Thank you all for coming. Thank you, Nelson, in particular, for inviting me to be here today. Thank you to the remarkable, amazing city of Lisbon. I feel like I’m in balance right now between two complete governmental shit-shows. With the US government shutdown and Brexit happening where I live now, to come to Lisbon and to be part of this group and to experience these talks and intellectual conversations has been an incredible gift. So thank you for that. I am going to present today from my book, but also some new ideas that I’ve been thinking about, and I also really appreciate the fact that this winter school on populism has given me an opportunity to think through some of the differences and similarities between what I call the popular and populism.

As I was telling Nelson and Barbie yesterday, it’s very interesting to me to be thinking about populism. Lots of people have gone over definitions of populism here, so I’m not going to rehearse those in this talk. But about five years ago, when I started thinking about popular feminism and what it meant and what does the popular as a terrain of intellectual inquiry mean, I gave a paper at another conference on populism. And in that conference I argued that what we need to think about how we need to push “popular” forward towards populism, because it was before we started sort of equating populism with the extreme right. And so populism for me at that time was much more about a left kind of progressive movement. And I was thinking about how to push my thinking towards that direction.

Now, five years later I’m thinking, “Well, I’m just going to hold on to the popular for a while.” So again, lots of people have rehearsed this definition. I’ve really learned from a lot of different people here about what populism is. I’m just going to take as a kind of broad given that a definition of populism is about a struggle or challenge between a group that is identified as the elite and a group that is identified as the people. But I also think that populism—and many of us have talked about this, this week—is crucially about demagoguery. It is crucially about its own elite who stokes fears and passions in the people. And so I think that when we think about populism and the way I’m thinking about popular misogyny as a populism, I’m kind of thinking through what that means to have figures that stoke fear and resentment.

Peter Baker last week in the Guardian had a long article about definitions of populism. And one of the things that he said is that the word evokes the long-simmering resentments of the everyman brought to a boil by charismatic politicians, hawking, and impossible promises. So what I want to do in this talk is talk about that, how populism is also fueled by a strong sense of victimhood and recuperation. As Baker continues, “A populous ‘people’ can define itself by an ethnic identity it feels is under threat, but just as easily by a shared sense of being victims of economic exploitation. What matters is that it blames a perceived class of corrupt elites; in the
case of rightwing populisms, it may also heap scorn on some underclass, whether immigrants or racial minorities, whom the elites are accused of favouring with special treatment as part of their plot to keep power away from ‘real people.’”

This for me forms a lot of the logic of what I’m going to talk about in terms of popular misogyny, that it’s about a boiling resentment, about a feeling that women in particular received special treatment that has taken away from men, and it’s about victimhood. So I’m going to talk about this in the context of my recent book as Barbie said, Empowered. I’m going to argue here that popular misogyny can be seen as a kind of populism because it mobilizes a particular kind of networked movement. And it is about the shared sense of being victims of special treatment, about recuperation and restoration of patriarchy.

So I’m going to start off with two moments about one year apart. The first moment is one that everyone, I’m sure in this room and elsewhere, knows quite well. It kind of ignited in October 2017, and around then this article set it off from the New York Times. #MeToo began to circulate in digital and social media. The Times published this article detailing multiple accusations of sexual harassment against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. The Weinstein case mobilized hundreds of other stories about harassment in everyday life, which were manifest in the multimedia movement of #MeToo. As many have pointed out, the phrase #MeToo was actually created in 2007 by an African-American activist, Tarana Burke, a survivor of sexual assault and someone who created a movement, in particular, to help with connecting with other victims, especially women of color.

The fact that Burke, the originator of #MeToo, was largely eclipsed by the high-profile, mostly white, female celebrities who came forward in the Weinstein scandal is not insignificant. Time Magazine’s person of the year in 2017 was named the silence breakers, women who have come forward to expose sexual harassers and predators. Yet Burke who created the movement was inside the pages, not featured on the cover. Although, as you will see, Taylor Swift is featured on the cover, who needless to say has an ambivalent relationship to feminism. The mainstream media has covered these #MeToo stories expansively, which is an important move, but the stories are often about the powerful men who are accused or the celebrity women who accused them.

In other words, while the public awareness of #MeToo has helped to reveal how widespread and normative sexual harassment is across all industries, it’s also focused on very visible public figures. And I say this not to dismiss the accusation of those figures in any way, but I do want to point out that while #MeToo existed in the early 2000s as a mechanism for building intersectional feminist community, it becomes highly visible only under the mediated logics of a new kind of popular feminism. The #MeToo movement that is expressed on these media platforms are those [stories] that easily lend themselves to commodification and simplification, those industries that provide platforms of visibility, things like entertainment and the news
media, that are already designed and scripted for any mode of spectacular spotlight. So this happens in October 2017; roughly about a year later, we start to see another story that surfaces and begins to kind of supplant the ##MeToo stories in terms of visibility in the mainstream media.

These are stories of white male victimhood that circulate on the same media platforms as those that are about ##MeToo. And I’m arguing here that these two moments are not unrelated, that there are connections with the media visibility of ##MeToo and the visibility of what I’m thinking of as a different inflection of ##MeToo. In my mind, it’s always said as a whine or a snark, maybe even mocking, maybe cruelly, in either Trump’s or Brett Kavanaugh’s voice, like a child who isn’t getting enough attention rather than a mode of solidarity: “What about MeToo?” Despite the fact that misogyny has long existed as a norm and policy, in culture, economics, and the political realm, in the current moment there is an overt claim that masculinity and, more generally, patriarchy are under threat.

Popular misogyny is often expressed as a need to take something back, such as patriarchy, from the greedy hands of feminists and women. We see this palpably in the increasing visibility of the extreme right and right populism across the globe. And while the racist ideologies of the extreme right have been correctly identified as white nationalism, and a lot of people talked about and have been talking about this at this conference, the extreme right has also always run on an overtly misogynistic agenda. As reporter Matthew Lyons points out, harassing and defaming women isn’t just a tactic; it also serves the alt-right’s broader agenda and long-term vision for society. A key logic of right populism is recuperation. Men’s rights organizations in digital culture and . . . I don’t know if we can still say “in real life” ’cause that doesn’t really make any sense anymore, but not digital culture. The men’s rights organizations are filled with proclamations about how women and feminists have not only destroyed society, but perhaps even more importantly, have emasculated it.

So I’m thinking about how and in what ways—this is my book—the rise of popular feminism has encouraged both a response and an intensification of popular misogyny. So I want to argue that you can’t think about popular feminism without also thinking about, it’s always the response that always comes through misogyny. And I think that there are some themes here that are picked up that characterize popular feminism, things like shame, confidence, competence, and rage, that are also taken up by popular misogyny. So the meaning of them is distorted in that taking up and deflects attention away from women and towards men and then is targeted actively against women.

So in some ways we can think about popular feminism and popular misogyny as competing movements or competing populisms, but in other ways I want to suggest that they are always engaged in an antagonistic relationship with each other that depends on its core constitutive. Each of these themes that I see—and these are just a few of them that I see—that are kind of
engaged in this relationship between feminism and misogyny are also dependent on a logic that revolves around the twinned discourses of injury and capacity. By this I mean that both popular feminism and popular misogyny tap into a neoliberal notion of individual capacity for work, for confidence, for economic success, but that also they both position injury—the capacity that overcomes—as something that is core to its politics. So for women it’s injury of sexism. For men, it’s the injury of feminism and also the injury of multiculturalism, the other. And these are seen as key obstacles for realizing this capacity.

So expressions of popular misogyny often rely on the idea that men have been injured by women. Men are seen to be denied rights because women have gained them. Men are no longer confident because women are more confident. Men have lost jobs and power because women have entered into previously male-dominated realms regardless of how slowly. Men’s rights organizations and other forms of popular misogyny dedicate themselves to restoring the capacity of men, the restoration and recuperation of a traditional heteronormative masculinity and of patriarchy itself. This often is seen as a backlash to popular feminism. And surely it is a kind of backlash. It does lash back at feminism. But I also think it’s more than that, ‘cause backlash implies a linear direction. Something that goes in one direction. I think popular networked misogyny lashes in all directions, finding expression in obvious and in not so obvious ways.

So here victimhood is appropriated not by those who have historically suffered, but by those in positions of patriarchal power. Victimhood, in other words, is rerouted in this relationship, and it works to retrench patriarchal gender relations rather than challenge them. Victimhood, within this relationship, within this dynamic, becomes disarticulated from those who suffer and reallocated to the privileged, establishing a symbolic redistribution which then appropriates the moral meaning of victimhood or vulnerability itself. So these interconnected narratives of injury frame this talk, and I’m going to come back to them in the second part. But first I want to offer us some definitions about some of the concepts that I’m using here and what I mean specifically by popular feminism and popular misogyny.

It’s pretty clear that in North America and Western Europe, we are living in a moment in which feminism has become sort of incredibly popular. It feels like everywhere you turn there’s an expression of feminism. It’s on a T-shirt, it’s on the coffee mugs that I drink coffee out every morning, that say things like “superwoman” or “I drink male tears” or something. (Just kidding, I don’t have that one. But it actually does exist.) They’re in movies, they’re in anthems, in inspirational Instagram posts, in awards, acceptance speeches, and lapel pins that you wear. Feminism, for me, is popular in at least three senses. I know there are many different definitions of the popular. For me, these three characterize both popular feminism and popular misogyny.

One is that feminism manifests in discourses and practices that are circulated in popular and commercial media with digital spaces like blogs, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as broadcast media. Two, the “popular” of popular feminism signifies the condition of being liked or admired
by like-minded people and groups. So the popular of popular feminism is also about popularity, which means that some feminisms are pushed to the shadows whereas others are made luminous. And three, for me, the popular is as cultural theorist Stuart Hall said famously long ago, a terrain of struggle, a space where competing demands for power battle it out. So this means that there are many different feminisms that circulate in popular culture in the current moment. And some of them, again, become more visible than others.

Popular feminism is networked across all media platforms, some connecting with synergy, others struggling for priority and visibility. Popular feminism has, in many ways, allowed us to imagine a culture where feminism and its every form doesn’t have to be defended. It’s accessible, it’s even admiring. In many ways, this is an incredibly bolstering moment for me and is exhilarating in many ways. Despite that, despite that all this feminism everywhere is bolstering, it’s also given me pause to think about the social and economic conditions that define and describe popular feminism, because as I will argue, those social and economic conditions limit what feminism can be.

I think it’s important to critically analyze popular feminism. And I guide my analysis with some questions like, “Who can we think of as a popular feminist? What are the goals of popular feminism?” And again, there are different versions of feminism, but here I’m going to be talking about these sets of conditions including the media and the entertainment industries that comprise a highly visible form of popular feminism. So, in part, what I mean is that popular feminism refers to practices and conditions that are accessible to a broad public. From organizing marches to #activism to commodities, it’s popular, in part, because of the media forums on which it circulates. Feminist messages of gender and equality, body positivity, equal pay for equal work, the normalization of sexual harassment, self-confidence, these circulate and achieve visibility on multiple media platforms and industries.

And here this is just a very few samplings of some of the different forms of popular feminism websites. Emma Watson who has a UN campaign called HeForShe, Taylor Swift, again, with her ambivalence—I had to add her back on because apparently she’s feminist again, jewelry websites, how to build your online feminist hustle. I should read that every night just to make sure I know how to build my hustle! The Women’s March, the corporate campaigns, and so on. And the architecture of many of these popular media platforms is, of course, capitalist and corporate. That means that the social and economic conditions for popular feminism are, in part, about those technologies and underpinning logics of them. So while I’m not collapsing media platforms with entertainment industries, I am suggesting that they have a shared supporting logic.

So, for example, as we have seen historically, there’s specific messages of feminism that are often incorporated into advertising and marketing, and contemporary popular feminism is no different, with campaigns from Dove, to Chevy, to Verizon, which churn out these emotional ad
campaigns that then harness feminism as a selling point, as a way to sell products. There’s a whole industry and the “love your body” discourse, especially online and in beauty apps, which implore women to be confident and to love themselves, and most of all to be entrepreneurial and self-optimizing. I will say that part of the research in this book, I was trying to figure out as a user, how do you access all this popular feminism? So this website online feminist hustle offered a course and sells feminists self-love, which I took for $100 and I have a certificate. So anytime I feel shitty, I just bring out my wallet with my certificate and just show it to people because that works.

So there’s all sorts of different ways that popular feminism is expressed. There are hundreds of organizations, the corporate and nonprofit, that are dedicated to teaching girls and women to code and to enter the technology industries. Learning to code has become a hot new industry in itself. Social media, as we all know, has exploded with feminist campaigns from YesAllWomen, to NotOkay, to of course #MeToo. Blogs and websites such as Black Girl, Dangerous, Feministing, Feminist Current, Crunk Feminist Collective, Jezebel, all filled with passionate defenses and celebrations of feminism and exhortations towards feminist and anti-racist activism. And we also have—certainly not least for this particular era of consumerism that we’re in—we have a sartorial feminist ideology at sea, and others offer things like feminist tank tops, buttons. This empowers women.

Crop top is available at H&M, if you want it. Designer, Christian Dior in the 2017, 2018 runway fashion show at Fashion Week created a $710 T-shirt that proclaimed we should all be feminists, especially those who can afford a $710 T-shirt. There are other ones that are more modestly priced like the Prabal Gurung $195 T-shirt that says, “This is what a feminist looks like.” So again, all this feminism has been bolstering in many ways, but it’s also given me pause to think about not only the social and economic conditions that define and describe it, but also about the relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny. So for me, it’s made sense to think of these varied manifestations of popular feminism and the relationship with popular misogyny within a framework of visibility.

And it’s within this framework that I think that feminism becomes particularly tangible. So this is sort of a basic dictionary definition of visibility. The state of being able to see or be seen, the degree to which something has attracted general attention or prominence, right? Visibility is important for any kind of political vision to be seen. But I also think that we need to think about the mechanisms of visibility. How is a vision of feminism seen? Through what channels? And what I see with much of popular feminism is that the media economy, where it circulates as the most central, often ends up shaping and constraining the vision of feminist politics. That means that we need to think about what kind of attention we pay to popular feminism, what version is seen, what version becomes prominent. So while the rising visibility of a safely affirmative feminism is again in many ways a real progress, it also often eclipses a feminist critique of structure.
The mainstreaming of feminism often constricts its circulation as if seeing or purchasing feminism and contributing to its visibility is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures. So I’m thinking of these logics as a set of social and economic conditions for popular feminism, but I also think, in particular, in light of this conference that the implication of this logic is important to think about social movements and populism in general. These conditions have been called platform capitalism, they’ve been called other kinds of things, which implies the emptying and flattening out of the content on meaning, emphasizing instead the endless traffic and circulation of this content. And we talked a little bit about this already this morning.

Media and entertainment platforms are conditioning the contents, so business models often end up conditioning the kinds of expressions that we see. As we know, there’s a contemporary obsession with metrics and numbers, likes and followers, and given the predominance of digital media platforms that are predicated on the accumulation of these numbers, where their business depends on them, then to make oneself visible or to express oneself as visible is also dependent on an accumulation of numbers. This is what José van Dijck has called the popularity principle, where despite differences among media platforms, they’re invested, as she says, “on the same values or principles, popularity, hierarchical ranking, quick growth, large traffic volumes, fast turnovers and personalized recommendations.”

For me, these conditions comprise what I call an economy of visibility. An economy which can work to constrain and constrict the vision of feminism. Feminists, media scholars, critical race scholars, media scholars, in general, cultural studies folks, communication scholars have long been invested in studying the politics of visibility. And for me the politics of visibility usually describes the process of making visible a political category such as gender, or race, or class that is and has been historically marginalized in the media, in the law, and policy and so on. This process involves what is simultaneously a category, visibility, and a qualifier, politics, that then together can hopefully articulate a political identity.

Here, the goal is that the coupling of the qualifier and visibility can be productive of something, such as social change or social justice, that exceeds the visibility itself, and so that is where the vision of politics is. Politics then becomes a descriptor of the practices of visibility. This is often the core logic, whether or not it’s practiced, of many populisms, right? That visibility can amplify the politics, visibility is the root to the politics. So the politics of visibility have long been important and continue to be for the marginalized. To demand visibility is to demand to be seen, to matter, to count, to recognize oneself in dominant culture and insistence of marginalized and disenfranchised communities, women, racial minorities, non-heteronormative communities, refugees, immigrants, the working class—the insistence on being seen has been crucial to an understanding and an expansion of rights for these communities.

Now, of course not all politics of visibility, as we know kind of painfully and tragically, result in social change. But the point here is that visibility is understood as a leading to something, right?
As part of a political struggle, as a route to a vision. In the current media environment, however, while the politics of visibility are still important and they are still politically efficacious, I think that economies of visibility increasingly structure, not just our mediascapes, but also our cultural and economic practices in our daily lives. In the contemporary media and digital moment, media outlets and systems can easily absorb the visualization of basically any experience. So economies of visibility fundamentally shift politics of visibility so that visibility becomes the end rather than a means to an end. Getting seen can become all there is. In this way, some political visions have transformed their very logics from the inside out, so that the visibility of these visions is what matters rather than the structural ground on and through which they are constructed.

So, for example, wearing a T-shirt that says “this is what a feminist looks like” transmutes the potential logic of what it means to be a feminist, as a political subjectivity invested in challenging gender inequities into what a feminist looks like. Her visual or his visual representation. Visibility is best structured to stop functioning as a qualifier to politics. The T-shirt is the politics. The politics are contained within the visibility, so visual representation becomes the beginning and the end of political action. I should say as a caveat, I’m not arguing that we shouldn’t all be wearing this T-shirt, right? I have this T-shirt. You can well imagine I have lots of feminist T-shirts. It’s not that the wearing of the T-shirt is what I’m struggling with. It’s that wearing the T-shirt becomes the end in itself, but it doesn’t then carry on to thinking about how to critique and challenge structure. And Herman Gray has talked about this in a beautiful way, where he argues that the identification and announcement of one’s visibility is both the radical move and the end in itself.

Economies of visibility then do not describe a political process, but rather assume that visibility itself has been absorbed into politics. The absorption is the political. And the available structures for popular feminism’s visibility in the current moment are usually those that are dominant centers of power. Media companies, corporations, the technology industries. In this sense, visibility often becomes synonymous with trending, whether in the mainstream news media or on social media. And to trend is a different process of visibility than to agitate to be seen in order to be granted basic rights. Trending is about recognition and about making oneself available for normalization. As [Herman] Gray has argued, the visibility that fuels trending is a demand to be recognized in an attention economy. Indeed, the fact that Merriam-Webster chose in 2016 “feminism” as the word of the year is really great in many ways. But how Merriam-Webster makes that choice—does anyone know?

It’s number of clicks. Number of clicks on the word, right? So it doesn’t necessarily imply a support of feminism. I mean, it looks at different ways in which it is expressed, but plenty of people are using feminism, and the word feminism, and the concept of feminism, in ways that actually benefit misogyny rather than feminism itself. So it’s this kind of visibility that I’m asking us to be cautious of.
Okay, popular misogyny. Within this context of visibility, it’s also clear that feminism isn’t the only popular phenomenon that we need to contend with in the current moment. Every time I began to investigate a popular feminist practice or expression, there was always an accompanying hostile rejoinder or challenge, regardless of the mediated space in which it occurred, whether that was social media, the legal realm, or corporate culture. For every Tumblr page that is dedicated to female body positivity, there were fat shaming and body shaming comments. For every confidence organization for girls, there was yet another men’s rights organization claiming that men are the real victims.

Misogyny is popular in the contemporary moment for the same reason feminism has become popular: It is expressed and practiced on multiple media platforms, it attracts other like-minded groups and individuals, and it manifests in a terrain of struggle with competing demands for power. So for me, popular misogyny, in some ways, follows a conventional definition of misogyny, a hatred of women. But I also want to make a more nuanced case here that it is the instrumentalization of women as objects, where women are a means to an end, a systematic devaluing and dehumanizing of women that takes place in a network and on a network. It should go without saying that I’m not equating masculinity with misogyny. Not all men are misogynists, and misogyny isn’t just about men. Many women also practice misogyny.

To give you a little sense of what’s up here, this is a campaign that was created by an Indian online magazine that was in response to a UN women’s campaign. This is, of course, Jordan Peterson. It’s a little hard to see these. This is Elliot Rodger. This is Anita Sarkeesian, who is a feminist commentator who has a series on YouTube. She was part of this intense misogynistic effort called Gamergate. She had a show about female representation and video games, and gamers responded with death threats and rape threats. She had to cancel a presentation because they called in a terrorist threat. And then someone just made up a game that’s called Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian. All you have to do is press the space button and her face just gets more bloody.

This is the Red Pill, which is a misogynist section on Reddit. Because I’m British now, I had to put in something about Love Island, right? Alex becomes an incel icon. And I’ll talk about incels in just a minute. So those are just a few examples of the ways in which misogyny, like popular feminism, is networked, an interconnection of nodes and all forms of media and everyday practice. It’s also mobilized as a populous movement. So in the contemporary digital moment in this economy of visibility, misogyny itself is constantly moving from one node to another, emerging in different spaces with varied manifestations.

To confront popular misogyny means to confront the notion that patriarchy itself needs to be assessed differently than it ever has been before. It is not just a discrete group of organizations, or roles, or spaces, or practices, but it is a networked populism with interconnecting nodes. It finds expression and nodes ranging from social media to global meetups, to fashion, to neomasculine boot camps. Through this dynamics, misogyny is reimagined, takes new forms, and
has a variety of effects. And this is, of course, we all know, this is how networks work. They allow for different spaces of expressions simultaneously, and they function through rapid and asynchronous communication. As Manuel Castells has described, they decentralize power even as they remain loyal to hegemonic institutions.

We see this network at work in many different ways, some more visible than others. We see it in the election of an unapologetic misogynist as the president of the United States, and federal policy deliberations on health care and different countries that include only male representatives, and the continued disparity in wages between women and men in all industries across different countries, not to mention wage disparities between white people and people of color. We see it in the election of Bolsonaro in Brazil. We see it in the attack on gender ideology in Hungary. We see it in the Brexit decision in the UK.

The digital context for a contemporary economy of visibility does not only provide the context for popular feminism, in other words, but it’s also one that enables and validates what Jack Bratich has called affective divergence—cultures of judgment, aggression and violence. As Bratich argues, “We’re in the midst of a media-fueled popularization of bullies, a convergence of micro-violence perhaps comprising a cultural will to humiliation.” And in this way popular misogyny opens up spaces and opportunities for a more systematic attack on women and women’s rights. It is the context of a popularization of bullies, a convergence of micro-violence, that coalesces in this kind of neutralization of antagonism. And this cultural will to humiliation is what makes contemporary popular misogyny a shifted set of discourses and practices from previous historical moments.

Popular misogyny is a constellation of a popularization of bullies, present not only online, but offline as well. So that’s the wider context for a networked popular misogyny. It operates as a way to consolidate a cultural will to humiliation that holds as a promise the restoration of male privilege, prerogative, and rightful ownership of economic, cultural, and political spaces. This will to humiliation, in other words, it’s about the restoration of male confidence. So now I want to turn to just briefly talk a little bit about that theme as a way to kind of dig deeper into this logic of both feminism and misogyny. I think it’s worth spending a few moments thinking about what confidence even means in this context and kind of acknowledge some of the different manifestations of it. This is again a dictionary definition. Confidence is the feeling or belief that one can have faith in or rely on someone or something or the telling of private matters or secrets. Taking someone into your confidence.

Within popular feminism, confidence, specifically self-confidence, is seen as an individual act. One that women just need to adopt by telling themselves—ourselves—“They are beautiful. They are smart enough to code. They’re worthwhile.” And this is important. I mean, how can you argue with that? We should all tell ourselves that we are worthwhile, right? But it also refocuses the reasons for why women aren’t confident in the first place back to women themselves, rather
than, I don’t know, patriarchy or a context that tells you that you shouldn’t be confident in the first place. And these are, again, different kind of expressions of confidence coming forward as one.

This is Kim Kardashian, the confidence issue, Smart Woman’s Guide to Self-Belief. I choose beautiful wearing... confidence wear like makeup. My argument here is that, not that these are unimportant, but that they put it back on women themselves. I need to look in the mirror every day and say, “You are confident, Sarah. You are beautiful. You can do this. You are worthwhile.” And if I don’t feel that way, then it’s nobody’s fault by my own, right? And that’s the trick here, is that it is not about structure that would encourage me to feel differently in the first place. In that sense, I think that we need to think about another root of the word “confidence” and talk about the confidence game and the con artist. Con artist in contrast to confidence is someone who is adept at manipulating the truth, manipulating certainty. A confidence game is one where a person swindles or robs a person after gaining their confidence.

Confidence in this moment is positioned as a commodity, and like all commodities, it receives its value from scarcity. Within popular feminism and popular misogyny, both men and women are seen to lack confidence. The lack of confidence that men (often white, cis-gendered, heterosexual men) feel in themselves is frequently blamed on an “overconfidence” in women. As Sarah Ahmed has pointed out. this overconfidence is apparently enabled by popular feminism and then is in turn a confidence that is accessed primarily by white, cis-gendered, heterosexual women. So confidence here is positioned as a zero sum game. If women have it, that ownership somehow comes at the expense of men, and the goal is to take it back from women, right? So it’s this kind of way in which you can see that confidence is something that can be taken away from men if women have it.

Has anyone seen this new ad, this Gillette ad?

Yeah.

The razor ad that is... yeah. So it’s getting a ton of attention. It’s an ad that calls out toxic masculinity. It basically says we should teach men and boys to be more decent, right? It also uses feminism. There’s a shot of #MeToo. There’s a shot of the Women’s March, and the backlash has been swift and vicious, with people boycotting the company, memes being created—the number of likes versus dislikes, if you want to go back to those metrics, is way disproportionate. I mean, the huge discrepancy between those who actually like the ad and those who don’t. And one of the reasons why I think that it’s caused such an uproar is because of not this idea that you should be teaching your sons to be good humans if you’re a man, but rather the presence of feminism.
That what’s happening as feminism is taking something away and that something is confidence, male confidence, self-assurance, self-esteem. And so you can see these are different kinds of blog posts and messages about the taking away of male confidence. Okay. So a few months ago, a man shot and killed two women, and injured three other women, a man at a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Florida, in the United States. According to the reports, the man identified as an incel, a member in an online community of men united by their inability to convince women to have sex with them. Incel stands for involuntarily celibate. The shooter was also a self-proclaimed misogynist. He actually said he wanted something called misogynyism to take over. A little late for that, I think.

Over the summer again, in the United States, there was yet another school mass shooting. And like so many other shootings in the United States, the student who shot and killed 10 people apparently did so because the girl he liked rejected him and embarrassed him in front of his classmates. In a news story, after that shooting, which was at Santa Fe High School, in Texas, the shooter’s father said to the news that his son was the real victim here because he was embarrassed by this girl who didn’t like him. A few weeks before that, in April, last April in Toronto, a man named Alek Minassian killed 10 people and injured 16. Prior to doing so, he wrote on Facebook, “The incel rebellion has already begun.” Minassian went on his rampage, apparently because he identified as an incel.

Minassian as well as many others have held up Elliot Rodger, who killed six people and wounded 14 others in Santa Barbara, California, in 2014. He justified his actions, Rodger, in his manifesto, which he posted on YouTube. And he said they were a retaliation against women as a group for refusing to provide him with the sex he felt he was owed. There’ve been at least five mass killings in the last two years that have been explicitly claimed by incels. So while we can’t conflate incels with someone like Brett Kavanaugh, they are both enabled by a sense of the loss of white heterosexual male confidence that similarly revolves around women and what women are apparently taking away from men.

If anyone saw the Supreme Court hearings, Brett Kavanaugh was a Supreme Court nominee, has since been confirmed and was accused by Christine Blasey Ford of sexually assaulting her in high school. And during those hearings, Kavanaugh cried. He screamed. He claimed the mantle of a victim. Senator Lindsey Graham during that same hearing too had an outburst as well and said that Christine Blasey Ford was ruining Kavanaugh’s life. Brett Kavanaugh, who then later was confirmed as a Supreme Court justice. The sexual rejection by women, the #MeToo movement, the disruption of jobs and status by global economic recession and a subsequent loss of employment for many men are seen as injuries to men and they are, right? But they are caused most often by women as well as others like people of color, immigrants, refugees, and so on.

So to come back to the point with which I began this talk, white male victimhood is rerouted and appropriated from those who have historically suffered to those in positions of patriarchal power.
Those who often have inflicted the suffering in the first place. Here we can see empowerment as a discursive response to victimhood. The empowering discourse of popular feminism is both symbolically and concretely redistributed, and the moral meaning of vulnerability and victimhood itself is appropriated. This redistribution takes place in part within an economy of visibility where what is invisible is often more important than what is visible.

And this is how the mirroring of popular feminism and popular misogyny works. But it is a fun house mirror when that distorts and transmutes the tropes of injury and capacity. So for popular feminism, these twinned discourses of injury capacity that form its core logic. I’m arguing here that the injury itself is structural. It is centuries of patriarchy, of sexism, of racism, of gendered violence and control and discipline. But the capacity to overcome that structural injury is individual. Just be confident, work on your power poses, come forward, right? Tell yourself you can do it. So the capacity to overcome structural injury is individual. In this fun house mirror dynamic and for popular misogyny, the injury itself is individual. There is no structural injury that cuts across for white men in the way that sexism does. The structure is patriarchy and white supremacy.

It’s privileging a particular demographic. So the injury is individual. It is Kevin Spacey, an individual who was accused. It is Louis C K, it is Harvey Weinstein, right? It is Brett Kavanaugh. The injury is individual, but the capacity—and that’s why I think this is dangerous, and this is where populism comes in. The capacity to overcome those individual industry injuries by individual men is structural. There are presidents, and heads of state, and the Supreme Court, there is what I’ve called the comeback economy where you just wait after sexually harassing someone for a small time for people to forget in this economy of visibility and then you have a comeback. We see this in manifest in extreme movements around the world. So the economy of visibility and the affordances of technology contribute to a misogyny that is both networked and popular.

And a focus on these particular facets as the problem of misogyny blinds us, I think a bit, to the larger problem of misogyny itself. When we seek to understand popular misogyny and see it as a manifestation of digital culture, as online comments, as haters going to hate—we can then just write it off as merely a negative effect of technology. Instead, I want to argue that we need to see it for what it is, a manifestation of a crisis in neoliberalism, a consolidation of its failed logic to fulfill its promises. Neoliberalism and popular misogyny are deeply interconnected despite a general mediated discourse that positions popular misogyny as an outlier, a deviation from the culturally acceptable norms of traditional masculinity. The crisis of neoliberalism, however, produces not only via ideology, but also produces violence. And it is a structuring force that is both popular and networked. It also produces a populism that finds coherence and a shared sense of victimhood. The goal of this populism, I think, is recuperation and restoration of dominant masculinity, of patriarchy, and of whiteness. That was a bit grim. Sorry.