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# The Epistemic Significance of #MeToo

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### Abstract

In part I of this paper, I argue that #MeToo testimony increases epistemic value for the survivor qua hearer when experiences like hers are represented by others; for society at large when false but dominant narratives about sexual violence and sexual harassment against women are challenged and replaced with true stories; and for the survivor qua teller when her true story is believed. In part II, I argue that the epistemic significance of #MeToo testimony compels us to consider the tremendous and often unappreciated costs to the individual tellers, and the increased credibility they are owed in virtue thereof.

**Keywords:** testimony, #MeToo, epistemic injustice, motivated ignorance, rationality, sexual violence, sexual harassment

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I explore the epistemic significance of testimony in a particular domain of storytelling, specifically, personal stories about sexual violence and sexual harassment told by individuals who are marginalized in a strictly normative sense of term; that is, individuals whose experiences may or may not be statistically peripheral but whose lack of visibility makes them appear so. I have in mind stories that reflect particular social identities and their intersections—what it is like, for instance, to be a Muslim rape survivor,<sup>2</sup> or a black trans woman who has

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank everyone who attended the CUNY conference on #MeToo and Epistemic Injustice, in October 2018, for their generous questions and comments on an earlier version of this paper. This was an inspiring conference, and I am especially grateful to Linda Martín Alcoff for inviting me to participate in it.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, this interview with Nadya Ali, whose documentary film *Breaking Silence* weaves together stories of three young Muslim women who are sexual assault survivors, and who talks about how #MeToo made discussions about sexual violence in Muslim communities a bit easier to have: “How #MeToo Empowered Muslim Women to Speak Out on Sexual Abuse,” by Megan Hadley, *Crime Report*,

experienced workplace sexual harassment—like the kinds of stories we have seen in the Twitter version of the pioneering activist Tarana Burke’s #MeToo movement.<sup>3</sup>

There are important social, political, moral, and economic consequences of #MeToo, but in what follows, I look at its epistemic significance, for if this hashtag activism has shown us anything it is that personal stories make tangible unpleasant truths in a way that theorizing can miss. In part I of this paper, I argue that #MeToo testimony increases epistemic value, a term I use to refer to standard forms of cognitive success, including an increase in truth, knowledge, or understanding.<sup>4</sup> First, there is an uptick in epistemic value for the survivor qua hearer when experiences like hers are represented by others, as she comes to an enhanced understanding of her own experience as a result of seeing it contextualized by others. Second, there is an increase in epistemic value for society at large when false but dominant narratives about sexual violence and sexual harassment against women are challenged and replaced with true stories. And third, there is positive epistemic value for the survivor qua teller when her true story is believed, as she is rightly viewed as a credible teller and source of knowledge.

In part II of this paper, I argue that the epistemic significance of #MeToo testimony compels us to consider the tremendous costs to individual tellers and the increased credibility they are owed in virtue thereof. These costs are often radically

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June 5, 2018, <https://thecrimereport.org/2018/06/05/breaking-silence-muslim-women-speak-out-about-years-of-sexual-abuse/>.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the #MeToo movement has been less inclusive than one might have hoped, with far fewer trans and LGBTQ+ stories than those by cisgender white women, despite the fact that statistics tell us that queer and trans women are at a disproportionately greater risk of sexual violence than cisgender and heterosexual women (James et al. 2016; Bucik, 2016). This video is about the representation (and lack thereof) of trans women in #MeToo stories: “Trans Women and Femmes Are Shouting #MeToo—But Are You Listening?” by Meredith Talusan, *Them*, March 2, 2018, <https://www.them.us/story/trans-women-me-too>; and these two articles do a good job laying out some of the issues at stake here: “Making Space for Trans People in the #MeToo Movement,” by Gabriel Arkles, ACLU blog, April 13, 2018, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/womens-rights/violence-against-women/making-space-trans-people-metoo-movement>; and “She Was Sexually Assaulted within Months of Coming Out. She Isn’t Alone,” by Alia E. Dastagir, *USA Today*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/06/13/sarah-mcbride-gay-survivors-helped-launch-me-too-but-rates-lgbt-abuse-largely-overlooked/692094002/>.

<sup>4</sup> The so-called “value problem,” and the question of the priority of these epistemic values (or virtues), is not my concern here; see Pritchard (2007).

and systematically underestimated, resulting in a distorted view not just of the teller's credibility but of her very rationality. Using a standard characterization of practical rationality, I argue that in light of the importance of her testimony and the high costs she endures in giving it, when it comes to #MeToo stories, hearers have more than the usual reasons to believe.

### **Part 1: Representation, Marginalization, and #MeToo**

Certain aspects of marginalized social identities are ours from birth, and others come to us later in life, sometimes by choice and at other times unbidden, but in all cases, marginalized identities receive representational short shrift. They are largely absent from our scholarly canons and history books and have been relegated to the fringes of mainstream media and popular culture, at least until recently.<sup>5</sup> That is hardly surprising, since part of what it means to be marginalized is to lack the power and influence to tell one's own story, to be denied a voice and a platform to use it, and to risk serious threats to one's health, safety, livelihood, and community when one does.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to testimony about sexual violence and sexual harassment, there are also very real, if less tangible, costs to one's sense of self, since when marginalized individuals do go public with these sorts of stories, against all obstacles, they are often not properly heard. Their testimony is routinely filtered through distorting prejudice and dismissed as lacking credibility, epitomizing the central case of what Miranda Fricker (2007) has called testimonial injustice; these individuals are wronged in their capacities as knowers in virtue of a prejudice against them, qua social type (Fricker 2007, 45). The deflated credibility they receive as tellers results in an intrinsic epistemic injustice, insofar as they are degraded in their very humanity, qua knowers.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In philosophy, for instance, there have been efforts to revisit the historical canon in order to include hitherto excluded women philosophers (for example, see Emily Thomas [2018], and Broad and Detlefsen [2017]); and in popular culture, we are seeing a broader representation of nonnormative identities across the arts—the recent television shows *Transparent*, *Pose*, *Atlanta*, and *Insecure* are a good illustration of this trend.

<sup>6</sup> I refer to these harms as either risks or costs, depending on how predictable the harm or loss is.

<sup>7</sup> And, as Fricker (2007, 46–59) has elaborated, these individuals are further subject to various secondary epistemic and practical harms, which trickle down from the intrinsic harm, such as a diminished self-esteem and the loss of intellectual confidence. I discuss these (and other harms) in detail below.

The routine diminishment faced by marginalized tellers is part and parcel of the humiliation of patriarchy; of being a woman, of being not white, of being queer, trans, or disabled. But remarkably, since October 2017, while simultaneously suffering various social and political harms as a result of a US administration led by a dangerous president, who himself has been accused of sexual misconduct by no fewer than 22 women,<sup>8</sup> we have seen an increase in stories about sexual harassment and sexual violence. This started with the toppling of one of America's most powerful men, the Hollywood movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, following a *New York Times* story by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey that detailed Weinstein's decades of predatory sexual behavior;<sup>9</sup> and so began the international movement

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<sup>8</sup> Many of those women went public with their accusations following the October 2016 release of the *Access Hollywood* tape, in which Trump bragged about the influence of his alleged star power over women, which enabled him, as he put it, to "Grab 'em by the pussy" ("Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women," *New York Times*, October 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>); see also "The 25 Women Who Have Accused Trump of Sexual Misconduct," by Eliza Relman, *Business Insider*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/women-accused-trump-sexual-misconduct-list-2017-12>; and "These Women Have Accused Trump of Sexual Harassment," by Max Blau and Maegan Vazquez, CNN.com, June 24, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/14/politics/trump-women-accusers/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Just days after their article came out (Kantor and Twohey, "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades," *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html>), Ronan Farrow published an exposé in *The New Yorker* ("From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein's Accusers Tell Their Stories," Oct. 10, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories>), which was followed by an avalanche of stories about Weinstein by actresses, many of whom had previously worked with him and had been sexually harassed, assaulted, or otherwise demeaned by him.

known as #MeToo.<sup>10</sup> With over 19 million tweets in the first year alone,<sup>11</sup> we have since seen the downfall of one after another of some of America’s most powerful men, including Louis C.K., Bill O’Reilly, Kevin Spacey, Al Franken, Charlie Rose, Matt Lauer—men who, as Soraya Chemaly points out, “had for decades chosen, framed, investigated, written about, and produced our culture’s stories about politics, gender, and violence” (Chemaly 2018, 141–142). That some of the very men who had been controlling national narratives about gender-based violence were simultaneously guilty of perpetuating the problem induced a serious reckoning.<sup>12</sup> “The anger window was open,” as Rebecca Traister put it, referring to the collective mood following Weinstein’s downfall, and in the short time since then we have witnessed a global surge of rage, what Traister has aptly described as a “ ’70s-style, organic, mass radical rage, exploding in unpredictable directions” (2018, 141, 143).<sup>13</sup>

### 1.1 The Isolation of Survivors (Uptick #1)

I know from personal experience how important it can be for survivors of sexual violence and sexual harassment to have the opportunity to hear other people’s stories and to see similar kinds of traumatic experiences represented by others. This can help us make sense of our own experience by contextualizing it,

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<sup>10</sup> Even the origins of the Twitter version of #MeToo say something important about marginalized communities, power, and intersectionality. The “Me Too” campaign was started in 2007 by activist Tarana Burke, herself a survivor of sexual violence, as a grassroots movement to aid sexual assault survivors in underprivileged communities. This origin story is often overlooked in mainstream media and popular culture, and the hashtag is mistakenly attributed to actress Alyssa Milano, who, a decade after Burke, tweeted a call out to survivors of sexual harassment or sexual assault using “#MeToo.”

<sup>11</sup> Monica Anderson and Skye Toor, “How Social Media Users Have Discussed Sexual Harassment Since #MeToo Went Viral,” Pew Research Center Fact Tank, Oct. 11, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/11/how-social-media-users-have-discussed-sexual-harassment-since-metoo-went-viral/>.

<sup>12</sup> In many cases, these men have been publicly shamed; some have gone on to lose their jobs; but only a very few have been subject to criminal prosecution. That said, a *New York Times* article from 2018 (“#MeToo Brought Down 201 Powerful Men. Nearly Half of Their Replacements Are Women,” by Audrey Carlsen et al., Oct. 29, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/23/us/metoo-replacements.html>) notes that of the over 200 powerful men brought down by the #MeToo movement, nearly half of their replacements have been women.

<sup>13</sup> Brittney Cooper’s (2018) *Eloquent Rage* rounds out this triumvirate of brilliant books by women—all published in 2018—about women’s rage.

thereby reframing these phenomena not as personal problems—something that happened to me, for instance, because of what I was wearing, who I was with, or how much I had to drink—but rather as widespread sociological phenomena. Not only can this help survivors combat the corrosive shame that is part of the aftermath of sexual violence and harassment, but more to the point here, it can help us better understand what we have been through by viewing it through a broad social and political frame of reference.

In order to illustrate the epistemic value survivors gain by hearing #MeToo stories, I will start by telling one of my own. This is a story about something that happened to me when I was a graduate student in philosophy, over twenty years ago. It is an experience that is a bit hard for me to remember, not because my memory is failing me, but because it is painful to recall. This is not a story about sexual harassment in the discipline of philosophy (although I have my fair share of those stories as well).<sup>14</sup> Rather, it is a story about how I was doing, back in 1996, having just moved away from home to do my PhD in philosophy. This was a difficult time in my life, and not just because of the various pressures one faces when moving to a new city and entering a new university and new program, although none of that was easy. But I had other problems. Six years earlier, when I was twenty-two years old, I was raped. I had been travelling at the time, having just arrived in Paris to meet an ex-boyfriend. We had been invited to stay as houseguests at the apartment of his friend and mentor, along with another houseguest, a thirty-year-old Frenchman, whom I had met for the first time just that day. He seemed friendly enough, and a few hours later, when I was alone with him in the apartment, he kindly made me dinner, and then afterward, pressing a long sharp knife against my neck, proceeded to rape me.<sup>15</sup> It was a violent sexual assault, and I was lucky to have come out of it alive, but the experience left me destabilized. In the aftermath, I found myself reeling, awash with shame, so much so that I could not bear to have others know what had happened to me. And so, like many women in similar kinds of situations, I decided to keep it a secret, telling no one outside of my family and two closest friends. I buried the trauma of the experience deep within, hoping that would make it disappear, but unfortunately the body does not process trauma that way, or at least, not properly.<sup>16</sup> Instead, it weighed me down like an anchor. I struggled with crushing anxiety, cycling through recurring panic attacks, sleep deprivation, and troubled relationships with men—each a classic symptom of PTSD,

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<sup>14</sup> I do not detail those here, but there is no shortage of stories of sexual harassment in philosophy, as the blog “What Is It Like to Be a Woman in Philosophy” illustrates: <https://beingawomaninphilosophy.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>15</sup> I tell this story in more detail in *One Hour in Paris* (Freedman 2014).

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, van der Kolk (1996, 2006).

although I did not know that at the time.<sup>17</sup> One of the few places I was able to find relief from my wearing inner life was as a student in the world of thinking that philosophy offers. When immersed in my studies, I could almost ignore the debilitating consequences of being raped. Over the years, I became adept at covering up any perceptible signs of distress, but by the time I started my PhD, the energy required to sustain this double life was almost too much for me, and my anxiety worsened.

It was in this context that I enrolled in my first year of classes, in order to fulfill the coursework component of my degree. One of the classes on offer was being taught by a distinguished professor. It was a popular class, drawing students from various cohorts, and I signed up for it. I will never forget the first day of that class. There must have been 20–25 students crammed into a room that was meant to hold fewer than that. It was set up with long tables around the perimeter, forming a rectangle. When I arrived, the professor was sitting at the front of the room, which by then was already half full. I had to make my way around the crowded outer edges in order to find an empty seat in the back corner, about as far away from the doorway as you could get, which was the start of my problems that day. As soon as I sat down, I was in trouble. I immediately felt trapped, just as I had been, six years earlier, in that apartment in Paris. Once again, I had failed to anticipate what was coming next, and the triggering feelings heaved through me. As the remaining students filed in, I became unable to catch a deep breath. My heart was pounding as I found myself in the familiar grip of a panic attack. I remember squeezing my hands together under the table, hoping that I wouldn't faint, hoping that this one would pass quickly, but then the professor began to talk. He announced that we would be starting class by going around the room and introducing ourselves. At that, the feeling of being trapped intensified, and the room unspooled before me. I did not pass out, but when the introductions finally reached me, I was not able to speak. I choked out my name, my quivering voice betraying the panic within, bringing every surprised eye in the room to rest on me.

### *Solidarity Stories and Representation*

When I think about that experience now, what is most striking to me is not how mortified I had been, or how everyone in the room looked at me with a mix of pity and horror, but how truly alone I felt at the time. I was not unaware of the existence of other rape survivors, but personally, I did not know a single one. It is

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Herman's groundbreaking *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence* (1992) remains one of the best resources for understanding the classic symptoms of PTSD. See also van der Kolk (1996, 2006), Rothschild (2000), and Ogden, Minton, and Pain (2006).



hard to overstate how important it would have been for me, back then, to have had easy access to a multitude of stories by other survivors, by other women who had had experiences like mine; to have been able to feel that kind of solidarity, and to have been able to see my experience represented at a time when I was too vulnerable to make myself visible in the same way. That would have been integral in helping me understand this dramatic and uninvited change to my life, to my very identity; it would have saved me years of confusion, isolation, and shame.

When I further reflect about that in the context of my relative privilege at the time—specifically, of being a doctoral student at a reputable university, of being cis, white, heterosexual, able bodied, and middle class, and thus checking off all the boxes which guaranteed that at least I did not look out of place (however shattered I was feeling)—I cannot help but think about the legions of women, and men too, with far fewer entitlements, who have experienced sexual harassment and sexual assault and who, for one reason or another, had been isolated and suffering in silence until #MeToo. The injustice of it all is highlighted when we consider the routine silencing and lack of visibility of people on the margins. As we have seen over the past few years, representation—even in 280 characters or less—can be life-altering, and particularly so for members of groups who have been systematically disadvantaged. Although a hashtag will not heal you, seeing yourself in someone else’s story can be deeply impactful.<sup>18</sup> Not only can it help us make sense of our own experience by framing it in a broader social and political context, but having the chance to see someone come out the other side can be profound; it can set you on a path that you had never before imagined possible.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Tarana Burke, for one, has spoken about the limits of the Twitter version of #MeToo, cautioning that social media cannot be used as a replacement for the serious institutional changes needed to fund resources and support survivors of sexual harassment and sexual violence. A Toronto appearance of Burke’s is described in “Upcoming Budgets Must Have Sustained Funding to Combat Sexual Violence,” by Tiffany Gooch, *Toronto Star*, March 10, 2019, <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/star-columnists/2019/03/10/upcoming-budgets-must-have-sustained-funding-to-combat-sexual-violence.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Which is what happened to me as I was nearing the end of my PhD, in 2001, when I read Susan Brison’s *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, which had just come out. This remarkable book on rape, written by a rape survivor who, like me, was also a philosopher, gave me courage and hope for what might lie ahead; Brison showed me a way forward.

## 1.2 Motivated Ignorance and Epistemic Friction (Uptick #2)

The epistemic value survivors gain by seeing their realities represented is one significant consequence of #MeToo stories, but that value extends beyond individual survivors. Storytellers have a singular power to effect broad social and cultural change through their testimony, which can make unpleasant truths about sexual assault and sexual harassment tangible in a way that theorizing can miss. Not everyone has an equal opportunity to make her voice heard, but those who do open up a space in the social imaginary and thereby provide a uniquely persuasive kind of evidence in support of nonnormative identities. Stories thus provide epistemic friction, to borrow a phrase from José Medina (2013). They offer alternative representations that mitigate against the widespread resistance among dominantly situated knowers to acknowledge, in this case, the realities of sexual violence and sexual harassment against women. I call this resistance “male ignorance,” for it is a phenomenon that bears a distinct resemblance to what Charles Mills calls “white ignorance,” which is a motivated ignorance that maintains the status quo and allows for privileged groups to perpetuate dominant but false narratives about black people, thus enabling, as Mills (2007, 13) puts it, “a self-representation in which differential white privilege, and the need to correct for it, does not exist.” Likewise, in the case of male ignorance, the refusal to recognize and accept the truth about sexual violence and sexual harassment against women—and this includes all women: cis, trans, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming—whether brazen and willful or lazy and indifferent, provides concrete benefits for men. In cases of male ignorance and white ignorance there is an absence of knowledge, or better yet, an absence of true belief, which is not epistemically neutral but is instead motivated, and thus represents a cognitive failure, as I discuss below.

Just as white ignorance is perpetuated by racist individuals and also deeply embedded in our institutions and norms, such that biases are enacted even by those who aren’t straightforwardly racist (Mills 2007, 21), so too male ignorance is individualistic and structural, blatant and implicit. And in the same way that white ignorance results in concrete material, social, and institutional benefits for white people in the form of jobs, wealth, opportunities, housing, upward mobility, freedom of movement, freedom from incarceration, and freedom from the expectation of incarceration,<sup>20</sup> there are likewise material, social, and institutional benefits for men—and, it is worth emphasizing, in particular white, cis, straight

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<sup>20</sup> These systemic racial injustices have been documented in the work of today’s leading legal scholars and theorists on racial inequality and mass incarceration; see, for example, Alexander (2010), Stevenson (2014), and Forman (2012, 2017); the idea of unearned white privilege had been previously popularized with Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) “knapsack of privilege.”

men—that result from male ignorance. These men have the advantage of being viewed as inherently credible; they have the criminal justice system, with the presumption of innocence on their side; they have the freedom to remain unaware of the short- and long-term impact of trauma; and they have the benefit of receiving sympathy—or better yet, himpathy<sup>21</sup>—when they are accused, even convicted, of serious and criminal wrongdoing, as we have seen repeatedly in high-profile cases over the years.<sup>22</sup>

*Motivated Ignorance: The New View*

As Mills argues, in cases of motivated ignorance, these benefits provide an incentivized reason for people in positions of relative privilege to ignore facts that illuminate that privilege (2007, 31), and the same can be said when it comes to male ignorance. In both cases, the facts in question can be easily known. They do not make up the dominant narratives, but neither are they hidden, hard to find, or obscure. Indeed, people have to work at remaining ignorant of patent social realities about racial injustice and sexual violence and sexual harassment against women, and their relative privilege gives them a reason to do so, which is what makes these cases of ignorance *motivated*.<sup>23</sup>

Ignorance is often referred to as a kind of nonknowing, which it is, but the distinguishing feature of motivated ignorance is a lack of true beliefs, as opposed to, say, true beliefs that fall short of knowledge because they lack justification, or sufficient justification.<sup>24</sup> As such, motivated cases line up with what Rik Peels calls the New View of ignorance.<sup>25</sup> On this account, we can say that a subject is ignorant that  $p$  in three kinds of cases:

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<sup>21</sup> Manne defines this as “the flow of sympathy away from female victims toward their male victimizers” (2017, 23). Manne’s discussion of the Brock Turner case, from 2016, is especially illuminating on this point (2017, 196–205).

<sup>22</sup> Most recently, in the 2018 case of Brett Kavanaugh, who received the ultimate showing of himpathy following sexual assault allegations raised against him by Christine Blasey Ford, with the subsequent confirmation of his Supreme Court nomination.

<sup>23</sup> Which is not to say that these reasons are always or necessarily first-person accessible.

<sup>24</sup> These cases line up better with the so-called Standard View; see Le Morvan and Peels (2016).

<sup>25</sup> Peels (2010, 2011, 2012); see also Le Morvan and Peels (2016); and van Woudenberg (2009).

1. *Disbelieving Ignorance*: *S* considers that *p* but rejects *p* as false, even though *p* is true;
2. *Suspending Ignorance*: *S* considers that *p* but suspends judgment about *p*, even though *p* is true; or
3. *Deep Ignorance*: *S* does not even consider that *p*, in the first place, and hence neither believes, suspends judgment, nor disbelieves that *p*, even though *p* is true (Le Morvan and Peels 2016, 26).

#### *Male Ignorance: Not Having to Know*

A thorough analysis of epistemic culpability in cases of motivated ignorance goes beyond my purposes in this paper.<sup>26</sup> However, I will note here that epistemic culpability is relatively easy to assess in the first two kinds of cases, wherein the subject considers the facts of the matter, but fails to believe truly. Arguably, in these cases, the subject's failure to properly assess evidence can be pinned to bad epistemic practices that are cultivated to maintain privilege, falling somewhere on a spectrum of willfulness, and thus represents a cognitive failure.<sup>27</sup> The matter is more complicated in the case of deep ignorance, which is a particularly recalcitrant form of ignorance, and which does not, at first glance, appear willful. Peels, for one, has argued that in these cases ignorance is exculpating.<sup>28</sup> But he is not considering motivated cases of ignorance. I would argue that in these cases, there is epistemic culpability even in the absence of willfulness, insofar as the individuals in question benefit from their ignorance.<sup>29</sup>

Although there is more to be said on this matter, it should be clear that whether we are talking about disbelieving ignorance, suspending ignorance, or deep ignorance, individuals who lack true beliefs about the crushing impact of racism and

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<sup>26</sup> Questions of culpability are taken up by Fricker (2016), Medina (2013, 2016), Applebaum (2008), van Woudenberg (2009), and Peels (2014).

<sup>27</sup> Fricker (2016) makes a similar point. In this paper, she also draws out some key connections between motivated ignorance, epistemic injustice, and hermeneutical marginalization; see also Fricker and Jenkins (2017).

<sup>28</sup> Peels offers the example of Stephanie and Rachel, who both have a presentation to give on Operation Valkyrie (the well-known assassination attempt on Hitler). Peels argues that because Stephanie does not know she has access to relevant books, her ignorance gives her a full excuse for a badly prepped presentation, whereas Rachel, who has knowledge of the books, has no such excuse at hand (2014, 489).

<sup>29</sup> I am developing this position in a new paper in which I argue that, in cases of motivated ignorance, willfulness is not a necessary condition for epistemic culpability, even if it is a sufficient one.

misogyny on black people and women are in a privileged position wherein they effectively *do not need to know*. These individuals are not critically alive to the ways that the epistemic situation has been distorted, as Fricker (2016, 173) has put it, because, I would add, they do not need to be. These individuals have the luxury of being able to move around in the world without experiencing the everyday brutality of systemic racism and misogyny, which is something that individuals with marginalized identities will never have.

I had that thought after watching Barry Jenkins's stunning 2016 film *Moonlight*,<sup>30</sup> which tells the story of Chiron, who is poor, black, and gay, and whom we meet at three critical points early on in his life. At each stage we see Chiron's strength and his vulnerability, often juxtaposed; we see a character being built and broken, and through his story we learn something about the reality of being a gay black man in America. By the time we meet Chiron in act 3, he is in his twenties, having spent his teenage years being bullied before finally fighting back. This Chiron has known the tenderness of romantic touch only once in his life, and he is unrecognizable from his younger self. He has layered his body so that it is no longer a target, constructed his masculinity through muscle and grills so that it has become impenetrable. Yet Jenkins allows the audience to see through the beefed-up body to the person within, and to his humanity. We see this Chiron emerge out of his own artifice in order to reunite with the man who once showed him affection, his vulnerability now becoming his true strength, and a remarkable scene emerges.

The pageantry of Chiron's masculinity in *Moonlight* brings to mind an early passage in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, in which Coates unmask the meaning behind the protective layering. In reflecting on the black Baltimore of his youth, Coates says,

It was always right in front of me. The fear was there in the extravagant boys of my neighborhood, in their large rings and medallions, their big puffy coats and full-length fur-collared leathers, which was their armor against their world. . . . I think back on those boys now and all I see is fear, and all I see is them girding themselves against the ghosts of the bad old days when the Mississippi mob gathered 'round their grandfathers so that the branches of the black body might be torched, then cut away. (Coates 2015, 14)

Coates's book is a meditation on a question he poses early on in the narrative, "How do I live free in this black body?" (2015, 12). His story urges us to consider what it is like to be a black man (or, in the case of McCraney and Jenkins's movie, a gay black

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<sup>30</sup> *Moonlight* is set in Miami and is based on Tarell Alvin McCraney's unpublished semiautobiographical play, "In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue."

man) in America. Engaging imaginatively with these stories of black racialized identities told by black voices helps us to see Chiron’s beefed up body as stemming, at least in part, from deeply rooted intergenerational trauma.

### *Representation, Empathy, and #MeToo*

Marginalized stories thrust evidence of alternative lives into the spotlight, pushing back against dominant but false narratives that are perpetuated by bad epistemic practices, which are cultivated in order to maintain privilege. They enable us to learn something about the world as experienced from social positions other than our own. And perhaps unsurprisingly, the more we know about people, the harder it is to deny their humanity. Empirical studies tell us that exposure to disparate social types can minimize prejudice when certain conditions are met,<sup>31</sup> such that getting to know members of other social types makes it harder to hold negative stereotypes about them.<sup>32</sup> This notion that intergroup contact reduces prejudice is not uncontested, but recent research on the subject is encouraging.<sup>33</sup> A recent study of door-to-door political canvassing, for instance, shows that you do not need intense or prolonged intervention to see change, a 10-minute face-to-face conversation can have an impact on reducing prejudice (Broockman and Kalla 2016; Denizet-Lewis 2016). This phenomenon has been explained by the idea of “affective perspective-taking,” which can be seen as one facet of empathy.<sup>34</sup> Empathy, narrowly defined, is a sensitivity to others with whom we identify, whose feelings we can also feel, in some sense. As such, empathy can result in an implicit preference for in-group members (which is why some argue it should not be used as a basis for morality),<sup>35</sup> but affective perspective-taking can be a powerful way to bring about empathic concern for those not in one’s own social group. As Decety

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<sup>31</sup> Although current research on how to reduce implicit bias has yet to come up with definitive results, Jenny Saul (2012) offers a nice summary of much of this empirical literature.

<sup>32</sup> That is the basic premise of the “contact hypothesis,” a social psychological theory dating back to the middle of the last century, typically credited to Gordon Allport (1954), which tells us that prejudice stems from a lack of knowledge and exposure.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), Shook and Fazio (2008), and Singal (2017).

<sup>34</sup> Broockman and Kalla (2016) call this “perspective-taking,” but Decety and Cowell’s (2014a, 2014b) term “affective perspective-taking” seems to better capture the phenomenon. In their work, Decety and Cowell disentangle some of the ambiguity around the concept of empathy; they distinguish “affective perspective-taking” from emotional sharing and empathic concern, which, they argue, together comprise the three facets of empathy.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Bloom (2016) and Prinz (2011).

and Cowell (2014b, 526) put it, affective perspective-taking is “a strategy that can be successfully used to reduce group partiality and to expand the circle of empathic concern from the tribe to all humanity.”<sup>36</sup>

We saw an example of this in action not too long ago, in September 2018, in Washington, DC, at the height of the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings for the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court nomination, in a highly publicized encounter between Republican Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona and Ana Maria Archila and Maria Gallagher. These women, both sexual assault survivors, demanded, in a brief elevator encounter, that Flake witness their pain and acknowledge the need for perpetrators of sexual violence to take responsibility for their actions.<sup>37</sup> Almost directly following this encounter, Flake, reversing his previous position on the matter, demanded an investigation into the sexual assault allegations that had been brought against Kavanaugh.<sup>38</sup>

In telling their stories of sexual violence and sexual harassment, women have the power to challenge dominant misconceptions, overturn rape myths, and debunk traditional victim-blaming narratives, thereby effecting broad social and cultural change through their testimony. The profusion of #MeToo testimony by a diverse group of women brings to light the range of experiences suffered by survivors of sexual violence and sexual harassment. The long-term consequences of this have yet to be played out, but the immediate result is a positive uptick in epistemic value for the society at large via an increase in truth, knowledge, and understanding.

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<sup>36</sup> The sheer volume of scientific research on empathy in the last couple of decades is massive, but for an especially clear account of the relationship between moral behavior and empathy, from a neuroscientific perspective, see Decety and Cowell (2014a). A philosophical analysis of the source and structure of moral emotions, and their connection to empathy, goes beyond the scope of this paper, but the papers in the two edited collections by Maibom (2014, 2017) would be an excellent place to start; for some problems with using empathy as the basis for morality, see Bloom (2016) and Prinz (2011).

<sup>37</sup> The neurobiology of storytelling helps explain this further. It tells us that stories which are personal and emotionally compelling trigger the release of oxytocin and thereby engage more of the brain than would simply stating a set of facts (Zak 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Although Flake never confirmed that hearing the stories of these two women influenced his reasoning on the Kavanaugh hearings, because he had previously released a statement which said that he intended to vote to confirm Kavanaugh, it was generally presumed that this dramatic encounter influenced his thinking on the matter.

### **1.3 The Benefit to Tellers (Uptick #3)**

The third area in which #MeToo stories result in a positive increase in epistemic value is with the teller herself. Although in telling her story of sexual violence or harassment the survivor takes great risks (which I discuss below), if these can be alleviated there is the possibility of tremendous benefits for tellers, at least when their stories are properly heard. The epistemic gains can be significant, and there can also be emotive, therapeutic, and ethical gains for the teller. Having marginalized stories recognized by a receptive audience can help survivors combat the shame and silence that all too often piggybacks on nonnormative life experiences. Telling our stories can be a way of saying, this is not on me, this is not my fault, I have nothing to be ashamed of, and my truth is worth making known. For the teller, giving voice to her story can help give her life meaning, craft her identity, and maximize her self-worth and autonomy. It can be a privilege to tell one's story.

The opportunity that #MeToo has created for women to speak from a place of lived experience—and in particular women from the marginalized communities, including trans women, genderqueer and gender nonconforming women, women of colour, and women who are disabled (and especially women at the intersection of these communities)—and to do so on their own terms, brings into focus the positive epistemic value which tellers derive from first-person narratives of these sorts. Just imagine the boost for those women whose testimony is not dismissed due to faulty misperceptions of credibility. Imagine that instead of being denied status as a knower, they are recognized as having earned that status.

### **Part 2: The High Cost of Survivor Stories**

This point forces us to reflect on the individual teller, who, in making her story known, offers a salve for other survivors while disrupting the dominant narrative of male ignorance, but does so in the face of wide-ranging and largely underappreciated risks and costs to her well-being. As discussed earlier, there is the principal risk of not being believed and of having one's credibility undermined. When it comes to personal stories of sexual violence and sexual harassment, women's testimony is routinely ignored and denied, belittled and mocked, and distorted through entrenched myths about sexual violence and sexual harassment. These include the myths that if a woman had been sexually assaulted, then she would have reported the crime right away, not stayed in contact with her assailant, not gone on another date with him, and certainly not continued to live in the same home; and that if she had once consented to sex, then she must have wanted it again this time, as evidenced by the fact that she didn't fight back. When it comes to sexual harassment, there is the myth that if a woman had been harassed at work, then she would have immediately reported the incident to her superior (or his superior, if her immediate superior was the harasser); she would not have continued



to work in the same space and certainly would not have attended work social events. If she hadn't enjoyed the degrading and cajoling comments, then she certainly would not have dressed that way or continued to correspond or communicate in any way with her harasser.

These myths are deeply embedded in social and cultural attitudes, as evidenced by the everyday trivialization of sexual violence and sexual harassment through rape jokes and run-of-the-mill victim-blaming norms. As mentioned earlier, the reliance on prejudicial myths in assessing first-person testimony by women in these instances culminates in the central case of Fricker's (2007, 35) notion of testimonial injustice, wherein a negative identity prejudice results in a deflated level of credibility. As Fricker (2007, 45–49) illustrates, this form of epistemic injustice degrades women qua knowers; it diminishes their very humanity.

The undermining of their credibility is one of the greatest harms endured by women who go public with their stories in the aftermath of sexual violence and harassment, and this epistemic loss results in further negative consequences—practical, social, economic, and moral. Women who tell their stories of sexual harassment risk their jobs, their professional stature, and their livelihood: a recent study shows, when it comes to workplace sexual harassment, most employers react punitively (McCann, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Badgett 2018). Women who tell their stories of sexual violence are often ostracized from their families and friends, and they are treated callously by their social groups and communities, and even by the authorities, should they decide to bring charges against their perpetrators.<sup>39</sup> In speaking publicly about their experiences as targets and survivors of sexual violence and sexual harassment, women face serious misogynistic backlash that threatens their health and safety, even their lives. This is true across all populations of women, but especially hard hit are women in the LGBTQ+ community, and in particular trans women and trans women of colour, who are overrepresented when it comes to sexual violence as a result of rampant transphobia and transmisogyny.<sup>40</sup> It is hardly

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<sup>39</sup> A 20-month-long investigation by Robyn Doolittle, for Canada's *Globe and Mail*, looked into how police handle sexual assault allegations. The investigation gathered data from more than 870 police forces across the country in order to determine how often sexual assault cases were being closed as "unfounded," a term used to indicate that a case had been dismissed not for legal reasons (i.e., because there was insufficient evidence to prosecute) but because the investigator did not believe that a crime had occurred (Doolittle 2017). The *Globe* found that the national average of unfounded cases was one in five.

<sup>40</sup> Although there is not a lot of data on this matter, the well-cited 2015 survey reports that a disturbingly high number of transgender people—47%, or about one

surprising that many women refrain from telling their stories in the first place, thereby suffering an epistemic injustice before they even open their mouths to speak, something Kristie Dotson has called “testimonial smothering” (2011, 244).<sup>41</sup>

These are just some of the tangible costs borne by women who give #MeToo testimony, but there is a less visible side to their suffering, which is the emotional and psychological cost of this kind of testimony. I know what that can be like. I kept my rape a secret for over a decade, during which time I felt deeply ashamed, having internalized the victim-blaming norms discussed above, according to which women are responsible for the acts of violence perpetrated against them. Eventually, with considerable support from others, that changed for me, but not all women are fortunate enough to have the benefit of social supports, and still others make the choice to keep the truth of what happened to them private. And really, who could blame them? The high cost of talking, along with the shame and trauma that lingers in the aftermath of sexual violence and harassment, can be too much. Taken together, these factors help us understand why some women who suffer these crimes never report them to the authorities; why others speak about them only under the condition of anonymity; why it can take years, even decades, for some women to talk openly about their experiences; and why others chose to never speak about them at all.<sup>42</sup>

### **2.1 Testimony: Costs and Credibility**

And yet, the importance of these stories to hearers, to society at large, and potentially to the teller herself compels us to consider the normative implications of this kind of testimony. On standard philosophical accounts of testimony, a teller’s word is assessed on the basis of two factors: her sincerity and her competence,

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in two—are sexually assaulted in their lifetime (James et al. 2016), although anecdotal reports suggest that number is even higher.

<sup>41</sup> This can happen when the content of the testimony is unsafe or risky, as in the case of the rape survivor who decides not to bother reporting the crime to the police, knowing that she might not be believed. As Dotson argues, while testimonial smothering is a form of self-silencing, it ought to be construed as a coerced one (2011, 244). See also Steele (2010).

<sup>42</sup> This also helps to explain why sexual violence and sexual harassment are notoriously underreported. In Canada, for instance, fewer than 6% of all sexual assaults are reported to the police, and in the case of acquaintance or date rape, it is fewer than 2% (Benoit et al. 2015). And in the United States, 99.8% of people who are harassed in the workplace never file formal charges (McCann, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Badgett 2018).

which combine to determine her overall trustworthiness, or credibility.<sup>43</sup> In the case of first-person testimonials like #MeToo, where individuals are recounting an aspect of their own lives, the question of competence usually takes a back seat to the question of sincerity. That is, the issue is not typically “how did you come to know that?” but rather, “why should we believe you?” This question about the veracity of testimony is a central one in contemporary debates and is typically framed as a question about the hearer, that is, whether the hearer has a presumptive right to believe, absent any positive evidence about the reliability of the teller.<sup>44</sup> But in cases where there is evidence about the reliability of the teller, this question is normatively idle. In these cases, the evidence determines the reliability.

So why is it that in standard cases of testimony about sexual violence or sexual harassment, the evidence is presented as split, framed as a “he said/she said” scenario? It could be because these crimes often occur behind closed doors, which means there is seldom any eye-witness testimony. But we need to ask why eye-witness testimony is privileged in these cases, since if we broaden our gaze, we can see a mountain of other evidence—specifically, the evidence of the high costs of the teller’s testimony. For even if we know no other facts about her, as is often the case in #MeToo testimonials, we know that simply in virtue of telling her story, and thus coming up against the juggernaut of patriarchy, she has placed herself directly in harm’s way. And this fact bears directly on the question of what hearers ought to believe.

## 2.2 Practical Rationality

The connection between truth-telling and risk-taking is underwritten by the notion of practical rationality. Rationality is one of those philosophical concepts that can be unwieldy, but here I rely on a straightforward meaning of the term that, in practical matters, dictates that individuals act in ways that maximize their goals (Wedgwood 2014).<sup>45</sup> This characterization will suffice to generate a number of inferential moves, for if these tellers aim to survive and prosper, and to be treated with dignity and respect by their social groups, then *on pain of rationality* they would not give testimony that jeopardizes those goals—not unless they had a very good reason to do so, such as wanting the truth of what happened to them to be heard and believed. To suppose otherwise would be to attribute to this particular class of tellers a kind of cognitive dysfunction typically reserved for individuals who

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<sup>43</sup> See Coady (1992).

<sup>44</sup> I refer here to the standard debate between the credulist and the reductivist; see Elizabeth Fricker (1987, 2002), Coady (1992), and Burge (1993).

<sup>45</sup> For an in-depth analysis, see also Raz (2005).

suffer from serious mental illness, drug-induced altered states, or some form of extreme irrationality.

It is a commonplace that people rarely put their reputations, their professional well-being, their families, and indeed their very lives at stake, to give testimony that is untrue. Tamara Green, the California attorney who was the first woman to come forward and publicly support Andrea Constand's accusations against Bill Cosby, put it this way: "It was devastating" she said, "It never occurred to me no one would believe me. Why would I stand up and stick my neck out and take the heat I was taking if I weren't telling the truth?"<sup>46</sup> If the costs to the teller were suitably appreciated in these cases, instead of radically and systematically underestimated, they would carry weight in her favour when evaluating the sincerity of her testimony.

The idea that hearers ought to believe individuals whose testimony puts them in harm's way is a courtesy routinely afforded to individuals across a range of domains. Think, for instance, about whistleblowers. Here we have a group of people who put their jobs, and in some cases their lives, at risk by telling stories, who are often viewed as traitors and maligned for a variety of moral reasons, and yet their honesty is seldom in doubt. And why would it be? They simply have too much to lose to lie. When it comes to high-risk testimony, we even believe individuals who are otherwise completely untrustworthy, like low-level mobsters who give testimony about the criminal activities of their mobster bosses. Despite the fact that the low-level mobster is himself a criminal and thus implicitly not credible, his testimony is typically assigned a high credibility rating because of the risks he takes in giving it.

Unfortunately, the same respect is seldom given to women who report sexual violence or sexual harassment, which is all the more appalling given that false accusations in these cases are statistically negligible, on par with other crimes.<sup>47</sup> But we should not have to invoke the empirical data here. The normative principle does

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Nicole Weisensee Egan, "Bill Cosby Accuser Tamara Green Is Ready for Her Day in Court: 'It's a True Story and It Needed to Be Told,'" *People*, Oct. 29, 2015, <http://www.people.com/article/tamara-green-bill-cosby-defamation-lawsuit-andrea-constand>.

<sup>47</sup> At least, when it comes to false reporting vis-à-vis sexual violence against women (which, though not specifically on #MeToo cases, is relevant here); Lisak et al. (2010) suggest that this number is somewhere between 2% and 10%, but the Enliven Project (<https://sarahbeaulieu.me/the-enliven-project>) registers it at 2%. The discrepancy could be due to the fact that false reporting is difficult to measure, since how data are counted varies—i.e., does the false accusation count as one that was reported to police, as opposed to filed with the judiciary?

the work on its own and makes explicit a widely shared intuition, which is that when a speaker is undertaking more than the usual risks, hearers ought to give her more than the usual credit. The connection drawn here is not infallible; taking great risks when it comes to testimony is no guarantee of truth. To say that people rarely put everything on the line to give testimony that is untrue is not to say that they never do. This principle can be overridden in some cases by empirical counter-considerations, to be sure. But absent those sorts of defeaters, it should be the default position.

### **Conclusion**

Since the fall of 2017, in an impressive show of unscripted solidarity, women across the world have been speaking out in acts of defiance against prejudicial stereotypes, rape myths, and victim-blaming norms, and in doing so, putting a spotlight on male ignorance. We are witnessing a critical shift in social and cultural attitudes on sexual violence and sexual harassment against women, one that, in the face of tremendous risks, has been propelled by the power of a diverse group of women's voices. There is positive value in each one of those voices: value for the teller, when her story is believed; value for the hearer, who has the opportunity to better understand her own experience by seeing it represented by others; and value for society at large, when dominant but false narratives are disrupted. The epistemic significance of #MeToo testimony compels us to consider the tremendous costs to individual tellers, and on pain of rationality, the increased credibility they are owed in virtue thereof. The argument here tells us that, when hearing #MeToo stories, the appropriate normative stance to take is: I believe.

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