

Notes on not knowing: male ignorance after #MeToo

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Abstract

The essential premise of #MeToo is that, while large numbers of women are subject to sexual harassment and assault, this reality is not known to or understood by unnamed others. This article interrogates the subject of non-knowing that #MeToo points to but does not name, asking: who exactly does not know, and why? These questions provide the starting point to elaborate the concept of male ignorance. While this lexicon has been fleetingly deployed in canonical feminist works – where it denotes something so obvious that it does not require explanation, functioning instead as a kind of feminist common sense – I develop it here so it might be put to greater use as a dedicated analytic. The work of Charles Mills, particularly his writings on white ignorance, provides a critical precedent in this regard. Following Mills in foregrounding the ideological operations of not knowing, I conceive male ignorance as a structure of concerted if unconscious epistemic occlusion which both stems from and serves to protect male privilege. As such, it plays a crucial role in securing the overall relation of domination and oppression within which gendered lives are lived. While male ignorance is itself multiple and has a variety of stakeholders, I argue that the non-knowing that surrounds sexual harassment and assault – which #MeToo draws attention to and seeks to undo – constitutes a paradigmatic manifestation, one in which cisgender heterosexual men have a particular stake.

Keywords

Entitlement, epistemology, male privilege, sexual harassment, sexual politics

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#MeToo as epistemic intervention

In the now familiar narrative, the viral phenomenon that became #MeToo began with a tweet from Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano:

Me Too.

Suggested by a friend: 'If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too.' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.' (@AlyssaMilano, 2017)

With this post, Milano called on women at large to share their experiences of harassment and assault in order to demonstrate the scale of the issue to the general public. The express purpose was to expose and thereby educate; in attempting to make the statement 'Me too' go viral online, Milano set out to prove the existence of an offline epidemic. Embedded in her tweet is an assertion that while many if not most women have been subject to sexual harassment and assault, this reality is not known to or understood by unnamed others. At its most basic, then, #MeToo can be read as an attempt to make a problem known *among those who do not know*.

Feminist academics have produced voluble commentary on #MeToo, encompassing numerous editorials and articles alongside several monographs and edited collections. The general tenor of Anglophone literature is one of pronounced ambivalence, exhilaration mixing uneasily with disquietude, excitement tempered by discontent. While there is a general embrace of the fact that #MeToo has put sexual harassment and assault on the collective agenda, there is a great deal of unease about how this has been achieved, for whom, at what cost and with what implications. Many of these concerns reflect long-standing tensions among feminists alongside newer frustrations occasioned by the recent embrace of 'popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Without attempting an exhaustive catalogue, they include the vexed question of #MeToo's 'doubled origin' (Cherniavsky, 2019: 16) and the erasure of 'Me, Too' originator Tarana Burke from the mainstream narrative (Nathaniel, 2019); the centring of white women within the movement and in its wider representation (Tambe, 2018), leading to charges of 'political whiteness' (Phipps, 2019); the reproduction of a 'binary and fatalistic story' of sexual violence in which sexual oppression is presented as the singular cause of gender oppression (Hemmings, 2018: 971); and the tendency to elide structural and economic dynamics and thereby render 'poor and immigrant women, as well as women of colour, even more precarious and invisible than they already are' (Rottenberg, 2019: 42).

Despite these and other well-grounded concerns, #MeToo inspires feminist optimism and attachment. Existing literature pertaining to North America and Europe is replete with claims about the newness of this moment, in which women are apparently listened to and believed. Karen Boyle states the case simply when she contends: 'Arguably, what makes the #MeToo moment distinct is less the speaking

out – which women have been doing for decades [. . .] but rather the extent to which some of these stories have been widely *heard* (2019: 5 emphasis in original). Striking a more effusive note, the late Ann Snitow opens her commentary in *Dissent* by saying: ‘First off, and above everything else: for a feminist activist like me, after forty-five years, #MeToo is simply marvelous: “We believe the women!”’ (2018: 88). Dubravka Zarkov underscores the historical novelty of this situation by contrasting past media hostility towards women making accusations against high-profile men with the broad support shown to those coming forward now: ‘Today, we see the opposite: media seem to believe the accusers, fully and unconditionally – precisely what feminists hoped for since the 1970s!’ (Zarkov and Davis, 2018: 5). Elsewhere, Ashwini Tambe writes: ‘In an important way, the ground beneath us has shifted. #MeToo has tilted public sympathy in favor of survivors by changing the default response to belief, rather than suspicion’ (2018: 198).

Such comments are generally made in the context of nuanced analyses where the authors’ mixed feelings are readily apparent; indeed, many of those cited above espouse precisely the concerns already enumerated. Nevertheless, it is striking how often and emphatically claims are made about advances already achieved, with many seeming to believe that #MeToo marks a true cultural watershed and social sea change. This article sets out from a rather less optimistic perspective, seeded by a suspicion that #MeToo may not be quite such a novel moment or have such far-reaching effects as often seems to be assumed. Rather than critique #MeToo itself, however, or attempt to somehow measure its impact, I want to examine more closely the *non-knowing* that Milano’s invitational tweet highlights and from which the hashtag proceeds. #MeToo thus serves as the starting point for – rather than the ultimate object of – an analysis that asks: Who, exactly, does not know? Who is unaware of the endemic levels of sexual harassment and assault that women are subject to in the many societies where #MeToo has been taken up? Who is spared this knowledge? Who does not need it, or is able to proceed in life under the belief that they do not need it? What is it that keeps some people from apprehending this reality, when others are all too aware, indeed have no choice but to be aware?

In what follows, I consider the operations of a gendered yet generalised non-knowing which I propose to label *male ignorance*. While this concept does not have any particular traction in existing feminist literature – database searches return only scattered results – it can be found in earlier works. In ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’, for example, Audre Lorde writes: ‘Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs’ (1984: 113). Though Lorde deploys the term in passing, her usage implies that it gets at something quite central to feminist concerns; it is this non-knowing that women are so often tasked with traversing so that men may understand the basis of feminist complaint, and which women of colour are additionally beseeched to bridge for the benefit of white women. While not using the language of male ignorance expressly, Marilyn Frye addresses a similar dynamic when writing about ‘the

problem that has no name', a problem that she argues – contra Friedan – is necessarily 'about men, not about women' (1983: 42). Describing how men interact with women without taking on their perspectives or concerns, and while seeming to remain unaware that this is the case, Frye writes: 'The frustration of trying to function as a person in interaction with someone who is exercising this kind of control over others and over his own perceptions, and is not acknowledging it, is one of the primary sources of feminist rage' (1983: 48).

My argument proceeds in two parts. First, I introduce the work of political philosopher Charles Mills, who raises the possibility of male ignorance being taken up as a kind of gendered corollary to his own writings on white ignorance. Adopting some of the conceptual scaffolding his analysis affords, I begin to flesh out the concept of male ignorance and delineate its relationship with the social category 'men'. In a second section, I consider how the non-knowing that surrounds sexual harassment and assault constitutes a key example of male ignorance. Crucial in this regard is the manner in which male ignorance both stems from and serves to protect male privilege and entitlement, including that of sexual access to women's bodies. I conclude by reflecting on what this analysis might entail in assessing #MeToo and other struggles against sexual violence, and offer some thoughts about how the concept of male ignorance might – and might not – be put to work in feminist theory more broadly. Overall, the purpose of this article is to elucidate one particular aspect of the 'attitudinal-conceptual-cognitive-orientational complex' (Frye, 1983: 41) that sustains gender inequality and oppression.

Before proceeding, I must make clear that, even as #MeToo is not the focus of this analysis, my intention is not to question its value as a space to share or make sense of painful experiences. As a 'collective chorus' (Rodríguez, 2019: 121) and 'movement of mass disclosure' (Phipps, 2019: 2), #MeToo clearly provided a much-needed forum for the 'performance of mutual recognition' (Jackson, 2018: 5), allowing social media users to articulate individual injury and amplify collective grievance while opening out new modes of mediated consciousness-raising and peer-to-peer support (Hosterman et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2019). I must also state that where Milano's tweet positions women as the sole or special subjects of sexual harm – a focus largely retained in the wider #MeToo narrative (Halberstam, 2017)¹ – I take it for granted, on the basis of overwhelming evidence, that while women *are* disproportionately subject to sexualised harm in many parts of the world, women *are not* exclusively vulnerable or inherently violable. That is to say, the reality of sexual violence – which is both *gendered* and *gendering* – is contextual and contingent, not essential or universal (Helliwell, 2000). Relatedly, while I retain the formulation of 'sexual harassment and assault' used by Milano, I do so with an awareness that although #MeToo has usefully illuminated the continuum of sexual violence (Kelly, 1988), this has often meant collapsing different forms of harm and delimiting available horizons of redress (Burgess, 2018; Rodríguez, 2019; Wanzo, 2019). I also deliberately refer to sexual harassment and assault as 'practices' in order to foreground their status as acts *undertaken* rather than events that simply *take place*.

Male ignorance

Feminist epistemology has long been interested in the relationship between knowledge and power. Feminist standpoint theory (Hill Collins, 1986; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991) has been especially influential in its contention that those marginalised by or subordinated within dominant structures of power are often positioned in ways that allow them to both know *more* and to know *more accurately*. While this would seem to necessarily raise questions about non-knowing and the role this might play in facilitating relations of domination and oppression, feminists have paid rather less attention to ignorance, despite the fact that 'we cannot fully understand the complex practices of knowledge production and the variety of features that account for why something is known, without also understanding the practices that account for *not* knowing' (Tuana and Sullivan, 2006). Nevertheless, feminist thinking may alert us to the ways in which ignorance, far from being coterminous with a lack of social power, can actually result from and serve as a vehicle for its instantiation. As Eve Sedgwick writes in *Epistemology of the Closet*: 'ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing as knowledge. Knowledge, after all, is not itself power, although it is the magnetic field of power. Ignorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilising the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons' (1990: 4).

Building on ideas first set out in his milestone text *The Racial Contract* (1997), in a 2007 essay titled 'White Ignorance' Charles Mills pursues 'the idea of an ignorance, a non-knowing, that is not contingent, but in which race – white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications – plays a crucial causal role' (2007: 20). Mills is concerned not with simple gaps in or absences of knowledge, but rather more obdurate opacities. His argument builds on but goes beyond scholarship on situated knowledge and social location (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Code, 1995), positing a more thoroughly structural account (Alcoff, 2007). White ignorance, for Mills, is not just a product of experience – as standpoint theory might suggest – but a necessary mechanism of white supremacy. It has a material as well as phenomenological basis, in which white group interests play a coordinating role. As such, white ignorance is not incidental or immutable, but intensely *ideological*. As part of his exposition, Mills notes that 'it presumably does not need to be emphasized that white ignorance is not the only kind of privileged, group-based ignorance' (2007: 22), immediately going on to propose: 'Male ignorance could be analyzed similarly and clearly has a far more ancient history and arguably a more deep-rooted ancestry in human interrelations, insofar as it goes back thousands of years' (2007: 22). Mills does not expand on these comments in that essay or advance the concept elsewhere. Instead, male ignorance remains a conceptual proposition, which others are implicitly invited to furnish further.

I can admit a certain trepidation in proposing to take up this language. To begin with, and despite the fact that Mills himself offers the analogy, I do not want to imply an equivalence between race and gender, which must be understood as distinctive yet interrelated systems whose operations are 'sometimes parallel and

sometimes interlocking' (Hill Collins, 2017: 260). Focusing on gendered non-knowing specifically – in a manner broadly concordant with Mills' concern with racialised non-knowing – additionally risks pursuing a single-axis framework that some might find unsatisfying. A further source of unease pertains to the use of the word 'male', specifically on account of its valence within certain strands of feminist theory. As Angela McRobbie notes, concepts such as 'masculine dominance' and 'male power' have become passé among feminists and gender theorists alike, regarded as 'too crude, possibly essentialist, and theoretically unviable "after" queer theory' (2009: 17). While scholars including Imani Perry (2018) and Kate Manne (2018) have recently sought to revivify the decidedly "old" categories' (McRobbie, 2009: 17) of patriarchy and misogyny in their respective work, this does not in itself signal a wholesale reversal of the long-standing malaise that such concepts have invoked. The term 'male' is also complicated by developments in trans studies, which further underscore the indeterminacy of supposedly biological categories and collapse any remaining distinction that might inhere between sex and gender (Enke, 2012). At the same time, some of this work could be seen to make such categories available for new avenues of feminist enquiry, precisely because they untether them so completely from corporeal morphology – as seen, for example, with Andrea Long Chu's *Females* (2019).

Despite these qualms, I find the language of male ignorance compelling. To my mind – and as its invocation by such a pre-eminent figure as Lorde suggests – it helps illuminate a dynamic well-known to feminists but not expressly addressed in existing literature. It seems especially apt in trying to gain a greater handle on the epistemic gap that #MeToo points to and aims to redress, as I come on to further below. My interest in the formulation Mills develops arises not simply from the conceptual corollary he invokes, but rather from the ideological framing he proposes. For Mills, white ignorance is in no way essential or ahistorical but instead emerges in and through the modern construction of race and, with it, the elaboration of distinct experiences as well as interests among racialised groups. It is closely imbricated with but not reducible to racism on the part of individuals, stemming instead from 'both straightforward racist motivation and more impersonal social-structural causation, which may be operative even if the cogniser in question is not racist' (Mills, 2007: 21). In utilising the language of male ignorance, then, I mean to describe patterns of non-knowing that are structured by and which give structure to gender as a system of enforced binaries and imposed hierarchies. It stems from the collective interest men have in maintaining male power and privilege, whether or not this is known to or acknowledged by individual men. While likely pertaining to those who could be regarded as sexist or misogynist, male ignorance is in no way limited to patriarchy's most ardent defenders or faithful foot-soldiers. Rather, it is a product of and prescription for gendered inequalities and oppressions on a much wider plane.

Given the discomfort that any too straightforward linking of 'male' and 'men' is liable to occasion among feminists, it is worth sketching their relation further via Mills' own very careful delineation of the relationship between white ignorance

and white people. Crucial here is his insight that white ignorance is neither restricted to nor uniform among whites. With regard to the former, Mills argues that white ignorance 'will often be shared by nonwhites to a greater or lesser extent because of the power relations and patterns of ideological hegemony involved' (2007: 22); thus, for Mills it is possible to speak of 'black "white" ignorance' (2013: 41). Similarly, I see no reason to think that male ignorance is or should be limited to those who actively identify or are otherwise positioned as male. Indeed, a great deal of feminist scholarship attests to women's collusion with and investment in oppressive gender regimes, eloquently captured by Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) idea of 'bargaining with patriarchy'. Precisely because white ignorance and male ignorance are ideological non-knowings, at least some of those who are disadvantaged and even disarticulated by these systems will buy into them. Furthermore, where white ignorance is understood as 'a cognitive tendency—an inclination, a doxastic disposition—which is not insuperable' (Mills, 2007: 23), it stands to reason that this propensity can be overcome by those who inherit it. Likewise, it seems fair to suggest that at least some men can and do move beyond the bounds of their own ignorance; the more pertinent question for feminists is how and why.

Turning to the latter half of this proviso, Mills contends that 'speaking generally about white ignorance does not commit one to the claim that it is uniform across the white population' (2007: 22). For Mills, the need to account for other kinds of social difference is or should be self-evident: 'if the analysis of white ignorance is to be part of a social epistemology, then the obvious needs to be remembered – that people have other identities besides racial ones, so that whites will be divisible by class, gender, nationality, religion, and so forth' (2007: 23). Like Mills, I believe group interests play a key role in sustaining structural ignorance, precisely because of the advantages they can confer. Of course, the benefits accorded to men by virtue of their sex or gender have never been evenly apportioned, but are instead unequally distributed via their coincidence with other vectors of social power; this is a founding premise of men and masculinity studies (Carrigan et al., 1985). Grappling with similar issues, Mills argues that despite the inequalities that inhere among whites, the 'wages of whiteness' (Roediger, [1991] 1999) nevertheless constitute 'a major factor in encouraging white cognitive distortions of various kinds' (2007: 35). In a related manner, while acknowledging hierarchies and divisions among men – shaped by long and enduring histories of racism, colonialism and class exploitation, among other things – the conception of male ignorance I am arguing for here takes seriously the workings of the 'patriarchal dividend'. This, as Raewyn Connell argues, is 'the main stake in contemporary gender politics. Its scale makes patriarchy worth defending' (2002: 143). Even as their own claims may go unrealised, and despite the fact that it often exacts its own costs, all men stand to benefit from this pay-out.

In pursuing this line of analysis – one that admittedly privileges gender among other axes of oppression – my intention is not to elide the intersectional workings of male ignorance, but rather to suggest that these must be anticipated and

explored rather than assumed in advance. My thinking here is informed by Anna Carastathis' (2014) conception of intersectionality as a provisional concept, a point of departure rather than of arrival. While it would, perhaps, be easy to assume that different forms of structural non-knowing necessarily operate in concert with and compound one another, to make such an assumption a priori would be to neglect the complex and sometimes contradictory workings of intersectionality 'on the ground'. It may well be the case that white and male ignorance, for example, enable and entrench one another; indeed, given the long-standing interconnections between white supremacy and patriarchy, it seems reasonable to suggest that they do so. To leave the argument there, however, would be to neglect the operations of 'race and gender as social *processes* that inform each other, but which operate in distinct and particular ways' (Nash, 2008: 12 emphasis in original). Thus it may also be the case that different forms of structural non-knowing can operate more or less independently, such that marginalisation along axes of oppression other than gender can give rise to particular investments in gendered non-knowing, or conspire to ensure that gendered non-knowing is not an option.² Ultimately, my contention is that the intersectional workings of male ignorance need to be examined via specific instances of non-knowing, such as that which surrounds sexual violence – something I explore further below. Moreover, it is worth bearing in mind that structural non-knowings of all kinds can be uneven, pertaining in relation to certain settings or subjects but not others.

My argument, then, is that there exists such a thing as male ignorance, a pattern of non-knowing that does not simply reflect the social location men occupy vis-à-vis women and other genders, but which actively instantiates gender inequality and oppression. It is not an incidental arrangement but rather an imperative condition, vital to securing the overall structure of domination and subordination within which gendered lives are lived. It serves a multiplicity of functions – crucially as psychic resource, but also as rhetorical manoeuvre and exculpatory device. Based in the collective interest that men have in maintaining the various rights and entitlements which the patriarchal dividend unevenly accords, male ignorance has an ideological rather than purely experiential base. Precisely because it is ideological, it is not unique to men in provenance or purveyance, nor it is endowed to equal extent among or exercised with equal effect by all men. Vectors of race, nation, religion, class, caste, sexuality and (dis)ability all shape its operation; and yet this is not to say that those who occupy marginalised social locations are somehow inured to its workings, nor that those with social power are necessarily among its most obvious exemplars. While part of the cognitive schema that maintains gendered domination and oppression, it is not the same as a conscious investment in patriarchy or male supremacy; instead, it is a form of non-knowing that typically operates without the awareness of its inhabitants. Male ignorance actively resists change, continually insulating itself against possible threats and potential incursions – sometimes violently so.

From here, there arises the question of how or why the non-knowing that surrounds and supports sexual harassment and assault might be regarded as a

prime instance of male ignorance. My contention is not simply that knowledge of this kind is delimited or circumscribed in general, but that its distribution has gendered contours and implications. While experience and identification are manifestly important, I believe there is something more at stake here. I develop this line of thought in the next section by considering how male ignorance is imbricated with male privilege and entitlement, such that men have an interest in remaining actively unaware of sexual harassment and assault as problems that are both extremely pervasive and in which they are all too frequently implicated, directly and indirectly. In making this argument, I am primarily concerned with cisgender heterosexual (cis-het) men, not only on account of the particularities that belonging to this category is liable to facilitate – in ways likely to differ for gay and trans men – but also because gendered social power is overwhelmingly allocated to and exercised by this group, today and historically and across a wide range of contexts. Furthermore, heterosexuality as an institution offers specific benefits to men, such that there are advantages to not knowing the harm it very often entails for women.

On not knowing

In her work on epistemic injustice, Miranda Fricker (2007) describes the workings of hermeneutical injustice, that is, the harm that arises when important aspects of our experience are obscured from collective understanding on account of structural identity prejudice. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when there is a lack of shared interpretive resources with which marginalised or subordinated groups can communicate experiences that it is very much in their interest to make intelligible to themselves and others. As such, oppressed groups are liable ‘to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible’ (Fricker, 2007: 148). Fricker cites sexual harassment as its central case, noting that, in English, this terminology only became available in the 1970s. Prior to this point, ‘the absence of a proper understanding of what men were doing to women when they treated them like that was *ex hypothesi* quite general’ (Fricker, 2007: 151). This linguistic and cognitive gap was not incidental. Rather, ‘the whole engine of collective social meaning was effectively geared to keeping these obscured experiences out of sight’ (Fricker, 2007: 153). Precisely because sexual harassment is highly gendered, the inability to name it not only attests to but actively instantiates gender oppression. Without this vocabulary, the woman made to endure such practices is often ‘left deeply troubled, confused, and isolated, not to mention vulnerable to continued harassment’ (Fricker, 2007: 151). By contrast, while the man who perpetrates sexual harassment may lack the language to name what he is doing, this is not to his disadvantage; rather, ‘there is an obvious sense in which it suits his purpose’ (Fricker, 2007: 151). The coinage of the term sexual harassment was thus an important step in discerning the conditions that enabled it, as dynamics that were previously unnamed and unnameable became available for collective understanding.³

Yet where Fricker's concern is to illuminate how male structures of power can block women from knowing something important about their own experiences, mine is to discern how these same structures can block men from knowing something important about women's experiences. Here it is helpful to consider more closely the relationship between ignorance and privilege. In *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2013), José Medina distinguishes between forms of non-knowing that *issue from* privilege and those required to *preserve* it. He writes:

There is *not needing to know* and there is *needing not to know*. The cognitive predicament of the privileged involves, in some cases, a not needing to know that leads to epistemic laziness, but it also involves, in other cases, a needing not to know that creates blind spots of a different kind: not just areas of epistemic neglect, but areas of an intense but negative cognitive attention, areas of epistemic hiding—experiences, perspectives, or aspects of social life that require an enormous amount of effort to be hidden and ignored. Ignorance in these cases functions as a defence mechanism that is used to preserve privilege (Medina, 2013: 34 emphasis in original).

Attention to both modes provides insight as to how and why cisgender heterosexual men very often remain insulated from knowledge about sexual harassment and assault, specifically as propagated by men against women.

To begin, cis-het men have less need to know about sexual harassment and assault than do women simply because they are not its principle targets. This is not to say that cis-het men are not victim to such practices; clearly, they are. Rather, the point is simply that women are disproportionately subject to sexualised intrusion and abuse across a range of everyday spaces. As such, they are more likely to be familiar with – indeed, to know intimately – the insidious banality of these practices, their simultaneous to-be-expectedness and disorientating impact, their weathering force and enervating effects. Moreover, whatever the actual incidence of sexual harassment and assault, women are socialised to anticipate sexual threat and routinely enjoined to lead reduced lives by circumscribing themselves within the always-precarious bounds of 'safety' (Vera-Gray, 2018). Across a variety of domains in both the Global North and South, the fear of rape – the perceived threat of which often outstrips its statistical likelihood and frequently misattributes the source of danger – limits women's engagement with public space and public life (Valentine, 1989; Pawson and Banks, 1993; Stanko, 1995; Haskell and Randall, 1998; Silva and Wright, 2009; Phadke et al., 2011; Dosekun, 2013). Whether or not it ultimately accords with their own lived experience, cis-het men are generally not socialised to anticipate sexual risk in the same way or to the same extent. That is to say, because they occupy a privileged position in gender relations, cis-het men have less need to know – or, at least, are led to believe they have less need to know – about sexual harassment and assault. As such, this knowledge does not typically impact or preoccupy them in the same way as it does those whose lives are shaped by both its spectre and actuality.⁴

For Erinn Cunniff Gilson, the non-knowing that surrounds sexual violence rests upon a deeper denial of intersubjective vulnerability, that is, 'our frailty, dependence, susceptibility, interrelatedness, and the contingency of our development' (2015: 230). While social location may facilitate such ignorance – Gilson highlights 'masculine gender identity' as a possible contributing factor – it is undergirded by 'an unconscious but active interest in denying the pervasiveness of rape, its causes, and the nature of the vulnerabilities at play' (2015: 232). Ignorance of sexual violence is thus not simply a matter of experience or identification – actually being subject to it or envisioning it as a real possibility – but arises instead from a deeper will not to know. Such ignorance is highly gendered precisely because sexual vulnerability is coded feminine: 'a specifically feminine and/or female form of vulnerability is assumed; that is, feminine/female vulnerability is not just susceptibility to any kind of harm but rather is viewed as particularly sexual vulnerability' (Gilson, 2015: 233). Because of this, 'it is believed that it is women, not men, who are vulnerable and almost inherently so' (Gilson, 2015: 233). This modality of ignorance is at the same time classed and racialised in ways that 'obstruct recognition of the risk non-white and working class women face' (Gilson, 2015: 233) and invests middle-class white women with 'a sense of preciousity' (Hall, 2004: 4, cited in Gilson, 2015: 233).

Because the gendered coding of sexual vulnerability is frequently attended by a racialised coding of sexual threat – for example, via the 'myth of the Black male rapist' in the USA (Davis, 1982) or the 'Muslim grooming gang' in the UK (Tufall, 2015) – ignorance of sexual violence is potentially more available to some men than others. Some men cannot afford to not know about sexual harassment and assault, precisely because the spectre of sexual violence is so often projected onto them. And yet, by the logic of Gilson's argument, the desire to deny intersubjective vulnerability – including the threat of being falsely accused or otherwise unfairly implicated – may also lead those subordinated along lines of race, ethnicity, class and caste to all the more vigorously deny the realities of sexual harassment and violence both within and without their communities, as a matter of self-preservation. Indeed, scholarship by Black and postcolonial feminists attests to precisely this. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) documents how Black communities in the USA may suppress knowledge of sexual violence in their midst in an effort to stem racist stereotypes and the violence they enable. Elsewhere, María Lugones ([2008] 2016) describes how colonialism encourages men of colour to become indifferent to the suffering of women of colour, as the coloniality of gender promises them a greater stake in patriarchal relations.⁵

Ignorance, then, is one of the ways that privilege operates: to not know, to *not have to know*, is itself a particular form of entitlement. But as Medina points out, ignorance is also a means of *retaining* privilege; there are some things that *need* to *not* be known in order for privilege to prevail. While of course 'we all have things we would rather avoid: things that are hard to hear, things that are difficult to accept or even to acknowledge' (Medina, 2013: 34), there also exist more concerted forms of non-knowing. Privilege is instrumental in orchestrating such epistemic

‘close-mindedness’, as Medina terms it, entailing ‘an active effort not to see, no matter what the evidence may be’ (2013: 35). This is not to say that close-mindedness is conscious; rather, it is typically undergirded by a pattern of ‘socialization that leads one to be insensitive to certain things and immune to certain considerations’ (Medina, 2013: 36). Ignorance of this kind ‘can be very narrowly focused, targeting very specific experiences and perspectives that one’s mind becomes closed off to’, but more often entails ‘the lack of openness to a whole range (no matter how broad or narrow) of experiences and viewpoints that can destabilize (*or create trouble for*) one’s own perspective’ (Medina, 2013: 35; *emphasis mine*).⁶

This notion of troubling or troublesome knowledge is important when thinking about how and why cisgender heterosexual men might *need not to know* about sexual harassment and assault. In fundamental ways, this knowledge is threatening to cis-het men, as it throws the injustice of everyday gender relations into sharp relief. To confront the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault – the patterning of which is deeply gendered, even as it transverses other axes of oppression – means confronting the basic relation of domination and subordination within which gendered lives are lived. While for women such knowledge is imperative, for many men it is *perilous*, jeopardising the various rights and entitlements that the patriarchal dividend affords. Knowledge of this kind threatens to expose the insidiously *intimate* character of gendered domination and oppression. In this, male ignorance may function somewhat differently from white ignorance. While informal segregation in domains such as education, employment and housing – as historically and currently pertains in a variety of contexts, including the USA and UK – can mean that white people have little direct interaction or close relationships with people of colour, women and men tend to live in immediate proximity, whether as partners, siblings, parents, children, friends and so on. In addition, although economic and social power are clearly at play in both white and male ignorance, the advantages that men enjoy over and at the expense of women very often accrue most acutely in the private sphere, via assumed rights of physical and emotional access alongside claims on domestic and reproductive labour. As such, the will not to know takes on a particular character in relation to gender that may or may not apply in the context of race.⁷

Writing about male supremacy and moral selfhood, Michael Schwalbe offers insight into the psychic function of not knowing. At issue for Schwalbe is the manner in which men come to ‘see women’s pain as less important than their own, to deny responsibility for it, and to refuse to see as demanding for its alleviation any radical change on the part of men’ (1992: 44). While not couching his argument in the language of ignorance *per se*, he nevertheless points to a need not to know centred on the preservation of privilege:

It is not just that male privilege disinclines men to engage in receptive role taking vis-a-vis women. It is that, as with relinquishing control, this kind of role taking would threaten the survival of the masculinist self. This is a self premised not only

on dis-identifying with women, and on denying dependence upon them, but also on remaining insulated from their pain. If this pain were to be fully felt, its roots in the patterns of domination that sustain masculinist selves in other ways might become obvious. The pain men cause women would become men's pain and men would be motivated to destroy the masculinist selves causing it. A suicidal dilemma is thus avoided by avoiding receptive role taking. An inevitable by-product is moral irresponsibility in action vis-a-vis women (Schwalbe, 1992: 42).

Schwalbe highlights sexual harassment as a key example of men's ethical diminishment within male supremacy and the denialism this gives rise to. His analysis suggests that not knowing is part of what enables some men to perpetrate sexualised harassment and abuse, and further that it underlies a more general unwillingness among men to engage and empathise with women as relational subjects whose perspectives and experiences must be given equal weight to their own. Insofar as it serves to protect the gender and sexual status quo, then, male ignorance must be understood as *motivated ignorance*, operating in service to something that, for some, is very much worth protecting.

Ignorance of sexual harassment and assault – and with it the routine havoc and enduring misery they so often entail – is especially crucial in safeguarding one of the patriarchal dividend's chief affordances for heterosexual men: that of sexual entitlement. Such prerogative is underpinned by the male sexual 'drive' discourse (Hollway, 1984), which enshrines men's supposed 'need' for sex. This and other heteronormative discourses license myriad forms of compulsion in the context of heterosexual encounters and relationships, the majority of which are chalked up to and passed off as 'just sex' (Gavey, 2005) by men and women alike. The ultimate result is to normalise women's sexual acquiescence, as evidenced by the widespread phenomenon of technically-consensual-but-nevertheless-unwanted-sex (Bay-Cheng and Bruns, 2016; Burkett and Hamilton, 2012). Simply put, male sexual entitlement underwrites coercion as a normative facet of women's sexual experience and social existence, including that of lesbian and queer women (Fahs, 2011). Knowledge about sexual harassment and assault – of just how prevalent these practices are, and of how deeply they can impact those subjected to them – thus poses a threat to the heteronormative order writ large, quite besides the fact that sexual harassment and assault are normative to this order rather than anomalies within or aberrations from it. If cis-het men were to take on this knowledge, to experience the pain it generates as their own, they would have to ask serious questions about their ethical conduct vis-a-vis women; moreover, the manner in which sexual relations between women and men are conducted generally would be open to question. By contrast, it is through not knowing – or claiming not to know – that men are able to enjoy this particular form of entitlement more or less unfettered.

Precisely because ignorance licenses entitlement, it also underwrites violation. Sedgwick points to this directly when she argues that: 'The epistemological asymmetry of the laws that govern rape, for instance, privileges at the same time men

and ignorance, inasmuch as it matters not at all what the raped woman perceives or wants just so long as the man raping her can claim not to have noticed (ignorance in which male sexuality receives careful education)' (1990: 5).

A wealth of feminist research attests to this 'careful education' in ignorance, with rape and sexual assault routinely figured as products of men's 'not knowing' (O'Byrne et al., 2008). Such logics not only shape how men approach and negotiate sexual interactions with women, but also inform well-documented tendencies among women to downplay intrusion and abuse in an effort to 'evade victimhood' (Baker, 2010) and preserve an 'illusory sense of control' (Frith and Kitzinger, 1997: 524) – while also avoiding what for many is the too-costly toll of trying to hold men accountable. My own research demonstrates how ignorance of sexual harassment and assault can be maintained even in sites dedicated to the production of knowledge about 'female sexuality', a conspicuous omission motivated by the collective interest of the men involved in this setting (O'Neill, 2018). The non-knowing that surrounds sexual harassment and assault is thus cultivated, curated, coordinated – and also contested. Indeed, the 'orchestration of ignorance' (Sedgwick, 1990: 5) is a key site of political struggle, one which #MeToo strikes at the heart of.

Promises, propositions, problems, possibilities

The implicit promise of #MeToo was that if the full scale of sexual harassment and assault could be demonstrated, this knowledge would go some way to ending the problem. This, in itself, is not such a new proposition. After all, the imperative to 'speak out' has been central to feminist efforts against sexual violence for decades. Excavating this history, Tanya Serisier describes how feminist anti-rape activism in 1970s USA sought to establish the 'epistemological primacy and political power of women's experiential knowledge around sexual violence' (2018: 6). As a result, feminist anti-rape politics in and beyond the USA came to be 'founded on the belief that producing and disseminating a genre of personal experiential narratives can end sexual violence' (Serisier, 2018: 4). #MeToo reproduces this logic exactly, transposing the basic strategy to the digital realm and harnessing the network effects this affords. However, this and other feminist campaigns against sexual violence might also be read as having a more specific remit, albeit one that is not often expressly articulated. Sarah Jaffe gestures to this when she recalls: 'When #MeToo began to circulate on Facebook I was beyond cynical; I was actually angry that the men around me might be shocked to learn that yes, it had happened to me, it had happened to almost every woman I know' (2018: 80). Jaffe goes on to elucidate #MeToo's ultimate aim: 'It is a huge demand, perhaps unrealizable in our lifetimes, one that is bigger than any perpetrator outed in the media: It is not a demand for men to go to jail. *It is a demand for men to do the work of learning*' (2018: 84; emphasis mine). Understood in this light, the unspeakable promise of #MeToo was that if men could be made to know women's pain, they would no longer propagate and procure it.

While #MeToo has been heralded as ushering in an era in which women are, at last, believed, its ultimate impact remains unclear. As Kaitlynn Mendes and colleagues admit, 'we still know very little about what hashtags like #MeToo actually do; or whether and how they produce social change' (2018: 237). Empirical research on men's engagement with #MeToo does not provide any particular grounds for optimism. In an online questionnaire involving respondents in the USA and Norway, researchers found that 'men expressed less positivity toward #metoo than women and perceived it as substantially more harmful and less beneficial', a finding they argue can be accounted for 'by men being higher than women in hostile sexism, higher in rape myth acceptance, and lower in feminist identification' (Kunst et al., 2018: 818). Notably for the argument I have made here, the authors take this to evidence 'ideological differences rather than fundamental group differences' (Kunst et al., 2018: 818). Another study, examining the #HowIWillChange hashtag – created by an Australian journalist as a way for men to document how they planned to respond to #MeToo – charts three main usages: committing to change, which saw users promise to listen to and 'protect' women; indignant resistance, where users denied being implicated in the problem; and hostile resistance, where users claimed that no such problem exists, rejected the need for change and attacked those who advocate it. Accounting for these findings, the researchers state: 'it may be that men find it easier to externalize problematic behaviors contributing to rape culture to other people, rather than do a personal examination of how one benefits from and perpetuates rape culture themselves' (PettyJohn et al., 2018: 620). They go on to explain that, as a privileged social group, men may seek to '*remain ignorant*' (PettyJohn et al., 2018: 620; emphasis mine), deploying distancing strategies so as to maintain a sense of morality without having to alter their own conduct.

These findings, while certainly not the whole picture, broadly tally with the argument I have put forward regarding a deep and pervasive will not to know, a non-knowing in which cisgender heterosexual men have a particular stake. At the same time, it is important to highlight what research of this kind cannot capture; namely, apathy, indifference, disregard. While difficult to measure or assess, these variegated forms of non-response are crucial in tracking the import of #MeToo, precisely because 'knowledge requires work and its acquisition will not happen without the active participation of the knower' (Medina, 2013: 33–4). This is perhaps especially true in an era of communicative capitalism, the infrastructure of which is geared to produce 'no response' (Dean, 2005). While going against the grain of much existing feminist commentary, it should not be contentious to suggest that #MeToo may not have effected a great deal of change. As Serisier argues, the impetus to speak out contains a central paradox: 'Breaking the silence, despite its significant cultural impact, has not ended sexual violence, nor does it seem to have significantly reduced it, or to have eradicated the stigma associated with being a rape victim' (2018: 12). This is not to deny the importance that speaking out can have, especially as a means of remaking the self in the aftermath of violence (Brisson, 2002), but rather to acknowledge that it is a fraught endeavour, personally

and politically. In naming ourselves as victims, we may become for others in our entirety what we know ourselves to be only in part. Moreover, there is always the risk that in doing so we may inadvertently reify precisely the kinds of discourses that enable women's victimisation in the first place (Marcus, 1992; Heberle, 1996; Gavey, 2005). Following Lorde, we might also question the ethics of a strategy which places the burden of enlightenment on the oppressed rather than on the oppressor, not least in the face of 'tremendous resistance' (1984: 113).

Conceptually, this analysis brings questions of audibility and intelligibility to the fore. Grappling with these questions means moving beyond a concern with visibility and voice, both of which have been central to feminist discussion on #MeToo to date. This is not because such issues are unimportant; of course, they are critical. Even so, they can only take us so far when asked in isolation. By thinking about non-knowing – of who does *not* know, does *not need* to know and, indeed, *needs not* to know – we might gain new insight as to why sexual harassment and assault have proven so intractable. My contention is that, while identity and experience play a role, group interests are crucial. Quite simply, there is too much at stake. Despite the pains and opacities it may produce in their own lives, cis-het men *benefit* from not knowing how sexual harassment and assault shape women's lives. Not knowing enables everyday interactions to progress untrammelled by painful truths; not knowing keeps the image of the happy family intact; not knowing allows manipulation and coercion to obtain under the guise of 'romance' and 'seduction'; not knowing offsets uncertainty and offers a sense of moral uprightness; not knowing ensures a get-out clause even when the transgression is definite and deliberate; not knowing begets forgiveness in the court of public opinion. Male ignorance is not *incidental* but *interested*; it has a *purpose*, even if this is not always apparent to those who inhabit it.

What does this analysis offer in practical terms? Admittedly, my interventions on this front are limited. Recognising how deeply rooted sexual harassment and assault are in male privilege and entitlement, and how this entitlement both proceeds from and depends upon not knowing the impact these practices have on women, does not in itself tell us what we as feminists can do about the problem. This, then, is a diagnosis without a prescription. Nevertheless, I want to offer some caveats to accompany the conceptualisation I have developed here which may prove useful in thinking about struggles against sexual violence. These might also apply when investigating other instances of male ignorance – for example, the cultivated if unconscious forms of non-knowing that attend unequal divisions of domestic labour; the apparent obliviousness that sustains highly differentiated patterns of emotional engagement, affective provision and care work; the strategic inattentions, however unintended, that entrench gendered hierarchies across a range of organisational contexts and institutional settings.

First, it is crucial to recognise that just because ignorance is the problem does not mean knowledge is its solution. Sedgwick attests to this when she cautions against 'dwelling on the degree to which the power of our enemies over us is implicated, not in their command of knowledge, but precisely in their ignorance. The effect is a real one,

but it carries dangers with it as well' (1990: 7). To put it bluntly: some know very well what they do. Second, it is important to bear in mind that knowledge does not necessarily make a difference. After all, it is perfectly possible to know but *not care*, or *not care enough*, especially when power and privilege are at stake. In order to effect change, knowledge needs to be transformative rather than simply corrective or assimilative. As Sandra Lee Bartky argues with regard to anti-racism, what is needed is 'a form of knowing that transforms the self who knows, a knowing that brings new sympathies, new affects as well as new cognitions and new forms of intersubjectivity' (1996: 179, cited in Pedwell, 2012: 164). It is this kind of affectively charged and ethically compelling knowing that is so crucial to dismantling relations of domination and oppression, and yet so difficult to produce and sustain. Third, the most direct means of addressing a problem will not necessarily be the most effective and, moreover, a 'head on' approach may be detrimental at times. In relation to sexual violence, this means accepting that '[a]n effective strategy against rape must aim for more than the eradication of rape – or even of sexism – alone' (Davis, 1982: 201). Fourth, we should not underestimate the purchase of imagination in advancing feminist horizons. With regard to sexual harassment and assault, this means rethinking the primacy accorded to speaking out in what seems an increasingly desperate attempt to impress knowledge and thereby impose ethical relationality. Indeed, it could be argued that the continued exhortation for women to share their 'stories' – where these 'stories' are necessarily tales of degradation and violation – by now amounts to a kind of gaslighting, as several decades of painful outpour has done little to stem the problem at its source. Rather than continually expose our injuries, we could instead direct our energies towards narrating 'the world as we might desire it to be, a story in which we no longer need to tell the same stories of sexual violence' (Serisier, 2018: 215). In this way, we might counter the fatalism that so often surrounds sexual violation (Alcoff, 2018), based in the recognition that this is not and never was inevitable.

All this suggests that it is necessary to think a good deal more about what it is that enables so many men to propagate sexual harassment and assault in the first place. While understanding the structural underpinnings and institutional arrangements that support such practices is crucial, so too must we examine the cognitive blockages and emotional partitions that pattern their perpetration. My contention is that male ignorance plays a crucial role in this regard, not only by facilitating widespread inattention to the problem, but also by inculcating the disposition needed to undertake these acts. As an ideological formation, male ignorance is not fixed or immutable, but must instead be continually re-secured in the course of everyday life. Recognising this, a strategic task for feminists might be to decipher precisely how it is inculcated – in what times and places, by what means and mechanisms – and to scrutinise those instances in which it becomes obstructed, curtailed or otherwise compromised. In this way, we may learn how to instigate and accelerate these processes, such that the generalised yet gendered non-knowing that surrounds and supports sexual violence becomes finally untenable.

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Notes

1. As Jack Halberstam (2017) notes in relation to the USA, the overwhelming focus on women as victims and men as perpetrators has been accompanied by a resounding lack of attention to heterosexuality within popular commentary on and media coverage of #MeToo.
2. It is worth pointing out here that intersections are always located. In many contexts, the formulation of 'white ignorance' as a specific kind of racialised non-knowing simply will not apply, or will not apply in the same way, as different histories give rise to different forms of structured non-knowing. As such, while the manner in which white and male ignorance intersect represents a germane line of enquiry in contexts such as North America and Europe, in others it will not.
3. Of course, while the concept of sexual harassment is now in widespread use, this is not to say its definition is agreed upon or its contents uncontested.
4. Kortney Ziegler provides insight on this as a black trans man reflecting on his 'newfound privilege': 'One of the most obvious ways in which I benefit from male privilege is the reduction of public sexual assault from other men. When I walk down the street in this body, I can do so without the fear I once held as a victim of male harassment' (2017: 210). Highlighting the intersectional workings of such privilege, he goes on to note: 'Although I'm less likely to be sexually assaulted because of the ways I present my gender, this privilege is in exchange for becoming a visible target of racist practices designed to police young black manhood' (Ziegler, 2017: 210). Of course, this is not to say that trans people are less vulnerable to sexual or intimate violence, as research readily attests (Peitzmeier et al., 2020).
5. Here we begin to see why it is necessary to examine rather than assume the intersectional workings of male ignorance in relation to specific instances of not knowing. Precisely because the threat of sexual violence is so often displaced onto male 'Others' – which, depending on context, may include Black or brown men, low caste men, immigrant men, religious minority men and so forth – multiple axes of social power all shape whether and how men come to know about sexual harassment and assault. However, this does not necessarily play out in uniform ways, such that we can assume that men who are in some way marginalised necessarily know more readily than others. In some instances, subordination along lines other than gender may incentivise men to not know all the more concerted, giving rise to racialised silences around sexual violence (see: Moffett, 2006). Alternatively, it may be that men onto whom the spectre of sexual violence is most often projected cannot afford to not know about sexual violence, perhaps especially in relation to women who wield greater social power.
6. As an example, Medina highlights 'the sexist man who systematically undermines the epistemic authority of women, gives them no credibility and pathologizes their perception, reasoning, and testimony (depicting them as irrational or hysterical, for example)' (2013: 35). As my argument heretofore suggests, however, I see no reason to presume that

such close-mindedness is limited to the 'sexist man' (assuming he could be readily identified). Rather, and as Fricker (2007) suggests, in a sexist society women's credibility is diminished generally, rather than only in the minds of avowed sexists. At the same time, this credibility deficit is not evenly apportioned, as some women are deemed more credible than others.

7. This is not to say that racist oppression is without intimate dimensions. As Angela Davis points out in the context of the USA, 'One of racism's salient historical features has always been the assumption that white men – especially those who wield economic power – possess an incontestable right of access to Black women's bodies' (1982: 175). Through the institution of slavery, which involved all manner of 'monstrous intimacies' (Sharpe, 2010), white and male ignorance combined in an especially intense fashion, with long-lasting impacts both within and beyond the USA.

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