

**PLAYBOY
INTERVIEW:**

TARANA BURKE

A candid conversation with the activist who launched Me Too—more than a decade prior to WeinsteinGate—on backlash, boundaries and the future of the movement

Before Me Too was a hashtag, before social media gave everyday people the power to have public conversations about sexual harassment, assault and rape—and before the inevitable and ongoing backlash—Tarana Burke was working with young girls, most of them black, encouraging them to share their most traumatic stories by offering her own. Now 45 years old, the Bronx-bred activist has spent some two decades providing space for those testimonies.

In 2003, Burke launched an organization that would eventually become Just Be Inc., offering fellowship and programming meant to empower young women of color. One of its first campaigns, which Burke named Me Too, showed survivors of all genders that even their darkest trauma could be processed within a

community—that together they could change what feminists have long called rape culture. Soon Burke's organization relocated from Selma, Alabama, near her alma mater of Auburn University, to Philadelphia. In 2015, having reached thousands of girls, she moved back to New York and put the program on hiatus.

Flash forward to October 15, 2017: Ten days after *The New York Times* published a landmark story on the sexual-assault allegations against Harvey Weinstein, the name of Burke's campaign went viral thanks to a tweet by Alyssa Milano. Burke felt blindsided. And now that scores of powerful men have been taken to task and #MeToo has come to define this historical moment, she is an icon—a reluctant icon, but one with the substance and vision to make the moment a movement.

The blowback against Me Too has been no less sweeping than its viral reincarnation. It looks like Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos dismantling Title IX on college campuses, privileging the reputations of young men accused of rape. It looks like Louis C.K. quietly returning to the stage, his routine unaffected after an initial half-hearted apology. It looks like Russell Simmons posting #NotMe after several women accused him of rape. It looks like Wall Street firms warning men, Mike Pence-style, to avoid off-site meetings with their women colleagues, the implication being that the real threat is false accusations. And it looks like Burke facing condemnation from certain black men who've accused her of race betrayal for publicly standing with the accusers of Simmons, Bill Cosby, Nate Parker and R. Kelly.



"I'm a black woman who loves black people, who has fought with and for black men almost as much as black women."



"A friend of mine sent me a message: 'Congratulations, people are talking about Me Too.' I was like, 'What?'"



"It's one thing to say, 'I'm so sorry if anyone was offended.' It's a different thing to take ownership and responsibility."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CARISSA GALLO**

As she fields the vitriol, with sources ranging from anonymous trolls to White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Burke is subject to another sort of attention: She's constantly spotted in public and pulled into corners where survivors not only thank her for her work but often share, unsolicited, the stories of their own trauma. She has built some boundaries while navigating her newfound status as one of the most recognizable women in the country; other boundaries she formed after suffering abuse as a child.

In the hope of glimpsing the future of Me Too and its creator, we partnered with **dream hampton**—writer, filmmaker, activist and executive producer of *Surviving R. Kelly*, the Lifetime docuseries that broke records when it aired in January. (The series features Burke as an on-screen expert.) This past March, Burke and hampton met up in New Orleans; Burke, who spends much of her time on the road, was in town for the season-two premiere of the video series *Professional Black Girl*. Hampton reports: “New Orleans is a city that celebrates sex and fertility and the awakening of spring the ancient way—by playing naked and in public with a days-long parade. The city was an early home away from home for Burke, one where as a teenage activist she learned strategy from the Southerners she convened with. (During leadership-development camp her peers would teach her the ancient art of pussy popping, which we also discussed.) In person, she laughs easily. She flirts. She shows up for her girlfriends, supporting their projects and passions and gossip in group chats. She's a mother, and we often talk about what it's like to parent a 20-something.

“Burke remains not only a dreamer but, remarkably, an optimist. She knows there's no easy healing for the wounds exposed by #MeToo, and yet she stays in the work. We talked about the challenges of bringing the movement against sexual violence home to our black community—and the profound pain that comes with being targeted by other black people for doing so. We talked about self-care in the

age of the online drag, about what healthy sex between teenagers might look like (hint: It involves the absence of R. Kelly) and about bracing for blowback. What unfolded during our conversation was a vivid picture of the movement and some ideas about where it might go—from consent to real male accountability and beyond.”

PLAYBOY: We're in New Orleans, which is the site of much joy and obviously a lot of trauma. I'm thinking of course about



Hurricane Katrina and what followed—what Naomi Klein has called “disaster capitalism.” What does this city mean to you?

BURKE: Whew, New Orleans. I've been coming here since I was a young activist. An organization I was working with, Tambourine and Fan, had a big presence here. The founder of Tam and Fan was a guy known as Big Duck—a civil rights legend. But we were connected to Tam and Fan here, and New Orleans always represented at our annual leadership-development camps. When they would come to camp, they were so full of life. Before they called it twerking, the New Orleans kids at camp taught us this dance called pussy popping. *[laughs]*

You might not want to put that in there. **PLAYBOY:** This is PLAYBOY. I don't see why we wouldn't.

BURKE: Ha! It was 1989, 1990, and I was coming from New York, doing the wop and shit, and they were like, “Pop that coochie.” We did not dance like that, but the New Orleans kids were always so free. Everybody came from around the country. The people who ran the camp were from Alabama, and some of the elders were a little conservative. So we would have parties, little dances, and we'd be going off. They'd be like, “Y'all stop that! Y'all cut it out!” But Big Duck would say, “Let them children dance. Let them be free.” He allowed us to do what we wanted. So I always associated New Orleans with freedom and that kind of black joy and unabashed blackness. But they also had a lot of tragedy. It's not a joke at all, but it was sort of a running theme that every year they had a different RIP T-shirt. Every year somebody in their community had been killed. But it felt as though they'd mastered how to walk through tragedy. They'd be sad, they'd be down, but they'd always find a reason to celebrate. I just love my folks from here, and I love this city.

PLAYBOY: When you talk about these camp dances, I think about how some of the blowback I got from making *Surviving R. Kelly* has devolved. In the beginning some of Kelly's fans on social media had the nerve to argue that, because he was acquitted in 2008, he was innocent. And then, after the Gayle King interview, I started getting a different kind of pushback: grown men saying, “Well, teenagers have sex”—as if teenagers exploring their own sexuality is an invitation to prey on them. I didn't respond to any of those people, but my response would have been “Yes, 14-year-olds should be exploring sex—with other 14-year-olds.”

BURKE: Yes! With people in their own age group.

PLAYBOY: I bring this up because I know you're very sex positive.

BURKE: For sure.

PLAYBOY: So tell me about being sex

positive in your talks with teenagers when you also want to warn them about predators. **BURKE:** It's such a prime age. By the time my body was changing, I'd already been molested. I wasn't experimenting because of my experience, but I was watching it happen around me. It was just pure curiosity. I remember friends wondering about the size and shape of real penises, and there's nothing wrong with that. The problem is when you have predators in the community. And when you compound that with being in low-wealth communities, you get this disgusting, for lack of a better way to put it, mix of grown men who know these girls are both blossoming and exploring—and they're also poor and want the kind of creature comforts most people want. They want their nails done. They want their cell phones paid for. They want their hair done. And the men use that to manipulate them. The problem I saw as an adult working with sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade kids was these older men, some who even looked young, coming around girls they knew were interested and dangling these things. You know, “I'll pay your cell phone bill” or “I'll take you to get your nails done,” and they want favors in return. It's a manipulative relationship. The men are on the hunt for the particular kind of girl who's susceptible to this. And on the girls' end—we have all this research about brain development in young people and what they can and can't understand

and handle. Yes, they may be sexual, but they're not in a position to deal with the kind of manipulation these men introduce into their lives this early. It's awful, and I've seen it happen over and over.

PLAYBOY: Before MeToo broke as a hashtag, conversations around street harassment had been trending. It was one of the first times I saw the organizing possibilities of storytelling on Twitter. There was so much power in amplifying people's stories, but it was also incredibly depressing to think how widespread these experiences are for girls and women.

BURKE: Actually, I met my daughter's father, my first real boyfriend, by being harassed. I ran track, so I was really skinny, but I had a butt. He would see me in the hallway in school and say stuff to me all the time, and I was embarrassed by it. I had my only pair of Girbaud jeans with the button fly and my little riding boots, and I was so happy—but then

he started talking about my butt, and I didn't want to wear them anymore. I became aware of my body because of men in the streets saying stuff about having a booty. I grew up in the Bronx, and in the summer we would go downtown to Harlem. So you walked these gauntlets over and over again.

PLAYBOY: That's what it is, a gauntlet.

BURKE: That's the prime time when you want attention, but you want to have some control and some autonomy, and they take it from you. Because there's always the chance you can get smacked on the butt. Or if you don't respond in the right way, there's a chance that you'll have to fight, which is a real thing. I went through

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lots of painstakingly ridiculous things to avoid that. I think for so many young girls, black girls, we learn early how to figure out our own safety—how to navigate getting in and out of our building, in and out of the park, to the movie theater, all these spaces, without being harassed. It almost becomes second nature. So when people started asking me about harassment, I was like, “I'm worrying about not getting *attacked*.” Harassment? I have built-in defenses for that. I didn't even think about it. God, we have so much accumulated shit around that alone.

When I had my daughter, Kaia—tall, slim, cute—I remember walking with her when she was about 12 or 13, already taller than me, and this group of boys were coming, older teenagers, maybe some in their early 20s, and there was this moment when a separate group of girls were coming in the guys' direction. The girls were teenagers, loud, laughing, whatever, and

the boys were saying all types of stuff to them. I wanted so badly to say, “Leave these girls alone and just go on about your business.” But I also didn't want to bring attention to my daughter. They got past, and the girls said whatever they said to them, and then they saw Kaia. One guy was like, “That's what I need....” My daughter was petrified. She's looking at me; she doesn't know what to do. So I jumped in and said to them, “Can I help you?” They kind of straightened up, but what would she do if I wasn't here? She's not built the same way I was. She's not dealing with this all the time like I was. It's the first time I saw how *not* normal it is to have to go through life dealing with this shit.

PLAYBOY: I had the same experience, in Harlem. It was actually a factor in my picking up and leaving New York: I felt both homicidal and helpless. But back to the organizing possibilities of Twitter. I want to revisit the full origin story of how the MeToo hashtag became a movement.

BURKE: Days before #MeToo happened, white women on Twitter were organizing to have a day of absence. The week before Alyssa Milano tweeted “Me too,” Rose McGowan was suspended on Twitter. People accused Twitter of putting her in Twitter jail for tweeting about Harvey Weinstein and the things she said happened to her. Women on Twitter were angry because they believed it was silenc-

ing McGowan, and the response was “We should have a day without women on Twitter. Let's show them what it looks like *blah, blah, blah*.” The response of black women and women of color was “Oh, now y'all want to shut down Twitter when they bothering this white woman. What happened when Leslie Jones was being harassed on Twitter?” I was actually not a Twitter person; I had maybe 500 followers, so I was watching this from afar. Black women were like, “No, we're not getting off Twitter for a day. That's not for us. That's for you. You all rally around white women, but you don't rally around black women or women of color.”

PLAYBOY: And of course *Day of Absence* is a 1965 play by Douglas Turner Ward about black people taking a day off of labor.

BURKE: Right. I thought it was funny. Then the day #MeToo started to trend, a friend of mine sent me a message: “Congratulations, people are talking about Me Too.” I was like, “What?”

PLAYBOY: Because you had an organization named Me Too.

BURKE: I had an organization called Just Be Inc., and “Me Too” was a campaign that we started inside the program. Me Too grew on its own, separate from the organization, because so many people called us to do workshops or work with practitioners. We had Me Too T-shirts and paraphernalia and all this other stuff, separate from Just Be. My first thought was, If this trends now, people are going to think I got it from the hashtag. I had a fucking meltdown. I saw it on my friend’s page, and I was like, “Please take this down. Don’t push it further.” I didn’t know what was really happening, that she had nothing to do with making it popular. Then I started trying to figure out where it was coming from, and I didn’t see it in our spaces. I didn’t see black Twitter talking about it at all. I was so confused. My daughter told me how to set it up so you can see just a hashtag, and I saw that hundreds of people were tweeting it at this point. I was like, “Oh, fuck me.”

I felt like my life’s work had been taken overnight. This is the thing I care about more than anything, more than any work I’ve done. I’ve been trying to figure out how to make this—not become a worldwide phenomenon, but just get people to talk, because it’s so hard to get people to deal with sexual violence. I really did not understand the power of social media in this moment, because I’m a 44-year-old black woman who is nobody in the grand scheme of things, right? Why would they listen to me?

But I think this perfect storm happened. I remember sitting up at night, looking at my laptop, watching this hashtag. This person, who I’m assuming was a white woman, had used the MeToo hashtag, and then she had a link in her tweet. So I just clicked the link randomly, and it opened up to a blog post, and it was her story. I read that story, and it was so sad, about her being assaulted on a college campus and how it affected her life. I was like, Oh, fuck, Tarana, you got to pull it together. I had been consumed with “This is my work. How am I going to save this work?” But her story *is* my work. I was trying to save the work, and the work was happening right in front of me.

So I was like, Let me regroup. I had a video in my cell phone from 2014, from

a speech I’d given in Philly at the March to End Rape Culture, which used to be known as SlutWalk. We’d set up a table; we would have our little Me Too T-shirts and handouts, and I’d speak or I’d table, and this happened to be one of those times. In the video I’m wearing my Me Too shirt, and I’m making this speech. I put the video on Twitter and said, “You know, it’s been amazing watching people over the last 24 hours really take to this concept that we created.” And I just kind of took ownership in the moment.

PLAYBOY: But you also made space for other people. That’s such a beautiful pivot in that story. I know the ego of wanting to publicly claim a thing and be proprietary, but it’s not just ego; there’s a history of

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erasure. But then there’s the opening up to be, like, it’s actually about the work.

BURKE: I keep thinking now, if I had gone down this other path and started a fight—because people were ready to fight—it could easily have been “I saw this white woman trying to take our stuff again.” And then that would have died, and what would I have been contributing? It would have just come and gone. It would have been some urban legend, like the black woman who wrote *The Matrix*. People would’ve been like, “I heard *The Matrix* was started by a black person.”

PLAYBOY: Right. That’s a great analogy.

BURKE: So I put the video out, and my friends who had bigger platforms than mine tweeted out the video. Then people started saying, “Wait, who’s this?” People kept tweeting at Alyssa Milano, saying, “You didn’t start this. It already existed.”

To Alyssa’s credit, she tweeted out my website, an apology and the origin story,

which is what got people’s attention. On the other end, organizers like Alicia Garza, co-founder of Black Lives Matter, called me and said, “What can we do?” This is all happening in 24 hours. I’m like, “I don’t know.” Alicia was already booked to speak on *Democracy Now!*, and she invited me on with her—which speaks to something I’m always saying about black women: This is what we do. We would not be here if not for the generosity and connection of black women. I still thought, This is nice; for a week I get to talk about sexual violence. This is something I’ve been thinking about forever, but it’s actually happening. But before the week was over I got another message from Alyssa, and she invited me on *Good Morning America*. Then I was like, “Oh, shit. This is for real.”

PLAYBOY: What’s been amazing is that it’s not stopping. But then I get into full dystopia mode and think about what could be the blowback to #MeToo—I mean, Trump is absolutely the result of blowback to the idea and audacity of having a black man as president. So when I see a *New York Times* list of 201 high-powered men who have lost their jobs because of the #MeToo movement, I wonder what the blowback might be. There have been early wins, but also more conservative judges are being seated than at any other time in my life, and whether or not *Roe v. Wade* becomes the 2020 issue that immigration will surely

be, it will be a pivotal battle that will be fought again. And then we see things like Russell Simmons posting #NotMe—

BURKE: I think in some ways it’s going to get worse before it gets better. What’s discouraging is that I thought this was going to be an opportunity for us—and by “us,” I mean the black community, because that’s where my focus is as an organizer—to start peeling back layers of trauma and silence around sexual violence. But instead, so many in our community are planting our feet more firmly in patriarchy. Watching these black people who are going so hard in the other direction is heartbreaking. We might have changed a few minds—and I know those who are digging in may never change their minds—but I also try to look at the whole picture. The question I always ask is “Are we accomplishing what we need to accomplish?”

PLAYBOY: And are we?



BURKE: The corporate people are going to change this, change that, but they often do things that are outward-facing, that make people happy enough to be quiet. There are traditional feminist conversations about women being promoted. We won't see that for a few years, when we get new statistics. We also have this fight happening around sexual violence on college campuses, but at the same time you have Betsy DeVos chipping away at Title IX and taking away these rights. We won't see that for a few years. So part of me is always thinking about what we can't see happening right now.

PLAYBOY: Let's unpack this: What is Title IX, and how is DeVos attempting to dismantle it?

BURKE: Title IX has been a tool a lot of schools have used to fight sexual violence. It gives you a framework to do investigations, to file complaints, and for survivors of sexual violence on campus to have some kind of recourse. What she's proposing is giving more rights to the respondent, the accused. She wants to allow respondents to cross-examine their accusers. She's operating from the idea that the way Title IX is implemented in these schools is unfair and allows for too many false accusations. I don't even think that's the language she uses, but it's like she's really doubling down on "boys will be boys," that young men have these moments and it shouldn't scar their lives forever.

More important, she's calling to defund campus programs that we know work. They're doing what the right wing always does, which is trying to deregulate it federally so the states can regulate it, and then the states are like, "Oh well."

PLAYBOY: I imagine many PLAYBOY readers are men who might think that allowing someone who has been accused to cross-examine their accuser isn't such a bad thing. But that's not even how it would happen in an actual judicial process, correct?

BURKE: To be fair, the way it's set up is that the respondent would have to submit their questions to their attorney or an intermediary person, but it gets to the schools. And then you have them in a position to answer questions like "What were you wearing? Why did you come to my room?" We've been past this already. We have laws on the books that say a person's disclosure is evidence. That's why you see activists with signs that say

I'M THE EVIDENCE. People's voices and stories have been accepted as evidence in cases of sexual violence. Now you're rolling that back and allowing an accused person on a campus to communicate to a victim, "Talk to me about why you let me kiss you like that if you didn't want to have sex." Imagine that. It sets up a situation that is retraumatizing for the accuser.

I think we can figure out what is fair and balanced. I also think that sometimes when we say "Believe women" and "Believe survivors," it's taken out of context. People may not understand that we say "Believe survivors" because up until now people have started with the premise that the accusers are lying, and that

The reality is that consent has always been the same...morally and in personal relationships.

when people, particularly women, disclose, people start with a set of questions and a reasoning that says, "There has to be something you did."

PLAYBOY: Which is also different from a presumption of innocence, because you're actually shifting guilt onto the victim, or the accuser.

BURKE: My argument is that investigation into credible and serious claims of sexual violence should be respectful. You handle it with the gravity you would an attempted murder. You investigate. You collect evidence. You talk to the people involved. You deal with it. You don't start with "Are you sure? What did you do? Where were you at?"

PLAYBOY: I think what they're supposed to do is determine whether or not a story is credible—not even believable—and investigate from there. But what you're saying is that the credibility is the first thing attacked.

BURKE: They attack the credibility immediately. Exactly.

PLAYBOY: We've seen this kind of push-back from men before. It brings back to mind the idea that we have to re-fight struggles. For me, this includes the black feminist struggle. Black men saying we're throwing them under the bus and piling on to multiple oppressions when we speak up about sexual and gender violence is an issue another generation of black feminists has already addressed. It's almost as if we have to start all over again. So in the face of all that, how do you take care of yourself, pace yourself, protect your actual safety?

BURKE: I have new boundaries. I'm also fresh out of fucks. I don't really have to deal with a lot of shit that I dealt with before, and I feel okay about that. I'm good with saying no. I'd kind of figured out how to navigate through life in ways that made me feel comfortable, and I felt comfortable in my skin. This recent visibility upended all that for a moment. I remember it was all fun and lovely in those first few weeks, and then CNN did a pull-out video of me. They had makeup on me, and it was in extreme close-up, the way that they do, and when the video came out, it was the first time I got trolls—people tweeting and leaving comments like "God, she's hideous," "She's ugly," "Get her off the screen." My first thought was, I don't want my daughter to see this. Then it was,

I don't want to do this anymore. I went into full panic mode.

Even public speaking, I still talk like I talk. I didn't want to deal with those things, and I've never had to, because I'm an organizer; I was always fine with other people doing the forward-facing work. But now I have this new set of responsibilities and this new role, and it hasn't slowed down like I thought it might. It's been nonstop. Bill Cosby may bring out the black men, but depending on what's happening in the news, I'm just as likely to be trolled by white people. During Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation hearings, it was the Trump people, white men and women, calling me all kinds of horrible names. When #MeToo India trended, I got Indian men sending me horrible messages that I couldn't even read.

PLAYBOY: I'm so mad. I'm so mad.

BURKE: It's because I'm not just a black

woman; I'm a black woman who loves black people, who has spent my life in service to black people, and who loves black men, who has fought side by side with and for black men almost as much as black women. And so to hear... I know it's not real. What helps is when I go out into the world and get off social media.

PLAYBOY: I'm a big fan of deactivating. I understand that social media can be life-saving for people who feel isolated, but I've had experiences that have pushed me to limit my online presence. Back in January, there was an uproar over a tweet of yours—the one that said, in part, "When should black men be held accountable for their predatory behavior?! And why is it *my* job to 'go after' white men?"

BURKE: When that first damn thing hit and that one tweet got taken out of context, Tariq Nasheed and his folks took that "white men" line and tried to make it like, "See, she told on herself. She's only going after black men." I was like, "The rest of the thread says, 'We have spent almost two years talking about white men.'"

PLAYBOY: Period.

BURKE: Right? Y'all weren't paying attention, because it didn't affect you. So we've talked about Harvey Weinstein ad nauseam, and Kevin Spacey and Matt Lauer and Louis C.K. and Charlie Rose. We've talked about nothing but white men. And honestly, black men have gotten away in this moment. There has been only Bill Cosby and R. Kelly. Russell Simmons has, at last count, at least a dozen credible accusations against him. A.J. Callo-way is up to six public allegations. I didn't go after any of those men. We could easily have taken on any one of those and tried to make it into a thing, but the media didn't take it on. I'm still trying to unpack why. I think part of it is because it's black victims, black survivors. But these stories come and go. The bottom line is black men, by and large, have not been swept up—not in the music industry, not

in the entertainment industry.

PLAYBOY: I want to get back to what you were saying earlier around the subject of Title IX. You were kind of acting out how the accused, the respondent, would ask questions like "Why did you kiss me like that if you didn't want to?" One of the things that became clear with the Kavanaugh case, and a lot of pundits said this afterward, was that both stories were credible. I believe Brett Kavanaugh didn't believe he did anything wrong. You were in



the actual room during the hearing, yes?

BURKE: Yes. Kavanaugh changed me. I was in the room during the testimony, and it still sits with me in some ways. I've never experienced anything like that. The reality that this was not just an investigation but was affecting the makeup of the Supreme Court of the United States—something about that just keeps resonating with me. It was the lack of accountability and the fact that we think only in terms of crime and punishment as opposed to harm and harm reduction. What would it have looked like if he had just said, "I drank a lot at 17. I might have even had a drinking problem. And though I don't remember that day and those details, it doesn't sound

unlike something I would have engaged in at that time. I didn't have a real understanding of consent. It doesn't sound like something I would do now, and I've spent the past 40 years trying to be a different person than I was at 17. But I do want to be accountable for any harm I might have caused you at 17."

PLAYBOY: That would have been amazing.
BURKE: It would have given her some closure and possibly some healing. It would have set an example for what accountability can look like in retrospect. But nobody wants to be the first. I feel the same way about Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton.

PLAYBOY: And I feel the same way about R. Kelly. What if, during his interview with Gayle King, he had said, "I need help." What if his on-camera breakdown had been a real moment of contrition?

BURKE: We are forgiving people. We're a forgiving country. It would have set the stage so differently. With Kavanaugh, it would have shown leadership. In the case of R. Kelly, we're waiting for it. Black people are like, "Give me anything. Give me a reason."

PLAYBOY: Even his survivors. I interviewed all but two of them, and none of them said they wanted him in prison.

BURKE: But that's the other misconception. There's actual research that shows survivors of sexual violence don't think punitively at first. People don't immediately say, "I want them to go to jail." The relationship between survivor and perpetrator is often complicated, whether it's a family member or a community member or some person in leadership, and we worry how it will affect larger swaths of people. If R. Kelly had said, "I got a problem; they're barely legal"—not even incriminate himself—"They're barely legal, but I know I need help." Give us something.

Bill Clinton did that interview and got upset about the Monica Lewinsky questions, and then Hillary backed it up—even now. Yes, it was a consensual relationship, but she was 22 or 23, and you were 49 and the president. What would it have looked like for a former president of the United States to say, "I recognize that relationship

was an absolute abuse of power, and though it was consensual, I recognize that abuse of power creates an environment for sexual violence to happen?”

PLAYBOY: Bill Maher said on his show recently that the Dems need to stop apologizing. I thought that was, in his typical way, an incredibly reductive way to look at the possibilities of owning your shit.

BURKE: Yeah, because it's more than an apology. It's one thing to say, "I'm so sorry if anyone was offended." It's a different thing to take ownership and responsibility. The reality is that consent has always been the same.

PLAYBOY: What do you mean?

BURKE: I'm not talking about legally; I'm talking about morally and in personal relationships. The idea of needing consent to touch or to interact with somebody isn't new, but the laws have changed around it. Our understanding of bodily autonomy and these kinds of things has grown over time. So the understanding of consent has changed, and I get that. People use the same argument for Cosby: "Oh, it was a different time. People used a little bit of drugs, and it was fine. Everybody did Quaaludes, and it was fine." I'm like, "No, it wasn't." It may not have been against the law, though it probably was, but it was still wrong. Anytime you have somebody who's incapacitated and can't give consent, who doesn't have the ability to say yes, it's wrong. So consent is at the core of this. I want to talk about consent more, and I want to talk about it in the context of relationships and sex—and outside of them too. I think we have to examine the way we think about consent in our platonic, daily, normal relationships, because it influences other things. People touch people all the time—"Oh, I'm a hugger," and they just go right in and start hugging me.

PLAYBOY: I had to tell someone, "It's not 'I'm a hugger.' It's 'Do you hug?'" Brittney Cooper taught me that, because I was one of those people. It took only one time, and from then on I just said, "Do you hug?"

BURKE: "Do you hug?" I don't care what you are. It's so ridiculous to me. We need to have a different kind of consent education, and it's not "Let's teach a class on consent," but "Let's weave the idea of consent into everything we do." We can shift that as a cultural norm. I've gotten into the practice now, even when I take pictures, of saying "Do you mind if I put my hands here?" or "Do you mind if I put my arms around you?"

PLAYBOY: How about "Do you mind if I post this?"

BURKE: Oh, that's another one. That's a big one. But I don't like being touched. I never have. I have an aversion to touch from my history and all the rest of that. I've had to adjust, because people touch me all the time, which is such an oxymoron or irony or whatever. You love me because I talk about autonomy and consent.

PLAYBOY: And your own abuse.

BURKE: Right. But people don't ask how that affects you. So when you take pictures, their hands slide down your back or they rub your shoulder. Don't do that. Consent is largely about communication, and I think because people are so rigid in what they know, they can't see another way. So affirmative consent becomes "Oh, this is unsexy. I'm not going to say 'Can I insert my penis into your vagina?'" No. But there *is* a way to talk about it: I tell boys, "You want a woman to tell you that she wants you." We also have to resocialize girls, because we've been socialized for eons to be coy and to play hard to get and all that, which leads into the sex-positivity thing. This is why narrative and narrative shift is so important. We have to tell different stories. We have to create new norms.

Going back to the part about race, I do think we have a special situation in communities of color and in the black community. Honestly, I think we won't see a culture shift until we start with children. The push that should be happening is not for consent but for curriculums—culturally competent curriculums that also deal with sexual violence, sexuality, gender and all the rest. Start in kindergarten and then layer it on, year by year, so you'll have children who have been learning about boundaries, respect and gender norms from a young age, and it's just ingrained in their minds. We won't have a different society until we reeducate and resocialize, but that takes so many people being in agreement.

PLAYBOY: But it can also happen with a few, and it can happen where we are.

BURKE: When people ask me about restorative justice or transformative justice, I say we have to have both. Imagine a world that has these ideas about consent, that has a new dynamic around justice, while figuring out what safety looks like for us right now. We're figuring out what justice and accountability look like in the short term, but we don't just have to imagine that world; we have to put it in practice in small ways and wherever we have some control, in our institutions, in our communities. Create models that can be replicated, that we can grow from. It's one thing to sit in a

conference and talk about restorative justice and transformative justice and how this doesn't work and we need something new, and it's another thing to take that imagination and put it into practice so people can see that these things work.

I keep saying we need five to 10 years. This is an idea—I don't know how well it works or doesn't work. I've seen it work on a small scale. I feel it can work on a larger scale, but we need time and space. We have to try something different. We have to take away the noise about the perpetrators and the this and the that and focus on the people who have already suffered, who are already dealing with sexual violence, already holding this trauma, and the action it's going to take to keep more people from doing that. Our work is about healing and action. That's really it. All this other stuff about who's getting taken down, the gender war and *blah, blah, blah*—it's all noise. It takes away from this cultural work we have to do on the ground.

So you have the millions and millions of people who said "Me too," and folks forget about them. We wouldn't be here if not for the labor of survivors, people who labor to tell their stories, who labor to come forward, however hard that is. So that happens, and it builds this huge whatever it is we're in, and then folks immediately pivot away from that, as opposed to saying, "My God, this is a moment for us to examine culture, to look at what's happening around us." How did we get to the place where in the span of 24 hours you can have millions of people around the world all agree that their lives have been affected by this one thing? I always use the example of disease: If tomorrow we woke up and 12 million people said, "I also have this disease," and it just spread like wildfire and more people every day kept saying, "I have it now," imagine if our response was "Well, shit, how are we going to date now in this age of this new disease?" Or "I'm not taking meetings with that disease." It's ridiculous. We create all this distraction instead of dealing with the heart of the matter.

There are three questions: How the fuck did we get here? We know lots of people can answer that question about rape culture and misogyny and patriarchy. How do we stop it? Because, my God, these numbers are awful. And then, for the future, how do we make sure we move forward in a way that gets us as far away from this as possible? That's our work, period.

PLAYBOY: That's amazing.

BURKE: Anything else is not worth even talking about. ■

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