

“Lena Dunham Is Trash”: White Feminist Misogynoir and the Limitations of #MeToo’s Hashtag Activism

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On November 18, 2017, *The Root* published the following headline: “Lena Dunham Is Trash, Issues Apology for Defending Friend against Rape Accusations” (Callahan). The article was written in response to Dunham’s public accusation of Aurora Perrineau, a Black, biracial actress, falsifying her status as a rape survivor. A white celebrity and self-proclaimed feminist best known for her showrunning work on the HBO series *Girls* (2012-2017) and the now-defunct feminist blogging website *Lenny Letter*, Dunham is no stranger to Hollywood’s latest headlines. Dunham presents her celebrity image as someone “who deeply cares... about creating spaces to represent women” (Price). However, Dunham’s provocative social media persona suggests otherwise. After she wondered why NFL player Odell Beckham, Jr. didn’t want to sleep with her in a 2016 *Lenny Letter* article Dunham quickly came under criticism for hypersexualizing Beckham, with whom she has no relationship (Blay). Dunham’s desire to create intimate connections with followers via a quirky persona blurs the boundaries between provocation and racism.

At the height of the Hollywood-driven #MeToo movement in November 2017, Dunham claimed Perrineau lied about *Girls* screenwriter Murray Miller, a white man, having sexually assaulted her when she was a minor. Though Dunham published an op-ed in *The New York Times* in support of other Hollywood actors in October 2017, her stance shifted when a Black woman came forward. Facing pressure from prominent Black Twitter and feminist accomplice enclaves, Dunham soon retracted her words and, a year later, used substance abuse and chronic illness diagnoses to excuse her anti-Blackness and misogyny. Instead of believing Perrineau and amplifying her story, Dunham used her status as a white celebrity

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woman to condemn and gatekeep a Black woman from coming forward and sharing space in the primarily white-feminist led #MeToo movement.

This essay amplifies the vital critique of Black feminist Twitter counterpublics, whose responses to Dunham's anti-Blackness and misogyny reveal hashtag activism's¹ material impacts long past a trending period. I use Bailey and Trudy's portmanteau *misogynoir* – the systemic hatred and erasure of Black women – to frame my understanding of how white feminists often hijack digital activist movements by isolating and erasing Black women from the conversation (473). By white feminism, I am referring to mainstream threads of North American-based popular feminism created by and centering the perspectives of white, cisgendered, heterosexual, wealthy, non-disabled women. White feminism typically upholds patriarchy and ignores or misappropriates intersectionality as an analytic framework. White feminism's narrow lens rarely creates space for Black women (Aziz 165). Contemporary feminisms, such as popular feminism, adapt white feminism to the digital age through a lens of postraciality because of the internet's supposed anonymity (Banet-Weiser 16). This anonymity positions white feminists to conceive of gender as a universally experienced political identity, often erasing the digital presence and labor of Black women. In digital spaces, *misogynoir* reproduces the longevity of white feminist gatekeeping.

Subsequently, I support my use of *misogynoir* as an analytical framework with popular feminism, or neoliberal threads of western feminisms that present a universalized (read: white, middle class) idea of feminism and gender (Banet-Weiser 17); and hipster racism, which refers to white people who believe that their education and socio-economic status absolve them from their roles in white supremacy (Dubrofsky and Wood 282). *Misogynoir*, popular feminism, and hipster racism provide an essential intervention in understanding structures of white feminism in hashtag activism. Through a critical technocultural discourse analysis (Brock) of tweets and popular press articles, I ask: How is *misogynoir* constituted in online practices of white feminism?

The essay is organized as follows. I initially explain the networking between popular feminism and hipster racism. The subsequent section presents a brief history of Twitter-based hashtag activism and feminist organizing, noting why this platform uniquely hosts transformative movements simultaneously committed to

¹ Hashtag activism refers to strategies that digital counterpublics and subsequent allies employ through the use of hashtags (#) to make “political contentions about identity politics that advocate for social change, identity redefinition, and political inclusion” (Jackson et al. xviii).

racial and gender justice. The following section introduces critical technocultural discourse analysis as a research technique prioritizing digital cultural politics. I then use misogynoir to interpret Dunham’s cooption of the original metoo movement² in 2017 while simultaneously amplifying the necessary interventions brought forth by Black feminist Twitter enclaves. I conclude by discussing how white feminists limit #MeToo’s potential because of racist gatekeeping on and offline.

Popular Feminism, Hipster Racism, and the Problem of White Feminism

Lena Dunham’s critically acclaimed, semi-autobiographical series *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017) received pushback for its lack of diverse racial representation. Moreover, the series received note for Dunham’s portrayal of anti-hero Hannah Horvath, a provocative aspiring writer. *Girls’* depiction of feminism reflected growing trends in popular feminism, which relies on the “universality” of gender; its dominance sustains the networking between media institutions (Banet-Weiser 14). Popular feminism also buttresses popular misogyny, a reactive and objectifying strategy dehumanizing and devaluing women (Banet-Weiser 2-3). This complex pull is inherent to popular feminism. One may engage in feminism that matches their ideals and values, yet a reaction to feminism that digresses from one’s own beliefs will be met with the misogyny that a feminist would claim to reject.

The push and pull of popular celebrity feminisms and popular misogyny becomes further complicated with hipster racism. Here, I refer to the dominance of white, upper/middle-class, cosmopolitan-dwelling, college educated North American people who use their education and class status to excuse racism as innocence (Dubrofsky and Wood). For example, after commentary on *Girls’* lack of diverse racial representation, Dunham claimed she was only writing what she knew and argued that she never intended to tokenize the series’ few Black characters (Bernstein). Dunham’s self-reflection allows her portrayal as someone who is “too aware of being racist” (Dubrofsky and Wood 285). Hipster racism frames racist performances, such as Blackface or cultural appropriation, as ironic, satirical, or artistic. White celebrity women deflect and justify hipster racist

² I use “metoo” or “me too” when referring to Tarana Burke’s original phrase; #MeToo is used for the mainstream movement.

behavior through emphasizing self-growth, apologia, and naivete. I mark white feminism as a type of popular feminism that emerges at the intersection of whiteness and upper/middle-class mobilities. White feminism's single-issue approach to gender equality fails to account for the ways race intersects with gender and class, leaving racialized women behind. Misogynoir explains how white feminists weaponize this erasure to deny Black women agency (Bailey and Trudy 766). Because popular feminisms, like white feminism, evolve only to serve white, upper/middle-class women, it does not include Black women and girls within its contours.

Twitter's Black Feminist Hashtag Activism

Over the past 15 years, Twitter evolved into one of the most popular global social networking sites, with over 300 million users (Jackson et al xxiv.). The hashtag is central to the site's success. Formed by the # key, hashtags increase the visibility of a user's tweets – often with a short, memorable phrase or keyword (Jackson et al. xxviii). Hashtags are valuable tools in pointing political conversations in a particular direction and serve as a hybrid “connecting online with offline” (Kuo 496). Through Twitter's algorithm, hashtags organize and link together. Based on high levels of user interaction, hashtags “trend,” referring to a point of viral popularity (Kuo 496). The more a hashtag is used or shared, the more Twitter's algorithm will prioritize it.

More recently, Twitter's longevity is supported by its function as a consciousness-raising tool for facilitating social change. Enclaves, or users united by a shared identity or social cause, use the site for “democratizing discourse” (Kuo 496) via reframing dominant socio-cultural conversations, exposing injustices, and promoting policy change through viral hashtags. For instance, Black Twitter emerged in the early 2010s due to the percentage of Black Americans engaging on the network for signifyin' Black cultural discourse through hashtags, tweet challenges, and cultural production that eschewed (dominant) white publics (Brock). Importantly, Black social media enclaves are not a new invention. Black counterpublics traditionally served as alternative spaces for coalition-building against hegemonic white supremacist discourses (Squires 449). Black newspapers, churches, and other social institutions prioritized “Black publicity, rights, and interests... [that] transformed into strategies to counter the oppression of White

Supremacist rule” (Squires 451). In the digital age, the legacies of these Black cultural organizations live on in Black (feminist) social media enclaves³.

Racial justice hashtag activism quickly became an essential part of North American organizing throughout the 2010s. Users rely on hashtags to address injustice and catalyze social change by negotiating politics and identity. For instance, in the hashtag #PaulasBestDishes, users concurrently engaged in racial justice hashtag activism and community building by paying satirical homage to former *Food Network* star Paula Deen after she was fired (Clark 210). Likewise, #FergusonIsEverywhere powerfully addressed the permanence of anti-Black racism and police brutality following the extrajudicial murder of Michael Brown and the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014 (Jackson and Foucault Welles). Racial justice hashtag activism is a critical strategy for building community when mainstream media institutions typically fail to report or are responsible for racism (Clark 210). The power of a hashtag amplifies the voices and perspectives of marginalized communities, bringing issues forward to everyday (offline) conversation.

Many early feminist hashtag activist enclaves centered on white women’s stories, failing to consider Black women and their perspectives. Therefore, Black feminist Twitter users created new hashtags to “combat the institutionalization of Black women’s experience with abuse when mainstream media erases it” (Williams 342). This is especially the case in Black feminist hashtag activist movements, as “social media is grounded in African-American communication styles and patterns” (Durham 207). For instance, writer Mikki Kendall created #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen to highlight the systemic erasure of Black women’s experiences surrounding #YesAllWomen. More importantly the hashtag gained significant traction outside of Twitter becoming a cultural artifact “that was easily shared between online and physical settings without losing its meaning” (Clark 214). Black feminist hashtag activism often serves as a strategy of resistance for Black women to simultaneously challenge systems of white supremacy and gendered violence in order to bring justice for racialized women (Williams 343). Black feminist Twitter facilitates important world-making through storytelling, organizing, and digital community building. Intersectionality interrogates the

³ Through the use of related hashtags, Twitter hosts many counterpublics: communities united through dialogues challenging or disidentifying with dominant cultural conversations. Popular Twitter counterpublics, like #BlackTwitter, #GirlsLikeUs, and #DisabilityTwitter, foster spaces for influential dialogues on identity politics that shape offline culture.

various ways in which race and gender concurrently shape structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against racialized women (Crenshaw 1242). Intersectional readings of North American media texts help address and interrogate dangerous media tropes about Black women and girls (Crenshaw). Social networking sites like Twitter emerged as a place where publics could learn about the relationship between race, gender, and rape culture in creative, innovative ways through digital communications (Mendes et al. 237). Specifically, Black feminist hashtags privilege conversations centering Black feminist thought and critique.

#MeToo

Intersectionality is an essential tool for analyzing the digital #MeToo movement. #MeToo (stylized initially as Metoo or me too) was started by Tarana Burke, a Black woman and community organizer in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 2006. Burke created her non-profit, Just Be, Inc., as a space for Black women and girls to discuss the intersections of race, gender, and domestic violence. Using the phrase “me too” allowed survivors in the group to acknowledge the impact of sexual violence and create community (Jackson et al.). Metoo allowed survivors to reclaim bodily autonomy and recover.

On October 5, 2017, Metoo’s digital iteration began when white Hollywood actresses Ashley Judd and Rose McGowan came forward in a *New York Times* exposé with sexual assault accusations against Miramax Films co-founder Harvey Weinstein. Another white celebrity woman survivor, Alyssa Milano, tweeted on October 15: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet... we might give people a sense of magnitude of the problem...” (@Alyssa_Milano). Milano’s tweet collected nearly 40,000 retweets, 50,000 likes, and received almost 62,000 replies, effectively launching Burke’s phrase into cyberspace. White celebrity women were quickly associated with coining #MeToo. At the time, Burke was virtually unknown outside of Black feminist Twitter enclaves and community organizing in New York and Philadelphia.

Concerned with erasure, Burke took to Twitter to emphasize her previous work and authorship: “It’s beyond a hashtag. It’s the start of a radical conversation and movement for community healing. Join Us. #MeToo” (@TaranaBurke). Burke’s tweet collected over a thousand likes, and Milano quickly shared a link to Just Be, Inc.: “I was just made aware of an earlier #MeToo movement, and the origin story is equal parts heartbreaking and inspiring” (Olheiser). Despite the shift towards

crediting Burke, white celebrity women remained as the #MeToo spokespeople. Instances of early appropriation and erasure in #MeToo reveal ways that white upper/middle-class women with social capital hold power in cultural conversations about sexual assault. White women are imagined as the creators of social movements – even when Black women initiate the cause.

I will clarify that the issue at hand is not white celebrities participating in #MeToo: the hashtag’s powerful potential allowed even the most privileged of white women to be taken seriously when coming forward about sexual assault (Jackson et al.). As I explain in the following sections, I am addressing how white celebrity women’s involvement with #MeToo systematized pushback, gatekeeping, and erasure of Black women’s work and experiences. Bailey and Trudy coin this as misogynoir, which traces its roots toward the era of institutionalized enslavement of Black people in the Americas (763). Misogynoir intends to prioritize the experiences of Black women and girls, whose stories are illegitimated by white supremacy. Misogynoir names “specific types of violence” enacted through anti-Black racism and is communicated through polysemous strategies (Bailey and Trudy 764). Bailey and Trudy identify misogynoir’s typical evolution in digital spaces: Black women content creators are mocked or receive pushback from white feminists for their work until the mainstream absorbs it and white feminists take credit for Black women’s authorship through several gatekeeping strategies. I position misogynoir as a theoretical tool to assess how white feminism limits #MeToo’s hashtag activism, using Lena Dunham and her accusation-apology to Aurora Perrineau as a case study.

Methodology

Critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) is a multimodal technique used to investigate how offline semiotic frameworks and cultural practices inform artifacts produced via new media technologies, such as social networking sites (Brock 2). CTDA privileges the power of digital activism originating from ordinary users, centering experiences, conversations, or discourses derived outside of individuals and institutions upholding cultural power, such as politicians, corporations, or celebrities (Kuo). CTDA emphasizes the importance of intersectionality to map out dominant interlocking frameworks of oppression that limit hashtag activism’s liberatory potentials. CTDA presents social media enclaves, like Black Twitter, as important counterpublics. For example, I am

interested in how Black feminist Twitter users and accomplices used their respective enclaves to condemn Dunham's anti-Black feminism. CTDA's appreciation for multiperspectival analysis explores the depth of interconnectivity in digital users reacting and interacting with Dunham's content. Through my study of Dunham's tweets, CTDA reveals that her misogynoir is a symptom of more considerable ideological violence of white feminist practices.

I pay keen attention to tweets as primary texts. Though Dunham has large social media followings on other platforms, I selected Twitter because it hosts the largest follower count (as of April 2022, she had 5.2 million followers). I use the following for my data sets: Dunham's tweets; tweets from other public, verified users responding to or writing about Dunham; and popular press articles published around two dates: November 17, 2017 (the date Dunham issued her accusation against Perrineau) and November 25, 2018 (the day after Dunham's apology interview with *The Cut* was published). I selected tweets from public verified users and tweets from users quoted in popular press articles to "map" and account for their cultural production and labor (Kim and Kim). My essay expands upon recent commentary on Dunham's white feminist apologia (Dunne; Maule). However, I explicitly focus on Dunham's misogynoir to address pervasive anti-Blackness and misogyny in digital feminist movements.

Lena Dunham's White Feminist Misogynoir in #MeToo

I use misogynoir to map out Dunham's anti-Blackness and misogyny in #MeToo. Misogynoir evolves in three stages: mocking or pushback of Black women, gatekeeping of Black women, and eventual erasure of Black women's labor as the mainstream absorbs their cultural content. I chronicle how white feminist hashtag activists recreate offline historical patterns of misogynoir through gatekeeping and erasing Black women and girls from social movements.

Mocking. On November 17, 2017, Hollywood tabloid *The Wrap* reported that 23 year-old actress Aurora Perrineau filed a report with the Los Angeles Police Department to charge 44 year-old *Girls* screenwriter Murray Miller of sexual assault (Donnelly and Molloy). Perrineau stated the assault occurred in 2012, when she was a minor, and completed both polygraph tests and psychological interviews before filing. It is of interest that Murray had a personal friendship with Dunham at the time of the assault. Later that evening, Dunham and former *Girls* producer Jenni Konner (also a white woman) took to Twitter and *The Hollywood Reporter*:

But during every time of change there are incidences of the culture, in its enthusiasm and zeal, taking down the wrong targets. We believe, after working closely with him for over half a decade, that this is the case with Murray Miller. While our first instinct is to listen to every woman’s story, our insider knowledge of Murray’s situation makes us confident that this is one of the 3 percent of assault cases that are misreported every year. It is a true shame to add to that number, as outside of Hollywood women still struggled to be believed. We stand by Murray and this is all we’ll be saying about the issue. (Parker)

Bailey and Trudy note that the mocking stage of misogynoir refers to a systemic pushback of Black women’s words or work from a dominant group (764). For example, in Dunham and Konner’s statement, the nameless Perrineau is reduced to no more than a faulty statistic (“this is one of the 3 percent of assault cases that are misreported”). Dunham and Konner also claim that Perrineau’s coming forward will hurt women everywhere (“It’s a true shame to add to that number”). As members of a dominant group (white celebrity women), Dunham and Konner dehumanize Perrineau, stripping her of her agency as a survivor and as a Black, biracial woman.

Additionally, the statement positions Perrineau as an unrapable Jezebel (Hine). Jezebels are often characterized as excessive, irrational, and ultimately unable to control her emotions and actions (Collins 81). Dunham and Konner use adjectives like “zeal” and “enthusiastic” to demarcate Perrineau as taking advantage of the #MeToo media frenzy. Their description closely aligns with the Jezebel’s perceived threat to white men’s dominance and power (Collins). In the statement, the unnamed Perrineau is presented as a threat to the majority of (white woman) Hollywood survivors coming forward.

Black feminist Twitter users remarked on Dunham’s quick transition to misogynoir when a Black woman came forward. Many tweets named how white women contribute to the mocking and pushback of Black women. Journalist Rebecca Pierce wrote, “Aurora Perrineau... [was] signaled [sic] out for awful smearing by rapists and their supporters because Black women are considered less believable, but also bc rapes against us weren’t a crime for the majority of U.S. history. We don’t get that ‘pure’ white victimhood” (Pierce). Journalist Eternity Martis remarked upon the limitations of Dunham’s feminism, writing that the statement was “more evidence that Lena Dunham is absolute trash, and how self-serving white feminists leave WOC behind. She ‘believes’ all women, writes an

article on how men can do better, then defends her white male friend who is being accused of sexual assault by a young black actress.” Mikki Kendall also retweeted the statement, signing off with, “Hey, remember when Black women told you that racism will let white women sell out WOC? #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen... People who talk about rape culture & consent when they talk about white women are going to show you how much they believe WOC have no selves to defend. Don’t forget this lesson” (Kendall). Additional tweets called Dunham “trash” and a “feminist failure” for issuing the statement, remarking upon how her feminism failed to include a Black woman.

Popular feminisms (and misogyny) attach to discourses of accommodation, often taking on a universalized approach to a single issue, such as sexual violence. In doing so, popular feminisms like white feminism erase and devalue the contributions, perspectives, and lived experiences of marginalized people (Banet-Weiser 14). Conversely, Black feminist counterpublics readily name and acknowledge political intersections of identity by naming and educating about systemic violence through tweets, memes, and storytelling (Clark). Here, counterpublics address Dunham and Konner’s mocking of Perrineau in her statement as a repetition in American history where white women contribute to the dehumanization of Black women through pushing back on the realities of their sexual trauma. The erasure of a Black woman sexual assault survivor from the statement reifies the violence that comes from misogynoir’s erasure and malignment of Black women over their narratives. Through their demarcation of what a sexual assault survivor should and should not do, Dunham and Konner align themselves with upholding white supremacist patriarchy.

Gatekeeping. White feminist misogynoir is common in hashtag activist movements: Black women are mocked until a white feminist participates and claims the organizing as their own or determines who can be involved. The historical hatred, erasure, and decentering of Black women in United States (popular) culture continues into the digital age, creating an “overall silence in mainstream media to address the concerns of girls and women of color” (Durham 212). The white feminist-led #MeToo movement reproduced this, focusing on white celebrity women while invalidating Black and racialized women. Once #MeToo crossed into the mainstream, Dunham quickly positioned herself as a prominent figure and ally for the (primarily white) celebrity women who spoke out against Weinstein’s abuse. In an October 2017 New York Times essay, Dunham rallied for women everywhere to uplift one another, writing: “Hollywood’s

silence... only reinforces the culture that keeps women from speaking... When we stay silent, we stay on the path that led us here...” (Dunham). Dunham also tweeted to establish her solidarity, such as: “Things women lie about: what we ate for lunch. Things women don’t lie about: rape” (Dunham). Dunham branded her mission operative as empathetic and survivor-centered. However, it is essential to note that the only survivors Dunham supported were white women.

Black feminist Twitter users noted the ways Dunham and Konner gatekept with the release of their statement. In response to Dunham and Konner, Tarana Burke tweeted: “People wonder why I keep saying marginalized voices need to be centered @lenadunham is the reason why. Maybe I should be more clear: BELIEVE BLACK WOMEN... Dunham’s statement is trash... #IStandWithAuroraPerrineau” (Burke). Burke’s naming of Dunham’s gatekeeping refers to the various ways that white feminists fall back on their allegiances with white men (Crenshaw 1261). Bailey and Trudy note that misogynoir often occurs when Black women use digital spaces to collectively generate ideas, thoughts, and actions. Though white feminists initially reject or mock Black women’s content, white feminists begin to gatekeep this work, erasing Black women’s agency as discourse enters the (white) mainstream.

Following this initial criticism, Dunham tweeted a second statement: “I believe in a lot of things but the first tenet of my politics is to hold up the people who have held me up, who have filled up my world with love” (Dunham). Again, in direct accordance with misogynoir, Dunham abandoned her feminist principles to protect a white male rapist. Disability justice activist Imani Barbarin retweeted Dunham: “Retweet if you remember when POCs said her feminism was conditional? *sips mint tea*.” Barbarin and other interlocutors demonstrate how white feminists like Dunham more readily realign themselves with white supremacy and rape culture than with Black women. Dunham’s gatekeeping of #MeToo constructs white women coming forward about assault as natural, authentic, and necessary. Conversely, Dunham pathologized a young Black woman performing the same action as a threat to white woman coming forward about sexual assault.

Erasure. The last stage of misogynoir, erasure, reveals the violent removal of Black women from social movements through a culmination of white feminist mockery, pushback, and gatekeeping. Bailey and Trudy note misogynoir exposes “the unique ways Black women’s bodies are pathologized... and maligned” (763). As #MeToo’s permanence in mainstream media held steadfastly, white celebrity women like Dunham usurped further control through their gatekeeping. Dunham

shared the following post on November 18, 2017, after receiving backlash for accusing Perrineau:

As feminists, believing women is the first choice... Therefore I never thought that I would issue a statement publicly (sic) supporting someone accused of sexual assault, but I naively believed that it was important to share my perspective on my friend's situation as it transpired behind the scenes over the last few months. I now understand it was absolutely the wrong time to come forward with such a statement and I am so sorry... every person and every feminist should be required to hear her... Until we are all believed, none of us will be believed. We apologize to any women we may have offended. (Dunham)

In this initial apology, Dunham never addresses Perrineau by name, continuing to uphold misogynoir's erasure of Black women. Dunham also uses terms like "naively," "I now understand," and "sharing my perspective." Dunham's uses of these phrases chalks her behavior up to a childlike mistake, not racism. Additionally, Dunham's emphasis on exonerating her public persona aims to rehabilitate her celebrity image, rather than addressing her misogynoir (Dunne 268). Dunham's statement reflects that of many white celebrity women's public apologies to absolve their role in racism without holding themselves accountable (Dubrofsky and Wood). Finally, instead of addressing Perrineau by name, Dunham dedicates her apology to "any women we may have offended." Failures to name and account for racism in public apology statements become strategies to conceal and reproduce whiteness (Holling et al. 262). By omitting Perrineau's name, the transparency behind this apology reaffirms the power that white celebrity women like Dunham hold over Black women. Though these statements attempt to demonstrate "self-growth," justifying misogynoir reproduces the longevity of white feminist gatekeeping in digital activism.

Many Black feminist Twitter users who retweeted or replied to Dunham called on her to name Perrineau and directly apologize. Others told Dunham that she was "cancelled" and not a true feminist. Sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom wrote: "It is hard to imagine a better avatar for a white liberal capitalist feminism like Dunham. Truly this is *kisses fingers* spot on for that brand" (McMillan Cottom). *The Independent* noted: "Among what Dunham and Konner describe as 'a windfall of deeply necessary accusations' are the maligned voices of people of color... Women like Dunham, who have so vehemently supported the exposure of sexual harassment in the media, change course when the victims of this culture are non-

white” (Kang). White feminists, like Dunham, use their social media platforms as an attempt to control the actions of Black women from having space in mainstream hashtag activist movements. Noting the original me too movement’s intersectional origins, Banet-Weiser suggests its transition to a digital global movement replaced its original intent with white, upper/middle-class North American feminist ideals, narrowing the visibility and amplification for the communities me too was created for (15). Black feminist hashtag activism’s important interventions in social movements undermined by white feminism not only amplifies the lived experiences of Black women, but also addresses the ways white feminists silence or usurp space (Clark 214). Dunham’s defense of a white man and rapist is indicative of a more prominent cultural symptom of white supremacist gatekeeping in feminist social movements.

“High as a Kite...”: Justifying Hipster Racism

White celebrity women often rely on quirky and self-absorbed apology statements to exonerate racist social media posts (Dubrofsky and Wood). Likewise, Dunham’s apologies sustain white supremacy and misogynoir by centering herself (Dunne 267). Dunham used explicitly emotional social media posts to simultaneously gain sympathy from followers while authenticating her misogynoir as natural innocence. Nearly one year after her accusation, Dunham issued a 1,400-word apology letter in *The Hollywood Reporter* directly addressing Perrineau: “It’s painful that... I internalized the dominant agenda that asks us to internalize it no matter what... *I see you, Aurora. I hear you, Aurora. I believe you, Aurora*” (Dunham). A November 25, 2018 interview with *The Cut* revealed that Dunham privately reconciled with Perrineau. However, Dunham does not explain the details behind what happened in the meeting, obfuscating the accountability she claims. In the same interview, Dunham spoke at length about her accusation against Perrineau, disclosing to the reporter that she knew about Perrineau’s police report weeks before the press discovered the story. When *The Wrap* leaked the news, Dunham was “high... as a kite” on painkillers following a hysterectomy (Davis). It was not Dunham’s fault for her racist accusation against Perrineau, but her painkiller addiction. Here, Dunham uses her substance abuse to excuse misogynoir. Her hipster racist ideology fails to “own the particularity of whiteness... and the failure to acknowledge that, in a racist context, a ‘white’ voice stands in relationship to the authority of a ‘black’ voice” (Aziz 164). Instead of addressing harm, Dunham’s

non-apology reflects the ways that Black women must always intervene when white women reproduce misogynoir through their exclusion of Black women from conversations of systemic sexual violence.

Responses to Dunham's "apology" reflect the collective agency of Black feminist hashtag activism. Users questioned Dunham's accountability and noted that she failed to address her white feminism and class privilege. The onset of responses reflects the critical work and agency of Black feminists and accomplices in agitating against the pervasive harm caused by white feminists through storytelling and satire. Black feminist Twitter enclaves make essential interventions when white feminist shut out racialized women from hashtag activism (Clark 214). What good is #MeToo when white feminists co-opt the movement? Dunham's misogynoir reveals how white feminists fail to protect Black women: her hollow rhetoric does not repair but continues to feed systemic anti-Blackness and misogyny in conversations of sexual violence.

Conclusion: The Limits of #MeToo

In the nearly five years since the digital #MeToo movement began, the hashtag's hybridity⁴ showcases the potentialities and limitations of hashtag activism. Twitter fosters the democratizing potential of storytelling as a catalyst for social change at the intersections of race and gender (Jackson et al.). #MeToo created space for survivors to build community and seek justice. A CTDA of #MeToo shows how conversations about interrogating rape culture not only gained traction on social media but also catalyzed a crucial cultural shift offline. In 2019, Asian American artist Chanel Miller (formerly known as Emily Doe) released her award-winning memoir *Know My Name*. The book chronicled Miller's experiences as a sexual assault survivor and plaintiff in the *People v. Turner* trial. 2020 also saw the undoing of Harvey Weinstein, who was subsequently sentenced to 23 years in prison after several celebrity women testified against him in court (Pilkington). As a digital counterpublic, #MeToo reveals the transformative power of hashtag activism's offline impact.

Whom is #MeToo for? Originally, Metoo was created by Tarana Burke for Black women and girls to create community and provide a space for healing.

⁴ Kuo uses hybridity in reference to a hashtag's intertextual nature. Rarely used independently, hashtags serve as "indexing tools" connecting on and offline social events together (496). Likewise, my use of hybridity refers to the ways #MeToo connected on and offline feminist practices together.

However, white celebrity women like Lena Dunham were quick to take on #MeToo as their own invention when the hashtag went viral. I suggest that white celebrity women’s hijacking of #MeToo limits its potentialities for facilitating democratizing discourses. This is not to say Burke’s work is not important. Instead, I propose that Dunham’s role speaks to a more pervasive level of misogynoir within white feminist-led hashtag activism. For example, Black feminist Twitter users found in early hashtag activist moments (e.g., #YesAllWomen) were quickly absorbed and gatekeeping by white users in feminist Twitter enclaves (Clark). There are many Lena Dunhams: white feminists with class privilege who believe in the universal “goodness” of their feminism. In reality, white feminists take up space and cause harm by ignoring the concerns of Black women, thus becoming part of the problem (once more). In June 2020, Dunham reflected on her relationship with white supremacy, saying: “The goal is now to use my platform to support emerging Black artists, BIPOC artists, [and] LGBTQ artists” (Kirkpatrick). However, nearly five years after her statement against Perrineau, Dunham has done little to repair the harm of her previous misogynoir aside from ambiguous blanket statements on her various social media platforms.

Hashtag activist movements are powerful tools for ordinary people to facilitate conversations at the intersections of racial and gender justice. However, white supremacy’s legacies still threaten the mobilization of Black feminist hashtag activism. In a 2017 interview with *The Washington Post*, Tarana Burke remarked that #MeToo is merely contemporary strategy to agitate against systemic sexual violence (Olheiser). Perhaps it is the work of Black feminist activists that will outlive the limitations of white celebrity social media activism and popular feminism.

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