

(UN)BECOMING: SURVIVING SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND WHAT REMAINS

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that in social environments where rape culture is pervasive, facing rape culture induced trauma is an inescapable component of the woman's experience. Through a content analysis of writings from survivors of sexual assault, and self-reflective poetry written by the researcher, this thesis reveals the intimate reality of surviving the consequences of rape culture. The theoretical construct of (un)becoming, outlines both the experience of living in a rape culture and surviving sexual violence. The findings of this thesis outline five common themes in the writings of sexual assault survivors. First, the survivors provide similar descriptions of the impact of sexual trauma on the self. Second, survivors commonly frame dissociation as a form of survival. Third, survivors describe similar difficulties with sex after sexual trauma. Fourth, survivors of sexual violence often suffer with feelings of hate, frustration, and misplaced anger. Finally, the fifth theme explores the healing and resilience of survivors. The concept of (un)becoming will be weaved throughout this thesis, serving as the connecting thread of the project and as a representative voice for the survivor of rape culture induced trauma. In this way, the concept of (un)becoming will guide readers through the reality of living in a rape culture and the experience of surviving sexual violence.

Introduction

Sometimes the body knows; sometimes I am afraid of what my body knows.

Think of the five women who are closest to you, perhaps your partner, your mother, your sister or daughter, your best friend. According to national statistics, one of these five women will experience rape in their lifetime (NSVRC 2020). Arguably, rape is the most devastating result of rape culture. In the context of this work, rape culture is understood as “a complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women ... a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent” (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth 1993). For women, the impacts of this socialization process are widespread and devastating. Rape culture subjects all women (even those who are never raped) to sexual violence, objectification, and sexism as normalized and trivialized practices. I argue that the seemingly inescapable reality of living in a rape culture is a trauma inducing experience for all.

The goal of this thesis is to explore the lived experience of those impacted by rape culture—be that survivors of sexual violence or individuals impacted by being submerged in the culture. To accomplish this goal of the project, I use content analysis to examine the writings from survivors of sexual trauma. Additionally, I supplement the content analysis portion of this work with auto-ethnographic prose exploring the impact that rape culture has had on my own development. These poems were created through a process of self-reflection, in which I used a critical perspective to examine my experiences as a source of data. During this analysis of my experiences with rape culture, I developed the concept of “(un)becoming”. (Un)becoming is a theoretical construct that encapsulates the experience of living through sexual trauma and surviving a rape culture.

The concept of (un)becoming will be weaved throughout this thesis, serving as the connecting thread of the project and as a representative voice for the survivor.

Additional goals of this thesis are to spark conversation, provoke questions, and raise awareness about rape culture and its widespread effects. In a word, to create a safe space for those impacted by rape culture—where there is room for anger, frustration, questions, and ultimately healing. Finally, this project works to honor the resilience of survivors and acknowledge the power of art as a tool for healing.

Literature Review

The History of Rape and Rape Culture

The history of rape itself traces back to the earliest days of humankind (Jenkins 2020). In fact, stories of rape and survivorship can be found in ancient Greek and Roman mythology, as well as in the Bible (Jenkins 2020). Looking at the history of rape, it is clear that rapists, who are almost exclusively men, are driven by a search for power and desire to assert dominance over a particular group—most often women, girls, and young boys (Bennice & Resick 2003; Jenkins 2020; Mahoney & Williams 1998; Whisnant 2021). With men being the primary perpetrators of rape, it is easy to understand that rape is most prevalent in patriarchal societies where gender inequality is rampant (Baum et al. 2018; Cobos 2014; Gjika 2020; Harrington 2018).

As rape grew pervasive throughout history, the culture at large worked to define, explain, excuse, and make sense of the phenomenon (Jenkins 2020). With rape being concentrated in societies with drastic gender inequality, the beliefs that center around

rape have traditionally been influenced by patriarchal beliefs that inevitably absolve rapists and revictimize survivors. As time has passed, the definitions and understandings of rape have not progressed accordingly. Consequently, many antiquated and inaccurate beliefs about rape, rapists, and survivors still exist today.

During the second wave of the feminist movement, the term “rape culture” began to bring attention to the astounding number of sex crimes occurring in the United States (Jenkins 2020). Quickly thereafter, the term “rape culture” began to describe a social setting in which sexual violence is prevalent and normalized as a result of societal attitudes about gender and sexuality (Jenkins 2020). Rape culture often blames the victim, sympathizes with the rapists, implies consent, and routinely questions victims’ credibility (Baum et al. 2018; Cobos 2014; O’Hara 2012; Rollero and Tartaglia 2018). In modern society, rape culture is dominant, and its impacts are devastating.

The Impact of Rape Culture on Survivors

Arguably, rape culture affects victims of sexual violence most directly (Peterson 2019). Approximately one in five (or an estimated 25.5 million) women in the U.S. have been victims of completed or attempted rape at some point in their lifetime (Black et al. 2011; NSVRC 2020). And by age 44, one in four cisgender women have been raped at least once—a statistic that has remained consistent for over two decades (Axinn et al. 2018). Furthermore, one in sixteen women in the United States reported that their first experience with sexual intercourse was rape (Mahdawi 2020). Women of color experience rape and sexual assault at disproportionate rates. Over 20% of Black women are raped during their lifetimes (Barlow 2020). Indigenous women are 2.5 times more

likely to experience sexual assault compared to all other races, with one in three Indigenous women reporting having been raped during her lifetime (VAWnet.org 2021).

It is important to note that all the statistics discussed thus far are based on reported cases. Sex crimes are one of the most under-reported types of crime. According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, only 310 out of every 1,000 sexual assaults are reported to police (RAINN 2021). Often, fear of retaliation and shame are the strongest forces preventing survivors of rape from reporting their assaults.

These alarming statistics show that rape culture creates an environment in which sexual assault is commonplace for women and girls. For those who experience sexual assault, the influence of rape culture continues to haunt them even after they have survived a physical attack. Common rape culture-influenced myths cast blame and responsibility on survivors, (re)victimizing them and dismissing their experience (Bohner et al. 1998; Burt 1980; Peterson 2019; O’Hara 2012). Effectively, rape myths work to blame survivors for their own victimization (Ryan 2011). Because rape myths work to absolve rapists, many survivors do not report their assaults due to an internalized belief that they are to blame for the crimes committed against them (Peterson 2019). While in the past few decades popular rhetoric has shifted to more politically correct language, victim-blaming continues to occur in subtle expressions (Hockett et al. 2016; Saucier et al. 2015). As Peterson put it:

(Victims) are violated, abused, and then scrutinized, asked what they did to invite such a thing. They are assaulted with questions about their personal and sexual lives and inevitably put on trial for their own victimization. The worst moments of

their lives are turned into a story in which they are made out to be both the victim and the villain (2019).

A prime example of the traumatizing effects of victim blaming can be heard directly from a survivor. Chanel Miller, survivor of the brutal Brock Turner sexual assault, reflected on the way the media blamed her for her own attack, saying:

After a physical assault, I was assaulted with questions designed to attack me, to say see, her facts don't line up, she's out of her mind, she's practically an alcoholic, she probably wanted to hook up, he's like an athlete right, they were both drunk, whatever, the hospital stuff she remembers is after the fact, why take it into account, Brock has a lot at stake so he's having a really hard time right now. . . . It is enough to be suffering. It is another thing to have someone ruthlessly working to diminish the gravity and validity of this suffering (Peterson 2019).

The influence of rape culture creates a society where rape is statistically common, specifically for women and underage girls. Sexual assault survivors live through traumatic, life altering physical attacks, only to be continually victimized and villainized by a rape culture that trivializes their suffering and blames them for their own violation. Undoubtedly, the impact of rape culture most directly affects survivors of sexual assault. However, the roots of rape culture stretch beyond its most obvious victims, impacting society as a whole.

The Impact of Rape Culture on Society

Rape culture has changed the way that society thinks about sex, rape, rapists, and sexual assault survivors. Specifically, widely accepted false narratives about rape, rapists, and survivors, known as “rape myths”, have shaped the way society views and reacts to issues centered around sexual assault. Broadly speaking, rape myths are beliefs that compromise and perpetuate rape culture (Peterson 2019). Notably, studies have shown there is a correlation between sexists’ attitudes and the acceptance of rape myths (Chapleau, Oswald, and Russell 2007; Glick and Fiske 2011).

A common rape myth driven narrative about rapists, is that their assaults are based on lust and unadulterated passion (Peterson 2019; O’Hara 2012). This perception is dangerous because it paints the rapists as desperate, outcasts who are unable to acquire normal, consensual sex. In turn, this suggests that rape is a crime of passion. However, a rapist’s consensual sex life has little to no influence on their predatory behavior. Conversely, it is men who subscribe to rape myths and endorse patriarchal sexual stereotypes that are the most likely to be sexual assault offenders (Peterson 2019). Rape is not a crime caused solely by sexual frustration and rape is never a crime of passion, but instead always a crime centered around power and establishing one’s dominance.

A second common rape myth about rapists is that they are violent, monstrous criminals (O’Hara 2012; Peterson 2019). This myth is possibly even more dangerous than the first because it has a way of dehumanizing the rapists and presenting them as foreign or alien (O’Hara 2012; Peterson 2019). In reality, the majority of rapists know their victims. According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, 8 out of every 10 rapes are committed by someone the victim knows personally, with 39% committed by

an acquaintance and 33% committed by a current or former romantic partner (RAINN 2021). Rape myths like these skew the public's understanding of rapists and the most common types of sexual assault.

Some of the most common rape myths about sexual assault survivors are (1) victims often lie about being sexually assaulted; (2) victims somehow caused their attack by their behaviors and actions; and (3) victims have a responsibility to protect themselves from rape (Peterson 2019). First, only 2-8% of rape reports are false (Peterson 2019). Second, attempting to determine "something the victim did" to cause their assault is blatant victim blaming. In reality, it is not the victim's action or inaction that causes rape, but rather it is the acceptance of gender stereotypes, sexism, and the patriarchy that lead predators to rape (Peterson 2019; Gjika 2020). Thirdly, the belief that women are responsible to protect themselves from rape or sexual assault stems from the belief that women are sexual gatekeepers (Peterson 2019). This belief, at its core, is simply another tool to cast blame on women, since it categorizes them as either virginal innocents or promiscuous "bad girl" troublemakers who are somehow to blame for their own rapes (O'Hara 2012). Rape myths perpetuate a culture in which sexual violence becomes easy, acceptable, and trivialized. Further, these narratives (re)traumatize survivors and dismiss their experience by popularizing misconceptions about rape, rapists, and victims of rape.

Rape Culture Effects on Women as a Whole (The Pre-Victim)

Rape culture has a drastic effect on the way girls are socialized. With the staggering statistics on sexual assault, many women and girls understand that the possibility of them experiencing sexual assault in their lifetime is very real. Academic

and activist Markie L.C. Twist spoke to this very issue during a keynote speech in which she stated: “I am outraged that the only difference between myself and those who are survivors of sexual assault is really nothing more than luck. You heard me—luck!” (Twist 2020: 208). Tragically, within five years of this speech, Twist’s luck ran out. She became the survivor of marital rape at the age of 44 (Twist 2020). She became another statistic.

From a sickeningly young age, girls are taught to protect themselves from assault and subjugation. We are taught to alter our behavior to prevent victimization. We are taught to see all men as potentially dangerous, and to understand our bodies as potential crime scenes. Many of us fear rape before we even begin to be interested in sex.

Cahill describes this lived experience as the reality of the “pre-victim” (2001). Burke describes the pre-victim as, “she who anticipates rape, who fears the possibility of rape, who is taught to fear the possibility of rape, who comes to learn, accept, and experience herself as a subject who can be violated” (Burke 2019). In a society inundated with rape culture, the pre-victim mentality is a customary feature of the feminine experience. The constant warnings of rape, and the implication that as women we are responsible to protect ourselves from rape leads to living in a constant state of sexual self-defense (Burke 2019). Additionally, the pre-victim subjectivity strips women and girls of their sexual agency. As Burke explains:

The cautionary tales of rape that circulate and produce fear in girls’ and women’s lives are reminders that impoverished and often racist epistemologies of rape continue to foreclose sexual agency. They also, however, produce a mode of gendered embodiment that serves white hetero-patriarchy. Pre-victim subjectivity

is therefore lived as both a means of self-protection and secures a racialized gendered life in a particularly pernicious but paradoxical mode, that is, pre-victim subjectivity interrupts the capacity for sexual agency while rendering one acceptable and eligible as a woman (2019).

(Un)becoming

The idea of (un)becoming emerged in the process of analyzing and critically examining my attitude towards rape culture. Through deep reflection of memories, stories, and the exploration of my and other women's experiences, the thought of (un)becoming—unbeing and simultaneously starting to be, began to shape my approach for understanding how one processes trauma associated with rape culture. Thus, (un)becoming is a theoretical construct that aims to capture the experience of those impacted by rape-culture. While the concept of (un)becoming most closely relates to those who have experienced sexual trauma, the ideas that explain what (un)becoming entails can be extended to all individuals who are otherwise impacted by rape culture. In this way, the concept of “(un)becoming” captures multiple facets of the rape culture induced trauma experience.

First, this concept serves as a metaphor for the way that women and girls are stripped of their humanity at the hands of rape culture. We are subjugated, objectified, and sexualized nearly our entire lives. As a result, we begin to understand ourselves and our bodies as objects created for (male) pleasure and satisfaction. Secondly, “(un)becoming” describes the physical, emotional, and spiritual experience of dealing with trauma. Many sexual trauma survivors describe themselves as “hollow”, “empty”, and “lost” after their physical assaults. Survivors describe this as being both a physical

sensation and emotional manifestation, as they experience a loss of their sense of self after surviving sexual trauma. Finally, “(un)becoming” points to the future. It invites those living in a rape culture to re-socialize themselves and un-learn the toxic aspects of rape culture. Similarly, this manifestation of the concept invites those who have experienced rape culture induced trauma to heal and empowers them to rebuild their lives and their selves. Relatedly, (un)becoming invites all women and girls to stop seeing themselves as “potential victims” or “pre-victims” and to begin to understand themselves as full individuals with agency. While it is important for women and girls to be aware of the dangerous of rape culture, we cannot surrender to perverse norms and allow for ourselves to only be understood as potential victims.

The theoretical construct of (un)becoming will be woven throughout this thesis. As its multiple manifestations are explored, (un)becoming will serve as the through line of this work. Additionally, the reality of what it means to (un)become will be explored in the data analysis section of this thesis. Specifically, the poetry used to “interrupt” the data analysis section of this work will serve as a representative voice of the survivor of rape culture induced trauma describing all that it means to (un)become.

Data & Methods

This thesis uses a mixed methods approach to the explore the reality of living in a rape culture and the experience of surviving sexual violence. To investigate the intimate ways in which rape culture impacts women and girls, I conducted a content analysis of poetry and prose written by survivors of sexual assault. More specifically, I draw from the stories and writings in *A Sparrow Stirs Its Wings* (2019) by Rachel Finch; *(Re)humanize* (2017) by Marlee Liss; *Milk and Honey* (2015) by Rupi Kaur; *Silhouette of*

a Songbird (2021) by Elizabeth Shane; and *Purple Sparks: Poetry by Sexual Assault Survivors* (2015) edited by Stephanie Evans and Sharnell Myles.

Content analysis is an unobtrusive research process. Considering the traumatic nature of sexual assault, an unobtrusive method seemed most appropriate for this research topic. Furthermore, because I was interested in exploring the intimate, lived experience of those impacted by rape culture, I chose to analyze primarily poetry and prose writing.

Throughout history, poetry and prose have been used to explore the most personal, transformative, and difficult aspects of the human experience. Poetry and prose have the ability to reveal truths otherwise difficult to express. In this creative style of writing, there is room to express the unspeakable, to illustrate feelings the writer herself does not fully comprehend. Poetry leaves room for silence, for confusion, anger, and hope, and often brings in an undeniable “humanness” to hard to deal with issues. For these reasons, I believe the specific kind of trauma rape culture can inflict on an individual is perhaps best processed through this style of creative writing.

Additionally, I chose to write my own autoethnographic¹ poetry and prose, reflecting on the way rape culture has affected me personally, as well as the ways I have witnessed rape culture impacting society at large. These self-reflections will “interrupt” the written analysis. The interruptions serve as a reminder of the real human impact of rape culture, and its power of destruction. Specifically, I chose to use this intrusive style of narrative to mimic the way rape culture intrudes women’s lives. For example, survivors of sexual violence often experience flashbacks, chronic anxiety, and panic attacks as a result of their assaults (this is a direct result of rape culture). The fragmented

¹ Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience to describe and interpret cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (Adams, Ellis, Jones 2017).

writing style aims to mirror the choppiness, shatteredness, and discombobulation of those lived experiences. Rape culture also intrudes on the lives of women in general, despite direct experiences with sexual assault. For example, many women and girls will take “safety measures” to protect themselves from assault and objectification (e.g., wearing modest clothing, carrying self-defensive equipment, using a buddy system, crossing the street to avoid walking by a group of men, etc.). These actions are results of the unpleasant, pushy, and interfering nature of rape culture.

Throughout this thesis, the concept of (un)becoming will guide readers through the reality of living in a rape culture and the experience of surviving sexual violence. The separate manifestations of (un)becoming work to illustrate the repercussions of rape culture induced trauma, and by doing so acknowledge pain while also encouraging healing and growth. In this way, (un)becoming can be thought of as a representative voice for survivors of rape culture induced trauma in conversation with themselves, fellow survivors, their abusers, and with our society at large discussing the impacts of rape culture and sexual trauma.

When reading the data analysis, the reader will notice that there are two distinct columns. The left-side column includes the content analysis, while the right-side column includes original poetry intended to represent the voice of the survivor responding to and interrupting the data. The recommended method of reading the data analysis is for the reader to shift their attention to the poem found in right-hand column when they come across a blank space in the left-hand column. The poetry in the right-hand column is meant to disrupt the reader and reveal the lived experience of (un)becoming. In this way, the poetry can be thought of as a representative voice of the survivor of rape culture

induced trauma in conversation with the data analysis revealing a personal response to the broader themes.

Data Analysis

The following data analysis explores the lived experience of those impacted by rape culture—be that survivors of sexual violence or individuals impacted by simply being submerged in the culture. When analyzing the poetry and prose written by survivors of sexual trauma, five prominent themes emerged. First, the survivors provide similar descriptions of the impact of sexual trauma on the self. In other words, this first theme explores how sexual trauma makes one (un)become in an emotional and physical sense. The second theme discusses the way that survivors of sexual assault frame dissociation as a form of survival. The third theme outlines the difficulty of sex for survivors of sexual trauma. The fourth theme illustrates how survivors of sexual trauma often suffer with feelings of hate, frustration, and misplaced anger. Finally, the fifth theme explores the healing and resilience of survivors (how, in a final act of (un)becoming survivors of sexual violence free themselves from the binds of abuse).

The Unravelling – Sexual Trauma and the Self:

Survivors of sexual violence provide similar visceral descriptions of the impact of sexual trauma on the self. (What does it feel like to be made undone? What does this do to the self?).

*I feel like I've been
ripped
down the middle
and turned inside-out.
The raw parts of me are
bleeding,
but I still have laundry to
fold
and my hair to do in the
morning.*

Analysis of the data showed that survivors of sexual violence give similar descriptions of the visceral impact of sexual trauma on the self. First, the artists consistently described how they felt “broken”, “empty”, and “lost” after experiencing sexual trauma. Second, the artists discussed how after experiencing sexual abuse they felt as if they had reverted to a childhood mentality yet at the same time lost their childhood innocence. Finally, the artists discussed the impacts that sexual trauma has on one’s relationship with their body. All these discussion points give insight to the destructive

nature of sexual trauma, and the long-term impacts it has on the self.

*This hurt is so complete,
it is all consuming.
And I keep trying
to figure out how to stop
bleeding
for long enough to water
my houseplants
without staining the
floor.*

The first way in which survivors commonly described the impact of sexual trauma on the self was the feeling of being broken by their assaults. In the data set, various descriptions and metaphors were repeatedly used to illustrate this feeling of brokenness. Several artists described feeling as if they had been “torn in half”, or “shattered like glass”. Additionally, survivors described themselves as “empty” and “hollow” after their assault and feeling as if parts of themselves had died.

These descriptions were used to reference the physical manifestations of the emotional pain they experienced. In other words, when processing the emotional pain of sexual trauma survivors commonly described feeling physically broken or emptied. The survivor’s description of how it feels to be broken by

sexual violence gives insight to the destructive nature of sexual violence, and its power to deconstruct one's sense of self and sense of reality. An anonymous contributor to *Purple Sparks* discussed this loss of one's sense of self and sense of reality in the following poem:

“What is It Like to be Sexually Assaulted?
What is it like for the victim after they have been sexually assaulted?
They feel sick inside because someone kissed them and ran greedy hands down their body. They feel powerless and ashamed because someone forced arousal from their bodies without their consent.
They scan their surroundings all the time now, making sure that no one is following them. They jump when they hear loud noises.
And if someone touches them from behind their fight or flight kicks into overdrive. They don't trust as easily anymore.
They expect the worst from people that show an interest in them.
They worry they'll be assaulted again.
They cry late at night because they don't want to be afraid anymore.
They feel isolated from everyone else, they're wary and less carefree as their peers. What is it like for the victim after they've been assaulted?
They're lonely, terrified, sad, hurt, confused, and lost. They want to be loved but they're afraid they'll re-live their assault again.
They wish being hugged didn't make them feel uneasy, especially if it's people they're close to. They have nightmares, flashbacks, and it all feels so real.
Hands painfully grip your arms, hot breath hits your face, you're pinned to the wall and you can't get away. Your clothes are being pulled off and you're not strong enough to stop what's happening. Why do I know these things?
Because I was sexually assaulted”.

*My brain is so full,
with instructions*

*on how to keep my skin
attached to my bones,
that I forget the
appropriate
answer
to questions like,
“How’s your day
going?”
and
“Would you like cream
and sugar?”
and
“Why are you always
making a mess of
everything?”*

Second, the survivors often expressed feeling like they had somehow reverted to childlike mentality after experiencing sexual assault. One poet even compared herself to a fetus. These descriptions highlight the depth of vulnerability one feels after suffering sexual violence. Interestingly, these comparisons were often made in close proximity to discussions about a loss of innocence. In other words, the survivors described feeling like they had retrogressed to childhood while simultaneously losing all remnants of childhood innocence. While this theme appeared amongst all the artists whose work was analyzed, Marlee Liss, author of *Re-humanize* described this experience most directly:

“I am a child once again.
Needing to be held.
Guided.
Soothed.

Needing a nightlight to offer refuge
From the darkness that lies behind my eyelids
And
I am older than I thought possible.
Weary.
Used and tainted
Like a thing that sits in an attic
Gathering dust and cobwebs
Becoming the kind of sad that is uncomfortable to look
at
And is easier to cast aside
This is the paradox of rape survival”.

This aspect of the impact of trauma on the self
gives insight to how sexual violation can make survivors
feel not only small, helpless, and vulnerable, but also
dirty, unworthy, and damaged. Understanding this
“paradox of rape survival” can be a helpful tool for those
healing from sexual trauma, and for those supporting a
survivor of sexual violence.

*I am young enough
so that my hips are as
narrow
as my ribcage,
so that my ribcage
protrudes
past my chest
so that my chest bones
are protecting a heart
not yet able to admit all
the ways
it has already been
broken.*

*I am learning to sound
out letters,
and how to bury hurt.*

*I am learning to ride a
bike,
and how to hold someone
else's secrets in my
shaking hands.*

*I am so quiet
that even I
forget
all the things I am
meaning to say.*

This is what I practice:

forgetting

forgetting

forgetting

The third way survivors described the impacts of sexual trauma centered around the way sexual trauma severs the relationship between the self and the body. For example, there were descriptions of survivors feeling as if their body had been robbed and turned into something that no longer belonged to them. One poet claimed that her abuser had “stolen the love of (her) body”.

*My body is not a home.
My body is a crime scene,
and I am trying to clean
up the mess. I worry that
this may make me an
accomplice to the crime.*

With reverse personification, some poets framed the body as an inanimate object, like poet Marlee Liss who described her body as a “home that had been destroyed”. An anonymous poet in *Purple Sparks* summarized this theme well in their poem “Body”:

My body is a crime scene.
Bloody, broken, violent.
My body is a war zone.
Destroyed, damaged, angry, dead.
My body is a virus.
Contagious, toxic, must be eradicated, quarantined. My
body is a famine.
Empty, lacking, starving.
My body is a collapsed mine.
Dark, cold, suffocating.
My body is a fire.
Mottled, raging, deceptive, reeks.
My body is a bomb.
Unreliable, unpredictable, weapon of mass destruction.
My body is an invitation.
Ridicule, shame, abuse, disease, guilt.
My body is a report card.
Failure, does not work well with others, needs
improvement,
Poor conduct, resistant.
My body is a trap.
Enticing, sneaky, malicious, maiming.
My body is a cage.
Locked, rusted, permanent.
“Do Not Feed the Animal.”

The descriptions highlighted in this theme point to the way sexual trauma can sever the relationship between the self and the body. Many survivors of sexual assault account to feeling disconnected from their own bodies. As a result, they begin to understand their body as something entirely separate from themselves—something that exists parallel to their sense of self rather than intertwined with their identity.

*There are days
my body does not feel
like
my body.
There are days
my body does not feel
a part of my self at all.
There are days,
my body feels like
nothing
but something to take
care of,
like something to beware
of.
There are days my body
feels like everyone's
but my own.
And there are moments
my body feels like
some thing
someone else owns.*

Interestingly, it is estimated that “30% to 40% of eating disorder patients are survivors of sexual trauma” (After Silence). It could be argued that the damage that sexual trauma has on the relationship between the self

and the body makes individuals more susceptible to disordered eating habits.

*Was I trying to starve you
out of me?*

Floating – Sexual Trauma and Dissociation: Survivors describe dissociation as a form of survival.

In their poetry, many of the survivors discussed how dissociation can serve as a survival mechanism. Most often, these explanations of dissociation as a form of survival were in reference to victims dissociating during their physical attacks. This process was commonly described as a super-power or as divine intervention. Several artists referenced angels carrying them away from their bodies, rescuing their conscious mind from the physical attack. For example, poet and rape survivor Rachel Finn described this feeling of divine intervention in her poem “The Prayer is Alive”:

The prayer is alive when I rise from my body
and float above it, watching him grab fistfuls of
the back of my head and the angels are singing.

The prayer is alive when Light fills the room and
drags me from the stain between my legs lifting
me to the sky so the singing of the stars can

drown out his grunting. The prayer is alive when
I slam back into my body and the presence of
angels still ripples through me. I am listening to
the sound of the cosmos chanting my name.

*My body is so small that I
can manage to change in
the backseat of our family
car
out of my denim shorts
and into the new skirt I
just convinced my mom I
needed from Old Navy.
We are stuck in traffic,
and I am stuck fumbling
to get this skirt on, when
a man
in a semi-truck pulls up
parallel to our car.
Traffic is slow, and he is
pacing himself to stay in
line with the window into
the backseat. As our cars
inch along I squirm down
so that I am on the
floorboard. Skirt still
caught somewhere
around my knees, I am
trying to cover myself
with a shopping bag. He
is grinning at me now. I
knew I needed to be
telling my mom. I knew I
needed to be screaming. I
knew that I needed to be
doing anything else but
holding someone else's
secret in my shaking
hands. I have always
been so good at staying
quiet.*

Others described more intentional choices to “float away” or to “disconnect” themselves from reality as they endured their abusers’ attack. In these cases, dissociation was framed as a method of self-preservation. Consider this example:

my mind had a world a place
deep inside
I could hide
A beautiful place
where no one could go a place that was safe and
I could call my own you tried to break
all of me
You thought
you won
in the end
you failed
miserably
for my mind
rescued me

In both cases, the artists credited this dissociation ability as the reason they were able to survive their sexual assaults. As Rachel Finn put it frankly,

“I thought he could break me until I was broken and still thinking outside of my body”.

The Body Remembers – Sex and Survivorship: Survivors provide similar descriptions of the challenges of sex after sexual trauma. (How does the body hold evidence of trauma? How is the sexuality of survivors damaged?)

Through their poetry, the artists/survivors gave similar accounts of how challenging sex can be after experiencing sexual trauma. For many sexual trauma victims, consensual sex can be a (re)traumatizing activity. The artists discussed having a difficult time engaging in consensual sex without having flashbacks to their previous physical attacks and/or physiological trauma responses.

*I am sorry for the times I
cracked,
under the weight of your
perfect love.
But in the way that glass
shatters,
It is so easy to
(un)become.*

In their poetry, the survivors described the challenge of convincing their bodies that consensual sexual activity was safe. As one poet explained, it is

difficult for her to remember that “not all hands are rough and uninvited”. Other poets reflected on how sexual trauma had led them to become fearful of consensual sexual activity. Many survivors expressed concern that they would never escape the fear of sexual intimacy. As one survivor questioned, “Will life ever be normal again? Will I continue to flinch when touched by men?”.

*I am sorry,
for the times I have
confused your hands with
any others than those of
love.*

Another common discussion about the difficulty of sex after sexual trauma centered around survivors having flashbacks to traumatic experiences during consensual sex with their partners. A survivor discussed that after her attack, even her lover’s kiss felt like it was threatening to devour her. These trauma responses to consensual sex are painful and traumatizing for survivors of sexual trauma as well as for their romantic partners. Marlee Liss discussed how the challenges of sex after sexual trauma affects the sexual partners of survivors:

There is moaning and
There is crying and
The distinction is important
He must know this distinction
He must learn it
And study it
So that he recognizes the sound before it is a sound at
all.

*What angers me the
most,
is how you forced me,
to ask my lover to learn
the
subtle difference
between my pleasure and
my panic.
The way you made going
to bed
feel like walking a tight
rope.
The way you turned
making love
into a game of Russian
roulette.*

This theme in the data set shows that the impacts
of sexual trauma on the sex lives and sexuality of
survivors is long-lasting and repercussing. The
flashbacks that many survivors experience during
consensual sexual activity are (re)traumatizing events

that reopen old wounds for the victims and create new trauma for their romantic partners.

Sharp Edges – Bitterness and misplaced anger after Sexual Trauma: Survivors of sexual violence describe a similar process of the way that sexual trauma has hardened them emotionally. (What does trauma turn us into? How can we fight this?)

The fourth theme found during the analysis of the data was a discussion of survivors feeling emotionally hardened by sexual trauma. For example, the artists discussed feeling emotionally “cold” or distant after trauma. Poet Elizabeth Shane described herself as an ice-queen. These descriptions often coincided with discussion about how experiencing sexual violation had caused them to feel constantly and inescapably angry. This inner rage was often described as being implanted by abusers. Marlee Liss alluded to this phenomenon by claiming that her abuser had “force fed (her) hatred”. As explained by survivors, this inner rage often results in misplaced anger towards their loved ones and themselves.

*He put the hate in me
and it grew, grew, grew*

*into a faceless monster,
that made a home
at the center of me
eating away at
innocence,
until there was nothing
left,
but the rage that
festers
rumbles
boils
over,
out from under buried
secrets
and onto my paper-thin
skin.*

*And I scream
Because the radio is too
loud
Because my boyfriend
forgot to do the dishes
Because that fucking
bitch in the Range Rover
just cut me off.*

*And I scream,
with the same fury he first
touched me with
and I hate,
how sharp the words
feel,
as they rip up my throat.*

*I scream,
in the face of love,
because all of this hurt
cannot fit inside my
body.*

*“It feels like there is this
anger bomb that
randomly explodes inside
me, and whoever is
closest has to deal with
the shrapnel. I hate that it*

*is always the people that
I love most.”*

*I hate
that my body is still
carrying his baggage.
I hate
that my body is still just a
vessel
made to hold
someone else's secret,
someone else's anger.*

*But mostly,
I hate the way that I fail
at this.
I hate the way that my
body refuses to hold the
hurt inside.*

*“I feel like a porcupine,
with all these sharp
needles poking out of me.
I don't even know how to
be soft anymore.”*

*He put the hate in me
and it grew, grew, grew,
until my body was
nothing,
but a monument to
anger,
an homage to hostility.*

*“I feel so out of control of
myself. This anger feels
foreign, feels evil. I hate
what he did, but I hate
what he turned me into
more. I mourn all the
people I could have
been.”*

In an astounding testament to the strength and grace of sexual trauma survivors, descriptions of this inner rage were often followed by a call for survivors of sexual trauma to resist being consumed by this rage. As these artists acknowledged the anger they feel as a result of their trauma, they also recognized how destructive these negative feelings can be and emphasized the need to resist being consumed by hate. Through this explanation, the artists validated feeling of anger while also encouraging themselves and fellow survivors of sexual trauma to resist allowing anger to define them and keep them forever bound by their abuse. As poet Marlee Liss reminded fellow survivors, “we cannot begin to let our hearts resemble those who broke them in the first place”. Poet and childhood sexual abuse survivor, Rachel Finch, echoed these sentiments and summarizes this theme well in her poem “Still Smouldering”:

I said “What do I do with all this fucking rage?”
and she told me “Swallow it, we will not become
them, turn the pain into flames” and I was reborn
a dragon feasting on the fire in my belly, lit with
milk teeth in my mouth, still smouldering.

Alchemy – Healing After Sexual Trauma: Survivors

discuss the importance and the challenges of healing and forgiveness.

In a demonstration of resilience, the survivors all included sections on healing and forgiveness in their poetry books. Interestingly, all the artists discussed how their art was a tool for healing. The artists viewed their poetry as not only a medium of expression but also as the very thing allowing for healing to occur. For example, one artist described poetry as “the art of (her) survival”; another claimed that “prayer, poetry, vocal prose punctuate redemption”. Other poets included references to alchemy, as they explained the way their poetry allowed them to create something beautiful out of their brokenness. The descriptions of the relationship between art and healing demonstrates the power of self-expression as a therapeutic tool.

In their writings on healing, the artists discussed how difficult and messy healing from sexual trauma can be. In these discussions, the survivors described the ways in which healing can feel “chaotic” and “ugly”. One poet reflected, “nothing hurts as much as healing”.

I want to write about love

*(something about the
softness of your sweater)
I want to write about joy
(something about the
smell of summer)
I want to write about
forgiveness
(something about the
tenderness of knobby
knees).*

*But all I can think about
is fragility,
and all the mornings I
have been convinced are
announcing the end of the
world,
But all I can think about
is loss
and how easily glass
shatters.*

*And these thoughts swirl
into questions
about how long it takes
for flowers to wilt and
why
I cried after my first kiss.
Of course, the answers lie
somewhere in between
the memories I have
buried
and my shaking hands
(something about the art
of survival)*

*“Tell me, where does it
hurt?”*

*I answer, “Here and here
and here and here...”*

*I answer, “It hurts
everywhere
except at the center of
me,*

*where there is nothing
left but anger”.
(something about a curse
filled prayer)*

*I answer, “This healing
feels less like a victory,
and more like a hopeless
surrender.”*

While acknowledging the challenges of healing, all the artists recognized how necessary healing and forgiveness are for long-term growth. For many of the survivors, the healing process allowed for them to realize their own resilience and strength. As one childhood sexual abuse survivor put it: “Imagine living in a world where you already know that nothing worse can be done to you, imagine the freedom of that thought”. Through these realizations of one's inner strength, many survivors were able to reach a place where they knew it was necessary to forgive their abusers in order to move on with their healing journey. For many survivors, forgiveness severed the final bonds that their sexual trauma held them with. In a final act of (un)becoming, survivors grew beyond victimhood and embraced life beyond trauma. A poet under the pen-name Christine Marie described this final manifestation of (un)becoming when she wrote: “What I reassembled,

from my shattered self, filters light in the loveliest
ways”.

*The hurt still sits at the
center of me.
But in the way that
flowers grow out of
concrete,
I am finally learning how
to be soft again.
And like overused
metaphors,
I am forgiving myself
for all the times I have
felt
unworthy of existence.*

*The hurt still sits at the
center of me,
But yesterday I held the
hand of my inner child.
and I apologized
for the years I made her
bite her tongue.
Yesterday, I held the
hand of my inner child,
and asked her to remind
me what it meant to be
tender –*

*We are both still learning
what it means
to (un)become.*

Discussion: *How does one (un)become?*

Step 1: Lose a little bit of your humanity.

“Look at that piece of ass!”, “Damn, you hit that?”, “She your side piece?”

We all know this aspect of (un)becoming. How the hands of rape culture strip layers of our humanity away. Lesson one: the most interesting thing about you is your body. Lesson two: you must be wanted and never wanting, sexy and never sexual. Lesson three: it is your job to protect yourself from exploitation; and if you fail everyone will blame you for your own violation.

Step 2: Be treated as if you are less than human.

Once we are seen as less than, it becomes easier for others to treat us as less than. We are seen more as a body than person. More thing than human. Rape culture weakens others’ perceptions of our humanity, thus enabling them to treat us inhumanely. This is what allows for so many of us to be harassed, objectified, molested, raped.

Step 3: Unravel

The manifestations of rape culture unravel us. The catcalls, the harassment, the drunken groping, the molestation, the rape, *the fear of it all*, this is what constitutes rape culture induced trauma. These are the anxieties and the realities that make us feel as if our humanity has been revoked.

This kind of (un)becoming is the direct and devastating result of rape culture induced trauma. We are deconstructed, emptied, hollowed. We are made undone. The repercussions of this trauma reverberate like the aftershocks of an earthquake. The

foundation of our understandings about ourselves, our bodies, and our reality are shaken, cracked, and crumbled. The severed relationships between ourselves and our bodies, our loved ones, and our sexuality are collateral damage of the disaster.

It is easy to allow the wreckage to turn us to ruins. It is easy to morph into a wasteland, polluted by hate, anger, and frustration. It is tempting to rot in the brokenness. So, how do we heal from this kind of trauma? How do we piece ourselves back together? How do we learn to be soft again? I hate the answer, and I do not understand it fully, but I know it has something to do with forgiveness, something to do with grace.

Step 4: Pick up the shattered pieces of yourself and create a mosaic picturing resilience.

In a final act of (un)becoming, those who have endured rape culture induced trauma must find forgiveness in order to free themselves from the binds of their trauma. We must (un)become victims and/or pre-victims so that we can reclaim our voice as survivors. And our voice needs to be heard. As all women and girls are subjected to rape culture induced trauma, our stories should be central to the discussion on rape culture. With intimate knowledge of the impacts of rape culture, survivors of sexual violence—and other forms of rape culture induced trauma—are the most equipped to educate the public on the consequences of rape culture and advocate for our society to unbecome a culture where rape is insidious and pervasive.

Conclusion

By revealing the lived experience behind the statistics and theoretical discussion on rape culture, this project provides insight into the reality of living in a rape culture and surviving sexual violence. Additionally, this thesis introduces the theoretical construct of

(un)becoming to capture the multiple facets of rape-culture induced trauma. Finally, this project honors the resilience of survivors of sexual violence and aims to challenge society by revealing the visceral impacts of rape culture as described by survivors of sexual violence. By adding personal insights of what it means to live in a rape culture to the existing literature, this thesis provokes empathy, stimulates conversation, and inspires real change in our society.

Because this project focuses so heavily on how rape culture affects the feminine experience, it is my recommendation to future researchers to include this perspective in studies of men and masculinities. Seeing as how most sexual assaults are committed by men, research on how rape culture is potentially grooming men to be sexual predators could be extremely helpful in the goal to eliminate rape culture. I thank everyone who has taken time to read this thesis and encourage us all to continue to fight against rape culture.

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