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International Relations and #MeToo: Confronting Racialized Sexual Violence

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ANNA M. AGATHANGELOU AND SHEILA NAIR, MAR 30 2018

Tarana Burke, an American civil rights activist uttered the phrase “Me Too” in 2006 to raise awareness of the structural pervasiveness of sexual abuse and assault in society. As the creator and developer of Just Be, an organization she founded that same year, she worked to benefit young women of color. Just Be Inc. was created to “guide young women of color in their process of self-discovery so that they may find the tools necessary to be empowered past their ‘risk’ and around their circumstances in order to set or reset the trajectory of their lives.” Burke is still active giving plenary talks and runs her organization spending much of her time listening and talking with girls about sexual harassment and abuse. Her vision was to build a movement to fight all forms of sexual violence focusing on the most vulnerable groups in American society: black and brown survivors. Calling for solidarity and support for these survivors, Burke’s work and message clearly presaged and predated the mainstreaming of #MeToo that took off in 2017.

It is laudable that this #MeToo moment has brought down or marred the reputations of titans of industry, Hollywood, politicians and public officials, powerful men across the arts, sciences, literature, the medical and legal establishments, and academic spaces, which many of us reading this post are part of. The hash tag has become a popular way of identifying and exposing what has for the longest time been the lived realities of white cis-dominated, heterosexist patriarchy: sexual coercion and violence. Yet, Burke’s earlier Me Too did not take root in public consciousness. This is surely a puzzle that feminists must address. Why has it taken this long for a “public” awakening and the outing of mostly cis men, who have been accused of sexual assault and violence against women, to be aired widely now? Does it have anything to do with the fact that it was Burke, a black woman, who was responsible for first generating the phrase and the movement, Me Too? While we do not want to go back to this question of origins (i.e., who is responsible for what and when) it should give us pause on how and why the labor of a black woman such as Burke is elided. This is not an uncommon phenomenon; women of color have historically been less visible than white women, and even more marginal depending on their class and sexuality, in public life.

The energized # MeToo has also drawn attention to the racialized, gendered and sexualized academy. Across Europe, North America, and other regions of the world, allegations of groping, sexual harassment, lewd comments, assault, rape and their enablement have poured out. In surveys (i.e., “Sexual Harassment in the Academy: A Crowdsourcing Survey,” “Not on the Radar: Sexual Assault of College Students With Disabilities”) to films (for example, the Hunting Ground) scholars have been describing and showing how this violence is structural, not merely individual or behavioral. A survey titled, “Sexual Harassment in the Academy,” which former Professor of Anthropology Karen Kelsky launched, contains more than 2,000 anonymous anecdotes that describe a wide range of alleged harassment at universities, and the variety and range of sexual violence. From students, staff, and faculty telling their stories and pointing out the effects of such actions and behaviors perpetrated by colleagues or powerful men on their lives, it is clear that academia has been a central site of such sexual predation and violence.

This would be astounding except that we have known all along how persistent such forms of abuse and criminal behavior have been in academia despite the presence of employee resources and safeguards to help prevent or address such abuses. Even when those against whom such crimes have been perpetrated are visible trail blazers they have been forced to leave institutions when they have dared to speak up against sexual harassment, assault

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and rape on their campuses. Take, for example, the allegations against the prominent Harvard comparativist and Latin Americanist, Jorge Dominguez, whose work is presented as “seminal” in introductory Comparative Politics, and who now stands publicly accused by female colleagues and students including the Stanford political scientist, Terry Karl, of harassment and lewd behavior. Although Professor Karl complained to the relevant Harvard authorities about his behavior toward her during her time at Harvard where she was then hired as an assistant professor, there was little meaningful accountability by the institution or pressure and sanctions on Dominguez, which led to Karl’s eventual departure from Harvard. Decades after the harassment and abuse happened to her, and other stories surfaced of Dominguez’s harassment of other colleagues and students in the wake of #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, he has either “retired” or been placed on leave (we are unclear about which one exactly given conflicting media reports). This outcome appears to be a little too late given how Dominguez was promoted and rose in stature in the profession without any lasting damage until now.

Critical, postcolonial and decolonial writers, thinkers, public intellectuals, and scholars whose work we have found more inspiring, are not exempt from this #MeToo wave. Some of those accused are being charged with behavior that is hard to wrap our heads around. A quick scan of the headlines reveals among others, Sherman Alexie, the late Derek Walcott, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Tariq Ramadan, all held up as icons of a critical and postcolonial dismantling of long held presumptions around culture, identity, colonial legacies, and racial oppression. While we acknowledge, these are still only “allegations,” as may be the case with a number of their prominent white counterparts who stand similarly accused, we cannot suspend our belief in all these women’s stories merely because we identify with their alleged abusers’ efforts to unsettle and disrupt through their work anti-blackness, racism, imperialism, coloniality, and settler coloniality. While we recognize intellectual labor that goes into disassembling racist discourses, we cannot stand by the work of those whose actions run completely counter to the principles they may espouse.

The violence outlined is sustained by dominant forms of power without, at least till now, much of any accountability. More radically, this violence co-constitutes certain relational dynamics with long term effects on the bodies and psyches of people, their relations with one another, and intellectual production. It is a violence that is embedded in the workings of the academy. Its persistence raises many questions about connections and possibilities for transformation of spaces that range from classrooms, faculty meetings, academic units, professional associations, boards of journals, offices, conferences, workshops and so forth.

The truth concerning such sexual violence and trauma is not a mere revelation of some constant unchanging provocateur expressions by women, people of color, and other sexual marginalized subjects. Sexual violence and trauma are structural, dynamic and conditioned, with grave effects. And it is important that we do not just see this as another moment that will soon pass or as a form of feminist and gender fanaticism that is out there to “get men” and punish them. What this moment signals to us also is that our relationships depend extensively and deeply on explicit abuses of authority, practices of complicity, and neglect when it comes to creating networks of influence that further perpetuate inequities and abuse.

In a series of panels at the 2017 International Studies Association (ISA) annual conference, called, Transforming International Studies’ Professional Culture(s): Challenging Systemic Oppression, this exposure and formal resistance has begun. In the words of the group that has worked hard to organize around this idea of oppression in the profession, sexual violence as well as other forms of gendered, ableist, and racialized systemic violence, are more prevalent than we sometimes want to admit:

This is a broad-based initiative of a coalition of Caucuses, Sections, Committees and concerned ISA members, including victims/survivors, who recognize the need for drastic change. The panels aim to map problems and to identify solutions in the process critically examining systems of power and privilege that enable various forms of discrimination – especially racism, disability, religion, regionalism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia – that have condoned violent practices, including sexual harassment and assault. Our intent is to focus on key issues and problems as we make inclusion and diversity a cornerstone of both the planning and the execution of the special sessions.

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This ISA initiative should also open up conversations about who gets to gate keep in the discipline, how power, connections, and influence shape career trajectories in the academy, the complicated role of mentorship, and contradictions that surface in the “solidarities” that have been built in the discipline. For example, when terms such as “gender,” sexuality, or “patriarchy” are understood as concepts that belong to whiteness and viewed principally as “feminist” concerns instead of being seen as integral to any analysis of global structures, politics, systems and power, we have a problem.

The #MeToo movement is a critical moment for International Relations on two registers. First, what is and what ought to be the conversation about sexual violence in our field, discipline and practice? Second, what are the stakes in taking seriously the multiple issues that the #MeToo has brought to the fore and many others that it hasn't? Responding to these two questions, of course, requires that we rethink the question of sexual power in IR and how it understands itself, how it produces and organizes people's lives, and what IR's inner workings are in this production. Paying close attention to feminist postcolonial, black, indigenous and queer labor and thought is not just a call for “inclusion” and “integration” of their voices into a discipline that is already built on the elision of racialized sexuality, and gendered and sexual violence. Instead, there must be a collective, public reckoning and commitment to exposing how International Relations has constituted itself through silences embedded in epistemologies that conceal such sexual violence.

In short, what such a commitment entails is moving beyond white and patriarchal reformist apparatuses that legitimize the status quo. Thinking and challenging such sexual violence demands of us to draw on ideas and theorizations that complicate understandings of race, class, gender, sexuality and empire in deeply interconnected ways. We must rupture the complicity and enablement that makes permissible sexual predation and violence and instigate a deeper interrogation of the systems that have long sustained such oppressions in the academy and kept them hidden.

Notes

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