

Fall 2015

"You Have to Confess": Rape and the Politics of Storytelling

Tara Roeder
St. John's University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Law and Gender Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Roeder, Tara. 2015. "'You Have to Confess": Rape and the Politics of Storytelling." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 9 (Fall): 18-29. <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol9/iss9/3>

This Article is brought to you by the University of Rhode Island. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu. For permission to reuse copyrighted content, contact the author directly.

“You Have to Confess”: Rape and the Politics of Storytelling

Tara Roeder, St. John’s University

Abstract: This article examines the discourse of rape in contemporary culture, paying special attention to the courtroom setting, where rape victims are often required to tell cohesive, linear narratives that underscore their blamelessness if they hope to be believed. Because of deeply entrenched cultural myths about rape, the type of story often required for the successful prosecution of perpetrators may require rape victims to construct narratives that do not accurately reflect their lived experience. Writers such as Susan Brison, Patricia Weaver Francisco, and Alice Sebold engage with the complex politics of rape and its telling in their memoirs. While constructing stories that will suffice in the courtroom setting remains an important task for many rape victims, such stories may ultimately have to be relinquished and rewritten in order to revise prevailing cultural perceptions of rape, its perpetrators, and its victims. The memoirs of rape survivors thus come to function as a different—and necessary—type of public testimony.

Keywords: rape, memoir, storytelling, courtroom rhetoric

Copyright by Tara Roeder

And so, when the time comes, you have to turn to him,
the maniac’s sperm still greasing your thighs,
your mind whirling like crazy. You have to confess
to him, you are guilty of the crime
of having been forced.

— Adrienne Rich, “Rape”

The relationship between trauma and storytelling is rarely linear. In her groundbreaking work *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman cautions trauma victims and those working with them of the danger of a “premature demand for certainty,” cautioning that “zealous conviction can all too easily replace an open, inquiring attitude” (1997, 180). Rape victims who choose to make their stories public and/or seek redress from the justice system, however, will indeed find themselves under intense pressure to tell clear, concise, and coherent accounts of the violence they have undergone.

The single-minded demands of legal and political power structures may negatively impact trauma survivors struggling to have their complex stories heard. In *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith explore both the risks and the possibilities for transformation embodied in trauma narratives, tracking the multiple and overlapping purposes served by stories constructed around collective traumas such as apartheid in South Africa, the forced sexual slavery of Korean women by the Japanese government during World War II, and the unethical treatment of US prisoners. They describe their book as a “testimony to the efficacy of stories: stories silenced by and emerging from fear, shame, trauma, and repression; stories enlivened by hope, connection, commitment, and affiliation; stories fed

by calls for justice, fueled by empathy and an ethics of equality and human dignity” (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 223). While they cite such stories and the human rights campaigns that sustain and employ them to promote social change as “the most viable hope for extending democracy, social justice, and freedom” (234), they also critique the way in which these narratives may be repurposed when put in the service of larger human rights campaigns. A significant example of this kind of rhetorical “altering” occurred at the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, in which many witnesses who testified saw their stories acting as a vehicle for social change even as they were flattened to fit into a preexisting schema of victim forgiving oppressor. The multiplicity of other, more complex emotions and desires that might inspire and become embodied in trauma narratives (e.g., hatred, desire for revenge, despair, confusion) can be discouraged in a context in which the search for one cohesive narrative is privileged.

In this article, I look at rape as both a personal and a collective trauma, one in which the type of linear, cohesive narrative privileged by the legal system has particularly harmful effects on both victims of rape and culture as a whole. In light of Schaffer and Smith’s argument, philosopher and memoirist Susan Brison’s claim that rape survivors may ultimately have to “give [their story] up, in order to retell it, without having to ‘get it right,’ without fear of betraying it, to be able to rewrite the past” (2002, 103) is compelling. My goal here is to examine some of the ways in which mainstream responses to rape may be shaped by the demands of the judicial system in problematic ways, and to explore the power of alternative testimony such as memoir to unsettle preconceived notions about sexual violence. I ultimately advocate for more capacious, generative modes of responding to narratives of sexual assault, no matter what form these narratives may take.

“Did He Have a Gun?”: Rape Discourse in the Public Sphere

The average rape victim “gives her account of the crime 57 times to various officials before the case even lands in court” (Goldman 2008). These accounts will be combed over for inconsistencies by police, lawyers, and often, if the stories become publicized, random members of the general public. Evidence that the victim’s narrative has been anything less than scrupulously consistent may lead to the outright dismissal of her claims. As Andrew E. Taslitz writes in *Rape and the Culture of the Courtroom*, his critical examination of the judicial system and the rhetoric of gender and rape, “With rape, the victim’s truthfulness is almost always challenged” (1999, 6).

Coming forward with a narrative of rape is never easy. The public response to recent cases such as the 2011 gang rape of an 11-year-old girl by 20 men in Cleveland, Texas attests to a recent resurgence of victim-blaming in even the most cut-and-dry cases. In this particular instance, for example, numerous reporters cited community members who insisted the rape was the fault of the girl, who “dressed older than her age” (McKinley 2011). In the court of public opinion, as well as in the actual legal system, the onus is on the rape victim to maintain her “innocence” by rigidly adhering to gendered societal scripts about what constitutes appropriate appearance and behavior for women who are not “asking” for rape. In the words of Andrea Dworkin, when it comes to acts of gendered violence, all too often “the tellers and the stories are ignored or ridiculed, threatened back into silence or destroyed, and the experience of female suffering is buried in cultural invisibility and contempt” (1983, 20). Women who wish to make their stories of violation and abuse public are often met with retraumatizing reactions such as blame and doubt, rather than empathy and belief.

On May 14, 2011, Nafissatou Diallo, a member of the housekeeping staff at Manhattan’s Sofitel hotel, reported a sexual assault by International Monetary Fund head Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Almost

immediately, her account was called into question in print by men such as prominent French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy and conservative economist Ben Stein, who wrote: "The prosecutors say that Mr. Strauss-Kahn 'forced' the complainant to have oral and other sex with him. How? Did he have a gun? Did he have a knife? ... [I]f he was so intimidating, why did she immediately feel un-intimidated enough to alert the authorities as to her story?" (Stein 2011).

Stein's victim-blaming rhetoric is unfortunately all too common when it comes to the crime of rape. Unlike most other crimes (arson, murder, etc.), the assumption that rape victims are somehow complicit in their own violation is shockingly standard. In her seminal text *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller asserts that there is "a provable bias by police and juries against the word of the female victim ... particularly the word of a black female victim" (1975, 175). In the case of Diallo, this doubt was compounded by her position as an immigrant, the rumors spread by news outlets like the *New York Post* (which ran an unsubstantiated story calling Diallo a "hooker"), and the fact that her alleged assailant was a powerful man. After reports of Diallo's immigration status and connection with an incarcerated man were released, there was a noticeable shift in the way the public received and consumed her story. Rather than being (if it ever was) a rape narrative, the alleged attack became a moving target for a variety of competing voices invested in exposing "class warfare" or a "broken immigration system" and a warning tale for powerful men about vindictive, economically disadvantaged women who will attempt to ruin their careers by crying sexual assault. Although, as Herman points out, "in the course of reconstruction, the story [of the survivor of rape] may change as missing pieces are recovered" (1997, 180), shifts in Diallo's chronology of events were often attributed not to trauma but to the fact that she must have lied about events. (The fact that Strauss-Kahn's own story had also morphed quite frequently did not seem to matter as much to many mainstream journalists.)

We, the "public," received Diallo's account through a myriad of competing prisms, as articles with titles such as "Strauss-Kahn's Accuser: Schemer or Immigrant Survivor?" (Trotta 2011) proliferated. While high-profile rape cases like this may indeed speak to larger concerns about economic inequality or differences in judicial processes, what I found myself longing for amidst the swirl of metaphors and accusations were accounts of the irreducible singularity of the victim's experience. Presented to us through various lenses fashioned by competing desires, Diallo is emptied of identity by both detractors and "supporters." Although his intent was different than that of Lévy and Stein, for example, comedian Jon Stewart engaged in a similar rhetorical erasure of Diallo's individuality by referring to her as "an African" in his attempt to link her interaction with Strauss-Kahn to the IMF's economic dealings in Third World countries. Only by putting overlapping narratives—the narrative of the victim against the larger backdrop of the climate in which such violation occurs—in dialogue with one another can we ever hope to come to an understanding of the complex politics surrounding rape and its telling. While there are multiple narratives for public consumption in this particular case—attractive stories of power, wealth, and truth-telling, for example—there are also the (non-metaphorical) narratives told by Diallo herself. The import of fostering widespread societal empathy for victims of sexual assault begins with the realization that their stories must be heard within the framework of individualized, embodied experience. In the words of Ann Cahill, we need to ask ourselves, "Who are the beings being raped?" (2001, 49).

Alternative Testimony: Rape in Memoir

In her memoir, *Lucky*, writer Alice Sebold chronicles her own experience as a rape survivor. Violently attacked by a stranger while walking across Syracuse University campus one night, she expresses frustration

with the reactions of those around her, from her family and neighbors who cannot bring themselves to use the word “rape” to the therapist who jokes, “Well, I guess this will make you less inhibited about sex now, huh?” (Sebold 2002, 77). From the start, the knowledge that she is expected to perform in “acceptable” ways is incumbent on her. When she is encouraged to write about her experience by a poetry professor, her violent poem—in which she expresses a desire for revenge on her rapist—is met with silence and dismay by her classmates. “You don’t really feel that way, do you?” asks a male classmate (100). It becomes obvious that her narrative deviates in important ways from the scripts of guilt, silence, forgetting, and forgiveness often forced upon female victims of sexual violence.

The form of memoir allows Sebold to shape her story free from the strictures of the legal system, while simultaneously offering an insightful critique of the way the system circumscribes the narratives of women who have been raped. Sebold’s encounter with police officials after her violent attack underscores the fact that rape victims are expected to perform in particular ways if they wish to be believed. She offers a potent example of how the truth/lie binary that informs the scrutiny of women’s rape narratives operates in an investigative context. Discussing an encounter with the police officer with whom she filed her initial report, she writes:

“Listen,” he said. He began to fumble out an apology. He said he was sorry if he hadn’t seemed very nice back in May. “You get a lot of rape cases,” he said. “Most of them never get this far. I’m pulling for you.” ... Fifteen years later, when doing research for this book, I would find sentences he had written in the original paperwork.... “It is this writer’s opinion, after interview of the victim, that this case, as presented by the victim, is not completely factual.... it is suggested that this case be referred to the inactive file.” ... For Lorenz, virgins were not a part of his world. He was skeptical of many of the things I said. Later, when the serology reports proved that what I had said was not a lie, that I had been a virgin, and that I was telling the truth, he could not respect me enough. (Sebold 2002, 144–45)

Lorenz’s initial response to the evidence of a college student who had just been brutally raped is skepticism. It is only when her virginity is “proven” that the officer is free to respect the young woman, who now inhabits the realm of “perfect victim.” Sebold’s own narrative tells the story of a woman who convinces those around her of the veracity of her experience by molding it to the expectations of both the judicial system and a larger social insistence that only “good girls” make sympathetic rape victims.¹

Navigating such a hostile system effectively requires knowledge of its tropes. Sebold appears in court with the awareness that she “represented an eighteen year old virgin co-ed. I was dressed in red, white, and blue” (Sebold 2002, 172). The bodies and comportment of rape victims are scrutinized in often unconscious ways by police officers and jurors. In Sebold’s case, she strives to balance the appearance and behavior she imagines conform to culturally sanctioned conceptions of femininity and virginity with the kind of certainty and assertiveness that tend to mark witnesses as “truthful” in the eyes of those who may not understand the ways that traumatic experience can affect normal storytelling habits.

Feminist scholar Jennifer Griffiths writes that testimony “offers a public enactment of memory, and clearly, the cultural context and content work collaboratively to shape testimony” (2009, 5). Sebold’s testimony is a virtuoso performance, one that springs from her certitude that any story that veers too far away from cultural expectations of coherence and blamelessness will be perceived as suspect:

On television and in the movies, the lawyer often says to the victim before they take the stand, “Just tell the truth.” What it was left up to me to figure out was that if you do that and nothing else, you lose. So I told them I was stupid, that I shouldn’t have walked through the park. I said I intended to do something to warn

girls at the university about the park. And I was so good, so willing to accept blame, that I hoped to be judged innocent by them. (Sebold 2002, 144)

In the powerful words of Adrienne Rich, the rape victim is “guilty of the crime of having been forced” (1973, 44). To take the stand against one’s rapist is a difficult prospect; in order to be believed, Sebold is compelled to parrot victim-blaming rhetoric, and is thus also forced to reinscribe common myths about rape.

There is also intense pressure to present a cohesive tale where one may not exist: “the story of a case must be told in such a way as to satisfy a jury’s need for narrative coherence and fidelity” (Taslitz 1999, 15). The concept of “truth” in the courtroom setting is problematized for the rape victim because of “the intense linguistic trauma wrought by the present system and the immense failure of adversarial ‘truth-finding’ assumptions in rape cases” (Taslitz 1999, 120). Sebold writes about beginning her testimony: “It was a shaky start to the most important story I would ever tell. I began a sentence only to trail off and begin again. And this wasn’t because I was unaware exactly what happened in the tunnel. It was saying the words out loud, knowing that it was *how* I said them that could win or lose the case” (Sebold 2002, 174; original emphasis). The nature of the legal system puts pressure on witnesses to perform perfectly, especially in the face of cross-examination. While the stereotypes that many people hold about rape and its victims already put rape victims at a disadvantage during trial, Taslitz points out that “patriarchal stories are not the whole problem.... Another barrier stands in the way of a fair rape trial: the adversary system itself. That system is based on competition. It assumes that a battle between warring adversaries will yield truth” (9). The masculinist notion that truthful stories emerge from combative argument is a further impediment for rape victims. In the context of an adversarial courtroom, victims lose control over the shape and presentation of their narratives. Sebold echoes this knowledge when she writes about the defense attorney in the case: “I reentered the courtroom and took the stand.... In front of me was my enemy. He would do everything he could to make me look bad—stupid, confused, hysterical” (180). Indeed, “awe, intimidation, and adversariness; reliving rape trauma; and lawyer domination of language are a combination well designed to silence victim voices” (Taslitz 1999, 9). Sebold is understandably filled with relief when the court bailiff tells her after testifying that she is “the best rape witness I’ve ever seen on the stand” (198). This particular narrative performance was marked a “success” in the eyes of the legal system.

Yet Sebold’s desire, throughout her memoir, to place this story in a larger cultural context is marked. In the context of rape culture—signified for Sebold by a crude drawing in the elevator of her sister’s dormitory at Penn State of a fraternity gang-rape victim, as well as the later rape of her roommate—Sebold’s story is one of many. In the interview published at the end of *Lucky*, she says that one of her motivations for writing the book was “the desire to just put it out there on the table, ‘This is what rape can look like.’ If people maybe know more about it, then the victim’s not as alienated” (Sebold 2002, 5). Her particular narrative becomes not only a way for her to make sense of her own experience, but also for that experience to be situated in a larger framework and serve a larger goal. Memoirs of sexual assault become a different kind of evidence than courtroom testimony. They allow victims to regain control of their experience and explore the complex truths of rape without altering their narratives to fit seamlessly into culturally sanctioned scripts. In the words of Susan Brison, “perhaps there is a psychological imperative, analogous to the legal imperative, to keep telling one’s story until it is heard” (2002, 110). Additionally, such texts shed light on the backdrop of sexual violence against which women live their lives, serving as invitations to their audiences to begin to rethink rape and its effects simply by the act of listening.

Rape and Re-Vision

Brison's *Aftermath*—an account of the violent rape she underwent while on a trip to France—also invites readers to grapple with the complexity of engaging with sexual violence, both for the victim and for those who hear her story. Like Sebald, Brison acknowledges the widespread pressure to be a “perfect” victim: “Since I was assaulted by a stranger, in a ‘safe’ place, and was so visibly injured when I encountered the police and medical personnel, I was ... spared the insult, suffered by so many rape victims, of not being believed or of being said to have asked for the attack” (2002, 7). Yet she also points out that even in her case, her assailant claimed she had “provoked” the attack, and the police officer who took her report was quick to add the phrase “Comme je suis sportive” (“Since I am athletic”) to explain why she was taking a walk on the morning of the rape (7). Simple physical desires such as the urge to exercise must be appropriately subsumed into airtight narratives of acceptable female behavior in order to ensure the perceived “innocence” of rape victims. Brison's injured body is further scrutinized by two male doctors: “For about an hour the two of them went over me like a piece of meat, calling out measurements of bruises and other assessments of damage, as if they were performing an autopsy” (8). Such dehumanizing treatment underscores the ways in which the very bodies of rape victims become public property, subject to analysis by those searching for evidence of the reality of the violent assault that victims are forced to describe multiple times to multiple audiences. Brison's insistence on being able to revise her own narrative, to “rewrite the past in different ways, leading up to an infinite variety of unforeseeable futures” (103), is the impetus behind her project.

The ability to take control of one's own story is likewise a theme of Patricia Weaver Francisco's *Telling: A Memoir of Rape and Recovery*, in which Francisco intertwines the story of her own violent rape with fairy tales, the work of poets and trauma theorists, and other women's experiences with rape and with antirape activism. Although her own experience with police investigators is largely positive, Francisco also explores the ways in which the legal and medical processes connected to rape cannot help but further dehumanize victims. She describes her own experience in the hospital after her assault: “A man comes in with a camera, explaining that he needs to take photographs of my wounds for evidence. He is perfectly respectful and quiet about this, but it requires that he label each cut with a small white card lettered with my name and a number. As he props these cards next to my arm, neck, face, hand, and methodically photographs each, I feel myself disappearing” (Francisco 1999, 44). Like Brison's, her body literally becomes evidence as both it and her individual experience are subsumed into the larger “justice” system. She writes that “for soldiers returning from war, we have medals, monuments, and public ceremonies of memorial. With rape, the criminal justice system functions as the formal arena for recognition and restitution, and has largely failed at both” (58). Although the man who raped Francisco is never caught, she details her experience watching the trial of another serial rapist as a sort of proxy for the trial she never experiences herself. This particular trial, in which multiple victims were brutally attacked by a stranger while in their homes, leads to a guilty verdict. Yet even when the legal system is successful in prosecuting rapists, Francisco implies, there may be other equally meaningful ways for victims to experience closure.

Like many other women who write about rape, Francisco explores the complex relationship between trauma and storytelling: “At first, I could not stop telling the story of the night a stranger raped me. I told it obsessively, sequentially, each detail rigidly in place” (1999, 10). While Brison focuses on the feeling of “unclenching” that comes after the “obsessive” story is told in a courtroom setting, Francisco also looks to the ways in which, absent of that particular context, victims of rape may relinquish the need for such rigid storytelling practices. Her own rape has multiple effects—it is ultimately responsible for her divorce, as well as her engagement with feminist critique of popular culture (117). Yet the realization that she

finds most profound is that telling stories of rape can connect women in activist, as well as therapeutic, alliances. Francisco joins a group of feminist activists in Minnesota who design an art project, entitled *Silent Witnesses*, to draw attention to domestic violence. The project consists of “twenty-six life-size wooden figures representing the Minnesota women killed in domestic violence in 1990.... The genius of the *Witnesses*’ design is the fact that they take up space. It’s been said that this is art’s function, ‘to make the invisible visible’” (Francisco 1999, 202). By using both their own bodies and the bodies of the women represented in the sculpture to purposefully occupy public space, the activists refuse to inhabit the realm of invisibility that has been designated for them. The presence of their bodies disrupts the notion that violence against women is something that can be repressed or hidden in the “private” sphere. Further, by connecting these figures with stories of the murdered women and participating in rallies for domestic violence legislation outside the state capital, Francisco and the activists she works with highlight the ways in which body, art, and community all play a role in enacting larger social change.

Such activism may, Francisco suggests, ultimately have an impact on what Brison calls the “widespread emotion illiteracy” (Brison 2002, 12) with regard to rape, which compels people Brison is close with to either choose not to respond to her rape at all, or to offer clichés such as “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” As Brison points out in her introduction, “the prevalent lack of empathy with trauma victims, which is reinforced by the cultural repression of memories of violence and victimization ... results ... not merely from ignorance or indifference, but also from an active fear of identifying with those whose terrifying fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own” (2002, x). This fear may partially explain the brutal doubts with which stories of rape are often countered. The unthinkable realization that any woman, at any time, might become the victim of a life-changing physical and psychological violation merely by virtue of her being is a harder pill to swallow for some than the comforting notion that we can protect ourselves by behaving in a certain prescribed way—walking with a “buddy,” wearing less “revealing” clothes.² The idea that we can never be fully in control of our bodies and destiny is a frightening prospect that may make many uncomfortable.

But it is precisely this discomfort we must inhabit if we are ever to make sense of the narratives of women who have been raped. Judith Butler’s query in *Prearious Lives*—“What is real? Whose lives are real? ... What ... is the relation between violence and those lives considered as ‘unreal?’” (Butler 2006, 33)—is pivotal if we are to meaningfully challenge a paradigm in which the lived experience of many survivors is discounted because it does not fit a certain, culturally sanctioned narrative. Only by understanding our encounter with the story of *any* rape victim as an interaction between two subjects can we begin to undo the violence of questions such as “What was she wearing?” As Cathy Caruth reminds us, “the problem of witnessing trauma ... is learning the difficult task of speaking the trauma in the terms offered by the survivor” (1996, 117). This is especially true when those terms do not fit our preexisting schemas.

Responding to Rape Narratives

Each of the memoirists I have explored above writes powerfully about the instrumental role that the response of listeners plays in the recovery process. The reactions of those who hear rape narratives can have the ability to retraumatize victims, or to empower and support them. Judith Herman puts special emphasis on the role of witness: “The [rape] survivor needs the help of others who are willing to recognize that a traumatic event has occurred, to suspend their preconceived judgments, and simply bear witness to her tale” (1997, 68). While Herman focuses primarily on the psychotherapeutic relationship, many of her

insights into the narrative and recovery processes following rape are instructive for multiple audiences, including the reader who wishes to cultivate an ethical relationship to a narrative born from the violation of an embodied subject. Although it would be both irresponsible and philosophically suspect to suggest any sort of one-to-one correspondence between reader and therapist, there is nonetheless a way in which the knowledges of these distinct but connected positions can inform each other. In contrast to the recurring character of the police investigator invoked by Sebold in *Lucky*, Herman stresses that “the therapist has to remember that she is not a fact-finder and that the reconstruction of the trauma story is not a criminal investigation. Her role is to be an open-minded, compassionate witness, not a detective” (180). Adopting a similar position when we encounter rape narratives in the public sphere functions not only as an act of empathy but as a gesture with deep political resonance in a culture where, as I have indicated earlier, the blaming and doubt of rape victims have become something of a national pastime.

Andrea Dworkin writes:

The accounts of rape ... and the other commonplaces of female experience that are excavated from the past or given by contemporary survivors should leave the heart seared, the mind in anguish, the conscience in upheaval. But they do not. No matter how often these stories are told, with whatever clarity or eloquence, bitterness or sorrow, they might as well have been whispered in wind or written in sand: they disappear, as if they were nothing. (1975, 20)

One only has to read the news to encounter stories of rape on a daily basis, often told from the victim-doubting position I have critiqued. The prevalence of this position with regard to rape victims easily evidences the frustrating truth of Dworkin’s realization: most narratives of rape indeed “disappear,” both from the minds of their readers and from culture at large.

Given the well-documented manifestations of rape culture on many college campuses, I encourage my own university students to think critically about mainstream discourse about sexual violence. I often share Adrienne Rich’s poem “Rape” (Rich 1973, 44) when we talk about poetry and politics, for example. The poem—which puts the reader in the position of a rape victim, “the maniac’s sperm still greasing your thighs”—is a powerful testament to the experience of rape victims confronted by a hostile system. The police officer in the poem “knows, or thinks he knows, how much you imagined; / he knows, or thinks he knows, what you secretly wanted.” The poem ends with the haunting question: “if, in the sickening light of the precinct, / your details sound like a portrait of your confessor, / will you swallow, will you deny them, will you lie your way home?”

While many of my female students (and some male students) recognize that the poem is about the continued violation of female rape victims in a system that is automatically suspicious of their motives and doubtful of their narratives, I am consistently surprised by a small but angry minority of male students who are highly resistant to this reading. The first time we read this poem in class, one student (after a vibrant discussion in which another student, who had herself been raped, connected the poem to her own experience) blurted out, “I wish women would just stop talking about rape already.” Just this past semester, a student dismissively commented that the speaker of the poem is “hysterical” and “hates all men.” Another very angrily defended the policeman in the poem as “just doing his job.” Even after we then analyzed the specific language and imagery Rich uses to describe the policeman, the student maintained his position.

I actually should not be surprised by these reactions; they merely echo very popular cultural stereotypes about rape and its victims, and evidence an anxious desire on behalf of some men to defend their sex class against what they perceive as feminist “paranoia” about rape. The “Not all men are rapists!” defense is commonly used in response to systematic feminist analysis of patriarchy such as Brownmiller’s or

Dworkin's. As reader-response theorists Patrocínio Schweickart and Elizabeth Flynn remind us, "the reader is a producer of meaning; what one reads out of a text is always a function of the prior experiences; ideological commitments; interpretive strategies; and cognitive, moral, psychological and political interests that one brings to the reading" (Schweickart and Flynn 2004, 2). Hence the wide spectrum of reactions, from empathetic recognition to disbelief, to anger, to venomous attack, with which rape narratives are met. However, while "it may be true that readers can read in various ways, ... are all these ways equally valid, valuable, or acceptable?" (Schweickart and Flynn 2004, 3). The answer to this question must be an insistent "no" if we truly believe that reading practices have a shaping role in transforming culture. Violent readings that purport to judge whether a rape survivor has "lied" relieve the reader of the responsibility to engage with the other as a subject bearing witness to her own experience. As Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol observe,

Personal testimony, understood and judged unproblematically as evidentiary, turns the speaker into a victim and molds his or her story into a case history, a piece of positivist evidence.... the reduction of testimony of remembered experience to evidence judged either as purely factual or mendacious, obscures the ways in which narratives of suffering offer bits of evidence that cannot easily be reduced to evidence. (Hesford and Kozol 2001; quoted in Schaffer and Smith 2004, 37)

Although widely divergent in form and purpose, any account of rape—from literary memoirs to courtroom testimony—can be experienced as a "difficult" text, one in which gaps and elisions signify. As Herman notes, in "the course of reconstruction, the story [of the survivor of rape] may change as missing pieces are recovered. This is particularly true in situations where the patient has experienced significant gaps in memory. Thus, both patient and therapist must accept the fact that they do not have complete knowledge, and they must learn to live with ambiguity" (1997, 180). The willingness to read from and into a space that may constantly revise and rewrite itself is a necessary challenge for those who seek to meaningfully engage with accounts of rape.

Because rape victims risk social marginalization as well as psychic fragmentation, it is important to remember that "marginalized individuals ... tend more frequently to invoke subversive and subvocal iterations to re-member the fragmented subject and regain an enabling sense of psychic coherence" (Henke 2000, xix). We may see this insight evidenced more explicitly in memoir that addresses sexual assault, but it is not only such "literary" texts that can make use of nontraditional narrative strategies in response to sexual violence. Yet, although most of us will encounter multiple stories of sexual violence in various contexts, the public at large does not always have access to knowledge about the ways in which trauma may alter conventional storytelling habits.

From student responses to peer-authored work to public comments on newspaper articles, reactions to accounts of rape vary as dramatically as the accounts themselves. Reader-response theory can offer us a valuable framework to begin to understand some of these divergent reactions: "By bringing their unique backgrounds and values to the words on the page, readers actualize the text into a meaningful work that in turn stimulates response. Meaning, therefore, should be attributed not to the text or reader but to the dynamic transaction between the two" (Schweickart and Flynn 2004, 4). All readings are products of the interactions between personal experience and larger cultural scripts. These readings may reinforce prevailing paradigms, or disrupt them. As individual readings of particular narratives and general cultural narratives feed into each other, each may be altered in response to such an exchange. My interest here is in how a multiplicity of ethical individual readings may have the potential to ultimately intervene in the

mainstream response to rape, in which doubt and repression are the predominant mechanisms for dealing with such an “unspeakable” event.

By approaching trauma-informed text from a standpoint of openness and reciprocity, and engaging with it on its own terms, we privilege practices that veer away from judicially based reading models: “Personal narratives and witnessing spur critical awareness of cultural difference and initiate possibilities for intersubjective exchange beyond the certainties of a secure sense of selfhood” (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 233). And because “the meaning of a text is not the product of isolated readers but the collaborative product of a community of readers” (Schweickart and Flynn 2004, 6), it thus becomes possible to collectively rewrite mainstream narratives of rape by encouraging reading practices—in our texts, in our classrooms, and in our courtrooms—that privilege ethical interaction with the experiences of another, no matter their form. Taslitz maintains that “the muting and distortion of women’s and minorities’ stories at trials work to support group subordination. The framing of narrative, therefore, carries profoundly political implications” (1999, 148). He thus puts an onus on the legal system “to unsettle cultural narratives” by educating jurors about the (often counterintuitive) sociology of rape: “The goal would be to open jurors’ minds to plausible alternative tales to the dominant ones” (132). The presentation of counternarratives that take into account the nature of trauma and the demographics of rape can lead audiences (here, the audience of the jury, whose response to rape narratives has immediate and immensely important consequences) to rethink their point of entry into stories of rape: “When a jury judges an act ‘consensual,’ it ... creates an interpretive truth based on its notions of worthy, coherent narratives and its moral judgment about the gendered meaning to be ascribed to the man’s and woman’s social behavior” (Taslitz 1999, 141). Providing juries with alternate lenses to approach testimony that cannot be accurately read through the lenses they have already acquired may, Taslitz suggests, encourage more comprehensive and ethical readings.

As Sebold and Brison attest, however, while successful prosecution of rape is important, it is not enough to halt the traumatic aftermath experienced by victims of sexual assault. Many victims turn to either therapy or therapeutic writing in the wake of rape. While the act of piecing together a story may be necessary, Herman stresses that “by itself, reconstructing the trauma does not address the social or relational dimension of the traumatic experience” (1997, 183). For those who choose to tell their stories of violation even in the face of overwhelming hostility and doubt, the presence of an audience committed to engaging with such utterances from a nondefensive position can be transformative for both speaker and witness.

Considering the fact that “life narratives have become salable properties in today’s markets” (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 23), and that stories of sexual violence continue to proliferate, it seems more important than ever that there is an audience that is attuned to the particular demands of trauma-based text:

Personal narratives expand audiences of people around the globe educated about human rights abuses. As they reach larger and larger audiences, they can affect readers and prompt acts of engagement with persons having experienced rights abuses. Within the context of life narrating, claims take on a human dimension, calling for the listener/reader to become more self-reflexive, more informed, more active.... While such narrative acts and readings are not a sufficient ground for social change, they are a necessary ground. (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 226)

The transformation of rape culture is indeed deeply connected to narrative and reading practices. As Schaffer and Smith hint, “translating” the embodied experience of sexual assault into language does not, in and of itself, solve the complex and lasting results of such violence for an individual or a culture, but I want to end here by insisting that the continued construction—and the ethical reception—of rape narratives is of overwhelming import. These acts can not only help victims of violence regain control of their own

experience, but are valuable in expanding narrowly conceived social constructions of what rape victims “are like.” The relentless cultural transmission of all stories of sexual assault—partial, fragmented, “imperfect” as they may be—is one way to confront the reality of rape and shape our knowledge of its reality. Each story of rape varies in its particulars; there is no one narrative that can contain these explosive and singular moments of disruption. Yet, placed beside each other, these experiences come to mean in a culture in which rape has always been a shaping factor, and function as a reminder of the complex power associated with not only the telling, but the hearing, of such stories.

Notes

1. And this when the rape is a violent one at the hands of a stranger—as Brownmiller reminds us, “date rapes look especially bad for the victim in court, if they ever get to court, nor do they look good on paper” (1975, 257).

2. I focus on female rape victims here because, as philosopher Ann Cahill points out, “men’s and women’s bodies are accorded radically different social significance, subject to radically different discourses, and presented with radically different demands.... Class, race, sexual orientation: these axes also distinguish bodies and produce different bodily experiences; therefore, those axes produce differences in the experience of rape and the threat of rape. By understanding the role of the body in sexual and social politics, we will gain a clearer understanding of rape as a bodily assault that is a disproportionate threat to women” (2001, 48–49).

References

- Brison, Susan. 2005. *Violence, Aftermath, and the Remaking of the Self*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Brownmiller, Susan. 1975. *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Butler, Judith. 2006. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- Cahill, Ann. 2001. *Rethinking Rape*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Dworkin, Andrea. 1983. *Right-Wing Women*. New York: Perigee Books.
- Francisco, Patricia Weaver. 1999. *Telling: A Memoir of Rape and Recovery*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Goldman, Abigail. 2008. “Rape Still a Crime Where Victim Can Share Blame.” *Las Vegas Sun*, August 17. <http://lasvegassun.com/news/2008/aug/17/rape-still-crime-where-victim-can-share-blame/>.
- Griffiths, Jennifer. 2009. *Traumatic Possessions*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 1994. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Henke, Suzette A. 2000. *Shattered Subjects*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Herman, Judith. 1997. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hesford, Wendy S., and Wendy Kozol, eds. 2001. *Haunting Violations: Feminist Criticism and the Crisis of the Real*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

- McKinley, James. 2011. "Vicious Assault Shakes Texas Town." *The New York Times*, March 8. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/09/us/09assault.html?_r=0.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1973. *Diving Into the Wreck*. New York: Norton.
- Schaffer, Kay, and Sidonie Smith. 2004. *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schweickart, Patrocínio P., and Elizabeth A. Flynn, eds. 2004. *Reading Sites: Social Difference and Reader Response*. New York: Modern Language Association of America.
- Sebold, Alice. 2002. *Lucky*. New York: Back Bay Books.
- Stein, Ben. 2011. "Presumed Innocent, Anyone?" *The American Spectator*, May 17. <http://spectator.org/articles/37595/presumed-innocent-anyone>.
- Taslitz, Andrew. 1999. *Rape and the Culture of the Courtroom*. New York: New York University Press.
- Trotta, Daniel. 2011. "Strauss-Kahn's Accuser: Schemer or Immigrant Survivor?" *Reuters*, July 26. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/26/us-strausskahn-accuser-idUSTRE76P4FA20110726>.