Of Victims and Survivors: Representing Collective and Individual Rape Trauma

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The female victim-survivor of sexual and gendered violence is seldom theorized in scholarly accounts of such violence on screen. The presumed audience for much scholarship in the fields of film studies, feminist studies, and trauma studies as they intersect with cultural production is one that must first be informed of the horrors of rape and abuse, must be touched by a film in a way that they have not been in real life. This dissertation, by contrast, assumes that the audience for representations of rape and abuse in cultural production—literary, poetic, filmic, to name a few—has personal, lived experience with sexual and gendered violence. By theorizing media through the rape victim-survivor, and then creating media based on that theory, this dissertation and accompanying film work to disrupt common-sense notions of who is and is not allowed to speak as a victim, how victim-survivors are constructed and exist in the world, and what possible ways forward may exist in the realm of imagining better futures. I begin with a study of rape in cinema, surveying the 1910s and ‘20s forward, with case studies from the 1960s and ‘70s rape-revenge film cycle. From there I expand out to analyses of current fiction film trends, poetry (written and spoken word), music, art, documentary, and memoir. This dissertation closes on a discussion of digital media and where representations of rape victim-survivors intersect online with real-world conditions.
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Preface

I have done so many things because you told me that I could not. You told me they did not matter. This is for every single victim, survivor, victim-survivor out there. Every person who has been abused, sexually harmed in some, any, way. Our trauma does not make us stronger; you do not make us strong. We were always strong. This is not for you; it is for us.

There are, as with so many dissertations, far too many people to thank for this work’s progression. First and foremost, I could not have asked for a better director of photography, research assistant, reader, supporter, or partner than my husband Zack Wall. He listened to every emerging thought, read every draft, watched every film with me (through many pause breaks to close-read scenes or express frustration). Zack read as I wrote, trading paragraphs as I finished them and then reading in full once something was coherent enough to merit that approach. He questioned, challenged, and pushed at the work in the gentlest possible ways, but in places where it was needed. He commiserated with me through the frustration of the writing and revision process, was with me both when my writing was blocked and when it could fly. He laughed and cried with me through the whole process. While I feel a certain ownership over this work, I can confidently say it might not have happened and would certainly look very different without his support.

I would also like to thank my dissertation chair and committee for their support and feedback throughout this process. Dr. Adam Lowenstein has guided me through my PhD study starting with an initial contact prior to accepting the University of Pittsburgh’s admissions offer, for which I am ever grateful. Similarly, Dr. Mark Lynn Anderson, Dr. Neepa Majumdar, and Dr.
David Pettersen have been involved in my development as a scholar throughout my time at the University of Pittsburgh in the most diverse and helpful ways I could ask for. Finally, Dr. Bridget Keown, whose work in fields adjacent to my own is spectacular, has supported my work across forms (in scholarship, service, teaching, archival research, and filmmaking), acted as a sounding board for ideas and provided granular feedback without which this dissertation would be all the poorer. I thank my entire committee profusely for their consistent and sustained support of my work.

This project has encompassed not just a written component but also the involved production of a short film that mobilizes the theories and politics of the dissertation in an audio-visual medium. Part of this process for me was finding my way back to art practice to move through writer’s block but also to dig deeper into the visceral reality of the theories I was writing. Once again, I thank Zack for encouraging me in 2020 to revisit my old films, reediting those shorts I originally made in the middle of abuse. This initial reediting work opened a door to a creative praxis that makes this dissertation feel complete in a sense of wholeness, if not done-ness. Zack is not the only filmmaker and artist who helped me through this process though. I owe a great deal to the women filmmakers who collaborated, to various degrees, on the projects I completed both for this dissertation and alongside it. Lia Knight is perhaps the best film composer and musician I have encountered (a significant statement as the granddaughter of a prolific working musician). She and Rebecca Shapass helped make my first film to explicitly address sexual violence, Collective (2023), come to fruition, and both have been among those who have encouraged and supported the work on this dissertation’s film, Leakage (2023). I also had the great fortune of meeting director Vida Skerk through her own work on gendered and sexual violence and queer
women’s horror filmmaking. Her film *Night Ride* (2022) is a *tour de force* and I recommend it as an exemplar of emerging voices in women's filmmaking.

The writing support for this project from women in intersecting fields has also been heartening throughout such a necessarily collectively inflected project. I want to especially thank Dr. Kelsey Cummings for her willingness to read and engage with each chapter as it has come together. She is one of those unique readers whose incisive feedback sets a new standard for how to both support a writer and help elevate their work. Perhaps the best, most helpful and encouraging feedback I’ve received has been from Kelsey and I cannot begin to thank her enough for it. Similarly, Dr. Jessie Male’s responses to my work from a disability studies and Disability Justice perspective have significantly improved the work both in progress and as a “finished” product. It is not just Jessie’s breadth of knowledge but her commitment to the political and social realities and consequences of scholarship that have made all the difference in this project. I took the position as event assistant for her series Creating a Culture of Access for financial reasons but doing that work in community with her and so many other wonderful interlocutors has been a true boon to me on personal and professional levels.

Additional assistance, including moral support, draft-reading, inspiration, and guidance through the PhD and dissertation processes, came from many quarters. Colleagues from the University of Pittsburgh like Dr. Sonia Lupher, Phoebe Marshall-Collins, Sritama Chaterjee, and Dr. Silpa Mukherjee have been invaluable for navigating this process. Additionally, a friend and colleague in the biological sciences, Eli Rivka kept me writing on particularly difficult days. Rhyse Curtis, a brilliant mind in the field of horror studies, has also been indispensable. I thank all of them for thinking along with me throughout this process.
My family, Dr. Katherine Kiefer-Newman, Ron Newman Ed.D., and Sarah Newman have also been supportive throughout my academic career. They were especially important to the process of finishing and finalizing this dissertation, supporting my husband and me as I dove deep into the writing process towards the end of the summer and into fall 2023. Additionally, with regards to the encouragement and influences I have taken from earlier in my academic career, I would like to thank Dr. Setsu Shigematsu and Dr. Keith Harris as exemplary scholars and mentors at the University of California, Riverside. Additionally, I met Dr. Kara Keeling during my time at the University of Southern California, and her writing and teaching in the realm of film and philosophical theory have left an imprint on my thinking about cultural production that I hope never to lose sight of. Without Hilja Keading at UCR and Stu Pollard at USC, my filmmaking may never have developed at all or would look totally alien to what I have found life and power in all these years hence. Their mentorship and teaching have come to define my artistic practice over the years, and I will always feel lucky to have stepped into both of their classrooms.

Finally, a thanks to all my scholarly, activist, and communal interlocutors, including Mariam Kaba, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Dr. Kumars Salehi, Roqayah Chamseddine, Stephanie McKellop, Dr. Kendall Phillips, Brady James Forrest, and Dr. Pearson Bolt. I have not only grown as a scholar through their theoretical works and praxis, but have learned to be a more generous, hopeful, and ultimately kind person because their lives have touched mine. There are too many amazing QTBIPOC and disability activist folks to continue listing here (lest I write another dissertation composed entirely of those names), so I’ll turn to a guiding principle in my life from one such activist-scholar: “hope is a discipline” and it is a discipline that I work towards daily. Thank you all so much.
In Memory of Denis Saltykov
1. Introduction

1.1. A Brief History of Rape in Cinema

Rape in fiction film, like so many violences, begins as a tool for reifying notions of purity. Further, in early cases such as The Birth of a Nation (1915) and The Sheik (1921), racial purity is the central theme. Across all iterations of rape in cinema, however, the notion of women being pure both sexually and in terms of their gender performance is the organizing logic. To this end, rape and rape-ability become shorthand for impurity—that is, the rapist is impure, and infects his victim in turn, soiling her so that she must be made-clean again through recuperative heterosexuality. This cleansing is achieved in various ways across narratives, with marriage and romance most prevalent among them such as in Alfred Hitchcock’s Blackmail (1929), Jean Negulesco’s Johnny Belinda (1948) and Ida Lupino’s Outrage (1950). In all three films, while marriage is not necessarily spoken of directly, there is a prevailing sense that a “pure” man’s love of the raped or nearly raped (in the case of Blackmail) woman absolves her of the sin of having been victimized by another man. This organizing logic fell very much in line with the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors (MPPD) sense of morals necessary for film production, which would later be codified in the Production Code in 1934. While the facts in the case of Virginia Rappe’s death will not be re-litigated here, suffice it to say that the possibility of behind-the-scenes rape was a major factor in the adoption of self-censorship guidelines among the major studios, later to be known as the Hays Code. Further, the act of rape arguably has less to do with Rappe’s death catalyzing the instantiation of The Code. Rather, the scandal around sex (and sexual impurity, again), liquor, and violence created a singular flashpoint around which entities like the
Catholic League of Decency would rally. It stands to reason, then, that the threats of sexual impurity and contagion were responsible for a major shift not only in how rape was depicted in media (and it was continually depicted throughout the Code era, even if obliquely), but in the industry as a whole.

Rape in media, regardless of the organizing logic that contains it, is about society working through who is and is not allowed to be made less-than-human, or indeed, who must be made less-than-human. This is the rhetorical force behind Hitchcock’s two later films that deal specifically with rape, *Marnie* (1964) and *Frenzy* (1972). *Marnie*’s narrative revolves around the titular character’s (Tippi Hedren) trauma after having seen her mother nearly raped and having intervened, ultimately killing the rapist, at a very young age. While Marnie’s relationship with Mark Rutland (her boss, played by Sean Connery) is coded as romantic in the film, it ultimately forwards a system in which she must be saved through a kind of exposure therapy; Marnie has incredible difficulty with physical intimacy, which Rutland barrels straight through with a combination of physical force and coercion. By 1972 Hitchcock had given up the pretense of saving the traumatized victim-survivor with “good” or “romantic” rape and moved directly into punishing women on screen. The women in *Frenzy* whose graphic rapes we sometimes see and sometimes do not, but who are all murdered in the process, are little more than set pieces. The film is not about them, it is about the cat-and-mouse between the men in the film to elude or enact justice respectively. Hitchcock, in this way, makes women writ large disposable, rape-able bodies.1

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1 For a further example from the 1960s, see Alain Resnais’s 1961 *Last Year in Marienbad* and Lynn A. Higgin’s excellent analysis of the film as one about rape here: Lynn A. Higgins, “Screen/Memory: Rape and Its Alibis in Last Year at Marienbad,” in *Rape in Art Cinema*, ed. Dominique Russell (New York, US: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2012).
Another trend, most prevalent in the 1990s and early aughts (though not without precursors, most notably *The Virgin Spring* [1960], *Straw Dogs* [1971], and *The Last House on the Left* [1972]), was the proliferation of male savior and avenger narratives. In films like *The Crow* (1994), *Fear* (1996), and *Irreversible* (2002), among others, the woman’s experience of rape, domestic violence, and in some cases her murder, must be avenged by a male partner or parent. While these films, especially *The Crow* and *Irreversible*, are heralded as artistic feats in cult, art house, and horror sectors of film scholarship and criticism, the personhood of the women raped or abused in them is far less often the primary topic of conversation. Instead, the focus is on the badness of the villains and/or the moral ambiguity of the male saviors/avengers. Running alongside some themes highlighted above, as early as the 1970s we begin to see the inklings of pushback on these established codes. Pushback that would come more fully to fruition in the late 1990s (primarily with *Audition* [1999]) and continue through today, though not without setbacks. This tendency arguably begins with *I Spit on Your Grave*’s 1978 iteration, but also includes films from following decades such as *Ms. 45* (1981) and *Baise-Moi* (2000) as well as those discussed throughout this dissertation (most notably *Run, Sweetheart, Run* [2020]). The pushback that I reference here is felt largely in critical, scholarly, and institutional reactions to these films. *Run, Sweetheart, Run* is unique in that contemporaneous reviews of the film reflect a segment of the audience’s reaction to the film. Others listed, however, have seen reactions from governments (in the form of bans and limitations of distribution) as well as scholarly and critical lambasting as regards gratuity, specificity, and the politics of violence depicted.
1.2.Behind-the-Scenes: Sexual Violence in the Media, Off-Screen²

There is no shortage of women who have come forward in the entertainment industry in the years since Tarana Burke began the #MeToo campaign in 2006 to publicly speak the truth of experiences of sexual violence. Somewhat less has been said and written about violence, sexual and/or otherwise, on set during the production of media texts, enacted against women in particular. I have chosen four examples here: Tippi Hedren, Sandra Peabody (credited as Sandra Cassel), Marilyn Burns, and Evan Rachel Wood. Each of these women has talked, openly or guardedly, about the trauma that shooting their respective films/videos (Marnie and The Birds [1963]; The Last House on the Left [1972]; The Texas Chainsaw Massacre [1974]; and “Heart Shaped Glasses” [2007]) has produced for them. While these cases range from generally horrendous and distressing production conditions (Burns) to “alleged” on-screen rape (Wood), it is not my goal to establish a continuum of behind-the-scenes harm done to women in the entertainment industry. Rather, in discussing each of these women’s experiences, I wish to highlight the prevalence and proliferation of victim-survivors in various proximities to media production, and to stress the stakes involved when victim-survivors are not the central concern for filmmakers working on representing sexual violence.

Alfred Hitchcock has, unsurprisingly, made several appearances in this chapter already. My interest in him, however, is less to do with his work as a “Great Horror Auteur” and more with his status within filmmaking, critical, and scholarly discourse despite the open secret of his

² The examples in this section are primarily pulled from horror and horror-adjacent media, however examples of this kind of behind-the-scenes abuse about. Especially see Maria Schneider’s discussions of shooting the rape scene in Last Tango in Paris (1972).
predation on young actresses throughout his career. To take one example, Tippi Hedren explains his extreme controlling and abusive behavior and sexual harassment of her while filming both Marnie and The Birds. Referring to her in those early days as simply “The Girl,” Hitchcock wielded power over Tippi Hedren from the moment they came into any kind of contact, power that he would later use to control her life extensively.\(^3\) Hitchcock had tasked his studio with finding The Girl after seeing her in a commercial and setting up a meeting with his agent three days on, with no information provided to her about who he was or what role he wanted her for. This power play, in which Hedren is left with sparse information but a deep, abiding sense of how powerful this mysterious man was in her line of work, shapes their career and contextualizes his later abuse of Hedren. Throughout their time working together, he not only had final say over how she dressed but to whom she spoke, or more accurately, who spoke to her.\(^4\) In her memoir Tippi, Hedren discusses the possessive way that Hitchcock treated her on set and his proclivity for telling her male costars not to talk to her outside of the bare necessity of discussing lines. Perhaps most dramatically, if not most alarmingly (I leave that judgement to the reader; all of Hitchcock’s behavior is alarming from the perspective of a victim-survivor of abuse, control, and sexual violence), is the secret door Hitchcock had installed between his office and Hedren’s dressing room.\(^5\) It is this doorway that allowed him to sexually harass and assault Hedren. According to her memoir, he made verbal advances and physically attacked her, trying to kiss her, at which point she escaped the room.

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\(^4\) ibid

\(^5\) ibid
The abuse of women behind the scenes is often excused as a way to “produce a better performance” in these actresses, as if they are so incapable of acting that they must be put in mortal fear for their bodies, selves, and lives in order to act those emotions out on screen. This excuse was surely used for Hitchcock’s abuse of Hedren in the climactic scene of *The Birds* in which he insisted on repeatedly shooting the same scene with live birds attacking her until she reached physical and emotional exhaustion. This form of physical punishment for rebuffing his violent advances has been taken up in the annals of horror performance history as having produced a superior performance. Much like the following cases, however, I question whether this performance could equally have been achieved with a safe set and better directing.

Along these lines, Sandra Peabody’s “performance” in *Last House* has less to do with acting by her own admission and more to do with the very real fear she experienced on set. It is difficult to track down interviews with Peabody about her experiences, or with David Hess who played Krug Stillo, the film’s main antagonist, but both actors have expressed regret for having participated in the film at all. Unlike Hitchcock, Wes Craven did not take it upon himself to torment Peabody, but rather allowed her cast-mates to do so. According to Marc Sheffler who played Junior in the film, he threatened Peabody with bodily harm and murder in order to “improve her acting”: Sheffler states, “She wasn’t getting the scene. She wasn’t at the anxiety level that she needed to be. So, we’d done it I don’t know how many times … everybody was getting annoyed. So, I said to Wes, ‘Give me a minute with her.’ What I did was—you can’t see it in the shot—but I took her over to the cliff, and I put her over the cliff and just grabbed her and said, ‘If you don’t get this fucking scene right now, I’m going to drop you … and Wes’ll shoot it, and we’ll get a different
scene, but it’ll work because you’ll be fucking mangled.” The article in which this quote appears also includes a note that Hess threatened to assault Peabody in order to produce the fear reaction that the scenes called for. All of this contributes to the fact that, rather than being allowed to perform fear, anxiety, and trauma, Peabody lived those emotions with a camera pointed at her vulnerability.

Similarly, exhaustion and discomfort are familiar tools for male directors to manipulate women into specific reactions with cameras trained on them. Tobe Hooper’s shoot for Texas Chainsaw, like Stanley Kubrick’s for The Shining (1980), was notoriously fraught. While both Burns and Shelley Duvall in their respective films experienced extreme exhaustion from arguably unethical shooting schedules and repeated takes, Burns’ costar Gunner Hansen has given interviews including descriptions of exchanges between himself and the first true Final Girl (according to Carol Clover’s Men, Women and Chainsaws). According to Hansen, “The whole dinner scene is burned in my memory, I think just because of the misery of it,” he said. “At that point we were really just on the verge of mental collapse. And Marilyn told me about how awful it was for her because she was terrified … Just being tied to a chair and then having these men looming over her constantly, she said it was really unnerving.” According to the same article, among other occurrences on set that would certainly violate even today’s paltry health and safety regulations for film shoots, Burns was repeatedly hit with a real sledgehammer that was covered in foam and rubber rather than made of foam and rubber, a major distinction in prop creation for

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7 ibid
film production. Horrifyingly, Burns’ experiences on the set of *Texas Chainsaw* are par for the course in terms of women’s physical safety and wellbeing on film sets.

In her autobiographical docuseries *Phoenix Rising* (2022), directed by Amy Berg, Evan Rachel Wood alleges that at 19 years old, while in a relationship with the then-38-year-old Brian Warner (Marylin Manson), he raped her on camera during a music video shoot. I would like to note here that the video is still live on YouTube as of this writing in 2023 and that I have specifically chosen not to include stills from it here.\(^8\) While some segments of the music video are included in the docuseries, presumably with Wood’s consent (which she says she could not and did not give at the time the original video was shot), to reproduce them here, I believe, would be to reproduce images of a young woman in the process of being raped in front of not just a set full of cast and crew, but in front of a camera, so that her trauma has been shared and reproduced countless times over online. This statement is not a divergence, but rather a crucial element of both my methodology and my research argument broadly: to enact violence against women, and violence here includes any sexual contact to which she cannot or does not consent, for the sake of the camera, ultimately perpetuates those same violences behind the scenes and away from the screen. Art and activism are, to be sure, separate—though interconnected—endeavors, but art does affect the world. Violence against women on screen that does not take those women (particularly victim-survivors) behind the scenes and in the audience into account serves to reify and bolster a

\(^8\) For more information on the video and petition to remove it from YouTube’s platform, see the following articles on the topic: Gabrielle Sanchez, “YouTube Responds after Evan Rachel Wood Shares Petition to Remove ‘Heart-Shaped Glasses,’” *The A.V. Club*, March 18, 2022; Evan Minsker, “As Evan Rachel Wood Calls to Remove Marilyn Manson Video With Alleged Sexual Assault, YouTube ‘Monitoring the Situation,’” *Pitchfork*, March 17, 2022; Bindu Bansinath, “Evan Rachel Wood Wants the Video of Her Alleged Rape Off YouTube,” *The Cut*, March 18, 2022.
socio-cultural, -economic, and -political system in which women are necessarily less-than-human and therefore always already rape-able.

1.3. Methodology

*Of Victims and Survivors: Representing Collective and Individual Rape Trauma* is written as an anarcha-feminist text at its core, and thus the methodology for this study is necessarily and intentionally theoretically promiscuous. I do not foreground any singular theory of sexual violence, feminist film theory, any hierarchical solutions to representational or real-world problems of gendered violence, or approaches to trauma that rely on analysts, scholars, or theorists as the arbiters of truth for traumatized individuals. Instead, I follow a third wave anarcha-feminist approach that decentralizes my ethical and theoretical considerations. Taking an anarchist theoretical approach does not mean a total absence of citation, but rather that I eschew conceptions of coercive hierarchy as organizing logics to establish the foundations on which *Of Victims and Survivors* builds its scaffolding. Likewise, I consider the women and nonbinary artists and creators discussed and referenced throughout this dissertation to be my primary interlocutors. The creative production that comes out of feminist spaces, for all that it can and cannot do in the world, is ultimately essential to the political, theoretical, and scholarly work that we produce.

To that end, I take this opportunity to explicate the *modes* of analysis through which I engage with these creatives, and the ways that my scholarly praxis intersects with artistic practice. Throughout this project I trace lineages, preferring crip time to straight-forward teleological, historical trajectories. By this I mean that while I do draw connections between eras of cultural production, *Of Victims and Survivors* is organized not around date periods but relationally, with
connections between specific moments and movements standing in relief. This concept is built from a critical disability studies approach to both trauma and temporality. Crip time means “a reorientation to time.” Further, “Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded.” While the most concrete explanations of crip time for non-disabled bodyminds pertain to deadlines, event timelines, scheduling, and the like, this concept is necessarily loose and seldom defined. This definitional ambivalence is where I bring crip time, and critical disability studies, into this project; time for traumatized bodyminds, for people disabled by experiences of sexual violence and intimate partner violence, functions differently from linear, narrative, abled time, to a degree of variance that cannot adequately be described textually. Crip time, then, allows for a time outside the realm of trauma studies that is centered in the bodyminds of traumatized, disabled, femme folks.

Returning to the notion of activist and scholarly praxis as deeply engaged with art and creative practice, I spend considerable time on formal analysis throughout *Of Victims and Survivors*. Tools, including shot-by-shot analyses and close readings of sequences, are useful to my argumentation about the aesthetic-political trends, tendencies, and valences of the texts under consideration. I would like, however, to highlight the form of the dissertation, a text-on-paper document, as being somewhat antithetical to the kind of art-practice-as-praxis that I ultimately build towards. It is for this reason that I include my own art production (a short film) and an artist’s statement on said film as appendices to this written text. I would like to additionally encourage readers to engage with digitally available texts (especially music videos and spoken-word poetry) to the best of your ability; a cornerstone of this dissertation work is wrapped up in the embodiment

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10 ibid
of experience. I would be remiss not to encourage my readers to *experience* these texts with me. In so doing, I propose engaging non-linearly with the material at hand; to engage with text and media in fragmentary turns. I have included summaries throughout this dissertation for those who will not be watching/reading along together, however, these can also stand as useful markers. Rather than watching/listening to/reading all texts prior to engaging with this dissertation, I might suggest crippling the mode of consumption. Put simply, abandon the notion of spoilers and the hesitation over the pause button; allow the texts at hand to speak *to* and *with* each other.

1.4. Chapter Breakdown

Chapter One, “Whose Rape, Whose Revenge?: The Rape Revenge Sub-Genre” discusses the primary rape-revenge film cycle of the 1970s as well as the 2009 and 2010 remakes of two exemplary films of this cycle, *The Last House on the Left* and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), respectively. Through these case studies, and an examination of their precursors—*Rashomon* (1950) and *The Virgin Spring* (1960)—I begin building an argument in opposition to what I term the “empathy imperative” for representing rape in media. Chapter Two, “Representing Rape in the 2020s” brings us forward to the current decade, with case studies of *Promising Young Woman* (2020) and *Run, Sweetheart, Run* (2020). I begin the chapter with an analysis of the critical reception of each film which, in short, saw the former praised for the same elements that the latter was condemned for in both professional and audience reviews. From here I build out a theory of rape response and responsibility that posits collective solutions as providing more political potential for a radical reimagining of power relations than individual, evidence-based, criminal punishment “solutions” to the same.
The third chapter, “Quick to Anger, Quick to Justice; Rape Poetry and the Flawed Framework of Testimony” moves us out of the realm of film studies proper and situates an argument for what collective approaches to rape response might look like from the perspective of poetic cohorts. In this I analyze not just poetry in its most recognizable form, but music and music videos from an emerging, but historically grounded, collection of musicians. While I focus here on Scene Queen and her lineage of feminist musicians in the alternative scene (beginning with the Riot Grrrl Movement, but including Pussy Riot as an ongoing phenomenon), examples for this chapter could be pulled from any number of sources, including but not limited to the music and videos of ZAND, UPSAHL, Lenii, Ashnikko, K.Flay, Mothica, Maisie Peters, and many more.

The final full chapter, “We Are Not Unaware of Rape: The Rhetoric of Documentary and the Problem of Proof” blends analyses of women’s work in fine art (Méret Oppenheim), memoir (Chanel Miller), and documentary (Evan Rachel Wood) as foundational texts with which to think about feminist praxis. While not every text in this chapter is unequivocally praised and pedestaled as exemplary of the “perfect way” to address rape through feminist cultural production, each is chosen for the imaginative work it allows us to do. Following on this notion of im/perfection, the Coda, “Bad Victims, Bad Survivors” sets out to begin moving us away from notions of perfection in victimhood, testimony, evidence, and empathy in order to establish personhood more fully for victim-survivors and a sense of communal responsibility to ending rape writ large. I take Amber Heard as my primary example here both for the minutia involved in Johnny Depp’s defamation trial against her, and for the deeply mediated way that said trial was commented on misogynistically.

The appendices for this dissertation, the short film Leakage (2023) and accompanying Artist’s Statement, present a possible way of conceptualizing and creating media born out of this
dissertation’s analysis. The film, broken into three acts, presents three possible experiences of rape and abuse. The first encompasses the immediate aftermath, the liquid, visceral encounter of “cleaning up” post-rape. The voiceover here is a collection of quotes from various open letters in response to rape and abuse, often critiquing specific institutions or specific individuals. Act One, in this way, poses the question of whether the open letter as a form that necessarily appeals to an unsympathetic audience is helpful and effective in addressing systemic, institutional, and interpersonal violence. The second act uses pieces of personal blog posts from a victim-survivor, describing the beginning of a relationship that involved grooming and statutory rape. The visual design for this segment operates on alternating large and small scales, again calling into question the distinctions between interpersonal and systemic violence.

Finally, Act Three uses the motif of fire and the destruction of documents to address institutional failures that are facilitated by individual administrators but nonetheless contribute to an institutional culture. Voiceover of an account of sexual violence obtained through the Freedom of Information Act from the Office of Civil Rights within the Department of Education lays out a narrative in brief, redacted statements, while on screen the pages of said redacted report burn. The entire film is scored with a syncopated metronomic backbeat and incorporates flashing lights and abnormal temporality to produce a feeling of disjointedness. The goal, here, is for the film to be viscerally reminiscent of these forms of abuse and trauma.
2. Whose Rape, Whose Revenge?: The Rape Revenge Sub-Genre

In *The Last House on the Left* Phyllis’ (Lucy Grantham) rape belongs to everyone but Phyllis. By 2009, Paige’s (Martha MacIsaac) rape is still not hers. Mari’s (Sandra Cassell, Sara Paxton) rape in both versions of the film, is largely the provenance of her parents, but could also be a Kent State/Vietnam War Protest stand-in. Jennifer Hills from 1978 to 2010, certainly does not retain the rights to her bodily violation in *I Spit on Your Grave*, instead they are the purview of presumed video nasty, horror grit, and torture porn agendas. In terms of rape in cinema, especially in the rape-revenge cycle of the 1970s and its remake cycle in the 2000s-2010s, any given woman’s rape belongs to everyone except her. This is to say that the women in these films are seldom instilled with enough character development to constitute representations of personhood, they are the subject of violence in the absence of subjectivity. The state of women victim-survivors in rape-revenge films is unsurprising in the context of these films’ influences. Both *Rashomon* (1950) and *The Virgin Spring* (1960) are credited as precursors to films like *Straw Dogs* (1971) and the 1972 *Last House*, and both films, as will be discussed shortly, evacuate the victim-survivor’s personhood from their rape narratives, leaving her body as the to-be-raped object of study and scrutiny. The victim-survivors in many of these films are not characters so much as they are archetypes draped over rape-able bodies.

This chapter operates from the premise that rape is always a metaphor in non-victim-survivor-centered films. This means that in films made with a goal, on any level, of speaking *for*

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or about rape victim-survivors, no matter how graphic the depiction of rape, the violation itself is always representative of some other conflict. As mentioned, excellent work has been done on *Last House* as an exploration of Vietnam War conflict and ensuing trauma, and the violence with which incumbent protests were met (particularly the Kent State protest) by Adam Lowenstein.\(^{12}\) Taking this reading, the intense, extreme violation of these women's bodies and personhood do not enter the frame, they are stand-ins for a discussion of the realities of war in which rape is never included as one of those realities. The real-world stakes of sexual violence are not metaphorical, however, so representations of such violence that make bodily violation into metaphor deny those embodied lived experiences. This is not to say that rape necessarily cannot be understood metaphorically in a real-world context, but rather that the metaphorizing looks very different from the representational metaphor-making of so much cinema. Juliana Hu Pegues explains that,

Complicating the feminist intervention (and condition) that the personal is political, experiencing sexual assault is at once emblematic and constitutive of larger structures of dominance but also remains a site of personal violence that cannot be fully apprehended by a systemic framework. Such a political or explanatory maneuver enacts a further elision and violence compounding the original site of injury. Rape is, therefore, always and never structural, at once and impossibly a metaphor for other violences.\(^{13}\)

The kind of metaphor that Pegues uses to discuss rape in “Rape Is/Not a Metaphor,” however, operates on a different level than that of media representations of sexual violence. Here, the metaphor is the way in which rape functions for the purpose of social control; the threat of rape is where metaphor is located, rather than the act of rape. I maintain that the kind of metaphor rape

\(^{12}\) ibid

enables as the purest form of terrorism\textsuperscript{14} is vastly different from understanding rape as a metaphor for other forms of violence.

This chapter builds on the foundational work of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in their discussion of decolonialism, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor” in order to build the framework for understanding how metaphorizing rape, like metaphorizing decolonial struggle, ultimately sands-off the hard edges of violence and defangs any attempt at calls for, and strategies to achieve, justice. To be clear, I hold settler colonialism and decolonization and rape and transformative justice as distinct forms of violence and methods of redress; decolonization is not a metaphor for transformative justice, just like settler colonialism and rape are not analogous. I continue the lineage of feminist work that Tuck and Yang build in order to challenge the premise that sexual violence, and potential solutions to it, are an apt form of violence through which to understand any/all other violations on both small and large scales. The process of metaphorizing forms of violence like settler colonialism and sexual violence, and their challenges in decolonial struggle and transformative justice, works to make these violations unspeakable. Put simply, if rape is made to stand in for state and/or interpersonal violence, rape cannot then also stand on its own as a particular form of violence with particular human consequences and potential solutions. By making rape metaphorical, films like \textit{Last House} and \textit{Spit} make the extreme destructiveness of rape (physical, mental, emotional, ontological) unspoken and unspeakable. This process then has real-world implications in that the unspeakability of rape permeates social, cultural, and legal contexts in which the ability to name sexual violence as such is vital to fully addressing its causes. Further, the unspeakability of rape dictates not just what can be said, but who can say it. Rape is

\textsuperscript{14} That is, a process by which terror is instilled in a wide swath of the population, rather than the Patriot Act-era understanding of terrorism as inherently tied up in xenophobia and state power.
unspoken as a function of horror and misogyny, an alchemical mixing that is enacted through and enforced by metaphor-making. The violence of rape is sanitized in media representation and scholarly work on that representation by making embodied lived experiences, that belong to victim-survivors in the audience to be sure, stand for national trauma and state violence.

2.1. Precursors: Rape as Metaphor and the Folk Tale

Where films like Last House make rape stand in for national trauma, other iterations of similar stories, films that heavily influenced Craven’s work, metaphorize rape as philosophical problem. Akira Kurosawa’s 1950 Rashomon, regarded as a cinematic classic, is a Jidaigeki film (set somewhere between the Edo and Meiji periods) that tells the tale of a rape—although this is in doubt—and murder in a forest clearing. The narrative, bookended by Prologue and Epilogue, is told from four distinct perspectives: the Bandit, the Wife, the Samurai, and the Woodcutter. The key events remain the encounter between Bandit and Wife/Samurai; sexual encounter between Bandit/Wife; Samurai’s murder; and the recourse to a local court. Whether the “sexual encounter” was rape or adultery is in question, and the motives for the Samurai’s murder (at the Bandit’s hands) are equally ambivalent. The film functions much like familiar ethics puzzles like the Trolley Car Problem or the Lifeboat Dilemma, wherein there is no “good” solution, no “wholly true” telling of the story, so the judge/viewer/ethicist is forced to choose the lesser of two evils. This deeply cynical, radically unimaginative approach to human life and livability is a familiar one under utilitarian ideological structures, including capitalism and heteropatriarchy; these structures, among others, influence and are influenced by cultural production that includes discussions of rape.
Rashomon is more of an abstract ethics question or thought experiment than thoughtful meditation on testimony and rape, despite rape being the film's central conflict. The film, based on several short stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, is folkloric in narrative structure and pastoral in aesthetic. Further, it has been debated in scholarly and critical circles in terms of its presumed presentation of the idea that Truth can be known if (and only if) multiple accounts of the same events are triangulated, a critical and scholarly trend explained and challenged in Robyn J. Stilwell’s article “The Rashômon Effect.” It is not my goal to rehash this debate; rather, I note Rashomon as existing in a filmic lineage that would eventually lead to the rape-revenge cycle of the 1970s and those to follow, by way of Ingmar Bergman’s The Virgin Spring and from there Last House. In tracing this lineage, however, it is important to untangle the rhetorical and socio-political implication of Kurosawa’s film, and subsequently Bergman’s, in order to see where they intersect and how they have influenced later representations of rape in cinema.

As noted, rape in Rashomon is a convenient way to explore questions of testimonial reliability and ambiguous perspectives on violence. The problem here though is that consent is not a matter of debate and rape is not an element of a thought experiment for so many people, including victim-survivors in the audience. The film is a meditation on the question of testimonial veracity but is an intellectual inquiry into the problem without a real sense of the stakes for victim-survivors in the audience or world broadly. While I would not necessarily trace the figure of the Perfect Victim solely to this filmic representation of rape testimony, it certainly contributes to the social construction of Perfect Victims and the testimony of victim-survivors as always-already suspect. This rhetoric begins from a belief that women can have an ulterior motive in talking about sexual

violence enacted against them. It presumes that there are benefits to coming out as a victim-survivor, to giving testimony of this kind of violence. This presumption is demonstrably, historically false, but persists in media about rape, nonetheless.

*Virgin Spring* takes both the testimonial truth question and the construction of Perfect Victims further than *Rashomon* while maintaining the distance from the real-world violence of rape that would come to define the rape-revenge genre at least in part. The film follows Ingeri (Gunnel Lindblom) as she and Karin (Birgitta Pettersson) leave their parents’ farm to deliver candles to a relatively nearby church. Along the way Karin is raped and murdered while Ingeri watches, hidden nearby. The rapist-murderers find their way to the young women's family farm, and when Ingeri returns, the women’s parents brutally murder the men. They then set out to the place where Karin died, with her father, Töre (Max von Sydow) vowing to build a church on the spot where his daughter was raped and killed.

While not a horror film, *Virgin Spring*, in Ingeri, constructs the anti-Final Girl who would later come to prostrate her flayed corpse over the horror genre. This anti-Final Girl is set up as the antithesis to purity and moral virtue in young women, though neither saves Karin from rape and murder. Rather, purity and virtue are crucial to her placement in the story; in order for her body to be rape-able, she must first be made archetype and set in opposition to her archetypal antithesis—otherwise the violation of her body would fail as a driving motivation for the film’s meditations on religion and revenge. As a far more direct influence on *Last House* than *Rashomon*, *Virgin Spring* sets forth the building blocks for the rape-revenge films to come as encompassing this dichotomy, as well as this reliance on the metaphorization of rape. The unspeakability of rape, the inability for it to stand as its own form of violence without also already standing for other violations, is taken up by later films, but has origin points in their 1950s and 1960s precursors.
2.1.1. Against the Obfuscation of Sexual Violence

In Wes Craven’s *The Last House on the Left*, Mari Collingwood and her friend Phyllis Stone make an excursion to the city for a concert on the occasion of Mari’s seventeenth birthday. Once in the city, Mari and Phyllis ask a young man (Junior, played by Marc Sheffler) around their age about buying marijuana. After some reluctance, he invites the women upstairs where his father (Krug, played by David A. Hess), uncle (“Weasel,” played by Fred Lincoln), and their partner (Sadie, played by Jeramie Rain) lay in wait to trap and torture the women. The four are on the run, having recently escaped prison after a previous conviction for myriad sex crimes and other violent crimes. After humiliating the women through the night, the next morning the group loads the women, bound and gagged, into the trunk of their car on their way out of town. The car breaks down near Mari’s family property, and so begins Mari and Phyllis’s trials in the woods and futile attempts to escape. The young women are further humiliated and tortured, raped, and then killed. The quartet of rapists then clean the blood off of themselves and make their way to Mari’s parents’ home, where they are welcomed to stay the night. From there, her parents (Estelle [Cynthia Carr] and John [Richard Towers]) eventually discover Mari’s violation and death, and the group’s involvement in it. Her parents torture and kill Mari’s rapist-murderers in turn, with the film resolving that while they cannot bring Mari back, they have avenged her death.

While some scholars turn to *The Last House on the Left* as an example of historical allegory and collective national trauma,\(^\text{16}\) this chapter instead moves away from a reading of the film that would reify the use of rape as metaphor. That is to say that the film does the work of metaphorizing rape already, so this chapter analyzes how and why that model for representing sexual violence is

\(^{16}\) Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*.\(^{16}\)
harmful. Further, I look at the ways in which the systemic and institutional de-centering of victim-survivors as central to representing and working towards an end to sexual violence bears out in the representation of rape-as-metaphor.

Part of the process of making rape into metaphor in Last House, drawing on the work already done in Rashomon, is in externalizing validation for the claim to the word rape. In Rashomon, the audience is given some assurance of the Wife’s sexual assault because her testimony is given in a legal setting and arbitrated as such by outside observers. Last House operates self-reflexively, making the audience witnesses to Mari and Phyllis’s sexual degradation. Paradoxically, both versions foreground doubt as inherent to sexual violence—women are not to be trusted—by taking extreme measures to eschew that doubt, an act that is particularly gruesome in Last House but no less present in films like Rashomon and Virgin Spring. Put simply, the only way to know if a woman is raped, per these films’ diegetic and structural logics, is to have “been there” or to otherwise corroborate the experience externally. Like the proliferation of the Perfect Victim trope, which infiltrates courtrooms as much today as in earlier eras, this inextricable linkage between doubt and rape has harmful real-world implications for women who speak publicly about their experiences of sexual and intimate partner violence.17

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17 See the defamation trial of Amber Heard and ongoing criticism of women including Angelina Jolie and Evan Rachel Wood in the #MeToo Era and beyond.
2.2. Iterations of Last House

I position Last House as a film whose ultimate use is to obfuscate the ways in which heteropatriarchy relies on sexual violence to begin with. My argument is not so much a diminishing of the scale in which Craven operates, but rather, that I characterize his film, later iterations of it, and the films to follow in this chapter, as doing a kind of sleight-of-hand with the audience in order not to talk about rape. The question arises then of how a film in which two young women are brutally raped and murdered is not about rape at all. In order to get to the root of this problem, it is first necessary to excavate the realities of rape and sexual violence writ large as they are enacted outside the context of the film screen.

Two of the scripts for the film that would eventually be titled The Last House on the Left, Sex Crime of the Century (first draft script) and Night of Vengeance (shooting script) tell a very different story about the film’s politics than has been previously theorized. From the outset, both scripts are significantly longer than the film might suggest. What makes them most interesting for my consideration of how sexual violence is depicted, and what those depictions do to political imaginaries, is the amount and kinds of violence that were cut from the finished feature. Both Sex Crime and Vengeance include extended descriptions of the violence and degradation enacted on Phyllis’ body immediately preceding and following her death, perhaps most shockingly (though not exclusively) at Sadie’s hands.

Both scripts include the following descriptions (figs. 1-3). I have selected pages from Vengeance because they would have been written closer to the time of shooting, but the selected scenes were not included, or were dramatically altered, for the finished film. The sequence focuses so much and so deeply on anatomical destruction, that we lose sight of the person being brutalized. A striking pattern in the sequence as written is the use of simile and metaphor to divest Phyllis’
body of personhood. Phrases including “impaled on their cocks like meat on hooks” and “until [Phyllis’ vagina] is reduced to a glistening pit” do the work of turning person into body, body into flesh, flesh into gore, and gore into metaphor.

While Mari is the focus of so many analyses of Last House, I center Phyllis here specifically because she is the antithesis to the Perfect Victim and is therefore subjected to significantly more gruesome disembodiment and destruction of personhood. The violence enacted upon her body and self do not begin with the selected scene, but her rape and murder do, starting from a Freudian metaphorical penetration and moving further into literal penetration and gore as the scene progresses. This scene, beginning from, “Then the men are upon her, holding her secure, stabbing her over and over, in a frenzy,” is complex in that the temporal question of violent penetration versus literal rape remains obscure. Her body hangs limp, twitches, spills fluids, all before penile penetration has begun. Further, Sadie’s involvement in the destruction of Phyllis’ body mimics sex in a grotesque, caricatured, funhouse image of same sex intercourse. Early in the scene, “We see [Sadie] reach into Phyllis’ twisted mouth grab something and hack it off. She crams it in to her own mouth and rips chunks of it off with her teeth, then throws it to the ground and squashes it with her heels.” It is not long before penile penetration and more conventionally-defined forms of sexual violence ensue, with the description of each man’s “Blood-smeared hard-on” that they are “jerking […] toward the inert groin of the carcass” solidifying the categorization of this interaction as rape per se. It is Sadie, however, who deals the final blow to Phyllis’s body

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19 ibid 97
20 ibid 98
and closes out the scene: “Sadie: ‘Let me finish…’ Suddenly she is stabbing the knife again and again into Phyllis’s cunt, piercing, slashing, tearing at it with her hands and fingernails until it is reduced to a glistening pit.”21 Through these descriptions, we see that the degradation of the Imperfect Victim is not just a process of humiliation (as we will encounter it in Spit [2010]) but a total annihilation of anything that makes the woman a person; she remains, however, female in a biologically-essentialist, classically-archetypal way in that she is bearer of all wounds, a physical manifestation of the most extreme castration.

Where Phyllis’s rape is metaphorical insofar as it is literal gore made to speak for figurative destruction of womanhood, and the ways in which femininity is always already tied up in said destruction, Mari’s rape functions as a kind of evidence for the audience. Mari’s rape is brutal, though tempered by the severity of the torture Phyllis experiences. Her rape is depicted on screen though, for a different purpose; it is not represented to make the same point about feminine lack and destruction. Rather, Mari must be raped on screen in order to eschew any doubt in the (presumed non-traumatized) viewer’s mind as to whether she has been raped. Put differently, in order for Mari to have been raped, we as the audience have to see it happen. Where Phyllis stands as a warning of being imperfectly feminine, Mari is better described in the terms attributed to so many young women of folk and fairytale; like Red Riding Hood, she is a good girl, led astray by curiosity. As in Charles Perrault’s moral at the end of his recording of “Bluebeard's Wives,” the “feminine” desire to cross boundaries into the unknown, to allow curiosity to overcome one’s duty to patriarchy, is ultimately a woman’s downfall. It is always her fault for giving in to these desires for knowledge, but provided she is otherwise “pure” she is described in infantilizing terms (“she

21 ibid
could not help herself,” “she gave in to her curiosity”) as opposed to being annihilated outright as Bad Girls are.
SHOT OF PHYLLIS TURNING FRANTICALLY AND BEGINNING TO RUN, BUT THEN STOPPING SHORT, A LOOK OF HOPELESSNESS COMING GRISLY OVER HER FACE.

SHOT OF PHYLLIS'S P.O.V., SHOWING SADIE AND WEASEL DAWNING UP BEHIND HER, PLANKING. WEASEL ALSO HAS A KNIFE.

SHOT OF PHYLLIS, HER FACE AT LAST RESIGNED. SHE WAITS WITH HER HEAD HIGH, ONLY HER RAGGED BREATHING BETRAYING HER WEAKNESS. WEASEL STEPS BEHIND HER, HIS ARMS JUMPS, AND HIS KNIFE THUDS HARD INTO HER BACK. HER FACE CONTORTS AND SHE SPINS TO CONFRONT HIM, STUMBLING. WEASEL CUTS A LONG CRUEL SLASH ACROSS HER SHOULDERS.

THEN THE MEN ARE UPON HER, HOLDING HER SECURE, STABBING HER OVER AND OVER, IN A FRENZY.


SADIE'S VOICE: I want a knife, Krug, I want a knife -- please -- I want to get her -- I want to stab her!

SHOT OF KRUG SUDDENLY THRUSTING HER HIS COREY KNIFE.

HE HOLDS THE TOSSING BODY OF THE GIRL UP, AND SADIE ADVANCES.
SADIE: (Enraged) She thought she had such fuckin' eyes!

AND SHE THUMBS UP HIGH ON THE KNIFE BLADE AND SCOPS OUT
PHYLIS'S EYES, FLINGING THEM OFF THE BLADE LIKE FISH
ENTRAILS.

SADIE: An' the fast, sweet-talking tongue.

WE SEE HER REACH INTO PHYLIS'S TWISTED MOUTH, GRASP SOMETHING AND HACK IT OFF. SHE CRAMS IT TO HER OWN MOUTH
AND RIPS CHUNKS OFF IT WITH HER TEETH -- THEN THROWS IT
to the ground and squashes it with her heels.

SADIE: And your fuckin' sweet nipples (She cuts them
away, clumsily and savagely) And your fuckin'
tits (She hacks away at them) And your belly you
thought was so fuckin' sexy.

SHE DRIVES THE KNIFE INTO IT REPEATEDLY, MAKING A P LOCK-
PLOCK SOUND. HER HANDS ARE DRIPPING RED NOW, AND HER
DRESS AND FACE ARE SPLASHED WITH BLOOD.

SHE SUDDENLY GROPES IN THE SLASHED STOMACH, JERKS AND
PULLS OUT A GLISTENING LOOP OF INTESTINE. SHE INSANELY
HAULS IT OUT LIKE A HAMSER, IT FLOPS AND TWEETS AT HER
FEET UNTIL IT IS ALL OUT, THEN SHE SEVERS IT FROM THE
COLON. THE BODY IS NOW DEAD. LIMP. THE HEAD IS A
MASS OF TANGLED HAIR MATTED WITH BLOOD, THE SKIN PEELING
BACK IN A LARGE FLAP AT ONE POINT JUST ABOVE HER LEFT
EAR.

Figure 2: Night of Vengeance Script Page 97
ABRUPTLY KRUG AND WEASEL PUSHD SADIE AWAY. THEY ARE LIKE DRUNK MEN NOW. THEY ARE SOAKED WITH THE BLOOD OF THE SLAIN GIRL, BUT EACH IS CLAWING WITH ONE HAND AT HIS LILY, AND SOON EACH HAS A BLOOD-SMEARED HARD-ON IN HIS HAND, JERKING IT TOWARDS THE INSERT GROIN OF THE CARCASS.

KRUG EMBRACES THE CORPSE WITH A GRUNT, ITS FACE LOLLING AGAINST HIS SHOULDER, HE INSERTS HIS DICK AND BEGINS FUCKING, MUTFERS AND SALIVA SPILLING FROM HIS MOUTH.

WEASEL COMES FROM BEHIND AND DRIVES HIS LONG DOG'S COCK UP THE DEAD GIRL'S RECTUM, AND FOR A MOMENT BOTH MANIACS KEEP THE TORN BODY THAT ONCE WAS PHYLIS DANCING OBSCENELY BETWEEN THEM, IMPALED ON THEIR COCKS LIKE MEAT ON HOOKS.

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY THEY COME AND PULL OUT, STAGGERING. SADIE CLOSES IN IMMEDIATELY. SHE WAVERS ABOVE THE CORPSE, PULLS APART ITS STIFFENING LEGS.

SADIE: Let me finish...

SUDDENLY SHE IS STABBING THE KNIFE AGAIN AND AGAIN INTO PHYLIS'S CUNT, PIERCING, SLASHING, TEARING AT IT WITH HER HANDS AND FINGERNAILS UNTIL IT IS REDUCED TO A GLISTENING PIT.

SC: 33

CUT TO MARI AND JUNIOR, STILL AT THE LAKE'S EDGE. FOR A MOMENT THE SCENE IS SILENT. MARI IS LEANING TOWARDS...
2.3. When Rape Is Not Metaphor

Contrary to other films in the 1960s–’70s rape-revenge cycle and sub-genre broadly, the 1978 *Spit* is far less concerned with metaphorizing rape; it is one of few films to narratively center rape and also be about *rape as such*. This could account for the scholarship around the film emerging around alternate readings in which the rape, and Jennifer Hills ’body, must mean something wholly outside of themselves. According to Carol Clover, among the first scholars to discuss the film at length, “[G]ang rape has first and foremost to do with male sport and male pecking order and only secondarily to do with sex, the implication being that team sport and gang rape are displaced versions of one another, male sorting devices both, and both driven by male spectatorship.” Like much of Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, this argument re-centers male rapists as the primary point of interest in analyses of rape in film. I shift this focus, however, to female victim-survivors, in part by taking rape on its own terms. From this perspective rape is not *about* the meanings that men may or may make with it. Rather, it is about the trauma and destruction of women’s personhood and bodily autonomy as a result of rapists ’actions. By de-centering rapists and re-centering victim-survivors, I see solutions to rape being imagined differently on screen, with women as the central focus, building outwards to encompass accountability for rapists on a communal level. This is the work that focusing on victim-survivors begins to do.

Returning to rape as such in cinema and *Spit’ 78* specifically, the film is largely about Jennifer Hills (Camille Keaton). Jennifer Hills is a short story writer for women's magazines living

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in Manhattan. She rents a cabin in rural Connecticut in order to write her first novel. Upon arrival, she draws the attention of four men comprising the major cast of the film. They later rape her brutally and repeatedly. Where other rape-revenge films are read at even a surface level as being about something other than rape, *Spit* is so spare that it better lends itself to a discussion of rape and rape victim-survivors as subjects in their own right. Beginning from a characterization of the victim-survivor presented to the audience here, Jennifer is a softened, de-fanged version of the "new woman" of the Women's Liberation Movement. She is a writer and financially comfortable, but she specifically writes for women's magazines, which demand little from men politically. While these publications contribute to a long trajectory of making space for women to speak to and with each other, they arguably also diffuse more radical revolutionary energy. Further, publications like *Ms. Magazine* included icons of the era on their editorial boards like Gloria Steinem. In Steinem's case specifically, she was directly involved in anti-revolutionary actions, working both as an outspoken public feminist and a counter-revolutionary CIA asset. In the absence of more information that would signal Jennifer's writing for more leftist publications like *Redstockings*, she instead signifies a kind of mainstreaming of feminism to be palatable for heteropatriarchal centrist and right-wing factions.

While it is tempting to argue the film is about anxieties around Women's Liberation or, as Clover later explains, economic disparities between urban/rural populations, I read Jennifer differently. Her mainstream, semi-modern (yet non-specific) job makes her approachable but signals a moderate amount of education and socio-economic comfort—her privilege is that which remains unmarked in so many mainstream films. Further, coming from a major city brings with it an expectation that she has some familiarity with self-defense or otherwise the hyperawareness associated with femininity in urban environments. Again, however, this is coded into the character
and does not require remark; the audience is allowed to see themselves in Jennifer and assume the best of her. She is, put simply, constructed as a “normal woman,” not a dumb blonde or femme fatale. Victim-survivors in the audience, particularly those from unmarked categories themselves (white women, middle class women, cisgender women, etc.), can easily see themselves in her and therefore see their own experiences in the trauma she endures, if not the details of the assault.

While the film does a lot of work to critically represent rape from the victim-survivor’s perspective, and in so doing moves towards a representation that allows rape to carry its own meaning rather than making meaning of something else, it still denies a kind of radical politics and reifies heteropatriarchy in the process. The film relies on what I term the empathy argument, in which the filmmaker posits an audience unaware of the havoc rape does to the body and psyche of a victim-survivor, and from there assumes that, if only that audience knew about this damage, they would do something to prevent it in the future. The core assumption here, that if people knew then they would act, however, is built on a false understanding of rape as a social factor: people know that rape is horrendously violent and damaging, but they benefit in large and/or small ways from its continued existence, so preventing rape in the future is, at best, not a priority.

Though film audiences may not know the extent to which, or specific ways that, rape can damage a person, they do know that damage is done, and on a scale much greater than other criminalized acts. The threat of sexual violence in myriad contexts, however, acts as a punishment for behaviors deemed socially impermissible. Women talking back to abusers, to catcallers, to

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23 I use scare quotes here to trouble this category, especially in the context of rape, where marked categories of women (Black and Indigenous, poor, sex worker, and trans women) are at far higher risks of assault. Those identifiers, however, if Jennifer embodied them, would make the film about said identity, rather than about rape per se in a conventional, mainstream context.
police; incarcerated people leaking information about prison conditions to the media; trans men and lesbians refusing their “rightful” place in the home as child-bearers and housekeepers: these are among a few populations for whom the threat of violent rape is felt most potently. While this threat does not serve as a deterrent in the way some assume it is intended—queer communities would not only not thrive, as they do, but would cease to exist if this were the case—sexual violence is a foundational form of punishment within heteropatriarchal, carceral culture that serves to dehumanize and debilitate populations already marked for destruction. Key to this process though is that rape does not kill the victim-survivor outright in all cases. Therefore, subjugated populations can be raped (repeatedly) and threatened with sexual violence (persistently), while remaining part of the workforce necessary to the perpetuation of capital production. Jennifer’s rape, then, is systematically useful because on a broad scale it pushes women like her out of the creative workforce (short story writing) and into reproducing the means of production (childbearing, emotional labor). Where Spit provides some radical potential is in the ambiguity of its ending. Jennifer is not punished again in the film; she has endured enough in the survival of the four sexual assaults. She is not, then, subjected to the criminal legal system either as witness to her own assaults or as murderer. We also do not follow up with her to see where her life goes after the trauma she has lived throughout the film.

2.3.1. Bodies and Absence in 2009’s Last House

The original Last House unavoidably prompts discussions of the Vietnam War and backlash. It disallows conversations about rape on its own terms. The same could be said for the 2009 remake and various geopolitical and socio-political developments concurrent with the film’s production and release. The metaphor that rape stands in for, however, does not matter. From the
victim-survivor’s perspective, rape can mean many things, but none so much as *rape*. The 2009 *Last House* is not academically interesting, for this project, because it overlaps with the Presidency of Barak Obama, the reassertion and mainstreaming of gay and lesbian rights to the detriment of marginalized queer rights, or yet another distinct era of surveillance capitalism and carceral imperialism. To be sure, these lines of inquiry are all fair readings of the film, though there are films of the era that perhaps better situate and exemplify these specific elements of the moment. I reiterate, however, that for the purpose of this dissertation, the metaphor does not matter. What matters, instead, is the fact of the young women’s bodies, the fact of the abuse and torture they endure. Further, Mari and Paige’s bodies matter for their absence and their absent presence on/off screen. Finally, it is the personhood that is so thoroughly divested from these young women’s bodies from the beginning of the film that interests me here.

The 2009 *Last House* makes a number of changes to the original film but none so striking as the decision to excise much of the sexual violence from the film. 2009’s version of the story draws a distinct line between the “devious” and “perverse” sexuality of the first film and its own “normal” sexuality. Normal, here, still includes brutal rape, but lacks the queerness and representation both of the rapist’s pleasure and voracity from Craven’s film. Additionally, the 2009 film is helmed by young women who were, by the time of its release, well known children’s and young adult media stars—Paxton got her start in Mary-Kate and Ashley films and had recently released *Sydney White* (2007) after having starred as Darcy Fields in the television show *Darcy’s Wild Life* (2004–2006), while MacIsaac had voiced characters on two animated children’s series after gaining attention for her role in *Superbad* (2007).

Where other iterations of the rape-revenge film, especially the original *Last House*, incorporate visceral acknowledgements of sexual pleasure (both during and outside of rape), *Last
House 2009 is decidedly sexless and anti-erotic. The film seems to take Clover’s assertions that rape is a utilitarian male sorting device, or otherwise that it is entirely about constructed/-ing masculinity as the *raison d’être* for its inclusion. Again, however, what rape means for rapists is not of interest here. It would not be fair to assert, however, that the film lacks an aesthetic of rape. The visual waypoint for the singular rape scene (Paige is stabbed as in the original but not otherwise penetrated on screen, nor is she groped in the way Mari is) is Mari’s body, particularly her butt, as Krug penetrates her. We do briefly move to her face as she whimpers and cries, but the majority of the scene is anchored to her butt. When we do get Mari's point of view, it is to look at Paige’s gasping, heaving, mid-death bosom; Paige's face may be in the shot, but it is not the camera's central focus, just as the camera seems elastically drawn to Mari’s behind even as it scans the rest of her body and face. Whether the director, director of photography, cinematographer, grips, or anyone else on set was aware of these moves or not, the effect is one of displaced eroticism. Mari’s body, even in the midst of such extreme violence, is eroticized. Her rapist does not visibly take joy in this fact, but the audience—the non-traumatized audience—is asked to engage in some form of titillation at these shots, perhaps in preparation for the violence to follow, or perhaps because the filmmakers behind the camera did not account for the *victim-survivor’s perspective* on how this scene plays. Regardless, the result is that these young women's bodies scream silently through the screen.

2.3.2. Culpability for Which Audience? 2010’s *Spit* and the Victim-Survivor

Much of the scholarship surrounding *I Spit on Your Grave*, especially the 2010 remake, makes a point of noting that the audience identifies with Jennifer, both as victim and as murderer. These theories propose that the audience is meant to put ourselves in Jennifer's shoes during the
rape portions of the films, then endure the complicated mix of moral responsibility for torturing and killing rapists alongside catharsis at taking her/our agency back. But which audience is this identificatory process ascribed to? Surely, victim-survivors in the audience have a markedly different relationship to depictions of rape than non-traumatized audiences—we do not have to “imagine” or do mental gymnastics to put ourselves in Jennifer's place. Victim-survivors have been, are still in some ways, Jennifer Hills. So, then, what of the consequences? How are victim-survivors supposed to feel about torturing and killing rapists; how are victim-survivors 'reactions being prescribed by this argument, and what assumptions about this kind of trauma, rape trauma, does that belie?

One such iteration of this theory of identification comes from Alexandra Heller-Nicholas' Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study in which she specifically discusses the 2010 Spit: “[S]omewhere in the grueling 25 minutes is a lightning flash of empathy where we realize we are trapped, too—even leaving the cinema or turning off the DVD can’t take back what we’ve already seen.”24 Heller-Nicholas goes on to explain that, “Jennifer's rape therefore leaves us powerless. I Spit on Your Grave moves the onus of trying to comprehend the brutal incomprehensibility of rape firmly onto the spectator.”25 The victim-survivor in the audience has not only seen the violence of rape but has felt it. She knows what it is to be penetrated against her will, and further, what the aftermath of that experience looks, feels, tastes like in her body. The kind of fear and damage, physical and psychological, that rapists force onto, into, their victims is not an abstract concept to the victim-survivor. It is not within the scope of this project to define comprehensibility, an unbounded and unbound-able phenomenon. Suffice it to say, however, the brutal understanding of


25 ibid
rape that victim-survivors have far exceeds the non-traumatized audience’s impressions upon walking out of the theater or turning off the DVD.

By re-centering rape victim-survivors in the audience, the rhetoric here—that the film produces a burden on its audience, rather than rapists and rape culture burdening entire populations as well as individual rape victim-survivors—can be problematized and questioned. The utility of 2010’s Spit takes on a different valence in this context, especially for the ways in which it differs from its source material. Clover points out that the original film comprises four rapes instead of the three so often attributed to its sexual violence count. 2010's Spit adds a fifth rapist and places him at the front of the line. In 2010 the critique of systemic and institutional perpetuations of rape is made explicit: the first rapist is Sherriff Storch (Andrew Howard), who questions the validity of Jennifer’s claims regarding the initial sexual humiliation the other men enact before he anally rapes her. The humiliation takes roughly ten minutes of screen time, while the rape that Storch initiates and encourages for the other men lasts another fifteen. While it is tempting to separate Storch’s position as law enforcement (“one bad apple”) from his role as rapist, and the humiliation from the penetrative acts of rape, I argue instead that these constitute a configuration or assemblage. Put simply, the men are representative (one man video tapes the encounter, others “offer” Jennifer’s bloodied and beaten body to their friends). Further, every action the men enact, from Jonny's (Jeff Branson) casual but unwanted flirting at the gas pump early in the film to the final penetration before Jennifer limps to a bridge and throws herself off of it, exist on a spectrum from harassment to assault, all of which are geared towards terrorizing Jennifer and serving as warning (threat) to other women of what men do when women do not comply with their wishes.
2.4. Conclusion: Against Agency, Against Empathy

Compliance as a prerequisite to not being raped implies or even outright asserts that women have agency over whether or not a man chooses to rape them. It puts the onus back on victim-survivors to create conditions under which they are less- or un-rape-able. It also falls on victim-survivors, in this framing, to solicit and elicit empathy on the part of non-traumatized people, particularly audiences, in order to inspire intervention to end rape as a phenomenon. In this configuration, one that by no means began with the Anti-Rape and Women’s Liberation movements but was certainly popularized in and by them, eschews “victim” in favor of “survivor” in order to empower women with agency. That empowerment, however, relies on a false premise. Women do not enjoy the same structural, institutional, and socio-historical privileges as men, and victim-survivors do not retain the same social capital as non-traumatized people. Without the means to effect tangible, lasting changes to social and institutional structures, this enforcement of an empowerment narrative serves to leave unchanged the conditions under which rape is allowed and encouraged to occur. Instead, it makes victim-survivors responsible for their own violation. If agency is the metric by which we measure women as worthy of personhood, victim-survivors fail every time because they are fundamentally not agents in their own rape. It is only by acknowledging powerlessness as part of personhood, by grappling with the ways in which sexual violence is socio-cultural, systemic, institutional, and individual that we can begin to address it fully. Rape must stand as its own meaning, and victim-survivors cannot be expected to appeal to non-traumatized audiences as Perfect Victims or Perfect Agents before the imaginative work of building a world without rape can start.
3. Representing Rape in the 2020s

“We see these wounded women everywhere” (Leslie Jamison, “The Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain”)

I am interested in the same project as Leslie Jamison: we see wounded women, but more importantly wounded women are constructed as audiences, narratively, structurally and formally, towards political ends. Despite the proliferation of wounded women, specifically raped and abused women, in media and in the world, there is a distinct lack of acknowledgment of their presence. That is to say that women as (horror) audiences or audiences for depictions of sexual violence are often ignored. When they are considered, their potential status as victim-survivors does not enter the frame whatsoever. Suffice it to say that wounded women are as prevalent as they are imperceptible. Carmen Maria Machado’s story, “Real Women Have Bodies,” opens on a morbid note: “I used to think my place of employment, Glam, looked like the inside of a casket.”

The funerary scene here is prescient upon reconsidering the story as a whole; the fashion in the store is stitched together with the bodies of women who have mysteriously faded into near-complete invisibility but are inexorably still there. As Jamison further explains in her exploration of terminology surrounding pain:

[T]rauma implies a specific devastating event and often links to damage, its residue. While wounds open to the surface, damage happens to the infrastructure—often invisibly, irreversibly—and damage also carries the implication of lowered value. Wound implies en

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*media res*: The cause of injury is in the past but the healing isn’t done; we are seeing this situation in the present tense of its immediate aftermath.²⁷

The term victim-survivor acknowledges that the work of healing is not necessarily *done*, that healing takes time, is incomplete, comes with its own set of remissions, steps forward, and unexpected curves in the road. It also comes with what Jamison describes as *trauma* and *residue*: a specific event or set of events, and a kind of after-effect that never fully leaves the person. In short, while *healing can occur*, the traumatized subject is not the same post-healing as they were pre-trauma, thus the residue to which Jamison speaks is never fully *gone*. This *never-leaving* is, in part, due to the invisibility referenced above and in so many other iterations of stories focused on violence against women. The women in Machado’s story are described as pernicious, manipulative, untrustworthy *because of their invisibility*. Put differently, the very fact of their inability to make an impression on the world makes them *bad*, which further justifies their subjugation.

It is vital to make visible the rape/abuse victim-survivor in terms of understanding spectatorship and ways through the thicket of misogyny that encapsulates the media landscape. Where Jamison ultimately calls for a vastly different approach to wounded women—who constructs them and how, in addition to how they are received—Susan Sontag helps us to further undermine the premises that allow us to dismiss women, wounded or otherwise. One of Sontag’s main assertions in *Regarding the Pain of Others* is that there is always, whether acknowledged or not, an audience to/with/for whom the writer or speaker is writing or speaking. Or, indeed, making art.

3.1. Spectatorship and the Realities of Violence

“No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain.” (Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others)

Sontag opens Regarding the Pain of Others, a text focused on historical trauma and the photographic documentation of atrocity, with a discussion of a conversation between Virginia Woolf and an unnamed lawyer. The discussion in Woolf’s Three Guineas turns to a consideration of the implied spectator for war photography or otherwise images of tragedy and cruelty in places distinctly not here, places at a geographical (and temporal) remove from the parties in conversation. While Woolf, in her writing on the topic, approaches a feminist perspective, that perspective is still always-already colored by the imperial, colonial, or otherwise exploitative and oppressive national background within which she speaks. While Sontag does not make this point directly, she does point out that “The photographs [of “foreign” wars] are a means of making ‘real’ (or ‘more real’) matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore.”  

Filmmakers addressing sexual violence often operate as both Woolf and the lawyer in the conversation, neither of whom expresses a stake in that conversation (or, rather, do not acknowledge their stakes in the conversation). Both positions, whether pointing out patriarchy or inhabiting it, uphold institutionalized, historical, systematic violence against Black, brown, and Indigenous communities who are overrepresented in terms of lived experiences of rape and abuse. Put differently, I argue that while rape on film features white women victims, the reality is that they do not represent many real-life victim-survivors. Recent data on the disproportionality of

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Black,⁹⁹ brown, and Indigenous³⁰ women facing intimate partner and/or sexual violence is thin, with most of the information coming from 2010 reports. What is clear, though, is that sexual and intimate partner violence in general have not decreased and have, as recently as the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, increased.³¹

3.1.1. High Art/Low Art: Critical Reception and Representations of Rape in the 2020s

Thus far, the 2020s have yielded roughly eight films (in the horror genre) that incorporate themes of rape, sexual violence, and/or abuse fairly directly. These films tackle the topic in various contexts, including rape as a function of racial violence (Antebellum [2020]), intimate partner violence (The Invisible Man [2020]), sexual harassment (The Nanny [2022]), public accusation (Barbarian [2022]), child sexual abuse (The Turning [2020]), and as a past trauma (The Pale Blue Eye [2022]). Two films, Promising Young Woman (2020), and Run, Sweetheart, Run (2020), the foci of this chapter, approach sexual violence as systemic and institutional. To varying degrees of success, these films take aim at patriarchy and rape culture as oppressive structures, casting the problem of rape as a collective rather than individual problem, even if they come to different conclusions regarding how to eradicate sexual violence. One film, heralded as a tour de force of feminist filmmaking, envisions a bleak, individualized, and gruesome solution to the proliferation

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of sexual violence. The other, a widely panned, small indie film, builds out a collective imaginative potentiality, with a collective of women uniting to turn the tides of patriarchal violence. Emerald Fennel’s Promising Young Woman, as of this writing, sits at a 90% approval rating from critics and 87% from audiences according to the review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes.\(^{32}\) Shana Feste’s Run, Sweetheart, Run, often criticized for those elements praised in Fennel’s film, has garnered a dismal 63% from critics and 45% from audiences on the same site.\(^{33}\) Just three years after the release of Promising Young Woman, the film has gathered not just critical consideration but academic and scholarly writing as well. Both the illustrious Barbara Creed and feminist film scholar-to-watch Michele Meek address Fennel’s film with reverence.

Fennel’s Promising Young Woman follows Cassie (Carrie Mulligan), the best friend of the late Nina, who was publicly raped and videotaped in medical school and subsequently killed herself due to grief and trauma. Cassie, who left medical school to take care of Nina in the intervening period, now focuses her energy on going to bars, acting inebriated, and going home with men (most of whom are self-professed “Nice Guys”). Once at their apartments, she lets the scene play out, stopping them and her act only when they begin attempting to sexually assault her. Cassie lectures the men profusely before leaving them to think about what they’ve done. Along the way she also punishes the women who helped bully Nina out of med school and perpetuated the “he said/she said” myth surrounding campus rape; she sets one up to think she herself was raped and threatens the same for the other woman’s daughter. The middle of the film includes a brief romance with a Nice Guy former colleague who, predictably, turns out to have been in the room for and laughed at Nina’s rape. This plot point allows Cassie the leverage she needs to attend the


rapist, Al Monroe’s (Chris Lowell) bachelor party. Once there she drugs the other men, handcuffs Al to the bed, and threatens to carve Nina's name into his abdomen. In the ensuing fight Al kills Cassie and he and his best man burn her body. The film’s denouement sees Al arrested at his wedding reception and Cassie's body found. We do not see justice served but can safely assume that while the criminal punishment system failed Nina all those years ago, Cassie's corpse may finally be enough to convince them to incarcerate one wealthy, white, cis, heterosexual man. Of the other men involved in the rape and corpse disposal, nothing is concluded.

In her review, Michele Meek, along with many critics who reviewed *Promising Young Woman*, focuses on the film’s ability to start a conversation about rape and rape culture in the 2020s broadly and in the midst of the #MeToo movement specifically. The #MeToo movement, which Fennel claims not to be responding to directly, however, existed long before the 2010s when Harvey Weinstein was publicly outed as an abuser and famous white women like Alyssa Milano came forward with allegations on social media sites like Twitter. The phrase and hashtag, #MeToo, came about in 2006 as a community organizing project of Tarana Burke, a Black woman specifically speaking with and about Black women's experiences of sexual violence. Like Kimberlé Crenshaw's term intersectionality, however, while #MeToo was originally geared towards talking about the particular oppressions and violences enacted against Black women and *from there* extrapolating outwards towards other communities, it was not until these terms were taken up by white women (especially educated and/or wealthy white women) that they garnered media attention. So, for as much as Fennel implies that she made *Promising Young Woman* to be of an era rather than speaking to a specific movement, that era had long since been defined for her,

34 Michele Meek, “‘Promising Young Woman’: A Modern-Day Take on Rape-Revenge,” *Ms. Magazine* (blog), February 27, 2021.
just not in terms she was comfortable confronting. Similarly, her film is prestigious and lionized precisely because of its overabundance of whiteness. Despite these trends in media representation and lack thereof for Black women, however, race and class signifiers remain strong markers for high risks of forced sexual intercourse among adolescent women.35

3.2. Who Is Your Film For: Representing Rape Trauma for Men

Fennel’s film is not speaking fully to and in its own era, so that the more apt question is instead one of the imagined audience for the film. Given that Fennel is speaking from a particular positionality within matrices of class, race, and gender, that is, producing a film about white women victim-survivors, it is useful to question for whom the film about these victim-survivors is made. This dissertation’s primary argument hinges on there being more power, and more effective, meaningful power at that, in cultural production efforts undertaken with and for victim-survivors as co-producers and audience members simultaneously. The question, then, of what rape in U.S. media in the 2020s looks like, centers on whether the horror genre takes victim-survivors into account as presumed audiences or not. For Emerald Fennel’s film, the answer is a resounding “no.” The film is geared not just towards men, but especially towards men who categorize themselves as “Nice Guys,” who believe that they (and their male friends) would never commit an act of rape, but for whom the definition of rape is slippery and convenient. When Meek praises Promising

Young Woman for starting a conversation, for getting its audience to think differently about rape, she presumes an audience that has not been raped prior to entering the theater.

Supporting this argument is the perspective of non-traumatized male viewers of the film, specifically horror fans, who felt that Promising Young Woman was aimed directly at them. In an exclusive subscriber-accessible episode of their podcast Horror Queers, Joe Lipsett and Trace Thurman state outright that “This film is actually made for men.” They go on to discuss the kind of eye-opening experience they each had with the film in terms of “understanding” rape and rape culture:

[The film is] giving the male viewer the experience of what being an assault survivor is like when you watch your assailter not get punished or maybe even go to trial and then get off because they don’t have enough evidence. Because it’s obviously a really upsetting experience, ya know, it should be cathartic, I feel, because you’re seeing justice be served or punishment get doled out. And more often than not because of the system we have, it doesn’t happen. And it’s crushing. And that’s kind of the experience I had watching the end of this movie. This assertion, that a film can give the non-traumatized male viewer some deep understanding of what it feels like to have been raped and see the institutions meant to protect or at least provide care after the fact fail you, is ridiculous on its face. This is because, as Vivian Sobchack writes, “In all cases the audience [for rape in fiction film] has been placed in the position of voyeur rather than participant.”

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37 ibid
than victim.”³⁸ She goes on to explain that “the audience watches from a safe and separate dimension,” and that the acts of sexual violence on screen are a “fait accompli in which we cannot possibly intervene.”³⁹ Instead of understanding what it is like to have been raped and subsequently failed by institutional powers, what these men and many others who reviewed the film are expressing is empathy with the fictional protagonist, then projecting onto a hypothetical rape victim for whom “justice” was never served. One key problem with this dynamic, however, is the hypothetical nature of that rape victim. This configuration does not take actual, real, living rape victim-survivors, in all of their complexity and messiness, into consideration. It presumes that all victim-survivors have the same desires and goals, and further that rape is a foregone conclusion, so that the only “solution” to the problem is to empathize with the imaginary victim in these men’s heads. What this review, and others like it, make clear, however, is that men (especially those who think of themselves as unequivocally good) are the primary audience for Promising Young Woman.

3.2.1. Target Audience and Formal Considerations in Promising Young Woman

The problem of the Male Gaze in cinema is not one to be solved by simply pointing the camera at men and leaving all other existing frameworks intact. Centering men is not a solution to the fact that men are consistently centered in heteropatriarchal society. While I disagree with Laura Mulvey’s turn to psychoanalysis in her explanation of the Male Gaze in cinema, I do find the concept on its own merits useful in establishing why and how Promising Young Woman, and so

³⁹ ibid
many films like it, do not function as radical texts and indeed do a kind of reifying work with regard to heteropatriarchal visual and aesthetic norms. To that end, *Promising Young Woman’s* opening sequence seems to be a parody of the visual codes with which women are seen in cinema. The woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness is flipped on its head, with male bodies, and not conventionally attractive ones at that, on display dancing and writhing for the camera. In the film’s opening, before Cassie encounters her first Good-Guy-Possible-Rapist, we see what looks like an office party of primarily middle-aged men with token women scattered throughout dancing and drinking at a club. We begin with close-ups on their bodies, but then pull back to see the relatively small group, comically dancing and chatting on and around the club’s stage as colorful lights strobe and a remix of Charlie XCX’s “Boys” shifts from extra-diegetic to the club’s soundscape. The introduction of the film tells us in no uncertain terms that this is a film about (and largely for) boys.

The title sequence comes after we are introduced to Cassie’s particular brand of almost-rape almost-revenge in which she gives Jerry (Adam Brody) a hefty scolding for attempting to sexually assault her. In said sequence this method of “retribution” is concretized as her *modus operandi* when a trio of construction workers begin catcalling her on her way home. Cassie does not respond to the men; she simply stops, squares up to them, and stares until they walk away. The scene, when considered in any kind of real-world context, reeks of white privilege and calls to mind the very real consequences of such reactions for women who are not Carrie Mulligan and are not badass Girl Bosses in Emerald Fennel films. To illustrate, in her poem “Just Another Rape Poem,” Tasha Receno includes the following lines: “He does not know / what it is like to go from ‘Hey Beautiful ’to ‘Hey Bitch ’/ in the same amount of time it takes to spell the word / ‘compliment’” and closes with “He doesn’t understand / that this is the only time / that I can be
loud, / and resistant, / and angry, / without wondering if anything will happen to me / in the end.”

The juxtaposition of Fennel’s characterization of this common occurrence and Receno’s accounting for her fear in the face of the same is a stark reminder that, while fiction films can provide imaginative potential to see the world as we would like it to be rather than how it is, to do so through the exclusion of some women’s, some victim-survivors’ experiences is to do a disservice to those same populations.

Current-to-2020 statistics on sexual violence in the U.S. are difficult if not impossible to aggregate, with specific numbers coming out of certain sectors (the U.S. military, college and university surveys) but very little data on the country writ large. The statistic most often cited, that one in six women will experience an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime, is current as of 1998, using contemporary definitions (which have expanded significantly in the intervening quarter century). Even if we consider this number accurate—despite rape being chronically under-reported and changes in definitional structures—as of 2021 census data, the US population comprised 167.51 million women, meaning that the victim-survivor population in the United States as of Promising Young Woman’s release was roughly twenty-eight million potential viewers of the film. Exact screening numbers broken down by victim-survivor status may be untenable to collect, however, we can safely assume that the film marketing’s acknowledgement of its subject matter could account for a relatively large percentage of the population—more than we might otherwise presume—having experienced attempted or completed rape or other forms of sexual violence. And yet, the film makes clear in its opening moments that it is not for those women. Victim-survivors are laid bare on screen for an audience that fundamentally does not walk into the

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40 Tasha Receno - “Just Another Rape Poem,” 2016.

film understanding their culpability and complicity in rape and rape culture, but victim-survivors as complex people do not enter the imagined theater for this film.

3.3. Critical Disability Studies and Trauma: Nothing About Us Without Us

“You are staring out at a world on fire / complaining about how ugly you think / the ashes are. […] the work is never pretty / but it’s the only way the house gets built.” (Brenna Twohy, *Swallowtail*)

A key concept in critical disability studies and Disability Justice is the organizing principle “nothing about us without us,” a protest slogan that James Charlton traces back to South Africa in the 1990s. The concept seems simple on its face: any social, political, or institutional effort to impact the lives of disabled people should necessarily include people (particularly with the disability/ies under discussion) in every step of decision-making. The history of disability, however, is one that is defined in large part by the lack of disabled people in conversations about them and their communities. To this end, I deploy the framework of necessary inclusion in my explication of trauma: cultural production, social policy, and institutional solutions to the main causes of trauma should be undertaken in deep conversation with people who have experienced those same traumatic events. This is where I draw the contrast from *Promising Young Woman*, a film about a rape victim-survivor in which the rape victim-survivor is nowhere considered as a key

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party in the narrative development. By extension, rape victim-survivors are not treated as key stakeholders in the audience.

By contrast, Shana Feste’s Run, Sweetheart, Run is a film that centers victim-survivors as a protagonist in the narrative with a voice and an impact on the narrative. The film additionally, however, makes central victim-survivors as a collective who are posited by the film's narrative as the only effective way to combat violent heteropatriarchy and by extension sexual violence. Run, Sweetheart, Run ostensibly follows Cherie (Ella Balinska), a young single mother who works as a legal secretary and attends law school at night. Cherie’s boss selects her as a tithe to an ancient demigod, Ethan (Pilou Asbæk) who is charming and affable through the business dinner-turned-date that Cherie takes to resolve a supposed scheduling conflict for her boss. After Ethan invites Cherie in for a final drink, he brutally attacks her.

We hear a dog barking and Cherie is able to escape, bloodied and barefoot, into his wealthy neighborhood in the Hollywood Hills with no quarter in sight. She eventually makes it to a theater and asks for help from two white women standing outside, who promptly call the police to arrest her for “public intoxication” (she has not been drinking). More of Ethan’s lore comes to light while she sits in jail, with Ethan finding her and introducing the “game” to Cherie and the audience: if she survives his pursuit until dawn he will (supposedly) spare her life and her daughter’s. A cat-and-mouse chase through the streets of Los Angeles ensues, with various women making their best attempts to protect or aid Cherie (and some men doing the bare minimum of the same). She learns that her menstrual cycle is operative in Ethan’s ability to track her, but really any exposed blood operates as a signal that he can sniff out. Eventually she meets The First Lady (Dinah, played by Shohreh Aghdashloo) who has an entire system in place to hide Ethan’s past targets. She entreats
Cherie to help fight Ethan, to kill him and end the proliferation of his violent misogyny. Their plan works and with the help of Dinah and past victim-survivors, Cherie weakens and immolates Ethan.

3.3.1. Aesthetics and a Disability Justice Approach to Trauma

*Run, Sweetheart, Run* is not a pretty movie. It is a dark film (sunrise is operative to the lore, so that the action necessarily takes place at night) that most often inhabits unmanicured underground spaces. Blood is important and Cherie is bleeding, a lot. We cringe as she cleans her wounds with bleach and covers the bleeding sores with bleach-soaked cloths. We wince as she inserts yet more bleach cloth into her vagina, and again as she quickly and painfully rips a tampon out, tossing it onto a passing truck on the freeway, sending Ethan off in the wrong direction. This is not the gore of so-called torture porn. The film does not pause for us the appreciate her beautiful suffering, to dwell on gorgeous, gruesome practical effects. Time is precious here and neither we nor Cherie have time to linger on what is least or most visually attractive in the frame. Ideologically, the film is straightforward to a fault: it is a screed against misogyny and men's violence and violent thoughts directed at women. This film bulldozes its audience with its politics in the worst and best possible ways. All of which is to say, this is an ugly film on purpose.

This section opens with part of Brenna Twohy’s “Another Rape Poem,” in which she describes the ugliness of trauma and trauma recovery. Twohy is a rape and abuse victim-survivor who mobilizes her trauma, in all of its ugliness, in her poetry. *Run, Sweetheart, Run* does similar work, putting victim-survivors at the forefront of the narrative, making that narrative as unattractive as it needs to be, and letting it play out to an end of promoting collective responses to violence. As Angela Carter explains in “When Silence Said Everything”: “*If you want your trauma to be acknowledged, you must talk about your experience through a particular, recognizable*
narrative." Run, Sweetheart, Run, while still falling into the trap of recognizable narrative in places, is largely something outside of the typical horror or Hollywood fare. The story is moderately incoherent, with little explanation of what Ethan is (I say demigod here because it feels the most correct, but this is never confirmed). What we know is that he revels in and actively promotes a violent, dogmatic misogynist ideology. He has weaknesses that are not fully explained (dogs, for some reason, and sunlight) but the reality is that the film is not about him and these details about his ontology simply do not matter. The question of Cherie’s legibility is slightly less fraught. We know that she’s a single mother, that her daughter’s father had an affair with her best friend, that she aspires to being a lawyer, and that she comes from a long line of nurses. We know just enough about her as a person for her to have personhood. What we do not know, crucially, however, is what Ethan did to her in the intervening minutes between entering his house for a drink and her running out screaming, bloodied, and terrified.

As Carter continues, “[These narrative frameworks] turn trauma into a commodity, easy for others to consume—a spectacle for audiences to take in without having to truly bear witness, hold space, or face their own belief systems.” Cherie’s trauma is not a commodity though; we cannot immediately identify it or how it was forced on her. All that the audience knows is that she has been traumatized and what that looks like for her moving through the space of late-night Downtown Los Angeles. In this way, her trauma is recognizable to victim-survivors in the audience, people who also flinch at the sight of men, who are hyper-vigilant and constantly watching over their shoulders, quickening their step. People who have had trust in the general


44 ibid
safety of the world violently ripped out of them can see themselves in Cherie, not in her story exactly, but in her embodied interactions with space and time and other people.

3.4 Playing with Formalism: Run, Sweetheart, Run

On a formal level, Run, Sweetheart, Run is a difficult film to pin down as being traditionally anything. It is tempting to label the film as camp, per Susan Sontag’s writing on the sensibility. It certainly contains camp elements but may not read as such to some (particularly non-queer) audiences. Here I reference the film’s strategic disregard for the fourth wall which takes two forms throughout. First, Ethan (and later, significantly, Cherie) is able to control the camera’s gaze. He addresses the audience, moves the camera away from the main action, keeps us outside of the door while he attacks Cherie. Cherie takes the camera first here. Previous instances of Ethan taking/moving/stopping the camera have multiple purposes, which I will discuss shortly, but this moment towards the end of the film when Cherie takes hold of the frame and moves us to watch Ethan’s death functions as the final thesis of the film; she, with the help of the other victim-survivors who come to her aid, takes control of the frame and the narrative of her life, reclaiming it from the violent misogyny that we have watched steal her personhood throughout the film. It is notable that when Ethan controls the camera, we do not see his hands. It is as if the camera, the frame, moves autonomously at his will, rather than him having to lift a literal finger to shift the worldview we are given. We are introduced to this technique early, just before he attacks Cherie. Ethan stops the camera, and the score, before closing the door on us. Rather than a feminist reclamation of the gaze (which this move will become at the end), here our inability to see what happens to Cherie in that house is both a commentary on Laura Mulvey’s concept of the Male
Gaze—because of the form it takes, Ethan’s unspoken demand that we stop looking—and a denial of her experience for the viewer.

While gaslighting as a term has passed through therapeutic usefulness and into a colloquial cliche, it is appropriate here as a way of describing the purpose of this blockage for the viewer. We are only allowed to see traces of the damage done to Cherie’s body and her descriptions and performance of psychological damage. We see her physical and emotional trauma but not what caused it. In this way, the audience, and particularly victim-survivors in the audience, are denied the ability to validate beyond the effects of her experience. We cannot, in short, hold Ethan accountable for his actions, only for their effects. While this commentary is necessarily feminist, it encompasses a kind of messy feminism. It operates on two contradictory levels; put simply, it is both “good” that we are not asked to corroborate or relitigate her experience, but “bad” that we are not allowed to do so because of the will of her attacker. This messiness, for as much as it may frustrate viewers—especially non-traumatized viewers—is vital to understanding the nuances and complexity of how representations of rape and sexual/gendered violence operate in media, and how they are then extrapolated into the world.

The second notable place in which Ethan’s control of the camera makes a pointed political statement comes near the halfway point of the film. When he catches up to Cherie in a dark alley behind a convenience store, he drags her by the hair up against a dumpster and moves the camera to focus on a homeless women sitting nearby while he assaults Cherie (physical and/or sexual assault is unspecified here). This commentary on homelessness and vulnerability deserves a book project unto itself, especially when we consider that unhoused women and nonbinary people are at significantly higher risk for sexual and physical violence. Suffice it to say though that, once again, Ethan’s movement of the camera, always offered with a self-satisfied smirk, both obfuscates
the violence he enacts on women’s bodyminds and reinforces our awareness of the effect that violence has on women in the form of trauma.

Second, the use of on-screen titles, particularly the word “RUN” at pivotal moments in the film, breaks the illusion of displacement or distance from the film as it unfolds for the audience. One critique of representing rape on screen, especially in narrative fiction film, is that the distance from the screen and the story unfolding maintains a safe distance between audience and violation. While I would not argue that this distance is completely collapsed by the imperative to RUN in *Run, Sweetheart, Run*, it does break the phantasmagoric element of horror cinema. In so doing, the audience is reminded that they are sitting comfortably outside of the frame. The command does not immediately precede particularly violent scenes, it does not function as a content warning. Instead, it serves to validate what victim-survivors (and others, perhaps) in the audience are already thinking. The second time that this technique is used it is in response to Cherie’s boss telling her to trust him. The same man who insisted that she go out with Ethan, who has known Ethan for years and yet insists that “this is outside of his character,” and who Cherie has just learned has calendar notices every month listing a “TITHE w/” and a different woman’s name, is now asking her to trust him. The audience, perhaps regardless of their experience of trauma, knows that for her to trust him is patently absurd. What the command to RUN does in these moments, then, is to reinforce and validate those instincts for victim-survivors in the audience. For all of the insistence on the irrationality of hyper-vigilance and “trusting your gut,” these are self-soothing and survival mechanisms that victim-survivors develop in an effort to keep breathing. They are not by any means perfect, but by validating a deep-seated understanding of Cherie’s circumstantial (lack of) safety, the film allows other victim-survivors to see themselves validated as well.
3.5. Conclusion: The Work is Never Pretty

Women’s lives do not have to resemble the inside of a casket, to return to Machado’s metaphor. It is possible to imagine our way out of those enclosures and entrapments that derive from the heteropatriarchal need for the threat of violence to control women. That imaginative work, however, cannot happen in a vacuum. There are many points of contrast between Promising Young Woman and Run, Sweetheart, Run, but none is so stark as the economic conditions and industry imperatives that contextualize each film. Run, Sweetheart, Run was produced on a six-million-dollar budget, with Promising Young Woman’s production coming in at ten million dollars. The cast for Run, Sweetheart, Run all entered the project with moderate recognition (Ella Balinska from the 2019 Charlie’s Angels reboot and the critically panned Resident Evil Netflix series; Pilou Asbæk from a somewhat minor role on HBO’s Game of Thrones; and most notably Clark Gregg for his inclusion in the Marvel Cinematic Universe). By contrast, Promising Young Woman includes Carrie Mulligan (whose acting credits include thematically similar work in films like An Education [2009] and Suffragette [2015]), and Bo Burnham of YouTube and streaming video on demand fame (especially with his role in the critically acclaimed Eighth Grade in 2018). Additional cast members like Jennifer Coolidge, Laverne Cox, Connie Britton, and Chris Lowell are rounded out by Emerald Fennel’s cameo and star power. All of this to say, Promising Young Woman is a prime example of a glossy Hollywood production, replete with star-studded cast and well-known director—for whom this was a feature debut but certainly not her introduction into popular media making. Run, Sweetheart, Run by contrast comprises a relatively little-known cast, traditionally horror aesthetic, and ultimately failed to break one million in returns on its budget. Promising Young Woman is an essentially pretty film where Run, Sweetheart, Run is necessarily ugly. Where one leans into an aestheticization of rape culture that appeals to a broad audience, the
other goes for grit and negative emotions, driving home the horror of rape and violence against marginalized genders.

*Promising Young Woman,* with its ensemble of stars, makes out to be a film about the collective impact of rape and rape culture on women. It does not, however, follow through on the political implications of this thought. In the end, it is up to one woman to sacrifice herself in order to avenge one other woman. The notion of collectivity only exists for men in this film. On the other end of the spectrum, *Run, Sweetheart, Run* relies on collective solutions to the dual individual/communal problem of sexual and gendered violence. Not only does Cherie kill Ethan as a direct result of operating in a collective, but the film highlights the ways in which operating as an individual, one woman alone, is a fundamentally unsuccessful strategy. *Run, Sweetheart, Run* begins to do the imaginative work that needs to be done in order to move toward collective solutions to collective problems.

Violence against women, non-binary folks, and femmes writ large does not go away in a world where the most marginalized people’s bodyminds are always already held up to the standard of white, masculinist, Christian able-bodied/-mindedness and found wanting. By taking an intersectional, Disability Justice framework to our understanding of sexual violence and trauma, we begin to do the work—the ugly, difficult, unpleasant, and necessarily *nuanced* work—of imagining a world in which sexual violence is fundamentally anathema to how society functions. Further, when accountability is a real part of that conversation, as it is decidedly not in *Promising Young Woman,* we begin to move towards an actionable artistic praxis for making that world possible.
Testimony, as a philosophical concept, relies on questions and conditions that qualify and/or quantify the validity of the person delivering the statement to be considered testimony. Much has been written on the problem of rape victim-survivors providing testimony that extends beyond the courtroom. While Ruth Leys, using Paula Jones as a case study, arguing that PTSD and trauma symptoms disqualify someone from providing accurate testimony in a court of law, these logics and rhetorics extend far beyond the juridico-legal system. Leys ’parenthetical statement is informative with regard to the rhetorical formation that victim-survivors contend with routinely in trauma theory and academic approaches to “theorizing them” in ways that deny personhood: “On [the PTSD] model, if Paula Jones did suffer from post-traumatic stress, as she claimed, she ought to have been incapable of consciously testifying to her traumatic experience; rather, she should only have been able to repeat it in the mode of compulsive and repetitive acting out.”45 If we consider a rhetorical analysis of this (already deeply troubling) sentence as a means to extrapolate a relatively recent trend in trauma studies scholarship,46 we begin to see how and why victim-survivors are so glaringly absent from scholarly spaces, and, as a result, scholarship on the topic. To begin, the “if…then” structure undermines Jones ’perspective from the outset. As readers, we are encouraged to doubt Jones ’account regardless of any form of corroborating evidence or information to the contrary—more on corroboration to follow. With the structure of

45 Ruth Leys, Trauma: A Genealogy (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

46 The text from which this is drawn, Trauma: A Genealogy, was published in 2000, still not so dated as to lack influence, especially given its first chapter’s references to the much older Freudian theory.
the statement establishing a deep, abiding sense of doubt in the victim-survivor, analytically and
rhetorically we move to the specific language and qualifiers embedded in the statement. Four
words in the above quote stand out distinctly as not just calling Jones ’particular testimony into
question, but the very notion that a victim-survivor could reliably testify: “claimed […] ought […]
incapable […] should.”47 These words do not mean the same things or operate on the same level,
however, they are part and parcel of the same concept: if someone rapes you, if someone abuses
you, the kind of trauma you have suffered must necessarily fall outside the bounds of your ability
to communicate that harm. In effect, your rapist or abuser has not simply treated you as non-human
but has made you non-human in a communicative sense. This analysis comes before any
acknowledgement or assertion of Leys ’personal perspective or, more pointedly, biases.

This background of testimony’s theorization in trauma studies is necessary groundwork for
the way that this chapter approaches the rape poem as operating outside the realm of testimony.
The concept of testifying to rape is fraught regardless of the field, but especially those that directly
intersect with this dissertation—trauma studies and legal studies. For this reason, I instead consider
poetry by victim-survivors speaking to their experiences of harm to be operating more in line with
the form of dramatic monologue. This means that the purpose of the poem is not so much to speak
to an antagonistic or even ambivalent audience, as testimony often is, but to speak to and with
other victim-survivors. While the poems included here do not reference each other directly, I link
them through thematic and content analysis as speaking to/with/for the same audience members,
so that these female poets/victim-survivors are building a loose kind of collective or cohort
amongst themselves.

47 Leys, Trauma.
From the perspective of dramatic monologue, I then move to a formal theory of the rape poem in particular as functioning on crip or trauma time, with both extreme quickness and slowness. Most often the poems included here engage anger or rage as primary emotions, meaning that they move towards ever-increasing speed as a sensational experience of reading/watching/listening. This makes the moments of slowness that are present all the more noticeable, significant, and palpable. I begin from Brenna Twohy’s chapbook and performances of the same poems in Swallowtail, and from there extrapolate an understanding of the rape poem on the page. This genre, however, is one that encompasses an incredible amount of work that lives primarily online in YouTube videos and similar formats/on similar platforms, so that the written rape poem and the spoken rape poem are essentially inextricably linked.

4.1. With(in) Trauma: Spoken Word Poetry and Mediated Rage

What the cases in this chapter have in common formally is a kind of encapsulation of story. The speed and tempo of the poetry considered here equate fairly directly to an intense incisiveness, a directness and wit that may not be possible in the same stories spread over longer periods. The uniting factor between the poems included is that they approach narration as a mode of testimony, or otherwise foreground the problem of testimony within their stories and poetics. Additionally, this chapter considers poetry not just on the level of the page, but also as performance. Some of the poetry discussed herein began its public life as spoken-word performances for an audience that were then recorded and posted to online platforms, primarily YouTube. This chapter unpacks the work that poetry does, and that poetic performance does in relation to sexual violence and victim-survivors.
Brenna Twohy’s *Swallowtail* is a poetic first-hand account of trauma as a present- and past-tense series of events or moments within which the subject of trauma, and moreover traumatic sexual violence, sits. To sit with(in) trauma is to allow for its consumption of you, but also for transformation, as Twohy articulates in the process that is her chapbook. Twohy expresses across the poems included here that trauma is not singular, can be a transformative force in some cases, and that the rage that comes with trauma is less about healing oneself and more about healing the world.

The rape poem as a genre does not make truth *claims*. The poets who write rape poems are not concerned with convincing an unsympathetic audience to finally hear them. The point of the poem is not a persuasive one; it is a reclamation, a reconning become word and flesh, ink and paper, a victim-survivor standing on stage, screaming, yelling, quivering. The rape poem is (often) a woman being quiet, and loud, and silent, and angry for the sake of it. None of these things are meant to persuade. They are not emotions exhibited for the as-yet-unconvinced. People who have experienced rape, and intimate partner violence, *know* that the lack of care they have encountered is not for a lack of convincing. Put simply: no one thinks that rape is not a problem. Further, even those who know that rape is a problem do not act for any number of reasons, some of which stem from a lack of communal commitment to act. Survivors know, and are potentially motivated to write by, those community members who know the moral weight of their choices, choose not to act regardless, and apologize in the aftermath anyway. In the face of gendered and sexual violence, an apology is just not good enough.

The rape poem as a genre is one fueled by extreme exasperation. Exasperation not in the sense of annoyance—the prevalence and staying-power of rape trauma are far more than annoying. Exasperation in the sense of fury not at the acute and painful, but rather the utterly mundane nature
of sexual violence. Rape is not poetic. Rapists are not seductive or erotic when they attack their victims. Rape is about power, and where most creative work on the violence of power fails is in its assumption that oppression and harm can be poetic. Poetry, and in particular the rape poem, comes from the reassertion of oneself, one’s wholeness, into the narrative that would otherwise eclipse the self. The rape poem, then, while it may take many forms, stories, tones, and emotional valences, is always one of reassertion, and in that, rage.

4.1.1. Anger: Brenna Twohy and Victim-Survivor (Legal) Testimony

Following Lesley Goodman’s analysis of Christina Rossetti’s “No, Thank You, John” and Christine Blasey Ford’s congressional testimony, I categorize the rape poem as a subgenre, and Twohy’s instantiation of it in “To the Guy at the Back of the Room Complaining about Reading Another Rape Poem” as a dramatic monologue. Goodman puts Rossetti’s 1862 piece into conversation with Dr. Blasey Ford’s testimony in front of Congress regarding now-Justice Brett Kavanaugh’s appointment to the position. Dr. Blasey Ford’s testimony is a powerful, heart wrenching account of a sexual assault that was (allegedly)\(^\text{48}\) perpetrated by Justice Kavanaugh. The connection between Rossetti’s poem and Dr. Blasey Ford’s testimony, then, despite the nearly 160 years between them, is both texts’ insistence on politeness as a means of protecting the women in question.

Toward the end of her article, Goodman adds a third text, one that challenges this insistence on politeness, and allows us to re-think the relationship between feminist speech and political power: Ana Maria Archila and Maria Gallagher’s confrontation of Senator Jeff Flake at an elevator

\(^{48}\) Included for the sake of legal correctness, not as a statement on the veracity of her testimony.
during the hearings. While Goodman makes allowances for the fact that this intervention did not, ultimately, prevent Brett Kavanaugh from receiving the appointment to Supreme Court Justice, the purpose of this interaction can be read as having a goal wholly separate from Flake himself. Rather, Goodman argues that “Through the mask of the persona and the silence of the interlocutor, the dramatic monologue may be a way for angry women to speak to angry women.”49 This is where Twohy’s poem, and so many other texts in this chapter, come into conversation with Rossetti and Dr. Blasey Ford. Twohy opens her poem: “I get it / I know you are tired of hearing rape poems. // I am tired of hearing rape poems,”50 but her point is not that the poems are the problem; rather, sexual violence is the problem. Twohy goes on to argue, through dramatic monologue in which “The Guy” is silent (just like John in Rossetti’s piece), that the work to be done in order to not just survive and heal from the trauma of sexual violence, but to end sexual violence as a taken-for-granted element of society, begins from the point of victim-survivors’ testimony.

“Rape Poem” exists across two iterations and multiple mediums. The published version foregrounded here is from Twohy’s 2019 chapbook, Swallowtail, as mentioned. The poem first appears, however, as a performance given at the 2014 Individual World Poetry Slam in Phoenix, Arizona. While Twohy neither won nor placed in the slam competition’s rankings, her performance of what was then titled “Another Rape Poem” was featured on Button Poetry’s YouTube channel, and eventually published by Button’s press as the piece cited here.

Returning to the notion that “No, Thank You, John” is more dramatic monologue than lyric, Goodman goes on to explain the dramatic monologue as such: “While ‘No, Thank You, John ’is


50 Brenna Twohy, Swallowtail (SCB Distributors, 2019).
not always categorized as a dramatic monologue its depiction of feeling not as isolated but as social, not as individual but as relational, and not as expressive but as communicative is essential to the genre.”

The description of dramatic monologue as characterized by a feeling that is a social phenomenon allows insight into the utility of such poetry, and Twohy’s “Rape Poem” in particular. Twohy ends “Rape Poem” with the verse: “I am going to be here, / voice made from smolder, / because this is my story / and you cannot take this / from me.”

The poem as a whole and this verse in particular are ostensibly addressed to The Guy, but if read as dramatic monologue, the language and feeling of the piece are far more usefully considered as a means to speak to and with other women victim-survivors.

4.2. Music as Poetry, Poetry as Feminist Ire

“I’m about to pop your music bubble / I’ll be pickin’ fights, gonna get in trouble / Label said to / watch the way I talk, but / I’m about to pop / Fucking pop off!” (Scene Queen, “Pink Bubble Gum”)

The music video for Scene Queen’s “Pink Bubblegum,” from which the above epigraph is taken, serves as an inroad to understanding the relationship between women’s performance art, particularly punk rock, as existing in relation to spoken-word poetry in terms of the delivery of rape poems. Everything about Scene Queen’s video, from the DIY punk references such as the

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52 Brenna Twohy, Swallowtail. 6
camcorder timecodes at the bottom of the frame and pink painted shovels, to the pastel pink ski masks over dramatic false eyelashes, blends queer femme camp and direct political commentary. The video, and by extension the song, is an homage to the history of women in the punk scene, just as Brenna Twohy’s use of dramatic monologue is an homage to the history of women poets speaking about and against misogyny.

While Scene Queen’s sound is not immediately reminiscent of early Riot Grrrl artists—though the use of heavy punk/metal instrumentals is part of that lineage—her blend of feminist, queer femme aesthetics, and overtly political lyrics place Scene Queen in the historical trajectory of the Riot Grrrl movement. Riot Grrrl could, at one point in time, be better described as a moment rather than a movement, but with the proliferation of artists like Scene Queen, ZAND, Royal and the Serpent, VIAL, Banshee, Pinkshift, and many more, that moment has had a resurgence in recent years. Just like the conventional poets in this chapter, the women who embrace Riot Grrrl aesthetics and politics in the 2020s form a cohort of voices, a collective and community, just as the Pacific Northwest feminist music scene did in the 1990s.

Part of the Riot Grrrl lineage, though removed in space and time (once again bolstering the conceptualization of Riot Grrrl as a movement or ethos as opposed to a bounded moment) are the 2010s-present Pussy Riot guerrilla performances. The Russian feminist group—of intentionally unknown number—formed in 2011, engaging in performance protests in public spaces, singing political lyrics over classic punk instrumentals inside the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow.
4.2.1. Audience Reception, Femme Aesthetics, and Real Stakes

Writing on a bathroom wall of the club, bar, or scene hangout has always been a moderately effective way to alert people who use that gendered bathroom of potential threats. When bands go on tour across disparate venues, states, countries, the “words on the wall” need to equally update to encompass safety for someone who may not be in the right place and right time to see the literal writing on the wall. In some cases,53 allegations such as those against All Time Low54 are enough to warn women away, but most often they are not. Moreover, what many advocates refer to as litigation abuse,55 or the use of lawsuits to control sexual violence narratives, as we have seen with many of the men in this dissertation, is common and works in the predators’ favor, painting any woman speaking out against him as hysterical or duplicitous.

53 “Imbeinghonest on Twitter,” Twitter, October 25, 2021.
As Scene Queen’s opening verse of “18+” states, “Headline spot goes to the abuser (That's right) / Half my idols are fucking losers / If I'm the bitch just starting rumors / What about the dogs
turned into groomers.” The use of the term “groomer” is necessary and fraught in the release context of this track. The single, released in 2023, deploys the language of victim-survivor advocacy and trauma-informed activism and counseling in the turn to the term “groomer” but, unfortunately, was also released into an environment in which this term has been co-opted by right-wing extremists to refer to queer folks and allies. For this reason, and for the term’s relevance to my broader study of sexual violence dynamics, I contextualize “grooming” here from a victim-survivor perspective. In its most innocuous form, grooming means to prepare or train. In a sexual violence context, grooming is the process (typically with a significant age differential) of an abuser preparing or training their victim to accept abuse, violence, and harm. In Scene Queen’s usage, the track specifically refers to bands who weaponize not just the age differential between themselves and their fans—the members of All Time Low are all thirty-five years old as of this writing, with the band’s founding dating to 2003—who are often under the age of eighteen (though significant age-based power differentials can exist without the codification of statutory rape), but also their fame and industry influence as a means by which to exploit and take advantage of young women and girls. When Scene Queen uses the term “groomer” she’s referring to a multiplicity of processes, including but not limited to the use of lyrics and aesthetics in music creation that make the band more “relatable” to younger audiences; the doling-out of favors like, as she notes, “pink wrist bands on the guest list;” and access to VIP events and spaces. Scene Queen’s calling this phenomenon out in a popular track with music video was not likely to be a popular career decision, as the Reddit page for r/poppunkers makes clear:

56 Scene Queen, 18+ (Hopeless Records, 2023).
57 ibid
Figure 6: Reddit r/poppunkers comments on Scene Queen's "18+

The YouTube comments on the music video present a vastly different audience reaction, with an overwhelming majority of posts coming from supportive listeners who see themselves in the demographics that the song is written for, victim-survivors. Comments include general support ("@SheshkuDeiwe: This is a song I'd be proud to blast with my windows down") and feminist statements ("@Ineedagoodusernamebutforno8002: But FOR REAL girl, thank you so much for this. It's about time someone went feral on the abusers and creeps in the scene") in addition to support from other similar artists in Scene Queen’s cohort like Delilah Bon ("@DelilahBon: So incredible! Thank u for using ur voice for us Scene Queen♡ brave for u to release this and we
are so grateful 😭”). Additionally, comments included references to specific bands that the track applies to or speculation as to who the lyrics call out: “@Duckbats: ‘If nice guys finish last, Then a stadium tour is a victory lap’ ‘The allegations that have been made against a member of [bleep bleep bleep] I KNOW SHE’S CALLING OUT DANCE GAVIN DANCE” 59 and “@MrTomFTW: I would say the industry is at All Time Low but lets be honest this shit’s been going on longer than I’ve been alive and needs to stop” 60 All of this commentary speaks to two interconnected facts about the alternative music scene at the time of the song’s release (and long before it): as with any other (creative) industry, alternative music has a persistent problem with misogynist sexual violence, and people from marginalized genders have reached a tipping point for addressing this kind of violence in the scene. Scene Queen’s music comes not just from an artist’s perspective, but also from a fan perspective. As a fan-practitioner, she and other artists already mentioned are building a rhizomatic infrastructure with fans to actively combat the harm that has historically been done at live shows in the genre.61

On an aesthetic level, Scene Queen’s video for “18+” fluidly blends references to femme media (the t-shirt with breasts cut out is a Mean Girls reference, paired with the neck brace from the end of the film) and feminist imagery (bra burning, screaming in her male bassist’s ear). Her

58 Scene Queen - 18+ (Official Music Video), 2023.

59 ibid

60 ibid, emphasis mine

61 Scene Queen VIP Meet and Greets are primarily community-building events that include personal and communal affirmations and sincere promises to look after other femmes in the concert space both for the coming show and in future alternative music spaces. This was my experience at the VIP session for her Pittsburgh, PA concert with Set It Off in May 2023.
choices are rooted in a camp sensibility, however, a tongue-in-cheek approach to a serious subject that nonetheless does not diminish the seriousness of sexual violence in this arena. The fun of this video is not about making a joke of rape or of liberation, but rather in finding “your people,” being in community, and agreeing to burn everything harmful down together.

4.2.2. Scene Queen and Femme Fury

Hannah Collins, stage name Scene Queen, has begun building a career on feminist, queer, femme rage. Her music is also decidedly raunchy, soaked in drugs, sex, alcohol, and general recalcitrance to purity culture. Her track titles alone speak to the blend of queer femme kitsch, sex and sexuality, and wrath present throughout her music. She operates in a sub-genre of alternative music that she has dubbed “bimbocore” from which her first two Extended Plays (EPs) take their name. Her first EP, Bimbocore, includes tracks such as “Bring It On,” “Pretty In Pink,” “Pink Bubblegum,” and “Pink Rover.” The prevalence of pink in the titles might suggest a pop-music sound, however, her aesthetic is far closer to metalcore (a blend of metal and punk rock) with dance and pop mixing over heavy guitar riffs and screaming vocals. Her second EP, Bimbocore Vol. 2, is more of the same in important ways, with track titles like “Pink Barbie Bandaid” and “The Rapture (but it’s Pink)” but with club and house influences that lean into the overtly queer sexuality that she embraces. It is her single, “18+,” which dropped on March 17, 2023, that amplifies the increasingly political overtones in her music. This is not to say that her previous work has not also been overtly political, but rather that this single in particular additionally operates outside of the creative space. The proceeds from the song’s streaming licenses are earmarked for the Rape and Incest National Network, and Collins gave an interview with Alessandra Rincon at Ones to Watch discussing the work that she hopes her music does beyond aesthetic enjoyment.
In response to the question, “If you could say anything directly to your female, female-presenting, female-identifying, nonbinary, or any fan who can relate to the experience, frustrations, and anger of 18+, what would you say?” Collins speaks directly to the kind of communal work that I propose rape poetry (and other, similar forms of cultural production) does:

I hope you feel validated because you're not the only one that's gone through this. There are so many stories that I feel like, hopefully, people are starting to realize this is incredibly common. But I also hope that through all of this, we can begin to feel safer within our scene. And you know what? If the song comes out and nothing changes in the scene, I have no problem making the same music but playing it in another scene. Like, I said in ‘The Rapture,’ I want to burn down the old scene and just start a new one. And at this point, it feels like there are so many bands that I know feel the same way that I'm like, ‘Okay well, why are we still holding on to this thing that doesn't serve us?’

Collins’s understanding of her positionality in an ecosystem is one that she openly discusses as being painfully commonplace, in that the kinds of harm and abuse to which she speaks have had incredible staying power in the alternative music scene: “I’ve been hit on by people that do merch for bands. I’ve been hit on by bands and I’ve lived through the scene.” More to the point of this chapter’s discussion of poetics as intimately tied up in a kind of retributive rage, she goes on to state that “it’s a big release for me to do this song now, after all these years of just seeing so much happen in the scene,” having earlier explained that “The scene is not like it was when we were 16 years old and actively getting creeped on by people at these shows, but now that I'm almost 26,


63 ibid
I’m still seeing that same toxic masculinity.”  

The call here, for Collins, is an imperative to change the current culture, but it is deeply rooted in a historical and institutional understanding of the persistence of violence.

Part of the political project that femme rage engages is to move towards individual and collective autonomy. To that end, Collins’ music and personal perspective on her creative work purposely steps away from individual solutions and toward systemic, communal understandings of responsibility for one another. In the interview, Collins specifically emphasizes that “18+” is not written as an attack on any specific artist or band for a number of reasons. First, to reference specific individuals works against victim-survivors’ autonomy: to release a song about a particular incident is to tell another woman’s story for her without consent. Further, however, Collins takes care to explain that the ultimate goal is to establish safer spaces for young girls and women in the alternative music scene, and society writ large, by building communal responses to harm. Her point, in short, is that the problem of sexual violence is not solved by punishing individuals who enact harm, but instead by addressing the conditions that allow for that harm in the first place.

4.3. Claire Holland: Fragmenting the Final Girl

Part of a trauma-centered approach to representations of sexual violence in cultural production is allowing space for the ways in which sometimes traumatic experiences, experiences of extreme violence, break things—places, memories, conceptions of the self—in ways large and small, but significant all the same. Claire Holland’s I Am Not Your Final Girl uses some of the

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64 ibid
best-known Final Girls in the horror genre as subjects for individual poems in the chapbook, in some cases bringing female characters who might not constitute the classic Final Girl (“India” [Stoker 2013], “The Female” [Under the Skin 2013], “Amber” [Green Room 2016] and “Shideh” [Under the Shadow 2016]) under the term’s umbrella. Holland’s inclusions are distinctly political. She opens her introduction with a cogent critique of politics in the United States between 2016 and 2018, the first full year of Donald Trump’s presidency, and ends with a broader critique of the trajectory that media has taken in relation to representing women on screen: “If the year since that fateful election has taught me anything, it’s that real women are final girls, and so much more. We are more than a trope. We’re strong and slutty, quiet, and confident, outspoken and sarcastic and we don’t feel like smiling because we have work to do. We defy definition. And we’re not going down without a fight.”

The two poems under consideration here, “Sally” and “Jennifer,” are positioned in the first section of the collection: “Assault.” The following sections, “Possession,” “Destruction,” and “Transformation” each have their own organizing principles and themes, but it is this first section that most clearly grapples with sexual violence and rape on screen.

Sally Hardesty, whose poem comes towards the end of the section, is perhaps the first Final Girl in Carol Clover’s definition of the term. Sally’s film, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre takes the prototype for the slasher film developed in Hitchcock’s Psycho (1960) and refines the formula, setting forth the terms with which Clover, and filmmakers, critics, and audiences alike would discuss the slasher film for decades to come. The most relevant element of the slasher in Clover’s formulation, the Final Girl, is defined at length in Men, Women, and Chain Saws:

The image of the distressed female most likely to linger in memory is the image of the one who did not die: the survivor, or Final Girl. She is the one who encounters the mutilated

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bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified. If her friends knew they were about to die only seconds before the event, the Final Girl lives with the knowledge for long minutes or hours. She alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B).66

Clover then moves into the psychoanalytic space of explaining why this last point is so often the case in horror (women must subvert their gender—Clover erroneously uses sex—in order to survive this certain death), but the formula here is still useful in discussions of how gender, horror, and sexual violence intertwine. Clover’s over-reliance on Freudian psychoanalysis, however, is a strong argument for the politics of Holland’s subversion of the Final Girl trope: Holland pulls in so many disparate examples because “[Women] are more than a trope,” and while Clover and Holland are both discussing fictional women in their work, Holland makes room for the idea that her fictional women could just as easily be parts of living women, women reading her poems, women who need to be seen.

Sally’s poem, named for the Final Girl upon which all other Final Girls are based, is concerned with the same image of Marilyn Burns as so many other artists through the years: the final, closing shot of her. As the poem describes, “Her face, / bathed in blood” is the most striking visual moment of the film. Holland goes beyond describing the visuality, or even aurality of the film—Sally's laugh is equally unsettling in this moment—to postulating an interiority for the character: “There is nothing else in this world / like realizing / you're going to live / and not being

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sure / you can.” This move, to shift from Clover’s formulation of “knowing one will die” to “knowing one will live” is not just a trite reversal, but an acknowledgement of something that so many survivors demonstrate in their work: the lived experience of extreme violence leaves a person with the impossible question of how to continue breathing.

The alternate reading of the verb *break* in the context of sexual violence is explored in Holland’s *I Spit on Your Grave* poem, “Jennifer.” *Spit* is a harrowing film, oft maligned by “both” sides of the political spectrum. Holland’s use of this film, and this version of the film, belies the revolving nature of *Spit*’s sharp edges. *Spit* is often touted as the first, or quintessential rape-revenge film: Jennifer Hills is *both* passive and active simultaneously. This simultaneity is important to the film’s narrative development, but also to its politics and Holland’s ability to appropriate the character as she does. Holland writes to/of Jennifer: “… She has teeth and claws / and fight in this fight, but it will / mean nothing to a man who says / I like a girl with spirit / when what he means is / I like a girl that can break.” Jennifer does break in the film. She also *breaks others*. In every iteration of *Spit*, the protagonist does not just kill her rapists, she annihilates them. Jennifer’s rapists are no longer recognizably people by the end of *Spit* (1978 and 2010) in ways that include physical death but go far beyond it. It is only through this retribution that Jennifer is able to recognize her brokenness for what it is: a moment of rupture in a prescribed life, a small but significant place in which the boiling violence of patriarchy underneath the surface of her life broke through.

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67 Holland, *I Am Not Your Final Girl*.

68 It is, in fact, the third, but like *Texas Chainsaw* it refined the formula.

69 Holland, *I Am Not Your Final Girl*.
4.4. Conclusion: Retribution

Rage, as a powerful tool for regaining a sense of wholeness, is indicative of the state of sexual violence in the United States, if not the world, as of 2023. Brenna Twohy illustrates this rage in “Consider This Your Only Warning”: “They see the way I smolder, / & they think whiskey & they think easy, // not knowing I have swallowed hell / & carried it back in my belly. // Sometimes I call this healing. / Sometimes I twist my hair up, // cross my legs, & watch them / learn the difference // between a smile / & a baring of teeth.”70 As with so many texts in this chapter, there is a specific kind of temporality to the process of recognizing and embracing rage in this poem. Victim-survivors are not static, or, they do not necessarily stay stuck in one moment, emotion, or place. While stuck-ness is a valid response to trauma, it is not the only response, as Twohy illustrates. Rather, her poem indicates that she, the author-narrator, is in a state of flux, a state of sometimes. Additionally, there is an unspeaking interlocutor, or interlocutors, here that contribute to the narrator-author’s flexibility, just as in dramatic monologue: “they think whiskey & they think easy.”71 The “they” of this poem is a universal concept, established as a symbolic counterpoint to, and explanation of, Twohy’s rage. “They,” the creators and enforcers of rape culture, sexual violence and harassment, and heteropatriarchy, are on the receiving end of Twohy’s bared teeth, and rightly so. It is not only a justified threat because it is a reaction to existing violence, but because that violence is perpetuated and borne out of a sense of misunderstanding or underestimation of the powerful anger in the zeitgeist of women’s experience. The utility of these texts does not lie in each individual narrative or testimonial. Instead, it is in their collective power,

70 Twohy, Swallowtail.

71 ibid
their existence as a communal response and as productions of a cohort of women pushing back against a culture of sexual violence, that lends them their usefulness.

Another way to frame brokenness and the things that trauma and violence break is through the work of fragmentation or rupture. Taking a postcolonial, queer, feminist reading of rupture allows for the act of breakage, of fragment-making, to be read as potentiality. Once again, this is not a process of imposing positivist readings on heinous experiences. Rather, following from Carine Mardorossian’s work in *Framing the Rape Victim*, I challenge the dichotomy between active-agent and passive-victim. As Mardorossian points out, much of the feminist history of the anti-rape movement relies on the idea that women are *passive victims* who need to take more active roles: learning self-defense, being aware of their surroundings, parking exclusively under street lights—following all those little rules for surviving in a hostile world that have been imposed on girls and women in the years since the anti-rape movement took them up. Agency is used as a proxy in these discussions for power, and the issue of power in relation to sexual violence is seldom rooted in the precise moment in which sexual violence takes place. People from marginalized genders, women included, are historically, systemically, institutionally, and interpersonally disenfranchised. More so depending on intersectional factors and social contexts, in which cases “oppressed” is a more apt term. Women do not have ultimate control over the sexual violence they experience; they may in exceptional cases be able to shift or alter the details, how, what, where—the form—of their attacker's violence, but the question of consent is never a question. If a woman cannot give consent, cannot enforce a “no” on her attacker, then she ultimately cannot exert control over the situation. If, instead of insisting on agency and activeness, scholars and activists working in the realm of sexual violence make space for broken moments, memories, and experiences, for broken *people* who may be able to find their way to wholeness eventually but do not have to, we
deny victim-blaming ideologies. This is to say that by acknowledging and honoring the ruptures that violence opens up, we are better able to push back against internalized shame and external stigma.
5. We Are Not Unaware of Rape: Forestalling Justice with Evidence

Acknowledging that rape is so prevalent and harmful that we do not have words to adequately encompass the damage rapists do to victim-survivors and the social fabric is a deeply uncomfortable position to be in for many people. Reasons for this vary, but for non-victim-survivors to *genuinely* speak this harm is necessarily to recognize their own complicity in rape culture. It would mean speaking to how all people, to different degrees, are at least capable of benefitting from a system that instills the fear of violation in women. Women, especially white women, must come to terms with intersecting oppressions that rely on and bolster rape culture. One ideological underpinning of rape culture that this chapter will take as its focus is seldom recognized as such. The constant turn towards “empirical evidence” to the detriment of all other forms of knowledge undergirds systems that perpetuate and encourage rape.

In philosophical terms, empiricism is contrasted with rationalism as distinct epistemological modes.72 Whether relying on the five worldly senses or the addition of self-knowledge and the sensing self, metacognition, both epistemological approaches posit some form of Knowledge or Truth that can be ascertained by engaging and gathering the requisite “unbiased” information. This is the core problem with evidentiary approaches to sexual violence and justice, therefore. People are messy; victim-survivors are messy; a rapist’s violation of a victim-survivor is *messy*. The notion that any of this can be reduced to discrete pieces of evidence is patently unrealistic. For that reason, this chapter deconstructs the rhetoric and aesthetics that victim-

survivors are often forced or conditioned into using to describe their own messy experiences of sexual violence and abuse. I begin from an analysis of art practice as a way through this thicket of aesthetic, formalized evidence, and from there move to the rhetoric of memoir. Finally, I end with an analysis of documentary style and codes that ultimately do a disservice to victim-survivors, including those behind the camera or working in collaboration with filmmakers. All of this illustrates the breadth and intricacy of how the ideological work of empiricism and other Enlightenment epistemologies work against victim-survivors and oppressed populations by imposing false and unattainable standards of “Truth” on messy, complicated, nuanced experiential knowledge.

5.1. Méret Oppenheim and the Materialized Feminine

Oppenheim’s Object, as it is most often experienced today, is not sculpture. Rather, the artwork is experienced in mediated form, as a photograph taken by Dora Marr of Oppenheim's artwork. Further, the photograph is significantly more likely to be seen as a digital object than it is a printed piece in a museum or gallery, adding yet another layer of mediation to the way the object that is the teacup is experienced; it is still an object, but it is the digital object of the photograph of the physical, sculptural object. What, then, becomes of the polemical, feminist artwork when it is transformed from physical thing in a physical space through celluloid, into so many pixels and so much light? If, following from Marshall McLuhan, the medium is the message, what happens to the message when it is translated three times over into vastly different contexts? What, especially,

happens to that message when it is originally one that assaults the spectator with a critique of coerced femininity and its inherent violence? What, in other words, happens to that assault when the physical object is literally reduced to electronic signals, 0s and 1s, and transmitted into bathrooms, bedrooms, living rooms, classrooms, to name a few? I pose these questions as a means of getting to one of several possible considerations: does a polemical, protest-oriented, assaultive message (in the form of object, speech, testimony, etc.) retain its power upon widespread dissemination, or is it instead coopted by a mainstream politic set on awareness of sexual/gendered violence rather than its eradication? All of these questions highlight the importance of an embodied, material framework for analyzing ephemeral, digital media.

The importance of materiality, of the embodied, the ephemeral but irreducibly always there, is not new to female and feminist artists working in memoir and documentary in the 2010s-2020s. Méret Oppenheim’s work, particularly her sculptural work in the 1930s, grapples with exactly these questions, so that her work, in her own words, “is not an illustration of an idea but the thing itself”74 While any number of pieces of Oppenheim’s interwar sculpture could serviceably describe the intersection of feminist art practice and materiality, the two selected, *Object* (1936) and *My Nurse* (1936) are the literal things of restrictive femininity. Trussed-up pumps do not simply signify that cisheterosexual womanhood is both compulsory and heartbreakingly limiting, they are one tool through which that limitation is enacted. Taking a different tack, *Object* is a feral object. It is not about the boiling rage of femme subjugation; it is that rage made porcelain and fur. Neither object is just anything, and neither is meant to stand in for something—as Edward Powers explains in his art-historical analysis of her work,

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Faced with Surrealism’s misogynistic conception of Woman as the literal object — to whom only the male subject can lend the metaphorical structures and meanings, of which she is dispossessed in her own right — Oppenheim responds by letting men have their (Freudian) metaphors, and instead reclaiming the (Irigaray-like) literal for women in their own right. In effect, Oppenheim fights essentializing fire with fire, by embracing her own alterity, although not as the ‘Other’ of Surrealism’s male subject, but rather as the ‘Other’ of herself.  

In Oppenheim’s embrace of alterity, her Otherness to herself rather than archetypal masculinity, she subverts what Laura Mulvey would later identify in film as the Male Gaze. Oppenheim’s sculpture is not a response to the Male Gaze but operates wholly outside of, and is indifferent to, it. In this way she enables what Avery Gordon terms complex personhood for herself as artist and for the disenfranchised female viewer. Oppenheim’s work lays the foundation for what I describe as a victim-survivor-centered aesthetic mode or viewer address.

Further, the relationship between her sculptures, her objects, and a masculinist utilitarianism is also one of subversion. This subversion establishes for us a feminist lens that turns away from evidence and testimony as corroborative, turns away from materiality and vocalization as inherently validated by outside authority. According to Powers, “[Oppenheim’s] objects are not constituted as use-values. Rather, the contrary: they are not so much useless as against usefulness altogether. Trussed like a goose or wedded at the toe, her shoes hobble rather than ambulate.”

Oppenheim’s objects are not useful, nor do they speak to the use value of their component parts. They are to be experienced as they are; they leave an impression not for what they can do or what

75 ibid 375

76 ibid 364
they represent, but for their being and existence in space. I thus extrapolate this aesthetic approach to art practice towards an understanding of the aesthetic mode in which cultural production surrounding rape operates as being *against* use value. Simply put, feminist art, writing, and filmmaking around rape must begin from a place of sitting in the experience, a place of ontological understanding, rather than intellectualized and corroborated epistemologies of Truth. This chapter explores texts that do, and more often do not, approach rape this way, and the ways in which they ultimately fail as political texts as a result.

5.2. Talking Back to Power: Chanel Miller and the Refutation of Cross-Examination

Chanel Miller’s account of being cross-examined during *People v. Turner* is harrowing to say the least. The pattern is a familiar one for anyone who has followed high-profile cases in the realm of sexual violence. The defense attorney works towards two goals: undermine the victim-survivor’s credibility and confidence and cut away at their narrative in “small” places until there is little coherence left. For Miller, the moment that drives these tactics home is the defense attorney for Brock Turner asking repeatedly what she had to eat the night of the assault. The pattern remains: the point of these questions is not to “get the facts” or establish a setting or context, the way it might be in testimony. Rather, the rhetorical purpose of asking Miller to confirm details about the night of her assault is to embed subtext into her narrative. It is a victim-blaming tactic that builds her up as a particular kind of caricature, a party girl who drinks too much on an empty stomach and makes bad choices, but makes choices nonetheless, and then “cries rape” in the aftermath and regret of those decisions. The memoir, then, is a useful tool for making space for victim-survivors’ truth, lived experiences as they are most significantly understood *by the victim-
survivor. For Miller’s part, she spends time second-guessing her account of dinner the night she was assaulted before finally finding her rage, and subsequent power, in narrativizing the assault in her own way:

_Fuck the fried rice._ Fuck what you sipped, how you sipped, when you sipped with whom, fuck if I danced on the table, fuck if I danced on the chair. You want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Your whole answer is sitting with his shoulders low, head down, his neatly cut hair. You want to know why my whole goddamn family is hurting, why I lost my job, why I had four digits in my bank account, why my sister was missing school? It was because on a cool January evening, I went out, while that guy, that guy there, had _decided_ that yes or no, moving or motionless, he wanted to fuck someone, _intended_ to fuck someone, and it happened to be me.\(^77\)

The shift in subject in this passage is significant. She is, at once, speaking to other victim-survivors (“Fuck what you sipped, how you sipped, when you sipped with whom”)\(^78\) and to the non-traumatized audience that is the judge and jury (“You want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”).\(^79\) This dual audience address works at cross-purposes, in one breath emboldening victim-survivors for whom the criminal punishment system has been a site of continued trauma, and in the next breath turning away from victim-survivors and towards an unsympathetic audience.

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\(^77\) Chanel Miller, _Know My Name: A Memoir_ (Penguin, 2019).

\(^78\) ibid

\(^79\) ibid
5.2.1. When You Don’t Give Him What He “Needs”

Miller explains the purpose of the defense attorney’s line of questioning, which is definitively not to hear her answers, but rather to build his own argument about who she is as a person: “I shut my eyes and remembered something else he said; That’s not the answer I need for my question. I felt naive as it dawned on me he was never interested in my responses. He already knew the answers he wanted; he just wanted me to say them.”

The acknowledgement that he has a pre-existing conclusion to his own questions before they are asked, and feels comfortable saying so in the courtroom, might strike Miller, and her reader, as blatantly running counter to the ideological basis of seeking justice. As the rape-revenge films of the 1960s–1980s demonstrate, however, the fact of justice existing for victim-survivors if, and only if, they create it for themselves has developed into its own kind of common sense. The defense attorney’s goal in this line of questioning is not to protect his client’s right to a fair trial; Miller explicates his ideological argument as a function of rhetorical pattern: “That’s what you decided to do at that time, right? That was an intentional thing. And that was a decision you made. He littered my night with intentions and poor decisions, suggesting they had everything to do with the final act.”

Miller did correct the defense attorney though, no matter how uncomfortable, and did not give him the answers he “needed” from her. While Miller “won” her case, Brock Turner was sentenced to six months in jail with three years of probation. The assault occurred in 2015 with his sentencing in 2016. As late as December 2017, after having been released only three months into the sentence for “good behavior” in September 2016, he appealed to have the sentence overturned. Miller may

80 ibid
81 ibid
have “won” the day, but Turner was not held accountable for his actions, the harm he caused, and remains a vocal public advocate of “dry campuses” and “alcohol education” as a means to end sexual violence in college settings. As if he had no agency or control over his own body in the moments leading to, during, and immediately following the assault when he ran from the scene.

5.3. Evidence as an Appeal to Authority

The demand for evidence in the documentary mode presupposes an appeal to authority. In order for something to be considered evidence, it must first be certified, validated, by some form of authority outside of the immediate situation. This presents an existential problem for victim-survivor narratives in that the victim-survivor can never be an authority on their own rape. A woman’s experience of sexual violence must always-already be verified by a more authoritative figure with regard to her experience than herself in order for her story to constitute a form of “truth claim.” This appeal to authority may take multiple forms, with multiple forms of appeal and authority both cropping up as formal trends or seemingly aesthetic choices that mask an otherwise clear rhetorical mode of engagement. Formal trends may turn towards mainstream media coverage (including national and local news), legislative hearings, and temporally static accounts take precedence over victim-survivors’ narratives of their experiences. In Phoenix Rising, where Evan Rachel Wood reads out her diaries, recorded during her experience of intimate partner violence, the appeal to authority comes in the form of the diary as corroborative evidence, not in her present commentary on the experience in hindsight. It is expected that she will use her diaries to cast her experience in amber, setting it as a fixed event or series of events, impervious to present conditions.
Clinical work on trauma since Van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score* in 2014 has acknowledged that trauma re wires the brain. Less commonly espoused is the notion that healing re wires the brain as well. In order for the diaries of a victim-survivor to stand in amber as solid, immutable, authoritative documentation of a past event, that victim survivor’s testimony in the present moment must be considered superfluous, disregarded. Trauma is, then, allowed to do its reworking with regard to neuro-chemical circuitry, but healing is not, or at least is not allowed to weigh in on that past process. Complicating this, Allison Crawford draws on the historical and contemporary fields of trauma studies and psychotherapy to intervene in discussions of the mind-body split with regard to post-traumatic stress. While I take issue elsewhere in this dissertation with Ruth Leys ‘work, we are aligned, based on Crawford’s characterization, in our critiques of van der Kolk: “In order to prove [a direct link between traumatic event and trauma], which is important for the social and judicial response to people who have been exposed to traumatic events, she argues that van der Kolk and others have insisted on traumatic memory as having a kind of pristine literality, of being faithfully ‘etched ‘on the mind (and body) rather than being a subjective representation of events.”  

Where my work here diverges from Leys’, van der Kolk’s, and Crawford’s is in this operative turn towards “pristine literality” or an imperative for traumatic memory to be held up against some form of empirical Truth.

In order for the messiness of traumatic memory to be a problem, to be *pathologized*, we must first assume that there is any form of memory that is *not* messy. The assumption that any person is able to perfectly, “pristinely” recall events for the purpose of evidence and clean testimony is on its face absurd, and the proliferation of theories of trauma that rely on a contrast

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between disabled, traumatized bodyminds and “normal” or “reliable” bodyminds works in direct opposition to understanding both victim-survivor personhood and the general messiness of people. I assert that this philosophical/clinical model is deeply embedded in both judicial contexts (in the forms of testimony and evidence) and in the aesthetic codes of documentary that aim to appeal to a non-victim-survivor audience (in order to elicit empathy).

5.3.1. The Documentary Mode, Truth Claims, and Radical Reimaginings

One central element of the documentary mode, according to some experts in the field, is the notion of a truth claim. The truth claim is the premium that the documentary mode has on accurately representing some, any element of reality. The core problem here is that what constitutes reality is highly subject to power structures and relations. Furthermore, systemic, structural, historical, and institutional oppressions often (if not always) inflect whose reality is considered real. Furthermore, even if a unified notion of reality could be derived, that is not to say that media, defined by what is and is not within the frame, could represent that reality. This is where the axiom “believe women” becomes crucial: in an almost Kierkegaardian sense, the belief in survivors must negate a reality constructed through the exertion of power. There is no amount of evidence, no type of evidence, sufficient to turn the tides of public, law enforcement, judicial, or critical


opinion with regard to rape allegations when the abuser’s power is strong enough. So, then, whose truth is “claimed” when a documentary truth claim is made? Yes, survivors have worked closely with filmmakers to produce documentaries in which their claims to truth are taken seriously, but critical and audience reception eventually always falls to rhetoric, and heteropatriarchal misogyny always influences reception. The trap, then, is for victim-survivors, as creators or collaborators in documentary efforts to forego radical possibilities in favor of an over-reliance on existing hierarchies. This is not to say that evidence has no place in documentary filmmaking or victim-survivors’ filmmaking. Rather, it is the reliance on a preponderance of evidence and a misunderstanding of the purpose of evidence that leads filmmakers astray. A world in which accountability is prioritized over punishment, in which the victim-survivor’s wellbeing is paramount, does not come about by relying on the formal truth claims of heteropatriarchy.

5.3.2. Formal Codes and Rhetorical Turns in Phoenix Rising

When documentary form is defined by the presence/absence of truth claims, questions of framing, editing, composition, exclusion, style, etc., only belatedly enter the conversation. The definitional reliance on the notion of a singular truth is untenable. In taking victim-survivors seriously, in believing women to follow the axiom, we reject such considerations of objective truth precisely because objectivity is based on power, and those most likely to be subject to sexual and state violence (Black women, sex workers, trans women, Indigenous women, and other women of


86 For example: The Keepers, 2017; The Hunting Ground, 2015; Roll Red Roll Film, 2018.
color) exist in a power relation that will never, never privilege them in a foundational, evidentiary way.

The 2022 docuseries *Phoenix Rising*, directed by Amy Berg, is about Evan Rachel Wood's experience with intimate partner violence and rape (allegedly) at the hands of Brian Warner. While Evan Rachel Wood's voice, account, and overall lived experience are to be taken seriously, to be believed, *Phoenix Rising* relies so heavily on the notion of a singular, unassailable truth, that it is difficult to see a way out of sexual violence through this text. The below shot-by-shot breakdown covers roughly from the docuseries title card (four minutes or so) through the first six minutes where the film begins to transition into Wood's childhood in the first segment. The primary challenge *Phoenix Rising* has regarding rape is its reliance on a preponderance of evidence. The presentation of facts, photographs, testimony, accounts, character witnesses, police reports, and the list goes on, once again relies on a framework that is always-already built by heteropatriarchy. Berg and Wood build the argument in Wood’s favor under a deluge of evidence.

### Table 1: *Phoenix Rising* Shot-by-Shot Breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shot Number</th>
<th>Source Date</th>
<th>Insert</th>
<th>Audio</th>
<th>Style and Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Phoenix Rising Part One: Don’t Fall</td>
<td>VO: Evan Rachel Wood</td>
<td>Storybook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Summer 2020</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Storybook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Animated scrapbook: young Evan Rachel Wood and Brian Warner (5 photos)</td>
<td>VO: Evan Rachel Wood intro of Brian Warner, aka Marilyn Manson, by name</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2006-2011</td>
<td>Final photo of Evan Rachel Wood and Brian Warner</td>
<td>Scrapbook</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>News segment shorts/inserts</td>
<td>Score</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>News segment shorts/inserts</td>
<td>VO: statement from Evan Rachel Wood that she became and activist after her “final escape” from Warner @3rdHourTODAY: Actor “Evan Rachel Wood Stands up for Domestic Violence Victims”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>VO: statement from ERW</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>VO: statement from ERW</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>VO: statement from ERW</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Ilma Gore: Artist/Activist</td>
<td>Who is Ilma Gore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Score</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>Phoenix Act whiteboard shot</td>
<td>What the Phoenix Act Coalition is</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>Evan Rachel Wood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In shots two through nine, we see a model of the information delivery that persists throughout the docuseries. First, as noted in Table 1 under shot one, the storybook motif begins early in the series and persists. Along these lines, shots two through five utilize this aesthetic to
convey a sense of innocence (later to be “innocence corrupted”) for Wood prior to her involvement with Warner. We cut from this temporal and moral framework to news footage of an interview with Wood serving as an activist for domestic and sexual violence victim-survivors. The notion of innocence remains. The problem with this construction, established in fewer than ten shots post-title card, is two-fold. First, the immediate turn to news footage serves to undermine Evan Rachel Wood’s personal accounts, readings of diaries, and even photographs taken during the abuse by privileging a more “objective” form of media from the beginning to define her, a trend that will emerge throughout the docuseries. Second is the reliance on “perfect victim” narratives to establish credibility. Throughout the docuseries, illustrations based in the art style of John Tenniel’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass are utilized to lend a juvenile air to Wood as a young woman involved with a much older man. The cause of the violence, though, is not one of innocence or corruption. If Evan Rachel Wood had not been a virgin, were not so young, had not been sexually sheltered—she provides an anecdote about not knowing what her own genitalia “should” look like, replete with fantastical, tentacular illustrations—according to Wood’s account, Warner’s actions would still constitute extreme violence, torture, and rape. None of this is to argue that Wood is not, was not, innocent at the time that Warner groomed and subsequently attacked her. Rather, it is to say that her innocence or lack thereof does not matter to whether she deserves justice for the harm she endured. Innocence is a key organizing principle of the docuseries, and subsequently, a major reason that it provides little in the way of thinking a world without sexual violence.
5.4. Conclusion: Messy Personhood and the Importance of Imperfection

Often, though not always, non-fiction media depicting victim-survivors rely on a rhetoric that ultimately reifies the hierarchies of power that make rape and abuse possible in the first place. This disavows trauma, and incumbent messiness, victim-survivorship and personhood. That is to say, all people are messy, and the act of making a “perfect victim” denies victim-survivors that reality. The work of imagining otherwise, then, or of restoring messy personhood to victim-survivors considers victim-survivors’ material and emotional needs (housing, healthcare, communal support, to name a few) and allows for perpetrators’ accountability within their communities. Ultimately, the media produced around, by, and for victim-survivors, moving forward, must take cues from these past examples, while prioritizing an aesthetic and rhetorical instantiation of what victim-survivor personhood looks like.

In Dying in Full Detail, Jennifer Malkowski calls into question “The belief […] in the ability to decrease war and violence through documentary representation of war and violence—that if a photograph, say, can perfectly communicate ‘the horrors of war,’ then its viewers will come to oppose war and promote peace.” 87 This belief also undergirds the logic behind documentaries about rape. These documentaries often focus on one woman or a handful of women, individualizing the narrative and attempting to call their (non-victim-survivor) audiences to action. As with Malkowski’s argument around war and death documentary, however, if successful documentaries about rape were effective organizing tools as they are currently conceived, rape would by now have significantly decreased as an effective social control tactic. Heteropatriarchy

and rape culture would be in serious decline. Women would be significantly safer in precarious places like college campuses, the hospitality industry, and sex work. These statements do not reflect our current reality though. The same belief that Malkowski critiques is one that this dissertation may be seen as upholding: that scholarly work on rape is, in itself, an effective praxis for social change. It is not. Rather, my work in this dissertation and accompanying short film is to build out ways for us to begin talking differently about rape and victim-survivors through and with cultural production. Talking about rape is not enough, however, by any means. For this reason, I would encourage non-victim-survivor readers to begin building spaces that hold people accountable for harm done. To create spaces in which victim-survivors can reliably come forward and be supported by the community you have built around yourself. For victim-survivors who may read this work, I encourage you to be vocal about your victim-survivor status if, when, and how you are able. Rest assured though, in the process of doing this work I have seen other cultural critics and academics entering the field turning toward communal accountability and community-building for victim-survivors. We are already imagining a better world. The work ahead is to build the language and infrastructure that will allow that world to become reality and allow use to thrive within it.
6. Coda: Bad Victims, Bad Survivors

“We’re fucking sick of disclaimers. We resent having to provide apologies and justifications for our words before we even speak them. We’re bitter about how specialized discussions of rape, sexual assault, and abuse have become.”

(WordsToFire, Betrayal Zine)

Victim-survivors do not owe other people their stories. We do not owe our propriety, decorum, repentance, or the details of our trauma to anyone else. Rape and abuse are about taking something deeply personal and important to the victim-survivor. This means that a powerful part of creating communal spaces and responses to sexual, gendered violence with victim-survivors is the act of divesting ourselves from demanding things of us—easy narratives, sadness, or anger. At the same time, accountability for rapists and abusers means that they must name the harm that they have done to their victim-survivors and to their communities. As it stands, we live in a double-bind in which victim-survivors are required to speak the harm they have endured in the immediate aftermath of their trauma and are subsequently punished for doing so. This dual process of compulsory disclosure and victim-blaming forms the architecture for cultural production in the absence of, and sometimes even with, victim-survivor input. Put differently, where Laura Mulvey identifies the cinematic gaze as always-already male, I identify the modes, styles, and structures of cultural production (within a certain mainstream United States context) as always already informed by and encouraging rape culture. Alternative forms of cultural work must, then, begin from a place of reimagining what different forms can do, how they can operate, and how our bodyminds are necessarily implicated in them. While this dissertation ends on a tempered but
hopeful note, this Coda will bring forth some case studies of the work women are doing in this area as of this writing in the summer of 2023. The goal of this analysis is not to cast doubt on our ability to imagine otherwise and from there build a different, better world. Rather, I include these cases as a way of soberly assessing the position we are in at this moment in order to move forward more effectively.

6.1. Amber Heard: A Doomed Vector of Change

“I spoke up against sexual violence — and faced our culture’s wrath. That has to change.” (Amber Heard, Washington Post Editorial)

Those fateful words, for as “libelous” as a Virginia jury found them, have never been more demonstrably true. The basis of both the US and UK trials around the Johnny Depp/Amy Heard domestic violence claims are based, legally, entirely on rhetoric. In the UK, the libel suit that Depp brought was against The Sun for a headline calling Depp a “wifebeater,” which Depp claimed was unfounded. In the US, the above was the title of an op-ed that Heard published in the Washington Post in 2018, which ultimately became the basis for the libel suit against her. Heard does not reference Depp in the article, nor does she cite specific incidents or details that might support the claim that she is referring to their relationship. Instead, she has been the subject of public knowledge surrounding Depp’s actions as an (alleged) abuser, and in that context has written about the impact of this kind of public knowledge on her life. Put differently, the legal terms of the trial are, at a minimum, three steps removed from the “facts” of the case. Amber Heard lost her trial.
Depp was awarded $10.35 million in damages, meaning that the Fairfax County jury found Heard’s article, in which she did not reference her ex-husband’s abuse explicitly, constituted the following: “a false statement purporting to be fact; publication or communication of that statement to a third person; fault amounting to at least negligence; and damages, or some harm caused to the reputation of the person or entity who is the subject of the statement.” Simultaneously, Heard was awarded $2 million on the basis that one of Depp’s lawyers defamed her in statements on the falsehood of her claims of abuse. To simplify, Depp was awarded five-fold the damages that Heard was, on the basis that they.defamed each other regarding abuse. In essence, Amber Heard made false and malicious statements that Depp had abused her (without naming him), and Depp’s lawyer made false and malicious statements that Depp had not abused Heard.

6.1.1. Testimony and Bearing Witness to the Bad Victim

In watching Amber Heard’s testimony after the trial ended, I was dismayed to realize I found her supremely unlikable. This is not to say that I found her unconvincing—and the very notion of a victim-survivor needing to be convincing itself is problematic. Rather, she is a negative space of charisma, so concerned with justifying her actions ("why she stayed") in terms understandable to her non-traumatized jury, that each experience gets encapsulated by that failed justification. And any justification was always doomed to fail; there is no adequate reason to have been abused or raped in a world in which those violences must remain omnipresent and, equally,


unspoken. I foreground my frustration with Amber Heard’s testimony to make a very specific point, drawing on an argument that has surfaced at various times throughout this dissertation: it is not necessary to like a victim-survivor in order to acknowledge their personhood and validate their experience. There are no Perfect Victims because there are no perfect people. Victim-survivors are people, and people are fundamentally _messy._

Amber Heard’s defamation trial was a miscarriage of “justice” for many technical legal reasons. It was never about justice though. It was a test of how well she stacked up to the Perfect Victim caricature of our collective social imagination. Amber Heard is not a Perfect Victim (no one is). “We” (broadly speaking, largely excluding victim-survivors) may have expected that of her as a conventionally attractive white woman and Hollywood ingenue. Heard is those things, but she is also a _person._ She comes from rural working poor roots; roots she has obfuscated to varying degrees throughout her career—as have many entertainers from similar backgrounds. She grew up in an abusive household, making her a good candidate for “she should know better” rhetoric. This childhood also makes her an incredibly typical victim-survivor.

For women reporting sexual violence within an abusive relationship, the number of individual assaults is conservatively twenty acts of rape over the course of the relationship.\(^90\) While poor women (under $7,500 in their bank accounts) do not encompass Amber Heard at the time of her later assaults by Johnny Depp, they may or may not have earlier in their relationship. What is certain is that he ensured power over her career in the same way Alfred Hitchcock did Tippi Hedren in terms of their relationship. That is to say, regardless of the dollar amount, a man making a career for you is a means of control that quickly becomes coercive regardless of other circumstances. To

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further extrapolate beyond Amber Heard’s case, according to the Centers for Disease Control, “Over half of women and almost 1 in 3 men have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetimes.” Ultimately, not only did Heard fail the Perfect Victim Test, she failed so spectacularly that she was cast as a villain. She was painted, by Depp, his lawyers, and anonymous commenters on Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube, as an abuser, a nag, an Evil Woman through and through. Amber Heard had absolutely no control over this characterization or public opinion. Just as she did not have agency when Johnny Depp raped her on a countertop with a broken bottle, she likewise could not alter the course of public opinion in the face of twin heteropatriarchal and capitalist forces, both of which needed her to remain silent and be vilified for speaking at the same time.

6.2. Alexa Nikolas and Digital Victim Advocacy

A more recent case still, that of Alexa Nikolas, is developing as of this writing. Nikolas initially spoke out against her own abusers at the Nickelodeon Network and has since established the social media network EatPredators to do the same for as many survivors as Nikolas can in the music and entertainment industries. She has held picket lines separate from and in conjunction with ongoing Writers ’Guild of American and Stage Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Actors (WGA and SAG-AFTRA) strikes. In her most recent “outing” of alleged predators, including Justin Long and Brandon Quinn, she has taken fire not necessarily from the public (comments I observed on livestreams of the video were generally supportive) but

\[91\text{ ibid}\]
in the form of what some might call litigation abuse. Brandon Quinn’s lawyers have since reached out to serve a cease and desist to Nikolas and her producer/husband as of August second, 2023, per an EatPredators YouTube livestream.92 According to Leigh Gilmore,

[T]he person who has suffered harm and writes, speaks, displays bodily, or otherwise performs a first-person representation about it will be tasked with doing more than bearing witness to this injury. When the witness is a woman, and especially when the harm includes sexual violence, she will be subjected to practices of shaming and discrediting that preexist any specific case.93

Nikolas fully embodies this positionality. She begins from her own subjectivity as a victim-survivor speaking her truth, and then moves into advocacy, reading “alleged” messages between “alleged” abusers and their “alleged” victim-survivors. According to Nikolas, these messages were private correspondence between the men (Justin Long and Brandon Quinn, allegedly) and two underage girls (allegedly fifteen years old for each girl). The alleged conversations range from unsettling to sexual, all of which are, allegedly, far overreaching the range of conversation that is safe and acceptable between forty-year-old and older men and fifteen-year-old girls. This case has yet, despite Brandon Quinn’s efforts, to be litigated in a court of law, but the fact remains that Alexa Nikolas has been punished, via litigation threat, for speaking as a victim-survivor on behalf of other victim-survivors.

92 THE Brandon Quinn Is Threatening to Sue Me, 2023.

6.3. Female Victim-Survivors are Deceitful; Male Victims are Tragic

Male victim-survivors are most often ignored on cultural and systemic levels.\footnote{For examples see the following: “Anthony Rapp Alleges Kevin Spacey Made Sexual Advance Towards Him When Rent Star Was 14,” Playbill, accessed December 12, 2022; “Brendan Fraser Says He Was Groped by H.F.P.A. Member in 2003: ‘I Became Depressed’ | Vanity Fair,” accessed December 12, 2022; Sam Levin, “Hollywood Actors Speak of ‘rampant’ Problem of Male Abusers Targeting Men,” The Guardian, October 31, 2017, sec. World news; Laura Bradley, “‘I Was Terrified, and I Was Humiliated’: #MeToo’s Male Accusers, One Year Later,” Vanity Fair, October 4, 2018; Weaver, “James Van Der Beek Reveals His Own Experience of Sexual Harassment,” Vanity Fair, October 12, 2017; Zack Sharf, “Terry Crews Answers His Sexual Assault Critics in Powerful Message: ‘Why Did You Just Let It Happen? I Didn’t,’” IndieWire (blog), June 29, 2018.} Men who are sexually and otherwise physically violent to the women in their spheres are, in the courts of public opinion and the criminal punishment system, the real victims of sexual violence. Media (social and news) proliferates with stories of false accusations,\footnote{The Duke University case is the only I have found in which there is credible evidence, from my perspective, that the accusations of rape could be false.} raped women ruining men’s lives and futures,\footnote{Brock Turner was certainly discussed this way, but for another example see Wendy Hui Kyong’s assessment of the Steubenville, Ohio case in “The Leakiness of Friends, or Think Different Like Me” from Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media} women who fight back as the true abusers in intimate partner violence.\footnote{In Hollywood, Amber Heard and Angelina Jolie come to mind, but more often this argument is used to describe Black women and other women of color who fight back against their abusers. See the cases of CeCe McDonald and Tracy McCarter in addition to ongoing campaigns for women like Nicole Addimando, Maddesyn George, and Ashlyn Griffin and many more at Survived and Punished (https://survivedandpunished.org/survivor-solidarity).} In her discussion of the Kobe Bryant rape trial, Carine Mardorossian explains that “The mobilization of
the agent/victim opposition as a way of undermining rape allegations by the prosecution reveals the contextualized ways that the term ‘victim’ gains visibility as an ideologically loaded word in the twenty-first century.”

In this case, much like in Heard’s civil proceedings, the opposing council contended that their clients (Bryant and Depp respectively) were the *real* victims of women hell-bent on destroying careers and taking whatever money and fame they could from these powerful men. Further, the overarching mythology of both arguments, and the disavowal of these women as victims (or even survivors) is based on an understanding of women as inveterate liars on a biological level. As Leigh Gilmore points out, “Women victims recast as wrong-doers, instigators even, of the harm in which they are caught up find themselves unable to access the benefit of the doubt. Victim blaming represents an inverted image of the individual to whom choice is attributed.”

Returning to Amber Heard and her “un-likability,” it is not simply that we (scholars, witnesses, audiences, people) can look on objectively, deciding in a vacuum whether we want to be friends with a victim-survivor and then set that hermetically-sealed opinion aside in order to politically assess the situation and its consequences within larger frameworks of power. How we *feel* about a victim-survivor, about her testimony, is the basis upon which initial judgements are made. It requires a concerted mental and emotional effort, a short-circuiting of intellectual-emotional processes, to move from “I do not like her” to “she deserves the benefit of the doubt *anyway.*”

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Appendix A. Leakage Short Film

Find Leakage here:

https://vimeo.com/853214683?share=copy

Password protected: Defense
Appendix B. Artist’s Statement

*Leakage* is viscera made digital. I set out, with this film, to explore the small- and large-scale effects of rape for victim-survivors in its aftermath. The temporality of this is intentionally indeterminant. Whether the narration for each act is drawn from moments immediately preceding or following rape, or informed by reflection long after the harm has been done is purposely opaque. In producing this film, I wanted to play with fluidity and rigidity, with knowability and unknowability; put simply, this film is a statement against the ability to master an understanding of sexual violence from *outside* of that violence. I worked through each act individually with preceding acts informing the development of the next, but each also stands on its own. Together, they explore the utility of digital media for material considerations of trauma and traumatized bodyminds, the materiality of bodily fluid as a visceral sense memory, and the necessary institutional failure that is undergirded by a presumption that rape can be fully and completely comprehended by non-victim-survivors.

Shot on digital, I take much of my influence from video art and installation production; one goal for this short film was to replicate a sensorial experience of viscosity. I reference not just the literal viscous liquids used in the shooting (DIY special effects blood, semen, and spit) but the metaphorical viscosity of the audio tracks in each act. Getting to “information” or “narrative” in each act and in the film as a whole is a frictional experience. Watching *Leakage* should not be aesthetically easy; it is intentionally difficult to track because mental and emotional processes around rape and trauma are themselves non-linear and recalcitrant to being molded into traditional narratives.
I bookend the film with references to specific institutional(ized) responses to rape: the audio of Act I is drawn from a number of institutionally recognized open letters, while the audio for Act III comes from a collection of filings with the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request. In the former, we see an attempt by grassroots or individual organizations to appeal to larger institutions, often (if not always) with limited results. The third act, then, demonstrates some of the concrete reasons that these open letters are doomed to failure. This is not to say that the middle act does not address institutions, but rather that it does so *in absentia*. The narrator/writer of these words is seventeen at the time of their writing, making the sexual relationship that she describes an instance of statutory rape. While age restrictions of sexual conduct are hotly debated in some sectors of academia and social conversation, I hope that the use of her other posts (used with permission) serve to illustrate the personal power distinctions between parties involved and, in so doing, to illustrate the problem of where institutions presumably in place to protect her were or were not present in this dynamic.

While it is tempting, especially giving the visual influence of filmmakers like Maya Darren on this piece, to read the film symbolically, I would hesitate to encourage such a reading. Blood and semen do not *stand in* for rape; the film operates in the marginal spaces *around* rape, so bodily fluids constitute that space on their own, rather than acting as symbols of the attack itself. Similarly, it was important for me to use concrete documentation, a makeshift archive of sorts, of rape in the form of writing about it by victim-survivors at various times surrounding “the event” (and also encompassing multiple genres of writing). All of this is to say that I hope what becomes clear is that rape and abuse are not a singular or collection of acute events. They comprise the lead-up and aftermath of an attack/attacks. We need a new language, written/spoken/visual to address rape as the fluid amalgamation of moments, objects, and embodied experiences that it is.
Bibliography


THE Brandon Quinn Is Threatening to Sue Me, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6d3qZR15FI.


