

**We Can't Stop Thinking About It:
Sexual Misconduct, Feminism and Documentary Storytelling**

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INTRODUCTION

Seeing Our Conditions

“It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting.”

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Sexual violence is a persistent problem on most university campuses and the University of Texas at Austin (UT) is no exception. According to the Cultivating Learning and Safe Environments survey released in 2017, 15% of undergraduate female students and 5% of undergraduate male students indicated that they had been raped since enrolling at UT.¹ 28% of undergraduate female students at UT said they were the victims of unwanted sexual touching and 12% experienced attempted rape.² Furthermore, 24% of undergraduate female students, 15% of undergraduate male students, 30% of graduate/professional female students and 15% of graduate/professional male students at UT reported “sexist gender harassment” (the survey does not clearly define this term) by faculty or staff members, with even more students experiencing “crude sexual harassment”, “unwanted sexual attention harassment” and “sexual coercion harassment”.³ Most reported perpetrators of faculty/staff sexual harassment were male (81%) and faculty members (64%).⁴ These numbers indicate an issue of gender-based sexual violence pervasive within the UT system.

¹ “Cultivating Learning and Safe Environments,” last modified Spring 2017, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://utexas.app.box.com/v/utaustinclasesurveyreport>, 48.

² “Cultivating Learning and Safe Environments,” 48.

³ “Cultivating Learning and Safe Environments,” 34.

⁴ “Cultivating Learning and Safe Environments,” 37.

Many are familiar with numbers like the ones above about sexual violence, but as Tarana Burke, founder of the MeToo movement notes:

"The work is more than just about the amplification of survivors and quantifying their numbers. The work is really about survivors talking to each other and saying, 'I see you. I support you. I get it.'"⁵

I, like too many people, have had personal experience with sexual violence. Over the past year, meeting other students who are survivors of sexual violence as well as meeting student protestors against sexual misconduct in learning environments (an umbrella term encompassing sexual discrimination, harassment, assault and other forms of violence committed by professors, staff and students) has inspired me to write this thesis and create a documentary film titled *We Can't Stop Thinking About It*. My goal is not only to highlight the prevalence of sexual violence. My goal is to find support in my community and give support in return.

In this paper, I contextualize the topic of sexual misconduct at UT to the fields of documentary film theories and practices, intersectional feminism and the study of rape culture in the United States. I explore my personal experience learning about sexual misconduct at my school, meeting protesters on campus, filming the Coalition Against Sexual Misconduct (a student protest organization), the editing process and my take-aways from creating *We Can't Stop Thinking About It*. My hope is that people reading and watching my thesis will reflect on sexual misconduct procedures in the education system, think about the consequences of those procedures and consider change.

⁵ Elizabeth Wellington, "Tarana Burke: Me Too movement can't end with a hashtag", The Philadelphia Inquirer, last modified October 23, 2017, accessed April 23, 2020, https://www.inquirer.com/philly/columnists/elizabeth_wellington/philly-me-too-movement-founder-tarana-burke-20171023.html.

CHAPTER ONE

The Personal is Political: Documentary Storytelling and Feminism

“I wanted to speak strongly about feminism in my life, since it’s been a struggle.”

Agnès Varda, *The Believer*.

“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change...I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.”

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, documentary is defined as a non-fictional motion picture “based on real events or circumstances, primarily for the purposes of instruction, education, or maintaining a historical record”, insinuating that documentary film is obliged to inform audiences and be factual.⁶ Scholar Sheila Bernard notes that dry definitions like this insinuate a stereotype of documentaries as something like what we were forced to watch in school--full of facts and painful to sit through--when in fact documentaries can function as much more than educational or instructional devices.⁷ Much like Hollywood fiction films, documentaries are movies which may emphasize character, conflict, rising stakes, a dramatic arc and resolution; they take viewers on a journey, delve into unexplored worlds and embrace

⁶ “Documentary, adj. and n.” last modified March, 2020, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/56332?redirectedFrom=documentary>.

⁷ Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling: Making Stronger and More Dramatic Nonfiction Films* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2010, accessed April 23, 2020), ProQuest Ebook Central, 1.

universal themes; they “compel viewers to consider and even care about topics and subjects they might previously have overlooked.”⁸ Yet, although documentaries share similar qualities with fiction, documentaries operate on a different and powerful premise: they are based on actual events and real people.

Documentaries are concerned with representations of real events through images of real-world actors, places and objects.⁹ But, to see something as representative of something that happens in the “real world” should not be confused with “objective” and universal reality. In general, documentary filmmakers use factual elements but weave them into a compelling narrative that is greater than the sum of its parts. As Erik Barnouw said in his 1974 book *Documentary*, “the documentarist has a passion for what he [sic] finds in images and sounds—which always seem to him more meaningful than anything he can invent...Unlike the fiction artist, he is dedicated to not inventing. It is in selecting and arranging his findings that he expresses himself.”¹⁰ In other words, what is included in a documentary is artistically reflective of how filmmakers (in Barnouw’s words, masculine filmmakers) view the world. While paying due diligence to “the facts”, documentarians present an emotive, personal, artistic and subjective interpretation of experiences in the real-world through the inevitable decision of which stories to tell and how to tell them.

From my point of view as a feminist, in my documentary film I would like to tell stories of students dealing with sexual misconduct on campus, which reflects and documents the broader damage done by patriarchy. According to gender theorists Ayu Saraswati, Barbara Shaw and Heather Rellihan, patriarchy means that “men hold power and are the central figures in the

⁸ Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling*, 1.

⁹ Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling*, 1.

¹⁰ Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling*, 2.

family, community, government, and larger society.”¹¹ That is to say, patriarchy is a term to describe an unjust social system rooted in a gender binary, including any social, political, or economic mechanism that evokes power imbalances and gender-based oppression.

It is often said that patriarchy is connected to other oppressive social structures, such as capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy, heterosexism, ableism and so on. As Charles Mills and Karl Marx have theorized, much like patriarchy means that men hold more positions of power in society, white supremacy means that white people hold more positions of power in society and capitalism means that financial power is held in the hands of the few through the exploitation of labor and other resources.¹² I draw this understanding from bell hooks’s use of the concept of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. hooks has noted that “interlocking systems of classism, racism, and sexism work to keep women exploited and oppressed.”¹³ Additionally, I would connect patriarchy to Audre Lorde’s understanding of heterosexism, the belief in superiority of gender-binary identities and heterosexual relationships which leads to the oppression of those who do not conform to socially constructed gender norms.¹⁴ It follows that feminism arises in resistance to the patriarchy, seeking social, political and economic equality regardless of sex, gender, race, class or other social factors.

However, some feminists have critiqued documentary practice, claiming that this form of filmmaking contributes to patriarchal attitudes and beliefs. During early feminist studies in the United States during the 1970s, documentary filmmaking faced a number of critiques in the so-

¹¹ Ayu Saraswati, Barbara Shaw and Heather Rellihan, *Introduction to Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies: Interdisciplinary and Intersectional Approaches* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

¹² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy-The Process of Capitalist Production*, (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007); Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014).

¹³ bell hooks, *Feminist theory: From Margin to Center* (Pluto Press, 2000), 109.

¹⁴ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, 2007).

called “feminist-realist debates”, wherein feminists rejected documentary forms of realism because, by their nature, they connect to patriarchal attitudes and behavior.¹⁵ Ann Kaplan describes the feminist-realist critique concisely: “realism as a style is unable to change consciousness because it does not depart from the norms that embody the old consciousness.”¹⁶ According to these criticisms, defining realist texts as texts which signify real world experience means that realist depictions reflect and contribute to the objective reality of oppression.

But as I mentioned before, documentary filmmaking presents a subjective view of reality and employs styles that do not necessarily fall within the category of realism. Media certainly can enable and normalize the patriarchy through stylistic choices, but it can also contribute to the dismantling of the patriarchy. Because patriarchy is an unjust social construction, it logically follows that it can be deconstructed, bit by bit, through revealing its structures and critically analyzing its manifestations. As bell hooks said: “We have to constantly critique imperialist white supremacist patriarchal culture because it is normalized by mass media and rendered unproblematic.”¹⁷ Through critical reflection, documentary filmmaking can provide a meditation on the consequences of patriarchy through subjective presentation. I reject the idea that documentary as a mode of filmmaking leads necessarily to conformism and perpetuating oppression--by presenting stories which demonstrate the real manifestations of patriarchy, one can be critical of patriarchal structures.

Many famous documentary filmmakers identify as feminists. For example, Agnès Varda, who infamously said: “I think I was a feminist before being born. I had a feminist chromosome

¹⁵ Alexandra Juhasz, “They Said We Were Trying to Show Reality - All I Want to Show Is My Video: The Politics of the Realist Feminist Documentary,” *Screen* 35, no. 2 (1994): 190-192.

¹⁶ Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 125.

¹⁷ bell hooks and Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 61.

somewhere” and often mixed documentary, fiction and other artistic technique.¹⁸ In 2014, Ms. Magazine published a list of “Top Ten Feminist Documentaries Streaming on Netflix,” which included *Miss Representation*, *The Invisible War*, and *After Tiller*—films about gender issues in the media, sexual assault in the military, and reproductive rights respectively.¹⁹ With so many feminists using different technique to make films about lived experience, it is clear that through various stylistic choices documentary filmmaking can be critical rather than conservative.

Furthermore, feminist filmmakers find many ways to avoid reinforcing the patriarchy using documentary technique, including interviews, voice-over, narrative coherence, observational footage and identification which serve to create a personal interpretation of experience under the patriarchy.²⁰ Documentary filmmaking by marginalized groups has long been a powerful site of political and ethical negotiation for those subject to different forms of reality--by focusing on various feminist goals, content and styles in filmmaking, one can step outside of the oppressive system as a whole and therefore avoid reinforcing it.

The documentary short film titled *Sister Hearts* is an example of a film which confronts the effects of unjust patriarchal institutions through its content, goal and style. The film follows Maryam Henderson-Uloho, who spent thirteen years in prison--six in solitary confinement--for an obstruction of justice charge. After Maryam’s release, she lived on the streets of New Orleans and sold found items on street corners to get by. Maryam then decided to help other ex-

¹⁸ Renan Borelli, “6 Decades of Agnès Varda in The Times: ‘She Aims to Unsettle’”, *The New York Times*, last modified March 1, 2018, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/movies/agnes-var-da-oscars.html>.

¹⁹ Anita Little, “Top 10 Feminist Documentaries Streaming on Netflix”, *Ms.*, last modified November 24, 2014, accessed April 23, 2020, <https://msmagazine.com/2014/11/24/top-10-feminist-documentaries-streaming-on-netflix/>.

²⁰ Shilyh Warren, *Subject to Reality: Women and Documentary Film* (Urbana; Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 131-143.

offenders, especially women like herself, by opening *Sister Hearts*--a thrift store and housing facility for ex-offenders to transition from prison back into mainstream society.

Sister Hearts begins in black-and-white and follows Maryam entering a correctional facility and addressing a group of women. She guides them through mental exercises to support them and help them from feeling worthless or dejected from the world. She asks the group of women to share something good about themselves. One woman responds:

“I’m a beautiful black African-American woman. I have a passion for people. I have five kids and... at the age 12, I was told that I wasn’t gonna amount to shit, amount to nothing, none of that.”

Maryam responds:

“We good. Alright, now ladies let me share something with you. There was a time in my life where I didn’t feel there was any good in me at all. And the reason for that is because I was sitting on that side where you guys are today, not so long ago. So during my many days behind bars, I had to go inside myself and find something good about me because I felt like trash.”

Later in the film, when the members of *Sister Hearts* are cleaning and restoring abandoned objects, Maryam says that “as ex-offenders, we are a group of people that have been discarded by society. So we related to those discarded items. We relate to that trash.” By choosing to include this dialogue, the film emphasizes how women in prison often feel dehumanized and thrown away by society. After Maryam says this line, the film uses Maryam’s voiceover to explain how when she got out of prison, she had nowhere to go because felons are not allowed or able to get the tools they need to sustain themselves in society. She then says:

“And as a woman, I had to think about my safety in a way that a man wouldn’t have to. I didn’t know what to do. I was alone, I was scared, I had no one. I knew there were women that was coming home from prison that was in the same boat that I was in. They didn’t have a place to stay, they didn’t feel safe, they couldn’t make money. They felt like I felt. And that’s where *Sister Hearts* started.”

During this voiceover, the film chooses to explicitly address that there is a problem with how society treats formerly incarcerated people and women. It emphasizes that women deal with a sense of danger that men do not--insinuating that there is gender-based oppression in society.

However, the film also emphasizes that ex-offenders and women can redefine themselves and find purpose through self-love and sisterhood. By stylistically choosing to follow Maryam and feature formerly incarcerated women as the heart of the film's narrative, the film avoids reinforcing dominant narratives about women who have been incarcerated by following their stories, seeing their struggles and acknowledging that the challenges they face are unique. Stylistically, the film sees them through tracking shots, voiceover, observation, portraiture, expressionistic image, sound, color and poetic language.

In talking about the name "Sister Hearts", Maryam says the following to the group of women inmates:

"'Sister Hearts.' Y'all need each other, y'all call up on each other. You're not alone. You don't have to fight this battle by yourself no more. Y'all got help, we're here...When I was in prison, I met a lot of wonderful women. Those women was with me when I was lonely, when I was hurting, when I was frustrated. Those women gave me comfort and I call those women my sister hearts."

This dialogue leads to a scene with a photoshoot of the women in Sister Hearts. The portraits of the women are overlaid with narration of their experiences being incarcerated and then being released back into society. During this scene, the film shifts from black and white to color, as well as from Maryam's perspective to the perspective of the other former inmates who are a part of Sister Hearts. This stylistic device is a powerful and celebratory moment, representing the humanization and empowerment of women prisoners escaping an institution which attempts to dehumanize and disenfranchise them.²¹ Maryam says during this scene:

²¹*Sister Hearts*, directed by Mohammed Gorjestani (2018; USA: Vimeo, 2017), video.

“We’re not dependent on society to rehabilitate us. We have taken the reins to rehabilitate ourselves. We came from death--which was prison--to life. And that’s what *Sister Hearts* is for me, it’s life. What I want to do with my life is to help other ex-offenders really live. I want them to feel how wonderful they are. I want them to know they matter. Just because they’ve committed a crime, they’re no less of a human being. They can regain their dignity. They can be successful after incarceration.”

This line shows how *Sister Hearts* is going against the grain of dominant power structures--even though people who have been incarcerated face social death and society attempts to degrade their self-worth, they can live with dignity and be successful.

Sister Hearts is about incarcerated people and my film is about a completely different group of people, college students. College students do not face the challenges that ex-offenders face--they have more social, political and economic capital. Nevertheless, while working on my project, I drew inspiration from the message in *Sister Hearts*. People who have experienced sexual violence have been traumatized, dehumanized and treated without respect for their autonomy. Their experiences have been minimized and normalized by society. However, by defining themselves as survivors, not victims, and finding purpose in fighting for rehabilitation, self-care or institutional change they are able to regain their dignity and feel successful. My subjective truth is that I want all survivors of sexual violence to know that they can thrive. Even though they have been harassed, assaulted or raped does not mean they have any less agency or worth as human beings. I want all the protestors at my school to know what they are doing matters, even if the school system or other parts of society do not recognize that.

To express this perspective in my film, I draw stylistic inspiration from *Sister Hearts* through my transition at the end of the film from the perspective of my main characters, the protestors on my campus, to a celebration of resistance to patriarchy by protestors around the world. Though there are different groups which are experiencing different kinds and rates of sexual violence, survivors are finding support in their communities. By adding uplifting music

and voiceover expressing the powerful connections within the coalition of protestors at UT, I intend to project a message of hope, resistance and solidarity which goes against the dominant messages in society about survivors and protestors against sexual misconduct.

Although *Sister Hearts* does not expressly communicate a specific political goal, the film is political in the sense that it explores personal stories of people who are affected by political issues. By documenting the experiences of ex-prisoners, by having audiences sit with these stories and contemplate the lack of resources for those who have been incarcerated, the film's effect (intended or unintended) is to mobilize in opposition to oppression. According to Alexandra Juhasz—a documentary filmmaker and feminist writer—a political documentary is defined as “any film or video which espouses an opinion or position whose articulation contributes to some manner of change.”²² As Juhasz elaborates, the goal of feminist political documentaries is to improve political efficacy, to convince, to document, move individuals towards personal and collective action.²³ *Sister Hearts* as a film explores issues that are often not reflected on--by invoking reflection, the film has led to change.

We Can't Stop Thinking About It is also political as it presents a personal interpretation of events on UT campus which invokes reflection on a dominant institution of power, the university. It addresses a problem in our society--a lack of support and resources for survivors--through seeing the stories of those affected by that problem. By encouraging people to reflect on processes that are often not scrutinized, the assumed affect will be some kind of change in the way they see the world or act in it.

Under my point of view as a filmmaker, I present the growing resistance on my campus regarding sexual misconduct and the ineffective administrative procedures in place to deal with

²² Juhasz, “They Said We Were Trying to Show Reality”, p. 176.

²³ Juhasz, “They Said We Were Trying to Show Reality”, p. 176.

such misconduct. I chose to tell this story because I am a survivor of assault, because this is my school and because this was a story that I could not ignore. This film works to document a part of a global movement against sexual violence, to convince viewers of the legitimacy of student demands regarding sexual misconduct policy at UT, to inspire action amongst students and administration to improve campus climate and action against social, economic and political structures which are oppressive.

CHAPTER TWO

We Can't Stop Thinking About It: Meeting the Protestors Against Sexual Misconduct

In October of 2018, a friend of mine shared a post on Instagram which said to avoid a list of undergraduate classes taught by professors who were known to have made sexual advances on students. I looked up the names listed and found that there were harassment allegations against multiple professors who were currently teaching at UT. UT had conducted misconduct investigations and found the professors guilty of misconduct--for instances of harassment reported by multiple students--but they were allowed to come back to teach classes within the following year. One of the professors was teaching a small seminar class in my Honors program and the other taught a class that one of my friends was in. I also became aware that there had been a series of protests by different groups of students regarding these cases.

As a survivor, I related these cases to the concept of rape culture. Rape culture has existed as a term since the 1970s, coined by American feminists addressing institutionalized violence against women, although today activists have extended that definition.²⁴ In the literature I reviewed, rape culture is generally referred to as a range of social attitudes, policies and laws that normalize sexual violence. Because sexual violence occurs at higher rates for people who are part of marginalized groups--people who are women, black, queer, transgender, incarcerated and so on--there is a particular focus on how rape culture enables violence against those groups. In the article "*Speaking Unspeakable Things*," which explores how survivors are using digital

²⁴ Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson, *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women*/by New York Radical Feminists, edited by Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson (New York: New American Library, 1974).

platforms to confront rape culture, it is said that although rape culture “inevitably involves rape and sexual assault, it is also defined by a number of other harmful practices, including rape jokes, sexual harassment, cat-calling, sexualized ‘banter’; the routine policing of bodies, dress, appearance and code of conduct; the re-direction of blame from the perpetrator in an assault to the victim; and impunity for perpetrators, despite their conduct or crimes.”²⁵ Using this understanding of rape culture, I describe rape culture as a multitude of practices in the world that range in terms of legality, prevalence, and cultural acceptance but which all operate to trivialize and eschew responsibility for the prevalence of sexual violence.

Because of the pervasive nature of rape culture, deeply entrenched in the patriarchy, feminist activists in the United States have struggled to uplift and maintain an agenda which addresses sexual violence. After Alyssa Milano tweeted, “if all women who have been sexually harassed wrote ‘me too’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem”, millions of women around the world used the hashtag #MeToo or reconfigured it to reflect local context.²⁶ Founded originally by civil rights activist Tarana Burke in the United States, the MeToo phrase now has circulated in 85 countries, beyond the global North, from South Korea, to Japan, Indonesia, and Palestine.²⁷ The movement’s global accessibility indicates the movement’s ability to cross lines of social stratification. Through social media, women demonstrated how common sexual violence was for their gender and sought recognition of their personal experiences of violence. By declaring and validating each other's experiences online,

²⁵Jessalynn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes, and Jessica Ringrose, *Speaking ‘Unspeakable Things’: Documenting Digital Feminist Responses to Rape Culture*, *Journal of Gender Studies* 27, no. 1 (January 2018): 22-36, doi 10.1080/09589236.2016.1211511, 23.

²⁶ Rachel Loney-Howes and Bianca Fileborn, *#Metoo and the Politics of Social Change*, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 29.

²⁷ Metoorising, last modified 2017, accessed April 19 2020, <https://metoorising.withgoogle.com/>.

women survivors challenged the power structures that traditionally function as arbiters of recognition.

Despite addressing the prevalence of sexual violence for women, many scholars and celebrities (such as Cardi B, Jess Founier and Claire Hemmings) have critiqued MeToo for promoting an understanding of sexual gendered violence as primarily experienced through wealthy white cis-gendered men and women, thus undermining broader coalitions of those vulnerable to sexual violence in the face of masculinist dominance: trans men and women, intersex people, gender non-conforming and genderqueer people, lesbian, gay and bisexual people, black people, lower-class people, immigrants, people with disabilities, people in prison and so on.²⁸ In other words, institutionalized rape culture was not confronted in ways that go beyond high-profile individual acts of violence. The MeToo movement has been used to place public attention on particular, powerful men, positioning them as rogue and deviant actors. The power structures which are likely to value certain complaints over others are not addressed.

Furthermore, MeToo did not clearly define its goals as a movement to challenge patriarchy. As academics Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad suggest, MeToo is “contained by a postfeminist sensibility” and does not confront the conditions that condone violence and render certain groups vulnerable.²⁹ While creating a sense of recognition and validation amongst vulnerable populations, the power structures which enable and normalize violence against those populations remain intact. Emphasis on charitable legal funds, more women in various fields of

²⁸ Clare Hemmings, “Resisting popular feminisms: gender, sexuality and the lure of the modern,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 25, no. 8 (2018): 963-977.

²⁹ Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, “The Shifting Terrain of Sex and Power: From the ‘sexualization of Culture’ to #MeToo,” *Sexualities* 21, no. 8 (December 2018): 1313–1324.

work and better corporate policies does not undo systems of corporatization, capitalism, imperialism and patriarchy which accept rape.

As a genderqueer feminist, I carried the memory of MeToo with me as I approached my work on the issue of sexual harassment of students by professors at my school. Rather than categorizing these professors as con-artists who somehow found a way to outsmart the otherwise benevolent school system, I wanted to find out how the corporatized education system was culpable for reinforcing and perpetuating such abusive behaviors and explore ideas on how to make structural changes to combat culpability in the future. While I was interested in protestors who demanded policy change within UT, I did not do this project to only promote changes in UT's policy because I do not believe that such policy is enough to change the behaviors and attitudes which enable violence. Furthermore, I decided I would learn a lesson from MeToo and make sure I did not portray my exploration of sexual violence as a women's issue, but as a patriarchal issue; that is, masculinized dominance which affects a variety of people.

To explore the variety of people affected by sexual violence, I decided to focus a class project on the issue. At the time, I was in a photography class and I was assigned a project which would be presented in the Liberal Arts Honors office. I thought this would be a perfect time to share my questions and concerns about sexual misconduct at UT. I completed a series of iPhone portraits and interviews of students reflecting on cases of sexual misconduct on campus. I reached out to several protestors, a student-journalist, my friend who was in the class of a professor who had been convicted of misconduct and a few other students.

When I distributed my project online, I received some positive feedback and support for student protestors of sexual misconduct. But I got many responses with a variety of cliché

questions associated with rape culture, delegitimizing and normalizing incidents of harassment: How do we know the professor did not have a consensual relationship with the student? Does flirting with a student, or asking them to pose nude for example, really qualify as “harassment”? What about these professors’ reputations and contributions? Isn’t firing a professor for sexual misconduct a little harsh?

In my view, these questions reflect rape culture even if the ones asking the questions are unaware of how. The questions I had were completely different: Why does the university not thoroughly warn students about professors who have harassed and formed inappropriate relationships with students in the past? Why is the burden to seek out and disseminate that information placed on students? Why were these professors allowed quickly back to teach instead of being fired?

These questions set me off to do a more complete thesis project and documentary film about my concerns. Now, having completed a short documentary on the subject, I still do not have the answers to those questions. *We Can’t Stop Thinking About It* and this paper do not attempt to provide answers. Instead, I am asking people to reflect on sexual misconduct procedures in the education system, think about the consequences of those procedures, their impact on students, and consider requisite change.

I focused *We Can’t Stop Thinking About It* on a group of protestors in an organization called CASM--the Coalition Against Sexual Misconduct. CASM was the coalition of three independent groups who had organized sit-ins outside the Provost’s office and at the UT tower after the course schedule had been released which showed that the aforementioned professors who had been found guilty of sexual misconduct were still teaching classes after only a short

leave of absence. Though their demands varied initially, they had come together and composed the following list of demands which they sent to the provost, dean of students and president of the university:

1. The attendance of the Provost and any other relevant university administrators at a student-led town hall to address the current methodology for university investigation and sanction procedures, and how administrators will address student concerns of transparency in the future.
2. A UT-wide report to be sent out to all students informing them of professors who have been found guilty of misconduct. This report should state: the name of the professor, courses they are teaching, what they have been found guilty of. Additionally, students should be made aware of why the administration deems certain professors “safe” in lieu of sexual misconduct allegations.
3. The creation of a restorative-justice program by 2021, and actionable steps are taken to address faculty and staff sexual misconduct. This includes university-wide faculty and staff trainings addressing the behavior that is encompassed/constitutes the different levels of sexual misconduct.
4. The investment of university resources in interpersonal violence prevention, such as an increased number of Advocates, who are designated non-mandatory reporters to Title IX. Currently, there is only one Advocate and one private non-reporting peer support resource.
5. To implement university-wide faculty and staff training that would address the behavior that is encompassed/constitute the different levels of sexual misconduct.
6. Inclusion of diverse voices and classifications on the newly formed misconduct working group, with full transparency on who is involved and how they were selected.
7. A statement by the university addressing any follow-up actions that will be taken in response to these demands to be sent via a university-wide email.

These demands followed the responses of NYU and other institutions to cases of faculty misconduct similar to what has occurred at UT.³⁰ Only one of the demands had been met when I began filming *We Can't Stop Thinking About It*--the student led forum. This was promised when in December, UT had created a “misconduct working group” to address student concerns.

According to UT’s website, the working group serves as an interface between the university,

³⁰The Chronicle of Higher Education, “He Violated Sexual-Misconduct Policy. He’s Back in the Classroom. What Should the University Do Now?” last Modified November 15, 2019, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/He-Violated-Sexual-Misconduct/247558>.

students and external experts (the law firm UT hired, called Husch Blackwell). The group also hosted a student-led forum on UT sexual misconduct policies and practices at the start of the spring term.

I attended the student forum hosted by the working group. Nearly two hours long, it was emotional and tense as the president, provost and dean of students interacted with students, most of whom were visibly upset by what was occurring on campus. Protestors had handed out sheets of paper that had “NO” written on them and students used them to express disagreement throughout the forum by raising their sign. A sea of “NO”s would fly into the air when the president would say something like “we hear you” or “the question is not do I have confidence in our system, the question is do you?”

A few times during the forum, students told their stories of being subjected to sexual violence and having to participate in the university’s Title IX process. One student shared that after being assaulted by a classmate the perpetrator had still not been interviewed by the Title IX office nine months later. President Fenves said later during the forum: “By the fact that you are here and you are telling us your stories, yes, we have failed you.”³¹ However, no answers were given on how, if at all, policies would change moving forward. One student, a protestor named Tasnim to whom I would talk later, noted that President Fenves had not even attended a misconduct working group meeting. She asked if he would come. Fenves said yes. Students were

³¹The Texas Tribune, “UT-Austin students condemn school's handling of sexual misconduct cases,” last Modified January 28, 2020, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.texastribune.org/2020/01/28/ut-austin-students-condemn-schools-handling-sexual-misconduct-cases/>.

thanked for attending and we were told we would hear back after Husch-Blackwell had made their recommendations.

After the forum, I arranged with CASM to film one of their meetings. The CASM members I spoke to were mostly young women, non-binary and/or queer. They seemed overworked and exhausted yet dedicated to keeping the university administration attuned to certain concerns--the most common being lack of transparency, lack of resources for survivors and a slow pace of change in the system. I listened at length to and at times filmed protestors telling stories of students left behind in the reporting process, administrators yelling at or talking down to students, demands made and a lack of progress in policy changes. Most commonly, the protestors spoke of long, sleepless nights of unpaid, arduous and emotionally-draining labor.

Many of them were a part of the working-group UT had established. They seemed unsatisfied with the situation--only one of their demands had been met. Deciding to strengthen their approach, they planned to hand-deliver the list of demands to president Fenves when he attended the working group meeting for the first time. They would then ask him to sign the list of demands as a promise to fulfill them. I came in with a small crew and filmed one of their meetings during this time--they said I could come along for the delivery of demands the following day.

In the hallway outside the misconduct working group, I was with Tasnim as she waited to come inside, the list of demands in her hands. She paces back and forth in the hallway, nervous and chattering in preparation for her delivery speech. "It's not that crazy, right? It's not that crazy." I chose to include this footage in the film because I think sometimes when we see protestors in mainstream media they are shown as fearless warriors. But the protestors at UT are just young people, stressed out and fearful about what is to come, hoping for the best. Tasnim

receives a text giving her the green-light to come into the room down the hallway. She walks down the hallway, turns to me, takes a deep breath and smiles before opening the door.

The administrative staff did not express anger with my filming and did not dissent as I stayed while the protestors gave their speech. Tasnim and another protestor Sarah noted in their speech the importance of having a touchstone for students and a promise from the university, while also explaining that there was precedent for university presidents to sign demands about sexual misconduct. The president said he would not sign the demands right now and needed to look over them. Then the administrators politely asked to continue on with the meeting as usual and I left.

In the end, the president did not sign their demands. Some policy changes--in my opinion, vague changes--were announced in early March. UT said it will streamline the resources it offers to survivors to support them effectively. Furthermore, if any UT faculty or staff member is found after a thorough investigation to have committed sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking or interpersonal violence, the presumptive punishment will be termination, and if there is a case in which a UT employee is found to have engaged in one of these four types of misconduct and is not terminated because of mitigating factors, that information will be compiled and made publicly available, while “preserving the privacy of the survivors”. Additionally, the school would begin to consult “experts” on establishing a restorative justice program.³² This gives the hopeful impression that the new policy is going beyond punishing individual actors and indicates the institution’s historic irresponsibility in supporting survivors of sexual violence.

³² “Changing Sexual Misconduct Policies at UT Austin”, last modified March 4, 2020, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://news.utexas.edu/2020/03/02/changing-sexual-misconduct-policies-at-ut-austin/>.

While these changes seem positive, as I mentioned earlier in this paper, an emphasis on better corporate policies does not work to undo systems of corporatization, capitalism, imperialism and patriarchy which enable and normalize rape. The patriarchy is rooted in a system of overlapping institutions, and expansive structural changes are needed to end it.

In the meantime, people who are in touch with the conditions of survivors in their communities will continue to advocate for them. As one protestor Lynn says in my film,

“We just can’t stop thinking about it. I don’t know, someone once told me a couple years ago that if you can’t stop thinking about an issue you should just go ahead and do it, that’s a calling for something. So, I don’t know. I’m just here because no one else is going to do it.”

We Can’t Stop Thinking About It hopefully illustrates that none of us are defined by the institutions that oppress us. In one of my first edits, I had a voiceover reading the policy changes made by the University near the end of the film to provide a feeling of narrative conclusion and victory. However, I realized these policy changes are not the victory to me. Instead, on a grimmer note, I included text that said the administration did not sign the lists of demands. Furthermore, I noted that there were over 1,500 signatures. I followed that text with the real victory, a voiceover of the protestors’ personal experiences of finding meaning in their work together. This editing choice is to show that how institutions of power treat us does not define us, instead we are defined by how we treat those around and by our purpose.

The final voiceover is then overlaid by images of the movement against sexual misconduct in a variety of places—other schools, other settings, other countries. And finally, I end the film on clips from a series of performances of “Un Violador En Tu Camino” (“A Rapist In Your Path”), a Chilean feminist protest song against sexual violence. I chose to do this because the song specifically points out the connection of sexual violence to the patriarchy and rape culture. Also, the song originated outside of the United States, showing how the issue of

sexual violence is being confronted in different settings to reflect local context. The song has been performed all over the world, including at UT—our experiences under the patriarchy vary based on where we are and who we are. Our experiences are connected.

In this paper, I considered the issue of sexual misconduct in the UT community and connected the issue of sexual misconduct to concepts like patriarchy and rape culture which perpetuate sexual violence. I discussed my motivations for making my documentary film about sexual misconduct, *We Can't Stop Thinking About It*, and asserted that while realism has been criticized in the past for reinforcing oppressive power structures, documentaries can in fact be critical and contribute to societal change. Using the film *Sister Hearts* as an example, I presented various feminist stylistic choices in documentary storytelling. In relation, I explored the content and style of *We Can't Stop Thinking About It*. I have concluded that although there is a lot of work yet to be done, change is happening within communities of survivors both at UT and around the world.

My hope is that those who see *We Can't Stop Thinking About It* will critically reflect on the issue of sexual misconduct. But regardless of who sees it, I feel pride in the protestors who have spoken out against violence and united under a common goal at the university. I also feel proud that I was able to contribute something to that goal. Hopefully, those survivors who see the documentary will feel more connected, more in touch with their emotions around their experiences and a sense of pride.

As survivors we need each other. We need to support each other. We need to comfort each other. We need to find hope in each other. We need to help each other. We need to see each other.

I feel seen.

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