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Private Lives of Public Figures

Charlotte Miriam Albert
Bard College

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Private Lives of Public Figures

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Charlotte Miriam Albert

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For Mema.

*Without your unconditional love and support,
none of this would have been possible.*

Introduction

"Everything that deceives may be said to enchant."
- Plato, *The Republic*

We are currently experiencing a moment of social and political destabilization. In the wake of President Donald Trump's election in 2016, there has been a dramatic shift in the use of social media for political proclamations and condemnations. The swell of social media, the Trump campaign, and subsequent administration triggered a spike in public allegations of sexual misconduct. The #MeToo movement, which gained momentum on social media in 2017, inspired a national trend of sharing intensely private and personal experiences of sexual assault on public-online platforms.^{1,2} The sea of anecdotal evidence, in the absence of an equitable justice system, illuminates the oft-ignored and misrepresented experiences of victims. This moment of civil disobedience foregrounds the desire for change on levels both personal and political.

Since the proliferation of the #MeToo movement came into being only two years ago, there is a limited amount of academic literature on the movement. Within the existing literature, social media is the primary condition that triggered this rapid trend. I argue that social media is not the condition, rather a symptom of pre-existing sociopolitical tensions. The effects thereof are viewed as the result of social media because it is easier to blame one small facet of interaction than to acknowledge systemic social issues that precipitate these events and

¹ Milano, Alyssa. "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." Twitter. October 15, 2017, 1:21 PM. https://twitter.com/alyssa_milano/status/919659438700670976?lang=en. The social media trend of #MeToo began after this Tweet by Alyssa Milano in 2017.

² Burke, Tarana. "The woman behind 'Me Too' knew the power of the phrase when she created it—10 years ago." Interview. The Washington Post. Last modified October 10, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/theintersect/wp/2017/10/19/the-woman-behind-me-too-knew-the-power-of-the-phrase-when-she-created-it-10-years-ago/>. Tarana Burke, founder of the MeToo Foundation, originally, coined the phrase back in 2006.

interventions. As these tensions become part of large-scale public contention, many scholars turn to Western philosophy to understand this seemingly new phenomenon.

With such a widely impactful subject matter, it becomes helpful to narrow one's lens and define the structure. This project begins with an introductory chapter focusing on the public-private distinction, storytelling, and the impacts of the digital age. The sub-chapters therein analyze and critique existing literature on this topic. After this framework is set, two chapters of case studies are presented. The first details and comments upon the Monica Lewinsky-Bill Clinton scandal of 1998, and the second on Christine Ford's statements leading up to and during Brett Kavanaugh's Senate Judiciary hearing of 2017. These two cases illustrate the different effects that personal narratives have as they are brought into the public-political realm.

*

Power Structures

Hannah Arendt explores the dangers of modern technology on the private-public distinction in *The Human Condition*. The rise of, what Arendt calls the social realm has dismantled the distinction between the two realms. This complicates the way in which we think, act, and exist in society. Without a private realm, such as the four walls of the home, there is no space for "self-reflective critical thinking."³ This hinders our ability to act and speak with true agency, as the social realm promotes monotony rather than difference. The public realm, for Arendt, is where "men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world."⁴ The problem is the limitation on who gets to

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). The phrase "Self-reflective critical thinking" is from Samantha Rose Hill to summarize Arendt's conception of thinking [from a personal communication].

⁴ Arendt, *The Human*, 179. This "who" we are is commonly mistaken for "what" we are since our unique perspectives are limited to our own speech and actions rather than in the appearance of these actions to others.

have a public platform. Historically, the people who had access to a public audience were the highly-educated, wealthy men of society. Those outside of this standard were not treated with the same respected regard. This is no longer the case, however, these implicit ideals are still fundamental to our political structures.

In the public realm, our actions become meaningful through public recognition within the context of plurality. In the words of Arendt, “Action...corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world.”⁵ Actions are meaningless without public recognition; action is quintessential for publicity and plurality. Recognition enables us to understand the unique perspectives of our fellow men that contribute to our shared world. Patchen Markell critiques the politics of recognition in his work, *Bound by Recognition*. Using Arendt as a primary interlocutor, Markell argues that political recognition should not be inherently relied on as it complicates and obscures identity politics. Political and interpersonal recognition requires vulnerability—a vulnerability of being amongst our fellow men—especially as “our identities are shaped in part through the unpredictable responses of other people.”⁶ This ideal standard of recognition hinders us from the ability to conceal aspects of our being—making all aspects of our being knowable. This is dangerous for Markell as it prohibits our autonomy through a political standard for “what acting ‘authentically’ means for [our society]” Markell offers an alternative approach to combating standards of political recognition in what he calls the “politics of acknowledgment”. This approach supports the Arendtian plurality—as it “makes unpredictability and lack of mastery into unavoidable conditions of human agency.”⁷—by preventing a flattening of our being into a singular identity

⁵ Arendt, *The Human*, 7.

⁶ Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 12-16.

⁷ Markell, 180.

for political stability. While Markell does not expand on the complexities of recognition in light of the digital age, he does suggest that we must use the state as a tool for acknowledgment, specifically in moments when recognition is at stake.⁸ This can be done in direct conversation with existing political frameworks—i.e. social movements of civil disobedience—in pursuit of radical change.

Arendt's public-private distinction is widely addressed within contemporary political theory literature, including feminist readings and interpretations that aim to explore what Arendt omits from her own work. Linda Zerilli critiques Arendt from a feminist perspective in her talk "Is The Private Political?"⁹ The public realm, for Arendt, is necessary for freedom; in order to have freedom, we must be able to participate in the public in order to shape the world from our unique perspectives. While Arendt was not a feminist, her framework of freedom continues to be used in feminist movements in the pursuit of equality. Women, who have historically been banned from the public realm, demanded to be accepted and given equal access to the public.¹⁰ While that was the case during the suffragette's movements, we are now seeing the same call to action in queer communities, people of color, and religious groups as they fight for recognition in the public realm. As we are constantly redefining and shaping the world, as diverse voices contribute to our conception of the world, the political realm must also shift to include these new voices.¹¹ The problem is that the political realm isn't adapting to these new voices and we must alter our thinking surrounding these spaces of freedom in order to prevent them from

⁸ Markell, 126.

⁹ Linda Zerilli, "Is The Body Political" (lecture, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, April 21, 2017). Hosted by the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities and the Gender and Sexuality Studies Program as part of a one-day colloquium on Natality, Laboring, and the Body. The lecture can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWKBmMHIY1M>.

¹⁰ Zerilli, "Is The Body."

¹¹ The voices of individuals who are not commonly represented in political affairs—i.e. women, people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community. These voices are important as we cannot truly have a plural world, in the Arendtian sense, if these voices are omitted from public discourse.

disappearing forever. Zerilli questions the way sexed bodies appear in the public realm; is the body political? Is what Arendt considered private affairs—that should remain hidden in the private realm—something that should be politicized in the hopes of public recognition?

Women's bodies are contested within feminist literature. Some argue that women's bodies are inherently political, while others want to exempt women's bodies from political jurisdiction.

When bodies are politicized they are no longer our own, they become extensions of the state. The physical body is personal; our body is our true private realm as it holds our being and allows us to think, breath, move, and experience. Our skin becomes the four walls of the home, and our bones the support system protecting the fragile, intimate contents. If the state exerts control over our bodies, our last tie to privacy will be forever lost. The politicization of bodies means the sacrifice of autonomy. This also means losing natality which Arendt works in conjunction with plurality to make the world durable to the unknown and unexpected. This is not to say that we should do away with politics, on the contrary, Zerilli agrees with Arendt that law and order are crucial to prevent anarchy, what we need is a new way of thinking about bodies and spaces of freedom in the face of mass politicization and the flattening of collective bodies.¹²

*

Remembrance & Storytelling

Socrates is often called upon within the Western tradition of political philosophy as an exemplar of a truth-teller and of civil disobedience, yet he is merely a subjective ideal. Socrates is an allegorical example of the experience of men who are discursively privileged and recognized as public figures. This completely disregards the narratives of those outside of the traditional public platforms. Socrates is used by many public figures to illustrate the ideal citizen;

¹² Flattening, in the Arendtian sense, is the delegitimization of meaningful difference.

Martin Luther King Jr. in his “Letters from a Birmingham Jail,” participates in this traditional rhetoric,

But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word ‘tension.’ I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, non-violent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.¹³

This tradition is replicated by countless public figures in addition to customarily disenfranchised individuals. This rhetoric is so ingrained in Western thought as the ideal truth-tellers of society that it rarely is called into question. The ideologies of modern scholars are shaped by the tradition of Western thought and the figures who changed the course of history for centuries. While scholars are critical of Socrates, rarely is the significance of Socrates disputed or challenged. Socrates’ actions—as presented in the various accounts of scholars after his lifetime—are undeniably significant to Western thought; my concern is that as society continues to evolve at a rapid rate, this significance will no longer be beneficial while preparing for the unpredictable future. I propose putting this traditional rhetoric in conversation with modern scholars in order to parse out the underlying tensions that are currently affecting our sociopolitical climate while using the rhetoric of the past to explain how we got here. This allows the significance to remain tied to the life-story of Socrates while calling non-traditional life-stories that did not have the ability to be as influential as they were unable to be a part of the public realm.

¹³ King, Martin Luther, *Letter from the Birmingham jail* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).

Storytelling enables our meaningful actions to remain a part of history. Hannah Arendt claims that we are “not the authors of our own life story.”¹⁴ For Arendt this means that we are dependent on others to tell our stories for us. Socrates is exemplary of this, for Arendt, as his meaningful actions would have been lost without narrators to recount the pre-historical significance of his life-story.¹⁵ Narratives allow our actions and public deeds to push against the temporality of our being. Temporality, a key element of storytelling, creates distance between the event itself and the current moment. This distance enables critical reflection on not only our own experiences but on the life-stories of public figures that shape our current political reality as well as prepare us for the unpredictable future. Narratives hold a questionable degree of truth, as the storyteller, not the actor, is responsible for preserving meaning and significance in their story. Storytellers, for Arendt, “tell us more about their subjects, the ‘hero’ in the center of each story, than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it.”¹⁶ These stories contextualize our past and present, as well as provide examples to reference in the future.

Adriana Cavarero, in her book, *Relating Narratives*, engages with Arendt’s notion of storytelling as she examines the relationship between the self and narratives. The narrative of a life story, according to Cavarero, “offers an alternative sense to politics, not only because it deals with unique persons, but because it illustrates the interaction of unique people.”¹⁷ This goes beyond Arendt, who states, “that every individual life can eventually be told as a story with a beginning and an end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history.”¹⁸ Our narratives are political acts. These narratives are integral to politics as they illustrate the unique

¹⁴ Arendt, *The Human*, 184.

¹⁵ Arendt, *The Human*.

¹⁶ Arendt, *The Human*, 184.

¹⁷ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, digital print. ed. (London [u.a.]: Routledge, 2010), x.

¹⁸ Arendt, *The Human*, 184.

perspectives and experiences of citizens rather than subjecting them to a singular, collective narrative. Our life-story is important in our current world, we should not depend on time and history to preserve our narratives. Cavarero's work explores the possibility of re-orienting our political realm, by rejecting the traditional distinction between private and public life, in order to make politics closer to the private experiences of the collective public.

*

Impacts of the Digital Age

The rise of the digital age—mass media, social networking services, etc.—has complicated the traditional systems of power, acts of public storytelling, and remembrance. Social media has given us a false sense of authorship by giving us the ability to curate our narratives as we want them to be presented and perceived. Our narratives are regulated by pre-existing structures—i.e. political, social, cultural, and economic structures. The social media platforms used to share our stories give the illusion of autonomy by design, the only way to resist the power structures already in place would be to develop one's own software for digital storytelling. Until then, our narratives continue to be bound by the pre-existing power structures.

Our understanding of reality, both on and offline, has been formed and distorted through social media platforms and news media politics. The rapid onslaught of technological advances challenges the effectiveness of historic moments to provide a solution for our current moment. The digital age has exacerbated the pre-existing tension between truth and politics as we enter a “post-truth” society.¹⁹ Fabricated narratives serve as a replacement for factual truths. Truth no longer holds any real power in this time of political uncertainty. Arendt addresses the social threats that now face those who value truth, “if [society] could lay hands on [such a] man...they

¹⁹ The tension between truth and politics is a reference to Arendt's “Lying in Politics,” see Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, “Lying in Politics” (NY: Penguin, 1953), 1.

would kill him.”²⁰ Arendt is influenced heavily by Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*, along with his narration of the life of Socrates. Plato’s cave allegory is a crucial example as it shows the dangers associated with breaking one’s understanding of reality in order to bring them to the truth.²¹ Simultaneously, it makes us aware of our own conceptions of reality and the possibilities of other realities outside of our own.

French theorist Jean Baudrillard in his work, *The Precession of Simulacra*, examines the relationship between reality and society; specifically, the effects of media on our conception of a universal reality. Baudrillard argues that reality, as we know it, no longer holds any meaning as society has become completely consumed by simulacra.²² Leaving us in a simulation of reality. Contrary to Plato’s cave allegory, this simulation is not a replica of reality nor is it an attempt to obstruct our ability to perceive reality as it has no association with reality to begin with; which Baudrillard called the “precession of simulacra.” The stages of simulacra, while not directly associated with fake-news, resonate deeply with the progression of truth in society.²³

Political scandals, for Baudrillard, are exemplary of this as they blur the distinction between fact and fabrication. He argues that the Watergate scandal was not actually a scandal, rather, “... Watergate in particular succeeded in imposing the idea that Watergate *was* a scandal— in this sense it was a prodigious operation of intoxication. A large dose of political morality reinjected on world scale.”²⁴ The true scandal was in the integration of morals into the political

²⁰ Arendt, *Between Past*. This is Arendt referencing the last sentence of Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*.

²¹ Plato and Francis Macdonald Cornford, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945).

²² Jean Baudrillard and Sheila Faria Glaser, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). Simulacra, in Baudrillard’s work, is the replication of something that either never existed to begin with or that no longer exists.

²³ Baudrillard, 6. The four stages of the “precession of simulacra”: (1) the original, or “reflection of a profound reality”; (2) the perversion of reality, a the replication of the original that drastically alters the nature of the original; (3) absence of a profound reality, where an replica pretends to be the original yet the original does not exist; (4) complete simulacrum, the final product has no ties to reality whatsoever and any mimicking of reality is meaningless.

²⁴ Baudrillard, 14.

realm by framing Watergate as a scandal to deflect the reality of the situation. The rise of fake news and alternative facts can be viewed in the same light as the simulacra; it is an acknowledgment that what is being deemed true is not true, nor has any basis in truth. Yet, fake-news fails in the sense that it does not go far enough into the simulation as it stops at identifying the falsehood of what has been asserted to be facts. The media has capitalized on the simulation of reality by continuously altering experiences of individuals to create numerous false-realities that eventually become reality. While movements like #MeToo serve as a way to bring truth into our understanding of reality, ultimately, these online narratives fall flat as they are absorbed into the simulation.²⁵

The screen creates a protective shield—an almost new kind of private realm—from the risks associated with pure vulnerability, whereas offline in the public-political realm the risks are more prominent and intensified. Social media has broken down the standard of legitimacy for public figures, expanding the public realm to include a wider range of voices—specifically voices that are not traditionally recognized publicly. This can be seen in the approach President Donald Trump has taken in politics, specifically in his use of Twitter as a political platform. The public standard of behavior for a political figure has become intertwined with the use of social media. We turn to Twitter for the candid opinions of political figures, rather than turning to traditional news sources. Social media is a viable resource that has created new challenges that did not exist with traditional journalism. The digital age has dissolved the framework for distinguishing what we are exposed to, in regards to truth and credibility. Without a standard framework, we are left with the knowledge that truth is not inherently objective.

²⁵ They are absorbed into the simulation as they are mediated by external parties—i.e. social media platforms, storytellers, news media sources, etc.

The existing political system is unable to address these social issues to the same extent as these online platforms. The power structures reinforce the existing framework, making anything that comes outside of these existing structures illegitimate. The #MeToo movement is exemplary of this tension. No political change has come from the movement because of the political limitation, what we are left with is the emotional impact of these narratives on our personal being. This begs the question; how can we shape our changing world? Especially if the frameworks in place reject alternative narratives.

Lida Maxwell, in her book *Insurgent Truth*, explores this tension as it relates to these non-traditional narratives and their political significance. Maxwell's book focuses on Chelsea Manning as the primary case study for understanding the politics of outsider truth-telling. Arendt's framework for truth-telling is critiqued as it omits the integral question of how someone appears in public as a credible truth-teller. Maxwell challenges the public presentation of alternative narratives in what she calls *insurgent truth*. Maxwell defines insurgent truth as, "a kind of truth that does not stabilize society by offering a pre-political fact but instead unsettles society by showing that the social ground is already rough, excluding, and often lopsided."²⁶ These truths are radically different than the traditional Western standard of Socrates as they are not pushing private interests aside for the sake of the public good. Nor are they attempting to stabilize our existing political world. Narratives of insurgent truth call attention to unacknowledged issues that relate to both their public and private experiences. This is for the sake of public interest, while simultaneously for the sake of the private. These outsider narrator's attempt to destabilize society in order to combat the political framework that reinforces oppression and silencing.

²⁶ Lida Maxwell, *Insurgent Truth: Chelsea Manning and the Politics of Outsider Truth-Telling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), xii.

Maxwell engages with Arendt's notion of factual truth; which Arendt considers to be apolitical and a provider of stability for plurality in democratic politics. Maxwell critiques Arendt in light of the current post-truth age, as it complicates our framework for understanding truth. Socrates, as well as other Western thinkers, want to keep a firm distinction between the private and the public, these alternative narratives challenge this notion by merging their public and private interests for the greater good of the public. Arendt's public-private distinction is limiting as it sets a standard for what should and should not remain private. In order to resist these social structures, we must engage with insurgent truth-tellers. As Maxwell concluded, "because their acts of truth-telling are very human, messy, complex, and situated that their practice reveals an alternative model of what truth-telling could be for our own time: a practice of creating connections through refusing absorption into public and private realms that also shape outsider speech and existence, and collectively creating new sense of reality that make different forms of politics, and publics, possible."²⁷ These outsider truth-tellers are controversial as they are not attempting to appear perfect. Their raw, unadulterated narratives show the imperfect world we live in as an attempt to change it for future generations.

The #MeToo movement illustrates Maxwell's insurgent truth as women use their personal narratives to inform their fellow citizens of the underlying issues of misogyny and sexual misconduct in everyday life—workplaces, politics, etc. #MeToo illustrates the everyday philosophical issues by attempting to change the public dialogue. These alternative narratives—alternative to the traditional Western principle—express what the existing frameworks fail to acknowledge. The political structures are not prepared for these alternative narratives as they aim to destabilize these frameworks. This is different than Socrates, and other public figures, as they

²⁷ Maxwell, 146.

are not attempting to change society for the sake of the greater good, rather they are using their narratives, both in the private and public, to shape our public to be more accurately representative of its citizens. The difference is in the conception of reality. The public realm highlights a particular reality in which we are all subject to. This subjective understanding of reality is not accurate as it omits contradicting perspectives that challenge the stability of existing frameworks of society.

Monica Lewinsky & Bill Clinton

*“America demands and deserves big things from us
– and nothing big ever came from being small.”*
- Bill Clinton’s Second Inaugural Address

The Monica Lewinsky-Bill Clinton scandal of 1998 illustrates the risks associated with making private affairs public. At the time of the scandal, and for the following decade, Lewinsky’s narrative was mediated and reproduced by politicians, academics, artists, etc. She had no control over her narrative, nor was she treated as a respectable subject—she became a commodity used as a means to a political end. Lewinsky’s own narrative of the affair, from her Grand Jury testimonies to the retraction of her account after joining the #MeToo movement, highlights the effects social media has had on acts of storytelling. The different modes of storytelling, on and offline, have different political and social consequences. Lewinsky’s case is unique as the rise of social media enabled her to re-tell her narrative as a public figure.

Monica Lewinsky had no intention of publicly sharing her story in 1998, nor did she, at the time, accuse Bill Clinton of sexual misconduct. Her involvement in the scandal was not voluntary; she was obligated to share intimate details of her relationship in order to protect herself and her family from perjury. The first allegation against Clinton occurred in 1992, during his presidential campaign. Gennifer Flowers, an Arkansas state employee and cabaret singer, claimed she was involved in a 12-year-long affair with Clinton. Her allegations were published in the Star on January 23, 1998.²⁸ Clinton and his campaign team were able to sweep the story under the rug by switching public focus toward the economy. Flowers’ accusation never resulted in a hearing nor did it negatively affect his campaign. Two years later, Paula Jones made a public accusation against President Clinton in 1994, three years after the alleged assault. Jones’ case

²⁸ Lorraine Adams, "Flowers Feels Vindicated by Report," The Washington Post, last modified January 23, 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/01/23/flowers-feels-vindicated-by-report/067389f7-e446-4553-944e-4e4f25b71792/>.

resulted in a lawsuit against the President. Kathleen Willey was the next to come forward, in 1998, about her assault in 1993.²⁹ Jones' case was backed up by John W. Whitehead, founder of the Rutherford Institute, a conservative-evangelical Christian civil liberties union. After receiving an anonymous tip about Monica Lewinsky, members of the Rutherford Institute and Jones' legal team subpoenaed Lewinsky.³⁰ They expected Lewinsky's affidavit to support their argument that Clinton had a pattern of sexual misconduct; yet, Lewinsky denied any sexual misconduct or relationship with Clinton. The affidavit was not questioned until Kenneth Starr presented over 20 hours of taped phone conversations between Lewinsky and former friend Linda Tripp that contradicted the affidavit.³¹ While the *Jones v. Clinton* case was dismissed in 1998 due to a lack of credible evidence, the Starr Report provided new information that would ultimately lead to the impeachment of Clinton. The case became one of morality and perjury. President Clinton's morals were in question during the hearings; the affair while consensual was immoral.³²

²⁹ *60 Minutes*, "Interview with Kathleen Willey," CBS News, first broadcast March 15, 1998. Interview conducted by correspondent Ed Bradley. Transcribed by the Federal Documents Clearing House.

³⁰ Starr, Kenneth, *The Starr Report: the independent counsel's complete report to congress on the investigation of President Clinton* [New York: Pocket Books, 1998].

³¹ "Starr's Evidence," Washington Post, WP: Clinton Accused Special Report, 1998, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/stories/docs092198.htm#lewinsky>. Linda Tripp became friends with Monica Lewinsky while the two worked together in the Pentagon's public affairs office. After Lewinsky confided in Tripp about engaging in a physical relationship with President Clinton, Tripp began secretly recording their conversations and encouraged Lewinsky to document intimate details about the affair. Tripp's justification was self-defense in fear of political retaliation from the Clinton Administration; yet, this fear was self-imposed as she created her own narrative of exchanges between Clinton and Lewinsky: that Lewinsky told Clinton that Tripp was the only person who knew about the affair. Tripp exchanged the tapes, along with information about *the dress*, to Kenneth Starr in exchange for immunity from prosecution. Tripp became the "whistle blower" of the Lewinsky-Clinton scandal. While Tripp claims that her motive was bound by her patriotic duty, her actions of "self-defense" destroyed lives, reputations, and ultimately led to her becoming "the most hated woman in America."

³² Immoral, a term used by the Republican party to describe the extramarital affair of President Clinton. The morality of Clinton was called into question throughout the scandal for the purpose of impeachment. Historically, morality has been integral to the position of POTUS. His immoral private affairs contradict his public presentation, which caused many to question whether Clinton is fit to serve as POTUS.

The majority of literature surrounding the Lewinsky-Clinton affair has been centered around the effects the affair had on Clinton, both as a president and as an individual, rather than on the effects the scandal had on Lewinsky. More broadly, the effects the scandal had on the media's representation of her story. The outcome of the impeachment inquiry set the standard for future political scandals entering an era of mass media.

*

The Hearings

In a critical reading of the August 6th and August 20th Grand Jury testimonies of Monica Lewinsky and the August 17th testimony of President Bill Clinton, it becomes apparent that the nature of the hearings—due to political implications and motivations of various external parties—gave Lewinsky incentive to provide a deeply personal narrative and Clinton the incentive to provide vague answers that were “truthful, but not particularly helpful.”³³ Lewinsky answered every question asked with as much detail as possible. Her testimony was deeply personal and intimate as she revealed in extensive detail the sexual nature of their relationship and of her private life. Conversely, Clinton answered the majority of the questions asked with “I don't know” or by reading his prior statement rather than providing an answer.³⁴

Lewinsky, who was in her early 20s at the time, told her story as she experienced it knowing that she had nothing to lose since the worst-case scenario was already happening. The damage had already been done. All she had left was her story. She told the grand jury, and the nation, everything and was completely transparent in order to bring clarity to the situation that was blurred by tabloids, newspapers, and journalists who manipulated her story for their own

³³ “Starr's Evidence,” President Clinton's Aug. 17 Grand Jury Testimony. Clinton's interpretation of his testimony.

³⁴ Rather than answering the questions, Clinton held up the hearing by filibustering.

gain.³⁵ At the time of the scandal, the age gap between Lewinsky and Clinton did not seemingly affect the consensual nature of their relationship—their age gap was used at times, by news media outlets, to address the immorality of Clinton as Lewinsky was only three years older than his daughter, Chelsea. The hearings only addressed the age gap when referencing Lewinsky’s prior relationship with a married man, her age only became apparent as she recounted details of their affair.³⁶ During the August 6th, 1998 grand jury hearing the following questions were asked to Lewinsky,

Q: Did the relationship with the President develop into or also have a non-sexual component to it?

A: Yes, it did...

Q: What sort of things would you talk about?

A: We would tell jokes. We would talk about our childhoods. Talk about current events ... I think back on it and he always made me smile when I was with him. It was a lot of — he was sunshine. ³⁷

Since Clinton was not the reason she was testifying, for her it was Linda Tripp, she acknowledged many times over the course of her testimony that she never wanted to share her story publicly because she cared so deeply for him, not only as the President but as a person. In addition, age became a critical factor in the sexual relationship between them as Lewinsky noted after being asked to explain why the two never had sexual intercourse, “He didn’t want to. The President said that he — that at his age, that there was too much of a consequence in doing so and that when I got to be his age I would understand. But I wasn’t happy with that.” ³⁸ While she

³⁵ These news-media act similarly to the ways in which social media functions today.

³⁶ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky’s Aug. 20 Grand Jury Testimony. Before the Lewinsky-Clinton affair began, Lewinsky was in a relationship with a married man. This relationship was used against her in the hearing as it demonstrated a trend of her involvement with married men. This “homewrecker” narrative discredited the power-dynamic between Clinton and Lewinsky, since this was not the first time she was with an older man. In addition, Lewinsky was viewed as naïve as she expected both her previous partner and Clinton to potentially leave their wives for her.

³⁷ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky Aug. 6.

³⁸ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky Aug. 6.

wanted to have sex with Clinton, the two never engaged in sexual intercourse. The relationship was more than sex, according to Lewinsky, it was an emotionally intimate relationship that involved physical affection at times.

The definition of sexual intercourse played a huge role in the hearings of both Lewinsky and Clinton, as they had both previously denied having sexual relations. At the beginning of the August 6th hearing, Ms. Immergut read exhibit ML-6 which states,

[The] Definition of sexual relations. For the purposes of the grand jury session, a person engages in ‘sexual relations’ when the person knowingly engages or causes contact with the genitalia, anus, groin, breast, inner thigh, or buttocks of any person with an intent to arouse or gratify the sexual desires of any person. Contact means intentional touching, either directly or through clothing.³⁹

Sexual relations, according to this definition, are not limited to traditional conceptions of intercourse—i.e. penetration.

The definition is important because Lewinsky altered her responses to various questions according to the definition of sexual relations presented to her; as her prior understanding of the term did not include oral sex.⁴⁰ President Clinton was not as receptive to the newly defined term as he refused to agree that the “inappropriate” acts that he engaged with Lewinsky fell under the category of sexual relations. He kept returning to his statement in which he stated, “When I was alone with Ms. Lewinsky on certain occasions...I engaged in conduct that was wrong. These encounters did not consist of sexual intercourse. They did not constitute sexual relations as I understood that term to be defined [during my depositions].” He continued by adding, “I regret that what began as a friendship came to include this contact, and I take full responsibility for my actions.”⁴¹ However, he never directly addressed what these actions consisted of. In addition,

³⁹ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky Aug. 6.

⁴⁰ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky Aug. 6.

⁴¹ “Starr’s Evidence,” Clinton Aug. 17.

Clinton kept referring to the Jones case insofar as the definition used then was not applicable since it was one of sexual harassment.

Since the definition provided was the same in both the Jones and Lewinsky hearings, Clinton justified his claim that the two were incomparable as they are of different natures—of sexual harassment and consensual sexual activity. Regardless, he continued to make comparisons between Lewinsky and Flowers by making a point that his understanding of sexual relations is completely focused on the act of sexual intercourse, which he did not do with Lewinsky.⁴² This backfired on Clinton as it invited more questions to be asked of the Paula Jones case in the context of the Lewinsky affair.

As questions became more and more explicit, Lewinsky continued to answer the questions regardless of how embarrassed she was. She was legally required to disclose the intimate details of her private life. Lewinsky's private sex life became public as she answered questions that no one would ever want to be made public. Not only did she have to recall how many times she performed oral sex on the President, she was asked, "How many times did he ejaculate when you performed oral sex?" Out of the nine counts of oral sex, Clinton only ejaculated twice in her presence. She even made note of the dates, February 28, 1997 and March 29th, 1997.⁴³ This unprecedented public invasion of Lewinsky's privacy exposed intimate details that should never be forced into the public without clear reasoning. This level of transparency is unsettling and embarrassing; no longer could she conceal parts of her life, as her private affairs were made knowable to the nation. Lewinsky, when asked if oral sex was performed on her, addressed the fact that Clinton never reciprocated, "No. We discussed it and there were times

⁴² In Clinton's deposition during the Jones case he addressed the Flowers allegation by stating that the two had sexual relations one time in 1997. Flowers admitted that she lied about the affair for personal financial gain. See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/stories/clintondep031398.htm>.

⁴³ "Starr's Evidence," Lewinsky Aug. 6.

when it almost happened, but mother nature was in the way.”⁴⁴ Not only did she give Clinton nine blowjobs, only two until completion, he refused to reciprocate because she was menstruating. Clinton took phone calls while she performed oral sex on him. Lewinsky relayed an encounter in which they took a break from being physically intimate so she could bring the President pizza before continuing. In addition, she addressed phone sex and an instance where Clinton used a cigar to engage in sexual relations.⁴⁵ This level of detail is so raw and non-censored; her transparent narrative was at times uncomfortable, as she shared intimate details of her sexual encounters with the POTUS to the grand jury and the nation.

All of their sexual encounters took place in the hallway near the oval office, as Lewinsky stated, “Because...it was really more the president choosing the hallway...there weren’t any windows there. It was the most secluded of all the places in the back office.”⁴⁶ They intentionally found a private space where Clinton would still be able to engage with work-related business if need be, but secluded enough where they could be intimate.

After countless questions about the location of their sexual encounters, Lewinsky was asked to direct her attention to February 28th, 1997, “the day that you wore the blue cocktail dress—” Lewinsky interrupted the question to state, “It’s not a cocktail dress.” She later continued by saying, “I’m just a little defensive about this subject. I’m sorry.”⁴⁷ This blue dress, from the Gap, had been the focus of many entertainment media sources as this dress potentially had a stain of the President’s semen on it. Her response to the question, “Could you describe what you did with the President that led you to believe that [your dress had semen on

⁴⁴ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky Aug. 6.

⁴⁵ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky Aug. 20.

⁴⁶ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky Aug. 20.

⁴⁷ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky Aug. 6.

it]” was the first of many times that she acknowledged how embarrassing it was to share this personal information. She went on to answer the question,

...I was performing oral sex. I’m sorry, this is embarrassing. And usually he doesn’t want to—he didn’t want to come to completion... this has been sort of a subject that we talked about many times before and he was always saying it had issues to do with trust and not knowing me well enough at first and then not feeling right about things, and not that he said this but I took away from that to sort of mean – that maybe in his mind if he didn’t come then maybe it wasn’t – he didn’t need to feel guilty about that, that maybe not coming to completion that that was easier to rationalize...after we had engaged in oral sex for a while he stopped me as he normally did, I said to him, you know – this is really embarrassing, I’m sorry. I said to him, you know, I really - - I want to make you come. I mean, this is...⁴⁸

As she answers the question, it becomes apparent that she is not comfortable with the amount of detail she is relaying, yet she feels a level of obligation to do so. She provided as much information as she could; she was afraid of the consequences if she didn’t.

Returning to the infamous dress, Lewinsky explained how the dress came to be a focal point of the media: Linda Tripp. Lewinsky was going to wear the dress on Thanksgiving, she explained that she doesn’t wash her clothes until she wants to wear them next, so when she asked Linda Tripp for advice on what to wear Lewinsky mentioned the stain as a “funny, gross thing.”⁴⁹ Lewinsky went into detail about how she wanted to look slim at Thanksgiving since she was insecure about her recent weight gain. Tripp discouraged her from wearing the dress and even told Lewinsky that the dress made her look fat. For Lewinsky, the dress was not a souvenir, as many portrayed it to be, it was just a dress.

When asked about Paula Jones and Kathleen Willey, Lewinsky was transparent in her opinion of their accusations; Lewinsky did not believe Jones nor did she want Willey to come

⁴⁸ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky Aug. 6.

⁴⁹ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky Aug. 6.

forward and become “another Paula Jones.”⁵⁰ Lewinsky did not want to be a part of the Jones’ case since she did not believe Jones, nor did she want to make her experience public or affiliated with accusations of sexual misconduct.

As Jones’ case intensified, the nature of their relationship drastically changed. Their honeymoon phase subsided. Passion no longer blinded them to the reality of their affair. Lewinsky threatened to tell her parents about their relationship, to which Clinton responded, “First of all, it’s illegal to threaten the President of the United States...”⁵¹ Lewinsky viewed the president as a person, not the POTUS. So, her threat was not directed to him as President Bill Clinton but as Bill. Clinton, on the other hand, had the power to decide when he was President and when he was not in his relationship with Lewinsky. This became apparent in his testimony as he glossed over many of the elements of their relationship that were so meaningful to Lewinsky, but for him, they were just another part of being President—i.e. receiving gifts, cards, attention, etc.⁵²

Lewinsky noted a shift in her sentiments towards Clinton after his testimony and his apology to the nation. Clinton made it clear that he had no intention of ever publicly admitting the details of their relationship. What hurt Lewinsky the most was Clinton’s portrayal of her as an obsessed intern who he didn’t know well nor cared for; which made Lewinsky question the validity of their relationship, or at least her perception of it. In addition, Clinton only apologized in public, to this day the two haven’t spoken nor has he ever attempted to apologize to her in person.⁵³

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⁵⁰ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky Aug. 6.

⁵¹ “Starr’s Evidence,” Lewinsky Aug. 20.

⁵² “Starr’s Evidence,” Clinton Aug. 17.

⁵³ “Bill Clinton: 'I Did The Right Thing' During Monica Lewinsky Scandal | TODAY," video file, 6:14, posted June 4, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKXo4PR_G2E.

Defining *That Woman*

I did not have sexual relations with that woman.

-Bill Clinton to the nation, January 26, 1998

From former White House intern to public figure, Lewinsky's newfound fame and media attention transmogrified her to "celebrity status".

In April 1998, Lewinsky's lawyer, at the time, William Ginsburg approved of her offer to participate in a photoshoot for *Vanity Fair's* magazine. Ginsburg was unaware of the damage this would cause to her and her hearing. After being dismissed as Lewinsky's lawyer, her new legal team, Plato Cacheris and Jacob Stein, were horrified over the photo spread and feared that it would damage not only her reputation but her chances of avoiding criminal charges. The glamorous photos of Lewinsky, posing with a pink-dyed dog, appeared in *Vanity Fair* despite these concerns. Lewinsky did not provide the magazine with an interview nor did she receive any payment for the photographs. Her involvement was purely to distract her from the public contention she was receiving in other news-media sources.

The description of Lewinsky that appeared next to Herb Ritts' photos of Lewinsky, styled by the late L'Wren Scott, was written and published without Lewinsky's input. It stated,

Because as the star of the Starr report she went down in history as the woman who went down on—well, the rest of the sentence writes itself. Because, deprived of her voice, the media were able to project every dark wish, sociological cliché, and erotic fear onto her amplitude and turn her into a post-Diana all-purpose feminine message board. Because her conversations with Linda Tripp were *Beverly Hills 90210* meets Salem witch. Because, despite all the oral-sex jokes and burlesque props (the stained blue dress, the cigar, presidential kneepads), this is a melancholy story, covered in shame. Because, disown her as we may. Disparage her as we might, she belongs to all of us now (we're stuck with her).⁵⁴

The magazine's portrayal and inclusion of Lewinsky was timely as it was published during the peak of the Lewinsky-Clinton scandal. The abstract of her role in the scandal aided to the

⁵⁴ *Vanity Fair*, "Monica Lewinsky," *Vanity Fair*, December 1998.

demeaning commentary of Lewinsky in the public eye. While Vanity Fair attempted to acknowledge her silenced narrative, they failed as they perpetuated the national humiliation. Focusing their commentary on her sexual prowess, “as the women who went down on — [the President of the United States],” the later remarks became obsolete. This “melancholy story, covered in shame” no longer held Lewinsky’s voice or personal narrative as it became public domain. As it continues to humiliate Lewinsky, her public contention solidified her as a part of our history. Monica Lewinsky is a household name. Her name is no longer associated with her as a person but as Monica Lewinsky the woman that “went down on” the President of the United States. This hinders her legitimacy in the public realm and her ability to tell her own story, as she is unable to distance herself from this public narrative. This reflects Baudrillard’s claim that our understanding of truth no longer holds any meaning as society is consumed by fabricated narratives.

While the scandal resulted in the impeachment of President Clinton, Lewinsky’s personal and professional life ceased to exist. After losing her Pentagon job, Lewinsky applied for countless positions, none of which she got. No one wanted to hire her. Regardless of her qualifications, she was a professional risk especially with the cultural associations attached to her name. *Monica Lewinsky* became a derogatory term used to insult sexualized women. Rudy Williams, in his song “Can’t Blame Me” released in 2012, over 10 years after the scandal, stated, “Chicks try to hustle but they never influence me – She’s an obvious slut I call her Miss Lewinsky.”⁵⁵ Using Lewinsky synonymously with “obvious slut” perpetuates the already ingrained association between Monica Lewinsky and promiscuity. Also, in 2012, E-40 released the song “Let’s Fuck” in which he refers to the sexual nature of their affair, “Califonication /

⁵⁵ "Can't Blame Me," performed by Rudy Williams, 2012.

You can be the head doctor I can be the patient / Ugh! Sexual relation / Monica Lewinsky style fucking masturbation.”⁵⁶ While calling out the one-sided nature of their sexual relations—associating oral sex to masturbation—the usage of Lewinsky continues to damage her reputation. Realistically, regardless of Lewinsky’s qualifications, what employer would hire the face of extramarital affairs and oral sex? Lewinsky had no intention of capitalizing on the scandal, the general public commodified her and exploited her name for their own benefit. No longer does it matter what Lewinsky did or didn’t do, as covered in the hearings, her name has taken on a new form that any and all reference to her contributes to the public’s narrative of Lewinsky. No professional employer would want to hire someone that could tarnish their reputation; leaving Lewinsky unemployable.

After the impeachment, Bill Clinton remained a respected political figure, while Lewinsky removed herself from the public eye—both on and offline. Her public hiatus remained in effect for over a decade. In 2014, she broke her silence in a Vanity Fair essay—reclaiming a platform that contributed to her criticism back in 1998.

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The Retelling

Monica Lewinsky broke her 15-year silence in her essay, “Shame and Survival,” published in Vanity Fair’s June 2014 issue. After “10 years of self-imposed reticence,” Lewinsky began her journey to reclaim her narrative in the hopes of becoming an advocate for victims of internet shaming.⁵⁷ While Lewinsky’s public humiliation began at a time before the proliferation of social media, she is empathetic to victims of cyberbullying while simultaneously cognizant of

⁵⁶ "Let's Fuck," performed by E-40, 2012.

⁵⁷ Monica Lewinsky, "Shame and Survival," Vanity Fair, last modified May 28, 2014, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/society/2014/06/monica-lewinsky-humiliation-culture>.

the disparities between her own experiences and the experiences of others. The damage media can do on an individual's livelihood hasn't changed, if anything it has gotten worse, as it affects more individuals in smaller online communities. This is not to say that these issues did not exist before social media, rather social media exacerbates pre-existing social tensions. Historically, private spaces existed where targeted individuals were able to have a sense of safety and protection from the verbal and physical abuse of others. Whereas online, with the rise of social media, this private space no longer exists as cyberbullying and other forms of online hate creep into our everyday existence.

Back in 2001, Lewinsky agreed to an interview for an HBO documentary in hopes of moving the narrative away from her towards the larger and more important issues at hand: "the erosion of private life in the public sphere, the balance of power and gender inequality in politics and media, and the erosion of legal protections to ensure that neither a parent nor a child should have to testify against each other." Yet, her intentions and hopes fell flat during the Q&A as she was asked questions that hindered her ability to shift the public narrative, such as, "How does it feel to be America's premier blow-job queen?" She remained composed as she responded, something that many would fail to do, "It's hurtful and insulting..." she then turned to the man who asked the question and stated, "You might be better poised to answer that... That's probably [going to] cost me another year of therapy." Looking back on this interview, Lewinsky is almost thankful that it did not occur years later, with the rapid rise of social media; and "[t]hanks to the Drudge Report, I was also possibly the first person whose global humiliation was driven by the Internet."⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Lewinsky, "Shame and Survival," Vanity Fair.

It was only after September 2010 that Lewinsky was able to see her own experiences in relation to a new social phenomenon: social media and suicide. Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old Rutgers freshman who committed suicide days after a video was leaked on social media of him kissing another man. The public humiliation drove Clementi to suicide. Lewinsky didn't compare her story to that of Clementi's nor did she equate the two; it was not until she spoke with her mother that she began to understand how Clementi's death resonated with her own experience. She described her mother's lasting fear that the public humiliation and shaming would drive her to kill herself. Her life was exposed and publicly broadcasted to the world, yet, "as hard as it is to imagine surviving it, it is possible."⁵⁹ Lewinsky would no longer hide in silence, she would share her story to help others feel less alone and in turn, change her own narrative into something meaningful.

Lewinsky's retraction of her account during the 1998 hearings was not on the consensual nature of her relationship with President Clinton. Rather, she recanted her narrative that the affair was not an abuse of power. The abuse, for Lewinsky, began when she was subpoenaed during the Paula Jones case. This was the moment where Lewinsky's identity and narrative no longer belonged to her. Monica Lewinsky became a tool for impeachment, a scapegoat for the President, and a figure to sell stories. The manipulation of Lewinsky split herself into two: Monica Lewinsky, an individual, and Monica Lewinsky, the *slutty intern*. The damage done to Lewinsky radically altered the trajectory of her life. The ability to have a normal life was no longer a possibility. Everyone knew the name, the face, and the scandal.

Even 20 years later, Lewinsky is unable to break the tie between her and *That Woman*. In a job interview, back in the early 2000s, Lewinsky was asked, "If you were a brand, which brand

⁵⁹ "Shame and Survival."

would you be?” While it remains a loaded question, she was and continues to be a brand: “a social representation, a social canvas on which anybody could project their confusion about women, sex, infidelity, politics, and body issues.”⁶⁰ While this brand has haunted Lewinsky, it holds power. At the time of the scandal, Lewinsky, now, recognizes she was too young to understand the potential of this power, the shame and humiliation consumed her and kept her silent and trapped in her brand; “No longer. It’s time to burn the beret and burn the blue dress. And move forward.”⁶¹

Lewinsky continues to be a public figure using her voice and her experience as a means to bring shed light on larger social issues at hand. In her Ted Talk in 2015, she stated, “I admit I made mistakes, but the attention and judgment I received was unprecedented. I was branded as a tramp, tart, slut, whore, bimbo, and of course, ‘that woman.’ I was seen by many, but actually known by few. The public humiliation was excruciating.” Lewinsky even revealed that she was diagnosed with PTSD after enduring so much public ridicule.⁶²

On Twitter Lewinsky found a new way to regain control over her story. After the #MeToo movement, she became a loud voice in the movement as her story is represented being involved in a *relationship* defined by the greatest disparity of power between the most powerful man in the country and an intern. Lewinsky even uses her new-found celebrity status as a way to poke-fun at those who use her name; notably, Beyoncé in her song “Partition” used Lewinsky as a verb, “Oh, he so horny, yeah, he want to fuck / he popped all my buttons, and he ripped my blouse / he Monica Lewinsky-ed all on my gown.” Lewinsky publicly responded to the lyric,

⁶⁰ “Shame and Survival.”

⁶¹ “Shame and Survival.”

⁶² Monica Lewinsky, "Monica Lewinsky Emerging from 'The House of Gaslight' in the Age of #MeToo ," Vanity Fair, last modified February 25, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/02/monica-lewinsky-in-the-age-of-metoo>.

“Thanks, Beyoncé, but if we're verbing, I think you meant 'Bill Clinton'd all on my gown,' not 'Monica Lewinsky'd'.”⁶³ Her ability to defend herself publicly only came to be after the rise of social media, in which she was given a platform to critique the re-presentation of her narrative. Lewinsky, now, as a public figure, has the power to re-tell her story in light of #MeToo.

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Monica Lewinsky unintentionally became a public figure. She was exposed and legally forced into sharing intimate details of her life, specifically her sex life. The investigation destroyed her ability to have a private life as she was permanently associated with the scandal. She was, and continues to be, viewed by the nation as *that woman*, even feminist had problems with her and defended Clinton. The media alienated Lewinsky from her own experience, name, and identity. She was turned into not only a public figure but a cultural figure. Entertainment media could not get enough of Lewinsky jokes, the public loved them and they had so much material to work with.

The danger associated with the sharing of intimate experiences in the public is the nature in which the media handles these stories. Media sources manipulate and fabricate stories and use them as a means to their desired end. For journalists, she was a tool to sell stories, in politics she was used as a tool to impeach the president, and for women, she was the enemy as she represented the *other woman*, and for Clinton, she was *that woman* that he did not have sexual relations with but still ruined his reputation, family, and career. Even now when her name is mentioned the mindset has not changed, regardless of her statements in the light of the #MeToo movement. The association between her and the affair has been forever solidified.

⁶³ Lewinsky, “Shame and Survival.”

Returning to Baudrillard's understanding of political scandals, the Lewinsky-Clinton scandal was not actually a scandal. The presentation of the affair as a scandal was a political tool to avert the general public from the reality of the situation. The affair became a means of impeachment. The integration of morality into the public-political realm hinders the ability for objectivity. Emotions blur our ability to discern fact from fabrication. The characterization of the affair as a political scandal further obstructs our conception of reality. While Lewinsky was able to re-tell her narrative in the public through social media, her re-telling will never undo or charge her life-story.

Lewinsky is exemplary of Arendt's claim that we cannot narrate our own life story. The public perception of our life is mediated by the narrators of our life-story. The consequences of our individual agency are extreme in the case of Monica Lewinsky. Up until her resurrection in the public realm, her story was completely detached from her and her experiences. This misrepresentation is exemplary of poor story-telling. All meaning was stripped from her narrative as it was solidified in history at the time of the scandal. Individual agency is lost through other's retelling of our stories. Social media complicates this as it enables us to have more personal agency; our online persona tells our life story through our posts. As we post on social media we are creating a memoir of our life that will live on indefinitely. We have the power to write our life-story, yet when others make posts about you it adds to the narrative, whether you like it or not.

In the case of the #MeToo movement, there is power in numbers. The more and more posts about these experiences of sexual misconduct can inspire others to share their own narrative to contribute to the larger movement. These stories are powerful and shape the social dialogue surrounding sexual misconduct. Lewinsky is exemplary of both the power of our

narratives and the dangers associated with sharing these intimate narratives. As a strong figure in the #MeToo movement, Lewinsky's empowerment came from social platforms. And the movement itself is based on these online social platforms. The issue that arises from this is in the movement's goal: political change. As social media is a social platform, all acts done on this platform are social. Regardless, these online social acts are continuing to be politicized while not directly engaging with the political realm. Ultimately, these quasi-political acts are unable to change political structures as they are done solely in the social realm. What Lewinsky illustrates is the power that can arise from social platforms, especially in re-orienting the public's understanding of reality through the lens of the actor rather than a storyteller.

Christine Blasey Ford & Brett Kavanaugh

“I like beer.”

- Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh

“This is hell.”

- Sen. Lindsey Graham

Amidst the rise of #MeToo, President Donald Trump began drafting a shortlist of Supreme Court nominees to fill the newly vacant spot of Justice Anthony Kennedy.⁶⁴ The shortlist, originally published in November 2017, was narrowed down to one, on July 9, 2018: Brett Kavanaugh. Upon Trump’s announcement, Christine Blasey Ford, a professor of psychology at Palo Alto University and a research psychologist at the Stanford University School of Medicine, decided to break her silence, almost 30 years after the alleged incident. Ford, unsure of how to get this information to the senate, without exposing her identity, reached out to the Washington Post—via their information tip line on WhatsApp—and contacted her congresswoman, Anna Eshoo.⁶⁵ Eleven days after Trump’s nomination, Eshoo and Ford met to discuss Ford’s allegations and concerns with Kavanaugh and to verify her credibility. Eshoo encouraged Ford to write a letter to Senator Feinstein; On July 30, 2018, Ford sent the letter and asked to keep the allegations and her identity confidential. Ford’s intention in sharing her experience with Kavanaugh was based in a sense of civic duty, until this moment Ford never intended to ever share her story with anyone outside the four walls of her therapist’s office. Ford

⁶⁴ While all spots on the Supreme Court are important, Anthony Kennedy was a critical swing-voter on the court. His retirement, in our current political climate, gave Trump the ability to nominate primarily right-leaning individuals.

⁶⁵ The direct quote, of Dr. Ford’s anonymous tip, was leaked from The Washington Post’s confidential tip line, “Potential Supreme Court nominee with assistance from his friend assaulted me in mid 1980s in Maryland. Have therapy records talking about it. Feels like I shouldn’t be quiet but not willing to put family in DC and CA through a lot of stress.”

passed her preliminary polygraph tests, and Feinstein kept the information regarding Kavanaugh concealed, as requested.⁶⁶

On September 12, during the confirmation process, it was reported in *The Intercept* that Senator Feinstein was withholding critical information regarding Kavanaugh and his confirmation; Ford was never mentioned by name. Feinstein turned over Ford's letter, with her name redacted, to the FBI, and ultimately the White House, for Kavanaugh's background checks.⁶⁷ On September 16, Ford's identity was leaked and made public. Ford began receiving death threats and feared the safety of her family. Since Ford had no intention of being publicly acknowledge she began questioning whether she should continue to go forward or stop altogether; as she noted in various interviews, she did not want to be *that woman* bound to her story.⁶⁸ Ford, an accredited professor, already had a semi-public identity and did not want to lose all that she had worked for by speaking her truth. Yet, her sense of civic duty and the #MeToo movement gave her strength to share her story in hopes of providing insight on the character of a man who might receive a life-long position in the Supreme Court.

Ford, who is not active on social media, gained a huge internet following of supporters. In light of #MeToo, narratives of sexual misconduct continued to surface in solidarity with Ford's coming forward. While the support was plentiful, many were against Ford, including President Trump who tweeted, on September 21, "I have no doubt that, if the attack on Dr. Ford was as bad as she says, charges would have been immediately filed with local Law Enforcement Authorities by either her or her loving parents. I ask that she bring those filings forward so that

⁶⁶ Kavanaugh hearing: Transcript," The Washington Post, last modified September 27, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/national/wp/2018/09/27/kavanaugh-hearing-transcript/>.

⁶⁷ "Kavanaugh hearing," The Washington Post.

⁶⁸ Ford mentioned this in various conversations with her legal team.

we can learn date, time, and place!”⁶⁹ Trump’s public distrust of Ford’s validity triggered another moment, similar to #MeToo, known as #WhyIDidntReport. An on slot of replies were made to Trump’s tweet, the majority of which were individuals sharing their #MeToo moments along with why they did not report or discuss their experiences. These additional narratives represent the other side of #MeToo, exploring the various reasons why individuals remain silent.

On September 27, amidst the “media circus,” Christine Blasey Ford and Brett Kavanaugh came before the senate for their public hearing. The hearing, while similar to most regarding sexual misconduct, differed as the senate was split between two pre-determined outcomes: those who would push the nomination of Kavanaugh forward, regardless of Ford’s testimony, and those who would dismiss Kavanaugh as a candidate for the Supreme Court.

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The Hearings

Within days, of Dr. Ford’s allegation and identity being leaked, a public senate hearing was scheduled. The public hearings streamed live on major news media networks along with various live Twitter updates. Going into the hearing, the senate and the nation all had their predetermined opinion of the situation and regardless of the outcome of the hearing were going to stay firm in their opinions. The hyper-polarization of our current political climate continues to erase abject opinions in order to reinforce and substantiate pre-existing political structures. In addition, this polarization diverted attention away from the hearing itself, making this a political-party issue. Senator Feinstein, who was contacted by Dr. Ford and Congresswoman Eshoo, and

⁶⁹ Donald J. Trump, "I have no doubt that, if the attack on Dr. Ford was as bad as she says, charges would have been immediately filed with local Law Enforcement Authorities by either her or her loving parents. I ask that she bring those filings forward so that we can learn date, time, and place!," Twitter, September 21, 2018, 9:14 AM, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1043126336473055235?s=20>.

Senator Grassley led the senate hearings and attempted to return focus on the hearing itself in the face of large-scale public-political contention.

Grassley, in his introductory remarks, addressed the public's misconception of FBI reports, specifically in regard to the credibility and validity of their investigations. In order to shed light on the conflicting perceptions of FBI reports, Grassley quoted then-Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Joe Biden, "The FBI explicitly does not, in this or any other case, reach a conclusion, period. They say he said, she said, they said, period. So, when people wave an FBI report before you, understand, they do not—they do not—they do not reach conclusions. They make recommendations."⁷⁰ This point is critical, as FBI reports continue to be the determining factor in various high-profile investigations. Brett Kavanaugh went through countless background checks, yet, the FBI did not go as far back as 1982, the year of the alleged incident. Nor did they interview everyone associated with Kavanaugh to a degree that would verify Kavanaugh's credibility. Relying on FBI reports alone, especially reports that omit key figures from the investigation, is dangerous as they hold no basis in factual truth.

Senator Feinstein dedicated a majority of her introductory remarks to address the historic issue of sexual misconduct to the senate and the American people. "Sexual violence is a serious problem and one that largely goes unseen...60 percent of sexual assaults go unreported...fearing their stories will not be believed."⁷¹ This point is critical, especially in the case of Christine Ford as she waited 36 years before reporting her assault. In addition, Feinstein referenced the #MeToo movement,

There's been a great deal of public discussion about the #metoo movement today versus the Year of the Woman almost 27 years ago. But while young women are standing up and saying 'no more,' our institutions have not progressed in how they treat women who

⁷⁰ "Kavanaugh hearing," The Washington Post.

⁷¹ "Kavanaugh hearing."

come forward. Too often, women's memories and credibility come under assault. In essence, they are put on trial and forced to defend themselves, and often revictimized in the process.⁷²

Regardless of the powerful changes in the social realm, institutions have not evolved as quickly and remain traditional. Women are still fearful of reporting sexual assaults as they see a lack of change in the treatment of victims. Women continue to witness the persecution of victims who come forward as the accused continues to live a normal respected life. Dr. Ford never wanted to make her story public, she was afraid of the consequences for her and her family, nevertheless, she found the courage to come before the committee and the nation. Her bravery is commended by many but there are still those who truly contest her and enter the hearing without a willingness to listen, Feinstein stated, "What I find most inexcusable is this rush to judgment, the unwillingness to take these kinds of allegations at face value and look at them for what they are: a real question of character for someone who is asking for a lifetime appointment on the Supreme court." In addition, she addressed the predetermined bias of members of the senate who "have made it clear that no matter what happens today, the Senate will plow right through and ensure Judge Kavanaugh [s appointment]."⁷³ This mindset is not productive; why have a public senate hearing if members of the senate are determined to push Kavanaugh into the Supreme Court regardless of the hearing? This goes against Arendt's notion of plurality and natality, as it denies productive disagreement. The whole hearing was a performance. While some may argue that all politics are performative, this hearing, in particular, was performative as it was designed to side with Kavanaugh regardless of the outcome of the testimonies presented. And Dr. Ford faced the repercussions she feared, while Kavanaugh fears disappeared.

⁷² "Kavanaugh hearing."

⁷³ "Kavanaugh hearing."

Dr. Christine Blasey Ford began her testimony, "I am here today not because I want to be. I am terrified. I am here because I believe it is my civic duty to tell you what happened to me while Brett Kavanaugh and I were in high school." Many accusations against Dr. Ford centered around the idea she was coming forward with a political motivation rather than out of sincerity. This false narrative is part of why Dr. Ford questioned publicly recounting her assault to begin with. Regardless of the fear she felt, her fears had been actualized and her reality was worse than her expectations,

"My family and I have been the target of constant harassment and death threats, and I have been called the most vile and hateful names imaginable. These messages, while far fewer than the expressions of support, have been terrifying and have rocked me to my core. People have posted my personal information and that of my parents online on the internet."⁷⁴

What else did she have to lose? The assault itself and now reliving of her experience in front of the world, her life has become a public spectacle and an object for public-online contention.

The assault, which took place in the summer of 1982, occurred at a small get-together. Dr. Ford remembers 5 individuals present: Brett Kavanaugh, Mark Judge, P.J, one boy she could not recall the name of, and her friend Leland. Dr. Ford, who was 15 at the time, had one beer. She recounts Mark Judge and Brett Kavanaugh being visibly intoxicated. The moment she left the main room of the party to go use the upstairs bathroom is what brought her to this hearing and "have been seared into my memory, and have haunted me episodically as an adult."⁷⁵ Upon reaching the top step of the staircase she was pushed into a bedroom, she was unable to see who had pushed her until Mark Judge and Brett Kavanaugh locked the door behind them, leaving the three alone in the bedroom. "I was pushed onto the bed, and Brett got on top of me. He began

⁷⁴ "Kavanaugh hearing."

⁷⁵ "Kavanaugh hearing."

running his hands over my body and grinding on me. I yelled, hoping that someone downstairs might hear me, and I tried to get away from him, but his weight was heavy.” Dr. Ford was petrified and “believed [Kavanaugh] was going to rape me.” What deeply affected Ford was the laughter of Brett and Mark throughout the assault. While Ford was losing her ability to breathe, from the weight of Kavanaugh on top of her, fearing her own life, Brett and Mark “seemed to be having a good time.” It was all fun and games for them. Finally, Ford was able to escape and ran out of the bedroom, the party, and headed home. Unlike Trump’s Tweet claiming that if the assault was “so bad” she would have told her parents, Ford was “too afraid and ashamed to tell anyone these details. I did not want to tell my parents that I, at age 15, was in a house without parents present, drinking beer with boys.”⁷⁶ She began to convince herself that because she was not raped she should just ignore the assault and move on with her life. Ford remained silent until May 2012 when she opened up about the details during a couples counseling session.

Dr. Ford had no intention of sharing these details, but after an extensive remodel of their home, Ford “insisted on a second front door.” Her husband and friends couldn’t understand why this second door was so important. But after she opened up about the assault, with her therapist and husband, her reasoning became clear: the trauma from her assault made it difficult for her to feel secure in any home. During this session, she described the assault in full detail and mentioned that “the boy who assaulted me could someday be on the U.S. Supreme Court, and spoke a bit about his background at an elitist all-boys school in Bethesda, Maryland.” Her husband remembers that Ford named her attacker as Brett Kavanaugh.⁷⁷

After countless years of suppressing the memories of the assault, it became a coping mechanism to avoid panic and anxiety. Any mention of the experience, either with herself or her

⁷⁶ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

⁷⁷ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

therapist, caused her to relive the assault. Dr. Ford kept Brett Kavanaugh's name canceled, with the exception of therapy sessions, until July 2018 when she began seeing press reports of President Trump's shortlist of supreme court nominees. Since the list had other qualified nominees, Ford thought it would be in the best interest of the country for her to relay this information regarding Kavanaugh's past conduct while considering him for this life-term position; "My hope was that providing the information confidentially would be sufficient to allow the Senate to consider Mr. Kavanaugh's serious misconduct without having to make myself, my family or anyone's family vulnerable to the personal attacks and invasions of privacy that we have faced since my name became public."⁷⁸ Dr. Ford's concern of privacy is justified, as historically women who share experiences of sexual misconduct in the public-political realm have been scrutinized and invalidated. She feared what would happen to her own family if thrown into the public light, simultaneously she feared preserving her privacy and "allow the senate to make its division without knowing the full truth of [Kavanaugh's] past behaviors." This weighed on Ford, until August 2018, when press reports were portraying Kavanaugh as "a champion of women's rights and empowerment." Ford feared that if she were to come forward her voice would be silenced by a "chorus of powerful supporters." This was the turning point for Ford, she needed to "describe the details of the assault in [her] own words." Lastly, before the senate began the question portion of the hearing, Dr. Ford concluded by stating, "It is not my responsibility to determine whether Mr. Kavanaugh deserves to sit on the supreme court. My responsibility is to tell you the truth."⁷⁹

Senator Whitehouse addressed the potential FBI investigations, "And I submit that never—never in the history of background investigations has an investigation not been pursued

⁷⁸ "Kavanaugh hearing."

⁷⁹ "Kavanaugh hearing."

when new, credible, derogatory information was brought forward about the nominee or the candidate.”⁸⁰ This comes in response to the prevention of further FBI investigations into those mentioned by Dr. Ford and Kavanaugh—i.e. Mark Judge. Furthermore, Whitehouse is addressing a critical problem with this investigation in particular, that Kavanaugh believes this hearing and the allegations are part of a larger political conspiracy against him. Regardless of the historic pursuance of investigations upon new information coming to light. Kavanaugh is not and should not be an exception to this. In making this exception for Kavanaugh the power of incumbency is perpetuated; a tactic for preserving the political power of white men.

Senator Coons addressed the generational myth that men are not accountable for their actions in boyhood during his allotted questioning time. Coons asked Ford to react to the “excuse that boys will be boys.” Ford’s response did not attempt to universalize her experience with misogyny, rather parse the particularities of her experience. Ford was unable to schematize the lasting effects the assault could have on her adult life as a fifteen-year-old. ⁸¹ As an adult, Ford was able to find coping mechanisms to address her past trauma. The idea that “boys will be boys” could be a justification for the past actions of a man is ridiculous, to say the least. If boys will be boys, this hearing would not be happening.

The majority of the questions for Dr. Ford revolved around her reasoning for not-reporting the assault, her fear of flying, her desire to remain anonymous, and why speak up now. These questions varied in length but were all answered with as much detail as possible. There are details that Dr. Ford does not remember, like how she got home from the party. But the heart of Dr. Ford’s hearing is the manner in which she shared her story and responded to the senate. She did so truthfully, calmly, and efficiently. She did not waste time going on tangents, she didn’t

⁸⁰ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

⁸¹ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

belittle or question the senators, and she most certainly did not yell. Dr. Ford's testimony was powerful. Yet, this power was nothing in comparison to the anger and determination demonstrated by Kavanaugh. The special sex-crimes prosecutor, hired by the Republican party for the hearing, told members of the Senate that she is "100%" certain that Kavanaugh sexually assaulted Ford. After Ford's portion of the hearing, the special prosecutor was no longer of use for the republicans. They decided to proceed without her for the questioning of Kavanaugh. Ironically, many of the republicans, who supported dropping the special prosecutor for Kavanaugh's questioning, were publicly vocal about the hearing being a political tactic to destroy the reputation of the Republican party.

Kavanaugh's testimony was quite different than Dr. Ford, rather than treating the hearing as a preliminary interview for the Supreme Court or to shed light on the events that transpired while in High School, Kavanaugh took an aggressive-defensive approach. He began his introductory remarks, after explaining that he wrote his opening statement the day before with no consultation, he addressed Dr. Ford's public accusation and "denied the allegation immediately, categorically and unequivocally." The day following the allegation, Kavanaugh demanded a public senate hearing for the next day. Unfortunately, for Kavanaugh, in the 10 days it took for the committee to arrange the hearing, his family and his name had "been totally and permanently destroyed by vicious and false additional accusations. The 10-day delay has been harmful to me and my family, to the Supreme Court and to the country."⁸² This self-righteous statement blames the Senate for all the damage done to his reputation after Ford's accusation. The senate has no control over the manner in which the press and the general public engage with public claims. It is a matter of free speech, they are unable to censor the general public to protect one man,

⁸² "Kavanaugh hearing."

regardless of his nomination. He went on to refer to his confirmation process as a national disgrace, “The constitution gives the Senate an important role in the confirmation process, but you have replaced advice and consent with search and destroy.” He went to say, “Since my nomination in July, there’s been a frenzy on the left to come up with something, anything to block my confirmation.” He then quoted various Democratic members of the Senate who publicly addressed Kavanaugh, that supporters of him were “complicit in evil.” Others stated, “Judge Kavanaugh is your worst nightmare.” And lastly, “Judge Kavanaugh will threaten the lives of millions of Americans for decades to come.” These phrases, while “passions of the moment,” have meaning. He continued to explain that, “Millions of Americans listen carefully to you. Given comments like those, is it any surprise that people have been willing to do anything to make any physical threat against [me and my family].”⁸³ While true, historically his claims have been rejected when done from the other side. While Kavanaugh was on the Starr Independent counsel investigation against President Bill Clinton, Kavanaugh had no problem with the “search and destroy” method to impeach Clinton. Yet, when the tables turn, Kavanaugh is the victim.

The allegation, according to Kavanaugh, tarnished his reputation and tainted his name. In addition, the two weeks leading up to the hearing were “a calculated and orchestrated political hit fueled with apparent pent-up anger about President Trump and the 2016 election. Fear that has been unfairly stoked about my judicial record. Revenge on behalf of the Clintons, and millions of dollars in money from outside left-wing opposition groups.”⁸⁴ His conspiracy, that the left is out to get him, has led Kavanaugh to believe that he is the true victim of the entire situation at hand, and because of this, “the consequences will extend long past my nomination... This grotesque

⁸³ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

⁸⁴ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

and coordinated character assassination will dissuade competent and good people of all political persuasions from serving our country.” Regardless, Kavanaugh did not remove himself from the confirmation process, he addressed those on the opposition, “...your coordinated and well-funded effort to destroy my good name and to destroy my family will not drive me out. The vile threats of violence against my family will not drive me out... You may defeat me in the final vote, but you’ll never get me to quit. Never.”⁸⁵ The determination of Kavanaugh is extraordinary, given the allegations and the position he wishes to fill in the Supreme Court. The problem with this determination is his unwillingness to listen to those who oppose him, along with aggressive rhetoric—all things a Supreme Court Justice should not engage with.⁸⁶

Kavanaugh, as a “supporter of women and women’s rights”, claimed “I’ve never sexually assaulted anyone. Not in high school, not in college, not ever. Sexual assault is horrific. One of my closest friends to this day is a woman who was sexually abused and who, in the 1990s when we were in our 30s, confided in me about the abuse and sought my advice.”⁸⁷ While this may be true, having female friends does not excuse anyone from sexual misconduct—similarly, having one friend of color does not make you immune to being racist. He continued with, “Allegations of sexual assault must always be taken seriously, always. Those who make allegations always deserve to be heard. At the same time, the person who was the subject of the allegations also deserves to be heard.”⁸⁸ Yes, both parties deserve to be heard, which is why this hearing occurred. Kavanaugh and his family are not the only ones enduring public contention.

Historically, women have been the ones to be silenced, yet, in the age of #MeToo we are

⁸⁵ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

⁸⁶ Donald Trump has drastically changed what is acceptable of a public-political figure, opening the door for others to follow suit. Nevertheless, this behavior should not be condoned and accepted in other aspects of the political sphere.

⁸⁷ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

⁸⁸ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

witnessing a radical shift in the social commentary and treatment of allegations of sexual misconduct. Now, this does not mean that men should suffer so women can prosper, rather that men should be held accountable for their actions and cognizant of the gendered power dynamics deeply rooted in the foundation of our judicial system. Kavanaugh may be a victim of violent threats, but that is an aspect of being a part of the political world: public contention. This does not justify the threats, what it does is speak volumes on the ability of Kavanaugh's temperament in the face of disagreement.

Kavanaugh went into the impact this hearing has had on his own family, "my daughter, Liza, said [her] prayers. And little Liza—all of 10 years old—said to [my wife], 'we should pray for the woman.' It's a lot of wisdom from a 10-year old. We mean [no ill will]." ⁸⁹ While this humanizes Kavanaugh, he directly followed up this point by discussing the last 26 years of his career in which he worked under extreme public scrutiny. He denies the allegation of Dr. Ford and attempts to *prove* she is lying because of the extensive background checks he has gone through in light of public scrutiny. During the impeachment inquiry of President Clinton, Kavanaugh "and other leading members of Ken Starr's office were opposition researched from head to toe, from birth through the present day." These investigations unearthed intimate details from the private lives of various public figures. While Kavanaugh was a member of Starr's team, he was not a well-known individual, making any details of his internal life inconsequential to the investigation. It was not until Kavanaugh's Supreme Court nomination that he was in the public spotlight. His nomination brought increased scrutiny as it is a life-long appointment that affects not only the political standing of our nation but the lives of every citizen. As Dr. Ford expressed, she never intended on coming forward until Trump's shortlist was narrowed down to

⁸⁹ "Kavanaugh hearing."

Kavanaugh. The allegations against Kavanaugh were not intended to be made public, this was not about destroying his career. Kavanaugh has shifted the public narrative from being focused on Ford to the heinous acts of the Senate, the American people, and of the Supreme Court for allowing this to occur. As a job interview for the Supreme Court, blaming your potential future coworkers is not the approach many would take.

Kavanaugh's other main point of evidence was his calendars. Calendars he has kept all these years, detailing his daily activities throughout his life. "Why did I keep my calendars? My dad started keeping detailed calendars of his life in 1978. He did so as both a calendar and a diary...Christmas time, we'd sit around and he regales us with old stories, old milestones, old weddings, old events from his calendars."⁹⁰ Kavanaugh began keeping his own calendars in 1980. These calendars exclude minor tasks and events, ones that are "automatic" to him, like brushing his teeth and going to church. While these calendars are similar to those of Lewinsky, in the sense of keeping a detailed record of important information and events, his are a little different in the sense that he keeps them to share with his family not to detail an affair with the POTUS. Having these calendars does not prove anything, especially if the intended audience is his family at Thanksgiving. No one is going to write "crime" or "drank beer" on a calendar to be shared with family. While Kavanaugh's calendars note that he was lifting weights with friends every night in the summer of 1982, this circumstantial evidence is inconclusive as it does not prove him innocent of anything that occurred that summer—whether that be drinking or sexually assault.

A lot of media coverage has focused on his yearbooks from the time, where he uses language with alternative meanings. One page, in particular, refers to a female friend as an

⁹⁰ "Kavanaugh hearing."

“alumnus.” She did not attend their all-boys school, so her mention is out of place without the social connotation to the term itself. Kavanaugh denies the term being related to sex, on top of that he addresses the sheer mention of sex in the hearing, “this is not a topic I ever imagined would come up at a judicial confirmation hearing.” He went on to say, “I never had sexual intercourse, or anything close to it, during high school, or for many years after that... For me and the girls who I was friends with, that lack of major rampant sexual activity in high school was a matter of faith and respect and caution.”⁹¹ This is interesting, especially after his involvement with the impeachment of Clinton, where sex was the main focus. After a grand jury hearing revolving around sex, morality, and extramarital affairs, how can he not imagine the topic of sex in a judicial confirmation hearing? In addition, his lack of sexual intercourse or engagement in sex is not what is on trial. This hearing is about a sexual assault, this assault may or may not have had the intent of rape, nevertheless, the assault itself is representative of the character of a man. How he presents himself now, in front of the nation, is what is in question. If he is unable to reconcile his past, or at least handle the public allegation, how can he sit on the Supreme Court?⁹²

As Kavanaugh wrapped up his introductory remarks, he went through various moments in his past where women have supported him and thanked him for his work with women. In addition, he discussed his love of teaching and coaching his daughter’s basketball team. But this accusation has threatened this love, he stated, “But thanks to what some of you on this side of the committee have unleashed, I may never be able to teach again,” he continued, “I love coaching more than anything I’ve ever done in my whole life. But thanks to what some of you on this side

⁹¹ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

⁹² This question will be addressed in the conclusion of this chapter.

of the committee have unleashed, I may never be able to coach again.”⁹³ The reality of the situation is that no one is a winner. The damage done in these public accusations is immense, but never one-sided. Both Kavanaugh and Ford faced the threat of losing careers, security, and reputation. Contrary to Ford, Kavanaugh blamed the senate for the repercussions of his actions. The damages done to powerful male figures are nothing in comparison to living every day with the constant reminder of what happened. This is a moment when one's past catches up to one's present self. Regardless of how influential you are, your past will haunt you. These various public accusations create more damage than private accusations as they can lead to the removal of someone from the public realm. In some cases, the loss of a credible reputation is justified—especially in the cases of Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby—instances in which men have explicitly taken advantage of their fame to excuse their actions, while damaging the lives of many. Yet, Kavanaugh finds himself to be the exception. He is hypocritical in his rhetoric and in his understanding of the situation at hand. He concluded his remarks with, “I ask you to judge me by the standard that you would want applied to your father, your husband, your brother, or your son.” This attempts to set him up in a favorable position, in which he will be treated as family and not as an individual. He should be treated like a Supreme Court nominee. If they are to treat him as family, in respect to his prior claims of due process, Dr. Ford is also a member of this hypothetical family.

In the question portion of the hearing, they addressed examples of sexual behavior: which includes, but is not limited to, “rubbing or grinding your genitals against somebody, clothed or unclothed.”⁹⁴ After reviewing this definition, the senate moved on to asking about Kavanaugh's friends who were mentioned by Dr. Ford, to have attended this party, and mentioned to have

⁹³ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

⁹⁴ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

been lifting weights with Kavanaugh during the summer of 1982. Mark Judge, who was acknowledged by both Ford and Kavanaugh, was good friends with Kavanaugh at the time. Judge, who has a known substance abuse problem, wrote a book titled, “Wasted: Tales of a GenX Drunk.” Which references a character named Barthold Kavanaugh who was “vomiting on someone’s car during Beach Week and then passing out.” Kavanaugh’s response to this character, that shares his last name and mentions Beach Week, in which he attended and threw up at, was that this book was “part of his therapy—or part of his coming to grips with sobriety, he wrote a book that is a fictionalized book...he picked out names of friends of ours to throw them in... for characters in the book.” Upon being asked if this character is based on him, Kavanaugh responded, “we can sit here and you [can] make fun of some guy who has an addiction.”⁹⁵ This immediate response is avoidance of answering the question. Rather than simply answering the question, he decided to make this an issue of attacking Mark Judge’s addiction.

The yearbook, was also mentioned by Senator Leahy, when he asked Kavanaugh, “Does this yearbook reflect your...focus on academics and your respect for women? That’s easy. Yes or no. You don’t have to filibuster the answer...” This came after Kavanaugh had avoided answering countless questions by giving irrelevant answers to deflect the questions onto the character of the senate members. Kavanaugh’s response,

The yearbook...was something where the students and editors made a decision to treat some of it as farce and some of as exaggeration, some of it celebrating things that don’t reflect the things that were really the central part of our school. Yes, we went to parties...of course we went to parties and the yearbook page describes that and kind of makes fun of it...if we want to sit here and talk about whether a Supreme Court nomination should be based on a high school yearbook page, I think that’s taken us to a new level of absurdity.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

⁹⁶ “Kavanaugh hearing.”

Not a single member of the Senate, or the nation, was attempting to make a high school yearbook a determining factor for the Supreme Court. The intention was that this hearing would shed light on recent information calling the character of a nominee into question. This is an opportunity for Kavanaugh to demonstrate his ability to handle difficult situations, whether or not he is confirmed into the Supreme Court or not. It is a matter of his reputation. These filibuster answers discredit the capabilities of Kavanaugh in his approach to conflict and opposition. In a job interview, there are little times where it is acceptable to question the validity of the interviewer's questions, especially by referring to them as absurd.

Senator Linsey Graham's questions for Kavanaugh were radically different than most as he outwardly defended Kavanaugh while condemning the actions of the Senate in regards to the damage done to Kavanaugh's reputation. Graham asked Kavanaugh directly, "Are you a gang rapist?" To which Kavanaugh responded, "no." In addition, Graham referred to this hearing not as a job interview but as hell,

GRAHAM: Would you say you've been through hell?"

KAVANAUGH: I—I've been through hell and then some.

GRAHAM: This is not a job interview.

KAVANAUGH: yes.

GRAHAM: This is hell. ⁹⁷

Graham's commentary on the situation is outrageous but consistent with the manner in which many have and continue to approach instances of allegations of sexual misconduct and have the potential to affect one's reputation by association. Graham concluded his questions and remarks with,

To my Republican colleagues, if you vote no, you're legitimizing the most despicable thing I have seen in my time in politics. You want this seat? I hope you never get it. I

⁹⁷ "Kavanaugh hearing."

hope you're on the Supreme Court, that's exactly where you should be. And I hope that the American people will see through this charade. And I wish you well. And I intend to vote for you and I hope everybody who's fair-minded will. ⁹⁸

Even members of the Senate are treating this as *you're either with us or against us* situation.

When in fact, this is a hearing to ensure that the open seat on the Supreme Court is filled with someone who's character reflects that which this country stands for. Lindsey Graham did exactly what Kavanaugh attempted to do in his introductory remarks, make this about the treatment of a man accused of sexual misconduct. This narrative is counterproductive. Men have always been treated more fairly than women in these instances, and this is no exception. It is no surprise that Kavanaugh continued to have a majority support by members of the Republican party, and no surprise he was confirmed into the Supreme Court. Regardless of his lack of temperament control and ability to handle difficult conversations, he continues to be able to live his life with the power and ability to move on, while Dr. Ford is unable to live a normal life and continues to be unable to return to work. This is not justice. This hearing was nothing more than a theatrical production demonstrating how much a man can do wrong and still get his dream job.

Kavanaugh's beer consumption was another topic that dominated the hearing. On many occasions, he stated, "I liked beer. Still like beer. We drank beer...I sometimes probably had too many beers, and sometimes other people had too many beers." Yet, he denies ever blacking out from beer. In a few instances, he attempted to switch the conversation by questioning the Senate, specifically with Senator Klobuchar,

KLOBUCHAR: Drinking is one thing, but the concern is about truthfulness, and in your written testimony, you said sometimes you had too many drinks. Was there ever a time when you drank so much that you couldn't remember what happened, or part of what happened the night before?

⁹⁸ "Kavanaugh hearing."

KAVANAUGH: No, I — no. I remember what happened, and I think you've probably had beers, senator...⁹⁹

He went on to say that he was interested in hearing if Senator Klobuchar ever had too many beers, or a drinking problem.

Senator Booker, in the last 10 seconds of his allotted questioning time stated,

Listen to both sides, this is not about somebody—one side being despicable, the other side not. Listen to both sides. She...gave credible, meaningful testimony, a woman who had the courage to come forward and tell her truth, sir. And... that's what I'm just asking you, is say she is not a political pawn. She is not orchestrating, she is not part of the Clinton's efforts to get some kind of revenge. She is a woman who came here with corroborating evidence to tell her truth. ¹⁰⁰

Booker's powerful closing statement was completely discredited as Kavanaugh response, "was that a question?" In addition to the remarks of Senator Cruz who took over the questioning after Booker. Cruz, rather than asking any questions, made a statement about how unfair this process has been, especially to Kavanaugh and his family. He even mentioned that Senator Feinstein's concealment of Dr. Ford's allegations was a tactic to blindside Republican members of the committee. This developed into a conversation amongst the senate about the credibility of Feinstein's claim that neither she nor her staff leaked this information. The hearing continues to unconsciously question the women involved, blaming them for everything that has transpired.

At the close of the hearing, Kavanaugh continued to stand firm in his belief that this was a conspiracy against him because of his involvement in the Starr investigation team. And Senator Kennedy, who concluded the hearing, asked Kavanaugh the final questions,

KENNEDY: None of these allegations are true?

KAVANAUGH: Correct.

KENNEDY: No doubt in your mind?

KAVANAUGH: Zero, I'm 100 percent certain.

⁹⁹ "Kavanaugh hearing."

¹⁰⁰ "Kavanaugh hearing."

...

KENNEDY: You swear to God?

KAVANAUGH: I swear to God.

KENNEDY: That's all I have, judge. ¹⁰¹

The hearings of Dr. Ford and Brett Kavanaugh demonstrate a radical turning point in the social-political dialogue surrounding accusations of sexual misconduct. There continues to be a stark divide between those who support the accuser and those who support the accused. Even in a public Senate hearing, the committee members allowed for their personal biases to take precedence over the contents of the hearing. Senator Graham was right, this was not a job interview, this was hell. This was hell for everyone, not just Kavanaugh. This hearing was absurd, but because of Kavanaugh not because of the treatment of Kavanaugh. This was a disgrace to the American Judicial process, not because of the investigations but because of the manner in which personal opinions were brought into the hearing as a way to persuade members of the committee to vote a certain way or else they are culpable of evil via association. The entire hearing was a performance. Dr. Ford and various Senate members were overlooked because they were being vulnerable and were not participating in this theatrical performance. Those who took the hearing seriously were forgotten and those who made a fool of themselves remain memorable.

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The Confirmation

On October 6, 2018, the Senate confirmed Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court with a 50 to 48 vote. Leading up to the senator's final vote, President Trump agreed to order an FBI investigation into the allegations under one condition, the investigation must be "limited in scope

¹⁰¹ "Kavanaugh hearing."

and completed in less than one week.”¹⁰² Trump’s public input on the Ford-Kavanaugh hearings continued, at a campaign rally in Mississippi, he openly ridiculed Ford’s testimony, “I had one beer. Well, do you think it was —nope, it was one beer,” he continued, “How did you get home? I don’t remember. How’d you get there? I don’t remember. Where is the place? I don’t remember. How many years ago was it? I don’t know.”¹⁰³ Trump’s out of pocket commentary, days before the final Senate vote, misrepresented Ford’s character and testimony. Deborah Ramirez, who accused Kavanaugh of sexual misconduct while the two attended Yale, spoke publicly about the issue prior to the Senate vote, “Thirty-five years ago, the other students in the room chose to laugh and look the other way as sexual violence was perpetrated on me by Brett Kavanaugh,” she continued by making a comparison to the hearings, “As I watch many of the senators speak and vote on the floor of the Senate I feel like I’m right back at Yale where half of the room is laughing and looking the other way. Only this time, instead of drunk college kids, it is U.S. senators who are deliberately ignoring his behavior. This is how victims are isolated and silenced.” Upon receiving the FBI’s final findings, the Senate Judiciary Committee began their unofficial deliberation. This deliberation was clouded by protestors, personal biases, and widespread public contention. Senator Chris Van Hollen, Democratic representative of Maryland, stated on the Senate floor, “Any remaining hope that Judge Kavanaugh could be trusted to be an impartial justice or perceived to be an impartial justice was shattered by his opening statement at his last hearing.” Republican members of the senate had an alternative perspective, Senator Mike Lee, republican representative of Utah, stated, “[Kavanaugh] was seeking sincerely to defend his own record of public service, his own private conduct against great adversity, in circumstances in

¹⁰² Statement from Trump to the Senate, Sept. 28, 2018.

¹⁰³ See Donald Trump’s statement, at a campaign rally in Mississippi, here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=809yRtq1cp8>.

which he and his family have been dragged through the mud by no choice of their own.”

Ultimately, on October 6, 2018, the outcome of the hearing was finalized by a senate vote of 50 to 48. Kavanaugh was officially sworn into the Supreme Court.

The hearing itself and the confirmation process opened up underlying issues that have gone unaddressed: the strong partisan divide and the intersection of gender and sex in politics. The erosion of hostility in bipartisanship is more apparent than ever before. What began as a hearing to determine the character and credibility of a Supreme Court nominee became a political war between the Democratic and Republican parties. The reputation of the Supreme Court is at stake. The Supreme Court was considered to be above partisanship. Now, the court is facing the social and political repercussions of the Senate’s vote as people question the legitimacy of the court, as it appears to be more politically divided than before.

Amidst the controversial confirmation of Kavanaugh, Dr. Ford disappeared from the public eye. She denied interviews and continued to abstain from social media. Her narrative resonated with victims of sexual assault across the nation, especially online with #MeToo, #WhyIDidntReport, and #ImWithFord. In her testimony, she answered all questions without hesitation or refusal. She let each senator speak without interruption. Nor did she raise her voice in frustration. She was praised and congratulated by various committee members for her bravery. Kavanaugh’s testimony was a stark contrast to Dr. Ford. He was unable to control his temperament. He continuously interrupted senators. He filibustered answers. And was sworn into the Supreme Court.

While Ford’s legacy remains, she has abstained from involving herself in public discourse. Dr. Ford’s intent was two-fold: not only did she publicly share her story for the sake of her own catharsis, additionally, she wanted to make the Senate aware of the character of

Kavanaugh, who was about to be appointed to a life-long position. Before her identity was leaked to the public, anonymity allowed Ford to continue living her private life without being confined to her narrative. Ford told her legal team, prior to the hearing, “I don’t want to be *that person*.” *That person* who is known only by their public narrative. Dr. Ford sacrificed her career, her privacy, and her family’s privacy because she felt a strong sense of civic duty to come forward. What Dr. Ford did is admirable, and took an incredible amount of bravery. Regardless of her removal from public-political affairs, she remains a public figure. Christine Blasey Ford represents hope. Our voices have the potential to make a difference. At a time when our voices feel powerless—Kavanaugh’s confirmation—Dr. Ford demonstrated that our voices are powerful, even if they don’t seem like it. Days following the confirmation, the #MeToo movement published “A Love letter to Dr. Christine Blasey Ford.” The online letter had a section for individuals to add their name to the letter, to show support for Dr. Ford. The poetic letter illuminates the power of her testimony on the world, in the face of public contention. Regardless of Kavanaugh’s confirmation, Dr. Ford’s courage “runs deeper and wider than who sits on that court seat.”¹⁰⁴ At the end of the day, our voices are “neither powerless nor alone because we have the truth — and we have each other.”¹⁰⁵

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In a public opinion poll conducted, by the Marist Institute for Public Opinion, before the public senate hearing found that 32 percent said Ford was truthful while 26 percent favored Kavanaugh. 42 percent were unsure, prior to the hearing.¹⁰⁶ One year later, the same poll was

¹⁰⁴ Tarana Burke et al., "A Love Letter to Dr. Christine Blasey Ford," me too., last modified October 10, 2018, <https://metoomvmt.org/a-love-letter-to-dr-christine-blasey-ford/>.

¹⁰⁵ Burke et al., "A Love," me too.

¹⁰⁶ Domenico Montanaro, "Poll: More Believe Ford Than Kavanaugh, A Cultural Shift From 1991," NPR, last modified October 3, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/03/654054108/poll-more-believe-ford-than-kavanaugh-a-cultural-shift-from-1991>.

conducted and found that 45 percent believe Ford, 33 percent Kavanaugh, and only 22 percent undecided. Lee Miringoff, director of the Marist Institute for Political Opinion, addressed the findings of both polls, “If it remains ‘he said, she said,’ the benefit of the doubt is very different than 1991, and it goes to Ford not Kavanaugh.” He continued by drawing a comparison between the public opinion of Ford and Kavanaugh to the 1991 Capital Hill testimonies of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas, “It shows the reaction to the testimony and does show an underlying change in attitude than 27 years ago.” While the public’s opinion is changing, the opinion of the Republican party is not. Around 77% of republican men and 73% of republican women believe Kavanaugh.¹⁰⁷ Regardless of the conduct of Kavanaugh during the hearing, the Republican party stood firm in their belief of Kavanaugh. The public-political contention surrounding the confirmation of Kavanaugh will continue to be a large-scale issue far into the unforeseeable future.

Returning to the question: If Kavanaugh is unable to reconcile his past, or at least handle the public allegation, how can he sit on the Supreme Court?¹⁰⁸ He is able to sit on the Supreme Court because the hearing was never about justice, it was nothing more than a performance. If the hearing hadn’t been transmogrified into a political party dispute, Kavanaugh might not be serving a life-long position on the Supreme Court. The questions asked, during the hearing of Ford and Kavanaugh, made the hearing one of political partisan. Truth, character, or justice no longer were of concern. All that mattered was who you sided with.

Unlike Socrates, Ford’s act of civil disobedience included her private interests along with the public. The insurgent truth of Ford brought a relatable, private experience into the public light. Ford’s truth, along with the narratives and experiences of others who are not granted a

¹⁰⁷ Montanaro, "Poll: More," NPR.

¹⁰⁸ See footnote 92.

public platform or space to address these underlying issues, had no aim in stabilizing our existing society. Rather, destabilize it in order for these alternative perspectives to be publicly recognized in the public realm. While Ford has removed herself from the public realm, her narrative influenced social discourse and our history. Regardless of the fact that Kavanaugh was appointed, Ford was able to inspire individuals to recognize the power of our personal voices and narratives. Ford is exemplary of Socrates as the ideal standard for a citizen and truth-teller in our current political moment. Putting Socrates in conversation with modern examples expands the significance of these exemplary figures while demonstrating the temporal changes of society. These alternative narratives, or insurgent truths, shed light on underlying issues that go unaddressed in the public-political realm.

Conclusion

*"It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world,
but you are not free to desist from it either."
-Rabbi Tarfon, Pirke Avot 2:21*

The proliferation of digital media has further complicated the traditional power configurations of the public and private realms. Mass media and social media networks have capitalized on this instability by facilitating the creation of a new realm. This digital realm eliminates the constraints of the public-political realm through the inclusion of the private affairs of oft-ignored and misrepresented experiences of marginalized individuals. While these technological advancements are beneficial for plurality, the dangers have become increasingly prevalent.

Donald Trump's presidential campaign and inauguration precipitated the exposure of these systemic issues in a large-scale public debate. The surge of fake news and alternative facts in news media has served to exacerbate the tension between truth and politics. Mass media mediates our exposure to the world; simultaneously limiting and expanding our perception of reality. Social media has brought these underlying tensions to the fore of public contention. Condemning social media in our post-truth age is a diversionary tactic to deflect attention from the core problems.

Society has become diluted with simulacra, which Baudrillard identifies as symbols with no basis in truth. Fake news and alternative facts have concealed factual truth; fabrication has become indistinguishable from truth. The insurgent truth of #MeToo narratives attempts to re-orient the public's perception of society towards the underlying private experiences of the collective public.

Bill Clinton's presidency was radically different than his predecessors, the influx of news-media technologies created an environment where Clinton's exposure was more

heightened than ever before. The public's interest in politics, specifically in the private affairs of public figures, drastically increased. The distinction between entertainment and hard news began to dissolve. In 1998, the Monica Lewinsky-Bill Clinton sex scandal became a national crisis. The representation of the affair as a political scandal, rather than a moral scandal, provided additional value for the Republican party's implicit desire to impeach Clinton. Monica Lewinsky unintentionally became a part of this national debate. She became a means for impeachment; mass media alienated Lewinsky from her own experience, name, and identity. The scandal destroyed her ability to have a private life. After years of self-imposed removal from the public realm, Lewinsky re-entered the public light through social media. Regardless of Lewinsky's re-telling of her narrative online, her name is still associated with the scandal. She remains a cautionary example of the dangers associated with the sharing of intimate experiences in the public.

Christine Blasey Ford was hesitant to share her experience because of the damage done to Lewinsky and other insurgent truth-tellers. Nevertheless, her strong sense of civic duty empowered her to come forward and share her experience with Brett Kavanaugh. Similar to Lewinsky, Ford removed herself from the public realm after her grand jury testimony. Kavanaugh was ultimately confirmed to the Supreme Court. Nevertheless, Ford's life-story is exemplary of the hope and the rebellious power of individual voices. Unfortunately, this hope was compromised by the short attention span of the media in an unrelenting 24/7 news cycle.

The #MeToo movement, while empowering, stripped the political power of our personal narratives by using social media as its primary public platform. Storytelling is inherently a political act when done in the public realm. While social media functions similarly to the public realm, the two are not interchangeable. The problem is in the politicization of social acts on

social platforms with the expectation of political change. Without engaging with the existing political frameworks no political change is possible. Narratives of #MeToo lose their political power as they are done outside of the public realm. The results of the movement are unsatisfactory, as no real change has come about. Our personal narratives will continue to fall flat upon entering the public realm until there is a restructuring of the existing public-political realm. We need a living framework to combat issues of radical societal destabilization in order to prevent further decay of our already fragile public-private realms.

Post-truth is a mischaracterization of our current moment. Truth exists yet is endangered. The communication channels of the digital age have been grossly misused, further solidifying the collapse of the public and private realms. Society has become infatuated by the sensationalism of fabrication and is losing the capacity to comprehend factual truth at an alarming rate. In order to combat this decay, we must recognize and engage with raw, messy, and destabilizing alternative truths in order to return meaning and truth in our world. While there is no simple solution to our current moment, truth will cease to exist if we do not reconcile these existing tensions. Insurgent truths are one step in the right direction, yet the future remains uncertain.

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