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#MeToo: The Literary and Social Impact of Sexual Violence Narratives

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**#METOO: THE LITERARY AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE
NARRATIVES**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Honors Studies in
English

by
Aura Dai Comer

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DEDICATION

At its core, this thesis is for the women whose stories made this project possible and for anyone who has ever written, spoken, or thought, “me too.” I also dedicate this thesis to my parents and my sister, Ruby, who always encouraged, supported, and loved me every step of the way. To my best friend, LaTeace, thank you for believing me and never leaving my side. I could not have done it without you.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Sexual Violence

Legal definitions for crimes of sexual violence and abuse vary from state to state. For the sake of continuity, understanding, and accessibility, definitions of sexual violence will be provided by the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, unless sources provide their own definitions.¹ For the purposes of this study, definitions, statistics, and experiences will pertain only to the United States of America. Sexual violence is an “all-encompassing, non-legal term that refers to crimes like sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse” (RAINN, n.d., paras. 1). Consent plays the primary role in determining what can be legally considered a crime and an act of sexual violence. Given that definitions and legality vary by state, consent will be framed through three parameters: affirmation, threat or coercion, and capacity. Affirmative consent regards both parties directly expressing their desire to partake in sexual activity (RAINN, n.d.). Freely given consent exists given that both parties engage in sexual activities their own accord and free will, absent from “fraud, coercion, violence, or threat of violence” (RAINN, n.d., paras. 3). Capacity to consent ensures that both parties have the capacity and/or legal ability to engage in sexual activities: this includes, but is not limited to intoxication, age, and disability (RAINN, n.d.). State by state differences in law and definition hinders the protection of victims of sexual assault, and this is a noteworthy reason for advocacy of social and legal change or reformation. For example, the legal age of consent in Arkansas is only fifteen – a federally defined minor. However, in California, where two or more of this study’s covered assaults took place, the legal age of consent is eighteen years old—a federally recognized adult (RAINN, 2022). While there are many forms of sexual violence, this research is framed around the general definitions of

¹ Moving forward, the organization will be referenced as RAINN

sexual assault and rape. Categories within these definitions specify elder abuse, child abuse, drug-facilitated abuse, intimate partner abuse, and more.² According to RAINN (n.d.), “sexual assault refers to sexual contact or behavior that occurs without explicit consent of the victim” (paras. 2). Sexual assault includes rape, attempted rape, sexual touching, or forced performances of sexual acts (RAINN, n.d.). Rape is included in sexual assault, but sexual assault does not equate to rape. Rape is defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigations as “penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus, with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim” (RAINN, n.d., paras. 4).

To fully understand the severity of sexual violence and its pervasiveness in America, I will present statistics of rape and sexual assault, as well as available legal court statistics of justice and punishment for offenders (or a lack thereof). However, there must be an acknowledgment of the disparity in information and representation pertaining to indigenous, LGBT+, immigrant, and minor communities. Note that these statistics do not speak to the complete pervasiveness of rape and sexual assault in the United States, given the negligent protection and lack of belief in victims, which results in victim silencing and a lack of reporting. In 2018, 734,630 people reported being sexually assaulted (NSVRC, n.d.). Women and girls experience higher rates of sexual violence, with one in three females between the ages of 11 and 17 being raped or experiencing attempted rape (NSVRC, n.d.). Approximately 1 in 4 male victims were raped or experienced attempted rape between the same ages (NSVRC, n.d.). Within these statistics and parameters, 21% of transgender, genderqueer, or nonconforming college students between the ages of 18-24 have been sexually assaulted, comparative to the 18% of non-transgender, gender queer, or non-conforming women and the 4% of non-transgender, gender queer, or

² The word abuse here pertains only to sexual abuse and violence.

nonconforming men (RAINN, n.d.-b, paras. 6). Being non-cisgendered substantially increased one's rate of sexual violence, in this case specifically within college students. This information speaks volumes towards the risk of sexual violence given that college-aged students "are 3 times more likely than women in general to experience sexual violence" (RAINN, n.d.-b paras. 4). Indigenous women are twice as likely to be a victim of sexual violence compared to all other races (RAINN, n.d.-b paras. 11). When introducing these statistics, I argued that because of systemic errors and cultural behaviors most assaults go unreported. With statistics this high, one could wonder the reason for not reporting when there are, as proven by these statistics, other people with shared experience. Yet victims of sexual violence don't report because the American justice system is failing to convict perpetrators of sexual violence, as shown within these statistics and the following figure.

Figure 1

Sexual Assault Conviction Rates in the United States³

³ RAINN. (n.d.-a). Statistics: The Criminal Justice System

OUT OF EVERY 1,000 SEXUAL ASSAULTS, 975 PERPETRATORS WILL WALK FREE

310 are reported to policeⁱ



50 reports lead to arrestⁱⁱ



28 cases will lead to a felony convictionⁱⁱⁱ



25 perpetrators will be incarceratedⁱⁱⁱ



RAINN

National Sexual Assault Hotline | 800.656.HOPE | online.rainn.org
Please visit rainn.org/statistics/scope-problem for full citation.¹

1.2 Rape Culture

The statistics given beg the question: what aspects of culture in the U.S. encourage or contribute to the pervasiveness of sexual violence around us? There are numerous ways in which individuals are affected by the social problem of sexual violence, without being victim to rape or sexual abuse. These ways which individuals are affected contribute to the social problem, the dominance of rape culture, and the pervasive fear of the threat of violence and abuse. Before discussing rape culture directly, definitions of sexual harassment and stalking are necessary to introduce. Sexual harassment includes verbal and physical behaviors of “sexual nature” in which there are “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors” or other activities (RAINN, n.d., paras. 2). Sexual harassment is a civil matter, rather than a criminal problem. Stalking is a form of harassment which can result in sexual violence, similarly shaped around “power and control” (RAINN, n.d., paras. 2). Stalking has been defined by the Department of Justice as being “a pattern of repeated and unwanted attention, harassment, contact, or any other course of

conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to feel fear” (RAINN, n.d., paras. 2). Sexual harassment and stalking both work alongside general rape culture in a sense which leaves individuals consistently afraid and on guard, feeling at risk for sexual violence and trauma.

To generally define rape culture would be to state that it is exactly that in America – a culture of rape. Rape culture constitutes American society through victim blaming, rape apologists, empathizing towards perpetrators, biased media coverage, etc. (Baum, et al., 2018). These components work towards creating a general distrust of the system and a constant fear within women. The specific term “rape culture” was developed in the 1970s by feminists, attempting to explain the ways in which American culture normalizes sexual violence, whilst pushing blame onto victims. Emilie Buchwald’s *Transforming of Rape Culture* (2005) defines rape culture as

a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm [...] In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable [...] however [...] much of what we accept as inevitable is in fact the expression of values and attitudes that can change. (p. vii)

FORCE, a collective founded by survivors in 2010, explains rape culture to include jokes, media, language, music, film, etc. which all normalize violence against women (Upsetting Rape Culture, n.d.). Rape culture does not only pertain to women, but also includes genders within

marginalized communities, including the nonbinary, gender nonconforming, and transgender individuals.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape by Sohaila Abdulali is both a testimony of her rape and an analysis of sexual violence and rape culture. Abdulali's novel covers a culture which contributes to, if not encourages, sexual violence through victim blaming, systemic failings, and a lack of knowledge of and discourse surrounding consent. Abdulali advocates for sex education, citing the educational failings for contributions to sexual violence and rape culture, writing that "high-quality sex education can and should equip young people with the language and tools to understand and critique the roles of gender and power in their friendships and romantic relationships" (2018). The overarching message of Abdulali's writing is that "we must talk about rape, and we must talk about how we talk about rape" (2018). Abdulali's message directly aligns with this study, as we are going to talk about rape.

1.3 The #MeToo Movement

Tarana Burke, a survivor of sexual abuse, is also an activist who founded the #MeToo movement. She is committed to interrupting sexual violence and systemic issues in America, particularly for those who are disproportionately marginalized and victimized (Me Too, n.d.). According to Burke, the movement began in the "deepest, darkest place in [her] soul" when she denied her support to a young girl named Heaven, directing her to another female counselor at the youth camp she was working at (Me Too, n.d.). Burke admits that in that moment she did not have the courage to face her own trauma and begin the movement yet by saying "me too." This experience is at the core of the movement. In 2006, Burke introduced the phrase "me too" to help young girls and women of color who were subject to sexual violence, bringing "resources, support, and pathways to healing" where the help did not exist (Me Too, n.d.). This phrase was

picked up on October 15th, 2017, when the actress Alyssa Milano made a tweet, asking her fans and anyone who say it to reply and write “me too” if they had ever been sexually harassed or assaulted (*Chicago Tribune*, 2021). Stories were told by those with and without fame: stories of what they had been subject to within their lifetime, and stories that formed doors opening to expose politicians, actors, musicians, and many other with fame and wealth, erupted and were circulated to create a larger movement (*Chicago Tribune*, 2021). Over time, what began as a simple phrase, made to convey a sense of connection and solidarity, turned into an international movement of #MeToo. The movement’s current mission statement reads:

Today, our work continues to focus on assisting a growing spectrum of survivors—young people, queer, trans, the disabled, Black women and girls and all communities of color. We’re here to help each individual find the right point of entry for their unique healing journey. But we’re also galvanizing a broad base of survivors, and working to disrupt the systems that allow sexual violence to proliferate our world. This includes insisting upon accountability on the part of perpetrators, along with the implementation of strategies to sustain long term, systemic change. So that one day, nobody ever has to say “me too” again (Me Too, n.d.)

Burke’s main goal through the movement lies within her theory of “empowerment through empathy” which aims to heal survivors collectively and change the ways in which America and the world regard autonomy and sexual violence (Me Too, n.d.). Since the rise of the movement, Burke has been interviewed multiple times, in which she speaks on this theory and purpose to a greater extent. In Burke’s TEDTalk in 2018, she explains the far-reaching power of empathy of the millions of people who said “me too.” That collective trauma has made the building blocks for creating a world which one can want to live in. Through collective trauma and healing, the

movement can work towards dismantling the power and privilege that sustains sexual violence; in order to be free of sexual violence there must be a dramatic cultural shift in a culture which believes vulnerability to be “synonymous with permission” (Burke, 2018). In a love letter published through *Marie Claire*, Burke speaks directly to those who have said “me too” about her theory of healing, saying that “[they] built this movement on the backs of survivors, of people who have suffered these indignities and had their humanity snatched away from them [...] in order for us to stand on a front line, to testify before legislators, to tell our stories, we need to heal” (Burke, 2021). The #MeToo movement believes that through intersectional empathy, survivors can not only heal, but change the culture which perpetuates sexual violence.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

With the prevalence of sexual violence in rape culture, the #MeToo movement works towards systemic change and collective healing through shared stories of trauma. This movement begs the question: can literature change history and heal victims of trauma? For this thesis, two texts of theory and literary will be used alongside two rape memoirs and an anthology of sexual assault narratives. The theory discussed will be *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992), as well as *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* by Cathy Caruth (2016).⁴ As I will show, these pieces of literary theory and research, rooted in Holocaust studies, also work towards answering the question of the validity of the sexual violence narrative as historical testimony and a means of healing. In applying the research surrounding Holocaust studies, I will argue that the methodology can be applied to sexual violence victims, through their collective suffering and healing; in recounting sexual violence trauma the victims are demanding to be witnessed. Simultaneously, the rape memoirs and assault narratives will work in support of Felman, Laub, and Caruth's theories of consciousness, trauma, testimony, and history. To understand the theory which will be used for analysis, this project will begin with a summary Felman, Laub, and Caruth's research, followed by definitions and a framework of methodology for the analysis of rape testimonial narratives.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* is a book centered on "memory and on questions" (1992, p. xiii). Within their book they analyze the relationship between narratives and history. In combining both a clinical perspective and a literary perspective, Felman and Laub work to "grasp and to

⁴ For efficacy in quoting the texts, Felman and Laub's research will be cited as *Testimony* and Caruth's as *Unclaimed Experience*.

articulate the obscure relationship between witnessing, events, and evidence, and [...] the phenomenon of culture [...] in contemporary history” (1992, p. xiii). Through the text the authors analyze trauma in literature, as well as the power of witnessing and testimonies within a political and historical context, arguing in favor of the effectiveness in witness testimonies presenting the tension between both contextualization and textualization. The beginning chapters of the text work to provide an understanding of the differences between reading and listening. However, for the framework of this study, listening will only be used under the assumption of comprehension and the reading of the survivor memoirs I analyze. Chapter one, written by Felman, discusses the pedagogy of trauma literature and the resulting trauma she experienced within the academic setting. Laub writes chapters two and three, discussing listening and the “practice of the testimonial.” The theory of testimony is theoretically analyzed for understanding the historical, philosophical, and psychoanalytic implications of the testimony (Felman and Laub, 1992, xvii). Moving through chapters four, five, and six, the collection analyzes texts that emerge from World War II and the Holocaust in support of testimonial theory. Through the text, Felman and Laub assert that witnessing through testimony allows access to reality, while simultaneously revealing history and challenging politics of our patriarchal society. *Testimony* also argues in favor of the literary alignment between witnesses through testimonies. Felman and Laub’s definitions will be used in relation to Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*.

Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* is a research novel about the voice of individuals after experiencing a trauma, or mind wound.⁵ Caruth’s research explores writing surrounding trauma from Freud to Kant and various others. In her work, she addresses how witnessing plays a role in the conscious knowing and unconscious experiencing of repeated trauma. Through her

⁵ The definition of trauma throughout the thesis will be understood as “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth, 2016, p. 3).

studies she analyzes trauma through a framework following Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Within this framework she identifies falling, burning, awakening, and departure as positions in the experience of trauma, within the journey from unconsciousness to consciousness. Within this story, a father is having difficulty grasping the trauma of his child dying, to which he has a dream that the candles surrounding his son fall onto the child's body and the child burns. The father awakes from the dream, realizing that the child had really been burnt and having to accept the death of his son. The dream tells of the story of the grief of the father in relation to the psyche, "the dream, as a delay, reveals the ineradicable gap between the reality of a death and the desire that cannot overcome it" (Caruth, 2016, p. 98). Caruth uses this interpretation for analysis, while explaining the dream as representing different aspects of the traumatic experience. Caruth's research presents falling as the unexpected experience of trauma, burning as the real trauma repeating itself unconsciously, awakening as the awareness of trauma taking a conscious position, and departure as the leaving of the trauma through raised consciousness (2016). Through this framework of interpretation which Caruth presents, we can envision how written testimony presents a conscious awareness of trauma, brings about healing, and reveals history to effectively change it.

Given the nature of this thesis, definitions must be thoroughly provided for context. These definitions will work to provide context for the analysis and set the framework of my project. Personal testimonies of rape and sexual violence will be understood as life testimonies, defined by Felman as "not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can penetrate an actual life" (1992, p. 2). This definition of life testimony provides an understanding that while these testimonies are personal, they in fact

work as a part of history revealing and impacting parts of life itself through the testimony's written existence. To provide a testimony, one must first bear witness.

Laub identifies three levels of witnessing: the first level of autobiographical awareness, the second level of the immediate receiver of a witness testimony, and the third level being the process itself of witnessing witnesses (1992, p. 75-76). For this thesis, the first level of witnessing will be used as evidence, with the third level of witnessing being the bridge between the narratives and social change. The beginning of the validation of testimony lies within the responsibilities of a witness to speak truth (Felman, 1992, p. 204). To testify is to vow to tell the truth, addressing the experience to others as a "vehicle" of reality, making a testimony an access to the truth rather than simply a statement (Felman, 1992, p. 3, 5). Based on this understanding, one can begin to formulate not only the validity of the witness testimony, but how that testimony speaks to history and holds power to change it. Felman goes as far as to argue that with current cultural standards, testimonies have become central in the crises of searching for truth (1992, p. 6). The purpose of the testimony, as argued by Felman and Laub, supported through this thesis, is to "take responsibility [...] for history [and] for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal, in general having (nonpersonal) validity" (Felman, 1992, 204). Specifically, the purpose of the literary testimony is to not just record what has happened, but to bring about conscious awareness in the victim and reading witness, allowing a perception of history which namely only happens "by one's own immediate physical involvement" (Felman, 1992, p. 108). Through this involvement of the reader and new consciousness of the other, both parties become present in their roles in history and the realities of the circumstance. By which, Felman, Laub, and Caruth (later) will argue promotes changing of history and a healing from the departure following newfound awoken consciousness. In

seeking reality through testimony, the authorial witness and reading witness not only explores the injury of trauma, but “reemerge[s] from the paralysis [...] to engage reality [...] as a vital and critical necessity of *moving on*” (Felman, 1992, p. 28).

In my reading, Caruth presents literary testimony as potentially offering an awakening which leads to the departure. The literary awakening of writing the testimony itself brings about consciousness of trauma, allowing one to depart from their trauma and return to their conscious identity, thereby healing and changed history. To bring an awakening and consciousness, one must first experience what she calls “a history with no place.” In response to trauma, the victim often has a separation of their identity and a sense of unconsciousness in relation to the trauma. This separation of self, which results in dissociation and compartmentalization, will be understood as the “falling.” While Caruth, based on Freud’s and other theories, presents unconsciousness as a literal lack of conscious memory and awareness, I want to concentrate on the outcome of such repression in the traumatized, explicating how the memoirs I analyze describe and demarcate the separation of self-identity and the presentation of an “otherness” or “voice” whose memory and experience of trauma remains separate from the identity of “self.” The “other within the self” is the one which “retains the memory of the ‘unwitting’ traumatic events of one’s past” (Caruth, 2016, p. 8).

For Caruth, traumatic neurosis is the revictimization that happens outside of individual’s control, but during which the victim suffers and cannot have a full understanding of their emotions because of the “otherness.” During traumatic neurosis the victim experiences “the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” (Caruth, 2016, p. 2). While individuals do not have control over this re-traumatization, it is within their control to

awaken and depart. This revictimization will be referred to as the “burning” in which the individual is suffering and feeling the pain of their trauma, without fully understanding it. The trauma itself is experienced “too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (Caruth, 2016, p. 4). This unexpectedness causes the unconsciousness and the burn, only allowing consciousness to be reached through the victim repeating and reexperiencing the trauma. In Felman and Laub’s work, the burning is explained through the example of a Holocaust survivor before he told his testimony. The survivor explains that he “disintegrated, could not sleep, developed fears, and started having nightmares” while he kept his silence (Felman, 1992, p. 46). These symptoms presented represent that state of unconsciousness before survivors has fully processed and come to terms with their trauma. Following the burning, victims can reach consciousness again through their awakening.

The awakening will be understood as the moment in which the victim and survivor becomes aware of their traumas and reaches a consciousness through the recombination of the self-identity. The literary testimony allows for the awakening. The bond between the not knowing, within the falling and burning, and the knowing, of the awakening and departure, are closely tied to the language of trauma and literature. For this thesis, the awakening and departure can only happen in relation to each other. Through the awakening of giving testimony, the departure and sense of healing take place. The voice of trauma, through the literary testimony is “the force of an imperative – transmitted through the emergence of the powerful address- whose possibilities lie at the heart of trauma and that arises, paradoxically, through the traumatic eclipse of consciousness or understanding” (Caruth, 2016, p. 131). Through this awakening and departure of the witness testimony, a “personally addressed imperative receives a response that is

not only a listening but also a change in action in the context of a political conflict” (Caruth, 2016, p. 131). This response, listening, and change in action allow for the author to heal, promote collective healing of the witnesses to the narrative, and allows the language of trauma literature to create historical shifts of greater healing and change. In Felman and Laub’s telling of the Holocaust survivor previously mentioned, his awakening comes when he testifies and speaks to his experiences. The sense of reclamation telling of his trauma, allowed him to experience “an exhilarating, unexpected liberation from his nightmares” (Felman, 1992, p. 46). This liberation allowed him for the first time, in the process of awakening and departure to “experience feelings both of mourning and of hope [...] into the extent to which his burden and this silence [...] reshaped, his whole life” (Felman, 1992, p. 46). Through giving his testimony, he was able to express the internal feelings of his trauma and reshape his life developing hope and letting go of the burden of silence. The “imperative need to tell” allows one to come to “know” their story, awakening and departing from the “ghosts from the past [...] which one has to protect oneself [from]” (Laub, 1992, p. 78). To describe Caruth’s theory and framework in layman’s terms: the falling is an unexpected trauma in which causes a separation of self and identity, the burning is the “real trauma” of reexperiencing the trauma and dealing with the suffering which follows, the awakening is the conscious awareness brought through testimony and the reclamation of the victim’s experience, and the departure is the result of the testimony in which the victim combines themselves again through consciousness and allows themselves and witnesses of their testimony to heal.

Arguably, this evidence and theory conceptually makes sense. However, how does narrative combine healing and history together? Furthermore, how is narrative imperative to healing and to a shift in history? Political and autobiographical texts present “a moment of

historical reality [...] in its reading by others and/or in its reading by itself, in its own self-presentation and self-perception” (Felman, 1992, p. 143). The power of witnessing lies in not only reporting the traumatic incident, but also in the witness becoming a medium of testimony that makes the narrative of the trauma carry a historical significance beyond the individual (Felman, 1992, p. 24). This referential reality through literature is presented through three aspects: “the inescapable materiality of one’s past [...] the irreducible reality of the confrontation through the writing [...] and the political and ethical effects of writing as itself an act, an act that provokes change and that thus itself has material consequences” (Felman, 1992, p. 143-144).⁶ The referentiality of writing and the act of composing the literary witness testimony itself is what makes the witness testimony not only a historical act, but a necessary formulation of history. Trauma testimonies through literature draw the bridge between knowing and not knowing, while forcing the reader and the author to bear witness to their trauma realities. Caruth argues that in the writing system of the testimony, “it produces the human figure of the author in the very elimination of authorial referentiality” (Caruth, 2016, p. 85). However, in the sexual violence memoirs I analyze in this project, we can see testimony enlarged to include the historical witness of both the external world and the personal experience. DeMan’s story, as presented in Caruth’s analysis, provides the “possibility of referential self-recognition” in which the author speaks to embodied experience and is “redeemed through writing” (Caruth, 2016, p. 88). This analysis of DeMan validates the claim that referentiality of the author can be upheld while being both personal and historical.

The literature of the rape memoir and sexual violence narrative allows for interconnectedness through the communication within gaps and difference of culture and

⁶ Referentiality refers to the reference of the external world, rather than oneself.

experience. Trauma is connected to the trauma of others, being revealed through the witnessing of testimony (Caruth, 2016, p. 58). The address to the reader in the author's testimony allows the story to be read "not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his or her own past, but as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (Caruth, 2016, p. 8).

2.2. Framework and Methodology

The most important part of both *Testimony* and *Unclaimed Experience* is the effectiveness of their theories in portraying the validation of the written witness testimony within history, and in the way they position it as a means by which consciousness and collective healing can be achieved. This research project consists of a literature analysis of two memoirs and narratives from an anthology. I focus on testimonies of rape and sexual violence in a U.S. context. The psychoanalytical and literary theories provided by Caruth, Felman, and Laub will provide the framework of the analysis; their work will also define testimony and witnessing for this project. Through Felman and Laub's research, this thesis will be aided by historical and political trauma being not just known, but through being read, thus validating the assault narrative as historical testimony. Caruth's research and her interpretation of Freud's "the burning child" will provide this thesis' framework of analysis. This project will use her framework of repeated trauma, consciousness, and unconsciousness. Felman and Laub's argument regarding written testimonies being historical narratives which reveal reality will work alongside Caruth's framework towards providing an explanation of why the rape memoir and sexual violence narratives work not only as historical narratives, but also assert the effectiveness of collective healing. I will argue that the works of Chanel Miller, Rose McGowan, and Shelly Oria attest to

the validity of the rape memoir and sexual violence narrative as testimonies within parts of the historical and political realm, providing historical witnesses to rape and sexual violence in America. My work underscores that these works of literature work towards collective healing of victims and social change through the empowerment and interconnectedness of shared trauma, made only possible through literary testimonies.

CHAPTER THREE: I HEAR YOU. I SEE YOU. I BELIEVE YOU.

Within this section of the thesis, two memoirs and multiple narratives from a sexual violence anthology will be analyzed via the frameworks provided by Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Cathy Caruth. For the analyses to be understood and effective, context must be provided and summarized over the telling of their testimonies. Before analyzing the texts, they will be introduced, providing an overall understanding of these stories. Within this section the reader will submit to their own witnessing of sexual violence trauma through the witness testimony of survivors. The texts included in this section are as follows: *Know My Name* by Chanel Miller, *BRAVE* by Rose McGowan, and *Indelible in the Hippocampus: Writings from the Me Too Movement* by Shelly Oria (ed.). Following an introduction of the texts' content, they will be introduced under the parameters set by Caruth of falling, burning, awakening, and departure, as understood by Felman and Laub's definitions of testimony, witness, and the contextualization historically of the narrative. Using theory to validate the witness testimony as a historical narrative, these texts will assert the rape memoir within this theory of witness testimony and argue the strength of these narratives towards collective healing. Through literature, history and trauma is revealed reinterpreting "the figure of the departure and the return." The testimony is a conscious choice to be aware of trauma and claim the experience as truth and history, which can be recovered from (Caruth, 2016, p. 17).

3.1 Chanel Miller

3.1.1 Falling

In January of 2015 Chanel Miller was raped behind a dumpster on the campus of Stanford University. Brock Turner stripped Miller of her autonomy to satisfy himself. The assault would be continuously replayed in media coverage for three years, during an

internationally recognized court case and appeal. Survivors of sexual assault were dismayed to see the legal system work with Brock Turner and strip Miller of her voice and identity. After months of ridicule and victim blaming, Turner faced apologies for his future and only six months in jail. One night took Chanel Miller away from herself, for as the legal proceedings began, she “was given a new name to protect [her] identity ... Emily Doe” (Miller, 2019, p. vii). Splitting her identity, Emily, and Chanel “lived separate lives” (Miller, 2019, p. 53). Emily Doe, a persecuted victim, “lived inside a tiny world, narrow and confined,” whereas Chanel Miller remained an autonomous woman who “did not like [Emily’s] fragility” (Miller, 2019, p. 53). The split of Miller’s identity follows the proceedings of the “falling” within Caruth’s theory. As her identity is split between Emily Doe and Chanel Miller, Miller could not possess full consciousness of the trauma Turner gave her. Miller would one day recombine the parts of herself and claim her experience as her own, recognizing Emily’s “hunger for nourishment [and desire] to be acknowledged and cared for” (Miller, 2019, p. 53). Before Miller can recombine herself and experience the awakening, she was subject to the burning and re-traumatization of her assault. Not only did she experience re-traumatization on her own, while dealing with the assault, but she was subject to public and legal re-traumatization through the court system.

3.1.2 Burning

Throughout the memoir there are a multitude of experiences which expose the silencing of victims and invalidation of witness testimonies, which functioned as the burning of Miller’s story. In Miller’s attempts to get legal help for her assault, she not only had to relieve her trauma consistently, but also had to face the response of not being believed and being interrogated. Through her story, she confronts attempts to silence and/or invalidate her, not just to assert the “individual significance, but [the] commonality [of] all the people enabling a broken system”

(Miller, 2019, p. viii). The story begins with her legal experiences, before moving to combine the legal experience with public and media responses. Because of definitions of rape in California, Miller's experience was invalidated; she "refrained from calling him a rapist, afraid of being corrected" (Miller, 2019, p. viii). In the US justice system, there is continued pressure put on the victim to look and act the part, for their experiences to be validated and believed or silenced. In her memoir, Miller recounts the details and fears of investigators watching her; she wondered that if she kept drinking if the defense would argue that she was not affected or if she appeared to be smiling the defense would say she was not suffering (Miller, 2019, p. 57). Turner was innocent until proven guilty, whereas Miller was placed under a strict scrutiny of her character. Through the scrutiny she was made aware that "money could make cells doors swing open" and that "if a woman was drunk when the violence occurred, she wouldn't be taken seriously [but] if [a man] was drunk when then violence occurred, people would offer him sympathy" (Miller, 2019, p. 23). Through consistent attempts at invalidating witness testimonies and silencing victims, Miller's loss of memory became an opportunity, and her victimhood became "synonymous with not being believed" (Miller, 2019, p. 23). No amount of preparation can protect victims from the erasure of self, which the system works to create (Miller, 2019, p. 159). In this portion of the memoir, Miller contributes her unconsciousness not only to her lack of memory of the night, but to the treatment she received while going through the legal process. Here we can see a feminist critique of the US legal system, for the court works to assign blame to the victims, contributing to their symbolic burning.

In court, Miller felt as though she was being "flattened, characterized, mislabeled, and vilified," feelings of being stigmatized and shamed which would only increase through public response (Miller, 2019, p. vii). Miller learned details about her assault through articles on the

internet and news channels, having her trauma met with a focus on the offender's success and loss of potential:

The woman is recovering at a hospital. Turner, a freshman, was a three-time All-American high school swimmer and state record-holder in two freestyle events [...] If convicted, Turner, who raced in the London 2012 U.S. Olympic trials, could face up to 10 years in prison (Miller, 2019, p. 36).

Media response continued to erase the existence of Miller, focusing on Turner's potential swimming career and the damage this experience could have on his life. Erasure of the victim's identity in the media works alongside the court system in attempts to prevent justice, while encouraging the silence of victims whose voices could shift the position of the status quo.

Through representational politics of the media and our nation's legal system, the public is given the strength to continue the silencing and invalidation. Public response to hearing the story of Miller's trauma thus supported rape culture through a continued blame, shame, and attempted fear-mongering cycle that repeated and reverberated on the internet and in the news media:

She hooked up with a freshman? Doesn't that make her the predator? Haven't you ever heard of gang rape in India. There are women out there suffering real abuse and you want to call this assault. Bored suburban kids can't keep it in their pants. Lame. It's not like he dragged her. If she had a boyfriend why wasn't he there? [...] Not trying to blame the victim but something is wrong if you drink yourself to unconsciousness... She didn't even go to Stanford. Did she pass out with her underwear off while peeing? Whatever happened to the buddy system? I, for one, am not convinced there was a crime of the felony magnitudes charged here, and possibly no crime at all aside from consensual lewd behavior. Did he give her a roofie? If not, why would any woman get so drunk? [...] This

is a real mystery: This was a top athlete, a highly intelligent, good-looking boy! One might think he'd find lots of girls who wanted to hook up with him! Instead, he ruins his life by doing this? It's hard to credit (Miller, 2019, p. 47).

In Miller's perspective, the public seemed angry with her for making "[her]self vulnerable, more than the fact that he'd acted on [her] vulnerability" (Miller, 2019, p. 47). Beyond the crimes themselves, the victim is continued to be degraded, forced into an immediate struggle to navigate both the legal system and the public's "relentless judgment" (Miller, 2019, p. 52). Even those figures who were on Miller's side—for example, her boyfriend at the time--contributed to the silencing of her experience as a victim and a woman in society. Her boyfriend requested to not see any more videos of the harassment and risk she faces daily, and Miller was met with questions of why she was walking alone at night if she felt uncomfortable. Regardless of what she wore, how she acted or what she did, the harassment was constant (Miller, 2019, p. 82). Miller was consistently revictimized and threatened with fear of repeated sexual violence, yet any chance of awakening and consciousness was stripped from her by the patriarchal system within U.S. culture.

3.1.3 Awakening and Departure

Writing provides an important therapeutic forum for this necessary psychic work. In Chanel Miller's *Know My Name* (2019), she reclaims her name and identity, which she had separated from her trauma to survive. Throughout the text, Miller not only explains her experience as a survivor of assault and asserts the injustices of the system, but also fills the text with what makes up her identity beyond the trauma forced upon her. Miller is a Chinese American woman, a sister, a friend, an artist, and a writer – not just a woman who has been taken advantage of in a violent, traumatic act. *Know My Name* is an assault memoir and a victim

statement, which works to validate shared experiences and encourage the reclamation of identity for all victims through validating and reclaiming Miller's own life. Through Miller's writing of her own narrative, she was able to reach an awakening and departure from her trauma, bringing healing to herself and others by means of the publicity of her testimony and victim impact statement. In writing her testimony, Miller had to relive her trauma in detail. Through Miller's reclamation of her story, she moved from the burning to an awakening; the act of combing Chanel Miller and Emily Doe moved towards an awareness of her experiences, rather than a continued repetition of trauma by the separation of self. The waking up from the dream and facing reality as one individual, who was simultaneously part of a greater experience, was only possible through a reclamation of self in the narrative testimony.

Through sharing her experience in her memoir, Miller hopes to undo societal responses and beliefs, saying that "whether you are a man, transgender, gender non-conforming, however you [...] exist in this world, if your life has been touched by sexual violence, [she] seeks to protect you" (Miller, 2019, p. viii). Despite the attempt to invalidate and silence the testimony of Chanel Miller, her voice was heard, speaking to the power of shared trauma and #Me Too literature as historical narratives. Miller asserts that she is a victim, but her identity is not defined by the acts of Brock Turner, and she does not belong to him. When telling her friend who was assaulted four years ago, Miller was met with the realization that her burdens were opportunities to provide justice not only to herself, but to other victims who were denied their victories – she was the one who was going to do it (Miller, 2019, p. 73). Chanel Miller did exactly what she realized she had the opportunity to do. She fought for justice for herself, while bearing the way of bringing victories to a collection of survivors of sexual violence. Miller's strength, identity, and testimony were enough to combine thousands of victims together and advocate for a change,

through her honesty of society and sexual violence made public, even before her decision to be named. We reached a position in society where sexual violence was normal and women were/are viewed as statistics (Miller, 2019, p. 140). The memories and testimonies which the legal system, public responses, and ourselves try to perceive as weaknesses are the greatest strengths we hold (Miller, 2019, p. 211). Through claiming her identity and memory, Miller empowered thousands. Beginning with a letter received while in the legal process, she realized how powerful her statement was:

So many of us have read about you. When I saw this card in the store, I knew I had to get it for you because this little girl reminds me of your strength. I'm sending this card to let you know you are not alone. I can't imagine the hell you've been through. We are in awe of your courage and resiliency and badassery. Know that you have a huge army of soldiers behind you (Miller, 2019, p. 211).

There is a combined solidarity in victims, proving the importance of witness testimonies and the trauma and assault memoir. When Miller felt most alone, she now realized that she was “surrounded by survivors” and a part of a collective that “had been waiting for [her] to find justice” (Miller, 2019, p. 211). The true power of the witness testimony as seen through Miller's story became undeniable after the publishing of her victim impact statement. A portion of society which feels ignored, silenced, and invalidated was finally heard. Nearly every response Miller received was filled with the locations of where the reader wept through enrage, devastation, and gratitude (Miller, 2019, p. 246). Soon, the statement was published in *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *the Los Angeles Times*, and *The New York Times*; the story spread in media outlets which before had commended Turner's achievements and mourned his lost opportunities, while questioning, vilifying, or blaming Miller. Because of her shared story, “rape hotlines were

ringing, calls and volunteers increasing” (Miller, 2019, p. 248). Witness and survivor testimonies not only empower and reclaim the person who shares them through an awakening and departure, but encourage the fight for our voices, identities, and justice. Miller ends her memoir with a brief love letter to herself and other victims, pleading for the perseverance of our voices and tenderness:

“Hold up your head when the tears come, when you are mocked, insulted, questioned, threatened, when they tell you you are nothing, when your body is reduced to openings. The journey will be longer than you imagined, trauma will find you again and again. Do not become the ones who hurt you. Stay tender with your power [...] Fight because you know that in this life, you deserve safety, joy, and freedom. Fight because it is your life. Not anyone else’s. I did it, I am here.” (Miller, 2019, p. 328).

Chanel Miller’s writing of her memoir allows her conscious awareness of the trauma to be awakened through the combining of Emily and Chanel Miller. Supported by the literary and psychoanalytical theory of Felman, Laub, and Caruth, Miller’s awakening allows her to reach her departure from the trauma. This works towards the purpose of witness testimonies as historical narratives; not only do they tell history, but they change societal and cultural standards. The full departure is only reached through her cathartic feelings of claiming her trauma, alongside the support and response she received to her testimony. The responses to her trauma by other survivors of sexual violence speaks to the extent to which witness testimonies support collective healing and departure by means of social change, which the #MeToo movement advocates for.

3.2 Rose McGowan

Rose McGowan begins her memoir with an author’s note asserting that her book *BRAVE*, “is not about #MeToo” (McGowan, 2018, p. ix). Respecting McGowan and the purpose of her

writing, rather than addressing her memoir as a piece of #MeToo literature, my argument will work to articulate the interconnectedness of sexual assault victims in relationship to the broader work and power of reclaiming voices through testimony. The violence of sexual assault makes clear the need for broader social change, including the support and believed validity of witness and survivor testimonies for collective healing, the systemic change of the legal system, and the eradication of rape culture. Rose McGowan's account of her life experiences serves a great purpose in addressing the silencing of victims and the protection of predators in the United States' patriarchal status quo. McGowan is an artist, who was once a well-respected actor, but she has been subject to repetitive shame, silencing, and assault – all of which began long before her rape. For the thesis, her experiences following her assault by Harvey Weinstein will be addressed by name; however, this is not his story, and my analysis will center McGowan's voice as paramount and central.

3.2.1 Falling

McGowan's falling presents differently than the falling of Chanel Miller. In the case of McGowan's falling, she is subject to the unexpected trauma of harassing, sexual abuse, and silencing from a very young age. This unexpected trauma instilled in her a sense of disconnectedness. Due to this upbringing, her falling begins to happen at a young age. McGowan accepted that trauma would happen to her, premeditating her unconsciousness; this was an attempt to protect herself from the unexpectedness. Once McGowan experienced falling because of sexual violence in Hollywood, she was even more at risk for the suffering which happens during the burning.

McGowan's life began under the control of a patriarchal system in a cult in Italy. Her experiences in the cult started a long life subject to silencing, control, and attempts to strip her of

her autonomy. Through the memoir, while recounting the experiences that brought her to Hollywood, she focuses on an industry which is fundamentally patriarchal and misogynistic. When McGowan was just a child, she was forced into silence by her mother's partner at the time. When discussing the relationship, she had with her mother's partner she writes that "it drove me insane that this worthless human had power and control over me [...] silencing me was his favorite thing and what I hated him for the most" (McGowan, 2018, p. 41). This direct silencing begins an understanding of the social misogyny which works to rid women of their voices, covering over them with shame and blaming. McGowan was literally stripped of her right to speak, parallel to the stolen voice she experienced in Hollywood following her assault. Starting at a young age, as a girl not yet a woman, McGowan was told that she could not speak and if she did then she would be punished.

McGowan spent time homeless and living with abusive boyfriends, searching for any way to make money to escape. Already subject to years of abuse and silencing, she was opened into another world in which not only would she be silenced, but perpetrators and predators would also be protected and not asked to be accountable for their actions. Her first experience with assault in the industry was when another male actor "push[ed] against [her] vagina" while filming a scene (McGowan, 2018, p. 101). When she later told her story, the director would respond saying that she remembered it incorrectly (McGowan, 2018, p. 101). Society works to protect offenders, while punishing the victim – both of which McGowan's experiences can attest. The threat was never just in Hollywood; rather, McGowan's memoir shows a consistent threat of sexual violence that extended beyond her workplace. McGowan argues that the predators in the industry weren't much different "than the supposedly sane men who would follow [her] around the streets of Seattle" (McGowan, 2018, p. 66). The harassment and assaults in everyday life

parallel the experiences of assault within Hollywood, working to show that as a woman there is a constant threat in our society. McGowan couldn't "walk a city block without men honking, wagging their lewd tongues through their v-split fingers" (McGowan, 2018, p. 66). Consistent threats and risk forces women, especially those who have been a victim of assault, to disconnect and dissociate from themselves, becoming two with one version internal and the other external (McGowan, 2018, p. 66).

McGowan's experiences in Hollywood could not have been prevented by not being in the industry. However, these experiences work to show the extent to which men hold power over female autonomy. Harvey Weinstein was an incredibly wealthy, well-known, and well-respected man in the industry. According to McGowan, "he was a huge ogre of a man, and [she] was a girl" (McGowan, 2018, p. 125). At the time, McGowan was only nineteen, hoping to make her way in the industry enough to get by and regain the freedom she had always wanted; she knew nothing about Weinstein other than what his connection could do for her future. She didn't know "what exactly his kind of power meant," but would soon learn after being subject to his assault on her (McGowan, 2018, p. 116). When meeting with Weinstein, McGowan was walking into a trap "that started the twenty-year conspiracy of collusion," which would forever affect her life (McGowan, 2018, p. 116). The trap McGowan describes is the exact moment in which the unexpected trauma happens to cause the definitive falling before the burning she experienced in Hollywood and her life after.

3.2.2 Burning

In trying to get justice and protect herself, she reached out to her lawyers, management, and others in the industry. However, regardless of her attempts to protect herself, the system worked against her, bringing her blame, silencing, and punishment. She wrote that it seemed like

everyone in Hollywood knew her “most vulnerable and violent moment [...] like being assaulted over and over and over” (McGowan, 2018, p. 128). Everyone “looked the other way” soon making it clear that covering up Weinstein’s behavior was just the beginning (McGowan). Weinstein was not only protected by the industry, with powerful men covering up stories about him, but his victims were persecuted (McGowan, 2018, p. 125).

In her short time in Hollywood, McGowan’s honesty led to her becoming blacklisted. Weinstein “called every other studio and independent producer in town,” telling them not to hire her (McGowan, 2018, p. 128). Victim silencing is not just covering up stories or literally ridding women of their voices but attempting to destroy the lives and identities of the victims. Survivors and witnesses of assault are met with defamation, shaming and blame, all while protecting the predator and boasting their accomplishments. Just like with her mother’s partner, McGowan once again lost her voice to patriarchal control (McGowan, 2018, p. 199). The burning for McGowan presented a silencing which mirrored her trauma as a child and the blacklisted surrounding of her rapist within Hollywood. In this way, her silence was a repetition of the trauma of her early falling.

3.2.3 Awakening and Departure

As her experience shows, a published memoir is not the only way of reclaiming one’s voice and connecting to other victims. Through social media McGowan was able to tell her story and “shine a light on the darkness” in an accessible way (McGowan, 2018, p. 212-213). By using her stories, McGowan worked towards collective healing and creating accountability culturally and legally.

In the 2016 election year, women came forward with experiences of assault by the hands of Donald Trump, triggering McGowan’s activism and testimony, when she realized that society

“gives men a free pass” and that they were allowed to “get away with everything and permitted all” (McGowan, 2018, p. 235, 101). Social media responded to Trump’s election, tweeting about #WhyWomenDontReport. McGowan began to discuss women’s experience “particularly when the [offender] is a prominent individual” (McGowan, 2018, p. 220-221). McGowan’s awakening is like that of Miller’s, in that it began with publicity surrounding rape and sexual violence. McGowan, however, was inspired by testimonies of other women. This alone speaks to the validity of witness testimonies for social change and collective healing. Through the testimonies of other women, McGowan was brave and shared her own story. Like the #MeToo movement, the popularity of #whywomendontreport shed light on victim’s experiences and responses to their honesty. McGowan began directly calling out Hollywood:

A (female) criminal attorney said because I’d done a sex scene in a film I would never win against the studio head #WhyWomenDontReport (McGowan [@rosemcgowan], 2016, [Tweet]).

Because it’s been an open secret in Hollywood/Media & they shamed me while adulating my rapist. #WhyWomenDontReport (McGowan [@rosemcgowan], 2016, [Tweet]).

Because my ex sold our movie to my rapist for distribution #WhyWomenDontReport (McGowan [@rosemcgowan], 2016, [Tweet]).

Dear Hollywood [...] how many more stories do you have to hear before you do the right thing and stop rewarding men that are predators (McGowan [@rosemcgowan], 2016, [Tweet]).

McGowan's memoir fulfills the awakening, departure, and role of the witness testimony in not only sharing the truth of her experience and paving history with the truth of Hollywood, but in helping herself and others to heal. Although her testimony does not want to be a part of the movement, her values and reasoning for publishing it support the mission of #MeToo. In writing her testimony, McGowan knew that she spoke to "people like [her]: the disenfranchised, the hurt, the lost, the lonely, the brave ones who choose to live their lives differently, who choose to see things differently, who choose to function in a society that doesn't want them in their own way, on their own terms" (McGowan, 2018, p. 223). She spoke to the interconnectedness of people like her, who shared her traumas and considered if through sharing the trauma and advocating "we could live a better, freer, stronger life" (McGowan, 2018, p. 223). McGowan reached her departure through the responses of people to her story, asserting that collective healing through testimonies and departure works. McGowan claims to "know [her] own worth now" because she sees it in the people who shared their testimonies and followed her, McGowan saw her worth because of the worth she saw in the witnesses to her testimonies (McGowan, 2018, p. 244).

3.3 Shelly Oria, et al.

Indelible in the Hippocampus: Writings from the Me Too Movement is a collection of essays and poems written by various survivors of sexual assault and edited by Shelly Oria. The importance of victim narratives to collective healing is communicated through retellings of assault, harassment, silencing, and shame, presented through an intersectional and inclusive approach. Oria introduces the anthology with the importance of written narratives surrounding assault; however, through her introduction she also calls attention to the lack of representation and inclusivity of the #MeToo movement. Oria states that "books invite concentrated focus and offer an immersive experience" (Oria 11). In continuing to bring the movement to published

literature, readers are offered an experience to which they can connect and through which they can be empowered. By the end of 2017, the #MeToo movement had completely taken off, with shared stories of actresses and celebrities, who were predominantly white, straight, and wealthy (Oria 11). Oria acknowledges the privilege of those people whose voices were being heard and stories being shared, so she viewed this anthology as essential in including queer, transgender, immigrant, Latinx, Asian, and Black experiences (Oria 11). Through this anthology, the goal was not only to increase inclusivity within the movement, but to remind readers that legal and systematic change is possible through the movement's core of telling stories (Oria 13). Though these stories help to bring awareness towards rape culture, motivate systemic change, and support the effectiveness of collective healing, as readers and/or fellow survivors, we must remember that these stories belong to the victims and no one is entitled to them, regardless of the intentions. This reminder works to ensure that academic research, media publicity, and legal actions remain compassionate and humanized. Due to the multitude of stories within the anthology, this analysis will address general themes of the victim narrative and witness testimonies. Within these stories, the presentation does not follow the exact framework of Miller and McGowan's testimonies. Due to the shorter nature of these narratives, they speak more to the burning because of trauma and the capable departure and awakening. The falling and the extent of the burning are not described in as long of an extent as full memoir. The motivation of Oria collecting these narratives was more to speak to the interconnectedness of sexual violence victims and present collective healing, while positioning the narratives through an intersectional approach.

While these stories are not as long and the analysis will focus more on the overall messaging of the anthology and testimonies, it is important to respect and acknowledge the

identities of the authors of these narratives. Through their narratives this study works toward an intersectional understanding of how the burning and departure affect individuals living within different cultural contexts and social positions. The narratives included are nonfictional essays by survivors of sexual violence, and these survivors all come from different backgrounds while presenting the same messages, which together work towards revealing history and healing. Those authors who will be included are as follows: Kaitlyn Greenidge, Nelly Reifler, Quito Ziegler, Jolie Holland, Gabrielle Bellot, and Karissa Chen.

3.3.1 Falling and Burning

Due to the nature of this anthology focusing more on trauma related to sexual violence and the rape culture within American, this analysis will combine the falling and the burning. Similarly to McGowan, many of these authors have disconnected from themselves and reached a form of dissociation due to the societal negligence towards rape culture and sexual violence. Many of these authors, however, do share their traumatic experiences in which they experienced the falling. Every one of these authors, after their trauma experienced the burning of a consistent fear and re-traumatization, all while being disconnected from themselves.

Through the anthology, these writers share their personal experiences of sexual assault and violence. However, these stories are not limited to events of assault, but represent the greater extent of consistent threats against women, sexual harassment, and general fear. Nelly Reifler describes this harassment and fear not as an if, but as a when, noting that “if you have not been followed, you will be soon” (Reifler, 2019, p. 62). Jolie Holland supports Reifler’s experience and claims, stating that “when [she] walk[s] alone in any city, in any neighborhood, [she is] sexually harassed” and that it has been that way since she was a child (Holland, 2019, p. 109). Reifler goes further in describing this consistent threat, detailing the words of a man who

harassed her. The man told Reifler that she was so small, she could fit into his suitcase. Because of the consistent threats and harassment, she knew that he could take her. This experience of Reifler speaks not only on the repetition of assaults and harassments, but the extent of fear that women have in which they come to know and accept what could be done to them. The repetition of assaults and harassments is indicative of these authors experience of the burning, while the supposed acceptance of the trauma connects to the sense of otherness and disconnection from the self. Gabrielle Bellot takes this framework of consistent verbal degradation and presents it through her lens and experience as a transgender woman. When Bellot came out, she began “to feel it everywhere from men: a devouring gaze, a hunger” (Bellot, 2019, p. 192). This sense of hunger she describes refers to the predation of men in the United States’ patriarchal society, in which women are viewed as prey for pleasure. Bellot’s fear of her safety and threats from men, which were already existent due to her gender identity as a transgender woman, was increased through her feminine identity and publicity of it. After coming out, Bellot describes persistence from men and sexual objectification to be routine and continuously pursued, regardless of saying no (Bellot, 2019, p. 194). This general harassment in a society of rape culture, is met with increased fear and silencing of women and victims. Holland provides a series of harassments and assaults, writing that she “didn’t tell anyone because there was no one [she] could trust” (Holland, 2019, p 104). Holland depicts her own mother’s lack of concern for sexual harassment by her doctor, only supporting that women do not feel a sense of trust or protection. When harassment and assault is so frequent, this sense of distrust and a lack of defense for victims, contributes to their silencing. In this case, it is not forced silencing by others alone, but the chosen silencing victims do to themselves because of fear – and this only further takes power away from the victims. Bellot meets this framework of silencing by sharing her experiences with

her uncle and a man from an internet dating app. While the culture within America works to generally instill fear in women and contributes to the silencing of themselves, as a transgender woman this silencing is increased through other cultural implications.⁷ Bellot was afraid that no one would believe her, but she also feared that sharing the story of her uncle's predation would "out [her] as queer" (Holland, 2019, p. 190).

To be honest, I was afraid of speaking out. I had read too many stories of trans women who went to the police after men harassed them and were told by the cops that it was the trans women's own fault; what do you expect, the officers asked, when you dress like a woman? It was a version of blaming the victims of assault for how they dress, but now mixed with a sense that we, as trans women, were asking for trouble by presenting as female. We were to blame, it seemed, first for being women, then for being the wrong kind of women. I came to feel ashamed, at times, of what I was, stupidly believing, even as I should have known better, that my stories didn't matter because I wasn't the right kind of woman (Bellot, 2019, p. 195).

The collective threat of sexual assault against transgender women as women, is increased through their expression of their gender identity. Reviewing the experience of transgender women is essential in analyzing witness testimonies and victim narratives. The #MeToo movement must be understood inclusively and addressed with intersectionality. The experiences of Bellot work to not only share her female experience of assault, but to also address the inclusivity of the movement as it is progressing. When the behaviors of Bellot's uncle began to change, she wondered if he had noticed her female identity that she was suppressing (Bellot, 2019, p. 188). This perspective works in suggesting the predatory natures towards women, as

⁷ Transgender women are statistically more likely to be subject to sexual violence, with 21% of genderqueer, nonbinary, and transgender individuals experiencing sexual violence within the ages of 18-24.

well as the shame and fear she felt towards her identity because of her treatment. When assaulted by the man she met through the internet, Bellot had a greater fear of safety because she is transgender (Bellot, 2019, p. 194). As a transgender woman in America, Bellot fears for her safety from sexual and physical violence.

The stories shared by Bellot, Holland, and Reifler speak to the consistent threat and revictimization of trauma victims. As these victims silenced themselves or were not believed, they were constantly subject to the burning of their trauma repeatedly. In this sense of silencing and/or a lack of belief, these survivors were not able to process their traumas and experience an awakening through testimony. In understanding the context of these survivors' lives, one can attest that awakening is more different for some communities than others. The presentations of repeated trauma and harassments which caused a disassociation and fear did not allow these individuals to be connected to themselves and truly live their lives, while suffering the survival of the trauma. However, this collective is in fact about reclamation/awakening, and healing/departure – which they all did achieve to some extent through the writing. Some of these authors reached their awakening and departure before this collective was published. However, these writings still work effectively if not as their own departures and a way to create interconnectedness and help the departure of other survivors.

3.3.1 Awakening and Departure

The #MeToo movement, which is meant to empower women and victims of sexual assault, brings about further confusion for Bellot, as she feels that she both fits and does not fit within the community of the movement (Bellot, 2019, p. 195). While the movement is affirming for Bellot, it can also be isolating due to tendencies for simplified nuances. Rhetoric surrounding the movement, anti-abuse, and sexual assault isolates and hurts transgender women, as well as

those who are gender queer or nonbinary, when “all people with penises” are viewed as “rapacious rapists” (Bellot, 2019, p. 195). This discourse puts transgender women who have not had gender reassignment surgery in an uncomfortable position (Bellot, 2019, p. 195). While Bellot points out the complications of belonging within the movement, she does not disgrace it or disapprove of it. Through her writing she supports it and collective healing.

The piece itself was written with intentions of supporting collective healing inclusively. Most of the writers themselves, address this sense of collective healing. Various writers addressing the healing through telling their stories, works to suggest the importance of witness testimonies and victim narratives – telling the stories of assault brings about a sense of community, in which victims can heal. Kaitlyn Greenidge suggests that “telling your story is a key component of recovery” (Greenidge, 2019, p. 16). Greenidge supports her assertion through mentioning a story of sexual assault survivors walking on a stage and telling their experiences. She says that it was “there that an entire generation discovered the power of telling their story” (Greenidge, 2019, p.16). When a story is told, life begins to change, and a process is started (Ziegler, 2019, p. 85). The change, which can be overwhelming, is a healing process in which survivors are no longer isolated in their experiences. The directly connects to the awakening and departure process of the theory. In survivors no longer being isolated they awaken, but the healing process can be difficult in coming to terms with the traumatic experienced and a new sense of consciousness. Karissa Chen told her story in an attempt to just see “if pattering it into words made permanent by ink and paper, will help exorcise the symptoms rushing through [her] body” and if writing the narrative and telling her story is the way which victims “begin to heal [their] bodies, by airing out what we have forced them to reckon with silently, protectively, alone” (Chen, 2019, p. 205). This works alongside the healing of other victims and their

experiences to argue that collective healing through narrative is effective. Bellot, who critiqued the inclusivity of the movement for queer and transgender people, herself argues in favor of collective healing through storytelling. Bellot writes that collective healing is possible through the interconnectedness of assault victims and the power the voice and narrative holds.

“What heals, I’ve come to learn, is faith in the power of other women, faith in an open-armed sisterhood and in talking openly – especially about how my experiences both intersect with and deviate from those of most cis women [...] speaking lights a candle in a room inside us” (Bellot, 2019, p. 196).

Oria advocates for the anthology and the victim narrative, suggesting survivors not be alone and to “encourage everyone’s voice and act as vigilant witnesses” (Oria 13). Victims must “hold one another through the aftermath of telling [their] stories” (Oria 13). Through these women’s stories the greater issue of rape culture and the consistent threat of harassment and sexual violence against women is met with effective solutions of collective healing by women who tell their stories and believe in the movement’s narrative healing. Each of these authors use their narrative to awaken themselves, as well as others, to the historical trauma of sexual violence in America and the culture which contributes to its existence. Through the collective essays recounting sexual violence and harassment, the authors work alongside Oria, supporting the #MeToo movement and collective healing. The departure shown throughout these narratives works alongside the asserted validity of the witness testimony to show the extent to which a narrative can process and heal trauma, individually and collectively through referentiality and honesty.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

Through the memoirs and sexual violence narratives of this study, Felman, Laub, and Caruth's theories and analyses of trauma testimonials support that #MeToo movement literature demands validity of victim testimonies and witness listening as a promotion of healing by means of a social and cultural shift. The rape memoir and assault narrative allow literary works to address the political necessity of analyzing and confronting the social and historical contexts of sexual violence, affecting both the present and future. Within these testimonies the authors and readers bear witness to the injustices of stolen bodily autonomy prevalent in a country which subscribes to misogyny and rape culture. The testimony not only allows culture, history, and trauma to be revealed to the reader through a narrative but allows the author to accept their traumas and history in attempts of departure and a reclamation of their stories. Caruth's framework of processing trauma through Freud's dream analysis provided a methodology for analyzing the texts. The texts were looked at through a lens of falling, in which the victim was subject to an unexpected trauma, which caused a disconnected sense of self and identity. Following the falling, victims experienced the burning, in which society itself revictimized the survivor of the trauma, or the survivor experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, which could not be fully processed due to the sense of disconnectedness. The rape culture and persistent threat of sexual violence in America works preventatively of allowing survivors to give their testimony and process their trauma, reaching an awakening. Through an awakening, the victim of sexual violence reclaims their narrative and combines their identities once again. Through this raised awareness of an awakening, the victims can experience a departure in which they heal from their trauma. Through the #MeToo movement and sexual violence testimonies, survivors are able to achieve their awakening and departure, supported by survivors who have

experienced the same thing. The #MeToo movement provides a backing and platform for the sexual violence testimony to exist and to be effective in awakening and healing. The connection between the survivor testimony and the #MeToo movement works collectively with Felman and Laub's research to firmly attest that the sexual violence narrative is not just a personal retelling, but also a revelation of history as it is forming.

Through the validation of witness testimonies and collective healing through narratives, I believe further research could work to dive deeper into how intersectionality affects this process of testimony and healing. A more specified framework for how intersectionality impacts the experiencing of the falling, burning, awakening, and departure would uphold the mission of the #MeToo movement to an even greater extent. In the future, I hope that the witness testimony is validated socially, allowing victims of sexual violence to be believed – which is the first and most prevalent step at ending rape culture and creating serious social change.

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