

Feminism and Philosophy



FALL 2023

VOLUME 23 | NUMBER 1

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Barrett Emerick and Ami Harbin

ABOUT *APA STUDIES ON FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY*

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

ARTICLES

Ann Cahill

Aftermath's Aftermath: Brison's Methodological, Pedagogical, and Disciplinary Contributions

Danielle Tumminio Hansen

Temporality, Hermeneutical Injustice, and Freedom After Rape

Karyn L. Freedman

Bodies Under Threat: Trauma and Motivated Ignorance

Miranda Young

Narrative Care: A Political Method of Survivor Self-Making and Communal Critique

Marie-Pier Lemay

Surviving the System: Justice and Ambiguity in the Aftermath of Sexual Violence

Jordan Pascoe

The Aftermath of Roe v. Wade

Susan Brison

The Words to Say It



APA STUDIES ON

Feminism and Philosophy

BARRETT EMERICK AND AMI HARBIN, CO-EDITORS

VOLUME 23 | NUMBER 1 | FALL 2023

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Barrett Emerick

ST. MARY'S COLLEGE OF MARYLAND

Ami Harbin

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

Susan J. Brison first published *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* in 2002. This issue celebrates its twenty-year anniversary and the publication of its second edition. It is not an exaggeration to say that *Aftermath* changed the way that many people think about what philosophy is and how it can be practiced. Brison recounts her experience of sexual assault and attempted murder, providing a profoundly rich analysis of violence, the nature of the self, what it means to experience trauma, and how to recover from trauma in community with others. It also makes the case for doing philosophy in a way that is deeply personal, starting from the lived experience of a particular person and thereby helping to illuminate similar experiences for others. We are honored to have been able to edit this issue and pay tribute to such an important and valuable work.

In October 2022, the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy held its conference at Oakland University in Michigan, and asked participants to consider the concept of aftermath, broadly construed. Speakers presented on the topic as considered and/or overlooked in discussions in the history of philosophy, and many focused on how feminist philosophical scholarship has taken up the concept over time. Brison presented the keynote address. Following the conference, the call for papers for this issue was shared, welcoming submissions from conference participants, as well as any others. Two of the authors in this issue were part of that conference program.

In what follows readers will find six anonymously peer-reviewed essays that were inspired by *Aftermath*, followed by a reflection from Brison.

In "Aftermath's Aftermath: Brison's Methodological, Pedagogical, and Disciplinary Contributions," Ann Cahill explores the transformative role *Aftermath* has played for the discipline, as well as the profound impact it often has on students when working through it together in class. In particular, Cahill puts *Aftermath* in conversation with the work of Merleau-Ponty, arguing that Brison's methodology avoids some of the ableist pitfalls that can be found in his work. Cahill goes on to explore two insights that emerge from that approach. The first is that our ways of thinking

impact our experiences and the meaning we make from them. The second is that legal processes can interfere with the way that those who experience trauma or violence attempt to engage in such meaning-making.

In "Temporality, Hermeneutical Injustice, and Freedom After Rape," Danielle Tumminio Hansen argues that dominant scripts of what counts as rape create circumstances where many people who survive rape are unable to name it as such, since their experiences do not fall within the bounds of those very limited scripts. An inability to name an experience as rape can create further distress for survivors. At the same time, one's body can know one has been raped, even without the ability to name the experience. Employing Miranda Fricker's conception of hermeneutical injustice, Tumminio Hansen argues that the process of acknowledging one's own experience of rape starts by tempering the hermeneutical power of the rape script and prioritizing the wisdom of the body.

In "Bodies Under Threat: Trauma and Motivated Ignorance," Karyn L. Freedman describes Brison's *Aftermath* as prescient: it pointed towards an account of trauma's embodiment that would in the years following its publication come to be seen in a shift away from a *psychological* towards a *neurobiological* conception of trauma in neuroscience and trauma theory. Freedman notes that there are good reasons to reserve the notion of trauma for the biochemical and neurological changes to the brain that result from a central nervous system under threat, and for those types of events in which such changes occur. Freedman then asks the question of why the neurobiological model has failed to gain widespread and mainstream purchase, and argues that such persistent ignorance ought to be regarded as *motivated*. The perpetuation of dominant but false narratives about the realities of sexual violence—a historically gendered phenomenon—results in tangible benefits for those who have committed sexual violence at the expense of losses to survivors. Misconceptions of the effects of traumatic events undermine the credibility of those who endure such experiences and contribute to unjust social relations within communities and between individuals.

In "Narrative Care: A Political Method of Survivor Self-Making and Communal Critique," Miranda Young considers the significance of survivor narratives following experiences of sexual violence. In particular, she examines the construction of narratives within the contexts of oppressive social norms which shape and constrain the survivor's self-understanding. Young argues for the importance of narrative care in the process of establishing survivor

narratives: “a practice of self-making through narrating, listening to, and treating survivor stories with care.” The paper outlines three tools of narrative care: third-person narration, an intentional form of listening that actively shifts subjectivity, and a Foucaudian form of genealogical work to understand the historical events that shape our understanding of sexual violence.

In “Surviving the System: Justice and Ambiguity in the Aftermath of Sexual Violence,” Marie-Pier Lemay explores some of the ways in which criminal or legal systems influence and shape the normative expectations experienced by survivors of violence. Specifically, she notes that survivors often experience moral ambiguity about whether to participate in the criminal justice system. On one hand, survivors might be reluctant to do so because they oppose carceral systems more generally or are personally reluctant to go through the process of a criminal trial. On the other hand, survivors might feel the social pressure of what it means to be a “good survivor” who is thought to be willing to participate in such systems. Lemay argues that such ambivalence is born in part from the way that being a “good survivor” is treated as something that is individualized, neglecting the way that sexual violence is in fact a structural phenomenon.

In “The Aftermath of *Roe v. Wade*,” Jordan Pascoe argues that Brison’s work in *Aftermath* offers tools for understanding how to conceptualize the harms of forced gestation following the *Dobbs* decision in June 2022. Noting that the end of *Roe* has created disastrous conditions for women and other potentially pregnant persons, Pascoe notes that more work is needed in philosophy and beyond to conceptualize the particular violations of state-mandated forced pregnancy, gestation, and childbirth. Pascoe argues for the need to reframe experiences of forced pregnancy, gestation, and childbirth as themselves instances of sexual violence, and explores further how such violations must be situated among other persistent state- and socially-sanctioned instances of gender-based violence.

In conclusion, Susan Brison weaves concepts found throughout these papers into a discussion of her experiences—of violence and writing about violence, of being silenced and speaking out. In further unpacking her own narrative, Brison situates it in the context of contemporary attacks on reproductive health care, misogynistic violence, and the ongoing privileging of some survivors’ narratives over others. Brison offers a reflection on the possibilities created by anti-rape activism from the 1990s up until the present, the pushback such activism generated, and the ways in which more public attention and transformation of social norms are still deeply needed. To that end, Brison’s paper serves as an invitation for more people to speak out and join this vitally important conversation.

ABOUT APA STUDIES ON FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY

APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy is sponsored by the APA Committee on the Status of Women and Gender. The newsletter is designed to provide an introduction to recent philosophical work that addresses issues of gender. None of the varied philosophical views presented by authors of newsletter articles necessarily reflect the views of any or all of the members of the Committee on the Status of Women and Gender, including the editor(s) of the newsletter, nor does the committee advocate any particular type of feminist philosophy. We advocate only that serious philosophical attention be given to issues of gender and that claims of gender bias in philosophy receive full and fair consideration.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

1. Purpose: The purpose of *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* is to publish information about the status of women in philosophy and to make the resources of feminist philosophy more widely available. *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* contains discussions of recent developments in feminist philosophy and related work in other disciplines, suggestions for eliminating gender bias in the traditional philosophy curriculum, and reflections on feminist pedagogy. It also informs the profession about the work of the APA Committee on the Status of Women and Gender. Articles submitted to the newsletter should be around ten double-spaced pages and must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language. Please submit essays electronically to the editor. All manuscripts should be prepared for anonymous review. References should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

2. Where to Send Things: Please send all articles, comments, suggestions, books, and other communications to the incoming editors: Ami Harbin, Oakland University, at aharbin@oakland.edu, and Barrett Emerick, St. Mary’s College, at bmemerick@smcm.edu.

3. Submission Deadlines: Submissions for spring issues are due by the preceding November 1; submissions for fall issues are due by the preceding February 1.

ARTICLES

*Aftermath's Aftermath: Brison's Methodological, Pedagogical, and Disciplinary Contributions*Ann Cahill
ELON UNIVERSITY

Sometime in 1995 or 1996, as I was approaching the end of my coursework for my PhD, I decided that I was going to write my dissertation on the topic of sexual assault. I was lucky enough to be in a graduate department that consistently supported feminist projects, and thus I had no hesitation about choosing this topic with regard to my standing in the department, no worry that it might be controversial or that I might struggle to assemble a supportive committee. With regard to professional implications, I was entirely naïve, and although there was no way to avoid knowing how dismal the job market was, I didn't think twice about going on the market with feminist theory as one of my primary AOSes, and the topic of sexual assault as central to my current and future research agendas.

I emphasize this lack of concern as a point of contrast, to highlight the kinds of risks that Susan Brison took in deciding to write about sexual assault. She wrote the articles that preceded *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (2002)—articles that I relied on as I completed my dissertation—as an untenured professor, unprotected by the kind of naivete that surrounded my choice of dissertation topic. Even if she had been so protected, her colleagues made it clear that writing about something so political, so disturbing, and so feminist could place her tenure in jeopardy. And of course there was the biggest risk of all: Brison was going to write about her own traumatic experience. Philosophers, by and large, are not supposed to do such things. We can imagine other worlds, and we can rely on utterly fictitious and even ludicrous examples, but delving into the meaning of our own trauma? Recounting the nuts and bolts of attacks against our bodies, our selves? It was untoward. It was hopelessly, and embarrassingly, particular. It wasn't philosophical. More to the point, it risked making the author herself seem less than philosophical.

It is no exaggeration to say that *Aftermath*, and the courage that drove Brison to write it, transformed our discipline. And given its transformative effects, I offer this piece as an unapologetic, albeit incomplete, tribute to the work. Other contributions to this issue will, I trust, extend its analysis and engage in the kind of critical reading that philosophers rightly value. But there is also a place within our field, or should be, for responses that remain focused on how a given text has improved how we think, how we teach, and how we adopt philosophical methods that are both generative and in alignment with anti-oppression values. In any case, that is what I aim to do here.

In claiming and mining her own experience of sexual assault as the philosophical topic that it was, Brison

changed our assumptions of what a philosopher looked like, sounded like, thought like, paving the way for works such as Karyn Freedman's *One Hour in Paris* (2014) and Linda Martín Alcoff's *Rape and Resistance* (2018). It helped, of course, that *Aftermath* is elegantly written, rigorously argued, and brimming with novel insights that ring true. As she describes the experiences of being overwhelmed by a violent stranger, subjected to judicial processes that were alienating and unmooring, and forced to construct a new self in the wake of gender-based, sexual violence, Brison the writer is sure-footed. She writes confidently about having her confidence shaken, organizing beautifully her portrayal of the cognitive confusion that trauma imposed upon her and laying bare the logical contradictions she identified in the charged assumptions that wove through her interactions with friends, family, and colleagues, some of which caused significant pain.

There are few books that I know as well as *Aftermath*. There has probably not been a year in the past two decades that didn't send me back to this book, diving into it with students of all levels, as well as fellow scholars. And while I've delighted in the careful parsing of Brison's arguments and analyses that I've undertaken in the context of colleagues, I have to admit that it's the experience of engaging the text with undergraduate students that has brought home to me its importance. I have taught chapters of *Aftermath* in such a wide variety of courses—a methods class, a class on sexual ethics, a two-week class as part of the summer philosophy program at Hamilton College (where the students had the opportunity to discuss their questions with Brison over Zoom), a philosophy of the body class—and it always, always stops students in their tracks. It has for me a remarkable balance of accessibility and insight; the writing is so direct and clear that there's no danger of the students becoming lost in a sea of jargon, and yet the central ideas are so astute, so revealing, that the students start clamoring to apply them to their own experiences and knowledge. It provides students with a model of how to reflect carefully and authentically on lived experience, demonstrating to them that it is possible to honor the particularity of the experience while simultaneously relating it to other scholarly texts and conversations—sometimes to reveal the latter's flaws, sometimes to illuminate the former's meanings, but always with the dual and co-constituted aims of generating philosophical insights and figuring out how to live in the world into which we have been flung.

But perhaps most importantly, *Aftermath* is pedagogically valuable insofar as it allows the students in my classes to grapple with the topic of gender-based violence without the distancing effects of the philosophical texts that preceded the work. Brison's work wasn't the first philosophical text centered on the harms and meanings of sexual violence, but the ones that preceded it refrained, on the whole, from extensive considerations of firsthand experience. This is not to say that there wasn't substantial and insightful feminist scholarship on sexual assault, including in feminist philosophy; Catharine MacKinnon's analysis of sexual violence (1989) was enormously influential, and works by Susan Griffin (1977), Susan Estrich (1987), H. E. Baber (1987) all made their way into feminist analyses (the scope

of the different feminist theoretical approaches to sexual assault were represented in Keith Burgess-Jackson's 1996 *Rape: A Philosophical Investigation*). But by and large, the scholarship generated by the discipline did not delve into the details of the experiences of those who had suffered sexual and/or gender-based assaults, primarily relying on either hypothetical, ostensibly paradigmatic examples or references to the sheer scope of the phenomenon (i.e., how commonplace sexual assault was). Such patterns were particularly strong in the non-feminist philosophical literature, which adopted a supposedly objective stance that often strenuously avoided questions of gender inequality.¹ While these and other texts made crucial philosophical interventions that illuminated the social and political meanings of sexual assault, none of them has had the pedagogical impact that *Aftermath* has had. By centering an actual, lived experience of sexual assault (and the social, judicial, emotional, and psychological effects of the assault), *Aftermath* made space in the classroom for other lived experiences, including ones that differ substantially from Brison's own. In reflecting on Brison's experience, and sometimes their own, students didn't so much apply her analysis to lived experience as much as they joined her in *Aftermath's* project: to think philosophically, and generatively, about firsthand experiences of the gender-based violence that is so prevalent in their everyday lives.

It matters, too, that I've recommended *Aftermath* to friends, colleagues, and relatives—not only to those struggling with an experience of gender-based violence, but also those trying to find their footing after any kind of traumatic experience (a car crash, the witnessing or experiencing of interpersonal violence, even if not gender-based, the sudden loss of a loved one). In one case, I suggested the book to a family member who is an accomplished artist, who produced [a series of moving works](#) inspired by Brison's description of trauma as a surd:

My current view of trauma is that it introduces a "surd"—a nonsensical entry—into the series of events in one's life, making it seem impossible to carry on with the series. This account of the nature of trauma draws on both senses of surd—the mathematical sense (from the Greek *alogos*) of an irrational number of quantity, not expressible by an ordinary fraction, but only by an infinite series and the linguistic sense of a voiceless sound or a sound dampened or deadened by a mute.²

While *Aftermath's* direct and accessible writing style, as well as its insistence on the importance of firsthand accounts of traumatic experiences, including gender-based violence, can explain how it thrives beyond the disciplinary bounds of philosophy, its scholarly contributions to the field itself are also crucial. Here, I highlight three of those contributions: crucial methodological approaches, one of which I explore at some length, and two specific insights that continue to reverberate throughout the literature on gender-based violence and trauma.

Central to the analyses that we find in *Aftermath* is Brison's insistence that experiences of trauma, as related by those who have actually undergone them, are philosophically

relevant—that they, if unpacked carefully and insightfully, speak directly to central philosophical questions:

Sexual violence and its aftermath raise numerous philosophical issues in a variety of areas in our discipline. The disintegration of the self experienced by victims of violence challenges our notions of personal identity over time, a major preoccupation of metaphysics. A victim's seemingly justified skepticism about everyone and everything is pertinent to epistemology, especially if the goal of epistemology is, as Wilfrid Sellars put it, that of feeling at home in the world. In aesthetics, as well as in philosophy of law, the discussion of sexual violence in—or as—art could use the illumination provided by a victim's perspective. Perhaps the most important issues posed by sexual violence are in the areas of social, political, and legal philosophy, and insight into these, as well, requires an understanding of what it's like to be a victim of such violence.³

I find it particularly helpful to contrast Brison's methodology regarding firsthand experiences of trauma with a quite different philosophical approach, precisely because it too promises to think from firsthand, embodied experiences: the references to and descriptions of illness and disability that are central to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. From his extensive descriptions of Johann Schneider's many ailments to his reliance on the example of the blind man's interaction with his cane, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1996) regularly turned to impaired and disabled bodies as he developed his phenomenology of embodied existence. Even as and when scholars in various fields related to critical theory (feminist theory, queer theory, disability studies, etc.) find his phenomenological approach useful in illuminating the lived experiences of members of socially and politically marginalized groups, they consistently note problematic ways in which such examples are put to use in his work:⁴

Merleau-Ponty uses case studies of people with impairments, in most instances, as subjects whose abilities and behaviors deviate from those of the "normal" subject. His primary interest is on what the former can elucidate regarding the latter. Merleau-Ponty only discusses the functional limitations of Johann Schneider and other individuals he uses as examples rather than focusing on ways society may limit them. This approach is in marked contrast to that of disability theorists. So, it may seem that Merleau-Ponty's framework is counterproductive for disability theory. However, given that he considers being in the world to be a system in which one's body and the world are fundamentally intertwined, his analysis goes beyond the objective body to examine some of the implications of impairment and illness for being.⁵

Merleau-Ponty's famous reading of the blind man's cane is problematic insofar as it omits the social dimensions of disabled experiences, misconstrues the radicality of blindness as a worldcreating

disability, and operates via an able-bodied simulation that conflates object annexation or extension with incorporation . . . if phenomenology is to become non-philosophy, as Merleau-Ponty once hoped, it must heed the insights of “crip” or non-normate phenomenology, which takes experiences of disability as its points of departure.⁶

These excerpts identify two different ways in which Merleau-Ponty’s inclusion of disabled and impaired bodies is problematic. On the one hand, as Christine Weisler points out above,⁷ Merleau-Ponty seems to use descriptions of the lived experiences of physical and cognitive impairments in order to discern the structures of normative embodied experiences. The pathology of the impaired body, in this methodology, allowed the normative functioning of embodied human beings, usually difficult to perceive precisely due to its consistency, to be identified and described. Here, Merleau-Ponty’s methodology seems distinctly subtractive: to come to an understanding of the ineluctably, intricately co-constituted nature of both embodiment and consciousness, he examined experiences where one or more factors were absent or impaired. Deficiency (particularly in the examples derived from Schneider’s experiences) here functions methodologically as a kind of experimental condition, philosophically relevant insofar as it illuminates normative forms of embodiment.

The case of the example of the blind man and his cane constitutes a different kind of mistake, one that Joel Michael Reynolds (2017) has examined at length. Here, the experience of the blind man, and the ways in which the cane is integrated into the man’s corporal schema, is taken as an example of human embodiment tout court. This methodology seems to be a distinct improvement over the first kind of approach, insofar as it does not take blindness as a deficiency, but rather as a form of embodiment that shares structural elements with non-blind embodied human beings. The trouble is, as Reynolds points out, that Merleau-Ponty does not avoid the “ableist conflation” of disability with suffering and deficiency, primarily insofar as he does not include central aspects of the lived experience of blindness in a world that privileges sighted bodies, and does not take into account the ways in which such ableism distorts the description of the blind man’s experience, a description not grounded in actual lived experience:

Of central concern here is the extent to which Merleau-Ponty’s claims about the cane are based in an able-bodied simulation of blindness that does not recognize the difference introduced by disability in the example and, insofar as they are so based, misleadingly support the role of blindness in the analogy with the feather and car. For brevity’s sake, I will refer to this henceforth as the bodily habit analogy. I will argue that this analogy runs awry by 1) omitting the social dimensions of blindness, 2) misconstruing the radicality of blindness as a complete sensory-perceptual experience—what I will call a “worldcreating disability,” and 3) operating via what seems to be a simulation grounded not in experiences of blindness, but of ocular sightedness.⁸

In both modes, Merleau-Ponty risks dehumanizing disabled persons. In the first case, by framing their experience as telling and illuminating precisely due to its distance from normative experience, the figure of the deficiently disabled person is used to throw into relief the structures of normative embodiment. In the second case, by blithely and implicitly using ableist assumptions about how disability shapes experience and ignoring how social dynamics shape the lived experience of disability, Merleau-Ponty too quickly conflates abled and disabled experience, thus failing to recognize the particularity of blind ways of being in the world.

In *Aftermath*, Brison avoids precisely both of these pitfalls. Her avoidance of Merleau-Ponty’s second mistake is the result of *Aftermath*’s most central contribution to the field, that is, her use of personal, firsthand experience. Where Merleau-Ponty must imagine what the blind man is experiencing, Brison is remembering (with all the complexities that memory entails) her own experience, and explicitly tracking the differences (including the epistemological differences) between the experiences of a survivor and the norms and assumptions of a social world that has not honored or integrated those experiences.

Her avoidance of the first mistake, however, is a bit more complicated, and requires more unpacking. As Brison reflects on her own experience of trauma, and draws on narratives from other survivors of trauma, she does not shy away from the harms and suffering that trauma imposes, including the paradoxical experience of feeling as if one was not alive:

When the inconceivable happens, one starts to doubt even the most mundane, realistic perceptions. Perhaps I’m not really here, I thought, perhaps I did die in that ravine. The line between life and death, once so clear and sustaining, now seemed carelessly drawn and easily erased.

For the first several months after my attack, I led a spectral existence, not quite sure whether I had died and the world went on without me, or whether I was alive but in a totally alien world. Tom and I returned to the States, and I continued to convalesce, but I felt as though I’d somehow outlived myself.⁹

Were Brison to adopt the first of Merleau-Ponty’s methodologies described above, she would take this experience as a kind of deficiency, an example of human beings leading a life that lacked something crucial to normative human experience. By contrast, Brison takes the lived experience of the survivor of trauma as itself a human experience, one not beyond the bounds of the norm, which by its distance and marginalization help us to see the norm in starker relief. By taking actual experiences of trauma seriously, and philosophically meaningful, we learn more about human existence, because Brison refuses to dehumanize those survivors, even as the harms that other persons have visited upon them include the persistent sense of nonexistence.

By avoiding Merleau-Ponty's first mistake, Brison is able to derive from the experiences of survivors of trauma a complex notion of the self that is resolutely relational and that honors both the importance of autonomy and the centrality of embodiment. She grounds this notion of self in a nuanced understanding of how a survivor may move through that sense of nonexistence, and what the process of integrating the experience of trauma (not to be confused with common models of healing, which too often implicitly adopt the foolhardy and damaging goal of reclaiming the self that one was before the trauma) requires and entails. What the survivor needs in this moment reveals truths about the self: not because the survivor is lacking in selfhood, but because the self of the survivor has been directly targeted and threatened, but not destroyed. In the same way that an acutely hungry person reveals the dependence that marks all humans, including those with easy and regular access to appealing and nutritious food, so too does the need of the survivor to have their narrative of trauma heard and recognized reveal truths about all selves:

Not to be heard means that the self the survivor has become does not exist for these others. Since the earlier self died, the surviving self needs to be known and acknowledged in order to exist.

This illuminates a connection among the views of the self as narrative, as embodied, and as autonomous. It is not sufficient for mastering the trauma to construct a narrative of it: one must (physically, publicly) say or write (or paint or film) the narrative and others must see or hear it in order to for one's survival as an autonomous self to be complete. This reveals the extent to which the self is created and sustained by others and, thus, is able to be destroyed by them. The boundaries of the will are limited or enlarged, not only by the stories others tell, but also by the extent of their ability and willingness to listen to ours.¹⁰

Brison's methodology produces a host of compelling insights that I find generative and insightful; here, I will limit my discussion to just two. The first consists of her analysis of how our categories of thought shape both our experiences ourselves and the meaning that we're able to make from them:

How one experiences a trauma, for example, depends on how one (often unconsciously) categorizes the event: is it life-threatening, is it human-inflicted, is it inescapable? These categorizations (which depend on the culturally available models and metaphors) determine whether one feels fear, anger, hopelessness, or other seemingly unmediated emotions.¹¹

In identifying the structural role that categories of thought play in experiences of trauma, the emotions associated with those experiences, and the meanings that survivors wrest from them, Brison refuses overly simplified models of sexual violence (such as Brownmiller's [1975] understanding of rape as violence, not sex) that do not sufficiently take into account social and political context.

It is crucial to note here that recognizing the socially constructed nature of an experience of sexual assault could be read as politically risky in a social context where there exist multiple hermeneutics of suspicion regarding the prevalence of gender-based violence and the harms that it imposes. If one has to convince one's community that gender-based violence happens (and far more frequently than is assumed), and that it is deeply harmful, it's tempting to adopt highly definitive approaches: sexual assault always does this, and always means that. Yet such definitiveness, as Alcoff (2018) argues persuasively, misrepresents the phenomenon itself (or, better yet, the phenomena, as gender-based violence occurs in a wide variety of social contexts and thus has a wide variety of meanings) and the experiences of those who are targeted by it. If one takes seriously the model of the human person as both embodied and relational, incapable of having experiences except through the lenses of shared (and contested) social categories and norms, then there can be no easy, clear, definitive understanding of sexual assault or gender-based violence; feminist political goals must thus be shaped by a willingness to engage with their irreducible complexity.

The second insight I would like to briefly address is Brison's description of how legal processes stultify the meaning-making process that integrating an experience of trauma requires, a description that captures an aspect of engaging with the criminal justice system that had previously been absent from the literature on sexual assault:

In comparison to most other rape survivors, I was lucky, in being able to bring the perpetrator to justice. But, it seems to me now, there are ways in which having to get—and keep—trauma narrative straight, for the purpose of a trial, for example, can also impede the process of recovery, hampering the ability to go on.¹²

What I emphasized earlier in this book as the central task of the survivor—regaining a sense of control, coming up with a coherent trauma narrative and integrating it into one's life story—may be crucial to the task of bearing witness, of living to tell, but it may, if taken too far, hinder recovery, by tethering the survivor to one rigid version of the past. It may be at odds with telling to live, which I now see as a kind of letting go, playing with the past in order not to be held back as one springs away from it. After gaining enough control over the story to be able to tell it, perhaps one has to give it up, in order to retell it, without having to "get it right," without fear of betraying it, to be able to rewrite the past in different ways, leading up to an infinite variety of unforeseeable futures.¹³

Here again, Brison's analysis allows us to see the harms in requiring, as judicial processes do, a stable and unchanging representation of an experience of sexual violence. Such a requirement denies not only the experience's complexity, but also the survivor's ongoing process of identifying (or not being allowed to identify, or refusing to identify) its meanings. That process, and therefore the meanings that it can generate, necessarily changes as the survivor

is inevitably (but not in predictable ways) influenced by any number of encounters: with other survivors, with communities of all sorts, with art, with one-on-one relationships. And yes, with scholarly texts. Neither Brison nor I would argue that all such influences are positive or beneficial to the survivor's flourishing and well-being, but the overarching point—that both survivors and their understandings of their traumatic experiences must be recognized as always in process, and that the judicial process distorts both in its demand for consistency and stability—is a crucial one.

These and other points have instigated meaningful and productive conversations in my classrooms, deeply informed my own understandings of sexual assault and gender-based violence, and served as models for me of just how productive philosophical work can be. But I'm not sure they or any of the many other insights in the work are as important as the way in which Brison's philosophical method serves to counter the specific kinds of harm that interpersonal violence imposes. As her theory of the self emphasizes, we, as embodied human beings, are vulnerable to the actions of others, so vulnerable that if those others attack and violate us, we cannot help but experience ourselves as the living dead. As a philosopher, though, Brison refuses to perpetuate that harm, and takes survivors of trauma not as the living dead, but as resolutely, persistently, undeniably human. Not shards of persons, but persons themselves. And this is the move, I think, that allows so many readers to respond to her work with relief and gratitude.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Belliotti, "A Philosophical Analysis of Sexual Ethics," and Bogart, "On the Nature of Rape," the latter of which explicitly refused the relevance of firsthand experience.
2. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, 103.
3. Brison, *Aftermath*, 4.
4. In addition to the two quoted here, see Weiss, "The Normal, the Natural, and the Normative: A Merleau-Pontian Legacy to Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Disability Studies."
5. Wieseler, "Missing Phenomenological Accounts," 89.
6. Reynolds, "Merleau-Ponty, World-Creating Blindness, and the Phenomenology of Non-Normate Bodies," 420–21.
7. See also Shew, "From a Figment of Your Imagination: Disabled Marginal Cases and Underthought Experiments."
8. Reynolds, "Merleau-Ponty, World-Creating Blindness, and the Phenomenology of Non-Normate Bodies," 424.
9. Brison, *Aftermath*, 8–9.
10. Brison, *Aftermath*, 62.
11. Brison, *Aftermath*, 31.
12. Brison, *Aftermath*, 102.
13. Brison, *Aftermath*, 103.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alcoff, Linda Martín. *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation*. Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018.

Belliotti, Raymond. "A Philosophical Analysis of Sexual Ethics." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 10, no. 3 (1979): 8–11.

Bogart, J. H. "On the Nature of Rape." *Public Affairs Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1991): 117–36.

Brison, Susan. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. New York: Bantam, 1975.

Burgess-Jackson, Keith. *Rape: A Philosophical Investigation*. Brookfield, VT: Dartmouth Publishing, 1996.

Estrich, Susan. *Real Rape: How the Legal System Victimizes Women Who Say No*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.

Freedman, Karyn. *One Hour in Paris: A True Story of Rape and Recovery*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Griffin, Susan. "Rape: The All-American Crime." In *Feminism and Philosophy*, ed. Mary Vetterling-Braggin, Frederick A. Elliston, and Jane English, 313–32. Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, 1977.

MacKinnon, Catherine A. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. London and New York: Routledge, 1945/1996.

Reynolds, Joel Michael. "Merleau-Ponty, World-Creating Blindness, and the Phenomenology of Non-Normate Bodies." *Chiasmi International* 19 (2017): 419–34.

Shew, Ashley. "From a Figment of Your Imagination: Disabled Marginal Cases and Underthought Experiments." *Human Affairs* 30 (2020): 608–16.

Ward, Katherine. "Misfitting, Breakdowns, and the Normal in Merleau-Ponty." *Human Studies* 45 (2022): 697–718.

Weiss, Gail. "The Normal, the Natural, and the Normative: A Merleau-Pontian Legacy to Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Disability Studies." *Continental Philosophy Review* 48 (2015): 77–93.

Wieseler, Christine. "Missing Phenomenological Accounts." *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 11, no. 2 (2018): 83–111.

Temporality, Hermeneutical Injustice, and Freedom After Rape

Danielle Tumminio Hansen
EMORY UNIVERSITY

When Susan Brison wrote in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* that, "Saying something about a traumatic memory does something to it," she made an enduring contribution to how we understand the narrative fracture of the self that occurs in trauma and the performative power that speech in community has as a means of recovery.¹ Now twenty years old, Brison's book remains fundamental to the work of philosophers and those more broadly engaged in trauma research.

The assumption that one can say something about trauma, however, presumes that trauma can be identified by the victimized party and, in turn, spoken about. But what happens when the trauma—and I will limit my argument here to sexual trauma—is not so easily identifiable? Put differently, what happens when, as Nicola Gavey asks, someone is raped but does not know it?² In what follows, I propose that hermeneutical limitations exacerbate problems with naming rape, resulting in a form of hermeneutical injustice that limits speech and that can even distort how victimized individuals know their own experiences, thus resulting in epistemic constraint. In particular, I propose a kind of friction between these dominant hermeneutics and the wisdom of the body. The lack of epistemic authority

granted the body as a valid source of knowledge—coupled with the hermeneutical power of rape scripts—thus has the potential to increase victims’ distress and inhibit their freedom, where freedom is defined as liberation from dominant hermeneutical constraints. In response, I suggest that individuals need three elements—time, resonant epistemologies, and safety—to counter the effects of this form of injustice so that they can speak in a way that, as Brison states, “does something to trauma.”³ To build this argument, I will employ Miranda Fricker’s conception of hermeneutical injustice to propose that there is the potential for a form of freedom to emerge if one can transcend the hermeneutical constraints. In the spirit of Brison, I employ first-person narrative to construct the argument.

HERMENEUTIC INJUSTICE AND RAPE ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Susan Brison’s most celebrated work revolves around her unflinching and skillful ability to weave her own experience of rape and attempted murder into a philosophical argument about the self, but the sexual violation she experienced at the hands of a stranger in France more than thirty years ago was not the only time she was raped. As she recounted in an op-ed for *TIME* back in 2014, Brison had also been raped as a college student by an acquaintance who came into her dorm room and used, presumably, minimal physical violence. She did not report the rape and, as she writes in the op-ed, she “told no one about it until many years later, and, even then, didn’t call what happened ‘rape.’”⁴ Brison goes on to recount that the event left her so traumatized that she considered taking her own life.

Brison is far from being the only person victimized by rape who does not label the experience as such and, because of the lack of labeling, does not receive the support needed to recover. Indeed, the psychologist Mary Koss proposes that a majority of women who have experiences that meet the legal definition of “rape” fail to acknowledge them, such that they are what Koss refers to as “unacknowledged rape survivors.”⁵ Koss provides data suggesting the lack of acknowledgment is most likely to occur when—as in the case of Brison’s rape in college—their experiences deviate from dominant rape scripts, often due to a prior relationship with the assailant or a lack of physical violence.⁶ Reinforcing the groundbreaking findings that Koss made, one meta-study found that only 39.6 percent of women who survived an event that matched the definition of “rape” acknowledged it;⁷ rates dipped further on college campuses, where 28.1 percent of women who survived an event that matched the legal definition of “rape” acknowledged it as such,⁸ while another study found that among cisgender men and trans individuals, rape acknowledgment was 17.9 percent.⁹ That same study found that lack of acknowledgment correlates with significantly higher rates of PTSD, anxiety, and depression.

Together, this data suggests that rape scripts hold significant hermeneutical weight, even going so far as to frame how victimized individuals label the event itself. This inability to label in turn exacerbates the harm. Individuals may experience greater psychological distress, and, without a label, they may have greater difficulty describing

it, with the result that they face additional barriers to telling others about it and receiving support. Their body’s reaction, therefore, can war with the hermeneutical pressure imposed by rape scripts in a kind of epistemic battle waged between the body’s ways of knowing and the dominant culture’s. Insofar as language reflects the construction of the latter, individuals with sexually violating experiences that deviate from the rape script may find themselves relegated to a locus of linguistic powerlessness such that they encounter what Hornsby and Langton have referred to as a lack of linguistic reciprocity.¹⁰

Much is at stake here, given that most rapes more closely resemble the one Brison experienced in college, not the one she wrote about in *Aftermath*. So if language performs such that the term “rape”—or its cousin, “sexual assault”—only represents violations that fit into the script of a stranger using physical violence to attack a white, sober, middle- or upper-class, unprovocatively dressed cisgender woman without significant disabilities, then a majority of those who experience harm will not find their experiences within the word meant to represent it. Low acknowledgment rates make even more sense when one recognizes how dominant beliefs and interpretive structures construct men, LGBTQ+ individuals, Black, Native American, Latinx, and Asian women as unrapable, as well as how a certain degree of violence has become embedded into normalized sex scripts. One need only refer to the rise in choking rates in sex for an example of what this looks like.¹¹

Still, what can be explained and what is morally justifiable are not synonymous. Likewise, the idea that something can be explained is not synonymous with the eradication of suffering. As stated above, low acknowledgment rates do not correlate with the kind of ignorance that leads to bliss; they correlate with increased distress, perhaps because the body knows a violation occurred even if that violation seems to exist beyond speech. Hence, the inability to find one’s experience rooted within dominant hermeneutical structures can be devastating for someone who experiences a violation they cannot label, as the event may leave them isolated, feeling they’re not entitled to use the word “rape,” and worried that, if they do so, they will not be understood. They may wonder why they’ve responded negatively to something that appears to be within the scope of “normal,” or be concerned that they’re co-opting the term from individuals who truly deserve to use it. They may feel significant psychological distress for no apparent reason, and, lacking an etiology that can be named, they may wind up feeling more distress as a result. Finally, they may feel unentitled to claim any kind of wrong was done because of the way the wider community might react to their testimony. As Brison herself reflects on the distinction between the rape she experienced in France and the one she experienced in her dorm room, “One was the best kind of rape, as far as my credibility as a victim was concerned. The other was the worst.”¹² In this way, a community can just as easily thwart the self’s recovery as it can aid in its reconstruction, per Brison’s argument in *Aftermath*.

If one’s experience deviates enough from rape scripts such that it seems as if the word “rape” no longer applies, but one is nonetheless experiencing a negative aftermath, informed

by shame, fear, depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, an eating disorder, or suicidal ideation, then one also faces what Miranda Fricker refers to as a “credibility deficit.”¹³ That deficit can be both internally imposed (*I believe I am not a credible victim*) as well as externally imposed (*Society does not believe I am a credible victim*). Those who survive a sexual violation that deviates from the rape script can thus face significant challenges both in terms of labeling the event in the privacy of their own mind as well as publicly labeling it to others, not just because the hermeneutical structures do not create space for it but also because the price to one’s sense of self may be too high. In both cases, there are practical effects. The inability to name what happened impacts the likelihood that one might seek out and receive appropriate support, whether it be in the form of therapeutic support or support from law enforcement, the court system, a Title IX office, one’s faith community, or one’s family and friend group. In other words, a vicious cycle emerges in which someone who was raped is unable to seek out support, thus exacerbating their own difficulties, and, in turn, doing little to change dominant hermeneutical structures because no one is challenging them.¹⁴

If victimized individuals face these challenges, so do those who perpetrate the harm, for the role they played in the rape likewise remains unacknowledged. As Brison herself notes in the *TIME* piece she wrote about the acquaintance rape in her dorm room,

I haven’t named the man who raped me when I was 20 and I don’t intend to. If he were to read this piece, he wouldn’t recognize himself—or me. If he did care enough to think about what happened, he wouldn’t have remembered it as a rape, since I froze instead of fighting back.¹⁵

Brison’s suggestion that the man who raped her would not himself label the event as such provides an example of how sex has absorbed within it some of rape’s violation. Put differently, because a certain degree of violence is considered part and parcel of a normal sexual encounter, then it becomes more likely that a perpetrator might not label their actions as inappropriate, much as a victim might not label their experience as “rape.” As Catharine MacKinnon summarizes, “Men who are in prison for rape think it’s the dumbest thing that ever happened . . . it isn’t just a miscarriage of justice; they were put in jail for something very little different from what most men do most of the time and call it sex. The only difference is they got caught.”¹⁶

As a result of the hermeneutical elision between sex and rape that MacKinnon describes, it makes sense that a person who perpetrates harm might be as unlikely to see the wrongdoing as the victimized party is. Indeed, if the violating event that someone enacts is normalized as appropriate according to dominant sex and rape scripts such that—to their minds and the minds of others—it ought to be labeled as “sex” and not “rape,” then they lack a reason to see themselves as a “perpetrator.” In contrast to barriers faced by the victimized party, however, the hermeneutical barriers to labeling the offense as “rape”

and the credibility deficit accompanying it appear, *prima facie*, at least, to benefit the perpetrator, as they can avoid uncomfortable accusations or the vulnerability required for active accountability. Audrey Yap relatedly suggests that the social imaginary also contributes to who we see both as a credible victim and as a credible perpetrator. Indeed, because the social imaginary aligns more with rape scripts than the actual scope of sexual harm, the victimized party not only suffers a credibility deficit but the person who perpetrated the harm experiences a credibility excess in cases where the sexual violation violates the rape script.¹⁷ That credibility excess, in turn, impacts not only how a single perpetrator interprets their actions but also how the class of perpetrators does. This includes pre-perpetrators, who have the luxury of believing their future actions are both possible and morally blameless because that is the hermeneutic that has been modeled unquestioningly for them.¹⁸

One thus sees that the way the rape script has embedded in language and affected acknowledgment rates, enabling the continued perpetuation of the violation. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that, as violence has become embedded into the normalized sex script, what is socially acceptable to categorize as “rape” must be more exotic than sex to attain credibility as a wrong.¹⁹ Systemic oppression—specifically misogyny and racism—can aid here, by casting the perpetrator as a Black male stranger who uses physical force against a white woman.²⁰ Of course, a majority of rapes do not possess this element of the exotic,²¹ such that the term “rape” performs in ways that enable continued perpetration not only of it but also of misogyny and racism, in turn benefiting those with power who would just as well prefer to maintain the status quo. As Catharine MacKinnon writes:

The world is not entirely the way the powerful say it is or want to believe it is. If it appears to be, it is because power constructs the appearance of reality, by silencing the voices of the powerless, by excluding them from access to authoritative discourse. Powerlessness means when you say, “this is how it is,” it is not taken as being that way. This makes articulating silence, perceiving the presence of absence, believing those who have been socially stripped of credibility, critically contextualizing what passes for simple fact, necessary to the epistemology of the powerless.²²

In this way, the hermeneutical injustice faced by those whose experiences do not align with standard scripts of rape illustrate how power embeds in language such that it performs in ways that enact concrete harm not only on the victimized party but on the wider community. The dominance of these scripts may cause listeners to adopt a kind of implicit bias; it may also cause pre-victims of rape, regardless of gender, to receive interpretative guidelines for their future experiences that ultimately result in a credibility deficit because the possibility of labeling themselves as “rape survivors” is foreclosed by the dominance of rape scripts.²³ An element of legacy thus accompanies the hermeneutical injustice of the term “rape,” one that elides through time, enabling not only the

lack of acknowledgment but also the assurance of future harm.

DOMINANT HERMENEUTICS VS. THE BODY

More than a decade before Brison published her *TIME* editorial, I experienced a rape that likewise might be considered “the worst,” as far as my credibility as a victim was concerned, a rape that fundamentally resembled the one Brison experienced in college.²⁴ Like her, I was in a dorm room. Like her, I knew the person who perpetrated the harm. There was psychological and verbal coercion but quite limited physical force. I had no reason to seek medical help and did not report the event to anyone at the time because it didn’t seem that there was anything notable to report. Indeed, had you asked me then—now more than twenty years ago—I would have told you that this all had been entirely appropriate, despite the fact that I said “no” several times through tears. The rape also caused substantial psychological harm that required years of therapy to address. I experienced intense anxiety, numbness that alternated with irrational anger, crushing nightmares, deflated grades, and trouble driving because my heightened startle response was triggered every time a neighboring car passed mine. I questioned whether I would ever date, marry, or have children, let alone finish my degree, and all the while time appeared to stop, and the narrative of my life stopped with it, as I found myself stuck in the trauma. Still, despite these symptoms, I didn’t say anything because I didn’t think there was anything to say, and when I went searching for stories that resembled mine, I found none. In other words, Brison’s reflections on her first rape might just as well have been mine: “I told no one about it until many years later, and, even then, didn’t call what happened ‘rape.’”²⁵

Legally, though, it was a rape, and even if legally it had not been, my body processed it that way, leaving me—like so many other survivors—in this liminal state of a trauma that lacked a label. Echoing Fricker, I was inhabiting the landscape of hermeneutical injustice, which had very practical consequences insofar as the symptoms I had appeared to have no etiology. But it also raised the question of what would happen if I could address what my body was trying to tell me and transcend the hermeneutical foreclosure. Returning to Nicola Gavey’s question posed at the beginning of this article, it was not so much that I did not *know* I had been raped. My body knew all along. The problem was I could not *name* that I had been raped.

Brison writes in *Aftermath* of the fury and terror that come with acknowledgment, and I have felt both. I have hated the world with a vengeance I did not know was within my heart to feel. Yet in cases where acknowledgment involves transcending hermeneutical injustice, my proposal is that one of the byproducts of naming the seemingly unnamable can also be that one enters into a less constrained epistemic and hermeneutical space, one in which what counts as a valid source of knowledge is reassessed such that knowledge is not interpreted according to the limits of dominant discourses but rather by the truth of what one has actually experienced. In this way, the process of challenging dominant beliefs about what constitutes “rape” creates the potential for a kind of epistemic freedom, in

which freedom isn’t defined by a positive, pleasant good—such as happiness—but rather is defined by epistemic and hermeneutical liberation from false ideologies. It is not, for instance, a joyous revelation to name one’s experience as rape, but it is one that can counter hermeneutical injustice and can open up once unforeseen epistemic possibilities, including a richer respect for the body’s wisdom. It is likewise not a joyous moment—epistemically or hermeneutically speaking—to recognize that sexual violations like rape are far more common and insidious than most publicized examples would have the public believe, but it does offer the possibility for fury and grief, as well as the eradication of the cognitive dissonance that may come from experiencing embodied symptoms of trauma but having no name for what has brought them on. Perhaps most importantly, it affords one the opportunity to act in resistance to future physical and hermeneutical violations by naming, listening, and acting differently in the world.

The process of acknowledging one’s own experience of rape, I would argue, starts by tempering the hermeneutical power of the rape script and instead prioritizing the wisdom of the body. Indeed, the body is a check and balance against whatever hermeneutics or ideologies or social constructions dominate the ways that individuals come to know and label “rape.” It registers what it experienced as violating, regardless of whether dominant hermeneutics codify it as such or not. In other words, one may be conscious that sexual harm happens to others; one might identify as a feminist; one might have read every book there is to read about rape, but there is a difference between reading about a violation and the body’s knowledge of it, and the epistemic bias against the body only exacerbates that. Moreover, when the body registers harm that does not lie within the scope of books or social norms or popular discourses, then suffering is exacerbated because it becomes difficult for the victimized party to speak and for their wider community to understand what they are saying. Given that, as Brison recognizes, “*Saying* something about a traumatic memory *does* something to it,” speech is necessary because it codifies and validates that what the survivor’s whole self—including their body—experienced is wrong.

But that speech is, of course, only effective if words exist to hold the concept *and* if listeners can receive what is being said without a credibility deficit getting in the way. This is another reason why Brison was right to assert in *Aftermath* that rape requires a communal response for the remaking of the self to occur.²⁶ Particularly when hermeneutical injustice intermingles with linguistic injustice—perhaps because of a gap in language or, per Hornsby and Langdon, because of a lack of linguistic reciprocity—then enacting any kind of liberation requires constructing speech that does the required conversational work, as well as having a community that is equipped to let those words perform as intended, rather than constraining them in a way that facilitates a credibility deficit.²⁷ Putting Brison’s work directly into conversation with Fricker’s, one might argue that the self can only be remade in relationship to others if a credibility deficit doesn’t obstruct it.²⁸

My proposal here is that decoupling one's naming of a violation from the dominant hermeneutics of it involves a process that might be described as the double consciousness raising of the body. At an internal level, the survivor becomes more aware of and takes the wisdom of what their body is trying to communicate more seriously, regardless of whether language can encapsulate it. At an external level, it also involves becoming more aware about what the societal body is saying, doing, and valuing about rape, sex, gender, power, and intersectional systemic oppression. The disharmonies, gaps, and syntheses between one's own embodied experience of a violation and the wider society's disembodied perceptions about it can reveal how hermeneutical injustice operates within the life of survivor. In this context, such injustice occurs, at least in part, because sources of power construct the wisdom imparted by survivors' bodies as being invalid or unreliable as a source of knowledge.

PRECONDITIONS FOR THE PROCESS

Three elements may be helpful foundations for the process of survivor acknowledgment, namely, exposure to time, resonant epistemologies, and safety. Time, the first component, is a double-edged sword for trauma survivors, both their biggest asset and, literally, their nightmare. Time—*prima facie*, at least—appears to exist as a horizontal plane that one moves forward in, from birth to death, accompanied by the daily undulations of one's moods or the body's needs. Yet survivors often feel stuck in time, seemingly unable to affect agency or escape from their embodiment of the trauma due to the presence of flashbacks and other psychological symptoms. Every moment of time, however, possesses the potential to lessen the power of the trauma, making temporality an essential asset for the trauma survivor.²⁹

Time, however, requires the synthesis of two other elements, one of which is exposure to resonant epistemologies. Philosophy—alongside other disciplines that confront assumptions in order to make sense of the world around us—makes unique contributions here. It is willing to challenge what society at large overlooks or refuses to name, just as it dares to speak of that which seems unspeakable but which is in fact merely taboo.³⁰ This is one of the reasons Brison's work remains so revolutionary, a model for a generation of scholars who have been inspired by her bravery to tell a vulnerable story while also being willing to employ that story in order to strengthen the wisdom of her discipline. Indeed, I first encountered *Aftermath* as I was struggling with my own experience of rape, and while I did not find myself in the practicalities of what she experienced, I did discover resonances in the argument she made for how the self is both undone and remade in community after a trauma. Those resonances, in turn, gave me the courage to take the wisdom she articulated and apply it to my own experience, such that she became a member of the community that helped me to reconstruct my own sense of self and begin to feel safe enough to publicly articulate what happened.

Resonant epistemologies, in other words, are worth little if there is not enough safety to uphold them. Safety—which psychiatrist Judith Herman notes is a primary need for

trauma survivors—therefore comprises the third element needed for this double consciousness raising process to occur.³¹ Such safety may be cognitive—as in the case I just described, where Brison's work offered cognitive solidarity, and, in turn, cognitive safety—but just as importantly, it may be physical, psychological, or spiritual. In my case, a community was essential to rebuilding my sense of safety, and it was a community made up not only of supportive friends but also of professors who created opportunities for me to wrestle with concepts that related to trauma and rape through their course offerings, readings, and assignments. Many of these professors had no idea that undergirding the comments I made in class, the notes I wrote in the margins of books like *Aftermath*—which a professor assigned to me early in graduate school—or the words I wrote in my papers was a personal wrestling with rape. Disclosure was not the point; wrestling with matters of ultimate concern was. Academics, in other words, play a critical role in trauma recovery, sometimes in ways they never know, simply by doing the work of teaching, writing, and researching about issues that touch the lives of their students.

The process of interpreting rape through time, safety, and exposure to epistemologies and hermeneutics that challenge dominant ones thus has the potential to change a survivor's understanding of not just the event itself but also of the world around them such that the survivor has a more authentic way of expressing their experiences, who they are, and how they make sense—or do not make sense—of the world around them. These elements thus can prevent hermeneutical injustice from having a hold, from constraining one's knowledge of their experience and the world around them, but also, as Fricker notes, from becoming a person who “may be, quite literally, prevented from becoming who they are.”³²

The way one labels the memory may thus become more accurate with time, truer to itself via exposure to epistemologies and hermeneutics that offer solidarity, and easier to acknowledge with safety. The cash out, in turn, is a different way of knowing and being in the world, one that has practical wisdom that can be used for good, perhaps to challenge dominant power structures or to support other survivors. As Linda Martin Alcoff reflects, “A personal history that includes rape or sexual abuse can indeed color our perception, not necessarily causing us to jump to conclusions, but perhaps yielding into likely outcomes. We may be more aware of the signs of abuse, more distressed at what we know will be a long-term trauma.”³³

One might contend, from this argument, that the process I'm proposing suggests that there is a concrete good that emerges from rape—what social scientists might term “resilience” or “post-traumatic growth”—and that this concrete good is worth the cost of the trauma, per Brison's aunt, who wrote in a belated birthday card to Brison that the rape she described in *Aftermath* would enable her to “become stronger” and “able to help so many people. A real blessing from above for sure.”³⁴ Such a read would be to misappropriate my argument, which is not that there is a benefit to sexual trauma that outweighs the cost or even that the knowledge gained could not be gained by

another means. Rather, my proposal is that in cases where hermeneutical injustice constrains acknowledgment, the experience of breaking through that barrier has the potential to participate in the reconstruction of the self by helping one to restructure how one understands their experience of sexual harm as well as their sense of self and the world around them. One might even go so far as to say that in such cases, the truth does set a person free.

This oft-invoked biblical quotation—cloyingly inscribed onto mugs and wooden Etsy plaques—is one Brison herself references in *Aftermath*, where she reflects on what she has learned in the period following the attack she experienced in France. In that statement, she writes that “It has been hard for me, as a philosopher, to learn the lesson that knowledge isn’t always desirable, that the truth doesn’t always set you free. Sometimes, it fills you with incapacitating terror and, then, uncontrollable rage.”³⁵ The expression—whether implicitly or explicitly—reflects the assumption that freedom ought to be an asset to the self. This assertion also relies upon a certain conception of it. Indeed, truth may not set one free if one presupposes freedom as an existentially laden concept wherein being set free is equivalent to being liberated from physical, psychological, and emotional constraints. In this case, joy, happiness, and a life that involves moving around in the world without risk are treated as synonymous with liberation from such constraint. But if one reconceives freedom as hermeneutical liberation from falsehoods, including flawed ideologies or, borrowing Kate Manne’s terminology, from being pre-gaslit or self-gaslit, then perhaps freedom is indeed what is attained when one acknowledges a sexual violation that seems, *prima facie*, unnamable.³⁶

Of course, one might argue that this kind of hermeneutical freedom is of comparatively little value in relation to the cost of attaining it, and at some level, I don’t disagree, if for no other reason than that taking the experiences of survivors seriously means including those survivors who have felt that life was not worth living after what they suffered.³⁷ Though I’ve never been suicidal, I can imagine a million ways my life would be more carefree and convenient if I didn’t know what I know cognitively or if my body didn’t know what it knows physically. What I experienced left me needing years of mental health treatment, and it has impacted every corner of my life, from how I hear news articles about an alleged rape to how I parent. I do not know who I would have become had it not occurred, for good or for ill, but I know that I would not be who I am now.

While the cost of knowing has been high, I would argue that the higher cost was that the violation occurred in the first place. In other words, wishing I did not know I was raped is different than wishing there was nothing to know. I was raped, and even if I did not want to cognitively give credence to that knowledge, my body was not willing to forget. Put differently, I cannot undo that night or the relationship of which it was a part, and insofar as that time in my life left an embodied trace, not knowing was doing concrete harm because it meant I could not ask for help. Having spent years with undiagnosed mental illness and an undiagnosed cause for it, I can say that it was a lonely and frightening way to live. At least now I can speak and be

heard, and I want to speak and be heard, because I know there are others who have had or will have experiences like mine. I want to be part of the community that listens and takes concrete steps to change individual lives and societal structures because, as Brison argues, this is not only how the self gets reconstructed after the fracture of a trauma but also how future harm gets prevented.

Society, of course, is not always interested in helping survivors reconstitute the self or in hearing their stories. All too often—even given the heightened awareness of #MeToo—it is not interested in survivors at all. To that end, one of the reasons why some survivors feel that life is not worth living—or that knowledge is not worth having—after a sexual violation is because of what they learn about their communities when they try to disclose the harm. They discover too many people do not believe survivors or are apathetic to their suffering. They find that the criminal justice system and Title IX committees will all too often not care to hear what they have to say. They become prophets unwelcome in their hometowns. The freedom that comes from being aware thus becomes a double-edged sword, yielding to a “consciousness of weakness and a consciousness of strength.”³⁸ That consciousness is not just about one’s own being but about society at large, such that, to some extent, the question of whether knowledge is worth gaining is contingent upon what kind of knowledge one gains about their community. If communities more often did the work of self-construction that Brison describes as meaningful or took steps to eradicate sexual harm in the first place, then perhaps some of what survivors could discover about their communities would be less distressing.

Yet there is a distinction between imposing a way of interpreting one’s life and making a hermeneutic available as a potentially valuable resource that a survivor can call upon of their own free will. In other words, just as it could be potentially harmful to tell someone they were raped if they did not know it, it could potentially be just as harmful to keep that knowledge from them if it could give them a more complete understanding of their past and present experiences. Hence, I would not go so far as to force another survivor to know that they’d experienced a rape if they were blissfully ignorant, but at the same time, the body does keep the score, as Bessel van der Kolk notes.³⁹ The body has the capacity to speak in ways that press against the limits of language and social constructions and hermeneutics, and at times when its wisdom is demanding acknowledgment, I cannot help but wonder about the freedom that can come from employing language and hermeneutics in its service, especially if the wider community aids in the effort.

The society that Brison wrote *Aftermath* for twenty years ago both is and is not the society of today. In many ways, the fears, divisions, injustices, and power structures that existed then are more prominent now, simultaneously because of the efforts of those like Brison who sought to raise the culture’s consciousness and because of the continued attempts by those in power to chip away at institutions and systems designed to protect the vulnerable. Her book is one that might be said to be unfortunately timeless, because it would be vastly preferable if society had taken

more steps over the past twenty years to eradicate the kinds of violations that Brison so unflinchingly analyzes. Indeed, in a more ideal world, she would never have had to write the book at all. But neither her body nor mine has the luxury of denying that rape occurs in ways more frequent and insidious than society cares to acknowledge.⁴⁰ Her book therefore continues to remind readers that survivors speak to be heard, just as those who listen have a responsibility to listen in order to understand. After all, it is their understanding that reminds us that we are not alone, that there is trust worth having, and that there is hope for a world that might one day come to be, even if it's a world that our bodies may never know.

NOTES

1. Brison, *Aftermath*, 56.
2. Gavey, *Just Sex?*, 288.
3. Brison, *Aftermath*, 56.
4. Brison, "Why I Spoke Out about One Rape but Stayed Silent about Another."
5. Mary P. Koss, "Hidden Rape: Sexual Aggression and Victimization in a National Sample of Students in Higher Education," in *Violence in Dating Relationships: Emerging Social Issues* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 145–84. See also Mary Koss, "The Hidden Rape Victim: Personality, Attitudinal, and Situational Characteristics," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 9 (1985): 193–212, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1985.tb00872.x>.
6. See Koss, "The Hidden Rape Victim"; Koss, "Hidden Rape." See also B. Bondurant, "University Women's Acknowledgment of Rape," *Violence Against Women* 7 (2001): 294–314.
7. Laura C. Wilson and Katherine E. Miller, "Meta-analysis of the Prevalence of Unacknowledged Rape," *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse* 17 (2016): 149–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838015576391>.
8. Laura C. Wilson et al., "Examining the Psychological Effect of Rape Acknowledgment: The Interaction of Acknowledgment Status and Ambivalent Sexism," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 73, no. 7 (September 2016): 864–78, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22379>.
9. RaeAnn E. Anderson et al., "Differences in Rape Acknowledgment and Mental Health Outcomes Across Transgender, Nonbinary, and Cisgender Bisexual Youth," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36, no. 13–14 (July 2021): NP7717–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519829763>; Karen G. Weiss, "Male Sexual Victimization: Examining Men's Experiences of Rape and Sexual Assault," *Men and Masculinities* 12, no. 3 (January 2010): 275–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X08322632>; Tiffany Artime, Ethan McCallum, and Zoe Peterson, "Men's Acknowledgment of Their Sexual Victimization Experiences," *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 15 (July 1, 2014): 313–23, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033376>. Interestingly, the rate was way higher among gender nonbinary individuals at 79.9 percent.
10. Rae Langton and Jennifer Hornsby, "Free Speech and Illocution," *Legal Theory* 4, no. 1 (1998): 21–37, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1352325200000902>.
11. Debby Herbenick et al., "Frequency, Method, Intensity, and Health Sequelae of Sexual Choking Among US Undergraduate and Graduate Students," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 51:6 (August 1, 2022): 3121–39, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-022-02347-y>.
12. Brison, "Why I Spoke Out about One Rape but Stayed Silent about Another."
13. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 17.
14. To be clear, I do not think it is the responsibility of a rape survivor to challenge hermeneutical structures. I am saying that the wider society, especially those with power to construct hermeneutics and narratives, need to widen the scope of what is considered wrong so that victimized individuals can find themselves within the words meant to represent their experiences.
15. Brison, "Why I Spoke Out about One Rape but Stayed Silent about Another."
16. MacKinnon, Catharine, "Sex and Violence: A Perspective," in Patricia Searles, ed., *Rape And Society: Readings on the Problem of Sexual Assault* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 30.
17. Audrey S. Yap, "Credibility Excess and the Social Imaginary in Cases of Sexual Assault," *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (December 20, 2017): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2017.4.1>.
18. I employ the term "pre-perpetrator" in the spirit of the term "pre-victim" utilized by Ann Cahill. See Ann J. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).
19. For a study on how students described the difference "rape" and "sex" in a way that defined "rape" in terms of its most stereotypical and least common attributes, see Heather L. Littleton and Danny Axsom, "Rape and Seduction Scripts of University Students: Implications for Rape Attributions and Unacknowledged Rape," *Sex Roles* 49, no. 9 (November 1, 2003): 465–75, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025824505185>.
20. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 22–28; 173–201.
21. While reporting of rape remains low, it is worth noting that according to an FBI report from 2019, approximately 70 percent of those arrested for rape were white men, whereas only 26 percent were Black men. "FBI: Arrests by Race and Ethnicity, 2019," <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime-in-the-u.s.-2019/topic-pages/tables/table-43>.
22. Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 164.
23. For more on the concept of the pre-victim, see Ann J. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 200.
24. Brison, "Why I Spoke Out about One Rape but Stayed Silent about Another."
25. Brison, "Why I Spoke Out about One Rape but Stayed Silent about Another."
26. Brison, *Aftermath*, xi, 49–52.
27. Brison, *Aftermath*, 176–226.
28. Brison, *Aftermath*, xi.
29. For a book-length philosophical examination of sexual violations and time, see Megan Burke, *When Time Warps: The Lived Experience of Gender, Race, and Sexual Violence*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).
30. Brison, *Aftermath*, 51.
31. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 155–75.
32. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 5.
33. Linda Martín Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018), 70.
34. Brison, *Aftermath*, 11.
35. Brison, *Aftermath*, 20.
36. Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 15.
37. For one particularly well-publicized case, see the suicide of Daisy Coleman.
38. Sandra Lee Bartky, "Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness," *Social Theory and Practice* 3, no. 4 (1975): 425–39, 431. See also Ami Harbin, *Disorientation and Moral Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 82.
39. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014).
40. Brison, *Aftermath*, 4, 9.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alcoff, Linda Martín. *Rape and Resistance*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018.

Bartky, Sandra Lee. "Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness." *Social Theory and Practice* 3, no. 4 (1975): 425–39.

Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

———. "Why I Spoke Out about One Rape but Stayed Silent about Another." *Time Magazine*. Accessed October 14, 2019. <https://time.com/3612283/why-i-spoke-out-about-one-rape-but-stayed-silent-about-another/>.

Burke, Megan. *When Time Warps: The Lived Experience of Gender, Race, and Sexual Violence*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

Cahill, Ann J. *Rethinking Rape*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Vintage, 1983.

Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Gavey, Nicola. *Just Sex?* New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

Harbin, Ami. *Disorientation and Moral Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Herbenick, Debby, Tsung-chieh Fu, Heather Eastman-Mueller, Sally Thomas, Dubravka Svetina Valdivia, Molly Rosenberg, Lucia Guerra-Reyes, Paul J. Wright, Keisuke Kawata, and John R. Feiner. "Frequency, Method, Intensity, and Health Sequelae of Sexual Choking Among US Undergraduate and Graduate Students." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 51, no. 6 (August 1, 2022): 3121–39.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Kolk, Bessel van der. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking, 2014.

Langton, Rae, and Jennifer Hornsby. "Free Speech and Illocution." *Legal Theory* 4, no. 1 (1998): 21–37.

Littleton, Heather L., and Danny Axsom. "Rape and Seduction Scripts of University Students: Implications for Rape Attributions and Unacknowledged Rape." *Sex Roles* 49, no. 9 (November 1, 2003): 465–75.

MacKinnon, Catharine A. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Searles, Patricia, ed. *Rape And Society: Readings on The Problem of Sexual Assault*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1995.

Yap, Audrey S. "Credibility Excess and the Social Imaginary in Cases of Sexual Assault." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3:4 (December 20, 2017): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2017.4.1>.

Bodies Under Threat: Trauma and Motivated Ignorance

Karyn L. Freedman
UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

Among the many remarkable achievements of Susan Brison’s *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* is the account she offers of the unruly body of the rape survivor, indeed, as she lays bare, of her own unruly body in the aftermath of the life-altering sexual assault and attempted murder she suffered in the summer of 1990, as she found herself gripped by what she calls the “autonomy-undermining symptoms of PTSD.”¹ When *Aftermath* was published, the fast-developing neuroscience of trauma was just taking a firm hold. In the twenty years since then, the neurobiological model of trauma has come to dominate the field. Over this period there has been a marked shift away from a conception of trauma as psychological, manifesting in the deliberative and self-reflective evaluations survivors

experience following a traumatic event, to a conception of trauma as neurobiological, manifesting in a set of autonomic bodily responses that result from structural changes to the brain. Brison was prescient on this point in *Aftermath*, as she was on many others. The way that trauma plays out in the body seemed to her no more under deliberative and conscious control than “were my heartrate and blood pressure,”² as she put it, which made her wonder, twenty years ago, whether we ought to be calling trauma “psychological.”³ She was onto something.

Picking up on her lead, in Part One of this paper I argue for a narrow and precise conception of trauma. While there are a multitude of serious harms that survivors experience following events that threaten life and bodily integrity, there are good reasons to reserve the notion of trauma for the biochemical and neurological changes to the brain that result from a central nervous system under threat, and for those types of events in which these changes occur. As I elaborate below, this conceptual shift is in keeping with the science of trauma as it has evolved over the last two decades, and it is a conception that captures a broad spectrum of traumatic events, from a one-time sexual assault, which will be my central focus here, to the complex trauma that arises from repeated incidences of sexual or physical violence, as well as the trauma that results from living under life-threatening social, political, and material conditions, like war, racism, and colonialism. Finally, it provides leverage against a host of injustices faced by survivors of traumatic events.

Considering its dominance in neuroscience and trauma theory, it is worth asking why the neurobiological model has failed to gain widespread mainstream purchase. In Part Two, I argue that this persistent ignorance ought to be regarded as *motivated*. My thinking on this subject has been influenced by Charles Mills’s notion of white ignorance,⁴ which I take to be the defining case of motivated ignorance. With white ignorance, the truth about what it is like to be a Black person in the United States (and elsewhere⁵) is systematically denied through the perpetuation of dominant but false narratives that help to maintain white privilege. As Mills shows, motivated ignorance arises in circumstances of unequal power relations between social groups in which the absence of truth inoculates people in positions of privilege from having to reflect on the unearned benefits they receive in virtue thereof.

In the case of trauma, ignorance about the neurobiological consequences of traumatic events occurs within the context of a broader phenomenon that, in a nod to Mills, I call male ignorance.⁶ Here, the perpetuation of dominant but false narratives about the realities of sexual violence, a historically gendered phenomenon, results in tangible benefits for men at the expense of losses to women, as I elaborate below.⁷ This incentivized non-knowing about the ways in which threats to life and bodily integrity result in acute brain changes allows for the flourishing of misinformation and falsehoods about the routine and predictable embodied consequences of threatening events. This leaves us with a picture of the survivor’s behavior in the aftermath of a traumatic event as incoherent, baseless, exaggerated, overly emotional, even foolish, a picture which feeds into

rape myths while trivializing and minimizing the harms of sexual violence, abusive domestic environments, and oppressive social conditions. This view of the aftermath of traumatic events undermines the credibility of those who endure these experiences and contributes to unjust social relations within communities and between individuals. It results in unfair treatment of survivors of sexual violence broadly speaking, but perhaps most acutely within the criminal justice system.

PART ONE: TRAUMA

Aftermath was published in 2002, around the same time that I was completing my PhD in philosophy. A dozen years before that, in the summer following my first year as an undergraduate student, I had been raped while travelling in France, coincidentally like Brison, as she reveals in *Aftermath*, but unlike Brison, I was not “out” about my experience. Being raped had nearly destroyed me, as it often does, and immediately afterwards, awash with the shame that comes unbidden from having your body used sexually against your will, I decided to keep my rape a secret, as if not talking about it might make it go away. But my body has always known better. The trauma lodged deep within and played out in my body in ways that seemed to me, at the time, surprising and arbitrary—jumping at the slightest sound, feeling afraid in situations that I knew were safe, my heart racing for no apparent reason, and so on. I could not make sense of these and other recalcitrant experiences, which only amplified the various other challenges that I was having—the crushing anxiety, intrusive thoughts, panic attacks, and sleepless nights. Ten years on, my inner life had become wearying, and I could not go on as I had been, in denial. I decided to find a therapist and face head-on what had happened to me. Not long after that, I got my hands on a copy of Brison’s newly published *Aftermath*.

This book broke me wide open. At a time when I was too vulnerable to speak my truth, it made me feel seen by rendering visible what it is like to be raped, what it feels like, from the inside. Before Brison, rape was barely considered a legitimate topic in mainstream philosophy.⁸ *Aftermath* changed that and set a bar for philosophical accounts of rape by interweaving the personal with the philosophical, legitimizing the value of first-person narratives in philosophy by expertly providing a case in point, and its account of relational autonomy and the remaking of the self through narrative laid the foundation for contemporary philosophical conceptions of rape and recovery.

But, in my mind, one of the key achievements of the book is Brison’s account of the chaotic and uncooperative body of the rape survivor. Her description of what happens to bodies under threat, of what happened to *her* body, mirrored what was happening to mine in a way that, when I first read it, seemed uncanny. That sense of uncanniness faded once I understood more about trauma, but at first, I found it surprising how similar our experiences in the aftermath had been, especially the patent loss of control over our own bodies. This is what Brison refers to as the autonomy-undermining symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including intrusive thoughts, flashes of unwanted images, exaggerated startle response, panic attacks, and hypervigilance.⁹ While not all survivors of

threatening life events experience the full range of these symptoms, and not always to the same degree, far from being unpredictable or arbitrary—despite how they might feel in the moment—these autonomic responses are the routine and foreseeable consequences of traumatic events like rape.

I will refer to these characteristic symptoms of PTSD as somatic harms because they are foremost among the acutely felt unconscious embodied responses of a central nervous system to a threatening life event. But they are only one kind of manifestation of the damage to the brain’s threat circuitry, and only one of a multitude of serious harms that survivors experience in the aftermath of sexual violence.¹⁰ These harms are not discrete, and they interact in complex ways. Still, it can be helpful to group them roughly into general categories.

In addition to somatic harms, sexual violence can also result in clinically detectable injuries to the body, like abrasions, cuts, and fractures—a straightforward conception of physical harm, for which the expression “physical trauma” remains apt. There is also a set of harms that fall somewhere in the categories of psychological and emotional, including shame, grief, sadness, fear, and rage, which tend to chip away at one’s self-image, identity, trust in others, and sense of security.¹¹ There is also the potential of social, political, and material harms that arise within certain cultures, especially but not exclusively religious ones, including rejection by family and friends, dissolution of relationships, and ostracization from communities. Finally, following Fricker,¹² there is the quintessential epistemic and ethical harm of not being believed or treated as a credible reporter of one’s own experience.¹³

These are some of the typical harms that arise in the aftermath of a traumatic experience like rape. They are properly categorized as harms because each one changes one’s life for the worse.¹⁴ Colloquially, and in fields outside of neuroscience and trauma theory, they are referred to collectively as the trauma of rape. This loose characterization of trauma is, in part, indicative of the evolution of the concept, which has become both ubiquitous and diluted, such that “trauma” is used to refer to all manner of unpleasant life events, ranging from truly difficult but not life-threatening to trivial—from the breakup of a marriage to not getting a table at the trendy restaurant. While characterizing the harms of sexual violence as the trauma of sexual violence has the advantage of identifying the cause or source of the various harms, it does so at the expense of conceptual accuracy. Given what we now know about what happens to brains under conditions of inescapable threat, we ought to say, more precisely, that the trauma of rape, like the trauma of war, complex trauma, and the trauma that arises from living under threatening social conditions, consists in prolonged stress to the brain’s threat circuitry. The collection of harms described here are best understood as the consequences of trauma—the *aftermath*—in varying degrees of directness.

Although the neuroscience of trauma is a relatively new discipline, the concept of trauma dates back centuries, and in recent history has undergone dramatic paradigm

shifts. This has been well documented by historians of medicine, sociologists, and trauma theorists, who chart the evolution of the term from the Greek for “wound,” used to refer strictly to physical injuries (a use still seen in medical contexts, e.g., trauma wards), to the striking shift in the mid- to late 1800s when the concept was psychologized.¹⁵ With increased attention being paid to the mind and human psyche among physicians and in the emerging fields of psychiatry and psychoanalysis in America and Europe, the idea of a psychic wound took hold, as medical practitioners observed in their patients behavioral patterns suggestive of a nervous system subjected to extreme threat. The early permutations on psychological trauma—from railway spine to nervous shock, hysteria, traumatic neurosis, and shell shock—reflected shifting conceptions of illness and disease.¹⁶ The concept continued to gain momentum over the course of the century, in the context of catastrophic events like World War One and the Holocaust. By the end of the Vietnam War, with the explosion of post-war forms of suffering among veterans, there was a coordinated and successful campaign by activists, psychiatrists, and social workers to have psychological trauma recognized as an official psychiatric category in the third edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)*.¹⁷ Soon after that, feminists and mental health professionals began to draw attention to the consistency between the characteristic symptoms of PTSD exhibited by war veterans and survivors of rape and domestic violence.¹⁸

Forty years later, following a fertile period beginning in the 1990s (what Bessel van der Kolk has dubbed the “neuroscience revolution”),¹⁹ we now have a robust explanation that accounts for this remarkable consistency among survivors of traumatic events. The routine and predictable aftermath of terrorizing life events is a consequence of the brain’s threat circuitry gone haywire due to prolonged activation of the stress response. The brain is evolutionarily wired to scan for danger. The amygdala is the central hub of the defense or threat circuitry in the brain (what used to be called the “fear center”²⁰), and when it senses threat it sets off a fight-or-flight-or-freeze response. These are adaptive, nonconscious defense responses that have evolved over time to help us survive dangerous situations. Recent advancements in neuroscience tell us that once the defense mechanism is triggered, there is a significant release of stress hormones, including cortisol and adrenaline, which make the heart beat faster and increases blood pressure, pulse rates, and breathing. This rush of chemicals occurs instinctively, before we even feel afraid and before we are consciously aware of a threat. This energizes a fight-or-flight-or-freeze response in a dangerous situation,²¹ which, when successful, can help quell the release of the stress hormones. But when the threat is inescapable, such as in cases of chronic abuse, rape, war, and oppressive social conditions, the secretion of stress hormones continues and floods our nervous system, which results in structural changes to brain circuits.²²

These brain changes are what lead to the classic arousal and dissociative symptoms of PTSD. In cases of extreme threat, the brain can get stuck in a defense mode, primed for danger, and unable to stop scanning. Hyperarousal, startle response, hypervigilance—these are adaptive

biological responses, and in situations of actual danger, being on guard can save lives—it does save lives. That is true not only in the case of a one-time sexual assault, but also in situations of ongoing heightened threat, such as in abusive domestic environments and oppressive social conditions. But staying highly alert to threat becomes *maladaptive* once the danger is gone, and the survivor can find herself, as Brison put it, “jump[ing] at the sound of a dry leaf skittering down a sidewalk.”²³ Instead of properly regulating, in other words, the threat response dysregulates, and thus interferes with basic human systems of biological functioning—eating, sleeping, breathing, and connecting with others.

We can tell a similar story of maladaptation for the less theorized immobilization strategy of freezing (and its more severe variations), especially in cases of chronic abuse, which can result in complex posttraumatic disorder (C-PTSD).²⁴ Dissociative symptoms, including numbness, blunted affect, and avoidance, can be equally adaptive under conditions of extreme threat, helping us survive the seemingly unsurvivable. Indeed, these behaviors exist to keep us alive, but by prolonging disconnection in the absence of an ongoing threat, they too become maladaptive.²⁵

According to the neurobiological model of trauma, the changes to the brain depend on which of the three main defense reactions is taken (flight, fight, or freeze). The data here are not conclusive and research continues apace,²⁶ but we can broadly summarize current findings and say that extreme stress impairs the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), which is the rational part of our brain that regulates cognitive function; it increases activity in the amygdala; and it results in a reduced hippocampal volume, which is connected to memory storage and retrieval.²⁷

This tells us that traumatic events leave biological markers in survivors, which sets off the characteristic arousal and dissociative symptoms of PTSD. These biological markers, on their own, do not determine exactly how someone responds to a traumatic event. Biology is nothing without ideology.²⁸ Our neurobiological responses get expressed in the context of particular social, cultural, and environmental information. These factors, in addition to genetic predispositions to stress, account for much of the variation we see among people who have suffered traumatic events. But the biochemical and neurological changes to threat circuits are foundational in understanding what happens to bodies under threat.

It makes sense that, absent current neuroimaging techniques and other advances in neuroscience, we might have imagined that the classic somatic symptoms of PTSD were the result of the conscious and deliberative responses of survivors in the scary aftermath of a terrorizing life event—how we had come to see and feel about ourselves and the world, in light of our experience. But we now know better, and this helps normalize the aftermath of a traumatic event: the survivor’s heightened expectation of catastrophe, the panic, the fast-beating heart and inability to catch a deep breath, the disconnection, numbing and low affect, and the uninvited images that flash through

her mind—all part of her body’s autonomic response to threat, working overtime.²⁹ Even better, this enhanced understanding of trauma as written in the body has led to a host of body-based therapies for healing, which offer tremendous possibilities for recovery.^{30,31}

The science of trauma has come full circle, in a sense, once again privileging a conception of trauma as a physical injury, one that leaves a biological imprint on survivors, even if the marks of trauma are not always clinically detectable. This evolution of the concept might help to explain why, in fields that study the phenomenon, the use of the prefix ‘psychological’ has all but disappeared.

PART TWO: MOTIVATED IGNORANCE

Given its dominance among neuroscientists, trauma theorists, and trauma practitioners, it is worth considering why the neurobiological model of trauma has not been met with broader uptake outside of specialist discourse. No doubt, this is at least partly due to the genealogy of trauma just discussed, in which the concept has undergone multiple mutations, from physical to psychological and now neurobiochemical. Certainly, this evolution has resulted in shifting meanings and contributed to common misconceptions of trauma, but it seems to me that we need a more robust explanation for the widespread and persistent ignorance about the neurobiological model of trauma.

Our cultural preoccupation with the idea of trauma has waxed and waned over time, but we are currently at a high peak, given recent calamitous events in climate, Western democracies, regional wars, a global pandemic, and a renewed focus on sexual violence because of #MeToo. This heightened interest has accelerated an outpouring of decidedly accessible information on the consequences of extreme threat on brain circuits. In its early stages, neurobiological research on trauma was published exclusively in science journals for experts in the field, but over the last decade that database has moved into the mainstream in many formats intelligible to the nonspecialist. For instance, the number of reputable podcasts on trauma is in the hundreds, and many of these reflect current scientific research geared to the general listener.³² There are also hundreds of trade books on the subject, again, many offering up-to-date and accessible accounts of the science of trauma, including Bessel van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), which has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for paperback nonfiction off and on for nearly a decade, for a total of at least 141 weeks since its publication (during the height of the pandemic it remained in the number 1 spot for 27 consecutive weeks).³³ Add to this the 362 TED talks on trauma, and we have clear evidence of the trickle-down effect of scientific knowledge on trauma.³⁴ The information is out there, so to speak, but it seems clear that there is some sort of barrier limiting the flow of knowledge, which is failing to make significant inroads with a mainstream audience. As such, there remain many falsehoods about the aftermath of traumatic events—a jarring disconnect between specialist discourse and general knowledge, with large pockets of ignorance. What is blocking the successful transmission of knowledge in this case?

Earlier, I characterized this ignorance as motivated, drawing on Mills’s idea of white ignorance. Mills’s profound insight is that some gaps in knowledge are not morally or epistemically neutral, but instead motivated by circumstances of unequal power relations between social groups.³⁵ In his analysis of white ignorance, race plays a causal role in epistemic practices that promote misinformation, such that the truth of what it is like to be a Black person in the United States is suppressed or denied though the perpetuation of false beliefs or absence of true ones. For Mills, this incentivized non-knowing can be perpetuated by individuals, willfully or without intention, and it is also manifested structurally, embedded in social norms and institutional practices. As he explains it, white ignorance functions to protect and preserve the privilege of white supremacy: “So white normativity manifests itself in a white refusal to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today, and all of its consequent advantages in negotiating opportunity structures.”³⁶ White ignorance insulates privilege and affords concrete benefits to white people at the expense of losses to Black people. Thus, white supremacy is left intact at the expense of Black wealth, health, education, employment, opportunities—indeed, at the expense of Black lives.³⁷

Analogously, I propose that the gendered nature of sexual violence, in which women are vastly overrepresented, is a key contributing factor to the flourishing of misinformation and falsehoods about the aftermath of traumatic events like rape. This incentivized non-knowing about the ways in which threats to life and bodily integrity result in acute brain changes is part of the broader phenomenon of male ignorance in which the realities of sexual violence are minimized or trivialized.

It is a fact of patriarchy and its deeply entrenched gender bias against women that the broad range of profound harms detailed earlier are downplayed or outright dismissed in the aftermath of sexual violence, leaving survivors feeling misunderstood, unseen, unheard, even gaslit. This long-established practice of diminishing the realities of sexual violence becomes more challenging, however, in light of the neurobiology of trauma, for if one accepts the current science about the impact of extreme threat on brain circuits, it becomes difficult to maintain dominant rape myths that tell us that sexual violence is no big deal; that the victim needs to just “get over it”; that if she didn’t “want it,” she could have stopped it; that if it was not consensual, then she would have fought back; and that if a victim’s account is in any respect inconsistent, then she must be lying. None of these myths are sustainable considering what we know about trauma. But instead of widespread understanding about what happens to brains under conditions of extreme threat and a corresponding dismantling of these myths, there is persistent ignorance which leaves us with a picture of the rape survivor’s behavior in the aftermath as muddled, incoherent, and overly emotional, and renders her testimony of what she has suffered through all too easy to dismiss.

Who stands to benefit from this ignorance? Primarily, perpetrators of sexual violence, who are overwhelmingly

male.³⁸ These perpetrators are the central beneficiaries of the trivialization of sexual violence within the criminal justice system, as I discuss below, but just like one does not need to be a white supremacist to benefit from the ingrained privileging of whiteness, one does not need to be a sexual predator to benefit from the trivialization of the realities of sexual violence. This non-knowing functions to protect and preserve privileges for men, more generally. It sustains the status quo. It insulates men from having to reflect on their role in a culture that promotes pernicious rape myths and victim-blaming norms. It affords men the advantage of not needing to know what it is like to experience the everydayness of the threat of sexual violence, or what it is like to live in a body that has been attuned to the terror of sexual violence. Absent this knowledge, the unfettered freedom of mobility that men enjoy—the relative ease with which they are able to travel, ride public transport, use public restrooms, walk alone at night³⁹—and the opportunities that this opens up for them, from employment to housing and recreation, is not something that they are forced to consider or reconcile.

Male ignorance is a group-based ignorance, like white ignorance, but not all men are equally served by it. Trans men, queer men, and men of color (and those with intersecting identities) do not get to move through the world with anywhere near the same level of ease as straight white cis men. And while women and girls are the main targets of sexual violence, men and boys also suffer high rates of sexual violence.⁴⁰ Privilege comes in degrees, and thus it is to varying degrees that men have the freedoms described here, and the advantages that come with them. What's more, not all men are the equivalent of Mills's racist cognizer.⁴¹ Some incentivized non-knowing is perpetuated willfully,⁴² by sexists and misogynists, but some men form mistaken beliefs (or lack true beliefs) about the realities of sexual violence without bad faith (as Mills puts it), but because of structural forces, through embedded social norms and institutional practices.

This structural form of male ignorance is manifest in the ingrained social norms that suppress or deny what it is like to be a victim of sexual violence, but arguably, it is most acutely visible within the criminal justice system. These days, it goes without saying that the criminal justice system is in dire need of complete reform, if not abolition. But until such time, survivors deserve respect and dignity within the system that purports to protect them. Instead, among its many enduring flaws is its institutional bias against survivors of sexual violence, whom it fails at every point of contact within the system—from police and lawyers to judges and juries.⁴³ It is a paradigm of institutionalized misogyny.

This should come as no surprise, given the history of rape law and its well-known overt discrimination against women in general, and victims of sexual violence in particular—treating women as property, marital rape exemptions, proof of chastity requirements, the utmost resistance condition, and so on.^{44,45} Despite important reforms to rape laws and the rule of evidence over the years,⁴⁶ the adversarial nature of courtroom justice combined with vestiges of gender discrimination in the law and the unchecked reliance on

prejudicial stereotypes by its main representatives results in the system's wholesale failure to secure justice for women who report rape.

This failure is well known and, in light of how poorly women qua complainants are treated within the system, helps to explain why rape is universally the most underreported of all crimes.⁴⁷ In the unusual case that a victim of sexual violence decides to file an official report, her first encounter with law enforcement often marks the beginning of a lengthy process in which her account is treated with skepticism and her credibility questioned, if not undermined, owing to police cultures that are saturated with victim-blaming norms and rape myths.⁴⁸ If she passes the first hurdle and the police believe her, she can expect further challenges to her credibility as her case moves forward within the criminal justice system. Complainants are instructed by prosecutors to brace themselves for the always vigorous and often vicious cross-examination by defense lawyers, who poke fun at inconsistent testimony, find fault with fragmentary memories, and belittle those who remain in threatening situations and do not fight back when under attack, which gets used as evidence against their veracity.

This kind of treatment by lawyers is unexceptional. Judges permit it and juries are swayed by it.⁴⁹ And as far as legal strategies go, it is a successful one, resulting in a miniscule number of convictions.⁵⁰ Women who go through this experience describe it as brutal. To be asked to tell and retell one's story can be overwhelming for survivors, but the demand to do so by aggressive defense attorneys is almost inhumane, and it inevitably results in testimonial injustice for survivors, who suffer the intrinsic epistemic and ethical harm of having their credibility undermined because of prejudicial stereotypes, and it also results in serious secondary harms.⁵¹ To be poked and prodded in this way can be humiliating for anyone, but for the rape survivor it can trigger familiar feelings of powerlessness and shame and a shattering of trust, bringing her right back to her experience of terror.

The legal strategy of undermining the credibility of rape survivors by preying on inconsistencies in their testimony is made possible by the systemic failure to acknowledge the neurobiological consequences of trauma, with each instance of derision reflecting motivated ignorance about the evolutionarily wired responses of bodies under threat. And yet, despite the intractability of ignorance⁵² and the high incentive for it in this context, the science of trauma is making inroads within the criminal justice system. In Canada and the United States, for instance, in the wake of #MeToo and due to ongoing pressure from feminists, legal activists, medical professionals, and trauma scientists, we have seen the beginnings of change. There have been calls for positive reform through the implementation of trauma-informed courtrooms, with trauma-informed lawyers, judges, and juries, supported by trauma-informed policing with trauma-informed interview techniques.⁵³

A trauma-informed criminal justice system would go some distance to ending the poor treatment of women in this system, which currently fails sexual assault survivors by even its own measure. No doubt there will be backlash

to these reforms—gender discrimination is nothing if not resilient—just as there has been resistance to the scientific facts about trauma, in the first place. One does not need to be overly cynical to imagine that if these facts were more broadly accepted, they could lead to new legal strategies, giving defense lawyers an opening to argue for the testimonial incompetence of the “brain-damaged” survivor. This would not be very surprising, but, fortunately, this argument only backs the lawyer into a corner, by conceding the very fact against which they are building a defense.

CONCLUSION

Near the end *Aftermath*, in Chapter Six, “Retellings,” Brison talks poignantly about the shape trauma narratives take when they are told and retold, how they morph, depending on who we are talking to and what information is demanded of us—from police to doctors, friends and parents: “My story was shaped by what the listener needed to know most urgently, and, after a few days when I could breathe more easily, it expanded and contracted to fill whatever time was available.”⁵⁴ Her deposition to the police, which she gave from her hospital bed, took an astonishing eight hours. Every detail had to be precisely told and then exactly remembered. Reflecting on this later, after the trial in which her assailant was convicted of rape and attempted murder, she said there was something “deadening” about the demand for truth, “from the perspective of a detached, objective observer,”⁵⁵ as she found that she had to force herself to “will the true story to stay straight in order to reproduce it at trial,”⁵⁶ two and a half years after her near-death assault.

The science of trauma has enhanced our understanding of the aftermath of terrorizing events over which we have no control. We now know that rape and other traumatic events are so-called because a central nervous system under threat results in structural changes to the brain. The impact of extreme stress on the mPFC, the amygdala, and the hippocampus helps to explain why the survivor’s testimony is jumbled or inconsistent, why she has a hard time remembering certain aspects of her story, and why her emotional response is flat. The evolutionarily wired freeze response helps to explain why she stayed and why she didn’t fight back. The science of trauma gives us leverage against a host of injustices faced by survivors, including a requirement for flawlessness in testimony and the demand that, in the immediate aftermath, a survivor give an eight-hour-long deposition from her hospital bed.

The basic upshot of this science is not hard to understand, however specialized it is in its detail, but it does challenge long-held pernicious stereotypes that are epitomized in the criminal justice system and that motivate widespread ignorance while sustaining the status quo. And although institutional norms can amount to legitimate obstacles to truth, it is important not to overestimate the power of dominant but false narratives. That we are beginning to see inroads within the criminal justice system gives us at least some reason for optimism. Until we have alternative methods for obtaining justice for rape survivors, we can continue to advocate for an end to humiliating and damaging cross-examinations and for the implementation

of concrete, trauma-informed measures to ensure that the criminal justice system is less stressful and more humane for survivors of sexual violence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I presented a version of this paper at CSWIP 2022. I am grateful for the inspiring and nourishing community of feminist philosophers who attended this conference, and I owe a special thanks to those who were at my session and responded to my paper with insightful comments and questions. I also want to thank the editors of this journal and an anonymous referee for their helpful suggestions and guidance.

NOTES

1. Brison, *Aftermath*, 59.
2. Brison, *Aftermath*, 44.
3. Brison, *Aftermath*, 44.
4. Mills, “White Ignorance.”
5. Mills, “Global White Ignorance.”
6. Freedman, “The Epistemic Significance of #MeToo.” In clarifying his position that white ignorance is not the only kind of privileged group-based ignorance, Mills uses the example of “male ignorance” (“White Ignorance,” 22), but his meaning of the term is more general than the sense I am employing here.
7. The perennial statistic pegs 1 out of 3 women worldwide (WHO, “Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018”) as victims of sexual violence, but the threat of sexual violence has never been evenly distributed across all demographics, with even higher incidence rates—one out of two—found among trans women (James et al., *The Report of the 2015 US Transgender Survey*), disabled women (Cotter, “Violent Victimization of Women with Disabilities, 2014”; UNFPA, “Young Persons with Disabilities”), and nonbinary individuals (James et al., *The Report of the 2015 US Transgender Survey*).
8. Notable exceptions (published pre-*Aftermath*) include Alcoff and Gray, *Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?*; Burgess-Jackson, *A Most Detestable Crime: New Philosophical Essays on Rape*; Cahill, *Rethinking Rape*; Card, “Rape as a Terrorist Institution” and “Rape as a Weapon of War”; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*; Frye and Shafer, *Rape and Respect*; Gardner and Shute, “The Wrongness of Rape”; MacKinnon, “Rape, Genocide, and Women’s Human Rights”; and Pineau (“Date Rape”).
9. Brison, *Aftermath*, 59.
10. While my focus here is on rape, most (if not all) of these harms arise in the aftermath of chronic abuse and domestic violence as well as war, racism, and colonialism.
11. These harms can arise from deliberation and self-reflection, hence the categorization, but structural changes to the brain impacts memory storage and retrieval as well as our ability to construct coherent narratives of the self, as *Aftermath* illuminates so well. Thus, even if these harms are not obviously somatic or embodied in the same way as, say, exaggerated startle response, they too are impacted by the biochemical and neurological changes to the brain’s threat circuitry.
12. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*.
13. I have further elaborated these harms elsewhere (Freedman, “The Epistemic Significance of #MeToo”).
14. Mill, *On Liberty*; Feinberg, *Harm to Others*.
15. The essays in Micale and Lerner’s *Traumatic Pasts* chronicle this time and the central figures in this early history of psychological trauma in America and Europe, from Erichsen, Charcot, and Oppenheim through to Janet, Breuer, and Freud.
16. See Leys (*Trauma: A Genealogy*) for an intellectual history of the concept of trauma through the twentieth century.
17. From its first appearance in *DSM III* (1980) to its most recent in *DSM-5* (2013), PTSD has never not been controversial. The fascinating and fraught story of the “invention” of PTSD, which is a story of biology and politics, has been definitively told by Scott (“PTSD in DSM-III: A Case in the Politics of Diagnosis and

- Disease”) and Young (*The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*). The number of critiques of PTSD over the last three decades outstrips any other standing psychiatric category in the *DSM*. Many of these controversies have centered on the unique stressor criterion (i.e., what ought to count as a stressor) and the related worry that PTSD pathologizes normal human distress. For a taste of this controversy, Summerfield (“The Invention of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and the Social Usefulness of a Psychiatric Category”) remains a classic. The stressor criterion has been updated with each new edition and revision of the *DSM*, always with mixed reviews; see Hoge et al. (“Unintended Consequences of Changing the Definition of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in *DSM-5*: Critique and Call for Action”) for an argument that the problems with the categorization and definition of PTSD in the *DSM-5* are insurmountable.
18. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1992.
 19. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*.
 20. Joseph LeDoux’s (*Anxious: Using The Brain to Understand and Treat Fear and Anxiety*; “Feelings: What Are They & How Does the Brain Make Them?”; *My Word: Thoughtful Feelings*; LeDoux and Pine, “Using Neuroscience to Help Understand Fear and Anxiety: a Two-system Framework”) work here has been influential, leading the way on this conceptual shift, which marks a reversal from his early work in which defense responses were described as “fear” responses (*The Emotional Brain*). LeDoux’s goal, with this conceptual revision, is to clearly demarcate subjective feelings (i.e., fear) from brain mechanisms that operate nonconsciously to detect danger.
 21. The autonomic nervous system is comprised of mobilizing responses (fight-or-flight), which employ the sympathetic branch of the nervous system, and immobilizing ones (freezing/collapsing/tonic immobility/death feigning; Kozłowska et al., “Fear and the Defense Cascade: Clinical Implications and Management”), which employ the parasympathetic branch. In the later part of the twentieth century, research on trauma emphasized sympathetic responses, often to the exclusion of parasympathetic ones, but that has changed in recent years, no doubt due, in part, to Stephen Porges’s influential Polyvagal Theory (“The Polyvagal Theory: New Insights into Adaptive Reactions of the Autonomic Nervous System”; *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation*; *The Pocket Guide to The Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe*).
 22. Arnsten, “Stress Signalling Pathways that Impair Prefrontal Cortex Structure and Function” and “Stress Weakens Prefrontal Networks: Molecular Insults to Higher Cognition”; Bremner, “Traumatic Stress: Effects on the Brain”; Frewen and Lanius, *Healing the Traumatized Self: Consciousness, Neuroscience, Treatment*; LeDoux, “My Word: Thoughtful Feelings”; LeDoux and Pine, “Using Neuroscience to Help Understand Fear and Anxiety: A Two-system Framework”; van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*.
 23. Brison, *Aftermath*, 81.
 24. Burke Harris, *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-term Effects of Childhood Trauma and Adversity*; Porges, *The Pocket Guide to The Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe*; Frewen and Lanius, *Healing the Traumatized Self*.
 25. Roelefs’s in-depth review (“Freeze for Action: Neurobiological Mechanisms in Animal and Human Freezing”) of recent work on the neural mechanisms of freezing, drawing on comparisons between animal and human studies, brings much-needed attention to this undertheorized defensive threat reaction. See also Roelefs and Dayan (“Freezing Revisited: Coordinated Autonomic and Central Optimization of Threat Coping”) for a novel interpretation of the freeze response, which sees it not as a passive response, but as a complex and coordinated cognitive state that is preparing for action.
 26. Reis and Ortega discuss a variety of ongoing challenges to neuroscientific models from neuroscientific and philosophical perspectives in “Neuroscientific Perspectives for a Theory of Trauma.”
 27. Arnsten, “Stress Signalling Pathways that Impair Prefrontal Cortex Structure and Function” and “Stress Weakens Prefrontal Networks”; Fenster et al., “Brain Circuit Dysfunction in Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: From Mouse to Man”; Sherin and Nemeroff, “). Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: The Neurobiological Impact of Psychological Trauma”; Terpou et al., “The Effects of Trauma on Brain and Body: A Unifying Role for the Midbrain Periaqueductal Gray.”
 28. Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*; Lewontin, *Biology as Ideology*.
 29. In *Aftermath*, Brison talks about a realization she had while reading Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery*, and the “aha” moment when she first understood that she was not, in fact, “too sensitive,” as she had been told since her attack: “I wasn’t crazy. I was *traumatized*. My responses were normal, to be expected, after such a terrifying event” (*Aftermath*, 111).
 30. The shift in understanding of trauma as rooted in the body, in addition to a deepened understanding of neuroplasticity, has led to a wide variety of somatic or body-centered approaches to therapeutic treatment of trauma, like neurofeedback and somatic experiencing (e.g., Fisher, *Neurofeedback in the Treatment of Developmental Trauma: Calming the Fear-driven Brain*; Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice*; Ogden et al., *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy*), as well as some unconventional approaches, like dance, yoga, and martial arts.
 31. On the other hand, when left untreated a dysregulated stress response can lead to a variety of health problems, beyond PTSD, which result in severe health outcomes and shortened life expectancy (Burke Harris, *The Deepest Well*).
 32. Here are the top sixty (“ranked by traffic, social media, domain authority & freshness”); https://blog.feedspot.com/trauma_podcasts/; here is another ranking, done by a human (Laura Reagan): <https://traumatherapistnetwork.com/podcasts-trauma-therapists/>.
 33. Elisabeth Egan, “Does a Writer Ever Get Cozy on the Best-Seller List? Bessel van der Kolk Says No,” *New York Times*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/08/books/review/the-body-keeps-score-bessel-van-der-kolk.html>.
 34. Pediatrician (and California’s first Surgeon General) Nadine Burke Harris’s TED talk on childhood trauma, from 2015, in which she links toxic stress from early childhood trauma to brain changes and corresponding adverse health outcomes and reduced life expectancy, has been viewed over ten million times (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95ovIJ3dsNk>); see also Burke Harris, *The Deepest Well*.
 35. Mills, “White Ignorance.”
 36. Mills, “White Ignorance,” 28.
 37. I offer a more detailed analysis of Mills’s account in Freedman, “Knowing Better: Motivated Ignorance and Willful Ignorance.”
 38. Not all men are perpetrators of sexual violence, of course, but the majority (99 percent by most accounts) of perpetrators are men.
 39. Chapter Two (“Gender Neutral with Urinals”) of Criado Perez (*Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*) is chock-full of detailed examples of urban planning from around the world that show gender discrimination built into the very fabric of cities.
 40. In the US, the statistic is 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 33 men (Rainn.org).
 41. Mills, “White Ignorance,” 21.
 42. In Freedman, “Knowing Better,” I distinguish between willful and non-willful motivated ignorance and argue that while not all motivated ignorance is willful, all motivated ignorance results in harm, and it is harm, not willfulness, that grounds attributions of culpability.
 43. In Freedman, “Rethinking the Wrong of Rape,” I discuss a multitude of ways that the criminal justice system fails survivors of sexual violence, but for some striking legal failures globally, including a list of countries in which rapists can escape legal punishment by either paying the victim’s family or by marrying their victim, see Equality Now, “The World’s Shame – The Global Rape Epidemic: How Laws Around the World are Failing to Protect Women and Girls from Sexual Violence”; and World Bank, *Women, Business, and the Law*.
 44. Marital rape continues to be legal in at least ten countries and remains prevalent even where it is illegal (Equality Now, “The World’s Shame – The Global Rape Epidemic”).

45. However disastrous rape law has been for white women, it has always been worse for Indigenous women, disabled women, women of color, and especially Black women. Historically, enslaved women could not refuse sex or testify against their "masters," and even after emancipation, Black women were not considered rapeable under law (Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*). This way of thinking evolved over time into a unique set of rape myths in which Black women are seen as naturally promiscuous, "jezebels," with insatiable sexual desires (Capers, *Real Women, Real Rape*).
46. West, "Consent, Legitimation, and Dysphoria."
47. This varies by jurisdiction, but in Canada, for instance, 90 percent of rapes go unreported (Johnson, "Limits of a Criminal Justice response: Trends in Police and Court Processing of Sexual Assault").
48. In Canada, for instance, 1 in 5 official reports made to the police are deemed "unfounded," a classification that denotes that the crime never happened (i.e., the victim is lying) (Doolittle, "Unfounded: Mishandling of Sex-assault Cases Violates Right to Equality, Lawsuit Alleges"), but an even larger number are rejected as baseless because, according to police, there is no evidence that the woman didn't want it, or that she didn't change her mind midway, or that she hadn't had just a bit too much to drink and is now embarrassed, etc. See (McQueen et al., "Sexual Assault: Women's Voices on the Health Impacts of Not Being Believed by Police") for a discussion of the health impacts of not being believed by the police based on firsthand reports by survivors.
49. Craig, *Putting Trials on Trial: Sexual Assault and the Failure of the Legal Profession*.
50. Statistics show this number to be under 3 percent globally: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/rape-statistics-by-country>.
51. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.
52. Medina, *The Epistemology of Ignorance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*.
53. Craig, *Putting Trials on Trial*; Haskell and Randall, "The Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims"; Hopper, "Important Things to Get Right About the 'Neurobiology of Trauma'; and Lonsway and Archambault, *Victim Impact: How Victims are Affected by Sexual Assault and How Law Enforcement Can Respond*.
54. Brison, *Aftermath*, 106.
55. Brison, *Aftermath*, 109.
56. Brison, *Aftermath*, 109; italics in original.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alcoff, L., and L. Gray. "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18 (1993): 83–101. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494793>.

American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 3rd ed. Washington, DC, 1980.

American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. Washington, DC, 1994.

American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. Arlington, VA, 2013.

Arnsten, A. F. T. "Stress Signalling Pathways that Impair Prefrontal Cortex Structure and Function." *National Review of Neuroscience* 10 (2009): 410–22. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2648>.

Arnsten, A. F. T. "Stress Weakens Prefrontal Networks: Molecular Insights to Higher Cognition." *Nature Neuroscience* 18 (2015): 1376–85.

Bremner, J. D. "Traumatic Stress: Effects on the Brain." *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 8 (2006): 445–61. <https://doi.org/10.31887/DCNS.2006.8.4/jbremner>.

Brison, S. J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Burgess Jackson, K., ed. *A Most Detestable Crime: New Philosophical Essays on Rape*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Burke Harris, N. *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-term Effects of Childhood Trauma and Adversity*. New York, Mariner Books, 2018.

Cahill, A. J. *Rethinking Rape*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

Capers, I. B. Real Women, Real Rape. *UCLA Law Review* 826 (2013): 826–82.

Card, C. "Rape as a Terrorist Institution." In *Violence, Terrorism, and Justice*, edited by R. G. Frey and C. W. Morris, 296–319. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625039.013>.

Card, C. "Rape as a Weapon of War." *Hypatia* 11 (1996): 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1996.tb01031.x>.

Collins, P. H. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Cotter, A. "Violent Victimization of Women with Disabilities, 2014." Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, March 15, 2018.

Craig, E. *Putting Trials on Trial: Sexual Assault and the Failure of the Legal Profession*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018.

Criado Perez, C. *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. New York: Abrams Press, 2019.

Doolittle, R. "Unfounded: Mishandling of Sex-assault Cases Violates Right to Equality, Lawsuit Alleges." *Globe and Mail*. April 2, 2017. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/investigations/unfounded-sexual-assault-canada-main/article33891309/>.

"The World's Shame – The Global Rape Epidemic: How Laws Around the World are Failing to Protect Women and Girls from Sexual Violence." Equality Now. November 7, 2017. <https://www.equalitynow.org/resource/the-worlds-shame-the-global-rape-epidemic/>.

Feinberg, J. *Harm to Others*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Fenster, R. J., L. A. M. Lebois, K. J. Ressler, and J. Suh. "Brain Circuit Dysfunction in Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: From Mouse to Man." *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 19 (2018): 535–51. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41583-018-0039-7>.

Fisher, S. F. *Neurofeedback in the Treatment of Developmental Trauma: Calming the Fear-driven Brain*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014.

Freedman, K. L. "The Epistemic Significance of #MeToo." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2020.2.8030>.

Freedman, K. L. "Rethinking the Wrong of Rape." *Philosophical Issues* 31, no. 1 (2021): 104–27.

Freedman, K. L. "Knowing Better: Motivated Ignorance and Willful Ignorance." *Hypatia*. (Forthcoming).

Frewen P., and R. Lanius. *Healing the Traumatized Self: Consciousness, Neuroscience, Treatment*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015.

Fricker, M. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Frye, M., and C. M. Shafer. "Rape and Respect." In *Feminism and Philosophy*, edited by M. Vetterling-Braggin, F. Elliston, and J. English, 333–46. Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977.

Gardner, J., and S. Shute. "The Wrongness of Rape." In *Oxford Essays in Jurisprudence: Fourth Series*, edited by J. Horder, 1–42. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Hacking, I. *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Haskell, L., and M. Randall. "The Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims." Department of Justice Canada, 2019.

Herman, J. L. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

Hoge, C. W., R. Yehuda, C. A. Castro, A. C. McFarlane, E. Vermetten, R. K. Jetly, C. Koenen, N. Greenberg, A. Y. Shalev, S. A. M. Rauch, C. R. Marmar, and B. O. Rothbaum. "Unintended Consequences of Changing the Definition of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in DSM-5: Critique and Call for Action." *JAMA Psychiatry* 73 (2016): 750–52. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2016.0647>.

Hopper, J. "Important Things to Get Right About the 'Neurobiology of Trauma.' Part 1&2: Benefits of Understanding the Science." End Violence Against Women International, 2020.

James, S. E., J. L. Herman, S. Rankin, M. Keisling, L. Mottet, and M. Anafi. *The Report of the 2015 US Transgender Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016.

- Johnson, H. "Limits of a Criminal Justice Response: Trends in Police and Court Processing of Sexual Assault." In *Sexual Assault in Canada: Law, Legal Practice, and Women's Activism*, edited by E. Sheehy, 613–34. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2012.
- Kozłowska, K., P. Walker, L. McLean, and P. Carrive. "Fear and the Defense Cascade: Clinical Implications and Management." *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 23, no. 4 (2015): 263–87.
- LeDoux, J. E. *The Emotional Brain*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.
- LeDoux, J. E. *Anxious: Using The Brain to Understand and Treat Fear and Anxiety*. New York: Viking, 2015.
- LeDoux, J. E. "Feelings: What Are They & How Does the Brain Make Them?" *American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 144 (2015): 96–110.
- LeDoux, J. E. "My Word: Thoughtful Feelings." *Current Biology* 30 (2020): R617–R634. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2020.04>.
- LeDoux, J. E., D. S. Pine. "Using Neuroscience to Help Understand Fear and Anxiety: A Two-system Framework." *American Journal of Psychiatry* 173 (2016): 1083–93. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2016.16030353>.
- Levine, P. A. *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010.
- Lewontin, R. *Biology as Ideology*. House of Anansi Press, 1996.
- Leys, R. *Trauma: a Genealogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Lonsway, K. A., J. Archambault. *Victim Impact: How Victims are Affected by Sexual Assault and How Law Enforcement Can Respond*. End Violence Against Women International, 2020.
- MacKinnon, C. A. "Rape, Genocide, and Women's Human Rights." *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 17 (1994): 5–16.
- McQueen, K., J. Murphy-Oikonen, A. Miller, and L. Chambers. "Sexual Assault: Women's Voices on the Health Impacts of Not Being Believed by Police." *BMC Women's Health* 21 (2021): 217, 1–10.
- Medina, J. *The Epistemology of Ignorance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Micale, M. S., and P. Lerner. *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870–1930*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Mill, J. S. *On Liberty*. Hackett Publishing Co., 1859.
- Mills, C. W. "White Ignorance." In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by S. Sullivan and N. Tuana, 11–38. New York: SUNY Press, 2007.
- Mills, C. W. "Global White Ignorance." In *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, 217–27. Abingdon: Routledge, 2015.
- Ogden, P., K. Minton, and C. Pain. *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.
- Pineau, L. "Date Rape: A Feminist Analysis." *Law and Philosophy* 8 (1989): 217–43. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00160012>.
- Porges, S. W. "Neuroception: A Subconscious System for Detecting Threats and Safety." *Zero to Three: Bulletin of the National Center for Clinical Infant Programs* 24 (2004): 19–24.
- Porges, S. W. "The Polyvagal Theory: New Insights into Adaptive Reactions of the Autonomic Nervous System." *Cleveland Clinic Journal of Medicine* 76 (2009): S86–S90. <https://doi.org/10.3949/ccjm.76.s2.17>.
- Porges, S. W. *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.
- Porges, S. W. *The Pocket Guide to The Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017.
- Reis, R., and F. Ortega. "Neuroscientific Perspectives for a Theory of Trauma: A Critical Review of Integrative Models of Biology and Culture." *Reports in Public Health* 37, no. 8 (2021): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1590/0102-311X00352820>.
- Roberts, D. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.
- Roelefs, K. "Freeze for Action: Neurobiological Mechanisms in Animal and Human Freezing." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 372 (2017): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2016.0206>.
- Roelefs, K., and P. Dayan. "Freezing Revisited: Coordinated Autonomic and Central Optimization of Threat Coping." *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 23 (2022): 568–80. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41583-022-00608-2>.
- Scott, W. J. "PTSD in DSM-III: A Case in the Politics of Diagnosis and Disease." *Social Problems* 37 (1990): 294–310.
- Sherin, J. E., and C. B. Nemeroff. "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: The Neurobiological Impact of Psychological Trauma." *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 13 (2011): 263–78. <https://doi.org/10.31887/DCNS.2011.13.2/jsherin>.
- Summerfield, D. "The Invention of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and the Social Usefulness of a Psychiatric Category." *BMJ* 322 (2001): 95–98. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.322.7278.95>.
- Terpou, B. A., S. Harricharan, M. C. McKinnon, P. Frewen, R. Jetly, and R. A. Lanius. "The Effects of Trauma on Brain and Body: A Unifying Role for the Midbrain Periaqueductal Gray." *Journal of Neuroscience Research* 97 (2019): 1110–40. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jnr.24447>.
- UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund). "Young Persons with Disabilities: Global Study on Ending Gender-based Violence, and Realising Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights." UNFPA, New York, 2018.
- van der Kolk, B. A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.
- West, R. L. "Consent, Legitimation, and Dysphoria." *The Modern Law Review* 83 (2020): 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2230.12489>.
- World Bank. *Women, Business, and the Law*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022.
- World Health Organization (WHO). "Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018: Global, Regional and National prevalence Estimates for Intimate Partner Violence Against Women and Global and Regional Prevalence Estimates for Non-partner Sexual Violence Against Women." Geneva: World Health Organization, on behalf of the United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group of Violence Against Women Estimation and Data, 2021.
- Young, A. *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Narrative Care: A Political Method of Survivor Self-Making and Communal Critique

Miranda Young

THE NEW SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

CW: mentions of sexual violence, attempted murder, and trauma

Since the self is intersubjective and thus steeped in social power relations, when considering social understandings of sexual violence, oppressive social norms mediate both the survivor's self-understandings and the audience's receptions of their narratives. Oftentimes survivor narratives are treated with suspicion or ignored. If a narrative does not fit the description of an ideal victim, it may be questioned or undermined by an unsympathetic audience. Given these conditions of social reception, it is unclear how a survivor can construct a narrative that transcends these oppressive social norms. How can a survivor tell a story that both ruptures oppressive norms and is true to their experience? How can audiences give narratives proper uptake (i.e., appreciate survivors' testimony, update their hermeneutic resources and skills, etc.) if their ability to hear is mediated by oppressive social norms? If we follow Brison's account of the intersubjective narrative self, what can we say about the structure and effectiveness of political storytelling,

given that all narratives are mediated through oppressive social norms?

This paper argues that this process happens through something I term *narrative care*, which I ultimately argue is necessary to build a better anti-rape politics.¹ Narrative care is an intersubjective political practice that contests rape culture by engaging in a practice of self-making through narrating, listening to, and treating survivor stories with care. This kind of care draws attention to what I call *the discursive conditions of possibility for the intelligibility of narratives as such*. In my view, narrative care offers a view into the historical, material, and discursive conditions that operate at the background of storytelling. This kind of attention allows one to draw conclusions about the systemic and intersecting dynamics of oppression that produced the narrative, and therefore leads to radical political engagement.

In this paper, I bring narrative care into view by fleshing out three tools of narrative care. The first (1) is the practice of third-person narration. Third-person narration is when you tell someone else's story that is not your own. This is an integral part of narrating with care because in telling someone's story you are able to be cognizant of the ways in which you represent others, and the worlds and subjectivities you afford to them. Narrating another involves bringing them into a space of appearance and requires a careful engagement with their uniqueness. The second tool of narrative care (2) is an intentional form of listening that actively shifts our subjectivity and ruptures our frameworks of sense-making. This practice addresses how our society often struggles to make sense of survivor narratives on the perceptual level. I argue that this attitude disrupts our forms of listening, enacts new forms of listening, and thus remakes our perceptual capacities. The third tool (3) involves genealogical work or engaging with a "history of the present."² This form of genealogy is distinctly Foucauldian. Foucault creates genealogies to destabilize concepts we take for granted as natural or fixed. In other words, to enact narrative care we have to get into view the historical events that precede our comprehension of sexual violence. When we pay attention to our histories, our cultural scripts, and our archival documents, we can see how they produce us and our experience of the world and what they leave out.

Section 1 breaks down Brison's interrelational self, which she develops from a study of trauma. Here, I aim to show how *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* opens up questions about a political project of listening to survivor narratives. Section 2 describes narrative care as a response to the political question of how we can and ought to engage survivor narratives. Narrative care involves self-narration, narration of others, and listening to others as a specific practice of attention to the discursive conditions of narrative intelligibility. In particular, I address the political stakes that animate these questions: What norms are organizing our narrative understandings? Whose pain is recognizable to us? Which character arcs are redeemable in our view? Answering and engaging these questions is part of the process of narrative care, and give us resources to advocate for better feminist politics: pursuing the end

of rape culture through intersectional and radical politics, without relying on carceral logics. Sections 3, 4, and 5 expand on the three practices constitutive of narrative care I pointed out previously: third-person narration, modes of listening, and genealogical work.

BRISON'S RELATIONAL SELFHOOD

Susan Brison illustrates the role that first-personal storytelling plays in a survivor's therapeutic negotiation of trauma as well its role in social transformation. In her view, a study of trauma illustrates a new account of the self:

The study of trauma reveals that the accounts of embodied self, the self as narrative, and the autonomous self are compatible and complementary, focusing on different aspects of the self. I also argue that the study of trauma provides additional support for the view that each of these aspects of the self are fundamentally relational.³

Brison argues that the self is embodied, autonomous, and narrational. Each of these aspects of the self is fundamentally related to the social environment in which it is situated. Our embodiment, our will, and our desires are fundamentally dependent on others. We are vulnerable to the world and are marked by this fragile dependency.

Brison feels this interdependency when remaking herself after her rape and near-death experience. She writes that narrating her experience to others helped with the dynamic, common to survivors, of intrusive and involuntary memory. Narrative made it so that memory did not have to be "passively endured" but could be turned into action—an action that allows one to develop control around the recall of a specific memory.⁴ In her view, trauma survivors need to be able to narrate their experiences in order to construct themselves anew. Remaking the self involves narrative control over traumatic memories, and this involves constructing a new narrative self in turn.

Often times, survivors cite not having a language for their suffering.⁵ Brison believes this phenomenon illustrates a despair that the world is either indifferent or hostile to the survivor's experiences. Audiences have trouble hearing survivors' stories because it is difficult to bear the idea that they could be vulnerable to the same kind of violence.⁶ Awareness of our relational selfhood comes when we feel the failure of recognition, when we feel abandoned and alienated. Brison cites the psychoanalyst Dori Laub, who writes that a survivor needs to have their narrative heard by an "empathetic listener" in order to understand their stories anew. New understandings of their experience are important for a survivor as they process their trauma.⁷

Brison addresses remaking the self on both an embodied and narrative level. On the embodied level, Brison tried medications, took self-defense classes, and debated on whether to have children. On the narrative level, she participated in individual and group therapy, sharing her story with empathetic listeners and retelling it over and over again.⁸ Each of these relational practices—narrating and engaging with a healing of her body—allowed Brison

to rebuild a sense of autonomy. Remaking the self involves “being sustained by, and caring for others,” she writes.⁹

For Brison, survival is about a social world that gives you what you need to live: it is about acceptance and care from a community, and about finding a way to see the future as significant. In this sense, her work is normative: she demands that the world make space for survivors to create new narrative selves, a creation that has the capacity to fundamentally address and change rape as a cultural practice. This imperative is where I begin my inquiry. While I agree that narratives have the power to alter social arrangements—narratives of survivors entail the potential for personal and social transformation—the conditions of possibility for the shift remain unclear. This is because narratives of survivors can also be weaponized by oppressors and then re-entrench oppression: trauma testimonies can be mobilized towards oppressive politics. The rest of this paper outlines an approach, what I call “narrative care,” that tries to address and solve these issues. This kind of radical systemic critique is committed to abolishing rape culture and taking seriously its multiple sources. Narrative care offers us a view of how white supremacy, capitalism, coloniality as well as patriarchy produce sexual violence. It subsequently mobilizes an intersectional politics—a prison abolitionist decolonial anti-racist feminist politics.

THE CONDITIONS OF NARRATIVE CARE

A central political project to be picked up after Brison’s book is the following: If the survivor’s self-(re)construction after trauma is bound up with the audience’s reception, and if the audience’s epistemic and hermeneutic resources are mediated by oppressive politics, how does one remake oneself against or through those forms of reception? How do we counteract oppressive social implications in our own narratives when those norms mediate the audience’s recognition? And if narrative selves are informed by cultural “master narratives,” how do you engage in narration as a means to liberate both yourself and other survivors?¹⁰

Storytelling as political critique involves narration that struggles to overcome entrenched and oppressive social understandings of specific phenomena. In the feminist movement, this is prevalent in relation to phenomena of sexual violation (e.g., #MeToo). However, without critical attention to the conditions of narrative articulation and narrative reception, oppressive politics may be reproduced. Indeed, many uses of political narrative storytelling in the guise of “feminist” politics are used to mobilize harmful stances. For instance, trauma narratives have been instrumentalized by the political right to incite xenophobic rhetoric like increased border policing: think, for example, about Donald Trump’s appeal to the “Mexican rapists” to incentivize the construction of the border wall.¹¹ Narratives have also been used to justify the rolling back of gun control and transphobic policies around public restrooms. Furthermore, stories of sexual violence are used to mobilize “tough-on-crime” carceral politics and systemically targets poor Black and brown communities rather than protect them.¹²

Narratives—such as the construction of “counter-stories” that purportedly oppose a “master narrative”—are not

intrinsically neutral or good. They can bolster or produce other oppressive “master narratives.” Simply producing a story against what one perceives as a master narrative is not an adequate expression of radical politics. Rather, the expression of radical politics has to involve a specific kind of attention to the social production of narrative selves and the conditions through which we empathetically engage with them. This is what I take to be the discursive conditions of intelligibility.

Discursive conditions mediate how we become intelligible to ourselves and how others become intelligible to us. In his account of narrative intelligibility,¹³ Alasdair Macintyre argues that the narrative form is essential to conceptualizing a human life, primarily because we are “storytelling animals.”¹⁴ We tend to shape our ordinary actions into a narrative framing: e.g., “Why did you do that?” “because x,y,z.” Further, these small framings are conditioned by a narrative history, or setting, which comprises all the material events that lead to a specific action and organize its explanation.¹⁵ Macintyre theorizes intelligibility in terms of the framing of action. In his words:

To identify an occurrence as an action is in the paradigmatic instances to identify it under a type of description which enables us to see that occurrence as flowing intelligibly from a human agent’s intentions, motives, passions and purposes.¹⁶

We understand actions once they become conceivable to us—when we manage to frame a sequence of actions in a causal structure. Narrative, as a sequence of events, produces a causal structure. Actions become intelligible within the frame of a narrative sequence.¹⁷

Through Foucault, it is important to emphasize that these conditions of intelligibility are themselves historically contingent and discursive. For Foucault, discourse means a historically produced set of meanings and knowledge that organize our social comprehensions; it is both practical and linguistic.¹⁸ Discourses are created, reproduced, repudiated, or ossified by material and institutional dynamics of power. Foucault referred to these as technologies of the self—the study of how the subject is made.¹⁹ Structures of power produce our ability to recognize, engage, and feel emotionally involved with someone’s narrative sequence. Sylvia Wynter refers to these discursive conditions as a “culturally specific discursive program” through which we construct ourselves.²⁰ Our ability to hear stories is mediated by discursive conditions that both influence us on an affective level and organize how we are persuaded and moved by storytelling. We arrive as listeners with pre-given intuitions that impact which stories persuade or move us. The affects and embodied aspects of narration are pertinent to the political project of storytelling because they can both obscure and produce stories, told or untold.

I develop this general account of discursive conditions of intelligibility to call attention to a method that is particularly powerful in women of color feminisms. Black feminist theory and decolonial feminism engages this method. This practice of narration is involved in calling attention to

and then, potentially, narrating through, against, and with those discursive conditions. Perhaps unintuitively, this is done as an act of care. This is a deep political commitment to a particular that is outside of your form of life and your habitus.

I situate my definition of care within a literature of feminist care ethicists. Nel Noddings argues that care involves both an affective dimension and a behavioral dimension. You care about something when you engage in an affected displacement of yourself for another person, where you supplant your reality with the reality of another. For Noddings, the affective phenomenon of “engrossment” is a requirement for care to exist. The engrossment motivates the carer towards action: placing oneself in the reality of the other impels one to act in service of that other.²¹ Joan Tronto similarly argues that care involves a dual process of a “mental disposition of concerns” and the “actual practices that we engage in as a result of those concerns.”²²

My view of care extends from these thinkers, in that I think of care as a form of affectivity that invests in another body and person and a set of practical actions that follow from that investment. These actions aim at preserving the well-being and flourishing of the person the care is addressed to. However, I depart from these care ethicists in that I believe that the affects themselves need to be subject to interrogation—something that a practice of paying attention to discursive conditions of possibility would reveal. For example, I take there to be a real issue with vindicating the role of empathy that induces care without this attention to the discursive and material conditions that allow empathy to manifest.²³ This critique is inspired by Saidiya Hartman’s critique of the role that white empathy plays in garnering moral outrage against slavery.²⁴ She makes the case for her concerns through the prominent white abolitionist, John Rankin. In letters to his brother, Rankin expressed a deep abhorrence to the scenes of slavery he witnessed. He felt it important to “render the horrors of slavery” through narrating them to other white people.²⁵ He pictures “the cruel lash approaching my wife and children. . . .”²⁶ Rankin felt drawn towards reproducing the images of violence. And he expressed that they moved him towards deep sentiment and solidarity for the enslaved, and motivated him towards convincing other white people to become abolitionists.²⁷ In Hartman’s view, Rankin’s empathetic identification revealed more about what he felt for himself than what he felt for the enslaved.²⁸ And the ease through which he was able to empathetically identify with the enslaved relied both on his good intentions as well as the “fungibility of the Black body.”²⁹ Hartman argues that the material economic conditions of the Black body as a commodity are the grounds through which one can easily insert themselves into the experience and consciousness of a Black enslaved person. This material reality produces a dynamic wherein the perspective of the Black enslaved is obscured.³⁰ Here, when moral sentiment relies on a white perspective, it occupies a Black body as *if it were a commodity* in order to garner political investment.³¹

While it is unclear whether Hartman thinks that the affect of empathy is always fueled by a problematic desire, I view this critique as a good example of how examining the discursive

conditions changes our understanding. Hartman’s insight is that under the specific historical materialist conditions through which the Black body is rendered “fungible,” it seems reasonable to conclude that the psychic practice of projecting a white viewpoint onto a Black body is made possible by having material conditions that make that occupation easy, or on her view, even pleasurable.

This view departs from that of some care ethicists who have argued that empathy is a moral emotion indispensable for care. For example, such uncritical vindication of empathy as a method of care goes awry in Maurice Hamington’s 2004 work on the caring imagination. For Hamington, imagination allows us to expand that particular caring process across worlds and avoid parochialism. Hamington argues that we can cultivate our capacity to care via imagination so that we can care for those beyond our immediate surroundings and communities. This is a valuable insight, but his examples illustrate the problem with empathy that Hartman details. One example he gives is of “young girls who face the horrors of genital mutilation in foreign lands.”³² This was a prominent political issue at the time his book was published; however, this example of empathy, often deployed in white feminist Western thought, frequently took for granted uncritical assumptions about the cultural specificities of the clitoridectomy, specifically in North Africa and the Middle East, and consequently contributed to racist and xenophobic inferences.³³ This example demonstrates how some care ethicists at the time argued for the practice of empathy without examining the cultural and historical context through which they are deploying that affect. They thereby ran the risk of projecting or exporting politics and care practices that are oppressive and harmful, rather than attentive. The point is not that empathy is bad all of the time. The point is that attention to the discursive conditions reveals what is mobilizing the emotion, and whether the care practices that follow are productive.

I have reconstructed what I take to be some of the conditions of narrative care from a set of theoretical accounts. I adopt Brison’s definition of narrative: “a social interaction—actual or imagined or anticipated or remembered—in which what gets told is shaped by the (perceived) interests of the listeners, by what the listeners want to know and also by what they cannot or will not hear.”³⁴ I define care as a process of both affective engagement and practical rationality that accompanies a set of actions that tend towards the well-being of the cared for. In addition to engrossment, it often involves experimentation, humor, trepidation, caution, and an openness towards being corrected or fixing mistakes. These affects and their practices have to be a part of our political care engagement. You have to be willing to attend to the background political systemic conditions in order to address what practices are needed to care for the person, narrative, or situation. Specific to the practice of narrative care is an attention to the discursive conditions of intelligibility that are historically and contingently produced so that the actions and politics that follows from that attention are politically radical. By “politically radical,” in the context of feminist anti-rape politics, I mean politics that acknowledges and resists the multiple sources of domination that produce rape culture: white supremacy, late capitalism, carceral logics, a history of colonial violence, as well as a misogynistic sense

of impunity. Narrative care is in service of producing a radical politics that is systemic and multifaceted. Narrative care towards survivor narratives leads us towards a feminism that is anti-racist and abolitionist—abolishing both carcerality and rape culture, which I see as intertwined.³⁵ I now detail tools of narrative care through several feminist scholars—and those tools are narrating others, modes of listening, and historical and genealogical work.

NARRATING OTHERS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THIRD-PERSON NARRATION

Brison illustrates the significance of first-person narrative accounts in survival storytelling. However, when thinking about survivor stories it is important to consider the political significance of third-person narration and how it influences social understanding of survivors of sexual assault.

Cavarero argues that we each hold a desire to be narrated.³⁶ And this desire to be narrated drives the practice of narration as a way of revealing identity. Our desire to be narrated reveals that personal identity is relational and dependent on another, since we appear before the other. Self-construction is incomplete without a sense of our own narratability by others. Our selfhood is pre-conditioned by the way we appear to another, and our ability to narrate is predicated on how we are narrated, or how we view to be narrated.³⁷ To illustrate the significance of this claim, she tells the story of Emilia and Amalia. This story is from the famous Italian feminist text *Non credere di avere dei diritti* [*Don't Think You Have Any Rights*].³⁸ Emilia loved to narrate herself—she was known for endlessly telling different stories from her life. However, she lacked an ability to express herself well, often boring the people to whom she was narrating. On the other hand, her friend, Amalia, was gifted in her ability to express herself. So, Amalia, as a gift to her friend, wrote the story of her life. Given Emilia's frequent narrations, she knew the story well, and Emilia carried the narrative with her in her handbag, "reading it again and again, overcome by emotion."³⁹

We can draw two conclusions from the story of Emilia and Amalia. First, consider the emotional relief that Emilia feels reading her story. Emilia "weeps because she recognizes in that narration the object of her own desire . . . and the desire reveals itself in relation between the two friends in the act of the gift."⁴⁰ Being narrated by another, being third-person-narrated is emotionally important because it is an invested attention to the details of your life by someone else, and a way of tending to that particularity that cultivates your well-being and meets your desires. For Cavarero, narrative care is the oldest form of care—attention to the accidental quality of a life, something that distinguishes it as "this and not that."⁴¹

Second, relationality (and things that fall out of it, like attention to detail) is important to the proper narration of others. It matters that Amalia is Emilia's friend, that she pays attention every time Emilia tells her story. While others were bored by Emilia's self-narration, Amalia listened carefully and then constructed a narrative with an intimacy and detail that only a friend could. Through storytelling Emilia and Amalia provide each other their own space of

exhibition and appearance. Emilia's life appears significant to her because of the attention Amalia has given it. Her life has not gone without narration—a fate that Cavarero considers intolerable.⁴²

Caring third-person narration produces diverse and plural survivor narrative experiences that then circulate the public sphere. In *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation*, Linda Martín Alcoff argues that this is politically important. Public recognition of plural survivor experiences leads to better feminist politics in that it allows us to get into view the different ways that rape culture is produced and maintained. Narrating for others is an important tool of narrative care.⁴³ It can be a method of engaging in radical feminist politics when we pay attention to the discursive conditions that precede the narrative. Amalia is able to give Emilia's narrative that kind of attention, given the intimacy of their relationship. We take from this anecdote the idea that the good, life-affirming way to treat narratives (including survivor narratives) is to treat them with the kind of care one naturally gives to friends, and that third-person narration is important for the well-being of the person who is being narrated.

FRAMEWORKS OF SENSE AND FORMS OF LISTENING

I argue that some forms of listening to survivor narratives may lead us towards radical feminist politics. I am informed by the work of María del Rosario Acosta Lopez, a decolonial feminist scholar who develops an aesthetic and political method that she calls "grammars of listening" to respond to trauma.⁴⁴ Acosta broadly defines trauma as "a particular type of experience, or . . . a particular structure of experience that, in its devastating effects, profoundly colonizes the subjectivities, identities, bodies, and languages it cuts through."⁴⁵ She develops her methods on the grammars of listening after working with survivors of torture by Chicago police.⁴⁶ She found that, when listening and documenting their experiences, she needed to develop a method of listening that helped her process the stories on a perceptual level.

Acosta builds off Friedrich Schiller's work on aesthetic experience to lay the groundwork for resistance and critique. Schiller claims that aesthetic experiences cause a radical shift in the frameworks through which we perceive. This radical shift involves "a suspension of and resistance to the frameworks that give shape to what has been recognized and accepted as truth."⁴⁷ Acosta mobilizes this insight to explain what happens when we listen to stories of trauma. She writes:

What one hears in [trauma] testimony is also the shattering of all available frameworks to make sense of what is being communicated. This is due . . . to the unprecedented forms of violence to which it bears witness, and thus to the lack of available categories that can properly name and render intelligible what is being communicated.⁴⁸

Recall Brison's discussion of a listener's instinct to turn away from the survivor's narration. Acosta calls this

moment the shattering of perceptual frameworks for the listener. Listening to trauma requires that we attend to the frameworks of sense that underpin our understandings of that violence, and further, such listening resists or explodes these frameworks, which Acosta calls “grammars.” When a survivor tells us a story—related to their own shattered ability to make sense of their situation, the listener can also experience this shattering.

The listener of the survivor narrative ought to dwell in that space of rupture instead of turning away from it. When we hear a story that disrupts our normal abilities to make sense of that story, we need to dwell on the inadequacy of our frameworks of sense, to stay in the feeling of discomfort, unfamiliarity, and fear. We need to make space for survivors to show us worlds that we didn’t know existed. Some modes of listening to survivor storytelling would involve being open to the idea that the violence they are describing may have been invisible to you. This would involve attention to the narrative background that the survivor is providing you. One should be curious and open minded as to how the survivor experienced the harm and how they made sense of the experience, and paying attention to what the survivor needs or asks of you. The ways in which art illustrates to us new forms of music, painting, visual images, survivor stories show us realities and experience formerly beyond our comprehension. These forms of listening create something new—something new for the narrator and something new for the listener. Acosta refers to this listening as making audible a story that our frameworks have been consigned to silence. Just as the survivor lives in a space where their sense of perception has been destroyed, so too does the listener of the story. When we listen, we create a new form of self, and when we are listened to, we have the chance to construct ourself anew.

We run the risk of erasing, ignoring, and obscuring violence that doesn’t make sense to us if we don’t see how oppressive norms, values, and structures mediate our own narrative self-understandings. Some examples of these conditions are the ways in which sexual violence against sex workers, the incarcerated, or undocumented migrants are rendered unperceivable under the eyes of the law.⁴⁹ These discursive conditions influence our capacity to listen to survivors of sexual violence and dignify their narratives. Acosta’s grammars of listening combat these discursive conditions by disrupting frameworks of sense that result from structural violence. By framing the practice of listening as aesthetic, she addresses the pre-reflective and sensuous realm of experience.

Forms of listening cut to the heart of a problem of subject-construction under oppressive material conditions. The frameworks of sense-making are themselves organized by oppressive political systems, and it is through a careful practice of listening that we have a chance at rupturing them. Grammars of listening involve a method of listening to survivors that addresses the systemic reproduction of sexual violence. Acosta helps set the conceptual groundwork for the production of fundamentally new narrative selves that desire worlds where we don’t have to rely on punishment or the incarceration of bodies for “protection.” In order to create something like these new

selves, we must employ grammars of listening. We can hear more stories of sexual violence as morally significant, and we can build a world that meets the needs of all survivors.

GENEALOGY AND ARCHIVAL GAPS

In order to engage in narrative care, revealing discursive conditions for intelligibility is indispensable. Genealogical and historicizing work discloses those conditions. Hartman does genealogical work that reveals how we tell stories about Black women. Her work is a testament to the kind of care needed to create genealogies of gender, race, and sexual violence. And specifically, I argue that this type of genealogical construction or awareness of historical context is needed in order to avoid shortcomings of the type of empathy which I highlight in section 2. I interpret Hartman as inviting us to reflect on the normative grounds of empathy. It is important to highlight that empathy is not an oppressive emotion in and of itself. On the contrary, it is notably important for the success of radical political struggles. As an emotion that manifests in a set of historical and psychic contexts, its very manifestation and success is constituted by (and dependent on) those very contexts. Instead of an a-critical focus on empathy, Hartman’s work in the archive and her use of genealogy invites us to examine emotions and affects that are present in politics by illustrating and naming those historical contexts. In particular, Hartman’s reflections on historiography reveal the discursive conditions of intelligibility that mediate our understandings of sexual violence, race, carcerality, and gender. She engages with historical archives to explore the experiences of the American enslaved and freed Black experiences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵⁰ Her early work was preoccupied with undermining the central values and tenets of liberalism (freedom, dignity, citizenship, sovereignty) that have been used towards Black Emancipation. Instead, she illustrates how the social production of those concepts helped to maintain domination, captivity, and subjugation of Black bodies.

Hartman’s claim is that there is a continued and sustained reliance upon white perspectives to narrate experiences of violence against the Black enslaved. She explores this problem in her 2008 article, “Venus in Two Acts,” describing finding a legal indictment of a slave ship captain for the murder of two enslaved women.⁵¹ One is a woman named Venus and the other is an unnamed girl. She explains that the legal documents, ships record, and bills of sale, i.e., “the archive,” are riddled with scenes of violence against these two girls.⁵² There are some particularly horrible narrations from the crew members of the sexual violence that these women and other slaves on this ship were subject to. Even sympathetic narrations to the enslaved were dominated by the white abolitionist’s perspectives.⁵³

In the archive, Hartman often faces scenes of violation and violence against the Black enslaved, both from the perspectives of the slave trader or master and that of the abolitionists. She notes that there is little in the archive from the perspective of the enslaved themselves. She writes:

And these stories are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess . . . transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified

them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is . . . a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property . . . a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.⁵⁴

Hartman feels a responsibility to move beyond the excess of the reproduction of scenes of violence she reads in the archive. From her perspective, to merely reproduce the scene of violence from the outside crucially misses the particular perspective of the Black enslaved themselves. This reverberates forward with our contemporary politics.

Hartman identifies how discursive possibility and conditions are informed by the voices in the archive and the voices that are not in the archive. This genealogical work is indispensable for narrative care to occur. When we consider our hermeneutic and normative resources for our stories as historically produced, we may ask how they came to be. Genealogy is a practice of arranging events so that we destabilize concepts, values, and norms that we take for granted because we see that our histories are contingent and thereby subject to change.

By engaging with the archive in the way she does, Hartman sets herself up to be doing a type of second-order narration, or meta-narration. Contrast this, for example, with Hamington's form of empathetic imagination. Hamington takes his conception of empathy as a first-order process. That is, Hamington takes the process of empathy wherein one produces images from a given set of empirical data. The empathetic process extends from access to a material reality, and the caring imagination allows one to extrapolate from that first-order interaction and establish emotional investment across different cultural contexts.⁵⁵ Hartman's historicizing and genealogical work, on the contrary, places what she examines—the seemingly objective data in the archive—into a narrative context: [what is there and what is not, and who has left it out and why.] In this sense, Hartman develops a type of meta narration—a second-order narrative context that seeks to fill in the gaps of history without reducing them to empirical givens. We may think that, by filling in those gaps, she is making the same kind of mistake as Hamington, but it is her use of genealogy and historicizing that prevents her from making that mistake. Through this activity she destabilizes her own position as an archivist, historian, philosopher, and narrator. She holds the stories of these women at an ambivalent distance, and expresses her own worries about what feeds her and others' desires.

I conclude by showing how Hartman develops a method to respond to our historical discursive conditions called "critical fabulation," which is an example of narrative care. Critical fabulation is a form of narrative care that is directly related to the type of historical work one does in order to get discursive conditions into view. This section aimed to show that engagement with one's historical specificity and context is indispensable towards acts of narrative care. In order to narrate ourselves, another, and listen with care, we have to see ourselves as situated at the end of a contingent history and genealogy.

CONCLUSION: TWO EXAMPLES

In Hartman's words, critical fabulation is a tool to "tell the impossible story" while highlighting the "impossibility of storytelling."⁵⁶ It involves rearranging the "fabula," i.e., discrete but related events, of a story. Shifting narrative causality is an aspect of critical fabulation, which also involves narrative restraint. That restraint, for Hartman, is articulated as a refusal to fill in gaps or "provide closure";⁵⁷ it signals the presence of the "Black noise" that underlies the experience of the transatlantic slave trade but is not captured by the archive: "shrieks, moans, nonsense, opacity."⁵⁸

Critical fabulation is a hermeneutic as well as a method. It's a form of storytelling that also brings into view the practices and investments that inform the storytelling process. Hartman's *Wayward Lives* is a practice of critical fabulation: it documents young Black women's stories at the turn of the twentieth century in Harlem and Philadelphia.⁵⁹ The characters are figures that Hartman discovered in the archive. She follows their lives closely, engaging in the form of close narration—a first- and third-person narration style where the narrator and the character are inseparable.

Hartman employs critical fabulation to handle scenes of sexual violence and coercion with care. In a story entitled "A Minor Figure," Hartman unpacks a photo of a young Black girl found in the belongings of the infamous photographer Thomas Eakins. Eakins was a prominent artist in Philadelphia who was subject to scrutiny when accused of coercing women to pose for him in the nude. While the complaints of white upper-class women students of his are well documented, Hartman notes that little is known about a photograph found in his possession of a nude Black child reclined on a couch.⁶⁰ There is no documentation of her name, and amongst the list of Eakin's victims she is not accounted for. Hartman tries to imagine the story of the child.

She left the studio exactly as the way she came: down the four flights of stairs into the rectangular garden with the row of elephant ears, past the water hydrant, the four cats and the setter, exiting through the wooden fence back onto Eighteenth Street, and then made her way back home. Was she able to settle back into her life or did this latest violence leave a mark, a record as indelible as the photograph? . . . As the photograph makes plain, her body was already marked by a history of sexual defilement, already branded as a commodity. Its availability to be used, to be hurt, was foundational to the prevailing set of social arrangements, in which she was formally free and vulnerable to the triple jeopardy of economic, racial and sexual violence.⁶¹

Hartman overlays the words of the text over a faded image of the photo. She refuses to clearly reproduce the image of violence. She will not make a spectacle of the image. She tries to imagine the narrative she does not have access to—how the girl felt, what it meant for her to leave the studio. But Hartman complicates her authority as narrator. She does not claim, even from her careful study in the

archive, to know the truth of what happened. She narrates a possibility, one outcome of the event.⁶² She uses first- and third-person narration, and this oscillation between forms produces an ambiguous affect, where the reader tries to latch onto any narrative intelligibility and have it yanked from them, their perceptual senses inadequate to the task of full comprehension.

Critical fabulation allows Hartman to center Black women's perspectives and Black women's relationships, even with a sparse archive, rather than exclusively centering the scene of violence and the perspective of the rapist. She reflects the ambivalence she finds in the narratives, feeling on one hand a desire for romance and whimsy for these women and on the other a commitment to honestly recording their experience of violation. Her words at the end remind us of how the violent use and abuse of Black women's bodies is a historical fact that directly influences our contemporary discursive conditions. Violence against Black women in the United States was a routine practice that organized an entire system of subjugation. And we must remake our perceptual capacities through and against this historical phenomenon.

Critical Fabulation is an example of narrative care as I defined it above—a perspective that crucially responds to the fraught discursive terrain of storytelling and sexual violence. It is a method that historicizes the practice of storytelling in order to reveal the conditions that produce the ability to tell stories. Engaging in critical fabulation entails some risk: there is always the possibility that one is romanticizing a perspective, or distorting, or projecting one's desires. This process is not politically pure, and it is possible to produce uncaring narration from fabulation. However, Hartman and others show that by engaging with genealogical accounts and framing the words and values within a contingent (and always revisable) discursive framework, we have a better chance to tell stories in caring ways.

Feminist philosophy brings to light the personal as a site of theorizing, and this move fundamentally changes the way in which we do philosophy and the project of political storytelling. Understandings of care, however, are never purely abstract but constantly affected by our lived practices and investments. Some of my personal experiences have been crucial in shaping this understanding of care. My *Popo*, or 婆婆 (translates from Cantonese to "grandmother"), suffers from multiple conditions that impact her mobility, one of which led to a successful but intense spinal surgery in 2021. She was then released to a rehab facility to face a long and difficult recovery. The facility's understaffing and budget cuts in addition to the language barrier between her and the nurses led to harmful neglect of my grandmother. A product of racist, xenophobic, ageist, ableist, and classist structures, this neglect led to the accumulation of bedsores during her time there, which by the time she left had developed into open wounds. Upon her release from the rehab facility, she went to live with my mother and sister. My sister and my mother worked tirelessly to heal the wounds. This proved difficult because the wounds had routinely been wrapped in damp bandages without being treated with antibiotics and, therefore, never healed. Committed healing involved my mother and sister

cleaning and changing the bandages multiple times a day for several months. My sister cut the bandages into particular shapes that kept them from getting damp. She applied a series of creams. Some of them were for healing, some were for comfort. Getting *Popo* ready for bed was an extensive process, which involved a series of moisturizing and massage techniques to make sure she was nice and comfortable at bedtime.

When I first came back to help my mom and sister, the sight of the wounds really frightened me. I was raised by my grandmother and had been used to the image of her standing upright, her mouth in a tight firm line or yelling at me in Cantonese. I had to adjust to seeing her so vulnerable and in so much pain. But my sister brought an odd sense of fun to the process. She would tease my grandma, she laughed at my squeamishness, she made games out of placing the bandages. And every time we would lift *Popo* into her bed, my sister would say, "Now we have to hug her to lift her! It's her favorite part!" The kind of care my grandmother needed took time, attention, and experimentation. It took us a while to find the right combination of creams, the right bandage configuration, and the right changing schedule. It involved mistakes, pain, and humor. We also needed to continually ask *Popo* how she felt, and what felt good and what was working.

I share my story as an example of narrative care. In telling this narrative I exemplify how narrative care may be extended beyond stories of sexual violence: it's a method that can be used across political contexts. I attend to the details of my grandmother's story. I see her experience as important to narrate and treat it in a loving manner, but also in a way that pays attention to the structural and systemic causes of her maltreatment. I narrate this moment of coming up against understanding (being frightened) but pushing through my lack of understanding to gain new perspective. I shared this story in order to show that my own thoughts and views are not really my own, but passed to me by the people that I love and my care community. And they are open to correction—my grandmother will likely have edits in my retellings of her experience.

In this paper, I have shown that a method of narrative care is needed for feminist political storytelling. Brison offers us a conceptual schema to think about narratives, selves, and politics through the study of trauma. That conceptual schema, however, presents a fundamental puzzle—one that has political and ethical stakes for survivors. Given that we are constituted by the social narratives that surround us, how do we change ourselves? And further, how do we use our self-transformation to change that social world? I believe this kind of attention to discursive conditions of survivor narrations can lead us to be critical of carceral politics and supportive of prison abolitionist politics, but I will not be able to go into that work in this paper.

I have argued that political storytelling must pick up this puzzle through a multiplicity of methods subsumed by the term *narrative care*—a process of writing and narrating for ourselves and for others and listening deeply with an attention to the particular and a curiosity for what you don't yet understand. Women of color feminist theory

is at the forefront of this methodological production, precisely because it directly engages in the theoretical heart of self-making under oppressive material, discursive, and epistemic conditions. We employ narrative care to bring forth stories that have been silenced, obscured, or unnarrated and produce new social narratives so that these selves have places to thrive. We can tell stories about those who have gone unnarrated, even as we pay close attention to ourselves as narrators. By attending to these histories, we build new worlds towards the future. Narrative care can help us see the truthful logics of domination that are illustrated by our survivor narratives, and we can consciousness-raise towards beautiful radical ends.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am lucky to have a community of people who have helped me voice these thoughts. Agnese Di Riccio, Michael Greer, and Mariam Matar tended to every word of every draft. My academic mentors, Daniel Rodríguez-Navas, Romy Opperman, and Cinzia Arruzza, were indispensable for the writing process. The New School Mellon Fellowship Group and the NSSR Theory Collective provided valuable feedback on earlier versions of this work. I am grateful to the anonymous peer review, Ami Harbin, and Barrett Emerick for their thoughtful and detailed edits. And I am grateful to my mom, Catherine Young, sister, Elise Young, and Popo, Chung Lin Ng 伍仲蓮, for sharing their ideas with me and teaching me about care.

NOTES

1. The term “narrative care” emerged from my participation in Fanny Söderbäck’s seminar on *Singularity, Vulnerability, Narration*. Söderbäck’s work on “Narration as a Practice of Care” and the discussions of the class were influential for this work: I am deeply indebted to them.
2. Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History.”
3. Brison, *Aftermath*, 41.
4. Brison, *Aftermath*, 71.
5. Brison, *Aftermath*, 82.
6. Brison, *Aftermath*, 50.
7. Laub, *Testimony Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*; cited in Brison, *Aftermath*, 58.
8. Brison, *Aftermath*, 71.
9. Brison, *Aftermath*, 66.
10. I take this language from Hilde Lindemann’s text *Damaged Identities and Narrative Repair*. She brings in these terms to show how cultural master narratives can be oppressive and an individual’s “counter narrative” can rupture them.
11. Phillips, “‘They’re Rapists.’ President Trump’s Campaign Launch Speech Two Years Later, Annotated.”
12. For more information on the topic of carceral feminism, please see Mindy Gottschalk’s text *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America*.
13. Macintyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*.
14. Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 216.
15. Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 208.
16. Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 209.
17. Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 210.
18. Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*.
19. Foucault, “The Subject and Power.”
20. Wynter’s argument on narrativity relates to a general claim on the general construction of the human as both bio-evolutionary produced as well as socially discursive. Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter To My Colleagues,” 5.
21. Noddings, “Why Care About Caring?” 10–11.
22. Tronto, “An Ethic of Care,” 16.
23. This critique is informed and inspired by Kelly Gawel’s work on radical care. Gawel argues that care ethicists take for granted the social and material conditions in which caring emotions manifest. As a result, this often leads to unequal distributions of care labor and naïve and vindictory arguments on engrossment, empathy, and self-sacrifice. Gawel, “Radical Care: Seeking New and More Possible Meetings in the Shadows of Structural Violence.”
24. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.
25. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 17.
26. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 18.
27. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 18.
28. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.
29. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.
30. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.
31. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 21.
32. Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 64.
33. For more information on debates around this issue, see Sylvia Tamale’s work *African Sexualities, a Reader*, or Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*.
34. Brison, *Aftermath*, 102.
35. For more information on this type of abolitionist feminism, see Amia Srinivasan’s chapter on carceral feminism in her book *The Right to Sex*.
36. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 32.
37. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 32.
38. The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Non credere di avere dei diritti*; cited in Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 55.
39. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 55.
40. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 56.
41. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 53.
42. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 56.
43. Narrating others is an indispensable and unavoidable dynamic in feminist politics, but when done without care can reproduce oppressions that survivors face. See Linda Martin Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991–1992): 5–32.
44. María del Rosario Acosta López, “Gramáticas de lo inaudito as Decolonial Grammars: Notes for a Decolonization of Listening,” *Research in Phenomenology* 52 (2022): 203–22.
45. del Rosario Acosta López, “Gramáticas de lo inaudito as Decolonial Grammars,” 207.
46. María del Rosario Acosta López, “From Aesthetics of Critique to Grammars of Listening: On Reconfiguring Sensibility as a Political Task,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 6 (Summer 2021): 141.
47. López, “From Aesthetics of Critique,” 143.
48. López, “From Aesthetics of Critique,” 146.
49. NHI is the legal acronym for No Humans Involved. Sylvia Wynter and Jackie Wang in different places of their text illustrate the categorical logic that legal linguistic implements to designate who is a victim, criminal, and thus “human” (see Sylvia Wynter, “‘No Human Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues”; Jackie Wang, “Against Innocence,” *Lies Journal*, 2012). NHI is often used to classify the jobless, homeless, sex worker, and migrants, and thereby organizes liability and criminal activity based on this status.
50. Specifically, Hartman is working within the context of the United States’ archives and the perspectives of the black enslaved American experiences.
51. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 1.
52. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 5.

53. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 5.
54. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2.
55. Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 69.
56. Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 11.
57. Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 12.
58. Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 12.
59. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*.
60. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 17.
61. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 29.
62. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 80. "Atlas of the Wayward."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*. Georgetown University Press, 2013.
- Cavareto, Adriana. *Relating Narratives*: Routledge, 2000.
- Gawel, Kelly. "Radical Care: Seeking New and More Possible Meetings in the Shadows of Structural Violence." *Krisis* 43, no. 1 (2023).
- Foucault, Michel. *Archeology of Knowledge*. New York: Harper and Row, 1961.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95.
- Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History." In *Language, Counter-Memory and Practice*, edited by D. Bouchard. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- Gottschalk, Mindy. *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Hamington, Maurice. *Embodied Care: Jane Addams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Feminist Ethics*. University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- . "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.
- . *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. New York: Norton Publishing, 2019.
- Laub, Dori. *Testimony Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Lindemann, Hilde. *Damaged Identities and Narrative Repair*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- López, María del Rosario Acosta. "From Aesthetics of Critique to Grammars of Listening: On Reconfiguring Sensibility as a Political Task," *Journal of World Philosophies* 6 (2021): 139–56.
- Macintyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.
- Noddings, Nel. "Why Care About Caring?" In *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.
- Phillips, Amber. "'They're Rapists.' President Trump's Campaign Launch Speech Two Years Later, Annotated." *Washington Post*, June 16, 2017. Last accessed February 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/06/16/theyre-rapists-presidents-trump-campaign-launch-speech-two-years-later-annotated/>.
- Srinivasan, Amia. *The Right to Sex*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021.
- Tamale, Sylvia. *African Sexualities, a Reader*. Pambazuku Press, 2011.
- The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective. *Non credere di avere dei diritti*. Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987.
- Tronto, Joan. "An Ethic of Care." *Ethics and Aging: Bringing the Issues Home* 22, no. 3 (1998): 15–20.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "'No Humans Involved': An Open Letter To My Colleagues." *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1, no. 1 (1994).

Surviving the System: Justice and Ambiguity in the Aftermath of Sexual Violence

Marie-Pier Lemay
CARLETON UNIVERSITY

In her essay "The Woman Who Stayed Silent" published in 2022, Sarah Polley returns to her decision not to join other complainants in the 2016 Canadian criminal trial against radio host Jian Ghomeshi. She chose not to report her sexual assault that happened two decades before the trial. Polley describes how her ambivalence towards Ghomeshi and the assault through all these years (often retold in a lighthearted way as *just* a bad date) would impact her credibility as a victim of sexual violence. She recalls how the attorneys she consulted in connection to her sexual assault discouraged her from pressing charges against her assailant, saying that they would never recommend a woman they love press criminal charges for rape; she was told that going forward would be "The most stressful thing [she]’d ever experienced."¹

Yet, we do have this persisting archetype of a heroic sexual violence survivor successfully pressing charges against their assailant and overcoming their trauma in a court setting ending with a guilty verdict. The reality, as I show, is often more complex and intricate. In this short essay, I explore how the demand to be a *good* survivor of sexual violence is constituted through the criminal-legal process,² which undermines survivors’ ability to heal and pursue accountability and justice on their terms. Victims may feel ambivalent about how to move forward and pressured to perform survivorhood, which is only realized through criminal prosecution. The aftermath of sexual violence can be more morally ambiguous and confusing than it appears in mainstream narratives of justice; either one seeks justice through traditional means, or one avoids the second victimization that often plagues victims who go through criminal-legal processes. As much as we collectively expect crimes to be punished, we expect that victims will go through criminal proceedings; failure to do so can be seen as a failure to conform oneself to norms of good survivorhood, and thereby amounts to a moral failure.

Inspired by Susan Brison’s philosophical method in her book *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*—interweaving first-person narratives, social science research, and feminist philosophy—this paper explores how moral expectations in the aftermath of sexual violence are shaped by the criminal-legal system.³ When someone acknowledges that they survived an instance of sexual violence, this often raises the question of what should follow, which may trigger a moral ambiguity about how one must act. I describe the moral ambiguity of people who experienced sexual violence as a set of beliefs or behaviors that seemingly exhibit indecisiveness or inconsistent choices regarding what they might do in the aftermath; for instance, victims may regret or be hesitant about participating in the criminal process. In addition to being influenced by the criminal-legal options, good

survivorhood is often fashioned through an individualized framework, preventing us from seeing the structural nature of the violence that happened. The aftermath, I show, often takes the form of a double-bind, where victims must perform enough agency and survivor traits on one hand, while at the same time they must demonstrate the traits of being a victim.

To proceed, I first show that, when an instance of sexual violence is recognized as such, we expect survivors to seek justice through the criminal-legal system. Good survivorship is often actualized through pressing charges against perpetrators of violence where there is no place for ambiguity. I explore how horizons of accountability and justice for sexual violence are shaped by survivor myths and the individualization of the aftermath of sexual violence. I argue that the criminal-legal frame of justice cannot make room for survivors' ambiguity, the latter of which can be a space of healing. Later, I reflect on what we might learn from recent work by abolitionist feminists about the entanglement of the aftermath of sexual violence within the carceral, criminal, and legal framework. The tension between the individual nature of sexual violence and the collective and political meaning of its punishment deserves more critical and normative attention in feminist philosophy.

FROM RAPE MYTHS TO SURVIVOR MYTHS

The type of story I mentioned above about Polley's hesitation in pressing charges matters for thinking through the aftermath of sexual violence. It allows us to grapple with the high-stakes dilemma survivors may experience in wondering whether it is the right decision to press charges for an instance of sexual violence against someone they know. I acknowledge that this is an unusual case because survivors of sexual violence often do not recognize and name the violence that happened to them. In this section I argue that rape myths shape our collective and individual understanding of sexual violence, and in particular that they shape how victims recover from sexual violence.

Rape myths are beliefs that make us less likely to believe people who experienced sexual violence when they disclose this to us or to service providers. Rape myths—such as “she was asking for it,” “most rapes are committed by strangers,” “false rape accusations are common,” or “a husband cannot rape his wife”—prevent us from identifying common instances of sexual violence, simultaneously “minimizing” victims' credibility and harm while “catastrophizing” the supposed exceptional character of sexual violence.⁴ In practice, these myths may impact access to services in the aftermath by rape victims because they may not be seen as “real” victims by service providers (e.g., doctors, social workers, attorneys, police officers) or their immediate community.⁵ Survivors themselves can fall into rape myths when they intend to understand what happened to them. Because sexual assaults often do not follow a *clear* narrative of a stranger attacking someone (e.g., the case of a date rape such as the one described by Polley), they render victims vulnerable to hermeneutical injustice, in which they are unable to identify the situation as involving sexual assault because they lack the conceptual resources to do so.⁶

Concurrently with rape myths that assign the responsibility of an instance of sexual violence to victims themselves (i.e., victim-blaming), survivor myths individualize responsibility by making victims responsible for their recovery.⁷ I argue that there is not only pressure on survivors regarding how they should have behaved before and during the event, but there is also pressure in the aftermath of violence, when victims recognize that the harm of what happened to them is rife with social expectations of how to “move forward” after sexual violence. If a victim recognizes what happened to them as sexual violence, victims may feel pressured, as a result, to press charges and seek justice through traditional means. Hence, a failure to do so discredits their survivor identity. In the aftermath of violence, rape myths, through survivor narratives, constrain and silence people who experienced sexual violence. As I will contend later, the necessity to keep a coherent account of victimization, in case one goes through the criminal-legal system, silences ambiguity experienced by the victims.

According to more mainstream versions of the #MeToo movement, one becomes a survivor by denouncing and refusing to be silent; survivors must follow a teleological path from victimhood to (criminal) justice and recovery.⁸ The rape myths that persist in the aftermath may make the survivor believe that there is only one right way to present oneself as a survivor, exacerbating the ambiguity that might be felt by them. The rich social science literature on norms of survivorhood is helpful for grappling with this individual responsibility for recovery; that is, victims are individually tasked to find remedies to the structural problem of sexual violence.⁹ Stephanie R. Larson conceptualizes what she calls “compulsory survivorship,” highlighting the need to individually overcome violence and take personal responsibility for the effects of violence. She shows how this disdain of victimhood is rooted in a denial of pain and celebration of the able-bodied, neoliberal, and independent individual.¹⁰ Failing to perform survivorhood becomes a personal failing, rather than a societal one. People who experienced sexual violence bear “the responsibility for surmounting social ills through individual efforts, in a context where social remedies are sorely lacking.”¹¹ Victims become virtuous survivors through individual empowerment, not through community and collective empowerment.

The myth of survivorhood does not give enough room for the complex moral ambiguity that can characterize the aftermath of violence; the figure of the survivor allows for some anger, but not too much. Erinn Gilson writes about this impossible double-bind survivors may experience in these terms: “to be ‘good,’ ‘true’ victims, women must be vulnerable—weak and incapable—but simultaneously agential, perfectly rational, and calculating about how best to document and prove their victimization, yet never so rational as to be perceived as unemotional (contrary to normative gender expectations) or manipulative (aligning with tropes of ‘bad’ femininity).”¹² This double-bind, where victims must perform their victimization while showing how successful they are at resisting, is also present in many cases of domestic violence. As argued by Paige Sweet, domestic violence survivors must respond to similar social expectations of sexual violence survivors in

order to be deemed credible and legible to the eyes of the law and service providers.¹³ As Sweet shows, while domestic violence survivors must be “successful” in their embodiment of survivorhood (i.e., through trauma therapy and self-help strategies) for accessing resources, they must at the same time convince criminal-legal authorities that they are, indeed, victims.

Making victims individually responsible for their recovery shapes their ability to imagine justice beyond the criminal-legal system. Indeed, how can one think about recovering through collective means when they are deemed responsible for overcoming their pain? Seeing the aftermath of violence as an individual project realized through myths of survivorhood shapes horizons of justice.

LIMITED HORIZONS OF JUSTICE

The social expectations are that to be a *good* victim or a *good* survivor is to seek criminal prosecution, which may in turn pressure victims into seeking criminal-legal options. In this section, I focus on how survivors are pressured to enter into the criminal-legal process and how they are revictimized as a result. For sexual violence survivors, horizons of justice appear to be limited to the criminal-legal system despite the fact that alternatives to criminal prosecution might be available. If we expect that harmful and immoral behavior, such as a rape, must be criminally punished, this implies that we expect that victims of sexual violence must go forward and press charges. In *Just Sex*, Nicola Gavey writes that the way in which the law distinguishes rape from non-rape affects how survivors perceive themselves and understand their experience of violence; the legal definition of rape demarcates victims, even if one does not go through the process of pressing charges.¹⁴ As a result, the aftermath of sexual violence is intertwined with legal definitions of sexual violence. Thinking about instances of sexual violence that happened to us through a “legal consciousness”¹⁵ not only individualizes the accountability and the remedy for what happened, but silences remaining ambiguity, as I will show in the third section.

Pressing charges for a sexual crime is known for creating a second victimization for those that have been first victimized by sexual violence. The combination of rape and survivor myths work in tandem to impact service and legal responses to disclosures of sexual assault. Jurist Elaine Craig¹⁶ quotes a Toronto woman who filed a complaint and expressed that much of her trauma is not related to her sexual assault *per se*, but to the brutality of the criminal-legal system. As Craig highlights, while Canada has become one of the countries with laws that are the most progressive in terms of protecting sexual assault complainants, reporting rates of sexual assaults have not risen since the law changed.¹⁷ As she writes, “Perhaps most disappointingly, given that the aim of many of these reforms was to protect complainants from the discriminatory and traumatizing treatment they endured as witnesses in sexual assault trials, women continue to report their experiences of the sexual assault trial process as brutal and inhumane.”¹⁸

The second victimization, however, is not limited to the court process itself. The horizon of justice provided by the criminal system can be additionally observed in the

state’s efforts to provide care, even when it is not actively being used to seek justice. Sameena Mulla’s ethnographic research in Baltimore in the *Violence of Care*¹⁹ analyzes the peculiar standpoint of forensic nurses that need to simultaneously perform care for women who experienced sexual violence while collecting forensic evidence that could be used if women were to press charges for what happened to them. She persuasively argues that this cold and antiseptic first response to sexual violence, centered on the need to collect evidence (e.g., DNA) for potential prosecution, is a form of violence and injustice for survivors. People who have experienced sexual violence do not get the justice they deserve as a first response to their traumatic experience.²⁰ This body of work highlights the entanglement between medical and criminal responses to sexual violence.

The politically charged dilemma faced by victims, who, in order to become survivors are expected to speak out about their experiences, often takes the form of entering a long and excruciating criminal process. The dichotomy established between the complainant and the perpetrator in a criminal setting further contributes to the individualization of responsibility for sexual violence. The process of filing charges for sexual violence can involve long wait times and requires the survivor to relive their experience in court, even years after the event, and to leave all traces of moral ambiguity behind. In her book, Brison helpfully distinguishes the retelling that happens in court from the one in a therapeutic space; within a criminal setting, the emphasis on “getting the story right” superseded the acknowledgment of harm done to the victim—a point to which I will return shortly.²¹ If one decides to go forward because, above all, one is seeking to receive some form of apology, as soon as we enter the criminal realm, it is not in the interest of the perpetrator to apologize, or to offer any reparations for what they did, because to do so would be an admission of guilt. Instead, it is in the interest of the perpetrator and their defense attorney to wholly deny what happened (or to argue that it was consensual for both parties). Because of the nature of the cross-examination of the victim by the defense attorney in court settings, legal scholars John Conley, William Barr, and Robin Riner argue that “all too often [. . .] the courtroom reenactment results in the victim being blamed for the crime.”²² As the state is legally the accuser, and the victim the witness, in criminal cases, the victim must partially relinquish their agency in the criminal proceedings while still being responsible—at least in some cases—for the decision of whether to prosecute.

Within this criminal setting, sexual violence survivors often find themselves in a double-bind where either they choose to remain silent or they choose to prosecute. In practice, victims may find themselves in a situation where either they follow what is expected for them (pressing charges) or they avoid the common second victimization of victims that go through the criminal-legal system. We expect survivors to be “brave” while being victimized enough to keep their credibility intact in legal proceedings. Therefore, people who have experienced sexual violence find themselves in a situation where their agency and victimization are in conflict. Performing a pristine view of victimhood may be

more challenging when the violence was done by someone we know because we often belong to the same community as the person who assaulted us. From this conflicting terrain, I argue that the focus on reporting and pursuing criminal complaints tends to isolate and pathologize the complex moral emotions experienced by survivors. Indeed, the hesitation to report or the ambivalence some survivors may feel towards their perpetrators may be construed as a failure to be a heroic survivor standing up for themselves.

The choice not to report or to pursue criminal prosecution is often equated with remaining silent, and so the moral dilemma that characterizes the “duty to report” in the current criminal system can be interpreted as a lack of self-respect. Overcoming sexual violence becomes an individual endeavor that is only realized through the criminal prosecution of the perpetrator. The narrative of a *perfect victim* harmed by a *monster* obscures the structural dimension of sexual violence. Moreover, this individualization of sexual violence hinders ways of seeing perpetrators of violence outside of a “monster narrative,” instead of considering the social structures that lead to the creation of this form of violence. Philosopher Audrey Yap compellingly writes that we lack the resources in our social imagination to recognize that “nice young men” can commit acts of sexual violence and still maintain healthy relationships with family and friends.²³ If we leave behind the idea that the people perpetrating sexual violence are monsters, it allows us all to finally see the fact that violence is often committed by perfectly *normal* men. The time, energy, and emotional readiness required for pressing charges and going through the criminal and legal system is further complicated by the fact that it is the state itself that confronts the perpetrator of violence. It is not, in most cases, the fully agential process that the feminist embrace of the carceral state has promised, as I explore later.

CRIMINAL-LEGAL FRAMES

While most cases of sexual violence do not end up in court, the criminal-legal frame is deeply influential in the ways in which victims make sense of their experiences of sexual violence, and how best to remedy it. Using Kristie Dotson’s notion of “epistemic oppression,”²⁴ Heiner and Tyson write about the “epistemic occupation” of carceral logic; that is, our horizons of justice are shaped by our inability to imagine justice outside of the criminal-legal system.²⁵ Thinking through the criminal-legal frame as occupying our own horizons of justice is helpful to understand how it creates zones of ambiguities for survivors. In this section, I argue (concurrently with Brison’s work on trauma and sexual violence) that the emphasis on clarity, and the underlying dichotomy between victim and perpetrator, within the criminal-legal frames, is harmful for survivors. I suggest that the uncertainty and ambiguity felt by survivors may constitute spaces for healing.

In her book *Aftermath*, Brison details the court process following her assault and notes that it was relatively straightforward due to a number of factors, the most important of which were the physical injuries she sustained that helped to corroborate her account. In many ways, Brison’s assault was paradigmatic of the idea we have of rape: it was committed by a stranger (even though most

sexual assaults are committed by people known to the victim); it was committed in broad daylight in the middle of the day; and it was overtly physically violent.²⁶ Despite being straightforward in all these ways, Brison describes the pain of keeping one’s memory of a traumatic event straight enough to answer questions in court. As she writes, “it seems to me now, there are ways in which having to get—and keep—a trauma narrative straight, for the purpose of a trial, for example, can also impede the process of recovery, hampering the ability to go on.”²⁷ When one goes forward with pressing charges, keeping a coherent testimony in criminal-legal proceedings is not easy for most people who have had a traumatic experience, sexual or otherwise. Brison describes the relief she felt after she gave her testimony in court, as she no longer needed to “keep the story straight. [She] could let go of the details [she]’d kept alive in [her] mind.”²⁸ Going through criminal proceedings often involves for the survivors keeping alive painful memories in minute details to testify in court or, earlier in the process, to answer questions while the sexual crime detective investigates the crime.²⁹

Not only is it difficult to keep a traumatic memory in our minds, but it is also challenging to present it in a coherent manner—even when, as in Brison’s case, it is a comparatively straightforward account. Legal scholars Conley, Barr, and Riner note how, during a court setting, “Trivial inconsistency in [a victim’s] testimony will be blown out of proportion to suggest a fault, if not mendacity.”³⁰ Linda Martín Alcoff writes similarly about the consistency of memories that is expected from people who pressed charges for sexual crimes, arguing that consistency should not be the test of truth in court proceedings given what we know about research on trauma.³¹ In her memoir, Polley gives an account of how trauma impacted her ability to remember any difficult memories before poignantly asking, “What, then, are we to do with the uncomfortable fact that people who have been traumatized do not often have a handle on the whole truth or are covering up some surrounding details of an assault out of shame or embarrassment?”³² The inability to maintain a consistent testimony over a prolonged period undermines one’s credibility as a witness in criminal-legal proceedings, making the victim suffer from a testimonial injustice where they are not believed for the harm they suffered.³³

The binary constructed between the victim and the perpetrator within the criminal-legal frame often implies that the victim leaves aside the affective dimensions of her testimony. Legal scholar Nicola Lacey writes about how often the court process negates the reality of embodiment to embrace clear speech: “the language of embodied existence—of pain, shame, loss of self-esteem, the sense of violation and objectification—find no place within formal legal categories: nothing in those categories invites the victim to construct her testimonial narrative in the terms which empirical research suggests would best relate her experience.”³⁴ Until the criminal-legal process is over, the victim must keep their sexual violence narrative intact while silencing underlying ambiguity.

Because the criminal-legal frame tends to silence survivors’ remaining ambiguity around their instance of sexual

violence, this necessarily shapes how victims understand themselves and the remedies that are available to them. Sexual violence survivors may experience ambiguity about how to seek justice in a way that aligns with their values and philosophical outlooks; this ambiguity may be a space for healing and for seeking alternative frameworks of justice. Sitting with this felt ambiguity may be valuable in itself. People who experienced sexual violence must often turn to other solutions to seek accountability for what happened (or apology of some form) and to leave the detrimental victim/perpetrator binary that is reinforced through the criminal-legal frame.

In her preface to the 2022 edition of *Aftermath*, Brison addresses the practice of punishing and jailing perpetrators of sexual violence, and their rights as defendants in the criminal-legal system. She unambiguously positions herself as an “anti-carceral and anti-racist feminist,”³⁵ refuting the reading some may have had of her work as advocating for criminally punishing perpetrators of sexual violence. As she clarifies, “Even then, I did not think the criminal law was the best way to address sexual violence. The problem is structural and ideological—not one our system of policing and criminal punishment can solve.”³⁶ Along with Brison, I end this essay by exploring this issue further. In the original edition of her book, Brison explores the impact on memory of keeping these often-painful narratives straight for criminal-legal proceedings, while I reflect on how this flattening of testimony and suppressing of ambiguity is inherent to the criminal-legal frame and cannot be transformed within the current criminal-legal system. Critical legal scholars have argued that rape law reforms have had, in practice, little impact on its incidence; furthermore, the nature of the criminal-legal system reproduces inequality in the courtroom.³⁷ In addition to the second victimization often entailed by criminal proceedings, a sexual violence survivor often feels that they cannot express ambivalent feelings around its aftermath. As Brison recently writes, “When the only relevant question to be investigated and decided by the fact-finders is ‘did he do this to her there/then?’ the victim’s testimony about how she experienced the assault and its aftermath in the broader context of life under patriarchy [. . .] is rendered irrelevant and the victim is silenced.”³⁸ Because the courtroom’s focus is on prosecution, it may not be the most appropriate space to respond to victims’ needs for closure or accountability.

Centering survivors’ voices in the search for justice means seriously considering the pain reported by them as they go through the criminal-legal system. While I recognize that some victims may go through the criminal-legal process with the end goal being the prosecution of the perpetrator, we must consider the fact that other victims go forward seeking accountability, closure, and recognition, which survivors may not believe to be accomplished through the current system. As a result, I join other feminist scholars that ask for an alternative framework of justice outside of the criminal-legal frame.³⁹ Seeking alternative justice frameworks could mean that accountability would no longer be reduced to punishing, and incarcerating, the “bad men” (often from our community) that individually perpetuated sexual violence.⁴⁰

Feminist scholars have increasingly looked at the impact of the interplay between the carceral, medical, and legal systems on how people who experienced sexual violence understand themselves and their experience of violence.⁴¹ This body of work complements recent calls to abolish the criminal-legal system, “envisioning a continuum of alternatives to imprisonment.”⁴² Feminist abolitionist thinkers ask us to reimagine accountability for sexual violence outside of the prison-industrial complex and thus reject the logic of punishment and vengeance. To be clear, abolishing the carceral state does not mean letting those who commit acts of violence off the hook. Rather, it is to find alternative ways of seeking justice, centered on the survivor’s needs. As the abolitionist thinker Ruth Wilson Gilmore stresses, “abolition is not primarily about absence—the absence of police and prisons—it is fundamentally about presence.”⁴³ In contrast to the criminal framing of sexual violence, abolitionist thinkers, such as Mariame Kaba, write about “making violence unthinkable in our culture” and about centering accountability on the victims’ healing process.⁴⁴ Abolitionist approaches to justice are amenable to recognizing the ambivalence felt by sexual violence survivors because the focus is not on punishing the “bad men” but on finding ways to create accountability for sexual violence. That being said, I acknowledge that going through community justice initiatives is rarely an option for someone, given how ingrained and prevalent the carceral logic is.

Finding ways to listen to the ambiguity felt by sexual violence survivors matters for collectively grappling with the aftermath of sexual violence. The ambivalence of survivors towards the criminal-legal system must be recognized as meaningful and common, and used to explore alternative frameworks of accountability and justice. Hearing the voices of those who have experienced sexual violence requires allowing for the conflicting dilemmas and pressures they feel as they navigate the aftermath of violence. I hope I have shed some light on such tensions, and on the need for alternative, ambivalent responses.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the editors, Barrett Emerick and Ami Harbin, an anonymous reviewer, Polly Galis, Karen Houle, Dallas Jovic, and Sonia Rucic for written comments on this essay. Some preliminary ideas were presented in a workshop on Manon Garcia’s *The Joy of Consent* at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières in October 2022. A version of this paper was presented at the miniconference *Feminists Re-Theorize the Political* in the Western Political Science Association Conference in April 2023; special thanks to Elena Gambino, Alisa Kessel, and Archana Kaku for discussing these ideas with me. Lastly, I am grateful to Jenny Hempen, and *Pittsburgh Action Against Rape* more broadly, for helping me to work through some of these ideas.

NOTES

1. Polley, *Run towards the Danger*, 67.
2. Following critical work on the carceral and criminal system, I refer to this system as the “criminal-legal” process, frame, or options rather than “criminal justice system.” I concur with Anna Terwiel

who did so in her work on carceral feminism “in order to unsettle the assumption that this system delivers justice.” Terwiel, “What Is Carceral Feminism?” 438.

3. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*.
4. Tilton, “Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility”; cf. Hall, Howard, and Boezio, “Tolerance of Rape: A Sexist or Antisocial Attitude?”
5. Campbell, “The Psychological Impact of Rape Victims”; Campbell and Raja, “Secondary Victimization of Rape Victims: Insights From Mental Health Professionals Who Treat Survivors of Violence.”
6. Jenkins, “Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices.”
7. Gilson, “Responsibility for Sexual Injustices: Toward an Intersectional Account.”
8. Pilipchuk, “Good Survivor, Bad Survivor: # MeToo and the Moralization of Survivorship.”
9. Boyle and Rogers, “Beyond the Rape ‘Victim’–‘Survivor’ Binary: How Race, Gender, and Identity Processes Interact to Shape Distress”; Stringer, *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times*; Ross, “The Survivor Imperative: Sexual Violence, Victimhood, and Neoliberalism”; Larson, “Survivors, Liars, and Unfit Minds: Rhetorical Impossibility and Rape Trauma Disclosure.”
10. Larson, “Survivors, Liars, and Unfit Minds.”
11. Ross, “The Survivor Imperative,” 65.
12. Gilson, “Responsibility for Sexual Injustices,” 9.
13. Sweet, *The Politics of Surviving: How Women Navigate Domestic Violence and Its Aftermath*.
14. Gavey, *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*, Second edition, Women and Psychology.
15. While I borrow the phrasing “legal consciousness” from Sally Engle Merry, I understand that she uses that term to refer to human rights struggles against gender-based violence. See Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice*.
16. Craig, *Putting Trials on Trial: Sexual Assault and the Failure of the Legal Profession*.
17. Craig, “Feminism, Public Dialogue, and Sexual Assault Law.”
18. Craig, *Putting Trials on Trial*, 102.
19. Mulla, *The Violence of Care: Rape Victims, Forensic Nurses, and Sexual Assault Intervention*.
20. In the same vein, anthropologist Sonia Rucic movingly describes a similar narrative in *Care Centres* in South Africa, where, what she calls, a “biocarceral citizenship” is bestowed upon those who seek HIV care after a sexual assault and those who caused sexual harms. The need for the medicalization and criminalization of care for the victims and the perpetrators deprives these individuals of a sense of agency. Rucic, “Biocarceral Citizenship: Criminalizing through Care in Post-Apartheid South Africa.”
21. Brison, *Aftermath*, 102.
22. Conley, O’Barr, and Riner, *Just Words: Law, Language, and Power*, 19.
23. Yap, “Credibility Excess and the Social Imaginary in Cases of Sexual Assault.”
24. Dotson, “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression.”
25. Heiner and Tyson, “Feminism and the Carceral State: Gender-Responsive Justice, Community Accountability, and the Epistemology of Antiviolence.”
26. Brison, *Aftermath*, 2–21.
27. Brison, *Aftermath*, 102.
28. Brison, *Aftermath*, 108.
29. It is vital to not reduce criminal proceedings to the courtroom. Indeed, the criminal investigation, which occurs when one files a complaint, may be revictimizing. Additionally, we should bear

in mind that plea bargains (where typically the perpetrator will plead guilty to a lesser offense to avoid a trial) are more common than trials for cases of sexual violence in the US. Golding et al., “Justice Served? Perceptions of Plea Bargaining Involving a Sexual Assault in Child and Adult Females.”

30. Conley, O’Barr, and Riner, *Just Words*, 19.
31. Alcoff, “Consistency Shouldn’t Be the Test of Truth in Sexual-Assault Cases.”
32. Polley, *Run towards the Danger*, 92.
33. Brison, “What’s Consent Got to Do with It?”; Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*.
34. Lacey, *Unspeakable Subjects: Feminist Essays in Legal and Social Theory*, 116.
35. Brison, *Aftermath*, xii.
36. Brison, *Aftermath*, xii.
37. Conley, O’Barr, and Riner, *Just Words*, 20; See Matoesian, *Reproducing Rape: Domination through Talk in the Courtroom*.
38. Brison, “What’s Consent Got to Do with It?” 15–16.
39. Bernstein, “The Sexual Politics of the ‘New Abolitionism’”; Bumiller, *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement against Sexual Violence*; Goodmark, *Imperfect Victims: Criminalized Survivors and the Promise of Abolition Feminism*; Gruber, *The Feminist War on Crime: The Unexpected Role of Women’s Liberation in Mass Incarceration*; Taylor, “Anti-Carceral Feminism and Sexual Assault—A Defense: A Critique of the Critique of the Critique of Carceral Feminism”; Terwiel, “What Is Carceral Feminism?”
40. See the preface to the 2022 edition of *Aftermath* where Brison makes a similar claim.
41. See the preface to the 2022 edition of *Aftermath* where Brison makes a similar claim.
42. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 108.
43. Woody, *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements, Transgressing Boundaries: Studies in Black Politics and Black Communities*, 118.
44. Kaba, Nopper, and Murakawa, *We Do This ‘til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, 58.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alcoff, Linda Martín. “Consistency Shouldn’t Be the Test of Truth in Sexual-Assault Cases.” Aeon, 2019. <https://aeon.co/essays/consistency-shouldnt-be-the-test-of-truth-in-sexual-assault-cases>.

Bernstein, Elizabeth. “The Sexual Politics of the ‘New Abolitionism.’” *Differences* 18, no. 3 (December 1, 2007): 128–51. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2007-013>.

Boyle, Kaitlin M., and Kimberly B. Rogers. “Beyond the Rape ‘Victim’–‘Survivor’ Binary: How Race, Gender, and Identity Processes Interact to Shape Distress.” *Sociological Forum* 35, no. 2 (June 2020): 323–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12584>.

Brison, Susan. “What’s Consent Got to Do with It?” *Social Philosophy Today* 37 (2021): 9–21. <https://doi.org/10.5840/socphiltoday202181983>.

Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Bumiller, Kristin. *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement against Sexual Violence*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Campbell, Rebecca. “The Psychological Impact of Rape Victims.” *American Psychologist* 63 (2008): 702–17. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.63.8.702>.

Campbell, Rebecca, and Sheela Raja. “Secondary Victimization of Rape Victims: Insights From Mental Health Professionals Who Treat Survivors of Violence.” *Violence and Victims* 14, no. 3 (January 1999): 261–75. <https://doi.org/10.1891/0886-6708.14.3.261>.

Conley, John M., William M. O’Barr, and Robin Conley Riner. *Just Words: Law, Language, and Power*. Third edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.

- Craig, Elaine. "Feminism, Public Dialogue, and Sexual Assault Law." In *Turbulent Times, Transformational Possibilities?: Gender and Politics Today and Tomorrow*, edited by Fiona Macdonald and Alexandra Dobrowsky. University of Toronto Press, 2020.
- . *Putting Trials on Trial: Sexual Assault and the Failure of the Legal Profession*. Montreal & Kingston London Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Open Media Book. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003.
- Dotson, Kristie. "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression." *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 115–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2013.782585>.
- Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Gavey, Nicola. *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*. Second edition. Women and Psychology. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2019.
- Gilson, Erinn Cunniff. "Responsibility for Sexual Injustices: Toward an Intersectional Account." *Hypatia* 37, no. 2 (May 2, 2022): 422–46. <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2022.8>.
- Golding, Jonathan M., Kellie R. Lynch, Sarah E. Malik, and Olivia Foster-Gimbel. "Justice Served? Perceptions of Plea Bargaining Involving a Sexual Assault in Child and Adult Females." *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 45, no. 4 (April 1, 2018): 503–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854817743538>.
- Goodmark, Leigh. *Imperfect Victims: Criminalized Survivors and the Promise of Abolition Feminism*. Gender and Justice, Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2023.
- Gruber, Aya. *The Feminist War on Crime: The Unexpected Role of Women's Liberation in Mass Incarceration*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021.
- Hall, Eleanor R., Judith A. Howard, and Sherrie L. Boezio. "Tolerance of Rape: A Sexist or Antisocial Attitude?" *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 10 (1986): 101–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1986.tb00739.x>.
- Heiner, Brady T., and Sarah K. Tyson. "Feminism and the Carceral State: Gender-Responsive Justice, Community Accountability, and the Epistemology of Antiviolence." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (March 23, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2016.3.3>.
- Jenkins, Katharine. "Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34, no. 2 (February 2017): 191–205. <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12174>.
- Kaba, Mariame, Tamara K. Nopper, and Naomi Murakawa. *We Do This 'til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. Abolitionist Papers. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021.
- Lacey, Nicola. *Unspeakable Subjects: Feminist Essays in Legal and Social Theory*. Oxford: Evanston, Ill: Hart Publishing, 1998.
- Larson, Stephanie R. "Survivors, Liars, and Unfit Minds: Rhetorical Impossibility and Rape Trauma Disclosure." *Hypatia* 33, no. 4 (ed 2018): 681–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12435>.
- Matoesian, Gregory M. *Reproducing Rape: Domination through Talk in the Courtroom*. 1st edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Merry, Sally Engle. *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice*. Chicago Series in Law and Society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Mulla, Sameena. *The Violence of Care: Rape Victims, Forensic Nurses, and Sexual Assault Intervention*. New York; London: New York University Press, 2014.
- Pilipchuk, Miranda. "Good Survivor, Bad Survivor: #MeToo and the Moralization of Survivorship." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 19 (2019): 5–12.
- Polley, Sarah. *Run towards the Danger: Confrontations with a Body of Memory*. New York: Penguin Press, 2022.
- Ross, Lily Kay. "The Survivor Imperative: Sexual Violence, Victimhood, and Neoliberalism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 48, no. 1 (September 1, 2022): 51–75. <https://doi.org/10.1086/720413>.
- Rupcic, Sonia. "Biocarceral Citizenship: Criminalizing through Care in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *American Anthropologist*, Forthcoming.
- Stringer, Rebecca. *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times*. Hove, East Sussex: Routledge, 2014.
- Sweet, Paige L. *The Politics of Surviving: How Women Navigate Domestic Violence and Its Aftermath*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021.
- Taylor, Chloë. "Anti-Carceral Feminism and Sexual Assault—A Defense: A Critique of the Critique of the Critique of Carceral Feminism." *Social Philosophy Today* 34 (2018): 29–49. <https://doi.org/10.5840/socphiltoday201862656>.
- Terwiel, Anna. "What Is Carceral Feminism?" *Political Theory* 48, no. 4 (August 1, 2020): 421–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591719889946>.
- Tilton, Emily C. R. "Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility." *Episteme*, March 28, 2022, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2022.5>.
- Woodly, Deva R. *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements*. Transgressing Boundaries: Studies in Black Politics and Black Communities. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Yap, Audrey S. "Credibility Excess and the Social Imaginary in Cases of Sexual Assault." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (December 20, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2017.4.1>.

The Aftermath of Roe v. Wade

Jordan Pascoe
MANHATTAN COLLEGE

In the wake of *Dobbs*, the situation in Louisiana is dire. A woman was forced to endure hours of labor when she miscarried because the hospital refused to perform a fifteen-minute evacuation procedure banned by the state's abortion law.¹ Another woman was turned away from two hospitals when she experienced a miscarriage; neither would confirm that she was experiencing a miscarriage, nor provide care.² In another case, a woman carrying a non-viable fetus missing parts of its skull was forced to travel 1,400 miles to New York City to obtain an abortion.³ She carried the fetus for weeks longer than she might have had she been able to have an abortion nearer home.

These are stories of trauma, and they are not limited to Louisiana: abortion bans are reshaping not just access to abortion, but basic maternal care across the country. In this essay, I explore how Susan Brison's work, which offers a critical, transformative perspective on embodied violations and the experience of trauma in their aftermath, offers us some critical tools of orientation in this new landscape. In other words, I want to think with Brison in another kind of aftermath: the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade*.

Let us begin by acknowledging that the end of *Roe*, since the *Dobbs* decision came down in June of 2022, has been nothing short of a disaster for women and potentially pregnant persons, with impacts that go far beyond the already horrific lack of access to safe, legal abortions, the danger posed to pregnant women and persons, and to doctors providing abortion and prenatal care. The end of *Roe* has transformed health-care standards for women and other potentially pregnant persons, with impacts that reach far beyond pregnancy to access to medication, treatment standards for those with health conditions that make pregnancy dangerous (like cancer, heart and lung disease, MS), and privacy concerns for all menstruating persons. And yet, much of our public debate about abortion remains organized through arguments that are depressingly familiar, especially to those of us who have long taught "the abortion debate" in its standard form in philosophy

courses: we ask, following the Court’s framework in *Roe*, about the rights of the fetus (Is it a person?), and about the state’s duty to “balance the interests” of women and fetuses; we accept the assumption that abortion is a “special” or “exceptional” form of health care, provided primarily in special clinics designed for this purpose, which are then subject to special regulations and risk. But the fallout from the end of *Roe* makes it unavoidably clear that these arguments fail to grasp the kinds of violation that forced gestation entails, and to center the experiences of trauma that state-mandated forced pregnancy, gestation, and childbirth generates.

The question I ask is how should we reframe our understanding of abortion and forced gestation in this new landscape? One problem that philosophers, in particular, face is the serious gaps in our resources for thinking about the question of abortion. As Margaret Olivia Little put it more than two decades ago, “a question of method thus shadows all discussions of abortion”:⁴ a question about what the abortion question, methodologically, is *like*. We inevitably compare the status of the pregnant person and the fetus to conflicts between persons (Is it a kidnapping or an act of self-defense?), but the relation between the pregnant person and the fetus is nothing like other kinds of relations.⁵ And because we have failed to take pregnancy as a paradigmatic feature of what it is to be a person (we are all here, after all, because of a pregnancy), we have failed to build accounts of personhood that take pregnancy as a given, as a normal, essential part of what it is to be human.⁶

I am not asking questions about personhood here, but about method. I suggest that we can draw on Brison’s thinking about violation and trauma to inform conversations about what forced pregnancy is *like*. I mean this in two senses. Brison’s account gives us tools for thinking about embodied trauma and the importance of first-personal experience, which allows us to ask *what it is like* to endure forced gestation and forced childbirth. This can help us reframe an experience that is often overlooked as one that is profoundly traumatic, and in doing so, to make space for first-personal accounts of forced gestation, forced childbirth, and the forms of obstetric abuse that follow from this, in our account of abortion. But it also gives us resources for responding to Little’s methodological question: one thing that forced pregnancy and childbirth are *like* is sexual violation. I begin by drawing on Susan Brison’s *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* to explore the second question: What, conceptually, is forced gestation and childbirth *like*? I will then use Brison’s account of trauma to make some space for thinking about what *experiences* of forced gestation and childbirth, as well as the obstetric harms that follow from abortion bans, are like. Thus, in the first section, I argue that forced gestation and the obstetric harms that follow from abortion bans are best understood as sexual violence, while in the second section I explore how forced gestation and childbirth and obstetric harms shape experiences of trauma that should be understood as serious disruptions of the self.

One note about terminology before I continue. I use the phrase “women or pregnant persons” at various points

throughout this essay. At times I also focus on one or the other. While the class of pregnant persons is not co-extensive with women, one important feature of sexual violence is that it is violence that targets people because of their gender or sexuality. While it is important to be inclusive of pregnant persons who do not identify as women—and to recognize the distinctive harms they face in the aftermath of *Roe*—it is equally important to situate the violence of abortion bans as continuous with forms of sexual violence that have long targeted women because of their gender. Indeed, part of my aim in this piece is to recognize the gendered nature of such violence.

CONCEPTUAL RESOURCES: HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE AFTERMATH OF ROE

Brison’s work is part of a body of work that did not exist when the Court framed *Roe* in 1973: a rigorous conception of the wrong of rape and of the specific nature of embodied violation. These are important resources for thinking through the ways that the wrong of forced pregnancy is akin to the wrong of sexual violation. Both involve a violation of, and an invasion of, the body against one’s will in ways that disrupt one’s self in profound and long-lasting ways. But at the same time, both are so common and so mundane that many assume they are, as Brison puts it, “natural, a given, something not in need of explanation and not amenable to change.”⁷ Like rape, forced gestation and childbirth have been an element of womanhood—and a threat to women’s lives—quite literally forever; the idea that we might encounter these experiences as a serious violation of the self may need some scaffolding.

The feminist literature on forced pregnancy—like its literature on sexual violation—has long centered consent, or the idea that what is wrong with forced gestation is that one is pregnant without one’s consent, and that, therefore, one’s body is being used against one’s will. As we develop better philosophical and legal conceptions of consent with regards to sexual violation—the importance of affirmative consent, of *ongoing* consent, of the right to rescind one’s consent at any point—we would do well to revise our conception of the right to abortion accordingly, taking seriously how the use of one’s body against one’s consent—or after one’s consent has been revoked—is a serious violation. And we would do well to learn from feminist attendance to the ways in which the *conditions* of consent are relevant here: it matters whether I feel that I *can* say no, that I have access to what I need to remove myself from the situation safely, that I can say no for my own reasons, and not only if I have a very good reason to do so. Likewise, it matters whether women or other potentially pregnant persons *can* say no to pregnancy, whether they have access to abortion care, whether they have the resources to access it, whether they can access it safely, and whether they feel that accessing abortion is an option *available* to them. It matters whether they think they can access an abortion simply because they need one, or if they believe they would need a really, really good reason to access one (for example, because they’ve been taught it’s acceptable only in cases of rape or incest, or only to save the mother’s life, or that abortions must be “safe, legal, and rare”).

But the resources this comparison provides do not stop at consent. As Brison reminds us, understanding rape as “sex without consent” mischaracterizes the nature of the violation: “we don’t think of theft as ‘coerced gift-giving.’ We don’t think of murder as ‘assisted suicide minus consent.’”⁸ We don’t explain the wrong of theft *through recourse* to gift giving; theft is, as Brison puts it, already conceptualized in such a way that no one would reasonably consent to it. When we define rape as “sex without consent,” it must be because “the violation in the case of rape hasn’t been all that obvious.”⁹ I want to follow Brison’s intuitions here and suggest that conceiving of forced gestation and childbirth as “pregnancy without consent” mischaracterizes the nature of the violation. Instead, Brison argues, we should understand rape as *sexual violence*: violence committed on the basis of sex.¹⁰ Likewise, I argue, we should understand forced gestation and childbirth—and the kinds of obstetric violations proliferating in the wake of *Dobbs*—as a species of sexual violence.

I am not arguing that the fetus violates the pregnant person. Rather, I am arguing that when the state forces a pregnant person to gestate against their will, or creates conditions in which obstetric care is compromised, the state commits sexual violence against the pregnant person.

Very few of our famous abortion analogies include the role of the state. And this is because, as Alycia LaGuardia-LoBianco has argued, our philosophical framings of the abortion question tend to be dangerously apolitical.¹¹ We create a false moral bubble to examine the “relationship” between the pregnant person and the fetus, to “balance” their rights, to weigh them against one another. But as the months since *Roe* fell have made clear, the abortion question is a profoundly political question, and it is centrally a question about how and when the state is justified in forcing a woman or pregnant person to have her body used against her will (in order to further the state’s purported interest in protecting the value of life). It is a question about what this means for the institutions and agents through which the state enacts this enforcement—which are often the very institutions and agents (hospitals, emergency and obstetric physicians) who are ostensibly meant to provide care to the pregnant person at their most vulnerable.

Brison provides us with resources for thinking about this kind of dynamic, particularly in her analysis of the ways in which such violations cause us to “lose trust in the world”: “It is as if the tormentor says with his blows, ‘you are nothing but a body, a mere object for my will—here, I’ll prove it!’” writes Brison.¹² In forced gestation and the obstetric harms that follow, it is the state standing in the position of the tormentor. In this dynamic, Brison argues, the victim’s experience of rape is akin to testimonies of torture, “not only because both objectify and traumatize the victim, but also because the pain they inflict reduces the victim to flesh, to the purely physical.”¹³ Likewise, to be told that you *must* undergo the experience of gestating a child, of birthing a child, of carrying a dead fetus inside you until you nearly die and thus “deserve” an abortion, is to be objectified and traumatized, to be treated merely as a “purely physical” entity. It is an experience through which one is bound to lose trust in the world—and certainly, to

lose trust in those agents and institutions who are enforcing these rules rather than providing you with care.

And so, it is critical that in the aftermath of *Dobbs*, we develop new conceptual resources that reframe reproductive injustice as sexual violence. We need to center an awareness of forced gestation and childbirth, as well as the obstetric violations proliferating in the wake of *Dobbs* as profound violations, akin to sexual assault, and name these violations as state-sanctioned and state-enforced violence. We need to develop our shared awareness of the ways that forced gestation is a profound violation of one’s self, and to name the ways that forced childbirth is among the most extreme forms a torture a person can be subjected to. And we need to be unyielding in our insistence that the state is inflicting these violations and this violence upon women and pregnant persons.

Thus, it is not overstating the case to claim that those undergoing forced gestation and childbirth, or being denied care because of abortion bans, are being violated by the state. Or to name the ways that states that have banned abortion are committing violence against women and pregnant persons who are undergoing miscarriages and are turned away from hospitals in order to wait until the fetus ejects itself from their bodies, or that they are torturing pregnant persons who must go into sepsis before a doctor can claim to be intervening to “save her life.” The state is committing violence against women and pregnant persons who cannot gather the resources to travel thousands of miles for an abortion and are forced to gestate against their will, and they are traumatizing women and pregnant persons who are too terrified to ask for help to gather those resources for fear that anyone they talk to will be sued.

And it is, of course, not the first time the state has tortured women in these ways. Rape, forced pregnancy, gestation, and childbirth were normative institutional features of American enslavement.¹⁴ As Black feminists have long pointed out, female slaves were positioned as “breeders” responsible for the profitable reproduction of slaves; these children were often taken from them. Reproductive injustice has been central to Black feminist narratives since Harriet Jacobs positioned a violently “frustrated maternity” at the heart of the experience of enslavement,¹⁵ and enslaved women used forms of folk contraception and abortifacients as a matter of survival and resistance.¹⁶ But feminist framings of abortion have persistently neglected to frame the politics of abortion in light of the history of enslavement, in part because, as Brison argues, “intense psychological pressures make it difficult, however, for others to listen to trauma narrative. Cultural repression of traumatic memories (in the United States about slavery, in Germany and Poland and elsewhere about the Holocaust) comes not only from an absence of empathy with victims, but also out of an active fear of empathizing with those terrifying fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own.”¹⁷ These habits of repression continue to shape collective ignorance of reproductive injustice and sexual violence, shaping a debate about abortion and reproductive rights that centers white women’s histories and experiences.

But Black women in the US have long been warning us that the state can—that it *has*—forced women into pregnancies and childbirth, and the history of forced reproduction during enslavement has important implications for contemporary abortion law. Dorothy Roberts points out that, under enslavement, white planters were granted *in futuro* rights to enslaved fetuses, setting a precedent for contemporary moves that treat the fetus as a distinct entity from the pregnant person, to which one might have a competing interest.¹⁸ Likewise, Roberts describes the practice of punishing pregnant slaves by first digging a hole in the ground to fit the pregnant belly, and then whipping the mother's back, as forerunner to contemporary policies that punish and abuse women in the name of protecting fetuses.¹⁹ When we understand reproductive injustice in these terms, as a structural feature of enslavement, then we both anticipate state practices that enforce reproduction—and we find reasons to think that the right to reproductive freedom *is* embedded in the Constitution, as a feature of the 13th and 14th Amendments, especially as related to Black women's bodily autonomy, liberty and privacy which extended beyond freeing them from labor in cotton fields to shielding them from rape and forced reproduction.²⁰ But Black women have also insisted that forced reproduction and the right to abortion cannot come to define our understanding of reproductive injustice by calling our attention to broader patterns of state control of reproductive freedom, from the ways that forced sterilization and birth control techniques were developed on Black bodies²¹ to the widespread use and state legitimization of sterilization and criminalization to control Black reproduction.²² Black women carry what Brison calls the "postmemories" of this trauma,²³ as well as the "prememories" of the ways that obstetric care, in the US, continues to harm Black women and babies at unparalleled rates so that maternal mortality rates are consistently three times higher than for white women—and rising—while the racial gap in infant mortality is wider now than it was under enslavement in 1850.²⁴ From this perspective, the state's culpability in maternal trauma and death is impossible to deny, and Black women have, accordingly, rarely framed the question of abortion in terms of agency or choice, but have persistently developed a broader analysis of reproductive and intimate justice that attends to not only the right not to have children one does not want, but also to the right to have children, and to parent them in conditions free from violence.²⁵ The contemporary Black feminist-led Reproductive Justice movement offers a broad vision of the kinds of transformative justice required to hold the state accountable for this long history of violation, by connecting the question of the right to abortion to the right to health care, childcare, food and housing security, education, poverty relief, environmental justice, gender and racial justice, and an end to private and state violence like rape, police brutality, and mass incarceration. This vision is informed by and rooted in the postmemories of Black reproductive trauma: it is explicitly, as Loretta Ross argues, a vision of a world that has never existed before.²⁶

My engagement with Brison is inspired by this orientation: our job, in the aftermath of *Roe*, is not to yearn for a return to the days of legal but often inaccessible abortion—to

return, in other words, to the "normal" of *before*—but to acknowledge the deep trauma of the present moment, and to marshal a wide range of resources to radically reframe what is possible, to reshape our understanding of both reproductive justice and the wrongs of reproductive injustice, and to resist our habits of looking away from the lessons of state-sanctioned reproductive trauma, from enslavement to the present.

This means building new conceptual resources and new epistemic habits; it is here that I think Brison's work should inform our thinking, teaching, and arguments in the aftermath of *Roe*. Rather than rehearsing the familiar arguments about the rights of women and pregnant persons, and the rights of fetuses, I want to center the insight that, just as Brison helped us to understand sexual violation as a trauma so immense that one can barely live through it—that one must, in effect, outlive oneself—we must reframe forced pregnancy as a trauma so immense that we must fight for a world where it, like rape, is simply *unthinkable*.²⁷ But to do this, we will also have to draw on Brison to think about what experiences of forced gestation, forced childbirth, and obstetric trauma are *like*.

TRAUMA IN THE AFTERMATH OF ROE

To begin with, we must reframe our philosophical accounts of abortion around LaGuardia-LoBianco's insight that abortion is a *political* problem, and refuse to think and teach about abortion in ways that treat it as an abstract question of justice or morality. But to do this, we must also, following Brison, center *experience* in our analyses of abortion and forced gestation, making space for first-personal accounts of forced gestation and childbirth, and allowing these to transform our understanding of the kind of violation involved. We must, as Brison puts it, think against the ways that philosophical writing often frames questions of ethics or justice in impersonal terms.²⁸

For Brison, the problem is not just that philosophical framings do not center personal narrative, but that they pose questions from a dislocated perspective: for example, she notes that we take up questions of strategy and justice in war, but not soldiers' experiences in war; we write essays on "the wrong of rape" that do not attend to how the experiences of survivors should inform our understanding of the wrong.²⁹ Likewise, we tend to think about pregnancy and abortion as a question of ethics or justice, from a dislocated position (e.g., from the perspective of the law) from which women's and pregnant persons' rights and the state's interest in protecting the fetus can be balanced, rather than allowing the visceral, embodied experience of forced pregnancy and labor to orient our moral awareness and considerations of justice.

This is exacerbated by the fact that when exploring difficult or "inconceivable" experiences, philosophers tend to turn to thought experiments.³⁰ In abortion discourse, we have of course the "famous violinist" case, and the many cases constructed to develop and challenge it. Brison argues that such thought experiments, "however farfetched, are at least *conceivable*, whereas the experiences of rape victims, Holocaust survivors, and war veterans are, for most of us, *unthinkable*."³¹ The same is true for forced pregnancy and

obstetric abuse. We have few philosophical resources for considering the phenomenology of pregnancy to begin with, and extraordinarily few for thinking about what it is like to have an unwanted being living and growing inside yourself—and forcing its way through your body into the world against your will. And this is striking, since pregnancy is at once one of the most mundane and miraculous parts of human life: we are, after all, all here as a result of a pregnancy. And yet pregnancy remains, within philosophy, such a strange and undertheorized experience that we rely on thought experiments to render it *thinkable*.

Brison names the complicity of even feminist philosophy in this problem, in de Beauvoir's understanding of childbirth and nursing as "passive" and thus dehumanizing processes.³² Brison roundly rejects this argument, attending to the ways that (rare) philosophical treatments of motherhood have "led me to see the liberatory potential in *chosen* maternity, childbirth, and childrearing."³³ The italicized *chosen* is no mistake: Brison understands better than most that one's agency and participation—one's right to choose—what happens to one's body is a critical feature of theorizing. In this sense, there is no sense in developing philosophical accounts of "pregnancy" that do not account for the distinction between wanted and forced pregnancies: from the perspective of the person experiencing it, a wanted pregnancy is no more like a forced pregnancy than sex is like being assaulted. Thus, we need not only philosophical accounts of wanted pregnancies—the "embodiment and connection pregnancy provides"³⁴—but also philosophical accounts of *forced* pregnancy, forced childbirth, as well as of the kinds of obstetric abuses that were already common but have proliferated under abortion bans.

These abuses, however, draw our attention to the ways that this distinction is not so simple. In our post-Roe era, we must attend to the ways that *forced* gestation does not necessarily track cases of *unwanted* pregnancy: in states with abortion bans, many women and pregnant persons are being forced to gestate fetuses that are desperately wanted but not viable, or being forced to carry dead fetuses inside them for extended periods of time because they are turned away from medical care when they experience a miscarriage.³⁵ Kate Parsons points to the continuities between elective abortions and the experience of miscarriage when she relates her own experience of using the abortion pill Mifepristone to complete a miscarriage that ended a desperately wanted pregnancy, noting, "the slow methodical dripping of blood and dropping of tissue from my body made the process more intense and more traumatic than I would ever have expected."³⁶ And yet, as she notes, her miscarriage was free from "the cloud of shame that our society heaps on women who electively abort," and it occurred at a time and in a place when she had access to obstetric care including medical abortion pills.³⁷ Parsons was one of the lucky ones: Dorothy Roberts and Michele Goodwin have tracked the ways that Black women and other women of color have long been denied obstetric care and faced legal punishment when they miscarried; in states with abortion bans, women and pregnant persons are not only turned away from care, but sometimes found legally liable for the death of their fetus.³⁸

These continuities between experiences of miscarriage and abortion, and the impact of abortion bans on those seeking care for *wanted* pregnancies unsettles many of the binaries that orient our understandings of pregnancy.³⁹ This is particularly true given how much of our conceptions of pregnancy are shaped by an impersonal approach, with an emphasis on morality and the "weighing" of rights. And so it is particularly important to draw out the experience of forced gestation, forced childbirth, and obstetric abuse, and to attend to these first-personal accounts as we would other instances of sexual violence.

In one of the few philosophical articles on abortion to center the embodied experience of pregnancy, Margaret Olivia Little argues, "to be pregnant is to be inhabited. It is to be occupied. It is to be in a state of physical intimacy of a particularly thorough-going nature. The fetus intrudes on the body massively; whatever medical risks one faces or avoids, the brute fact remains that the fetus shifts and alters the very physical boundaries of the woman's self."⁴⁰ If the fetus has such an invasive effect on the pregnant person's self in a "normal" pregnancy, then we should attend to the ways that such an invasion is experienced as a *disruption* of the self in a forced pregnancy. Brison's analysis of trauma is particularly rich in its resources for mapping the multidimensional ways that the self is disrupted through embodied violation, which challenge standard philosophical dualisms that organize our thinking about the persistence of personal identity over time. She argues that, in the aftermath of being raped, "I was no longer the same person I had been before the assault, and one of the ways I seemed changed was that I had a different relationship with my body."⁴¹ Her body now felt like the enemy—but one she could not turn away from, since traumatic memories *live* in the body, intermingling with the mind in ways that render the will useless in overcoming or making sense of these memories.⁴² In forced gestation, likewise, it is not only difficult to feel oneself to be the same person as one's body transforms; when this transformation is occurring against one's will, when it is inflicted upon one by others (in this case, by the state), then the body—and the fetus inside one's body—becomes one's enemy. And yet, of course, one cannot distinguish the body from the self, particularly as the body transforms in ways that make it difficult to hold onto clear distinctions between the body and the mind.

A critical part of this disruption of the self, as Brison maps it, is the way that trauma challenges our sense of our selves as autonomous through the experience of loss of control. She notes, "some researchers of trauma have defined it as a state of complete helplessness in the face of an overwhelming force. Whether or not such total loss of control is constitutive of trauma, a daunting, seemingly impossible, task faced by the trauma survivor is to regain a sense of control over her or his life."⁴³ There are few embodied experiences that involve a deeper loss of control than pregnancy and childbirth. When these experiences are chosen, there can be a kind of willing surrender to this loss of control. But even then, the loss of control can be terrifying—and all the more so for those who have already suffered trauma. As a rape survivor myself, I remember the terror with which I awaited labor when I was pregnant (by

choice) with my first child. I knew that the loss of control was coming, that one of these days, a process would begin in my body which would subject me to terrible pain, over which I would have no control. Against this fear, I had my own agency in my pregnancy, and my desperate excitement to meet the child inside me. It was enough to get me through. But it is hard not to imagine how devastating that fear of the loss of control would be if I had not chosen the pregnancy, if the child inside me was unwanted and I had been forced, by the law, into this position. In those days before labor began, it was hard not to think of labor like torture: terrible, terrifying pain ahead of me, with no control over when it would begin or how long it would last or what the ramifications might be. It was hard not to draw on the resources I had for thinking about such terrifying loss of control: my memories of rape.

We should think, then, about what it is like to await childbirth for a woman or pregnant person whose pregnancy is the result of rape. About what it is like to go through childbirth against one's will, for a child one did not want, or a child who is not viable. We should recharacterize childbirth against one's will as amongst the most extreme forms of torture to which a person can be subjected. This is not just about the pain (although, as anyone who has been through childbirth will tell you: it is *also* about the pain). It is, as Brison reminds us, about loss of control. All stages of forced gestation involve a terrifying loss of control; when this loss of control is human-inflicted—when it is inflicted on pregnant people by the state, and enacted by those in medical contexts, “it not only shatters one's fundamental assumptions about the world and one's safety in it, but it also severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity.”⁴⁴

The loss of this connection is a particularly difficult dimension of trauma. Brison notes that “shattered assumptions about the world and one's safety in it can, to some extent, eventually be pieced back together, but this is a slow and painful process. Although the survivor recognizes, at some level, that these regained assumptions are illusory, she learns that they are necessary illusions.”⁴⁵ Critically, for Brison, reconstructing these illusions, and the sense of safety they support, is not a project one can undertake alone: one *needs* those sustaining connections between one's self and others. This is because piecing oneself together requires one to construct new self-narratives capable of containing this trauma, but to do this, “we need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them. This aspect of remaking a self in the aftermath of trauma highlights the dependency of the self on others and helps to explain why it is so difficult for survivors to recover when others are unwilling to listen to what they have endured.”⁴⁶

A central piece of Brison's argument is the insight that “*saying* something about a traumatic memory does something to that memory.”⁴⁷ Survivors of trauma need spaces in which they are safe to construct and share new narratives in ways that allow for the remaking of one's self. And so it is important to attend to the ways in which *silencing* is a critical part of the new regime in places

where abortions have been banned. We should consider the impact of a law like Texas's SB8, which allows private citizens to sue anyone who “aids and abets” an abortion, creating a context in which women are unable to share their experiences for fear that doing so might incriminate their listener. We should think about how medical providers are refusing to listen to or acknowledge women's and potentially pregnant persons' testimony of miscarriages or pregnancy complications in order to shield themselves from liability. And we should think about how it is not standard practice for care providers to ask women and pregnant persons whether or not a pregnancy is against their will, meaning that those living through forced gestation and childbirth are often offered “the joy of meeting their child” as motivation by well-meaning caregivers.⁴⁸

All this is further complicated by the fact that the narratives necessary to reconstruct oneself in the wake of forced gestation and childbirth are often nearly impossible to construct and share. Take, for example, the story of seventeen-year-old G, who was denied judicial permission for an underage abortion in Texas in 2020 on the grounds that she wasn't “mature enough” to have an abortion (but apparently, she was mature enough to experience forced gestation and childbirth, and to make the impossible decision about whether to keep her twins).⁴⁹ When her babies were placed on her belly after twenty-six hours of painful labor, she felt empty. She struggled emotionally after the birth, but couldn't tell anyone: she knew she was supposed to be adjusting, falling in love with her babies, coping with the logistics. But she wasn't. And because her support system was made up of people who'd told her that having an abortion would be “murdering two people,” she also couldn't begin to share her narrative of what had happened to her: admitting how angry she was would mean that she was a bad mother. And that meant, as Brison reminds us, that she could not begin the work of piecing herself together. In the end, G told her story to a journalist; it was the journalist she called, late at night, when faced with the decision of whether to give up her parental rights or try and raise her children in conditions of poverty and instability.

The journalist doesn't frame G's story as one of trauma. But I think perhaps it should be: the depression that followed the judge's denial and stretched into the dark months after she gave birth is likely the result of the ways in which, as Brison puts it, “trauma not only haunts the consciousness and unconscious mind, but also remains in the body, in each of the senses, ready to resurface whenever something triggers a reliving of the traumatic event.”⁵⁰ The journalist's telling focuses on G's inability to navigate the economic and emotional realities of mothering, even though she had successfully and independently navigated the impossible, labyrinthian Texas bureaucracy to make her way from an abortion clinic to a legal services fund to court, and through the hoops (a crisis pregnancy center, Christian abortion counsellors) the court required her to jump. Framing G's experience through the lens of trauma might allow us to see her transformation after the judge's denial not as mere “depression” but as a profound loss of trust in the world that is compounded by the ongoing experience of forced gestation and childbirth; it allows us to understand

her numbness after the birth of her children as a result of the ways that “trauma can obliterate one’s former emotional repertoire, leaving only a kind of counterfactual, propositional knowledge of emotions.”⁵¹ G knows how she is supposed to feel about her children, but she doesn’t feel it. And, as Brison notes, “the inability to feel one’s former emotions, even in the aftermath of trauma, leaves the survivor not only numbed, but also without the motivation to carry out the task of constructing an ongoing narrative.”⁵² G is numb, and she’s also processing the profound loss of control which is constitutive of both trauma and new motherhood. It is no wonder that, surrounded by people who can accept only the “I love my children” version of the story, that G struggles to remake herself.

I linger on G’s story in order to lay out the profound challenges that women and potentially pregnant persons face following forced gestation and childbirth. There is the trauma of those embodied experiences. There is the loss of trust that follows from knowing one was forced into them by the state, with the complicity of those purportedly meant to provide care. There is the divergence between one’s nightmarish experience and the expected narrative. There is the fact that one is now a new mother, with all that follows from that—particularly in circumstances where one knew one did not have the resources to parent. And there is the fact that there is no way to piece this narrative together without being seen as “a bad mom.” There is no end point, no place of safety or stability from which to begin this process of remaking oneself. Our country fails new mothers at the best of times, but it is downright cruel to those facing new motherhood in poverty and isolation, to those unprepared for it. The victories of the so-called pro-life movement have done nothing to change that.

We cannot understand the terrain in which we now find ourselves without centering, and understanding, these stories. We will never understand the horrors of the post-Roe landscape if we continue to treat abortion as an abstract question of morality or justice, or if we treat it purely as political, but not as personal. It is essential that we reframe the abortion debate around trauma, that we repeat and amplify and share these stories, that we make it impossible to look away from the profound violations this legal reality is shaping.⁵³ It is important that we use every tool in our arsenal to make this visible as a *wrong*, and that we fight for federal and state constitutional abortion rights, for expanded abortion access, for an overhaul of maternal care, and for the full legislative agenda developed by the Reproductive Justice movement.⁵⁴ But it is also critical that we *do not turn away* from the women and others undergoing these harms, right now, that we build spaces where these stories can be shared, and develop the conceptual resources for naming and sharing these harms.⁵⁵ As Brison reminds us, sharing experiences like these *does something* to them. But in this case, it is not enough to listen. We need, too, to unflinchingly center these stories in the fight for reproductive justice, and to connect them to our long national history of racialized reproductive injustice, as we fight for a world in which this kind of violence is unthinkable.

CONCLUSION

Much of the public imaginary of the “abortion debate” in the years Roe was the law of the land turned on the inescapable image of the fetus inside the womb. As feminists have long argued, it’s an image turned into a symbol—a poster, a billboard—by the anti-abortion movement.⁵⁶ The image is taken inside a woman’s body; there is no woman in the image. The image is distorted, blown up: it doesn’t matter. It’s powerful anyway: an image all of us carry with us, that our students picture even as we raise questions about women’s agency and the nature of justice.

In the face of this image, feminist and philosophical thinking about abortion has often been rather defensive and careful: we take up the question of the moral standing of the fetus, the question of when a life matters; we grant, like Thomson, the premise that perhaps a fetus is a person. What these arguments lack is an equally compelling image around which a positive account of reproductive justice, of abortion as a social good can coalesce.⁵⁷ What Brison’s work offers is a resource for reshaping this imaginary around an understanding of forced gestation as sexual violence, and the obstetric harms that follow from abortion bans are forms of torture sanctified by the state. In *this* imaginary, women and pregnant persons’ experiences of trauma are at the center, requiring us to shift the gravity of the “abortion debate.”

This is not a hopeful vision of a world without reproductive injustice or sexual violence. That’s okay: this moment, in the aftermath of Roe, is not a hopeful time. What we need are resources for being *here*, in this moment of terrible collective trauma. And for beginning the process of sustaining one another in ways that make it possible to move forwards, to improvise, and to imagine.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks audiences at the 2023 APA Eastern Division meeting, Richmond University, and Manhattan College for feedback on this paper, with particular thanks to Susan Brison for her reflections on an earlier version of this paper, and how it might speak to the project of *Aftermath*. With thanks to Jon Keller, Mitch Stripling, Laura Pascoe, Elvira Basevich, and Sarah Clark Miller for their support and presence throughout the writing of this, and F. Sterling for the childcare that made this paper possible.

NOTES

1. Mark, “Louisiana Woman Whose Water Broke at 16 Weeks Was Forced into ‘Painful, Hours-long Labor’ Because of Abortion Ban, Lawsuit Says.”
2. Westwood, “Bleeding and in Pain, She Couldn’t Get 2 Louisiana ERs to Answer: Is It a Miscarriage?”
3. Vargas, “Louisiana Woman Carrying Unviable Fetus Forced to Travel to New York for Abortion.”
4. Little, “Abortion, Intimacy, and the Duty to Gestate,” 297.
5. Susan Sherwin, Carolyn McLeod, Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla), and Ann Cahill have argued for a relational conception of pregnancy which refuses presumptions of a bounded, individualist conception of persons and recognizes, as Kukla puts it, that pregnant persons are “an agent whose very nature and boundaries are themselves under contest during pregnancy” (*Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers’ Bodies*, 137), and that affirms “a stable body and agency strong enough to resist boundary crossings that are violating rather than liberating” (*Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers’ Bodies*, 226). As McLeod argues, such a conception must recognize the epistemic agency of the pregnant person by attending to highly

- varied subjective experiences of relational pregnancy, including the varying degrees to which a pregnant person may recognize the fetus as being “part of them” (*Self-trust and Reproductive Autonomy*, 160). These analyses offer an important corrective to “standard” accounts of pregnancy and abortion that take the relation of the pregnant person and fetus to be comparable to other kinds of relations between persons, by developing instead a phenomenological account of pregnancy, grounded in the epistemic authority of pregnant persons.
6. Feldman, “From Occupied Bodies to Pregnant Persons,” 265.
 7. Brison, *Aftermath*, 4.
 8. Brison, *Aftermath*, 6.
 9. Brison, *Aftermath*, 7.
 10. Brison, *Aftermath*, 93.
 11. LaGuardia-LoBianco, “Reframing Abortion Lessons.”
 12. Brison, *Aftermath*, 47.
 13. Brison, *Aftermath*, 47.
 14. Cf. Davis, *Women, Race and Class*; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*.
 15. Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic*, 52.
 16. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 48–49. Black women also adopted birth control as a critical component of a feminist agenda much earlier than white feminists; cf. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 1893.
 17. Brison, *Aftermath*, 57.
 18. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 33.
 19. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 44.
 20. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 304.
 21. Dorothy Roberts traces the ways that vasectomies were perfected as a form of punishment for Black inmates (*Killing the Black Body*, 66); Durrenda Ojanuga explored the development of gynaecological techniques on enslaved women (“The Medical Ethics of the ‘Father of Gynaecology’, Dr J Marion Sims”).
 22. Loretta Ross points out that “the United States became the first nation in the world to permit mass sterilization as part of an effort to ‘purify the race’” (“Trust Black Women,” 66); Angela Davis (*Women, Race and Class*) and Dorothy Roberts (*Killing the Black Body*) examine how population control and forced sterilization were central to twentieth-century race politics, from the ways that the birth control movement gained widespread uptake not as an arm of the feminist movement, but through the eugenics movement, which promoted birth control as a form of population control, to the use of forced sterilization in prisons and as part of standard medical practice from the South to Boston and New York (Roberts *Killing the Black Body*, 90–92), to the promotion of Norplant and Depo-Provera as forms of reproductive control in the 1990s; Toni Cade (“The Pill—Genocide or Liberation?”) grapples with the legacies of this history for Black liberation movements, while Loretta Ross (“Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism”) and Melissa Murray (“Race-ing Roe: Reproductive Justice, Racial Justice, and the Battle for Roe v. Wade”) examine impact of these histories on contemporary anti-abortion rhetoric.
 23. Brison, *Aftermath*, 87.
 24. Villarosa, “Why America’s Black Mothers and Babies Are In a Life-or-Death Crisis.” For an excellent discussion of how Black maternal mortality has been positioned as a “crisis,” casting Black women as symbols of “tragic heroism,” see Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers*.
 25. Cf. Dorothy Roberts reframes reproductive rights as a social justice-oriented form of “reproductive liberty” (*Killing the Black Body*); Shatema Threadcraft defends a capabilities-oriented conception of “intimate justice” (*Intimate Justice*).
 26. Ross, “Reproductive Justice.”
 27. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape*.
 28. Brison, *Aftermath*, 26.
 29. Brison, *Aftermath*, 26.
 30. Brison, *Aftermath*, 38.
 31. Brison, *Aftermath*, 39.
 32. Brison, *Aftermath*, 42.
 33. Brison, *Aftermath*, 43.
 34. Brison, *Aftermath*, 43.
 35. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer who encouraged me to develop this point.
 36. Parsons, “Feminist Reflections on Miscarriage, in Light of Abortion,” 16.
 37. Parsons, “Feminist Reflections on Miscarriage,” 16. Parsons, like Carolyn McLeod (*Self-trust and Reproductive Autonomy*), Sarah Clark Miller (“The Moral Meanings of Miscarriage”), and Alison Reiheld (“‘The Event That Was Nothing’: Miscarriage as a Liminal Event”), explore the ways that miscarriage can be a profoundly destabilizing experience, in both an embodied and relational sense, as well as one in which one may experience grief that is in direct tension with one’s beliefs about abortion and the nature of the fetus (Parsons, “Feminist Reflections on Miscarriage”). This may include grief about the loss of the fetus—with the recognition that the fetus may mean many things, from a wanted, prospective child to a burden—about the impact on relationships, about the liminal, invisible grief of the miscarriage experience itself, about the immediate embodied experience of pregnancy loss—as well as, in many cases, a sense of self-doubt and guilt about whether one in any way contributed to the pregnancy loss.
 38. See Baldwin, “Losing a Pregnancy Could Land You in Jail in Post-Roe America”; Goodwin, *Policing the Womb: Invisible Women and the Criminalization of Motherhood*; and Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*.
 39. See, for example, Kukla’s distinction between the “Fetish Mother” and the “Unruly Mother” (in *Mass Hysteria*), and Parsons’s distinction between the ways that abortion rights advocates insist on the careful language of “embryo” and “fetus” while the miscarriage support community suggests referring to the loss as a “baby” (in “Feminist Reflections on Miscarriage”).
 40. Little, “Abortion, Intimacy, and the Duty to Gestate,” 301.
 41. Brison, *Aftermath*, 44.
 42. Brison, *Aftermath*, 45.
 43. Brison, *Aftermath*, 73.
 44. Brison, *Aftermath*, 40.
 45. Brison, *Aftermath*, 50.
 46. Brison, *Aftermath*, 51.
 47. Brison, *Aftermath*, 56.
 48. For further discussion on how attendance to forced gestation and childbirth should inform trauma-sensitive standards of care, see Laura Pascoe, “Consent and Trauma-Informed Birth Practices,” in *Consent: Gender, Power and Subjectivity* eds. Laurie James Hawkins and Róisín Ryan (Routledge, forthcoming).
 49. Presser, “She Wasn’t Ready for Children. A Judge Wouldn’t Let Her Have an Abortion.”
 50. Brison, *Aftermath*, xvi.
 51. Brison, *Aftermath*, 50.
 52. Brison, *Aftermath*, 50.
 53. These stories are particularly important given that full data on maternal morbidity and mortality for 2022 will not be available until 2025. Given the lag in official data for tracking the impacts of these legal changes, anecdotal and journalistic evidence must provide us with some sense of the scope of the problem.
 54. Ross and Solinger. *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*.
 55. For further discussion of how such gaps in conceptual resources have a silencing effect, see Kristie Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236–57.

56. See Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*; Petchesky, "Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction"; Kukla, *Mass Hysteria*.
57. Peters, *Trust Women*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baldwin, Robert III. "Losing a Pregnancy Could Land You in Jail in Post-Roe America." *NPR*, July 3, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/03/1109015302/abortion-prosecuting-pregnancy-loss>.
- Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Bambera, Toni Cade. "The Pill—Genocide or Liberation?" In *Reproduction and Society: Interdisciplinary Readings*, edited by Carole Joffe and Jennifer Reich, 31–32. Routledge, 2014.
- Cahill, Ann J. "Miscarriage and intercorporeality." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 46, no. 1 (2015): 44–58.
- Cahill, Ann J. *Rethinking Rape*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Vintage, 1983.
- Duden, Barbara. *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Feldman, Susan. "From Occupied Bodies to Pregnant Persons." In *Autonomy and Community*, edited by Jane Kneller and Sidney Axinn, 265–82. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998.
- Goodwin, Michele. "No, Justice Alito, Reproductive Justice Is in the Constitution." *The New York Times*, June 26, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/26/opinion/justice-alito-reproductive-justice-constitution-abortion.html>.
- Goodwin, Michele. *Policing the Womb: Invisible Women and the Criminalization of Motherhood*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Kukla, Rebecca. *Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers' Bodies*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.
- Little, Margaret Olivia. "Abortion, Intimacy, and the Duty to Gestate." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 2 (1999): 295–312.
- LaGuardia-LoBianco, Alycia. "Reframing Abortion Lessons." *The Blog of the American Philosophical Association*. May 22, 2022. <https://blog.apaonline.org/2022/05/18/reframing-abortion-lessons/>.
- Mark, Michelle. "Louisiana Woman Whose Water Broke at 16 Weeks Was Forced into 'Painful, Hours-long Labor' Because of Abortion Ban, Lawsuit Says" *Insider*, July 19, 2022. Last accessed January 20, 2023. <https://www.insider.com/doctor-louisiana-abortion-ban-affidavit-patient-miscarriage-2022-7>.
- McLeod, Carolyn. *Self-trust and Reproductive Autonomy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002.
- Miller, Sarah Clark. "The Moral Meanings of Miscarriage." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 46, no. 1 (2015): 141–57.
- Murray, Melissa. "Race-ing Roe: Reproductive Justice, Racial Justice, and the Battle for Roe v. Wade." *Harvard Law Review* 134, no. 6 (2020): 2025+.
- Nash, Jennifer C. *Birthing Black Mothers*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021.
- Ojanuga, Durrenda. "The Medical Ethics of the 'Father of Gynaecology', Dr J Marion Sims." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 19, no. 1 (1993): 28–31.
- Parsons, Kate. "Feminist Reflections on Miscarriage, in Light of Abortion." *IJFAB: International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 3, no. 1 (2010): 1–22.
- Petchesky, Rosalind Pollack. "Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction." *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987): 263–92.
- Peters, Rebecca Todd. *Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018.
- Presser, Lizzie. "She Wasn't Ready for Children. A Judge Wouldn't Let Her Have an Abortion." *New York Times*, November 29, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/29/magazine/teen-pregnancy-abortion-judge.html>.
- Reiheld, Alison. "'The Event That Was Nothing': Miscarriage as a Liminal Event." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 46, no. 1 (2015): 9–26.

- Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Vintage, 2014.
- Ross, Loretta J. "Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism." *Souls* 19, no. 3 (2017): 286–314.
- . "Trust Black Women." In *Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundation, Theory, Practice, Critique*, edited by Loretta Ross, Erika Derkas, Whitney Peoples, Lynn Roberts, and Pamela Bridgewater, 58–85. New York: The Feminist Press, 2017.
- Ross, Loretta, and Rickie Solinger. *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*. Vol. 1. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017.
- Sherwin, Susan. "Abortion Through a Feminist Ethics Lens." *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review/Revue Canadienne De Philosophie* 30, no. 3 (1991): 327–42.
- Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "A Defense of Abortion." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1971): 47–66.
- Threadcraft, Shatema. *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Vargas, Ramone Antonio. "Louisiana Woman Carrying Unviable Fetus Forced to Travel to New York for Abortion." *The Guardian*, September 14, 2022. Last accessed January 20, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/sep/14/louisiana-woman-skull-less-fetus-new-york-abortion>.
- Villarosa, Linda. "Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are In a Life-or-Death Crisis." *The New York Times*, April 11, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/11/magazine/black-mothers-babies-death-maternal-mortality.html>.
- Westwood, Rosemary. "Bleeding and in Pain, She Couldn't get 2 Louisiana ERs to Answer: Is It a Miscarriage?" *NPR*, December 29, 2022. Last accessed January 20, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/12/29/1143823727/bleeding-and-in-pain-she-couldnt-get-2-louisiana-ers-to-answer-is-it-a-miscarriage>.

The Words to Say It

Susan J. Brison
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

I'm filled with gratitude to Barrett Emerick and Ami Harbin for planning and editing this special issue marking the twentieth anniversary of *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, and I'm moved beyond words by the contributors' wonderfully insightful and generative responses. I'm not a solitary scholar and writing by myself is a lonely, anxiety-ridden task that I avoid whenever possible. But philosophy as conversation is one of my life's greatest pleasures, and I couldn't ask for a more thoughtful and inspiring group of interlocutors.

I'm good friends with some of the contributors and I hope to become friends with the others. Philosophy-with-friends is a refreshing change from the pre-feminist, pugilistic style of philosophizing—scoring points by taking down opponents. (Someone who used to teach in the Rutgers Philosophy Department tells an anecdote about a former chair who had a blackboard in his office on which he kept a running tally of invited speakers' talks, noting, for each week, whether the visiting team or the home team won.) These articles have sparked exchanges that I hope will continue for years to come—ideally, in person—and this brief response, which touches on some themes raised by each of the contributors, is only the beginning.

Learning how *Aftermath* was received by these six theorists has prompted me to think more about the reception of trauma narratives in general and about how my perception

of the ways my own narrative has been received has changed in the thirty years since I began writing publicly about my assault. What follows is not a stand-alone article, with a thesis and argumentation of its own, but, rather, a coda that resonates with themes sounded in the six articles that precede it.

I first spoke out publicly, as a rape survivor, at a Take Back the Night Rally at Princeton University in April 1991, nine months after I was raped and nearly murdered in France. I was on disability leave for the academic year, living in Princeton, where my partner, Tom Trezise, teaches. Although I'd had difficulty speaking for months after my assault, by that time, I'd gotten my voice back, after taking a Women's Self-defense and Rape Prevention class at Princeton and participating in a rape survivors' support group in Philadelphia for several months.¹ Tom also spoke out for the first time that night, as the group walked around the campus, stopping in several places to listen to survivors tell their stories. He was, as I recall, the only Princeton faculty member who spoke at the march, and it was only then that I learned how my assault had traumatized him, as well. We then submitted our narratives to *The Dartmouth*, a student newspaper, which published them as a cover story during sexual assault awareness week.

The responses—from friends and colleagues who knew *something* had led to my being hospitalized in France the previous summer, but didn't know what—prompted me to write a longer essay on rape from the perspective of a survivor, stressing the political significance of gender-based violence. I submitted it to *The New York Times Magazine* where it caught the attention of the editor, Warren Hoge, who phoned me to say that he was intrigued by what I'd written, but that they had already commissioned a feature-length article on rape that was in the pipeline. However, he added, if I were to shorten my piece, focusing only on my personal experience, leaving out the gender politics of rape, it would make an excellent "Hers" column.² I was so irritated by his trivializing and marginalizing what I considered the central point in the piece that I said I had no interest in doing that. A year later, though, after meeting many other survivors who were suffering in silence and coming across virtually nothing in the mainstream media on rape from a victim's perspective, I relented and submitted a "Hers" column on sexual violence, which appeared in the magazine on March 21, 1993.³

Three months later, the magazine's cover announced, in big, bold letters, "RAPE HYPE BETRAYS FEMINISM." This was the article the Magazine had commissioned. Entitled "Date Rape's Other Victim," it was an excerpt from Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus*. In it, Roiphe claimed that campus rape is a myth promulgated by "rape crisis feminists" who longed for a return to "the days of greater control, when the university acted in loco parentis and women were protected."⁴

But the anti-rape activist students I'd come to know by that time had no desire to restrict women's sex lives and were, on the contrary, refusing to allow their lives to be limited by the threat of male violence that had for so long kept women "in their place." Far from needing anyone to "protect" them,

these women were seizing control of their own lives, taking self-defense classes, educating their male peers, fighting for equality, and celebrating their sexuality.

I wrote a letter to the editor to that effect and, after it was published, a producer from NBC Now contacted me to say they were doing a special on campus rape and would like to interview me at Rockefeller Center. I flew down for the day and spoke with the producer at length about my experience with student rape survivors. We also talked about my "Hers" column. When the segment, hosted by Katie Couric, aired, I was dumbfounded to see that it was a puff-piece focused entirely on Katie Roiphe, amplifying her claim that campus rape was a myth. Nothing of my critique, other than a couple of lines from my letter to the editor, was aired.

When the producer later asked me what I thought of the segment, I told her I thought it was a piece of shit and said I felt used and betrayed. She acted surprised and said that it was precisely because these so-called "campus date rapes" were so unlike what I had experienced, that to call them "rape" *trivialized* what had happened to me, which was, in contrast, something really serious. I was furious with her—how could she so distort and misconstrue what I wrote and said?—but that should have been a warning to me of how my narrative, intended to make it easier for other survivors to speak, could be used to silence them.

The media backlash against campus anti-rape activists had only just begun and was intense and relentless that year, with newspaper and magazine articles entitled "Crying Rape: The Politics of Date Rape on Campus,"⁵ "Sexual Correctness,"⁶ and "The Victim Trap,"⁷ most of which were written by women. Just as some of us had begun speaking out about having been raped, we were told, by some self-described feminists, no less, that, in drawing attention to male violence against women, we were not only revealing ourselves to be weak, fragile, and pathetic, but were also turning *other* women into victims, denying their agency, infantilizing them, and looking to men to protect us. Anti-rape feminists were labeled "anti-sex" and campus feminism came under attack.⁸

For nearly two decades following that backlash, anti-rape activism—and feminism, generally—were seen by many young women on college campuses as *passé*, no longer needed, if they ever were. Amia Srinivasan wrote that, when she was in high school (in 1999–2003), she and "all [her] friends" would have been "ashamed" to call themselves "feminists,"⁹ and added, in an interview, that she had no awareness of feminist theory as an undergraduate at Yale, having discovered it only later in graduate school.¹⁰ I was shocked by this revelation, but I've since heard from some other now-feminist colleagues of her generation that they, too, were not at all interested in feminism in high school and college.

The incidents of rape on- and off-campus, however, continued unabated. As a professor at Dartmouth and at Princeton in the 1990s and 2000s, I was a lightning rod for women students who'd been assaulted, none of whom reported their assaults to the police, and very few of whom

said anything to campus authorities.¹¹ Some said they hadn't told anyone else but me. They minimized what had happened to them. They blamed themselves. They told me it would be "social suicide" to speak out publicly. They said they didn't want to be known as *that girl*, the one who ruined a young man's future.

I thought I understood well the reasons why victims remained silent. I regularly warned them that they would have no control over how others would view or use their stories, should they decide to speak about their assaults at a campus Take Back the Night March. I stressed that my speaking out about my assault should never be interpreted as my exhorting other victims to do the same. The fact that I had masses of unearned credibility that most victims didn't have led to my deciding that I had an obligation to speak out, but that didn't mean I thought any other victims did.

Still, one of my primary motivations for going public with my easy-to-tell narrative of having been raped by a stranger, in circumstances that didn't prompt victim-blaming,¹² was to make it easier for other victims to tell their harder-to-tell stories, should they choose to. So I was floored when, sometime around ten years ago, I asked a student who had confided in me about her assault why she didn't feel able to tell even her closest friends that she had been raped, and she said it was because what had happened to *her* was trivial compared to what happened to *me*. It wasn't such a big deal, and she knew she'd be socially ostracized if she talked about it, so shouldn't she just get over it?

This made me realize I had to tell the story of another rape, the one I described in the 2014 *Time* magazine piece Danielle Tumminio Hansen discusses in her article in this issue.¹³ This rape occurred when I was twenty, during a junior year abroad in England. One night, at the end of the winter quarter, I was asleep in my dorm room when someone knocked on my door. It was an older graduate student, someone I considered a friend, and I let him in. I had a (secret) crush on him and so, although I was a little bewildered by what appeared to be his sudden romantic interest in me, I wasn't alarmed and I even welcomed his unexpected passionate kiss. But then, in an instant, he threw me down on my narrow bed, got on top of me, penetrated me, and after a few thrusts, ejaculated into me. I didn't scream and I didn't try to fight him off. It happened so quickly and was over before I fully realized what was going on. And then, without saying a word, he got up and left.

I wasn't sexually active at the time and wasn't using any form of birth control, and he didn't use a condom. I never saw him again.

I didn't tell anyone what had happened. What would I have said? What *had* happened? I wasn't *raped*. I didn't call it "rape." Whatever *it* was didn't have a name or an identifying description. After a disastrous spring break stint as a tour guide taking American high school students around Europe, I suffered a complete breakdown. I stayed in my dorm room and didn't go to my new spring quarter classes. I stopped eating, except for the occasional cups of yogurt I ventured out to the student co-op to buy.

After I missed my period, I was sure I was pregnant. I blamed myself for what had happened and believed that I didn't deserve to live any longer. I now know that, when someone treats you as worthless—something to be used and discarded—even if only briefly, you can come to believe that you *are* worthless. After several weeks, someone notified my parents that I had dropped out of school and arranged for me to fly back to the States.

I stayed at my parents' house for a couple of months trying to figure out the best way to kill myself. I'd missed another period, then another, so I was even more certain I was pregnant. I couldn't tell my parents what was wrong with me. It wasn't only that I was pregnant; it was that there was something terribly, irredeemably, wrong with *me* and, even though I didn't know what it was, I knew it wouldn't go away. I was convinced I was a horrible person. It seemed to me that the only solution to my unlivable situation was to jump off a highway overpass during rush hour.¹⁴

I didn't say any of this to my parents, but I could tell I was breaking their hearts. I remember my father sitting on my bed next to me telling me I was beautiful, smart, and had everything going for me. But I thought I was so ugly that people couldn't bear to look at me and, even though I'd gotten the equivalent of straight As in my junior-year-abroad philosophy courses before I dropped out, I was convinced I wouldn't be able to complete an undergraduate degree.¹⁵ And, anyway, what would be the point?

I rarely left my room—why would I inflict myself on anyone?—and when my parents were at their wits' end, I heard them, outside my door, arguing about what to do with me. My mother didn't believe in therapy, but she believed in God and she insisted I meet with their minister for counseling. When I refused, she told me that, if I didn't agree to meet with him, I would have to move out. "You can ruin your life, if you want to," she said, "but you're not going to ruin ours." This may sound harsh, but it got me out of bed. I agreed to meet with the minister and I decided that, whatever I did, I had to leave soon.

My mother drove me to their church where I met with the minister in his office. I didn't say much. I didn't tell him I was pregnant, but my mother must have told him something had happened to me while I was in England. On his desk was a glass filled with water into which he dropped something that caused the water to spill over the rim. He looked at me and said, "One can only bear so much. Sometimes one can't take any more. And that's OK."

At the time, I didn't think much of this demonstration—how was *that* supposed to help?—but I now think it registered unconsciously that I didn't *do* something bad, but that something bad *had happened to me*. That it wasn't my fault. That I wasn't irreparably damaged. That maybe I could get help.

It didn't occur to me until nearly four decades later that I had been raped, that someone else had *done something wrong to me*, but the next morning, I borrowed my parents' car, and, instead of stopping on an overpass, I drove to a Planned Parenthood office. They gave me a pregnancy

test and I didn't believe them, at first, when they told me I *wasn't* pregnant. How could I *not* be, I told them, when I'd had unprotected sex and then hadn't had a period for three months?¹⁶

I can't know for sure, but had abortion not even been a possibility, I think it's quite likely that I would have killed myself. The abortion I *didn't* have, but could have had, saved my life.

Now, after Dobbs,¹⁷ in many parts of the US, my twenty-year-old self would not have that option. The availability of abortion is crucial, not only for people with unwanted pregnancies, but also for those who think they *might* be pregnant and for those who know that they could get pregnant, whether they want to be or not. It's crucial for the well-being of potentially pregnant persons to know that, should they need to terminate a pregnancy, for whatever reason, they would have the means to do so.

As Jordan Pascoe argues in this issue, just as it matters, in a sexual encounter, "whether I feel that I *can* say no, that I have access to what I need to remove myself from the situation safely, that I can say no for my own reasons . . . , it matters whether women or other potentially pregnant persons *can* say no to pregnancy, whether they have access to abortion care, whether they have the resources to access it, whether they can access it safely, and whether they feel that accessing abortion is an option *available* to them."¹⁸

Abortion, like rape, must be viewed as a political problem, not merely a matter of personal choice. A large part of the harm of *Dobbs* is the message it sends to those who might become involuntarily pregnant, which is strikingly similar to the message conveyed to victims by rapists (and, typically, by the social/legal response to rape): *You don't matter. Your choices don't matter. It's your fault you're in this situation and now there's nothing you can do about it.*

*

In comparison to the rape I experienced when I was in college, the one I wrote about in *Aftermath* was easy to talk about. For a while, it was harder *not* to talk about it. And, in many ways, it was easier to recover from. I wrote, in *Aftermath*, about how I wished I could blame myself for doing something careless or foolish, so I could simply avoid doing it again.¹⁹ It was hard to accept that I would never be safe, and that I never *was* safe. But I didn't become suicidal. If anything, I became suicide-proof, because, whenever I was in the grip of depression, I thought, *I'll be damned if I'm going to finish my assailant's job for him.*

It feels self-indulgent to talk about this earlier rape.²⁰ But I'm now aware of the harm in *not* talking about it.

By 2014, many other survivors of campus rape had begun to speak out publicly, bringing the issue of sexual violence back into national prominence, and had formed organizations, such as KnowYourIX, End Rape on Campus, A Long Walk Home, and SurvJustice, to reform campus policies and provide support for survivors. It was anti-rape

activists, such as Alexandra Brodsky, Wagatwe Wanjuki, Salamishah Tillet, Annie E. Clark, Laura Dunn, Andrea Pino, and Dana Bolger, who, by speaking out about their own rapes, loudly and insistently, enabled survivors of the most prevalent type of rape—and not only those of us who survived the more spectacular and relatively rare stranger rapes—to be heard and accorded credibility.

*

All the contributors to this special issue stress the importance of reconceptualizing rape, of finding the words to call it what it is, and of acknowledging when the right words aren't (yet) available in our conceptual repertoire. Sometimes trauma narratives enable other, even quite different, narratives to surface. After I published my "Hers" column, I heard from a Black male victim of a racist hate crime and a mother whose toddler had drowned in her pool that my narrative made them feel understood and accompanied in their pain. But sometimes trauma narratives, especially those that conform to and reinforce pernicious stereotypes, can occlude other stories, as in the case of those whose experiences of sexual violation don't "fit" the language available to describe them.

At the end of *Aftermath*, I say of my mother, who had an extremely traumatic childhood, but was told she had to be "a rock," that "[s]he was schooled, no doubt benevolently, in the ontology of silence, as if, without the words to say it, there wouldn't be so much pain."²¹ But pain doesn't work that way. Silence can calcify it and make it worse. So I'll end by saying "thank you," again, to the editors of and contributors to this issue whose words have heartened and inspired me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd also like to thank Ami Harbin, Kate Norlock, and Michael Doan who organized last year's annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy on the theme of "Aftermath" at Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan, USA, October 28, 2022, in conjunction with a panel on "The Twentieth Anniversary of *Aftermath: Violence and Remaking of a Self*" at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, November 24, 2022. Some of the conversations continued in this special issue began at those events, as well as at an Author-Meets-Critics Session on "Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self—Twenty Years Later," organized by Sarah Tyson, with papers by Ann Cahill and Linda Martín Alcoff, at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Annual Meeting, Montreal, Canada, January 5, 2023.

NOTES

1. Although that was the name of the course, it was a course in *rape avoidance*, not *rape prevention*. Would-be rape victims can't prevent rape; they can only try to reduce the odds that *they* will become victims. However, if all girls and women (and other feminized groups) were trained in self-defense and socialized to consider themselves worth defending, would-be rapists would have reason to think twice before sexually assaulting anyone.
2. The "Hers" column was a section of the *Magazine*, started in 1977, that featured writing by women on "women's issues."
3. Susan Brison, "Survival Course," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 21, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/21/magazine/hers-survival-course.html>. I had, by that time, also become aware of influential "Hers" columns that had been written by such feminists as Barbara Ehrenreich, Gloria Naylor, and Katha Pollitt.
4. Katie Roiphe, "Date Rape's Other Victim," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 13, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/06/13/magazine/date-rape-s-other-victim.html>.

The *New York Times* had already published an op-ed by Roiphe on "Date Rape Hysteria" on November 20, 1991: <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/20/opinion/voices-of-the-new-generation-date-rape-hysteria.html>.

In "Taking Back the Night," Chapter Two of *The Morning After*, Roiphe, who was a graduate student at Princeton at the time, ridicules speakers at the Take Back the Night march at Princeton in 1991 at which Tom and I spoke. She refers to me as "a girl" who "tells of being raped by a Frenchman," although I was thirty-five when I was raped and had been a visiting assistant professor at Princeton the previous year. Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex Fear, and Feminism on Campus* (New York: Little, Brown, 1993), 35.

5. Peter Hellman, "Crying Rape: The Politics of Date Rape on Campus," *New York* magazine, March 8, 1993. Was it intentionally published on International Women's Day?
6. Sarah Crichton, "Sexual Correctness," *Newsweek*, October 25, 1993.
7. Barbara Sullivan, "The Victim Trap," *Chicago Tribune*, October 14, 1993.
8. Karen Lehrman, "Off Course," *Mother Jones*, September/October 1993.
9. Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 49.
10. Of her time as an undergraduate at Yale, in 2003–2007, Srinivasan says, "I was barely even taught by any women. Even when we were reading these great texts and rethinking everything else . . . the thing that was just never questioned in my milieu was the basic terms of relating between women and men." *British Vogue*, July 25, 2021, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/amia-srinivasan>.
11. In the last ten to fifteen years, it's become more acceptable, although still very difficult, for male and non-binary students to speak out about having been raped, but it was almost impossible in the '90s and '00s.
12. Although I wasn't explicitly blamed for my assault—no one took seriously my assailant's claim that I had "provoked" it—the colleagues Tom and I were staying with when I was attacked said that nothing like that had ever happened there before. (The local paper noted that a very similar rape happened the following day in the next village over.) And when another woman from the US visited them a few months later, they wrote to us that they "kept her on a short leash."
13. Susan J. Brison, "Why I Spoke Out about One Rape but Stayed Silent about Another," *Time*, December 1, 2014 <https://time.com/3612283/why-i-spoke-out-about-one-rape-but-stayed-silent-about-another/>.
14. I don't recall having given any thought to the trauma such an act would inflict on the driver(s) who hit me. And I believed my parents and siblings would be better off without me.
15. Since I'd already taken a year's worth of philosophy courses in two quarters and there was no gap evident in my transcript, no one but my parents, my siblings, and a few acquaintances with whom I soon lost all contact knew I'd dropped out of college for a few months. For decades afterwards, I told no one, and it continued to be a source of shame.
16. I learned later that extreme stress and malnutrition can cause amenorrhea.
17. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* 597 U.S. __ (2022).
18. See Pascoe in this issue.
19. I'm not, however, suggesting that's it's ever right for rape victims to blame themselves.
20. This is not because the earlier rape was more mundane than the later one, but because I've already written one first-person narrative about rape.
21. Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (with a new preface by the author) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 117.