On September 27, 2018, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford stood before the US Senate to detail allegations that she had been sexually assaulted in 1982 by Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh while both were still in high school. In a public and televised hearing, Blasey Ford testified under oath that Kavanaugh “groped me and tried to take off my clothes... I believed he was going to rape me.” Kavanaugh categorically denied the allegations. Despite vocal public support on social and conventional media, Blasey Ford was also subject to harassment and death threats; she moved from her home due to fear of retribution and was unable to resume her work as a professor at Palo Alto University. Brett Kavanaugh was in the end confirmed to the US Supreme Court on October 6, 2018, by a vote of 50 to 48. Only one Republican senator, Lisa Murkowski from Alaska, expressed opposition to the confirmation, although she ultimately abstained from the vote.

The Kavanaugh hearings and Blasey Ford’s testimony, in the midst of the #MeToo movement, highlighted once again the profound impact of power and politicization on the outcomes of sexual assault allegations. While Kavanaugh’s name is forever tied to the allegations, he sits on the Supreme Court and has been granted the power to make decisions of law that reverberate through the lives of many women.1 Christine Blasey Ford, respected and celebrated though she is in her field of psychology, has all but disappeared from public life. To those who believe her, Blasey Ford is a hero who spoke truth to power at great personal cost; for those who do not believe her, she is symbolic of the danger a lying, manipulative
woman can pose to a man’s reputation and status. Whether you believe her or not, the outcome clearly demonstrates that allegations of sexual misconduct come with costs—for both victims and alleged perpetrators.

Where sexual harassment emerged as a construct principally through workplace policy and law, and sexual assault was developed through legal and criminal justice institutions, the basic argument we advance in this book is that “sexual misconduct,” as a social construct, has developed primarily through mass media. Further, we argue that the development of the discourse of sexual misconduct through media has contributed to changes in the interpretation and definition of social affairs at both the institutional and individual levels. Dorothy Smith, among the most influential feminist sociologists of the twentieth century, elucidated in her 1987 book how the “relations of ruling” involve the constructions of texts and discourse that offer a framework through which individuals interpret and define their own experiences. These relations of ruling are deeply gendered yet at the same time structured to make their gendered nature invisible. Mass media are part of these relations of ruling, and the development of the discourse of sexual misconduct in news media, as we demonstrate in this volume, simultaneously draws our attention to and minimizes the gendered nature of these troubles.

This book focuses largely, although not exclusively, on news media. Mass media play an essential role in the societal reaction process, including influencing how situations are defined, discussed, and understood, as we outline in detail in the following pages. When dealing with a seemingly infinite volume of media materials as potential data, researchers must make methodological decisions regarding data inclusion and exclusion prior to collection and analysis. In this regard, much of the data materials in the chapters that follow are from the New York Times and the Washington Post. These media organizations were selected because, as among the most powerful and influential news companies in the United States, they are recognized as primary agenda-setting news media and have a wide global reach. The point is not to extrapolate from the media data presented in this book to make generalizable statements, but rather to add to our growing awareness and, importantly, our understandings of the contemporary cultural recognition of sexual misconduct, and to stress the significance of media formats in relation to how social situations are defined, understood, and acted upon.

Sexual misconduct covers a broader symbolic terrain than other related terms dealing with sexual harms. For instance, unlike sexual harassment or sexual assault, definitions of sexual misconduct can range considerably from employer restrictions of consensual sexual relations
between co-workers of equal seniority and status to forms of criminal sexual assault. Because sexual misconduct has no single agreed-upon definition, as explored in the following pages, we argue that its development in mass media beginning in the 1980s allowed for the widespread reframing of a number of behaviours, ranging from the criminal to the untoward, under the broad umbrella of sexual misconduct, resulting in a contemporary discursive framework through which people, mostly women, can share their personal stories. The outcome has been a remarkable sea change of public conversation about a topic that was previously taboo.

Many people have experienced inappropriate advances or uninvited behaviours that left them feeling less than comfortable, the authors included. We are not always entirely reflexive about such interactions; nor are we always able to respond in ways of which we are proud, whether in the moment or even years later. One of the important, if often overlooked, outcomes of the #MeToo movement has been the creation of a discourse, language, and awareness that has opened the possibility for individuals to re-evaluate and reinterpret past interactions. Experiences that were once understood as awkward or uncomfortable but tolerated may be affectively and discursively redefined as harmful, while similar experiences may not be tolerated today.

In 2005, Stacey attended an academic conference to present on some of the earliest iterations of her doctoral thesis work. She was pleased to be placed on a panel with a well-known and respected academic whose work she admired very much. As a young and unknown PhD candidate, she was even more pleased when, following the panel, this individual expressed further interest in her work, inviting continued conversation. But she remembers being taken aback by a hand around her shoulders and the “too close for comfort” intensity of the conversation, and the combined feelings of confusion and relief to see a member of her doctoral committee approaching across the room to intervene. She also remembers the quiet warning, “maybe best to avoid and keep your distance, if you can.”

Over the years, there were whispered conversations with other women academics—good feminist academics with connections and tenure-track positions. Stacey wasn’t the only one with a story like this. But there were strategies: A good friend suggested, “Pull in close when he comes in for a hug, then the kiss lands on your hair instead of your face.” Another advised that she “just keep moving—give a wave and keep going; if you’re busy you can avoid it getting awkward.” The general consensus among the women in this close-knit community was that this behaviour was
annoying, and awkward, but probably not really harmful—inappropriate, but not worth jeopardizing collegial relationships. After all, this individual, a white male, a full professor, was and remains well respected, well cited, and admired. There was a general sense that it would be more awkward and disruptive to the community to say something than to just put up with the problem. Although Chris also ran in similar academic circles, as a man he had not heard the rumours or concerns until we began to discuss these interactions. Women are good at keeping secrets and pretending that everything is fine.

As a young professor, Stacey found herself giving the same advice to female graduate students: “Best to just stay away.” These management strategies worked—mostly—until they didn’t. Three generations of intelligent, capable women scholars tolerated awkward and inappropriate behaviour, sharing their best coping strategies, until a graduate student was placed in a situation that she was not willing to tolerate. She spoke out. She broke the silence of whispered conversations and insisted that there be a community response. In doing so, she forced us individually and collectively to confront the effects of our inaction and our shame at our failure to be brave and to live up to our own feminist principles.

In many ways, the impetus for this book—the wish to examine our burgeoning social reckoning with sexual misconduct—was rooted in a personal need to consider (still at a distance) the intergenerational failures within our own academic community. Even among progressive social thinkers, we still have so much work to do to create a safe and egalitarian space for all. But change is coming, and we will all be indebted to those who are willing to put themselves on the line to ensure such a change happens.

This book is the culmination of three years of research coupled with hundreds of hours of discussions between us about the dynamics of sexual misconduct. The aforementioned events piqued our shared interest in many of the topics covered in these chapters, and we spent many hours discussing the dynamics of the news coverage and popular media that are the subject of this book and asking one another questions that drove our curiosity. In our conversations, research, and analysis, we attempted to unpack the dynamics of gender and power that underlie the experience of and social response to sexual violence. Our approach is perhaps unique, informed as it is by our separate gendered viewpoints and our collective approach to empirical data with a concern for understanding what is happening in the given moment but also with a vision for what a better future might look like. In this sense, our book is both a map of
the existing terrain and a hopeful conception for a different and, as we outline in the concluding chapter, better and more just tomorrow, with less harm.

The media’s attention to sexual misconduct and #MeToo has focused largely on heteronormative concerns, especially related to white women’s experiences. Much of what emerged from our empirical analysis—and this is subsequently reflected in much of the book—followed a similar heteronormative trajectory that focused largely on the experiences of women discussed in mass media. Legitimate criticisms have been levied against #MeToo for not being more queer and for its lack of inclusion of other voices, like those of heterosexual men and marginalized communities, including queer folks and racialized people. Similarly, sexual violence against children has often been bracketed and considered as separate from broader movements that focus on sexual violence against women. While we do provide some evidence of marginalized voices in chapter 5, much work remains to bring these voices to the centre of public conversations. Wherever possible, we endeavoured to use more inclusive language to recognize that the dynamics of power and abuse are not limited to heterosexual relations. In what follows, then, our use of the terms “woman” and “women” may be read as inclusive of both cis and trans women.

Lastly, this global and mediated discussion of sexual violence has also arisen in the midst of Canada’s reckoning with a long, brutal history of colonial violence against Indigenous women and girls, who are among the most marginalized and targeted groups in Canada. The Canadian government’s National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was in progress as we worked on this manuscript, reminding us every day that sexual misconduct and sexual violence exist on a wide spectrum and that the consequences of gendered and sexual violence are devastating for individuals, families, communities, and indeed for entire nations. The inquiry’s final report was released on June 3, 2019, and documents myriad experiences of violence and sexual violence perpetrated against Indigenous women and girls by men. The men come from both within and outside their communities, and police—the people who are supposed to protect the vulnerable—are implicated as perpetrators of violence and complicit in failing to respond to Indigenous women’s and girls’ reports of violence.

As the report points out, this is not the first time that Indigenous women and girls have spoken about the violence that they face—they have been speaking about violence for many years and nothing has been done to address it. In her book Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative
Politics, Tanya Serisier suggests that “narrative requires both an individual to speak and a collective to listen.” While we are beginning to listen and acknowledge these narratives, we have yet to move decisively to action. As we write this preface, more than a year after the national inquiry released its final report, the Government of Canada has yet to begin implementing its recommendations; once again, women’s and girls’ experiences of sexualized violence are not a priority. As we put the final touches on this manuscript, Canadians have just begun to face the terrible reality of the unmarked graves of Indigenous children who suffered and died in so-called residential schools. The reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada contain thousands of horrific stories of sexual abuse and violence perpetrated against Indigenous children by clergy and lay teachers who oversaw these colonial institutions. The unmarked graves came as no surprise to those who had been listening. The fact that our collective social attention was first captured by white women speaking about sexual harassment and sexual assault in the workplace, and that we overlooked centuries of sexualized racial and colonial violence against Indigenous women and children and women of colour, speaks to the profound erasure of these experiences from the narratives of white feminists and the societal framing of sexual violence as an individual rather than a structural phenomenon.

The Indigenous women and men who shared their experiences with the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have been called “change makers.” Along with all those brave people who speak out, in media, in courtrooms, in their everyday lives, they challenge our complacency and insist that we, as a society, listen, acknowledge, and respond to the harms of sexual violence. It is our hope that this book contributes to the conversation about sexual violence and sexual misconduct and offers some insight into the hegemonic barriers to systemic and concrete change for the better.