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The French Revolution, #MeToo, and Embodying Rights*

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At the Golden Globes of January 2018, Hollywood insiders and audiences worldwide witnessed a partnership of eight activists—including Ai-jen Poo and Marai Larasi—and well-known celebrities, such as Meryl Streep and Amy Poehler, who all wore black to protest sexual assault and gender inequities in the workplace.¹ They represented the #MeToo movement, started by one of the activists, Tarana Burke, who had coined the hashtag as a part of her efforts to assist young survivors of sexual abuse. Burke's activism became a global movement when the actor Alyssa Milano used the hashtag in October 2017 to reveal that she had been assaulted by the producer and studio mogul Harvey Weinstein. We are now familiar with the story's cascading effects as over 12 million people revealed, many for the first time, that they too had endured some form of abuse and harassment. Increasingly, men, and on some occasion women who headed boardrooms or taught in classrooms, were exposed for having used their positions to make advances and overpower individuals—individuals whose apparent acquiescence reflected their subordinate positions as well as their shame. Some responded in shock while others shook their heads because such revelations were not surprising but rather universal. Nearly a year later, the feeling that #MeToo was a watershed dissipated as many watched the hearings of Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh; for viewers who had witnessed the Clarence Thomas hearings of 1991, Kavanaugh's and various senators' performances were strikingly familiar, as was the outcome.² *Plus ça change....* At the same time as the #MeToo movement appeared to represent a "moment" unlike any other in making abuse and harassment transparent and protecting the rights of victims, the parallels between individual cases and these hearings, as well as those to other contemporary events, like a 2018 gang rape trial in Spain in which the victim was maligned and

* I would like to thank Daniel J. Watkins and Elizabeth Durso for their comments on early drafts of this essay.

¹ "'We say, time's up!' Who were the activists at the Golden Globes?" *The Guardian* (January 8, 2018) www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/08/golden-globes-activists-times-up-awards (accessed April 13, 2019).

² Maureen Dowd, "Sick to Your Stomach? #MeToo," *New York Times* (April 22, 2018) www.nytimes.com/2018/09/22/opinion/sunday/kavanaugh-christine-blasey-ford-anita-hill-clarence-thomas.html (accessed April 25, 2019). Steve Phillips, "Some Democrats Haven't Learned the Lessons of #MeToo," *The Nation* (April 5, 2019), www.thenation.com/article/biden-metoo-kavanaugh-harassment/.

the perpetrators immune to consequences, suggested that sexual assault is a universal and perennial issue, so endemic that it is beyond history.³

How then can historians contribute to this discussion, especially those who research or teach the French Revolution, which took place 230 years ago? In the following essay, I will suggest that the fraught history of feminism during the French Revolution can help us think critically about the conflicting issues surrounding the #MeToo movement. At its heart, the movement echoed the activism pertaining to rights that was very much a legacy of the French Revolution. Whatever the ideals of the French Revolution, the efforts to establish universal rights did not make inequalities disappear but, instead, made them more manifest. As Joan Scott has argued, the debate about rights almost necessarily transformed into one of exclusion as well as inclusion, becoming a part of the political discourse over the next two centuries.⁴ In a political order that prized transparency, the goals of such activism were to make visible those who were thrust to the margins. The fluid understanding of rights shaped late eighteenth-century feminism (or feminisms) and still influences our own perspective of sexual assault, the victim, and the accused perpetrator. It reflects the inherent tension between individual and society, the Gordian knot of democratic society that values both equity and liberty. And like the French Revolution, proponents and opponents of the #MeToo movement debate what kind of change is necessary and the pace of that change. Is it about reform or revolution? As in the eighteenth century, the debates about sexual assault reflect the kind of society we wish to inhabit.

The French Revolution, Activism, and Rights

At the end of August 1789, revolutionaries issued the “Declaration of the Rights of Man,” which held a universal promise of equal rights for all, a remedy to the structural inequities inherent in a society based on *privilèges*. But if the “natural, inalienable, and sacred rights” of man were meant to denote the universal rights of the individual, critics quickly noted that many were excluded: Jews, Protestants, mixed people of color and women. Early modern women had participated in collective action over issues such as food shortages, and noble women functioned as powerbrokers at Versailles. But perhaps for the first time, many women organized politically for rights for all women, in clubs, such as the *Cercle social*.⁵ Some agitated for a more

³ Meaghan Beatley, “The shocking rape trial that galvanized Spain’s feminists—and the far right,” *The Guardian* (April 23, 2019) www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/23/wolf-pack-case-spain-feminism-far-right-vox. (accessed April 23, 2019).

⁴ Joan Wallach Scott, *Parité: Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For a similar argument pertaining to wealth, see Samuel Moyn, *Not enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018).

⁵ Shanti Marie Singham, “Betwixt Cattle and Men: Jews, Blacks, and Women, and the Declaration of the Rights of Men,” *The French Idea of Freedom: The Old Regime and the Declaration of Rights of 1789*, ed. Dale Van Kley (Stanford, CA: Stanford U.P.), 1994), 140; Lynn Hunt, “Introduction: The Revolutionary Origins of Human Rights,” in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996), 16-29. Darlene Gay Levy and Harriet B. Applewhite, “Women and

institutionalized presence in the National Assembly, others the right to fight in the war, and for rights regarding divorce and inheritance.⁶ Taking advantage of the Revolution's vibrant print culture, women lobbied for free education, such as the group of women who issued the *Pétition de femmes du tiers-état au roi* in early 1789, while others would later repeat demands for improving women's education.⁷

The variety of female experience during the French Revolution reminds us that women's activism and agency were made possible because of the protean nature of citizenship both in terms of how it was understood and how it was exercised. Women certainly faced challenges during the First Republic when a vocal segment of male revolutionary voices in the National Convention vehemently rejected the presence of women in the political arena. However, focusing on such polemics obscures how various women did exercise agency. As Suzanne Desan discusses in her overview of current scholarship on revolution and gender, "with greater focus on contingency, individual motivation, and close attention to the day-by-day, play-by-play dynamics of revolutionary politics," scholars have uncovered the multiple ways women claimed citizenship, which extended beyond established political practices.⁸

Envisioning multiple categories of citizenship enables us to see how citizenship operated outside or on the margins of the political realm. For example, Katie Jarvis argues for the paradigm of "economic citizenship" in her examination of how the market women of Paris took political action to protect their rights as food retailers. When the Convention issued the General Maximum, these Dames des Halles came into conflict with the women's club the Société des Citoyennes Républicaines Révolutionnaires who allied themselves with the *enragés* to advocate for capping prices. According to Jarvis, "the Citoyennes Républicaines tied citizenship to innate rights and embraced new democratic institutions such as voting, serving in the militia, and acting political clubs. In contrast, the market women portrayed citizenship as contingent and earned through public utility."⁹ Thus, the unstable and changing meanings of citizenship in the early republic enabled women to act on their own behalf but also created tensions among women in terms of how they should represent themselves and what their place was within the new body politic.

Militant Citizenship in Revolutionary Paris," in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 79-101.

⁶ For a broader discussion of these issues, see Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, CA: University of Berkeley Press, 2006), chapters 3-4.

⁷ For discussions of later revolutionary discussions on women's education, see, for example, Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French women Became Modern* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 114-129, 134-136; Meghan K. Roberts, *Sentimental Savants: Philosophical Families in Enlightenment France* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago 2016), 131-134.

⁸ Suzanne Desan, "Recent Historiography on the French Revolution and Gender," *Journal of Social History* 52 (Spring 2019), 567.

⁹ Katie L. Jarvis, "The Cost of Female Citizenship: How Price Controls Gendered Democracy in Revolutionary France," *French Historical Studies* 41 (October 2018), 676. For a more complete argument, see Katie Jarvis, *Politics in the Marketplace: Work, Gender, and Citizenship in Revolutionary France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Although many women sought to carve out a sphere of action within the new political order, their calls for rights or recognition did not necessarily represent a challenge to the gender hierarchy that privileged a patriarchal society. Thus, the *Pétition de femmes du tiers-état au roi* noted carefully that they were writing with hopes to be better employed and to gain respect, but “not to usurp the authority of men.”¹⁰ One notable exception was the activist Olympe de Gouges whose *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* issued a call to arms: “women, wake up; the tocsin of reason sounds throughout the universe; recognize your rights.” The *Declaration* was “both compensatory—adding women where they have been left out—and a critical challenge to the universality of the term ‘Man.’”¹¹ De Gouges adopted a rhetoric of equality that was, Joan Scott argues, grounded in sexual difference. Women were equal to men not because they were the same but because their contribution to this new political order, while different in content, was equally necessary. Part of the “paradox,” as Scott defines it, emanates from De Gouges’s embodied depiction of women. For example, article 11 asserts: “every citizeness may therefore say freely, I am the mother of your child; a barbarous prejudice [against unmarried women having children] should not force her to hide the truth.”¹² Not only does De Gouges affix woman’s status as citizen within her body as mother, but she claims rights for that body. Moreover, in a political order that claimed transparency as a necessary element of legitimacy, De Gouges challenges the denial of woman as subject.

De Gouges was a rare voice, and despite some of the visible laws advancing women’s positions, revolutionary legislation did not disturb a patriarchal order that placed women in a subordinate position. The French Revolution ultimately reflected the tension between laws and custom. Thus, although divorce laws worked on the premise of self-determination, in matters of conjugal violence, judges generally adjudicated in favor of the husband’s “rights.” Georges Vigarello argues that crimes of assault were no longer defined as moral crimes, associated with sin, but were social crimes “against private persons.”¹³ While the definition of rape remained nebulous (and seduction disappeared as a category), there were codified lists of acts that threatened “public decency,” which potentially identified violence not directly associated with rape as a crime. According to Vigarello, linking such transgressions to the liberty and well-being of the individual was a step toward recognizing the victim. Regardless of legislation, the number of documented complaints did not increase with the introduction of new legislation.¹⁴ Thus, laws identifying sexual assault had very little impact in the context of the ossified attitudes that privileged male rights, as husbands and fathers, and subordinated women’s rights, fueled by assumptions about women’s intellectual and emotional volatility.¹⁵

¹⁰ *Pétition de femmes du tiers-état au roi* (n.p., 1789), 6.

¹¹ Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 402.

¹² Olympe de Gouges, “The Declaration of the Rights of Women, September 171,” in *French Revolution and Human Rights*, 126. On illegitimacy, see Desan, *Family on Trial*, chapters 5-6.

¹³ Georges Vigarello, *A History of Rape: Sexual Violence from the 16th to the 20th Century*, trans. Jean Birrell (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2001), 93.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁵ Germaine de Staël provides a critique in *Déphiline* (1802). See Lori J. Marso, “The Loving Citizen: Germaine de Staël’s *Déphiline*,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 5, 2 (1997): 109-131.

The French Revolution and #MeToo

While contemporary U.S. feminism and the #MeToo movement are rooted in the civil rights and women's movements of the 1960s, the language of empowerment, of claiming the right to speak and be acknowledged, echoes the French Revolution's legacy of activism. Moreover, feminism's history in the twentieth and twenty-first century also included a struggle with inequities that required adjustments and reflection. Issues such as reproductive rights became topics of mobilization, reflected in organizations such as NOW and Planned Parenthood. Other organizations like #MeToo or Laura Bates' "Everyday Sexism Project," a U.K.-based website that allows women to record their stories of assault or of sexism in their daily lives, aim to assure victims that they are "not alone."¹⁶ Such activism in effect seeks to recognize victims, who often feel isolated from fear or shame, and to place their stories within a more universal narrative. At the same time, there is an effort to reveal the inequities inherent in the structures that enable assault and sexism. According to Laura Bates, "The Everyday Sexism project aims to take a step towards gender equality, by proving wrong those who tell women that they can't complain because we are equal."¹⁷

The irony has been that such protestation about inequities haunt the #MeToo movement from within. When the actor Alyssa Milano launched the first #MeToo tweet in October 2017, those familiar with Burke's activism expressed dismay that the optics suggested that the movement had been co-opted by wealthy white women. What about women of color? Trans people? LGBTQ people? Men? However, as the scene from the Golden Globes indicates, Milano and others were quick to acknowledge the intersectional identities of many of the leading activists. Moira Donegal notes that the form of the movement has been shaped by intersectionality: "The gesture of saying 'me too' implies solidarity with all women who have had these experiences, but the form the movement has taken has also allowed for it to be a specific, personal declaration, and for those testimonies to come from women with different stories and in different circumstances."¹⁸ At the same time, Donegal cautions about overemphasizing the commonality at the expense of recognizing how other forces—racism, class—not only affect different women but are modes of exclusion that are also enforced by women. Thus, the #MeToo movement, at least in the Anglophone world, is attempting to balance the particular with the general, to embrace the individual while remaining universal, an effort that preoccupied eighteenth-century revolutionaries. But as Donegal suggests, there are two sides of the movement that disagree on feminist tactics (individual empowerment vs. collective liberation) and responsibility—"whether it is a woman's responsibility to navigate, withstand and overcome the misogyny that she encounters, or whether it is the shared responsibility of all of us to eliminate sexism, so that she never encounters it in the first place."¹⁹

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *The Everyday Sexism Project* <https://everydaysexism.com/about> (accessed April 13, 2019).

¹⁸ Moira Donegal, "How #MeToo revealed the central rift within feminism today," *The Guardian* (May 11, 2018), www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/11/how-metoo-revealed-the-central-rift-within-feminism-social-individualist (accessed April 13, 2019).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

In France, the same threads are embedded in the collision between activists and feminists who believe that the #MeToo movement has gone too far, has turned into a man-hating movement. It is a division the media has been quick to reinforce. One of the most widely discussed examples of this backlash is the letter signed by 100 French women, most notably Catherine Deneuve, which denounced the #MeToo movement, known in France as #BalanceTonPorc. Insisting on the distinctions between rape and other advances, the letter described the movement as a frenzied moment in which men were essentially treated as “pigs” and condemned to the “slaughterhouse.” It insisted that “incidents that can affect a woman’s body do not necessarily affect her dignity and must not, as difficult as they can be, necessarily make her a perpetual victim.”²⁰ The response to this letter swiftly noted that many of the authors and signatories were privileged women who ignored structural inequities and failed to see that the vocalization of assault was, in and of itself, an act of empowerment that rejected victimhood.²¹ Laura Kipnis challenges this position by situating #MeToo within the discourse of rights: “What the Deneuve statement misses, with its high flown talk about rights and freedoms, is that rights don’t exist until they’re conferred politically, and the democratic revolutions that substantiated them in France and American didn’t confer them equally on everyone.”²²

The divisions highlighted by the French example have invited several explanations, including the differences between French and American feminism. One of these distinctions includes intersectionality, a cornerstone of U.S. feminism since the 1990s, which exposes the tensions between universal aspirations and structural differences and inequities embedded in race, ethnicity, and class. However, for many French feminists, “America was differentialist, France

²⁰ Full translation of “French Anti-#MeToo manifesto signed by Catherine Deneuve,” www.worldcrunch.com/opinion-analysis/full-translation-of-french-anti-metoo-manifesto-signed-by-catherine-deneuve (accessed April 13, 2019). Rachel Donadio, “France, Where #MeToo Becomes #PasMoi,” *The Atlantic* (January 9, 2018), www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/france-me-too/550124/ (accessed April 13, 2019). Agnès Poirier, “After the #MeToo backlash, an insider’s guide to French feminism,” *The Guardian* (January 13, 2018), www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/14/france-feminists-catherine-deneuve-metoo-letter-sexual-harassment. Aurelian Breeden and Elien Peltier, “Response to French Letter Denouncing #MeToo Shows a Sharp Divide,” *New York Times* (January 12, 2018), www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/world/europe/france-sexual-harassment.html

²¹ Kim Willsher, “Annie Ernaux: ‘I was so ashamed for Catherine Deneuve...’,” *The Guardian* (April 6, 2019), www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/06/annie-ernaux-interview-the-years-memoir-man-booker-international (accessed April 25, 2019). Karina Piser, “In France, Is the MeToo Movement Passé?” *The Nation* (November 2, 2018). www.thenation.com/article/france-metoo-balancetonporc/ (accessed April 13, 2019).

²² Laura Kipnis, “Has #MeToo gone too far, or not far enough? The answer is both,” *The Guardian* (January 13, 2018), www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/13/has-me-too-catherine-deneuve-laura-kipnis (accessed April 13, 2019). Kipnis’s position is an interesting one, given her controversial statements regarding Title IX and sexual assault on college campuses. See, for example, Laura Kipnis, “Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 27, 2015), www.chronicle.com/article/Sexual-Paranoia-Strikes/190351 (accessed October 8, 2019).

universalist,” a perception that ignores the hegemonic attitudes associated with colonialism.²³ Arguably, in France, the intersectional matrix, reflecting France’s colonial past, involves religion as well as race and class. For example, the debate over the hijab operates in the nexus of neo-colonialism and Islamophobia, secularism and republicanism, and feminism.²⁴ Elisabeth Badinter has attacked #MeToo as symptomatic of the excesses of American feminism and has also come out strongly against practices such as the hijab. For Badinter, the veil and other signs of religious faith are symbols of female oppression and the antithesis of French universalism, but critics of Badinter have been quick to point out how her perspective is highly suggestive of racism and xenophobia.²⁵

The discussion of the politics surrounding the veil is a complex one, but for the purposes of this essay, I am drawn to an observation Badinter made about sexual assault within the context of religious difference. In a 2016 interview with *Le Monde*, Badinter was challenged if there was a double standard between the racialized responses to the sexual assaults against women in Germany around New Year’s 2015/16, attributed to immigrants as a group, and to clerical predators, whose crimes are individualized. Badinter rejected the idea that the responses were different, shaped by racism and xenophobia. She stated that the Church no longer argued for the inequality of the sexes and had denounced pedophilia even after a history of protecting perpetrators whereas imams continued to advocate for women’s sexual submission to their husbands.²⁶ This statement is suggestive of a series of deletions that, ironically, undermine the emphasis Badinter has placed on abstract individualism and universalism. Speaking on behalf of the victims of sexual aggression, she denies that the rhetoric surrounding the accused in Germany has roots in imperial and neo-colonial discourse at the same time that she reverts to older tropes pitting Islam against Christianity. Although she has been a critic of the Catholic Church’s position on abortion, Badinter chose in 2016 not to acknowledge that although the Church has publicly denounced abuses within its ranks, its actual efforts to investigate and change are operating on a glacial pace and often in response to outside pressures.²⁷ Her statement appeared not only to disavow the openly patriarchal structure of the Church but also erase the voice of victims.

²³ Scott, *Parité!*, 71

²⁴ See Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 156-183; Annabelle Timsit, “The Muslim Feminist Group Scrambling France’s Left-Right Divide,” *The Atlantic* (September 16, 2017), www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/the-muslim-feminist-group-scrambling-frances-left-right-divides/539856/ (accessed April 13, 2019)

²⁵ See also Jacques Bolo, “Elisabeth Badinter et la laïcité,” *Exergue* (October 2011), www.exergue.com/h/2011-10/tt/elisabeth-badinter-laicite.html (Accessed April 25, 2019).

²⁶ Nicolas Truong, “Elisabeth Badinter appelée au boycott des marques qui se lancent dans la mode,” *Le Monde*, April 1, 2016), www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/04/02/elisabeth-badinter-une-partie-de-la-gauche-a-baisse-la-garde-devant-le-communautarisme_4894360_3232.html (accessed April 14, 2019). The feminist Caroline de Haas critiques Badinter in the late-night show *On n’est pas couché* (April 9, 2016). www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfPYhfQiIrs

²⁷ Interview on France Inter, October 14, 2018. See <https://twitter.com/franceinter/status/1051714396752371712>.

The predetermined invisibility of these voices comes as no surprise for historians who are endeavoring to uncover examples of sexual assault, as I have discovered in a current project on sexual abuse in the early modern French Church. Part of the controversy surrounding the Catholic Church involves the systematic cover-ups of assault; in 2018, the ‘secret archives’ of the Pennsylvania Catholic Church revealed a predetermined game plan to protect predatory priests and isolate victims, a theme repeated in the series *Examination of Conscience* released by Netflix in January 2019, which documents systemic pedophilia in the Spanish Church.²⁸ This pattern suggests continuity, a point recently made by Wietse de Boer.²⁹ However, I would argue that while acknowledging continuity, we also have to note historical differences in order to have a chance at retrieving victim’s voices or simply acknowledging their existence. As Miriam Deniel-Ternant’s work has shown, police and ecclesiastical records indicate that neither secular nor ecclesiastic authorities—including police commissioners, bishops, and monastic superiors—turned a completely blind eye to clerical misbehavior.³⁰ For example, at the end of 1767, the Paris *officialité* investigated charges made against Adrien Nicolas Pierre Dardet, a curé in the parish of the Ile Saint-Denis. Twenty-three witnesses spoke of irregularities not only regarding sexual transgressions (Dardet appeared to have penchant for squeezing backsides) but also with respect to how he fulfilled his clerical duties. The meticulous notes taken by the vicegerent Jean-Baptiste Robinault du Boisbasset gave ample space to the witness testimonies, including those who complained of sexual assault dating back to the mid-1740s. However, Deniel-Ternant notes that the authorities took 22 years to respond and then only when the complaints were about Dardet’s failure to complete his pastoral responsibilities.³¹

From the perspective of the authorities, the women’s grievances in and of themselves did not merit investigation and did not trouble officials who were more concerned about the potential scandal created by disclosure and publicity. This omission was more pronounced in the police records that documented identified monks and priests, who were not in an “odor of saintliness” and were associated with unnamed “*femmes du monde*.” Thus, the 55-year-old abbé de Courbe came to the attention of the police in 1752 when frequenting “La Richard” on the rue Meslée. The police spy noted that one of the “women” was an 11-year-old virgin whom de Courbe initially deflowered with a candle; eventually, he focused on her 16-year-old sister.³² What is

²⁸ Scott Dodd, ‘Pennsylvania grand jury says church had a “playbook for concealing the truth”’, *New York Times* (August 14, 2018). <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/14/us/pennsylvania-child-abuse-catholic-church.html> (accessed January 11, 2019).

²⁹ Wietse de Boer, “The Catholic Church and Sexual Abuse, Then and Now,” *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective* 12, 6 (March 2019) <http://origins.osu.edu/article/catholic-church-sexual-abuse-pope-confession-priests-nuns> (accessed April 22, 2019)

³⁰ Myriam Deniel-Ternant, *Ecclésiastiques en débauche (1700-1790)* (Paris: Camps Vallon, 2017).

³¹ Deniel-Ternant, *Ecclésiastiques en débauche*, 199-201. The *officialité* records contain the interrogations. For example, in the list of accusations, the assault is the last of seven purported crimes. “Extrait de l’information faite à la requête de Mr. le promoteur général de l’archevêché de Paris contre le sr. Dardé cure de l’Isle St. Denis., Archives Nationales, Z/1o/225A.

³² “The abbé de Courbe, rue Licorne, 12 janvier 1752), Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Archives de la Bastille, 10246, f. 39.

striking is that neither woman was named; their identities and their experiences were not central to the inquiries of Inspector Meusnier.

But even named women could face erasure. The name of Catherine Cadière was on the lips of the public who followed the sensational 1731 trial in which Cadière accused her Jesuit confessor Jean-Baptiste Girard of seduction and bewitchment.³³ The numerous verses and legal briefs generated during the case indicate that Jean-Baptiste Girard signified all the purported crimes of the entire Jesuit order while Cadière represented the French family and society threatened by Jesuit domination. Cadière's true value lay in her role as a proxy for these other social institutions supposedly threatened by the Jesuit order. Indeed, on a certain level, public sympathy for Cadière as victim was inauthentic. After all, early modern society operated with "the presumption that a woman could not behave responsibly, which cast suspicion on her personal and private decisions."³⁴ For most victims, "submission" to sexual violence could be construed by the courts and the public as consent, depending on status and age. Thus, Cadière necessarily had to efface herself, which she did by claiming ignorance of Girard's supposed assault on her. Cadière's story and those of countless women and men suggest continuity: what Judith Bennett identifies as a patriarchal equilibrium in which changes in one arena of society that may have benefited women were countermanded by reactions in another arena.³⁵

Continuity and Change

The history of sexual assault then appears to be one of inexorable continuity, but at the risk of sounding like a term paper taking a final gasp, I would like to suggest how attitudes may be shifting because of how we conceptualize rights. The French Revolution revealed the degree to which the understanding of rights was continually changing and therefore was expandable, precisely what enabled a movement like #MeToo to emerge over two centuries later. I would argue that the questions of rights in this context are intertwined with issues of erasure and embodiment. According to Lynn Hunt, insofar as individual rights are defined by autonomy, the body becomes a sacred space to be respected by others, and a part of individual agency is to define the boundaries between one's own body and another's. Thus, "human rights depend both on self-possession and on the recognition that all others are equally self-possessed."³⁶ Hunt argues that the emotive elements, so central to the idea of universal rights, also create flexibility: "Rights remain open to question because our sense of who has rights and what those rights are constantly changes."³⁷ The MeToo website, established by Tarana Burke and her associates, exemplifies Hunt's connection between empathy and rights in its message to advocates: "Many of us are survivors, too; so we know that empowering others through empathy is often a part of our healing journeys."³⁸

³³ Mita Choudhury, *The Wanton Jesuit and the wayward saint: a tale of sex, religion, and politics in eighteenth-century France* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2015).

³⁴ Vigarello, *History of rape*, p. 38.

³⁵ Judith Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2006), 54-81.

³⁶ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 29.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁸ *metoo* <https://metoomvmt.org/> (accessed April 13, 2019).

The empathetic paradigm has fostered an awareness of the importance of recognizing difference and contingency but also of making connections, thus having universal meaning. The activism surrounding #MeToo, like labor activism, which seeks an end to violence against women trapped within a low-wage economy, reflect these shifting paradigms with respect to the dignity of bodies and rights. In many instances, their agenda is shared whether it concerns domestic violence, sexual harassment in the workplace, and reproductive rights. For example, as Annelise Orleck has shown, female laborers have built coalitions through organizations such as World March, to draw attention to the global feminization of poverty and to the various forms of sexual harassment in substandard work conditions.³⁹ And just recently, there has been controversy over UN resolution 2467, which affirms a commitment to combat sexual assault in war. However, at the insistence of the US, the resolution that passed on April 23, 2019 failed to reference sexual and reproductive health. Numerous global activist organizations have noted the disservice this does to impoverished women caught in the crossfires of combat.⁴⁰

Moreover, these contemporary movements also share another concern that defined the French Revolution: transparency, which involves accountability as well as visibility. Today, #MeToo, female labor activism, and organizations denouncing sexual abuse in the Church, such as La Parole Libérée and Infancia Robada, are seeking not just to enable individual victims to speak out but also to hold institutions accountable for the abuses that were buried to prevent scandal.⁴¹ In exposing crimes of this nature, these movements and organizations shed light on how institutions such as the Church, companies, and schools systematically suppress victims' voices. The common goal of making abuse evident casts suppression as a violation of rights.

In making these links between the French Revolution and movements such as #MeToo, my intention is not simply to show the broad relevance of revolutionary history, nor to draw a straight line from the late eighteenth century to the present. What then are the implications for historians? I would suggest that drawing such connections provides an opportunity to make voices of the past visible but also to query how we ourselves might be engaged in erasure. In *Dispossessed Lives*, Marisa Fuentes argues that the silencing of assaulted slave women reflects how the archives themselves reproduced existing power structures. According to Fuentes, the violence experienced by her subjects is also suggestive of an epistemic violence, which “originates from the knowledge produced about enslaved women by white men and women in this society, and that knowledge is what survives in archival form.”⁴² Can we then trust the sources, often written by the individuals and groups who sought to minimize or suppress

³⁹ Annelise Orleck, *We Are All Fast-Food Workers Now: The Global Uprising against Poverty Wages* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018), 48-60.

⁴⁰ Liz Ford, “UN waters down rape resolution to appease US’s hardline abortion stance,” *The Guardian* (April 23, 2019), www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/apr/23/un-resolution-passes-trump-us-veto-threat-abortion-language-removed

⁴¹ Hannah Brockhaus, “In private meeting, victims tell leaders of abuse summit: ‘We want action,’” *Catholic News Agency* (February 20, 2019), www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/in-private-meeting-victims-tell-leaders-of-abuse-summit-we-want-action-26040 (accessed April 16, 2019).

⁴² Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016), p. 5.

instances of rape? As Amy Stanley notes, we have been trained, with good reason, to be skeptical of our sources and of false accusations, which can also play a role in sexual assault narratives. But she also observes: “After all, relatively powerless people almost always had reasons to lie, if only because their lives were so often on the line. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that they weren’t credible, or that we should lead our readers toward that assumption.”⁴³ Thus, the #MeToo moment invites us to ask to which historical subjects do we bestow credibility and whom are we more likely to dismiss?

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⁴³ Amy Stanley, ‘Writing the history of sexual assault in the age of #MeToo’, *Perspectives on history* (September 24, 2018), www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2018/writing-the-history-of-sexual-assault-in-the-age-of-metoo (accessed 20 December 2018).