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1930s Gold Digger Films and #MeToo: Collaging Modernist Moments

William Drew Chandler

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

1930s Gold Digger Films and #MeToo: Collaging Modernist Moments

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Susan Friedman's recent theory of planetary modernisms, from her book *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time*, holds that modernism as a distinguishable period, and modernity, as the characteristics of said period, can take place at any point in time and in any place that is experiencing rupture and upheaval. Planetary modernisms studies de-colonizes and de-centralizes traditional modernism and opens it up to logical and important new horizons. It encompasses not only literary output, but all forms of cultural production, including theatre and film. I use this theory to identify and compare two unique moments of modernism which until now have been neglected by modernism studies. Friedman suggests that the side-by-side comparison or "collage" of two disparate instances of modernism throughout history elucidates each respective moment and creates additional meaning.

I examine on one hand the "gold digger" showgirl musical film subgenre of the early 1930s, a product of the intense social upheaval of the Great Depression, in which aspiring actresses desperate for jobs are forced to come to illicit agreements with the rich male producers of the shows. I juxtapose this with the #MeToo movement of the 2010s, wherein women speak out en masse against men who have exploited their influence over them to sexually harass them. Both center around women uniting in physical and/or online spaces to work against the abuse committed against them within the entertainment industry. In each case, men have wealth and power on one hand, while on the other hand women in need of jobs have little or no power. This power imbalance creates an environment in which predatory sexual behavior thrives. Furthermore, both time periods, past and present, are marked by rapid social and economic change, which serves both to exacerbate these power imbalances as well as accelerate the need for women to defend themselves despite possible retribution. The pressures of each period vary as do the potential outlets for women to voice their concerns and seek relief. I highlight the effects of women's solidarity in resistance to harassment and abuse and note how far society has yet to go when women today pushing for fairness and change continue to face intense opposition which at times belittles, disregards, and fights back against them.

Keywords: Planetary modernisms, MeToo, gold digger, sexual harassment, Busby Berkeley

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Introduction

The “gold digger” film subgenre was a sensation during the short but fiery Pre-Code period of classical Hollywood cinema. In 1933 alone, Warner Bros. released three film musicals—*42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, and *Footlight Parade*—all of which feature mainly female casts of aspiring showgirls. The figurative (derisive) use of “gold digger” had begun in the early 1910s and been popularized by Avery Hopwood’s successful 1919 Broadway play *The Gold Diggers*. But the Great Depression, at its worst in 1933, created a timely context within which the “gold digger” story flourished. Pressured by the economic hardship and job scarcity of the Depression to secure work in a theater show under any circumstance, the women in the 1933 films are often forced to come to illicit agreements with the rich male producers of the shows. The cleverest women turn these arrangements to their favor, securing their own jobs (and friends’ jobs) and sometimes exposing the men for their predatory practices. Though these women are belittled for it, and referred to not only as “gold diggers,” but even as “chiselers,” and “parasites,” those who assert themselves are those who come out on top.

Unfortunately, work cultures of illicit agreements and sexual harassment continue on many fronts today. Recently, the #MeToo movement has once again turned a spotlight on the prevalence of such activity in society at large, and specifically in the entertainment industry. The string of celebrity harassment scandals, spearheaded by the most prominent case of Harvey Weinstein, and subsequent fallout have been unprecedented in scope and consequence, but the women’s issues involved and women’s responses to the crisis do have precedent. Such sexual harassment is and has always been patently wrong, though in the 1930s as now, the harassers have hidden behind their power and wealth, often successfully. In order to illustrate the ongoing problem of powerful men abusing their power in the harassment of relatively powerless women,

I will analyze specific institutional abuses of power, juxtaposing the 1930s and late 2010s, and noting several striking similarities. I will further highlight the effects of solidarity in resistance to such abuse.

Today's #MeToo movement and the "gold digger" movies of the early 1930s both center around women uniting in physical and/or online spaces to speak out against the abuse committed against them within the entertainment industry. In each case, men have wealth and power on one hand, while on the other hand women desperate for jobs have little or no power. This power imbalance creates an environment in which predatory sexual behavior thrives. Crude men are enabled by their means to demand that women indulge their lustful desires in exchange for job favors. Furthermore, both time periods, past and present, are marked by rapid social and economic change, which serves both to exacerbate these power imbalances as well as accelerate the need for women to defend themselves despite possible retribution. The pressures of each period vary: in the 1930s, the worldwide stock market collapse crippled the nation's economy and changed the job landscape. Women, generally, needed to work more because of financial woes, but faced a tight job market. Those women who did succeed in finding work and asserting their own financial independence met with conservative backlash because they were defying the gender norms of the day. In the 2010s, social change speeds forward in large part because of the interconnectedness of the world through social media. Women fighting for their rights and independence have a much larger platform from which to do so, and have more access to lawmaking bodies to further their causes. While contemporary women continue to pressure society for progress, they still meet with similarly intense opposition which at times belittles, disregards, and fights back against them.

These dual periods' traits of rapid, significant pressure and change figure in recent rearticulations of the concept of modernism espoused by Susan Friedman and others. Friedman's theory of planetary modernisms, from her book *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time*, holds that modernism as a distinguishable period, and modernity, as the characteristics of said period, can take place at any point in time and in any place that is experiencing rupture and upheaval. For decades, scholars had reserved "modernism" for the periodization of the first half of the 20th-century in the United Kingdom and America. This application of the concept is at best unnecessarily limited in scope, and at worst, prejudicial, imperialist, and elitist. Planetary modernisms studies disrupts this traditional application not simply to make a splash academically, but to de-colonize traditional modernism and open it up to logical and important new horizons. The plural "modernisms" emphasizes the multiplicity of instances throughout history in which social upheaval has affected literature and culture. And different scholarly cohorts refer alternatively to "global" or "planetary" modernisms to emphasize the unlimited geographical reach of such upheaval.

The field of planetary modernisms, specifically, expands the theoretical modernist apparatus beyond previously established national, temporal, hierarchical (high vs. low), and modal limitations. It encompasses not only literary output, but all forms of cultural production, including theatre and film. Scholars have studied modernism and film for a long time, but the recent explosion of modernisms studies¹ invites a reassessment of what should be considered modernist and how we study the modernist. For example, the "gold digger" film subgenre grew

¹ Influential works include *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, Simon Gikandi's *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature*, Jahan Ramazani's *Transnational Poetics*, and the Warwick Research Collective's *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*.

out of a highly “modern” moment: the stock market crash of 1929 and subsequent Great Depression drastically disrupted American society, including previous norms for working women and movie studios. Yet, because these narratives were produced in the popular medium of film, rather than the critically privileged written word, the “gold digger” films have until now not been recognized as modernist texts.

The study of film within the traditional definition of modernism is difficult, ironically, because film rose to prominence during the traditional literary modernism period. (D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, an important milestone of film history, premiered in 1915, right around the common touchstone year of 1914 for traditional transatlantic literary modernism based on shifts connected with the beginning of World War One.) Because much of film was viewed as cheap popular fare, modernism scholarship tended to center on the aesthetics of film and filmmaking which set it apart from literature, often ignoring elements such as narrative and cultural context. John Orr, in *Cinema and Modernity*, notes that film scholarship focuses on two periods: first, “the earlier moment of high modernism between 1914 and 1925 when cinema was still in its technical infancy,” and second, “the 1960s and early 1970s” (2). Orr asks, “How do we explain a gap of nearly three decades?” Part of the answer lies in the redefining of modernism, especially the elimination of the hierarchical distinction between “high” modernism and “low.” Popular classical Hollywood films have too often been skipped over by scholars, although they offer a consistent, frequent record of movie studios’ attempts to both reflect and shape the public’s lived experience.

A planetary modernisms approach provides the tools not only to argue the “gold digger” film subgenre as constituting modernist texts, but also to compare it side-by-side with the modernist #MeToo movement today. Friedman’s book, as the title *Planetary Modernisms:*

Provocations on Modernity Across Time suggests, offers ways to “provoke... modernity across time.” Specifically, she outlines four major methods whereby the field of modernism(s) may be expanded, including re-vision, recovery, circulation, and collage. I intend to employ Friedman’s collage method to compare disparate moments in the United States of America’s cultural history, over eighty years apart. According to Friedman, via collage “sharp juxtapositions of fragments produce new relational perceptions, where the eye circulates, moving back and forth to read the whole” (15). As Friedman writes, the act of collage approximates the film editing technique of montage, wherein many fragments are studied together to bring into focus some main idea or subject. Through this approach, we can better appreciate the “gold digger” films as examples of modernity and not just mindless mass-produced entertainment. And, crucial to the relevance of my argument, my analysis of 1930s films will not stay in the 1930s, but inform and commingle with my analysis of contemporary American media and culture. We can better understand our present situation vis-à-vis our better understood past.

The “Gold Digger” Films

Depression-era film has been studied by critics, but the “gold digger” films are underappreciated or ignored in film and modernism scholarship. Andrew Bergman in *We’re in the Money: Depression America and Its Films* classifies and evaluates important film genres of the era, including crime/gangster works like *The Public Enemy*, the burgeoning fantasy/horror genre including *King Kong* and *Frankenstein*, and melodramatic social consciousness films like *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. Saverio Giovacchini brings modernism into film studies in *Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal*, although he focuses largely on behind-the-scenes workings in Hollywood. However, Bergman references the Warner

Bros. “gold digger” musicals only in passing and Giovacchini doesn’t even mention them, notwithstanding their critical praise, social relevancy, and box office success.

In rapid succession, Warner Bros. released a string of films all dealing with the recently minted female “gold digger” character. The films were all hits and their financial success likely saved the studio which was in dire straits due to the Depression. *42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, and *Footlight Parade* were each among the top ten grossing films of 1933 (Warner Bros.’ only three films on the list), as was the MGM rival showgirl film *Dancing Lady*. *Gold Diggers of 1933* was the second highest-grossing film of the year. Furthermore, *42nd Street* received a nomination at the 6th Academy Awards ceremony for Best Picture, while both *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933* were nominated for Best Sound Recording. The films, released in March, May, and October, built on each other’s hype and formed a sort of repeating narrative. This cohesiveness was strengthened by the repeated use of directors, writers, producers, and actors amongst the three films, including musical director Busby Berkeley, director Lloyd Bacon, writer and producer Robert Lord, writer James Seymour, and actors Dick Powell, Ruby Keeler, Joan Blondell, Guy Kibbee, and Ginger Rogers.

The three main films I discuss all center around young adult women in poor conditions trying to secure a job in a theater show under any circumstance. In some cases, the women come to illicit agreements with rich, older male backers to get a part in the show. More often than not, the women who advance in show business (as in moving up from chorus girl to lead) do so based on romantic relationships with male backers, directors, or actors. But also, as in *Gold Diggers of 1933*, women flirt with rich older men as a means of getting what they want, especially jewelry, clothing, and cash. In two of these films, Joan Blondell plays a woman who cons men into awkward situations which force them to give her what she wants (whether it be a part in a show

or presents). Ruby Keeler, on the other hand, consistently plays a sweet waif who generally comes across at first as shy and dependent, though intelligent, but ultimately becomes more assertive as the film progresses. The juxtaposition of the two stereotypes reveals a paradox of the Depression, that while the majority of working women are pushed to rely on rich male employers for their livelihoods, clever women learn to go a step further and start pushing the employers themselves. That these films adhere to traditional Hollywood tropes in other ways (the guy ends up with the girl, and this makes the girl happy and fulfilled, for example) is to be expected as the studio was on thin ice financially.

The Depression is more than a contextual backdrop in each of these films. In one of the famous lines of *Gold Diggers of 1933*, Ginger Rogers' roommate comments on the difficulty of finding a job, and Rogers smugly responds, "the Depression, dearie." Amongst many things, the Depression as a social and economic rupture pushes the women together. In every movie, multiple women live together for the convenience of sharing rent costs (which, still, they fail to meet). Each woman roommate is given a story, and though there are certainly lead characters (generally Blondell and/or Keeler), every woman is important.² Similarly, in the huge dance sequences which generally take place at the end of the film, hundreds of women are shown dancing on stage, and yet the camera often zooms in for close-ups of the girls, even chorus girls who play no other part in the rest of the movie. This serves to highlight the idea that the Depression is the plight of the masses, yet in a very modernist way the story of the everywoman is told and considered important.

² For another insightful representation of this same social dynamic, see the 1937 RKO film *Stage Door* loosely based on the 1936 play by Edna Ferber, wherein women struggling to acquire work on the stage share money earned and truly rely on each other for survival, uniting for their common well-being even as they sometimes viciously chase the same job opportunities.

Close Reading of the Films

42nd Street tells the story of a production team desperate to put on a hit Broadway musical to stay afloat financially. Peggy (Ruby Keeler) is a starry-eyed newcomer who must learn how to navigate show business and ultimately comes out a star. From the beginning of *42nd Street*, it is clear that women's looks are the focus of the show producers. In the first major scene, casting directors are auditioning young adult women for their show by asking them to lift skirts, calling "come on higher, higher, I wanna see the legs," and then having them turn around to show their backside. At this point, another man notes as an aside, "they have pretty faces too." This is where the objectification and harassment begin for the would-be actresses, and it continues from there. In their first rehearsal, Peggy is referred to as "you with the legs" and Lorraine is touched on the backside by a man "with the busiest hands." Throughout this character interaction, the Depression informs the characters' daily lives. Women speak of how they are driven to seek acting jobs because of the Depression, or how they face limited acting roles because of it. For the producers' part, their anxiety to cast eye candy in their show is heightened by their need to sell tickets or go out of business.

Finally, the "show within a show" at the end of *42nd Street* revisits stage themes from the movie. The main actors and actresses and chorus girls sing of "Naughty Gawdy Bawdy Sporty 42nd Street." The number ranges from honeymooning newlyweds and having babies to attempted sexual assault. The sequence begins with lively shots of New Yorkers going about their day, then zooms into an apartment building to show a brutal scene of a man trying to assault a woman. The woman resists and jumps out of the window onto an awning and then the ground. The man first attempts to shoot the woman (and fails) and then sneaks up behind her on the street and stabs her in the back. A male onlooker from an adjacent building laments, "The big parade goes on for

years / It's a rhapsody of laughter and tears," but then turns away from the window to go about his business. Though more explicitly violent, the assault parallels moments throughout the movie in which women have to fend off the men: Peggy has to slap a drunk man and run away to resist his advances, Bebe slaps a man twice and starts throwing stuff at him to get him to leave her alone at a party, and Peggy reacts helplessly as her director "instructs" her by grabbing her and kissing her for an extended period of time. Furthermore, the male onlooker's callous reaction also reveals prevailing attitudes of the time toward women who are victims of sexual assault.

Gold Diggers of 1933 is the most focused on how each individual woman's life is affected by the Depression. The film begins with the famous number "We're in the Money": Fay (Ginger Rogers) and others sing that "the long lost dollar has come home... we're in the money," and the women are decked out in lavish coin costumes. Fittingly, the rehearsal of the number is interrupted by a credit collector; he and his posse run the actresses and showrunners out of the building and even take the coins off Fay's costume, exposing her flesh even more. The song's hopeful message is interrupted, unrealized, and reversed, as the camera goes on to a series of shots: a list of all the shows that have closed, a landlady asking for rent, a woman stealing milk from a neighbor, and Fay walking into her apartment with sunglasses on so her landlady will not recognize her.

Gold Diggers spends a lot of time on the interaction between the women (all would-be actresses) who are living with each other. Fay announces to her cohorts that there is a new show in town that is hiring, a familiar plot device for all of these movies. Fay asserts her qualifications for a role in the show, and insists, "if Barney [the producer] could see me in my clothes," to which another woman replies, "he wouldn't recognize you," alluding to the sexual nature of her interactions with Barney.

As the pianist Brad (Dick Powell) begins to pursue a showgirl Polly (Ruby Keeler), his blue blood family is distraught and threatens to disown him. Says Brad's father, "all women of the theatre are chiselers, parasites, or as we called them, gold diggers." Later, Polly and her friends discuss the terms used and one says, "we should have a conference." Carol decides to get back at the men by "gold digging" her way to accessories she wants as well as parts in the show for her and her friends. Ultimately, the other women join her in this endeavor, not only duping the men but also securing themselves financially. The necessity of their teaming up shows the hurdle they face: the men have the power by virtue of the status quo (built on centuries of gender discrimination and misogyny) and they do not have to do much to maintain it. The women, on the other hand, must not only team up, they must also be smart, strategic, and in some cases secretive to secure for themselves a piece of the pie.

In the powerful closing musical sequence, "Forgotten Man," Carole (Joan Blondell) and the others sing about their "forgotten man," a veteran turned government-employed farmer now unemployed. The sequence shows victorious soldiers cheering as they march home, then cuts to bloody and injured soldiers, and then cuts to men in line for soup and bread. The men ask, "where are we today," and Carole sings, "he used to take care of me." This highlights the issue of women's husbands dying or becoming incapacitated in war, leading directly to women's need to seek employment themselves, make their own way, and navigate new suitors.

Footlight Parade takes a decidedly more economically-based view of show business, which is reflected not only in the financial machinations of the show producers but also in the way the women actresses are treated. In this film, Bea (Ruby Keeler), plays Mr. Kent's (James Cagney) secretary, and Bea is the one who has the huge idea to bail the studio out. Here, the leg-showing audition is repeated from *42nd Street*, the casting director shouting, "all right girls, stand

up and show Mr. Kent your legs—higher, higher,” although Mr. Kent responds, “this is an audition, not an exhibition.” Aside from the focus on the legs, Bea’s appearance is demeaned by the women around her. Bea looks like a stereotypical secretary with glasses, and Scotty (Dick Powell) derides her saying, “you’re not alive, you’re not a bit feminine.” Bea changes her appearance after these remarks, and later describes, “I got sick of looking like a schoolteacher and I’m sick of working in an office. I want to go back on the stage.” For her, the modifying of her appearance enables her, first, to earn the gaze of a male suitor, and second, to earn the gaze of a male casting director (in this movie, the two males are distinct persons, but that is not always the case). It is true, in a way, that the makeover makes her a greater focus of objectification, however she uses her advantage to further her power to make decisions as a subject not an object. Having changed for Scotty, Bea asserts her independence in her first reaction with him after her makeover. Scotty recognizes her and asks “how ‘bout a kiss then,” to which she refuses and calls him a “little boy.” It is not long until the two kiss but the important thing is that Bea controls the timing.

In the show within a show for *Footlight Parade*, the emphasis is again on two things: scantily clad women and baby-making. One of musical director’s Busby Berkeley’s most famous set designs is featured here: the human waterfall. Hundreds of showgirls make up the human waterfall, showing off their legs and thighs, and surrounding the waterfall are “sirens,” wearing less than swimwear. The waterfall of women turns out to be a day dream for the male actor in the show. His lover then wakes him up, they kiss, and the camera pans to four baby chicks in a nest, one of many references to sexual reproduction.

The last musical number of the movie is more on the nose, however. In “Shanghai Lil,” Mr. Kent (Cagney) plays a man searching for a prostitute in a harem. The number begins with a

sultry close-up of a stockinged leg, and proceeds to the harem wherein many women are laying down and bearing a lot of cleavage. When the Asian woman “Shanghai Lil” appears, played by Bea, Mr. Kent’s character holds her in his lap. Without fully analyzing the racial ramifications of this number, it is important to note that in this case it is not only gender and wealth which convey privilege and impunity, but also perceived racial superiority. The Asian woman, who at the time would not have been considered marriageable for a man such as Mr. Kent, is portrayed as being entirely available, sexually, to him.

As *Footlight Parade* is the third and last of these three main entries, it works to build on what Warner Bros. had already done. In the trailer for the movie, the announcer declares “only Warner Bros., producers of *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933*, could surpass the wonders of both with *Footlight Parade*.” *Footlight Parade* “surpasses,” it seems, because there are *more* showgirls, more attractively displayed. By extension, the women in the film are portrayed as more sexually available. The “Human Waterfall” number is touted in the trailer as displaying “300 of the world’s most beautiful and talented girls.” Finally, the trailer states, “and wait till you see the ‘Honeymoon Hotel’ number with scores of bashful brides,” emphasizing the young adult women’s sexuality. The “Honeymoon Hotel” is in fact portrayed much like a brothel, from the sex appeal of the women to their availability for male guests.

#MeToo

In America today, we see a different instance of modernism, that of women’s increased power on the public stage, and specifically the power to speak out against men in power who have sexually harassed them. Fourth-wave feminism shares an intimate connection with modernism and is empowered thereby, and 2017 was in many ways a landmark year for the development of this modernist moment. First, the 2016 presidential election featured Donald

Trump, a celebrity his entire life and known for his misogynistic behavior and ideology as much as for anything else. Not long before Election Day, a 2005 radio interview between Howard Stern and Mr. Trump surfaced across news media wherein Trump not only spoke derogatorily about women but also boasted of sexually harassing them. Trump spoke freely of “his daughter Ivanka's physique, having sex with women on their menstrual cycles, threesomes, and checking out of a relationship with women after they turn 35,” among other things (Kaczynski).

Furthermore, multiple women came forward throughout the course of his campaign and his presidency to accuse Trump of kissing them spontaneously and unwelcomely. According to a February 2019 *Business Insider* article, 23 women have accused Trump of sexual misconduct from the late 1970s to as recent as August 2016 on the campaign trail (Relman). Public outcry ensued after each successive revelation (or reminder), including from within the Republican party, but the backlash was not enough to prevent his election. Trump's commentary on a series of incidents (also on the Howard Stern radio show previously mentioned) clearly shows the link between wealth and privilege and perceived “permission” and immunity from retribution:

Trump... boasted in an April 2005 interview with radio host Howard Stern that he regularly walked into contestants' dressing rooms on the beauty pageants he owned while women were unclothed.

“I'll go backstage before a show and everyone's getting dressed and ready and everything else. And you know, no men are anywhere. And I'm allowed to go in because I'm the owner of the pageant,” he said. “You know they're standing there with no clothes. And you see these incredible-looking women. And so I sort of get away with things like that.” (Relman)

Trump's contradictory language in the phrases "I'm allowed... because I'm the owner" and "I sort of get away with things like that" shows a dual perception of having permission to engage in sexual misconduct and getting away with it despite a lack of permission. In either case, he surmises he can do what he does because of his status, not because of any permission or consent, much less desire, of the women he harasses. The juxtaposition of Trump on the one hand, with his misogynistic notions and behavior, and the first female presidential candidate from a major party on the other hand, threw into harsh perspective the reality of continuing misogyny and how it translates to and is received today.

Beginning in the buildup to Trump's election, an astonishing string of allegations of sexual harassment committed by a variety of celebrity males dominated news headlines for months, and in most cases affiliated companies and studios were quick to cut all ties with them. This list includes film producer Harvey Weinstein, former *Today Show* host Matt Lauer, actor Kevin Spacey, comedian Louis C.K., and radio host Garrison Keillor. The nomination hearings for Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh in September 2018 represent one of the more recent high-profile cases of sexual harassment accusation. This political moment caused a stir and steered public conversation to issues like the scarcity of evidence in many sexual harassment cases, and arguably enlivened the #MeToo movement anew. As high-powered male individuals have been precipitously toppled from their places of public prestige and connections, the masculine-dominated hierarchical structure has weakened, allowing for slow progress for women as well as necessitating national dialogue about where to go from here.

In 2018, fourth-wave feminists have derived various responses to the continuing masculine-privileging power structure, in traditional formats such as marches, as well as new media including Twitter and Facebook. On January 21, 2017, the day after Trump's

inauguration, an estimated five million people (mostly women but also men) marched in 673 locations around the world to protest Trump's misogynistic attitudes as well as all those like him empowered by the same patriarchal power structure. Many women defiantly wore "pussyhats, pink caps made to look like cat's ears to fight back against Trump's remark that women let him "grab them by the pussy," effectively reclaiming the terms "pussy" or "pussycat" for women, terms which have long been used derogatorily against them. Later in the year, beginning with the denouncement of Harvey Weinstein for sexual misconduct, actress Alyssa Milano kicked off a worldwide Twitter campaign centered around the hashtag #MeToo. On October 15, 2017, Milano tweeted, "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too.' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem" (@Alyssa_Milano). The response was staggering, as 4.7 million people on Facebook in 12 million posts used the hashtag in the first 24 hours of her original tweet (this in addition to the 500,000 tweets on Twitter) (CBS News). Facebook reported that 45% of users in the United States had a friend who had posted using the term (Santiago). Many famous actresses, musicians, academics, and politicians responded as well with the #MeToo hashtag and often their own experiences with sexual harassment and abuse.

Collaging these two modernist moments is an especially important endeavor as we are still very much in the epoch of #MeToo and fourth-wave feminism. While companies and media corporations have the power to cut ties quickly with actors, TV personalities, and the like, accused politicians answer to a different system. While pressure from colleagues and constituents can lead to a "forced" resignation, as in the case of former Senator Al Franken, it is also evident that politicians with enough power can choose to ignore and brush off allegations, as

in the case of Donald Trump. In such instances, only voters in the next voting cycle can meaningfully act to change outcomes.

Collage and Going Forward

Friedman contends that distinctive modernisms “constitute a multinodal world system of expressive/symbolic culture, one not set apart from but rather embedded within the other dimensions of the modernities of which they are a part” (216). One such “symbol” present in both the gold digger movies and the #MeToo movement is the image of the immoral rich white male showrunner. Whether portrayed in a film by an actor like Warren William or Guy Kibbee, or represented in the face of a once beloved, now fallen celebrity like Matt Lauer or Louis C.K., the shared symbol unites the present with the past and reminds us that in some ways we have not done enough to alleviate the problem of sexual harassment for the past 80 years. We even use some of the same language to describe similar situations. The term “gold digger” may not be in common use today but can still be heard used to dismiss women who come forward seeking relief; generally, more tactful though just as dangerous language is used to paint the same picture, words like “opportunist,” “fame-seeking,” and “self-serving.” And the same derogatory language is used against harassed women to imply that their complaints are invalid because they are or were “easy” or “asking for it,” based usually on what they were wearing at the time of the harassment.

Another necessary component to the collage method is the question of relevance. Even if two periods are related, is there enough basis to warrant the effort of collage and the suggestion that there are important takeaways therefrom? To this, Friedman responds that “as aesthetic articulations repeatedly read, viewed, and dialogued with, they [the various modernisms] have an afterlife or a new life with each iteration, with each new engagement.... Like pebbles thrown

into a pool, the bigger the stone, the wider its circles” (216). As I just mentioned, some of the dialogue between the two periods is culturally imprinted in our language. But more still of the relationship between them must be consciously pursued. Literary scholars have the power to bolster the afterlife of texts by their “repeatedly read[ing], view[ing], and dialogu[ing] with” them; part of the importance of planetary modernisms studies is that it opens up scholars to read, view, and dialogue with more texts. *42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, and *Footlight Parade* do not have the same modernist markings as Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* or T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, but they do connect with and even predicate modernist happenings today like the #MeToo movement. The issues we are seeing such as sexual harassment in the workplace and women’s solidarity despite enduring misplaced social stigmas did not blossom into existence a few years ago, nor did they start in the 1960s and 1970s, or even the 1930s. The 1930s gold digger films give us a cultural-historical touchstone to see not only how society was at the time, but also what pressures contributed to the problem then and what efforts were successful in working against those pressures.

Collage is not just about the similarities but also the differences between modernisms. One of the most promising differences is the influence of women of all races in the #MeToo movement. Whereas the gold digger films featured entirely white casts, the #MeToo movement is worldwide and its leaders belong to many different races. Tarana Burke, the first person to use the phrase “Me Too”, is a black woman and civil rights activist. This being said, it has still proven hard for some people to think past the famous white women who are the most recognized victims: Gwyneth Paltrow, Reese Witherspoon, Jennifer Lawrence, and Taylor Swift, for example. But with any amount of Googling, even the most casual observer of the #MeToo movement can see that it belongs to people of all races.

Another complicated difference is that today we understand that women of all occupations (including no occupation), race, and social status face potential power imbalances and sexual harassment. We know that it is not just actors, actresses, and politicians who face these things, although their stories are the ones we see the most often and are the most familiar with. It is easy to garner popular support around taking down a well-known movie producer like Harvey Weinstein on behalf of a beloved actress, but it is far more difficult to encourage people to look within their own community at systemic sexual predation happening between average people who will never make a headline. In the same way, it would have been easy in 1933 to root for the beautiful lead actresses in the gold digger films like Joan Blondell and Ginger Rogers, but there is no indication that the public then took that empathy and transferred it to underprivileged and women of other races suffering the same sort of harassment on an everyday basis.

Despite differences and complications, in both instances, many women unite on a common stage to tell their story, whether it be the filmed theater stage or the Internet. As the chorus girls sing “We’re in the Money” at the beginning of *Gold Diggers of 1933*, they have a platform to accuse “old man Depression,” saying “you’ve done us wrong.” Their subsequent struggles to overcome their hardships both within staged musical numbers and the events of the films are always undertaken as a group. Similarly, the women behind the #MeToo movement made their collective voice heard more effectively because of their large turnout online, in marches, and in other ways. Planetary modernisms studies embraces the many formats of both the 1930s and the 2010s whereas traditional modernism studies would privilege novels, short stories, and poetry, sometimes to the exclusion of other media. To talk about the gold digger films and the #MeToo movement requires application of the kind of close reading and textual analysis you would use for literature to film, tweets, the interconnection of hashtags, other social

media posts, videos circulated online, and the many texts present in a physical march, from the bodies of the protesters to the signs held and speeches given. Clearly, a study of traditional written work alone could not scratch the surface of the issues involved in collaging these two moments.

The gold digger films brilliantly highlight a common female plight of the time, analogous with female plights today and across history, and do so in a way not only critically appreciated but popularly successful in their own time. Their value to modernism studies stems from their subject matter, focus on women, and suggestive dialogue which shortly thereafter would be shut up by the stringent Hays Code censorship guidelines. The Warner Bros. studio continued until 1938 to try and capitalize on their success with cheap rehashes of the same material (see *Dames*, *Gold Diggers of 1935*, *We're in the Money*, *Colleen*, *Stage Struck*, *Gold Diggers of 1937*, and *Gold Diggers in Paris*), but none of these subsequent films bore as much social meaning nor met with much success. It was not just that the films did not do as well at the box office, but that they had less of an influence on the viewing public and were not able to tackle sensitive issues with the same rawness that the pre-Code films had done. The implementation of the strict Hays Code in 1934, a steep drop-off in studio commitment and production quality, and, simply, changing economic prospects in the United States, meant that the concentrated moment of modernity in early 1930s America was over, at least in this regard. The trio of 1933 films had dealt with issues of sexual harassment with an honesty and openness which a year later was impossible.

Unfortunately, different kinds of censorship can still be enforced in today's America. If the pushback to 1933 "vulgar" Hollywood was restrictions on freedom of speech in film, we should be wary of what pushback may be possible to present-day instances of speaking out against the male-driven power system. Social media movements like #BelieveHer or

#BelieveSurvivors have arisen to combat situations in which abusive men are using the same power and prestige to shut up accusers that they did to abuse or harass in the first place.

Collaging these two moments illuminates ongoing struggles pitting outspoken, critical voices against men in power and other injustices committed by the social hierarchical system. The best we can hope for is that by learning from the success and failure of the past we can now address the present situation with real, tangible progress, not just talk and hashtags.

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