

SHOUT YOUR STORY: THE RHETORICAL
INFLUENCE OF RAPE MEMOIRS
ON PUBLIC DISCOURSE

by

ALLISON CHRISTINA KENNON

JESSY J. OHL, COMMITTEE CHAIR
MEREDITH M. BAGLEY
MEGAN GALLAGHER

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ABSTRACT

Rape memoirs have been present on our bookshelves ever since the groundbreaking publication of *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou in 1969. The combination of storytelling, sexual violence, and wide readership has allowed for rape memoirs to make a profound impact on public discourse. This thesis explores how the unique rhetorical situation of rape memoirs, with the heavy reliance on first-person narrative, impacts public discourse, distinct from the #MeToo sharing of sexual violence stories. This thesis is a feminist rhetorical analysis of two notable memoirs within the past five years: *Know My Name* by Chanel Miller and *Unbound* by Tarana Burke. To provide thought behind the writing of rape memoirs, I provide my own autoethnography, as well as an Instagram Reel rhetorical analysis to examine the new age of digital memoirs. Due to Burke and Miller's influence and the Instagram Reel's virality, all of these texts serve as essential artifacts within the anti-sexual violence movement, utilizing them as representative models of rape memoirs in popular culture. This thesis explores the rhetorical strategies through which rape memoirs engage public discourse, revealing their role as a feminist tool to combat sexual violence.

DEDICATION

For Patricia Lawrence, whose memoir *Why I Didn't Save the World* sparked my own interest and amazement at the ability of a memoir to impact change. I will forever be thankful you decided to write your memoir. I wish I could tell you in some way how many people you've impacted, not only me, but the hundreds who saw my Junior year prose. In the preface of her book, Patricia Lawrence writes:

"I like to tell stories. This one is mine. As do most storytellers, I like my stories to be heard and hope in the hearing welcomed, but most of all, I hope they will be helpful. I would so like this story to be helpful. In the scheme of things, I know it doesn't matter whether or not I tell this story, that in truth this telling remains an effort to justify myself, but in the telling, I simply look for understanding."

Your story was helpful, Patricia. Thank you.

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I am so incredibly lucky to have so many people that have supported me throughout this process. To my thesis committee, thank you for your endless encouragement not only in my ability to see this through, but particularly, in your continued sacred echoes of the importance of this topic. I am so grateful to have an academic space to discuss sexual violence in such a way, and to engage with each other in important discussions that I know are moving the needle towards a better world. To Dr. Gallagher, thank you for agreeing to be on this committee before even having me as a student! I am so in awe of the graciousness and compassion you lead with, both in the classroom and on this committee. To Dr. Bagley, you were one of the scholars I mentioned wanted to work with during my time at UA. I am so grateful I got the chance to take your theory class, that I truly feel helped set me up for success with my thesis. I'm forever thankful for your encouragement, especially within the first semester of my time at UA, to keep researching sexual violence and continue discussing it within rhetoric. To have a professor in a similar research background cheer for you is something I hope for every student. Dr. Jessy Ohl, I cannot reiterate my gratitude enough. From our early discussions as a Junior at Hastings College, to now seeing the end of my graduate thesis, your endless support is truly what has ensured the completion of this degree. I have been lucky to have so many mentors to have impacted me deeply, but you are the person that taught me what deep, hard academic work looks like, and pushed me to excel in ways I never thought possible. Thank you for your mentorship. I hope to one day provide for my students the same confidence that you've instilled in me.

I am lucky to not only be supported by great mentors, but by my speech team and a great graduate cohort as well. To the Alabama Forensics Council, I am not only eternally grateful that you all have made this thesis financially possible, but I do not think I would have mentally been able to finish this out without the encouragement and creative outlet of the team. To my students, thank you for always sparking the flame inside me to enact social change and fight for a better world with our words. To Dr. Benjamin Pyle, words cannot express my gratitude. I am continually amazed at the capability and confidence you continue to pour into me, ever since our first conversation at Norton in 2019. Thank you for giving me the ability to continue my education. Thank you for pushing me to grow and allowing me to make mistakes, so that I can come back better. I hope to one day possess the same amount of compassion, leadership, and devout mentorship that you give freely to every student, coach, and person you encounter at UA. To the B.A.B.S., I am so glad we rallied together in Dr. Ohl's class to talk about the Bitch Manifesto—who truly knew it would lead to lifelong friendships. I couldn't have done it without you. May the legacy of the Bitches of UA live on.

To my friends and family, thank you for cheering me on as I finished up this thesis in a place that is near none of you! I have greatly appreciated the hours-long working facetimes, care packages, and visits. To my husband, Caleb, you taught me that love after sexual violence is truly possible. Every person who experiences sexual violence deserves a partner as good, compassionate, and dedicated as you. I know acts of service are neither of our love languages,

but, I will forever be in awe of the care you have given me to see this through. I cannot wait to support you in the writing of your own thesis very soon.

Lastly, to the people with sexual violence trauma that I have encountered leading up to the writing of this thesis, I am so glad you are still here. Thank you. While I am grateful for my vast support system, I will always burn with the reminder of the work that is left to be done.

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FIGURES

A. Instagram Reel: Hyperlinked for your access. Not all comments will be visible, due to some comments that were particularly violent being hidden, and dependent on your web browser.

B. Tweet Thread:

The image displays a screenshot of a tweet thread on the left and an Instagram privacy dialog on the right. The tweet thread, from user @allikenyounot, consists of three tweets. The first tweet, dated Dec 28, 2018, at 9:00 PM, reads: "I can't believe I can say this after 3 years of absolute torment, harassment, and trauma: My rapist was sentenced to jail and was put in prison today." It has 7,327 retweets, 266 quote tweets, and 152.3K likes. The second tweet, a reply to the first, says: "i'm going to say it one more time: my rapist is in jail for child pornography (like actual missing children, absolutely horrifying) and sexual dissemination of information (revenge porn)." It has 3 replies, 49 retweets, and 1,797 likes. The third tweet, dated Dec 28, 2018, says: "I couldn't prosecute him when it happened. I was 17, in another country, and I didn't know I couldn't transfer it criminally to the states. This is the justice for all of his victims. It might not be justice for my rape, but it is justice." It has 2 replies, 36 retweets, and 1,733 likes. The Instagram dialog on the right, titled "Change Privacy?", asks if the user wants to make their account private. It states: "When your account is private, only people you approve can see your photos and videos on Instagram. Your existing followers won't be affected." It has 11 replies, 50 retweets, and 2,898 likes. Below the dialog is another tweet from @allikenyounot dated Dec 29, 2018, which says: "I just wanted to thank you for all of your support! I wanted to say as well: if your experience isn't punishable in a court of law, if you haven't spoke out, if you feel disbelieved, if everything is working against you: I believe you. I'm so sorry. What can I do to help?" It has 9 replies, 60 retweets, and 1,872 likes. An "Add another Tweet" button is visible at the bottom of the thread.

@allikenyounot

I can't believe I can say this after 3 years of absolute torment, harassment, and trauma:

My rapist was sentenced to jail and was put in prison today.

9:00 PM · Dec 28, 2018 · Twitter for iPhone

View Tweet activity

7,327 Retweets 266 Quote Tweets 152.3K Likes

@allikenyounot · Dec 28, 2018

Replying to @allikenyounot

i'm going to say it one more time: my rapist is in jail for child pornography (like actual missing children, absolutely horrifying) and sexual dissemination of information (revenge porn).

3 49 1,797

@allikenyounot · Dec 28, 2018

I couldn't prosecute him when it happened. I was 17, in another country, and I didn't know I couldn't transfer it criminally to the states.

This is the justice for all of his victims. It might not be justice for my rape, but it is justice.

2 36 1,733

@allikenyounot · Dec 28, 2018

YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW LONG I HAVE BEEN WAITING TO HEAR THOSE WORDS!!!! All of my social media accounts have been on private because he stole pictures from them. He harrassed me on multiple platforms. I can finally go public again; so small, but powerful. I don't have to hide.

Private Account

When your account is private, only people you approve can see your photos and videos on Instagram. Your existing followers won't be affected. [Learn More](#)

Change Privacy?

Anyone will be able to see your photos and videos on Instagram. You will no longer need to approve followers. Note: any pending follow requests will also be automatically approved.

Change

Cancel

11 50 2,898

@allikenyounot · Dec 29, 2018

I just wanted to thank you for all of your support!

I wanted to say as well: if your experience isn't punishable in a court of law, if you haven't spoke out, if you feel disbelieved, if everything is working against you: I believe you. I'm so sorry. What can I do to help?

9 60 1,872

Add another Tweet

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*Alice Sebold felt that before she could write *Lovely Bones*, a novel about a young girl abducted and sexually assaulted, she had to write her own story first.¹ Sebold grew in fame due to her stunning 2002 novel *Lovely Bones* being adapted into a film in 2009. However, her memoir had been published 3 years prior. Sebold's 1999 memoir *Lucky* details her sexual assault adjacent to her college campus when she was 18 years old. She recounts the night with acute clarity: "In the tunnel where I was raped, a tunnel that was once an underground entry to an amphitheater, a girl had been murdered and dismembered."² After her assault, her case was considered inconclusive by police and closed until she coincidentally made eye contact with her rapist on the street 6 months later. After Sebold was able to identify her rapist, prosecutors reopened her case. What followed is what survivors who have been through the criminal justice system are all too familiar with: an alarmingly intimate criminal trial, debilitating trauma, and the conflicted need to speak about it. Sarah E. Stone Watt argues that Sebold's memoir offers insight into the complexity of sexual violence "and questions dominant assumptions about rape by sharing her experience."³ When *Lucky* was published in 1999, it was one of the first memoirs to represent sexual assault in such stark and graphic terms. While other memoirs had achieved a comparable level of visibility, none centrally revolved around the theme of rape. Sebold's star status from *The Lovely Bones* catapulted her into fame, along with *Lucky*, leaving an imprint on millions of readers, especially those with a personal history of sexual violence. To this day,*

¹ In an interview with the *Independent*, Sebold remarks: "I never thought about writing a memoir," she declares matter-of-factly, "because I wanted to be a novelist or a poet." It was only after two years of writing *The Lovely Bones* that she became aware that another story was fighting to come out: "When I felt a sense of polemic entering the novel, I realized that I had to get myself out of there ... It almost felt like Serena or Venus Williams; they lift a lot of weights, they build a lot of muscle, in order that they can play the game they're meant to play... It wasn't necessarily what I wanted to do, but if I wanted to write the novel, I had to do it." "Alice Sebold: Rape and Redemption." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 30 Sept. 2013.

² Stone, "Seeking Survival, Justice, and Recovery," 63.

³ Stone, "Seeking Survival, Justice, and Recovery," 64.

Lucky is the most popular memoir in multiple lists of memoirs that center around rape.⁴ For those who see her memoir as a warning sign of sexual violence that seems to inevitably occur in women's lives, it is seared into memory.

Prior to November 2021, the above writing was the introduction to my thesis. But on November 22nd, 2021, Alice Sebold's legacy was altered immensely, as well as the identity of her perpetrator. It would be remiss and inappropriate to not acknowledge Anthony Broadwater, who Sebold testified in court was her perpetrator and pushed to send him to prison for 20 years. Broadwater, however, was exonerated on November 22nd. As prosecutors went back and examined his case, they found: "flawed hair comparison testimony, a heavy reliance on Ms. Sebold spotting her rapist five months afterward, and that Mr. Broadwater had passed two polygraph tests."⁵ In the original police lineup, Sebold even admits within her memoir that she originally chose to suspect 5. Broadwater was suspect 4. Sebold, to the prosecutors, "would insist an hour later that the two men had looked identical to her."⁶

Broadwater's case follows many similar narratives of Black men being falsely accused of rape by White women, such as that of Emmett Till, or the Central Park Five.⁷ Ersula Ore discusses this prevalence of White women weaponizing innocence against Black men. During the trial of George Zimmerman, who had murdered Trayvon Martin, an all-White women jury was used to ensure an innocent verdict for Zimmerman, poisoning him as a savior and protector for

⁴ Slaughter, "Murder, She Wrote," 17.

⁵ Knoll, Corina, Karen Zraick, and Alexandra Alter. "He Was Convicted of Raping Alice Sebold. Then the Case Unraveled." The New York Times. The New York Times, December 15, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/nyregion/alice-sebold-anthony-broadwater.html>.

⁶ Knoll, Corina, Karen Zraick, and Alexandra Alter. "He Was Convicted of Raping Alice Sebold. Then the Case Unraveled." The New York Times. The New York Times, December 15, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/nyregion/alice-sebold-anthony-broadwater.html>.

⁷ "From Emmett till to Pervis Payne - Black Men in America Are Still Killed for Crimes They Didn't Commit." Innocence Project, August 6, 2020. <https://innocenceproject.org/emmett-till-birthday-pervis-payne-innocent-Black-men-slavery-racism/>.

the White women who had recently been killed in the area. Ore explains, “Such tactics sought to [encourage the jury to] rhetorically identify with the myth of feminine virtue and the Black beast rapist.”⁸ White women have long been an oppressor for Black men, especially through weaponizing their femininity in order to encourage racist violence that may be carried out by White men, such as the case of Emmett Till. From Emmett Till to Anthony Broadwater, the statistics of false accusations against Black men of rape only continue to worsen.

1 in 100 Black men are registered sex offenders, double the rate of White men.⁹ However, the likelihood that Black men are committing sexual violence at double the volume of White men is extremely unlikely and sheds light on another harrowing statistic—Black men are disproportionately falsely accused by White women, specifically. 59% of sexual assault exonerees are Black.¹⁰ Based on the population of sexual offenders within United States prisons, a Black man serving time for sexual assault is three-and-a-half times as likely to be innocent than a White man.¹¹ Similar to Sebold’s errors, many of these false accusations are the product of misidentification during police lineups. Syracuse continues in relation to Sebold’s racist profiling: “[Black men] constitute half of the sexual assaults with eyewitness misidentifications that led to exoneration.”¹² Broadwater is now a part of this group.

In Sebold’s case, many pointed out the errors. When Sebold identified another Black man in the lineup provided to her, but then still claimed it was Broadwater, prosecutors for Broadwater claim that the case should’ve been paused at that moment to identify further

⁸ Ore, Ersula J. *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019. 30.

⁹ Hoppe, Trevor. “Punishing Sex: Sex Offenders and the Missing Punitive Turn in Sexuality Studies.” *Law & Social Inquiry* 41, no. 03 (2016): 573–94. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lasi.12189>.

¹⁰ Gross, Samuel R, Maurice Possley, and Klara Stephens. “Race And Wrongful Convictions,” 2017. http://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Race_and_Wrongful_Convictions.pdf.

¹¹ Gross, “Race and Wrongful Convictions.”

¹² Gross, “Race and Wrongful Convictions.”

suspects, or result in DNA testing.¹³ But, Sebold was not given that choice. District attorney Gail Uebelhoer was quoted complaining that jurors were too reluctant to issue guilty verdicts, wanting to see the “perfect victim.”¹⁴ Uebelhoer was the key attorney who pressed on Sebold, bad lineup and all, telling Sebold: “that Broadwater and Hudson (the man Sebold originally chose) were friends who used each other “in every lineup they do” to confuse victims.”¹⁵ But, Broadwater had never been brought in for police questioning, and did not know Hudson prior to meeting him in jail.¹⁶ This lie was used to encourage a heavy prosecution of Broadwater, as well as a further demonization of him by Sebold.

Uebelhoer’s manipulation is unsurprisingly common within the prosecution of Black men specifically, but also among people with sexual violence trauma (PWSVT).¹⁷ The loss of details can often be a symptom of the trauma endured during the violence, causing the brain to black out.¹⁸ However, Sebold claims that she recalls the incident with acute clarity within her book—the one detail that seems to be missing was the exact identity of her perpetrator. Sebold acknowledges her mistake to some extent and does not question her own sexual violence.¹⁹

¹³ Dowty, Douglass, and Tim Knauss. “The Untold Story of How Race and Incompetence Doomed Anthony Broadwater to Prison for Alice Sebold’s Rape.” Syracuse. Syracuse College, January 25, 2022. <https://www.syracuse.com/news/2022/01/alice-sebold-case-how-race-and-incompetence-doomed-anthony-broadwater-to-prison.html>.

¹⁴ Dowty and Knauss, “The Untold Story.”

¹⁵ Dowty and Knauss, “The Untold Story.”

¹⁶ Dowty and Knauss, “The Untold Story.”

¹⁷ I will be referring to survivors and victims’ at large with the term “people with sexual violence trauma,” or PWSVT. I feel that this label is more encompassing of everyone who has endured sexual violence and holds fewer negative connotations than survivor or victim.

¹⁸ Schooler, Jonathan W. “Discovering Memories of Abuse in the Light of Meta-Awareness.” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 4, no. 2 (2001): 105–36. https://doi.org/10.1300/j146v04n02_06.

¹⁹ Knoll, Corina, Karen Zraick, and Alexandra Alter. “He Was Convicted of Raping Alice Sebold. Then the Case Unraveled.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, December 15, 2021.

“I am grateful that Mr. Broadwater has finally been vindicated, but the fact remains that 40 years ago, he became another young Black man brutalized by our flawed legal system. I will forever be sorry for what was done to him.”²⁰

But Sebold’s usage of the words “what was done to him” instead of “what I did to him” absolves her of guilt, as well as echoes White women’s feigned innocence in hate crimes against Black men, as Ore previously discussed. While her apology is certainly flawed on account that she does not take personal responsibility, understanding the lack of details many people with sexual violence trauma (PWSVT) physically cannot possess due to the Blackout during traumatic emotional states, the criminal punishment system is just as culpable. For instance, the White attorneys and judges like Uebelhoer push victims to encourage numbers within their own districts, filling prisons with innocent Black men. Sebold is not the only person who should be held culpable, but her lack of acknowledgment of her role in Broadwater’s incarceration reiterates the myth of the irreproachable White woman in a Black man’s injustice.

The Sebold case complicates the credibility of not only her own memoir but practically all memoirs on shelves currently. However, memoirs, especially those discussing rape, remain immensely important because of the social hierarchies present in rape culture itself, and how memoirs, such as *Lucky*, may point to the nuances and complexities of not only, sexual violence, but racism and criminal punishment. These three sociological issues (sexual violence, racism, and criminal punishment) have been previously under-discussed in conjunction with one another, with the fear of discrediting either side. Diamond discusses how community safety often takes precedence over social struggles within a hunting incident in Maine where a hunter accidentally

²⁰ Sebold, Alice. “Statement from Alice Sebold.” Medium. Medium, November 30, 2021. https://medium.com/@Alice_Sebold/statement-from-alice-sebold-c109361d6150.

shot a person, instead of a deer. Diamond continues, “Individuals protect their own kind, their own community, society, or culture, against that which is alien,”²¹ turning the alien into a scapegoat for the issues that arise. Both Sebold and Broadwater, at different points, are used as a “roaming scapegoat” in an attempt to deflect blame by two sides of public discourse.²²

Broadwater is scapegoated by Sebold, and subsequently prosecutors, pinning the stereotypical, racist assumption of Black men being dangerous rapists. Sebold is utilized as a scapegoat to outline how women generally are lying, or missing details when exposing sexual violence—making them unreliable and ignorable.

The tension of Broadwater’s innocence, and Sebold’s sexual assault, lie at a crossroads of rampant false accusations against Black men, and a lack of justice for people with sexual violence trauma. Sebold was sexually assaulted. Broadwater was falsely accused as her perpetrator. Both exist within the spectrum of rape culture. In order to eradicate rape culture, we must grapple with both the racial tensions within rape culture and injustice for PWSVT simultaneously, because, without the popularity of *Lucky*, Broadwater’s prosecutors said they would not have been able to re-open his case, and exonerate him.²³ *Lucky*’s prominence, and the consequential events that occurred after, attests to the prominence of rape memoirs in our society, and their ability to create change for all those involved with the proper sociological context. This thesis investigates the rhetorical impact rape memoirs have on sexual violence public discourse to understand their role within our culture, and specifically rape culture, in complex, often dichotomous ways.

²¹ Boor Tonn, M., Endress, V. A., & Diamond, J. N. (1993). Hunting and heritage on trial in Maine: A dramatistic debate over tragedy, tradition and territory. In C. R. Burghardt (Ed.), *Readings in rhetorical criticism*. State College, PA: Strata.

²² Turnage, Anna Kimberly. “Scene, Act, and the Tragic Frame in the Duke Rape Case.” *Southern Communication Journal* 74, no. 2 (March 2009): 141–56. doi:10.1080/10417940802335946.

²³ Knoll, Corina, Karen Zraick, and Alexandra Alter. “He Was Convicted of Raping Alice Sebold. Then the Case Unraveled.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, December 15, 2021.

For years, rape memoirs like *Lucky* have been passed between PWSVT as they seek to belong in the pages of stories that are not usually told openly. Public storytelling surrounding sexual violence is often silenced by dominant discourses that refuse to push the stories out to the wide public. By making space for these stories to be told publicly, these stories ask not for "accommodation of public space but rather for a transformation of the public sphere."²⁴ This transformation can look like an altering of a silent space to one that takes stories at face value, allowing them the room for discussion and amplification rather than deeming it uncomfortable or inappropriate for public conversation. Transformation can occur through PWSVT's ability to be candid and honest in their memoirs, detailing experiences through the author's control over the narrative. As many PWSVT are confronted with public shaming and disbelief, the rhetorical avenue of storytelling can allow them to "transform a 'victim identity' into a 'healing, feminist identity' by enabling narrators to theorize their experience."²⁵ Because of this frankness, rape narratives can cause a ripple effect through communities grappling with sexual violence, causing "audiences [to become] jolted by their visceral responses."²⁶ Likewise, personal narratives or memoir writing can give agency back to the PWSVT.

Memoirs and autobiographies are influential genres of literature that focus inward to project outward the complex nature of specific lived experiences that allow readers to find belonging.²⁷ These narratives transform authors into rhetors, acknowledging "the inexplicable links a singular experience has to larger cultural and sociopolitical phenomena."²⁸ Memoirs also tend to reveal the author's societal views and identity groups, such as their gender, sexuality,

²⁴ Larson, "Everything Inside Me Was Silenced," 130.

²⁵ Stern, "He Won't Hurt Us Anymore," 374.

²⁶ Wieskamp, "I'm Going Out There and I'm Telling This Story," 139.

²⁷ Brien, Donna Lee, "Dreaming of Creativity."

²⁸ Edbrook, "You're the Least Important Person in the Room and Don't Forget It," 126.

trauma, race, ability, aesthetic, religion, and more. Books such as *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou gave a glimpse into racism and growing up in the United States as a young, Black woman, and is often cited as the first rape memoir to exist.²⁹ *Night* by Elie Wiesel shared the experiences of concentration camps from the Holocaust.³⁰ *I Am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai showcased the need for education for women in Pakistan and the control of the Taliban.³¹

The success of these memoirs in drawing attention to lived oppression has inspired multiple generations of people to share their own traumatic experiences. Many of these books are taught in English classes as literary examples and in history classes as evidence of socioeconomic issues. Memoirs such as these shape our understanding of culture and society at the times, they take place and provide a mirror by which we can evaluate contemporary political struggle. For marginalized groups especially, storytelling is one of the most powerful ways to communicate and ensure history is memorialized within communities.³²

As many historical records and quantitative evidence have been altered or destroyed through history as a means of domination, the stories passed down through generations help shape and replace the forgotten or silenced narratives that are so desperately important. While storytelling as evidence is still sometimes stigmatized, with qualitative measures being seen as less legitimate compared to quantitative measures, the presence of memoirs and the inclusion of these texts within courtrooms, research, and education continue to reiterate the need for autoethnography, autobiography, and memoir in our society in order to legitimize the role of

²⁹ Chambers, “Published 50 Years Ago, ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’ Launched a Revolution.”

³⁰ Berger, Alan L. “Night.” *Elie Wiesel*, 2021, 143–44. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315817538-10>.
search-ebshost-com.libdata.lib.ua.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001534072&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

³¹ Sadaf, Shazia. “I Am MALALA: Human Rights and the Politics of Production, Marketing and Reception of the Post-9/11 Memoir.” *Interventions* 19, no. 6 (2017): 855–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801x.2017.1347053>.

³² Ames, Kate. “Conversational Storytelling in Community Context: Examining Talk on Transgender Radio.” *IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication & Film* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 33–47. doi:10.22492/ijmcf.4.1.03.

first-person narrative in shaping the thoughts, feelings, and actions of audiences throughout history. Likewise, we can trace rewritten history by patriarchal hegemony throughout the United States in particular by examining memoirs, serving as historical texts.

Memoirs or personal storytelling are often relied upon to keep communities safe and for PWSVT to receive justice. The criminal punishment system time and time again also turns PWSVT away, as they have a "demonstrably poor record in responding to the needs of victims of sexual violence."³³ From failed sentencing to a lack of justice within the criminal punishment system, to perpetrators remaining in close contact with the people they've attacked, to racist misidentification of actual perpetrators, this poor record only grows as more allegations come to light. Thus, with nowhere else to turn for justice, "telling your story" can be a powerful tool for reclaiming agency and receiving justice. In *Lucky*, Sebold discusses her experiences of trauma after her assault, after she was dismissed by the police within the first 6 months of her being assaulted.³⁴ If Sebold was not turned away, could she have correctly identified her perpetrator, instead of being pushed to identify Broadwater? Disbelief can cause PWSVT to doubt their own stories. They are regularly defamed in different ways throughout this process, with questions such as: Why didn't you tell your story earlier? Why did you tell your story now? Why didn't you wait to tell your story? Is this even your story? This disbelief was ever-present in Dr. Christine Blaisey Ford's sworn testimony against Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, who Ford testified assaulted her during high school. As Ford faced scrutiny over her story, sexist narratives attempted to push "pervasive conceptualizations of sexual violence as made-up stories."³⁵ However, empowerment can come from sharing your story through solidarity with other

³³ Mack and McCann, "Recalling Persky," 373.

³⁴ Sebold, Alice. *Lucky*.

³⁵ Pollino, "(Mis)Representations of Sexual Violence," 78.

PWSVT and healing through telling regardless of public disbelief. Dr. Ford does not regret speaking up, despite the hurt she endured, because, as she explains in her testimony, "it was important to me to describe the details of the assault in my own words."³⁶

Throughout history, PWSVT have been told to keep quiet, not share their assault, and forget about it in order to move on. Self-silencing, such as this, is usually in response to the belief that justice is impossible, and healing is easier through dismissal of the story, rather than through speaking out. As this discourse grows, famous PWSVT have written memoirs to recount their assault, such as Gretchen Carlson, Roxanne Gay, and Gabrielle Union, that shape media perception of who does experience sexual violence and its widespread nature.³⁷ As more rape memoirs become published and circulated, the broader willingness of PWSVT to share their experiences can be seen outside of the literature world, through op-eds, interviews, video testimonies, and social media posts.³⁸ Many have pointed to rape memoirs becoming their own distinct genre due to their difference in storytelling from other memoirs on shelves. Regardless of whether they are their own genre, the substantial popularity of rape memoirs serves as the ground for this analysis.

Public perception of survivors is essential in the fight to end rape culture. "Rape culture, like all violence, disrupts our bodies and narratives of self" as it is the representation of sexual violence in norms and expressions of the widespread culture.³⁹ We can find subtle expressions of rape culture all around us. From the normalities of sexual violence being romanticized within popular music to Title IX's continued injustice towards PWSVT to rape allegations against

³⁶NPR Staff, "READ: Christine Blaisey Ford's Opening Statement for Senate Hearing," 19.

³⁷ Gilmore, Leigh. "#MeToo and the Memoir Boom: The Year in the US." *Biography* 42, no. 1 (2019): 162–67. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2019.0024>.

³⁸ Serisier, Tanya. "'A New Literature of Rape': Storytelling, Genre and Subjectivity." *Speaking Out*, 2018, 43–68. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98669-2_3.

³⁹ Stern, "Embodied Interventions," 110.

popular celebrities becoming a norm and those in powerful positions, like the current President, maintaining their power regardless of a past of sexual violence, society is built upon implicit and explicit assumptions that rape is a part of our humanity. The history of rape culture is a complicated and incomplete one within the United States. Memoirs serve as a remembrance of sexual violence and its mark on the individual and collective. They also provide a nuance within the public discourse surrounding sexual violence, altering our understanding of what sexual violence is, how it occurs, and how justice can be attained.

While our previous access to stories of sexual violence occurred mainly through anonymous stories or media layered retellings, hearing the story from the first-person perspective can significantly alter public discourse, as was prevalent with the assaults committed by Harvey Weinstein, Larry Nassar, and Bill Cosby. Weinstein's allegations and criminalization brought forth the "Time's Up" movement, which sought to remove assaulters and abusers from Hollywood.⁴⁰ Nassar's court case allowed the world to bear witness to 204 victim impact statements of sexual abuse and called into question the complicit negligence of governing institutions.⁴¹ Cosby's criminalization broke down the myth that beloved media idols cannot be perpetrators, and his release refueled stereotypes Broadwater combatted against the myth of rapists being predominantly Black men, and subsequently, Black men being dangerous. Again, this engages tensions Sebold's case requires us to engage in. All these cases were fueled by the rhetorical power of first-person testimony.⁴²

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Wagmeister, Variety. "Time's up Calls Harvey Weinstein Guilty Verdict a 'New Era of Justice.'" [chicagotribune.com](https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-ent-times-up-harvey-weinstein-verdict-20200224-htfot4xocfalnljqkchrsh4tq-story.html). Chicago Tribune, February 24, 2020. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-ent-times-up-harvey-weinstein-verdict-20200224-htfot4xocfalnljqkchrsh4tq-story.html>.

⁴¹ Kozłowski, Sarah Rahal and Kim. "204 Impact Statements, 9 Days, 2 Counties, a Life Sentence for Larry Nassar." The Detroit News. Accessed February 21, 2022. <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2018/02/08/204-impact-statements-9-days-2-counties-life-sentence-larry-nassar/1066335001/>.

⁴² Earle, Elizabeth R. "'The Consequences Will Be with Us for Decades': The Politicization and Polarization of the #MeToo and Time's UP Movements in the United States." *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture* 10, no. 3 (2019): 257–71. https://doi.org/10.1386/iscc.10.3.257_1.

New iterations of memoir and autobiography came with the emergence of digital communication.⁴³ Transformations of typical rape memoirs have taken form through news op-eds, such as “Lupita Nyong'o: Speaking Out About Harvey Weinstein”⁴⁴ in the *New York Times*. Another form that has taken shape through the rise of digital media is viral YouTube videos, blogs, Tik Tok videos, and social media posts which all serve as shortened mini versions of sexual violence memoirs, or discussion of your story of sexual violence. These often preface memoirs themselves, serving as markers of public interest in the whole story of trauma and the individual survivor. Likewise, their ability to be quickly published allows them to force media attention on criminal proceedings and push an otherwise slow court system to move towards sentencing quicker. While memoirs have withstood the test of time, the past 20 years have shown the power of digital media to bring justice to survivors and create powerful change within rape culture.⁴⁵

Digital media continues to rise in popularity amongst younger generations, both long-form and short-form, with YouTube and Tik Tok taking their height in society through video content. Views of first-person narratives of sexual violence trend upwards in the millions, with both perpetrators and survivors receiving a platform to discuss the details of the sexual violence.

A recent example is Tik Tok stars Sienna Mae Gomez and Jack Wright. Gomez was accused by Wright's friend, Mason Rizzo, of sexually assaulting Wright, which was confirmed by Wright's brother, James. Gomez has shared multiple Tik Tok videos and YouTube videos detailing "her side of the story" of the allegations against her, while Wright has been able to

⁴³ Rossiter, Marsha, and Penny A. Garcia. “Digital Storytelling: A New Player on the Narrative Field.” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 2010, no. 126 (2010): 37–48. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.370>.

⁴⁴ Nyong'o, Lupita. “Lupita Nyong'o: Speaking out ABOUT Harvey Weinstein.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, October 19, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/opinion/lupita-nyongo-harvey-weinstein.html>.

⁴⁵ Mendes, Kaitlynn, Jessalynn Keller, and Jessica Ringrose. “Digitized Narratives of Sexual Violence: Making Sexual Violence Felt and Known through Digital Disclosures.” *New Media & Society* 21, no. 6 (2018): 1290–1310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818820069>.

share his story of assault.⁴⁶This new age of increased access to every side of the story dramatically alters our understanding of sexual violence.⁴⁷ Public discourse responds in real-time by posts, comments, and interactions recorded for the whole world to see. Public discourse and rape culture alter each other through the circulation of communication influenced by sexual violence narratives. Inevitably, we are altered, as this communication happens around us, by us, and with us. This cyclical effect through communication creates an ever-growing, ever-changing dynamic for our combatting of sexual violence itself, revealing the ways public discourse either reinforces or denies rape culture rhetorically.

While movements against sexual violence were seen throughout the first and second waves of feminism, several historic moments persist in our understanding of sexual violence. Anita Hill made history in 1991 when she testified before Congress about the sexual harassment she had endured by Clarence Thomas.⁴⁸ Hill's testimony against Clarence Thomas was historic as, at the time, White women were the minority in the house of representatives, and no Black women were currently serving, putting Hill at a disadvantage throughout her testimony. Her voice shaped a powerful movement of women running for Congress and the House of Representatives.⁴⁹ Her trial put media attention on the severe lack of representation desperately needed to prevent sexual violence in the workplace.⁵⁰ While history was made, progress and eradication of sexual assault from Capitol Hill, unfortunately, continues to be, slow. The pace of

⁴⁶ Morin, Natalie. "Netflix's New TIKTOK Show Is Already Riddled with Drama." TikTok Sienna Mae Denies Jack Wright Sexual Assault, n.d. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2021/06/10503247/tiktok-sienna-mae-gomez-jack-wright-sexual-assault-allegations>.

⁴⁷ Gray, Bronwen, Alan Young, and Tania Blomfield. "Altered Lives: Assessing the Effectiveness of Digital Storytelling as a Form of Communication Design." *Continuum* 29, no. 4 (2015): 635–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2015.1025359>.

⁴⁸ Blumell, Lindsey, and Dinfin Mulupi. "Presidential Framing in the Christine BLASEY Ford and Anita HILL CASES." *The Communication Review* 23, no. 2 (2020): 91–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2020.1776042>.

⁴⁹ Paxton, P, and M Hughes. "Introduction to Women in Politics." *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective*, 2015, 8.

⁵⁰ Han, L. C., & Heldman, C. (2018). Chapter 3: The many faces of feminism. *Women, Power, and Politics: The Fight for Gender Equality in the United States*. Oxford University Press.

progress was proven to be glacial by Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testimony 27 years later against then-Supreme Court Justice nominee Brett Kavanaugh and the election of former President Donald Trump. After allegations came against Trump for sexual violence and he still was not removed from the race, his winning of the 2016 election, while baffling to some, seemed unsurprising due to societal treatment of sexual assault allegations against powerful men.⁵¹ His election sparked the Women's March on Washington, led by Evvie Harmon, Fontaine Pearson, and Breanne Butler, against Trump's election and abuse towards women—creating the largest march on Washington in history.

After the Women's March, #timesup emerged following allegations against Harvey Weinstein by Ashley Judd and countless other women. Hollywood came together to announce that time was up on abusers in the media and remaining in power.⁵² With the Time's Up movement in full swing, Tarana Burke's "me too." Movement from 2006 is echoed by Alyssa Milano after she asked: "anyone who had experienced sexual harassment, abuse, and assault to respond to the #MeToo tweet on October 15, 2017."⁵³ The Me-Too movement launched into its own consciousness-raising surrounding sexual violence, causing an explosion of rape memoirs being published, allegations and testimonies coming to light, and sexual violence entering everyday vernacular through the simple utterance of "Me Too." The Me-Too movement has forever altered public memory, with more cases widely circulated, like Brock Turner assaulting Chanel Miller, which is known by the shorthand "Stanford Swimmer case."⁵⁴ Now, as we situate

⁵¹ Blumell, Lindsey E., and Jennifer Huemmer. "Silencing Survivors: How News Coverage Neglects the Women Accusing Donald Trump of Sexual Misconduct." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3, June 2017, pp. 506–509. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/14680777.2017.1304714.

⁵² Fink, David E., And Sarah E. Diamond. "Morality Clauses in the Age of #MeToo and Time's Up." *Communications Lawyer*, vol. 34, no. 2, Winter 2019, pp. 4–6. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cms&AN=135543220&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

⁵³ "The Voices of #MeToo," 1.

⁵⁴ Miller's assault was alluded to as the "Stanford swimmer case" due to media coverage at the time homing in on Turner's status as an elite swimmer at Stanford, disbelieving any narrative of his crimes.

in what some deem as a "post-me-too movement" state, our understanding of public discourse and sexual violence is even more important to locate and access.

In order to fully understand the impact of both memoirs and digital media in PWSVT storytelling, this thesis examines mixed media artifacts as an opportunity to discuss the broad spectrum of storytelling that can impact public discourse in a different, nuanced manner compared to published, physical memoirs. The research question guiding this study is: how is public discourse surrounding rape culture impacted by the invention and circulation of first-person narratives of sexual violence trauma? Ultimately, by uncovering the connection between narrative and public discourse surrounding sexual violence, this thesis seeks to support the importance of PWSVT memoirs in modern culture. Rape memoirs gain cultural legitimacy through their readership, criticism, and content as valuable interventions inside and outside of the classroom. In this thesis, I hope to aid in this growing field of anti-sexual violence rhetoric, contributing to its significance within the field of Communication Studies.

Preview

This thesis examines the research question through three case studies of first-person narratives of sexual violence, progressing through past, present, and future understandings of the impact of these narratives on societal understanding of people with sexual violence trauma.

In Chapter Two, I examine current relevant literature surrounding sexual violence. Likewise, we will dive deeper into the connections between rhetoric and sexual violence. This connection will serve in our understanding of genre theory. Finally, we will examine feminist criticism as our method.

In Chapter Three, I offer an analysis of Chanel Miller's memoir *Know My Name*. Considered on the top 10 best-selling list for memoirs, Miller's experience as what the world

knew her to be, “Emily Doe” in the media’s titled, “Stanford Swimmer Case” is a powerful and impactful first-person narrative. While Miller’s memoir is still fairly recent, the publication of it took a previously known story and shifted the power of the narrative into the survivor’s hands. Specifically, this case study will examine public perception of Miller before her identity was revealed through her memoir and after her identity was revealed utilizing feminist criticism. Thus, this chapter will focus on the past tense, uncovering what was previously known and the shift that was caused by the revealing of identity.

In Chapter Four, I perform on a mixed-methods approach, utilizing feminist rhetorical criticism and autoethnography to understand the effect of the personal retelling of my sexual violence experience on Instagram. In November of 2020, a video where I shared my personal sexual violence story went viral on Instagram, garnering 587,000 views, 32,300 likes, 231 comments, and hundreds of messages. Autoethnography will be utilized to apply theory to my own experiences leading up to sharing this story on social media, as well as how the sharing of my story has shaped my current perception of my own trauma. While memoirs typically reveal how PWSVT are shaped by sharing their stories, this chapter will seek to uncover that process in real-time with real-time reaction using what is commonly articulated as a form of “autobiography 2.0.” To understand how it shaped public perception of sexual violence, I conduct a feminist rhetorical criticism of the comments and reactions to the video, as well as my own autoethnography.

In Chapter Five, I look to the future of memoirs, specifically, Tarana Burke’s new memoir, *Unbound*. Burke was a central figure in the Me-Too movement as its original founder through her work with sexual violence crisis centers and her own organization, “me too.” However, she has largely been left out of the Me-Too commentary by the media, focusing

instead on Alyssa Milano's digitization of the movement through #metoo. Now, as Tarana Burke starts to receive proper credit, her upcoming memoir could potentially impact future discourse of social movements surrounding sexual violence. This final case study will examine the public perception and discourse of Burke, as well as the Me-Too movement as a whole, prior to the release of her memoir. Once her memoir is released, feminist criticism is utilized to understand the differences in what was anticipated to be in her story, what actually is in her story, and reactions to the memoir after it has reached the public.

Finally, Chapter Six summarizes insights from each chapter and their ultimate connection to the prevalence of sexual violence in first-person narratives. These insights offer implications for future research and further questions within the field of communication studies.

CHAPTER TWO: RELEVANT LITERATURE & METHODS

Sexual violence, seemingly, has been part of society for as long as we can recall. In the Old Testament story of the Rape of Tamar, Tamar, and other PWSVT like her, are shamed, forced to live out the rest of their lives as a “desolate woman” because women who were not seen as “pure,” regardless of the reason, were abandoned.⁵⁵ As Western history unfolded, “revolutionary novels of the 1790s transformed the ontological paradigm of rape” by portraying rape as seduction, a part of sex, and enticing.⁵⁶ With the introduction of revolutionaries like Mary Wollstonecraft, Anne Greenfield, Mary Hays, and Charles Brockden Brown, consciousness amongst women in particular surrounding the difference between sex and rape began to take shape. Through their influence, rape legislation transformed from what was a crime against property to an assault on women’s subjectivity, paving the way for the nineteenth-century women’s rights movement.⁵⁷ However, Black women at the time were subjected to legalized rape because “enslaved women were denied reproductive freedom alongside the other forms of sexual violence to which they were subjected.”⁵⁸ Further, the use of rape allegations by White women to criminalize Black men in the era of Jim Crowe resulted in Black people, particularly Black men, being wrongfully incarcerated and killed.⁵⁹ We saw in the Civil Rights Movement a consciousness-raising occur surrounding sexual violence towards particularly Black women, but also, Indigenous women and women of color.⁶⁰ The Gay Rights Movement and AIDS epidemic created harsh societal views on LGBTQIA+ cases of sexual assault. This prejudice has

⁵⁵ Adelman, “The Rape of Tamar,” 93.

⁵⁶ Tarr, Clayton Carlyle. “The Loss of Maidenhead: Rape and the Revolutionary Novel.” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2019, pp. 549–574. EBSCOhost, doi:10.3138/ecf.31.3.549.

⁵⁷ “The Loss of Maidenhead,” 551.

⁵⁸ Fielder, “Embodied Race and (Re)Production,” 4.

⁵⁹ Whatcott, Jess. “No Selves to Consent: Women’s Prisons, Sterilization, and the Biopolitics of Informed Consent.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no. 1 (2018): 131–53. <https://doi.org/10.1086/698280>.

⁶⁰ Hallstein, D. Lynn. “Silences and Choice: The Legacies of White Second Wave Feminism in the New Professoriate.” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 31, no. 2 (2008): 143–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2008.10162526>.

stemmed from LGBTQUIA+ members being less likely to be believed when they do come forward about sexual violence. Likewise, sexual violence within the community is less likely to be taken seriously. PWSVT who identify as lesbian are scared to come forward for the fear of seeming violent, or “with gay men portrayed as dangerous predators.”⁶¹ The emergence of the Me-Too movement brought a powerful vindication of PWSVT and reckoning for perpetrators. The growing presence of voices speaking up against sexual violence has enabled greater analysis of rape culture. To provide the necessary context for this particular analysis, however, it is necessary to understand the issue of sexual violence in U.S. culture and proper terminology. Thus, the next sections of this chapter delve into further understanding of sexual violence, genre and memoir theory, and feminist criticism.

Categorizing Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is defined here broadly as “any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient.”⁶² Whereas earlier conceptualizations were predicated on physical penetration, this definition is broad in order to include oral, digital, and penetrative rape, sexual abuse, sexual assault, stealthing, sexual coercion, sexual manipulation, cyber sexual violence, sexual harassment, and any type of violence of a non-consensual sexual nature that occurs between any number of parties. Recent statistics suggest that every 68 seconds a person is sexually assaulted, and every 9 minutes the PWSVT is a child.⁶³ Our understanding of what sexual violence looks like is crucial to this study, as many PWSVT may feel excluded from certain definitions of rape or sexual abuse as they consider themselves PWSVT. These feelings of exclusion are why I will primarily rely on the terms “sexual violence” and “rape

⁶¹ Hindes and Fileborn, “Reporting on Sexual Violence inside the Closet,” 168.

⁶² Champlin, “Everyday Life Information Seeking,” 2.

⁶³ “Statistics.” RAINN. Accessed September 12, 2021. <http://www.rainn.org/statistics>.

culture” to discuss the elements guiding our understanding of rape memoirs, in order to fully encompass the whole spectrum of PWSVT and their experiences. For rape culture, I will be delineating it as the presence of misogyny within society, as defined by Kate Manne.⁶⁴

“Misogynist violence is a matter of maintaining subordination, the law enforcement arm of a patriarchal social order,”⁶⁵ thus relating it to the way in which rape culture enacts violence in order for the subordination marginalized people.

Likewise, as described earlier, I will be relying on the term PWSVT or “people with sexual violence trauma” to discuss anyone involved in the community impacted by sexual violence. Current literature suggests connotations involving the labels ‘survivor’ and ‘victim’ as harmful to some while empowering to others. People who experience sexual violence are bombarded with “labels that may or may not resonate with their own circumstances or their own understanding of sexual violence.”⁶⁶ For many, the survivor frame holds the connotation of what happens after the incident, and empowerment, but forced empowerment that may restrict healing.⁶⁷ Victim, on the other hand, captures a sense of injury and injustice felt by those who’ve experienced sexual violence but have a weak implication for those deterred from the label.⁶⁸ Many people choose to forgo any labels whatsoever, as it may seem only necessary in spaces that require disclosure, like public speaking events themed around sexual violence or support groups and legal proceedings. Thus, PWSVT appropriately allows us to discuss the community as a whole without pushing a label that may trigger unwanted emotion.

⁶⁴ Manne, Kate. 2019. *Down Girl*. Harlow, England: Penguin Books.

⁶⁵ Yap, Audrey. “Kate Manne, *Down Girl*: The Logic of Misogyny, Oxford University Press, 2017” Review of *Down Girl* by Kate Manne, . Kennedy Institute of Ethics-Georgetown, (2017).

⁶⁶ Young, Stacy L., and Katheryn C. Maguire. “Talking about Sexual Violence.” *Women & Language*, vol. 26, no. 2, Fall 2003, pp. 41. *EBSCOhost*, search-ebSCOhost-com.libdata.lib.ua.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cms&AN=11901615&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

⁶⁷ Young and Maguire, “Talking about Sexual Violence,” 41.

⁶⁸ Young and Maguire, “Talking about Sexual Violence,” 42.

As earlier discussed, sexual violence happens to a multitude of groups, with most PWSVT experiencing sexual violence before the age of 30.⁶⁹ However, this statistic only seeks to represent the current problem. All ages are capable of being sexually assaulted, with one in 9 girls and one in 53 boys experiencing sexual violence under the age of 12.⁷⁰ Likewise, cases of sexual violence towards nursing home patients are extremely high, with 51% of perpetrators being facility staff and 26% of perpetrators being other residents.⁷¹ All races, genders, ethnicities, abilities, classes, sexualities, and more experience sexual violence at various rates. 21% of transgender non-conforming people are sexually assaulted within their lifetime.⁷² Native Americans are at the “greatest risk of sexual assault” experiencing sexual violence at a rate two times higher than all other races.⁷³ Likewise, those in prison and in the military experience high rates of sexual violence within government facilities.⁷⁴

These numbers exclude those who choose not to report, which would result in even more alarming statistics. The point remains that sexual violence is a persistent and widespread problem in contemporary society that is especially pronounced within marginalized groups. It is of vital importance to discuss who can be, and who is, impacted by sexual violence. Aside from socioeconomic factors, personhood, like emotions, aesthetics, and personality, can also play a

⁶⁹“Federal Justice Statistics Program: Arrests and Bookings for Federal Offenses, 2010.” ICPSR Data Holdings, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.3886/icpsr34336.v1>.

⁷⁰Finkelhor, David, Anne Shattuck, Heather A. Turner, and Sherry L. Hamby. “The Lifetime Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse and Sexual Assault Assessed in Late Adolescence.” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 55, no. 3 (2014): 329–33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.12.026>.

⁷¹ Abner, Erin L., Pamela B. Teaster, Marta S. Mendiondo, Holly Ramsey-Klawnsnik, Jennifer L. Marcum, Tim N. Crawford, and Tenzin Wangmo. “Victim, Allegation, and Investigation Characteristics Associated with Substantiated Reports of Sexual Abuse of Adults in Residential Care Settings.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 34, no. 19 (2016): 3995–4019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516672051>.

⁷² Dowad, Rachel. “Transgender People over Four Times More Likely than Cisgender People to Be Victims of Violent Crime.” Williams Institute, March 31, 2021. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/nsvs-trans-press-release/>.

⁷³ Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *American Indians and Crime, 1992-2002* (2004).

⁷⁴ Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Sexual Victimization in Prisons and Jails Reported by Inmates, 2011-2012* (2013).

role in the transience of the PWSVT, both in court and socially. Factors of physical appearance and ability enact a considerable role in determining the extent to which reports of sexual violence are believed. When our understanding of attractiveness interacts with “race, gender, disability, age, and gender identity, among other aspects of social identity,”⁷⁵ preconceived judgments can negatively inform the way we view people with sexual violence trauma. Thornton and Rickman studied physical appearance’s impact on believability and found that “unattractive rape victims are judged more blameworthy for the fact that they have been raped.”⁷⁶ On the other hand, attractive women are viewed as complicit or “promiscuous.”⁷⁷ As we study PWSVT’s memoirs and lives, we must keep in mind the many barriers of public discourse that are active, oppressive, and unrelenting in silencing those without privilege.

Sexual Violence and Rhetoric

The occurrence of sexual violence cannot be divorced from cultural scripts structuring rape culture, such as, “historical, geopolitical, and cultural struggles, narratives, and fantasies shaping the materiality of rape and its representation.”⁷⁸ Scholars have continually created links between rhetoric and sexual violence, which began to gain traction as an area of study in the 90s. While many rhetorical scholars published at this time, Hesford’s 1998 analysis of the documentary, *Rape Stories*, in which the central figure walks us through her experience of rape, the aftermath, and potential revenge, is particularly enlightening for our study. Hesford argues that Stressford, the producer and central figure of the film documenting the aftermath of her rape, enacts cultural scripts of rape, while also engaging actively her own agency to use these scripts

⁷⁵ Irvin, “Resisting Body Oppression,” 4.

⁷⁶ Irvin, “Resisting Body Oppression,” 5.

⁷⁷ Haskell, Lori, and Melanie Randall. “Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims: What the Criminal Justice System Needs to Know.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3417763>.

⁷⁸ Hesford, “Reading Rape Stories,” 193.

to both her advantage and disadvantage. Much of the narrative surrounding “victim” status is couched in weakness, and occasionally coincides with stereotypes surrounding women’s lack of strength and ability to “fight back.”

However, Hesford argues that this cultural script is what might have saved Stressford, as “complicity, albeit a strategic performance, functioned as a form of agency, as is often true in many other contexts, such as child abuse and sites of captivity.”⁷⁹ But, Hesford isn’t the only person in the scene engaging with rhetoric during an encounter of sexual violence. Hesford argues material rhetoric is necessary to properly analyze sexual violence encounters, as a rhetorical analysis of this kind “recognizes how both victims and violators negotiate, resist, or enforce rape scripts with their bodies, actions, and narratives.”⁸⁰

While sexual violence is typically thought of as a private matter, sexual violence in and of itself is facilitated by public discourse that brings the issue to the forefront to be judged, scrutinized, and reappropriated into a new, rhetorical script. In popular culture, sexual encounters often include sexual violence without naming it as such, creating perceptions of sex being aggressive, without contraceptives, without communication, and full of rape culture themes. A majority of television shows and movies emphasize “sexual violence/abuse and power relations among adult couples with no mention of contraception.”⁸¹ In many romantic comedies, the popular trope of celebrating men who refuse the rejections of women through stalking and consistent pursuance in the name of romance is stereotypical in film and has been proven to cause a “decrease in intentions to adhere to sexual consent.”⁸² In everyday life, rape culture can

⁷⁹ Hesford, “Reading Rape Stories,” 201.

⁸⁰ Hesford, “Reading Rape Stories,” 202.

⁸¹ Kinsler, “A Content Analysis of How Sexual Behavior and Reproductive Health Are Being Portrayed on Primetime Television Shows,” 651.

⁸² “Influence of Viewing Movies on Intentions to Adhere to Sexual Consent,” 20.

materialize in friendships, families, even our internal monologues. Rape culture thrives on our own intrapersonal communication, coercing choices over what we choose to wear each day, especially for women, and how we choose to feel about our sexual encounters, for example, feeling shame for a healthy sex life for women and forcing men to brag about “sexual conquests.” All of these examples demonstrate that rape culture rhetorically infiltrates our everyday lives, making many of the habits borne out of sexual violence an unspoken norm.

Sexual violence thrives on the absence of consensual communication; thus, a form of non-verbal rhetoric can institute sexual violence. When verbal communication is removed from a sexual encounter, the reliance on non-verbal cues can inadvertently result in sexual violence by assuming or coercing consent from the other person, without it being fully expressed or encouraged. It is true that sex can be consensual even in silence, as sex is multifaceted, everchanging, and growing in its definition, but speaking widely of our ability to interpret non-verbalized signals, the variation can cause misunderstandings between parties. Furthermore, even if objections are verbalized and communicated, if the other party does not respect statements of boundaries and manipulates the other partner, a non-consensual encounter is likely to occur. As much as it is physical, “victims are created *both* rhetorically and physically.”⁸³ When the violence that has occurred is acknowledged, PWSVT are created through both their internal dialogue and their external discourse with either the perpetrator and/or their communities—as the body has been altered, so has the communication.

Rape forcefully establishes a hierarchy of needs, interests, and pleasures based on the power dynamics it creates. The presence of sexual violence during wartime serves as an apt example of power dynamics. Wood suggests there are also acts of rape that can be classified as

⁸³ Hesford, “Reading Rape Stories,” 192.

“‘opportunistic’ or ‘strategic.’”⁸⁴ Opportunism may look like perpetrators taking advantage of people in vulnerable positions, allowing them to seize power and control that was not planned in advance. But strategic sexual violence can occur when the perpetrator plans to sexually violate or assault another party as a calculated, power move. This is often expressed through utterings of the need to “put people in their place” or get revenge for rejection. In this case, sexual violence is a strategic decision that is used to elicit submission and put in place dominance over another. In her book on wartime rape and public memory, author Nayanika Mookherjee discusses these power dynamics central to the Bangladesh war of 1971.

As is common in wartime rape, the perpetrator is not only engaging in sexual violence but “acting out historically established power relationships.”⁸⁵ Wood argues rape is more traditionally used by armies as a tool of control, power, and dominance over enemies. While sexual violence is typically thought of as sexually motivated, the motivation of control cannot be ignored. When we separate the two, we are able to see clearly where sexuality and rape intersect, and where they remain exclusive. An example that is often drawn upon in advocate spaces is BDSM. While BDSM sometimes engages in behavior that could be deemed as violent to an outside viewer, the acts usually take place in a consensual, safe space. However, if one partner were to engage in BDSM without the other partners consent, that would constitute sexual violence. While both grapple with sexuality in some way, the line is drawn at consent.

An important distinction Wood makes, however, is the idea that sexual violence is somehow “inevitable,” as “what is not inevitable can be ended.”⁸⁶ Currently, public discourse often articulates sexual violence as an inevitable part of popular culture, only recently shifting

⁸⁴ Wood, “Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,” 470.

⁸⁵ Mookherjee, “The spectral wound,” 3412.

⁸⁶ Wood, “Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,” 478.

away from the silence surrounding it.⁸⁷ While activists have worked for generations to push the problem of sexual violence into public discourse, the current widespread reckoning of allegations across society requires an in-depth understanding of violence's complex nature and roots. Public discourse is shifted and changed by significant events surrounding sexual violence. Our understanding of rape culture shapes public discourse, and vice versa, echoing earlier mentions of sexual violence as rhetorical. Wood's analysis adds to our understanding of how public discourse shifts depending on the cultural context of the sexual violence that took place.

Likewise, as echoed earlier, rhetoric in and of itself has been described through associations with rape and violence. Brockeride explains that the arguer who utilizes rhetoric can take many stances, one of those being categorized by rape. Some communicators are not simply satisfied in gaining assent from the other party, but "through power, through an ability to apply psychic and physical sanctions, through rewards and especially punishments, through commands and threats."⁸⁸ From this point on, the other person in conversation may feel out of control of the boundaries of the rhetorical situation, forcing them into a non-consensual, submissive communicative encounter. Within the rhetorical situation, the communicative exchange, especially one in areas like argumentative debate, can take on many attitudes and presumptions that support rape, as "the adversary system in all its glory manifests rape when one adversary sees another as an object or as an inferior being and when he intends to destroy that opponent."⁸⁹

This power gained over another is laden within rhetoric as persuasion, and this, in turn, reinforces rhetoric of the hegemonic patriarchy as outlined by Foss and Griffin. The rhetoric of patriarchy is categorized as "efforts to change others and thus to gain control over them, self-

⁸⁷ Mookherjee, "The spectral wound," 231.

⁸⁸ Brockriede, "Arguers as Lovers," 8.

⁸⁹ Brockriede, "Arguers as Lovers," 9.

worth derived from and measured by the power exerted over others, and a devaluation of the life worlds of others.”⁹⁰ With this information in mind, we can deviate from patriarchal rhetoric through the means of invitational rhetoric and feminist rhetoric, taking a particularly anti-rape stance when engaging and utilizing rhetorical criticism.

Feminist theory proves useful in examining the personal as political, and the political as personal. Arthos Jr. argues this as syncretic sociability, or “the conceptual dichotomy of public and private realms.”⁹¹ Meaning, our public and private realms are at once different and overlapping. For many, sexual violence is a deeply personal experience, that is difficult for others to understand the specific nuances and dynamics of what occurred. However, because dominant rhetorical scripts engage in our everyday behavior, sexual violence also engages in these scripts, making the personal experience collective, as different people across the world share interconnected experiences.

Ultimately, anti-sexual violence rhetoric is a growing area of research that is distinct from other forms of rhetoric through its combination of both the physical and the symbolic; the personal and the political. This thesis seeks to incorporate the physical and symbolic dimensions of sexual violence by developing a clearer understanding of the narrative’s influence on public discourse. Rape memoirs are uniquely designed to represent the lived experience of sexual violence. In the next section, we will turn to a discussion of genre theory in order to fully synthesize the methods behind our analysis.

Genre Theory and Memoir

Memoir as a rhetorical form is built upon authorial self-disclosure of actual events, whereas other genres such as science fiction or mystery are unique in their pursuit of alternative

⁹⁰ Foss and Griffin, “Beyond Persuasion,” 6.

⁹¹ Arthos Jr., “My Voice Is Bound to the Mass of My Own Life,” 113.

worlds and hypothetical situations. Genres are constellations of discourse that are shaped by cultural norms and audience expectations that evolve over time in response to specific conditions.⁹² As Jamieson and Campbell explain, because there are a finite number of rhetorical responses to a situation, rhetors and audiences develop preferences and conventions for discourse that come to define a unique genre.⁹³ Memoir writing is a distinct species of rhetoric that allows us to turn from isolation to connectedness through self-expression, “blurring the ‘I’, ‘we’, and ‘they.’”⁹⁴ Memoirs fall under the general rhetorical descriptor as a genre within and of themselves, often being categorized with autobiographical work. Genre can be summarized as “a distinctive category of discourse of any type, spoken or written, with or without literary aspirations.”⁹⁵ Definitions of genre still continue to take shape, but key terms that can be helpful in guiding our study are genre awareness, genre-specific knowledge, and the connection between genre and rhetoric. Genre awareness is generally described as “explicit awareness or understanding of how genres work—a consciousness of and process for analyzing, learning, and critiquing any genre.”⁹⁶

A rhetorical consciousness is needed to put genre awareness into practice by implementing “a conscious attention to genres and their potential influences on people and the ability to consider acting differently within genres.”⁹⁷ For example, fiction may seek to immerse the reader and amaze them, while non-fiction research-driven books may seek to inform the reader and educate them. Here, Devitt argues that genre awareness can help students to approach

⁹² Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell. “Rhetorical Hybrids: Fusions of Generic Elements.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68, no. 2 (1982): 146–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638209383600>.

⁹³ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell. “Rhetorical Hybrids: Fusions of Generic Elements.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68, no. 2 (1982): 146–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638209383600>.

⁹⁴ Friedman and Schulermandl, “Introduction: Autobiography 2.0,” 5.

⁹⁵ Swales, John. *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=brd&AN=68615830&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

⁹⁶ Devitt, “Teaching critical genre awareness,” 338.

⁹⁷ Devitt, “Teaching critical genre awareness,” 339.

new genres differently and deepen “their rhetorical understanding of certain genres.”⁹⁸

Essentially, genre can combine literature analysis, as well as genre analysis of various media, and rhetorical understandings through situating the genre within the larger context of the rhetoric surrounding that specific text.

Within genres, distinctions take shape through mental patterns of discourse audiences recognize. Audiences may be able to distinguish a genre based on “the particular constellation of properties and expectations a reader may have concerning works of particular type.”⁹⁹ Bicjutko argues, “any currently prominent narrative genre, raises high expectations of a specific macrostructure composed of image schemas.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, our understanding of what memoirs are supposed to look like and achieve create an expectation of a structure that transcends an individual memoir to the ability to find this structure within most memoirs, usually composed of certain practices and conventions we anticipate.¹⁰¹ By understanding narrative genre through macrostructures, we can easily apply these preconceived notions audiences anticipate when encountering rape memoirs. These macrostructures are guided by genre theory, usually materializing in the expected dramatic arc, tropes, and disclosures. Tracking how these rhetorical features fit into the audience’s anticipated outcome of the book itself can help us to assess a memoir’s impact on public discourse. Bicjutko’s analysis, while completed through childhood memoirs, utilizes this theory and argues that it can provide “a stable background for further investigation of metaphoric target domain(s), staging empirical studies of embodiment and reader-response in general.”¹⁰² As we’ll be examining audience reaction to the memoirs in

⁹⁸ Devitt, “Teaching critical genre awareness,” 339.

⁹⁹ Diengott, “Psychonarratology,” 192.

¹⁰⁰ Bicjutko, “Modelling Literary Communication,” 31.

¹⁰¹ Benoit, “Beyond Genre Theory,” 156.

¹⁰² Bicjutko, “Modelling Literary Communication,” 31.

this study, this background is particularly pertinent to our analysis. By having a roadmap to follow, we can begin to locate the specific dramatic arc and key components of rape memoirs, to articulate the rhetorical impact on public understanding of sexual violence.

Commonly, reader-response theory has been used to analyze rape memoirs specifically in order to “examine the implied position of the reader in rape texts and reader response to different ways of representing rape in literature.”¹⁰³ Stone utilizes feminist rhetorical analysis with reviews of Sebold’s memoir, *Lucky*, as an artifact to understand rape memoirs and the way audiences “learn and deliberate about rape as a result of reading those narratives.”¹⁰⁴ An important note here: *Lucky* is being pulled out of publication by Sebold’s publisher. However, due to its prominence during the past 20 years, it still stands as a relevant historical context for the way readers digest rape memoirs. While authors are in greater control of their story during the writing process, they have far less control over the interpretation. Once rape memoirs are published, “they must interact with the world, thus requiring conversation and debate, which in turn requires interpretation and analysis.”¹⁰⁵

The genre specific element of rape memoirs is their ability to dive deeply into a particularly volatile topic, which takes a deviation from memoirs that are more generally focused on the author’s life story, as authors may be writing these stories for personal reflection, creating opportunities for critique, but not a necessity in the way rape memoirs demand. Memoirs usually demand the author provide both entertainment and education. However, rape memoirs deviate from this, hoping to take away the aspect of entertainment from their stories of sexual violence. Stone argues that therapeutic rhetoric is utilized particularly in rape memoirs, which seeks to

¹⁰³ Tanner, Laura E. *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

¹⁰⁴ Stone, “Seeking Survival, Justice, and Recovery,” 69.

¹⁰⁵ Haronian, “When the teller ends with the tale: The story as metaphor for feminist agency,” 34.

“individualize the effects of broader conditions of human exploitation and oppression that are in reality social and political.”¹⁰⁶ This specific rhetorical aspect of rape memoirs can help to bridge understanding about those who are merely concerned about the issue, and anti-rape activists actively attempting to eradicate rape culture, focusing their audiences instead on education and understanding.

This thesis seeks to dive deeper into public discourse and rape memoirs by understanding genre theory’s connection to rhetoric, memoir specifically, and rape memoir’s rhetorical functions. Essentially, these theories guide our study in explicating the specific ways rape memoirs will impact public discourse.

Methods

This analysis will be grounded in feminist criticism, as an “ideological critique that is animated by the political goal of ending sexism.”¹⁰⁷ Feminist criticism is appropriate for analysis as sexual violence is embedded within the fight for women’s equality and cannot be separated from the lived experience of women. Likewise, artifacts included in this study all focus on women, how their experiences with sexual violence are represented, and their rhetoric’s impact on public discourse, making feminist critique uniquely fit. Particularly, the understanding of feminist dilemmas within criticism, as coined by Kate Lockwood Harris, is helpful in connecting sexual violence to feminist criticism. As rhetoric combines the word and the world, examining how feminist rhetoric is situated in dilemmas, at the point of oxymorons, can be helpful to understand the multi-faceted nature of sexual violence, as PWSVT are often placed between double-binds by the justice system, their place in society, family and friends, and even themselves.

¹⁰⁶ West, “The rhetoric of therapy,” 49.

¹⁰⁷ Kornfield, “Feminist Criticism.”

While studying PWSVT's experiences, embodied rhetoric can cause feminists to "both preserve and undo an idealism–realism split and make these two moves at once."¹⁰⁸ Lockwood-Harris's understanding of these dilemmas connects the everyday lives of PWSVT that exist within dichotomies, reflecting authorship and agency of their stories, while critically understanding their contribution to scholarship and society. These dilemmas relate to Kornfield's description of the main motives of feminist criticism as analyzing discourse in ways "that reveal the realities of women's lives" and "the hegemonic processes that support sexism."¹⁰⁹ In this case, an example of the hegemonic processes that support sexism is the prevalence of rape culture, as the dominant gender roles that are exacerbated by sexual violence. The three guiding principles of feminist criticism that guide this study are the principles of mutuality, reflexivity, and agency. The principle of mutuality seeks to humanize the rhetors that feminist criticism analyzes, especially important in the case of rape memoirs as our artifact. Rape, and memoirs, both separately and together are deeply personal, emotional experiences.

In our efforts to analyze the impacts of these specific texts on audiences, it is important to recognize the humanity "surrounding the text."¹¹⁰ Often, PWSVT are placed on pillars as trauma spectacles, either through print, murder podcasts, or film. In these representations, their stories are devoured, critiqued, and dehumanized. As I come from the perspective of someone with sexual violence trauma guiding this study, humanization and mutuality must occur through tone and analysis.

This humanization can come through an understanding and empathizing of where the author is positioned, socioeconomically, as well as refraining when possible from the usage of

¹⁰⁸ Harris, "Feminist Dilemmatic Theorizing," 162.

¹⁰⁹ Kornfield, "Feminist Criticism."

¹¹⁰ Kornfield, "Feminist Criticism."

violent terms, extensions of patriarchy, to describe the rhetoric employed by the author. By treating the artifacts as if they are human, instead of merely text on a page, mutuality helps us to refrain from the harsh, needless critique that may only further hurt survivors. Understanding that “rhetoric is a political practice and performance through which power ebbs and flows”¹¹¹ helps to remove the ego from the rhetorical scholar utilizing feminist criticism, reflecting instead the humanity reflected in the artifact.

Reflexivity is equally important, as my status as a White, cisgender, middle-class, married woman gives my story and my voice a privilege in my reading of experiences of Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color, as two of the artifacts in this project are written by an Asian American woman and a Black woman respectively. By recognizing my participation in power dynamics as a White woman author and the political ethical choices I make in my writing, this study is guided by reflexivity to “offset limitations and to recognize the power of the [author’s] argumentation.”¹¹² Reflexivity allows us to pivot when privileged arguments are being made, and engage in self-awareness of not only the critique but the author’s writing of the critique that cannot be separated from the critique itself.

The principle of agency then, is relevant, as the ultimate goal of feminism is to end sexism and “use power in ethical ways.” By giving the artifacts agency, that is, allowing “synthetic and complex views of authorship,” we utilize humanization to ethically extend feminist beliefs and free women from the constraints of critique that are usually put on them by patriarchy, refraining from furthering internalized sexism into this dialogue.¹¹³ Likewise, this humanization allows us to expand scholarship and analysis within feminist criticism, to “commit

¹¹¹Dow, “Authority, Invention, and Context,” 67.

¹¹² Kornfield, “Feminist Criticism.”

¹¹³ Campbell, “Agency,” 8.

to undertaking broader, more widely distributed considerations of how gender differences and norms become naturalized, enhanced, or diminished.”¹¹⁴ The stakes, of course, are rather higher because these norms can become violent through perpetrators’ capitalizing on societal understanding of PWSVT to escape consequences, or the pressure put on PWSVT by these norms, causing double the trauma from the sexual violence to only worsen. Gentle handling in the artifacts themselves, thus, protects the PWSVT we are discussing, and only intends to empower them, straying from any further harm.

Using feminism criticism as my guiding method, my thesis seeks to ask feminist questions of the artifacts, as these artifacts cannot be divorced from the fact each author as a woman whose rhetoric aims to challenge patriarchy by refraining from silence. An analysis utilizing feminist criticism is needed, as “readings that focus on the intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality, and nationality with an eye toward equality and justice are especially valuable today.”¹¹⁵ The dominant scripts that permeate all three artifacts are reclamation, a vindication of PWSVT status, and freedom from perpetrators. These scripts mentioned influence each woman’s experience of sexual violence, and thus, guide our study to understand rape memoirs’ impact on public discourse from a particularly feminist perspective as guided by the goal to confront sexism and patriarchy.

Finally, in analyzing the uptake of these memoirs, as we’ll be discussing their impact, I will be utilizing each memoir within their specific context surrounding public discourse. For many, I will be equating uptake with the amount of press and reviews on websites like *Amazon* and *Goodreads*. For the digital memoir, I will be couching uptake in the virality of the reel, focusing impact on the specific audience it reached. While this does not allow us to influence in

¹¹⁴ Hallenbeck, “Toward a Posthuman Perspective,” 25.

¹¹⁵ Griffin, “That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names,” 502.

the same way as quantitative measures, it does allow us to examine how widely these are impacting discourse (press) and the minutiae of the audiences being impacted (reviews and comments).

CHAPTER THREE: CHANEL MILLER'S *KNOW MY NAME*

The previous chapter examined the ways sexual violence and rhetoric intertwine, particularly through feminist rhetoric that allows us to see patriarchal hegemony's overwhelming presence within public discourse. One of those ways identified is through the use of memoir. Memoirs can allow individuals to openly discuss the intimate details of their own life stories, creating space to discuss the minutia of living as a PWSVT. Likewise, rape memoirs are a growing nuance of memoir that truly deserves examination as a written, rhetorical situation. The rape memoir offers PWSVT a platform to discuss their sexual violence with incredible detail and honesty, while also providing editors and publishers the opportunity to profit off of these stories.¹¹⁶ These tensions require examination of the impact these memoirs have on public discourse, and how they change broader conversations surrounding PWSVT. Our current chapter focuses on Chanel Miller, whose memoir was an overnight sensation, due to her revealing her identity after the media attention on her sexual assault at the hands of Brock Turner in 2016. Miller was the victim known as “Emily Doe” within the case of the People v. Turner, which caused national attention through her victim impact statement’s circulation from *Buzzfeed News*.¹¹⁷ The release of Miller’s memoir, *Know My Name*, reclaim rhetorical agency over the narrative of the People v. Turner case through reframing focus, engaging with the dialectical tension between the labels of survivor v. victim, and creating visual empowerment for Asian-American women with sexual violence trauma.

Methods

¹¹⁶ Hesford, “Reading Rape Stories,” 197.

¹¹⁷ Miller, Chanel. “Chanel Miller on What Happened after Her Victim Statement Went Viral.” BuzzFeed News. BuzzFeed News, October 5, 2021. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/chanelmiller/chanel-miller-know-my-name-book-stanford-victim>.

In order to analyze the influence of *Know My Name* on public discourse, the case of *People v. Turner* will be discussed in-depth to examine the main themes of Brock Turner's depicted by the media. To conduct this analysis, I gathered headlines and stories from local news stations in the California area. I specifically focused on the location where the assault occurred, as this set the precedent and framework for the nationwide coverage of the *People v. Turner* case, effectively contextualizing Turner's narrative for domestic public discourse. After examining the local news reporting on Turner, I will examine Miller's intervention into these narratives through the release of her memoir. I predominantly focused on national news outlets, both stories, and headlines, for Miller's narrative, as the release of her memoir happened two years after coverage of the case. By this point, in 2019, the *People v. Turner* circumstance gained substantial national attention, causing the media to rely not on local news stations, but larger news outlets such as *NPR*, the *Washington Post*, *60 Minutes*, the *New York Times*, and predominantly, *Buzzfeed News*, who was responsible for publishing Miller's victim testimony anonymously in 2017. After examining these dominant media narratives surrounding the memoir, I utilize the memoir itself to discuss the comparison between the media discourse and the writings of Miller, in order to see the telling/intent vs retelling/impact of her story.

People v. Turner

Chanel Miller's experience of sexual violence is often credited as one of many catalysts for the #metoo movement.¹¹⁸ In 2015, Chanel Miller was sexually assaulted by Brock Turner on the Stanford University campus. When the incident occurred, Miller was unconscious and immediately taken to the hospital for a rape kit. The trial that followed gained worldwide interest, but that interest was not in Miller due to her anonymity. Turner was predominantly the

¹¹⁸ Gilmore, Leigh. "Chanel Miller and the New Power of Women's Words." *Cognoscenti*. WBUR, September 17, 2019. <https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2019/09/17/brock-turner-she-said-me-too-leigh-gilmore>.

focus of the news. As a Stanford swimmer poised to compete in the Olympics, Turner's identity and background were the main focus of the trial, not his violent actions. The case became known by the media through the name of "the Stanford Swimmer Case." Miller's identity at the time was known to the world as Emily Doe. In 2016, upon Turner receiving the sentence of 6 months in prison and light sentencing from the judge, Miller appealed the decision. In her appeal, Miller's victim impact statement went viral after being published on *Buzzfeed News*. "It was common to have people forward me the statement saying, *You have to read this*. I wanted to respond, *I wrote it*."¹¹⁹ Her victim impact statement being circulated led not only to the fame of the case growing even larger but the judge in the case was removed from the judicial system and fired.¹²⁰

Rhetorical Framing of Turner: Athleticism

On January 27th, 2015, most local news outlets were reporting on Brock Turner sexually assaulting an unconscious woman on the grounds of Stanford. At the time, and until her *60 Minutes* interview on August 6th, 2019, Miller's name was redacted from any reporting, allowing protection of her identity. Attention then deflected to Turner, whose name was in most reports almost immediately. Reports focused on his athleticism. The *L.A. Times* describes Turner as: "an Ohio native, Turner was a freshman at Stanford. He swam freestyle and backstroke for the Cardinal, according to the university's online athletic roster."¹²¹ News outlets furthered Turner's star-studded student-athlete persona. Many of the headlines lead with Turner's status as a Stanford Swimmer, headlines like: "Former Stanford swimmer pleads not-guilty to sexual

¹¹⁹Miller, Chanel. "Chanel Miller on What Happened after Her Victim Statement Went Viral." BuzzFeed News. BuzzFeed News, October 5, 2021. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/chanelmiller/chanel-miller-know-my-name-book-stanford-victim>.

¹²⁰Mack, Ashley Noel, and Bryan J. McCann. "Recalling Persky: White Rage and Intimate Publicity After Brock Turner." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 43, no. 4 (October 2019): 372–93. doi:10.1177/0196859919867265.

¹²¹Matt Hamilton, "Former Stanford Swimmer Accused of Raping Unconscious Woman on Campus," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles Times, January 28, 2015), <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-former-stanford-swimmer-accused-of-rape-20150127-story.html>.

assault charges.”¹²² Within the stories themselves, news outlets discuss Turner’s bright future, or lead with “All-American Swimmer,” putting Turner’s athletic identity at the forefront of the story.

As the world comes into the understanding of who Brock Turner is exactly, his narrative remains clear from local news outlets: Turner is an All-American Stanford Swimmer, who was accused of sexual assault after a party. While every article mentions the allegations, many lead with his identity first, instead of his actions. “A former top swimmer at the university, Turner was found guilty in March of three felony charges.”¹²³ We gain an understanding of rhetorical identity markers, like All-American, before we learn what he has done. Rhetorically, this sets up the reader to see Turner as an athlete, a person, first, and a rapist second, rhetorically disengaging his violence from his identity.

Turner’s Coverage: Presumption of Guilty vs. Innocence

Turner’s innocence continually was rhetorically reaffirmed, while Miller’s innocence was continually questioned. Miller’s description in the *Los Angeles Times*, states: “The alleged victim was not enrolled at Stanford and was visiting the campus for a party, prosecutors said.”¹²⁴ Alternatively, many of Turner’s supporters, including his father's statement, would attempt to prove his innocence. Brock Turner’s dad states in his personal statement, read at the time of sentencing: “That is a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action out of his 20 plus years of

¹²²Elena Kadavy, “Former Stanford Swimmer Pleads Not Guilty to Sexual-Assault Charges,” News | Palo Alto Online |, February 2, 2015, <https://www.paloaltoonline.com/news/2015/02/02/former-stanford-swimmer-pleads-not-guilty-to-sexual-assault-charges>.

¹²³ Jacobo, Julia. “Stanford Swimmer Exhibited Concerning Behavior Before Sex Assault: Prosecutors.” ABC News. ABC News Network, June 8, 2016. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/stanford-swimmer-exhibited-behavior-prior-sex-assault-prosecutors/story?id=39707680>.

¹²⁴ Matt Hamilton, “Former Stanford Swimmer Accused of Raping Unconscious Woman on Campus,” Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, January 28, 2015), <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-former-stanford-swimmer-accused-of-rape-20150127-story.html>.

life,"¹²⁵ insinuating Turner engaged in consensual sex with Miller and did not sexually assault her. This rhetorical situation creates a tone of innocence around Turner rhetorically within public discourse, while Miller faces an air of disbelief.

Continually, if articles do not list Turner as “Stanford swimmer”, he is listed as: “accused” or “alleged,” with only one source listing him as a “rapist.”¹²⁶ After the sentencing, the news reports remain consistent, even with pushback from anti-sexual violence advocacy sources arguing that labeling Turner as anything but “rapist” ignores the seriousness of his violent actions. Turner was sentenced to 8 months in jail. But his release caused mass reporting from major news outlets. Once again, specific outlets were criticized for their labeling of Turner. Naomi LaChance writes for *The Intercept*, stating: “Associated Press, USA Today, TIME, CNN, Sports Illustrated, MSNBC, and the BBC were criticized by readers for failing to identify Turner as someone who had committed sexual assault.”¹²⁷ But this urge for media to drop the label of “Stanford swimmer” and exchange it for rapist was met with criticism as well. Due to Turner’s sentencing being technically sexual assault, some critics believe these headlines were due to the worry of misinterpreting the sentencing.¹²⁸ LaChance continues, “he was convicted of sexual assault and intent to commit rape, but not rape. Media organizations may be exercising caution so as not to misidentify Turner’s crime.”¹²⁹ Regardless, the public criticism intensified, with tweets going viral like, “Dear @TIME & @SInow, you spelled "convicted rapist" wrong. Brock

¹²⁵ “Stanford Sexual Assault: Brock Turner's Father Sparks Outrage.” BBC News. BBC, June 6, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36459504>.

¹²⁶ Kristin J Bender, “Stanford Rapist Brock Turner to Serve Just 3 Months in Jail Instead of 6,” KCBY, accessed November 1, 2021, <https://kcby.com/news/nation-world/gallery/stanford-rapist-brock-turner-to-serve-just-3-months-in-jail-instead-of-6?photo=1>.

¹²⁷ Naomi LaChance, “Media Continues to Refer to Brock Turner as a ‘Stanford Swimmer’ Rather than a Rapist,” *The Intercept*, September 2, 2016, <https://theintercept.com/2016/09/02/media-continues-to-refer-to-brock-turner-as-a-stanford-swimmer-rather-than-a-rapist/>.

¹²⁸ LaChance, “Media Continues to Refer to Brock Turner as a ‘Stanford Swimmer’ Rather than a Rapist.”

¹²⁹ LaChance, “Media Continues to Refer to Brock Turner as a ‘Stanford Swimmer’ Rather than a Rapist.”

Turner THE CONVICTED RAPIST, not Stanford Swimmer.”¹³⁰ At this point, many knew of the case through the lens of the “Stanford Swimmer,” and multiple news outlets remained consistent in their messaging.¹³¹

Turner’s Coverage: His Own Voice

Many headlines also lead with Turner’s quotes, such as: “Stanford Swimmer Charged in On-Campus Sex Assault Says Drunken “Hook Up” Wasn't Rape.”¹³² We hear from Turner very little throughout the entire case, but when we do, he reiterates Miller’s participation in what happened. “The prosecutor’s sentencing document stated that Turner is still in denial about his criminal culpability and that he violated the victim's body.”¹³³ Turner acknowledges some culpability but disagrees with the harsh sentencing. *The Guardian* quotes one of the prosecutors on the case, explaining: “he seems to regret his choice, not because it caused a woman to be sexually assaulted, but because it has greatly affected his life as though he is the ‘victim’ of ‘peer pressure.’”¹³⁴ In his own words, Turner also places his accolades in front of any acknowledgment of the sexual assault, stating: “I can never go back to being the person I was before that day. I am no longer a swimmer, a student.”¹³⁵ Throughout his statement, again and again, Turner never says it is sexual assault.

¹³⁰ Campoamor, Danielle. Twitter Post. September 2, 2016, 9:02 AM. https://twitter.com/DCampoamor/status/771709975844487168?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E771709975844487168%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Ftheintercept.com%2F2016%2F09%2F02%2Fmedia-continues-to-refer-to-brock-turner-as-a-stanford-swimmer-rather-than-a-rapist%2F

¹³¹ LaChance, “Media Continues to Refer to Brock Turner as a ‘Stanford Swimmer’ Rather than a Rapist.”

¹³² Bay City News, “Stanford Swimmer Charged in on-Campus Sex Assault Says Drunken ‘Hook up’ Wasn't Rape,” NBC Bay Area (NBC Bay Area, January 30, 2015), <https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/ex-stanford-student-charged-in-alleged-on-campus-sexual-assault-denies-raping-unconscious-woman/82593/>.

¹³³ Jacobo, “Stanford Swimmer Exhibited Concerning Behavior Before Sex Assault.”

¹³⁴ Levin, Sam, and Julie Carrie Wong. “Brock Turner's Statement Blames Sexual Assault on Stanford 'Party Culture'.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, June 8, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/07/brock-turner-statement-stanford-rape-case-campus-culture#:~:text=I%20can%20never%20forgive%20myself,is%20completely%20unwarranted%20and%20unfair.&text=During%20the%20day%2C%20I%20shake,thinking%20about%20what%20has%20happened.>

¹³⁵ Levin and Wong, “Brock Turner's Statement Blames Sexual Assault on Stanford 'Party Culture'.”

The largest component of Turner's story is his focus on alcohol being the sole reason behind his decisions. "I want no one, male or female, to have to experience the destructive consequences of making decisions while under the influence of alcohol."¹³⁶ He continually states that if he were placed on probation, he could better society by warning college-aged students about alcohol and promiscuity. Turner's statement deflects any acknowledgment of sexual violence, effectively wiping what Miller experienced out of the picture, and focusing on the subject of binge drinking in college. This not only rhetorically creates an illusion of accountability for part of his actions, creating again, the rhetoric of innocence, but places partial blame on Miller. Largely, Miller's early narrative in the media was focused on her drinking on Stanford's campus, while not being a student. By including Miller in this blame of alcohol, Turner creates a narrative for the *People v. Turner* case: a young 'boy' who made a 'simple' mistake after drinking too much, effectively removing Miller and any agency she may have over the story.

Chanel Miller Tells Her Own Story

On August 6, 2019, *60 Minutes*, an interview-based program focused on investigative journalism, aired a show with Miller, releasing her name for the first time to the entire world.¹³⁷ Shortly after the *60 Minutes* segment, in September of 2019, Miller's memoir *Know My Name* was published. The memoir detailed her full experience, in her words, for the first time. The book was named one of the top ten books of the year by *The Washington Post*¹³⁸ and *the New York Times* listed the book as one of the top 100 books of 2019.¹³⁹ Miller's story and release of

¹³⁶ Levin and Wong, "Brock Turner's Statement Blames Sexual Assault on Stanford 'Party Culture'."

¹³⁷ *Chanel Miller Reads Her Entire Victim Impact Statement. 60 Minutes.* YouTube, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qK28Powy4ZQ> .

¹³⁸ "The Best Books of 2019." *The Washington Post.* WP Company, November 21, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/entertainment/books/best-books-of-2019/>.

¹³⁹ "100 Notable Books of 2019." *The New York Times.* The New York Times, November 25, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/books/notable-books.html>.

her memoir were monumental throughout the past 6 years and require a discussion. This section begins by offering a brief overview of the media coverage of the release of Miller's memoir from top news outlets (*The Washington Post*, *the New York Times*, *Buzzfeed*, *The Atlantic*, etc.).

Likewise, I will compare this coverage of the memoir to Miller's experience as detailed in the book. Ultimately, Miller's memoir reclaims rhetorical agency over the case of *People v. Turner* through three key themes: 1) reframing, 2) victim vs survivor dialectical tension, and 3) visual empowerment.

Reframing

First, as we examined in the first portion, the narrative of the *People v. Turner* was largely about Turner himself. That is, until Emily Doe's appearance on *60 Minutes*. Suddenly, the world knew Chanel Miller as the victim of Brock Turner's sexual assault on Stanford's campus. The headlines changed with her reveal. The headlines now read: "Victim of Brock Turner Sexual Assault Reveals Her Identity,"¹⁴⁰ "Chanel Miller, survivor in Brock Turner Rape Case,"¹⁴¹ and, "You know Emily Doe's story. Now Learn Her Name."¹⁴² Many of these stories start with the same messaging from the *60 Minutes* statement, "The world knew her as Emily Doe for years."¹⁴³ Throughout these stories, Miller's switch from Emily Doe to Chanel Miller is at the forefront of the narrative, discussing the impact this reveal of her identity had on her. "In newspapers she was described as the 'unconscious intoxicated woman.' In the courtroom she

¹⁴⁰ Lynn Neary, "Victim of Brock Turner Sexual Assault Reveals Her Identity," NPR (NPR, September 4, 2019), <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/04/757626939/victim-of-brock-turner-sexual-assault-reveals-her-identity>.

¹⁴¹ Kristin Lam, "Chanel Miller, Survivor in Brock Turner Rape Case, Speaks about Assault in First Interview," USA Today (Gannett Satellite Information Network, September 23, 2019), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/09/22/chanel-miller-brock-turner-rape-survivor-sentencing-memoir/2412608001/>.

¹⁴² Concepción De León, "You Know Emily Doe's Story. Now Learn Her Name.," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, September 4, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/04/books/chanel-miller-brock-turner-assault-stanford.html>.

¹⁴³ Lam, "Chanel Miller, Survivor in Brock Turner Rape Case, Speaks about Assault in First Interview."

was called Emily Doe. On Tuesday, she let the world know that her real name is Chanel Miller.”¹⁴⁴

Throughout these articles, her agency, and her identity, are continually reiterated. “Know My Name forces readers not only to look and listen, but also to really see, to really hear—to meet Miller on her terms, in the context of the story she is telling about herself.”¹⁴⁵ Articles discuss her disgust with being labeled as anything but Chanel Miller and Emily Doe, with the use of labels like “unconscious women” or “Stanford Swimmer victim.”¹⁴⁶ Throughout the reiteration of her experience, Brock Turner slowly turns into a background character. Megan Garber, for *The Atlantic*, writes: “Know My Name’s power resides, in large part, in its details—details that could belong only to Chanel Miller, that could serve only her story.”¹⁴⁷ The continual reiteration of phrases like “her story” suggests more focus on Miller, than Turner. Some even denounced the focus *only* on the act of the sexual assault and that night in particular. For instance, as Chanel Miller tells Elle Magazine, “imagine if the worst thing that ever happened to you became the only thing people knew about you.”¹⁴⁸ *ELLE Magazine* continues, “*Know My Name* is more than an indictment, though it is a successful and moving one. It is also an outstretched hand, inviting you to fight alongside her.”¹⁴⁹

In contrast, although, many news articles continue to hold space for Turner and Judge Persky within the article. “A fact: whether you believed Brock Turner to be a good boy, ensnared by the confusing lures of hookup culture, or an entitled élite, cornering women like game, you

¹⁴⁴ Neary, “Victim of Brock Turner Sexual Assault Reveals Her Identity.”

¹⁴⁵ Megan Garber, “The Paradox at the Heart of ‘Know My Name,’” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, October 2, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/10/chanel-miller-know-my-name-and-unbelievable-review/599191/>.

¹⁴⁶ De León, “You Know Emily Doe’s Story. Now Learn Her Name.”

¹⁴⁷ Garber, “The Paradox at the Heart of ‘Know My Name.’”

¹⁴⁸ Feller, Madison. “We Knew Everything about the Worst Night of Her Life. Now, Chanel Miller Wants Us to Know Her Name.” *ELLE*. *ELLE*, November 29, 2021. <https://www.elle.com/culture/books/a29133859/chanel-miller-know-my-name-review-memoir/>.

¹⁴⁹ Feller, “We Knew Everything About the Worst Night.”

knew his face.”¹⁵⁰ Judge Persky, the judge who ruled in the case, is continually criticized, but still remains in the background, only popping up once or twice in multiple news articles.¹⁵¹ “Miller is radicalized by her grueling two-year experience in court—in particular, by Judge Aaron Persky’s lenient sentencing of Turner.”¹⁵² Her book sparked more think pieces surrounding the impact of the case itself. While Miller’s case was prior to the rise of the digital #metoo movement, De León for the *New Yorker* writes: “her statement and Mr. Turner’s sentence became part of the intense debates around rape, sexism and sexual misconduct over the past years.”¹⁵³

Her case was a major factor in California imposing mandatory minimum sentences for sexual assault cases, and Miller’s impact statement was read aloud on the floor of the House of Representatives.¹⁵⁴ Besides this, her book itself created a reaction. Many reviews were quickly published amidst the book’s release, with various titles of: “The Paradox at the Heart of Know My Name,”¹⁵⁵ “‘Know My Name,’ a Sexual Assault Survivor Tells the World,”¹⁵⁶ or “Chanel Miller’s Incredible Memoir Know My Name.”¹⁵⁷ Within these articles, they stress the importance of Miller’s impact. “Know My Name stands unapologetically large, asking others to reckon with its author’s dazzling, undiminishable presence.”¹⁵⁸ Suddenly, the focus is on Miller’s impact, not Turner’s.

¹⁵⁰ Félix, Doreen St., Jeannie Suk Gersen, and Phyllis Thompson. “The Irrepressibly Political Survivorship of Chanel Miller.” *The New Yorker*, October 11, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-irrepressibly-political-survivorship-of-chanel-miller>.

¹⁵¹ Neary, “Victim of Brock Turner Sexual Assault Reveals Her Identity.”

¹⁵² Félix, “The Irrepressibly Political Survivorship.”

¹⁵³ De León, “You Know Emily Doe’s Story. Now Learn Her Name.”

¹⁵⁴ De León, “You Know Emily Doe’s Story. Now Learn Her Name.”

¹⁵⁵ Garber, “The Paradox at the Heart of ‘Know My Name.’”

¹⁵⁶ De León, “You Know Emily Doe’s Story. Now Learn Her Name.”

¹⁵⁷ Anna Silman, “Chanel Miller’s Story Needed to Be Told in Her Own Words,” *The Cut* (*The Cut*, September 23, 2019), <https://www.thecut.com/2019/09/review-chanel-millers-incredible-memoir-know-my-name.html>.

¹⁵⁸ Liu, Rebecca. “Know My Name by Chanel Miller Review – Memoir of a Sexual Assault.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, September 25, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/25/know-my-name-by-chanel-miller-review>.

While she does not mention it specifically in her book, the release of *Know My Name* happened once news about Brock Turner seemingly had died out. Brock Turner was released from prison in September of 2017. The news coverage of Judge Persky, the judge presiding over the case of the People v. Turner, went into June of 2018, for the larger part of a year. But Brock Turner's name and Emily Doe, at the time, went undiscussed by the large news conglomerate. Through the analysis of the language used to describe the case at the time, Miller's decision to wait was hardly ineffective. Rather, public attention at the time was still on the power of the digital #metoo movement. Rage surrounding Miller's case hadn't died out due to the #metoo movement's usage of her victim impact statement as a pioneer in launching the digital wave.¹⁵⁹ By launching her book after the news outlets had stopped remembering Brock Turner as the Stanford swimmer, Miller was able to position him as a rapist, a naming of Turner that many media outlets, prior to Miller's reveal of her identity, declined to do. As noted earlier, a large amount of the news coverage surrounding Miller's release of her book barely discussed Turner. Upon examining the news articles, the focus of her story after the trial, and after Turner's inflicted violence, was over half, if not three-fourths of news articles, with Turner's naming coming up once or twice.¹⁶⁰ The story, then, turned to her story of survival and justice for her sexual assault. Finally, news outlets got to hear what her experience was that night, rendering Turner's identity to the position of the perpetrator, instead of the Stanford All-American athlete.

Miller rhetorically reframes the story of her sexual assault to impact the rhetorical discourse surrounding sexual violence by focusing attention on the story the survivor tells of their experience, not the violence Turner inflicted or the impact it may have on the perpetrator.

¹⁵⁹ Pevac, Mikayla. 2020. "Sexual Assault Activist Chanel Miller Is Keeping #MeToo Alive." *Communication Currents*, May 1–4. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cms&AN=143736516&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁶⁰ Megan Garber, "The Paradox at the Heart of 'Know My Name,'" *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, October 2, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/10/chanel-miller-know-my-name-and-unbelievable-review/599191/>.

Miller describes this tension in her memoir, writing, “when a victim does go for help, she’s seen as attacking the assailant. We force her to think hard about what this will mean for his life, even though he never considered what his actions would do to her.”¹⁶¹ Prior to the release of her memoir, the media narrative was largely concerned with Turner’s star-studded status being maintained. The reframing of this narrative happens by Miller secluding Turner’s assault of her to one chapter. However, she is clear that the impact of the assault goes beyond that night. “The moment I was violently dragged into his story, my story stopped. When his hands finally slipped out of me, I was released back into my life, but I lost everything.”¹⁶² The largest portion of the book details her battling the aftermath of the legal system and her own mental health. Miller admits it was hard to decide how to articulate this story¹⁶³, but by focusing on the healing, rather than Turner’s actions, PWSVT are able to witness tangible depictions of sexual violence aftermath, specifically the emotional experiences they may possibly endure.

By taking the story into her own hands, Miller creates a feminist narrative for her story, focusing attention on the largest part of the story of sexual violence that so often goes unnoticed. When the entire story becomes about what the perpetrator did, the rhetorical discourse surrounding sexual violence reinforces the hegemonic, rape culture that created the space for violence to happen in the first place. Miller’s reframing disrupts patriarchal hegemony by turning the story towards her, and towards the reality of the aftermath for many survivors. “What was normal now? I felt sure that if I was being blamed for Brock’s pain.”¹⁶⁴ She continues to discuss how the hardest part of this whole experience was not being able to live her life normally, even

¹⁶¹ Miller, *Know My Name*, 287.

¹⁶² Miller, *Know My Name*, 67.

¹⁶³ Miller, *Know My Name*, 34.

¹⁶⁴ Miller, *Know My Name*, 258.

sleeping at home becoming a struggle. “You weren’t raped in a house, one might wonder. But it’s the sleeping itself that got me, the unconscious, vulnerable state.”¹⁶⁵

Miller includes her boyfriend, Lucas’s statement for the sentencing of Miller, which details the pain she continually goes through after the assault. “Chanel habitually hides in our apartment bathroom for hours at a time, unprompted. I can hear her crying through the door.” Miller’s reframing of the story, from Turner’s actions to her ongoing healing, rhetorical reclaims agency over the *People v. Turner* case to reiterate that the story does not stop when “justice”¹⁶⁶ begins.

Victim v. Survivor Dialectical Tension

Continually, Miller’s release of her memoir creates a dialectical tension between the label’s “victim” and “survivor.” While her name and identity was labeled “Emily Doe,” many news outlets referenced her as “Brock Turner’s victim,” “Stanford Swimmer’s Victim,” or “unconscious woman,” as mentioned previously.¹⁶⁷ While a lot of this labeling was due to the legal proceedings using the term “victim” to label those within a court case, the prevalence of it was something Miller was clearly uncomfortable with, due to her discussion of it upon the release of her memoir, as she tells us in *Know My Name*. She states, “anything I do in the future will be by *the victim who wrote a book*, [but] I did not come into existence when he harmed me.”¹⁶⁸ Many articles, such as those in *The Guardian*, described it as demeaning, writing that that inside the courtroom and for the media, “she was ‘Emily Doe,’ the pseudonym of the ‘Brock

¹⁶⁵ Miller, *Know My Name*, 258.

¹⁶⁶ I use “justice” here loosely, as the act of the physical sexual violence stopping, marked usually with some kind of rape kit or move towards justice, can look different for every person. For some, this may mean that they are able to escape continued abuse and live away from their perpetrator. For others, it could mean the collection of a rape kit. The difference in justice will look comparatively distinct from one another depending on the PWSVT.

¹⁶⁷ Baker, Katie J.M. “Here’s the Powerful Letter the Stanford Victim Read to Her Attacker.” BuzzFeed News. BuzzFeed News, March 17, 2021. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her-ra>.

¹⁶⁸ Miller, *Know My Name*, 288.

Turner sexual assault victim,' a woman reduced to the sum total of what someone else had done to her."¹⁶⁹ This quote acknowledges the negative connotation with the label 'victim,' one which is prevalent in the public discourse surrounding sexual violence.

Miller desires to break this tension. She uses both labels interchangeably in positive and negative connotations, highlighting the word "victim" when describing her audience. Her choice between what to include and what not to include while writing the book is explained within these utterings on labels. "I've found victims identify with pain than platitudes. If I were to say I was healed and redeemed, I worry a victim would feel insufficient."¹⁷⁰ Throughout the book, Miller remains strong in balancing both labels, as she refers to her audience by the label of the survivor as well. She utilizes survivor as she describes the impact of her victim statement, explaining, "The statement had created a room, a place for survivors to step into and speak aloud their heaviest truths."¹⁷¹ Alternatively, Miller also refers to herself as a victim, as she writes in the book, "I am a victim, I have no qualms with this word, only with the idea that it is all I am."¹⁷² This understanding of the label is in direct contrast to our understanding of the dialectical tension of survivor versus victim. Due to normalized, colonized understanding of those healing from sexual violence, you cannot be one and the other; it's either/or.¹⁷³ PWSVT can be ostracized as the weeping, angry victim or the courageous, positive survivor. They cannot be both or neither.

Miller was constantly, throughout the book, toying with being too strong or too angry, trying to toe the line between victim and survivor, code-switching between them to whichever

¹⁶⁹ Brookes, Emma. "Chanel Miller on Why She Refuses to Be Reduced to 'Brock Turner's Victim'." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, September 25, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/sep/25/stanford-sexual-assault-victim-chanel-miller-interview>.

¹⁷⁰ Miller, *Know My Name*, 311.

¹⁷¹ Miller, *Know My Name*, 252.

¹⁷² Miller, *Know My Name*, 116.

¹⁷³ Wieskamp, Valerie N., and Cortney Smith. "'What to Do When You're Raped': Indigenous Women Critiquing and Coping through a Rhetoric of Survivance." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106, no. 1 (February 2020): 72–94. doi:10.1080/00335630.2019.1706189.

was most beneficial within the legal system. “I did not want to be written off as a ranting victim.”¹⁷⁴ Miller’s insistence on the word victim throughout the media seems to be one drawn by the media narratives themselves, represented in headlines like “Miller refuses to be Brock Turner’s Victim” when in actuality, those weren’t the words of Miller herself.¹⁷⁵ By opening the space for a broadening of the term, Miller disrupts the rhetorical tension between the labels victim and survivor. The issue was not that the victim label was disempowering, it was that her name, and her identity, were erased alongside it. This infers that the survivor label could also be harmful if it was all someone was to be known by.

Miller describes this tension with survivor well with her art installation at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, put in place in 2020.¹⁷⁶ In this installation, there are multiple drawings of people with the phrases “I was,” “I am,” and “I will be.” Under “I was,” there are images of an abstract person crying. Under “I am,” the person is now walking. Under “I will be,” the person appears to be meditating. In her description of the artwork, Miller writes, “the point of the piece is that healing is cyclic. We are always transitioning between past, present, and future, but life is not linear.”¹⁷⁷ Miller’s memoir, and subsequent mural, push us to move past a linear understanding of moving from victim to survivor, as many of the news articles surrounding the release of the memoir visibly did. This understanding of healing is in direct alignment with survivance rhetoric, as outlined by Wieskamp and Smith, to discuss the way in which Native American women cope with sexual violence. Wieskamp and Smith explain, “the rhetoric of survivance creates a space in which communities disproportionately affected by violence can

¹⁷⁴ Miller, *Know My Name*, 222.

¹⁷⁵ Brookes, “Chanel Miller on Why She Refuses to be Reduced.”

¹⁷⁶ Rea, Naomi. “I Can Always Draw My Way out of a Feeling’: Artist and Author Chanel Miller on Why Doodling Is Her Essential Emotional Outlet.” *Artnet News*. Artnet News, March 30, 2021. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/chanel-miller-interview-1953659>.

¹⁷⁷ Rea, Naomi. “I Can Always Draw My Way out of a Feeling’.”

simultaneously practice collective coping methods while also challenging dominant discourses.”¹⁷⁸ Within this instance, Miller practices these collective coping methods, and her disruption of this rhetorical tension between labels caused public discourse to follow suit.

Even the same news outlets, like *ABC News*, shifted their language from victim to survivor within weeks, implying flexibility within the label. On September 4th, 2019, *ABC News* published a headline stating: “Victim in Brock Turner Stanford sexual assault case goes public with her name and memoir.”¹⁷⁹ This headline was printed when Miller’s name was revealed in the *60 Minutes* special. Once the book was released, *ABC News* on September 25th, 2019, published a headline stating: “‘Humiliated’: Chanel Miller, survivor in Brock Turner sex assault case, shares her story of trauma and recovery.”¹⁸⁰ This change assists in disrupting the public discourse surrounding the case, refusing to solely delineate Miller as “Brock Turner’s Victim.” Miller’s reclamation of her rhetorical agency over this narrative moves our understanding of the victim vs. survivor rhetorical tension from linear to that of cyclical experience of trauma, disrupting colonial and patriarchal hegemonic power over who is allowed to speak out, and for how long.

Visual Empowerment

Finally, Chanel Miller revealing her identity through the release of her memoir disrupts hegemonic white supremacy’s understanding of who can experience sexual violence. Traditionally, society pushes that the only person capable of being believed when they come forward with sexual violence allegations is the affluent White, heterosexual, able-bodied,

¹⁷⁸ Wieskamp and Smith. “What to Do When You’re Raped,” 72.

¹⁷⁹ Frances, Enjoli. “Victim in Brock Turner Stanford Sexual Assault Case Goes Public with Her Name and Memoir.” *ABC News*. ABC News Network, September 4, 2019. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/victim-brock-turner-stanford-sexual-assault-case-public/story?id=65385613>.

¹⁸⁰ Frances, “Victim in Brock Turner Stanford Sexual Assault Case.”

cisgender woman.¹⁸¹ During the trial, Miller describes her experiencing the jurors and all those in the courtroom viewing her for the first time. “I felt the eyes taking me in. I wondered if they were surprised I was Asian, if I looked like a woman, or a girl.”¹⁸² Many readers also admit that they automatically assumed Emily Doe was a White woman, as one survivor explains in a review of *Know My Name*, “I realized I’d first assumed that Emily Doe was White, a reminder of how often we internalize Whiteness as a default in America.”¹⁸³ Miller acknowledges this sentiment in her memoir as well. She explains that she was used to being erased due to her Chinese American heritage, forcing her “to never be fully known. It did not feel possible that I could be the protagonist.”¹⁸⁴

By revealing her identity, Miller not only reclaimed agency over the case *People v. Turner* focusing solely on Turner, but she also rhetorically altered the public perception of the default race of PWSVT. Miller discusses the importance of representation when it comes to seeing other PWSVT that reflect true demographics, after attending Margaret Cho’s performance in 2015 at Helium Comedy Club. “I looked up to her for being unapologetic, honest, and one of the few Asian American role models in mainstream culture.”¹⁸⁵ She continues, her viewing of Cho’s music video *I Wanna Kill My Rapist* left an imprint on her. “She understood how it felt when someone wanted you broken.”¹⁸⁶ While this representation clearly made Miller feel seen, alternatively, she describes the hate she received for being Asian from the few people that discovered her identity. “The few that had discovered my identity had taken screenshots of my

¹⁸¹ Lykke, Lucia C. “Visibility and Denial: Accounts of Sexual Violence in Race- and Gender-Specific Magazines.” *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, Apr. 2016, pp. 239–260. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/14680777.2015.1061034.

¹⁸² Miller, *Know My Name*, 110.

¹⁸³ Ko, Lisa. “Why It Matters That ‘Emily Doe’ in the Brock Turner Case Is Asian-American.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, September 24, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/24/opinion/chanel-miller-know-my-name.html>.

¹⁸⁴ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name*

¹⁸⁵ Miller, *Know My Name*, 221.

¹⁸⁶ Miller, *Know My Name*, 222.

old spoken words videos, leaked with the caption, *Brock Turner has yellow fever.*¹⁸⁷ The inclusion of these statements are few within the book. Miller's acknowledgment of this visual empowerment predominantly focuses on the representation not only she experienced from Margaret Cho, but herself as well.

Miller explains, "I craved stories of Asian American women who embodied power and agency. I never wanted to wield a megaphone to announce to everyone, I simply wanted to acknowledge who I was as a result of what I'd endured."¹⁸⁸ Her impact did reach Asian American women, while also altering the inclusion of them within public discourse surrounding sexual violence. Erin Khuê Ninh, a professor of Gender and Race Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara explains to *Bitch Media*: "I think the most powerful thing about Chanel Miller's 'outing' herself racially is that moment so many Asian American women then had, where they realized they themselves had also assumed she was white."¹⁸⁹ As Ninh continued to explain, where White women may simplify the issue of sexual violence to a gender issue only, *Know My Name* complicates the narrative, and "held up a mirror for Asian American women and survivors to see themselves and their often invisible pain for the first time."¹⁹⁰

Ultimately, Miller rhetorically reclaims agency over the *People v. Turner* case by visually empowering her own identity in revealing her racial identity as an Asian woman. She disrupts the common narrative of White women being the face of the anti-sexual violence movement. Now, everyone not only knows the name Chanel Miller, but they also know her face, too.

Conclusion

¹⁸⁷ Miller, *Know My Name*, 252.

¹⁸⁸ Miller, *Know My Name*, 328.

¹⁸⁹ Cheung, Kylie. "'Know My Name' Voiced the Pain of Being an Asian American Survivor." *Bitch Media*. Bitch Media, October 9, 2019. <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/chanel-miller-asian-american-survivors-voice>.

¹⁹⁰ Cheung, "Know My Name."

After analyzing Turner's depiction in the media, *Know My Name* media coverage, and Miller's rhetorical strategies through her memoir, Miller's memoir *Know My Name* reclaimed rhetorical agency over the public discourse surrounding the *People v. Turner* by engaging in rhetorical reframing, disrupting the rhetorical tension between Survivor and Victim, and visually empowering marginalized survivors, particularly Asian-American women. While Miller's impact goes beyond this, these rhetorical strategies refocus the most important part of the story from the details of violence to the person who lived through the horrifying act. Often, the media only hones in on the most gruesome aspect of the story. "The media socializes us to bear witness, authenticate events and to respond to human trauma" which at times, can create the "the aestheticization of suffering."¹⁹¹ However, for people living through the violence, the largest part of the story is often about what the PWSVT had to endure and the violence that was inflicted upon them. Instead of discussing the aftermath, or the journey through trauma, PWSVT may be required instead to retell the traumatizing story of what happened, over and over, again. This focus on the sexual violence act turns trauma into a spectacle for the media to devour, but also, focuses on what the perpetrator did. Effectively, the story becomes about the perpetrator—their actions, the consequences, and who they hurt. The person hurt by the perpetrator is simply a background character, much like Miller was rendered into an 'unconscious woman' by the media.

The story of healing from trauma, like that of which Miller focused on, cutting out the perpetrator entirely from the narrative, may not have the same, gruesome appeals as the story of violence. Healing from sexual violence could potentially not be as glamorous or empowering as much as popular narratives of survivorship can make it out to be, with phrases like, "you're not a

¹⁹¹ Ibrahim, Yasmin. 2011. "Domestication of Suffering: The Politics of Pity and Communion through ICTs." *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 2 (1): 137–50. doi:10.1386/ejpc.2.1.137_1.

victim, you're a survivor." Miller described this often, returning back to the times she didn't shower for weeks, how she would yell at everyone close to her, or continually isolate herself. These very real experiences many PWSVT describe as they heal from a traumatic incident is often left out of the narrative in favor of stronger bits. However, this can cause PWSVT themselves to feel like there is something wrong with their healing.

In Chapter 9, Miller elucidates this feeling, especially after Turner was found guilty by the jury. "I'd grip the sink, turning on the faucet to drown out the sounds. *Why are you sad, I kept thinking, you won.*"¹⁹² She continues to explain how by paraphrasing her victim statement, the probation officer had labeled her forgiving, and passive, due to Miller's focus on rehabilitation for Turner and her calmness. "The officer noted she had been *struck by the victim's ability to objectively digest the gravity and ramifications of the defendant's behavior.* She had mistaken my strength for digestion."¹⁹³ Healing is difficult. Miller exposes that to us and reframes any kind of understanding of her as simply "over it." When we are able to see how entrenched the trauma becomes in PWSVT's lives, our discourse shifts from how do we protect ourselves to how do we prevent anyone from doing this ever again? Miller's impact on the rhetorical discourse of sexual violence turns our conversation towards the PWSVT, not the perpetrator, effectively disrupting patriarchy's control over the narrative.

In the next chapter, we'll examine what this process looks like internally, and how memoirs can both impact public discourse, while also examining how public discourse can impact PWSVT after their memoir is exposed to a wider audience.

¹⁹² Miller, *Know My Name*, 215.

¹⁹³ Miller, *Know My Name*, 219-220.

CHAPTER FOUR: DIGITAL MEMOIR

After examining the impact of Chanel Miller's memoir *Know My Name* on public discourse surrounding sexual violence, we are able to see the effect her memoir has on the public and the way we interact with survivors. Likewise, we are able to widely see how memoirs interact with public discourse. An important aspect of popular culture that has been revolutionizing the memoir space, however, is digital storytelling.

Blogs transformed the internet prior to social media, and "brought about a noticeable collapse of the boundaries between offline and online lives."¹⁹⁴ This memoir-style writing was able to be accessible to all who had a computer and caused a surge in regular people sharing their lives, instead of the celebrity memoirs we are so used to seeing on bookshelves. Specifically, digital memoir, or memoir 2.0 gave freedom to those with marginalized identities to feel as though they had a space where they could express their authentic identity without fear of consequence from societal norms.¹⁹⁵ For example, Jan Kachnowski examined fat-positive blogger spaces, specifically fashion blogs, and found they allowed for plus-size users to feel safe in expressing their love for fashion, escaping ridicule that they would normally experience outside of the space.¹⁹⁶ Now, as social media takes over and blogs remain popular, our idea of memoir is changing from long form blog posts to short-form social media posts like reels, Tik Tok, or shorter YouTube videos.¹⁹⁷ Memoir 2.0, or digital versions of memoirs that specifically focus on storytelling surrounding our personal lives, is an area that must be studied within sexual

¹⁹⁴ Friedman, May, and Silvia Schultermandl. "Introduction: Autobiography 2.0 and Quick Media Life Writing." *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, vol. 9, no. 2, July 2018, pp. 146. *EBSCOhost*, doi.org/10.1386/iscc.9.2.143_2.

¹⁹⁵ Limatius, Hanna. "'There Really Is Nothing like Pouring Your Heart out to a Fellow Fat Chick': Constructing a Body Positive Blogger Identity in plus-Size Fashion Blogs." *Token: A Journal of English Linguistics* 6 (January 2017): 25. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cms&AN=128637160&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁹⁶ Limatius. "'There Really Is Nothing like Pouring Your Heart,'" 27.

¹⁹⁷ Poletti, Anna. "Coaxing an Intimate Public: Life Narrative in Digital Storytelling." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 25, no. 1 (February 2011): 77. doi:10.1080/10304312.2010.506672.

violence. By having this closeness to the person discussing their trauma, the audience may change its reaction to the story they are being told. We've yet to see how this can impact public discourse as a whole in the nuance of sexual violence.

In order to truly uncover this, I will be examining my own memoir 2.0, through an autoethnographic and rhetorical lens. As someone who has experienced sexual violence trauma firsthand, I will be exploring my own story through autoethnography. Likewise, I have engaged regularly in memoir 2.0, specifically sharing my story of sexual violence on Instagram and TikTok regularly. Due to this, I will dive into the background behind my thought process in putting together my own Instagram reel that was posted on December 2020 (see Figures), in which I share my story of sexual violence. After my autoethnography, I will conduct a rhetorical analysis of the comments using feminist criticism as a model, and the impact of the video not only on the public discourse surrounding it but the survivor, myself, as well.

Autoethnography and Rhetorical Criticism

Prior to the autoethnographic portion, it's important to understand the choice behind utilizing a mixed-methods approach. Autoethnography is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)."¹⁹⁸ In autoethnography, the self, or 'the body' is the main focus of study. "The body provides us with first-hand, visceral experience of the world, thus being a necessary precondition for emotion, language, thought, and social interaction."¹⁹⁹ As the body is the research, the researcher is the participant, who uses personal experiences in order "to understand facets of the social world within which [they are] embedded."²⁰⁰ These personal

¹⁹⁸ Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, "Autoethnography," 1.

¹⁹⁹ Hokkanen, "Analyzing personal embodied experiences," 25.

²⁰⁰ Hokkanen, "Analyzing personal embodied experiences," 26.

experiences are translated into artifacts or evidence to conduct analysis and connect back to theory. Introspection and cultural analysis are often the two parts that are employed when utilizing autoethnographic study.²⁰¹ By bringing the inner world and the outer world together, autoethnography allows us as researchers to examine just how the personal is political.

Due to its focus on the text and the words of the researcher, autoethnography blends nicely with rhetorical criticism as a mixed-methods approach. In the past, rhetorical criticism leaned heavily away from any kind of connection to autoethnography, perhaps, “because we are already inserting ourselves into the critique and wish to portray a veneer of objectivity.”²⁰²

However, at the heart of rhetorical criticism, the researcher is required to have a meta-view of the artifact they are examining, as “if rhetorical criticism is rhetoric about rhetoric, then it is also a story about another story.”²⁰³

Likewise, combining the two forces us to examine this story in a new light, one that is not disembodied from the artifact, but instead, in conversation with the rhetorical situation surrounding the artifact. This may allow for a deepening of the analysis that connects the criticism in new ways, like the profound emotional appeals within rhetoric.²⁰⁴ Emotion, or pathos, is a deeply intrinsic aspect of rhetoric. As critics, even, “we are persuaded, angered, sympathetic, given hope, and may feel a range of countless emotions.”²⁰⁵ Through this, critics become a part of the rhetoric taking place about the rhetoric they are studying, a story about a story. This reflects very similarly to autoethnography, which seeks to create a story through theory and cultural analysis by analyzing the story in front of the researcher: their own.

²⁰¹ Hokkanen, “Analyzing personal embodied experiences,” 27.

²⁰² Lunceford, “Rhetorical Autoethnography,” 3.

²⁰³ Lunceford, “Rhetorical Autoethnography,” 4.

²⁰⁴ Lunceford, “Rhetorical Autoethnography,” 9.

²⁰⁵ Lunceford, “Rhetorical Autoethnography,” 9.

Rhetorical autoethnography would essentially have the same goal as rhetorical criticism, “to help us more fully understand the rhetorical artifact under consideration.”²⁰⁶

In this sense, autoethnography is extremely helpful in uncovering the ways in which memoir is impactful, as it forces an almost memoir-like exercise. Likewise, it forces the researcher to examine from an author’s perspective and input their personal experiences into the cultural analysis that is being conducted rhetorically. Through this connection to rhetorical criticism, we can see how the audience may interact or interpret the story taking place in front of them.

Autoethnography: *The Before*

The bite life took out of me arrived earlier than anticipated. I thought the teeth hadn’t found me, or at least, not really. I already had a couple of wounds and came out alive and kicking, regardless. A childhood divorce, cross-country parents, the usual stuff that would create a large paycheck for any therapist across the United States. At 17, I thought I had rid all of my clothes of the ants that bit me just enough to live uncomfortably forever. I was wrong. At 23, there haven’t been any bigger antagonists, or if they were, I blindly escaped them, my memory wiped of the gore.

At 17, I was sexually assaulted, and it was not very clear cut, as most things during teenage years feel too complex yet too simple to even comprehend. And that is where the violence he inflicted on me that night, the part of the story I didn’t have control over, *his story*, ends.

What happened after that night is where the bite seemed to sting, and sting, and sting and keeps stinging. A very distant me recalls what happened right after: I reported it to my school,

²⁰⁶ Lunceford, “Rhetorical Autoethnography,” 10.

but not to the police. When my rape happened, I was in Ireland on a school trip. I was told I could report to the police once I got home, so I went from the Minneapolis airport to the nearby hospital and waited for 6 hours. From there, the rape kit was performed, and I went home. What happens between then is a liminal space that I'm not sure I could remember even if I wanted to. My school suspended me for 3 days for opening the door to let my assaulter into our hotel room. My school suspended him until the end of the semester but allowed him to sing at graduation next to me. And when he graduated from high school that year, it felt like what happened went with him.

I want to stay rudimentary in my retelling of the exact details because there is no need to cushion the frankness of my experience. If I could describe it as someone would be asked to describe a household object, it would be blunt, sharp, and without kindness. Adding beauty to an aspect of this story that simply isn't beautiful in any way feels like a knife to a 17-year-old self that couldn't escape honed corners. Any kindness I tried to find in that time was not given to me by him, or quite honestly, anyone surrounding him. The beauty comes after but not due to what he did, because of what I did with the life I still was expected to live.

The violence did not leave with him but stayed inked across my life. I moved 400 miles away for college in the hopes of making a break for it—a new chapter. I didn't realize I had skipped a few pages before I could empty my life. Unbeknownst to me, my perpetrator had been utilizing a secret Twitter account to post nonconsensual images (or revenge porn) of past girlfriends (not including me) and used public pictures of anyone who supported me, and myself, in crude and derogatory ways. The ways he used these images, in both video and pictures of himself with the printed-out images, are ways that I wish I didn't have to witness, and I don't want to describe for anyone else. Horrifying as it is, our finding of this account allowed us to

create a court case, that was able to also uncover his collection of child sexual abuse material. I was never able to see any kind of justice that I had originally wanted. After I moved away, I wasn't able to see anything coming from it at all. This was our chance to hopefully protect other women from him. Two years later, he was found guilty on all charges and was sentenced to two years in federal prison. He served 8 months, in total, and got out early on good behavior.

When he was first found guilty, and immediately entered prison, I am not ashamed to say I rejoiced. Many PWSVT would, the women that were directly tied to this case did. In my moments of excitement, I tweeted:

“I can't believe I can say this after 3 years of absolute torment, harassment, and trauma:
My rapist was sentenced to jail and was put in prison today.”

I didn't predict at all that the excitement would completely die out within days, and what would be found in its place was entirely unexpected. Twitter users, those following me and strangers, responded in floods. From one simple sentence, I had messages upon messages about others' experiences of sexual violence, asking for my help, and just general support of my status as someone dealing with sexual violence trauma. It was overwhelming. Comments flooded in like, “Don't know you but fucking CONGRATS. I hope you get the peace you deserve ♡” Other comments followed this similar format:

“I'm so happy for you. I'm so thankful and proud that you made a difference in the world by following through with this. I wasn't strong enough to and it kills me sometimes, but I'm SO proud of you. I can't imagine the added pain.”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Kennon, Alli. “I Can't Believe I Can Say This after 3 Years of Absolute Torment, Harassment, and Trauma: My Rapist Was Sentenced to Jail and Was Put in Prison Today.” Twitter. Twitter, December 28, 2018. <https://twitter.com/allikenyounot/status/1078848284263878656>.

I was surprised to see that even friends from my time in high school reached out, stating: “You didn't deserve any of the negative energy you got. You're such a sweet person and I'm glad you have some closure on this.”²⁰⁸ A lot of people shared their own stories with me and found healing in me sharing my story. One user writes: “I actually teared up going through your thread. This gives me hope and makes me feel better that someone who has felt similar things to me knows victory. Idk if you'll see this but thanks for sharing.”²⁰⁹ Another shares their story of sexual violence: “My rapist is a rich frat boy who doesn't even know that I know he raped me. I can only hope he gets caught one day. I'm happy that yours did.” In my personal messages, it got to the point where I was assisting others in finding crisis centers, advocacy support, or giving general advice to help them. One person messaged me, almost immediately after my tweet.

“Hi...I read your tweet regarding your rapist being sentenced in prison. I was sexually abused by my stepfather and reported it, and it's been under investigation for about 3-4 months now. How long does the process take? What is the process? I have only been interviewed and that is it.”

Within this conversation, I helped her locate a crisis center in her area and even researched legal advice for her state. All of this being said, it was extremely difficult to constantly take in and consume others' trauma, as I processed new details and new plotlines within my own. The messages flooded in for weeks, and I felt the due diligence to respond to every single one, letting them know I was grateful for the messages or trying to help in any way that I could. There are so many of us hurting, and the idea of someone else being out there, hurting as much as I was at one point, without help, made me move towards action.

²⁰⁸ Kennon, Tweet.

²⁰⁹ Kennon, Tweet.

But I was also reckoning with being seen as someone *to go to for advice*. All of the sudden, I was blasted into becoming an expert of sorts, one that I hadn't really signed up for at the time. I had a good amount of knowledge, due to my experience happening earlier and my Collegiate Forensics (Speech & Debate) background being largely focused on sexual violence topics. But, I had no training. I had no years of school in social work. I was just someone who had been through the same thing. Did that make me somehow... *enough* for these people? It was a thought I grappled with quite a bit. How had what I had gone through made me a person to trust? I have met so many people with sexual violence trauma who did not feel safe, who shamed me as well, and suddenly, I was someone that others felt they could go to. I've never been a particularly... affectionate person. I'm not the mom friend. I'm not maternalistic. I'm usually very bad at advice. I'm not the caretaker.

I helped regardless because I didn't know what else to do. Eventually, the responses slowed, but my feelings about it didn't. The tweet remains to this day at 152.5K likes, 7.6K retweets, and 266 comments. I still get interactions every once in a while, but they're slim. Eventually, I forgot about the tweet altogether, and the secondary trauma I felt from all those messages faded too.

But then, as I was sitting in a Barnes & Noble pretending to work, I got a notification from the main victim who directly discussed my perpetrator's case with the prosecutor. As my sexual assault happened years earlier, I was involved through my victim impact statement, but the main victims involved in the case were those who experienced revenge porn at the hands of Alex. She said, "Alex is being released in one week."

I saw my cursor blink. My laptop went to sleep, and the black screen reflected a ghost. I saw myself blink. I sat till close, staring at a black screen. I got home and searched all of the

prison databases to reveal Alex's release date: one week from now. Any kind of safety I felt slipped away. *He was going to be out?* The vindication I got from his prosecution went with my security. A high school friend who was still Facebook friends with my perpetrator told me Alex had posted a new playlist on his Spotify called, "finally free." There was genuinely nothing I could do about his release. So, I sat, and I stared, and I don't think I ever moved on from that Barnes & Noble, but I did stop talking about his imprisonment.

Then, the pandemic hit. I had been in Speech & Debate for the past 8 years, and it had become my safe haven to discuss my sexual assault with people who knew nothing about me and would share nothing with those who knew me in the past. All of my speeches were about sexual violence, some sharing explicit details and some more metaphorical. So, all of the sudden, when the COVID-19 pandemic made everything stop short, my catharsis escaped me.

Hollow is the word to describe it—like someone carved a tiny, fleshy chunk out of my ribcage. Nothing super noticeable about where they took it from, but maybe from an angle, you would notice it. I felt a little hollow after leaving behind the space that gave me thousands of minutes to discuss the sexual violence that had happened to me. They're right when they say that there's nowhere else that will listen to you for an uninterrupted amount of time. The internet was becoming a common avenue for other Forensics people I knew. Along with it, people from all over shared their stories of sexual violence through #metoo, and I wasn't one of them. I remember holding back and feeling like an uncomfortable pin was poking me in the shoulder. The Tweet was all that I had done. I felt like I had shared my story more than enough times in person... why did I need to blast it on the internet? For me, I knew my story and that was all that mattered.

But

I heard a little voice in the back of my head wondering *why* I hadn't shared my story online. Why did I feel comfortable sharing in every single place except the internet? I've told thousands of people I had been sexually assaulted, over and over again, with some fear, but ultimately just confidence. I knew what my story was. There wasn't any doubt in my mind that it was how I said it was, and what happened was the truth. He told me he had assaulted me. What more belief did I need from a bunch of strangers I would never see? Was there a reason I hadn't?

Quite honestly, I knew the reason. Beyond sharing on Twitter one time, I knew I was terrified he would see it, and so would his family. Twitter was safe and I knew he was in prison at the time. He wouldn't have seen it. But now, he was out.

There are days I sit in my apartment, in Alabama, and wonder if he is going to knock on my door. Every post I make on social media, every card that I get, every "*happy birthday!*" message on Facebook brings to the forefront of my mind that *it could be him*. There are a lot of things in place, like restraining orders, that ensure it won't happen and yet, I'm checking every corner to make sure he's not there. Margaret Atwood writes on male voyeurism, an inescapable internalized male gaze. "You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur."²¹⁰ When I look at my life, the pictures I share online, the times I speak about sexual violence, I feel his eyes looking out at my hands. The critique from the illusion of an audience that I keep trying to outrun.

I had always been terrified of his family. His mom was my choir director, and all of his siblings slowly cycled through choir as well. She was manipulative and unexpected. She was someone that everyone feared in the choir department, not just me. I was terrified she would find me, see what I had said, and come after me. It was why all of my social media was private.

²¹⁰ Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*, 442.

But

Why was I still afraid of her? I now lived thousands of miles away, about 15 hours by car to be exact, and if she did reach out, I could just block her. As far as he went, he was a registered sex offender. His online capabilities were limited.

In all honesty, I think I was just afraid. When my tweet went semi-viral, I had thousands of women and men messaging me about being sexually assaulted. They were probably more afraid than I was—asking for help from a total stranger. Although, strangers had always felt more comforting to me than speaking to friends and family. There's something warm about not knowing someone, and their kindness extending to you anyway. There's something unconditional in it; like, I don't need to know you, or if you're a good or bad person by my standards. I'll help anyway, just because we share this common pain.

Two years after my Tweet went viral, I knew I felt more like an expert in anti-sexual violence advocacy. I was a peer educator for 2 years, went under heavy training, worked with the local crisis center, and definitely had valuable information to share. Or, at least, I tried to convince myself that I did. That I wanted to help other people like me answer questions that I really needed answers to back then but didn't get till much later.

Isn't that what I wanted? To help people? Why was I holding back then?

For context, I had started posting educational videos about sexual violence on my Instagram and Tik Tok. They would range from educating on the criminal punishment system to simple videos about consent. I utilized trends, I created my own trends, and I played around with the format of them. They had received generally good feedback and reviews, with some garnering multiple thousand views, like around 5,000. They were doing great by the standards of my account, reaching people, but nothing big in comparison to the world of social media. I still

felt like I was hiding a piece of myself, my story, from people that might feel a connection to it, belonging, even.

However, now, everyone who followed me, from my childhood best friend's mom to my professors from my alma mater would know the details of my sexual assault. They knew I had sexual violence trauma, but they didn't *know* how or why.

I decided to film and edit the video anyways. I found a trending song and typed out the text above it to read: "I was 17 on an international school trip. He was 19 and we had previously dated. He didn't listen to my no, and I froze. My friends and close classmates believed me, but the administration blamed me and suspended me for 3 days. He got suspended for the whole semester and sang next to me at graduation. 2 years later, we found his secret accounts and years' worth of stalking, harassment, & child ****. He went to jail 2 years after we found the accounts. We thought it would be for 2 years. He was released in 8 months. I hid my social media for too long. He can't hurt me. And I want to help others like me. Healing isn't linear. But this is my journey and I believe it's my mission to help others to true justice and eradicate this culture. Sending you love. Join me."

I watched the video over and over again, re-reading what I had written down. I liked the video. I liked how I looked in it. This was my story. This was how I felt. There wasn't much room for anything else. I added the caption: "My story and my mission! #growwithmecomunity" to the bottom of the video.

I rewatched the video in my drafts folder and didn't feel anything but anxiety towards what others would think about it. I wonder if I'm numb to my own story at this point, feeling like any emotion I pushed out felt forced. Speech may have cursed me in that way—forcing my own dissonance with personal, intimate violence due to my repetition of it for a rank. I'm still not sure

whether this numbness is a good thing or a bad thing. All in all, it just feels like another page in my story, something someone might mention at my funeral, about how I ‘overcame’ and from beyond the grave, I’ll roll my eyes. I didn’t overcome anything—I just kept living and one day it hurt a lot less. But some days, it hurts the same. Today, it just didn’t hurt at all.

With a little bit of encouragement from my best friend saying, ‘who cares who sees it anyways,’ I hit send. I watched as messages from my closest friends and from strangers online slowly trickled in. All positive, which was nice. But not a huge reaction. Suddenly, my fear felt flippant, naive. I thought I was this big deal. Isn’t it just like the internet to show you that you’re not as important as you thought you were? In that, I find peace.

When the video was posted for a while, it slowly started to gain traction. That’s when I felt the impact of my own story, a paragraph from my memoir.

As I read the comments, I felt like my impact was being felt by others.

Comment Analysis

By the end of the reel’s virality, there were 229 comments left on my Instagram Reel. As I sorted through them, I noticed how my memoir impacted others in ways I either did anticipate or didn’t anticipate at all. In order to conduct a feminist rhetorical analysis of the impact of the video itself, I put all of the comments into one spreadsheet. They were analyzed through a coded color system of red for negative/aggressive language, purple for disbelief, green for encouragement/affirmation, yellow for story sharing, and orange for aggression towards my perpetrator. From there, I analyzed each section to understand the presence of each type of comment. After gaining awareness surrounding the language that was present within the comment section, three themes were identified spanning across the comment section entirely: nuanced positivity, violence, and platform disbelief.

Nuanced Positivity

Of the 229 comments, over half were extremely positive. Many of the positive comments were encouraging me to tell my story and help others. While some were negative, it seems most of them were antagonized by positive commenters, encouraging a community of safety and positivity towards story sharing. For the positive comments, many of them used iterations of the word's "courage" "strong" or "survivor." While I do disclose using the label 'survivor' throughout the video, the language describing me as a survivor within the comments leans towards an extremely positive connotation. With comments like, "such an inspiration!" or "keep going and raise awareness everywhere you can." While these comments are well-meaning, they reinforce the idea that PWSVT do not need support after sharing their stories, because they are already strong *enough* to do so. Young and Maguire found sufficient evidence for this assumption that is reinforced with the use of "survivor" as a label. "If [they] talk about [their] traumatic experience, but label [themselves] a survivor, the assumption may be that [they are] over the attack and [they] may be denied the space to talk about it."²¹¹ Alternatively, PWSVT who are often labeled as "victim," and do not share their stories, "risk being perceived as weak and vulnerable."²¹² This creates a rhetorical situation that nuances positivity. While positivity can reinforce support for the PWSVT, it can also reiterate a lack of support being needed to help them continue their journey, even if the specific words being written do not contain this language. In the previous chapter, we saw how Chanel Miller nuanced the binary between the labels of survivor and victim. In a lot of ways, this commentary can exist outside of this

²¹¹ Young, Stacy L., and Katheryn C. Maguire. 2003. "Talking about Sexual Violence." *Women & Language* 26 (2): 43. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cms&AN=11901615&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²¹² Young and Maguire, "Talking about Sexual Violence," 43.

rhetorical tension, almost creating a subtextual layer to either label. If both lack seriousness, it is not about the label per se, but the tone in which the label is used.

Positivity can also reiterate a mutuality of belonging. The comments are quick to state the personal impact on the viewer. One commenter writes, “I’m a French girl and I listened to your story and I’m proud of you, you have the power to speak and change the world.” This comment shows how a U.S.-based memoir, without translation, would only have reached English speakers. Due to the platform’s presence in multiple countries, and ability to translate captions, I was able to reach an audience through memoir 2.0, that I may not have reached through a traditional, published memoir. Likewise, in terms of personal healing, many commenters said this helped them through their process of moving forward towards healing from their sexual violence. “Thank you for sharing. I still haven’t shared my story.” Other comments reiterated that this was one of the first types of content they’ve seen of its nature. “I’ve never felt like anyone understood me or could relate to anyone until now.” Overly positive comments can be diminishing or minimizing of the trauma endured, but the point of the positive comments communicates stories need to be shared. Their impact can depend on the rhetorical audience. In this case, the audience my Instagram reel reached was mostly made up of other PWSVT that were looking for belonging. Quantitative measures tend to focus on larger audience numbers, and large statistical impact, while rhetoric can focus on one person’s impact through the words they’ve chosen. In this case, the artifact had a wide-reaching audience viewership, but the impact, within this theme, was deemed as intrapersonal in communication for PWSVT. For many that commented, this video impacted them, allowing them to tell their counselors, their friends, and family, even themselves what happened to them for the first time. “I didn’t know how to tell my parents and I kept my sexual abuse away from them for years and then one day I told myself I have to and I

told them and we are currently working on sending him to prison.”²¹³ The profound impact, in the ways that I have walked away from videos and been forever changed, is worth creating a channel to reach people that may not have access to memoirs in the same way older generations do. Likewise, social media controls are very limited in what is *actually* controlled. Parents may try to ensure items like this are restricted, but at the end of the day, this video reached an age demographic, under 25, that is the most impacted by sexual violence and the most likely to experience it. And overwhelmingly, they responded to it in the hundreds with encouragement for more. Positivity can be both toxic or simply, as it’s deemed, positive and good—creating a nuanced positivity, allowing for both the good and the bad to mutually exist within the same rhetorical situation, showing the multitudes present within the reaction to rape memoirs.

Violence

The second theme that emerged from the analysis of the comment section was the propensity to wish physical harm on the perpetrator. Alarming comments such as, “Wishing him the worst shit in life to happen to him” or “PERPETRATORS SHOULD DIE.”²¹⁴ These comments were increasingly common, not only on the reel but in the previously mentioned viral tweet from December of 2018 where I shared my perpetrator had been put in prison. Many of these comments had multiple likes on them, with other commenters agreeing with the sentiment, enforcing a cyclical understanding of violence and punishment. *If you’re violent towards someone, you deserve violence.* What this cycle implies is that violence will always be present, effectively trapping the PWSVT in a rhetorical calamity of toxicity. For many PWSVT, the grief process happens as they reckon with their trauma. The stages of anger may manifest in wishing harm on the perpetrator, wishing for them to feel the same hurt, or being gone from the world

²¹³ K, Alli. *Instagram Reel. Instagram.* @allikenyounot, December 5, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CIbDg-7nyUX/>.

²¹⁴ K, Alli. *Instagram Reel. Instagram.* @allikenyounot, December 5, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CIbDg-7nyUX/>.

entirely.²¹⁵ However, as these feelings change, it is common for PWSVT to wish for the violence surrounding them to stop. Since this violence was unwanted, and undeserved in the first place, encouraging more violence can often allow the PWSVT to feel like they are still not in control of their own lives. Or, that their trauma, and thus the following violence is inescapable, leaving no room for healing. By stating comments like, “perpetrators should die,” or one that arose from my viral tweet, “Good shit I hope dude dies in there,”²¹⁶ the narrative is taken away from the rhetorical situation of healing and given to rhetorical violence as the forefront.

Likewise, these comments reiterate the criminal punishment system as the sole giver of justice to PWSVT. This view is one that PWSVT are force-fed to believe is their only route towards justice in the first place, as is in line with the crisis centers many frequent after experiencing sexual violence. Crisis centers were originally abolition organizations, rooting their ties in the Black panther movement and abolitionist organizing in the 60s.²¹⁷ However, as funding became dire, many organizations turned towards the government for non-profit funds, creating a reliance on the government system for delivering care. “To secure public funding, many rape crisis centers abandoned the radical feminist movement and increased collaboration with hospitals, law enforcement, and the legal system.”²¹⁸ When this occurred, restrictions on their ability to serve their members came tied up with the promise of funding, inundating the shadow state over crisis centers.²¹⁹ Suddenly, abolitionist organizations were partnering with police stations to ensure the proper coordination of rape kits and the persecution of their

²¹⁵ Orgad, Shani, and Rosalind Gill. 2019. “Safety Valves for Mediated Female Rage in the #MeToo Era.” *Feminist Media Studies* 19 (4): 599. doi:10.1080/14680777.2019.1609198.

²¹⁶ Cincy Jake, “Good Shit I Hope Dude Dies in There,” Twitter (Twitter, December 30, 2018), <https://twitter.com/CincyFanJake/status/1079405204964020224>.

²¹⁷ Elizabeth Whalley and Colleen Hackett, “Carceral Feminisms: The Abolitionist Project and Undoing Dominant Feminisms,” *Contemporary Justice Review* 20, no. 4 (February 2017): pp. 456-473, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2017.1383762>, 458.

²¹⁸ Whalley and Hackett, “Carceral Feminisms,” 459.

²¹⁹ INCITE!., *Incite! Women of Color Against Violence and Incite! Women of Color Against Violence Staff, eds. The revolution will not be funded: Beyond the non-profit industrial complex.* South End Press, 2007.

perpetrators. However, this process can be extremely taxing for the PWSVT, re-traumatizing to the point that it may create more lasting damage than the actual violence inflicted.²²⁰ This heavy reliance on the criminal punishment system only leads to a failure in actual justice, with many perpetrators being removed from society for as little as three months, such was the case of Brock Turner, and then placed back into society with no bearings of actual accountability or learning.

However, it brings up a problem of a lack of resources for seeing justice in any other way than inflicted violence and criminal punishment. When I originally posted in celebration of my assaulter going to prison, my only understanding of justice was the criminal punishment system. There were simply no other options I was made aware of at the time, due to the education being mostly at the hands of sexual violence crisis centers. Through a more thorough understanding of the criminal punishment system now, in 2022, I am not sure I would have even made the choice to send my assaulter to prison or regretted the choice that I didn't when I was 17. While this is seemingly my singular experience, and exposure to other options like restorative justice, many PWSVT may not be able to have the funds to access options like restorative or transformative justice.²²¹ Seemingly separate from these comments, these iterations of understanding about sexual violence reinforce a patriarchal notion that with violence, comes more violence, not peace. With justice, comes harsh conditions and learning from inhumane practices, that simply are not viable avenues for PWSVT to receive true justice, or for perpetrators to learn from their actions.

Ultimately, as these comments come up time and time again, the rhetorical situation of dissuading them becomes an awkward one. If you, as a PWSVT, were to discourage any type of

²²⁰ Corrigan, Rose. "The New Trial by Ordeal: Rape Kits, Police Practices, and the Unintended Effects of Policy Innovation." *Law & Social Inquiry* 38, no. 4 (2013): 920–49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24545849>.

²²¹ Burns, Courtney Julia, and Laura Sinko. "Restorative Justice for Survivors of Sexual Violence Experienced in Adulthood: A Scoping Review." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 2021, 152483802110294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380211029408>.

criminal punishment for your perpetrator, are you seen as an apologist for the crime? An easy forgiver? These thoughts have transcended my mind more than once. Anger is a reasonable emotional reaction and verbal response to unjust violence. But when that anger is only read by the PWSVT, what are they left to do with it, but be taken back to the site of violence within their mind?

Platform Disbelief

Many comments connotated disbelief due to the format of the memoir itself. As one commenter explains,

“Looks like a bunch of a BS to me. The captions are skipping by so god damn fast you can’t even read them properly. Hope this man actually did something wrong with provided evidence instead of another case of false accusation causing a man to have his life ruined by some street belonging women.”²²²

In the comments, he continued to defend his opinion, providing how ‘women’ who post on social media about their sexual violence are only looking for attention surrounding the issue, making themselves into the victims, and painting men as unjust criminals.²²³ More comments continued to reiterate the issue with the captions moving quickly as an excuse for the story not being factual. The platform of social media creates a rhetorical situation, bound up in the reality that far transcends the physical channel into the disbelief surrounding sexual violence in general.

Social media inherently raises questions of authenticity.²²⁴ When the platform encourages filters and media advertising that may be under false pretenses, the natural reaction from the audience is to question the believability of the storytelling happening in the current media they

²²² K, Instagram Reel.

²²³ K, Instagram Reel.

²²⁴ Wellman, Mariah L., Ryan Stoldt, Melissa Tully, and Brian Ekdale. 2020. “Ethics of Authenticity: Social Media Influencers and the Production of Sponsored Content.” *Journal of Media Ethics* 35 (2): 68–82. doi:10.1080/23736992.2020.1736078.

are consuming. From diet teas being sold as weight loss cures to five-minute journals being sold as the immediate fix to anxiety, it's natural the consumerism and capitalism of social media have been inundated as the center of disbelief.

However, sexual violence has largely been given a similar treatment. From the beginning of women being claimed to experience symptoms of hysteria when outcries of sexual violence ensued, or even the disbelief surrounded Dr. Christine Blaisey Ford with her allegations against now-Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh being fabricated, stories of sexual violence have always been cast-off as fantasies, or outcries for attention.²²⁵

The platform also brings up questions about believability due to economic status. Social media requires no fees to join. However, social media algorithms, again and again, have proven that they are inherently coded to privilege the White, affluent influencer.²²⁶ There is still a lot of chance and ability involved, though, compared to the traditional publication of a memoir in book form, it is far more accessible. The process of going through an editor, then through a publisher, then through buyers, then through reviewers, creates a sense of legitimacy. But that legitimacy is only reserved for the select few, that may already be at an elevated status where they would have the time and the education to write 300-400 pages of their story on paper. For those without access to those resources, social media is a viable and helpful option. It requires little skill to learn, with millions of free resources available and helps you reach a quick amount of people in a short amount of time. While a memoir takes months, a Tik Tok or Instagram Reel could take as little as 24 hours. If a PWSVT was in a dangerous situation where they needed help immediately,

²²⁵ Frazier, Annabelle, and Joseph E. Gonzales. "Dispelling a Myth: Reevaluating the Predictive Validity of Rape Myth Acceptance for Likelihood of Engaging in Sexual Violence." *Sexual Abuse*, 2021, 107906322110262. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10790632211026287>.

²²⁶ Avriel Epps-Darling, "How the Racism Baked into Technology Hurts Teens," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, October 24, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/10/algorithmic-bias-especially-dangerous-teens/616793/>.

those on the internet could potentially be faster than a 911 dispatch.²²⁷ Thus, this accessibility could breed a wider reach of information surrounding sexual violence, allowing consciousness-raising to spread quicker, more efficiently, and with better accountability for change.

Conclusion

Digital storytelling profoundly impacts the way we engage in our own stories, and how others react to these stories changes our intrapersonal discourse. Through sharing my own story, I saw others' reactions to my own experiences, causing them to digest their experiences differently. This connectivity of an emotional event can cause both the intrapersonal to have an impact, but also the public discourse surrounding digital memoirs on social media. As others came to bat against comments that suggested disbelief, while it may be unproductive due to the nature of online arguments, the digesting of these arguments by other viewers can cause an understanding shift in sexual violence, impacting public discourse.

However, this discourse surrounding my video did not just impact the viewer. As I read through the comments, I found my own view of my story changed. Prior to this video going viral, I felt extremely disconnected from the details of the actual sexual violence I experienced and focused a lot more on the trauma I worked through afterward. Similar to other PWSVT, I experienced paralysis and many of the details of what happened are lost on me. My refusal to engage with my story may be due to his presence within it, but also the dealings of shame and disbelief that I still deal with it when it comes to what I experienced. Not only does the reaction give me the affordance to continue working through my trauma, due to the sheer amount of people who found belonging in me doing so, but also, the affirmation offers some healing in the

²²⁷ “New Research Suggests 911 Call Centers Lack Resources to Handle Behavioral Health Crises.” The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2021. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2021/10/new-research-suggests-911-call-centers-lack-resources-to-handle-behavioral-health-crises>.

belief in what happened to me. While it is simple to say that I should believe myself as much as I believe others who have experienced sexual violence trauma, the practice of doing so takes extreme emotional effort. I became a rhetor when I decided to publish it, but I find belonging in this voice through those listening, talking, and advocating with me.

The power in memoir 2.0, then, comes in its inter-collaboration between the rhetor and audience to impact public discourse. Tapping into such a large demographic allows for a widespread impact that can result in movements like #MeToo. In the next chapter, I will discuss Tarana Burke's founding of "me too." and the connection to the general Me-Too movement, as well as #metoo in order to examine how celebrity rape memoirs impact public discourse, before, and after publication.

CHAPTER FIVE: TARANA BURKE *UNBOUND*

In 2017, Alyssa Milano tweeted “If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet.”²²⁸ This all occurred during #Time’sUp, a period in which Hollywood's famous and elite were exposing predators and rapists, while the famous and elite were also being exposed *as* predators and rapists, both within the media and within popular culture. Unbeknownst to Milano, Tarana Burke uttered the words “Me Too” a decade earlier. Burke founded the “me too.”²²⁹ Movement organization in 2006 after experiencing sexual violence as a young girl and working with children who experienced abuse in Selma, Alabama.²³⁰ She had been working within advocacy her whole life and experienced abuse herself as a child. Burke dedicated her life’s work to the cause of eradicating rape culture, specifically working with Black women and girls. From there, her website launched on Myspace, creating buzz through her networks. “One woman, a designer, donated 1,000 "me too." T-shirts. Burke still wears one of them when she speaks publicly about the movement.”²³¹ Burke’s organization, and phrase of “me too.” seemed to spread quickly within her community, especially amongst Black women, who continually face sexual violence at higher rates with fewer resources.

On the day Milano tweeted in 2017, Burke awoke with a flurry of messages on Facebook. Someone had shared the tweet to their Facebook feed, tagging Burke in excitement—assuming Burke had been aware of her work being shared at such a volume. In her novel, she recalls the fear she felt immediately. “Y’all know if these White women start using this hashtag, they will

²²⁸ Chicago Tribune. “#MeToo: A Timeline of Events.” chicagotribune.com. Chicago Tribune, February 4, 2021. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-me-too-timeline-20171208-htmlstory.html>.

²²⁹ As a note, I will be referring to three separate, in my opinion sectors of the movements, all using an iteration of the phrase “Me Too.” For Alyssa Milano’s digital movement, I will be utilizing #MeToo. For Tarana Burke’s movement and organization, I will be using the “me too.” movement, as her website denotes. Finally, in discussing public discourse surrounding the phrase, I will use the Me-Too movement. All three of these happen simultaneously, for the most part, but delineating is important in order to understand how “me too.” may have a different impact on Me Too at large, than #MeToo.

²³⁰ Chicago Tribune. “#MeToo: A Timeline of Events.”

²³¹ Chicago Tribune. “#MeToo: A Timeline of Events.”

never believe that a Black women in her forties from the Bronx has been building a movement for the *same* purposes, for years now.”²³² Burke searched for videos of her presenting and luckily, just that past year, she was selected as a speaker at a conference, wearing one of the “me too.” shirts from Myspace, a decade ago.²³³ As she meditated on this ignorant transgression and co-opting of her work, Burke continued to read the outpouring of messages from women across the world, crying “Me Too” and sharing their stories. While Burke ensured that her voice was heard, “I didn’t want to fight about who got credit. I just wanted to show the world why a movement like this was necessary.”²³⁴

Tarana Burke’s work, which was used by Alyssa Milano in her viral tweet, was one that circulated like wildfire once the media picked up on her story. Milano acknowledges Burke’s work briefly after her original tweet but does not credit Burke as the originator of the movement. “I was just made aware of an earlier #MeToo movement, and the origin story is equal parts heartbreaking and inspiring.”²³⁵ Arguably claiming it may be a separate movement, most news outlets examined within this chapter included Burke and Milano together when discussing both the #MeToo movement and the “me too.” Movement, as Burke would later differentiate it.²³⁶ Burke and Milano were even named the “silence breakers” of 2017 by Time Magazine for their People of the Year. The media picked up Tarana Burke, hallmarking her as a historical figure in activism, alongside figures such as Stacey Abrams.²³⁷ Tarana Burke was essentially recentered as the face of the general Me-Too movement, after Milano’s acknowledgment. While Milano’s

²³² Burke, Tarana. *Unbound*. 6.

²³³ Burke, *Unbound*, 7.

²³⁴ Burke, *Unbound*, 11.

²³⁵ Milano, Alyssa. “I Was Just Made Aware of an Earlier #Metoo Movement, and the Origin Story Is Equal Parts Heartbreaking and Inspiring <https://t.co/Tabqbdscce>.” Twitter. Twitter, October 16, 2017. https://twitter.com/alyssa_milano/status/920067975016624128?lang=en.

²³⁶ Burke, *Unbound*, 224.

²³⁷ “Tarana Burke, Stacey Abrams, Weigh in on Sexual Assault Allegations against Joe Biden.” The Root, April 29, 2020. <https://www.theroot.com/tarana-burke-stacey-abrams-weigh-in-on-sexual-assault-1843157311>.

presence remained, Burke was attributed as the founder of the movement, where Milano was credited in bringing it to social media. The Me-Too movement, and the wide public, continued to see Burke as the expert on sexual violence, due to her decades of work.²³⁸ If “me too.” was an outcry about sexual violence, coming from the shadows to discuss everything in the light, Burke’s figurehead was representative of that, echoing she has always been here and will continue to be here.²³⁹

As time moved on from the height of the Me-Too general movement, the focus on Burke and her “me too.” Movement, in terms of the news outlets discussion, decreased. She’s still referenced in magazine articles, asked to discuss the latest sexual assault allegations, but as her name became memorialized, her media attention sloped downward. As news coverage tends to slope towards most recent news, like COVID-19, Burke’s focus, it felt, went from being neglected to be celebrated to distant. Seemingly quickly, “me too.” and Tarana Burke were reminders of sexual violence in America but were not at the forefront of news articles any longer.

However, in 2021, Burke released not only a co-authored book with Brene Brown but her first-ever memoir: *Unbound*. After the popularity of Chanel Miller’s *Know My Name* created a recent focus on figureheads within the Me-Too general movement writing books, *Unbound* was potentially an exciting release.²⁴⁰ Her memoir was the first time Burke had ever revealed intimate details of her work through “me too.”, her own story of sexual violence, and her current work. While Burke had continued to do interviews, work on her foundation, and even is cited as

²³⁸ Alexander, Kerri Lee. “Tarana Burke Biography.” National Women’s History Museum. Accessed February 21, 2022. <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/tarana-burke>.

²³⁹ Burke, *Unbound*, 9.

²⁴⁰ Prakash, Neha. “Tarana Burke on the Past and Future of #MeToo.” Marie Claire Magazine. Marie Claire (US), September 12, 2021. <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/a37465080/tarana-burke-unbound-memoir-interview/>.

in the works of creating a documentary of her experiences, *Unbound* was the first time she has published her story in her own words.

Methods

Due to Tarana Burke's unmistakable founding and influence of Me Too, as well as the current tensions with her media attention, the release of her memoir, *Unbound*, creates the perfect case study for examining the impact of rape memoirs on public discourse when the author is such a notable, and recognizable person within history. Burke's notoriety allows us to examine the impact of the book both before and after its release, in order to fully see how public discourse either changes or doesn't change with the publication of a rape memoir. In order to understand this impact, media discussion of Burke prior to the memoir's release was analyzed, through examining the number of major news outlets (*NPR, the New York Times, New Yorker, BuzzFeed, Washington Post, CNN, Fox, the Chicago Tribune, Bustle, Jezebel, Essence, Vogue, and TIME*) covering stories of her, and their amount of coverage throughout the years in order to understand Burke's impact on public discourse before the publication of her memoir.

Through this analysis, we are able to rhetorically see the recency effect of Burke's impact through news outlets, prior to the release of her memoir. From there, the release of Burke's memoir allows us to examine reviews of the novel by these same major outlets, as well as reader's reviews on Barnes & Noble, Amazon, and Goodreads to understand the intrapersonal impact on the reader themselves. From this analysis, we're able to rhetorically understand Burke's influence through the themes of suppressed impact, withheld critique, and sensationalization vs. ignorance. Ultimately, Burke's publishing of her memoir *Unbound* causes us to ask: *How does the publication of a memoir that intends to tell the intimate details of rape, by a celebrity figure, alter public discourse?*

Media Discourse Surrounding Burke: 2017-2021

First, Media discourse surrounding Burke changed from 2017 to 2021, causing her ability to pierce public discourse to subsequently change as well. In 2017, when Tarana Burke first responded to Alyssa Milano's tweet, numerous media outlets picked up the story almost immediately. Of the news outlet studied, all interviewed or covered Tarana Burke in some capacity in 2017. *TIME* naming her one of the "People of the Year" was certainly a large highlight. But many others also continued in-depth work of ensuring Tarana Burke got the name recognition she deserved, and a rift in the Me Too [general] movement was documented.²⁴¹ In an op-ed, Burke exposes the co-opting by white women through the use of the #MeToo movement. "Black women have been screaming about famous predators like R&B singer R. Kelly, who allegedly preys on Black girls, for well over a decade to no avail."²⁴² White women loudly took over the #MeToo movement and hashtags, which importantly raises issues of sexual violence, but narrows it to only the most privileged of women. "The young girls of color that first encountered the 'me too.' movement in community centers and classrooms and church basements were there not only because they needed a safe space, but because they needed their own space."²⁴³ Similar to Miller's theme of visual empowerment, Burke encourages a widening of the understanding of sexual violence in order to move towards solvency.

"I often say that sexual violence knows no race, class or gender, but the response to it does. "me too." is a response to the spectrum of gender-based sexual violence that comes

²⁴¹ "First, She Was a Survivor: #Metoo's Burke Tells Her Story." The Independent. Independent Digital News and Media, September 15, 2021. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/tarana-burke-alyssa-milano-people-hollywood-harvey-weinstein-b1920932.html>.

²⁴² Burke, Tarana. "Perspective | #MeToo Was Started for Black and Brown Women and Girls. They're Still Being Ignored." The Washington Post. WP Company, October 26, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/11/09/the-waitress-who-works-in-the-diner-needs-to-know-that-the-issue-of-sexual-harassment-is-about-her-too/>.

²⁴³ Burke, "Perspective."

directly from survivors — all survivors. We can't afford a racialized, gendered or classist response.”

However, “me too.” and #MeToo didn't reach *just* women. Men took to BuzzFeed to share “#HowIWillChange” because of the movement, and Tarana Burke's words.²⁴⁴ Author Benjamin Law tweeted, shortly after Alyssa Milano, stating, “Guys, it's our turn. After yesterday's endless #MeToo stories of women being abused, assaulted and harassed, today we say #HowIWillChange.”²⁴⁵ Law continued to list ways men can improve and help the situation of many women sharing their stories under #MeToo. More subsets, or offshoots of “me too.” began popping up on social media, some even extremely problematic. *The New Yorker* even cites the troublingly movements of “#ItWasMe” and “#IHave” where men admit their complicity or guilt in the sexual violence of other women.²⁴⁶

Burke was asked to comment on many of these facets of the Me-Too general movement and sexual violence. *Vox* quoted Burke from a women's conference stating, “For every Harvey Weinstein, there are a hundred more men in the neighborhood who are doing the exact same thing.”²⁴⁷ In these news outlets, the headlines almost always correctly attributed the movement to Tarana Burke as the founder. The *Washington Post* headlines their article with, “The woman behind ‘me too.’ knew the power of the phrase when she created it — 10 years ago.”²⁴⁸ *CNN*'s headline told the story, even more, stating, “an activist, a little girl and the heartbreaking origin

²⁴⁴ Esposito, Brad. “Men Are Sharing How They Will Change in Response to #Metoo.” BuzzFeed. BuzzFeed, October 18, 2017. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/bradesposito/how-i-will-change>.

²⁴⁵ Esposito, “Men Are Sharing How They Will Change.”

²⁴⁶ Schwartz, Alexandra, Ronan Farrow, and Jelani Cobb. “MeToo, #ItWasMe, and the Post-Weinstein Megaphone of Social Media.” *The New Yorker*, October 19, 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/metoo-itwasme-and-the-post-weinstein-megaphone-of-social-media>.

²⁴⁷ North, Anna. “For Every Harvey Weinstein, There's a Hundred More Men in the Neighborhood Who Are Doing the Exact Same Thing.” *Vox*. *Vox*, October 28, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/2017/10/28/16563668/me-too-tarana-burke-harvey-weinstein-harassment-assault>.

²⁴⁸ Ohlheiser, Abby. “The Woman behind 'Me Too' Knew the Power of the Phrase When She Created IT - 10 Years Ago.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, October 26, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/10/19/the-woman-behind-me-too-knew-the-power-of-the-phrase-when-she-created-it-10-years-ago/>.

of ‘me too.’²⁴⁹ In the *CNN* article, the first thing we see is Tarana Burke speaking in 2014, the same video she used to show her proof of the movement’s beginning, with “me too.” emboldened across her chest.

While the news outlets listed do include pictures of Burke, many of these lacks to mention her “me too.” movement’s focus on uplifting the voices of Black women and girls who experience sexual violence trauma. However, through this coverage, Burke’s amplification of her own voice and origins of her movement results in an impact on public discourse surrounding sexual violence, even if it is simply discussing it in the first place. Milano’s tweet was the amplification of Burke’s work, and Burke stepped up to acknowledge it and continued to make progress. However, certain voices were pushed, it seems, to the front even more so.

Within her work, Burke has always stated Black women are the focus because they so often are left out of the conversation of sexual violence. *Ebony* magazine was the only one to point out the messaging of Burke’s movement, putting a presence on Alyssa Milano’s co-option. “Tarana Burke, a Black woman, began the crusade 10 years ago particularly for women of color.”²⁵⁰ *Ebony* interviewed Burke on this lack of support and acknowledgment from the White women working within the space of the general Me-Too movement. Burke points out the feigned unintentionality from White women show their lack of true support:

“Many times, when White women want our support, they use an umbrella of ‘women supporting women’ and forget that they didn’t lend the same kind of support. In this instance, the celebrities who popularized the hashtag didn’t take a moment to see if there

²⁴⁹ Santiago, Cassandra, and Doug Criss. “An Activist, a Little Girl and the Heartbreaking Origin of ‘Me Too!’” *CNN*. Cable News Network, October 17, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/17/us/me-too-tarana-burke-origin-trnd/index.html>.

²⁵⁰ Grove, Rashad. “Black Woman Tarana Burke Founded the ‘Me Too’ Movement.” *EBONY*, December 14, 2018. <https://www.ebony.com/news/black-woman-me-too-movement-tarana-burke-alyssa-milano/>.

was work already being done. I don't think it was intentional but somehow sisters still managed to get diminished or erased in these situations.”²⁵¹

This aspect was an extremely crucial portion of the Me-Too movement that was covered extensively in research and critique of the social media-based portion of the movement. But, again, this facet of her Burke's work lacked coverage by major news outlets, especially within the first year of her spotlight within the movement.

In 2018, there was a drastic decrease in news outlets even discussing Burke. Many news outlets, such as *NPR*, asked her to discuss the R. Kelly documentary, and subsequently, the sexual assault allegations against him: “What we are looking for, in our community and out, is some accountability from the corporations that support this person who has a 24-year history of sexual violence perpetrated against Black and brown girls around the country.”²⁵² Besides asking her to comment on the newest allegations within popular media, most outlets asked her where they saw the movement going, one to two years after the spike in its popularity. Burke answered in *Jezebel* by saying, “There hasn't been enough conversation about the needs of survivors. It's been mostly about perpetrators.”²⁵³ Only a year and a half after the spike, and 10 years after Burke's founding of the movement, this question about the future of the “me too.” movement came up again and again—on the *Washington Post*, on *NPR*, on *Jezebel*, and *CNBC*.²⁵⁴ At this point in time, people are still interested and emboldened to keep the movement going.

²⁵¹ Grove, “Black Women Tarana Burke Founded the ‘Me Too’ Movement.”

²⁵² Tsioulcas, Anastasia. “#MeToo Founder Tarana Burke Responds to R. Kelly.” *NPR*. *NPR*, May 1, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2018/05/01/607448801/-metoo-founder-tarana-burke-responds-to-r-kelly>.

²⁵³ McDonough, Katie. “Tarana Burke on Me Too, 12 Years and 1 Year Later: 'Keep Your Head down, Keep Moving Forward'.” *Jezebel*, October 9, 2018. <https://jezebel.com/tarana-burke-on-me-too-12-years-and-1-year-later-keep-1829587201>.

²⁵⁴ Ottesen, KK. “#MeToo Founder Tarana Burke Reflects on the Movement - and the Reckoning.” *The Washington Post*. *WP Company*, November 6, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/metoo-founder-tarana-burke-reflects-on-the-movement--and-the-reckoning/2018/11/02/c17c31e4-cbd7-11e8-a3e6-44daa3d35ede_story.html.

In 2020, that interest fell off dramatically. A new event was catching most people's attention: COVID-19. There was less fear of workplace harassment due to workers staying remote, and distancing rules. However, there was more fear during COVID-19 in domestic violence²⁵⁵, child sexual abuse²⁵⁶, and cyber-stalking.²⁵⁷ Burke was still doing active work within the movement and running multiple events. She spoke at local libraries with Gabrielle Union, she appeared on major podcasts and was rumored to have been working with Brene Brown, renowned author and Ted Talk extraordinaire. But the major news outlets do not seem to pay any attention to this. It was extremely difficult to find any major news outlets reporting on Burke, besides the *BBC*, *The Guardian*, *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Independent*, causing her to have a large United Kingdom readership, but a diminishing coverage in the United States. One incident that the news outlets studied did comment on was Tarana Burke turning down Michelle Williams' invitation to the Golden Globes in 2018 and opening up about it in 2020. Burke recalls turning down the offer initially, "I'm not going to be the Black lady that you just drag down the red carpet. I can't be that person."²⁵⁸ Besides this coverage, reporting on Burke was slim.

With the release of her book looming in 2021, I anticipated news coverage of Burke spiking once again. However, the reporting was dismal in comparison to 2017. The biggest focus was Burke's organization, "me too." launching of "We, as Ourselves" in collaboration with TIME'S UP Foundation and the National Women's Law Center. Burke is featured in *People*

²⁵⁵ Nikos-Rose, Karen Michele. "Covid-19 Isolation Linked to Increased Domestic Violence, Researchers Suggest." UC Davis, November 10, 2021. <https://www.ucdavis.edu/curiosity/news/covid-19-isolation-linked-increased-domestic-violence-researchers-suggest>.

²⁵⁶ "Has Child Abuse Surged under Covid-19? despite Alarming Stories from ERS, There's No Answer." NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, July 27, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/kids-health/has-child-abuse-surged-under-covid-19-despite-alarming-stories-n1234713>.

²⁵⁷ Avast. 51% increase in the use of online spying and stalking apps during lockdown, July 8, 2020. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/51-increase-in-the-use-of-online-spying-and-stalking-apps-during-lockdown-301090012.html>.

²⁵⁸ Crist, Allison. "Why #MeToo Founder Tarana Burke Initially Turned down Michelle Williams' Golden Globes Invite." E! Online, January 28, 2022. <https://www.eonline.com/news/1167875/why-metoo-founder-tarana-burke-initially-turned-down-michelle-williams-golden-globes-invite>.

magazine for it, writing in her own words. “The campaign is largely about addressing the deficit of attention when we hear Black people come forward and say that they've dealt with sexual violence. I see it as a continuation of the work of the #MeToo movement.”²⁵⁹ Likewise, some smaller outlets comment on Burke’s upcoming memoir, but more so focus on the deal she signed to CBS studios “to develop scripted, unscripted and documentary projects for linear television and streaming platforms.”²⁶⁰ Having examined up until the release of her memoir in September, it is slightly surprising that the only news outlet commenting on the anticipated release was *Booksellers*, a smaller, book focused website.²⁶¹ Ultimately, the buzz seems insignificant surrounding Burke’s memoir in comparison to the want for interviews, similar to those she did in the past, where she is asked to comment on different sexual violence allegations happening in current popular culture.

Through this analysis of news reporting of Burke prior to the release of her memoir, Burke’s impact on public discourse is unmistakable, from joining forces with Alyssa Milano in #MeToo to amplify the work she does with “me too.” to the subsets of the movement. Unmistakably, Burke created an era of anti-sexual violence consciousness, where women especially were emboldened to share their stories, and refuse to let sexual violence go unchecked. But, while her impact is extremely profound at the beginning of news coverage, the awareness surrounding Burke slowly continues to trickle downward.

This rhetorically removes Burke from the iconography of the phrase and general movement of Me Too and causes the phrase itself to have more of an impact in sexual violence

²⁵⁹ Burke, Tarana. “Me Too's Tarana Burke Says 'Make Space' for Black Survivors in New Sexual Violence Initiative.” PEOPLE.com. PEOPLE Magazine, 2021. <https://people.com/human-interest/voices-against-racism-metoo-founder-tarana-burke-sexual-violence-initiative/>

²⁶⁰ Low, Elaine. “Tarana Burke, Mervyn Marciano Ink Overall Deal with CBS Studios.” Variety. Variety, April 6, 2021. <https://variety.com/2021/tv/news/tarana-burke-mervyn-marciano-overall-deal-cbs-studios-1234944744/>.

²⁶¹ Wood, Heloise. “Headline Signs Me Too Founder Tarana Burke's Memoir.” The Bookseller, August 11, 2021. <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/headline-signs-me-too-founder-tarana-burkes-memoir-1275786>.

discourse than Burke herself. While this creates longevity in terms of ideology, it causes a suppressed impact on the organization “me too.” In terms of the memoir's effect on public discourse, this lack of focus surrounding Burke in current media may cause the impact of the memoir to be diminished in terms of notoriety and discussion. As Burke goes from neglected to be celebrated, to dismissed, she remains a pivotal figure, but her voice may fade amongst the many that have blended into the faces of Me Too.

Rhetorical Analysis of *Unbound* Reviews

Unbound, while anticipated by some, seemed to generate most of its buzz on *Goodreads*, with over 4,000 reviews. On *Amazon*, for reference, there were over 800 reviews, causing *Unbound* to not make the top 100 memoirs on Amazon for 2021.²⁶² Barnes & Noble had 1 text review for *Unbound*. While this is still a large number of reviews, it is surprising that it did not make the top 100 list. Much of this may be due to the lack of news outlet reviews surrounding *Unbound*. Through our analysis of news outlet reviews after the release of the memoir, we rhetorically can understand the theme of suppressed impact.

News Outlet Reviews of *Unbound*

Of the major news outlets studied, the *New York Times* was the only newspaper that both previously covered Tarana Burke in 2017 and covered *Unbound*'s release. However, the newspaper did not do a review; instead, they interviewed Burke in anticipation of the release.²⁶³ For reference, the *New York Times* both covered the release of Chanel Miller's memoir, *Know My Name*, and did a review. Besides this outlet, the only other newspaper was *Jezebel*, one that

²⁶² “Amazon Best Sellers of 2021.” Amazon. Goettsche Partners, 2021. <https://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/2021/books>.

²⁶³ Kantor, Jodi. “The Surprising Origins of #MeToo.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, September 10, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/books/tarana-burke-unbound-metoo.html>.

has continued to consistently cover Burke’s “me too.” movement since 2017. Regardless of its singularity, the review is dedicated and in-depth.

“To be invited into a lived experience in such a vivid and visceral way is to surrender up a piece of yourself, of your peace of mind, in exchange for understanding this woman and the movement she created. There are some books that you can’t put down because they’re so appealing; with *Unbound*, you must put it down frequently to remind yourself to breathe.”²⁶⁴

In addition to *Jezebel* and the *New York Times*, *Unbound* was reviewed by *Publisher’s Weekly*.

The review is only a paragraph, and aside from paraphrasing the plot, the actual critique or review of the book came down to one line. “Intensely moving and unapologetically frank,

Burke’s fearless memoir will uplift and inspire the next generation of survivors, advocates, and truth-tellers.”²⁶⁵ Besides these prominent news sources, the rest of the reviews come from

various blogs, social media pages, and YouTube videos. However, the personal reviewers, on Goodreads and Amazon, were extremely thorough.

Suppressed Impact

Without prominent media outlets extensively covering *Unbound*, Burke’s impact on public discourse is limited to a smaller, more nuanced section of readers, creating a rhetorical theme of suppressed impact. At the end of the day, the book will be widely read by those already invested in sexual violence due to Burke’s notoriety. However, in a world that moves as quickly as ours currently does, with memoir 2.0 gaining steam, Burke’s presence can only be as powerful

²⁶⁴ Melero, Shannon. “‘And We Are Free’: The Power of Tarana Burke’s Memoir.” *Jezebel*, September 23, 2021. <https://jezebel.com/and-we-are-free-the-power-of-tarana-burkes-memoir-1847689454>.

²⁶⁵ “Nonfiction Book Review: *Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me-Too Movement* by Tarana Burke. Flatiron, \$28.99 (272P) ISBN 978-1-250-62173-3.” *PublishersWeekly.com*. *Publisher’s Weekly*. Accessed February 21, 2022. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-250-62173-3>.

within public discourse continually as the conversation about her on social media and news outlets allows it to be. With a lack of coverage, her rhetoric within the memoir is suppressed in its impact to truly affect public discourse surrounding sexual violence in the same way her gaining entry into becoming a household name did in 2017. Without this marketing, her readers will continue to interpersonally fight for her impact, but in terms of reach, her impact on public discourse may stop there.

Burke's suppressed impact is unsurprising because of the exact same issue her organization was created to fight: the lack of visibility for Black women who have experienced sexual violence. The barriers within structural racism for Burke do not afford her the same opportunities as someone like Chanel Miller or me. Already, she is not only dealing with a lack of momentum surrounding the Me-Too movement now that years have gone by since the Harvey Weinstein scandal, but also, an ignorance still to this day to her importance in the movement—beyond her creating it in the first place.

But rape memoirs importance is not always on *public* discourse. For issues of sexual violence, *private, interpersonal* discourse may be more impactful. One cliché phrasing that pops up in Instagram scroll through posts, crisis center blogs, and anti-sexual violence education is “imagine if it were your wife/daughter/mother.”²⁶⁶ While the phrase should be unnecessary in order to develop empathy for PWSVT, it is utilized frequently because 8 out of 10 rapes are committed by someone the PWSVT knows.²⁶⁷

Due to this prevalence, if you yourself have not experienced sexual violence trauma, it is almost guaranteed you know someone who has experienced sexual violence trauma. Due to this,

²⁶⁶ Dusenbery, Maya. *Feministing*, 2011. <http://feministing.com/2013/01/23/gender-and-empathy-men-shouldnt-need-to-imagine-if-it-were-your-wifedaughtermother/>.

²⁶⁷ “Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics.” RAINN. Accessed February 21, 2022. <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>.

rhetoric that is not outsourced to the wide public (i.e., stories on major news outlets, like that of Tarana Burke’s story or Chanel Miller’s story) may cause the audience to disengage due to the distance between the PWSVT and the audience. When the PWSVT is someone, the audience knows, they are not as easily able to disengage. Whether this changes their view on it or not, it may have a larger impact on their lives overall.

Likewise, there may be more power for anti-sexual violence discourse in intrapersonal rhetoric. Many reviewers state the impact the book had on their lives. “I haven’t found a biography that spoke to my life in this way since *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.” Other reviews speak to the hope that everyone would read this book, with reviews like, “I want everyone to read this book” or “I hope it finds a wide readership.” The impact the book had on the intrapersonal discourse is unmistakable in the reviews. As readers continued to share their stories even within these reviews, Burke’s impact retains its power.

However, the sharing of intrapersonal rhetorical transformations also can cause a ripple impact on the public. Anyone reading through all of the reviews would feel emotional, as so many say they found belonging in the book in ways they’ve never felt before, and how moved they are towards action. I found it hard to read the reviews after around page 5 of the results, with how heartbreaking and raw reviewers were with their stories. It’s reminiscent of Burke’s reading through the social media comments under the #metoo. Burke continues in *Unbound*, “Here [were women] feeling less alone because [they] found a place to be seen. I cried for the sheer volume of tweets I had seen that day. My work was happening right in front of me.”²⁶⁸

Burke herself was not moved to begin “me too.” until she heard the story of the young girl’s experience of child abuse in Selma, Alabama. When working with Reverend James Luther

²⁶⁸ Burke, *Unbound*, 10.

Bevel, women within the groups she led approached Burke with proof of abuse at the hands of Bevel.²⁶⁹ Prior to this, Burke had gone about the appropriate steps for reporting abuse but never engaged with it in the way she does now with “me too”. She described her turning point for reckoning with sexual violence in her community. “My whole life, my response to harm had been to take what was coming to me, pack it neatly in a container, and put it away. Now, it wasn’t just me who was harmed; it was those I cared about and felt responsible for.”²⁷⁰ Engaging in the news or engaging with stories under #MeToo, can cause us to act differently surrounding an issue like sexual violence. Suppressed impact through major news outlets may not be bad, if intrapersonal rhetoric from readers causes a rhetorical fantasy chain to enact change.

Analysis of Reader Reviews

Within the reviews, almost all were extremely positive. In fact, it was incredibly difficult to find any ratings under 3 stars, and with critique within them. Within the *Goodreads* break down of the voting, 67% are 5 stars, 26% are 4 stars, and the reviews with 2 and 1 stars are so little, they are both sitting at 0%.²⁷¹ Many reviews compared *Unbound* to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou. “Imani Perry said that *Unbound* stands alongside *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and I completely agree. I really believe that Tarana Burke's story is going to help women and girls as much as Maya Angelou's story has.”²⁷² Both text version and audiobook of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* continually rank in the top 100 memoirs on Amazon, year after year. Reviews of Tarana Burke’s story compare her words to the iconic Maya Angelou, especially with her inclusion of a chapter connecting Angelou’s story to her own. Through reader

²⁶⁹ Burke, *Unbound*, 210.

²⁷⁰ Burke, *Unbound*, 213.

²⁷¹ “Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me-Too Movement by Tarana Burke.” Goodreads. Goodreads. Accessed February 21, 2022. https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/57351643-unbound#other_reviews.

²⁷² Goodreads, “Unbound.”

reviews, we are able to see the impact of Burke’s memoir on intrapersonal discourse through two themes: withheld critique and sensationalization vs ignorance.

Withheld Critique

Many readers explain how incredible *Unbound* was to read. However, there were some structural critiques of the book itself. “My main critique, if I have one, is the book is paced a bit off and feels like the end is rushed and ends abruptly.”²⁷³ Some found the storytelling to be disjointed, or simply publishing issues due to a faulty editor, not Burke herself. “The last 3rd of the book felt rushed and less carefully edited to me, however.”²⁷⁴ The comments surrounding the structural aspects of the book seemed to be the largest area of critique, even as they stay shrouded within compliments. Another large portion within the comments on structural critique was the want for a different type of storytelling than what she included in the book. “I wished that the author would have made more of a direct statement for how to receive help if a reader was a survivor.”²⁷⁵ Readers also wished for more solutions to be included in the book, or more information on “me too.”, instead of Burke’s life story beyond the confines of the movement. “I wish the book could have been longer where she shared more of how she built up her work around childhood sexual abuse.”²⁷⁶ Dichotomous to this review, many felt that she should not have included her feelings surrounding Alyssa Milano’s tweet within the introductory chapter. “While I understand the loss and anger associated with something of yours being taken before you’re ready to release it to the world, I also think that part degraded her story a bit.”²⁷⁷ A lot of reviews are inherently positive responses to other, more critique-heavy reviews, like readers

²⁷³ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

²⁷⁴ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

²⁷⁵ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

²⁷⁶ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

²⁷⁷ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

analyzing the opening chapter. “One of the reviews I read mentioned that they wished the introduction [wasn’t included]. I really appreciated Tarana's honesty in including that chapter and describing her journey.” Some even openly critiqued those critiquing *Unbound*.

“I find it so hard to understand how any woman can give this book lower than 4 stars. The way her voice shines in her writing is still relevant to any woman who has ever feared for her safety, fiercely protected her autonomy, or craved validation from her fellow women over her trauma.”²⁷⁸

These reviews rhetorically create a discourse of encouraged unapologetic acceptance of the channel/structure through which sexual violence is told. This rhetorical situation brings up many questions surrounding the ability to critique PWSVT’s stories, especially when they are published and widely circulated, encouraging readers to purchase, digest, and review the memoirs. The *lack* of communication surrounding Burke’s memoir raises questions of the hesitancy of reviewers to genuinely critique the book. Without critique, we lack an understanding of the reader's intrapersonal rhetoric surrounding *how* the story was understood. The digestion and cohesion of a structurally sound memoir are separate from the believability of sexual violence stories, as one can be believed without having to confine to certain norms or expectations for storytelling.

With comments questioning how anyone could rate the novel below four stars, we rhetorically create a situation where PWSVT stories cannot be improved upon in structure, tone, context, linguistic foundations, to allow for readers to digest, understand, and create an impact on their own intrapersonal discourse. Burke’s mission is for the message of “me too.” to create a

²⁷⁸ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

platform for and empowerment within Black and Brown girls who are overlooked within the sexual violence movement at large.

With this mission in mind, Burke may be limited in the success that she is trying to achieve for the movement of “me too.” as structure can cause cohesion issues with the understanding of the issue she’s fighting against, such as anti-sexual violence. Reviews like this stand as examples of the issue: “Is it perfect from the lens of literary criticism? No. You could argue it has imperfections, as other reviews here will comment on. But quite frankly, that doesn't matter in a book as important as this.” This kind of messaging is echoing the restrictions of feminism within the 2010s, such as, rooting for women CEOs no matter what, since they are simply women, freeing them from any wrongdoing or critique. This analysis is not to say Burke is not the wonderful, powerful activist the world knows her to be. The criticism of this rhetoric is simply to acknowledge that PWSVT stories do not need to be perfected to be told or released, like much of that which is shared under #MeToo. However, if our stories are being told with a specific purpose beyond catharsis like to build a movement against sexual violence, critique is necessary to ensure the audience within the rhetorical situation is engaging with the intended impact. We need to examine the vehicles used, the pieces left behind, and the pieces kept, as well as the proper channels to reach those who cannot seem to be reached. Many reviews said they preferred the audiobook to the physical text, and in almost every review, it was due to the physical edition of the book. By acknowledging Burke’s vocal success, contrasted to her writing, her focus can turn towards live events, podcasts, and media focused on audio. If those within the PWSVT community cannot critique each other, the rhetorical situation becomes limited in exigence to circulate through every opinion, creating a one-dimensional image of the story.

Sensationalization vs Ignorance

Through this reluctance to review, another theme emerges as sensationalization vs ignorance. The juxtaposition between reviewers who claimed they finished the book in one day, compared to reviewers who took a long time to read the book was extremely prevalent, almost cutting the reviews into two separate groups. From reviews such as, “I read the majority of this book in 2 hours because I couldn’t put it down” to “There were times I had to walk away because of how heavy the content could be.”²⁷⁹ Across the board, it seemed readers were grappling with two different sides of the spectrum when it came to engaging with work about sexual violence. On one side, readers seemed to regularly engage with traumatic material, claiming they could not stop reading, and ‘gobbled’ the book up in one day.

This reveals the rhetoric of sensationalization—readers being engaged with the trauma to the point it is sought out to either be thrilled or moved emotionally in an intense way, similar to that of a rollercoaster high. Reviewers such as this tend to be the same ones that watch, listen, read murder documentaries, true crime podcasts, and memoirs containing violence on a regular basis. Think of reviews such as: “Quick read - could not put this one down.”²⁸⁰ Another reviewer even admits to refusing to put it down, “I did not expect to get as engrossed in this book as I did. I loved it so much that when I could not read it due to having a migraine, I seriously considered having someone read it to me.”²⁸¹ For authors, it is likely encouraging to hear readers enjoying the book. But the language implies an enjoyment to the point of obsession, turning the author and subsequent material into a trauma spectacle.

Burke, once again, faces this potential to become a trauma spectacle at a higher degree than our past two case studies due to Black women’s suffering being commodified for white

²⁷⁹ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

²⁸⁰ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

²⁸¹ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

entertainment. In *Unbound* white readers in particular may expect to hear the details of violence at a higher degree because society has imbued the media with depictions of Black people either suffering in violent situations or performing for our entertainment. Burke balances both with the publication of her memoir: walking a tight rope between providing enough entertainment to keep the reader engaged and evoking enough sympathy for the violence she endured to reaffirm their understanding of blackness as equal to pain.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, many reviewers felt like their only critique of the book was how difficult it was to get through. “This book was difficult to read because of all the terrible things it discusses,” one reviewer mentions.²⁸² Again and again, review after review, warns about how hard the book was to read. “I was not ready. I didn’t realize how HONEST and how graphic this autobiography would be.”²⁸³ Likewise, along with these reviews, many mention how they were unaware of the issues present in the book itself prior to reading. One review on this stands out from the rest:

“Confession (that I’m not proud of): I found myself getting irritated at points, feeling like the experiences of White women who suffered abuse was ignored, and feeling like there was a stark division between White/Black and brown skin. And you know what? There was that division. And my annoyance that people who look like me aren’t front and center of the story shows my immense privilege.”²⁸⁴

While this reader acknowledges her privilege in feeling annoyed or frustrated with not understanding the book material, many readers also call out their own ignorance. “I understand that I am not the target audience for this book, but it affected me all the same,”²⁸⁵ was an

²⁸² Goodreads, “Unbound.”

²⁸³ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

²⁸⁴ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

²⁸⁵ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

iteration that came up a few times, pointing out how Burke’s book may be seen as for Black women, and how White readers may feel a disconnect or feel as though the memoir isn’t aimed at them. Another reader explains this come to understanding: “the ages shocked me - assaulted at 5 or 7, I was in kindergarten, and Black women were being assaulted. it's hard to wrap my mind around.”²⁸⁶ The lack of understanding is understandable, especially if readers came in with the hope of being educated. But it shows the other side of the audience being conveyed: ignorance.

There are largely two readers represented here: those that sensationalize *Unbound*, turning it into a trauma spectacle, and those who have turned away from engaging with any kind of work surrounding sexual violence altogether. This creates the rhetorical tension of sensationalization vs ignorance for not only sexual violence, but Black women as well. The public discourse surrounding sexual violence tends to either sensationalize the trauma, ask for more explicit details, more entertainment within the story, and more drama. Or, the discourse will move towards complete ignorance, refusing to engage, or only lightly engaging, with sexual violence narratives of any kind, erasing them from history. If they do engage, it’s only through avenues that are palatable, and reduced in detail. On Goodreads alone, one review says, “This book was difficult to read, not light by any means,”²⁸⁷ right above a review that also says, “I tore through this.”²⁸⁸

When we engage with sexual violence in this way, it creates a dissonance within discourse, causing narratives that do focus on the real, lived experiences of PWSVT to either be sensationalized or ignored. Engaging with discourses through the lens of humanization allows us to pull away from the rhetorical tension, and dive into the nuances within each narrative.

²⁸⁶ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

²⁸⁷ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

²⁸⁸ Goodreads, “Unbound.”

However, this mostly relies on the work of the reader, not the author. While the author can create the rhetorical situation by pushing against editors that ask for more drama, or including every detail they want to without restraint, for the most part, the rhetoric surrounding the novel is dictated by the reader's reviews, who other readers may rely upon and create a fantasy chain for how the book is supposed to be read.

Conclusion

Tarana Burke's influence is unmistakably powerful, and necessary to the work being done to eradicate sexual violence. In returning to our research question, how does the publication of a memoir that intends to tell the intimate details of rape, by a celebrity figure, alter public discourse? In short: the memoir itself does not alter public discourse. Through our analysis of media reviews, we found *Unbound* fails in altering *public* discourse surrounding sexual violence, due to a suppressed impact from a lack of media response, both surrounding Burke currently and *Unbound*.

However, *Unbound* is commended as a life-altering read, altering *intrapersonal* discourse instead. Through the analysis of readers' reviews, who likening to the famous *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou in terms of impact on their life, we are able to see the rhetorical themes of withheld critique and sensationalization vs ignorance. Ultimately, Burke's power, as she has stated herself, was never intended to be focused on the online, wide-media sphere.²⁸⁹ Her work, as readers have expressed, will continue to focus on grassroots efforts and 1:1 mentorship, creating a life-changing intrapersonal rhetorical impact that is sure to trickle down for generations.

²⁸⁹ Burke, *Unbound*, 4.

CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

After examining three different iterations of rape memoirs, the presence of first-person narratives within the anti-sexual violence movement is unmistakable. Earlier, we asked: how is public discourse surrounding rape culture impacted by the invention and circulation of memoirs of sexual violence trauma? Public discourse is powerfully altered by rape memoirs, both in their digital and printed forms. These memoirs serve also as a testament to the prominence of sexual violence itself, creating a spectrum of the experiences each PWSVT faces. Memoirs create a means towards understanding for those who have not experienced sexual violence to begin with, and more importantly, for those that have or will experience sexual violence. This meaning allows us all to be connected to the issue. Some rape memoirs, such as *Know My Name*, have had a larger influence in terms of major news outlets coverage, as well as readership, landing on Top 100 lists across platforms, like Amazon and Barnes & Noble. Others have found prominence within intrapersonal discourse, like *Unbound*. Likewise, as seen in Chapter 5, digital memoirs can impact audiences in real-time, creating a rhetorical situation of connectivity for processing sexual violence trauma.

In Chapter Four, we discussed the rhetorical impact on public discourse of *Know My Name* by Chanel Miller, specifically surrounding the case of *People v. Turner*. Through the analysis of media outlets discussing *People v. Turner*, as well as Chanel Miller (previously understood as Emily Doe) before publication, we found Turner was thematized through the rhetorical narratives of athleticism, guilty v. innocence, and an agency of his voice in deciding the dominant narrative of the case itself. However, upon publication, the rhetoric of *People v. Turner* was altered by Miller through the rhetorical themes of reframing, victim v. survivor dialectical tension, and racial disempowerment. Miller effectively rhetorically reframed the

“Stanford Swimmer case” narrative to focus on her story of trauma, thus, reclaiming agency over her story of sexual violence through *Know My Name*.

In Chapter Five, we utilized autoethnography and rhetorical criticism to create a mixed-methods approach, assisting in our understanding of memoir 2.0’s role in the presence of rape memoirs. My experience of sexual violence, leading up to the digital publishing of my own memoir 2.0 through an Instagram Reel, exposes the internal reflections of PWSVT engaging with autobiographical writing in a new space. Analyzing the reactions to the Instagram Reel, we saw three rhetorical themes of nuanced positivity, encouraged sharing, and disbelief. Through these themes, we were able to connect the impact of the memoir on the audience, revealing a real-time collaborative rhetorical situation that engages with the discourse of sexual violence uniquely, compared to published memoirs. Likewise, we also were provided background on the impact of public discourse on the rhetor, showing how rhetorical narratives in reaction to rape memoirs can nuance intrapersonal discourse for the author.

Finally, in Chapter Six, we examined the reaction to *Unbound* by Tarana Burke, to understand how rape memoirs and the identity of the rhetor can impact public discourse in different ways. We examined public discourse surrounding Tarana Burke before the publication of her memoir and after its publishing, different than how she altered public discourse when she first was prominent within the height of the Me-Too general movement. From our analysis of Tarana Burke’s media coverage, we found that the rhetorical narrative of suppressed impact emerged, showcasing a hindrance in Burke’s allowance to influence popular discourse through her memoir publication. This suppressed impact highlighted the racial tensions prevalent within advocacy spaces against sexual violence. Through reader reviews, however, we saw the impact *Unbound* had on intrapersonal discourse through the themes of withheld critique and

sensationalization v. ignorance. Ultimately, Burke's chapter exposed how Black women, in particular, are withheld from participation in sharing their stories widely, but how their stories can often cause the most rhetorical impact on the readers themselves.

These case studies exposed many questions surrounding rape memoirs and sexual violence discourse, particularly, the possibility of classifying rape memoirs as a distinct genre of their own. After examining the impact of rape memoirs, themselves, the troubling nature of creating a genre distinction between rape memoirs and memoirs may hurt the impact of these texts. Michael Dango, writing for *Public Goods*, asks the question that could easily be applied to the tracking of our discussion's impact on public discourse: "What is the genre of rape?"²⁹⁰ As previously discussed, the classifying of a text within a certain genre can often be extremely nuanced. Some popular books, like *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado, is classified as a rape memoir, right next to *Know My Name* by Chanel Miller and *Hunger* by Roxanne Gay.²⁹¹ However, Machado's best-selling book is also classified as a lyrical memoir, an academic memoir, weaving fantastical elements within the very raw story of the experience of domestic violence. Within *In the Dream House*, Machado acknowledges the constraints of form and connects them to the tainting of abuse, alluding to a sense of wrongness. *The New Yorker's* review of Machado's technique puts it well: "These shifting angles of illumination achieve a full, strange representation of the subject."²⁹² *In the Dream House* returns with a follow-up question to the genre of rape: can sexual violence be contained to one genre?

²⁹⁰Dango, Michael. "What Is the Genre of Rape?" Public Books, March 25, 2021. <https://www.publicbooks.org/what-is-the-genre-of-rape/#fn-41639-1>.

²⁹¹"MeToo Lit: Reading the Silence Breakers." Wellesley College. Trustees of Wellesley College, April 8, 2020. <https://www.wellesley.edu/news/2020/stories/node/175031>.

²⁹²Waldman, Katy. "Carmen Maria Machado's Many Haunted Stories of a Toxic Relationship." *The New Yorker*, October 31, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/carmen-maria-machados-many-haunted-stories-of-a-toxic-relationship>.

The trapping of rape within a certain genre is also in line with our inability to contain sexual violence to a simplistic, textbook definition of how this form of brutality may appear in one's life. For years, we've attempted to simplify sexual violence through legislation, creating barriers within Title IX and redefining consent laws.²⁹³ Whether its defining sexual violence to penetration only and leaving out lesbian women from the picture of rape entirely, or only define the violence to be physical and create a gap for cyber harassment to thrive, the simplification calls for a lack of complexity that does not include everyone. With every PWSVT that may find justice through these laws, another PWSVT is barred in some way from receiving help from the government. A lack of intersectionality within the beginning of the #MeToo movement exposed the fears of one-dimensional approaches to eradicating sexual violence. The white washing of the movement cut out the origins of Tarana Burke's "me too" movement and lost focus on the most vulnerable PWSVT, Black²⁹⁴ and Indigenous women.²⁹⁵ If rape memoirs are given their own genre, does that restrict the ways in which we discuss rape within published writing? While memoirs can vary widely in their use of humor, drama, academic writing, and lyrical elements, the genre itself tends to follow a storytelling arch that requires a climactic moment of seriousness. Could rape be restricted from comedy, thrillers, poetry? As mentioned earlier, the rape memoir may exclude the aspect of "entertainment" many readers look for in memoirs, like that of Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*. However, Noah's memoir serves as the perfect example: you can blend traumatic events into any story, combining elements of entertainment and humor

²⁹³ Mahdawi, Arwa. "The US Criminal Justice System Is Failing Sexual Assault Survivors. It Needs a Feminist Overhaul | Arwa Mahdawi." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, October 2, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/02/us-criminal-justice-system-failing-sexual-assault-survivors-feminist-overhaul>.

²⁹⁴ "Black Women, the Forgotten Survivors of Sexual Assault." American Psychological Association. American Psychological Association, 2020. <https://www.apa.org/pi/about/newsletter/2020/02/black-women-sexual-assault>.

²⁹⁵ "Ending Violence against Native Women." Ending Violence Against Native Women | Indian Law Resource Center. Indian Law Resource Center. Accessed February 15, 2022. <https://indianlaw.org/issue/ending-violence-against-native-women>.

around the issue in order to reach readers who may otherwise restrict themselves from reading violent issues. The reality is rape storytelling cannot be confined to the dimensions of one book, but the fear lies in a containment causing less exposure to a wide readership, potentially resulting in less nuance and complexity within our discussions of sexual violence.

The boom of rape memoirs from the general Me-Too movement in some ways provided a lot of benefits in the efforts to eradicate, or at least, bring awareness to sexual violence. Jeannie Vanasco, the author of *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl*, a memoir about her rape at the hands of a childhood friend, explains the benefits of marketability in reaching other audiences to *Bazaar*. Vanasco explains, “the marketability brings fresh questions to the fight against sexual violence, as authors, readers, and sexual violence activists negotiate the increased visibility for their stories to different audiences.”²⁹⁶ Rape memoirs also mirror the consciousness-raising of early feminist movements, the shifting from isolation for PWSVT to collectiveness could be potentially beneficial during the pandemic of COVID-19 where PWSVT may not be able to connect with others as easily.²⁹⁷ This channel of publication may also give PWSVT the ability to find some kind of justice within their experiences, especially if popular avenues, like the criminal punishment system, are futile. Heather Hillsburg deems this the concept of “writing back.” Memoir writing can be a powerful method of justice when there are not any other viable options. PWSVT often battle against victim-shaming beliefs of “wanting” their sexual violence, or that they may have “wanted it” in the moment, and regret it now.²⁹⁸ Hillsburg continues, “[the

²⁹⁶ Froio, Nicole. “What Happens When #MeToo Memoirs Meet the Marketplace?” Harper's BAZAAR, November 2, 2021. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a36318233/what-happens-when-metoo-memoirs-meet-the-marketplace/>.

²⁹⁷ Froio. “What Happens When #MeToo Memoirs Meet the Marketplace?”

²⁹⁸ Wilson, C., et al. Understanding the Neurobiology of Trauma and Implications for Interviewing Victims. End Violence Against Women International. Nov 2016. www.evawintl.org

authors are granted] a venue (memoir) in which to contest (or “write-back”) the widespread logic that they consented to their [sexual violence].”²⁹⁹

Hillsburg also offers the other side of this opportunity, however, where “writing back” feels required for the PWSVT in order to prove their “innocence.” “[They] can either voice their experiences *or* be seen as complicit with their violence.”³⁰⁰ This insight reveals the tie between rape memoirs and the criminal punishment system. While it could potentially be used as a tool of restorative justice, all of the memoirs mentioned in this study included perpetrators who had been incarcerated at one point in time. If a rape memoir is on the shelf without an incarcerated perpetrator, the incident is often child sexual abuse—which generally speaking, is more widely believed in popular culture due to the innocence connotation towards children. Can rape memoirs still impact public discourse without a guilty verdict? Are the authors still believed?

Hillsburg’s downside of this opportunity to write back is also currently present in the ways rape memoirs are received, and the work authors already have to do to be believed, guilty verdict or not. In fact, Roxanne Gay in the publication of their book *Bad Feminist*, in which their sexual violence plays a large portion, describes this tension of forced details. Gay explains that one reviewer “threw the book across the room” when they did not disclose the details of the rape Gay experienced.³⁰¹ “I was furious at the reviewer’s unwarranted entitlement, furious that I had this terrible story to tell.”³⁰² Within Chapter 5 of this thesis, I discussed some of the disbelief I faced within the comment section of the Instagram reel. While the disbelief felt more minimal within that reel, in other posts of my own where I do not disclose the details of my sexual

²⁹⁹ Hillsburg, Heather A. “Subjectification and Confession in Contemporary Memoirs of Abduction and Prolonged Captivity.” *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (2017): 833–48. doi:10.1111/hypa.12359.

³⁰⁰ Hillsburg. “Subjectification and Confession,” 841.

³⁰¹ Gay, Roxanne. “Writing into the Wound.” Scribd. Scribd, February 2021. <https://www.scribd.com/book/490048177/Writing-into-the-Wound-Understanding-trauma-truth-and-language>.

³⁰² Gay, “Writing into the Wound.” Scribd.

assault, many of the comment sections fill with, now deleted, comments questioning the truth to my story. While rape memoirs can serve as a healthy outlet, the push for details can cause an unhealthy tension between the belief in PWSVT and the consumption of violent narratives for entertainment.

In some ways, the want for more details, particularly towards White women who have experienced sexual violence trauma, is fair. Examining Sebold's book alone, without looking up her court case, a reader would never know Sebold's perpetrator was a Black man. To her, whether it was her editor or her own inclusion of details, Broadwater's race was not an important factor to the telling of the book. But, in his conviction, and many others echoing his case—Central Park Five, Emmett Till, Groveland Four³⁰³, and countless others—his race was a central factor in his conviction. Without this inclusion of a detail, readers could begin questioning other rape memoirs by White women on the shelves, wondering where the line is drawn between a racist accusation and a true sexual violence testimony. As in Sebold's case, the line was messy, overlapped, and unclear—she was sexually assaulted, but not by the Black man she was quick to accuse 20 years ago.

Without critically scrutinizing Sebold's memoir, Broadwater may never have been freed. As racial tensions and sexual violence intersect, it is a wonder of whether we would need to dissect these narratives if the criminal punishment system was not as present as it currently is within sexual violence. If preventive measures, like comprehensive sexual education, were widespread, or toxic masculinity within subgroups was unpacked with accessible resources, like counseling, would we need to worry about every detail, if the repercussion was not so damning?

³⁰³ Tebor, Celina. "a Long Time Coming': Groveland Four, Four Black Men Accused of Rape, Exonerated after 72 Years." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, November 23, 2021. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/11/22/groveland-four-black-men-falsely-accused-rape-exonerated/8729818002/>.

In terms of critiquing PWSVT stories, like we discussed in Chapter 6, would we need to ensure our stories are told in “the best way possible” to reach the most audiences if we did not face disbelief? If our intelligence, our well-constructed arguments were simply enough, would we not need to use the details of our own traumas to enact progress?

Conclusion

The answer is not a simple one. The rhetoric of violence cannot be restrained to single definitions; in the same way, sexual violence cannot be separated into digestible, clear-cut understandings. These memoirs serve to further the discourse surrounding anti-sexual violence rhetoric, deepening our grappling’s with the communities it serves to embolden, as well as the justice it attempts to enact. As we examined, anti-sexual violence rhetoric, like that which is present in rape memoirs, can profoundly impact public discourse. Likewise, the rhetorical impact lies powerfully in intrapersonal rhetoric as well, changing the hearts and minds of the reader. This type of discourse can cause a rhetorical impact within interpersonal discourse that can effectively extend to public discourse.

Our broadening of what constitutes a rape memoir, as well as rape memoirs as a succinct genre, also complicates our understanding of the rhetoric currently present within the anti-sexual violence movement. As rape is a rhetorical phenomenon that can be studied either in concrete, tangible artifacts, or more metaphorical artifacts, like fiction novels, rape memoirs aid in our understanding of how storytelling and reality intersect rhetorically. For feminist criticism, this thesis can assist in emboldening more rhetoric that is necessary to grow in order to aid in eradicating sexual violence, both within our own discourse (rape culture impacting the way we communicate) and solutions for PWSVT struggling today.

Sebold's sexual violence and Broadwater's injustice serve as a complex case to attest to the mutations of rape culture. Tensions that have to be engaged with exist in all of the texts discussed, as well as the cultural contexts that cannot be ignored. Many rape memoirs have not yet been written, and others sit on shelves waiting to be read. Our responsibility calls us to engage not only as readers, but those fighting for a world without sexual violence *and* a world without racial prejudice within the criminal punishment system. As rhetoricians, dissecting the tangles between these issues, the work maintains its importance. These authors, that have displayed their heart, pain, and sorrow on pages published for the world, pen to us a universal truth: some stories are needed to begin the change of the world.

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