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Approaching Toxic Masculinity through #MeToo: Representations of Sexual Assault in *American History X*

Miranda Brookshier, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

ABSTRACT

Since its inception in 2006, Tarana Burke's #MeToo Movement has continued to affirm and support the experiences of survivors of sexual violence. Other outcomes from the #MeToo Movement include more open conversations about sexual assault and toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity has been linked to the prevalence of women's sexual assault; however, in a culture dominated by its values, coming forward proves to be that much harder for male survivors, who are conditioned to believe that assault is a form of weakness. Film operates as one medium that strongly perpetuates this notion; through film, viewers create and take in ideas from popular culture. Highly heteronormative films like *American History X* subtly reinforce the biases and barriers created by toxic masculinity. This essay develops working definitions of rape, assault, and the prison rape trope and applies these definitions to an analysis of Tony Kaye's 1998 film, *American History X.* Through my analysis of *American History X*, I will show how the trope preserves heteropatriarchal values that undermine the work of #MeToo and its critiques of toxic masculinity, thus muting conversations among male survivors of sexual violence. In spite of the challenges men experience in coming forward, former football player and current actor, Terry Crews, has sought to use his testimony to encourage others to realize that they, too, can find support in speaking up.

KEYWORDS

American History X, Tony Kaye, #MeToo Movement, Sexual Assault, Prison Rape, Toxic Masculinity, Terry Crews

Founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke, the #MeToo Movement seeks to support survivors of sexual violence by offering individualized resources and community-based relief in a way that "affirms empowerment through empathy" (*#MeToo*). In its inception, Burke primarily worked in communities with working-class people of color, witnessing the structural barriers to reporting sexual assault that many women faced. Burke reports common themes among survivors of sexual violence: feelings of shame or fear, tendencies to blame themselves, and the large amounts of courage required to tell their stories. These patterns were further exacerbated when survivors felt as if they had no alternative but to tolerate a boss's unwanted advances, a family member's prodding, or a friend's manipulation—leaving many silenced and in the dark about resources for healing. Due to the United States' historic rape culture and discrimination against Black, indigenous, and other women of color, the #MeToo Movement focuses on "help[ing] survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls and other young women of color from low income communities, find pathways to healing" (*#MeToo*). Following Burke's call to action, millions have joined in the campaign to share their experiences and fight against the apathy toward sexual assault.

One outcome of #MeToo includes more open conversations about sexual assault through its social media hashtag. This has created a space for many to share their experiences and promote awareness, though the space has been limited to privileged groups—namely white women with the backing of their prestige and wealth. Since 2006, millions of people on various platforms have shared their #MeToo testimonies; yet these masses encompass only a portion of those affected by sexual violence. While the viral hashtag, #MeToo, quickly populated social media feeds, Twitter user @akdwaaz, rightly acknowledged that "#MeToo is just [the] tip of the iceberg. There are millions without any computer [or] internet access who have worse experiences of daily abuse" (qtd. by Stevens). Tarana Burke's goal of providing aid to survivors has succeeded by equipping many people with resources; however, this is only a starting place in creating awareness on such issues.

The #MeToo Movement not only sparked a "national dialogue" about sexual assault; it also excited conversation around toxic masculinity (*#MeToo*). This designation reflects "the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of the passing year," showing the United States' recent, overwhelming concern about sexual assault and men's attitudes toward it. Originating in gender and women's studies, "traditional masculinity ideology," or toxic masculinity, refers to the

constructed ideas that men should suppress emotions, maintain an illusion of toughness, and view violence as a measure of power (Salam). Men aspiring to these ideals often experience harmful notions about gender that lead to an inability to handle difficult emotions and increased "aggression and violence" (Salam). The phrase made a comeback in 2018 amid allegations against high profile men like Harvey Weinstein, Brett Kavanaugh, and Matt Lauer. The phrase's usage was so noteworthy that the *Oxford Dictionary* deemed "toxic" to be its 2018 word of the year ("Word of the Year"). Toxic masculinity has been linked to the prevalence of women's sexual assault; however, in a culture dominated by the values of toxic masculinity, coming forward proves to be that much harder for male survivors.

Although dialogue on female sexual assault fills newsfeeds and rallies support, men like Terry Crews are simultaneously silenced or dismissed when they try to come forward. This tension results from the public's conflicting tolerances of sexual assault for men and women. While allies view female victims as survivors, their male counterparts are shamed by toxic masculinity's rigid beliefs about masculinity. These beliefs not only hinder male survivors of sexual assault, but they also permeate into media and perpetuate a cycle of toxicity. Through film, Americans create and take in ideas from popular culture. Highly heteronormative films like *American History X* subtly reinforce the biases and barriers created by toxic masculinity. This essay develops working definitions of rape, assault, and the prison rape trope and applies these definitions to an analysis of Tony Kaye's 1998 film *American History X.* Through my analysis of *American History X*, I will show how the trope preserves heteropatriarchal values that undermine the work of #MeToo and its critiques of toxic masculinity, thus muting conversations among male survivors of sexual violence.

Issues of male sexual assault have been worked out by others in multiple ways, including its portrayal within prison films. With the belief that film operates as a reflection of and influencer of American values, I argue that the prison rape trope reflects and heightens rape culture and harms the efforts being done to end toxic masculinity. While activists call for reform against the normalized and excused sexual violence against women, the same abuse serves as prime plot points for prison movies ("Rape Culture, Victim"). As Elizabeth King and Emily Shugerman note, "Prison rape is often used as a punchline in movies and TV shows—the ubiquitous 'don't drop the soap' joke can be found everywhere from *2 Fast 2 Furious* to *Family Guy*" ("'Prisoners are People First'"). Such films present a unified mentality that rape is an

expected and natural consequence for criminals while simultaneously discouraging men in broader society from reporting abuse due to the fear of appearing weak or feminine. If we claim to be allies for victims of sexual assault, then I contest that our support must not stop at the wired gates of prisons or be based on one's gender. True advocacy calls for the challenging of the implicit biases found in popular media, justice systems, and ideologies with the goal of dismantling the social and institutional barriers that prevent a person from making one's voice heard.

#HowWeDefineIt

Before analyzing the prison rape trope, we need to consider the shifting legal, cultural, and colloquial definitions surrounding this topic. With the renewed focus on ending sexual violence, the American public is becoming more vocal and expansive in its definition of sexual assault and consent. However, while supporters may be in unison in their urge for justice, the legal definitions regarding the handling of sexual assault, rape, and consent still vary too greatly. Legislation and enforcement differ by state and context. For example, legal scholar Ian Urbina argues "in some cases, different definitions can be appropriate" like on college campuses that "defin[e] rape more expansively than criminal laws that carry jail time." Notably, colleges must be more inclusive in their definitions of sexual assault to avoid losing federal funding through a violation of Title IX. Yet such unstable handling of rape allows many cases to go unreported due to incidents not meeting the legal criteria or victims' confusion. Additionally, these varying definitions and practices encourage the belief that rape is less significant in certain scenarios. College campuses may have strict policies of intolerance (though perhaps not matching enforcement) toward any unwanted sexual conduct, while workplaces doubt the intent or severity of a sexual offense. For the purpose of this essay, I will be referencing the #MeToo Movement's and Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network's definitions of sexual assault and rape, which focus on the lack of consent by the victim. While sexual assault encompasses any unwanted sexual behaviors, rape specifically includes "penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person without the consent of the victim" (qtd. by Urbina). Regardless of the surrounding circumstances, these definitions highlight the underlying need for consent and zero tolerance toward any unwanted sexual conduct.

Like "rape" and "sexual assault," "consent" has multiple, sometimes contradictory, legal and colloquial meanings, thus necessitating a baseline understanding of how "consent" will be understood for my arguments. Although the Illinois General Assembly's compiled Criminal Offenses (720 ILCS 5/) Criminal Code of 2012 affirms that one's clothing or lack of resistance does not establish a person's willingness to engage in sexual activities, for instance, popular discourse questions instances when a "no" is mumbled or alcohol is involved (Urbina). Trending informal definitions include either a "No means no" or a "Yes means yes" mentality, while Illinois legislation defines consent as "a freely given agreement" that does not result from "the use of force or threat of force" (Illinois General Assembly 720 ILCS 5/11-1.70[a]). Based on these definitions and cultural understandings, I propose that consent may be granted only on the following grounds: 1) both parties are mentally capable of comprehending the situation, understanding that one is able to "stop the sexual activity at any point," 2) no threat or perceived threat places one party at a disadvantage by another, and 3) both parties give an affirmative indication of their willingness to participate in sexual conduct (Illinois General Assembly; *#MeToo*). To advocate equally on behalf of all people, everyone—from law enforcement to civilians—requires clear and equally applied definitions of consent.

One of the most common arguments given to deny the prevalence of prison rape concerns the extent of consent given, claiming that a blurred line exists between forced, coerced, and consensual sex (Fleisher and Krienert). Mark S. Fleisher and Jessie L. Krienert argue in *The Myth of Prison Rape*: there is a "complex differentiation among acts of sexual violence, sexual consent, and sexual coercion [that] occur[s] as a function of inmate culture's symbolic reinterpretation of sociosexual behavior…Thus, the primary mechanism used to determine an act's meaning focuses on contextualization" (84). One example of contextualization includes "contractual relationships" in which inmates coerce fellow inmates into sex acts, often to ensure protection, repay a debt, or show appreciation for the gifting of commissary items (Kunzel 182). Princeton Professor Regina Kunzel writes:

> In these ongoing and sometimes contractual relationships, the man or jocker obligate[s] himself to provide complete protection for his partner, known as a punk or kid, at the cost of his life if necessary, and often provide[s] commissary items as well. In exchange, he expect[s] obedience, sexual service, and "wifely" domestic labor such as doing the

> laundry, making the bunk, cleaning the cell, and making and serving coffee. (182)

Many could argue that the inmate knowingly agrees to engage in sexual service, yet in these cases, the unequal power differential prohibits free consent. By leveraging protection or indebtedness in exchange for sex acts, one initiates a coercive force that many states outlaw. While Fleisher and Krienert note that prisons have distinct cultures that vary from other communities, their work serves as an example for the need to be cautious in outlining how consent may or may not be given.

My definitions of sexual assault, rape, and consent will allow us to establish a standard that foregrounds the victim's experience as we evaluate the impact of film's depiction of male prison rape. Despite Fleisher and Krienert's fluid interpretations of sex acts within prisons, the authors provide insight on how media depictions of violent prison sex affect viewers. In their studies on prison culture, Fleisher and Krienert note that the mere "*fear* of rape and sexual assault shapes prison culture as much as actual incidents" (24). Just as films and jokes about prison rape shape inmates' perceptions, they also shape the public's. Through exposure to "a barrage of pop media visualizations of violent prison rapes," many people who are unfamiliar with the penal system struggle to discern between fiction and reality (56). Fleisher and Krienert use this assessment to "downplay the problem of sexual violence behind bars, asserting that the ubiquity of violent rape in prison is a media-perpetuated myth" (Young). This paper is not invested in comparing incidences of prison rape to public perceptions of its ubiquity; rather, my goal is to illuminate the effects of media portrayals of prison sexual violence on the public's sentiment toward issues of sexual assault and toxic masculinity.

Prison films' employment of the prison rape trope relies on the public's disdain for those who deviate from social norms—including breaking the law—and toxic masculinity's and homophobia's assumption that a man's rape is synonymous with his emasculation. The prison rape trope centers on an individual character whose rehabilitation develops from his sexual assault in prison. Through this relationship, viewers learn to see criminals as less than human. This perspective supports a more accepting view of criminals' sexual assaults with the idea that they deserve such treatment. As Caster explains, "Understanding the rape as Derek's real punishment in the [*American History X*] reflects what prison historians describe as the 'just desserts' model of punishment" (*Prison, Race, and Masculinity* 124). This model flows from a

long history that understood punishment as necessarily retaliatory. Among the public, the (faulty) notion that an inmate deserves any kind of sexual abuse stems from classical criminology's idea of "Let the punishment fit the crime" and the Code of Hammurabi's "an eye for an eye" principle (Siegel 9). These ideologies may have served as guiding thoughts for sentencing, but they also encourage a vengeful view toward convicted criminals. While explicit sexual assault may never appear in a judge's sentencing for a person charged with a crime, many in the public sphere echo feelings of indifference when it occurs. As viewers become conditioned to the image of a criminal as deserving of his sexual assault, their sensitivity to such issues becomes minimized, thus encouraging viewers to watch this violence with little to no empathy toward its reality.

In addition to the public's apathy toward the treatment of incarcerated people, toxic masculinity's prioritization of a man's power suggests a connection between one's sexual assault and lost masculinity. Homophobia, and the bias it brings, instills in men the belief that any weakness may be read as effeminate, thus magnifying the (false) meaning behind one's sexual assault. Helen Eigenberg and Agnes Baro write, "Rape itself is used to convey power—the power to take what one wants including another person's body" (74). According to this view, for a hyper-masculine, "macho" man, sexual assault becomes the worst form of emasculation, showing that he lacked the strength to protect his body. Society shapes men to believe that admitting to being raped is admitting weakness, therefore "justif[ing] their victimization" because "a real man [would] stand up and fight" (Fleisher and Krienert 96-98). Due to these perceptions, many men avoid coming forward about their experiences. Sexual assault is already underreported by all, but the stigma created by toxic masculinity heightens the problem for men. Rather than confronting the reality of sexual violence toward men as a concern, media opts to use these insecurities as punchlines or plot points. *American History X* illustrates this through its handling of protagonist Derek Vinyard's rape as his moral proving ground while denying its emotional significance. *American History X*'s use of the prison rape trope shows the influence and tension of cultural attitudes toward sexual violence despite the legal call for reform.

#PrisonChangedMe: American History X's Climactic, Transformative Rape Scene

As shown in this paper, cinematic depictions of prisons offer concentrated spaces for grappling with ideas about male rape and victimization. These depictions mirror and influence the broader societal views on male sexual assault. Although Fleisher and Krienert dispute the pervasiveness

of sexual assault in prisons, they admit that the "barrage of pop media visualizations of violent prison rapes" continues to instill fear in new inmates (56). Clearly, as seen in inmates' shared anxieties about prison rape, these fictional films blur the lines between imagination and reality. Many prison films offer prescriptive ideas about justice and morality in addition to their descriptive portrayals of prisons' violent environments. Peter Caster expounds on this in *Prison, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film*: "Despite their differences of genre and media, these are all representations of crime and punishment shaped by imagination, but invested in operating in historical terms, drawing relationships between fiction and actuality" (2). Caster hits on a relevant point for many shows: regardless of the degree of intended fantasy or realism, film serves as a constructed space for creators to work through ideas about real topics. Within *American History X*, white supremacist, heteronormative ideals frame the "imagination" of its creators and viewers, encouraging a belief in prison rape as a sign of lost masculinity and a man's ultimate punishment.

Released in 1998, director Tony Kaye's film *American History X* employs the trope of imminent and life-changing prison rape to accomplish its moral thrust of teaching about the futility of white supremacy and racism. *American History X* offers a gritty depiction of protagonist Derek Vinyard's experiences—including his father's murder, his introduction to the white supremacist Skinheads gang, and his killing of two black men—that lead up to his conviction, reform, and release from prison. By sharing his ordeal with his younger brother, Danny, Derek hopes to save him from making similar mistakes. The film's narrative and formal structure draw out and reinforce a connection between Derek's immoral acts and punishment for those actions. The movie's mise-en-scène, cinematography, and editing combine to pair events, provide narration, and foreshadow key moments. Specifically, the editing compresses the time between injustice and punishment to heighten the causal relationship. For example, while Derek is being arrested for committing murder, he proudly stands in the center of a medium shot that shows a clear image of his rippling muscles and racist tattoos (*American History X* 00:55:26-00:55:57). The film juxtaposes this image against Derek's rape scene, where a similarly spaced shot shows Derek's body as it is being abused by others (01:25:40-01:25:44). Throughout the film, Kaye calls viewers to consider the connection between crime and punishment, thus illustrating the popular belief that one cannot exist without the other and justifying Derek's prison rape.

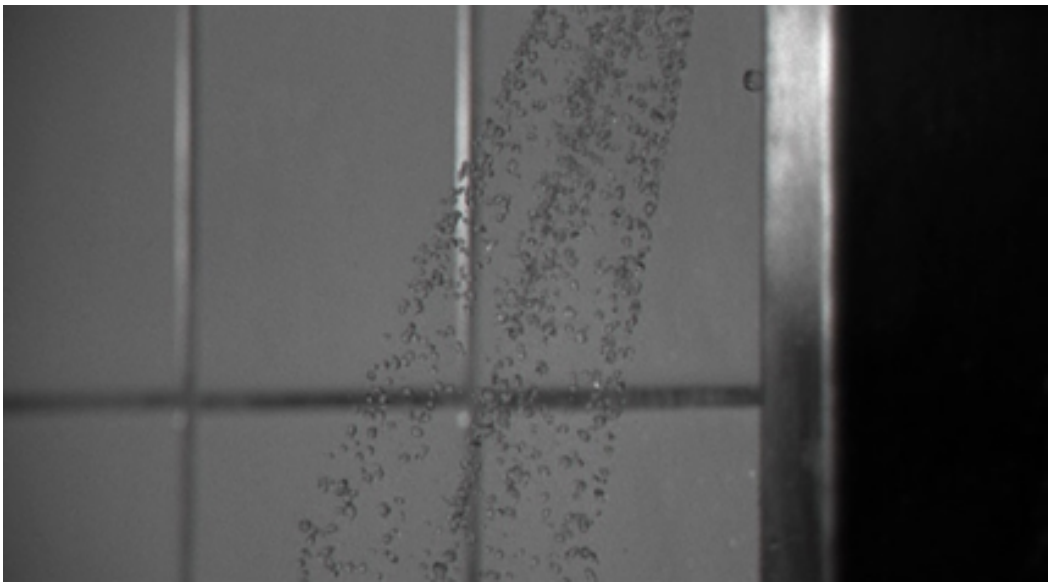
(Figure 1: Protagonist Derek Vinyard's arrest for murder. *American History X* 00:55:25)

Film critics have consistently read Derek's rape scene as a space that violently foregrounds Derek's experience with rape-as-punishment over the dehumanizing crime that places him in prison in the first place. The mise-en-scène in this moment enables it to be "watchable in a way that his crime is not," thus allowing "Derek's victimization by white supremacy [to be] more narratively significant than the victimization of the black man he killed" (Caster, *Prisons, Race, and Masculinity* 124). The film's cinematography intensely captures the murder scene—from Derek's wielding of the hand gun to his infliction of another man's death by curb stomping— yet remains more discreet when others inflict sexual harm on Derek. This decision creates a hierarchy that protects Derek from shame and leaves some of his dignity intact. By focusing on Derek's experience over the murdered black men's, *American History X* shows an unequal valuation of white experiences.

(Readers should be aware that this paragraph analyzes a scene of sexual violence.) Within the extended black and white flashback from Derek's time in prison, the actual rape scene takes place in under two minutes (01:25:06-01:26:48). Many cinematic elements cue viewers in to Derek's fate—"a gradually emptying shower, the disappearance of the lone guard from the scene, and more of the camera's adoring gaze, [and] the slow motion of Derek's naked skin" (Caster, *Prisons, Race, and Masculinity* 124). The editing cuts quickly, forcing viewers to keep

their eyes fixed on the screen while four men hold each of Derek's limbs against the wall and another begins the act of anal penetration. Intercut within the medium long shots that show Derek from behind, close ups of Derek's face portray the amount of pain being experienced as he grimaces and groans while the offender thrusts forcefully and stiffly. Ultimately, the cinematography's goal of holding viewers' attention both seeks to draw viewers in for the movie's climax while also creating a space for sexual interactions to be closely observed.

The abrupt cuts against the discordant music and flowing water create a scene that denotes power over another. While Derek showers and the space slowly empties, the music—long, low, and drawn out with interspersed high notes—builds on top of the steady rhythm of the water coming from the showerhead. The mixing of these diegetic and nondiegetic sounds aims to compel viewers to remain present and in suspense with Derek. The added underscoring in this scene furthers the feeling of powerlessness as Derek lacks the ability to fight back and viewers are intended to become unable to pull their eyes from the screen. Throughout the assault, the music continues to build behind the diegetic sounds of grunting, verbal fighting, and skin on skin jostling. Once the offender finishes, the music likewise comes to an abrupt halt, leaving Derek alone in silence. In this silence, the magnitude and bleakness of Derek's situation echo throughout the frame. Rape's use as a means of asserting power over another traces back to research from the late twentieth century in which researchers agreed that rape was "an expression of dominance and control" (Kunzel 170). In a similar manner that the music is meant to hold viewers' unyielding attention during this scene, Derek's assailants place him in a state of powerlessness that is magnified by the sound effects. Just as the silence at the end of the scene depicts a lack of sound, so Derek's rape represents a lack of control and masculinity.



(Figure 2: Water flowing from the showerhead within the prison. American History X 01:26:14)

In the same way in which culture presents rape narratives for women victims as self-inflicted and avoidable, Derek's rape in *American History X* places the blame on him, making it a justified punishment. While women receive punishment for their assumed promiscuity or for seducing men, men are punished extralegally for a social offense. To fully learn and grow, Derek must experience sexual victimization because his three-year prison sentence is considered insufficient. Rather than approaching Derek's assault with the posture of support or sympathy that beckons a "rape is never your fault" perspective, the movie pushes viewers toward apathy. As seen in *American History X*, Derek's assault was never expected to be a formal punishment for his crimes, yet no one—including the prison guard—made an effort to put an end to it. Ultimately, the rape is in Derek's hands: had he not committed a crime, he never would have been in prison, and in order to finally leave a changed person, he must undergo the ultimate hardship—emasculation by rape.

Derek's sexual assault as an act of power and retaliation operates under the shared understanding that a man should not allow himself to become subject to such abuse. This standard reflects toxic masculinity's connection between aggression and power, forcing a weak and effeminate view of Derek because of his assault. The rape scene—brutal, unfair, and undeserved—serves no other purpose than to propel Derek's plea for help due to his assumed

weakness. *American History X* contributes to toxic masculinity's inherent issues, which argue that a "'*real man*' cannot be raped or would fight to the death before he was raped," which Derek fails to do (Eigenberg and Baro 65). In casting Edward Norton as lead, the character of Derek Vinyard comes to life with rippling muscles, tattoos, and an intensely observant gaze. The film continually constructs Derek as a hypermasculine figure—from its opening sequence of Derek's rough sex with his girlfriend to his victorious basketball game between the Skinheads and black youth (*American History X* 00:02:11-00:03:18 and 00:17:10-00:22:32). This image of Derek as unbeatably strong and cocky builds, leaving his opponents questioning what could possibly happen to destroy his white masculine identity. Derek's rape as punishment depends on this hypermasculinity. In this interaction, both the offenders and the victim acknowledge the significance of the assault: that the involuntary penetration of one man by another shows the victim as a lesser man. Eigenberg and Baro's survey of popular prison films reinforces this through their findings: "There appears to be no other reason for these scenes except to convey this "*real man*" message" (65). Because Derek becomes subjected to such assault and stripped of his masculine power, he finally admits his weakness and need for help.

As a narrative tool, *American History X* perpetuates the convention of rape as the motivating factor for a man to change his ways by situating Derek's assault as the climax of his prison experience and the end of his neo-Nazi beliefs. Once Derek's assault ends and he is left alone, the frame shows close ups of Derek's white supremacist tattoos and pooling blood, ending on a full body shot of him naked and lying helplessly on the shower floor. This scene dissolves into the next, where high school teacher, Mr. Sweeney, walks into the medical ward to visit Derek, who is now stitched up on a bed. Mr. Sweeney's visit with Derek enables him to reconsider his approach to handling pain with the question, "Has anything you've done made your life better?" (*American History X* 01:29:19-01:29:21). The forced recognition of his misplaced blame and anger ultimately prompt Derek's change, but without the climactic rape scene, Derek still would not have been willing to listen to such reasoning. Derek's prison rape positions him in a "hellish place that paradoxically proves transformative, man-making, and redemptive," thus making his experience fundamentally worthwhile (Caster, "I Learned Prison" 112). Derek supports this notion when he replies to Danny's apology; after Danny says he is "sorry that happened to" him, Derek replies, "Nah, I'm not. I'm lucky. I feel lucky 'cause it's wrong, Danny" (*American History X* 01:34:58-01:35:05). Derek's acceptance and gratitude for

his sexual victimization encourages the belief that prison rape is a normal and necessary means for criminals to undergo significant change.

(Figure 3: Derek lying on the shower floor following his assault. *American History X* 01:26:41)

(Figure 4: Derek describing his prison experiences and why he is grateful for them to Danny. *American History X* 01:35:40)

In order to uphold a coherent view of Derek as a masculine figure, the film needs to carefully balance the extent of vulnerability, emotion, and rebounding shown by Derek. This approach differs from #MeToo, which encourages women in their vulnerability and courage to share their experiences. Toxic masculinity fails to allow such space for men like Derek Vinyard as shown in how *American History X* ambiguously handles Derek's confession of his victimization. Through the flashback, viewers understand that Derek confides in Danny about his time in prison to deter him from a life of criminality, yet the film remains unclear about whether Derek shares this with Mr. Sweeney. Immediately after the shot of Derek's assaulted body fades, the next scene with Mr. Sweeney's visit to Derek begins, showing Derek on a hospital bed with a stitched face. Few words are spoken between the two, and the brief scene fades as Derek sobs and wonders how he ended up in his position. The camera returns to a calmer Derek talking to Mr. Sweeney about Danny and the misdirection of his hurt (01:27:40-01:29:21). The film never explicitly notes whether Derek has shared his trauma with Mr. Sweeney, but details like the needed "six stitches" intend to lead the audience to assume that these are from the aggressive anal penetration. Between this and Derek's emotional outpouring with Mr. Sweeney, one can assume that Derek had shared his experience. However, the film's ambiguity on this detail perpetuates the difficulty that men face in coming forward about their victimizations. In a society that values strength and stoicism, Derek's emotional response breaks the norms. Rather than validating Derek's courageous decision to share his experiences, director Kaye simply uses it as a practical means for the plot, and thereby ignores the emotional complexities.

(Figure 5: Derek with Dr. Sweeney in the infirmary. *American History X* 01:27:30)

Media depictions rely on prison rape narratives for a variety of reasons. Some seek an easily elicited laugh through the "Don't drop the soap" one-liner, while other forms incorporate a victim's sexual assault as a means of motivating change. Regardless of their purposes within specific media outlets, the widespread use of sexual violence as a plot point negates the complicated, lived experiences of victims and "contribute[s] to a social structure that has come to accept, perhaps even endorse, that rape is part and parcel of the incarceration experience" (Eigenberg and Baro 87). Through its use of rape as a motivating factor in Derek's changed trajectory, *American History X* simultaneously centers on white heteronormativity and plays with the fear of lost masculinity. Derek's rape—mechanical, emotionless, and retaliatory—is understood as stripping him of the power and strength that many associate with masculinity. Serving as Derek's ultimate punishment, this assault fails to grapple with the emotional trauma that accompanies such experiences in favor of an easy plot point for a gruesomely attractive narrative.

The use of the rape-as-punishment trope in *American History X* not only serves as a "just desserts" view of sexual assault in prison, but it also manipulates whose experiences are being shown. The #MeToo Movement originated from Burke's desire to provide resources to "Black women and girls and other young women of color from low wealth communities"—people whom society often neglects (*#MeToo*). Derek, on the other hand—the privileged, white, and

physically strong lead—becomes the visible representation of a crime that happens to less visible groups of people. However, even though *American History X* portrays such a crime, this act only matters because it happens to the white, male lead, therefore negating the experiences of more vulnerable groups. Derek's characterization depends on a view of him as aggressive and cocky toward women and black men—a character whose apathy toward others results from his learned supremacist ideals. Derek asserts his physical and gendered dominance over his girlfriend in the opening sequences when they engage in rough sex (*American History X* 00:02:11-00:03:18). Although the film positions viewers to assume that she enjoys it, Derek's hardened character begs the question: would he even care otherwise? Because of society's general acceptance of a dominant male within heterosexual relationships, Derek's treatment of his girlfriend goes unquestioned; viewers are not meant to feel uncomfortable until other men subject Derek to the same treatment. Derek's role reversal with male perpetrators aims to disturb viewers based on society's discomfort and prejudice against homosexual acts. Yet in all of this, Derek's experience as a man who has realized his worst fear (rape by another man) becomes foregrounded, so that *American History X*'s use of rape to recuperate a white supremacist hinges on society's homophobia and erasure of others' experiences.

#CrewsInTheNews: Terry Crews and His #MeToo Backlash

While *American History X* provides a focused and fictional space that reflects the homophobic fear of men being viewed as feminine, thereby defining what constitutes a "real man," and how to punish him, many contemporary instances demonstrate the reality of being a male sexual assault survivor in such a culture. In October 2017 while on the set of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, actor Terry Crews tweeted his #MeToo story of being groped by executive Adam Venit while at a party. Thousands of men and women supported Crews's vulnerability and even felt compelled to share their experiences. However, amid the overwhelming encouragement, other notable figures like 50 Cent and D. L. Hughley called Crews's masculinity into question. In an interview, Hughley remarked, "it's hard for me to think that a dude with all those muscles can't tell an agent to not touch [him]" (qtd. by Chiu). Attitudes like Hughley's are exactly what Crews seeks to fight against. In his work to end toxic masculinity and create spaces for men to bravely share their experiences, Crews acknowledges, "I proved that size doesn't matter when it comes to sexual assault" (Crews qtd. by Gander). Crews's example shows the stakes involved when toxic

masculinity collides with #MeToo and how movies like *American History X* subtly bolster such issues.

The backlash against Crews exemplifies toxic masculinity's belief that a man should defend himself against sexual violence at all costs, which is also prevalent in *American History X*. Comedian D. L. Hughley asserts that an appropriate response to Crews's assault would have been to "slap the shit outa him" (qtd. by Chiu). Inherent in Hughley's interview about Crews is his "disbelief that a man as intimidating and large as Crews, a 240-pound former NFL player, had failed to ward off unwanted contact" (Chiu). Hughley's belief reinforces the "notion that a '*real man*'…would fight to the death before he was raped" (Eigenberg and Baro 65). Rather than supporting men like Crews for sharing their experiences, Hughley, celebrities, and viewers place the blame on the victim, in what Crews describes as the "male version of 'What was she wearing?'" (qtd. by Gander). By calling into question the victim's actions (or lack of), the blame unjustly shifts from the perpetrator to the victim. Both women and men experience dismissive questioning and inappropriately placed blame in response to their experiences, but the type of criticism differs depending on gender. While both reactions challenge the victim's character, this occurs along different lines and creates feelings of shame. Derek's motivated change results from the shame he feels after being victimized and the idea of lost masculinity just like Hughley's claims hinge on the belief that one's assault is a sign of personal weakness.

Notably, Crews admits that an initial reaction was to punch the offending Venit, yet he resisted because doing so would only escalate the situation, pose a threat to Crews's future employment, and perpetuate the cycle of toxic masculinity. Within what Crews describes as "the cult of toxic masculinity," macho men are celebrated for their physical strength and aggression (qtd. by Petrucci). However, Crews recognized the double-edged sword of this belief in his understanding that "'240 lbs. Black Man stomps out Hollywood Honcho' would be the headline the next day" (qtd. by Chiu). In addition to not wanting to lose everything for which he had worked, Crews also exemplified his desire to move away from the patterns of toxic masculinity that he had witnessed as a kid. In an interview with Kashmira Gander for *Newsweek*, Crews relays his "earliest memory…of his father repeatedly punching his mother in the face as hard as he could." Crews discussed how he absorbed many of the same toxic masculinity-driven ideas from his father and "look[ed] the other way" among his "card-carrying" NFL teammates (qtd. by Rothman). Crews's change of heart initially started from his fear of going to jail or losing his

career, yet now he seeks "to help others change what it means to be a man" (qtd. by Rothman).

A tension in *American History X* and Crews's experience involves the (dis)allowance for a man to vulnerably tell his story. In sharing his experience, Crews explains how he understood the amount of courage required by fellow survivors of assault to finally speak up—while many women are "dismissed…as gold diggers and attention seekers…I knew that even *I* was quiet about what I had been through" (qtd. by Gander). Derek Vinyard's ambiguous confession to Mr. Sweeney about his assault in *American History X* reflects Crews's acknowledgment that "everyone…depended on my silence, they depended on me being ashamed and feeling I'd be viewed as less than a man" (Crews qtd. by Gander). Through the pressures placed on men to appear emotionally hard, offenders escape accountability. By silencing men through a culture of shame, their stories of abuse remain unheard. Toxic masculinity's creation of a shame culture—a culture that invalidates others' lived experiences—prevents all survivors of sexual abuse from sharing their stories, yet as shown in *American History X* and by Terry Crews, the stakes are heightened for men.

However, the mutual reluctance to share their experiences is where the resemblance ends between *American History X* and Terry Crews. While *American History X* gives a clear offense-punishment dynamic in its use of the rape-for-punishment trope, Crews disrupts that narrative. *American History X*'s rape narrative hinges on the understanding that Derek's rape is a justified punishment, whereas Crews experience is completely unwarranted; Crews's backlash comes from his lack of retaliation or use of force to prevent his assault. *American History X* does not merely serve as a reflection of Crews's experience; the movie reinforces attitudes like Hughley's. The film's representation of ideals for how a "real man" should act creates the conditions for how people respond to Crews. As a hypermasculine figure, viewers are meant to see Derek as someone who would never allow such a sexual offense to happen to him in the first place, yet when it occurs, Derek requires four men to restrain him (*American History X* 01:25:06-01:26:48). Hughley contends that an appropriate response from Crews, who was forced to accept his assault to avoid causing a messy scene, would have been to retaliate violently against his assaulter; however, society's notions of masculinity conflict for men of color like Crews in a way that it does not for Derek. As a white man, Derek's machismo thrives off his toughness and physical superiority. Yet black men receive contradictory calls to display their masculinity through hardness while also being careful to not come across as violent black men. Crews's

conflicting experience with these intersectional identities exhibits a conflict of ideologies that *American History X* reinforces in a harmful way.

A final distinction between *American History X* and Crews includes their differing responses to their sexual assaults. While Derek's experience motivates him to renounce his white supremacist ways and protect his younger brother, Crews's experience mobilized him to advocate on behalf of fellow survivors. In prison, Derek's mother and Mr. Sweeney warn him about the destructive path that his younger brother Danny is on—a path that had been blazed by Derek and spurred on by their shared prejudice and hatred. Closely mentored by the Skinheads's leader, Danny proves to be an influential, rising member of the white supremacist group. The movie creates a parallel between the two brothers, encouraging viewers to partner with Derek in his urgency to change Danny's attitudes and prevent him from experiencing the same assault (Caster, *Prison, Race, and Masculinity* 122). While Derek is inwardly focused on himself and his immediate family, Crews turns his focus outward to grow his empathy for others and seek justice. Since coming forward with his #MeToo experience, Crews has sought to "'dig a tunnel with a spoon'"—that is, Crews hopes that by coming forward as a male survivor, he can encourage others to realize that they, too, can find support in speaking up (qtd. by Gander). Crews's advocacy extends beyond other men of color as he recognizes the distinct barriers and responses to men and women survivors and the influences of toxic masculinity. Moving forward, Crews continues to use his testimony while he presses onward with his goal of creating change that starts "with one guy, two guys, three guys" (qtd. by Gander).

#TL;DR: In Conclusion

As addressed throughout this essay, the trope of prison rape relies on *and* perpetuates an already constructed idea of masculinity. Ongoing ideas about what it means for one to be a "real man" influence the film culture of *American History X*, thereby "shap[ing] our expectations, ideas, and understanding" of the movie (Corrigan and White 14). *American History X* reinforces toxic masculinity's beliefs about how a man should carry himself through protagonist Derek Vinyard's hypermasculine characterization and response to his sexual assault. The movie relies on the public's dehumanizing views of criminals as worthy of such treatment, toxic masculinity's ideals for men, and homophobia's discomfort with homosexual acts. While Derek's experience serves its goal of motivating moral change, the rape relies on toxic masculinity's call for emotional

stoicism and manly power to fully emasculate and shame Derek, who could not maintain such standards.

This same logic plays out in daily life—inside and outside prison walls—as seen in Terry Crews's case. Crews poignantly describes the stigma of being a male survivor of sexual assault and facing the continual disbelief from others that such an act could happen to him. *American History X* and Crews both discuss the "feelings of shame" that surround male sexual assault and the blame that is unjustly placed on the survivors. However, *American History X* relies on the offense-punishment dynamic of Derek's rape and implicitly perpetuates the backlash received by Crews. Celebrities like Hughley criticize Crews for not reacting outwardly following his assault; this judgment stems from the idea that "a real man [would] stand up and fight" at all costs to avoid such an emasculating attack (Fleisher and Krienert 96-98). Yet the intersection of Crews's identity as black man creates a conflict between toxic masculinity's call for him to assert his male dominance through force while also protecting himself from being unfairly labeled as a violent black man. Terry Crews demonstrates that sexual assault is not limited to a particular gender, sex, or body type and that there is still more work to do in advocating for sexual assault survivors and ending toxic masculinity.

Thirteen years following Tarana Burke's founding of the #MeToo Movement, Terry Crews and many others continue to advocate on behalf of sexual assault survivors with the goal of "helping those who need it to find entry points for individual healing and galvanizing a broad base of survivors to disrupt the systems that allow for the global proliferation of sexual violence" (*#MeToo*). #MeToo has not only provided a platform for many to find solidarity among other survivors, it has also helped "reframe and expand the global conversation around sexual violence to speak to the needs of a broader spectrum of survivors" (*#MeToo*). This "global conversation" and "national dialogue" has created space for people to reconsider the definitions, policies, and enforcement of sexual assault, rape, and consent. Additionally, #MeToo has also brought renewed awareness of toxic masculinity's hindrance to creating change. While this moment of the #MeToo Movement is not the end—as more work for more invisible groups of people remains—Burke and many other courageous survivors have forged a space for such conversations and transformation to begin.

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