

*Statement on the Empty Graduate Student Seat on the
“MeToo: Discrimination, Harassment, and Abuse in the Academy” Panel
By the AAR Graduate Student Committee
November 17, 2018 | 9–11:30am | Denver, CO*

The empty chair at the table in front of you represents all graduate students who cannot speak out against the abuse, harassment, and discrimination they face as junior members of the academy. Most graduate students you know have at least one story of abuse, assault, harassment, or discrimination endured within this academy. Those graduate students who are fortunate not to have their own firsthand experience of these problems, certainly know others who do. We all have our own stories, and we could sit in that chair to tell them. But, in our academy as in many other professions, we face significant adverse professional and personal consequences for publicly sharing these stories — that is, if we are heard at all. These risks are even more pronounced for students of color and indigenous students. The #MeToo movement has been helpful in drawing attention to issues that are far too often swept under the rug, but it also puts the burden on victims and their allies to place themselves in the public spotlight, in a situation that could destroy their career prospects. This is true for senior scholars and graduate students alike. Importantly, however, unlike senior scholars, graduate students are dependent on others who have power, influence, and political capital inside and outside our home institutions. A graduate student who comes forward to say “me too” is too often labeled by potential hiring committees as a “risky hire.” This precarity is compounded by issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality, in that those who are already the most vulnerable are also the ones most likely not to be believed, to suffer retaliation, and to have their sexual assault itself interwoven with racism, sexism, heterosexism, and transphobia.

Sexual abuse and harassment in the academy have persisted for far too long, and the members of the AAR Graduate Student Committee say enough is enough. The current culture of academia is highly competitive, cutthroat, and frequently abusive. Graduate students exist in a precarious and vulnerable position: we are paid meager stipends that leave us below the national poverty line, lack union protections, often lack health insurance, have high rates of mental health issues, face a dismal job market, and depend on our advisors and departments for networking, publishing, and job opportunities. It is also no secret that our advisors and professors are sometimes also our abusers.

This pattern of abuse is an egregious violation of the ethics in our academy and our broader society, and something must finally be done. As graduate students, we can do little about the abuse that is deeply embedded and apparently accepted in the academy, because of the power imbalance that we face and the position that we are in. If the AAR and faculty members do not do anything about these problems, they are essentially giving graduate students two equally unacceptable options: 1) to leave the academy bearing physical and mental trauma, or 2) to remain in the academy and to continue to submit ourselves to labor in violent and unsafe spaces.

There is no individual scholar whose work and stature in the academy is so indispensable that the academy can justify allowing them to act and speak in any way they please. It is entirely possible to engage with someone’s scholarship while also condemning the individual’s unacceptable conduct. The Graduate Student Committee calls on the academy of religious studies, including everyone in this room, to hear our demand that scholars and other members of the academy who are known to display and engage in predatory behavior be no longer welcome at the

annual national and regional meetings of the AAR, regardless of their status or academic contributions. We acknowledge that removing these individuals from these events does not put an end to the problem, but it will make the meetings safer environments for graduate students and introduce a level of accountability for all members of the academy. How can a graduate student with no political clout or power report an allegation against a senior or tenured faculty member, when there is currently no assurance that they will be taken seriously and not dismissed as a matter of he-said-she-said?

We also recognize that the AAR alone cannot put an end to the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment. This must happen at the departmental level. There are, however, mechanisms that the AAR can put in place. We demand that the AAR publicly confirm its support of those who report sexual abuse and harassment, and that the AAR encourage departments to do their own critical work of ensuring real change. Departments must publicly stand with survivors, take all allegations seriously, and hold perpetrators accountable for their actions with more than a metaphorical slap on the wrist, regardless of tenure status.

For the perpetrator, the world is currently black and white. Survivors are called liars or loose, told nothing can be done because the professor is tenured, and the world moves on. Standing with the survivor is much more difficult; to do so we must take on their pain and admit that there is something deeply wrong with the system that produced the abuse. There is, of course, no singular solution for this problem. It will be a difficult and gritty process, but that is better than idly standing by. Today, we are using our voices in this statement to demand that tenured professors and those in institutional positions of authority listen to survivors and take them seriously. Recognize the positions of privilege you hold. Stop accepting the fact that the institution is flawed. To lament our broken system, yet stand by and not push for meaningful change, makes you complicit in the actions of our assaulters.