#MeToo witch-hunt targets veteran actor Morgan Freeman

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On Thursday, CNN published a lurid and sensationalist article—with very little substance—asserting that 80-year-old actor Morgan Freeman was guilty of inappropriate sexual conduct. Most of the claims came from anonymous sources.

Freeman is known for a screen acting and voiceover career that has spanned almost five decades and includes film roles in *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *Se7en* (1995), *Amistad* (1997), *Along Came a Spider* (2001), *Bruce Almighty* (2003), *Million Dollar Baby* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Invictus* (2009) and *Lucy* (2014).

The accusations all relate to incidents that allegedly occurred in the last five years, when Freeman was aged between 74 and 79.

Within 12 hours of the CNN report's publication, the Screen Actors Guild released a cowardly and hypocritical statement declaring that it was "reviewing" Freeman's lifetime achievement award, bestowed in January. The organization's spokesperson told the *Hollywood Reporter* that "any accused person has the right to due process, but our starting point is to believe the courageous voices who come forward to report incidents of harassment." In other words, "due process" begins with assuming that the accused is guilty and proceeding from there.

Also on Friday, Visa, the financial services corporation, suspended advertisements featuring Freeman. Connected to that, the transit authority in Metro Vancouver (British Columbia) announced that it was scrapping a planned promotional campaign that would have had the actor deliver various transit system announcements as part of a Visa ad campaign.

The most significant feature of CNN's article, which has gone totally "unnoticed" and unchallenged in the media, is the way it was produced. The lead investigator and journalist for the story, Chloe Melas, is herself one of Freeman's accusers, and the only one who is named!

CNN's selection of Melas to lead its investigation with editor An Phung indicates that its intention was never to produce an objective account. The plan was to provide a platform for Melas to publicly denounce Freeman in the guise of a "news article," and combine her own accusation with anonymous statements dragging Freeman through the mud.

Freeman released a statement on Friday afternoon stating, "I admit that I am someone who feels a need to try to make women, and men, feel appreciated and at ease around me. As a part of that, I would often try to joke with and compliment women, in what I thought was a light-hearted and humorous way.

"Clearly I was not always coming across the way I intended. And that is why I apologized Thursday and will continue to apologize to anyone I might have upset, however unintentionally. But I also want to be clear: I did not create unsafe work environments. I did not assault women. I did not offer employment or advancement in exchange for sex. Any suggestion that I did so is completely false."

Freeman added, "I am devastated that 80 years of my life is at risk of being undermined, in the blink of an eye, by Thursday's media reports."

While some of the incidents described in the report, if they occurred, involve lewd behavior, none could remotely be described as criminal. A healthy portion of Melas and Phung's rambling, 4,000-word article consists of examples of Freeman making "inappropriate" comments or "staring," or being described as "creepy" by former employees.

Melas' own accusation relates to an interaction at a 2016 press junket for Freeman's film *Going in Style*, co-

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starring Michael Caine and Alan Arkin, which she was covering as a CNN entertainment reporter. Melas, who was six months pregnant at the time, claims that Freeman told her, “You look ripe,” and, “I wish I was there.”

CNN published a video of the latter comment, which occurred in the middle of an interview with Freeman, Arkin and Caine. Based on the video, Freeman’s comment appears to be a response to an anecdote related by Caine about how he had once “congratulated” a woman who turned out not to be pregnant. Melas claims that Freeman made the same comment several times that were not captured on camera.

Remarkably, following the event, Melas began reaching out to others in the industry for stories about Freeman. Melas and Phung note that they spoke to “dozens” of people and that “some praised Freeman, saying they never witnessed any questionable behavior or that he was a consummate professional on set and in the office.” However, none of these people are quoted, and the reference is included only to provide a veneer of objectivity for the piece.

The remainder of the article consists of accusations from eight women who say they were harassed or made to feel uncomfortable by Freeman, and eight others who claim to have witnessed an incident. The sources are entertainment reporters, former staffers and production assistants at Freeman’s company Revelations Entertainment, or individuals who worked in the industry.

A woman identified as a former production assistant on *Going in Style* stated that in 2015 Freeman touched her lower back, and on another occasion he unsuccessfully tried to lift her skirt. The other allegation involving physical contact was made by an employee who said he saw Freeman massaging the shoulder of an intern.

One former employee is quoted describing Freeman as a “creepy uncle.” Melas and Phung write that in another incident, Freeman asked a woman to “twirl.” Another Revelations Entertainment employee said Freeman would “make vulgar and sexual comments about women” and had once said, referring to a woman, “I’d like to have her for an hour.”

A manager at Revelations told CNN that Freeman would “come over to my desk to say hi and he’d just stand there and stare at me. He would stare at my breasts.” She said that if she passed him he would “stare at me in an awkward way,” and would “look me up and down.” A number of similar accounts are cited.

The *New York Times*, which was awarded the Pulitzer prize for its role spearheading the sexual misconduct witch-hunt that has seen numerous artistic figures taken down by unsubstantiated allegations, has given its support to the campaign against Freeman, publishing a favorable interview with CNN reporter Chloe Melas on May 26 about the “investigation.”

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