulates throughout the 2010s and into the early 2020s therefore has cultural specificities – memoirs about childhood sexual abuse in France, the campus context in the US – while maintaining an intercultural linkage.

### **Research Questions**

With these cultural and chronological contexts in mind, in this project I explore representations of sexual violence in contemporary literature and film in French and English. In examining these representations, I answer the following research questions:

1. How do examples of literature and film in English and French respond to debates around gender and sexual violence that characterised the ‘long decade’ of the 2010s?
2. How do these texts respond to the polarisation between English and French cultural contexts suggested by the 100-women tribune?
3. How do French texts position themselves relative to an Anglicised discursive moment regarding sexual violence?

To answer these questions, I have selected a number of examples from literature and cinema in English and French that speak with and against the dominant discourses of the period. There are, of course, many texts that potentially fit the bill, therefore providing a rationale for my selection is necessary. Following this, I will describe the methods and approaches I have used to interrogate these texts and provide an overview of the thesis’s structure.

### **Choice of texts**

The texts that form this thesis’ corpus span a period of 8 years, from 2014 to 2022. They are in English and French, although their authors and directors are from diverse cultural backgrounds. The texts have been chosen as examples of cultural products deriving from a period of mass disclosure in English and French cultural contexts. They are emblematic of the cultural conversations foregrounded in the long decade I

have identified: conversations about consent, sexual violence, and disclosure, but also about cultural tensions. These cultural tensions are exemplified in the 100-women tribune, but have a much longer history. The 100-women tribune is therefore taken as an encapsulation these tensions, and the French examples here frequently situated proximate to its discursive claims. I do not claim that the texts here are representative of this moment in English or French contexts; it is impossible to posit that they represent a national literature or film. Instead, the selection offers insight into – and comparison between – texts that engage the key discursive components and problematics of this long moment. The texts here respond to this time period and its contexts. Around half are clearly rooted to #MeToo as touchstone (*Bombshell*, *The Assistant*, *Promising Young Woman*, *This is Pleasure*, *Les choses humaines*, *Cher Connard*, *Complicit*), while the others circulate temporally on either side and respond to the wider moment.

The analysis of the French texts does not necessarily amount to an analysis of their linguistic features (although there is an element of this in some of the close readings). Rather, the interrogation of their Frenchness explores their proximity to French language discourses about sexual violence in the contemporary moment. Perhaps paradoxically – at least on the surface – this instructs an analysis which situates them relative to Anglicised discourses. This cultural positioning is important to all of the French texts: there is both a speaking through and a speaking back to dominant English discourses. The 100-women tribune rejects these discourses outright, but the texts here are not so straightforwardly dismissive. They have been chosen on account of their diversity, with some reifying the polarisations of the tribune and others challenging them. In those texts that most closely align with the 100-women tribune, there is a sense that they are performing a corrective function. Anglicised sexual violence discourse and, in the later texts #MeToo explicitly, is rendered as problematic in its black-and-whiteness. *Elle* (2016, dir. Paul Verhoeven) predates the tribune chronologically, but is the example here that is allied with its concerns most obviously. Its ambivalence to a contemporary, and implicitly American, feminism is foregrounded in its production context as well as its narrative. *Les choses humaines* (2019) by Karine Tuil has a similarly complex relationship with the US, its protagonist's son a French Stanford student accused of rape. *Revenge* (2017, dir.

Coralie Fargeat) is, like *Elle*, a French-produced rape-revenge that predates the tribune, but one that uses an American woman protagonist to engender a more sympathetic portrayal of feminist concerns. *Cher Connard* (2022) by Virginie Despentes is similarly sympathetic, taking #MeToo as its backdrop. The selection of Despentes's latest novel relies, too, on her reputation as one of France's foremost feminist authors. *La mémoire de l'air* (2014) by Caroline Lamarche does not engage in this reaching out so explicitly in its narrative, but in its publication history. Published four years before the tribune in French, it is translated into English in 2022 with an introduction that clearly situates this translation as #MeToo-adjacent. There are, of course, other French texts about sexual violence in this period. Novels such as *Tropique de la violence* (2016) by Natacha Appanah and *Le Voyage dans l'Est* (2021) by Christine Angot stick out in particular: both narrate instances of sexual violation, and won literary prizes (the 2017 Prix du roman métis des lycéens for Appanah, and the 2021 prix Médicis and le Prix *Les Inrockuptibles* for Angot). The justification for these texts' absence reflects a general justification for the exclusion of other texts. *Tropique*, with its Mayotte setting, speaks from a postcolonial context outside the scope of the concerns highlighted in the 100-women tribune. *Le Voyage* recounts incest experienced by its narrator as a child; incest has been a focal point of public discourse about sexual violence in France, but requires a set of analytical and conceptual tools beyond those employed in this project.

Perhaps obviously, for the most part the English texts here do not reach back to France. Amongst them, there are two British and five American examples. Although the US has maintained cultural dominance in this long decade, particularly throughout #MeToo, British texts form a key component to the English cultural response to it. British novels, like *Boy Parts* (2020) by Eliza Clark and *Peach* (2018) by Emma Glass, have been absorbed into the English-language cultural response to this moment. Their explorations of sex, violence, and trauma see them described, paratextually, as interventions into contemporary discourses. *Peach* is 'timely and timeless' (Liu 2018) and *Boy Parts* tackles ideas of consent that have 'become part of mainstream discourse' (Kirkbride 2020). The British context may, in some ways, be seen as a bridge between the US and France. *M.F.A* (2017, dir. Natalia Leite), as the sole English-language film that predates #MeToo, is suggestive of some of the central concerns around campus rape culture that have dominated American-centric

conversations about sexual violence. Interestingly, those novels that respond directly to #MeToo are set in the US, instructive of the moment's geographical centre. However, the novels – *This is Pleasure* (2019) by Mary Gaitskill and *Complicit* (2022) by Winnie Li – respond to the moment quite differently. Comparing the two provides a productive challenge to the idea that American feminists' cultural responses to #MeToo were uniform. The #MeToo-adjacent films – *Bombshell* (2019, dir. Jay Roach), *The Assistant* (2019, dir. Kitty Green) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020, dir. Emerald Fennell) – share some concerns, while also invoking quite different ideas about the moment's emancipatory potentials. The stories that they tell are reflective of the stories that dominated media coverage of #MeToo but they, too, engage debates with a much longer history. It would be extremely difficult to quantify the number of examples of literature and film in English that have represented sexual violence in the period. Therefore, there is a plethora of texts that fit into this research schema but are absent in the corpus. Genre texts – particularly examples of thriller and crime fiction – are not represented, this thesis focalising primarily on literary fiction. There are works – like *His Favorites* (2018) by Kate Walbert and *The Tale* (2018, dir. Jennifer Fox) – that have been associated strongly with #MeToo but are excluded here because they deal with child sexual abuse. Films like *The Last Duel* (2021, dir. Ridley Scott) and *Women Talking* (2022, dir. Sarah Polley) deal with events that took place prior to the defined period of this work. Others, like *She Said* (2022, dir. Maria Schrader), do not have a strong enough victim-survivor focus.

Through the texts in this corpus, I will explore depictions of sexual violence that foreground victim survivors. All coalesce around women victim-survivors, although not all are woman authored – two of the films in the corpus have male directors. Although there is undoubtedly a feminist justification for prioritising woman authored texts, this thesis is more concerned with how men's sexual violence against women is represented in specific temporal and cultural contexts. With this goal in mind, it seems limiting to restrict analysis in this respect. This does not mean that author gender must be discarded completely: what is to be said of Paul Verhoeven, for example, allying himself with a postfeminist sensibility, or Jay Roach moving from *Austin Powers* to #MeToo drama? However, author gender was not a driving force in selection. Instead, the texts connect to each other through their thematic and contextual

similarities, and are organised based on this. All are in conversation with the debates around sexual violence that came to particular prominence from 2011 to 2022. In this sense, all contribute to the cultural rendering of sexual violence in the contemporary moment – this thesis attempts to evaluate these contributions through critical, close, and comparative feminist readings.

## **Methods and Approaches**

I make use of the above ways of reading to analyse the texts here. As is common in literary and film studies, throughout this research I employ several methodological approaches. The interdisciplinary nature of the work means that these methods are frequently blended. The most prominent of the approaches is close reading, as well as semiotic and narrative analyses. Historical and cultural analyses are also key to examining how particular discourses – feminist, mainstream, and reactionary – are articulated. Feminism provides the theoretical underpinning to the project, its relationship to sexual violence long established. The literature review will elucidate this relationship further. Feminist scholarship on literature and film has long concerned itself with the representational dimension of gendered domination, and with how violence and abuse are both represented and silenced. A representational silencing functioned as one of #MeToo's catalytic undercurrents. De-silencing is not an unproblematic task for feminist writers and critics. Horeck frames the challenge thus: 'What are the ethics of reading and watching representations of rape? Are we bearing witness to a terrible crime or are we participating in a shameful voyeuristic activity?' (2004, vi). It may seem obvious to state that to simply represent sexual violence does not a feminist text make – the debates over films like *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978, dir. Meir Zarchi) are emblematic of these tensions.<sup>7</sup> Even victim-survivor testimony, as Tanya Serisier (2018) contends, can be inflected with complex and contradictory political dimensions. Feminist scholarship has grappled with these tensions, moving

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<sup>7</sup> Feminists initially picketed screenings of *I Spit* upon its release. Julie Bindel recounts a protest she took part in at a Leeds Cinema screening where 'rape is not entertainment' was chanted (Bindel 2011). Carol Clover (1992) discusses the film's articulation of both feminist *and* reactionary discourses, in a mode typical of rape-revenge.

beyond an uncomplicated celebration of the speech act itself, or of representation for representations sake. The task now is not so much bringing the unspoken to light, but interrogating the implications contained within the spoken.

That #MeToo was about speech and voice is a truism. Both Milano and Muller's tweets, and Tarana Burke's original mobilisation of the phrase, were concerned with the act of speaking one's truth and of telling one's story. The #MeToo moment, pared back to its core, was about narrative. Here, I seek to connect literary and cinematic narratives with the narrative event of #MeToo, but also with the decade that surrounds it, with its proliferation of mediatised narratives of sexual violence. The idea of a series of heterogeneous activities and positions rather than a unified political movement is central to this thesis' conceptualisation of this period and of #MeToo more generally. However impactful #MeToo was, it seems prudent not to overstate its primacy or uniqueness amongst feminist discursive activism. Breaking the silence has long been a cornerstone of this activism – from the consciousness raising circles of the 1970s, to the campus speak outs of the 90s. As Serisier points out, '[a] key part of the feminist project in the last half century has been to assert this truth [of survivor knowledge] and the authority that it should grant to survivors' (2023b, p. 206). Despite the longstanding feminist investment in empowering survivor speech, it is also true that #MeToo has profoundly impacted the public discourse on speaking out. Indeed, it is impossible to discuss the narration of sexual violence, and survivor speech, in the contemporary moment without mentioning #MeToo, without acknowledging its influence on various discourses. As will become apparent throughout this work, it is not only in texts that evoke #MeToo directly that we see its imprints. Feminism is therefore the overarching theoretical anchoring here.

## **Thesis Structure**

The analytic body of this thesis exists begins with a literature review in Chapter one. This review is broken down into four connected thematic sections: feminist conceptualisations of sexual violence and #MeToo; believability; sexual violence and literature; sexual violence and film. The purpose of this chapter is to give a theoretical and contextual underpinning to this research thus it includes scholarly work in English

and French. The textual analysis is structured in two halves, one that focuses on film and the other on literature. These halves are each divided into two thematically structured chapters. In this sense, the halves mirror each other: chapters two and five consider texts that feature sexual violence but do not directly respond to #MeToo, whereas chapters three and four look at direct textual responses to #MeToo. The analysis chapters begin and end with the ‘surrounding’ texts, coalescing around the middle section which deals with the #MeToo response examples. This structure enables a narrativisation of the longer #MeToo moment in literature and film, while treating the 100-women tribune an analytical and comparative focal point around which this research circulates. It allows me to pull out textual examples from the 2010s-early 2020s period I have identified as being significant in English and French contexts, and situate these proximate to contemporary cultural discourses.

Analysis of film begins in Chapter Two: Contemporary rape-revenge and intercultural feminist discourse. Here, there are two French productions, and one American. Each of the films can be categorised as rape-revenge, although one – Paul Verhoeven’s *Elle* (2016) – does not follow the traditional narrative structure. *Elle* is accompanied by another French production, *Revenge* (2017, dir. Coralie Fargeat). *Revenge* has been described as a contemporary feminist articulation of the rape-revenge movie, much like *M.F.A* (2017, dir. Natalia Leite), the chapter’s American text. All three films in this chapter chronologically predate #MeToo as a hashtag moment; I will argue that they contain, however, discursive features – both feminist and backlash – that have come to be associated with #MeToo and were exemplified in the 100-women tribune. In *Elle* and *Revenge* particularly, there are exchanges between the US and France that are also observable throughout #MeToo, #BalanceTonPorc, and their associated backlash. In this sense, the films suggest the much longer chronology of the moment, with ideas about gender, feminism, and culture foregrounded in their narratives. These films, as I will demonstrate, are emblematic of the sexual violence discourses that come out of the long decade of the 2010s.

In Chapter Three: #MeToo-adjacent cinema, I continue with an exploration of sexual violence narratives on screen. This chapter is unique amongst the analysis chapters in that it features only American texts. Here, I focus on each of the film’s individually, as each of their settings reflects a site with specific importance to

#MeToo. All of the films here can be positioned obviously proximate to the #MeToo-moment, both in narrative and paratext. One, *Bombshell* (2019, dir. Jay Roach), is based on Roger Ailes's abuse of women at Fox News; *The Assistant* (2019, dir. Kitty Green) is fictional, but features obvious reference to Weinstein and the film industry; the final, *Promising Young Woman* (2020, dir. Emerald Fennell), is purely fictional but clearly invokes #MeToo-adjacent discursive features and references. This chapter explores the presence of speaking out in these #MeToo-adjacent films, this practice central in the films' engagements with sexual violence. Speaking out after sexual violence has occurred is of greater concern in these films than the event of sexual violence itself. I argue here that this is because speaking out is frequently positioned relative to first-ness and individual exceptionalism. This – particularly for *Bombshell* and *Promising Young Woman* – works on a meta-textual level; the women in the narratives are exceptional, as are the film's themselves (so frequently marketed as new, the first of their kind). This, I argue, is representative of the mediated discourse of #MeToo that obfuscated feminist histories – in the case of #MeToo-adjacent films, feminist *and* cinematic histories become obscured when claims to newness are overstated.

Chapter Four: #MeToo fiction, introduces the literature section of the thesis. Here, there are two French and two English language texts. Coincidentally, all had either a 2019 or 2022 publication date. *Cher Connard* by Virginie Despentes, is the most recent text in this thesis, published in the summer of 2022 and not yet translated from the French. Similarly, the other French novel here, Karine Tuil's 2019 *Les choses humaines*, is yet to receive an English translation. Both French novels reach out to a US context, speaking to the exchanges and tensions foregrounded in the 100-women tribune. Mary Gaitskill's novella *This Is Pleasure* was also published in 2019; like Despentes, Gaitskill has a reputation for courting controversy in her writing. *This Is Pleasure*, although American, articulates some of the 100-women tribune's concerns about 'expedited justice' and puritanism. Winnie M Li is perhaps less well known, but like Despentes and Gaitskill has been open about her experience of sexual violence. Her novel *Complicit* (2022) is the final in this chapter. The chapter will explore the texts' engagements with nuance and ambiguity. It will consider how they inserted themselves into the discourse of #MeToo, frequently as 'correctives' to a supposedly

dogmatic and binaristic politics. I argue that, in this sense, some texts here are responding to a ‘straw-woman’ of #MeToo, similarly depicted in the 100-women tribune. The chapter considers the formal aspects of the texts here – the epistolary, split perspective narration – exploring how they are used to provide insight into multiple perspectives and voices.

The focus on literature continues in Chapter Five: Contemporary literature, feminism, and sexual violence. This chapter comprises of three texts: one French and two English language. Like Chapter Three, the focus moves from texts that responds directly to #MeToo to fiction that features sexual violence but does not represent #MeToo explicitly. The chapter features the earliest text of the thesis, Caroline Lamarche’s *La mémoire de l’air*, published first in 2014, with an English translation in 2022. The other novels are both the debuts of British authors: *Peach* (2018) by Emma Glass and *Boy Parts* (2020) by Eliza Clark. Here, I will argue that issues of believability are of central concern – the narratives foreground issues of belief, engaging with rape myths implicitly and explicitly. The texts here function less as ‘correctives’ to a supposedly dogmatic feminist politics, instead engaging ambiguity and complexity for feminist ends. In this sense, the texts speak to feminist discourse around sexual violence that stretches beyond the long decade. Form is also of interest in this chapter, exploring its relationship to representing trauma and complex victim-survivor experiences.

# Chapter 1: Critical perspectives on sexual violence and representation

## Introduction

This chapter is a literature review, and provides a critical, theoretical context to the thesis. It will consider a number of perspectives on sexual violence with an aim to reconcile these with representations of sexual violence in literary and cinematic texts. As the primary sources are in English and French, the bulk of scholarly work in this section will be based in these language contexts with a particular cultural focus on France, North America and the United Kingdom. However, as Valérie Rey-Robert notes, research on the subject has been predominantly North American (2019, p. 41) therefore the balance of sources often reflects this. In *Public Rape*, Horeck asserts that '[s]tories of rape are essential to the way in which the body politic is imagined, serving as a site for cultural conflict and the embodiment of public concerns' (2004, p. vii). This thesis is primarily about these stories and the sociocultural phenomena they reflect, thus the literature review includes material on the *real* and representational features of sexual violence in order to make sense of this symbiotic relationship.

Four areas of study are identified and discussed here. The first section provides an overview of feminist conceptualisations of sexual violence, considering how various English and French speaking feminists have theorised in this area from the 1970s to present. A variety of feminist perspectives will be considered, with the theoretical scope ranging from constructing the continuum(s) of sexual violence to discussing contemporary rape culture and its effects. This will lead into an exploration of critical work on #MeToo that, primarily, considers its mediatised representations. Taking #MeToo as a locus of cultural conversations about belief facilitates a shift in focus to believability. This second section details work on believability and sexual violence, and through this considers work that explores marginality and grievability. Of particular interest are the interactions between these four components. Through examining this work on sexual violence, believability, grievability and marginality, attention will be paid to scholarship that explores how marginality (or lack of) interacts with victimhood and perpetration. The final component of the literature review looks

at research into representations of sexual violence in film and literature. I begin this section by focusing on film, giving a general overview of work that approaches representations of sexual violence on screen. From here, discussion will move to rape-revenge cinema specifically, due to its position as a key site through which discourses on sexual violence have been articulated. In addition to this, attention will be paid to scholarship that does not necessarily focus on sexual violence, but demonstrates contemporary critical trends. This thesis' focus on contemporary examples insists that theoretical works included in the literature section will primarily explore relatively contemporary mediations with sexual violence in literary forms, including specific case studies where relevant, and a brief consideration of sexual violence in memoir (although memoir will not be of direct concern in this work). Of central interest will be the various processes of reading and critical perspectives employed by different scholars; not all of the material discussed deals directly with sexual violence, but its relevance to the project will be explained.

### **Feminist Conceptualisations of Sexual Violence**

That rape is a feminist issue is now taken as a given. However, prior to the 1970s feminist scholarship on sexual violence was relatively sparse. Susan Brownmiller, author of one of the most well-known feminist texts on sexual violence: *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, admits that she did not initially view rape as a subject with particular resonance to the women's movement. She recounts her early belief that '[r]ape was a sex crime, a product of a diseased, deranged mind. Rape wasn't a feminist issue' (1986, p.8). After attending speak-outs in which women detailed their own diverse experiences of sexual violence, Brownmiller became 'a woman who changed her mind about rape' (ibid., p.9), as it gained prominence as a concern amongst feminists. This section of the chapter will thus trace the genesis of feminist perspectives on sexual violence, sketching a general theoretical picture of the last 50 years. Nicola Gavey comments in *Just Sex* that the 1980s saw 'some striking changes' in feminist theorising and research that 'would lead to a completely different understanding of rape' (2019, p. 1), therefore work from this period onwards will comprise the bulk of this section. However, due attention will be paid to earlier works

like Brownmiller's that laid the foundations for subsequent feminist scholarship in the area. Of particular interest here will be notions of the continuum, of rape culture, and of language and representation.

With the 1975 publication of *Against Our Will*, Brownmiller was in many ways considered to 'break the silence' on scholarship surrounding sexual violence. She traces rape, and historical and cultural interactions with it, through Biblical times to the 1970s. Initiating her examination at the 'humblest beginnings of the social order' (1986, p. 16), Brownmiller starts by considering how rape has long been defined in its relationship to criminality and the law. Detailing these early examples of misogynistic legal conceptualisations of rape contextualises a contemporary feminist perspective on rape culture; that the justice system relies heavily upon patriarchal constructs when defining and, importantly, prosecuting sexual violence. An early example of the influence of class on rape and prosecution, the *droit du seigneur*, defined as 'the custom of giving the manorial lord the right to take the virginity of the bride of any one of his vassals or serfs unless the bride and bridegroom paid a specific amount of produce in redemption dues' (p. 28) suggests that social and economic status have long been in interplay with notions of violability and bodily autonomy.

Many years after Brownmiller, French feminist socio-demographer Maryse Jaspard explores the history of sexual violence in *Les violences contre les femmes* with a particular focus on the French context. Discussing the legal repercussions for rape, Jaspard notes that typically it had been considered a crime only when there was a 'ruining' of a family following the 'degradation' of a daughter or wife (2011, p. 64). Similarly, Rey-Robert, considering the judicial history of rape in France, notes that under l'Ancien Régime the rape of a virgin was seen as more serious than that of a married woman (2019, p. 147). This again suggests that rape was long seen as a crime against the patriarchal family unit – against father or husband – rather than against the victim themselves. Georges Vigarello describes how 'une vision durablement moralisée du crime sous l'Ancien Régime renforce ce silence enveloppant la victime dans l'indignité de l'acte' [an enduring moralised vision of crime under l'Ancien Régime reinforced this silence [around rape] by enveloping the victim in the indignity of the act] (2000, p. 894), drawing attention to a long history of legal moralisation and victim implication. Although these are, of course,

historical conceptualisations of sexual violence, remnants of these attitudes clearly remain in contemporary constructions of sympathetic victimhood: where sympathy is elicited on account of an individual women's proximity to male familial relations, as a daughter, mother or sister. Jaspard illustrates the extent to which, in France particularly, historical notions regarding what constitutes violence have been used to hierarchise instances of sexual violence in the penal code, which distinguishes between two forms: 'le viol qui est un crime, l'« agression sexuelle autre que viol » qui est un délit' [rape, which is a crime, and "sexual aggression other than rape", which is an offense]. Ultimately, this functions to problematically hierarchise different forms of sexual violence.

Using Brownmiller's notion of rape as a universalising oppressive force in the lives of women is a helpful starting point for an exploration of how rape functions as a feature of the everyday. However, Brownmiller's theorisation of rape, with its essential connections drawn between historical and contemporary accounts, may suggest that it is a somewhat immovable and, thus, unassailable fact in the lives of women. It is possible therefore to view Brownmiller's argument as an essentialist one; it is suggested that men, through their sex, are naturally predisposed to perpetuate sexual violence, and that women have an inherent violability. This thesis opposes the existence of rape as *given* or natural fact, and essentialism in all forms. Serisier helpfully unpacks the racial politics of Brownmiller's work, with particular regard to her 'evidenced' hypothesis that rapists are most likely to be poor men of colour. Noting a prioritisation of gender over race, as well as an appeal to gender universality, Serisier comments that Brownmiller 'paradoxically constitutes race as a generic boundary around the genre of women's stories' (2018, p. 9). As Angela Davis notes, Brownmiller fails to question the racialised rape myths propagated by the criminal justice system and instead actually reifies these (1983, p.184). Marxist commentator Sandra Bloodworth accuses Brownmiller of making a 'crudely reductionist argument' (2015, p. 6) that infers women are physiologically predisposed to experience sexual violence and takes an anti-materialist, ahistorical approach that does not accurately account for actual historical conditions. Further, Bloodworth critiques Brownmiller's use of crime statistics that reflect a 'clear class bias towards the disadvantaged involved in rape' (1992, p.2). Brownmiller's statistics strikingly illuminate cases of

stranger rapes but do little to unpack the instances of sexual violence that are much more common, that is those committed by perpetrators known to the victim. Brownmiller's work, published at this relatively early stage in scholarship, lacks range when describing and evidencing certain forms of violation that are now accepted to constitute the majority of instances of sexual violence; it, too, works to obscure the sexual components of rape.

The view that rape is about violence not sex, which Boyle identifies as 'popularly attributed' to feminists, could be seen to originate in Brownmiller's work (2019c, p. 103). The problems with this framing, however, are myriad. As Rebecca Whisnant points out, '[r]ape's sexual nature is central to understanding both its perpetrators' motivations and its effects on victims' (Whisnant 2017). The 1980s saw a shift away from 'violence-not-sex' to an understanding that situated sex at the core of rape discourses. Catharine MacKinnon's work was integral in driving scholarship that interrogated the sexual nature of rape, with her assertion that 'men rape women because they get off on it in a way that fuses dominance with sexuality' (1987, p. 92) stressing that power and sex are equally forceful. This highlights the 'eroticization of violence against women' (ibid.), while maintaining that sex constitutes a critical component of sexual violence. Drawing attention to sexualised harm, Whisnant underscores that '[t]he violation of bodily and sexual autonomy is no doubt among rape's most central harms' (2017). The impulse to fundamentally separate 'consensual' sex from sexual violence misunderstands the connections between both and, frequently, presumes that consent is a cut and dry affair unaffected by dynamics of power.<sup>8</sup> Understanding the sex of sexual violence requires a consideration of how normative heterosexual practices and, crucially, men's understandings of these practices are necessarily connected to obviously non-consensual events like rape. This understanding must be further underlined by analysis of women's experiences of these practices, and the ways in which supposedly quotidian male behaviour – even that which is not *explicitly* sexually aggressive – interacts with other more clearly violent behaviours.

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<sup>8</sup> See Katherine Angel (2021) for a convincing exploration of how consent in and of itself is insufficient in guaranteeing positive sexual interactions.

In her highly influential work *Surviving Sexual Violence*, Liz Kelly names and defines the ‘continuum of sexual violence’. The continuum denotes the idea that violence exists on different ‘scales’ in the lives of all women (Kelly 1988). This informs an understanding that ‘specific forms of sexual violence are connected to more common, everyday aspects of male behaviour’ (Kelly 1998, p. 183), which assists women in identifying different experiences as existing on this continuum. When examining the primary texts, which contain varying representations of sexual violence, the concept of the continuum is useful in revealing how different narratives are fundamentally connected in nature, particularly through the lens of examining men’s behaviour. It is underscored that the continuum should not be thought of as a straight line that connects experiences of sexual violence and hierarchises them by placing the most ‘severe’ instances at one end. Rather, the concept of the continuum expresses the idea that ‘there are forms of sexual violence which most women experience in their lives and which they are more likely to experience on multiple occasions’ (p. 187) and these are connected to the forms of sexual violence currently considered criminal and, in most instances, aberrant.

The continuum allows for the drawing of connections between texts featuring ostensibly different forms of violence. Where a film like *The Assistant*, in chapter 2, about workplace abuse depicts a largely socially accepted form of male behaviour, there is nevertheless an interaction with a book like *La mémoire de l’air*, in chapter 5, that features the aberrant act of stranger rape. Kelly summarises this relationship by explaining that ‘[t]he continuum of sexual violence ranges from extensions of the myriad forms of sexism women encounter everyday through to the all too frequent murder of women and girls by men’ (p. 226). Kelly returns to the continuum conceptually in 2012, reflecting on the way in which it has been employed, as well as misused, since 1988. Identifying a central tension with legal and criminal concepts, Kelly notes that the law ‘is built through gradations of seriousness framed in terms of behaviour (and in some instances levels of injury) applied to discrete incidents’ (2012, p. xxii). The concept of ‘seriousness’ or severity of incidence sits at odds with the continuum, which is opposed to hierarchisation of sexual violence (except in the case of murder). As Fiona Vera-Gray points out, the conflict is fundamentally ‘between providing a framework that can be used and understood by individuals as reflecting

lived realities, and providing one that can be operationalised easily in legal and policy contexts' (2017, p. 10). This reflects an important general tension between sexual violence, the state, and criminality that Susan Estrich, identifies in *Real Rape*, where she details how the American law's treatment of 'simple' as opposed to 'real' rape cases 'stands as clear proof of the power and force of a male rape fantasy' that implies women, on some level, desire 'to be forcibly ravished' (1987, p. 5). When considering cultural perceptions of sexual violence, it is necessary to consider how legal definitions affect which instances and acts are considered serious.

Boyle adapts Kelly's concept of the continuum in order to provide a supplementary model of thinking and theorizing about the connections between women's experience of sexual violence, calling this 'continuum thinking' (Boyle 2019b). For Boyle, continuum thinking as feminist practice allows the drawing of connections between, for example, gender-based violence and gender inequality while also problematising perceived binaries of 'violence/not violence, victim/survivor' and so on (p. 32). Of particular significance to this project will be Boyle's conceptualisation, following Kelly, of 'the continuum of men's violences' (p. 29) which seeks to make sense of male behaviours that range from quotidian to aberrant, rather than focusing solely on women's experiences of violence. Vera-Gray similarly adapts the continuum concept in her work on 'men's intrusions'. In discussing how various experiences of intrusion on the continuum affect how women move through the world, she attests that '[k]ey then across the experiential continuum of men's intrusion is an understanding of female embodiment as a conduit connecting different practices of men's intrusion' (Vera-Gray 2017, p. 116). This informs an analysis that allows us to make gendered sense of behaviours that do not fit neatly into previously explored continuums.

The concept of continuums, and practices of feminist continuum thinking, is incredibly useful when considering not only 'real' instances of sexual violence but also the representational practices in literature and film. Jaspard identifies several acts that sit on this continuum, although without using this term explicitly, connecting them to the ways in which they embody unequal gender relations and power imbalances. She lists the myriad forms sexual violence takes, including, for example, familial, stranger and group rapes, and rapes that incur an abuse of power (Jaspard 2011, p. 71). Although it is helpful to have a

clear description of different forms of sexual violence, the process of listing seems somewhat to separate each in character from the others. Individualising instances of sexual violence where there is an abuse of power suggests that abuses of power do not take place across *all* instances of sexual violence. As Catharine MacKinnon asserts in her discussion of sexual harassment, only in instances where a legal hierarchy (for example, teacher and student) comes into play is there typically considered to be an abuse of power. In fact, gendered hierarchies are ‘themselves a power structure’ (MacKinnon 1987, p. 89) which imbue the acts on the continuum with a sense of sexual division and power imbalance.

In the second edition of her famous work on rape culture, *Just Sex*, re-published in 2018, Gavey draws attention to how in the 1980s the continuum(s), or ‘dimensional’, approach to sexual violence began to take precedence over a ‘typological’ approach (p.5). The latter had typically viewed rape as an aberrant behaviour, carried out only by particularly deviant actors. Gavey explains how this renewed understanding of rape as an extension of normative male behaviour, as discussed above, constituted a challenge to ‘normative heterosexuality’ (p. 6). In the last chapter, Gavey details the developments in research on sexual violence and gender more generally since the publication of the first edition in 2005. Of particular note is the evolution of the term ‘rape culture’. At the time of book’s initial publication, the phrase had not yet entered the popular lexicon. Gavey comments that her conceptualisation of the ‘cultural scaffolding of rape’ comprises one of the two key components of rape culture: The ‘gendered dominance–submission binary’ that informs the normative patterns of heterosexuality that both make a man’s rape of a woman possible and, at the same time, plausibly deniable (2018, p. 227). The other key intersecting component of rape culture, according to Gavey, is the ubiquity of both victim-blaming and sexual violence trivialisation – crystallised in, for example, rape jokes – that enforce the normative scripts of hetero sex and rely upon this cultural scaffolding (p. 228). When considering representations of sexual violence, it is necessary to interrogate if and how the notion of a ‘rape culture’ is present. The underlying premise of rape culture, that is a rejection of the idea that ‘that rape is an aberrant act committed by individual “bad apples”’ (Gavey 2018, p. 228), is also reflected in the concept of continuum(s) which links a wide range of gendered behaviours. Considering acts on the continuum to be acts that frequently express

normative heterosexual behaviour will facilitate an examination of rape culture and the continuum(s) in tandem.

A crucial comparative examination in this thesis will centre around cultural differences when it comes to the representation of sexual violence and varying sexual norms; to do this, it will be necessary to consult work on these cultural specificities. In 2018 Marlène Schiappa, current secretary of state for the Social and Solidarity Economy and Associative Life and former secretary of state for Gender Equality in France,<sup>9</sup> published *La culture du viol*, a text which according to her ‘n’est pas un essai sur le viol, mais sur la culture du viol’ [is not an essay on rape, but on rape culture] (p. 20). She notes that the concept of a *culture du viol* is imported from the American concept, suggesting that a large body of work treating the subject has ensured it has been well understood by the American general public since the 1990s. This somewhat contradicts Gavey's assertions about rape culture entering the popular vernacular from the early 2000s (Gavey 2019, p. xiii). Schiappa explores how rape culture is reproduced in the French media. There is an examination of the way in which the media's treatment of victims of sexual violence often relies upon harmful stereotypes, constructing a dehumanising dichotomy of ‘l’aguicheuse ou la paumée’ [the tease or the poor soul] (p. 25), with rapists often afforded a fuller sense of personhood. Schiappa's breakdown of these stereotypes, based in the French context but clearly somewhat universalised, are useful when approaching textual representations of victims and perpetrators of sexual violence – to what extent do they mirror the archetypal subjects represented in media? In discussing male victims of sexual violence, Schiappa notes how their stories are often trivialised and made light of, often reported in a manner clearly intended to make people laugh with headlines that invoke playground humour (p. 161). That victim-survivors are stripped of autonomy and subjectivity by re-victimising media treatment chimes with Ann Cahill's description of the function of sexual violence itself as ‘total denial of the victim's agency, will, and personhood, [which] can be understood as a denial of intersubjectivity itself’ (2001, p. 132).

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<sup>9</sup> Lexi Louz criticises Schiappa's position relative to feminist movement; as the police chief's ‘right-hand woman’, she ensures ‘les féministes ne sortent pas des rangs et n'imposent pas de grands changements’ [feminists don't step out of line and impose major changes] (Lamy et al., 2022).

Rey-Robert similarly looks at how rape culture operates in the French context, connecting threads of Anglo-American and French scholarship on sexual violence and, in turn, rape culture. She identifies a core tenet of rape culture in France as existing in the implication of victim-survivors in acts of violence committed against them, stating that they are made 'également culpabilisées' [equally culpable] (2019, p. 64). This notion persists further in rape myths that attempt to demarcate victims on the basis of perceived virtue, emblematic of the virgin versus vamp dichotomy explored by Helen Benedict (1993) in her work on media treatment of 'sex crimes' and again suggested by Schiappa's *l'aguicheuse* and *la paumée*. Rey-Robert examines the othering of rapists in French society, where '[l]'agresseur est un autre, et cet autre hypothétique masque une réalité très différente' [the aggressor is an other, and this hypothetical other conceals a very different reality] (p. 224). Categorising those who commit violence as 'other' facilitates a level of distancing that allows those not 'othered' (white, French citizens) to view themselves as non-complicit. This 'othering' of rapists and violent men more generally has been utilised for racist and xenophobic means by right-wing actors who insist sexual violence and sexism more generally are inherent to immigrant communities from North and Western Africa, in a similar mode to the historical conflation of black men with rapists in the United States (p. 245). This othering allows 'les bons Français' [the good French citizens] (p. 229) to distance themselves from those who commit acts of violence, avoiding the 'very different' reality that the majority of rapes are committed by individuals known to the victim.

Gisèle Halimi identifies this othering impulse in the French context as early as 1978, noting that the rapist/abuser is not a particularly marginal or deviant character, but rather an ordinary man, typically integrated into society and often well-regarded within his social circles as a good family man, good worker and, crucially, a good Frenchman (p. 20). In addition to distancing, othering necessitates that the victim be constructed as 'known' and thus worthy of sympathy, this knowability frequently excluding marginalised victim-survivors like women of colour or sex workers. Rey-Robert, in a section entitled 'Pour un viol, il faut un couteau' [For rape to happen, there must be a knife] (p. 305), draws attention to the fact that many French people believe that rape must always be accompanied by extreme physical violence, despite the reality that this is absent in the majority of rapes reported in both France and the United States.

All of the above function to characterise rape and, in turn, rapists as aberrant and existing outwith socio-cultural norms when, in reality, sexual violence exists on the continuum of normative gendered behaviour. In discussing the hierarchising of sexual violence, Rey-Robert describes how the French judicial system still considers some rapes more or less severe than others (p. 137). This corresponds to the claims of Jaspard in the French context, and Estrich in the American, that there is a clear manipulation of the continuum that ultimately contributes to a rape culture which harmfully categorises sexual violence in terms of seriousness. There is a sense, then, that despite some cultural specificities rape culture is a generalising force. It is worth considering, in turn, if it exists homogeneously across public and private spheres.

A materialist understanding of sexual violence views it as a social reality, rather than an essentialised one. Making sense of this requires reflection on the interactions between sexual violence and the economic system that structures social interactions; namely, capitalism. In two articles two decades apart, Sandra Bloodworth traces the roots of the contemporary epidemic of sexual violence to the capitalist family. Bloodworth argues that sexual abuse – from that within the Church to LGBT+ intimate partner violence – is ‘deeply rooted in the structures of capitalism’ (2015, p. 2). Drawing attention to the connections between sexual violence and capitalism is not to suggest that capitalism necessarily causes sexual violence but to show that capitalism imbues it with specific functions and meaning. Several of capitalism's key features are identified by Bloodworth as creating the social conditions in which sexual violence thrives: alienation, hierarchies of authority, the system of commodity production and, importantly, the family structure (1992, p. 1). Alienation – an experience of estrangement from both the products of one's own labour and other human beings – informs a perception of reality that is often fragmented and defamiliarised, ultimately rendering opposition to capitalist ideology impossible. For this reason, it becomes difficult for individuals to resist hegemonic ideas of, for example, male dominance or a naturalised heterosexuality that work in the interests of capital (2015, p. 11). These systems depend on enforced hierarchies. These hierarchies – for example, those within the workplace – frequently transform those in relatively powerful positions within them into predators who exhibit controlling and abusive behaviour both in and outside of their ‘professional’ life.

With regards to instances of sexual violence in the domestic sphere, Bloodworth argues that the family is a core site in which women are confronted with alienated behaviour, with the ideological ground already laid for viewing ‘women as sex objects, as bound to satisfy their husbands’ every demand, doing the housework and childcare as well as working for a wage’ (1992, p. 4). Ultimately, for Bloodworth, sexual violence as structural issue must be understood as rooted within the social and economic context of a capitalist society ‘which has taken alienation to its extremes’ (2015, p. 24). When sex is commodified, a domineering masculinity valorised, and the state sanctions abuse on various levels, endemic sexual violence will remain socially pervasive. Although Bloodworth convincingly outlines how capitalism upholds the conditions for sexual violence, along its continuum of oppressions and abuses, she stops short of underlining the nature of different forms of sexual abuse and the ways in which these are often specifically gendered. What is clear from Bloodworth’s analysis is that gender and sex remain at the core of systemic sexual violence, with these being inflected with capitalist social relations – with this in mind, I now consider how sexual norms and behaviours interact with sexual violence.

When considering how the systems and normative practices that underpin rape culture are enacted in daily life and, importantly, represented textually, it is crucial to examine how they are inscribed into language. Sharon Marcus’s 1992 article ‘Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention’ develops the concept of a ‘rape script’, the contemporary grammar of sexual violence that constructs rape as both an unpreventable fact of women’s lives and, at the same time, a fate worse than death. Marcus describes the purpose of the concept as a means to inform a ‘regarding [of] rape not as a fact to be accepted or opposed, tried or avenged, but as a process to be analysed and undermined as it occurs’ (1992, p. 387); it is, in this sense, a linguistic process. This definition of rape, according to Marcus, can be constituted in a number of ways. Firstly, language is the site in which often contradictory images of sexual violence are transmitted and reified culturally: ‘women are rapable, women deserve rape/women provoke rape, women want rape, women are ashamed of being raped/women publicly lie about being raped’ (Marcus 1992, p. 389). Rape’s linguistic dimension can also be viewed through the presence of speech in instances of sexual violence, where ‘[c]ontrary to received wisdom, which imagines rape as a wordless,

absolutely impersonal attack, most rapists take verbal initiatives with their targets in addition to deploying physical aggression' (p. 389). Cahill reflects on the social nature of gender that renders women and girls as 'rapable', noting that the 'socially produced feminine body' is the body of the 'guilty pre-victim' (Cahill 2001, p. 160) who is always poised to be victimised, and always seen as ultimately complicit in that victimisation. Finally, it is possible to recognise rape's position as linguistic when acknowledging that rape *itself* is structured like a language in the sense that it conveys 'a social structure of meanings which enables people to experience themselves as speaking, acting, and embodied subjects' (p. 390). This language informs how subjects position themselves with regards to sexual violence – for example, it has historically been used to validate a fear of the 'black rapist' in white women, encouraging belief in personal vulnerability structured along racialised and gendered axes. Susan Ehrlich undertakes a linguistic study of the language of rape trials heavily informed by Marcus's work, in which she contends that the core problem of these trials lies in their 'discursive practices' (2001, p. 152). Ehrlich argues that rape scripts, as performed adjudicatively rely on hegemonic assumptions about gender that frequently position victims as passively accepting while affording perpetrators a 'grammar of non-agency' that allows them to relinquish responsibility for their actions (p. 2).

Marcus rejects, but seemingly fundamentally misrepresents, the concept of the continuum of sexual violence. She comments that it connects 'language and rape in a way that can be taken to mean that representations of rape, obscene remarks, threats and other forms of harassment should be considered equivalent to rape' (p. 389). Thinking in the continuum(s), as in Boyle, allows us to circumvent Marcus's categorical error here. Rather than viewing, for example, 'obscene remarks' as equivalent to rape, continuum thinking informs a view of the former as part of the normative script of heterosexuality (as in Gavey) that is seen as commonplace and acceptable, with the latter an 'aberrant' occurrence that exists on the same continuum of gendered expressions of dominance. Marking speech acts as 'metaphors for rape itself' (Marcus 1992, p. 389) is not the purpose of continuum thinking. In fact, Marcus's concept of the rape script is complementary to that of the continuum(s) when considering how sexual violence is constructed across a range of linguistically inscribed experiences, from workplace harassment to rape. This does not occlude the

gap between threatening verbal acts and rape, as Marcus suggests, insisting women are innately violable and violence is inevitable. Instead, we might contend that the grammars of sexual violence are omnipresent across these continuums and imbue representational features.

When reflecting on Marcus's opposition to continuums of sexual violence it is possible to see this hostility as evidencing a distortion of continuum thinking. Such distortions can explain, as in Linda M. Alcoff's *Rape and Resistance*, the contemporary impulse of '[l]iberal comedians, alt- and indie writers, even some academic feminists, [to] suggest that the movement against sexual violence is creating a social panic, legitimating revenge, vilifying molesters beyond all reasonableness, and creating a slippery slope' (2018, p. 20). Alcoff is not directly responding to Marcus's assertion here, although she does move on to critique Marcus directly later in the text. Finding the argument that rape might be circumvented by victims at the point of the event through a subversion of the rape script difficult to pursue, she re-asserts Gavey's position that 'it is not entirely transparent exactly how this sort of transgression [of the rape script] would take place' (Gavey 2005, p. 188 in Alcoff 2018, p.80). Alcoff does, however, concede that the rape script has potential usefulness when applied to survivors' longer-term experiences of/responses to sexual violence. She does not reject the concept of a 'script' outright, suggesting that public discourses can have a profound impact on how victim-survivors engage in their own 'narrative-making' (p. 84). Here, Alcoff adapts the concept of the script to address survivor experience specifically, describing how response to sexual violence might be structured through the oppressive but commonplace language of rape – a language which frequently necessitates feelings of shame and guilt. Shame and sexual violence clearly do not have a naturally causal relationship and it is wholly possible to imagine an ideal situation where survivors do not feel shame. The experience of shame after sexual violence is evidence that the language of sexual violence works in a deliberately gendered way and is constructed in a manner that reinforces harmful myths about those who experience it.

Alcoff argues that what she calls the 'epidemic of sexual violation', in its physical and narrative dimensions, has specific implications for groups targeted due to characteristics like race and ability. When considering this 'epidemic', and these

implications, in our contemporary moment, #MeToo immediately springs to mind. The moment of mass disclosure associated with it spoke clearly to the epidemic nature of sexual violence and men's violence more generally. As this thesis is concerned with how this moment is represented – or anticipated – in text, there is cause for an exploration of the scholarship on #MeToo thus far. In their introduction to the *Handbook on the Politics of the #MeToo Movement*, Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir assert that 'the #MeToo movement is testimony to the universality of this power [of language] (2020, p. 1). In this sense, #MeToo can be characterised as a 'global outpouring of speech' (Serisier 2023a, p. 209). In *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism*, Boyle (2019a) conceptualises #MeToo as moment and discourse rather than 'movement', due to its mediated, discursive nature; consequently, '#MeToo has been difficult to disentangle from the mainstream media representation of #MeToo' (Boyle 2019b, p. 8). I follow Boyle's conceptualisation in this project, thinking of #MeToo and the decade that surrounds it as a flexible, discursive moment. Boyle, along with Chandra and Erlingsdóttir, argues that #MeToo is an amalgamation of decades of feminist theorising and activism around sexual violence, rather than an out-of-nowhere event. Sarah Banet-Weiser points out that, although there is obviously resistant potential in #MeToo, it became 'spectacularly visible under the logics of popular feminism' (2018, p. 17). Because of the interaction between logics of visibility and the spectacular, the central stories of #MeToo often focalised around already visible public figures. This interest in public figures is reflected in the #MeToo texts in this thesis.

In considering 'who' emerged as the principal subjects of #MeToo, its 'where' is equally important to map. Although MacKinnon (2020) speaks of a 'global #MeToo', it would be erroneous to argue that it had equivalent configuration across geographical contexts. As this thesis is engaging with English and French cultural contexts, these divergences are important to note. Because #MeToo arises in an Anglo-American context where feminism is unprecedentedly 'popular' (Boyle 2019a; Banet-Weiser 2018), claims to its generality and global impact are often implicitly Anglo-American. However, as Pavard, Rochefort and Zancarini-Fournel (2020) assert, #MeToo was nevertheless a major feminist event in France. Non-academic texts like the essay collection *Moi aussi: MeToo au-delà du hashtag* (2022) and Irène Théry's (2022) *Moi aussi: La nouvelle civilité sexuelle* explore the moment's French

dimensions in terms of media, politics, and culture. Pavard, Rochefort and Zancarini-Fournel (2020) argue that it became part of a sociopolitical context specific to France; it underpinned debates about national identity and, crucially, a *seduction à la française*, observable in the 100-women tribune. The 100-women tribune is indicative of a specifically localised hostility to #MeToo, that was not identical to the backlash seen, for example, in the US. Julie Gaillard speaks of the ‘discursive failure of the #MeToo movement within French society’ (2023, p. 4), which has failed to produce lasting cultural change.

Criticism of #MeToo, as Boyle (2019a) points out, has existed alongside it since its genesis as hashtag moment. Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad warn that ‘despite the excitement about MeToo’s wide appeal and cross-class, cross-ethnicity and cross-race character, its politics and aesthetics are exclusionary in various problematic ways’ (2018, p. 1319). They conceive of limitations in terms of race and respectability, sexuality and the gender binary, as well as the focus on sexual violence in the context of paid work. Reflecting Banet-Weiser’s (2018) assertion, Iqra Shagufta Cheema notes that ‘a majority of initial scholarly conversations about #MeToo—due to race and class, and their corollaries, fame and visibility—were dominated by white Hollywood’ (2023, p. xiv). Concurrently, Alison Phipps observes that, in its mediated form, #MeToo ‘often appeared to be a conversation between white people’: the victim-survivors speaking out, and the perpetrators defending themselves, who were typically wealthy celebrities or public figures (2020, p. 37). It is not just race and class, but their interaction with geographical location that has impacted what has been made of #MeToo. Tigist Shewarega Hussen and Tamara Shefer argue that ‘the power embedded in #MeToo as a “global” and transnational movement might threaten to erase the histories of local contemporary activist movements’ (2023, p. 182). For them, the focus on high-profile, individualised stories ‘may reflect and re-entrench global inequalities and un/privileges in which certain bodies and lives are more valued than others’ (p. 191). The next section of the literature review will focus on marginality more specifically, considering how interactions between believability and survival work on numerous axes to construct harmful ideas about who experiences and perpetrates sexual violence.

## **Believability, marginality and sexual violence**

Believability is a structuring force in the discursive context of sexual violence. This section of the literature review will explore believability in its relationship to discourse, narrative, and cultural context, particularly with regards to #MeToo. Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Higgins, in their book length study *Believability: Sexual Violence, Media and the Politics of Doubt*, assert that there is a ‘constructed “unbelievability” of marginalised subjects [which] is not about a simple lack of credibility but about a much more fundamental estrangement from truth’ (2023, p. 189). With this in mind, this section will explore believability across a number of strata: the problematics of women’s speech about sexual violence, marginality (in victim-survivor and perpetrator) and its interactions with identity, grievability, and belief within the #MeToo moment. Because, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins point out, logics of belief and doubt are historically and culturally constituted, distinct Anglo-American and French contexts are also drawn out here.

To begin thinking about how belief is discursively constructed, I turn to Jan Jordan’s (2004) concept of the ‘credibility conundrum’. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) point out, belief is not solely about the perceived credibility or truth of the speaking subject, but it is nevertheless important. The credibility conundrum describes the process through which women’s ‘speaking out’ frequently condemns them to non-believability as a victim. Jordan, through interviews with both women who had been raped or assaulted and with the police, ascertains that widely held cultural beliefs about women’s propensity to lie uphold this conundrum. The conundrum dictates that a woman is expected to speak out immediately after violation to be believable, but with this speaking out ‘she risks either being blamed for what happened, or being disbelieved for saying what happened’ (Jordan 2004, p. 245). Rey-Robert mirrors this conundrum in the French context, where the presumption is not only that ‘qui ne dit mot consent’ [silence implies consent], but also that ‘qui dit mot ment’ [those who speak out lie] (2019, pp. 223–236). The importance of narrative is foregrounded here, and that women victim-survivors’ narrative testimony is in a fraught position with regards to believability is clear. The ‘traumatic paradox’ (Walker 1997) is helpful in unpacking the conditions associated with believable narratives. Walker asserts that

‘popular and juridical venues tend to reject reports of traumatic experiences that contain mistakes or amnesiac elements’ (2001, p. 212), despite the fact that mistakes and misremembering are associated with the traumatic experience: ‘contemporary theories of trauma show that such memory features, along with “distressing recollections”, and “recurring hallucinations and dissociative flashback episodes”, are a common result of the traumatic experience itself’ (ibid.). The paradox lies in the fact that the conditions required for testimony to be rendered credible culturally are often modified by the traumatic experience itself. The intersecting nature of this conundrum and paradox are prurient when examining how victim-survivor testimony is represented and diegetically received in the literature and film here.

The concept of speaking out and survivor testimony is thus crucial to any work on sexual violence. That women have historically been considered non-credible testifiers means that, as Jilly Boyce Kay asserts, speaking out about gendered violence is necessarily radical in form *and* content (2020, p. 57). Serisier’s exploration of public speech and memoir in *Speaking Out* (2018), is a detailed consideration of the complex issues at play when considering women victim-survivors’ speech. She argues that in feminist discourses on sexual violence ‘silence frequently figures as a synecdoche for the effects of patriarchal power on women’ (Serisier 2018, p. 178), thus women’s speaking (and writing) out is viewed as essentially liberatory. However, she points out that to merely break the silence about sexual violence is not a straightforwardly, or exclusively, feminist act. Survivor speech has often been mobilised towards reactionary ends, used to circulate racist and class-based ideas about perpetration and victimhood.

It is essential to therefore clarify how race, gender and class intersect to inform the experience of, and discourse about, sexual violence in myriad ways, particularly across national and cultural boundaries. Angela Davis’s highly influential work is of crucial importance in the US context. In *Women, Race & Class*, Davis asserts that ‘[a]fter ages of silence, suffering and misplaced guilt, sexual assault is explosively emerging as one of the telling dysfunctions of present-day capitalist society’ (1983, p. 179). Davis draws attention to the impossibility of viewing sexual violence as a solely gendered reality; its racialised elements are fundamental to how it functions for black *and* white women *and* men. She traces the origins of the ‘myth of the black rapist’

through slavery and Jim Crow, identifying its continued prevalence in the United States in the 1980s. When black men are essentialised as predators and rapists, it becomes difficult even for white progressives to oppose brutality against them. Even opposition to lynchings, as Davis points out, was generally repressed; for who would want to be seen to defend a rapist (always of white women), for whom a predisposal to rape was a *fundamental* feature of their character?

For historian Gerda Lerner, '[t]he myth of the black rapist of white women is the twin of the myth of the bad black woman—both designed to apologize for and facilitate the continued exploitation of black men and women' (Lerner 1972, p. 193 in Davis pp. 180-1). Both of these conceptualisations work to create significations of black people that place them as fundamentally separate from norms of 'white civility', and thus legitimising any violence enacted against them. Whether there is actually perceived to be a 'legitimate cause' for this violence or otherwise is unimportant; it is *always already* sanctioned when black people are perceived to violate the normative sexual conventions of whiteness. Although Davis's work provides a comprehensive view of the historical links between sexual violence and race in the U.S, even she could not have predicted the seismic effects of neoliberalism, decades of racially inflected 'tough on crime' policies and 'the war on terror' on the contemporary relationship between sexual violence, marginalisation and criminality.

Looking to another geographical context, Miriam Ticktin draws attention to contemporary racialised discourses in France that work to construct images of the 'Arab rapist'. According to Ticktin, 'through a discourse against sexual violence, men of North African origin and, specifically, Muslims are excluded as barbaric and uncivilized, and now as violators of women's human rights' (2008, p. 865). Writers like Ticktin and Billaud and Castro (2013) draw further connections between the Republic's treatment of Muslims, and racialised groups in France more generally, by noting the French state's reluctance to engage in sustained public discourse about sexual violence until the issue of *les tournantes*<sup>10</sup> [group rapes] gained mainstream attention. The early 2000s saw an explosion of media attention that focused on gang rapes, said to be increasing at an alarming rate in

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase gained prominence in France in the early 2000s with specific reference to group rapes in the banlieues; it translates to 'pass around', as with a joint.

the banlieues with North African and, predominantly, Muslim young men identified as the central authors of these attacks. Reflecting on the attention afforded to the *tournantes*, Ticktin comments, ‘in its more institutionalized, dominant form, sexuality is often recognized only through the framework of racial, cultural, and religious difference; in other words, sexual violence is noted primarily when it is attached to other types of difference’ (p. 865). Helen Benedict makes a similar point when noting how the U.S. media covers instances of sexual violence that take place in other cultural contexts, noting that often ‘we look at why the men do it’, as opposed to American reporting that largely focuses on victim-survivor behaviour (2013, n.p). Attention to the *tournantes* has waned in recent years – however, the discursive legacy of the racialised perpetrator of violence against women has remained in France as can be seen in the far-right rhetoric employed by a number of politicians. It is of note that many women politicians, such as Marine Le Pen, have expressed ‘concerns’ about the safety of white women; this corresponds to Sara Farris’ (2012) concept of femonationalism, that is the use of feminist discourse for nationalist ends. Sexual violence is taken seriously and understood to be a structural issue only when those involved are racial, cultural or religious Others. These Others are perceived to be acting in opposition to national values, against sexual norms and performing decidedly un-French acts.

The representational features of racial and cultural Others in France require brief attention here. Nacira Guénif-Souilamas comments that the figure of the *garçon arabe* represents a ‘violent’ heterosexuality that situates him as a potential rapist and violator of Republic principles (2006, p. 31). According to Guénief-Souilamas, since the 2005 French riots, young black men have gained increasing centrality in public discourses on race: ‘Now, just as Arab boys are perverts, black boys are criminals and deviants’ (p. 33). The racism that is structured around these supposedly deviant figures is viewed as virtuous and performed in service of French secular values, employing these ‘convenient figures of an internally gendered otherness’ (Guénief-Souilamas 2006, p. 39) in a similar (although, of course, not completely equal) reflection of the U.S. case, where persecution of black men is taken to be in service of protecting white womanhood. It seems obvious that the interest of the French media in reporting on sexual violence, and

the French state in legislating against it, relies upon the presence of discernible difference in both/either the attackers or victim. Utilising her work on homonationalism in the U.S. context, Billaud and Castro follow Jasbir Puar in arguing that discourses of gender, sexuality and race ‘merge with discourses of nation, militarism, and securitization to produce US-nationalist homosexual subjects of rights against racially perverse “terrorist bodies”’ (p. 96). Muslim men’s sexualities are depicted through an Orientalist lens as at once savage and impotent, imbued with violence and inherently tied up in anti-women and anti-gay sentiment. This hypothesis can be appropriated to make sense of the French situation: the spectre of the Arab rapist, his principals and ‘perverse’ sexuality antithetical to the values of the Republic, haunts public discourses on rape and serves as legitimisation for racist policy purported to protect women.

In the UK, similar tactics have been utilised to suggest sexual violence is a specifically ethnic or cultural reality. The idea that Islam, for example, is incompatible with Western ideals (with particular regard to gender and sexuality) has long underscored populist drives to repress immigration across the UK, Europe, and the United States (Dagistanli and Grewal 2012). The figure of the savage Muslim rapist emerges most prominently in the U.K. with regards to organised sexual abuse or, as commonly referred to in the media, ‘grooming gangs’. Salter and Dagistanli identify the 2012 case of sexual exploitation in Rochdale as a core site in which these discourses were mediated: throughout, ‘the race of the offenders was a key issue’ (2015, p. 53). The Rochdale case involved the sexual trafficking and grooming of a number of white working-class teenage girls by British-Pakistani and Afghan men. However, as Salter and Dagistanli argue, the class of the girls was likely equally as important as the race of the men in the state’s initial inaction towards the case. As Beverley Skeggs comments, black and working-class white women have long been characterised as the promiscuous and deviant Other to which bourgeois, white femininity is opposed (1997, p. 99). In terms of respectability, this infers black and white working-class women are less credible victims – their perceived ‘vulgarity’ and hypersexuality again used to mark their bodies as unrapeable.. In a reflection of the French case of hyper-visibility of Muslim and North African offenders, it has been evidenced that the majority of organised abuse (and, of course, sexual violence more

widely) is carried out by white men but this receives ‘relatively negligible media attention’ in comparison to instances in which South Asian men are the perpetrators (Salter and Dagistanli 2015, p. 58). The complex interactions between the media, the state and prosecuting sexual violence are apparent here, drawing up fundamental questions about how these relationships are understood by feminist critics and scholars.

In her 2008 book *In An Abusive State*, Kristin Bumiller explains the alliances between feminists and the state that have come to characterise much anti-violence activism, particularly in the United States. As feminists came to push for state solutions to the problem of sexual violence – including judicially, through harsher sentences and socially, through greater state involvement in care for abused women and their families – the state began to occupy a central role in mediating ‘justice’ and placating an anxious public. Phipps maintains that this arises due to the fact that ‘[f]or white feminists, criminal punishment represents protection, not oppression. It is the colonial master’s intervention, the ‘empathy’ of Angry Dad’ (2020, p. 79) These feminist/state alliances have come to be known as ‘carceral feminism’, a term originally coined by sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein to describe the desire to criminalise the sex industry but now expanded to include appeals to punitive justice and incarceration in general (Bernstein 2007). Cases perceived to be especially shocking, like group rapes, are often given heightened attention by both prosecutors and the media, with their trials acting as a form of ‘expressive justice’ (Bumiller 2008, p. 37). The ‘expressive’ nature of these trials often involves a symbolic function: distinct classes of victim and perpetrator are articulated in order to send a message to the public about who commits violent crime, and who is victimised by it. Although Bumiller reflects primarily on the U.S. context, one can see clear echoes of this in the French hyper focus on the *tournantes* and crimes in the banlieues as opposed to other forms of sexual violence, as well as the handling of the Rochdale case in the U.K. Expressive justice, of course, is not ideologically neutral, with its continued reinforcement working to ‘allow for more “rationalized” forms of social control to serve the interests of most “deserving” victims and to target “dangerous” classes of perpetrators’ (Bumiller, p. 62). Although feminists continue to fight against the use of harmful rape myths in courtrooms, trials of expressive justice frequently re-articulate many dangerous myths about victimhood

(and, in turn, the perpetrators of sexual violence). The cultural perception of ‘ideal’ victims – that is, typically, white, middle-class ‘professional’ women – creates a circuit with the judicial view of ‘good’ victims and, importantly, reliable witnesses. Bumiller asserts that ‘cases in which the victim fits the “iconic” image of whiteness, innocence, and high status are more likely to be the focus of media representations of the crime (both in positive and negative terms)’ (p. 157), confirming that cultural notions of victimhood are informed by the media, which both informs and reacts to judicial conceptualisations.

Bumiller writes, ‘[r]eports of the most horrific cases generate excessive fears among women about the potential threat of violence from dangerous (usually dark-skinned) strangers. Yet these fears do not conform to the social realities of American life, where women are much more likely to encounter sexual violence from known perpetrators’ (p. 19). Reporting on cases that are particularly emotive in France and the U.K. often incur a similar obfuscation of the reality of sexual violence. Related mythologies regarding sexual violence – its perpetrators and its victims – can be observed across American, British and French contexts. Phipps, in critiquing how #MeToo and adjacent movements have frequently been exclusive in terms of race and class, describes how ‘the power of bourgeois white women’s tears was solidified in the modern colonial period, as “women’s protection” became key to the deadly disciplinary power that maintained racialised and classed regimes of extraction and exploitation’ (2021, p. 85). Phipps’ discussion centres on the power of white women’s tears, suggesting that white bourgeois women have the ability to weaponise affect (primarily, through crying) in a manner that women of colour and working-class white women are unable to access. Phipps makes it clear that she is not suggesting bourgeois white women have not experienced real, painful, and traumatic events, or that they should not be allowed to address these publicly. Rather, she seeks to address the fact that white women’s tears (real or otherwise) have been utilised in tandem with ‘white men’s punitive power’ (p. 85) in service of extreme violence against racialised men thought to have committed acts of sexual violence against white women. The essential point to note here is that bourgeois white women’s assumed vulnerability comes at the expense of other marginalised women: ‘This robustness expected of Black women (and their working class white sisters) reflects raced and classed histories’ (Phipps

2020, p. 73). It follows that the stories that certain women victim-survivors tell, because of these raced and classed histories, are prioritised within an economy of believability. Kristie Dotson uses the term ‘testimonial quieting’ to describe what ‘occurs when an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower’ (2011, p. 242). Dotson draws on the work of Patricia Hill Collins, which argues black women in the US are systematically undervalued as ‘knowers’ (ibid.); when a story is told by a victim-survivor who is not recognisable as a ‘knower’, their testimony risks both silencing *and* disbelief on the part of its audience.

The interrelated concepts of believability and grievability require further unpacking in this respect. Marginality informs the ways in which we categorise individuals as sympathetic, or otherwise, this being particularly relevant when considered how certain groups are excluded from *or* offered sympathy after experiencing or enacting sexual violence. Judith Butler’s concept of ‘grievability’ is instructive here, allowing an examination of how lives are framed through recognition and apprehension. Although the theorisation in *Frames Of War* is primarily focused on how war highlights the concept of grievable lives, it is possible to expand this concept to a view of victimhood in culture more generally. For Butler, ‘certain lives are regarded worthy of protection while others are not, precisely because they are not quite “lives” according to prevailing norms of recognizability’ (2016, p. 154). Butler’s conceptualisation of grievable lives relies on the notion that some lives are not apprehended as lives at all – in fact, ‘[w]ithout grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life’ (2016, p. 84). If grievability relies upon culturally inscribed notions of recognisability – this therefore precluding any body categorised as Other from being apprehended – then it is easy to see how the dehumanisation of marginalised people that demarcates them unsympathetic victims occurs. Describing how one comes to view a life as such, and thus deserving of sympathy, Butler suggests that ‘[t]he epistemological capacity to apprehend a life is partially dependent on that life being produced according to norms that qualify it as a life or, indeed, as part of life’ (p. 61). It is clear to see that access to sympathetic victimhood may be precluded to anyone who is seen to exist outwith normative categories. Conversely, those who perpetrate violence and fall within these categories – such as the ‘good Frenchman’ – may be afforded heightened sympathy. There is a

connection here to Kate Manne's conceptualisation of 'himpathy', the idea that disproportionate sympathy is awarded to male perpetrators who are 'white, nondisabled, and otherwise privileged' (2017, p. 197).

As I have suggested, believability and grievability are discursively related. Believability emerges with unprecedented discursive dominance throughout the #MeToo moment. Banet-Weiser and Higgins argue that understandings of believability as a discursive force must be grounded in historical and cultural context. The #MeToo moment constitutes a 'historical conjecture in which the problem of believability is taking on new complexities and (potentially) new political implications' (Banet-Weiser and Higgins 2023, p. 13). That #MeToo was fundamentally about silence-breaking meant that it 'flooded the economy of believability with stories of women, sparking believability struggles that might otherwise never have taken place' (ibid. p. 77). The terrain of struggle through which these dynamics were engaged throughout #MeToo was primarily media: social, fictional, and factual. That media engaged so intensely with #MeToo and, in turn, stories about sexual violence might suggest the moment successfully prompted a reckoning with previously silenced stories. However, much of these media engagements merely re-articulated the struggle for believability – the labour one must take in order to be believed – rather than promising it in and of itself. This demonstrates that believability is not merely about audibility and visibility of victim-survivors and their stories – #MeToo certainly amplified these, but this increased hearing and seeing did not preclude doubt. This is because, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins convincingly argue, the labour of believability is characterised by futility; in turn, what they term '#MeToo' media works *through* a representation of futility (2023, pp. 77-78). The labour of believability is futile because access to belief is fragile, subject to challenge and negotiation at every turn. That #MeToo did not ultimately result in an increased cultural impetus to 'believe women' (see Depp vs. Heard) is testament to this precarity. A cultural idea about who has implicit access to truth – powerful white men, like Depp and Brett Kavanaugh – persists. Ability to speak does not necessitate ability to be believed if the speaking subject is marginalised within the economy of believability, not considered a 'knower' or truth-teller.

Believability is therefore about stories told, who tells these stories, and how these stories are received. As a moment fundamentally about stories and narrative, #MeToo's relationship to believability is clearly constituted. This section of the literature review has used believability as a conceptual centre around which ideas about marginality and grievability circulate, drawing on material that straddles cultural specificity and generality. Identity – of victim-survivor and perpetrator – has been key to these explorations, as has cultural context in terms of geography and chronology. The next section of this chapter will focus on the forms stories about sexual violence take, examining how scholars have approached representations of sexual violence in literature and film in historic and contemporary terms.

### **Representations of Sexual Violence**

This section therefore moves to consider how stories about sexual violence in literature and film have been academically conceptualised. With feminist conceptualisations of sexual violence, believability and marginality in the *real* in mind, this section gives an overview of the work on sexual violence's representational qualities. Beginning with an examination of representational politics more generally, I then consider film and literature separately, foregrounding feminist approaches to sexual violence in both. Sarah Projansky, drawing attention to the frequency of references to sexual violence in everyday life points out that 'given the ubiquity of representations of rape, even someone who is a moderate consumer of mass media would have difficulty spending a week (possibly even an entire day) without coming across the subject' (2001, p. 2). It is clear, then, that a large portion of the public gain 'common sense' understandings of sexual violence through representational narratives – thus, what these representations have to say matters immensely. Employing a feminist mode of reading these cultural inscriptions allows us to 'identify and demystify the multiple manifestations, displacements and transformations of what amounts to an insidious cultural myth' (Higgins and Silver 1991, p. 2). Horeck's assertion that '[r]epresentations of rape are by no means separate or apart from the act of rape: they are part of it' (2004, p. 81) further speaks to the significance of representation. This is not to say that watching/reading a scene of sexual violence in a film or novel is the

same as being the spectator to an act of violence 'in real life', only that the issue of spectatorship and witnessing certainly prompts ethical consideration for feminist critics. Representation both informs, and is informed by, cultural perceptions of sexual violence; it comprises an important part of its social reality. Projansky succinctly underscores the real-life implications of rape narratives, writing:

Discourses of rape are both productive and determinative. They are not simply narratives marketed for consumption in an entertainment context, or 'talk' about real things. They are themselves functional, generative, formative, strategic, performative, and real (pp. 2–3)

In order to answer Horeck's question of '[w]hat is at stake in the communal 'look' at a representation of rape?' (p. 92), we must consider the ideological components of the 'look', as well as of the image to be looked at. Phylis Frus makes clear again that these representations carry great responsibility when she argues that, ironically, 'we get our ideas about what is real from narrative and dramatic constructions' (2001, p. 227). It is noteworthy that the two works on sexual violence in cinema, Horeck's *Public Rape* (2004) and Projansky's *Watching Rape* (2001), that have most clearly shaped my thinking do not focus on specific generic modes or movements. Their analysis instead spans examples placed in a variety of generic and temporal contexts and consider public narrativisation of sexual violence and these narratives' engagements with postfeminism respectively. The engagement with a wide range of films in both works suggests again sexual violence's narrative ubiquity representationally, although as both point out the representations within are frequently contradictory. Both work to connect narratives of sexual violence with contemporary feminist (and mainstream) discourses, a project equally important to this thesis. For Horeck and Projansky, discourse on sexual violence can be seen to ground and characterise much feminist discourse, this in turn necessitating a view of the feminist (or otherwise) ideas these narratives articulate. This in a sense follows Horeck's claim that sexual violence often functions as a sign for other issues, that 'it is also frequently used as a means of expressing ideological and political questions concerning the functioning of the body politic' (2004, p. 7). Rape thus structures narrative questions

about gender, race and class. Projansky's categorisation of rape narratives as those which broadly 'include representations of rape, attempted rape, threats of rape, implied rape, and sometimes coercive sexuality' (p. 18) is helpful in informing the limits of my own analyses.

### Film and sexual violence

Any analysis of women's representation in cinema invites engagement with Laura Mulvey's work on the male gaze. The idea of a compromised 'female image' within the economy of a male gaze is of interest to this project which primarily focuses on women protagonists. Mulvey observes that in a world defined by male domination, pleasure derived through 'looking' has typically been structured by a male/active vs. female/passive binary. This insists that the 'determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly' (1975, p. 62). As will be further explored in the discussion of rape-revenge cinema, the woman character signifies the threat of castration, thus 'voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms' are necessary 'to circumvent her threat' (p. 67). These mechanisms involve a unified look between the camera, the characters and the audience; to evade the threat that woman as castrator poses on screen, there must be a move from the narrative logic where the female image 'bursts through the world of illusion as an intrusive, static, one-dimensional fetish' (p. 68). Paying close attention to how this 'female image' is constituted is of particular significance when considering women characters who experience, or are witness to, sexual violence. As Projansky notes, '[w]omen are often vulnerable in rape films, but the relationship between rape and women's vulnerability is complex' (p.30), with antithetical representations presenting women as, on one hand, lacking independence and self-sufficiency and, on the other, as ultimately *too* independent. These contradictory representations are worthy of full examination and must be held in tension.

Feminist scholarship on rape and representation has frequently foregrounded the apparently contradictory need to simultaneously represent sexual violence and to end it. Jane Mills attests to the possibility that while 'cinematic representations of rape provide a trope that denies the embodied female experience, they also reveal an elision

which makes it possible to discover that which has previously been hidden' (1995, p. 40). Representations of sexual violence have the potential to illuminate the traditionally unspoken and perform, perhaps, a pedagogical function. Sexual violence in film is frequently utilised to symbolise a number of social issues, including articulating dynamics of gender, race and class. If, as I will suggest here, representations of sexual violence are a site in which several discourses (feminist, reactionary, mainstream) on sexual violence are articulated, it is important to examine how these discourses popularly present. In her examination of the connection between rape narratives and postfeminism, Projansky posits that sexual violence often functions as 'the narrative event that brings out a latent feminism in the woman (or man) who experiences rape; thus the texts make rape necessary for the articulation of feminism' (p. 21). This can be observed, for example, in sexual violence narratives where a victim-survivor undergoes an 'empowering' transformation, frequently becoming an independent and assertive woman (read: a feminist in some respect), following rape. This transformation characterises many rape-revenge films (like *M.F.A* in chapter 2). The notion that runs parallel to this, with explicitly negative connotations, is that feminism is in some way responsible for rape; for example, when an independent, ostensibly feminist woman engages in 'risky' behaviour that is purported as putting her in danger through her own volition. Projansky notes that '[w]hen rape narratives produce and maintain feminism or suggest that feminism leads to rape, then feminism is used against (other potential versions of) itself' (p. 233).

Cinematic narratives about sexual violence are clearly not confined to any generic mode. However, as this project features rape-revenge narratives often categorised as generic, cases where sexual violence interact with genre are of significance. Barry Keith Grant (1995) suggests that genre films are successful in their ability to 'tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations' (p. xv). Even if they did not feature in this thesis, it would be negligent to discuss representations of sexual violence in cinema without mentioning rape-revenge films. The most famous explorations of rape-revenge are found in Carol Clover's 'Getting Even' chapter in *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (1992) and Jacinda Read's 2000 book length *The New Avengers*, with Barbara Creed and Peter Lehman's work also highly influential on the field of study. While most typically agree on the underlying structure

that characterises rape-revenge films – that is rape-transformation-revenge – the approach to making sense of these through a gendered lens often differs significantly. Clover views rape-revenge as a subgenre of horror, ‘in which female figures and/or gender issues loom especially large’ (p. 5). Alexandra Heller-Nicholas points out that ‘[h]orror cinema is useful to an analysis of rape-revenge film if only because of horror’s particular treatment of the body’ (2011, p. 81). Clover argues that rigid gendered binaries within horror can be problematised, ‘especially on the side of the victim-hero, whose gender is clearly coded as feminine but whose sex, it seems, is up for grabs’ (ibid.). This notion leads to interesting considerations when thinking through the gendering process applied to victim-survivors in cinematic narratives. Taking primarily a psychoanalytical approach (also favoured by Creed), Clover attests that the psychosexual aspect of rape-revenge horror relies on a typically oedipal framework; she comments that it ‘may play on two powerful moments of the male oedipal drama: the fantasy of being “beaten” (sexually penetrated) by the father [...] and the fantasy of killing the father’ (p. 164). Creed focuses her attention primarily on the victim-avengers of women-centred rape-revenges, where she notes that ‘[m]ale castration anxiety has given rise to two of the most powerful representations of the monstrous feminine in the horror film: woman as castrator and woman as castrated’ (1993, p. 443).

The castrating woman, or *femme castratrice*, of the rape-revenge film employs castration in both literal and figurative modes in response to male violence and/or exploitation. What is interesting to Creed is that although coded as monstrous, the victim-avenger ‘appears to win, not lose, audience sympathy’ (p. 469). This, as Creed underlines, does not mean that these films do not contain misogynistic elements, only that they potentially complicate sexist ideas about sexual violence. These protagonists, in their proximity to an eroticised violence in the films’ ‘revenge’ sections, suggest that ‘woman signifies sex and death’ (p. 470). Lehman’s assertion that the avenging ‘phallic woman’ functions symbolically as a man, thus incurring masculine gendered identification, is rejected by Creed who argues that just ‘because the heroine is represented as resourceful, intelligent and dangerous it does not follow that she should be seen as a pseudo man’ (p. 460). Perhaps the most striking of Clover’s theorisations is the claim that rape-revenge films ‘repeatedly and explicitly articulate feminist

politics' (p. 151). She identifies the attention paid to the traumatic impacts of rape, the prevalence of rape as representation of male violence (and, in turn, patriarchy), and critiques of the justice system as frequently central to rape-revenge narratives, concerns with clear feminist implications. Considering feminists in the late 1970s and early 80s famously picketed films like *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978), Clover's suggestion that these might in fact engage positively with feminist discourses is noteworthy.

Jacinda Read agrees with Clover that feminism(s) can be read through rape-revenge films, but contends that her analysis of both feminist politics and rape-revenge as horror is altogether too homogenising. Instead, Read posits that a variety of discourses are at play and, in fact, rape-revenge narratives articulate feminist as well as reactionary politics, and reflect contemporary sociopolitical concerns. Read also suggests that Clover's analysis is missing an historicized aspect, relying too heavily on psychoanalytic theory. For Read, too, rape-revenge is not generically specific. It is difficult to classify as a genre due to its lacking a 'coherent iconography' (p. 242), or as a 'movement' as it is not created by a specific group of directors and writers unified by 'a common stylistic approach' (ibid.) Read argues that films that employ the rape-revenge narrative cycle are bound to the periods in which they are released; different time periods can be seen to inform variations in the structure. For example, rape-revenge films in what Read describes as the 'pre-feminist' period of the 1970s prioritised victims who were categorisable as wives or daughters, afforded subjectivity solely through their relationship to men. Post-1970 films seize the moment of women's liberation to depict independent women able to enact their own revenge and exert agency, 'increasingly telling feminine, even feminist stories' (p. 242). Martha McCaughey and Neal King underscore these potentials for subversion of normative gender roles, suggesting that '[v]isions of sexually attractive women skilled with weaponry, licensed to kill, beating up men might rather take the wind out of the sails of the culture in which sex difference seems unalterable. Such images might challenge smug oppressors' (2001, p. 6). Here again, the notion of a 'female image' is reflected upon; the key word in McCaughey and King's assertion is 'might', suggesting that these images should not be categorised as subversive merely on account of their complex process of gendering but rather read closely with and against feminist politics.

Read predicts that ‘with the maternal avenger, the rape-revenge cycle may have run its course [...] the narrative possibilities the rape-revenge structure offers may have been exhausted’ (p.245). The steady release of rape-revenge films since the texts publication in 2000 suggest that Read was rather hasty in making this assertion, and it will be part of the task of this thesis to examine the potential reasons for the contemporary surge in their popularity; in this sense, I take the 2010s as their relevant historical context. Claire Henry synthesises aspects of Clover’s psychoanalytical approach and Read’s historicisation in *Revisionist Rape-Revenge* (2014), which explores a comprehensive corpus of texts (including many that postdate Read’s apocalyptic proclamation). Henry explores what she terms the ‘revisionist rape-revenge genre’, that is rape-revenge films that have ‘evolved, mutated, and hybridized with other genres’ and frequently imply an ‘ambivalent relationship to revenge’ (p. 16) – these potentially different in character from examples of exploitation cinema like *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) or *Dirty Weekend* (1993, dir. Michael Winner). The films in Henry’s corpus range in national context and chronology. In similar vein to Read and Clover, Henry attests to ‘the genre’s potential for understanding (and helping audiences to understand and feel) the experience and psychology of rape and responses to rape, from vulnerability and desubjectification to rage and catharsis’ (p. 14). Although the approaches of the three vary, they come to a consensus that rape-revenge films act as a vehicle to explore feminist and, indeed, reactionary ideas about sexual violence and gender. Heller-Nicholas proposes that ‘[r]ather than dismissing rape-revenge as a single, unified phenomenon, it is time to ask what the significance of these films is—not despite but because of their complexities and contradictions’ (p. 187). Although critical approaches to rape-revenge films vary, there is a general agreement that these are sites in which questions about sexual violence and gender are explicitly explored. Drawing on the insights of several critics, this thesis will take an approach that considers rape-revenge a narrative cycle that typically employs the ‘loose iconography’ of genre (Henry 2014).

Due to this thesis’ focus on texts in English and French, it is important to clarify any differences with regards to cinematic representation. When discussing tendencies or trends, the most immediately obvious culturally specific example arises in New French Extremism. This a categorisation given to films that depict explicit sex and

extreme violence – Karine Chevalier describes them as breaking taboos by screening rape, incest, cannibalism amongst other extremes (2016, p. 414) – and includes early-mid 2000s work by directors such as Gaspar No  , Catherine Breillat and Claire Denis. Although New French Extremism predates the time period explored in this thesis, commentary on these films is helpful in contextualising sexual violence in French film. As Horeck and Tina Kendall point out in their 2011 collection *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, much of this critical work has centred on affect. However, there have been several important interventions regarding rape and representation in French film that are of relevance; films such as *Baise-moi* (2000, dir. by Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh-Thi), *   ma s  ur!* (2001, dir. by Catherine Breillat) and *Irr  versible* (2002, dir. by Gaspar No  ) have elicited particularly lively discussions on sexual violence, gendering and trauma. Commentary on *Baise-moi* has positioned it relative to a masculinist, white French culture: Leila Wimmer argues that it highlights how gendered dominance functions through race and class lines in the ‘economically devastated, socially fractured and multi-ethnic cityscape of post-industrial France’ (2011, p. 133). Linking sexual violence to nationalised political concerns will also be of concern in this thesis, as are ideas about Frenchness in general. The perceived ‘Frenchness’ of the films outside of France has been commented upon. However, as Martin Barker (2011) argues, what constitutes this Frenchness is frequently contradictory: UK viewers of Breillat’s *   ma s  ur!* associated it with difficulty, seriousness, and pretentiousness equally. Scholarship on these films does not exclusively utilise French theoretical material, frequently interweaving Anglo-American work within its analyses. The primary concern here will be contemporary critical discourse on French cinema, as opposed to *specifically* Francophone academic discourses.

It is not only cultural context that is relevant to sexual violence and cinema, but, as Read (2000) suggests, chronological context. In their introduction to *Screening #MeToo*, Lisa Funnell and Ralph Believeau insist that ‘[s]ocial justice initiatives require the development and adoption of new critical lenses’ to analyse oppressive systems’ (2022, p. 1). This project does not necessarily use #MeToo as a critical lens, but rather a cultural-chronological context unto which many of the themes within the texts here are mapped; this context extends to the long decade of the 2010s. When looking at *Elle*

in chapter 2 I, like Projansky, analyse postfeminism's interaction with the text. Jessalynn Keller and Maureen Ryan (2014) suggest postfeminism may now fall short as a means to analyse media, having receded as a cultural context due to feminism's increased popularity and visibility. However, Gill (2016) asserts that 'postfeminist sensibility' is still a potent force. She argues for a 'complicated but realistic understanding of the way that multiple and contradictory ideas can co-exist at the same moment' (2016, p. 622). The ubiquity of feminist media products does not necessarily mean postfeminist sensibility has retreated; in fact, many of these products hold postfeminist conceits within them.

When thinking 2010s, #MeToo and film, we must think through production as well as narrative. Rebecca Harrison (2018) writes of the problems inherent to engaging with cinema made with the involvement of abusive men. She argues that on one hand 'we denounce the film industry for failing to act, and on the other, we continue to circulate and legitimise the work of abusive men in academic and exhibition spaces, as if they are not all connected'. Dolores McElroy (2020) builds on this point in her discussion of films about men's abuse of women in Hollywood, writing that 'the ever-inventive industry has been ingenious in learning how to exploit even its sins'. When considering the depiction of abuse within film and entertainment industries in this thesis, it is also essential to consider their production contexts: their representative features constitute only one part of the story.

Several scholars have also identified #MeToo as providing fruitful analytic context for interrogations and re-appraisals of films that feature sexual and gender-based violence. The idea of re-interrogation is significant when considering this project's analysis of pre-2017 text. Using #MeToo as a context allows for the thinking through of key issues like belief in a historicised manner. Belief, unsurprisingly, is narratively crucial in contemporary sexual violence media and the scholarship that surrounds it. In her appraisal of *The Invisible Man* (2020, dir. Leigh Wannell), Michelle Kay-Hansen posits that when characters 'refuse to believe her [the victim-survivor protagonist], the audience is her collective community, longing for her restorative and transformative justice' (2022, p. 219). This instructs a wider argument that narratives about men's violence against women, when focalised through a victim-survivor, offer potentials for engendering belief. Problematic ideas about believability

can, in fact, be challenged in texts where women are not believed; the misogynistic currents that underpin these ideas can be exposed through technical, formal, and narrative choices that foreground victim-survivor perspective and voice. Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) use ‘#MeToo media’ to characterise the cultural products that respond directly to the moment – in this thesis, I use #MeToo-adjacent film and #MeToo literature for similar products. Like me, Banet-Weiser and Higgins identify *Bombshell*, *The Assistant* and *Promising Young Woman* as #MeToo films par excellence. They argue that while *Bombshell* and *Promising Young Woman* capitalise on the ‘hot topic’ of sexual violence in the #MeToo moment, *The Assistant* instead reflects the too frequent futility of speaking out in patriarchal contexts – it is a representation of ‘what makes believability “work” in the first place’ (Banet-Weiser and Higgins 2023, p. 75). As indicated here, then, work that directly responds to the films in this thesis and to #MeToo media will be used alongside scholarship that circulates sexual violence on screen more widely.

#### Literature and sexual violence

There has thus far been less scholarship that focuses on what I term ‘#MeToo fiction’. The editors of *#MeToo and Literary Studies* note that #MeToo has inspired work ‘not only in memoir but also in poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, graphic narrative, and writing for stage and screen’ (Holland and Hewett 2022, p. 16). Though expansive in its focus on re-readings, critical practice, and pedagogy, the volume does not feature work on fiction *about* #MeToo. Even more so than in film, the literary scholarship has focused on re-interrogations of older texts with the ‘new’ context of #MeToo in mind, as well as on memoir; this is particularly true in the English language context. The publication of *Le consentement* and *La familia grande* have inspired rich scholarship on sexual violence in contemporary French literature. They might well be considered #MeToo literature, but do not fall within this thesis’ boundaries of #MeToo fiction. They are nevertheless important to this work as textual attempts to break the silence, and thus that scholarship is not insignificant here. Generally, a great deal of the critical attention paid to women-authored narratives about sexual violence has come from studies that consider memoirs (Gilmore 2023; Serisier 2018; Francisco 1999); much

of this work on speaking out is appropriate here. Recent work on sexual violence in French literature – including analyses of recent texts by Leïla Slimani and Édouard Louis, but also re-interrogations of older works by Desportes – has incorporated the work of French poststructuralists, feminists and sociologists like Luce Irigaray, Christine Delphy, and Pierre Bourdieu as well as American scholars such as Judith Butler and Catharine Mackinnon (Mueller 2020; Erquicia 2018; Vachon 2017). In her 2007 article on Virginie Lou's *Éloge* and Héléne Duffau's *Trauma*, Kathryn Robson points out that due to the 'remarkably few attempts to theorize rape in French feminist thought since the late 1970s', it is often necessary to appropriate Anglo-American theory for French literary examples (p. 55).

From Ovid's Philomela, to Lucrece and Lavinia in Shakespeare, to Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, instances of sexual violence against women in literature – and, of course, resulting trauma – have traditionally been authored by men, and rape frequently used as a narrative event that symbolises other social issues. This thesis will move away from examination of representations in the 'masculinist literary tradition' (Balla 2002, p. 534) to largely contemporary women-authored and centred works, exploring how these resist or reify dominant (and feminist) understandings of sexual violence. As has been suggested similarly in film studies, the fictionalisation of sexual violence runs the risk of eroticising the event, as well as encouraging readers to engage in a form of literary voyeurism, although this has been a criticism typically levelled at male-authored works that ventriloquize women victim-survivors' experience. For feminists reading sexual violence in the contemporary moment, however, the question is no longer 'should we speak about rape?' We cannot avoid the reality that rape is being spoken and written about, thus the question becomes 'how do we speak about rape?' As a number of critics argue (Gunne and Brigley Thompson 2009; Horeck 2004; Higgins and Silver 1991) representations of sexual violence in literature play a key role in the construction of gender identity and what we might read as sexual difference; Horeck clarifies this most succinctly, proposing that 'questions are posed about masculine and feminine identity, sexuality and sexual difference and the origins of culture' (p. 9).

Much of the scholarly work that considers representations of sexual violence in literature employs theoretical work on the body that is not *necessarily* about rape,

but is appropriated to analyse corporeal and gendered experiences, thus outlining some of the key trends in this area is appropriate here. How the 'female image', relative to sexuality, is constructed in women-authored texts that feature sexual violence is significant in literature as well as film. Engagements with the body (across gendered boundaries) are of concern due to sexual violence's acute corporeality. With regards to French literature primarily, Shirley Jordan argues that '[n]ew women's writing in France persistently engages us in the meticulous observation of bodies' (2006, p. 8), with similar contentions made by Diana Holmes and Nicole Fayard in their work on authors like Desportes and Catherine Millet (Holmes 2004; Fayard 2006). These commentaries rely heavily on work by French writers like H  l  ne Cixous and Irigaray, examining how bodily encounters are weaved intricately into textual form, creating a feminine 'sexual body writing' (Jordan 2006). Virginie Sauzon speaks relatedly of French women's writing on sexuality, arguing that 'l'  criture de la sexualit  , chez Desportes, est avant tout le r  cit de l'exp  rience des rapports de domination entre hommes et femmes' [Desportes's writing on sexuality is above all an account of the experience of relations of dominance between men and women] (2012, para 2). For writers like Desportes and Lamarche, this sexuality writing incurs the depiction of sexual violence.

It seems impossible to discuss feminine writing, especially in a French context, without mentioning Cixous. Her 1975 conceptualisation of *l'  criture feminine*, originally conceptualised in the essay 'Laugh of the Medusa', explores the idea of a writing inscribed with an explicit femininity as opposed to the markedly masculine authorial tradition: 'a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated' (Cixous 1976, p. 879). When considering sexual violence as a site through which the repression of women has similarly been perpetuated, it seems appropriate to, like Wittig, make connections between these sites of repression. It is difficult to definitively quantify the precise features of this writing according to Cixous, but perhaps one of the crucial facilities is allowing women a 'return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her' (p. 880). In this sense, women authored and centred narratives might perform a reclamatory function, re-asserting bodily autonomy that might be compromised through experiencing sexual violence. Cixous's treatise now reads as somewhat out-dated, particularly in her contestation

that there had been very few examples of writing inscribed with femininity. However, it can be employed as something of a foundational work, helpful in facilitating analysis of the links between an explicitly ‘feminine’ writing (of the body) and representations of sexual violence.

Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject has also been frequently employed in work on violence and trauma in women’s writing. Defined in its most basic sense, it is not ‘lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order’ (Kristeva 1986, p. 4). Abjection, in the Kristevan sense, finds its initial iteration in the moment of separation from the mother, this suggesting a pervasively gendered character. The relationship of the abject to women’s embodiment is related, but not identical, to the process of misogynistic objectification – however, where the processes of objectification positions one within ‘the fragile texture of the desire for meaning’, abjection conversely draws one to a place where meaning collapses; in which there is a “something” that I do not recognize as thing’ (p.2). In her analysis of German author Inka Parei’s novel *Die Schattenboxerin*, Elaine Martin argues that rape ‘not only shatters the integrity of the victim’s physical boundaries, it also shatters the integrity of the ego’s boundary and along with it the notion of a coherent identity’ (2015, p. 122), positioning it as necessarily abject. It is possible then to view instances of sexual violence as potential processes of abjection – that is, a disturbing of corporeal boundaries and, frequently, a compromising of subjectivity that commits a fundamental assault on identity (primarily that of the victim-survivor).

Moving from a notion which views the victim-survivor as made abject through violation, it seems necessary to briefly comment upon the process through which they might reclaim their status as abject, themselves becoming a disturber of boundaries and exposé of the fragilities of the ‘Law’ of gender. In what appears to be a similar reclamation of the ‘violent woman’ in rape-revenge films, Liam Murray Bell et al. (2011) posit that women’s violence in narratives about rape function to subvert binarised ideas about gender and victimhood. While following Butler in making clear that this violence is ‘not intended to ‘turn the tables’ or seek revenge against men, but rather to complicate the way violence is viewed’ (p. 55), they posit that instead a ‘reclaimed’ violence works to problematise essentialist ideas about gender and violence, proposing denaturalising potentials. Echoing Sharon Marcus’s suggestion

that victim-survivors might flip the script, we might see texts that highlight this as making attempts to undercut normative social scripts about sexual violence. Murray Bell et al. certainly see the potentials for such reclamations – particularly by women authors – to depart from a literary tradition and cultural heritage that has often cast ‘women as passive and powerless victims of sexualised violence’, instead laying out the possibilities that a transgression and subversion of patriarchal discourses ultimately allow women to ‘seek a subjectivity of their own’ (p. 67). In suggesting how one might perform a feminist reading of such texts, the authors propose that contextualisation is key. In narratives that ‘represent women as perpetrators of violence because of social circumstance’, analysis must be ‘located within the dominant patriarchal discourses of the periods in which the works were written’ (p. 56). This harks back to Read’s assertion that rape-revenge films must be given historicised readings in order to fully ascertain which feminist (or otherwise) discourses are being articulated.

Although it may be possible to synthesise analytical approaches to representations of sexual violence across literature and film, Sorcha Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson contend that focusing on representations of sexual violence in literature demands particularly close attention, ‘because the use of language in the courtroom, the media and the literary text has masked the pervasiveness of sexual violence’ (2009, p. 4). This follows Higgins and Silver’s earlier assertion that it is frequently the gaps in literary representations that speak most loudly, gaps and absences that can be ‘both product and source of textual anxiety, contradiction or censorship’ (1991, p. 3). Ensuring that these gaps and absences are read through will be central to this thesis; literary silences can also be read in their relationship to the question of ‘who speaks?’ The concept of silencing is particularly significant when considering the context of #MeToo. For commentators like Higgins and Silver, as well as Gunne and Brigley Thompson, examining the use of subjectivity and voice – who is afforded it and who is precluded – is critical in the task of unravelling and demystifying narratives about sexual violence. Often, silences can be just as suggestive as explicit depictions; feminist reading in this respect ‘involves listening not only to who speaks and in what circumstances, but who does not speak and why’ (Higgins and Silver, p. 3).

Literary narratives about sexual violence ultimately have a silence-breaking power. Beyond this, they may exist – consciously or otherwise – within the sphere of narrative activism. In her exploration of #MeToo and life writing, Leigh Gilmore proposes ‘survivor reading’, which she defines as ‘a feminist critical practice grounded in ethical listening and informed by the transformational power of storytelling by and about survivors’ (2023, p. 15). For Gilmore, reading as survivor is an empathetic exercise: sympathy and care afforded to literary characters can be extended to real victim-survivors. In this sense, survivor reading reflects the identification encouraged by the phrase ‘me too’. There is also the potential to engender belief in a climate where it, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) argue, is marked by futility. Gilmore writes that ‘[t]hey [readers] can see survivors as credible rather than unreliable by default. They can attend to the edges of the frame, to who is pushed out, rendered unheard’ (2023, p. 57); stories about sexual violence can work *for* collective credibility by showing diverse characters and experiences, and affording readers insight into these experiences (ibid. p. 64).

Drawing attention to the difficulty of writing narratives about sexual violence that avoid the ‘second violation’ graphic representations often entail, Gunne and Brigley Thompson write that the challenge of a subversive text relies upon a skilful manoeuvring around ‘the reductive and negative myths about sexual violence’ (p. 7). Reading through these myths, as well as subversions of the rape script(s), will comprise a crucial component of the approaches to texts here. Unravelling engagements with rape myths in the texts requires sensitivity. As Carine Mardorossian points out in her discussion of J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, ‘[c]ritical analysis often falters in the face of extreme violence or acute suffering. The victim’s logic assumes an “authority of experience” in light of which further analytical considerations seem of bad taste, ill-placed, and unwanted’ (2011, p. 74). What Mardorossian is suggesting here is that the victim-survivor of the text does not (or should not) necessarily have the last word in their perception of events. The idea that analysis falters in the face of suffering likewise reflects the concept that textual engagement with sexual violence is frequently characterised by silences and gaps (Higgins and Silver 1993). It also reflects Walker’s (1997) traumatic paradox: that the way the traumatic experience is narrated does not square neatly with legal notions of credibility. Deborah Horvitz (2000), in her

study on sexual violence in American women's fiction, describes the specific challenges that arise when women victim-survivors' trauma narration intersects with literary narrative. She asks how 'such a lost, undefinable state of narrative existence be narratively represented'; one of her proposals is to interrogate how the protagonists project 'intrapsychic processes' onto the materialist world, understanding that, for traumatised subjects, internal/external boundaries are often blurred and fragmented (2000, pp. 4-5). Examinations of the speech, actions and memories of victim-survivors diegetically must be considered a part of the textual construction itself, as part of its reflection on sexual violence, trauma and narration. If, for example, they are to rearticulate a rape myth in response to violence committed against them, or make pronouncements that 'naturalise' sexual violence, it is important to unravel these. While this must be done sensitively and responsibly, it is not the case that we must accept any one perspective within texts as the definitive one. This perhaps squares uncomfortably with the assertion 'believe women' that has become a given for many feminists, but plays a decisive role in feminist textual analysis.

Horeck likewise identifies 'the demand that feminism – in literature, as in life – must not risk upsetting a victimized woman' (2004, p. 120). Mardorossian contends that rather than viewing complex victim-survivor responses to sexual violence as an analytical 'black hole', we might use contradictions and complexity as an opportunity to 'overhaul normative approaches to rape, justice, and human relationships' (p. 74). In her essay "On Not Being A Victim", Mary Gaitskill weighs up a complex teenage experience that she considers in some respects acquaintance rape, but that she frequently found herself exaggerating the violence of post-event. She suggests that the exaggeration of violence was not intended to elicit sympathy or revenge, 'but in service of what I felt to be the metaphorical truth' (1994, p. 36). Similarly, Gavey draws attention to the complexity of these experiences in *Just Sex*, noting that 'accounts of unwanted sexual experiences highlight the complexity of embodied subjectivity as a site of contradictory thoughts, feelings, and desires' (p. 133). Examinations of texts where victim-survivors have difficult and often contradictory reactions to sexual violence – including compromised remembering or exaggeration – should be approached in a manner that attempts to uncover this 'metaphorical truth'. As scholars

like Walker (2004) and Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) have pointed out, legalistic concepts of truth and credibility often rely on patriarchal standards of evidence.

Erin Spampinato convincingly critiques ‘adjudicative criticism’, that is ‘any reading of the text that focuses on the question of whether rape has occurred’ (2021, p. 128). Spampinato argues that these types of readings have dominated literary criticism and operate within a masculinist legal framework, even when asserting that rape did narratively occur. Adjudicative readings often mean we ‘forget about the nonlegal ramifications of rape, such as whether the act constitutes a moral crime, how society might redress the harms of rape, or how we might distinguish between the power dynamics of consensual or coercive sex’ (p. 148). There is a link here to Ehrlich’s work, with adjudicative rape scripts working similarly on hegemonic gender assumptions about women’s passivity. Not attempting to adjudicate on the truth of narratives is important here: instead, reading what they say about belief, and the position of victim-survivors and perpetrators, within a rape supportive culture is key. Moving away from legalistic notions has clear resonance with the #MeToo moment. Deborah Tuerkheimer (2019) describes the ‘informal reporting channels’ that characterised how many #MeToo-adjacent testimonies were shared. The use of these extralegal channels suggests a baked-in understanding that the police and courts are unable to sufficiently deal with instances of sexual violence. In this sense, it is significant that feminist critics post-#MeToo not slip into legalistic readings of sexual violence. Like Gilmore (2023) posits, we should instead look to narratives as opening up new possibilities for victim-survivor experience and belief.

Gaitskill fundamentally rejects the idea that fictional representations of sexual violence are ‘supposed to function as instruction manuals’ (p. 43). It does not follow that if we are confronted by a victim-survivor that responds to sexual violence in a challenging or ‘un-feminist’ way – like we see, for example, with *Elle* in chapter 2 and *Boy Parts* in chapter 5 – that the text is in and of itself anti-survivor or misogynist. In their article ‘Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation’, Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray argue that in ‘real life’, ‘a nonbifurcating ontology of experience and theory requires us to relinquish the idea that in reporting our experiences we are merely reporting internal events without interpretation’ (1993, p. 284). In order to understand victim-survivor responses to sexual violence textually, the notion that internal,

symbolic processes inform perceptions of events must be taken seriously as we try to make sense of characters' actions. A difficulty arises here when it comes to the question of who acts as an interlocutor of this speech and who decides upon its ultimate truth. Undertaking 'the role of the absolver, interpreter, and/or judge' might ultimately work to strip 'the survivor of her authority and agency' (p. 280). Brigley Thompson points out in an article on Alice Walker and Edwidge Danticat that in media representations of victim-survivors 'too often the exigencies of rape victims are ignored, because the media makes them simple stereotypes, which are dangerous too because they dismiss these women's voices', whereas fiction frequently creates more nuanced potentials for the representation of victim-survivors (2016, p. 75). Voice is therefore key when exploring women-authored and centred texts. Work on survivor narratives and speech is undoubtedly a key component in contemporary feminist discourses, thus any interrogation of textual discourses must take this into account. With this in mind, looking at various interlocutors within the texts and the positions of authority they occupy is of crucial importance, asking how this informs our perceptions of 'truth' when victim-survivors speak out about sexual violence.

That memoir has been a key literary medium through which victim-survivors have spoken insists it is afforded some critical attention here. Serisier asserts that personal stories perform a 'foundational role' in feminist responses to sexual violence (2018, p.4). From the consciousness raising groups of the 1970s to the campus 'speak-outs' of the 1990s, personal narratives have occupied centre stage in the feminist fight against sexual violence. In looking to the demographic of writers that produce 'rape memoirs', Serisier points out that they are overwhelmingly authored by heterosexual and cisgender university-educated white women from the United States. There is a clear link here to the relationship between sexual violence and marginality as detailed in the previous section, a connection between 'believability' and the ability to speak and, crucially, be heard (or, in this case, read). Tara Roeder insists that victim-survivor narratives have potential value in this respect, diversifying stories told and 'expanding narrowly conceived social constructions of what rape victims "are like."' (2015, p. 29). Despite Roeder's specific focus, like Serisier, on memoir, one can easily see how – as Gilmore (2023) argues – that fiction might offer similar diversifying potentials.

Connected to Serisier's work on speaking out and narrative is her work on the figure of the public survivor. Many of the primary texts in this thesis engage the concept of the public survivor, both within their narratives and in their authorship. Serisier defines the phrase public survivor as:

denoting someone who constructs a recognised persona as a survivor of sexual violence through speaking publicly about their experiences and is granted, at least to some extent, the authority to speak as an expert on sexual and gendered violence on that basis (2023b, p. 205).

The notion of authority has particular resonance with regards to the authors here who might be considered public survivors – what does this positioning mean for the reception of their fictional works? Are these texts granted a particular authority or positioned as uniquely able to speak about, for example, the #MeToo moment? The identity of the public survivor is highly fraught, bringing with it complexities. The burden of representation is a central problematic. As Serisier puts it, the 'representative role that public survivors are asked to play, speaking not only for themselves but as an archetypal figure, able to speak for "survivors"' (2023b, p. 207). That one individual voice should be privileged over others has clear negative implications for a collectivised feminist politics. The relationship between the public survivor and #MeToo is important, too, when thinking through these tensions. Kay argues that, with respect to #MeToo, 'contemporary media culture has provided a highly ambivalent communicative terrain through which to "speak out" about such violence, abuse and trauma' (2023, p. 194). Keeping this in mind will be essential when exploring the rendering of individual victim-survivor speech, and who it is assumed to represent. As Kay notes, it is 'communicative injustice' (2020) that sets the stage for these imbalances in voice, rather than the behaviour of individual victim-survivors themselves. Communicative injustice dictates that 'the conditions of possibility for meaningful voice are so impoverished' (Kay 2020, p. 7). The ability to collectively speak and act in an impactful way is limited by these mediatised circuits of communicative injustice.

Because this thesis is concerned with the cultural contexts in which fictional texts exist, going beyond purely narrative confines is essential. In this respect, paratexts will be key to the analysis of the primary texts' relationship to #MeToo and the contemporary moment. Paratexts were famously described by Gérard Genette as the 'threshold' between text and the world beyond (1991, p. 261). Paratexts, as sum of peritext and epitext, create meaning beyond narrative, and are particularly important when considering how the examples here are positioned proximate to cultural and temporal moments. Epitexts have a specific resonance for both the films and books here. Epitexts, as Genette specifies, are the 'sets of practices and discourses' that circulate the text beyond its physical threshold; typically, reviews, interviews, journal articles (1991, p. 262). Along with peritexts – details such as the texts title, author, blurb, prefaces and other exterior content – epitexts form part of the ecosystem that insists the work here be characterised as #MeToo-adjacent. Although this analysis will be particularly key for the literary examples, it also has relevance for the construction of cinematic texts.

This thesis is ultimately concerned with the ways in which representations of sexual violence in literature and film speak to the contemporary discourses of our post-#MeToo moment. In order to undertake feminist readings of the texts in question and, in turn, unravel their representational politics taking frequently contradictory perspectives on representation and violence into account will be crucial. Of central concern will be victim-survivor and perpetrator voice within the texts, with critical attention also paid to literary silences and gaps, formal experimentation, as well as rape myths. The bringing together of the *real* and representational features of sexual violence will be integral in informing the subsequent textual analyses here, integrating elements of psychoanalytic, sociocultural and historicised approaches.

This literature review has introduced critical perspectives that provide the theoretical underpinnings to this thesis. The first two sections deal with perspectives on sexual violence and marginality that might (or not) be mobilised within fictional representations. The last section has approached work on these representations more directly, a great deal of which will inform my own approaches to texts within the thesis. Ultimately, the work outlined here will form the basis of the representational analysis carried out within the thesis. Although it is important to state that this thesis' focus is

explicitly contemporary, the more dated texts will be drawn upon where appropriate but always fully contextualised. The next chapter of the thesis will move to analysis, exploring examples of rape-revenge films that exist pre-#MeToo, as part of a longer cultural moment with regards to sexual violence.

## **Chapter 2: Contemporary rape-revenge films and feminism**

### **Anticipating #MeToo? Rape-revenge in 2016 and 2017**

This chapter explores three films which pre-date #MeToo as hashtag, but are released in a moment where feminism, as Banet-Weiser (2018) describes, has unprecedented popularity. This popular feminism sets the stage for what was made of #MeToo in the media, how it materially functioned and how it was received. The discursive features that eventually characterised #MeToo as moment had their genesis before Milano's tweet and the public disclosures against Weinstein; pre-existing feminist (and 'mainstream') discourses on sexual violence, in this sense, function as its rhizomatic undercurrent. Consequently, *Elle* (2016, dir. Paul Verhoeven), *Revenge* (2017, dir. Coralie Fargeat) and *M.F.A* (2017, dir. Natalia Leite) exist in the same popular feminist moment as #MeToo, each exemplifying discourses and, particularly in *Elle's* case, anticipating the backlash that came to be associated with it. They are discursively oriented towards a 2010s characterised by cultural engagement with sexual violence and narrative. Understanding how each film is oriented towards feminism, then, is crucial to understanding how they operate within this context.

The films in this chapter are distinct within this thesis in that they are especially graphic, with each containing a rape scene that operates as a narrative catalyst. Unlike many of the other texts in this thesis, speaking out in and of itself is not the central conceit around which the drama circulates. The corporeal experience of rape, as well as its psychic effects on those who experience it, take narrative precedence. In considering what comes after rape for victim-survivors, sexual violence is not the only graphic violence present in the films; all three follow the rape-revenge structure (to varying degrees of faithfulness), thus are also concerned with violence as vengeance. That rape-revenge remains a prominent narrative structure in films about sexual violence is notable; revenge as a means through which to seek extralegal redress suggests something important about justice in the long #MeToo moment. As Tuerkheimer (2019) argues, extralegal conceptualisations of justice become discursively prominent throughout #MeToo. These films have been selected due to their release proximity – all three closely pre-date October 2017 – their evocation of a classic rape-revenge structure, and for their portrayals of feminism; each engages with the idea that feminism is unprecedentedly popular, through a generic form that has typically had complex relationships with it. If Americanness is a potent culturing force in the long #MeToo moment, where does France fit in? France's relative absence in #MeToo-adjacent films of the next chapter draws up questions about where it is located pre-Milano. How do the three films here, bound by both generic and thematic similarity, negotiate the terrain of sexual violence, and of contemporary feminist discourse, in ways that are French and American? The chapter begins with the chronologically earliest film, Paul Verhoeven's *Elle*. If classic rape-revenge films typically depict sexual violence *as* violence – while also sexual spectacle – *Elle* shows something slightly messier. This messiness speaks to the complexity of contemporary discourses surrounding sexual violence in France. In this respect, *Elle* pre-empts the 100-women tribune, suggesting ambiguity when it comes to victimhood and consent. Following *Elle*, *Revenge* and *M.F.A* will be considered together. Both woman-directed and released in 2017, one French and one American, the films offer potentials for reading comparatively, as well as with and against *Elle's* politics. They are interventions into the genre that manage expectations about gender and sexual violence through an explicitly feminist lens – this framework's political consistency

notwithstanding. If, as the 100-women tribune suggests, American-dominated discourses leave little room for ambiguity, where does this leave international productions like *Elle*? What happens with an ostensibly feminist Europudding text like *Revenge* in comparison to the similarly feminist but American *M.F.A*? Here, I will argue that the stories these films tell about sexual violence, feminism, and cultural difference reflect those that dominated #MeToo. That they predate the hashtag is instructive of #MeToo's temporal flexibility, of a longer moment that stretches beyond October 2017.

### **Introducing *Elle* and locating France**

Rape-revenge films retain their position as a key site through which sexual narratives are represented, consistently regenerating and moulding themselves to reflect contemporary concerns. Not every rape-revenge release of the years surrounding #MeToo, however, has been quite resolute in its feminism: *Elle* is decidedly more ambivalent. Verhoeven is not widely renowned for his feminist credentials. Sharon Stone recounts in her memoir that he misled her regarding the 'leg-crossing' scene in *Basic Instinct* (Ntim 2021), and films like *Showgirls* (1995)<sup>11</sup> have been derided for their near-cartoonish misogyny. *Elle* has, however, been appraised in contradictory ways: feminist, post-feminist, and misogynistic 'full-on sexploitation shtick' (Bidisha 2016). It is an adaptation of *Oh...*, Philippe Dijan's 2012 Prix Interallié winning novel and the source text, like the film, is male-authored.<sup>12</sup> The novel itself will not be explored in this thesis but its framing potentials require brief consideration – does Huppert's characterisation of the protagonist differ from who she is in the novel, for example? The story follows Michèle (Isabelle Huppert), the CEO of a male-dominated

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<sup>11</sup> *Showgirls* has been subject to re-appraisals over the past decade that view it through the lens of camp.

<sup>12</sup> In an interview about the book, Dijan says that he was warned 'les féministes risquent de me tomber dessus' [the feminists might come down on me] (Kaprièlian 2012). He suggests that being a man writing such a contentious story comes with a cost, and may attract the ire of feminists. Here, feminism is already positioned as a site of hostility.

video games company, divorced from Richard (Charles Berling) and mother to useless, soon-to-be dad Vincent (Jonas Bloquet). She is the daughter of a mass murderer; her father committed a series of gruesome murders in their neighbourhood when she was a child. She is raped in her home in the film's opening scene and develops an obsession with uncovering her attacker, who turns out to be neighbour Patrick (Laurent Lafitte), a pre-existing object of attraction. Like the revisionist texts described by Henry (2014), *Elle* is a generic hybrid, merging the classic narrative features of rape-revenge with film noir. This genre mixing articulates a specific type of (post)feminist protagonist: the victim-avenger detective-cum-femme fatale. Huppert's casting is particularly significant – she brings with her a history that is tied to both character type and to nationality, her Frenchness. As an actor, 'she is known for being enigmatic, mysterious, inaccessible, and for possessing a talent to balance contradictory impulses simultaneously' (Taylor 2022, p. 199); she is the 'icy French sophisticate' (ibid. p. 209), intellectual and complex. The film and the media that surrounded it circulate a particular idea about its Frenchness, too, proposing an amorality when it comes to sex and violence that sets up its engagements with feminism. *Elle*'s engagement with feminist politics through its representation of sexual violence is not straightforward, with outright hostility shading into an ambivalence that, at points, becomes an endorsement of feminist ideas. This ambivalence, as I will explore, is characteristic of *Elle* as film, informing its complex narrative and paratextual politics.

Many of *Elle*'s reviews highlight the necessity of Huppert to the film; Haskell posits that it would be 'unthinkable without Huppert and her hybridized-French milieu' (2016, p. 40), with Johanna Fateman (2016) emphasising that 'Verhoeven was very lucky to cast the superlative French actress'. However, Verhoeven did not initially have Huppert in mind for the role, originally planning to shoot the film in the United States with an American star. David Birke's script is indicative of this initial trajectory.<sup>13</sup> Despite this, the role was turned down by several American actors; apparently, 'no American actress would take on such an amoral movie' and 'turned it down for reasons that are so foreign' (Lee 2016). *Elle* is immediately positioned oppositionally to the values of American cinema, despite Verhoeven's notoriety in the

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<sup>13</sup> Birke wrote the script in English and Verhoeven notes that it was initially to be set in Boston (Clarac 2015).

U.S centring on his involvement with erotic offerings like *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Showgirls* (1995). Ginette Vincendeau (2017) notes that the actors' rejection of the role is something Verhoeven 'presents as typical of American "puritanism" contrasting it with French "freedom of spirit" and Huppert's "courage", a flattering vision lapped up by French critics as another manifestation of the French exception'. There is a suggestion that *Elle* exists in a cultural moment that insists upon a particular morality towards sexual violence. That morality is wrapped up in an Americanness that cowers away from controversy and demands straightforward narratives about good and bad sex. Moral complexity, for Verhoeven, stands alongside narrative complexity. Americanness is seen to preclude experimentation across all grounds, to promote uncomplicated stories. Despite the letter's publication two years after the film's release, the film anticipates the discourse of the 100-women tribune. When the authors worry that a 'frenzy for sending the "pigs" to the slaughterhouse, far from helping women empower themselves, actually serves the interests of the enemies of sexual freedom, the religious extremists, the reactionaries', they articulate concerns akin to Verhoeven's regarding American sexual repression (this always opposed to French libertarianism). The valorisation of Ruwen Ogien's *liberté d'offenser* in art – tied to their conceptualisation of *liberté d'importuner* – is correlate to *Elle*'s artistic project. The ability to make such art, according to both the writers of the tribune and to Verhoeven and his team, is threatened by an American cultural imperialism characterised by neo-puritan attitudes.

### **Film noir and the rape scene**

If *Elle* is morally and narratively complex, reviewers also consistently comment on its generic complexity, characterising it as a rape-revenge with elements of film noir, satire, and black comedy (see Bradshaw 2016; Brooks 2016; Kohn 2016; Stevens 2016). It invokes the classic rape-revenge narrative structure – its protagonist is raped, she hunts for the rapist – but, in the revisionist mode, hybridises with other genres to create and subvert competing sets of expectations. Like both *Revenge* and *M.F.A* that will be explored below, it is deeply intertextual, drawing on cinematic texts, literature and video games. Beyond rape-revenge, *Elle* is, as Gutiérrez-Martínez and Pedro

argue, ‘situated within the trend of French-based bourgeois noirs and neo-noirs’ (2020, p. 290). *Elle* takes place in Paris, primarily in the shadows of Michèle’s home and quiet neighbourhood. The first scene is characteristic of the colour palette throughout, the first visual a partially shaded grey cat, his green eyes shining, passively watching something off screen (fig 2.1). His name is Marty, and he is the scene’s Greek chorus. The film opens with the sounds of a struggle: there are crashes of glass and furniture, grunts, and screams, although it is not immediately clear that rape is taking place. A sensorial disorientation, frequently linked to the traumatic experience, is foregrounded. After resting a moment on the cat, the camera pans to reveal what he sees: Michèle lies immobile under a masked man in a black PVC suit, as he thrusts before standing to wipe his penis. Marty, like us, has failed to act. He slinks off nonplussed. The screen is split in two, with this violent tableau – observed through a doorway, foregrounding the film’s preoccupation with voyeurism – illuminated on the left, the other half of the screen almost completely black (fig 2.2). The relationship between darkness and light, their contrasts, is foregrounded in the tradition of film noir. The marriage of film noir and rape-revenge is something of a natural pairing, with Samantha Lindop asserting that the rape-revenge narrative ‘remains central to postmillennial noir’ (2015, p. 56). Women, their sexual (dis)empowerment, and (sexualised) vengeance play key roles across both. The rape taking place in the illuminated section suggests that, here, sexual violence is not an uncomplicated darkness. Instead, it enlightens Michèle to sexual desires and relationships anew.



**Figure 2.1** Michèle’s cat, Marty, passively observes her rape



**Figure 2.2** A scene of two halves, with Patrick's rape of Michèle illuminated

### **Watching Huppert: femme fatale or victim-avenger?**

*Elle* merges classic rape-revenge narrative features with noir, but it is difficult to characterise Michèle straightforwardly as victim-avenger or femme fatale. Initially, her age sets her apart from the traditional victim-avenger. She eschews identification with victimhood, telling friends at a champagne dinner 'I guess I was raped' but 'it's over, it doesn't need talking about any more'. She is sarcastic when talking about the experience, asking an employee 'didn't you hear I was the victim of a traumatic experience?' with an ironic eyeroll. Homer Pettey reads this as a critique of 'victimhood' discourse, noting that 'her ability to overcome without victimizing herself provides a socio-political lesson for the dis-abled logic of contemporary feminism' (2019, p. 229). Considering the film's affinity with postfeminist politics (Huppert herself describes Michèle as a 'postfeminist character building her own behaviour and space' (Verhoeven and Huppert 2016)), Pettey's approximation of the film seems a reasonable one. Read's (2000) argument, that rape-revenge narratives must always be read historically and as response to contemporary feminist discourse, is prudent here. Michèle's distancing assertions, however, may also be an attempt to gauge the reaction of those she tells, to ascertain if they might be responsible for the rape. She does not 'overcome' as simply as Pettey's assertion suggests. Significantly,

though, she makes little effort to avenge her rape. This is not to say that she pays no attention to the rapist's identity – she is investigatory from the start – but that she never actually attempts revenge. On only one occasion is she violent towards him, when he enters her home and commences a second attack, pushing her to the floor and removing her underwear. While struggling, she grabs a pair of scissors and stabs him through the palm. There is a reversal of the rape here; Michèle wields the phallic instrument, puncturing a hole in the offending hand. She then un.masks him, a symbolic castration of his power, revealing Patrick. Patrick *is* eventually killed, and the *lex talionis* fulfilled, but by Michèle's son. In this sense, *Elle* invokes a classic rape-revenge trope, in which a man avenges the rape of a woman family member.<sup>14</sup>

The transformation typically undergone by the classic victim-avenger, from androgynous asexuality to a sexualised hyper-femininity (Clover 1992), is also absent. Michèle remains oriented towards femininity and sexuality throughout. Although she is not an archetypal representation, she still undertakes the victim-avenger's teleological purpose, exemplifying a specific (post)feminist subject relative to the contemporary cultural moment: an independent, successful woman. Several critics have characterised her as a femme fatale, whereas Gutiérrez-Martínez and Pedro assert that her

character represents and encapsulates particular features of noir's *two* [emphasis added] most archetypal characters: male detectives and femme fatales. She stands out as a new type of woman, not only capable of economic self-sufficiency but also of maintaining her leading role among family, friends and employees (2020, p. 296).

The femme fatale figure occupies a structuring position within film noir and can be understood through both psychoanalytical and historicised processes. Her representations evolve alongside changing socio-political contexts and typify both cultural norms and, crucially, men's anxieties about feminism. Lindop asserts that the power of the contemporary femme fatale lies in her position as 'the strong, sexually

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<sup>14</sup> Read (2000) identifies the avenging of a woman's rape by a male family member as a foundational rape-revenge trope. It is observable in early cinematic narratives like *The Virgin Spring* (1960, dir. Ingmar Bergman), but can be traced even further back to texts like Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*.

assertive woman who strives for wealth, independence, or fame' who therefore poses 'a threat to male domination' (2015, p. 26). A divorced CEO, Michèle engenders these fears on the most basic level. Her role as CEO also immediately recalls neoliberal, postfeminist ideas about gender and success. The film emphasises that her gender marks her in a male-dominated workplace; in a scene where she reviews the team's progress, she is physically enveloped by tens of men who are seated around her on each side. Her very presence incurs disdain from the other workers, who question her suitability for the role due to her background in publishing rather than video game design. When an animated video of her face superimposed onto a character being raped by a monster circulates around the office, a sexualised element to their distaste becomes visible. Their hatred is bound up in both her workplace and sexual power. This speaks to Elisabeth Bronfen's argument that 'one could speak of her [the femme fatale] as a male fantasy, articulating both fascination for the sexually aggressive woman, as well as anxieties about female domination' (2004, p. 106). In this sense, Michèle can be seen as neoliberal femme fatale-cum-girl boss, a figure firmly rooted in her historical moment – a powerful woman resented by the men around her. Perhaps paradoxically, though, while evoking male anxieties, she also assuages some of them: like the resilient postfeminist woman of the 100-women tribunal, she does not let misogynistic treatment define her.

The role of detectives is worthy of further, brief comment. Beyond the generic link with noir, the amateur detective position occupied by Michèle and the viewer draws up comparisons with true crime that are reflected within the film's plot in another sense. A documentary is released about Michèle's father's crimes, initiating renewed public interest in the case and resulting in the re-opening of old wounds. Michèle stands watching the child version of herself on television as they seem to look directly into each other's eyes, both vulnerable, exposed. The question of true crime's ethical problematics bubbles under the surface. If true crime, as Horeck asserts, 'invites viewer judgment on matters of justice' (2019, p. 2), what does justice become and how is it doled out? This question takes on particular pertinence when it comes to evaluating rape-revenge narratives. *Elle*'s narrative functions as a meta-commentary on crime, violence and spectatorship; the film's fictional public watch a depiction of (diegetically) real crimes and we, the *real* viewer, watch a fictionalised depiction of

violence. Additionally, though, it locates the film in a particular historical moment in which documentaries about violence – particularly sexual violence – are culturally prominent: it reflects the ‘21st-century boom in true crime media’ (Horeck 2023, p. 233), the ambiguous representation of its human impact also reflecting some of true crime’s central critiques.

Michèle’s description as a femme fatale of film noir in the American vein seems paradoxically to lie in her – and the film’s – Frenchness. In a 2002 issue of *Positif* dedicated to French women stars, there is an assertion that in French cinema actresses have typically embodied certain roles: the ingénue, the bitch, the femme fatale, the grande dame (Ciment and Tobin, p. 5). Huppert has typically been accorded with the femme fatale and the bitch. Actresses, both within France and in service of the circulation of Frenchness internationally, are expected to conform to certain archetypes throughout their careers both intra and extra-diegetically (Bazgan 2008).<sup>15</sup> It is impossible to conceptualise who Michèle *is* as a character without taking stock of the actor who plays her and her position in French culture; she is indivisible from Huppert and her legacy. There is therefore a preconceived notion about who Michèle is as character: a ‘difficult’ woman, elegant, troubled. In a review of *Elle*, Molly Haskell concludes that ‘there has also been a noticeable hardening of the bitch persona, the ice queen who never melts’ (2016, p. 39). Huppert plays Michèle close to the source character in *Oh*, who is similarly restrained and sarcastic (although first-person perspective grants access to her inner monologue). Michèle’s face retains a calm veneer throughout, a raised eyebrow or eye roll from time-to-time expressing dissatisfaction. It functions as something of a mask, perfectly composed, often with red lips that part to utter her signature ‘oh’s and ‘ah’s. When she bathes after the rape, her face expresses no emotion; it is a blank canvas onto which the viewer can project their own understandings. Judith Butler argues through Emmanuel Levinas that ‘it is the face of the other that demands from us an ethical response’ (2016, p. 205). It is difficult to quantify the response Michèle’s face evokes, and particularly how it allows the viewer to view her as a ‘real’ victim, a violated subject. Is she traumatised or unmoved, emotionless? Huppert’s performance style, the visage as blank canvas,

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<sup>15</sup> Nicoleta Bazgan argues in her PhD thesis that ‘[a]s icons of the nation, French female stars crystallize a certain idea of Frenchness embodied in specific types such as Marianne, the gamine, and the Parisian woman’ (2008, p. 2), communicating these concepts to a global audience.

engenders its own level of ambivalence. In this sense she is not an ‘obvious’ victim, one who outwardly expresses signs of trauma. This works in service of a feminist politics in one sense – showing that there are many ways to respond to sexual violence – but can also be seen as forming part of the film’s implicit critique of ‘victimhood’ politics, positioning Michèle as strong in her stoicism and apparent refusal to succumb to trauma. As the signatories of the 100-women tribune might say, her ‘inner freedom is inviolable’.

### **“Victim feminism” and the 100-women tribune**

Petty argues that *Elle* ‘takes the subject of rape and radically alters conventional, popular, and academic assumptions about woman’s agency, undercutting as it critiques the several waves of feminism’ (2019, p. 211). His referent assumptions here are obviously American. Notwithstanding the use of the problematic waves metaphor to characterise feminist movements, there is the implication that feminism has consistently invoked harmful assumptions about agency. This argument is reflected in the postfeminist and anti-feminist context, in the former by commentators like Élisabeth Badinter (2003) in France and media feminists like Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe in the US, in the latter by reactionary critics like Eugénie Bastié (2018). That feminism has become self-victimising and uncharitable towards personal freedom is also a concern of the 100-women tribune:

Incidents that can affect a woman's body do not necessarily affect her dignity and must not, as difficult as they can be, necessarily make her a perpetual victim. Because we are not reducible to our bodies. Our inner freedom is inviolable. And this freedom that we cherish is not without risks and responsibilities. (2018)

The implicit critique of #MeToo-adjacent discourse contained here is markedly similar to that observable in *Elle* (and Verhoeven’s commentary around it). Petty’s appraisal of Michèle’s ‘ability to overcome without victimizing herself’ (p. 229) illustrates this criticism as it relates to contemporary feminism: that women are weakened by their

association with feminism, and that feminisms' prioritisation of collective political struggle debilitates individual resolve and resilience. This is, of course, not a new allegation – again, Paglia and Roiphe famously levelled these claims throughout the 1990s, as did French feminists like Badinter in the early 2000s – so the specification of 'contemporary' feminism is a striking one. Michèle is a symbolic antithesis to the supposed 'victim-feminist' that, according to its critics, has pervaded the #MeToo moment. Post-rape, she refuses to be the 'perpetual victim' of the 100-women tribunal, vacillating between a glassy, Huppertian stoicism and a sexual desire for Patrick that intensifies when he is revealed to be the rapist. She embodies the quintessential postfeminist subject – beyond her successful career, she is able to end relationships when they no longer serve her but is still desiring of companionship and the security of the heterosexual contract. Huppert emphasises Michèle's uniqueness, purporting that she is a 'new type of woman' (Verhoeven and Huppert 2016). In actual fact, this type of character has haunted sexual violence narratives since the 1980s; as Projansky posits, post 1980 depictions of rape on screen are frequently concerned with turning a 'woman into an active, independent agent—allowing a woman to take control, not play the victim, and hence become postfeminist' (2001, p. 99). Somewhat paradoxically, Michèle's interactions with Patrick undermine this supposedly fierce independence. She pursues him with an intensity that seems at odds with her general character. She coyly rubs his leg under the table at a Christmas dinner, allows herself to be enveloped in his arms during a storm (fig 2.3), and calls him when she gets into a car accident. The latter two incidents allow her to play damsel in distress, undermining her own self-reliance. Here, we see Michèle as the ideal postfeminist subject, always oriented towards heteronormative partnership in a way that exposes the limits of her otherwise autonomy. *Elle* therefore has allegiances with postfeminism, but also with a popular feminist moment which is 'framed by heteronormativity and heterosexuality' (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 15). In this sense, it is not novel or, as Verhoeven might postulate, especially French. The film is rooted in specific feminist and postfeminist contexts that are linked with the US – it is not merely a backlash to an implicitly American feminism.



**Figure 2.3 Patrick takes Michèle in his arms as a damsel in distress**

Michèle's mother is also presented through her sexuality: she is in a relationship with a much younger man who she pays for sex and speaks candidly about her sexual life. This, however, is presented as something of an embarrassment – it shames Michèle, who berates and humiliates her for her 'obnoxiousness' at a dinner party. This provides a challenge to the idea that *Elle's* world and, in turn, French culture is completely sexually liberated; attitudes to sex remain bound up in sexist ideas about age and decorum. There are affairs at the narrative's centre: Michèle's relationship with her best friend's husband, and her pursuit of the married rapist Patrick. Affairs comprise part of the film's representation of contemporary bourgeois French life – there are also numerous awkward dinner parties, social engagements, and a neighbourhood council involved in the policing of banalities like parking spaces and gardening. The 'two sides' of this bourgeois life – on one hand sexual deviance, on the other God-fearing, familial bliss – are most apparent in a scene where Michèle masturbates while watching Patrick and his wife erect a life-size nativity in their garden. Michèle is physically shrouded in darkness, in dark clothes, as she watches the illuminated scene through binoculars (figs 2.4, 2.5). Here, we see visually juxtaposed two interlinked facets of French bourgeois existence.

It is striking that in a film so preoccupied by its own Frenchness, there is a strong religious element; France famously takes seriously *laïcité* (secularism) and is consistently ranked as one of the world's least religious nations. Yet the film takes place at Christmastime and scenes of religious ceremonies play on television sets

throughout. Religion is not simply presented through juxtaposition, as a paradoxical 'good' to the darkness of the film. Instead, it is mobilised to highlight bourgeois hypocrisy. Patrick, for example, erects a life-size shrine to God while raping and terrorising Michèle. The central believing subject of the film, Patrick's wife Rebecca (Virginie Efira), is represented as a figure of mockery throughout – she is sickly sweet, a member of the neighbourhood association, the wholesome blonde to Michèle's seductive red-head. It is when she requests that the table say grace at a Christmas party that Michèle makes her under-the-table move on Patrick. In the final scene, she thanks Michèle for 'giving him [Patrick] what he needed'. This is an ambiguous moment but is suggestive of Rebecca's 'God works in mysterious ways' piousness. Her Catholicism, and the film's equivocation about religion generally, proffers a link to the 'puritanism' derided by the 100-women tribune when they equate 'the enemies of sexual freedom' to 'the religious extremists'. A puritan culture, religious or otherwise, is antithetical to sexual liberation and is, in fact, presented as partially responsible for Patrick's violence: responsibility is conferred partially onto the religious Rebecca.



**Figures 2.4, 2.5 Michèle masturbates while watching her neighbours erect a nativity**

### **Showing sexual violence, depicting rape fantasy**

*Elle* does not shy away from controversial depictions of sexuality and its intertwining with religion and violence. It is equally confronting in its representations of sexual violence. Unlike many rape-revenge films, it opens with the catalytic rape. The audience is never introduced to a pre-rape Michèle; she exists only in her violated version. This scene of sexual violence is revisited twice in the film with important alterations. In the opening scene, the rape is all but over by the time it appears on screen. The second iteration, a flashback, begins temporally before this point; as Michèle lets Marty in, the rapist pushes through the door. Throughout the flashback, the perspective oscillates; first, it is Michèle's, encountering the rapist as he seemingly

appears from nowhere. The camera moves between Michèle and the rapist's perspectives, and a long shot, as the attack progresses. This evokes what Douglas Keesey calls a 'split' in the viewer's identification when it comes to watching rape (2010, p. 95). At a crucial point, as Michèle is pushed to the floor and slapped, we share the rapist's view (fig 2.6), continuing in this shared look as he exposes her breasts. This moment of shared perspective adds a gratuitous element to the scene. The flashback ends, returning to Michèle in her home speaking directly to Marty: 'you didn't have to claw his eyes out, but scratch him [the rapist] at least. I'm just saying.' He meows blithely in response. The tone is disorientingly humorous, as the cat is chided for its inaction; the viewer, identified with Marty's passivity, is also implicitly chastised. The second flashback invokes the idea of fantasy – the rape begins in the same way as the second but, this time, Michèle fights off the attack. She beats the rapist with a piece of crockery until blood spurts cartoonishly from under his mask. This over-the-top violence engenders, again, a somewhat comic tone; as he flails flaccidly beneath her in a gimp suit, she hits him so ferociously that she runs out of breath.



**Figure 2.6 The viewer shares the rapist's perspective as Michèle is slapped and her breasts exposed**

In depicting real and re-imagined instances of sexual violence, the film also contends with the notion of rape fantasy. In *Elle*, romance and rape are intertwined in the main plot through fantasy. This concludes when, after Patrick tries to rape her in his home, Michèle attempts to engage in consensual sex. The scene takes place in his basement, illuminated by a red hue, suggestive of danger and eroticism. A shot-

reverse-shot foregrounds both Michèle and Patrick's perspectives as they exchange slaps. When the sex takes place, a long shot frames the pair to the right of the screen, taking their bodies out of close view – they are both fully clothed, their robotic movements and grunts markedly un-erotic (fig 2.7). The noises Patrick makes are almost identical to those made in the original rape, denoting him as still rapist rather than equal sexual partner. To the left of the screen is the underside of a staircase; the camera allows the viewer to watch from underneath it, a voyeur. The framing is a mirror of the original rape scene: in it, the action takes place to the left of a split screen whereas here it is on the right, signalling a definitive movement in the relationship. As Michèle orgasms through masturbation, she writhes on the floor, moaning loudly. It appears that, beyond orgasm, she is experiencing overwhelming relief. Her repeated 'ah's, her contorted body, give the impression of exorcism. It is significant that she ends the act through masturbation, suggesting that she is responsible for her own pleasure and self-fulfilment after all. She alone can free herself of obsession through the completion of fantasy. Rape fantasy, as Horeck describes, can serve a 'protective function' for the victim-survivor of sexual violence (2004, p. 39). Michèle, however, moves beyond fantasy as protection to the active pursuit of sexual contact. Towards the film's end, after she threatens Patrick with the police and he reacts angrily, she purposely leaves the gate to her home open, seemingly inviting him in.



***Figure 2.7* Michèle and Patrick in the basement. The viewer watches them, lit in red, from behind the stairs**

## Ambivalent feminisms

Where Michèle uses the apparent deviancy of fantasising about her rapist to escape the banality of her bourgeois existence, affairs and all, this relationship is also a push-back against the radical feminist conceptualisation of rape fantasy. This, according to feminists like Brownmiller and Andrea Dworkin, is a patriarchal construct imbued with the violence of a masculine sexual culture; in which '[t]he rape fantasy exists in women as a man-made iceberg. It can be destroyed—by feminism' (Brownmiller 1975, p. 322). *Elle* utilises rape fantasy to strike back against certain feminisms, weaponising it in its satire of 'bourgeois feminist concepts' (Petty 2019, p. 227) and valourising the individualist, 'empowered' woman subject. Feminism functions in the film as something of an invisible antagonist, an undercurrent to the representation of gender and sexual violence. I have suggested that there is a deliberate backlash towards American morality, but this does not tell the full story. Even Simone de Beauvoir is not safe from *Elle*'s critical eye; at one point, Michèle jibes at her ex-husband Richard that 'bimbos with big boobs are no big deal, but beware of women who have read *The Second Sex*. They chew you up and spit you out.' Richard is dating a young yoga teacher writing her dissertation on de Beauvoir. 'Traditional' feminism is as maligned as modern – women who read Simone de Beauvoir are as obsessed by patriarchy, as caught up in their own victimhood, as the feminists of today. There is an eclipse of meaning and of distinction that shades feminisms (and feminists) into each other. Feminism is frequently a site of suspicion, with both its historical and modern iterations treated with ambivalence and, often, outright hostility. When Michèle presents *as* victim of violence, when her trauma is present, the film seems to mock her apparent overreaction. Shortly after the rape, she accidentally pepper sprays Richard after mistaking him for an intruder – she sneaks up to his car in the shadows as ominous music plays, a film noir detective closing in on her prey. The climax is cartoonish. The music cuts out immediately as he stumbles around in pain, red-eyed, and Michèle realises her error. Richard then utters the apparently logical 'I was worried about you (...) You say you were raped and didn't report it...' Michèle is, for the only time, rendered hysteric. It is notable that this takes place when she elides the difference between two men, punishing one for the crimes of the other (if mistakenly). Here, in

her 'frenzy' (100-women tribune, 2018), Michèle illustrates that even if one experiences violence as a woman, we must not allow ourselves to indulge in victimhood lest we descend into madness.

Michèle overall represents the woman who refuses to be thwarted by patriarchy, despite her difficult relationships with men, beginning with her murderous father. The film's men are represented as simultaneously benign and dangerous. We discover that the apparently mild Richard once struck Michèle, triggering their divorce; the bumbling Vincent, too, is violent towards his girlfriend. When the rapist Patrick is not conducting frenzied home invasions, he is a seemingly gentle family man and Kevin, who is responsible for doctoring Michèle on to the virtual rape scene, is otherwise anxiously deferential to her. Kevin withers in her presence, tripping over his words and struggling to maintain eye-contact; when she demands he show her his penis (to prove that he is not the rapist), he quickly obliges. Patrick is represented in several scenes of matrimonial bliss, helping Rebecca unload a Christmas tree, happily decorating their home with fairy lights. If, as Gavey points out, 'the building blocks of rape exist within or alongside normative heterosexuality, rather than being the preserve of only an isolated deviant few' (2018, p. 41), Patrick's behaviour in and out of the home is not as oppositional it might originally seem. In an interview with *NPR*, Huppert describes the film's men as 'sort of fading figures, very weak, quite fragile' (Huppert in Shapiro 2016). Michèle's strength stands out in comparison. Although I have thus far suggested that the film is often hostile towards feminism, the male characters' complexities in fact articulate a markedly feminist idea about men's violence against women: that it is committed by ordinary men, not by monsters nor especially deviant actors, as part of a wider context of gendered domination. Boyle warns of the dangers of 'monsterising' individual abusive men, as it 'allows us to draw a line between the "good" and "bad" men, even at a glance, thus leaving hegemonic constructions of masculinity largely untroubled' (2019, p. 117). *Elle*, despite its general ambivalence towards feminist politics, rejects monsterisation and instead depicts a world where even 'good', seemingly well-adjusted men are capable of abuse and violence. There are, in this sense, multiple competing discourses regarding feminism and men's violence present.

Like the rape-revenges Clover and Read describe, *Elle* has a complex internal politics, at once espousing and dismissing feminist ideas about sexual violence. In contrast to classic examples like *I Spit* and the films which follow here, it is a large-scale production with an established director and star; Verhoeven and Huppert are both well-known and prolific, each attached to their own rich mythos. Although Verhoeven himself is not French, and the screenplay was authored by an American, the film's ostensible Frenchness has been consistently underscored. It is a 'Gallic delicacy' (Scott 2016) that 'ups the Frenchness by twenty' (Fogelman 2016). It is not only Huppert's presence that is responsible for this categorisation, but the amoral depictions of sexuality, violence, and desire within. Verhoeven's belief in the film's cultural exceptionalism seems to lie in the idea that it runs contra to American or, more specifically, Hollywood values. This bolsters the attachment between Frenchness and a perceived ambivalence towards feminist ideas about sexual morality (which are seen to be Anglo-American). As critics like Pettey have pointed out, *Elle* satirises a specific form of French, bourgeois life, as well as what it considers 'bourgeois' feminist concepts. The film's humour is at its most conspicuous when it surrounds scenes of sexual violence – this itself seems to lash out at feminism, perhaps situating feminists as having an overly serious, po-faced attitude to rape. The representation of rape fantasy speaks similarly to a backlash against feminism, with its apparent taboos and 'unspeakable' subjects; *Elle*, like the 100 women of the tribune, refuses to be told of what it ought not to say. Michèle's refusal of victimhood, along with her general identification as career-woman and empowered sexual subject, is in clear alliance with a postfeminist politic. In many respects, she is the woman invoked by the 100-women tribune: never a 'perpetual victim', accepting of men's *liberté d'importuner* and her freedom to refute it. The assertion that '[a] woman can, in the same day, lead a professional team and enjoy being a man's sexual object, without being a "whore" or a vile accomplice of the patriarchy' is a near-perfect encapsulation of her character. *Elle*, coming a year before #MeToo, already articulates some of the key features of the backlash against it. Disparaging of the politics of victimhood, positioning women and men as already equal and, importantly, equally vulnerable, it can be seen to pre-empt the critiques that have, as Boyle asserts, 'existed alongside #MeToo virtually from the outset' (2019, p. 3). It is, however, beholden to some feminist conceptualisations of

men's violence, which populates the film; it does not doubt that patriarchy exists. *Elle* may dismiss 'victim feminism', but it is unable to fully detach itself from expressing feminist ideas about rape and men's violence against women; its political complexity sits alongside its cultural ambiguity. *Elle* is not straightforwardly a counter-narrative, but rather emblematic of tensions within gender and feminist politics; as Gill (2016) describes, media products often contain competing feminist, postfeminist, and anti-feminist sensibilities. The representation of sexual violence and victim-survivors in *Elle* are ultimately political despite its appeals to amorality, anticipating a critique that would be re-articulated in *Le Monde* two years later. In this sense, it is clearly part of the long #MeToo moment, sitting at the juncture of postfeminism, popular feminism, and its backlash. Interestingly, films that assert a clearer allegiance to feminist politics also articulate these competing discourses.

### **A new feminist rape-revenge? Introducing *Revenge* and *M.F.A***

This section will introduce two films, one French and one American, that adhere to the classic rape-revenge narrative structure. Both *Revenge* and *M.F.A* were released in 2017, are woman-directed and were situated paratextually as feminist takes on the genre. Both came before #MeToo as hashtag, but directors Fargeat and Leite acknowledge that the cultural moment of mass disclosure and dialogue that began prior to 2017 was of undeniable influence, informing their release and reception (see Nugent 2021); like *Elle*, they exist in a decade characterised by discourse on sexual violence. Leite went on to direct two episodes of *The Handmaid's Tale* (S5E7, S5E8), an example of television's developing #MeToo media products (Banet-Weiser and Higgins 2023). Although each film stems from a different cultural context, they are ostensibly progressive revisions to the rape-revenge genre that are explicitly in conversation with contemporary feminist politics, with Fargeat and Leite acknowledging that these are genre texts in a way that Verhoeven refuses (Nugent 2021). Viewing *Revenge* and *M.F.A* together facilitates a comparative analysis of culturally specific concerns about sexual violence, rape culture, and victimhood. Although the films' cultural contexts diverge, their protagonists are not dissimilar. Both are young, white and American, despite *Revenge*'s French production. Jen

(Matilda Lutz) is an L.A socialite, mistress to Belgian Richard (Kevin Janssens), who has whisked her off for a romantic weekend in an anonymous desert. *M.F.A*'s protagonist is Noelle (Francesca Eastwood), an art graduate studying at an American university. Per Henry's assertion about rape-revenge's 'stock characters', both embody the 'young, white, attractive victim turned femme fatale' (2014, p. 4). However, they are otherwise characterised quite differently: Jen is gregarious and flirtatious, Noelle shy and seemingly unworldly. This allows both films to explore ideas about victimhood – the women are oriented in specifically gendered ways towards rapeability (Higgins and Silver 1993) and 'idealised' victim-survivor status. This in turn engenders an examination of rape myths and how these are articulated across a number of cultural practices, as well as of rape culture and its impacts. In what follows, I will explore how each film engages feminist and mainstream discourses in their representations of sexual violence, considering the films side-by-side. The analysis will begin with an exploration of what Read (2000) calls the woman victim-avenger characters, then to the rapists and the complicit individuals who tacitly (and, in some cases, actively) condone their actions. Following this will be a comparison of the films' respective representations of men's sexual violence against women and, importantly, of women's violence. An analysis of 'place' and thus culture will conclude the section, focusing on the representation of apparently different French and Anglo-American sexual cultures.

### **Victim-avengers: 'young, white, attractive'?**

*Revenge* follows a desert hunting trip taken by Richard, his young mistress Jen and Richard's two friends, Stan (Vincent Colombe) and Dimitiri (Guillaume Bouchède). After Jen is raped by Stan, the men attempt to kill her. She survives, and they enter into a cat and mouse game of which she is the victor. *M.F.A* is set on an anonymous North American campus and follows the journey of Noelle, who is raped by classmate Luke (Peter Vack) at a college party. She accidentally kills Luke in a struggle and, after being let down by university management and becoming privy to a culture of cover-ups, hunts down other men accused of sexual violence. Both protagonists act alone to undertake revenge, killing not only their rapists, but other abusive and

complicit men. Jen and Noelle, classic victim-avengers in a way that Michèle is not, are the moral lens through which the films' engagements with sexual violence and revenge are mediated; for the most part, the viewer is encouraged to share their ethical position. This works to varying effect, as Jen and Noelle's transformation to victim-avengers follow divergent paths. Noelle's first act of violence is unintentional, whereas Jen's revenge is deliberate throughout. After Stan and his friends chase her into the desert to an apparent death, Jen undergoes an acute physical and mental transformation after ingesting the hallucinogen peyote, returning strong and determined to pick off the men one by one. In *M.F.A.*, Noelle is initially panicked after killing Luke, but becomes enraged after discovering her roommate was also raped by a classmate and the victim of an institutional cover-up. Incensed by the sexual violence endemic to campus culture, she becomes something of a vigilante, tracking down and torturing male perpetrators of violence against women. Because she does not initially set out to take revenge, Noelle's transformation incurs a hesitancy that Jen's does not (although Jen's transformation takes longer within the film). To borrow from Clover's summation of *Ms 45*'s narrative trajectory, 'reactive murder turns to proactive murder' (1992, p. 141).

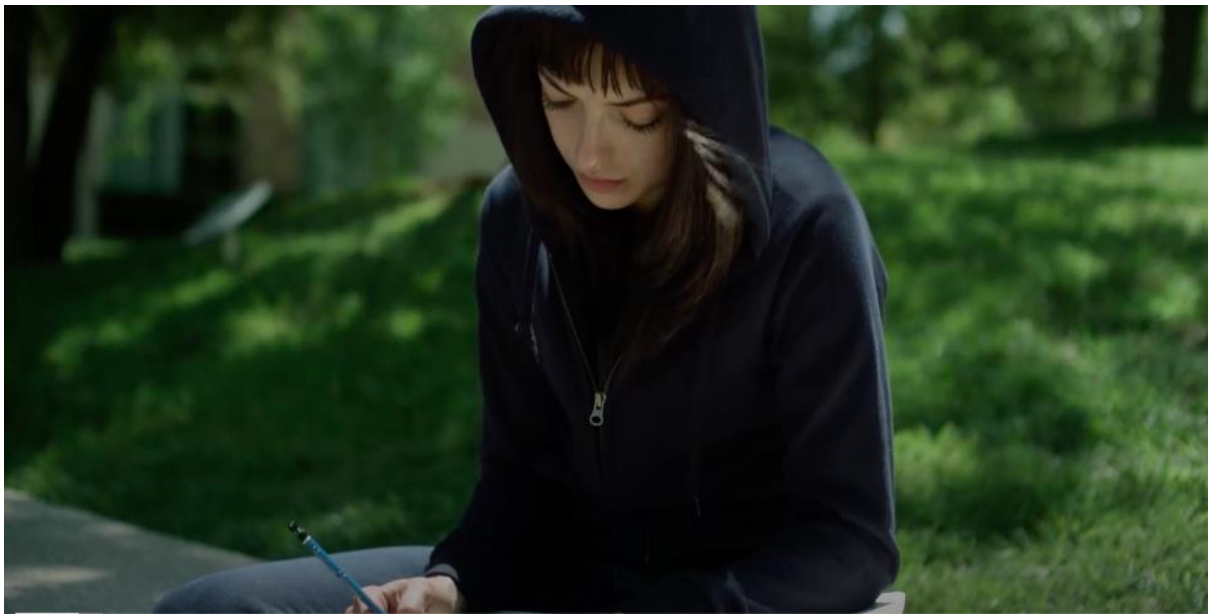
Jen and Noelle are constructed *as* women and victims quite differently. Their femininity and experience of victimhood post-rape are inextricably linked (Henry 2014, p. 12) and although both are presented as beautiful, but rejecting of men (employing, following Clover, the *cocktease* motif), they are oriented towards sexuality in divergent ways. Pre-rape, Jen embodies an idealised erotic femininity. She is introduced through a shot that begins with a close-up of Richard's face, the focus on his aviator sunglasses as he looks out to the desert. This initial focus on his looking-out is suggestive of *Revenge*'s preoccupation with the male gaze. The shot pans out to reveal her behind him, sucking a lollipop suggestively in Lolita style movie-star sunglasses. Her position in the frame (fig 2.8) foreshadows the later chase in which she stalks her prey from behind. She wears all hot pink: tennis skirt, leopard print top, nail polish, lipstick and star-shaped hoop earrings. The scene immediately becomes sexual when Jen drops to her knees to perform oral sex. During her first night with the men, she is flirtatious, dancing sensually with each in turn as they enjoy the performance. High BPM, ominous techno soundtracks the scene; a sense of anxiety,

of impending dread is foregrounded. Then, a track with vocals that assert ‘shit’s about to go down / don’t stop, the everlasting beast’ begins. The everlasting beast turns out, of course, to be Jen herself. Her dialogue is limited throughout the film and, when she does speak, she yields to the men, deliberately allowing them to steer the conversation. Her sexuality is on full display and, at least partially, constructed around subservience to men, per the initial scene of oral sex. This allows for Stan’s feigned ignorance when it comes to raping Jen – he implies that her apparent sexual openness and interest in the men has created the conditions for a consensual sexual encounter.

Noelle embodies a different form of idealised femininity; she is quiet and demure, at points painfully shy. In comparison to Jen, she dresses plainly, introduced in jeans, a white t-shirt and oversized black hoodie. She is ordinary, no blonde bombshell like Jen; she sinks into clothes that swamp her, concealing herself from the male gaze (fig 2.9). In a group critique with her classmates, she is barely able to make eye contact, physically disappearing into her environment. Her invisibility is emphasised when a group of students push past her in a hallway, tripping over her as if they do not register her presence at all. When she attends a rowdy college party, she is clearly out of place, alone amongst the chaos of her drunken classmates. When the rapist, Luke, invites her into his room, an anxious and overwhelmed Noelle is offered a brief reprieve. She is initially attracted to him, allowing her roommate to help her practice flirting techniques. She foregoes her muted aesthetic for one evening, wearing an uncharacteristic pink dress and styling her hair; her roommate comments that she has ‘a hot body’, and that she should show it off more. In similar vein to Stan, Luke is enraged when she rejects his advances. Following the rape, he behaves as if consensual sex took place, and that Noelle’s rejection was part of a sexual game. Interestingly, despite their diverging performances of femininity, both rapes can be seen to ‘*result from* such a rejection of the feminine’ (Read 2000, p. 92). Jen and Noelle are punished for failing to live up to the expectations they have supposedly created about their own femininity and sexuality.



***Figure 2.8*** Jen and Richard's first appearance on screen, their glasses foregrounding the importance of the gaze



***Figure 2.9*** Noelle cuts a muted figure as she sits alone in dark clothes and an oversized hoodie

The protagonists therefore begin at different points with respect to their performances of gender and sexuality. Their transformations to victim-avengers, however, takes them to similar places; unlike Michèle, they have obvious physical transformations. Read comments that the transformation of women characters to 'violent but hyper-feminine, eroticised women' is often characteristic of the rape-

revenge cycle (2000, p. 52). In fact, neither Jen nor Noelle's transformation follows this trajectory so straightforwardly. Jen's physical transformation is relatively drawn out and, post-rape, she embodies competing forms of femininity. After she de-impales herself from the phallic tree branch she has been pushed onto, she escapes into the desert. It is here she ingests peyote before cauterising her stomach wound with a sun-scorched tin can. At this point, she is dirty, disheveled and, in many respects, a defeminised version of her previous self, though she does retain her pink earrings. She quickly adapts her outfit into one more suitable for her hunt: a crop top and mini shorts. She becomes the bad-ass victim-avenger, physically strong and unafraid of getting her hands dirty, while retaining femininity in her adornments; her altering of her clothes allows her to choose her own 'look' as hero. Fargeat attests to the deliberateness of this, noting in an interview that she 'didn't want to convey the idea that she was going to be strong because she now has clothes on' (Cills 2018). Jen's body is her weapon, no matter its material adornments. As Jane Gaines comments, the use of clothes and self-decoration for self-actualisation in women needn't be inherently sexist, that they might give 'women a sense of potency to act in the world' (1999, p. 6). Her mental transformation is simpler, with her previous submissiveness directly substituted by a dominating and unforgiving mentality. Her gaze, that was initially yielding to the men, becomes direct as she hunts them (fig 2.10) – before killing Stan, she looks directly at him through her rifle from above. She is in control.

Noelle's physical transformation post-rape, on the other hand, makes her markedly hyper-feminine. It is implied that she begins the film a virgin, anxious about sex and relationships with men. Her sexual anxieties are reflected in her artistic repression; in an initial critique session, her work is criticised for being technically sound but lacking emotional depth. Her tutor implores her to 'get messy, make something ugly'. Her transformation to victim-avenger sees her not only embrace a newly discovered physical sex appeal, but an artistic vigour; these physical and mental transformations are intertwined. Two key scenes are emblematic of Noelle's transformation. She does not transform immediately after the rape, remaining in her dark, oversized clothing in the days following, traumatised and withdrawn. However, when she attends a frat party to take revenge on a known campus rapist, she applies dramatic makeup, wears a masquerade-style mask and an artificial looking pink wig

(fig 2.11). She becomes crucially not-herself, symbolic of a certain cinematic *fille fatale* (see, for example, Matilda in *Léon: The Professional* (1994, dir. Luc Besson) and Carey Mulligan in *Promising Young Woman*). There is a sense of play in this dressing up that reflects an embrace of adolescent femininity; in this sense, Noelle conforms to Lindop's characterisation of the 'fatal girl [who] presents a façade of youthful innocence in order to mask her lethal potential' (2015, p. 97). She continues to dress in a more stereotypically feminine way for the remainder of the film, shunning her oversized, plain attire for denim shorts, tank tops, fishnets, and choker necklaces. This newly embodied sexuality through clothing comes alongside a new attitude; she makes direct, unapologetic eye contact and flirts without embarrassment. Her art, too, is reflective of this increase in intensity and daringness, seeing her applauded by previously unimpressed peers and professors. Her metamorphosis into victim-avenger is complete when her physical and artistic transformations are synthesized. Art is Noelle's form of speaking out and creates resonance with projects like Emma Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)* (2014-15), that protested the non-expulsion of her rapist at Columbia University. *M.F.A* is therefore referentially oriented towards a specific cultural moment with regards to campus sexual violence. This predates #MeToo (and, in fact, has its genesis in 1990s activism), but is part of the longer zeitgeist regarding sexual violence – *M.F.A* engages the concerns of this longer moment.



**Figure 2.10** Jen hunts the men, looking for them through binoculars



**Figure 2.11** Noelle is transformed in a wig and mask, dressing up in the style of a *fille fatale*

Like Jen, Noelle embraces several typically masculine activities, adopting a sexually forward manner and using weapons adeptly to murder rapists. She does retain, however, a palpable form of femininity that Jen ultimately eschews at the film's end. Julie Monty underscores the utility of this gender play for feminist ends in her discussion of *Baise-moi*; because they frequently 'déstabilisent le système binaire des genres féminin et masculin, en exhibant des comportements à la fois hyper-féminins et hyper-masculins' [destabilise the gender binary of feminine and masculine, and exhibit hyper-feminine and hyper-masculine behaviours at the same time] (2013, p.

643), victim-avengers are able to expose the arbitrariness of these categories. Importantly both women become symbolic of the monstrous feminine; Jen's post-rape body, particularly, is proximate to the abject. After she removes the branch that impaled her, she is left with a gaping wound in her side that is both Christ-like and vaginal. Creed posits that wounds 'point to the imperfection of the bodily surface and the opening of the maternal body during childbirth' (1993, p. 265). Jen's relationship to the maternal body and, therefore, the abject is especially interesting. She is at once presented as an anti-maternal figure – Richard compares her in an unfavourable way to his wife (and mother of his children) – while maintaining the symbols associated with that body. When she cauterises her stomach wound, she is left with an eagle-shaped embellishment on her skin (fig 2.12). This eagle marks firstly here Americanness – her othering – amongst a masculinist French context. Significantly, too, it is flesh-but-not, human and non-human, creating an intersection between corporeal alteration and the feminine body; these, according to Kristeva, are two 'abominations' that characterise biblical renderings of the abject (1982, p. 93). The biblical resonances therefore exist within Jen's post-impalement crucifixion wound and her alteration of it. Jen, over the course of her transformation, arrives at the position of abject subject; that she embraces her abjection allows her to assert a small level of power over the men. They are afraid of her abjected maternal power. *Revenge* is explicitly engaging with women's embodiment post-rape, underscoring the relationship between violations of the corporeal and subjectivity.



**Figure 2.12** Jen brands an eagle on her stomach

## Rapeability and victimhood

Both films are concerned with the removal of women's subjectivity within the logic of rape culture. This is especially palpable in their dealings with rapeability – the idea that the rapes of certain women 'do not count as harm' (Helman 2018, p. 10). Jen and Noelle, despite their differences, are both unrapeable in the eyes of their rapists. Stan views Jen as unrapeable as a result of her previous flirting and dancing with the men: he comments that she came onto him like a 'pussy in heat', asking 'I haven't changed height since yesterday, have I?' when she explains she prefers taller men in rejecting him. In the eyes of Stan, her one-time consent to sexual contact insists that from then on, she is always already consenting despite speech and actions to the contrary. Gavey notes that when 'a woman's actions that can be seen to transgress some very rigid boundary of chastity', any refusal of sex can 'easily be cast as unreasonable and unfair within this conventional set of discourses' (2018, p. 149). Richard comments, too, that she is 'so damn beautiful that [she's] hard to resist'. Her beauty provokes violence. Richard's derogatory comparisons of Jen with his wife – she the honourable and therefore rapeable, Jen disreputable and thus the converse – are indicative of this paradigm. This false dichotomy is unsubtly illustrated when Jen is positioned in front of an image of the Virgin Mary (fig 2.13), drawing up the Madonna/whore complex that underscores the film's engagement with rapeability. Jen is both, and neither; the film rejects either binarism and asserts that what happens to Jen *is* rape.



**Figure 2.13 Jen meets Stan and Dimitri as they watch her through a window. She is positioned in contrast with a stylised portrait of the Virgin Mary**

Noelle is oriented towards rapeability rather differently; she occupies the position, culturally and judicially, of an ideal victim. She has no sexual history, setting out an initial challenge to the rape myth that she had asked for it with ‘provocative’ behaviour. Reading through a feminist lens, there is a concern about how this works to elicit spectatorial sympathy and identification. *M.F.A.*, in a sense, relies on rape myths to render its victim as rapeable and thus believable to the audience, even if that is not how Luke sees her; we do not identify with him. He views himself as above her due to his privileged social position, depicted as popular and well-liked by his peers in contrast to Noelle’s relative invisibility. She should be flattered by his attentions and, ultimately, obligated to have sex with him. As a result of this, her rejections go completely unregistered – she could not possibly be raped by him, as she could not possibly say no. His incredulity when she confronts him following him the rape is indicative of this; he scoffs when Noelle demands ‘I want you to say you’re sorry. You raped me’. Although Noelle is in many ways an ideal victim, she cannot escape the logic of rape culture, where someone with Luke’s social standing and general attractiveness is not accepted as a credible rapist. Here, one is reminded of ‘promising young men’, such as Brock Turner, the Stanford rapist. Parallels are drawn that clearly place the film in a specific chronological and discursive context regarding sexual violence. It is clearly rooted in a 2010s characterised by media reporting on sexual violence and, particularly in American context, a focus on the campus. In both films,

it is men who are responsible for circulating insidious ideas about rapeability; with respect to this, there is an explicit articulation of feminist concepts that *Elle* lacks.

### **Rapists and complicity**

Rebecca Liu (2018) comments that Richard, Stan and Dimitri ‘could each be the three major archetypes in the pantheon of terrible men’. Richard is an outwardly trustworthy ‘nice guy’, Stan a creep who refuses to take no for an answer and Dimitri a cowardly bystander. Archetypal characters frequently populate sexual violence narratives on screen (see Henry 2014). In *Revenge*, the characters physical renderings are symbolic of the social roles they inhabit; the renderings, too, begin to suggest a rootedness to a French context. Stan is dark, literally oil-slicked, his demeanour sly and threatening – the audience is aware that he is something of a shady character. Stan’s darkness codes him as racialised, in comparison to the white and blonde Jen. His hair and skin are decidedly darker, too, than Richard and Dimitri’s. In their first scene together, Jen wears a pink ‘IHEARTL.A’ crop top and underwear; Stan stands ominously watching her through the window, dressed in dark hunting gear, rifle in hand. She inhabits a specific form of flippant American patriotism, as well as youth. Ticktin points out that racial and religious difference characterises much of the French discourse on sexual violence, where it becomes significant when ‘it is attached to other types of difference’ (Ticktin 2008, p. 865). Along with Stan, Dimitri is clearly positioned as a figure of disgust. His apparent laziness (that translates into an apathetic response to Jen’s rape) is observable in his disheveled appearance, unpolished in comparison to Richard. As he witnesses Stan rape Jen, he stands otherwise naked in an open dressing gown and eats chocolate, chewing with his mouth open and allowing crumbs to drop freely. He turns up the television to drown out her screams before jumping into the pool – he cleanses himself of involvement with the act, implicitly aware of its wrongness. Like Stan, we are to know he is villainous because of the way he looks. This corresponds to Boyle’s proposition regarding Weinstein’s abuses that there is a persistent interest in the ‘(apparent) juxtaposition of female glamour and male monstrosity’ (2019a, p. 86). In this sense, *Revenge* provides an image of male violence that was reflected in the mediatised #MeToo. Mack and McCann argue that the ‘accentuating’ of non-

normative masculine bodies, and their violation of white women, moved Weinstein ‘further from the locus of normative White masculinity and closer to White projections of Black masculinity expressed through the myth of the Black male rapist’ (2021, p. 110). Stan and Dimitri’s physical renderings similarly Other them in a way that articulates rape myths – Stan especially is proximate to the myth of the Black male rapist. Although there is a clear power differential indicated through age, Richard’s physicality is slightly more complex: he is handsome and clean-cut, blond, perhaps an unexpected enactor of violence in the logic of rape culture. However, that he does enact violence against Jen despite his attractiveness problematises these rape myths. That he is white and normatively masculine suggests a departure from the straightforward monsterisation of perpetrators, giving way to feminist conceptualisations of this role.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond the rape itself Jen is, like Michèle, misogynistically brutalised in several other ways. In a similar vein to Creed’s proposition that the violence in *I Spit* can be ‘understood retrospectively as the actions of a group of men who are terrified of women’ (1993, p. 475), the rape itself, Richard’s subsequent attempt to silence Jen, and the men’s attempted murder of her amount to a view of men threatened by woman’s sexuality and autonomy. When Stan expresses fear of Jen, Richard pointedly asks ‘what are you afraid of? You seemed to have balls with her?’ The men are linked, fundamentally, by two interconnected things: their misogyny and their surveillance of Jen. Jen is constantly watched, subject to the unified gaze of the men, camera and audience; *Revenge* is captivated by the power of the gendered gaze. The film begins with a close-up shot of Richard’s reflective sunglasses; Jen, too, is wearing sunglasses, foregrounding the importance of the subverted ‘female’ gaze to the film. He looks, but so does she. The women of both films stalk and hunt their targets: Noelle watches men through windows, Jen through binoculars and rifle crosshairs. They are the objects of the gaze. Stan and Dimitri first appear through a window, where they watch Jen through the glass before startling her with their presence. Again, she is something to be looked at, but there is a solid (if see-through) barrier (see fig 2.13). In this image, Stan is reflected back in the glass; the viewer sees Jen through him, but also Stan as

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that it is still only Stan, the only racialised character, who enacts *sexual* violence.

she does. There is a complication in identification. Dimitri, too, watches her through binoculars as she dances, in a sense mediating his view of her – and, of course, likening her to the prey she becomes during the film’s hunt. Jen is, however, able to turn the tables. Throughout her hunt, she watches Richard and Stan through the crosshatch of her rifle, tracking their movements as if they were animals. She watches them from above, as does the viewer through a high angle shot, forcing complicity in this hunter’s gaze; as the men are now the surveilled objects, the power dynamic shifts. This is particularly noticeable in the final scene, the battle between Jen and Richard. Richard is naked and exposed, the camera lingering on his buttocks in a reference to his earlier comments about Jen’s ‘peachy butt’. It is now his body that is objectified, on display. After she kills him, he lies with his naked lower half facing the camera, intimately exposed. Fargeat posits that after the rape, ‘[p]art of her [Jen] dies, the part that defines her existence through the gaze of other people and through the male gaze’ (Monks Kaufman 2018). She becomes the bearer of the look.

Televisions are important in several key scenes, drawing up ideas of who chooses to watch. Images of a wrestling match playing on a television are rapidly interspersed with Jen dancing for the men. Both are a choreographed, constructed performance. While Stan rapes Jen, Dimitri watches TV, turning up the volume to drown out her screams. His lack of opposition permits the rape, although he foregoes actually watching it. What is at stake, the film asks, when we pretend not to see? He gives, as Vicky Lebeau describes in her analysis of refusal in spectatorial violence, ‘a strange “yes” that functions as negativity rather than “not no” and it speaks the impossibility of finding a position from which to object’ (1995, p. 134). His objection to Stan is compromised – he is literally muted, his mouth occupied by eating – but he is also unable to identify with Jen within the logic of misogyny. There are limits to what he will watch, but not what we will see: Dimitri precludes himself from watching in a way that the viewer cannot, confronting us with our complicity in watching rape (and, too, doing nothing). In the build up to the rape, there is an image that foregrounds this: as Stan stares at Jen dressing through the window, the camera cuts to an ant crawling on a rotten apple. The ant is identified with Stan, and the other men of the film, animalistic in nature and instinct. This dehumanization precludes audience identification with the rapist, making him ‘as bad as’ an insect. Moreover, the image

suggests that the rot of sexual violence spreads far, beyond rapists themselves to those who are essentially complicit. Both the ant and the apple function as stand-ins for those who enact and *enable* sexual violence; in this case, this includes the viewer. The ethics of watching are called into question here: Dimitri turns his eyes to another screen, but his inaction gives Stan tacit permission. The viewer, on the other hand, sees it all and is privy to Jen's pain. Watching the act of violence, in *Revenge*, allows one to recognise its seriousness in a way that Dimitri does not.

In *M.F.A.*, there is a more complex ecosystem of characters, oriented in differing ways towards complicity and male violence. Certainly, many of the characters occupy classically complicit roles; there are numerous men who are both directly involved in perpetuating and permitting sexual violence, as well as a university official who fails to offer adequate support. However, there are men who are represented as genuinely good – specifically, Noelle's classmate Shane (David Huynh). He is not aware of the rape but is a supportive friend throughout her various stages of transition. After Noelle gains confidence, the two spend an evening together, eating pizza and joking around. They are clearly interested in each other, and the atmosphere eventually becomes romantic. However, as they begin to get intimate, Noelle panics and becomes violent. Shane, although confused, reacts with sensitivity. His gentleness sets him apart from the film's other men. That Noelle is unable to undertake a consensual sexual encounter suggests she is traumatised and fearful of men in general. This is a harrowing and suggestive moment; although Noelle has become empowered in one sense through her vengeance, she is still unable to access her sexual self. This nuanced representation of trauma allies with feminist scholarship in the area that details its frequent contradictions and challenges (Walker 1997); here, *M.F.A.* is in direct conversation with feminist work on sexual violence.

### **A feminist rape scene?**

The representation of sexual violence in *Revenge* and *M.F.A.* is markedly more graphic than anything shown in the other texts in this thesis. In fact, *M.F.A.* has more than one rape scene; in addition to Noelle's rape, there is a video which shows a violent frat-

house assault imbued with clear reference to Steubenville.<sup>17</sup> Both feature characters who are already known, in comparison to *Elle* where the rapist begins as a masked stranger. While *Revenge* generally includes a great deal more graphic violence than *M.F.A.*, its representation of sexual violence is somewhat more subtle. The scene begins with an initial tense exchange between Jen and Stan. He attempts to flirt with her, becoming increasingly sexually explicit in his advances; he advances towards her physically, too, forcing their bodies into an uncomfortable closeness, invading both her psychic and physical space. Jen retreats as he becomes more aggressive but is unable to stop his physical imposition. Throughout this scene, in both the build-up to and during the rape, the camera's focus does not rest solely on Jen and Stan, the shot cutting between their bodies and a number of objects that surround them. First, a wide-angled shot focuses on both bodies from an objective, outsider perspective; the viewer watches from behind as Stan – fully clothed – rapes Jen, witnessing the struggle as bystander but unable to stop it. There are no close-up shots of Jen's face or, indeed, her body, save for when her hand slams against the window she was previously watched through.

Unlike *Revenge*, *M.F.A.*'s rape scene begins with initially consensual sexual contact; Noelle and Luke kiss, briefly, after flirting at his party. Noelle, however, quickly retreats while Luke, like Stan in *Revenge*, continues to advance physically, disregarding both her physical and verbal rejections: she repeatedly utters 'no' as she attempts to escape his assault. The camera films from a sideline viewpoint, giving a view of both as Luke forces Noelle to the bed, quickly shifting its focus to a closeup shot of Noelle's face. It is a challenging image: she cries out and seems to become immobile, unable to verbally or physically oppose the rape. The camera rests closely on her face, its pained expression, and her upper body for several minutes. Experiencing the full duration of the rape, the focus on Noelle's pain throughout, affords an immediate level of empathy with her. The shot widens at points to include Luke's nude upper body and its violent thrusts. The soundscape of this scene is notable; as Noelle begins to panic at Luke's increasingly aggressive advances, the sound of their voices and surroundings is replaced by a blurring white noise. This

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<sup>17</sup> The Steubenville high school rape case took place in Ohio in 2012. A high school student was repeatedly sexually assaulted by male classmates, who documented the events and posted them in social media.

replicates the disorientation Noelle herself is feeling, giving the effect of blood pumping in one's ears. We identify with Noelle's sensorial perspective even when afforded the rapist's visual point of view. As Luke rapes her, the white noise remains, punctuated by the muffled interruptions of Luke grunting. As it ends, the natural sound of the scene returns. Luke leaves Noelle unable to move on the bed, sneering callously at her to 'put [her] clothes on'. When Noelle is able to move, she stumbles down the stairs back into the hubbub of the party, clearly distressed and disoriented. The attendees that see her seem to look on disapprovingly; although no words are exchanged, the atmosphere suggests that she has in some way disgraced herself.

The other instance of sexual violence depicted in the film comes after Noelle undertakes an internet search regarding rape at her university, discovering that a student was the victim of a group rape at a frat-house party. The rapists were not convicted and allowed to continue their studies. She watches a video clip taken by one of the men involved, showing a young woman passed out and partially nude while a cacophony of male voices cheer in the background. The rapists' handheld camera zooms in on the student's face, unresponsive, as she is assaulted. We watch from Noelle's point of view first, before moving to a mid-shot that focuses on her horrified face. We move between these two perspectives, and the handheld camera operator's. We watch the rape scene with Noelle, watch Noelle watch the rape scene, as well as being *in* the rape scene. It is a harrowing sequence, made hyper-realistic through the use of a phone camera perspective.<sup>18</sup> Resonances with the Steubenville case, and the material posted online that depicted it, are, as I have suggested, obvious. The film uses Steubenville as a paratext that reminds the viewer of the *realness* of campus sexual violence; that although *M.F.A* itself is a work of fiction, it is firmly grounded in real world events, connected to contemporary conversations about sexual violence. Although both depict sexual violence differently, it would be difficult to accuse either of the straightforward 'lascivious sadism' Clover critiques as being characteristic of rape-revenge (p. 139). The frat-house video is a slightly more troubling representation, at points viewing the victim-survivor literally through the rapist's camera lens, focusing on her partly exposed breasts; although she is clearly unresponsive and unable

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<sup>18</sup> The use of the phone footage as evidence is also present in *Promising Young Woman*, a primary text explored later in this thesis.

to consent, there appears to be little reason to represent such a harrowing visual image across several minutes. Both films are clearly concerned with how sexual violence is depicted, reflecting engagement with the ethics of representation. In attempting to find a solution to this potential sexualisation of rape, while retaining an overall feminist, pro-survivor politics, the victim's perspective is privileged over the rapist's. Instead, there is a victim-centric perspective with the horror and trauma of experiencing sexual violence consistently emphasised through symbolism in *Revenge*, and soundscape in *M.F.A.* *M.F.A.*'s rape scenes are obviously rooted in a specific discursive moment with regards to sexual violence, their depiction of campus rape culture placing it clearly in the contemporary US. *Revenge*'s, although less obviously geographically rooted, reflects the cultural tensions that have characterised French vs. American discourses on sexual violence.

### **Depicting women's violence**

As *Revenge* and *M.F.A.* are, after all, rape-revenge films, rape is not the only graphic violence depicted on screen. Both protagonists express their own capacities for brutality following their rapes, with each killing several men. In a tradition that can be seen early in rape-revenges like *I Spit*, the punishments frequently run parallel to the crime. Jen stabs Dimitri in the eye – his punishment for watching – and he is ultimately drowned, becoming engorged and disfigured; this engorgement replicates his 'stuffing' of himself with food as Jen is raped. Before Stan is shot dead, his foot is maimed by a glass trap set by Jen, leaving him with an open wound akin to her own. Richard's death comes only after he has been chased around his home, naked and vulnerable; Jen reaches into a bullet wound to literally pull out his insides. A symbolic violation, the resonances with Jen's experiences of sexual violence, and the men's pursuit of her following it, are clear. Although Luke's death in *M.F.A.* is an accident, there is something of an inevitability to it; the film begins with Noelle painting a blood-like spatter on her canvas. Further, her attack on rapist Mason – she drugs him and strips him naked at a college party, before suffocating him to death – is reflective of the filmed frat-house rape in which he partook. The women's violence existing as a reflection of the men's makes clear the films' allegiances to *lex talionis* as a structuring

force. This rule of law, that Alison Young describes as genre defining, attests ‘that once rape takes place, the world is out of kilter until vengeance is carried out by the victim’ (2010, p. 46). The fact that the women’s violence apparently follows a logical, structuring force clearly works to engender sympathy, presenting their choices as rational. Creed (1993) argues that the women avengers of rape-revenge films typically embody the figure of the *femme castratrice*: the castrating woman (not to be confused with Freud’s phallic woman) who, in her violence, draws out the relationship between sex and death. Notably, according to Creed, the *femme castratrice* ‘appears to win, not lose, audience sympathy’ (p. 469). As the films largely are focused through the protagonists’ perspectives, the audience share in a unified gaze that watches violence being enacted, affording a base level of spectatorial sympathy and connection. There is, then, an element of solidarity. We are encouraged to empathise with the women as victim-survivors, even if their violence seems extreme.

Jen’s eye-for-an-eye violence is by no means presented as uncomplicated. Although there is an undeniable satisfaction to be gained via the retaliatory, punitive nature of the film’s initial kills, particularly when the tables turn on the bumbling Dimitri, the representation of revenge slowly becomes less celebratory. Jen becomes irreversibly marked by her own violence, becoming obsessed by an all-consuming brutality. The final scene of *Revenge* is perhaps the film’s most punishing, a brutal cat-and-mouse game between Jen and Richard lasting nearly 20 minutes. At its conclusion, there is no sense of justice or fulfilment. The final shot – of Jen turning to face the villa and camera, emotionless, with Richard dead – implies an ambiguous relationship to the politics of transformation and empowerment. Liu (2018) proposes that it is in this moment of *Revenge* that the viewer is ‘confronted with the question of what self-definition can look like after such chaotic and uproarious violence; old systems can be torn down, but how does one start anew?’ Jen has successfully wielded her power, winning various battles, but is now left alone to pick up the pieces. Before she looks back one last time, she faces the desert, the stage of her trauma. These moments speak to the difficulty of enjoying justice or catharsis in a fundamentally unjust world. Male violence still exists beyond the desert’s boundaries; Jen, we might imagine, is poised for a lifetime of healing from this trauma. *M.F.A.*, too, ends ambivalently. Noelle’s roommate, who was raped by one of the men Noelle attacks, dies by suicide. The film

closes with Noelle's arrest after she gives a graduation speech about preserving life's beauty despite its brutality. In her chapter on *Baise-moi* and French rape-revenge, Emily Brick proposes that a final bleakness is uniquely French, that 'rape-revenge films of other national cinemas lack; the revenge is empty and destroys them [the protagonists]' (2012, p. 99). However, the proven prevalence of this ambivalence across recent rape-revenge films in numerous national contexts<sup>19</sup> calls the validity of this assertion into question. However, Brick's assertion that *Baise-moi*'s pessimism and tensions ground it firmly in the time and place it represents (2012, p. 101) is relevant for historicised readings of *Revenge* and *M.F.A.* As Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) argue, the economy of believability in the #MeToo moment is characterised by futility; so, too, are the two films here. Jen is left alone and Noelle is going to prison. Neither's revenge has satisfied them nor afforded them justice. Their stories are credible to the viewer, but at what cost? They therefore take their place in the chronology of the 2010s, and a long #MeToo moment characterised by futility and tension.

### **Locating feminisms in America and France**

In this chapter so far, *Revenge*'s status as a French film has somewhat been taken as a given – its primary spoken language is French, as is its director – but, in fact, characterising it thus is not an uncomplicated task. The location is nondescript (it was filmed in the Moroccan desert (fig 2.14), like many French films) and the actors are a mixture of French, Belgian and Italian in Euro-pudding style. Its cinematic references seem to be largely American – classic/canonical rape-revenges, but also dramas like Kubrick's *Lolita* – and, as described, American culture is present, focalised through Jen. Can *Revenge* therefore be seen as having particularly French concerns or, in other words, can it be defined through proximity to Frenchness? Fargeat has identified South Korean cinema as a primary influence on the film, further complicating the task of tracing a straightforward cultural lineage (Cills 2018). As a horror film, it occupies a fraught position within French film production; as Emmanuelle Ben Hadj explores in

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<sup>19</sup> See Heller-Nicholas (2011) and Henry (2014) for a breadth of transnational rape-revenge case studies.

her doctoral thesis on contemporary French horror, many French directors attempt to circumvent problems with the French production system by shooting in English (2021, p. 44). Horrors have typically been marginalised by the Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC), their perceived lack of intellectualism and auteur-ship inhibiting their access to funding and support. As suggested in the discussion of *Elle*, the question of a film's Frenchness in general is not as straightforward as often suggested; as Barker (2011) comments sarcastically that although "everyone knows" that French films have some typifying qualities', these qualities are frequently nebulous and contradictory (p. 145). Importantly, though, French films are typically considered to explore that which is 'hidden in other cinematic traditions, that French films are, being blunt, sexier, more explicit, less scared of nudity, eroticism, and some of the stranger forms of sexuality' (Barker 2011, p. 145) This idea is observable in Verhoeven's comments around the inability to make *Elle* in the United States (with France positioned as its moral opposite). *Revenge* does not shy away from the explicit, presenting both sexuality and violence with graphic precision but nor do rape-revenges generally; it is markedly more violent than *M.F.A.*, but it is difficult to argue this illustrates a cultural difference in a meaningful way. It has frequently been connected to the legacy of New French Extremity due to its graphic and unflinching depictions of violence (see Billson 2018; Ide 2018), but Fargeat claims these films 'didn't have a real influence' (Cills 2018).



**Figure 2.14** *Revenge's* desert is anonymous and vast

The conceit that French sexual culture is unique and governed by its own set of moral codes and practices, expressed clearly in *Elle* and its paratexts, is ambivalently presented in *Revenge*. The belief that American and French sexual cultures are irreconcilable is not expressed explicitly by characters in *Revenge*, but Jen's Americanness does mark her. Stan's impression of his innate *liberté d'importuner* and Jen's rejection of this is instructive. By no means is Jen the stereotypical prudish, puritanical American implied by the 100-women tribune; she is openly and unapologetically sexual, allowing herself to be 'bothered' by the men. Her American-ness becomes problematic only through the rape and her response to it. Her position as a cultural and linguistic Other to the French-speaking men of the film becomes of particular importance at this point. She doesn't speak the language and is thus excluded from the conversations that take place between the men in it – linguistic/cultural difference becomes synonymous with sexual difference. When Stan mocks her 'tiny little oyster brain', this seems pointedly related to both her gender and her nationality.

*M.F.A* is located much more obviously in North America on a college campus. Although it remains nameless, the campus is representative of the American universities characterised by sexually violent cultures. The campus as a site of endemic sexual violence, thus a microcosm of wider society, has generated a great deal of media and political attention. In her book on campus rape culture, Meredith Minister proposes that 'we might read recent national attention to it by legislators and administrators on college campuses as an attempt to center whiteness, youth, and/or middle-upper-classness' (2018, xiv). This issue has been the most pronounced in the American context, from which the most high-profile cases have emerged. Chanel Miller's 2019 memoir *Know My Name*, which narrates her experience of being raped by Stanford athlete Brock Turner, was a resounding critical and commercial success following sustained media and public focus on the case; Miller is not white, which calls into question the comprehensiveness of Minister's assertion. The campus is ubiquitous in American culture and cultural production; it is, arguably, an essentially American symbol and linked clearly with the history of cinema. Campus culture has consistently garnered attention from across the political spectrum; it has oft been positioned as a locus of progressive politics, engendering criticism from 1990s commentators like

Paglia and Roiphe and, more recently, from ‘anti-woke’ commentators (which, again, include Paglia and Roiphe) decrying the existence of trigger warnings and supposed ‘safe spaces’ (see Bloomgarden-Smoke 2016; Gauthier 2016). Issues of sexual violence have frequently taken precedence in this commentary. Minister proposes that the University is an especially fertile ground for conversations about sexual violence because ‘predominance of rape culture in these spaces challenges educational narratives about the power of learning and the potential of education to produce not only skilled workers but also moral citizens’ (2018, p. 51). The campus as setting has clear referential value in the long #MeToo moment, bringing to mind lynchpin media events like Turner’s 2015 trial and Sulkowicz’s *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)* (2014-15) at Columbia.

*M.F.A*’s Americanness, beyond the accents and actors (the director is Brazilian), is intrinsically tied to its depiction of the college campus and the rape culture within. Beyond the evident ineptitude of institutional structures at preventing (and responding to complaints of) sexual violence, the activities and attitudes of campus feminists are placed under the microscope. Like campus rape culture, campus feminists are obviously not an exclusively North American phenomenon – they have, however, become attached with the American context most prominently. Commentators like Roiphe and Paglia have frequently taken campus feminists as their target, the latter characterising many as ‘grievance oriented’ (Daley 2015). Campus feminists may also be associated with the long #MeToo moment – Vanessa Grigoriadis (2017) argues that American campus feminists in the Obama years were harbingers of #MeToo.<sup>20</sup> *The Hunting Ground* (2015, dir. Kirby Dick), a documentary on rape culture on college campuses, can also be seen as part of a long #MeToo in media. After her rape, Noelle attends a feminist society meeting, keen to talk practical solutions to sexual violence on campus. She is angry, primed for radical action; the other attendees simply want to discuss their upcoming bake sale. The group are characterised by their ineptitude, their apparent flippancy in the face of insurmountable violence; they focus on foreign issues men’s violence against women in Brazil, creating the hashtag

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<sup>20</sup> The title of Grigoriadis’s book, *Blurred Lines: Rethinking Sex, Power, and Consent on Campus*, is a nod to *Blurred Lines* (2013) by Robin Thicke. The song was criticised for lyrics seen to indulge rape myths and misogyny, and was banned on several university campuses after lobbying by student groups. This event, in its mediatised version, was a key feature of a 2010s characterised by media discourse on sexual violence.

#RioHeroes, rather than the local violence around campus. When Noelle expresses a desire for vengeance, they collectively cringe at the idea of retributive violence (fig 2.15). This places the campus feminists in an equivalent moral position to the police within the film, both insisting upon a legally mandated form of justice. The alliance of feminist interests regarding sexual violence with state ones is illustrated by Bumiller, who describes how ‘an explicit or implicit reliance on the coercive power of government to ensure women’s safety’ has come to characterise feminism in the neoliberal context (2008, p. 2). Noelle’s role as solo-avenger is initially juxtaposed to a collective, coordinated response. However, her lack of catharsis and ultimate failure to access legal justice in this isolated position poses a crucial question about how successful any individual might be at preventing sexual violence. In this respect, *M.F.A* articulates critiques of liberal feminism. A further connected criticism lies in the representation of the groups’ interest in othered, Brazilian rapists rather than those on their campus. campus activism and (neo)liberal feminism more widely. That *M.F.A* ends with Noelle being arrested at her graduation also draws up critiques of carceral feminism. The inequities of the criminal justice system are laid bare – at the conclusion, there is justice for nobody.



**Figure 2.15** Noelle is frustrated by the tone of a feminist society meeting, wearing muted colours to their lighter and warmer shades

*Revenge*’s dealings with feminism are less immediately obvious – certainly, there are no feminist societies or institutional coverups. Jen is totally alone and begins,

in some respects, as what Liu (2018) describes as ‘an image plucked from a feminist’s nightmare’. She remains barely clothed throughout, the camera frequently lingering on her exposed body. She is in a relationship with a married man and expresses few opinions of substance. In fact, the audience knows markedly little about her other than her desire to be ‘discovered’ in L.A. We have virtually no access to her inner life; Fargeat comments that she purposefully depicted Jen as ‘being kind of weak and empty’ at the film’s beginning (Cills 2018). Her choice to embody a stereotypical form of femininity draws up questions about the limits of the ‘empowerment’ discourse popular in neoliberal feminism; is she really empowered by the choices she makes, or left empty by them? Her mental and physical strength following the rape, however, is clearly set out to subvert initial expectations. However, as Liu (2018) deftly describes, she lacks choice here, too, and ‘her violence is inflicted out of bare necessity; her narrative remains ultimately driven by the actions of men, and the triumphalism of her bloody rampage is qualified by the film’s nod to her desperate situation’. In *Revenge*, women’s choices are severely limited by the constraints of patriarchy – its effects are omnipresent. In this sense, the film presents a futile outlook on gendered domination and how it might be challenged, linking it to Banet-Weiser and Higgins’ (2023) conceptualisation of the #MeToo moment.

### **Conclusion: Setting the stage for #MeToo and the 100-women tribune**

I had initially considered *Revenge* and *M.F.A* cultural mirrors. Further consideration called this conceptualisation into question – although both were released in the same year and are genre texts with women directors, they deal with clearly separate cultural contexts and issues surrounding sexual violence. They share, however, in their dense intertextuality and therefore in their position as revisionist rape-revenge films. *Revenge* uses a classic, non-urban rape-revenge setting to explore ideas about male complicity, whereas *M.F.A*’s university setting reaches out clearly to a contemporary moment. A historicist understanding requires considering texts as articulations of contemporary political discourses, both mainstream and feminist (to be sure, there are feminist discourses, namely neoliberal ones, that have become mainstream). Although both films were positioned as feminist takes on the rape-revenge formula, they in fact

negotiate with both feminist and reactionary cinematic histories. Of particular interest is the dealings with place in both; cultural location has taken on particular resonance throughout #MeToo, with many commenting on its overwhelming Americanness. This issue, however, stretches back much further than #MeToo – there has been consistent scholarship focusing on the differences between French and Anglo-American approaches to theorising about gender, feminism and, in turn, sexual violence. In her influential study, Toril Moi outlines that French feminism’s ‘heavy intellectual profile’ and focus on psychoanalysis has insisted it has had relatively limited influence beyond the Francophone world (2002, p. 94).

*Elle* holds contemporary feminism in implicit suspicion in a way that is different from *Revenge* and particularly *M.F.A.*, which instead targets a specific form that it views as futile. There are persistent mythologies that attach Frenchness to anti-feminism (which is seen as Anglo-American); this is palpable in responses to *Elle* (see Pettey 2019). *Revenge* notably articulates its feminist politics through its American protagonist, with Frenchness almost secondary. *Revenge*’s ambivalent ending is less essentially French, as Brick (2012) argues these rape-revenge endings are. Instead, it is more obviously a feminist articulation of the ongoing trauma of being a woman victim-survivor in a patriarchal world, and a rape culture that transcends national borders. *M.F.A.*’s cynical conclusion reflects, too, the slippery nature of justice when it comes to sexual violence. The marrying of Frenchness to a hostility to contemporary feminism, expressed by Verhoeven and in the 100-women tribune, is not straightforwardly present in the films. Even in cases where ‘victim feminism’ is treated with suspicion, implicitly feminist ideas about rape, men’s violence against women (eg. that it is normative) and gender are communicated. *Elle* mostly deals with feminism implicitly, *M.F.A.* rendering it explicitly and *Revenge* somewhere in between. What they all share is a reflection of a cultural moment that treats feminism as both a site of ‘empowerment’ and suspicion; that sees it as discursively linked with sexual violence. They exist in a moment where, per Banet-Weiser (2018), popular feminism is intertwined with popular misogyny. The films here represent this within their narratives and, especially in *Elle*, their paratexts.

All three films express closeness to discourse associated with the #MeToo moment and its backlash; that they all pre-date #MeToo undermines any claims to

newness on its part. To therefore argue that the films merely anticipate #MeToo overstates its primacy in kickstarting a particular moment – they draw upon the same histories and tensions that #MeToo did. Although #MeToo has highlighted, through the 100-women tribune for example, supposed differences between French and Anglo-American sexual cultures, these ideas were pre-existing. They are exemplary of the long #MeToo as it existed in film particularly. All three films explore prudent issues around gender and sexual violence that have a certain contemporary significance, but are not novel representations. They not only sit amongst rape-revenge and film noir histories but feminist ones, and are suggestive of the fact that contemporary discourse around sexual violence and representation consistently harks back to the past. Cultural production in the period closely leading up to #MeToo tells a story about #MeToo itself, suggestive of the fact that discourse was evolving pre-Milano. *Elle*, *M.F.A* and *Revenge* are therefore cultural symbols of the longer moment, expressing ideas about sexual violence, feminism and cultural difference that would come to discursive dominance post-October 2017. The following chapter will move to consider films that approached #MeToo head on, and what changed in response to this stabler referent.



## Chapter 3: #MeToo-adjacent cinema

### Introducing #MeToo-adjacent cinema

This chapter will focus on what I describe as #MeToo-adjacent cinema, that is films that are inextricably connected to the mediatised concerns of #MeToo and of the cultural moment of mass disclosure which characterised it. The presumption in these films is that audiences have the ability to identify the iconographies and discursive elements of #MeToo, and are expected to position texts in their contemporary cultural context. Therefore unsurprisingly, #MeToo-adjacent films rarely refer to the moment by name. The analyses that follow here will pay close attention to how this cultural context is represented: what types of narratives about violence and speaking out about it are articulated, and how do the films make sense of their own place within #MeToo? This section will have one obvious gap, in the clear absence of French cinema. It is distinctly American. Although France obviously had its own reckoning with #MeToo (or #BalanceTonPorc), there have been fewer direct cinematic responses to the moment. There has been an adaptation of Karine Tuil's novel *Les choses humaines* (2021, dir. Yvan Attal), which constitutes the first example of #MeToo-adjacent cinema in France, but it has not had a UK or US release. In this sense, it has not yet been absorbed into the implicitly Anglo-American canon of #MeToo media, despite starring a recognisable figure in Charlotte Gainsbourg.

Drawing the boundaries of what constitutes #MeToo-adjacent cinema is not a particularly straightforward task due to #MeToo's nebulously defined characteristics. It would be easy to designate any number of films released in the past 6 years, set in the contemporary moment and containing representations of sexual violence as being #MeToo-adjacent. Our cultural context for discussing sexual violence in this period has been consistently imbued with the grammar of #MeToo, especially in the media. However, my use of #MeToo-adjacent cinema describes something decidedly more specific: films that respond to #MeToo by explicitly mobilising its iconographies and discourses. In this chapter, I will suggest that characterisation in #MeToo-adjacent cinema relies on a number of archetypes that were prevalent throughout #MeToo as discourse – trailblazers, all-powerful abusers and complicit men and women. In addition to these characters, #MeToo-adjacent cinema is largely concerned with

speaking out about violence and abuse, as well as the impacts of this silence breaking. Of significance in this respect will also be the presence of ‘firsts’ and claims to primacy that populate #MeToo-adjacent narratives and their paratexts. Here, the critical responses to #MeToo-adjacent cinema, that have frequently suggested and solidified the relationship between the films and #MeToo are also important. The films in this chapter have as their backdrops workplaces (particularly those within media industries) and university campuses, both positioned as important sites of abuse and gendered imbalance throughout #MeToo.

The three films identified here are key examples of #MeToo-adjacent films in English language: *Bombshell* (2019, dir. Jay Roach), *The Assistant* (2019, dir. Kitty Green) and *Promising Young Woman* (2020, dir. Emerald Fennell). Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) agree that these are prominent examples of #MeToo media. There is one notable absence here in *She Said* (2022, dir. Maria Schrader). *She Said*, which shares a star with *Promising Young Woman* in Carey Mulligan, is an adaptation of Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey’s book of the same name. It follows Kantor (Mulligan) and Twohey’s (Zoe Kazan) investigation into Weinstein (Mike Houston) for the *New York Times*, thus might seem an obvious candidate for inclusion here. However, due to its status as adaptation, its late arrival in the context of this thesis, and its lack of focus on victim-survivor narrative, it does not appear here. Future research may consider if *She Said* can be considered a straightforward ‘#MeToo film’ rather than #MeToo-adjacent. The majority of #MeToo-adjacent films have thus far been American, with two examples, *Bombshell* and *Promising Young Woman*, emerging from Hollywood and an indie production in *The Assistant*. Hollywood’s relationship with #MeToo is, of course, multifaceted: it was at the epicentre of some of the most high-profile disclosures of the moment, while also being the site of the most well-known artistic responses to it. As McElroy comments, Hollywood has been ‘ingenious in learning how to exploit even its sins’ (2020, p. 1), utilising its own channels to expose the abuses that took place within its own culture. For McElroy, these cinematic responses to #MeToo work as ‘superficial “demystifications” of the industry’s past abuses’ that ‘perform showy and lucrative mea culpas, they facilitate protracted displays of the industry’s time-honoured specialty: the humiliation of its female stars’ (ibid.). While misogyny and sexual violence remain rife, #MeToo-adjacent Hollywood

releases appear a cynical attempt at foregoing responsibility while still replicating on screen those patterns of gendered subjugation which informed the abuses exposed by #MeToo. However, beyond Hollywood, the films' relationship to both the awards circuit (*Bombshell* and *Promising Young Woman*) and the festival circuit (*The Assistant*) means all are connected on a meta level by one figure: Weinstein. Weinstein's omnipresence in both spheres means the three films are fundamentally connected to, and in conversation with, his legacy. All three therefore speak through and to Weinstein's influence on media industries, despite his non-appearance in the films. The first section of the chapter will consider *Bombshell*, the only film of the three that recounts real-life events in Roger Ailes's abuse of women at *Fox News*. I examine its relationship to #MeToo primarily through its representation of trailblazing, speaking out and (anti)solidarity, as well as complicity. Although the abuse predates #MeToo chronologically, *Bombshell*'s release context placed it in dialogue with the moment. Moving from *Fox News* to film, *The Assistant* is the focus of the second section. Analyses of complicity and solidarity will continue here, with close attention paid to the representation of power structures and workplace dynamics. The final section moves to the campus, taking as its subject *Promising Young Woman*, perhaps the text which most obviously articulates feminist discourses. Of consideration here will be the complicated position feminism occupies when it comes to complicity and gender, justice and the representation of violence. Ultimately, this chapter will explore what #MeToo-adjacent films have to say about sexual violence – through their engagements with speaking out, their representation of victim-survivors and perpetrators – in the contemporary moment, interrogating the role #MeToo plays as a cultural backdrop to these narratives.

### ***Bombshell* (2019) and the #MeToo moment**

*Bombshell*, its name derived from the 'blonde bombshells' at the narrative centre as well as the 'bombshell' allegations levelled against long time Fox chairman and CEO Roger Ailes, was released 3 years after the actual events of the film. In July 2016, former Fox anchor Gretchen Carlson filed a sexual harassment lawsuit against Ailes; two years earlier, Gabriel Sherman alleged in his 2014 book, *The Loudest Voice In The*

*Room: How The Brilliant, Bombastic Roger Ailes Built Fox News – and Divided a Country*, that in the 1980s Ailes offered a producer a raise on the condition she have sex with him. Carlson’s complaint sparked a deluge of similar accusations from current and former Ailes employees, including his one-time protégée Megyn Kelly. The complaints ultimately resulted in Ailes’s resignation. He went on to become an advisor to Donald Trump’s presidential campaign before his death in 2017. It is important to note the significance of Sherman’s book, and the resulting Showtime miniseries *The Loudest Voice* (2019), in underscoring *Bombshell’s* cultural context; the three narratives are fundamentally in conversation. However, the casting of Ailes in *Bombshell* and *The Loudest Voice* betrays the difference in narrative focus between them: Russell Crowe, inarguably the bigger star and associated inextricably with film, plays Ailes in *The Loudest Voice* with John Lithgow taking the role in *Bombshell*. Lithgow is eclipsed in terms of celebrity by Charlize Theron, Nicole Kidman and Margot Robbie in *Bombshell*, insisting this is a narrative focused on women as opposed to *The Loudest Voice’s* focus on Ailes. All three narratives – from the page to the screen – have ultimately worked to create a residing image of Ailes in the popular imaginary: imposing, stubborn, and larger than life in demeanour and physicality.

Categorising *Bombshell* as a #MeToo-adjacent film is partly informed by media and critical responses which emphasised its relationship to the #MeToo moment. Although the Ailes/Fox case occurred prior to #MeToo as hashtag, it took place in the context of a wider cultural moment that began prior to October 2017, as described in the previous chapter. *Bombshell*, and the events depicted within it, are placed in a culturally specific relationship with feminism and sexual violence. A number of mainstream reviews utilise the term #MeToo and references to the 'movement' in their discussion of *Bombshell*, with Rebecca Keegan (2019) for *Hollywood Reporter* describing it as ‘the first major film inspired by the #MeToo movement’ (see also Gray 2019; Harris 2019; Aguirre 2020). Similarly, Sangeeta Singh-Kurtz (2019) approximates in *Quartz* that ‘*Bombshell* might be the first great film about the Me Too movement’. Singh-Kurtz’s use of ‘Me Too’ rather than #MeToo here is notable in its conflation of the activist movement with the cultural moment, and works to suggest that *Bombshell* might in and of itself be activist work in a movement against sexual violence. These assertions are also significant in that they denote

*Bombshell* as ‘trailblazing’ in some respect – an important component of the mediatised #MeToo. Although the film's relationship to #MeToo is obvious due to the real-world events it depicts, the language employed in its reviews further cements its status as a central text in this developing micro-genre.

In order to ascertain how closely *Bombshell* aligns with other #MeToo-adjacent films *and* discourses, an analysis of *Bombshell's* characters and the archetypes they represent is an important initial task. In defining #MeToo-adjacent cinema, I have suggested that ‘archetypical’ characters – those representative of the focal mediatised subjects of #MeToo – are of crucial importance in orientating narratives towards this moment. There are resonances between the film’s protagonists (and their real-world counterparts) and the ‘stars’ of the media drama of #MeToo. The central action of the film revolves around Megyn Kelly (Charlize Theron) and Gretchen Carlson (Nicole Kidman); we are alerted to Kelly's significance in the film's opening scene, which shows the anchor reporting on Donald Trump's ex-wife's allegations of sexual violation. In the voiceover that follows, she narrates the controversial history of Fox and Roger Ailes before inviting the viewer to agree that 'if there's one thing you know about me, it's that I've got a big mouth'. The camera then follows Kelly as she moves through the chaos of the newsroom and Fox offices radiating importance and seniority, playing the role of the viewer's tour guide. A continuous shot insists that the viewer moves with Kelly as she traverses this chaos – as she addresses the camera directly, one has the sense that they are interviewing her for a documentary film of which she is the star. Theron's performance, her likeness to Kelly, similarly contributes to this documentary feel. Prosthetics were used to enhance her jawline, and she claims to have lost her voice for three weeks in the process of learning to replicate Kelly's distinctive alto tone (Keegan 2019). As she walks with intention through the newsroom, we already have the sense that this is a woman who forges her own path: a trailblazer. She is in control, of her life, of her career, and of the camera. Throughout the film, Kelly's oscillating grasp on this control is narratively integral – she loses it, compromises it and, ultimately, regains it. However, she remains characteristically headstrong. She is #MeToo’s ideal woman subject: independent, resilient, and able to ‘survive’ difficult experiences.

Kelly's story functions as one of the film's three central narratives, with the two others following Gretchen Carlson and Kayla Pospisil who have been similarly sexually harassed by Ailes. Carlson begins the film on the outs, having been 'demoted' from Fox's primetime slot to a 'dead zone' programme, and in direct conflict with Ailes due to her tendency to 'speak out' about women's issues and her colleagues' on-air sexism. The first shot of Carlson is suggestive of her tenuous position in the organisation; she is presented to the viewer in her lawyer's office, watching a montage of clips in which her co-anchors make sexist jokes and comments while she feebly attempts to push back. Like Kelly, Carlson breaks the fourth wall at various points, perhaps most significantly in the film's final scene. She delivers a brief monologue in her lawyer's office, triumphant after her 'defeat' of Ailes (he has been fired) and an apology from Fox. She muses that 'even women' can be sceptical about claims of sexual harassment, that is until it happens to them or to someone they know. Her gaze lingers directly on the camera as she asks the viewer to 'let me be that [someone] for you', a request that at once fuses a personal, intimate focus with that of the collective. This follows Clotilde Leguil's assertion that #MeToo's discursive power lies in its ability to connect subjective experiences to a wider collective political narrative (Leguil in Daumas, 2021). Carlson's individual victory here is thus posited being able to resonate with *all* women, *all* victims of sexual violence – her request encourages a movement from the 'me' of her personal experience (and triumph) to the 'you' of the viewers' lives.

Phipps posits that white women are frequently able to assume the default position of speaking for all women, allowed to speak 'universally on behalf of her gender, to the further particularization and epistemic marginalization of Black and Indigenous women, women from outside the West, and women who experience other intersecting forms of oppression' (2020, p. 4). Carlson is positioned as being able to relate to every woman, despite the fact not all women experience sexual violence identically, with experiences inflected by race, class, ability and sexuality.<sup>21</sup> This utterance also assumes the viewer requires a figurehead to relate to, and that Carlson

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<sup>21</sup> This critique can also be levelled at Carlson's book, *Be Fierce: Stop Harassment and Take Your Power Back* (2017). In it, she frequently asserts her individual power and strength; this, implicitly, should inspire any and *all* women. She assumes a universalised role that elides differences in race or class.

can function as the one story that allows you to see truth in claims of sexual harassment in the future. The implication that the viewer will be privy to similar stories in the future is obvious here, situating the film firmly within the #MeToo moment of mass disclosure. Carlson, like Kelly, occupies the role of trailblazer within the film; she, like the women of the 2017 *TIME* cover, is a silence breaker. Both Kelly and Carlson have continued to promote, and capitalise on, this version of themselves, both publishing books in which they advise women how to more ‘powerful’, taking control both in the workplace and in their interpersonal relationships. Carlson’s directly references her experience at Fox, entitled *Be Fierce: Stop Harassment and Take Your Power Back* (2017) whereas Kelly opts for the nominally empowering *Settle for More* (2016). Kelly and Carlson get to keep their position as ‘strong women’ through the relative non-representation of their abuse in the film. There is a narrative reluctance to present them as vulnerable.

The third narrative follows Fox ‘new girl’, Kayla Pospisil. Unlike Kelly and Carlson, Pospisil does not have a real-world referent, her narrative instead constructed from testimony gained through several affidavits accessed by *Bombshell*’s writers (Keegan 2019). She is a self-described ‘millennial Evangelical’ and ‘influencer in the Jesus space’. Our first encounter with her comes as she receives a dressing down for screening an image of Don Henley instead of Glenn Frey on a news report. As her superiors fume incredulously, she responds ‘I don’t know secular music’. Like Kelly and Carlson, Pospisil is blonde, thin and well-polished; she is conservative and a true believer in Fox’s mission, despite her apparent latent lesbianism (she sleeps with secret office Democrat, Kate McKinnon’s Jess). It is important to develop why the women’s identities are worthy of comment. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins suggest, the ‘economy of believability’ is inextricably linked with both representation and the #MeToo context due to the question of who to believe being a ‘heated point of cultural contention’ (2021, p. 2). Banet-Weiser and Higgins posit that the economy of believability,

emerges as a product of labor and resources, which tend to exist in an inverse relationship to one another: the more resources a subject already possesses

(including but not limited to various intersecting forms of social, cultural and economic capital, and structural privileges stemming from gender, race, class, etc.) the less labor required to secure access to believability through this economy, and vice versa (ibid p. 4).

Pospisil's access to these resources, particularly in terms of social and cultural capital, is not as plentiful as Kelly and Carlson's. However, all three possess power in terms of race and class, despite being marginalised through their gender, with their ability to be believed bound up in their position within race and class power structures.

Of particular significance when considering the film's engagements with believability is the fact Pospisil's abusive encounter with Ailes is the only one fully played out on screen; Ailes's abuse of Carlson is not explicitly represented, and his harassment of Kelly is introduced through flashback but not followed through to its end point. Notably, Pospisil's is the only one that did not actually occur. The relative lack of representation of Kelly and Carlson's abuse works in their favour within the logic of the film, ultimately positioning them as credible victims. They are not imprinted too obviously by traumatic experience that might compromise their believability. Similarly, there is a lack of representation of their speaking out directly about this violence. This representational silence, as Boyle (2020) points out in her blog on the film, means they are credible because 'we don't *hear* them speaking out, in a film that is ostensibly *about* them speaking out'. This is illustrative of Jordan's credibility conundrum (2004): if we were to hear them explicitly speak, their relationship with belief would be compromised within this fraught economy. In *Bombshell*, the visual representation of Pospisil's abuse ensures that which happened to the other women need not be represented – this, of course, would insist they be placed in a fraught position, a conundrum, with regards to credibility.

Pospisil is ambitious, seeking a promotion from Carlson's 'dead-end' show to Bill O'Reilly's staff. She is initially reluctant to speak up after Ailes sexually harasses her in his office, although she does tell Jess, whose response is a demand to 'keep her out of it'. This response depicts Jess as somewhat complicit despite her supposedly progressive values and, importantly, seems to frighten Kayla into silence. She is encouraged to break her silence by Kelly, who is obviously an inspiration to her; with

the support of an influential figure, she feels empowered to make an official complaint against Ailes. This relationship clearly has the potential to reflect the importance of solidarity and support networks when it comes to publicly disclosing instances of abuse. However, the concept of solidarity is never fully developed between the women, the focus instead on the individualised elements of each of their stories – their narratives are parallel, rather than innately connected. There are other women involved in accusing Ailes. They are named, and quotes about their experiences with Ailes are spliced and layered over each other in a brief scene, but this is explored no further, and the women's backstories are not elucidated. There is, then, the suggestion that the utility of speaking out relies on solidarity, the voices of a collective. However, the voices of some are given a priority – there is a hierarchy of speech. We do not see Kelly, Carlson, Pospisil or the other accusers form networks of support or solidarity. The individual story is privileged. The three women appear together in a scene only once; they silently share a silent elevator ride. This shot was used across the film's marketing (fig 3.1), somewhat misleadingly implying that *Bombshell* was a story about 'sisterhood'.



**Figure 3.1 Kelly, Carlson and Pospisil share their sole scene together**

At points, *Bombshell* is directly antagonistic to the concept of solidarity. After Kelly reveals her own experience with Ailes to Pospisil, the latter responds with anger, asking 'did you think what your [initial] silence would mean, for the rest of us?' suggesting that Kelly – a victim herself – is responsible for Ailes's continued abuse. There is, here, a preclusion of solidarity between victims. The focus on individual

narratives sits in tension with one of #MeToo's crucial rhetorical aims: fostering connections between those who have experienced abuse or violence. Solidarity between women in Fox is presented as virtually non-existent. 'Complicit women', characters represented as uncritically invested in maintaining patriarchal structures and condoning sexist behaviours (Bree Condon's Kimberly Guilfoyle in her "I support Roger" t-shirt, and Ailes's credulous wife Beth), are a key site through which this lack of solidarity are expressed. Women within Fox are largely united in silence over Ailes's behaviour; when Pospisil is about to enter his office for the first time (where he proceeds to harass her), his executive assistant closes the door slowly and uneasily behind her. This moment of silent trepidation expresses a great deal about her knowledge of the ongoing abuse.

Susan Estrich (Alison Janney), who acted as Ailes's legal counsel, is emblematic of the complex nature of women's complicity. Estrich's history of producing feminist legal scholarship on sexual violence (primarily in *Real Rape*, which is discussed in the literature review of this thesis) renders her especially remarkable. In her first scene with Ailes, she comments that because she has worked on many cases 'like this' but usually on the side of women, she is reluctant to make a spectacle of sexual violence. Without knowing more about her background, Estrich's character's relationship with feminism seems ambivalent. She seems to take sexual violence somewhat seriously, but stops short of 'believing women' until she is presented with the evidence of Carlson's recordings of Ailes. Estrich's character renders a 'complicit woman' character with nuance. The trope of the complicit woman can flatten the distinction between individual actors and their motivations, making complex subjects reduceable to a singular archetype. Janney's casting as Estrich illustrates a notable casting dynamic throughout *Bombshell*. Janney is known for her progressive views, as a vocal proponent of LGBT+ and women's rights. Similarly, Charlize Theron and Nicole Kidman are involved in activism around ending men's violence against women: Theron was involved in anti-rape campaigns in South Africa, and Kidman testified in front of United States House of Representatives committee in support of the International Violence Against Women Act in 2009. Casting actors with these backgrounds insists the characters are oriented towards feminism through those who play them, even when the narrative pushes them away from it.

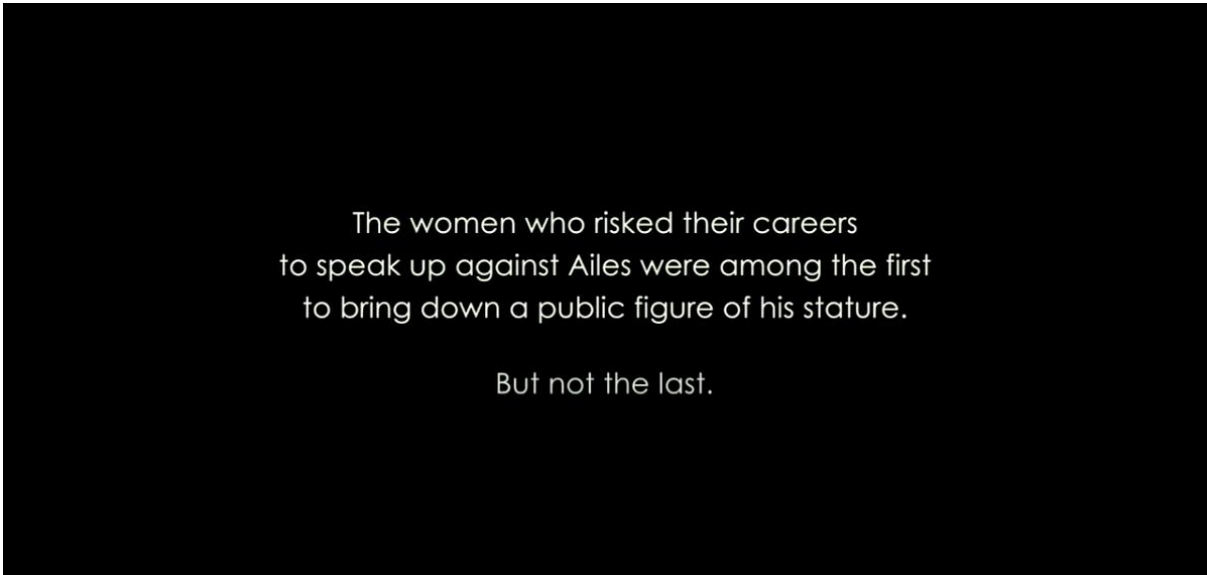
Like Estrich, Ailes, as the film's primary antagonist, is not uncomplicated. He is outwardly misogynistic and homophobic – in the first scene, he questions the validity of a rape complaint, then comments mockingly of Rupert Murdoch's son James, 'tell me those lips haven't sucked cock'. Despite this, he is not presented as straightforwardly disagreeable throughout, sympathetically supporting Kelly following media attacks by Trump. This reflects the fact that perpetrators of violence are rarely *always* violent and abusive. Ailes is married, and his relationship with his wife Beth is presented as genuinely loving and supportive. This is in line with the feminist assertion that perpetrators of violence are typically ordinary men with families, often in good social standing. Ailes is not depicted as deviant, and importantly does not think of himself as such. This corresponds with RW Connell's (2005) argument that although not all men commit violence, those that do are unlikely to consider themselves deviant because the cultural scripts that allow this behaviour are already in place. Confronting Kelly about her complaint, a woman colleague pointedly asks 'does Roger want us? Of course. He's a man! (...) We benefit from that kind of attention'. Ailes's behaviour is always-already legitimised and acceptable because he is a man in a societal context of gendered imbalance, where men's active sexuality in opposition to women's passive (a)sexuality and supposed need for 'release' is privileged within the gendered economy of sex (Gavey 2018, p. 98). It is noteworthy that in an interview regarding *Bombshell*, Julie Zann (a victim of Ailes who does not appear in the film) states that 'you [the filmmakers] really let Roger off easy' (Zann in Strause, 2020), suggesting that Ailes is presented overly sympathetically.

An obsession with looks – his own and those of others – is central to Ailes's character. He self-describes as 'old, fat and ugly' (this likely based on his comment to a reporter in 2011 that his detractors perceived him as 'paranoid, right-wing, fat' (Sherman 2014, p. 9)) but, as Kelly notes, is looks-obsessed when it comes to the women of Fox. He screams at staff to alter the camera angle to show an anchor's legs and is known for asking women staff to 'twirl' and hitch up their dresses in his office. *Bombshell* encourages its audience to see Ailes in a specific way: lecherous and creepy, the 'type' of man prone to abuse. Fatness is of crucial importance in this construction of Ailes, connecting him with Weinstein in terms of their media

representations. The relationship between weight and the ability for one to be recognisable as abuser is not straightforward; as Boyle (2020) posits, it works in contradictory ways, at once engendering disgust and sympathy. The focus on appearance betrays several troubling assertions: firstly, that there is a dichotomy between aberrant men (who are identifiable by how they look) and ‘normal’ ones and, secondly, that those who enact violence against women are in some way aberrant. Boyle describes how Weinstein’s ‘aesthetic “otherness” in the groomed world of Hollywood was something which made him easier to mark as monstrous’ (2019, p. 117). It is important to keep Hollywood and entertainment industry contexts in mind when thinking about how Ailes and Weinstein were represented as outsiders to a polished, glamorous world. Ultimately, this rendering soothes anxieties within these spheres, suggesting that these men were outliers; they were, fundamentally, not like *us*. Weinstein features as something of a main character in the media story of #MeToo, a uniquely powerful and dangerous subject. In *Bombshell*, Ailes functions similarly, and also as the archetypal abuser of #MeToo: an all-powerful, seemingly unbreakable monster. Narratives that focus on a few, select ‘stars of the show’ have the effect of exceptionalising these specific stories and removing them from their structural causes and contexts. *Bombshell*’s nearly exclusive focus on Ailes works to localise the issue to Fox, marking it out as especially abusive workplace environment rather than a representative one. The fact that Bill O’Reilly’s firing from Fox on similar grounds<sup>22</sup> is virtually absent from the film is instructive in this respect.

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<sup>22</sup> Bill O’Reilly’s employment with Fox was terminated in 2017. It was reported that O’Reilly and Fox had settled sexual harassment lawsuits with five women (Steel and Schmidt 2017).



The women who risked their careers  
to speak up against Ailes were among the first  
to bring down a public figure of his stature.

But not the last.

**Figure 3.2 *Bombshell*'s end credit notice**

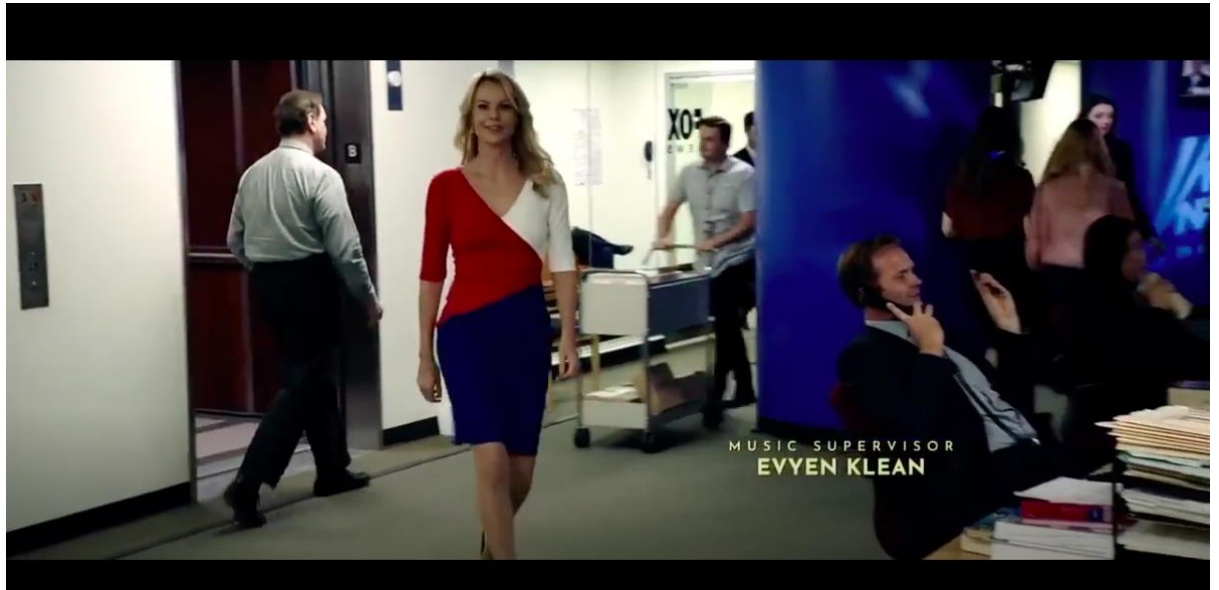
*Bombshell* closes with an end credits notice (fig 3.2) that reads '[t]he women who risked their careers to speak up against Ailes were among the first to bring down a public figure of his stature. But not the last.' It is a sober black and white to the film's generally colourful palette; this is an important public announcement. As it appears on the screen, Regina Spektor's 'One Little Soldier' plays. The lyrics open:

Did you think you'd get to run the world forever?  
Little soldiers fighting loyal by your side  
That you'd get to play the role of grand commander  
Never questioning your motives or your pride (Spektor 2019)

Ailes, clearly, is the grand commander. The use of real-world narratives and characters works to assert, as Horeck posits in her reading of *The Accused* (1998), the 'historical truth of the story that has just been depicted but more than that, it presents the film as a kind of memorial to all rape victims' (2004, p. 95). Although the film's characters likely would not define themselves as rape victims, they are victims of harassment and abuse. The film credits their bravery in speaking out while suggesting that many more victims will be encouraged to follow suit. There is another parallel with *The Accused* in that *Bombshell* functions as what Horeck calls the cinema of 'social consciousness'

(ibid.) Both films express a crucial tenet of this socially conscious cinema, that ‘films about social problems help solve these problems’ (Jones 1989, p. 76). This closing note implies that films of *Bombshell*’s nature do important work in changing attitudes about abuse and, as well as this, set the stage for further activism in this area. The viewer is given the opportunity to make sense of the wider cultural moment through the lens of a singular, coherent story and, crucially, to educate themselves about sexual violence.

Although *Bombshell* engages on some level with contemporary feminist discourse around sexual violence, the tension between feminism and the women characters’ conservatism is palpable throughout, at points echoing many of #MeToo’s key political problematics. In the film’s first shot of Kelly, she is wearing a red, white and blue dress (fig 3.3), expressing her staunch American nationalism. Carlson first appears being watched on TV by Ailes in his office, in a segment where she decries Americans’ increasing acceptance of ‘socialism’. Despite consistent sketching of both as conservative women, Kelly and Carlson are accused by colleagues and bosses of promoting a feminist agenda. This is positioned as fundamentally antithetical to Fox’s values, even prior to their reporting of Ailes’s misconduct; Kelly is forced to apologise by the network for her pointed questioning of then presidential candidate Donald Trump on his misogynistic attitudes, whereas Carlson is harangued by Ailes for her decision to go make-up free on air: ‘nobody wants to watch a middle-aged woman sweat her way through the menopause’. When Kelly argues with Ailes that Trump lawyer Michael Cohen’s claim that a man cannot rape his spouse ‘pissed her off’, Ailes responds ‘great. The future of Fox News is now a goddamned feminist’. When a colleague asks her ‘is this some feminist thing?’, Kelly’s staff reply in unison ‘she’s not a feminist’, as if trained to defend against the accusation. Here, the first indication of a connection between feminism and anti-rape politics is present.



**Figure 3.3 Kelly walks through the chaos of the office in a red, white and blue dress**

Hostility to feminism is presented somewhat ambiguously; the majority of the characters express negative opinions about it, however these are articulated in such a scandalised manner that they read more as parodies of the conservative position on feminism. The characters' defensiveness when it comes to rejecting feminism frequently comes across as them protesting a little too much. This reluctance is clearly influenced by the sexist culture of Fox, in which feminism is viewed with suspicion. The women vehemently reject the label, positioning themselves as strong-willed and independent, but decidedly unfeminist; they are the conservative woman par excellence that Schreiber describes, in that '[s]he is a smart, savvy woman, who can make up her own mind', unfettered by the parameters of her identity (Schreiber 2008, p. 70). The film's overall orientation towards feminism is ultimately characterised by ambivalence. Although *Bombshell's* characters maintain distance from feminism in name, the central role occupied by speaking out suggests that they are more beholden to feminist principles than is immediately obvious. As Serisier points out, to speak out about a violation is not an uncomplicatedly feminist activity, that 'increasing public acceptance of the tenets of speaking out often resulted in incorporation of this political practice within criminal justice discourses rather than promoting feminist

understandings of sexual violence' (2018, p. 25). This ambivalence was well received by some critics. In his review of the film, Thomas Gray (2019) recounts with relief that it 'is not a lecture about gender equality and it's not a knee-jerk indictment of all men. It's a study of interesting women in an extreme situation'. Here, some of feminism's negative cultural connotations – that it is about lecturing others from a position of self-righteous morality, that it is concerned with marginalising all men – are clearly expressed, along with the assertion that *Bombshell* is less about gender inequality, and more about 'interesting women' in a unique situation. For Gray, the film has succeeded in decontextualising the narrative of the film from a wider cultural context of gendered domination.

*Bombshell*, while being #MeToo-adjacent in that it utilises the moment as a cultural backdrop, is not as uncomplicatedly a '#MeToo inspired film' as many suggested. Certainly, the film's characters are frequently archetypal of the #MeToo moment, at least as it was articulated in the mainstream media – strong women, bad men, and complicit individuals. The focus on 'strong women' as victims is particularly noteworthy, engendering a complex relationship with speaking out, credibility and feminism. Kelly and Carlson's credibility as victims relies upon the non-representation of their abuse by Ailes; their status as strong women relies on the eschewing of vulnerability onto them. The film in some ways represents the ideal neoliberal postfeminist subject: individually empowered, rejecting 'victimhood'. There is a clear belief in the power and importance of 'trailblazing', of some individuals paving the way for others to speak out; this was a central feature of #MeToo in popular discourse, that certain individuals broke the silence. It is important to note that, although certain women have been credited as 'kick-starting' this moment, any ongoing activism they are involved with is rarely reported upon. For example, Carlson has since been involved in advocacy to end forced arbitration agreements that prevent victim-survivors from having their cases heard in court, but this has received little media attention. Within the film (and also generally in media reporting on #MeToo) there is, unsurprisingly, no acknowledgment of speaking out as a feminist practice with a long and complex history. A group of individuals are depicted as bravely making this decision of their own accord, although there is some suggestion that a contemporary cultural context in which people take allegations of men's violence more seriously

facilitates their speaking out. In this respect, #MeToo floats in the background, associated with a moment of mass disclosure that *Bombshell*'s women are presented as being at the forefront of. There is an ambivalence towards feminism that actually seems emblematic of the tension between #MeToo, or what was made of it in the media, and feminist politics generally. The conservative women of the film are suspicious of feminism, but still make use of well-established feminist practices. The rejection of feminism, but reluctant embrace of #MeToo's principles, is articulated in discourses that state one doesn't have to be a feminist to be involved in opposing, or speaking out about, men's violence against women. Feminism is not, however, an obvious site of suspicion across all #MeToo-adjacent films.

### ***The Assistant* and the abusive workplace**

In similar vein to *Bombshell*, Kitty Green's *The Assistant* was frequently depicted in the media as significant in its adjacency to #MeToo. Many critical responses to the film focused on its success in capturing the mood of the contemporary moment, despite its not being based on real characters or events. Although, as stated, *Bombshell* was described as being the 'first' of its kind, ushering in a new era of '#MeToo cinema', *The Assistant* did in fact premiere some 4 months earlier in August 2019 at the Telluride Film Festival. Its release as part of the festival circuit is of note when considering the film's proximity to Weinstein and early Miramax; it exists as part of the ecosystem he once controlled. Its plot follows a junior assistant named Jane (Julia Garner) through one working day as she becomes aware of continual abuses of power by her boss, a powerful figure in the film industry, creating clear resonances with some of #MeToo's most reported on stories. Reviews routinely mention Weinstein when contextualising the film; for the *Hollywood Reporter*, Seth Abramovitch (2020) described it as 'a new Weinstein movie' set to be 'the first (but certainly not the last) film based on the abusive mogul' (see also Lyden 2020; Dick 2020; Gilbey 2020). The language around *Bombshell*'s release is called to mind here, with a similar focus on its supposedly trailblazing nature – *The Assistant*, too, is positioned as a cinematic breakthrough. The notion of trailblazing once again appears as a crucial discursive

force in response to #MeToo-adjacent representations, with individuals and, clearly, certain cultural productions being slated as breaking the silence.

*The Assistant* is oriented towards #MeToo in an even more concrete way: Kitty Green planned to make a film about campus sexual violence and was in the process of interviewing Stanford students in October 2017 when the Weinstein story broke. She quickly shifted her focus to the film industry, commenting that ‘a lot of my friends had worked at places like The Weinstein Co. and Miramax and had worked for predatory bosses’ (Green in Abramovitch 2020). This suggests something of a personalised incentive to speak out – through fictionalised narrative – about occurrences intimate to Green and her social circle, drawing individual experiences together into a narrative with collective resonance. In addition to this, *The Assistant's* New York release coincided with the beginning of Weinstein's criminal trial, temporally connecting the film with one of the central stories of #MeToo. Although much of the commentary around the film focused on its relationship to Weinstein and #MeToo, Green was keen to avoid making the narrative about individuals, noting that ‘it’s not just about getting rid of Weinstein. We need to look at our workplaces and how we can make them safer and more fair and equitable’ (Green in Baughan 2020). Green therefore makes a clear attempt to undermine the focus on supposedly aberrant individuals like Weinstein, moving to represent the problem of sexist workplace abuse and harassment as structural issue. As Boyle asserts, individualised focus on high profile abusers like Weinstein that paint them as aberrant work to exceptionalise certain narratives about abuse; the focus on individual perpetrators can work to exacerbate ‘a reluctance to understand men’s violence against women structurally’, marking out ‘monstrous’ abusers as unique among men (2019a, p. 119). *The Assistant* tells a story about structures as well as about individuals.

The construction of characters in *The Assistant* plays a significant role in representing the collective experience of unequal workplaces. We follow the events of one day at a nameless film production company in New York City (where Weinstein was arrested and tried) through the perspective of Jane, the assistant of the title. Throughout the film, the camera’s focus is on Jane; her troubled facial expressions and her continued distress, is of central attention. It works to present a solitary figure, often disconnected from those around her even when interacting directly with them. When

she stands alone in the printing room, or in the corridor, she is physically shrouded in darkness (fig 3.4) – a sense of heaviness and foreboding prevails. It is a narrative as much about alienation and the frequent drudgery of office work as it is workplace abuse. In fact, the film shows that it is impossible to separate the abuses of power that occur within the office from the quotidian degradations wage labour incurs. The hierarchies that characterise this environment set the stage for abuse to go unchallenged. This follows Bloodworth’s materialist conceptualisation of sexual abuse in the workplace, in which she suggests the alienated subjects of capitalism are ‘transformed’ by exploitative workplace hierarchies that turn ‘people into predators who exhibit controlling and abusive behaviour both in and outside of their “professional” life’ (2015, p. 11). Jane functions as something of an everywoman, her name itself reflective of a Jane Doe. She does not stand out: her clothes are mutedly toned, allowing her to fade into the background of darkly lit shots. She is a college graduate in a job that both underpays and undervalues her, working for little personal reward in the search for career progression that exists only in the abstract. There are a number of repetitive shots of her undertaking banal tasks; a feeling of endlessness pervades as she repeatedly prints, scans and cleans. HR manager Wilcock (Matthew McFadyen) confirms Jane’s position in the workplace hierarchy when he asks if she’s willing to ‘fuck everything up’ in her future by reporting her boss. Unlike the women of *Bombshell*, Jane lacks class power, social capital and, in her position as a junior employee, workplace leverage to utilise against her higher ups when it comes to complaining of abuse. She wants to speak up, to break the silence, but her precarious position in the workplace prevents this – here, we have a narrative that poses a challenge to #MeToo, in exploring a situation where speaking out is precluded. As Serisier notes, #MeToo exposed ‘the processes of marginalisation and homogenisation along axes of race and class that can limit women’s ability to participate within and shape these stories’ (2018, p. 96); many of the critiques of #MeToo as media project focused on the reproduction of these axes of oppression, the silencing of certain voices. Those at the centre of the Weinstein story, like former assistants Rowena Chiu and Zelda Perkins,<sup>23</sup> were initially silenced by an NDA and their stories marginalised in

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<sup>23</sup> Weinstein attempted to rape Chiu, who then informed Perkins. Perkins herself was not abused by Weinstein but reported his behaviour to Miramax in the 90s, and later told her story to Jodi Kantor and Ronan Farrow.

mainstream media coverage. Through Jane, *The Assistant* reiterates a crucial truth which has characterised some of the most convincing critiques of #MeToo: not everyone has equal access to ‘public speech’ and visibility when it comes to sexual violence.



**Figure 3.4 Jane stands alone, fading into the background of the print room**

In a further deviation from the *Bombshell* narrative, the protagonist is not the victim of abuse. In *The Assistant*, a feminine perspective is foregrounded and there is a clear concern with depicting the indirect ways in which women are exposed to sexual violence. However, significantly, the film avoids graphic depictions of sexual violence, rather including them by suggestion. These implied representations work to circumvent the idea that to tell an effective story about sexual violence that one must screen scenes of extreme violence; the viewer is acutely aware of the boss’s abuse despite not being shown it, or him, directly. This accurately represents the way knowledge of abuse in heavily controlled environments (like this office) circulate: through rumour, innuendo, and micro-signals. Throughout her day, Jane encounters many ‘clues’ to the sexual behaviour of her boss: an earring on his office floor (which she later discovers belongs to an actress); used syringes in his bins (referencing the penile injections supposedly used by Weinstein); the transporting of a young woman to a hotel to meet with him and, crucially, loaded “jokes” from other, primarily male, staff. By having its main character be privy to abuse, rather than experience it directly,

*The Assistant* makes Jane a proxy for the viewer – being aware that violence is happening but being similarly powerless to stop it.

If Jane is an everywoman, her nameless boss is emblematic of every abusive boss, referred to only as ‘he’ or ‘him’ throughout. Although the connections to Weinstein are clear, as Green confirms he is instead a representative of systemic abuse (Green in Baughan 2020). The viewer ‘sees’ him through the evidence of abuse he leaves behind and, only once, his silhouette in a window presumably with the young employee from earlier in the film. It is not clear exactly what is taking place, but sexual contact is implied. Other male characters, such as two junior assistants who work directly with Jane and more senior executives (who have one woman amongst them), function as complicit bystanders. Similarly nameless, Jane’s colleagues are largely rude and dismissive towards her, with the other assistants offering no support – literally sitting in silence – when she is loudly attacked by the boss on a phone call. They physically separate themselves from her, at one point crowding together to laugh as they listen in to a phone call while she asks ‘what’s so funny?’ to no response. The shot amplifies her exclusion from their camaraderie as the viewer shares Jane’s perspective (see fig 3.5), watching on unable to hear the contents of the phone call, not getting the joke. The film uses sound to great effect here; the viewer is similarly excluded from the contents of the call, hearing only muffled voices and laughing in the otherwise silent room. There is clearly an exclusionary atmosphere which precludes solidarity between the workers. While male executives joke about ‘his’ behaviour, for example by telling Jane to ‘never get on that [casting] couch’, their female counterparts discuss a desire to switch departments.



**Figure 3.5 Jane's colleagues laugh while we look on with her, excluded**

In their discussion of male complicity in rape culture, Sarah Sorial and Jacqui Poltera point out that '[m]en are also complicit [in rape culture] if they tacitly condone rape or directly contribute to rape culture, but do not actually rape women' (2015, p. 23). Although Jane's male colleagues are not themselves harassing or raping women (as far as we know), they implicitly condone the sexist workplace culture by not speaking up about the abuse they are privy to and being flippant about the abusive behaviour of their boss. Wilcock, the HR manager who discourages Jane from lodging an official complaint about her boss's behaviour, is presented as directly complicit, undermining the severity of the abuse and, indeed, making light of it by taunting 'don't worry, you're not his type'. The sexist (in)actions and attitudes of Jane's male colleagues sit alongside the sexual abuses of power enacted by her boss on a continuum of behaviours, all which are tacitly accepted within the office. As Kelly posits, the continuum concept allows the drawing of connections between specific forms of sexual violence and 'more common, everyday aspects of male behaviour' (1988, p. 183). 'His' behaviour thrives because an environment where harmful 'everyday' aspects of male behaviour go unchallenged exists.

Women are also shown to be actively complicit in the office's sexist, silencing culture. As Jane leaves the office for the day, her facial expression troubled, a woman colleague enters the lift, notes Jane's troubled look and comments 'she'll get more out of it than him'. Like in *Bombshell*, co-operation with men's unwanted advances is

positioned as a pragmatic way of ensuring one's future career opportunities. It is suggested the young actress will ultimately 'gain' in terms of career from agreeing to sex with the boss, although this of course might come at the price her loss of 'sexual subjectivity' (Alcoff 2018). The trivialisation of sexual violence and abuse through jokes and victim-blaming is, as Gavey asserts, a crucial component of rape culture in that 'these sorts of discourses and practices help legitimate men's breach of sexual boundaries and ethical lines' (2018, p. 228). Clearly, it is not only between men and women that the concept of solidarity is precluded. Jane lacks connections with other workers generally, standing quietly alone as two women colleagues chat in the kitchen. Jane stands silently to the left of the shot while they enter talking animatedly, ignoring her, illuminated by the light of an open fridge while she remains in relative darkness. There is a marked distance between them. They are similarly dismissive of her junior position, leaving their dirty crockery by the sink for her to wash; she silently obliges when they leave the room after a brief, pregnant pause that expresses her discontent. Throughout the film, Jane's internal turmoil is depicted through long, static shots of her face; she is, for the most part, completely alone. It is apparent that the building of solidarity between women is in some ways actively discouraged by workplace management. Wilcox suggests Jane is jealous of the new young employee she expresses concerns about; he asks if she reports the situation because the other woman is good looking, or because she thinks the woman is 'beneath' her due to her previous role as a waitress. This discouraging of solidarity clearly works – Jane is intimidated into dropping her complaint.

The culture of the office therefore tacitly permits abuse through minimisation, flippancy and coercion. The view of the office itself is framed by tight, mostly static shots that emphasise the room's smallness as well as the slow, sluggish daily life of the office. When Jane's colleagues appear in the office, the camera's eye level angle betrays the desks' closeness and a sense of claustrophobia is tangible (see fig 3.5). Jane's desk is a liminal space, physically positioned between the boss's office and the rest of the building; when she is shown cleaning his office early in the film, the camera watches her through a doorway. There is a feeling of being boxed-in and of surveillance in these rigid framings. It also illustrates a clear barrier between the world of his office space and the rest of the workplace. She is shot through the frame of a

doorway multiple times throughout the film, producing an image of her as ‘in the middle’ (figs 3.7, 3.8, 3.9). Jane moves between these two spaces, an interlocutor with acute insight into the boss’s world through her role; she attempts to break down this barrier and bridge silence in the workplace through speaking out to HR. This informs a decidedly specific rape culture situated firmly within an exploitative workplace system. Jane's role in this system is suggested by the appearance of the film's title in tiny letters in the bottom corner of the screen on the backdrop of the imposing doors of her New York office building (fig 3.6) – she is merely an assistant, playing a small role in a much larger ecosystem, the imagery ‘consigning her job description literally to the gutter’ (Gilbey 2020). Her role, and thus her voice within this system, is not valued. The notion that she lacks importance sits in tension with the scrutiny she, and her work, are subjected to at all levels: the male junior assistants stand over her shoulder 'correcting' as she composes an email, while the boss screams obscenities at her over the phone for a minor scheduling error. A high, downward facing camera angle when a male colleague first enters a scene is descriptive of this reality, a technique which Ryan Gilbey (2020) likens to the gaze of a ‘scornful invisible judge’. Jane's lack of power within the system is linked to both her gendered and economic position; she is at once constantly watched, to ensure her productive value as a worker, and constantly ignored on a personal level, due to her 'low rank' as a junior woman assistant.



**Figure 3.6** The film’s title card, which places Jane in the gutter



*Figures 3.7, 3.8, 3.9 Jane observed through door frames*

Due to this culture, Jane is unable to speak out about her boss's abuse. In this sense, the #MeToo-adjacent notion of turning singular speech into part a collective narrative is not applicable here in the sense it is in *Bombshell*. This does not, however, completely prohibit connections between the film's 'speech' and the collective speech of #MeToo. Similarly to *Bombshell*, there is text on the end credits that speaks directly to the viewer and, particularly, to those Green interviewed prior to the film, thanking 'all of those who shared their stories'. This suggests that the collective stories that underscore the film's plot come together to create a singular cohesive narrative; there is an implication that although speaking out was not available to Jane within the logic of the film, it was only through speaking out that the film was able to be made. This moves away from the trope of the #MeToo trailblazer, instead focusing on a collective experience of storytelling that has simply been mediated through an individual voice. The focus, again, is less on individuals and directed more towards the systems and structures in which abuse is permitted. It is, crucially, a film about *knowing*. Janes knows that abuse is happening rather than being directly targeted; in some ways, *The Assistant* is as much about being privy to sexual violence happening than about experiencing it oneself. The preoccupation becomes one of showing abuse's effects on those who are surrounded by it. This in some ways circumvents issues of believability, in that it does not involve victims' perspectives directly (as in *Bombshell*). The veracity of the claims are mediated through an interlocutor, Jane, who does not experience the traumatic event herself. Victim-survivors of trauma are often perceived to be unreliable at remembering and narrating events accurately; using Jane, who does not experience the abuse, might work to circumvent this problematic for the viewer. Importantly, however, within the logic of the film she is *still* not believed; her position with respect to gender and class power, in contrast with her boss's, insists that she is silenced. In addition to this, because the 'evidence' she has is circumstantial, it does not conform to legalistic standards of belief, so problematically identified by Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023).

Although the subjects and environment of *The Assistant* clearly resonate with #MeToo associated concerns about abuse in media industries, it in some ways works to subvert the mainstream narrative through its focus on an average worker as opposed

to a celebrity subject. Some of the most prudent criticisms of #MeToo, and its relationship to the mainstream media, centred on its inability to connect with 'normal' people, and to make space for the stories of those outwith the media and celebrity classes; the fact it began as a 'US led, celebrity-oriented expression' (Boyle 2019a, p. 8) means it is difficult to separate it from the mainstream media narrative around it and, in turn, the focus on 'newsworthy' stories. Although, like *Bombshell*, it is set within the broad sphere of media, Jane's voice is not privileged through a proximity to fame or celebrity. It is possible to claim, then, that Jane could represent many woman workers, in many industries, since abuse and sexism are rife across workplace environments. The mise-en-scene of her office is generic (see figs 3.5, 3.9) rather than demonstrating an exceptionally glamorous film industry, the film suggests universality. There is a contrast to the colourful, busy offices of *Bombshell* (see fig 3.3) that illustrate scandal and excitement.

Witnessing and, ultimately, speaking out about abuse is the focal point of *The Assistant's* narrative – although the film's focus is almost solely on Jane, it is in many respects a less individualist film than both *Bombshell* and *Promising Young Woman*—drawing together some of #MeToo's key problematics: how to engage in *silence breaking* when an abuser holds significant social (and, in this case, economic) power over you. The non-visual representation of the boss allows him to slot into the role of every powerful man, moving away from the analysis of individuals (like Ailes, or his 'mirror' in Weinstein) to one of structures that permit abuse; exploitative workplaces, complicity and rape culture. That the women abused are not celebrities, but suggested to be aspiring actresses, displaces the problematic celebrity focus of the mediated #MeToo. *The Assistant's* slow burn and muted tones is in sharp contrast to *Bombshell's* quick-paced chaos and *Promising Young Woman's* pastel coated drama, a quiet exploration of the everyday banalities of men's violence against women.

### ***Promising Young Woman* and the return to feminist rape-revenge**

Emerald Fennell's Oscar winning directorial debut *Promising Young Woman* (2020) is the final example in this thesis of #MeToo-adjacent cinema; an ostensibly progressive take on the rape-revenge structure. In a review for *The Guardian*, Adrian Horton (2021) describes it as a 'thrilling revision' of the 'tired rape revenge drama', suggesting the film's subversive potentials, its efforts to re-write a 'rape story' from a new, pro-woman perspective. As described, rape-revenge has a complex history amongst feminist scholars; Horton's review reiterates the widely held belief that the rape-revenge narrative is typically reactionary and in need of a feminist revision (this perhaps implicitly suggesting that rape-revenge has been innately anti-feminist). *Promising Young Woman* positions itself as fundamentally feminist, engaging explicitly with rape culture, men's violence and cultures of sexism more generally (from those that exist within campuses and workplaces, to internalised misogyny); when asked by Amy Fleming whether she felt a responsibility to feminists when making the film, Fennell responded that she felt a responsibility to be 'honest about what revenge looks like for women, what violence looks like' (Fleming 2021). In a manner reminiscent to both *Bombshell* and *The Assistant*, its paratexts frequently described it as ground-breaking, a 'first'. Its distributor, *Focus*, called it a 'bold new vision that has ignited a debate' (Focus 2020). It, too, is frequently described in proximity to #MeToo; both *Vanity Fair* and *The Washington Post* propose that it is a film 'for the #MeToo era', while Harriet Hall for *The Independent* asserts that it is 'the #MeToo revenge movie that every teenager should see' (Oswaks 2020; Benson-Allott 2021; Hall 2021). The contention that every teenager should see *Promising Young Woman* suggests that it is a narrative of education, particularly for young people in the early stages of their sexual lives. For Hall, it is a film that teaches formative lessons firmly situated in the #MeToo 'era' – presumably, these are lessons about rape culture and complacency, although what makes them unique to the #MeToo moment is not immediately clear.

The film follows the journey of Cassie (Carey Mulligan) as she deals with, and avenges, the rape and subsequent suicide of her best friend Nina. It begins with a disturbing scene – an apparently drunk Cassie is alone in a bar, being watched by a group of men. The men, who initially make misogynistic comments about their women colleagues, progress to making increasingly sexualised comments about Cassie, noting

her inebriated state with pleasure and commenting ‘they put themselves in danger, girls like that’. One of the group, Jerry (Adam Brody), takes Cassie home, where he proceeds to attempt to rape her. Viewers familiar with rape-revenge cinema might here expect the first narrative event of the cycle to take place. Any expectations, however, are subverted when Cassie suddenly responds directly to the would-be rapist, revealing that she has remained completely sober throughout the encounter. The outcome of this initial encounter is ambiguous, but it is heavily suggested that Cassie intimidates and potentially harms Jerry. It is important to pause here to comment upon the film's casting of male characters; classic “nice guy” actors are strategically chosen to play dangerous men. In addition to Adam Brody, Christopher Mintz-Plasse (the dorky McLovin’ from *Superbad*) plays another potential rapist, while comic Bo Burnham is Cassie’s ex-classmate and eventual boyfriend, Ryan. These ‘nice guys who play along’ with sexism and a sexually violent culture (Liu 2021) exist to speak a crucial truth: that rape is not an ‘aberrant act committed by individual “bad apples”’ (Gavey 2018, p. 228) but rather enabled by social and cultural attitudes constructed around heterosexist ideas about gender and sex. Nice guys, the film tells us, are equally as capable of violence against women as the men who are socially coded as deviant and dangerous.

The soundtrack to the opening credits, Charli XCX’s hyper-pop anthem *Boys*, sets the tone for this subversion; its refrain ‘I was busy thinking ‘bout boys, I was busy dreaming ‘bout boys’ is a dark foreshadowing that is juxtaposed with the behaviour of men throughout the film. They are similarly invested in the perpetuation of the values of a rape culture. Through this, too, the film draws attention to the continuum(s) of sexual violence by connecting the quotidian sexist behaviour of “nice guys” (misogynistic comments about the women in their workplace) to, for example, potential rape. The male characters who attempt sex with an apparently drunk Cassie also invoke a number of culturally recognisable stereotypes, and particularly those that might be understood by millennial women specifically. Mintz-Plasse plays Neil, a writer who sniffs cocaine while rambling to Cassie about David Foster Wallace, and how women are prettier without makeup. In 2015, Molly Fischer wrote in an article for *The Cut* entitled ‘Why Literature Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace’ that in making ‘a passing reference to the “David Foster Wallace fanboy” you can assume the

reader knows whom you're talking about'; a pseudo-progressive misogynist, someone who talks down to and at women. The inclusion of Neil's character functions as a nod-nod-wink-wink to a specific audience. Similarly, Paul (Sam Richardson) – who also attempts to take Cassie home while apparently drunk – wears a fedora, an object that has become symbolic of a specific category of misogynist man (see Jennings 2018). Through these references the film speaks directly to a group of people with an assumed shared cultural literacy that has primarily developed online; at the same time, the film can implicitly reference the #MeToo moment and expect this to be understood by this same group of people.

Rape culture exists in the film as a primary antagonist; it is a force both pervasive and ubiquitous. Of significant concern is campus rape culture, particularly the complicity of institutions in allowing perpetrators of sexual violence to evade accountability. Cassie's fraught relationship with the university is revealed when she confronts the medical school Dean (Connie Britton) who dealt with the reporting – and subsequent coverup – of Nina's rape. Before entering the Dean's office, she sits in a waiting area in front of a poster that reads 'your future starts here' (fig 3.10), a tragically ironic assertion considering experiences at university were the catalyst for Nina's death. The interaction between Cassie and the Dean is indicative of rape culture's most insidious elements: that 'promising young men' should have their reputations protected, that women frequently make false accusations, and that *some* women invite rape with their actions, are expressed with varying degrees of explicitness. After commenting, ostensibly sympathetically, that 'it isn't always a good idea to go back to a dorm room full of boys after a party. It gives them the wrong idea', the Dean proceeds to ask Cassie 'what would you have me do? Ruin a young man's life every time an accusation is made?' These statements are emblematic of some of rape culture's most significant discourses, those that Gavey describes as 'minimizing the seriousness of sexual violence and in some cases justifying and excusing it' (2018, p. 229). The focus on institutional cover-ups creates resonances to events outside of the text; public cases of institutional mishandlings, such as those at Stanford, Columbia and covered in *The Hunting Ground* are brought to mind. *Promising Young Woman*, then, is clearly invested in drawing connections with a world beyond itself, encouraging its audience to situate the events of the film alongside some of the key

contemporary 'real world' iterations of rape culture. It is important to note here that the focus on campus culture contextualises the film as particularly American. As suggested in relation to *M.F.A.*, this is not to suggest that campus rape cultures exist only in the United States, but rather that it has been identified as problem particularly publicly in the U.S. (see the 'It's On Us' campaign, started under the Obama administration). The bulk of work in this area has coalesced around the American context, from the 1990s debates on campus feminism and acquaintance rape, to contemporary discourse on trigger warnings and institutional mishandlings (see Minister 2018; Grundy 2021).



**Figure 3.10** Cassie waits to meet Dean Walker under an ironic sign

The direction of the scene changes suddenly following the Dean's apparent rape apologetics. In a tense moment, Cassie deceives her into believing that her freshman daughter has been left alone, vulnerable, at a drunken frat party. Although this ultimately proves to be false – Cassie is merely attempting to 'teach her a lesson' – the Dean is forced to admit her own failings in refusing to believe Nina and to adequately punish the rapist, Al. Interestingly, Connie Britton who plays Dean Walker also acts in *Bombshell* as Ailes's wife, Beth; in both films, Britton's characters permit abuse through feigned ignorance and inaction. Cassie's deception of the Dean, namely the process of punishment through the threat of sexual violence, emerges as a prominent theme throughout the film. Cassie dupes ex-classmate Madison (Alison Brie), depicted as similarly complicit in disbelieving Nina, into thinking that she (Madison) has been

raped – by a man that Cassie has seemingly hired – after the two drink together. One is reminded of the complicit women within *Bombshell*, those characters who tacitly condone rape culture and abusive behaviour through their (in)actions. The importance of these characters to *Promising Young Woman*'s narrative is made clear primarily through the temporal space they take up within the film; together, the scenes involving the Dean and Madison are focal points of the narrative, about 5 minutes long per scene. The audience is encouraged to revel in both Madison and the Dean's discomfort as they are themselves placed in proximity to rape, in a vengeance-based twist. Both scenes are tense, employing a shot-reverse-shot as Cassie and her antagonists go back and forth. The pace of the dialogue is fast, unrelenting; the viewer is similarly caught up in the breathlessness of the moments. *Promising Young Woman*'s engagement with feminist politics thus seems muddled. The idea that internalised misogyny, particularly with regards to sexual violence, should be tackled by effectively threatening women with it reads as itself sexist and counter intuitive. The issue of internalised misogyny which, as Rebecca Liu points out, is most obviously observable in the film through those 'women who tell other women it's no big deal' (2021, n.p.), focalises around the film's 'bad women'. Cassie's own behaviour as the feminist avenger, her initial belief that women should be threatened with sexual violence if they have been otherwise complicit in it, is not subject to the same scrutiny.

Like Kelly and Carlson in *Bombshell*, Cassie functions as one of #MeToo's 'bad-ass' women, willing to speak out and to take action against powerful men. The film's engagement with the politics of men's sexual violence becomes increasingly clear following Cassie's initial encounter with Jerry, the central concerns of contemporary anti-violence activism like #MeToo at the forefront. In what Read calls 'displaced revenge' (2000, p. 93), Cassie – and, as she suggests to one man, a gang of women throughout the city – target men who try to take advantage of drunk women. Although the full extent of Cassie's relationship with this 'gang' of avengers or whether they actually exist is unclear, a solidarity amongst women and survivors – perhaps one of the central principles of #MeToo – is suggested. There is a sense that the tables are being turned; that men are now under threat, are unsafe on the streets. In their article on #MeToo and the affective turn in feminist solidarity, Alison Pullen and Sheena J. Vachhani attest that solidarity is visible in an 'unprecedented way in

contemporary social movements that are directly combatting women's inequality, sexual harassment and violence against women in the workplace and beyond' (2019, p. 2). We never see these women, who exist only in the abstract, co-ordinating their activity against abusive men. In actual fact, Cassie lacks material connections with other women: her only friend is her boss (Laverne Cox), and her interactions with other women (her mother, Nina's mother, the Dean and Madison) are defined by conflict. The concept of solidarity cannot, then, be accepted uncritically as a presence within the film. As bell hooks points out, the idea of a 'common oppression' has frequently been employed in service of 'disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality. Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices' (1986, p. 127). The romantic version of solidarity imagines that understanding shared oppressions will inform empathy and useful political alliances between women oppressed on varying axes. Rather, it often functions to obscure difference, insisting that oppression is experienced in a homogenous way by women.

It is certainly not the case that *Promising Young Woman* ought to cover all bases – it is, after all, fundamentally the story of two women (one dead, one alive) – but its perfunctory engagement with the politics of solidarity necessitates critique. The spectre of solidarity merely haunts the film – almost literally as Liu (2021) notes, 'solidarity – the kind that shakes the world; the kind that really makes the powerful feel, for once, their own wounded frailty – only exists here between dead girls'. Its presence seems insincerely engineered, inserted to make obvious the film's positionality as a necessarily feminist, #MeToo identified text. The importance of solidarity to #MeToo is inherent to even its name: I (me), as well as *you* (too), have experienced some form of violence and, through that, we are connected in struggle. For Henry, the female avenger as collective leader 'points to the potential of mobilizing a collective to achieve justice and resist sexual violence' while also underscoring 'collective action as an ethical responsibility' (2014, p. 146). *Promising Young Woman* seems to understand that solidarity is a powerful discursive tool in the #MeToo context, as well as in women's resistance to men's sexual violence, and thus engages it abstractly but stops short of fully exploring its possibilities. As in *Bombshell*, we are teased with a potential connection between women that does not

come to fruition. Like both *Bombshell* and *The Assistant*, the narrative privileges individualised experiences. In her article on #MeToo and neoliberal feminism, Catherine Rottenberg describes how a significant strand of critiques of #MeToo have centred on the movement's individualistic tendencies, focusing on the 'me' and privileging 'the individual and her resilience and survival' (2019, n.p.). It is possible, perhaps, to view Cassie in this respect; although she undertakes revenge on behalf of another, it often appears that this is in service of her own catharsis. Nina's mother draws attention to the selfishness at play in Cassie's actions when she demands that 'you [Cassie] need to stop this. It's no good for any of us. It's no good for Nina and it's no good for you'.

*Promising Young Woman* mobilises similar representative dimensions to *Bombshell* and *The Assistant* when it comes to sexual violence; rather than directly witnessing the event itself (through, for example, flashback), it is suggested to the viewer non-visually. Madison provides Cassie with an old mobile phone containing a video of Nina's rape. Although the audience is not privy to the video's visual content, we hear its audio and listen in horror as Cassie's now boyfriend, Ryan, is heard cheering on the attack in a manner reminiscent of the Steubenville case and, of course, of *M.F.A.* The film's refusal to visually depict the rape, only implying its occurrence and then confirming it through audio clips, moves away from what Amanda Spallacci describes as an 'event-centred narrative' of rape to a more nuanced representation of trauma (2019, p. 7). However, as I have pointed out in my discussion of *Bombshell*, although these films move away from a potentially traumatic visual spectacle, they still rely on some form of representation of the event to confirm its authenticity. This foregrounds some crucial questions about credibility: it is not enough for the viewer to believe Cassie (and therefore Nina) about the rape – we must hear it, even if we don't see it, to truly believe that it happened. Clover identifies the same problematic within *The Accused*, commenting that a male witness's flashback to the rape solidifies its veracity to the viewer, opposed to a woman simply *knowing* (my emphasis) that she has been raped (Clover, p. 150). The viewer takes the role of judge and jury, relying on mediated evidence to assess the verifiability of a woman's claim. A legalistic form of truth and evidence is valorised. The woman are not to be believed in and of themselves as, per Kay's (2020) argument, the film operates within a context of

communicative injustice for women. Their speech alone is, within this context, not credible or believable. In a further invocation of legal power, the final scene sees the police swoop in on Al's wedding to arrest him – Cassie has taken the precautions of informing them of her whereabouts at the bachelor party, should she fail to return. The police's action coming only after Cassie is murdered suggests a further de-privileging of women's voices when they speak out – it is only in death, after their physical ability to speak has been removed, that Nina and Cassie are offered a form of 'justice'. The police – who do not appear in the other two films explored here – are a notable presence; their appearance confirms to the viewer the veracity of the film's events, that they were both 'real' and criminal.



**Figures 3.11, 3.12** Cassie and Ryan move from lovers to antagonists in warm, then cool-toned scenes

Cassie's discovery of Ryan's collusion in Nina's rape is pivotal in forming the film's message about complicit men: that they are everywhere, and they are dangerous. Previously emblematic of the "nice guy", the good boyfriend, Ryan remains infuriatingly stoic and unapologetic when confronted by Cassie regarding his involvement. Scenes detailing the two's burgeoning romance are rose-tinted – literally, illuminated by a glowing pink sign, the shot framed by a pink gumball machine as Cassie giggles in a fuchsia cardigan (fig 3.11) – and soundtracked by the nostalgic, cheesy pop pining of Paris Hilton's 2006 hit *Stars are Blind*. Upon Ryan's transition to the complicit man, a 'bad guy', the colours of the scene change: the pair are starkly lit, Cassie's blue dress in harmony with the bleak blue/grey backdrop (fig 3.12). Children's drawings on his office walls frame this pivotal scene and expose Ryan's hypocrisy in protecting children through his work (he is a paediatrician) while endangering Nina through his involvement and subsequent silence. Cassie travels to Al's bachelor party – taking place in a remote forest location, emblematic of the classic rape-revenge rural/urban divide identified by Clover (1992, p. 104) – to seemingly enact her ultimate revenge. She shows up disguised as a hired stripper, wearing a "sexy nurse" costume, embodying the 'erotic spectacle' (Read 2000, p. 184) that Laura Mulvey describes as 'woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look' that 'always threatens evoke the anxiety [threat of castration] it originally signified' (Mulvey 1988, p.64, quoted in Read). As she approaches, an orchestral version of Britney Spears' *Toxic* (2003) plays – again, a gesture to the cultural reference points of millennial women. The men welcome her in, objectifying her immediately, before she leads the rapist Al for a private show. When her identity is revealed, generic expectations are once again subverted when, rather than being allowed to "get even", Al murders Cassie. This is an undeniably shocking scene: she is suffocated in an excruciating two-and-a-half-minute sequence that accurately reflects the time taken to die in this manner.

Although *Promising Young Woman* subverts generic expectations by neglecting to show Nina's rape, the violence against Cassie nevertheless brutalises the woman subject. The viewer endures the length of the act from Al's perspective, complicit in watching Cassie struggle and die – both Cassie and the viewer are punished by the scene. To echo Henry's reaction to a similar scene in Peter Strickland's

*Katalin Varga*, one is left questioning whether the moment is a ‘cheap twist on the rape-revenge formula’ or, instead, ‘a deeper interrogation of the moral precepts of the genre?’ (2014, p.1) For many critics, Cassie's shock death functions as a deeply unpleasant and, for some, decidedly misogynistic moment (Harrington 2021; Mediaversity 2020). It is notable that, in many respects, *Promising Young Woman* attempts to construct a rape-revenge that goes beyond the event (Spallacci 2019), with an exploration of Cassie's trauma that substitutes a physical visualisation of rape. This attempts to circumvent the ethical problematics that arise as a result of representations of graphic violence against women (Mills 1995), but the film ultimately cannot forego this representational violence completely.

The film's final scene is reminiscent of *The Accused*'s ending, which sees the criminal justice system reign supreme as avenger of violence against women. Clover, characterising such endings as ‘Pollyannaism’ (p. 149), comments that when rape-revenge dramas meet Hollywood production there is no surprise that these stories show ‘a third party’ who ‘succeeds in meting out justice, thereby proving the judicial system women-friendly after all’ (p. 147). This proves especially confusing in *Promising Young Woman*, where the judicial system's ineffectiveness at dealing with gendered violence is heavily implied throughout. Furthermore, Cassie is shown to have very little faith in institutional practice through her interactions with the University and the lawyer who ‘got AI off’ – what has changed upon the occasion of her death, and why does the ‘official channel’ of police intervention suddenly inspire trust? As Clover posits, central to the traditional rape-revenge is the ‘understanding that even when the law succeeds in the short run, it might fail in the long run’ (p. 148). *Promising Young Woman* does not betray such an understanding; the law prevails, betraying perhaps a neoliberal feminist allegiance to the state. As Bumiller points out, there has been a long history of critique of feminists' interaction with the state when it comes to men's violence against women, with a ‘focus on the expanding role of law enforcement as primarily driven by the interests of white middle-class women’ (2008, p. 9). The film's ending situates the narrative firmly within this neoliberal context, trading feminist analysis of coercive state power for a punchy, ‘win’ moment. The impetus for the ending might lie, too, in the film's distinctly Hollywood background: Fennell states that her ideal ending was the men burning Cassie's body, but her ‘financiers balked’

(Fennell in Aurthur and Donnelly, 2021), and it was ultimately fast-tracked through production (D’Alessandro 2021), presumably to capitalise on the contemporary discursive moment of #MeToo.

Cassie’s death is finalised with a shot of a dismembered hand, pastel painted nails confirming her identity (fig 3.13), sticking out from under burning rubble after her colourful wig is carelessly tossed in the fire. In death, Cassie is represented as a combination of her body parts rather than a fully realised subject. Diana Russell comments that representations of women’s cut up bodies work to reify rather than challenge misogynistic assumptions about women, legitimising the perspective of ‘men who fail to see women as human, but as body parts’ (Russell 1993, p. 135). The image of the hand as opposed to a sexualised body part is noteworthy; however, there is something of a problematisation of the traditional ‘objectified’ view of women’s violated, compartmentalised bodies. Immediately prior to the fatal attack, Al tells Cassie that ‘being accused of...that’ is every man’s worst fear; Cassie responds by asking what he thinks every woman’s worst fear is. We recognise that she means rape, but her subsequent murder suggests that death is innately tied up in this – Nina’s suicide after her rape insists that this relationship is central to the film, implying in Sharon Marcus’s words that rape is frequently seen as ‘tantamount to death’ (1992, p. 387). Although it is not Cassie herself who is raped, she acts as a proxy for the traumatised, violated woman, and performs the function of what Horeck describes through Žižek as ‘the uneasy liminality of the raped woman as the figure caught ‘in-between-two-deaths’ (Žižek 1989, p. 131 in Horeck 2004, p. 70). It is also important to remember that Nina, the victim, dies by suicide prior to the events of the film. When considering, for example, how many #MeToo-adjacent conversations centre around the possibility of healing after trauma, *Promising Young Woman*’s removal of this potential seems at odds not only with feminist scholarship in the area, but contemporary common-sense understandings of sexual violence. It is not, of course, the case that films have an ethical or moral duty to provide catharsis. However, the means through which catharsis is implied here – through the heroism of the criminal justice system – seems fundamentally a case of the Hollywood impulse to provide a ‘feel-good’-ending (Clover, p. 147). When two women are dead because of rape and its consequences, it is difficult to feel relief that one man *might* be punished on the film’s close.



**Figure 3.13 Only Cassie's hand remains of her burnt body**

*Promising Young Woman* clearly confronts issues of sexual violence, trauma and accountability, particularly as they pertain to #MeToo. There is an obvious attempt at articulating contemporary feminist discourses, with continued commentary on men and women's complicity in violence against women, institutional cover-ups and the lasting effects of trauma. In addition to this, it is fundamentally a rape-revenge narrative, which necessitates certain expectations in viewers with even the most elementary knowledge of the structure. This does not mean subversions of the typical narrative structure are unwelcome – indeed, the refusal to show Nina's rape visually shows clear engagement with the problematics of screening sexual violence and attempts to move towards more implicit modes of 'witnessing'. However, the film's denouement ultimately infers some rather conservative and troubling conclusions about men's violence and its consequences. Two women, affected by sexual violence in differing but impactful ways, die in a way that suggests a direct causality between experiencing rape and death. If we are to follow Horeck (2004) and accept that all representations of rape shape and inform our experience with it as *real* event, it seems obvious that *Promising Young Woman*, for all its valiant attempts to metamorphosise rape-revenge for a #MeToo literate audience, engages somewhat superficially with rape culture, offering an ultimately pessimistic view of the consequences of sexual violence.

## #MeToo-adjacent cinema in conversation

All three films are connected through the media discourses that present them as ‘firsts’, in some way, breaking a perceived silence about the industry’s silence on sexual violence. The parallels with the representation of #MeToo in the media are obvious here. The ‘explosion of speech’ (Serisier 2018, p. 13) that accompanied #MeToo was frequently framed in terms of firsts: the first mainstream cultural reckoning on abuse, with those who were first to speak out using the hashtag (namely, celebrities) privileged in public conversations. Much of the discourse surrounding #MeToo proposed that we were living in a new cultural moment; that a *new* form of speech and activism against men’s violence had emerged. The problems inherent to this type of positioning – across media representations of #MeToo as ‘movement’ and of #MeToo-adjacent cinema – fundamentally obscure feminist and cinematic histories. #MeToo as a moment did not appear out of the blue, but rather draws upon long feminist histories of ‘speaking out’ and of collective activism against men’s violence against women. There is an individualist focus present across both spheres that is imbued with key features of the contemporary neoliberal feminist moment; the focus on the ‘empowered’ self that Rottenberg describes as the ‘individuated feminist agent who, alone, is accountable for garnering her own ‘revolutionary’ energy’ (2014, p. 426). Similarly, the examples of #MeToo-adjacent cinema mentioned here were certainly not the first films to engage critically with rape culture, sexual abuse within workplaces and the entertainment industry, or with men’s sexual violence more generally.<sup>24</sup> This framing betrays a cultural obsession with firsts which often works to obfuscate complex histories. The rhetorical impetus to label a ‘first’ works against nuanced, materialist understandings of the past.

There are resonances with the spectacle of #MeToo, here, when considering how the moment was characterised by a public witnessing of several high-profile disclosures: the films are concerned with watching, witnessing and speaking out in varying ways. Through their representation of bystanders and witnessing, the films

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<sup>24</sup> See *The Accused* (1988, dir. Jonathan Kaplan) and *Thelma & Louise* (1991, dir. Ridley Scott) for films that portrayed sexual violence and won major awards; *An Open Secret* (2014, dir. Amy J. Berg) for an exploration of abuse within the entertainment industry; *The Hunting Ground* (2015, dir. Kirby Dick) for a documentary treatment of campus rape culture in the US.

also raise questions of credibility. It is not only the question of who is able to speak out, but who is able to be believed and with what evidence, that pervades throughout all three. If *Bombshell* shows that strong women can bring down powerful, abusive men through public speech, *The Assistant* suggests that one's ability to effectively speak out is often dictated by their social and economic position; Jane lacks an access to power that figures like Kelly and Carlson take as a given. *Promising Young Woman* is likewise concerned with power structures, with Nina's ability to speak out stifled by the legal system and University institution due to her rapist's class position. Both *Bombshell* and *Promising Young Woman*, though, provide the image of a just ending, where *The Assistant* does not. For *Promising Young Woman*, catharsis is crucial despite the logic of the film consistently working against it. The representation of sexual violence narratives as stories with a neat beginning, middle and end is reflective of some of the media's narrativisation of #MeToo. This impulse to create a logical, cohesive narrative often obscures the complexities of sexual violence and, particularly, of how trauma functions.

This is, of course, not the only resonance with #MeToo's media profile. The mainstream 'movement' has been critiqued in its promotion of some voices over others, relying on what Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2021) call 'the circuits of visibility'. These circuits 'prop up and prioritize industries that already enjoy visibility (entertainment, news media) in part because those industries are already designed and scripted for any mode of spectacular spotlight' (Banet-Weiser and Higgins 2021, p. 3). Those who are visible are given space to tell their stories, but the spectacular nature of the entertainment industry means that focus on certain 'newsworthy' stories risks individualising instances, promoting one specific 'type' of victim and making a singular story representative of *all* stories. *Bombshell* and *The Assistant*, with their focus on media industries, could be seen to reify the notion that these areas are especially worthy of attention. In their critique of #MeToo's initial lack of focus on race, Salamishah Tillet and Scheherazade Tillet write that '[e]ven today, as #MeToo continues to dominate headlines, black girls have been invisible in the movement' (Tillet and Tillet 2019), suggesting that a lack of visibility for some groups has led to their inability to be *seen* as victims or survivors.

Although the films narrate diverse stories in divergent ways, there is a marked lack of diversity across their central characters. All three are fronted by white women, their antagonists powerful white men. These, too, were the figures who took precedence in the media's representation of #MeToo. The media amplified these figures singularity and created identifiable #MeToo 'characters' – typically white, typically middle class or celebrity – that are mirrored in the texts. #MeToo-adjacent cinema also invokes a number of culturally recognisable references (to Weinstein, for example, but also to certain characters like Christophr Mintz-Plasse's 'lit bro') and employs, to varying effect, discourses associated with the #MeToo moment; these work to situate the films in a specific cultural and historical context. The narratives take as their principal subjects rape culture (particularly on campuses, in the workplace and in the entertainment industry), misogyny and, importantly, speaking out. Through their association with these issues, and with #MeToo generally, the films mediate with contemporary feminist concerns while articulating varying and, at times, contradictory discourses – their tensions reflect those of the previous chapter. The following chapter will shift in focus to literature, exploring novels released in the context of the #MeToo moment, a literary counterpart to these cinematic examples. These texts similarly hold political tensions and antagonisms within their confines. Where this chapter has focused solely on American examples out of necessity, the next will again include examples from the French context.

## Chapter 4: #MeToo fiction

### Contextualising fiction and #MeToo

That there was a cinematic response to #MeToo may seem intuitive, given the moment's inextricable attachment to film and entertainment industries. However, it was not the only sphere of cultural production in which a response was communicated. Literature, too, has begun to develop a canon of what I will call #MeToo fiction, as well as fiction that clearly sits amongst a 2010s characterised by mass discourse on sexual violence. Although literary industries were less discursively prominent than their moving image counterparts, they have nevertheless been the site of noteworthy responses to #MeToo. In order to evaluate this relationship more comprehensively, I now turn my attention to literature, another key site in which representations of and responses to culture are generated. This section of the thesis will explore fictional literature, reflecting a similar exploration of texts explicitly associated with #MeToo to those that *surround* the moment. Before approaching these examples directly, it is necessary to give an overview of #MeToo's relationship with literature in English and French from 2014 to 2022.

In 2020, two years on from the 100-women tribune in *Le Monde*, another letter appeared in the pages of *Libération*. This time, the target was no longer contemporary feminism but something quite different entirely. Virginie Despentes, known for her political outspokenness as well as her writing, had authored a piece in defence of Adèle Haenel, who walked out of the Césars in protest of Polanski's Best Director award. Followed by her then partner, director Céline Sciamma, Haenel could be heard shouting 'bravo, la pédophilie' as she left. Polanski won the award for *J'accuse* (2019), a drama about the Dreyfus affair. That the narrative is one surrounding overblown accusations and injustice in France is ironic when considering Polanski's proximity to the criminal justice system. In the piece, Despentes criticises the longtime silence of the French film industry and the protection of abusers amongst their ranks, writing that '[c]e soir du 28 février on n'a pas appris grand-chose qu'on ignorait sur la belle industrie du cinéma français' [on the evening of the 28<sup>th</sup> of February, we learned nothing we didn't already know about the "beautiful" French film industry] (2020).

Her intervention at once re-asserted her ardent feminism and pro-survivor politics, and her position amongst the arts world in France. Although primarily a writer – her 2022 novel *Cher Connard* features in this chapter – Desportes has also worked in film and is a ubiquitous media personality.

Haenel and Desportes spoke out against Polanski and French film culture specifically but, as in other national contexts, conversations about abusive men in entertainment industries emerged alongside those in other sectors including publishing, academia, politics and culture in France. As I have described in the introduction to this thesis, it was Dominique Strauss-Kahn who gave France perhaps its most notable pre-#MeToo public perpetrator. Strauss-Kahn's case had global resonance, with the assault itself taking place in the United States, putting France and, crucially, the sexual culture of its political/intellectual milieu in the international spotlight. *The Guardian* reported in 2016 that Johnny Depp was set to star alongside Marion Cotillard as Strauss-Kahn in a comedic take on the rape and its aftermath (Lee 2016). At the time of writing, the film seems to have been (wisely) shelved. Like DSK, the film industry's sheltering of convicted child rapist Polanski is another pivotal story in which links between France and the rest of the world are built when it comes to sexual violence in entertainment. Following his conviction for statutory rape in 1978, Polanski has lived mainly in France and other countries where he can avoid extradition to the U.S. Polanski has long been welcomed at Cannes, with *Based on a True Story* premiering there out of competition as recently as 2017. Cannes has been criticised for its platforming of men accused of violence and abuse: the 2023 festival faced backlash when Johnny Depp made a comeback with *Jeanne du Barry* (2023, dir. Maïwenn) after a highly publicised trial against former partner Amber Heard. Heard alleges that Depp was violent towards her. Social media users responded with the hashtag #CannesYouNot, which critiqued Depp's presence but also the festival's historic association with men like Polanski, Weinstein, Luc Besson and Gérard Depardieu.<sup>25</sup>

Much like film and television, literary industries have not come out of the #MeToo moment unscathed. Authors both alive and dead, and recognisable names like Junot Diaz and David Foster Wallace, were met with reports of sexual violence and

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<sup>25</sup> I have an article under review with Boyle, House and Rathnayake that explores the mobilisation of #CannesYouNot, as well as the pro-Depp backlash hashtag #YesYouCannes.

abuse. The context became international in 2018, the year when ‘#MeToo hits the Nobel prizes’ (Donaldio 2018); the husband of an academy member was subject to reports of sexual harassment by 18 women. The committee chose not to award its 2018 prize as a result. The relative lack of visibility afforded to individuals in publishing compared to those in entertainment has meant issues within the sphere have engendered less media interest in the US and UK, but Anna Ursu’s February 2018 article, ‘Sexual Harassment in the [American] Children’s Book Industry’ was a confronting moment for many. Holland and Hewett’s (2021) introduction to *#MeToo and Literary Studies* conceptualises the moment’s importance for literary studies as well as ‘literary activism’ more generally. The #MeToo moment in the US has been driven in large part by investigative journalism as opposed to literary interventions. In their early article on #MeToo, Gibson et al. (2017) identify ‘the courageous investigative journalism of a few women at major newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*’ (p. 221) as one of its catalysts, who persisted despite threats of harm from those whom they investigated. *She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement* (2019), one of the most prominent English language texts on Weinstein, narrates *New York Times* journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey’s investigation into the former producer. It would be remiss to ignore the language of ignition employed in the book’s subtitle. Much like the women in *Bombshell*, Kantor and Twohey’s story is rendered exceptional, a match that lit the fire of #MeToo.

Throughout #MeToo, France, on the other hand, has had both more high-profile cases connected with the literary world and a more specifically literary scaffolding. Memoir especially was a driving force in the French #MeToo context. Aristondo and Nizard argue that ‘the memoir’s impact [in France] has much to do with its ability to uncover the concealing power of the persona of the seductive, “civilized,” French man’ (2022, p. 160). In 2019, Vanessa Springora released *Le consentement*, a memoir in which she details her abuse as a child by writer Gabriel Matzneff. Matzneff had long discussed raping children in his literary work and on French television,<sup>26</sup> writing in his published diary *Un Galop d'Enfer* (1985) about “relationships” with boys

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<sup>26</sup> In 1990, Matzneff was confronted by writer Denise Bombardier regarding this on French prime-time television show *Apostrophes*.

between 8 and 14 in the Philippines, but had nevertheless enjoyed the good grace of the literary world. Springora's candid intervention undoubtedly shook things up. Another shock French release, Camille Kouchner's *La familia grande* (2021), recounted politician Olivier Duhamel's sexual abuse of Kouchner's twin brother in childhood. The twins are the children of Bernard Kouchner, a former French politician and co-founder of *Médecins Sans Frontières*. Sexual violence memoirs (Seriser 2018) were being mobilized as a cornerstone of the #MeToo moment in France, their explosive impact deriving from their subjects' very public identities. Beyond its effects on the backdrop of the literary world, literature has continued to respond to #MeToo as moment, both explicitly and otherwise. The 100-women tribune suggests that this has an inherently negative value, noting incredulously that 'already, some of our publishers ask us to make our male characters less "sexist", to talk about sexuality and love with more restraint'.

There is an element of backlash evident here that also pervades the discussions of some of the texts in this chapter, that positions them as correctives to the supposed dogmas of #MeToo and contemporary sexual violence discourse. This chapter will look specifically at #MeToo fiction: books that have responded directly to the #MeToo moment. I begin by introducing these texts together, before moving to a thematic discussion of their epitexts and authorship, exploring how ideas about #MeToo and, importantly, public survivors have been varyingly associated with them. The discussion then moves to form, exploring how multiperspective narratives and the epistolary are used to engender a sense of nuance that may strike back at #MeToo's supposed binaries. Several of the texts attempt to assert nuance by giving insight into victim-survivor and perpetrator perspective. With this in mind, the chapter then explores the representation of victim-survivors, who are frequently rendered as public survivors and, following this, perpetrators who, in most cases here, are also public figures. I consider, too, how the US functions as a contextual backdrop for the French texts, exploring how this situates them proximate to anglicised discourses of #MeToo.

### **Introducing #MeToo fiction**

This chapter will begin the section on literature by examining four texts that constitute examples of #MeToo novels in English and French: *This Is Pleasure* (2019) by Mary Gaitskill, *Les choses humaines* (2019) by Karine Tuil, *Complicit* (2022) by Winnie M. Li and *Cher Connard* (2022) by Virginie Despentes. *This Is Pleasure*, described in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* as doing something ‘that partisans on both sides of #MeToo, the subject of the story, will find intolerable’ (Taylor 2020), opens in the aftermath of sexual harassment complaints against publishing figurehead Quin by his former colleagues at a New York company. The novella employs a dyadic split-perspective format, narrated by Quin himself and long-time friend Margot as they process Quin’s behaviour and the history of their friendship. Margot has long borne witness to Quin’s eccentricities and his lecherousness towards women in particular; despite this, she remains sympathetic and concerned for her friend. *Les choses humaines* is similarly concerned with what happens when a loved one is accused of sexual violence, following the Farel family as son Alexandre is accused of raping family friend Mila at a party. Parents Jean and Claire are well-known French intellectuals, Claire a prolific public feminist and Jean an intellectual and TV presenter. The second half of the novel is largely devoted to Alexandre’s trial after he is prevented from returning to Stanford, where he had been studying, and the media responses to it. He is ultimately found guilty. Characters with public profiles also populate *Cher Connard*, Despentes’s latest novel. It takes an epistolary format, set across Instagram messages exchanged between Rebecca and Oscar, a middle-aged French actress and author respectively. Their back-and-forth begins when Rebecca responds to a post made by Oscar criticising her looks; ‘Cher connard,’ [Dear asshole], the message begins. It is quickly revealed that the two have known each other since childhood, their understanding of their relationship developing throughout the narrative. Like Quin in *This Is Pleasure*, Oscar has been accused of sexual harassment by a former publishing colleague, Zoé Katana. Fragments from Zoé’s popular feminist blog are also interspersed throughout the text. *Complicit* takes us back to the U.S, its focus firmly on the film industry. It is focalised through Sarah, a Chinese American woman with immigrant parents who, at the novel’s opening, is precariously employed in a university film department. After she is approached by a journalist writing an exposé on Hollywood producer Hugo North, Sarah reflects on her time as a production

assistant on several of his films. She reveals her own harassment by Hugo, as well as his sexually violent behaviour towards other women, including movie star Holly Randolph.

The texts have been selected due to their direct reflections on the #MeToo moment and because of their intersecting thematic concerns. As was the case in the previous chapter, in order to justify my categorisation of these texts I must offer a definition for the term '#MeToo fiction'. The corresponding category in film, #MeToo-adjacent cinema, offers a starting point: texts that are identified in their content, as well as in their para- and epitexts, as being related to #MeToo. The epitextual elements here are relatively straightforward. All examples here are described in their marketing but, primarily, in their reviews, as being “#MeToo books”, with comment frequently asserting their timeliness and relevance to the contemporary cultural moment. There is rarely a review for any of the four that fails to mention the moment by name; reviewers, beyond using the phrase ‘Me Too’ itself (which they virtually always do – see Jamison 2019; Le Morvan 2019; Etancelin 2022; Li 2022 for examples) all frequently appraise the books as timely or especially contemporary. In *This is Pleasure* ‘the book’s fictional world is our current one’, ‘an intense period of reckoning, during which sexual abusers and harassers have been called out’ (Hall 2019); *Complicit*, too, ‘is a novel very much immersed in today’s issues and complexities’ (Segura 2022). The UK edition of *Complicit* reifies the connection for the reader: in its ‘praise for’ pages, ‘Me Too’ is mentioned three times, with other reviewers expressing admiration for its ‘era-defining’ ‘timeliness’ (pp. 2-6). *Cher Connard* speaks ‘énormément sur notre monde contemporain’ [enormously about our contemporary world] (Crom 2022), *Les choses humaines* about ‘cette époque post #MeToo’ [this post-#MeToo era] (Richard 2019). Notably, reviews frequently conflate the notion that we are living amongst *and* that we are post #MeToo. Through this, the temporality of the moment is called into question; are we *in* #MeToo – that is to say, does #MeToo remain our contemporary structuring context – or has it passed? Three of the texts mention #MeToo by name within their narratives, making extra-diegetic connections with the moment in which they were produced. All, again with the exception of Gaitskill’s text, mention Weinstein. Discourse and terms that have come to be associated with the moment are also prevalent. In *Les choses humaines*, women protest with signs that

read ‘« STOP IMPUNITÉ. » « #MeToo. NON AU SILENCE ! »’ [“STOP IMPUNITY.” “#MeToo. NO TO SILENCE!”] (p. 292). Writers with pre-existing feminist profiles, like Desportes and Gaitskill, are also connected to newer author Li through their position as public survivor-authors. This authorship means that the books are immediately put in conversation with discourses about sexual violence and feminism in the public sphere; the texts themselves are, too, concerned with public survivors and, in turn, public perpetrators.

Across the texts, there is formal diversity; the epistle is mobilised in *Cher Connard* and *Complicit* to varying degrees, offering a diversity of perspective that also structures *This Is Pleasure* and *Les choses humaines*. It is not only victim-survivor voices present, but perpetrators are given formal space to respond. Gaitskill (2022), in an essay on political fiction, speaks of ‘expressing honour for art that illuminates this mystery of our human nature, where good and evil constantly and unpredictably mix’. In the French texts, dialogic exchange in particular is mobilised to this effect, setting up conversations about nuance, conversation and exchange that were also present throughout #MeToo. The figures that occupied media coverage of #MeToo, many of the characters in the novels and involved in these exchanges are public figures, or intimately related to them. How these characters are rendered within the texts is of crucial importance, with their relationships to traditional and social medias at the forefront of this analysis. Notably, there are borders traversed in multiple ways; in a more expected sense from France to America (considering typical flows of cultural exchange in #MeToo), but also from America to France. In three of the texts, the notion of a third, virtual space is introduced, moving the novels from their geographic specificities in the US and France and placing them into the global internet of #MeToo. It is worth mentioning at this point that none of the texts here have been translated between English and French (although *Cher Connard* likely will, considering Desportes’s longstanding partnership with translator Frank Wynne); cultural exchange might appear in the novel, but the texts themselves remain rooted in their linguistic contexts. In this chapter, I want to offer an analysis of #MeToo fiction that sees it as an intervention into the discourse of the #MeToo moment in the US and France. Here, the reflections of the mediatised #MeToo that exist within the texts will be given due attention but the central argument, the crucial one, interrogates the ways in which these

novels attempt to revise #MeToo's supposed binarisms and assert themselves, perhaps erroneously, as correctives to media discourses.

### **Epitexts and authorship**

Although *Cher Connard*, *Les choses humaines* and *This Is Pleasure* are all frequently related to #MeToo in epitextual material, to varying degrees #MeToo is not taken as an uncomplicated positive. Many reviews comment upon their apparent 'nuance' when approaching #MeToo, sexual violence and, especially, its alleged perpetrators. In *Le Huffpost*, Valentin Entacelin (2022) underscores this apparent complexity of approach, positing that *Cher Connard* is 'loin d'être un simple roman sur #MeToo' [far from being a simple novel about #MeToo]. Sarah Hall (2019) argues for *The Guardian* that the 'ambiguities of #MeToo are masterfully distilled' by Gaitskill, drawing parallels between the ambivalence that pervades the novella and the need for ambiguity – as opposed to ostensible rigidity – within #MeToo. There exists a general suggestion in these materials that the texts function as a corrective intervention into a #MeToo that was overly dogmatic, that lacked a nuance the texts provide. In one sense, this sees them as backlash adjacent. Backlash discourse around #MeToo often derided its perceived binaristic approach to supposedly complex interactions. Tuil in particular is appraised as exploring the 'zone grise' [grey zone] of consent (for examples see Heckenbenner 2019; Georges 2019), asserting the novel as a pushback against polarisation in sexual violence discourse. Gaitskill and Tuil have allied themselves with this type of reading, whereas Despentès has instead spoke of being 'very inspired' by #MeToo (Elkin 2019).

Despentès and Li's authorship is of significance when considering the texts' relationship to #MeToo and sexual violence discourse in the media. Both have been open about their experiences of rape and can be described as public survivors. Serisier defines public survivors as 'women who achieve a public profile through speaking about their experience of rape' (2018, p. 16); this chimes more obviously with Li's experience, as Despentès had already acquired a level of fame in France before her survivor status was disclosed. As both have identified with surviving rape in the public eye, however, the label is nevertheless relevant. Li's rape was reported on widely; she

was attacked in a park in Belfast, a story which garnered widespread attention and condemnation from the public. Desportes experienced group rape in her youth while hitchhiking with a friend outside Paris. Beyond discussing their rapes in interviews and media appearances, both have written literary accounts of their experiences.<sup>27</sup> Desportes relays her rape directly in the 2006 non-fiction polemic *King Kong Théorie*, where she relates it to her induction into feminist and survivor politics. Li narrates a fictionalised version of her stranger rape in the crime novel *Dark Chapter* (2017), closely mapping her own story onto the plot. *Complicit*, too, draws upon details from Li's life: like the protagonist, she is Chinese-American and worked in film production for several years. Although neither of the novels in question here directly represent the authors' own experiences of sexual violence, the positions they occupy as public survivors are nevertheless noteworthy. As Desportes has a larger public profile than Li, this is more immediately observable in the epitextual material about her. In a pre-*Cher Connard* profile for *New York Times*, Laura Cappelletti (2020) contends that '[m]any critics see Desportes' willingness to talk frankly about sexual abuse as paving the way for the #MeToo movement in France'. There is less commentary on Li in this respect, but her survivor status is prominent in that which does exist. In a review of *Complicit*, Stephanie Merritt (2022) writes '[s]exual assault survivor Winnie M Li delivers a visceral and timely novel', drawing a connection between Li and the content of the text. Desportes's feminist politics are often discussed in reviews alongside her survivor status; Fanny Turquais (2022) contends that, typically, 'elle défend l'idée d'un féminisme sans contrainte' [she defends the idea of a feminism without constraint]. The authors' identities – as public survivors and, for Desportes especially, as feminist – orient them towards sexual violence narratives and, in turn, #MeToo in a personal way. This might imbue reception of their fiction on one hand with the authority of experience and, on the other, the survivor's credibility conundrum (Jordan 2004). The need for distance and objectivity seems to wane in reception of the fictional text, with authority privileged as engendering authenticity.

The epitextual construction of Gaitskill is slightly different but equally relevant here. Much of her fiction and non-fiction work explores gender, sex, and violence and

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<sup>27</sup> Li is also co-founder of *Clear Lines* festival, 'the UK's first-ever festival addressing sexual assault and consent through the arts and discussion' (n.d).

she is often represented as an influential literary commentator in this respect. Gaitskill is perhaps most famous for her 1994 essay for *Harper's Magazine*, 'The Trouble With Following The Rules', in which she recounts her experience of what 'could be described as acquaintance rape' (p. 35) in the 70s, an experience two years later in which she was 'raped for real' (p. 39), as well as an attempted rape which she thwarted in adulthood. Like Desportes and Li, then, she has a relationship to sexual violence that exists beyond her fiction. She holds, however, a definitively more ambiguous relationship to the notion of public survivor. In the essay she mentions Paglia and Roiphe, who famously deride the "victim politics" of feminism. While generous to some of their arguments, Gaitskill ultimately concludes that they overall 'derive from a belief that everyone except idiots interprets information and experience in the same way' (1994, p. 38). She resonates somewhat with proponents of anti-victimhood (as Desportes does in *King Kong Théorie*) but overall considers them as dogmatic as 'those ladies dedicated to establishing feminist-based rules and regulations for sex' (1994, p. 38). Here, there is a commitment to nuance and, perhaps, compromise that is illustrated throughout her work and its epitexts. Interviewed by Anthony Cummins (2021), she asserts that 'I have a nuanced mind, for better and worse'. The notion that Gaitskill is committed to accessing a multiplicity of perspectives holds a particular significance for #MeToo. Discussing *This Is Pleasure* and its relationship to #MeToo, she comments that 'I don't like the word 'harassment' any more [...] That doesn't always seem to be the right word' (Jamison 2019) and, echoing the language of the 100-women tribune, that '[a] lot of bad things can happen that aren't rape, but rape is rape' (Cummins 2021). Gaitskill, through epitext, is therefore attached to ideas of nuance that shape perceptions of how *This Is Pleasure* might approach sexual violence, its perpetrators and #MeToo; this pre-conception is justified through the text's split-perspective narrative. This ambivalence often means commentators rush to paint Gaitskill as an anti-feminist writer. In her acerbic 1972 essay 'The Women's Movement', Joan Didion suggested that feminist critique and fiction writing were somewhat necessarily oppositional, noting '[t]hat fiction has certain irreducible ambiguities seemed never to occur to these women [of the movement], nor should it have, for fiction is in most ways hostile to ideology' (Didion 1972). This claim, although dated, echoes in Gaitskill's description of 'forever arguments about whether

or not fiction should be political' (Gaitskill 2022). In fact, Gaitskill as writer is emblematic of the ambivalence and ambiguity that has always punctuated feminist theory and writing about sexual violence. As Alcoff affirms in *Rape and Resistance*, '[t]he idea that rape is a simple, straightforward matter actually works to dissuade the many victims from coming forward who feel that their own experience had complexity and ambiguity, and it inhibits the vitally necessary process of being able to discuss one's experience with others' (2018, p. 12). Understanding the complexity inherent to sexual violence is a necessarily feminist task, despite frequent representations to the contrary in both anti-feminist and mainstream contexts.

Notably, when situating them in a contemporary context, French language reviews of the French novels largely refer to 'Me Too' in English. #BalanceTonPorc is virtually never mentioned. In a piece on *Cher Connard* (in English), Angelique Chrisafis (2022) mentions that 'France issued its own riposte #BalanceTonPorc' to 'the accusations of sexual misconduct against the US film producer Harvey Weinstein in 2017 that galvanised women across the world to speak out'. As I have noted, the French hashtag coined by Sandra Muller was tweeted out two days before Milano's tweet and aimed at a French TV executive. Etancelin (2022) notes that *Cher Connard* 'intègre des moments marquants de l'actualité française' [refers to significant moments of French current affairs]; *Les choses humaines* is acutely concerned with 'la bourgeoisie intellectuelle française' [the French intellectual bourgeoisie] (Patri 2021, emphasis my own). However, although the focus is primarily on French individuals, locations and events, the novels are still positioned relative to America when it comes to locating their relationship with contemporary discourse on sexual violence; American dominance in producing what we understand as '#MeToo' is reified. These epitextual elements are emblematic of a tension between the novels' Frenchness and their ostensible place amongst a supposedly global, but implicitly American, #MeToo.

*Complicit* is the only text of the four which explicitly mobilises its peritexts to create an unproblematic alignment with #MeToo. Genette's assertion that paratexts constitute

the privileged site of a pragmatics and of a strategy, of an action on the public in the service, well or badly understood and accomplished, of a better reception

of the text and a more pertinent reading-- more pertinent, naturally, in the eyes of the author and his allies' (1991, pp. 261-262)

influences an examination of the *type* of reading *Complicit's* peritexts endorse. To begin where a British reader might with *Complicit's* UK cover, the text reading 'you know what's going on. Would you speak up?' immediately evokes an affective response (the US version tells us the novel is 'devastating and timely', indicating an emotional drama for its age). It draws the reader in to the concerns of the narrative, making them a subject, asking: are you courageous enough to speak out? Are you willing to be an active agent in #MeToo? It is in the extensive 'praise for' section of the UK edition where the intended context is set out. In a tenth of the reviews (four out of forty) it is 'thought-provoking' (pp. 6-8), and 'makes you think' (p. 7); this novel, the paratexts tell us, is not merely about reading for pleasure. It has *something to say* and is ambitious in its scope<sup>28</sup> — from its reader, it demands allyship. Timeliness is emphasised repeatedly (pp. 4-7), so that the reader knows that they should find the narrative resonant, representative of the contemporary moment. In this sense, readers are implicitly assumed to share a cultural context – global, maybe, but unshakeably American. That it is also a novel 'for the ages' attests to its supposedly transcendental message about power, abuse, and complicity. The suggestion here is that a specific story about a specific industry might speak to a wider truth; here, the unspoken acknowledgment is that events within film and entertainment industries, particularly in their mediated form, shape culture more generally. *Complicit's* peritexts are by far the most plentiful of the texts in this chapter, and are exemplary of ideas that pervade all four: of bravery, of timeliness, and of universal resonance. Even when #MeToo is not named directly, it is clearly the dominant referent. Despite the relevance of peritexts across the board, *Complicit* is, in fact, somewhat exceptional amongst the texts here—there is a marked lack of epitextual discussion of ambiguity and ambivalence. Is *Complicit* positioned and received, then, as a text faithful to #MeToo, where the others strike-back? Is it a standard, rather than backlash form?

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<sup>28</sup> Its speaking out is particularly positioned as being about the 'dark and glamorous' (p. 5) world of the film industry and, in that respect, it is courageous, 'fearless' (p. 2), a parallel to the women of the narrative who take part in their own 'exposé' (p. 6).

## Forming narrative complexity

If *Complicit*'s politics are rendered along straightforwardly #MeToo supportive lines, it also takes a relatively uncomplicated form with 50 chapters written in Sarah's first-person perspective. It is not necessarily the most standard of the four, however. *Les choses humaines* is written in a third person perspective with a great deal of dialogue, particularly when it comes to narrating the trial in the novel's second and third acts. It provides brief transcripts of police interviews with Mila and Alexandre. The trial comes relatively late in the narrative. The courtroom environment is represented with verisimilitude, courtroom-style reportage detailing the back and forth between counsel and witnesses. This gives the sense that an actual legal trial is being relayed. The novel, in this sense, gives a sense of the investigatory; the apparent realness blurs boundaries between fact and fiction which, as Heinzelman describes in a study of law and fiction, combines 'two discursive formations – the literary and the legal' (2010, p. 37). In so doing, *Les choses humaines* situates itself amongst a rich literary tradition in French and English that explores the public/private schism through the medium of legality and, crucially, the courts (see Pollak 1990). The representation of courtroom proceedings intersects with Spampinato's (2021) critique of 'adjudicative readings' of rape narratives. She warns that readings which attempt to adjudicate on the *realness* of rape within narrative are analytically limiting within a feminist framework, relying on patriarchal constructions of law and legality. That readers principally recognise Alexandre's guilt through his conviction in a court of law sits at an uneasy juncture with feminist conceptualisations of credibility and belief (Banet-Weiser and Higgins 2023). We are implored to join in on the adjudication.

The court in *Les choses humaines* allows for the representation of multiple perspectives but ultimately privileges the law. *Complicit* contends with perspective and authority rather differently, introducing an epistolary context. This is primarily rendered through emails from journalist Thom (which are supplemented by brief interview transcripts from phone calls and meetings between himself and Hugo's accusers.) These inclusions are rather sparse across the novel's 657 pages, thus it is far from the modern 'email novel' defined by Jill Walker Rettberg (2014), but these small snapshots work to provide insight into characters' experiences that go beyond Sarah's

perceptions of them. As Walker Rettberg (2014) proposes, ‘the intimacy of email allows readers a sense of voyeurism’ that is not solely mediated through the protagonist. Along with geographic specificity, the foregrounding of Sarah’s focalised narrative is interrupted through emails and phone call transcripts. A particularly telling excerpt comes in the transcript of an interview with Courtney, Hugo’s former assistant. After expressing reluctance to talk to Thom, she ends the phone call by saying ‘Sarah Lee or Lai, something like that. [pause] Ask her. She’s got a lot to answer for’ (p. 455). This confirms some of the concerns Sarah has implied throughout; some former colleagues believe her to be complicit in Hugo’s abuse and, significantly, she believes this about herself. Here, the inclusion of epistles in the form of email and transcripts allow for a broadening of perspectives, but they do ultimately correspond to Sarah’s versions of events.<sup>29</sup> They assert her reliability as protagonist, even when she has a negative perception of her own behaviour. Through this, Sarah is granted partial redemption – her thoughtfulness about her own complicity in Hugo’s abuse, her awareness about and regret of it, engenders a level of narrative sympathy. She is constructed as the reflective, self-critical feminist subject that is somewhat exonerated in her guilt when it is revealed she was also harassed by Hugo.

Within *This Is Pleasure*, there is also a marked interest in multiplicity of perspective. The text is structured through the oscillating first-person speech of Quin and Margot, each section titled with either a Q. or M. to designate the speaker’s identity. There is less of a sense of direct communication than in *Complicit* or *Cher Connard* but a dialogue remains. Quin and Margot refer to each other, as well as events they’ve experienced together, offering ‘intertwinement of different ‘subjective’ viewpoints that vary in distance towards the object of observation’, a key affordance of multiperspective narratives (Igl 2014, p. 1). Margot sees things about Quin that he cannot: ‘[t]hough they don’t often express it freely, some people feel real sympathy for Quin’ (p. 57). Quin, on the other hand, is able to provide his perspective on the relationships between him and the women who accuse him. This is a conspicuous choice when it comes to representing sexual violence, allowing the perpetrator to be humanised and rendered three-dimensional. It is not, necessarily, a choice that simply

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<sup>29</sup> In a flashback, after becoming privy to the knowledge that Hugo coerced Courtney into sex, she responds ‘[y]ou’re a smart girl with an exciting future ahead of you’ describing herself as ‘taking a page out of Hugo’s own playbook’ (p. 565). She recognises her own complicity.

absolves Quin of culpability. The reader does not automatically share Quin's perceptions – Margot's interventions help to create a nuanced view in this respect, noting when women were repulsed by his behaviour, when a 'self-possessed young woman looked at him with disgust' (p. 35). The split perspective narratives in *This Is Pleasure* engender nuance by giving space to two homodiegetic first-person narrators. This does not mean, however, that any one of these perspectives across the texts is privileged or given ultimate authority. As I have argued in this chapter, #MeToo fiction may be considered correctional to the (supposed) black and white politics of #MeToo. Formal experimentation – particularly through mutliperspective – can be seen to constitute part of a wider backlash to narrative rigidity. Taylor (2020), discussing *This Is Pleasure's* function in this respect, comments that 'reducing the complexity of situation or character in order to make a point is the job of a propagandist, not a writer'. Throughout Taylor's piece it is suggested that the potential for the privileging of the perpetrator voice – and, in turn, version of events – might upset the (imagined) feminist reader. In this sense, the text's narrative complexity is seen to confront a feminism steeped in the "propaganda" of #MeToo.

Although *Complicit* plays with communicative forms and introduces the online space, it is in *Cher Connard* that the e-pistolary form is mobilised to its full extent. The novel is constructed through a series of messages between Oscar and Rebecca, primarily on Instagram. These messages are punctuated by excerpts from Zoé's blog. The epistolary is an ancient form – its origins are biblical – that gained mass popularity in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and has long been associated with women's writing and voice by critics (Patch 2014, p. 2); Marie Löchsnigg and Rebekka Schuh argue in their volume that, '[w]ithout any doubt, epistolary forms have seen a renaissance in contemporary fiction' (2018, p. 1). Many modern epistolary texts make use of contemporary epistolary communication as is the case in *Cher Connard*; they are structured as letters in the classic sense – Rebecca's first message begins 'Cher connard,' – but are instead sent through Instagram direct message. This usage here seems definitively political, connecting the novel to the contemporary moment and to #MeToo. The use of the epistolary here works, as Elizabeth Kovach argues in her chapter on epistolary and e-mail novels, as 'reference points for registering major historical shifts tied not simply to communications networks but also to the infrastructural and technological,

economic, social and political environments within which these networks are embedded' (2018, p. 262). That Rebecca and Oscar can communicate in this way is directly tied to this moment and attempts to make sense of how individuals interact – particularly through grievance – within it. Rebecca is able to respond directly to Oscar's insulting of her, opening a dialogue between them.

The concept of dialogue, when positioned alongside #MeToo, is noteworthy; many critiques of #MeToo centred on its supposed *shutting down* of dialogue through 'call-outs' and their discursive associate, cancel culture. Eve Ng traces the lineage of call-outs and cancelling through communicative practices originating in Black American communities, noting that as #MeToo developed, this practice, which had 'first been praised as important and necessary correctives to long-time systemic imbalances and abuses of power began to be criticized as itself problematic' (Ng 2022, p. 54). Rebecca does not attempt to publicly call-out Oscar, responding to his insult privately and directly. Zoé, on the other hand, opts for the public route. This dialogue between Rebecca and Oscar offers perspective into both of their interior lives; in this respect, Instagram DMs offer a democratic forum where both can speak. There is the sense that they communicate candidly, that the reader has a sincere insight into the development of their relationship. When considering the novel's theme of sexual violence, it is particularly notable that Oscar as perpetrator has a clear voice. The epistolary exchange does mean, however, that he can be challenged on certain statements. Although Oscar and Quin are given the opportunity to speak out, Rebecca and Margot's voices work to temper and, at points, directly undermine the men's attempt to exert control of the narrative. The nuance afforded by the split perspectives does not work only to let perpetrators off the hook. There seems to be an optimism about online messaging's potential as both an expressive form and a dialectical mode of relationship building. At the novel's end, Rebecca's final line reads '[t]u as raison, on commence à être à l'étroit dans ces lettres' [you're right, it's getting cramped in these letters] (p. 540), suggesting their friendship is now ready to move into the 'real world'. The use of 'lettres' is suggestive of Rebecca (and Oscar's) ages – Instagram direct messages are configured in the classic style of letter writing. Age plays an important role in *Cher Connard*; Rebecca and Oscar are of a different generation to

Zoé, and have not grown up online in the same way. It is interesting, then, that their use of the internet ultimately results in a more positive outcome than Zoé's.

Zoé's blog allows for further exploration of the virtual space within *Cher Connard*. It is through blogging that she is able to speak out in the first instance and narrate her experience with Oscar and publishing in general. The blog, in the tradition of feminist experiential narratives, merges the personal and the political and makes Zoé something of a feminist microcelebrity. It is interesting that Zoé does not become an influencer by the now more typical channels like Instagram;<sup>30</sup> it is the older characters who make use of this space more comprehensively. The blog provides space for longer form communication; in *Les choses humaines* especially there is the sense that platforms like Twitter, with its 280-character word count for unverified users, precludes nuance and encourages abuse. Zoé, as feminist blogger, makes visible an experience she may have otherwise been unable to. She speaks back to a much more powerful man, and communicates with other women and survivors. There is a class differential at play between Zoé and Oscar; she is by all accounts a low paid worker, he a relatively successful author (although depicted as something of a social loser). Blogging affords her space to re-dress imbalance. As Fawcett and Shreshta (2016) explore in their study of blogging about sexual assault, a desire for support and community is crucial in victim-survivor blogging. At first, the blog is a positive experience in this respect, an engagement in what Henry Jenkins calls 'participatory culture' (1992) for Zoé; she produces and expresses, but is also in feminist community with other women. She thanks them for 'precious' messages of support, addressing her audience as 'les copines féministes' [feminist friends] (2022, p. 304). She is, too, channelling a righteous feminist anger; she is in some ways, as feminist academic blogger Sara Ahmed (2010) denotes, a feminist killjoy. That she refuses to merely accept her lot, and instead communicates with unapologetic rage, marks her as a feminist who, as Ahmed describes, 'spoils the happiness of others' (2010, p. 581). Zoé's feminism, she proudly explains, is that of SCUM Manifesto; it was through Solanas's work that she left 'la honte derrière moi comme un manteau dont je n'avais plus l'usage' [shame behind me like a coat I no longer had use for] (2022, p. 126).

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<sup>30</sup> Novoselova and Jenson note that 'the public interest in the term "blog" peaked in 2009 and has been steadily declining since then' (2019, p. 257) and that blogging platforms have been eclipsed by other social medias and mobile apps.

Perhaps paradoxically, this makes her a figure of admiration, particularly for feminists online: she is shocked and pleased that ‘certaines me disent qu’elles sont devenues féministes en lisant mes publications’ [some people tell me they became feminists through reading my posts] (p. 125). An older ‘radical lesbian’ friend tells her to get off social media and protect herself, but she refuses: ‘mais je suis activiste ici, sur le Web’ [but I am an activist here, on the internet] (p. 127). Here, a generational disconnect is signalled in the discomfort with online activism. The friend’s warning seems prudent, as Zoé is targeted by a deluge of online abuse directed at her for daring to occupy this marginal subject position: the publicly angry feminist, the speaking/spoiling subject of #MeToo.

### **Public Survivors, Public Feminists**

Zoé, through her blogging, becomes a public survivor. The narratives in general ally themselves with the mediatised #MeToo in their engagement with the public survivor figure; media reporting quickly transformed many into public survivors and, in turn, spokespeople and advocates overnight. It is worth being clear, however, that when they experienced violence or abuse many of these survivors were not yet celebrities. Celebrity names were certainly essential in giving the initial stories about Weinstein, for example, a certain newsworthiness. Many of the women whose testimonies comprised the basis of these early Weinstein exposes were, like Sarah in *Complicit* and Zoé in *Cher Connard*, low-paid assistants in precarious roles (as Jane in *The Assistant*); Zelda Perkins and Rowena Chiu, for example, were both forced to walk away from their jobs at Miramax with a £125,000 settlement and an NDA (Saner 2020). It is not, then, the case that there is a straightforward relationship between the role of (traditional) celebrity and public survivor. It goes without saying that the stories of celebrities garnered the most media attention, but women who were simply in the workplace orbit of men like Weinstein and were abused by him also became, through their public speaking out, public survivors.<sup>31</sup> The position of public survivor is a challenging one, as Serisier (2023b) has pointed out, with the frequent media

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<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that many of these women were retrospectively written out of the narrative in accounts that both praised and critiqued #MeToo.

conflation of public survivors and feminist spokespeople insisting that the feminist politics of public survivorship are often complicated and ambivalent.

*Cher Connard* and *Complicit* both feature victim-survivors who are celebrities, although Rebecca in the former is not the victim-survivor at the narrative's centre, and non-celebrities. *This Is Pleasure* and *Les choses humaines* exclusively focus on characters who correspond more classically to Serisier's (2023b) definition, and are 'made public' after they speak out about their experiences. Notably, these are the two texts which also prominently feature legal action against the accused perpetrators. It is a lawsuit in the former case and a trial in the latter that propels the victim-survivors into the media's interest. In *This Is Pleasure*, there are multiple complainants, not all of them a part of the lawsuit. One woman who is not involved speaks to the *New York Times* about Quin's spanking of her; as Margot knows this to have taken place with at least one other of the complainants, 'she certainly made it [the lawsuit] look reasonable' (p. 49). Margot tellingly comments that she 'didn't know about Caitlin [a central accuser] until the lawsuit' (p. 48), suggesting her insight into Quin's sexual behaviour is not as comprehensive as she implies throughout, but also that these women only become fully realised through their interaction with the legal system. This is notable given the tensions between the law and informal channels mobilised by victim-survivors throughout #MeToo. Tuerkheimer describes that with 'the perceived futility of invoking formal accountability measures taken as given' (2021, p. 1150), victim-survivors frequently turn to informal reporting mechanisms. That the media in both texts takes an interest when the victim-survivors *do* use the law suggests the problematics of visibility, legality, and belief.

Newer forms of media are also mobilised alongside traditional forms in order to exert extra-legal pressure and, essentially, gain visibility for victim-survivors; Margot notes that hundreds of women 'had signed the endlessly circulating online petition, given interviews, demanded that Quin be fired, sought damages, made threats to boycott any company that would dare to hire him' (p. 28). This speaks to emergence of women's counter-publics against sexual violence online, as conceptualised by Michael Salter (2013). Salter writes that 'the apparent willingness of some girls and women to seek out alternative modes of discourse and redress suggests a perceived shortfall in the adequacy of institutional responsiveness to sexual violence and gender

justice' (2013, p. 229). Here, the lack of perceived legal leverage on the behalf of the women against a man like Quin is clear – they must use alternative methods to make their voices heard. Margot is derisive about the online activity, but it is nevertheless illustrative of the type of digital practices associated with #MeToo. As Mendes, Ringrose and Keller point out, digital feminist activists have argued that 'calling out' practices are a critical part of instigating social change' (2018, p. 241). In *Cher Connard*, Zoé speaks out about Oscar in the first instance in a blog; Mila in *Les choses humaines* also uses a blog to 'speak back' to a statement made by Alexandre's father in court and goes on to narrate her experience more generally. She begins, 'tu dis que nous n'avons pas vécu la même histoire mais au fond de toi, tu le sais : tu m'as violée' [you say that we have not lived the same story but deep inside you know it: you raped me] (p. 432), before linking the incident to the wider cultural moment of #MeToo. Online calling out practices are therefore employed in a crucial way in *Les choses humaines*, *Cher Connard* and *This Is Pleasure*. In her blog on Oscar in *Cher Connard*, Zoé writes that '[m]a voix est un flocon de neige dans l'avalanche qui vous engloutit' [my voice is a snowflake in the avalanche that engulfs you] (p. 32). The idea of snowflakes, or a snowflake generation, has emerged closely alongside the discourse of #MeToo; the term has also entered French public discourse, albeit in a less pronounced way with acknowledgement of its Anglo-American origins (see Cloarec 2021; Ferveur 2022). As Andrew Hunter Murray identifies '[t]he metastasis of "snowflake" – from a synonym for fragility to an age-based mark of prudery – took place around 2015 in the UK, and it has prompted a journalistic bonanza' (2018, p. 44). The term, virtually always used as a pejorative, encompasses a variety of meanings but typically signifies individuals who are easily offended, who lack resilience and who are typically left-wing.<sup>32</sup> In a 2018 interview with CNN, Condoleezza Rice utilised the term to express concern that #MeToo infantilised women, saying 'let's not turn women into snowflakes. Let's not infantilize women' (Rice in King 2018). In *Cher Connard*, the term is positively reclaimed; Zoé might only be 'a snowflake' in the avalanche of accusations against Oscar, but she is proud to be one. The metaphor of the avalanche speaks to the wider metaphors (like "waves" and "floods") that characterise women's

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<sup>32</sup> A mythology traces its origin to Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), in which a character makes a speech proclaiming '[y]ou are not special. You're not a beautiful and unique snowflake'. This genealogy has, however, been contested.

collective anger throughout #MeToo. These metaphors, as Kay points out ‘lend themselves to a wider sense that we are moving ineluctably—even organically—towards gender justice’ (2020, p. 11). In *Cher Connard*, at least, this seductive notion does not come to pass.

Zoé is ultimately hospitalised after a mental health crisis. In the lead up to this, she posts an emotionally charged blog which reads ‘[l]es masculinistes<sup>33</sup> ont déclaré la guerre aux féministes sur les réseaux, ils savent que leur stratégie fonctionne et qu’ils peuvent compter sur la complicité des réseaux, détenus par les masculinistes’ [the masculinists have declared war on feminists on social networks, they know that their strategy works and that they can count on the complicity of these networks, owned by the masculinists] (p. 266). She goes on to clarify that she personally is overwhelmed with abuse from these *masculinistes* and has received messages encouraging her suicide. The abuse of women and, particularly, outspoken feminists online is a much-documented phenomenon. The blog is illustrative of the tension Kay describes when ‘promises of voice, and the cultural inducements to speak up and speak out, come up against the brute realities of misogynistic backlash, ridicule, trolling and hate that circulate so easily throughout digital culture’ (2020, p. 6). Zoé’s description of the online war against women calls to mind, too, Emma Jane’s work on ‘gendered cyberhate’, that is material directed towards women and girls that ‘involves abuse, death threats, rape threats, and/or sexually violent rhetoric; and that involves the internet, social media platforms, or communications technology’ (2017, p. 7). Zoé’s experience online – speaking up about men’s violence against women and, crucially, feminism – bleeds into her offline life and has a profound effect on her mental health. As Jane asserts, it is increasingly difficult to draw a line between one’s online and offline life and, consequently, the harms caused by gendered cyberhate are ‘embodied harms’ (2017, p. 56). Zoé is able to circumvent Oscar’s relative position of power in France in one respect, communicating over a global internet. Ultimately, though, she cannot escape the very real misogyny present in French culture. Post-#MeToo in France, masculinist groups have mobilised cyber harassment for anti-feminist ends

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<sup>33</sup> *Masculinisme* is alike to men’s rights activism in English, a networked form of misogyny. *L’internaute*’s dictionary defines it as a ‘Mouvement pour la défense des droits des hommes, de leur indépendance et de leurs valeurs’ [Movement in defence of men’s rights, their independence, and their values].

(Grigris, Leblanc and Mamalet 2019). There is no doubt the mental harm she suffers is profound, unable to leave hospital. Oscar's initial Instagram attack on Rebecca might also be seen as part of this continuum of online hatred; she is, at least, impacted strongly enough to respond to him, and sympathises with Zoé generally. In *Cher Connard*, the abuse of women on and offline is indivisible from the #MeToo moment.

Although her blog exists within a global digital context, Zoé reaches out to the cultural moment in France explicitly and attempts to engage in what Kay (2020) calls collective speech when she mentions the patriarchal violence of incest, rape and harassment (p. 31). *Le consentement* and *La familia grande* are immediately called to mind as contexts to this comment. Zoé's experience with Oscar was negotiated through the world of publishing; as an author accused of sexual violence in a public forum, he is related to the subject of *Le consentement*, Matzneff. The foregrounding of incest in Zoé's statement recalls Olivier Duhamel's abuse of Kouchner's twin brother, his stepson. The intertextual references here are resoundingly French, and when Rebecca refers directly to the 100-women tribunal, describing how '[q]uand il y a eu cette pétition sur la liberté d'importuner signée par Catherine Deneuve et Brigitte Lahaie, j'ai dit à mes nouvelles copines féministes -- atterrissez, les filles' [when there was this petition on the freedom to bother signed by Catherine Deneuve and Brigitte Lahaie, I said to my new feminist friends – wake up, girls] (p. 95), she orients *Cher Connard* towards a clear national context. Lahaie's inclusion here is extra-diegetically notable – as a former actress in erotic films, she is connected to Desportes through their experience in the sex industry. Rebecca is associated with some of the 100-women tribunal's signatories through her profession and age, but she distances herself from them by asserting her 'new' feminist identity. There is also a further intriguing metatextual element at play here, recalling Desportes own engagement with public letter-writing around sexual violence.

After exchanging a few messages, Rebecca dictates to Oscar that 'si tu m'écris de longues lettres en espérant que je prenne ta défense publiquement, plutôt crever. Aucune chance que je mette mon bon public féministe en colère pour défendre un crétin de ton acabit' [if you're writing me long letters in the hope that I publicly defend you, I'd rather die. No chance that I'll make my good feminist audience angry defending a moron like you] (p. 37). There is a suggestion here that public perpetrators

rely upon public defence. Rebecca refuses this, with the implication that she'd receive backlash from her 'bon public féministe' in doing so. This reference evokes the notion of social media pile-ons, targeted at those seen to speak out about the wrong thing. In this case, however, Rebecca does insinuate this anger would be justified; Oscar is, after all, 'un crétin'. She has a complex relationship to feminist politics, and writes to Oscar that '[j]e ne sacralise pas la parole de la victime. Évidemment, parfois les femmes mentent' [I do not make the word of a victim sacred. Obviously, sometimes women lie] (p. 95). At other points in the novel, Rebecca reiterates that she makes an effort to believe people (women and men) when they speak out. The concept of belief arises in *Complicit* when Sarah's sister Karen comments on '#MeToo stories from Hollywood' and asserts, upon prodding from Sarah, 'I believe them. I'm just shocked, is all' (p. 482). In referring to his accusers in *This Is Pleasure*, Quin argues that 'I don't believe they were hurt. They were maybe offended, but that's different' (p. 61). In a phone call with Mila's mother in *Les choses humaines*, Claire responds, '[j]e suis désolée, je veux bien croire que quelque chose de grave est arrivé mais...' [I'm sorry, I would like to believe something serious happened but...] (p. 237). Her apparent desire to believe is undercut by her inability to cast her son as rapist. The concept of belief in both the experiences and suffering of victim-survivors and, crucially, women is mobilised across all of the texts.

Belief, as I have argued, is a central discursive feature of #MeToo: the slogan 'Believe women', which became prominent in this moment, is perhaps the pre-eminent media example of this engagement. 'Believe women' has in many cases become synonymous with #MeToo. In September 2018, dating app *Bumble* took out a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* that featured the words and nothing else, suggesting its potential marketability as slogan.<sup>34</sup> It has, as a slogan, been critiqued by both anti-feminist and feminist commentators – Rebecca Traister (2020), for example, describes it as a 'clumsy imperative' that is 'compelling but flawed'. The examples of believability from the texts, with the exception of *Complicit*, call it conceptually into question. Rebecca, in refusing to make the word of a victim sacred in *Cher Connard*, suggests that allegations must not be taken wholly at face value. Claire claims that she

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<sup>34</sup> Here, there is also the uncomfortable suggestion that men might be implored to 'believe women' and embrace feminist politics as a cynical dating tactic.

wants to believe that something happened to Mila at the hands of her son, but feels something is missing that prevents her from doing so. Her son, a white man, holds a privileged position in the economy of believability. *This Is Pleasure*'s Quin refuses to believe that his accusers were realistically hurt by his actions, although he does accept they might have been offended; in this sense, he fundamentally does not believe in their speech. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins argue '[w]omen who make allegations of sexual assault often find themselves bidding for recognition in the economy of believability against an attacker who denies the assault, or against white men in position of power who gatekeep the various options for justice, restoration, and restitution' (2022, p. 131). Quin denies the premise that what he did *was* assault, and relies on his power for protection. The presence of belief as a discursive force roots the books firmly in the #MeToo context, as detailed in the literature review section of this thesis. The difficulty in navigating belief insists that they are tied to both feminist and backlash critique.

As suggested through her comments on belief, in *Les choses humaines* Claire occupies a similarly complex position in her public feminism. She claims in an interview prior to Alexandre's trial, regarding the sexual assaults in Cologne at the end of 2015, that '[t]ous les agresseurs sexuels doivent être lourdement condamnés' [all sexual offenders should be heavily sentenced] (p. 208) and that, in their silence, feminists have put the 'défense des étrangers avant celle des femmes attaquées. Elle jugeait que ce silence était « coupable »' [defence of immigrants before that of the attacked women. She considered this silence to be "guilty"] (p. 50). Here, silence – not 'speaking out' when one apparently ought to – is indefensible. Feminists' public speech around violence clearly carries a certain significance. However, she subsequently defends, and does not condemn, Alexandre, even when she has doubts about his innocence. Like Zoé and Rebecca, she is privy to emotionally charged online messages that mobilise her feminist identity against her in a different way. After defending Alexandre, she receives 'des dizaines' [tens] of insulting messages (p. 265). Largely, they point out her apparent hypocrisy in condemning the rapists in Cologne while refusing to condemn her son: 'Quand c'est des étrangers, tu ouvres ta grosse gueule mais quand c'est ton fils, tu t'écrases !' [When it's immigrants, you open your big mouth but when it's your son, you cringe!] (ibid.) Another Tweeter recalls her

previous critiques of feminists' silence on Cologne, commenting '[o]uais, indignation à géométrie variable. Quand c'est des Arabes, c'est super grave mais quand c'est ton fils, y'a plus personne. Elle est passée où la féministe ?' [yeah, indignation when it suits you. When it's Arabs, it's a big deal but when it's your son, it's nowhere to be seen. What happened to the feminist?] (ibid.) There is a demand for feminist accountability, here, that we might associate with #MeToo, that is not present in *Cher Connard*.

The tweets flip Claire's previous comments on their heads; she accused feminists of culpability when they did not condemn sexual violence by immigrants, yet tacitly endorses the behaviour of her white son. This calls to mind Ticktin's (2008) argument that sexual violence is conceptualised by difference in the French cultural imaginary; the racialised 'violent heterosexual' (Guénif-Souilamas 2006, p. 31), typically coded as Muslim, can easily be viewed as rapist but her white, European son cannot. Claire views Alexandre as one of 'les bons Français' (Rey-Robert 2019, p. 229) who, symbolic of proper Republican values, does not meet the necessary 'aberrant' conditions of rapist (Gavey 2018). The second tweet, interrogating Claire's feminism, brings to mind Gill's assertion regarding contemporary feminism that 'claiming a feminist identity – without specifying what that means in terms of some kind of politics – is problematic' (2016, p. 619). Claire's targeting does not contain the same indiscriminately misogynistic elements that exist in *Cher Connard*; it illustrates instead the – often aggressive – calls for accountability from public feminists that characterised #MeToo. She is invoking the *white feminism* for which #MeToo's most prominent media voices were often critiqued; political whiteness is engaged so that, as Phipps describes in her study of race and #MeToo, threat from certain outsider groups (in this case, immigrants) can be emphasised whilst 'the figure of the "threatened" and "reviled" white man [is used] to great effect' (2019, p. 12). Claire perhaps demonstrates a situation in which 'race shapes the politics of sexual violence' (ibid. p. 17), focusing on the sexual violence of racialised men to the exclusion of white men. Her feminism relies upon already culturally dominant ideas about what types of men enact sexual violence; her son does not fall into this category. Public survivors and public feminists populate the texts, but rarely does a character occupy both positions.

When this is the case, as it is for Zoé, the character struggles to balance these differing forms of visibility.

There are similarities between Claire and Susan Estrich's character in *Bombshell*; a public feminist who publicly defends (legally in Estrich's case but not Claire's) a man accused of sexual violence. The text represents feminism as a tricky political identity, one that can be wrought by contradictions and tensions. This is representative of the concerns with ambiguity that characterise *Les choses humaines*, *Cher Connard* and *Complicité* especially. One also recalls here examples of publicly feminist celebrities, such as Lena Dunham<sup>35</sup> who, in the midst of the #MeToo moment, defended men accused of sexual violence. The perception of a feminist identity allows certain celebrities to speak from an assumed position of authority regarding men's violence, but also allows them to enact harm while weaponising a perceived feminist identity or, indeed, staying quiet about abuse. Claire functions, per Hamad and Taylor's description, as someone 'whose very fame is the product of their feminist enunciative practices' (2015, p. 125), whereas Rebecca is a celebrity who has become attached to feminism. They both, however, have a level of responsibility for disseminating ideas about feminism and, in turn, men's violence to the public. Both texts illustrate a tension between public feminists and the insistence that they speak out about specific subjects, and their intimate/professional proximities to abusive men. There is a recognition of the gravitas of this responsibility, and the difficulties that come with it; as Gill asserts, celebrity statements about feminism 'have a huge cultural impact' (2016, p. 619). *Cher Connard* and *Les choses humaines* are intimately concerned with private and public identities and how women – especially women who are publicly feminist – are (un)able to navigate these uneasy boundaries. Both recognise the weight that the speech of public feminists carries when it comes to sexual violence, while also acknowledging that most women will interact with abusive men in some capacity, making these boundary negotiations extremely challenging. Each of the novels is, then, in conversation with the public nature of survivor experience, exposing the tensions inherent to this identity. Both the French and American texts share interest in survivors made public; in both cultural contexts, #MeToo and

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<sup>35</sup> In 2018, Dunham defended *Girls* writer Murray Miller after he was reported to have sexually assaulted the actor Aurora Perrinau. She later published an apology in the *Hollywood Reporter*.

#BalanceTonPorc rendered survivor experience – and individual victim-survivors – public. In this sense, #MeToo fiction across geographical context responds to and reproduces this mediated experience. It does not necessarily tell *new* stories, but reflects those that characterised the moment in its characters and concerns. As texts about the public nature of sexual violence – and texts that prioritise nuance – the public perpetrator is equally important.

### **Public perpetrators, monsters and trials by media**

Rebecca and Claire's feminism is seen in some respects (at least, publicly) to be compromised by their relationship with men accused of sexual violence. The texts' perpetrators of violence are all men; in three out of four cases they are middle-aged, and they are all white. In fact, all correspond relatively closely to the archetypal male characters identified in the chapter on #MeToo-adjacent cinema, depicted as successful and, importantly here, somewhat public. It seems sensible to begin with the outlier of the four: Alexandre in *Les choses humaines* is young, an undergraduate student at Stanford. His power lies in his proximity to other powerful people, in his family connections – one is reminded of Al from *Promising Young Woman*. Both have *potential* prior to their accusations, are young men rendered in the vein of Stanford rapist Turner. It is accepted that Alexandre's good reputation, because of his good family, precedes him. He engenders what Kate Manne terms 'himpathy', that is excessive sympathy 'frequently extended in contemporary America to men who are white, nondisabled, and otherwise privileged "golden boys"' (2017, p. 197). Alexandre is obviously tried in France, but it is difficult to argue that the same grace is not extended to him. In a humorous scene, Alexandre tells an ex that he has been contacted by an American company to be a sperm donor: he describes that they are looking for 'des donneurs à fort potentiel : des QI élevés, des profils sociaux de haut niveau, ils m'ont contacté, ils me veulent' [high potential donors: high IQ, high social profiles, they contacted me, they want me] (p. 110). Although the tone is flippant, the utterance reveals a key facet of Alexandre's self-perception: he is a promising young man. At one point during the trial, his father Jean reiterates Turner's father's words exactly when discussing his potential punishment: 'un garçon à qui jusqu'à présent tout a

réussi, pour vingt minutes d'action' [a boy who for thus far everything has been successful, for twenty minutes of action] (pp. 429-30). Alexandre asserts that '[j]e suis fier de l'éducation féministe que ma mère m'a transmise. J'ai une vision totalement égalitariste des rapports homme/femme' [I am proud of the feminist upbringing my mother gave me. I have a totally egalitarian view of male/female relationships] (p. 78). Importantly, then, he perceives himself as an ally to feminism; in his own estimation, because of this supposed feminism, he is incapable of being violent to women. His ability to wield social power and cultural capital works in his favour – his mother's feminist identity undoubtedly inflects this with a unique significance. Weinstein's association with lawyer Lisa Bloom – the daughter of feminist attorney Gloria Allred – was mobilised by himself and his team to similar effect.

Stanford University looms as a constructing force in Alexandre's character. He has recently returned from studying there when he is accused of rape. If the discourse of the 100-women tribune, for example, is to be taken at face value, there exists a particular risk for a French man approaching sexual relationships with American women. Crucially, though, Alexandre is accused of sexual violence in France, by a French woman. It is not a case of a misunderstanding between an American who might have diverging cultural expectations around sex, those that the 100-women tribune harshly derides as 'neo-puritan'. Instead, we are told that '[a]ux États-Unis, Alexandre avait fréquenté les fraternités, ces clubs étudiants au fonctionnement secret. À deux ou trois reprises, il s'était rendu dans des sous-sols aménagés où des étudiants à peine majeurs attiraient des filles mineures' [in the United States, Alexandre had frequented fraternities, those student clubs that thrive in secrecy. On two or three occasions, he had gone to these converted basements where students who were barely of age lured underage girls] (p. 195). The problematic, secretive sexual cultures of fraternities are here foregrounded. Contending with her son's time in the US, Claire imagines that 'son fils allait bien, il était heureux aux États-Unis, il n'avait aucune raison de céder à la violence' [her son was fine, he was happy in the United States, he had no reason to give in to violence] (p. 235). Although Claire denies Alexandre's time in the U.S has impacted him negatively, his strong involvement with

a misogynistic and *American* fraternity culture is clearly a cause for concern in the narrative.<sup>36</sup>

Alexandre as public perpetrator is subject to a public response. A Parisian newsstand displays ‘de grandes photos de porcs sur lesquelles elles avaient imprimé les mentions « Farel » et « BalanceTonPorc ». Les Femen étaient là aussi’ [large pictures of pigs on which they had printed the words “Farel” and “BalanceTonPorc”. Femen were around too] (p. 293). Alexandre (Farel) is clearly being positioned relative the French moment specifically here, with the reference to Femen, a group with a large international base and heavily mediated presence in France, further anchoring the scene geographically. In depicting this image – the French newsstand with its targeted headlines, surrounded by protestors angrily targeting an individual – the tone seems somewhat derisive. The images of pigs are cartoonish, Femen’s chants loud; television journalists are there filming the scene, working a story. The commentary on French media culture is not a complimentary one – Femen seem to be represented alongside this as opportunistic, hostile. It is wrapped up in what the 100 women-tribune would describe as the ‘frenzy’ for sending pigs to the slaughter; in this respect, #BalanceTonPorc is very obviously invoked (and certainly critiqued). That #BalanceTonPorc’s first use was directed at French TV executive Eric Brion reflects striking similarities to Jean, Alexandre’s father, although he is obviously not the accused in this case. *Les choses humaines* faces the French context head on, calling upon #BalanceTonPorc and conflating it with #MeToo more generally. Although a sense of cultural specificity is preset every time #BalanceTonPorc is mentioned by name it appears alongside a mention of #MeToo or Weinstein. There is a sense, perhaps, that #BalanceTonPorc is not potent enough alone – the dominant referent, #MeToo, is used to make sense of its implications.

In the American texts, the perpetrators are cultural outsiders. Quin in *This Is Pleasure* is ‘English, from old-school wealth (father a banker, mother in organized charity)’ and eccentric (p. 12). So too is Hugo in *Complicit*: ‘Hugo’s accent granted him a patina of refinement, his voice promised a world of impossible privilege’ (p. 124). In one respect, they are rendered as alien to American culture, their habits and

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<sup>36</sup> It is interesting that this seems to be at odds with the 100-women-tribune’s description of American sexual puritanism. However, it is worth noting that this representation seems implicitly levelled at women and, especially, feminist women.

manners imported curiosities. This, however, largely works in a positive sense, as opposed to having an othering effect. Due to their wealth and their whiteness, they do not suffer the negative repercussions that other immigrants might. They are absorbed fully into the bourgeois cultures within which they operate. Phipps' assertion 'that white subjectivities are shaped by the structural position of white supremacy' (2020, p. 60) speaks to the dynamic at play. In fact, in both instances, their Englishness affords them an endearment and eccentricity that protects them. Their "eccentricities" are perceived, to varying degrees, as agreeable; Sarah calls Hugo 'civil and charming' (p. 401), Margot thinks of Quin (perhaps ironically) as 'someone who imbibed people' (p. 7), pulling them in. It is significant, though, that the otherwise definitive American-ness of these novels is undercut by the Englishness of their perpetrators; to have non-Americans in these positions works in a partly absolving way, the texts unable to identify American culture as a necessary backdrop to sexual violence. They are not monsters from start to finish. Quin is sexually forthright; in an early meeting with Margot he attempts to grope her under her skirt, but pulls back when she rebukes him. This rebuke allies Margot with the signatories of the 100-women tribune: she has exercised her *liberté* to say no. In a similar scenario, he asks a young woman at a party to bite his thumb upon greeting her, but takes her disgusted rejection in good humour. He is rarely outwardly aggressive or violent, at least in his own and Margot's memories.

Besides Quin, *This Is Pleasure* is rather straightforwardly American. It takes place in a New York characterised by expensive restaurants, therapists' offices, and the subway. The characters read the *Times*, and attend publishing parties. At the novella's end, there is a suggestion of a less glamorous New York, although the image is imbued with a modicum of hope. Quin walks the streets with tears in his eyes, noticing '[s]louching employees smoke in doorways; waiters clear outdoor tables. Eaters lounge before empty plates, legs spread, working their phones. Vividly colored drinks, wine, bread. Flocks of pigeons, a careful rat' (p. 73). It is a vibrant sketch of the New York we have come to know through literature and film. A beggar calls out to him '[d]on't be so sad. It'll get better by and by.' (ibid.) The city contains multitudes, and Quin feels buoyed by the interaction. He believes the man's words and decides that '[t]here will be something else for me. If not here, then in London' (ibid.) The

reference to London, another international city, underscores Quin's belief in his own importance and potential; if he is not to succeed in New York, he will surely be accepted into the cultural milieu of London.

*Complicit* takes place across New York City and L.A, save for a number of trips to Cannes. This is a rarer form of border crossing when considering American and French novels; the trip from the U.S to Europe, the reaching out from America to France, rather than the much more common inverse. It is difficult to situate Cannes film festival straightforwardly as a locus of French culture; its international nature is key to how it is conceived and experienced. It has also, as I have described, historically been a site of rehabilitation for men like Polanski. Cannes' inclusion in the narrative works to draw extra-diegetic connections to Weinstein and Miramax; it is well known, as described most aptly by Andrew Pulver in *The Guardian* (2018), that he used the festival as 'a private playground'. Sarah describes attending Cannes several times – it is on her third trip that she meets Hugo – and is starstruck by its glamour and scale. She posits that 'in Cannes, any interaction can sound vaguely flirtatious' (p. 113). There is an undertone of sleaze, particularly in the initial interactions with Hugo. Using Cannes and France as a backdrop to these interactions draws allusions to what Debra Olliver terms in a 2003 interview with Alain Giami as a 'long-standing image we Americans have of French people as promiscuous'. The people there are beautiful, the women 'a sexed-up Benetton ad in the making' (p. 131). Cannes itself is depicted as romantic, seductive; it is here that Hugo draws Sarah and the other producers in. They are intoxicated with his attention and with their environment (and, in Sarah's case, the weed she consumes for the first time). This reaching out to France facilitates a level of allure and sensuality that is associated with it as a culture. Hugo emerges from this foreign environment – a foreigner himself, although he is clearly at home here – and thus *Complicit's* engagement with France and, to a lesser extent, Frenchness is focalised through him.

In *Complicit*, Hugo, like Weinstein, takes on monstrous qualities in persona and appearance when it comes to the descriptions of his abuse. Unlike Quin, he is verbally and physically aggressive, and becomes enraged when Sarah rejects his advances; he fumes, then becomes violent. When she leaves the room, she notices that '[h]is robe had fallen open, revealing the bare, hairy bulge beneath, his cock furiously

erect' (p. 472). He is high on cocaine. The image is grotesque, underscoring Hugo's undesirability in the moment. There is a reflection of Weinstein here, in his inebriation and bulge (Boyle 2019a, p. 86). In another resonance with Weinstein, Hugo enforces 'something like an NDA, but not exactly' (p. 631); Sarah is able to speak out when it expires, although Hugo sends a number of threatening messages; she suggests that, with Holly, there was the potential of '[a]n NDA she may have been forced to sign later on, after I lost contact with her' (p. 497). This mirroring of Weinstein allow for categorisation of Hugo as abuser, as aberrant. Quin occupies a more complex position, his behaviour altogether more quotidian and linked to his 'playful' sexuality. The level of forgiveness afforded to him seems mediated through the male sexual drive discourse, that Gavey identifies as holding 'that the desire or "need" to have sex is a strong, almost overwhelming drive that exists in all healthy normal men' (2018, p. 98).

In *Complicit*, Sarah reads an *L.A Times* interview with a 'revered, white-haired actor': "'We are undeserving victims of wild accusations,'" says the pulled quote. "The world has gone mad.'" (p. 493) The language fosters a collective of potentially implicated men in its use of the first-person plural; it is *us*, the hunted and victims of 'wild accusations', against *them*, the hunters and accusers. *Cher Connard's* Oscar and the actor of *Complicit* believe themselves to be outsiders to a cultural zeitgeist that confounds them. Akin to Weinstein in his apology letter, there is the suggestion that because they 'came of age in the '60s and '70s, when all the rules about behavior and workplaces were different' (Weinstein 2017), their lack of familiarity with the new rules marginalises them. The 100-women tribune expresses a similar idea, that 'men are encouraged to acknowledge their guilt and to unearth, in the depths of their conscience, "inappropriate behaviour" that they might have engaged in ten, twenty or thirty years ago'. Importantly, in *Cher Connard*, being found guilty of breaking these rules, in their supposed new-ness and nebulousness, could 'happen to anyone' of Oscar's generation. In response to a letter from Oscar regarding his complicated feelings around Zoé, Rebecca admonishes his self-victimisation, scolding that '[i]l existe une ligne médiane entre "je suis le plus innocent des hommes et un martyr du féminisme" et "je me sens comme un violeur"' [there is a middle ground between "I am the most innocent of men and a martyr of feminism" and "I feel like a rapist"] (p. 277). Nuance is emphasised here, a caution between identifying too heavily with either

victimhood or the role of irredeemable perpetrator; Rebecca encourages Oscar to find a middle-ground, and to move away from a self-indulgence that centres only his feelings (at the expense of both ‘feminists’ and Zoé). My suggestion that novels were positioned as corrective to the supposed binarisms of #MeToo is potent here, the narrative prioritising nuance through having its virtues expressed by a sympathetic, feminist character.

Social media as a site of anti-nuance is intimated in both *Cher Connard* and *Les choses humaines*. Alexandre’s lawyer claims that:

Chaque jour, M. Farel est injurié, lynché sur les réseaux sociaux mais, disons-le, ce procès par les médias n’est pas un procès équitable. Nous ne voulons pas d’une justice qui rende des décisions arbitraires. Ce tribunal médiatique fait de tweets agressifs et vengeurs a nui gravement à la présomption d’innocence de mon client et a d’ores et déjà détruit sa vie.

[Every day, Mr Farel is insulted, lynched on social networks but, let's just say it, this trial by media is not a fair trial. We do not want justice that makes arbitrary decisions. This media tribunal of aggressive and vengeful tweets has seriously undermined my client's presumption of innocence and has already destroyed his life.] (p. 487)

The lawyer engages several of the rhetorical tools that characterise backlash to #MeToo and sexual violence discourse more generally. Here, he is positioned as a subject worthy of apprehension and identification, per Butler’s (2016) conceptualisation of grievability. His is a life that might be destroyed. That we are implored to recognise him as a subject worthy of empathy in this respect, while his victim’s suffering is rendered invisible, reflects those dynamics of marginality that constitute some lives as grievable and others as acceptable losses. The use of *lynché* recalls the grammar of lynching and witch-hunts frequently weaponised to defend men accused of sexual violence (see Boyle 2019a). Alexandre is re-calibrated as the victim of, as Michael Flood terms in his work on men and #MeToo, an ‘unjust #MeToo regime’ (2019, p. 291). The concept of a trial by media, too, was frequently invoked as a critique of #MeToo; as Cristy Clark notes, this suggests ‘it has turned the legal

principle of innocent until proven guilty on its head' (2018). Despite the fact Alexandre *is* granted a criminal trial, that he is afforded the benefit of these legal principles, his lawyer nevertheless utilises this language to insist upon his client's victimhood. In the lawyer's words, the intersecting elements of critique regarding legal and mediatised elements of #MeToo are laid bare.

Oscar employs similar tropes of trial by media when discussing his own position, lamenting that:

Et toutes ces insultes sur le Net me traitant de violeur, de gros dégueulasse, de porc libidineux – ça restera pour toujours sur le Web. Je paye mes factures en publiant des livres, mais je n'ai pas assez d'argent pour embaucher des avocats qui nettoieraient tout ça. C'est associé à mon nom, pour toujours. Les autres mecs savent – ils savent que je n'ai rien fait et que je suis juste la victime d'un traquenard. Ils prient pour que ça ne leur arrive pas mais ils savent que ça peut tomber sur n'importe qui.

[And all those insults on the Net calling me a rapist, a sleazeball, a libidinous pig - that'll stay on the Web forever. I pay my bills by publishing books, but I don't have enough money to hire lawyers to clean everything up. It'll be associated with my name, forever. The other guys know - they know I didn't do anything and that I'm just the victim of a sting. They pray it doesn't happen to them, but they know it could happen to anyone.] (pp. 139-40)

He, too, rewrites himself as a victim of, in this case, a 'sting'. Sting engenders images of aggressive police involvement which, of course, is never the case in *Cher Connard* as Oscar is neither arrested nor tried. Language that implies legality is merged easily with notions of social media trials; that he has been insulted, like Alexandre, on the internet is rendered as equivalent to being literally criminalised. Expanding her critique of the narcissism inherent to political whiteness, Phipps posits that when used to evade accountability this type of rhetoric 'equates attempts to hold powerful people to account with the systematic and violent persecution of marginalised groups' (2020, p. 66). *Cher Connard* makes it clear again that it is possible for accused men to employ

potentially legitimate critiques of online abuse (and abuse in general) and recast themselves in the role of victim. Of course, it is true that one can be both abuser and victim – scholarship on sexual violence has called attention to the potential harms of these binaries – but this is not the concept that Alexandre or Oscar rely upon. Instead, he finds himself, as Boyle describes, ‘newly vulnerable’ because ‘behaviour which has historically been rewarded or joked about is denaturalised and problematised by refocusing the narrative on how these behaviours were/are experienced by women’ (2019a, p. 70). He also reiterates the seriousness of his position by implicating other men, by assuring them that they, too, could soon be guilty of no longer knowing the rules (ibid.) He proffers early in the novel that ‘[j]e me suis fait metooïser’ [I got MeToo-ed] (p. 28). Here, the reference is to the English-language hashtag. #MeToo’s prominence as global movement (over localised iterations like #BalanceTonPorc) is, once again, asserted. Although the grammar takes on a French inflection, the root and referent is English. In this sense, Oscar expresses that not only has he been categorised in a way that he feels is wrong, that brings discomfort, but that the language used in this categorisation takes on a de-naturalised quality. The nomenclature itself takes on a certain forced-ness – he is the passive object unto which a culturally and linguistically *other* designation has been applied. How, Oscar seems to ponder, has this American concept been applied to him, a Frenchman? There is a sense that these things happen *over there* (in the U.S), but its presence in France comes as a shock.

### **Conclusions on #MeToo fiction**

The #MeToo fiction here is acutely concerned with the public components of speaking out about sexual violence, consistently depicting public perpetrators and victim-survivors. Throughout the texts, there is an interest in how media – social media and traditional forms – deals with these public instances of men’s sexual violence against women; that the media and #MeToo are almost inextricable is something that is understood throughout the four novels. Rarely is #MeToo taken as uncomplicated and the texts prioritise, almost as their *modus operandi*, ambiguity. Beyond this frequent narrative ambivalence, the texts are invested, too, in rendering nuanced characters, whether they be victim-survivors or perpetrators. In his review of *This Is Pleasure*,

Taylor (2020) calls Gaitskill ‘impervious to ideology’. Despite the fact that, as feminist philosophers like Elizabeth Anderson have argued, it is impossible to exist outwith the ‘political salience and rhetorical power’ of sexism (1995, p. 68), Taylor’s framing is suggestive of something crucial: Gaitskill’s novel has the ability to circumvent the (implicitly feminist) ideological constraints of #MeToo. In this sense, a novel like *This Is Pleasure* might be rendered as a feminist backlash text, offering complexity and nuance where exists only divisive polarity in #MeToo. This rendering would, in my perspective, be an erroneous one. To follow Alcoff, the assertion ‘sex is complex but rape is not is unhelpful’ (2018, p. 12) and, realistically, anti-feminist. To be sure, there was commentary attached to #MeToo that operated in binaristic terms and there is feminist commentary that produces similar polarities. It is not the case that all associated discourses lack complexity; to suggest this obfuscates the richness of feminist critique, particularly as it relates to sexual violence. Texts like *This Is Pleasure*, *Les choses humaines* and *Cher Connard* are not backlash simply because they prioritise complexity – if anything, this places them firmly amongst a feminist tradition.

It is through their forms especially that they promote this idea of nuance, providing access to a number of perspectives. *Cher Connard* and *This Is Pleasure* do this most straightforwardly through their use of epistolary and multi-perspective narratives. Both *Les choses humaines* and *Complicit* also bring in elements that attempt to represent a variety of perspectives, attempting to construct something of a balanced view. The focus on multiplicity of perspective marks the novels out from the #MeToo-adjacent films – the narrative form creates space for diverse subjectivities in this respect. Across this formal innovation, the virtual space appears as a crucial site in which one might speak out and, in turn, be spoken back to. The rendering of these virtual spaces, as I have argued, is somewhat ambivalent; in *Cher Connard*, Instagram messages allow Oscar and Rebecca to set up an exchange, but it was also the platform in which Oscar initially publicly insulted her. Zoé uses her blog productively initially but, due to backlash, is forced offline and made ill by the response to it. The reader understands mainly the harm experienced by Zoé through her blogs and interactions with Rebecca, leaving any positive aspect of her experience in doubt. The virtual space often works to de-anchor the texts geographically, pushing them beyond their cultural

specificities and making them more generalised. In terms of culture the texts are more diverse than the films, with border crossings punctuating not only the French text but the American ones too. The public feminists and public perpetrators do sit somewhat clearly within their own cultures – even the ‘outsiders’ like Quin and Hugo, who are Englishmen in the US – and respond to and through these contexts. Rendering Quin and Hugo, for example, along similar lines to Weinstein demonstrates a reaching out to a wider #MeToo moment; Alexandre in *Les choses humaines* is depicted along similar lines to Stanford rapist Turner (a key figure in the long #MeToo), which does the same work of de-Frenchifying him in some respect. Despite their cultural specificities and thus far lack of translation, the texts here have dimensions that stretch beyond France and are in dialogue with anglicised discourses.

The texts in this chapter – whether English or French – frequently reflect a mediatised #MeToo. Their concern with the public aspect of speaking out, as well as traditional and social medias, places them firmly amongst this moment. That they also engage backlash discourses – the 100-women tribune, for example – is notable. As Boyle (2019a) notes #MeToo incorporated elements of backlash since the outset. They hold elements of praise alongside critique – in this sense, like the rape-revenge films Clover (1992) identifies, they articulate competing discourses. It is notable that, despite the general idea that France was significantly more hostile to #MeToo, the French novels here are not more obviously ‘backlash’ texts than the English. In fact, all prioritise nuance and dialogue. *Complicit* and *Cher Connard* are written by authors who have been publicly more supportive of #MeToo, from English and French contexts; this does not mean, however, that they are straightforward narratives. This chapter illustrates that the literature around #MeToo has not reflected the cultural binaries asserted in both French and Anglo-American concepts; they begin to unravel these rigid and restrictive understandings. In the next chapter, I will argue that it is not only #MeToo fiction that disrupts a polaristic understanding of French and Anglo-American cultural response to sexual violence. In fact, as I posit, fiction that features sexual violence more generally has also been textured with nuance and complexity.

## Chapter 5: Contemporary fiction, feminism, and sexual violence

### Introduction: beyond #MeToo

This chapter, like the last, explores narratives that represent sexual violence and its effects; unlike the last, however, the texts here do not take #MeToo as a clear referent. There are three texts here. One longer and one shorter English text – *Boy Parts* (2020) and *Peach* (2018) – and one shorter French work, *La mémoire de l'air* (2014). That the English novels are British marks them as unique amongst this thesis. Their presence, however, offers an understanding that broadens the Anglo-American dimension of the sexual violence discourse of the 2010s. As I argue in my introduction, the UK had crucial mediated moments in this period that make it a site of geographical interest amongst this timeline. The year of *Peach*'s release saw a number of works that represent sexual violence and men's violence against women. *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2018) by Meena Kandasamy; *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2018) by Jesmyn Ward were nominated for the 2018 Women's Prize. *His Favorites* (2018) by Kate Walbert, *Asymmetry* (2018) by Lisa Halliday, *Putney* (2018) by Sofka Zinovieff and *Women Talking* (2018) by Miriam Toews also contend with these themes. Édouard Louis' *Histoire de la violence* (2016), a novel based on a real instance of rape, was also translated into English in the same year. This

chapter argues that these texts reflect ideas about sexual violence that speak to the concerns of this long 2010s; like the films in chapter 2, they engage both feminist and mainstream discourses about complexity, complicity, and consent.

The sole French text in this chapter, Caroline Lamarche's *La mémoire de l'air*, was first published in 2014. Its English translation by Katherine Gregor, *The Memory of the Air*, arrives relatively late in 2022 but suggests, as Dominique Carlini Versini posits in its introduction, a 'revived' public interest into this particular strain of French fiction (2022, p. 14). Here, I quote from this translation. Feminist writers like Lamarche, Despentes, Annie Ernaux and Constance Debré have, over the last five years, attracted attention outside of the Francophone world with high-profile translations. I consider the translation specifically as a lynchpin text for this chapter in its straddling of the 'pre' and 'post' #MeToo moments in its French (2014) and English (2022) iterations. When read in English, in 2022, its narrative concerns clearly connected to the wider cultural moment of mass disclosure; it takes its place amongst an in-translation #MeToo-adjacent French literature that includes texts like *Le consentement* and *La familia grande*.<sup>37</sup> The narrative takes the form of a monologue; the unnamed narrator has been dreaming of a dead woman, who looks 'the way I did over 20 years ago' (2022, p. 23). The narrator is married, but reflective on her relationship with a previous lover who she calls Davant in French (a portmanteau from *man of before*), in English Manfore from Man'before. He is abusive, and blames her reactions to him on the fact she was raped and never processed it. The rape occurs at the start of the fabula but is organised by the syuzhet to come at its narrative end. It is a stranger attack in the woods, which ends when the rapist cannot remain erect. Its monologic nature marks it as notably different from the French novels of the previous chapter. It is, however, far from an individualist narrative and has, as Carlini Versini puts it, 'a universal appeal' (p. 15). Like *Complicit* and *Cher Connard*, it draws connections between numerous forms of violence and abuse, the narrator's experiences existing on a continuum. She reaches out to an imagined community of women victim-survivors, identifying the patriarchal, systemic nature of men's

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<sup>37</sup> The translation also comes in the year of Annie Ernaux's 2022 Nobel Prize in literature. Ernaux, although not part of this #MeToo current, is known for writing frankly about sex and violence through a feminist lens. In this sense, we might see *La mémoire de l'air* as part of a wider moment of popularity for French women's fiction in translation.

violence against women. Like in Desportes, there is never any doubt that we should believe her story, the first-person narration engendering direct connection between narrator and reader.

As commentators like Desportes (2006) and Carlini Versini note, literature in English has a richer history of engagement with sexual violence, which is reflected in the balance of texts here. The text here that is closest in form to Lamarche's is *Peach* (2018) by Emma Glass; it is also a novella, also written in first-person. *Peach*, too, is fragmentary and formally experimental, its characters intimated as almost anthropomorphised versions of their names. Peach is made of 'orange fuzz and flesh', her blood 'sugar-syrup-tasting juice' (p. 96); her boyfriend, Green, tastes of twigs with a mouth 'smooth like sanded wood' (p. 36). Together, they also reflect their colours – Peach is soft and pink, Green verdant and innocent in opposition to the text's rapist. Peach is raped by a stranger while walking home and the novella opens in its aftermath. The event itself is narrated in fragments through flashback. She discovers that her rapist is Lincoln, greasy and phallic like the sausage. He torments her with oil-soaked 'love' letters and attacks on her loved ones before she takes revenge, killing him and moulding his flesh into sausages to be barbecued and eaten at a family gathering. As in *La mémoire de l'air*, the violence is once again narrated through victim-survivor memory and, despite the text's almost hallucinatory quality, the veracity of the rape itself is never in doubt. The first-person narration, which resembles that in *La mémoire de l'air*, engenders intimacy between the protagonist-narrator and the reader. The timing of its release in 2018, as Ruth Schneider (2018) notes, allowed *Peach* to gain 'immediate attention not just for its surreal, gory poetry, but for its timeliness in the midst of the #MeToo debate'. In its surrealism, *Peach* has similarities to Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes* (1996)<sup>38</sup>, a remarkable French feminist text in which a beauty therapist anthropomorphises into a pig. *Peach*'s experimentalism in representing violence and trauma suggest a sustained engagement with the politics of believability, trauma, and memory that make it particularly contemporary in a moment where these concerns are foregrounded.

The third and final novel here, *Boy Parts* (2020) by Eliza Clark, is also narrated in the first-person, and imbued with notions of unreality and hallucination, although it

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<sup>38</sup> Translated into English by Linda Coverdale as *Pigtails* (2003).

is more clearly anchored in a specific geographic and chronological context than the novellas. The novel has been described as a ‘TikTok sensation’ (Cummins 2023). Its sleeper success was proliferated in part by a community of readers known as BookTok, comprised predominantly of young women (Flood 2021). Published in the shadow of the first UK lockdown in summer 2020, *Boy Parts* appeared at a moment where online engagement was perhaps higher than ever. This chronology works in tandem with the novel’s representation of online spaces, and the politics of gender and sexuality that form through these, to evoke moments like #MeToo without referencing them explicitly. The action sees photographer Irina move between her home, Newcastle, and London, the city of her failed art career. Irina’s subjects are nearly exclusively men, who she poses in vulnerable and sexualised positions – frequently, she inflicts violence upon them, photographing its results. Like the other examples in this chapter, women’s violence features heavily. Here, though, it is not necessarily retaliatory violence; this is not the rape-revenge narrative of *Peach*, but follows a woman protagonist who routinely perpetrates violence against men. Irina’s violence is largely sexualised, and she admits to mutilating her male subjects for art. It is suggested at the novel’s end that she has probably murdered one man, who was young, homeless and vulnerable. She recounts experiencing abuse at the hands of her school teacher and, in the midst of the narrative action, an attempted rape by an acquaintance. Will, a man she knows from the local coffee shop, attempts to rape her while she is passed out from drinking and drug-taking; she has hazy memories of the event on account of this, putting her in a fraught position with regards to diegetic believability. Her best friend, Flo, with whom she has a relationship that is volatile, codependent, and inconsistently sapphic, is not sure whether she believes her. That Irina has been known to ‘fill in the gaps’ (2020, p. 96) of other experiences troubles Flo – of course, that Irina remembers anything is integral to her ability to speak out about it. The texts here are united by their engagement with this traumatic paradox, Walker’s term that describes how ‘popular and juridical venues tend to reject reports of traumatic experiences that contain mistakes or amnesiac elements’ (2001, p. 212), despite these features’ association with the experience of trauma. The texts’ non-linear and frequently ‘un-real’ qualities reflect ‘contemporary theories of trauma [that] show that such memory features, along with ‘distressing recollections’, and ‘recurring hallucinations and

dissociative flashback episodes', are a common result of the traumatic experience itself' (Walker 2001, p. 212).

If #MeToo-fiction is concerned with the public nature of sexual violence, the texts in this chapter depict its impact on the private lives of characters, the first-person narrations suggestive of this. The texts here have been chosen due to their thematic parallels, their engagement with memory and belief following the traumatic experience. Lamarche's work is categorised as necessarily feminist in its paratexts, and the other two examples receive similar epitextual treatment. Like the #MeToo fiction, understanding how they are oriented towards contemporary sexual violence discourse and, in turn, feminism will be crucial here. Unlike the texts in chapters 3 and 4, the texts considered here are not connected by a (un)stable referent like #MeToo. They all feature sexual violence, but the types of this violence are all rather different in instance – there is stranger and acquaintance rape, intimate partner abuse, and grooming. The victim-survivor characters are different too, diverging in age and in sexuality, although not, as far as we can tell, in race. In other ways, though, they contain similarities, in their engagements with trauma, credibility, and believability. The novellas are distinctly more abstract, more textually experimental than their longer counterpart, which is more formally standard (although not completely realistic or didactic). The analyses here will take similar focuses as those in the previous chapters, exploring what these texts have to say about feminism, about culture, about sexual violence. Considering how they work as fictional interventions into contemporary discourse will be key. Without the referent of #MeToo, how do they reach out to the worlds around them, in terms of temporality and place? Feminism snakes through the sections here, which begin with an exploration of form and context. Form is as important here as it is in the examples of #MeToo literature, working to communicate complex ideas about victim-survivor narration and temporality, how this works with and against belief and credibility. I discuss here the novels' cultural contexts, how they reflect ideas about 'generalised' vs. culturally specific understandings of sexual violence. Following this, an exploration of the scenes of rape in the texts lends itself to a discussion of how memory and temporality intersect with feminist conceptualisations of trauma and sexual violence. Here, perhaps, is where we see the conceit that links the novels most resolutely: the engagement with the difficulty of

narrating traumatic experience, and how this deprivileges victim-survivor speech. The third section considers the rendering of the victim-survivors who narrate through these experiences – all three in the first-person, through memory and flashback, a choice that faces believability head on. Following this is a brief exploration of how victim-survivors in the texts retaliate and, in the case of *Boy Parts*, enact other types of extreme violence. Lastly, as in the other chapters of this thesis, the focus turns to those men who perpetrate this violence: as Boyle argues, '[t]elling stories about men's violence against women cannot only be about telling women's stories or we risk making men's violence exclusively a women's issue, letting men off the hook' (2019b, p. 13). These engagements, as I will argue, situate the novels here firmly amongst the discursive moment of the 2010s.

### **Form and context**

*Boy Parts* is the most formally standard of the three texts here, structured in chapters punctuated by Flo's blogs. As in *Cher Connard* the blogs provide a space through which a non-protagonist's internal life is glimpsed. It is the blogging platform Tumblr Flo frequents; her confessional style is akin to Zoé Katana's, if somewhat less formal and polemical. This is not to say she shies away from the political – her long posts are inflected with references to feminism and queerness – but that her blogs express more private, diary-like qualities. She uses the pseudonym 'therabbitheartedgirl'. Irina routinely checks Flo's blog, seemingly hooked, while disparaging of what she sees as their saccharine, self-indulgent content. The content? Her turbulent friendship with Irina and relationship with bland boyfriend Michael. They are unpolished in style, often un-punctuated and littered with spelling mistakes. They invoke the conceit of 'crytyping', a mode of internet-based communication that KnowYourMeme describes as undertaken by an individual 'under intense emotional stress or when attempting to show they're under stress, resulting in many typos and misspelled words'. As KnowYourMeme identifies, crytyping evolved into a meme on Tumblr around 2017, mocked for its perceived contrived and self-infantilising nature. Flo's characterisation as *extremely online* is intimated through the linguistic features and referents of her

blogs.<sup>39</sup> The use of internet associated phrases like ‘shooketh’ and ‘tl;dr’ illustrate her online fluency (p. 176). The blogs also work to give an insight into Irina and her history that she obfuscates in her own narration, enriching reader understanding of her character. Like in other novels that contain epistolary elements, message writing is used to broaden perspective and render character-based nuance. We get the impression that Irina obscures the truth – not only about her past, but her relationships and vulnerabilities. After a falling out, Flo writes that ‘rini doesnt do well when shes left alone for long periods of times and idk if its attention seeking or if she’s actually just going a bit crackers on her own [sic]’ (p. 177). There are glimpses of this in Irina’s narrative, but it is clear she attempts to gloss over her deteriorating mental state and remain characteristically stoic. With this in mind, is important to stress that Flo is realised through Irina’s perspective. Knowing that Irina consciously obscures truths, her rendering of the relationship with Flo is not necessarily objective. The blogs therefore function as an intervention into such a biased view: presented as facsimile, they offer insight into Flo’s interiority.

Flo’s blogs about the attempted rape of Irina are especially instructive when it comes to exploring the problematics of truth and subjectivity; they are also where tensions between the personal and the political are played out most obviously. Flo is on a come-down from the night before, and her language is emotionally charged following a fight with boyfriend Michael. He doesn’t believe that Irina is telling the truth; the blog tracks Flo’s vacillation from outrage at his disbelief to a doubt of her own. She insists that Irina has a history of lying, particularly about things that have happened when she’s drunk. In the past ‘she’d just sort of fill in the blanks for herself and repeat it for people’ (p. 96), the implication that this situation might be similar. Her disbelief causes her to worry that she is a ‘shit friend, shit feminist’ (ibid.). Issues of believability are clearly foregrounded here, with Irina’s (in)ability to be believed bound up with both a history of unreliability and her challenging personality. That Irina is compelled to fill in the gaps, so that her story be rendered believable within the laws governing the traumatic paradox, does not occur to Flo. There are echoes of

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<sup>39</sup> Jay Hathaway for *Daily Dot* notes that ‘[t]he phrase Extremely Online—usually capitalized—dates back to at least 2014. It means to be familiar, even obsessed, with the things everyone is talking about (...) You speak an inscrutable language that alienates your less Online friends and acquaintances’ (2018).

Claire's utterance in *Les choses humaines* of the last chapter – the 'I want to believe but...' paradigm structuring Flo's response that 'i dont [sic] actually think??? She lied??? But she went from zero to blaming me so quickly' (ibid.). Flo wants to be seen as a feminist by those around her, including her Tumblr followers. More importantly, she wants to see herself as feminist. Questioning Irina puts her at odds with her own self-professed politics; can she still occupy the political identity of feminist – something very significant to her sense of self – while disbelieving her friend's account of sexual violence? Flo's feminism is rendered in particular ways – performative, overly wedded to identity, superficial – by Irina throughout the novel. Irina scoffs when Flo puts on a playlist entitled 'THIS IS A GAYS ONLY EVENT, GO HOME', featuring songs and artists (such as Lizzo and Demi Lovato) that she views as cheesy and trite articulates of queer feminist 'empowerment' politics (p. 58). Flo patronises their mutual friend, Finch, a trans man when she hangs off his shoulder and condescendingly brands him '*such* a ladies' man', to which he responds with an uncomfortable smile (p. 62). There is a sense – mediated through Irina's perspective – that Flo's politics of well-intentioned progressivism are half-formed and self-congratulatory. Her agonising over losing her feminist identity by disbelieving her best friend about rape is emblematic of these political tensions.

When considering *Boy Parts*' representation of contemporary feminism, and progressive politics more generally, understanding Tumblr's position relative to these is essential. Its presence in the novel anchors Flo and Irina to a specific political moment.<sup>40</sup> As Mendes, Ringrose and Keller (2019) point out in their study of digital feminist activism, a critique of rape culture is central to what is termed 'tumblr feminism'. In its general usage, the term is at once descriptive and pejorative. As the young women interviewed by Keller note, Tumblr created space for 'radical iterations of feminism' (2019, p.8) that were yoked to wider liberationist politics. As pejorative label, it connotes vapidness, superficiality, and a lack of real-life, material engagement with feminist struggle (see Connelly 2015; Gamble 2016; Ewens 2019). Flo engages with the feminist politics of Tumblr as platform as she blogs and so, too, does Irina who is representative of the backlash against it, with her implicit denigration of digital

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<sup>40</sup> Tumblr also features heavily in Clark's second novel *Penance* (2023). The teenage characters' politics are mediated primarily through Tumblr fandom communities in this instance, but the platform is used similarly as a site where the politics of gender and sexuality are foregrounded.

feminism. The platform existed as a locus of feminist, queer and anti-racist politics throughout the 2010s, its text-based and reply-centred elements encouraging long-form discourse that was often characterised by antagonism and animosity. It was frequently characterised by ‘call-outs’, posts that attempted to call individual users to account for supposed infractions, typically political ones. As Fredrika Thelandersson asserts, on Tumblr ‘feminist debates often turn into seemingly never-ending processes of calling out and blaming users for offensive terminology and ignorance of various groups.... Much of the discussion is based around ‘policing’ other participants’ (2014, p. 528). Although we do not get a sense of Flo’s online community in the text, there is a sense that she is performing for one that demands from her a specific political standard. There seems little reason to attempt to demystify the *real* state of Flo’s feminism – and, of course, such a task would be impossible as well as analytically useless – but its representation is politically suggestive. Flo represents one form of contemporary political engagement, the online, and Irina the backlash critique levelled against it.

The use of Tumblr posts as e-pistolary interventions creates a third space in *Boy Parts* that is not necessarily tied to its Newcastle setting. The novel’s explicit engagements with feminism are therefore mediated primarily through an online platform, lacking geographic distinctiveness. Where the geographic and, importantly, a defined sense of Britishness does come into play is with respect to class. Irina is decidedly middle-class, but has a Geordie accent that marks her when she attends art school in London. Flo, too, has returned from London to Newcastle. Irina’s status as ‘nouveau riche’ also distinguishes her from her peers; after her publicly-educated university friend calls her ‘working class talent’, she rants that ‘my dad might be successful but, at the end of the day, a plumber with a big house and a dodgy accountant is still just a fucking plumber’ (p. 261). Newcastle’s perception amongst the novel’s art scene characters as working-class city, as marginal to London, is rendered through a snobbery that is both class inflected and indicative of regional vs. metropolitan tensions. An artist comments to Irina that she attended a gallery showing in Newcastle, and ‘it was actually quite nice there, which I was really surprised about’ (p. 265). The pairing of class and specific gendered stereotypes is reflected at several points; a class-based misogyny relative to the city is illustrated when Irina describes

‘the point of the year where photographers from the *Daily Mail* start hanging around the Brigg Market, hoping to catch photos of women without coats, in unseasonably short dresses’ (p. 248). In this respect, *Boy Parts* is firmly anchored in a geographical context that draws up notions of gender and class that are somewhat culturally specific. British feminism has historically been structured, as George Stevenson (2020) argues, by its engagement with class politics. *Boy Parts*’ positioning of class and gender as frequently interlinked demonstrates an engagement with this cultural reality; in this sense, the novel’s politics are British ones. Flo’s blogs are the key points where geographic specificity is problematised, where class is notably absent. Through them, an internationalised feminism is implied, a feminism inflected not with Britishness but with the dialect of the digital. This does not work to geographically de-situate the novel as a whole, but places it within a wider, less geographically bound, cultural context.

The other texts do away with geographical specificity more resolutely. Lamarche is a Belgian author writing for a Parisian publisher, and *La mémoire de l’air* floats between these national contexts. Lamarche is positioned firmly within the Francophone literary canon, although it is worth noting that her publishing with a France-based outlet perhaps comes down to the relative marginality of Belgian publishing rather than personal choice. As Rene Micha points out as early as 1954, Belgian publishing houses are rarer, so many ‘big’ Belgian writers in French have historically published in Paris. The narrative calls upon a Franco-Belgian cultural referent when the narrator remembers May 1968 ‘when students were throwing Molotov cocktails in our street’ (2022, p. 82). Other than this, there are no definitive references to the narrator’s geographical location or cultural background. The cities she describes living in are nameless, and there is a sense of nebulosity that disorients. This disorientation is reflected, too, in the form of the narrative, its frequently fragmentary and dream-like nature unmooring the reader from reality and geographical location. In discussing the lack of local-ness in the city she lives in, the narrator mentions ‘chains stores selling clothes of local brands but actually manufactured in China, and Diet Coke-and-doughnut joints you find from Los Angeles to Kyiv, by way of Brussels and Paris’ (p. 35). There is a sense here that the city is a combination of all cities, and is missing a sense of cultural specificity; its geographical boundaries are not clearly demarcated. The linking of Brussels and Paris, however,

does suggest a European Francophone context. The border-less city is connected to the narrative's dreamlike form through the transgression of boundaries and borders. Stefan Brandt asserts in his article on the postmodern city in literature and cinema that '[t]he image of sleep, in particular, symbolizes the interzone between the real and the "imaginary"' (2009, p. 570): in the novel, the dreamworld of the text is also that of the nameless city. The distinctions between fiction and reality become blurred, in form and in narrative space. It is through this non-situation that we get the sense that the narrative takes place across cultural contexts – Western European, North American – and is not strongly geographically anchored. Sexual violence's transcultural existence, its totalising nature, is suggested here, too. The lack of real names given to characters also works to similar effect. The narrator and Davant's lack of first names afford them a level of anonymity in the first instance, but also mean they are somewhat universalised. We know more about Davant than we do the rapist, who is a stranger, but are unable to accurately name either. There is a lack of specificity and personalisation that pervades the text, allowing it to tell a universally intelligible story about men's physical and sexual violence against women. Unlike *Boy Parts*, or *Cher Connard* and *Les choses humaines*, there is a distinct lack of geographical and cultural anchoring. This is neither a particularly Belgian, French, or even European story.

*Peach* invokes a similar sense of geographic non-specificity. Its author Emma Glass is Welsh and lives in London but the narrative itself is not definitively British. Like *La mémoire de l'air*, the text disorients, and is characterised more obviously by a sense of non-reality. It is never clear if the characters really are human, despite their involvement with human structures and customs like education and marriage. It is not clear where they are, either; Peach seems to live in a housing estate, and go to cafes with friends, but their locations are never further clarified. Its temporal structure is also unclear: on page 19, Peach orders 'hot coffee for my frozen fingers' and expresses a need for new mittens, and on page 39 she is 'shovelling snow with my shoes'. On page 84, after Peach has killed Lincoln and brought home his meat, her dad suggests a BBQ – at the gathering, the baby's head is 'warming in the sunshine' (p.89). It appears to now be summertime, but the passage of time is not otherwise indicated. This porous chronology reflects Peach's journey following the rape – time becomes unclear, days and weeks merge into each other. Time and time again, boundaries in *Peach* are

blurred. Temporal lines are crossed, space becomes non-space, and the border between subject and object is repeatedly transgressed. These textual elements reflect Peach's internal process as victim-survivor, these formal ambiguities mirroring the disorganisation of her thoughts. As Horvitz argues, boundary transgressions are characteristic of women's fiction about sexual violence; in these narratives, for victim-survivor protagonists, 'borders between their "inner" and "outer" worlds dissolve, leaving them feeling lost and fragmented' (2000, p. 5).

This is true of Peach as character, but also of the novel itself: the reader is frequently lost in time and place, with the chapters working as fragments in their brevity and relative disconnectedness. The narrative margins dissolve; the juxtaposition between the starkly realistic sexual violence and the fantastical nature of *Peach*'s world is not a straightforward one. Affective boundaries are also troubled by the bouncy, poetic nature of the prose that often sits at odds with the brutality of the plot. There is a linguistic springiness and lightness that works to disorient when paired with the subject matter. The first words, 'thick stick sticky sticking' (p. 1), use rhyme and repetition playfully; they are representative of what Megan Marz calls 'a rhythm reminiscent of Dr Seuss' that, along with anthropomorphized characters, would be at home in a children's book (2018, p. 25). What the words actually describe, however, is the wool dressing that clings to Peach's post-rape wounds. Immediately, the tension between form and content that characterises *Peach* is set out. There is a sense of confusion and ambiguity that reflects Peach's trauma and post-rape experience. It is impossible to make a claim of what, in *Peach*, takes place precisely in the real world and real time. Unreality and hallucinatory experience in this sense unites the texts in this section, speaking to their engagement with the politics of traumatic memory. Joshua Pederson argues in his appraisal of literary trauma theory that critics should consider 'evocations of confusion, shifts in place and time, out-of-body experiences, and a general sense of unreality' to capture the effects of trauma (2014, p. 340). It is important to note, then, that a sense of non-reality in time and place does not obscure the story's political potency. Not knowing who or where Peach really is does not mean her story as victim-survivor resonates less. In fact, there is here, too, a sense of universalism that allows connection of her experience to that of other victim-survivors. The representation of trauma corresponds not only with that expressed in the other

texts in this chapter, but more widely in fiction about women who experience sexual violence, as Horvitz (2000) lays out in her study of American women's fiction. The relationship between the text's language, unconventional form and its content allow for a thoughtful exploration of the impacts of rape on victim-survivors, of trauma, of shame, and of guilt.

### **Scenes of sexual violence: memory and temporality**

As I have argued, the #MeToo fiction of the previous chapter is primarily about responses to sexual violence rather than singular moments, and thus lacks direct narration of rape. The texts here, on the other hand, do contain these depictions. The rape scene frequently dominates discussion of rape narratives on screen and on the page, in feminist and mainstream discourse (see Mills 1995; Horeck 2004; Brigley Thompson and Gunne 2009; Funnell and Beliveau 2022). In order to explore what happens when the event of violence, appears on the page, I now offer close readings of the scenes of sexual violence experienced by the protagonists.

*Peach*'s language is poetic, frequently abstract. The narration of sexual violence therefore engages ideas about the real and about graphicness somewhat unconventionally. We might first look to the chapter titles, which reflect a linguistic playfulness characteristic of the text as a whole. The opening chapter, which details Peach's agonised attempts to mend her post-rape wounds, is entitled 'Seam Stress'; when she removes her stitches, it is 'Decisive Incising'. The final, an implied attempted suicide where she cuts herself down to her core, her peach pit, is 'Final Pieces, Final Peace'. I write implied suicide because the language of *Peach* often obscures and makes opaque; at other points, it is strikingly graphic. The text begins, post-rape, '[t]hick stick sticky sticking wet ragged wool winding round the wounds, stitching the sliced skin together as I walk' (2018, p.1). The repetition of 'ick' evokes the pressing together of skin and viscous liquid, an onomatopoeic squelching of blood and flesh, of semen and skin. As it is repeated four-fold, we have the sense of repeated steps that pace Peach quickly towards her destination, her skin and wounds chafing in discomfort; the 'ick' is that, too, of 'sick', revulsion echoing throughout the paragraph. The sibilance of 'stitching the sliced skin' that follows 'wounds' creates a linguistic

slash, cutting across the gashes on Peach's body onto the page. There is, too, a whisper, a hushed-ness in our s-sounds, an implied secrecy between narrator and reader that will continue throughout the text; nobody knows but us. Even to the reader and to herself, Peach remains somewhat unknowable. She is then 'smothered in grease from his slippery, slimy, sausage fingers', a hiss that re-articulates our closeness with our narrator and now her rapist. Together, only we know – it is a private understanding that never leaks beyond this trifecta.

The rape itself is described through flashback: first, 'his commands crackle in my ears. Close your eyes. Close them tight. Tight like your – close them' (p. 2). The 'crackle' of the commands seem to echo too, in the reader's ear. We share in Peach's experience, the repeated 'close' suggesting not only to shut but highlighting our proximity to rapist and victim. With each hard c command, Lincoln encroaches closer, his voice physically tightening around the ear. The visual flashback follows thus: 'I see black. His black mouth. A slit in his skin. Open. Gaping. Burnt black. Burnt flesh. And his heavy charcoal breath clinging to my skin' (ibid.) Blackness merits comment here. Despite Lincoln's ostensible non-humanity the racialised connotations are difficult to ignore – particularly as he sits in contrast to the pink-tinged Peach. It is difficult, of course, to pin down a racial commentary to ambiguously human characters, but that the black flesh specifically evokes fear in Peach recalls the spectre of the black rapist of white women. Within this mythology, women and children are consistently framed as threatened by a racialised, masculinised violence. In this instance, the juxtaposition of the rosy-pink Peach against the black-skinned Lincoln works to re-state her innocence and his deviancy. She is afforded a form of racialised and gendered vulnerability, assigned increased – but still conditional – believability within a racist cultural and legal context. Beyond the racial dimensions of this moment, the metaphors are fleshy, with visceral images of burning meat. Like sausages cooking on a barbecue Lincoln leaves his scent on Peach's skin, unable to be easily washed away. These residues of meat take on a particular potency when Peach's ardent vegetarianism is revealed. Memories of her rape, and her rapist, stick to her like the stench of unwanted meat. The trauma metaphor is clear; she cannot wash off the memories of Lincoln's assault, cannot purge him from her body through vomit although she would like to.

The final chapter, the scene of self-mutilation and potential attempted suicide, offers similarly fruitful possibilities for a reading that foregrounds the traumatic experience. Peach is in the bath, swollen and in pain. She begins that ‘I tread. I tread. I reach between my legs and touch until I find the final thread’ (p. 95); throughout the following paragraph, there is more -ead in ‘threading’/ ‘dread’/ ‘tread’. Peach is unravelling from the inside out, the thread of her sanity – the thing that was holding it all together – yanked out. ‘Dead’ echoes obviously across the words, the morbid and final connotations of the thread-pulling. Peach has thus far tread, attempted to survive and keep her head above water. In the bath, it seems that she will finally go under; she will be subsumed by her trauma. The sibilance returns in ‘I seem to be sinking. I push, I push, pressure pushes me back, I push and push’ (p. 96). Her drowning is whispered, her trauma a secret still between narrator and reader. She drowns in the secrecy of the event. She tries to push back, tries to keep afloat by sharing what she can. Her survival is difficult as she slowly unravels in the hot bath, ultimately ripping flesh away until she is only core, only peach pit. ‘Flaccid fleshy fingers wave goodbye as they dissolve disintegrate minuscule molecules melt away’ alliterates her undoing; the hum of *m* sounds melt her away as she waves goodbye to the narrative, the reader, the world. Her peach flesh comes apart from the core, melting off until she is only pit in the pit of the bath: ‘In this pit I will sit. In this pit I will sit. In this. In this pit’ (p. 98). It is devastatingly final, a wallowing in the ‘this’ – a rape still unnamed – and in the ‘pit’ of her trauma and endless remembering. The use of repetition in language and sound works in *Peach* to reflect the continuity of trauma and the challenges of memory post sexual violence. Peach is haunted by her experience, unable to forget; it is also her secrecy that haunts her, suggested by soft alliterative sounds throughout. She whispers to the reader, and only we hear her.

*La mémoire de l'air* is similarly linguistically and formally abstract; the rape is narrated through memory, though in more detail than *Peach*. There is repetition here, too. The narrator’s red dress becomes symbolic of the violence she experiences, but also of her resilience and survival. She sets the scene on the day of the rape, remembering the warm summer weather and that she was ‘dressed quite lightly, in a bright red dress, an unusual outfit for my usual half-an-hour stroll’ (2022, p. 80). The unusualness of her clothing is linked to the exceptional event of the usual stroll: the

rape. She wrestles with the outfit's connotations, calling it 'not at all a provocative dress but – I admit it – red' (ibid.) The 'admittance' reads reluctantly, a sigh of defeat. In an echo of Banet-Weiser and Higgins' (2023) discussion of futility, resistance here is futile. The dress's redness evokes ideas of sex and of eroticism that she knows sit at an uneasy juncture with rape and credibility; the reflection on the colour anticipates the aftermath, the potential disbelief. The dress appears again in comparison with the rapist's balaclava. He approaches her on a path, '[r]ed I said, red, just like my dress' (p. 82). The relationship between violence and gender is foregrounded here; so too is the relationship between victim and perpetrator. In this moment, the narrator sees herself mirrored in the man who will attempt to rape her. His balaclava intimates the bloody connotations of what is to come – he is holding a knife with which he threatens her. The knife, rather than his penis with which he cannot maintain erection, functions as phallic symbol par excellence. More than anything, she worries what he will do with it. The ultimate violation, she surmises, would be for him to insert it into her vagina. Certain that she will not survive the encounter, the narrator thinks of her daughter, how she will be found: 'she'd be the first to glimpse a piece of red dress – *it's Mummy's dress!*' (p. 84). The image of her dress protruding from the earth, its bloodiness trickling out to be seen by her child, spurs her to action – it is at this point that she begins to thwart the attack through language and attempts at persuasion. Although this ultimately fails, the image of the red dress as representative of her potential death – viewed through her daughter's eyes – compels her to survive, to use the discursive tools at her disposal to fight back. When complying with his request to remove her clothes, she carefully lays out the dress next to them and muses that 'red blood on a red dress would be cinematic' (p. 85). The narrator's awareness of the symbolic resonance of these images, her reflection on the story they tell, corresponds with Sharon Marcus's (1992) conceptualisation of rape as partly narrative event. When the attack is over, she puts the dress on 'red and creased, not even damp' (p. 87); like her dress, she has survived, creased but not irreparably damaged. The dress becomes the site of multiple contradictory symbols: of the violence of rape, of blood and potential death, of love for her daughter, and of resilience.

The sexual violence Irina experiences in *Boy Parts* is, similarly, narrated through memory, but in a more recent sense. Due to her inebriation – she has taken a

cocktail of uppers, downers, and alcohol – her memory of the events is imprecise. A final ‘fat slug’ of ketamine is, as she describes, ‘where it all went tits-up’ (p. 89). As described, memory proves a key tension for Irina and for Flo when it comes to believability. Irina recounts prior to Will’s attempted rape that: ‘I believe I recall Will pulling my head back, yanking me by my hair and tipping water down my throat’ (p. 90). She then moves to say ‘I think I remember him lying on top of me, enraged’ followed by ‘[h]e called me a cunt, I do remember that’ (p. 91). When describing the attempted rape itself, her language is assertive, a linguistic absence of doubt. The personal pronoun, an assertive I, frames the section where she recalls that:

I remember him taking my skirt off, my lace bodysuit. He couldn’t work out my bra, he couldn’t quite get me rolled onto my stomach to get to the clasp, so he gave up, and just sort of scooped my tits out of the cups and fiddled with them for a bit, before proceeding to pull off my knickers and try to jam his *completely flaccid* cock into me. (ibid.)

Although her memory is compromised at other points, Irina is able to list Will’s actions with a level of clear-sightedness. There are no qualifiers like ‘I think/I believe’. It is the physical sensations that guide her memory most profoundly, asserting the reality of rape as corporeal experience. The texture of Will’s penis is emphasised in her memory, his lack of erection framed as a particular indignity. Tactility and sensory experience are foregrounded throughout the narration in this section: Will squeezes her face, spits at her, ‘scooped’ and ‘popped out’ her breasts, ‘fiddled’ with them (ibid.) This language of movement and touch integrates memory and corporality, drawing together the narrative and physical elements of sexual violence. The desire to adjudicate in our reading of the attempted rape (Spampinato 2021) is confronted head on here: Irina is not attempting to conform to legal standards of testimony, but to give a *sense* of the attack in terms of injury to the self. This reads as a feminist gesture towards a renewed concept of belief.

There is further palpable commentary on believability and the justice system. Irina rejects Flo’s pleas to call the police, due to ‘drugs, and the fact I can sort him out myself’ (p. 93), denying at once gendered victimhood and vulnerability and, crucially, any engagement with the criminal justice system. Due to her drug use, Irina doubts she

will be believed by the police. There is good reason for this: as Rosie Cowan points out, in legal contexts, blame attributed to drug and alcohol consumption on behalf of the victim is a pervasive rape myth (2021, pp. 87-88). Irina further links this distrust of the police to the contemporary socio-political moment when she asks Flo ‘what happened to *all cops are bastards?*’ (2021, p. 93). We are firmly rooted in a context where conversations around police brutality, as well as institutional racism and sexism, are prudent, particularly in the progressive circles Irina and Flo inhabit. Irina’s provocative questioning of Flo here illustrates the tensions between feminism and state cooperation with regards to sexual violence that Bumiller (2008) describes. These conversations have circulated predominantly around the US context even in British media, but they also have a pronounced UK relevance. The murder of Sarah Everard by Metropolitan Police officer Wayne Couzens, and the assault of women by police at a vigil to remember her, highlighted crucial connections between state violence and violence against women.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, *Boy Parts*’ dealings with the police is illustrative of contemporary discourse in the UK, US and Western Europe that interrogates the police’s role in maintaining oppressive structures: of gender, of race, and of class.

The story the body tells is crucial in all three of the texts; each narrates an intensely physical experience on behalf of the victim-survivor, although not all are left with lasting bodily harm. That those attacks that leave intense physical wounds are not necessarily rendered as more severe or impactful than those that do not encourages a practice of continuum thinking (see Boyle 2019b; Kelly 1988). The victim-survivors’ internal processes – how they remember and the painfulness of doing so – are focalised in all three texts here. Memory’s role as a dominant narrative force allows the texts to challenge legalistic notions of believability, prioritising instead a replication of the traumatic experience. The formal haziness which accompanies the representations is instructive of a complicated and traumatised form of remembering, comprised of fragments, flashback, and hallucination. These representations work to unpack and

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<sup>41</sup> Sarah Everard’s was murdered after the publication of *Boy Parts*, but nevertheless sits within the same cultural context of police violence against women. Couzens was also found to be part of a WhatsApp groupchat with six other Met officers where they joked about sexual violence (Sky 2023); a tribunal found that another WhatsApp group chat containing several Met officers ‘praised a rapist, made offensive remarks about the Holocaust, abused disabled people and applauded violence against women’ (Dodd 2023).

subvert the problematics of what Marta Fernández-Morales calls ‘the gendered dimension of memory within rape culture’ (2023, p. 6). Memory may not be straightforwardly represented, but its presence is nevertheless absolutely crucial in asserting narrative truths.

### **Difficult women? Representing victim-survivors**

I suggest above that the women’s candidness about their behaviour renders them believable to the reader within the logic of the narrative. They are open about behaviour considered undesirable in victim-survivors by a rape culture; through victim-survivor narration, time and time again, the texts call rape myths into question. The renderings of complex victim-survivors demonstrate feminist understandings of rape culture. Frequently, they are rendered ‘bad victims’; not sufficiently passive, (a)sexual and thus rapeable (Gavey 2019; Marcus 1992). The novels in this chapter deal with this conceit in diverse and frequently challenging ways. It is in *La mémoire de l’air* that this is tackled most explicitly: the police explicitly set at odds her behaviour during the rape and her ability to be believed. She describes her response to the rape over a number of pages, beginning with her primary attempt to fake an orgasm: ‘what if I fake it? Women sometimes pretend to get it over with more quickly, to be rid of it’ (p. 84). When this fails, she has the idea to ‘[g]ive him pleasure’ but ‘[n]o, it wasn’t working’ (p. 86). Thomas et. al. (2017) discuss how simulating orgasm is a significant way through which women attempt to end both unwanted (but consensual) sex and rape. As Gavey (2018) argues, the primacy of orgasm codifies norms of heterosex that prioritise men’s sexual pleasure and therefore enforce gendered norms. This, however, puts victim-survivors in a double bind: they might end an attack by simulating pleasure, but this might hinder their ability to be believed, if they are seen to have *really* enjoyed the encounter. In the police station after the rape, she pictures herself ‘standing opposite a large audience, someone at the bar saying, “She came or faked it, she enjoyed it”’ (Lamarche, p. 90). Paradoxically, her attempt to disrupt the interaction through simulating orgasm directly impedes upon her credibility.

The narrator's thought process throughout the encounter depicts her thinking through the rape script: 'rape as a scripted interaction which takes place in language and can be understood in terms of conventional masculinity and femininity as well as other gender inequalities' (Marcus 2002, p. 390). She finally attempts to plead with the rapist while weeping, noting that '[s]trangely, I was talking to him as though he was a brother, a cousin, a lover. Or a little boy you come across on the path, who's torturing an animal for no reason' (p. 86). His inability to maintain erection insists that he ends the attack at this point, but not before proclaiming, 'in a truly exasperated tone, "Because I can't help myself!"' (ibid.) Her reflections on these responses are lucid. She works through her options, attempting to stop him by appealing to both his masculinity and humanity in various ways. Following Marcus, she understands rape as 'a process to be analysed and undermined as it occurs' (1992, p. 388). However, her inability to stop him through discursive intervention – he only relents when his body essentially turns against him – is representative of the problematic of the rape script. In this case, her engagement with numerous discursive methods fails because, as the rapist asserts, he cannot help himself: he feels compelled to rape. This assertion is taken by the narrator at face value, a gender-essentialised understanding that is employed in service of small comfort – she is unable to stop him because sexual violence is wired into his very being. This calls into question Marcus's assertion that rapists and rape may be thwarted by upending the narrative script. The narrator makes clear that she understands different responses may have variant effects on her credibility as victim, noting that 'I must say, to my credit or discredit, as we'll see later, that I was capable of a certain presence of mind' (p. 84). Her detailed recounting of the rape suggests to the reader that she *is* present. She is consciously positioning herself proximate to the economy of believability where women are kept 'symbolically and structurally at arms-length from the possibility of truthful speech: they cannot be truth-tellers, only truthcorrupters, their accounts of the world always partial and biased in ways unacceptable to rational deliberation' (Banet-Weiser and Higgins 2021, p. 129). Despite attempting to utilise the limited tools at her disposal to thwart the rape, within the logic of rape culture and misogyny these impact her credibility as victim and ability to be believed. The reader, however, is encouraged to believe her – despite her fragmented memory, despite the dreamlike qualities of her narration, her account

of rape and Davant's violence is credible. In her recounting of the rape and her responses, the narrator engages clearly with feminist discourses on rape scripts and credibility. In turn, *La mémoire de l'air* exposes the problematics of these discourses, highlighting the fraught positions victim-survivors occupy with regards to credibility – it challenges its readers to look beyond the accepted legalistic scripts that marginalise the traumatic experience.

In *Boy Parts*, Irina's response to Will also involves a series of complex – and apparently contradictory – behaviours. She is angry at him, confronts him, ignores him, and eventually forces him to let her drive his car on a long trip. She imagines how she might confront him: 'do I send him a text? Just checking, Will, did you and your useless dick half-heartedly try to rape me last night?' (p.91) Although this is framed as a question, there is no real suggestion that she doubts her version of events. The question form is used as a provocation, an imagined way to force Will to respond – and to humiliate him and his 'useless dick' in the process. Although this seems an attempt to eschew vulnerability on her part, and to inject her signature dark humour into a traumatic experience, there is more to the exchange. Her recognition that 'it's been made *very* clear to me he doesn't like to be ignored' (ibid.) displays awareness of his position of power over her, a gendered dominance that shades into sexual violence. Irina may struggle to admit it, but she has been made vulnerable through her gender, victimised on account of it. Whether we believe she *can* handle it or not, there is a clear dissociation from the victim-survivor position and a move to an active, retaliatory role. There is an attempt at levelling the playing field, a turning of Will's violence back against him; 'do you remember when we watched *I Spit on Your Grave*?' she asks Flo, provocatively (ibid.) Through this reference, she clearly recognises the sexual violence as such and allies herself with Jennifer as avenger. She never does 'sort him [Will] out' (p. 90) in a manner akin to *Spit*'s Jennifer, but she does retaliate in varying degrees of severity. She hangs a potential 'outing' over his head, on one occasion forcing him to allow her to use his car. Her confrontation addresses his status as rapist implicitly, suggesting there is some level of danger attached to a direct provocation or naming. In her article on naming and sexual violence, Melody House asserts that 'tarnishing a man's "good" name is therefore considered more perverse than sexual assault' (2023, p. 4286). With this

understanding, Irina consciously leverages damage to Will's reputation. Will further recalls ideas about reputation when he stresses his feminist credentials – being named as rapist would not only harm his friendships, but undermine the progressive veneer he has cultivated. Invoking 'feminist' as identity marker and, in this case, shield allows Will to attempt to evade critique while doing none of the work of feminism. In *Boy Parts*, Will represents this contemporary iteration of the publicly feminist, privately misogynist man.

Irina also recounts experiencing abuse at the hands of a school teacher who groomed her at 17. Her description of this illustrates the complexity of victim-survivor response: she recalls her disdain for friends and family who looked at her 'seeing a raped child where Irina used to stand' because 'everyone *knowing* was more traumatic than being with him' (pp. 50-51). Her own assertions that she 'liked it' and 'liked him' are undercut by her descriptions of his real power over her. She recalls that he began by 'negging'<sup>42</sup> her by mistaking her for other female students, this quickly transforming to detentions and dates that involved sex. At first, she notes, 'it was disgusting' but 'I got used to it' (pp. 48-49). This line sits alone on the page, its brevity and singularity suggesting a sense of resignation. It is significant that the teacher, like Will, initially presents to Irina as a friend and admirer of her artistic talent. He is not outwardly violent, not a social outlier. *Boy Parts* works against '[i]ndividualizing the concept of the rapist' (Messner 2016, p. 64) in two ways: it shows that those men who do attempt to rape are not aberrant, and that the acts they commit are not individualised in women's lives but connected by a continuum. In this sense, feminist conceptualisations of men's sexual violence (Boyle 2019a; Gavey 2018; Kelly 1988) are palpable.

That Irina is violent physically and sexually textures her character significantly. She hurts and humiliates men, for artistic purposes and for the self-gratification this brings in turn. It is perhaps an understatement to say that she behaves deeply immorally and with cruelty, a brutal and narcissistic aesthete akin to *American*

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<sup>42</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary* defines negging as 'the practice of making negative or slightly insulting comments to someone you find attractive in order to make them take an interest in you'. It is largely a gendered phenomenon; Gabrielle Kassel (2022) writes for *Women's Health* that '[a]t its most distilled, negging is verbal emotional abuse'.

*Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman.<sup>43</sup> A hallucinatory flashback suggests that she murdered a young homeless man and documented the event with photographs; she sexually humiliates her young maybe-partner, Eddie from Tesco, forcing him to pose for pictures he is uncomfortable with. She uses her beauty and charisma to manipulate those around her. Upon first meeting Eddie she remarks that 'I'll scout him. I'll be able to get him to do some weird stuff – beta males like him are usually nasty' (p. 34). That she is sexually violent is notable: on one level, this is a comment about rape and power. On another, it is part of a feminist logic that precludes the reader from letting Irina off the hook. If we believe her, we must then find her victims similarly credible. *Boy Parts* does not mobilise a straightforward gendered reversal – that is, it is not simply a story about Irina getting even with the patriarchy. She does not invoke pseudo-feminist vindications of her actions, nor does the novel itself. She harms out of brutality, out of selfishness. When a woman comments upon watching one of Irina's videos at a gallery that '[t]he way you've played with consent here is wonderful' (p. 278), it is out of naivete, only underscoring Irina's distinct lack of interest in her subjects' consent. The moral implications of Irina's behaviour are never in doubt. This rendering, perhaps paradoxically, runs with rather than against a feminist politics of representation. In an interview with *VICE*, Clark expresses frustration with 'the glut of media about women that are a bit shit, and often a bit shit tipping into quite harmful' and the framing of this media as 'empowering' (O'Neill 2020). The novel allows Irina to just be bad, perhaps irredeemably so, but also a victim, and one who defies not only gendered expectations but social codes generally. Her reputation within the narrative logic does not (or ought not to) impact her credibility as victim, a conscious engagement with the economy of believability. Irina thus represents the heterogeneity of gendered experience. Her cruelty is depicted as such, rather than a superficially feminist attribute to which we ought to exclaim 'good for her!' There is a feminist current that flows through this depiction, attesting to women's heterogeneity, their ability to be bad as well as good. This lends itself to a feminist conceptualisation of sexual violence and victimhood: If rape in *Boy Parts* might be perpetrated by any type of person, it may

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<sup>43</sup> *Boy Parts* has frequently been compared to Brett Easton Ellis's 1991 novel. Chloe Ashby for *The Guardian* describes the novel as 'a bit American Psycho, if Patrick Bateman were a consistently underestimated pretty girl' (2020). Clark points out that she had not read *American Psycho* at the time of writing (Dickinson 2020).

also be experienced by any type. This corresponds to Murray Bell et al.'s (2011) contestation that women's violence in sexual violence narratives may have denaturalising qualities, prompting consideration on gendered essentialism. Irina's violence is 'reclamatory' (Murray Bell et al., p. 55) in the sense that it reclaims binarised ideas about vulnerability.

### **Getting even?**

Although the bulk of Irina's violence is carried out in the service of pleasure rather than revenge, revenge *does* exist across the novels. The courts do not play a role in any of the texts, beyond the mention of the police in *Boy Parts* and *La mémoire de l'air*. In *Peach*, the rapist is punished through extrajudicial means; in both, these incur extreme violence. Peach murders her rapist, making him into literal sausage meat that she then feasts on with her family at a BBQ, breaking her long-time vegetarianism. Peach literally consumes her rapist and shares him with her family as punishment. Consumption, particularly that of meat and flesh, has a pronounced relationship to gender and the history of literature. There are echoes of Philomela in Peach's consumption, although it is the rapist Tereus who is punished by being tricked into eating his son in the Ovidian rendering; Richard Hilliard (1990) argues that the ritual sacrifice of Clarissa in Samuel Richardson's early rape novel is dependent on a logic of cannibalism. There is therefore classical and literary precedent for the rape/consumption (frequently as cannibalism) relationship. In absorbing her rapist, ensuring he is cooked and eaten, Peach is not only able to ensure he essentially disappears, but that he nourishes those she cares about, before being literally expelled as excrement. The symbolic nature of the act is multi-layered, but allows Peach to both subvert and reclaim the patriarchal aggression inherent to the rape itself – through the feeding of her family and through the cannibalism. Upon tasting the sausage meat, bracing herself for the memory of 'that night', she is surprised by the pleasantness of its soft, melting texture. When Green asks why she finally decided to eat meat, she responds 'I didn't have a choice' (Glass p. 93). To move on, murder is her only option – she must castrate the phallic Lincoln, destroy his potency and subsume his power into her own body. She exalts in her monstrosity in recognition of the *lex talionis*: 'I

watch them all devour my demon and I join in' (p. 92). As Louise Flockhart argues in her PhD thesis on cannibalism and postfeminism, 'cannibalism is therefore a critique of patriarchy and demonstrates a resistance to it' but is limited in its ability to facilitate structural change (2019, p. 5).

*La mémoire de l'air* ends with a similar reflection on the nature of violence and its inefficacy. The narrator watches a mother violently shaking her child, 'saying violent words to him' (p. 92). She has no context for the interaction, but observes that he is 'probably at the "no" age' (ibid.) There is a stark recognition that the interaction is about power. The little boy has said no to his mother, refuted her power. In feeling powerless to make him concede to her demands, she responds with aggression: the child does not know better, 'there in the wrong place at the wrong time. A powerless being' (p. 93). The gendered dynamic here is a significant one. Although the child is male and the mother a woman, it is in her power over him that she chooses to enact violence – to put him in his place. The child – the powerless – is an echo of the narrator's victim-survivor, her treatment at the hands of the rapist and Davant who exert social power. Interestingly, she extends sympathy to the mother, as 'perhaps it was all getting mixed up in her head too' (p. 92). This rejects victimhood and perpetration as a black-and-white paradigm, attempting to understand the impacts of power on those who have it, considering victims *as well as* perpetrators of violence as three-dimensional characters. Here, there is an attempt to round off a narrative that, as Brigley Thompson and Gunne describe, reflects 'feminism(s) attempts to move beyond the victim/perpetrator binary' (2010, p. 4). This nuance works against seeing violence as an essentialising characteristic, presenting a vision for its possible end. By no means is the end of *La mémoire de l'air* especially utopian or hopeful: the last line reads that, upon observing the mother shaking the crying child, 'I understood what had happened to me' (p. 93). It does present, however, the space for understanding the violence of power. Carlini Versini asserts that the text 'is a striking testimony of the power of words and of their importance in our individual and collective understanding of, and dealing with, sexual violence (2022, p. 17). Words and testimony may have the power to upend violence where it begins, giving power and subjectivity to the socially powerless.

## Perpetrating violence

Upon viewing the mother and child, the narrator of *La mémoire de l'air* is able to place her rapist in the context of wider social power imbalances. Through this, he is made irrevocably human. The rapist in *Peach*, Lincoln, is distinctive in that he is rendered as literally non-human. Like the other characters, he is written as a transfigured version of an actual (Lincoln) sausage: where his sternum should be, there are 'thick chunks of gristle and flesh pushing tightly against wafer-thin shiny translucent skin' (p. 78). He drips with oil and slides along the street, leaving lines of glistening fat and the stench of meat behind. When he is dead, his meat is stuffed into overflowing bags and he is re-formed into 'fresh and juicy' sausages for the barbeque (p. 91). Lincoln's phallic connotations are clear, moving from beyond symbol to a physical representation of the patriarchal role he inhabits: the phallus par excellence. Importantly, though, he is still configured as man, described through male pronouns and at one point, by a friend, as 'this huge guy' (p. 57). It is significant that Peach herself never personalises him in this way; for her, he is always a monster. This, on her part, might work as an internal attempt to afford herself credibility as victim. If he is monstrous, then, even within the logic of rape culture, there can be no denial that he raped her. Lincoln's physical depiction, its proximity to fat, oil, and blackness, is worthy of examination in this respect. As Boyle argues in her summation of Weinstein's 'aesthetically marked' otherness, fatness is operationalised as a symbol of excess (in Weinstein's case in body size as well as temperament) (2019, p. 117). Like Weinstein, Lincoln's monstrosity lies in his ability to cross both physical and emotional boundaries, literally bursting out of his own sausage skin. To mention his oiliness without engaging abjection would be remiss – the fat he oozes, the residue he leaves in his wake, reminds of Kristeva's boundary transgressing body. In his expulsions of fat and oil from within himself, he is abject; he 'expels' himself, drawing attention to the boundaries between subject and object, life and death. His oil denotes 'something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object' (Kristeva 1982, p. 4).

Due to his repellent physicality, the reader has no trouble accepting that Lincoln is a rapist; we are repulsed by him as he drips and sweats, and thus he is surely aberrant. This does not square easily with feminist conceptualisations of perpetrators, the notion that rapists are *not* monsters, *not* exceptionally deviant actors. However, feminist discourses are articulated in other ways in Lincoln's characterisation. He is made proximate to men's violence against women in his rape and subsequent stalking of Peach, but also to violence more generally in his attack on her boyfriend, Green, and his murder of her dog. Lincoln's humanity is called into question again when he is described as attacking Green 'like this violent fucking machine' (ibid). His fundamental misogyny, too, is illustrated in this violence exchange when, throughout the assault, he says nothing but Peach's name, calling it out over and over again. Even in his obsession, he sees her as an extension of her boyfriend, refusing to recognise her as an autonomous subject. Her subjectivity is of little importance to Lincoln, who sends her 'love letters' following the rape. To him, Peach is not a victim or survivor of his violence but a lover, an object of unrequited affection – similarly, Will in *Boy Parts* views Irina as a romantic conquest despite her lack of interest. He engages in, then, a continuum of violence that sees him enact various iterations of gendered dominance, from stalking, to displaced violence, to rape. Although the stalking clearly does not invoke the same type of violence as the rape, it is nonetheless connected. Per Kelly's (1988) conceptualisation, the experiences share a common character, that of misogyny; the stalking as sexualised violence is an extension of the rape itself, both intelligible as part of an existing patriarchal power structure. Continuum thinking also allows us to make sense of Lincoln's attack on Green as also existing within this patriarchal context, an act of masculine dominance that allows him to exert power over Green *and* Peach. To appropriate Boyle's summary, Lincoln's actions exist as expressions of male sexual entitlement that exist to remind Peach of her subordinate status as woman (2019, p. 55).

Continuum thinking is key, too, in approaching *La mémoire de l'air*, allowing for the drawing of connections between the various instances of violence within the narrative. The narrator's former abusive lover, Davant, does not rape her but is violent in a different way. He is physically and emotionally abusive, blaming her for his actions. Attending a breast screening appointment, she asks the doctor to record a

bruise on her arm, saying 'I'd like to show it to you. I'd like a record. But I don't want to lodge a complaint, not at all' (p. 66). There is a necessity of acknowledgment, here, of recognition. She goes on to detail complicated feelings about the attack, exemplifying a distortion of continuum thinking when she claims that '[m]y arm wasn't an emergency (...) No vitriol, no gash from a blade, no bottle smashed on head no kicks in the liver, no neck squeezed and sort forth. In other words, I was far from dead' (p. 67). The hierarchising of abuse that Kelly (1988) cautions against is illustrated here; for the narrator, she is not yet dead thus the violence is not *that* bad. It is important to afford autonomy to victim-survivor experience here and allow for the naming of one's own experiences as traumatic or otherwise. However, this should not impact, as Mardorossian (2011) argues, a critical ability to make sense of it as violence. The narrator's reflections in hindsight on her relationship with Davant do suggest she makes a subconscious attempt to underplay his abuse; notably he does this, too, when he uses her rape as a means to minimise the severity of his violence. His repeated adage, 'one day I'll end up killing myself' (p. 53), suggests that he does cast himself as victimised. Her creation of a name for him does, though, afford a recognition of his power and the narrator's attempt to take it back for herself. If, as Elizabeth Hayes states, '[t]o name is also to claim dominion' (2004, p. 669), the designation of Davant allows the narrator control over her story. She is able to claim narrative autonomy, inserting herself into dynamics where she has so frequently felt powerless and silenced – the child of the last chapter, unable to speak and a 'being over whom one has all the power' (p. 93). Her ability to ultimately tell the story, and to render the characters how she sees fit, allows for a 'poetic encounter between the reader and a rich and complex female subjectivity' (Carlini Versini 2022, p. 17).

Although Davant is not the man responsible for her rape, his behaviour is clearly connected to it across a continuum of men's violence against women. Davant's abuse and the stranger rape are emblematic of acts of gendered aggression; although distinct in terms of chronology and instance, they work together to generate a particular effect on the narrator's life. There is reflection on this continuum, albeit in a somewhat roundabout way, when the narrator compares her soul to the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave in a short, abstract chapter:

I observe that all individual struggles find an echo in those of nations, and that women who've been subjected to a totalitarian education since childhood often march at the head of protests. At this stage, I don't know the route of the protest, but I am determined to march until the dead woman wakes up. (p. 49)

Patriarchy's existence as transnational and transcultural phenomenon is taken as context to individual struggle here. There is a connecting between the personal and the structural that is characteristic of continuum thinking, here. The narrator situates her own experiences of men's violence in a wider context of gendered dominance, her own experience understood through what Boyle calls 'the context of a gender-unequal society' which produces a particular effect on women's lives (2019b, p. 53). The narrator links the abstract, post-rape dead woman those women who live under totalitarian, misogynist states in which sexism is inscribed into law. This appears again at the end of the text when she qualifies her 'complaints' about the violence she has experienced with the proclamation that 'I'm alive. My family don't cast me out. I don't live in a country at war'. She then undermines her own desire to qualify: '[t]hat's what I told myself for many years. Until the moment Davant said, "You've never processed that rape, that's why you see violence everywhere" (...) He was telling me, only a few hours after hitting me, that I was guilty of provoking his act' (p. 78). This is a clear engagement with the continuum, a direct exposition of the misogynist context that enables *all* acts of men's violence against women to take place. The spectre of white feminism somewhat haunts this narrative thread, unravelling textual attempts at universality. She recognises that she may be egregiously 'instrumentalising the residents of Nagorno-Karnakh' (p. 49), but nevertheless connects their experience to her own. Her claim that she, too, has 'lost one fifth of her territory' (ibid.) homogenises woman and survivor experience alike, suggesting a generality that flattens distinctions of geography, race, and class. The narrator's complex and sometimes contradictory engagements with continuum thinking are, in fact, characteristic of it. In turn, the text itself becomes a reflection on that continuum, allowing for considered meditations on the connected impacts of individual and structural violence on women's lives.

## **Conclusion**

Discourses of polarisation – particularly across French and Anglo-American cultural contexts – were prominent throughout #MeToo and the decade that surrounded it. The texts in this chapter, however, are nuanced and complex across several strata: for some in form and narration, for all in characterisation and engagement with feminist discourses. *Boy Parts* sits obviously within a geographical context, while *La mémoire de l'air* and *Peach* do not. *Boy Parts* speaks to an anglicised discourse most clearly, while the other two speak to a general moment. It is notable that even those anchored in national contexts and discourses speak to the general; they reach out beyond these borders, engaging with sexual violence and, in turn, feminism as global phenomena. This suggests that all are proximate to contemporary discourse around sexual violence and, in turn, that which surrounds #MeToo. In Lamarche's novel particularly, but also to lesser extent in *Boy Parts* and *Peach*, this engagement approaches the idea of a global moment – although, as I have suggested earlier in this thesis, this supposed global-ness is often implicitly American. Attempts at generality are also implicitly rooted in the context of the global north. Despite the clear cultural specificities in *Boy Parts*, there remains elements of the *everywhere* and the *anywhere* – formulated through the engagement with the online – that are more explicit in *Peach* and *La mémoire de l'air*. The narratives themselves might focus on a victim-survivor protagonist, but their focus on structural misogyny and a patriarchy that is not confined to national borders insist they are not only individualist. We might see this as a move from the mediated discourses that surrounded #MeToo that, in their engagement with the public nature and aftermath of sexual violence, focalised around individual perpetrators and victim-survivors. The texts in this chapter, to varying degrees, promise something different. Sexual violence is not presented as merely an event between two individuals, but an experience underscored by a wider social misogyny; across all, there are understandings of sexual violence that connect it to wider issues of gender, class and power. All three sit amongst wider social contexts, moving away from an understanding of sexual violence as individualised event. All engage the idea of a collectivised response scholars like Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) Phipps (2020) and Boyle (2019a) identify as a necessary feminist task in the contemporary moment.

It is perhaps through the engagement with trauma and, particularly, the traumatic paradox that the texts here are most intimately connected. Each is acutely aware of the difficulty of narrating the traumatic experience, the hallucinatory and oft-contradictory qualities associated with this, and the challenges this poses for credibility in turn. The formal and narrative efforts across the texts to intimate these difficulties foregrounds feminist analyses of trauma and believability. It is the victim-survivor's memories of the events, their narration of them, that is a privileged site; the imbalance of epistemic injustice is redressed. In *Peach*, the reader is the only interlocutor, the singular judge and jury over the event. To the reader, that Peach has experienced sexual violence is never in doubt – our access to her internal thoughts is obviously key in this respect, the linguistic features that detail her trauma reifying the harm she has experienced. The narrator of *La mémoire de l'air*'s confessional tone works to the same effect; both 'admit' what they view as their own shortcomings in thwarting the attacks, positioning them as candid, truthful. Their complex responses and their openness about these works as a feminist interrogation of the traumatic experience and believability. In this sense, the texts here echo what we have seen in the films *and* other literature here: an attempt to represent the difficulties that come with engendering belief for women in a misogynist culture. What the reader is encouraged to do in the examples here is engage with victim-survivor stories; as Gilmore (2023) suggests, this allows us to take stock of these stories' richness, complexity and diversity. Some, like Irina in *Boy Parts*, may fall into socially constructed roles of 'bad victims' but are, crucially, also victimisers; the reader, however, is not encouraged to replicate these sexist attitudes, instead viewing victim-survivors as three-dimensional subjects. Similarly, male perpetrators of violence are not rendered without nuance. In *Peach*, for example, the representation frequently verges upon monstrous (and potentially racialised), but the victim-survivors respond to them in complex ways. In all of the texts, there is a markedly feminist understanding that sexual violence is about men as well as women: it can only be understood by looking at this symbiotic relationship.

Upon approaching these final corpus texts, I am struck by all's attempt to hold within them contradictions. The novels in this chapter may contain similarities in themes of violence and trauma, but are narratively diverse efforts that illustrate feminism's tensions. The texts here are united by a feminist understanding of sexual

violence that acknowledges its power and its lasting effects on those who experience it, while recognising its complexity. As they are not direct responses to it, there is less of an explicit attempt to insert themselves as correctives to the perceived binarisms of #MeToo. They do, instead, articulate the texture and diversity of sexual violence narrative, and prioritise the complication of victimhood binaries – telling complicated stories about characters who do not simply do everything right. In this sense, they engage feminist discourse, responding to it in a way that avoids straightforward backlash: in holding these complexities, they are clear textual products of the long #MeToo moment of the 2010s. They reflect thoughtfully on violence, moving away from essentialised understandings to those that visualise its social dimensions. They make materialist and feminist interventions into larger cultural conversations, becoming *part* of a moment focalised through women’s subjectivity and narrativization of sexual violence. As fiction, they have the ability to go beyond mediatised representations of what sexual violence *is*, who experiences it, and the impacts it has.

## Conclusion

The long 2010s may have stretched on, but this thesis certainly arrives past the point of their closure. This conclusion will summarise this project's position relative to existing and emerging research on sexual violence in literature and film, as well as to feminist theorising on the representation of sexual violence and #MeToo more widely. Crucially, I will explore where the work sits relative to the contemporary cultural moment and to the evolution of #MeToo. I will end by setting out some recommendations for future research, identifying the gaps that still exist in work on representation and sexual violence.

## Outcomes and contributions

The main aim of this thesis was to explore how sexual violence, as defining discursive feature of the 2010s, was represented in a small selection of cultural products in English and French from the period. The response to #MeToo in France, frequently represented as hostile in French and English language media, provided a catalyst for this comparison. The 100-women tribunal has become the iterative symbol of this backlash in France. Using examples of literature and film from French and Anglo-American cultural contexts provided fruitful analytic ground through which to interrogate cultural engagements with this supposed cultural polarity. A relatively diverse selection of texts allowed me to explore whether these much-stressed cultural differences in responses to #MeToo – and in turn, contemporary discourse around sexual violence – were indeed present in cultural production.

#MeToo is important to this thesis on several levels: principally, it is the chronological touchpoint around which sexual violence discourse in the 2010s coalesced. Now, cultural conversations about sexual violence and its iterations in popular culture are virtually always inflected with implied and explicit mention of #MeToo. When I talk about my thesis, to academics and non-academics alike, #MeToo's presence is often immediately assumed: 'you'll be writing about #MeToo, about Weinstein, of course?' Examples of sexual violence on screen, particularly, are frequently evaluated as *doing* #MeToo in some way; even when, more often than not, #MeToo is not the most obvious or expedient cultural referent. Series ranging from

80s women's wrestling comedy *GLOW* (2017) to animated series *Tuca and Bertie* (2019) have been as described as having #MeToo themes of their own (Nussbaum 2019); medieval drama *The Last Duel* (2021, dir. Ridley Scott) is a 'wannabe #MeToo movie' (Brody 2021), while 2022's *Women Talking* (dir. Sarah Polley) and *Tár* (dir. Todd Field) are (ostensibly admirably) '[b]reaking out of the #MeToo Movie formula' (Hess 2022). TV series and films not only have #MeToo themes, but *are* (or at least try to be) #MeToo media.

We must be careful not to overstate #MeToo's singularity, its uniqueness. As I have argued in this thesis, #MeToo as moment – and the texts associated with it – exists as an accumulation of decades of feminist activism and theorising around sexual violence; critically, it comes out of a decade entrenched in discourse about it. I was therefore concerned about imposing anachronistic readings on the texts here that predate October 2017 – insisting that these were mere anticipations, for example, might ultimately reify #MeToo's supposed primacy. It is virtually impossible, however, to write about texts that feature sexual violence without making mention of it. It features in the paratexts of those examples which do and do not invoke it directly; that it is referenced consistently, diegetically and paratextually, is indicative of its enormous discursive influence. That the examples in chapters 2 and 5 that do not respond directly to #MeToo contain discursive features that have come to be associated with it is instructive – #MeToo is formed through a discursive tradition around sexual violence that is present, too, in these texts. The texts themselves, as I have argued, are also formed within their own formulaic and generic traditions, like rape-revenge. In this sense, the 'surrounding' texts can be taken as examples of the long 2010s and, in turn, the long #MeToo moment in literature and film.

That both the direct and non-direct responses are concerned with the aftermath of sexual violence, rather than the event itself, is significant. Certainly, the #MeToo examples tend to be less graphic – sexual violence itself is rarely visually or textually depicted with the same detail as in the non-direct-response texts in chapters 2 and 5. That the '#MeToo texts' explore responses to sexual violence seems intuitive, particularly when we view #MeToo as discursive activism around speaking out. The utterance, the desire to speak of one's own experiences publicly, is as significant to the textual narratives as it was to the dominant narratives of #MeToo. The literary

narratives explore more heavily the affordances of the online, particularly representing the role of social media and blogging in speaking out/back. The films represent more formalised methods, that span dealings with HR, institutional management, and engagements with the legal system. In both literature and film, traditional forms of media are present; the majority of perpetrators in the ‘#MeToo texts’ are, to some degree, public figures. The mediated version of #MeToo focused almost exclusively, too, on public figures – the limitations of this for a radical movement are obvious, bound up in structures of power and running along axes of race, class, and geography. The books and films I categorise here are, in many ways, subject to some of the same representational biases – the characters skew white, British/American, and are disproportionately public figures. The characters in the non-direct-response texts generally share in the former categories, but are typically non-celebrities, more resolutely ordinary. Not all of the #MeToo texts privilege celebrity stories, however. In recognition of the fact that many of those who spoke out against major figures like Weinstein were non-famous, lower-paid assistants, examples like *The Assistant* and *Complicit* are populated with victim-survivors that are ordinary. That the #MeToo-response texts function themselves as representational components to what #MeToo is, and has become, is clearly significant. The moment, beyond presence in social and traditional medias, now has a related textual and visual output.

An investment in the politics of speaking out *after* violence occurs is not exclusive to the #MeToo texts, and is present in nearly all of the examples here; where it is not, silence – as in *Peach* – is equally significant. Frequently, too, the engagement with this practice represents its problematic juncture with the traumatic experience. Walker’s concept of the traumatic paradox echoes throughout the chapters here, an essential tool for untangling the difficulties of victim-survivor narration and its relationship to credibility. Serisier’s *Speaking Out* (2018) has further provided a theoretical underpinning to the interrogation of speaking out’s narrative politics. That these two works mostly pre-date #MeToo (Serisier wrote the bulk of her publication pre-October 2017) suggests, again, a longer story.

The practice of speaking out has long been associated with sexual violence in feminist, mainstream and reactionary discourses. From as early as the 1970s, as Brownmiller describes, feminists used consciousness raising sessions in which

patriarchal structures – and the violence embedded into them – were spoken back to, with traumatic experiences narrated. Campus ‘speak outs’ in the 90s performed a similar function (and, of course, faced backlash). Speaking out, and the backlash to it, is imbued with significance in feminist discursive and activist histories. It sits, too, in a difficult relationship with legal responses to sexual violence, that one must speak out in a number of specific ways in order to be credible. We might see these legalised conceptualisations as harmfully impacting the cultural perception of the ‘right’ kind of speaking out: demands that it is done within a specific time frame, that the speaker seem sufficiently traumatised (too little it can’t have been that bad; too much then she is not reliable), and that she narrate the *right* type of experience. In the literary texts particularly, we see this intersect with the traumatic experience, and the problems this causes in engendering believability. Feminist critics like Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) and Serisier (2018) have attempted to unpack the complexities of speaking out as practice, demonstrating how speaking out may be mobilised for competing political ends – to inform, for example, racist or otherwise reactionary policy. Within the discursive logic of #MeToo, speaking out was prioritised as the political end in and of itself. The texts here contend with its difficulties.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is in the #MeToo-adjacent films of chapter 3 that we see this most obviously. *Bombshell* follows the women who dare to speak out against their powerful boss, Roger Ailes, through a number of channels: they speak to lawyers, to the institutions of FOX itself and, eventually, to the media. That they speak to each other, as I have argued, is foregrounded in the film’s paratexts but less so in the narrative itself. Despite having three main characters, this is a markedly individual text – each woman is very much on her own journey. *The Assistant* features an individual, a lone speaker, but in a way that is quite different. Jane is isolated by her attempts to speak out against her Weinstein-esque boss, intimidated by HR and ultimately silenced by the pressures of the workplace. The failure of speaking out is also represented in *Promising Young Woman*, where Nina has attempted to report her rapist to the university but the complaint is institutionally mishandled, and her rapist ultimately protected, leading to her suicide. It is this failure that acts as the catalysts for Cassie’s faux-revenge attacks on potential-rapist men in their city. However, as I have argued, speaking out retains its privileged position at the film’s end – Cassie, before she is

murdered by Nina's rapist, has had the foresight to inform the police. Her utterance is foregrounded in the form of a text from beyond the grave. In the final scene, they swoop in to save the day and justice reigns supreme – or does it? That two women are dead suggests a rather fatalist analysis of speaking out's expediency; here, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) insightfully argue, it is futility that characterise the text's engagements with sexual violence and belief. It is in the #MeToo-adjacent films, with their focus on trailblazing and firsts, that we might read Kay's warning that 'incitements to be individually "confident" and "empowered" actually work against the possibility of collective voice and movements for structural transformation' (2023, p. 195) as coming to fruition.

A more challenging question has been that of cultural difference. As I have suggested, literary and cinematic texts that feature sexual violence across the long #MeToo share thematic concerns. That does not mean, however, that tensions between the French and Anglo-American contexts are absent. Films like *Elle* and *Revenge* anticipate some of these tensions as they were articulated by the 100-women tribune, where post-2017 literary examples like *Les choses humaines* and *Cher Connard* respond to them. It is clear, even from the texts mentioned in this respect, that the French texts are more acutely concerned with cultural tensions surrounding sex – it is in these where we see the relationship between France and the US grappled with most explicitly. However, although French texts disproportionately engage cultural tensions amongst the examples here, they broadly represent similar narrative concerns. There is ambiguity and a search for nuance which is rendered particularly strongly across all of the literary texts here, in English and French. The Anglophone works are not, for example, more dogmatic or binaristic than their Francophone counterparts, as the discourse of the 100-women tribune might suggest to be the case. In fact, every primary text in this thesis articulates, to some degree, feminist discourses on sexual violence – there are no examples that could be characterised as straightforwardly backlash. In this sense, the implications of the 100-women tribune – its implicit hostility to an Americanised feminism and its impacts on cultural production – seem rather overplayed. The fears expressed in the letter, that art might be censored by overzealous editors, or that trauma might have to be played out in certain specific ways, are not justified in the texts here. In fact, the English and French textual

examples here frequently express similar concerns about speaking out, the traumatic experience, and rape culture more generally. These might also be considered the dominant thematic concerns of contemporary discourse on sexual violence. Where they differ most strongly, perhaps, is in their dealings (or non-dealings, in the US case) of cultures beyond their own; the French texts, generally, are more outward looking and engage with anglicised discourses. The reverse – English texts engaging with French discourses – is generally not the case, however we nevertheless observe discursive remnants of the 100-women tribune in an American text like *This is Pleasure*. Many, however, still make claims to generality. This reflects a key problematic of conceptualising #MeToo as global moment – what is perceived to be ‘global’ is often implicitly American, and difference is flattened. It is a cause for concern, as Hussen and Shefer point out, that the globalised, mediated dynamics of #MeToo have ‘tended to reflect and reinstate global power inequalities’ (2023, p. 183). An internationalist feminist movement, while necessary, is limited when it fails to account for localities and specificities. That is to say, while interculturality is undoubtedly productive, claims to generality must always be scrutinised.

Due to its intermedial and intercultural approach, I believe this thesis to be a valuable contribution to several fields of inquiry. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, it is an intervention into feminist criticism on sexual violence and representation, with clear relevance to scholars in gender studies. In this respect, it also contributes to the growing body of work that interrogates #MeToo – and its iterations across numerous spheres and cultures – from a feminist standpoint (see Banet-Weiser and Higgins 2023; Gilmore 2023; Funnell and Beliveau 2022; Erlingsdóttir and Chandra 2020; Holland and Hewett 2021; Boyle 2019a). Relative to this body of work, this project offers an exploration of the cultural products that respond to, and surround, #MeToo and the long decade it sits within. With its focus on French texts, it builds on the work of those scholars who have interrogated how #MeToo functions beyond purely Anglophone contexts (see Pavard, Rochefort and Zancarini-Fournel 2020). The work is in conversation with contemporary scholarship that takes stock of how cultural products have responded to a moment characterised by discourse on sexual violence (see Banet-Weiser and Higgins 2023; Horeck 2023; Beliveau and Funnell 2022). In this respect, there is relevancy to film and literary studies in English and French, contributing to

the expansive scholarship on sexual violence and representation in both disciplines. The combination of these strata therefore engenders a project that also sits comfortably within Comparative Literature, the discipline in which I first conceived of this research at Masters level. What unites my engagement across these fields is, of course, a feminist approach to textual and cultural analysis. I have provided a vision of how the 2010s, and the long #MeToo, has been characterised through cultural production in English and French comparatively. This task is one that has thus far not been undertaken.

### **Further research**

The extent of the investigation this thesis could carry out was necessarily restricted by length. Although there is undoubtedly a relatively large sample of texts included, there are many more that did not make the cut. A book length exploration of this topic, in the vein of Alexandra Heller Nicholas's *Rape-revenge films: A critical study* (2011), would perhaps yield a more comprehensive trend study, and could make more expansive claims. In researching this project, I was struck by the relatively few scholarly examinations of contemporary texts performed with #MeToo in mind – true across English and French. The work on #MeToo in literature was particularly sparse; unsurprisingly, much has been published over the course of its writing. Scholarly attention has now been paid to the use of #MeToo as a pedagogical tool in the humanities classroom, when studying literature, film and other media (see Funnell and Beliveau 2022; Holland and Hewett 2021; Adams 2020; Mele and Stockstill 2020; Harris 2018). Even still, the #MeToo context has mainly been used as a lens through which to re-appraise older texts, considering how their representations of sexual violence may be viewed relative to our discursive moment (see Funnell 2022; Holland and Hewett 2021; Daley and Holzer 2020). There is comparably little that focuses on configuring #MeToo's role in contemporary literature that features sexual violence.

Over the course of writing this thesis, a number of articles have been published that consider films like *Bombshell* and *Promising Young Woman*, as well as 'positive' depictions of consent and sexual violence on screen throughout the #MeToo moment (see Banet-Weiser and Higgins 2023; Meek 2022; MacDonald 2022). Work on

contemporary productions is appearing across film and television studies. Films like *She Said*, which focuses on the scaffolding of #MeToo as moment and media event, demand specific reflection: do they merely reproduce a mediated version of #MeToo, or are there possibilities for challenge, subversion? Is all #MeToo media bound by, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023) argue, a sense of futility? Do literary examples articulate futility similarly? The focus on contemporary literature, in English and French, is still notably thin. It seems prudent that contemporary fiction, as a site where ideas about culture are re-produced, be afforded significant scholarly enquiry. This research does not look at poetry, although there are certainly examples of individual poems and collections that deal with sexual violence in the period.<sup>44</sup> Considering poetry's unique affordances, how these engage feminist (and, indeed, anti-feminist) discourses around sexual violence would undoubtedly be generative, and provide another perspective on how literature has responded to #MeToo and the contemporary cultural moment. It was the close analysis of language in texts that mobilise poetic conceits, like *Peach*, that provided some of this thesis' most revelatory and dynamic moments. An exploration of poetry with this in mind certainly seems timely.

Commentary in this thesis suggests that, proportionately, there has been significantly more examples of English sexual violence narratives, as opposed to French. As Desportes posits in *King Kong Théorie* (2006), this has also historically been the case. With releases like the essay collection *Moi aussi: MeToo, au-delà du hashtag* (Lamy et al., 2022) that explore the French context, this gap is undoubtedly beginning to be filled, but more research in the spheres of cultural production and media will nonetheless be necessary. The publication of novels like the ones in this thesis, and films like *Les choses humaines*, will undoubtedly merit more in-depth examinations.

Six years have now passed since Alyssa Milano tweeted her #MeToo call to action, since Sandra Muller outed her pig. It has been nearly two decades since Tarana Burke coined Me Too in solidarity with women and girls of colour impacted by sexual violence. As the public discourse around sexual violence continues to grow and evolve, close analysis of the cultural production that surrounds it will remain an urgent task.

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, *Witch* (2019) by Rebecca Tamás; *Indelible in the Hippocampus* (2019) edited by Shelly Oria; *#MeToo* (2018), edited by Deborah Alma.

As Banet-Weiser (2018) asserts, popular iterations of feminism are always accompanied by a popularised misogyny. There is certainly cause for concern for, in example, the media and public response to the Depp vs Heard trial, which saw mass trivialisation of intimate partner and sexual violence; the popularity of anti-feminist figures like Andrew Tate, who was arrested for human trafficking and sexual exploitation, also indicates a worrying trend. French, American, and British cultural contexts also map across these figures: Depp, the American, who makes his comeback in France after his “win” against Heard; Tate, American born and British raised, who a quarter of British 13–15-year-old boys view favourably (Smith 2023). A backlash to #MeToo and to the perceived excesses of feminist response to sexual violence, while expected, calls for a rigorous response in kind.

If we accept that cultural products circulate particular discourses that inform perceptions of social issues, which this research does, it remains a pressing feminist task to interrogate the representations contained within these products. In a world increasingly shaped by media consumption and engagement, by accessibility to all types of media (films via subscription service, books downloaded via application), we must take the stories told there seriously. It seems obvious to state that to end the epidemic of sexual violence, and men’s violence against women more widely, we must change how people of all genders think; challenging misogynistic prejudice where it exists, but also fundamentally abolishing the conditions that allow this form of violence to take place. Film and literature, as part of society’s ideological superstructure, necessarily respond to these material conditions. Moving away from the essentialised analyses of early commentators like Brownmiller, it is imperative to acknowledge sexual violence as a systemic issue, permitted by a specific set of conditions and, in turn, the attitudes and subjectivities these engender. If sexual violence is inherent to men’s nature, if it is as transhistorical as Brownmiller suggests, then there is no chance at ending it. It would do a great disservice to feminist movements, to the history of feminist theory and activism, to resign ourselves to this fate. Resistance is not futile.

Consciousness about the complexities of sexual violence – about who experiences it and who perpetrates it – must sit alongside education and, crucially, material socio-economic change. Art will continue to speak with and back to our

material realities; as feminist critics, writers, and activists against sexual violence, our task is to uncover exactly how. To work towards the end of sexual violence is an undeniably gargantuan task, and surely requires a holistic approach. To continue the work of those that came before, we must share the load. Representation is only one area of enquiry but, taken as part of the larger feminist task, it is absolutely crucial. As the porous boundaries of the long #MeToo moment stretch on, reflecting on texts from past and present with this context in mind will be essential.

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## **Appendix 1: Full English translation of the 100-women tribune**

**PARIS** — Rape is a crime. But trying to pick up someone, however persistently or clumsily, is not — nor is gallantry an attack of machismo.

The Harvey Weinstein scandal sparked a legitimate awakening about the sexual violence that women are subjected to, particularly in their professional lives, where some men abuse their power. This was necessary. But what was supposed to liberate voices has now been turned on its head: We are being told what is proper to say and what we must stay silent about — and the women who refuse to fall into line are considered traitors, accomplices!

Just like in the good old witch-hunt days, what we are once again witnessing here is puritanism in the name of a so-called greater good, claiming to promote the liberation and protection of women, only to enslave them to a status of eternal victim and reduce them to defenceless preys of male chauvinist demons.

### **Ratting out and calling out**

In fact, #MeToo has led to a campaign, in the press and on social media, of public accusations and indictments against individuals who, without being given a chance to respond or defend themselves, are put in the exact same category as sex offenders. This summary justice has already had its victims: men who've been disciplined in the workplace, forced to resign, and so on., when their only crime was to touch a woman's knee, try to steal a kiss, talk about “intimate” things during a work meal, or send sexually-charged messages to women who did not return their interest.

This frenzy for sending the “pigs” to the slaughterhouse, far from helping women empower themselves, actually serves the interests of the enemies of sexual freedom, the religious extremists, the reactionaries and those who believe — in their righteousness and the Victorian moral outlook that goes with it — that women are a species “apart,” children with adult faces who demand to be protected.

Men, for their part, are called on to embrace their guilt and rack their brains for “inappropriate behaviour” that they engaged in 10, 20 or 30 years earlier, and for which they must now repent. These public confessions, and the foray into the private sphere or self-proclaimed prosecutors, have led to a climate of totalitarian society. This frenzy

for sending the “pigs” to the slaughterhouse serves the interests of the enemies of sexual freedom.

The purging wave seems to know no bounds. The poster of an Egon Schiele nude is censored; calls are made for the removal of a Balthus painting from a museum on grounds that it's an apology for paedophilia; unable to distinguish between the man and his work, Cinémathèque Française is told not to hold a Roman Polanski retrospective and another for Jean-Claude Brisseau is blocked. A university judges the film *Blow-Up*, by Michelangelo Antonioni, to be "misogynist" and "unacceptable." In light of this revisionism, even John Ford (*The Searchers*) and Nicolas Poussin (*The Abduction of the Sabine Women*) are at risk.

Already, editors are asking some of us to make our masculine characters less "sexist" and more restrained in how they talk about sexuality and love, or to make it so that the “traumas experienced by female characters” be more evident! Bordering on ridiculous, in Sweden a bill was presented that calls for explicit consent before any sexual relations! Next we'll have a smartphone app that adults who want to sleep together will have to use to check precisely which sex acts the other does or does not accept.

### **The essential freedom to offend**

Philosopher Ruwen Ogien defended the freedom to offend as essential to artistic creation. In the same way, we defend a freedom to bother as indispensable to sexual freedom. Today we are educated enough to understand that sexual impulses are, by nature, offensive and primitive — but we are also able to tell the difference between an awkward attempt to pick someone up and what constitutes a sexual assault.

Above all, we are aware that the human being is not a monolith: A woman can, in the same day, lead a professional team and enjoy being a man's sexual object, without being a "whore" or a vile accomplice of the patriarchy. She can make sure that her wages are equal to a man's but not feel forever traumatized by a man who rubs himself against her in the subway, even if that is regarded as an offense. She can even consider this act as the expression of a great sexual deprivation, or even as a non-event.

**The difference between an awkward attempt to pick someone up and what constitutes a sexual assault.**

As women, we don't recognize ourselves in this feminism that, beyond the denunciation of abuses of power, takes the face of a hatred of men and sexuality. We believe that the freedom to say "no" to a sexual proposition cannot exist without the freedom to bother. And we consider that one must know how to respond to this freedom to bother in ways other than by closing ourselves off in the role of the prey.

For those of us who decided to have children, we think that it is wiser to raise our daughters in a way that they may be sufficiently informed and aware to fully live their lives without being intimidated or blamed.

Incidents that can affect a woman's body do not necessarily affect her dignity and must not, as difficult as they can be, necessarily make her a perpetual victim. Because we are not reducible to our bodies. Our inner freedom is inviolable. And this freedom that we cherish is not without risks and responsibilities. (Worldcrunch 2018)