When President Biden nominated Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson to the U.S. Supreme Court, fulfilling his campaign promise to appoint a Black woman, it should have been cause for celebration. Instead, it devolved into a rerun of the mistreatment of Anita Hill, a Black law professor, and Christine Blasey Ford, a white psychology professor, who had accused previous nominees of sexual misconduct. How does #MeToo enable us to connect two witnesses who testified about sexual harassment (Hill) and assault (Blasey Ford) to a third, herself a nominee to the Court, and the bizarre accusation that she harbored sympathy for child molesters? When #MeToo transformed the iterative phenomenon of one wretched case after another into a demand for accountability, it exposed a pattern of how institutions use formal processes against those who report sexual harassment, draw on a supply of racist and sexist bias to slander them, and turn their allegations against them in lurid and parodic ways. Anita Hill, Christine Blasey Ford, and Ketanji Brown Jackson, although distant in time and circumstance from one another, were denigrated by gendered and racialized smear tactics honed over time. Although the individuals change, every week brings new examples that expose the prevalence of abuse and the inadequate response to systemic sexual violence. So many, in fact, that I stopped trying to include the latest outrage in this preface and to focus
instead on what enables its repetition. The pattern persists because the racist and sexist associations required to reproduce it are entangled in processes that are enshrined as positive and fair. For this reason, our first thoughts about justice and protection are often for abusers rather than survivors.

Those who try to report sexual abuse are ensnared in Kafkaesque processes. They are often told there are no procedures for their complaints, or their complaints are recorded only to be shelved. When they follow up, often years later, they are told the statutes of limitations have expired. In contrast, abusers are often familiar to authorities—including police, religious leaders and school administrators—and benefit from the appearance of a fair process that entails no accountability. These same formal processes allow men, especially white men, to defame women, especially women of color, as threatening to the rule of law, confused about sexual abuse, and undeserving of respect. While the similar mistreatment of Anita Hill and Christine Blasey Ford demonstrates that nothing changed between 1991 and 2017 to clarify how a charge of sexual abuse could be communicated, equally important is how Republican senators were able to transfer their attacks from these witnesses to a historic nominee in 2022 by acting as if she were on trial, sexually suspect, and ultimately illegitimate. I begin with a recent Supreme Court nomination not because it uniquely captures the essence of #MeToo, but because it is one among many examples whose appalling familiarity demonstrates why “MeToo” struck a global public as both necessary and long overdue when it appeared in October 2017.

#MeToo erupted on social media a few months after the publication of my book Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives. In it, I examine how cultural practices of judgment diminish women as knowers and persons worthy of justice. I theorized that women count less than men as truth-tellers because we are trained to believe men, to value their futures and care about what might injure them in ways that simply do not apply to women. In addition to holding men in regard, we learn to doubt women. Doubting women is reaffirmed by the law and reproduced in workplaces, disciplinary processes, and everyday life. This doubt has the force of common sense, and it feels
rational and ethical to direct it at women. Because doubt welds sexism to other forms of abuse and bias, like racism, homophobia, and transphobia, those who speak out are often discredited before any evidence is examined. #MeToo raises a new proposition: What happens when we believe women?

I use “women” here and throughout this book as a name people call themselves and also as a category of feminist analysis. Within feminist scholarship, “women” is not a neutral biological descriptor but a concept that carries a range of legal, religious, political, and cultural meanings. It is inconceivable that we would minimize sexual violence as “not that bad,” “a case of he said/she said,” or an inevitable byproduct of women entering the workforce if we didn’t already consider women to be worth less than men. There is no comparable dismissal of entire categories of harm without the related disparagement of the groups harmed. Racist, settler, and gendered regimes rationalize the violence they benefit from by defining its targets as essentially different and less than. For this reason, the use of “women” and “men” is not about nomenclature as much as who counts and who does the counting. Although #MeToo has a global reach, some feel empowered by it while others feel excluded, for some of the same reasons they feel included in or alienated from the category of “women.” At Judge Brown Jackson’s nomination hearing, Republican senator Marsha Blackburn, a southern white woman, using a transphobic trope, challenged Brown Jackson to define “what a woman is.” Blackburn’s demand was a potent reminder that words are charged with political meanings and histories of exclusion. Survivors who are young, trans, queer, poor, brown, Black, or Indigenous often find formal processes revictimizing because they direct the powers of state, including carceral power—the power to imprison—at them. This is especially evident when they speak out about sexual violence.

#MeToo offers an alternative. As a response to hostile formal processes, #MeToo uses the power of stories to raise the credibility of all survivors. Although #MeToo is sometimes caricatured as a threat to due process or an example of carceral feminism most likely to harm people of color, the strategy of narrative activism is neither. At least not necessarily. While it seeks to hold abusers and their enablers accountable, and
often does so by placing its faith in activism rather than courts, it typically builds a case through testimony—truth-telling, evidence gathering, fact checking, and public disclosure—when that testimony is blocked by the law. It relies on journalists to provide what police and courts often refuse survivors, uses labor actions to demand third-party investigations and other alternatives to forced mediation, and embraces the power of storytelling to create empathy and understanding in diverse audiences. I draw on the humanities—literary criticism, narrative theory, and feminist criticism, specifically—to describe how survivors used narrative rather than strictly legal, administrative, or policy tools to revive a longstanding public conversation about sexual justice. This approach to #MeToo exposes the asymmetry between two threats: one posed by sexual violence, which is decried by survivors and activists, and the other by truth-telling about it, which is characterized by its critics as dangerous and retributive. #MeToo exposes this pattern of false equivalence and demands that we learn how to listen when survivors tell the truth. This book diagnoses why this is so difficult and how narrative activism makes it less so. It shifts the focus from demanding that survivors speak out to the features of narrative and reception that enable us to hear them.
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