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Namrata Verghese April 8, 2019

Silence, Fragmentation, and Embodied Trauma: A Cross-Genre Examination of Narratives of Sexual Violence from Women of Color

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Abstract

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By Namrata Verghese

In the contemporary post-#MeToo social climate—in which reports of sexual violence are more abundant and less stigmatized than ever before—I contend that it is increasingly imperative to pay nuanced, scholarly attention to the personal and political power of trauma narratives. As such, I aim to critically examine first-person accounts of sexual violence from women of color, which represent some of the most silenced stories in our social imaginary. An interdisciplinary, intersectional project that lives at the nexus of the fields of narrative psychology, literary analysis, and cultural studies, this thesis considers autobiographical personal narratives drawn from the Grady Trauma Project alongside published literary personal texts. In placing these traditionally disparate genres in conversation with each other, this project strives to bridge the void between theory and lived experience.

The aim of this work is twofold: to create a platform to hear the too-often silenced narratives of sexual violence from women of color, and, on a broader scale, to contribute to a legacy that elevates and validates the stories of marginalized, understudied populations who, historically, have been denied hegemonic subjectivity. To that end, I harnessed qualitative analysis methods to delve deeply into the ten narratives in this corpus, and ultimately focused on four recurring themes that emerged through immersive, iterative readings: silence and voice, embodied trauma, fragmentation, and particularized trauma. The results of this analysis revealed that women from both corpora described experiences of sexual violence in remarkably similar language, suggesting that the chasm between theory and lived experience may not be as wide as previously imagined.

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Silence, Fragmentation, and Embodied Trauma: A Cross-Genre Examination of Narratives of Sexual Violence from Women of Color

"I hope that by sharing my story, by joining a chorus of women and men who share their stories too, more people can become appropriately horrified by how much suffering is born of sexual violence, how far-reaching the repercussions can be ... I share parts of my story, and this sharing becomes part of something bigger, a collective testimony of people who have painful stories too. I make that choice."

— Roxane Gay, *Hunger*

Introduction

On October 14, 2017, the hashtag #MeToo appeared for the first time on Twitter, following actress Alyssa Milano's now-iconic tweet: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted, reply #MeToo to this tweet." Within twenty-four hours of her post, the words had been tweeted close to half a million times—a record-shattering level of engagement for the social media platform (Gilbert, 2017).

"We've never seen something like this before," Joan Williams, a law professor and gender studies scholar, told the *New York Times*. "#MeToo has caused a 'norms cascade'—a very abrupt change in social norms" (Salam, 2018).

The hashtag, rooted in a demonstration of solidarity among survivors of sexual assault, spoke to both the staggering prevalence of sexual violence and the stigma shrouding the disclosure of these experiences. While not a call to action in itself, in its unmasking of the colossal, previously unspeakable scale of sexual violence, #MeToo became revolutionary in its own right. It led to several other social media movements (#TimesUp, #WhyIDidntReport, #BelieveWomen), which cumulatively translated to actionable change: over the next year, more than 200 prominent figures, from Harvey Weinstein to Kevin Spacey, were denounced (and many arrested) for sexual violence.

In recognition, *TIME* magazine honored the originators of the hashtag—dubbed the "Silence Breakers"—as their 2017 "Person of the Year."

On the heels of #MeToo, for the first time in recent memory, the concept of "rape culture" has gained traction in the mainstream. Broadly speaking, rape culture denotes "attitudes and behaviors that normalize sexual assault, and systems that do not provide proper help to victims and proper prosecution of aggressors" (Hamblin, 2014). According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, one in five American women has experienced or will experience sexual assault in her lifetime—and this statistic only factors in those who reported. Data has always revealed the bleak ubiquity of rape culture; syllogistically, then, the "norms cascade" Williams alluded to most likely did not come about simply due to the sheer number of women tweeting #MeToo. Rather, I put forth that it was precipitated by the content of their tweets: their lived experiences of sexual violence. Their stories.

In a climate in which accounts of sexual violence are more abundant and less stigmatized than ever before, I contend that it is increasingly imperative to pay nuanced, scholarly attention to the personal and political power of trauma narratives. To that end, this project aims to critically examine first-person accounts of sexual violence from women of color, which, as I will outline shortly, represent some of the most silenced stories in our social imaginary.

The Personal and Political Power of Trauma Narratives

Extant literature overwhelmingly illustrates that stories carry a sticking power that facts and stats simply do not. As quintessential storytellers, humans are naturally predisposed to process, produce, and be persuaded by narratives; hence, the story has unique influence in informing our subjective realities (Smith, 2017). In fact, narrative psychology pioneer Jerome Bruner (1991) argues that stories do not merely influence our realities, but *become* our realities: we are, collectively, the stories we consume and produce. Identity is constructed through storytelling

(McAdams, 1993), and, on a macro scale, these accumulated micro stories carry the potential to become master narratives—the pervasive, prescriptive stories that structure our cultural psyche (Hammack, 2008). Conversely, Hammack notes that master narratives also seep into and give shape to our personal narratives, a dialectical relationship reflected in this project. Canonical master narratives form a "moral, ethical, and affective framework for understanding events," from the American Dream (the immigrants who come to the country with scarcely anything, but work their way up the echelons of wealth) to the classic redemption arc (overcoming adversity makes an individual stronger) (Fivush, 2010). These master narratives are not simplistic life scripts, but moral imperatives; those who stray from them may be stigmatized.

By examining personal narratives, then, we gain insight into identity formation on both an individual and a societal scale. This is exemplified by the ways in which the trauma narratives brought into the public sphere through #MeToo respond to (and depart from) master narratives of sexual assault, which typically follow two arcs: the "shattered self" or the "survivor." The shattered self refers to the rupture of trauma, drawing a temporal "before" and "after" of the event itself that reveals the "shattering" of an individual's interior world (MacCurdy, 2007). In her seminal work *Aftermath* (2002), Susan Brison dubs this a "reverse redemption narrative": "I was once found, but am now lost." The second arc, the "survivor," centers the process of identity integration and reconstitution in the wake of trauma, following which the individual emerges "stronger" and more resilient (Spry, 1995). The two plots are not mutually exclusive; the "survivor" arc frequently follows and addresses the "shattering" of the self.

In some ways, #MeToo is not merely invoking or shifting our master narrative on sexual assault, but, rather, inducing it. The movement deviates significantly from our prior cultural understandings of sexual violence, in that it does not revolve merely around the "shattered self" or the "survivor," but some combination of the two that, critically, incorporates a third element: the avenger (MacCurdy, 2007; Spry, 1995). The stories of these women are not merely personal, but

political; they aim to both expose and undermine the people, institutions, and structures that have led to the systemic, pervasive rape culture in which we live. Even the descriptors attributed to the core group of women associated with the hashtag are forceful, powerful: we cannot forget that the epithet "silence *breakers*" contains an action verb. To echo feminist scholar Diana Meyers (1986), these narratives of trauma unearth dark histories too long ignored, too frequently dismissed. They bring injustice to the attention of the public; they "serve to bear witness" (Meyers, 1986). Therefore, the first-person accounts gathered through the #MeToo movement not only provide valuable insight into the pervasiveness of sexual violence, but also facilitate understanding and empathy. This becomes vital in a society that, historically, has denied empathy to trauma survivors—perhaps, as Brison suggests, due to the "active fear of identifying with those whose terrifying fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own" (2002). For this reason, feminist theorists have increasingly turned to personal narratives as an imaginative platform through which to access others' experiences and, ultimately, glean the moral understanding necessary to complement more traditional, analytic methods.

Beyond their panoramic impact on a societal scale, these first-person narratives are equally powerful in a smaller, quieter way: they help survivors of sexual violence grapple with their trauma. Brison, who survived a near-fatal sexual assault and attempted murder, wrote that "empathetic listeners" are paramount in the recovery process, as "piecing together a shattered self requires a process of remembering and working through in which speech and affect converge in a trauma narrative" (2002). As the written or verbal representation of trauma, these narratives translate survivors' experiences into tangible words, a process that allows for enhanced processing and integration of the traumatic event. In her classic paradigm of trauma theory, Cathy Caruth (1996) terms trauma the "unspeakable void"—that which is more absence than presence, that which is inherently unrepresentable, incomprehensible. The trauma narrative attempts to bridge

this void, to mitigate the ancient tension between signified and signifier. The physical act of expression picks up the proverbial shards of the shattered shelf.

Notably, despite the significant merits of these first-person accounts, trauma narratives have historically been discredited as unsubstantial, unempirical, and ultimately incidental to the broader framework of trauma theory. Women's narratives, in particular, brim with "uncertainty, minimization, and self-blame"—content that has caused many scholars to read these reports skeptically (Brown, 2013). This phenomenon is nothing new; the dismissal of women's pain stretches back throughout the annals of history, from the trope of the Homeric "hysterical woman" onwards (Carson, 1994). Still, trauma narratives persist, even thrive. In a 2016 essay published in *Poets & Writers*, Melissa Febos argues that the act of writing trauma, while enmeshed in a patriarchal society that systemically trivializes, ridicules, and rejects these testimonies, is subversive. "It is not gauche to write about trauma," she concludes. "The stigma of victimhood is a timeworn tool of oppressive powers to gaslight the people they subjugate." For this reason, French feminist Hélène Cixous's pioneering work "The Laugh of the Medusa" similarly urges women to "Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (1976). In its celebration of stigmatized trauma narratives, then, the #MeToo movement is empowering—radical, even.

The Voices Missing from #MeToo

Crucially, however, for all the value in the #MeToo movement, it is necessary to note its significant homogeneity: it elevates the voices of white, cisgender, heterosexual women, at the expense of all others. In the thick of the 2017 #MeToo wave, distinguished Black[1] actress Lupita Nyong'o published an opinion piece in the *New York Times*, condemning Harvey Weinstein for

[1] In this paper, I capitalize Black, in adherence with style guidelines published by *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *Conscious Style Guide*. As journalism professor Lori L. Tharps writes in *The New York Times*, "It is not merely a typographical change; it is an act in recognition of racial respect for those who have been generations in the 'lower case'" (2014).

attempting to assault her when she was a newcomer in the film industry. In stark contrast to the reception of most articles published at the time by white women, Nyong'o's piece was torn apart (Garcia-Navarro, 2017). She was denounced as a liar, a ladder-climber.

"Not only is there a sense that we're excluded from the narrative, but even when prominent members of our community are in the narrative, we're the ones whose stories are pushed back upon," Nyong'o lamented in a subsequent interview with National Public Radio (NPR). "We're the ones who are lying" (Garcia-Navarro, 2017).

This gap in the cultural narrative perpetuates hegemonic structures of power by actively silencing those voices that deviate from the experiences of white women. It bears sinister implications for the ways in which we conceptualize and tackle questions of sexual assault, from treatment to intervention to outreach to simple empathy. As Michelle Balaev points out in the introduction to *Contemporary Approaches to Literary Trauma Theory* (2014), the classic trauma paradigm always had a glaring, but somehow invisible, flaw: it presumed traumatic experiences to be "universal" (which, she posits, equates to white, Western, and Judeo-Christian). Balaev urges scholars to interrogate our established understandings of trauma, to move away "from the focus on trauma as unrepresentable" and instead home in on "the specificity of trauma that locates meaning through a greater consideration of the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience." In other words, to ask ourselves: who (and, by extension, what) is missing?

Intersectionality, a term coined by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1990) that refers to the compounded effect of overlapping marginalizations, should ideally lie at the moral core of sensitive, nuanced scholarship. Feminist scholar Patricia Hill (2002) first put forth the concept of the "matrix of domination," a sociological lattice of converging social systems of power that serve to impede Black women's agency and structural well-being, that "immobilize Black women caught at the intersections of race, class, gender, and lack of access to normative modes of sexual behavior." Her analysis, in conjunction with the too-often overlooked work of other Black

feminists, suggests that our master narrative of sexual assault lacks critical insight from marginalized communities. The specific lived experiences of women of color (as opposed to the 'universal' and 'objective'[2] experiences of white women) problematize, complement, and enrich our understandings of sexual trauma. As Brittney Cooper writes in *Eloquent Rage* (2018), "Intersectionality—or the idea that we are all integrally formed and multiply impacted by the interacting systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy—is not only *not* objective, but it sneers at claims to objectivity, arguing that none of us is purely objective. We all come with a perspective and an agenda. We all have investments. We all have skin in the game."

Motivations for Increased Intersectionality in Trauma Scholarship

Drawing on feminist and critical trauma theory, I posit that examining the first-person trauma narratives of women of color will fill holes in extant literature. Simply put, the stark fact remains that, due largely to their marginal positions in society, women of color face significantly greater risk for physical and sexual violence—yet, despite this, there exists a dearth of scholarship on their particular and manifold traumas (van der Kolk, 1996).

In a 2018 article in *The Nation*, Candace King notes that Black women are erased in the conversation around sexual assault at college, especially at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), despite experiencing higher rates of campus rape than white women. She points to numerous factors that contribute to this silence. For one, Black women are reluctant to further vilify Black men in a society that already disciplines them for their existence. "There is a strict code of silence that Black women are compelled to adhere to when they experience sexual assault from Black men," NiCole Buchanan, associate professor of psychology at Michigan State University, told *The Nation*. "It becomes about a victim saying, 'Well, this is going to reinforce these

[2] I use single quotes to indicate field-specific terminology, rather than a direct quote from a source.

stereotypes about my brother, my dad, my lover, and I don't want to do that, so maybe I should just stay silent'" (King, 2018).

For another, Black women are less likely to be believed in systems that privilege certain voices over others. Kamilah Willingham, a third-year at Harvard Law School, was dismissed when she reported her assault to the Cambridge police force and the university. "I especially felt they looked at me and questioned me in a way that showed they were stereotyping me," Willingham told *The Nation*. Her Blackness, it seemed, obliterated (or, at the very least, overwhelmed) her status as a sexual assault survivor. Danielle McGuire, an associate professor of history at Wayne State University, emphasized that Willingham's experience does not exist in a vacuum. "We have the whiteness of history and the maleness of history, and, combined, they completely eliminated black women's voices," she said. "Black women have been telling their stories forever … The problem is that people weren't listening" (King, 2018).

Most insidious of all, perhaps, is the socially imposed self-silencing that many Black women endure. Manya Whitaker observes in "Breaking the Culture of Silence," a 2017 article published in *Inside Higher Ed*, that women of color are "raised to keep quiet" and not "air dirty laundry" about sexual violence so as not to further demonize the Black community, one of the most vulnerable demographics in the United States. Even more, the prevalent cultural myth about the "strength" of Black women can inhibit them from coming forward about their experiences of sexual violence (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). As the pillars of the community, Whitaker puts forth, Black women are expected to be stoic, quasi-infallible. To speak out against sexual violence in such an environment could be construed as "weakness" (Whitaker, 2017).

"Women of color have been demoralized, browbeaten and run over so much that we sometimes do not give ourselves the space that we need to fall apart. We are raised with messages of strength; we are the backbone of the family," Whitaker writes. "When so many black and brown men are unjustly behind bars, we have been left to bear the burdens of life alone. What we go

through on a day-to-day basis is unconscionable to people who do not live at the intersection of gender, race, class and religion. But for us, it is just another day."

But perhaps there is no more poignant argument in favor of increased intersectional scholarship on trauma narratives than the fact that #MeToo—the hashtag, typically attributed to Alyssa Milano, that sparked the movement, our current cultural consciousness of the prevalence of sexual assault, and this project—was originally coined by a Black feminist. Twelve years ago, Tarana Burke set up the Me Too activist group that inspired Milano's tweet. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Burke said that she was not surprised by her erasure in the history of the movement; after all, for decades, oppressive systems have co-opted the labor of people of color as their own (Brockes, 2018).

The Current Study

The conspicuous dearth of scholarship centered on the traumatic experiences of women of color motivated this study: a cross-genre examination of narratives of sexual violence by women of color. Just as the study of trauma is necessarily intersectional, I believe it must also be interdisciplinary. From its inception, trauma theory has harnessed an interdisciplinary framework, integrating literary criticism with psychological and sociological empirical analysis. In her introduction to the field-forming *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth writes that no one discipline can encapsulate the dimensions of traumatic experiences; therefore, "the irreducible specificity of traumatic stories requires in its turn the varied responses—responses of knowing and of acting—of literature, film, psychiatry, neurobiology, sociology, and political and social activism."

To that end, this project draws heavily from the field of narrative psychology, as well as from literary and cultural studies. It also considers both oral autobiographical narratives and published literary personal texts. These two distinct genres will, I hope, yield varied and equally

important insights into our conceptualizations of sexual violence against women in marginalized communities. The datasets differ greatly, in a variety of aspects. For one, the published literary texts have been edited time and time again, by a number of people (including the author, agents, editors, etc.), while the individuals who provided the oral autobiographical narratives were spontaneously recounting their stories to interviewers, often for the first time. Furthermore, the audience for the authors of the literary texts is the public at large—the people who will buy and share their work. The oral personal narratives, however, were only shared with one or two interviewers in a private setting. Fundamentally, then, the literary texts, then, represent more curated, deliberate, *packaged* narratives specifically released into the public sphere for widespread consumption (indeed, not simply released, but actively *marketed*, with an eye towards the story's potential to sell broadly), whereas the personal narratives are impromptu, unedited interviews, not intended for general dissemination.

It becomes critical, therefore, to underscore that I am not attempting to compare these genres directly; rather, I aim to place them in conversation with each other, to explicate how each provides us different ways of seeing the phenomenon. By examining not just literary texts, but also the oral personal narratives of women of color, this project strives to bridge the void between theory and lived experience.

The first dataset comprises five personal narratives gathered through the Grady Trauma Project (GTP), a collaboration between psychologists at Grady Memorial Hospital and Emory University School of Medicine that seeks to interrogate the clinical and physiological implications of post-traumatic stress disorder. The Grady Trauma Project participants included in the current study identify as Black women from lower-income socioeconomic backgrounds—theirs are the stories that too often fall between the cracks. From this dataset, I hope to glean an enriched understanding into the ways in which women from this understudied demographic speak about their experiences of sexual violence.

To complement this corpus, I selected five autobiographical literary texts[3]: Roxane Gay's memoir, *Hunger*, and four essays by Black women from two anthologies, *Not That Bad* and *Queering Sexual Violence: Radical Voices from Within the Anti-Violence Movement*. Methodologically, I chose to focus specifically on Black women, as opposed to women of color or marginalized communities more broadly, because I hoped to contain, as closely as possible, the demographic with the narratives from the Grady Trauma Project. Furthermore, the umbrella term 'women of color' is itself so broad that it threatens to flatten diverse subcultural groups into monolithic categories; to counteract this hazard, the current project spotlights Black women living in the contemporary United States, who inexorably navigate a particular social environment as a product of their racial marking. This approach is not, of course, infallible; while all the narratives are from Black women, this group is by no means homogenous. The dataset includes women from various socioeconomic, religious, class, and national backgrounds—all dimensions which inform and enrich their specific narratives, and which I aim to grapple with in the body of this paper.

In this study, I employ qualitative analysis to examine each of the ten narratives. This methodology allows for deeper, more nuanced appreciation of individual experience by resisting the temptation to reduce stories to mere data points (Chase, 2005). I discuss each narrative in considerable depth, then pull out overarching themes, motifs, expressions, and emotions to paint a more holistic picture of the overall dataset. Each narrative teems with more analysis-worthy content than I could possibly fit within the constraints of this paper. Therefore, while I linger on each individually, I focus on four recurring themes that emerged both from the literature on trauma and from the narratives themselves through immersive reading. These themes are: silence and voice, embodied trauma, fragmentation, and particularized (as opposed to 'universal') trauma. Below, in the Methods section, I develop these themes more thoroughly, and towards the end of the

[3] For the purposes of distinguishing between the two genres, I will refer to the GTP transcripts as "personal narratives" and the published pieces as "literary texts."

paper, I will revisit this discussion to incorporate additional insights provided by the qualitative narrative analysis.

Ultimately, the concrete, immediate aim of this project is to create a platform to hear the too-often silenced narratives of sexual violence from Black women, and to consider how these stories contribute to larger cultural conversations around sexual violence in the #MeToo era. On a broader scale, however, I hope this paper constitutes a step towards elevating and validating the stories of marginalized, understudied communities. Postcolonial scholar Edward Said posits that detached, objective scholarship is a myth; all work that contributes to the production of knowledge either maintains or subverts the hegemonic status quo (1983). Scholarship that does not actively engage with established structures of power, then, serves only to buttress them, because "for every poem or novel in the canon, there is a social fact being requisitioned for the page, a human life engaged, a class suppressed or elevated" (Said, 1983). Scholars therefore necessarily shoulder the moral responsibility of advocacy and inclusion, as "criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interest of human freedom" (Said, 1983).

Moreover, storytelling as an act is capacious and humanizing, and, for this reason, the narrative form has historically been privileged as a marker of humanity. In his essay "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," critical race theorist Henry Louis Gates incisively traces the correlation between written narratives and personhood: "Without stories, no repeatable sign of the workings of reason, of mind, could exist. Without memory or mind, no history could exist. Without history, no humanity could exist" (Gates, 1983). He then demonstrates how this quietly insidious link between stories and humanity has been deployed to deprive marginalized communities of their "humanity"—that elusive hegemonic subjectivity—as, for centuries, literacy was the prerogative of wealthy white males. Thus, the privileging of written narratives served to "delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of cultures and people of color" (Gates, 1983).

This paper represents an attempt to reclaim that humanity through the very form that discredited it in the first place. By actively seeking and uplifting the humanity too long (and still, too frequently) denied to marginalized people, I hope this project contributes to an enduring legacy that moves towards decentering the 'universal' in favor of the vibrant, urgent stories of the particular—towards shifting master narratives, one story at a time.

Methods

Qualitative Analysis Overview

This study utilized qualitative methods to analyze a corpus of five personal and five literary texts. Specifically, I harnessed a method of qualitative analysis that can most aptly be described as grounded theory, a framework developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to "resist reducing the lived experiences of an individual to a statistic." Grounded theory is a method of reading formally defined as an "ongoing systematic process of collecting, coding, analyzing and theoretically categorizing data using the information that *emerges from the data itself*, rather than forcing preconceived ideas onto the coding and subsequent analysis" (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). Following the "narrative turn" in psychology, a substantial body of literature has been produced suggesting that, while still underprivileged, qualitative methods are more conducive to sensitive, nuanced studies of marginalized populations than strictly quantitative methods (Reissman, 2005).

This reading strategy allowed for the organic defining and development of the four themes which I focus on in this paper, and which I will discuss in detail towards the close of this section. Importantly, the framework of grounded theory is both *immersive* and *iterative*. Each narrative was read by at least two people, and at least twice; I will delve deeper into the specifics of this two-pronged process in the next section.

Once these themes organically emerged through this iterative reading process, I applied a model of narrative typology called *thematic analysis* to narrow and systemize my approach.

Thematic analysis emphasizes the content of the text and prioritizes meaning, intentionality, and ambiguity over subjective shifts in telling (Reissman, 2005). However, while thematic analysis is the main push of this paper, my individual discussion of the narratives is not restricted to thematic analysis alone. It is supplemented by structural analysis, which allows for evaluation of the way a story is told (for example, nonlinear storytelling may reflect the characteristic fractured or disordered relationship with time following a traumatic incident).

Selection of Personal Narratives

The five personal narratives considered in this project come from the Grady Trauma Project and follow the standard interview format used with all participants in the GTP. The dataset these narratives were selected from includes over one hundred interviews conducted between 2015 and 2017. All participants identify as Black women who are between the ages of 18 and 44, come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (reported household income of less than $2,000 per month), and have a child or children between the ages of 8 and 12.

As part of the larger GTP study, these women were approached by researchers in the waiting rooms of Grady Hospital. Those who agreed to take part in the study then participated in a clinical intake interview in which they were asked about traumatic experiences using a structured interview protocol. My adviser and I accessed these transcripts to determine our corpus. Importantly, even before we narrowed our corpus to the narratives considered in this paper, this pool already represented a self-selected sample, as individuals had to agree to participate in the study and share their traumas with GTP researchers.

My adviser and I then restricted our corpus to interviews in which participants spoke about experiences of sexual violence. Specifically, we only considered interviews that detailed experiences of rape, which is legally defined by the United States Department of Justice as "the penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, without the

consent of the victim." Over ten women chose to describe experiences of rape,[4] and, in closely reading through these transcripts, we found that some of the interviewers did not provide opportunities for elaboration, while others did not allow the participants to tell their story. Thus, we eliminated interviews in which women were not given the space or opportunity to elaborate on their traumatic experiences (for example, if the interviewer repeatedly attempted to change the subject, or cut off the participant). At the end of this process, we determined that five narratives met our qualifications, which we then focused on for intensive qualitative analysis.

Selection of Literary Texts

The process of selecting literary narratives proved a more nebulous undertaking than the selection of personal narratives, as there is no singular dataset from which we could extract texts that met our criteria. Instead, I utilized online searches (Google, Amazon, and Goodreads, most notably) and spoke with the Emory subject librarian in English, Sarah Morris, to find nonfiction essays or memoirs written by Black women that engaged the subject matter of sexual violence (again, we adhered to the Department of Justice's legal definition of rape). We also restricted our search to contemporary pieces published within the last decade, to match the timeframe of the narratives collected through the Grady Trauma Project. Once we applied these criteria, we found five published literary texts that qualified for deeper qualitative analysis.[5]

Table 1, below, outlines all the Grady Trauma Project personal narratives and literary texts, as well as their attributions,[6] in the order that they appear in the body of this paper.

[4] Notably, this number does not represent the prevalence of sexual violence in this population; many more women reported sexual assault but did not choose to elaborate on these experiences during their interviews.
[5] Importantly, this study does not assume that these texts (or the personal narratives) represent all the possible accounts that fall within our selection criteria; these are simply the ones that we found through our selection process.
[6] Pseudonyms are used for the personal narratives.

Table 1

Narratives and Attributions

Personal Narratives from Grady Trauma	**Grady Trauma Participants**
Narrative 1	Rebecca
Narrative 2	Sarah
Narrative 3	Jane
Narrative 4	Lydia
Narrative 5	Maria
Published Literary Texts	**Authors**
Hunger	Roxane Gay
"Pitch Perfect" from *Not That Bad*	Sharisse Tracey
"Removing the Mask: AfroLez Femcentric Silence Breaker" from *Queering Sexual Violence*	Aishah Shahidah Simmons
"Fuck Off" from *Queering Sexual Violence*	Anonymous
"Innocence" from *Queering Sexual Violence*	Xiomara Castro

Immersive and Iterative Reading

This project began by considering the personal narratives. My adviser and I read each of the five narratives separately, working within the context of grounded theory in order to ensure that we were not artificially imposing our preconceived notions onto the texts. We then had lengthy

conversations about each narrative, lingering specifically on what was most salient to us about them. After we spoke about the individual narratives, I wrote detailed descriptions of each, synthesizing them and highlighting key points.

Following our preliminary reading of the personal narratives, we moved to the literary texts and conducted the same process, reading the narratives individually and discussing them together. When I wrote the descriptions for the literary texts, we began to notice themes and commonalities between each individual narrative, as well as between the two corpora. Through iterative reading and discussion, four themes emerged as common to one or both sets of narratives: silence and voice, embodied trauma, fragmentation, and particularized (as opposed to 'universal') trauma. We chose to focus on these four themes for the purposes of this project; in doing so, however, we recognize that there were innumerable alternative directions which this project could have taken with the wealth of material we were working with, and these alternative possibilities may prove fruitful for future avenues of research. Our final step, then, was to examine each of these narratives as they pertain to these four themes. Before turning to my analysis, I will touch on the theory and background for each of the themes and foreshadow the specific narratives that I subsequently analyze in more detail. Table 2, presented at the end of this section, outlines the four themes alongside a brief description of each.

Themes

Silence and Voice

The fraught dialectic between silence and voice—and, even more granularly, between *being silenced* and *staying silent*—constitutes a major theme throughout the narratives in this corpus. The former "being silenced" conceptualizes silence as imposed, disempowering, a loss of self, while the latter "staying silent" allows for the interpretation of silence as a form of power (Fivush, 2010). Perhaps the second is best captured by Maya Angelou, who, in her paradigm-shifting 1969 memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, describes her shock at the effect of her voice when her rapist was

murdered in response to her allegations. Faced with this newfound, unsettling power, Angelou chose to “stop talking,” as, “just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they’d curl up and die.”

The majority of the narratives considered in this thesis seem to fall into the former category of *being silenced*. If we are to take voice as the physical manifestation of the self, then silence by extension is the loss of the self—a type of death. And, indeed, many of the narratives equate forced silence to death: “A part of me was dead,” Roxane Gay writes in *Hunger* (2017). “A part of me was mute and would stay that way for many years.” This silencing typically co-occurs with betrayal: when these women disclosed their trauma to canonical guardians (parents, grandparents, etc.), they were either disbelieved, dismissed, or denied agency and protection by other means. This betrayal—silencing by the people who are normatively obligated to care for us—can often be just as or more profoundly psychologically scarring than other forms of silencing (Finkelhor, 1985).

Embodied Trauma

Much of the existing trauma literature operates on an abstract, mentalizing plane, but in material reality—and in traumatic experience most certainly—Cartesian duality does not pertain: that which affects the mind inevitably manifests in the body. As Brison wrote after her brutal assault, “trauma not only haunts the conscious 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” (2002).

This visceral expression of trauma takes on a plethora of forms. Eating disorders, for example, ranging from Gay’s compulsive overeating to the loss of appetite mentioned in some of the Grady narratives, are prevalent. Even more strikingly, many of our narratives drew parallels between bodily violation and a loss of self, a death. Sarah, from the Grady corpus, says that the aftermath of her rape made her feel like she “wasn’t even existing, wasn’t even a human anymore. Like I was dead, or maybe murdered.” This precise linguistic choice is eerily consistent: Brison, in

recounting her experience to others, had to repress the urge to say that, “I was murdered in France last summer” (2002).

Fragmentation

The category of fragmentation harkens back to the “shattered self” plot discussed in the Introduction. As Caruth outlines in her groundbreaking work, the nature of traumatic experiences is intrinsically unknowable; the event of trauma itself is conceived of as a void, a rupture, and this psychological disturbance yields a “disordering of time,” in which “past events threaten to take over the present” (1995).

Many of the narratives I analyzed seem to reveal and even reflect this fragmentation: some of the literary texts are written unconventionally, with irregular chapter lengths, lines, and sections (a few of which even morph into poetry), while others, both personal and literary, read as bizarre, almost surreal. Brison writes that forming a coherent narrative out of a traumatic experience is paradoxical, quasi-impossible, and acknowledges that, even in her intentional piece, long in the making, “the chronology of this period is fractured in the telling. Time may be linear (who knows?) but the aftermath was not” (2002).

Particularized Trauma

A significant portion of my motivation for this study stemmed from the desire to fill gaps in our current cultural narratives of sexual assault, to see if there were any specific experiences that had been erased from the ‘universal’ master narrative. To that end, I examined the narratives for whether and to what extent they placed their own traumatic experience in a particularized context of race, class, and/or culture.

Table 2

Themes and Descriptions

Theme	**Description**
Silence and Voice	The dialectic between silence (in terms of speaking out about experiences of trauma; can be self or other-imposed) and voice (volitionally sharing these experiences)
Embodied Trauma	The ways in which trauma manifests physically in the body
Fragmentation	The fracturing of the self (and, in turn, the disordering of memory and time) in the wake of trauma
Particularized Trauma	Identity-based traumatic experiences that are not conventionally "universal"

Results

Below, I present the results of this qualitative narrative analysis in the form of an individual profile for each participant—which includes a brief summary of the narrative—and qualitative analysis centered primarily on the four categories that emerged from the thematic analysis. I will first consider the personal narratives, and then move to the literary texts. Although this profile cannot capture all the nuances of each narrative, my aim here is two-pronged: first, to allow for a holistic, representative story of each participant's experience of trauma to emerge; second, to consider the ways in which each individual narrative either adheres to or deviates from the four major themes (silence and voice, embodied trauma, fragmentation, and particularized trauma).

Table 3, presented at the end of the section, summarizes whether each narrative demonstrated evidence of the various themes.

Qualitative Analysis of Personal Narratives

Participant 1: Rebecca

Summary of Narrative

Rebecca describes both childhood and adult sexual violence. As a four-year-old, she was sexually abused by another child; he forced her to perform oral sex on him. Her brother caught them, and Rebecca notes that he seemed "disgusted" with her.

Years later, at age twenty-two, Rebecca became engaged to a man with a criminal record (after knowing him for three days). His entanglements led to her being kidnapped and hidden in a truck. The kidnappers released her, but the incident made her feel unsafe alone in her home, so she asked people to check on her periodically. One of the men she called raped her. Following the rape, Rebecca lived with a friend for a short time, until a falling-out. She then attended the funeral of her friend's father, held in a town three or four hours away by car from Jacksonville, where she was living. After the funeral, Rebecca's family urged her not to return to Jacksonville, and even refused to give her money to take the bus there. Given this financial restriction, she called an acquaintance to drive her back. This man repeatedly raped her on the return journey, until Rebecca got out of the car and ran away. The repeated trauma "exhausted" Rebecca, and she called a friend to pick her up. The timeline blurs here, but, at some point, Rebecca was hospitalized because of the "effects it had on [her] body." She ends the story staying at her friend's house, where the impact of the violence caused her to panic when her friend's husband "chased" her around the house.

Descriptive Analysis

Rebecca's narrative in the original transcript is characterized by its idiosyncratic expressive style; the account itself comes across as somewhat absurdist or surrealist in the juxtaposition of its

heightened content and flat tonality—the extreme events are recounted in an emotionally blunted, almost matter-of-fact tone. While highly elaborative, Rebecca does not explicitly describe how she felt internally about any of her experiences. There is virtually no visceral or emotional content to this narrative; it reads almost as though Rebecca is sharing the story for entertainment value, thus minimizing the horror through jokes without lingering on disturbing details. There is discernible evidence of emotional blunting: when describing her childhood abuse, for example, Rebecca says, ""And he tells me if you want to be in my tent, you have to perform oral sex on me … So, um, I was like ok, whatever. So he takes me to this little patch of our apartments, and he made me give him head. So this continued until it became, like, abusive. Like, if you don't do that, I'll beat you up. So, that was that … I just stuck it in the back of my brain and just kept going."

This repressive coping strategy recurs throughout the narrative, but seems ineffective: Rebecca nevertheless ruminates over her trauma (for example, she says later on in the narrative, "I was so dumb, God knows, they should have just strangled me"). She also exhibits signs of deep-seated self-blame ("So, I felt that because I initially consented to it, I guess, that you know it was my fault, and I shouldn't have"), coupled with the deployment of the "bodily moral emotions"—those base sentiments that carry embodied moral connotations—of "shame" and "disgust" to refer to her own actions, as well as others' perceptions of her (Russell, 2013).

Theme Analysis

<u>Silence and Voice</u>

Rebecca's narrative is distinctive in its manifestations of silencing, as she is believed by her family, but experiences silencing in other ways: she does not receive any type of justice or validation of her experiences, either legally or emotionally. Her family appears to blame her—or, at least, to be apathetic when it comes to helping or caring for her—and nothing seems to happen to the men in question, despite their objectively heinous crimes. "I get questions about [it]*[sic]* all the time, so I'm kinda used to answer questions about it. It affects me, but I'm so used to talking about

it, you know," Rebecca says. "I called my dad … And he's like, well, both him and my brother were kinda like, well, you know, you got in a car with him so you knew something's gonna happen. So it was kinda like your fault … And I'm like, you know, y'all are so supportive. You know, it's remarkable that I'm still alive, and he doesn't even care."

Rebecca's widespread familial silencing of her adult experiences harkens back to the brother's earlier "disgust," and speaks more broadly to rape culture (for example, the pervasive notion that the abuse survivor must have done something to provoke the man). The notion that her brother was "disgusted" with her seems to deeply concern Rebecca. It seems to signify that Rebecca believes her brother considers her contaminated, or used; the master narrative about abuse survivors as "damaged goods" may apply here (Weiss, 2010).

It is worth noting that the family (and perhaps others) constantly ask Rebecca about these experiences, but do not seem to take any active steps towards helping her; in fact, Rebecca believes they remain indifferent that she is still alive after these incidents. Furthermore, the way her family blames her seems to reify her self-blame, cementing her belief that, yes, this was her fault—thus, Rebecca's self-blame corresponds to her family's reaction to her experiences.

Embodied Trauma

Rebecca alludes to the impact her experiences have had on her body, but she does not linger on this physical manifestation of trauma. She notes that, after the last assault, "I bathed like ten times a day because I wanted to, I thought that will make the disgust go away. Then I had to be hospitalized because of the effects it had on my body." This brief insight into the sustained effects of trauma reveals that Rebecca's repressive coping strategy is not effective; the trauma manifests physically, to the degree that Rebecca has to be hospitalized (although she does not elaborate on what sort of "effects" she suffered, a choice that aligns with her detached style of expression). The repetition of the word "disgust" here also merits note.

Fragmentation

Rebecca's narrative style reveals fragmentation not in linear progression, but in symptoms of dissociation. While the reader is, for the most part, able to follow her account, the juxtaposition of the heightened events of her story and her emotionally flat account of it reveals her detachment and blunting of the emotional content of her trauma. This contrast is epitomized by the following quote: "So he says no, we're gonna have sex. So, from Jupiter to Jacksonville, is, I'm gonna say, a 3-hour ride. It took 18 hours. Um, he stopped in every little pit stop, every little rest stop, every little place he could, and he raped me. And he stuck all kinds of objects in me, and he beat me, and he … it was just a mess. So finally when we get to Jacksonville, when we finally make the last stop in Jacksonville, I knew kinda where we were. So I just got out of the truck and ran."

Rebecca's emotive flattening ties into Brison's theorization of the impossibility of creating a coherent narrative arc—which necessarily denotes both a chronological and emotional progression—out of a traumatic, or "unspeakable," experience (2002). Brison's claim finds further credence in Rebecca's description of each act of violence, when she repeats the phrase, "So, he gets to do whatever."

Finally, when Rebecca speaks about her hospitalization and the aftermath of her trauma, the timeline becomes less structurally linear; we lose track of which events happened first.

Particularized Trauma

Rebecca does not exhibit any signs of trauma that is specific to her identity (in terms of race, gender, and class).

Participant 2: Sarah

Summary

Sarah recounts that, when she was sixteen years old, she was raped by her aunt's husband (she does not refer to him as her uncle). After the incident, she told her aunt and her aunt's sister, but her aunt humiliated her by telling her family that she is a mentally ill liar.

Descriptive Analysis

In contrast to Rebecca's narrative, Sarah initially provides nothing more than a bare-bones account of her assault. At the beginning of the interview, when asked about her trauma, Sarah simply says, "I was sleeping, and he came, and he slept, he raped me, and he left." However, as the interview progresses, she returns to this incident and fills in the details (importantly, not always at the request of the interviewer; in fact, even when the interviewer attempts to move on, Sarah comes back to the incident). By the end of the interview, she seems willing—and perhaps, given her family's earlier silencing, even eager—to tell her story.

Throughout the account, Sarah appears highly ruminative, fixating on certain actions and behaviors in an attempt to validate (perhaps to herself, perhaps to the interviewer/audience) that she did not provoke this violence. She refers to her virginity ("I never have slept with any men, I wasn't sexually active. He was the first person who did that to me"), and to the clothes that she was wearing ("I think I know I was wearing a panty suit, but then sometimes I don't remember I was not wearing it. But I know I had clothes on. I know I was wearing a T-shirt, I think, and … a cloth? But then I don't remember exactly if I was very covered up, or you know? And how did he come in and take off those, I had panties, you know?"). She appears to still, today, brood over the minutiae of this event.

<u>Silence and Voice</u>

Not only was Sarah indubitably silenced, but she was denounced in front of her family as a mentally ill liar. Sarah says, "My aunt lied to her children, because I didn't want to get in touch with her children anymore. And she lied to her children saying that I, I had a mental problem. She said that I was sick, and that's why I accuse her husband of raping me. That is a lie, is a lie. She said that I was lying, because her husband could never do that to me. So she, in a way, her children took me that I'm sick." Her family's distorted perception of her character still haunts her; she notes that, "Yeah, and they think that I have, that I'm completely sick, that I don't know what's going on." This

constitutes perhaps the clearest, rawest example in our corpus of silencing and betrayal by those who, canonically, serve as caregivers. It further illustrates that the silencing of trauma can be as traumatizing as the event itself.

Embodied Trauma

Sarah's narrative reveals two forms of embodied trauma. First, she notes the effects of her experiences on her body: "I couldn't eat for days, I lost a lot of weight, I didn't talk to anybody."

Potentially even more pertinently, however, Sarah conflates her body with her *self*; she describes herself as "dead" in the aftermath of trauma and bodily violation (which, as discussed previously, is a disturbingly common rhetorical expression). "I felt like dead. I felt like even killing myself," Sarah says. "I was helpless, not even in my right mind anymore. I thought I was dead." After the interviewer asks her when she felt this helplessness, Sarah responds, "During, after, and then even years after. Sometimes it gets bad, I feel like not even a human being, not even existing."

Here, clearly, violation of the body maps onto a fundamental death of the self. After she is raped, Sarah reports feeling subhuman. Specifically, she says that she felt like she was "dead, or … murdered." The two descriptors are, critically, linguistically distinct; the former is passive, a state of being, whereas the latter implicates a murderer, a perpetrator who performed this act of violence (this, I would assume, refers to her rapist, and the semantic difference here may play a role in absolving Sarah of self-blame).

Fragmentation

Sarah's emotional blunting constitutes a form of fragmentation, as does her long-standing rumination over events from her adolescence. This ties back to the disordered relationship between trauma and time, in which, as Caruth (1995) outlines, events of the past constantly threaten to overwhelm the present.

Particularized Trauma

Sarah does not exhibit any signs of trauma that is specific to her identity (in terms of race, gender, and class).

Participant 3: Jane

Summary

Jane describes both childhood and adult sexual violence. As a child (age not provided), Jane was sexually abused by her cousins when she stayed at her aunt's house. She told her aunt, who did not believe her. Jane subsequently refused to go back to that house.

Years later, in her thirties, Jane was raped by a stranger. She was hit on the head while waiting to take public transportation to pick up her son. She was abducted, raped, and beaten. She sought help through therapy, and now keeps a journal about the experience that she frequently refers to, and even shares with her children.

Descriptive Analysis

Jane's narrative is set apart by its unwavering, clear-cut sense of morality and right-and-wrong. She seems horrified not only by the ethical violation of the assault itself, but also by its implications: "It's incest," she says, and "That's no way to bring a kid into the world." This moral core guides her decisions, which exemplify high levels of agency; for example, after identifying the situation at her aunt's house as contradictory to her principles, Jane says, "I just stopped. I just stopped going. And I would never go back there." Even as a child, Jane recognized her aunt's house as a hostile environment for her (and, specifically, that her aunt was complicit in her abuse) and resolved to stop going there. She identifies as a religious woman who turns to prayer as a coping mechanism, so it may be possible that her moral center is grounded in her faith.

This account is also remarkably rich in psychological, emotional, and visceral detail. Jane describes her sexual assault as follows: "What I can remember is I remember a man stepping up on me, and then another one on this side. And the way they had my body, like, it was just unfair. Cause

they had this arm, hands tightened behind and tucked away, and this leg taken behind and … The whole time that the rape was going on, he wasn't talking, but he was constantly beating, beating, beating. And, um, at times I felt like I was gonna lose my breath. I felt like I was just gonna just pass right now, um, at times I just felt like it was the end." Notably, she provides details on how she felt during the event, an internal psychological elaborateness missing from other narratives. This reflective, detailed description may be a result of the therapy and journaling.

Jane is also uncommonly certain of the concrete facts of this experience (the time, date, location, etc.). For example, in recounting her assault, she says, "It was 15 August 1997, and it was some time, like I was on my way to my parents' house, because my son was staying with my mom and dad. And he was, his birthday was on the 16th, so it was only the 15th, the day before his birthday. And I was on my way over, and I was going, I was travelling by train." Unlike those of others, her narrative does not reveal a disordered relationship with time; Jane clearly grounds this event in the past and details the agentic steps she took to move beyond it.

Jane demonstrates agency not only in seeking help actively, but also in her insistence on sharing her story (particularly showing it to her daughter, a gesture that seems to reveal that she feels her daughter needs to know these harsh truths about the world). The act of telling her story seems paramount in her healing process.

Theme Analysis

Silence and Voice

Much like the other narratives, Jane was silenced as a child, in that her aunt dismissed her allegations. Jane says, "I would go and try to tell them up, my aunt didn't want to hear it. And she didn't want to believe it. And this is like, she hold it, you're just making it up."

Jane's exercise of agency, however, serves as her "voice." She takes concrete steps to leave her toxic situation as a child, as well as to seek out counseling and therapy following her sexual

assault. Telling her story is another form of voice, and Jane ensures that her experience is communicated, not only to her group at therapy, but to her children.

Embodied Trauma

The most salient instance of embodied trauma in this narrative is when Jane, much like Sarah, correlates her body with her *self*. In describing her sexual assault, Jane repeats the phrase, "You took me," multiple times. Notably, the euphemism "you took me" to describe a bodily violation suggests that the body *is* the self, a one-to-one mapping.

Fragmentation

Strikingly, Jane's narrative does not display instances of fragmentation. Instead, her sense of self and linear time seems stable; the traumatic events she recounts remain securely in the past, while she progresses forward in her convalescence journey through therapy, counseling, journaling, and sharing her story.

Particularized Trauma

Jane does not exhibit any signs of trauma that is specific to her identity (in terms of race, gender, and class).

Participant 4: Lydia

Summary

Lydia describes both childhood and adult sexual abuse (the narrative also references murders and domestic violence; while we are not examining the full transcript critically, the background of her home environment is useful in constructing her profile). As a child, Lydia's mother's boyfriend attempted to molest her, but she ran away. Later, as an adult, her ex-husband raped her twice (at least). She describes one such incident when she was pregnant, and one other that is not as coherent.

Descriptive Analysis

While Lydia's narrative is incredibly elaborative, it also borders on incoherent in places. In terms of linear progression and narrative structure, the account does not quite hang together; it moves back and forth in time and, fundamentally, talks *around* trauma. She first describes her rape as follows: "I was pregnant. And, um, my baby was, um, dead, on the inside. And um, we went through that whole traumatic incident and … he was cheating … And, um, I saw them kiss. And I told them, I said, "I saw you kiss her." He was like, "You saw me kiss her? You sure you saw me kiss her?" I was like, "Ok, yeah. What'd you want me do.' So, he started pushing on me, and pushing, and then, took my arm, put it behind my back … and wanted to have sex. And I was like, no. He was like, "You don't tell me no." So, he took it. And, he slapped me. And he told me, "You don't, you don't own anything. You have to remember that. I own all of you."" The relative ambiguity here is such that, the first time that my adviser and I read this transcript, we were not certain whether Lydia was describing an assault or not.

Theme Analysis

<u>Silence and Voice</u>

While Lydia's narrative is challenging to parse, it is clear that she was actively and potentially violently silenced by her ex-husband. She describes the incident of attempting to disclose the abuse to her mother as follows: "I kept telling my mom that he kept coming over every morning, and she wouldn't do anything about it. She didn't say nothing. Um, he beat me up every time I told her. Then he made me go to school because he was supposed to walk somebody, um, across the, um, yard, in the coronation(?). And he couldn't walk on this, a parent had caught him. So he had to call me that last day, that Friday, and, um, I had to tell them that he was out because he was sick. And they believed me."

This passage is convoluted to read; the timeline is unclear, as are the references to her husband, but this event takes place before they married, while she was in school. However, it seems evident that Lydia attempted to confide in her mother, but no one acted to protect her. In fact, her

ex-husband beat her whenever she tried to talk to her mother. This raises the possibility that Lydia's past violent silencing contributes to her current terseness in recounting this story. The last line, "And they believed me," ostensibly refers to someone believing that her ex-husband was sick when he was not, but it sounds almost sardonic, as though she were commenting on the fact that, oh, *that*, they believe.

Embodied Trauma

Lydia does not appear to exhibit signs of embodied trauma, although this passage suggests that she did endure some: "I was on an air tank. An oxygen tank. And the doctor has said, had told him, no strenuous things for me. No sex … until I can make sure that her lungs are not going to collapse. So I felt like at that time he had lost a whole lot of respect for me, he really wanted me dead. Because the doctor had already told him, "She can't have sex. She can't do anything." Because my lungs had collapsed because it was so hot up there, and he changed the [oxygen tank] filter. And he knew not to change the filter, while I was there at the house. And he changed it anyway … I tried to forgive and forget so that, um, I can move on."

Lydia's conjecture that her ex-husband lost respect for her because she could not have sex suggests she believes her worth is tied up in her sexual utility. Moreover, her husband actively tried to harm (if not kill) her by removing her filter and forcing himself on her when the doctor had warned him against doing so. Even more, when the interviewer explicitly asks her what the worst incident of her life was, Lydia responds, "Meeting my ex-husband," and then, "Him raping me." Clearly, the experience had deep, embodied effects, but given that she does not elaborate on them specifically, we cannot include such effects in this analysis.

Fragmentation

Lydia's narrative weaves back and forth in time, rendering the task of ordering a chronological timeline of her account somewhat difficult—this disordering is characteristic of trauma in the aftermath of sexual violence (Caruth, 1995).

Particularized Trauma

Lydia does not exhibit any signs of trauma that is specific to her identity (in terms of race, gender, and class).

Participant 5: Maria

Summary

Maria recounts a single instance of sexual violence: being raped at the age of sixteen by a person she knew from school, in her grandparents' home. After the rape, she called 911 and pressed charges against the rapist, who received probation. (Notably, while we are not examining the rest of the narrative in depth, it does include an incident of domestic violence that culminates in Maria placing a restraining order on her partner, just as she did when she was sixteen.)

Descriptive Analysis

Maria's narrative style is stringently reticent, despite the interviewer's multiple attempts to elicit more details from her. The initial exchange between the two, going over the details of the assault, goes as follows:

M: "I was 16. Cause I was raped at 16."

I: "Can you tell me a little about that?"

M: "I was staying with my grandparents at the time. And me being stupid I went off with him. I thought we were just going to talk, but we didn't end up talking."

I: "Who was this person?"

M: "One of my friends from school."

I: "So you came home with one of your friends from school?"

M: "Mhm."

I: "He was 17?"

M: "Mhm."

I: "Tell me what happened."

M: "He jumped on top of me and ripped off my clothes."

I: "Where were you?"

M: "I was at my grandparents' house and at the time they weren't home."

I: "What happened next?"

M: "After he got through, I called 911. And he ran off."

I: "What happened?"

M: "Then they came and I told them, you know, told them what happened and they took my clothes and everything for evidence. And then they found him and I did press charges."

I: "Then what happened?"

M: "He got probation and I put a restraining order against him."

Maria's flat affect comes across as detached and emotionally blunted, even indicative of dissociative symptoms. Like many of the other narratives, hers portrays the sexual assault in euphemistic terms ("after he got through"). Even in this sparse description, there is clear evidence of self-blame ("me being stupid"). Much like Rebecca, Maria utilizes an explicitly repressive coping strategy; when asked about how she dealt with her trauma, she says, "I just put it in the back of my head after that, cause my family wasn't trying to get me to apply to therapy or anything, so I was like, just forget it, just move on." Even now, years later, she says that, "When it bothers me, I try not to think about it."

Theme Analysis

Silence and Voice

Importantly, while Maria was believed (both by her family and the legal system), she lacked other forms of aid, particularly emotional support. "I just didn't have guidance to tell me that everything was going to be alright," she says. "I wish I had that guidance from somebody." Although

she was not silenced in the literal sense—she told her story, was believed, and, superficially, received justice—she still feels bereft. Her legal needs were met; her emotional needs were not.

Embodied Trauma

Maria notes that, in the aftermath of her assault, "Emotionally, I started going downhill. I started skipping school, didn't care." Even more, she underscores feeling "fearful," a sentiment that lingered "about three to four months" after the incident. These two symptoms provide clear evidence of the physical manifestation of trauma in Maria's narrative, yet she does not elaborate on how this incident impacted her in a visceral sense.

Fragmentation

Like Jane's, Maria's narrative contains a clear linear arc and does not demonstrate evidence of temporal or identity fragmentation.

Particularized Trauma

Maria does not exhibit any signs of trauma that is specific to her identity (in terms of race, gender, and class).

Qualitative Analysis of Literary Texts

Text 1: *Hunger* by Roxane Gay

Summary of Narrative

This book, as Gay puts it, is a memoir of her body—its making, its necessity, and its place in a world not built for "unruly" bodies (2017, 4).[7] Gay's backstory is critical to our project: at the age of twelve, she survived a gang rape, and writes that she overate and gained weight (she is now diagnosed as "super morbidly obese") as a coping mechanism (2). In this analysis, I only consider the excerpts of the text that actively grapple with sexual violence and/or its aftermath.

Descriptive Analysis

[7] I will include page numbers when quoting from the literary texts, although this deviates from APA style (which I use throughout this paper), for ease of reference.

As the only book-length text in our corpus, Gay's text offers a variety of entry points for analysis. The tone, firstly, is cerebral; Gay devotes entire chapters to providing statistics and other forms of evidence on the disturbing ways in which our society treats bodies of size. Unlike the personal essays below, this text does not incorporate much scene setting or carnal details. It reads like a highly intellectualized piece of nonfiction writing, acknowledging trauma without sinking into the meat of it. There is no overarching narrative arc like those typical to many memoirs. Rather, Gay begins in the present and dips into the past. The thread that binds the text together is, fundamentally, her body—its history and the ways in which it limits the way she navigates the world. To that end, the essay is framed at a meta-level; consider, for example, Gay's statement that, "I began eating to change my body… I knew I wouldn't be able to endure another such violation, and so I ate because I thought that if my body became repulsive, I could keep men away" (4).

The intentionality of this response to a situation in which she was stripped of autonomy places agency back into Gay's hands. Rationalizing her disordered eating as a form of protection is a quasi-feminist, empowering narrative of survival and overcoming obstacles. Even more, given that coping mechanisms are rarely deliberately employed in the moment (rather, they manifest as ways of grappling with what is otherwise too difficult to process), it is likely that Gay's agency is applied in hindsight. She attributes her weight gain to her conscious attempt to protect herself, thus reframing her subjectivity. Rather than a victim of abuse, she positions herself as a sovereign being capable of exercising free will. This meta-commentary ties neatly into Gay's broader social critique of rape culture: "He said / she said is why so many victims (or survivors, if you prefer that terminology) don't come forward. All too often, what 'he said' matters more, so we just swallow the truth" (11).

Overall, Gay presents this text as a somewhat didactic account of obesity as a direct result of trauma. This has much to do with authorial intent; Gay clearly wrote this essay with the motivation of conveying a specific message about inhabiting an "unruly" body in a society not built for it (4).

Other aspects of the narrative therefore necessarily recede into the background. It is worth noting, however, that the only truly visceral scene Gay includes is the scene of the assault, in which she describes sensory and emotional details with a level of precision she does not strive for anywhere else in the book. "Christopher pushed me down in front of this laughing friends, so many bodies larger than mine," she writes. "I was so scared and embarrassed and confused ... I wasn't a girl to them. I was a thing, flesh and girl bones with which they could amuse themselves" (11). This deliberate stylistic choice is jarring for the reader, breaking the rhythm of expository nonfiction in order to induce some sort of disruption or disorientation in the reading process, echoing the rupture of trauma.

Theme Analysis

<u>Silence and Voice</u>

Gay's silence was self-imposed and devastating; in the aftermath of her assault, she writes that, "I was broken. I did not know how to put myself back together. A part of me was dead. A part of me was mute and would stay that way for many years" (8). This correlation between death and silence appears throughout the text, reifying the theoretical construct of voice as a physical manifestation of self—and thus, syllogistically, positing silence as a metaphysical death of the self.

Importantly, however, Gay was not explicitly silenced, but chose to stay silent, a decision that she describes as harrowing: "Even now, I feel guilt not only for what happened, but for how I handled the after, for my silence, for my eating and what became of my body" (11). The former *silencing* is oppressive, while the latter *staying silent*—although still harmful, in Gay's case—can be construed as individual and almost agentic (Fivush, 2010). In some ways, Gay's silence continues today, as she chooses not to reveal the name of her attacker, instead dubbing him "Christopher," a pseudonym.

However, in other, important ways, Gay underscores her reclamation of voice. The educational system (both formal and informal) has endowed her with a "more expansive

vocabulary" for her trauma: "Thanks to books and therapy and my new friends online, I knew ever more clearly that there was a thing called rape. I knew that when a woman said no, men were supposed to listen and stop what they were doing. I knew that it wasn't my fault that I had been raped," she writes (24). This language empowered her to break her silence: years later, she wrote about her assault and spoke to her parents about it. "My father told me I deserved justice. He told me he would have gotten justice for me, and I went inside myself as I all too often do," she writes. "My family understands me more now, I think, and that's good. I want them to understand me. I want to be understood" (83). This tension between the desire for understanding and the difficulty in breaking her silence is apparent throughout the text, but ultimately Gay writes that, "I don't know how to talk about rape and sexual violence when it comes to my own story. It is easier to say, 'Something terrible happened' … I wish I could leave it at that because as a writer who is also a woman, I don't want to be defined by the worst thing that has happened to me … At the same time, I don't want to be silent … If I must share my story, I want to do so on my terms" (11).

Embodied Trauma

This text translates the theoretical construct of embodied trauma to lived experience in the most literal sense: *Hunger* is, at its core, a memoir of Gay's body. An "unruly" body, it is the result of and testament to trauma (4). Gay's text is fraught with the paradoxes produced by inhabiting her body in the world, a body that "shamed [her] but one that made [her] feel safe," that straddles the line between invisibility and hypervisibility (6). Ultimately, in a society that teaches women "that we should be slender and small. We should not take up space. We should be seen and not heard. And if we are seen, we should be pleasing to men, acceptable to society," Gay designates the act of taking up space in a marked body as radical.

Singularly, Gay—who is clearly conversant in trauma theory, considering her academic background and references to such foundational concepts as the "shattered self"—both plays into and plays with the discursive notion of the body as the "scene of a crime" (Brison, 2002). She writes,

"I don't want to think of my body as a crime scene. I don't want to think of my body as something gone horribly wrong … Is my body a crime scene when I already know I am the perpetrator? Or should I see myself as the victim of the crime that took place in my body?" For Gay, there remains another layer to the conventional paradigm: the crime, if defined by the moral "wrong" committed against the body, is not just the rape, but Gay's own treatment of her body. She turns this classic notion on its head, implicating herself in the crime. Here, self-blame and some of the established bodily moral emotions—shame, disgust—interplay with embodied trauma (Russell, 2013).

However, much as Gay reclaims her voice by writing her story, she reclaims her body through her tattoos. "With my tattoos, I get to say, these are choices I make for my body, with full-throated consent," she writes. "This is how I mark myself. This is how I take my body back" (53). The tattoos, as Gay explicitly states, represent a form of reclaiming bodily autonomy. Essentially, she repeats the traumatic experience on her own terms: someone is causing pain to her body, but this time, the "transgression" is utterly her choice. Her body is a product of trauma, yes, but also of her choice and making. Even more, willfully and conspicuously marking an already-marked body is a political statement, one that aggravates the inherent tension between invisibility and hypervisibility.

Fragmentation

Gay seems to respond to Caruth's theorization of disordered time in her coalescing of nonlinear temporality and embodied trauma. "So many years after being raped, I tell myself what happened is 'in the past.' This is only partly true," she writes. "In too many ways, the past is still with me. The past is written on my body. I carry it every single day. The past sometimes feels like it might kill me. It is a very heavy burden" (11). The specific language here bears resonances with Caruth's, as the past "threatens to overwhelm the present" in a targeted, visceral sense (1996). Gay devotes a significant portion of the text to dissecting this disrupted relationship with time, even mourning the person she might have been had she not endured this trauma—her "lost possible

self," in a sense (Carey, 2008). "I often wonder who I would have been if this terrible thing had not happened to me, if I hadn't spent so much of my life hungering so much. I wonder what Other Roxane's life would be like, and when I imagine this woman who somehow made it to adulthood unscarred, she is everything I am not," Gay writes. "She is thin and attractive, popular, successful, married with a child or two … Her life isn't perfect, but she is at peace. She is at ease" (48).

Gay does not merely discuss this fragmentation at a meta level, but reproduces it in the structure of the narrative itself: the book is fractured, with some chapters over ten pages long and others (such as chapter five) just a paragraph—this narrative presentation mirrors the "shatter," the scatter, of trauma. Furthermore, Gay actively engages with the construct of the "shattered self," writing that, "What you need to know is that my life is split in two, cleaved not so neatly. There is the before and the after. Before I gained weight. After I gained weight. Before I was raped. After I was raped" (5). While most of the narrative is written from the perspective of the "after," a single incident stands out as written in the voice of the "before": the scene of the assault itself, replete with the carnal details discussed above. This echoes the concept of flashbulb memories in trauma theory, in which memories of traumatic incidents remain fresh and vivid even years later, as though they were, as Christine Blasey Ford described, "indelible in the hippocampus" (2018).

Particularized Trauma

Much of Gay's narrative reveals identity-based trauma, from her size to her race to her sexuality. Gay's initial silence in the aftermath of her assault was prompted by her guilt over failing to adhere to her parents' expectations, as a "Haitian daughter is a good girl" (17). Her immigrant and racial identities informed the ways in which she grappled with her trauma, which then produced two other salient identities: those related to her size and her sexuality (she implies that she identifies as queer, and references dating both men and women). While we have considered the former at length, Gay does not expound upon the latter. Instead, she writes, "Sometimes, I get so angry when I think about how my sexuality has been shaped," and leaves the matter there.

Strikingly, she does not gender her current partner, instead opting for the gender-neutral epithet "my person" (32). This returns to the identity ambiguity she alludes to as a result of her trauma, an ambiguity that filters into both her racial and sexual identities, illustrating the extent to which fragmentation troubles the project of constructing a coherent self.

Text 2: "Picture Perfect," by Sharisse Tracey (from *Not That Bad*)

Summary of Narrative

Tracey recounts her relationship with her father, who raped her at age thirteen under the guise of taking photographs of her. She tells her mother about the rape, and her mother believes her; instead of taking action to protect her child, however, she seeks counsel from community members, who advise her to attempt to reconcile the family through a trip to an amusement park. At age sixteen, Tracey's father approaches her again, and Tracey leaves home. After a fall-out with the friend she was living with, Tracey moves back in, but writes letters to family and friends, asking for their help. She receives no responses. The timeline then cuts to Tracey at nineteen, when her father is on his deathbed. Under pressure from her mother and new husband, she says she forgives her father.

Descriptive Analysis

Tracey's writing style is highly literary, deploying conventional rhetorical strategies, including ample foreshadowing, split temporalities, and heightened scenes (some that read as specifically surreal). In this way, it adheres to the creative mandate of 'show, don't tell,' and thus differs from other narratives in our corpus. The foreshadowing is especially noteworthy; the essay opens with "Daddy moved us out to California when I was five. Mommy didn't like it there" (1). Already, the father figure is centered, and it becomes clear that the desires of the rest of the family are subordinate to his. In addition, the naming of the parents as "Daddy" and "Mommy" anchors the emotional center from the perspective of a child. Soon after, Tracey writes, "My mother didn't seem

to mind about the pictures—or if she did, I didn't know. I never heard them arguing about his photography or the women in the shots" (1). This gesture towards her mother's complicity forms the foundation for the essay. It also raises the question of how to foreshadow something in retrospect, something Tracey herself did not see coming at the time, a question that converses with the fracturing of self, identity, and linear temporality in the aftermath of trauma. Similarly, this ambivalence appears in the way Tracey describes her father throughout the essay: the epithets move from "Daddy" to "your husband" to "my father" to "my rapist" and, eventually, back to "Daddy"—vacillation that speaks to the difficulty in conceptualizing and constructing a relational self in the wake of trauma (Brison, 2002).

Theme Analysis

<u>Silence and Voice</u>

"Pitch Perfect" provides the quintessential example of the convergence of silencing and betrayal: while Tracey was believed—not only by her family, but the broader community—she was actively and vehemently prohibited from sharing her story or seeking justice. She told her mother about the rape a week after the incident, upon which her mother "looked at me hard and then she hugged me even harder … So after Daddy finally confessed, I assumed Mommy would throw him out … But she didn't make him leave ... I was so filled with rage; I couldn't understand her pain and I didn't understand her choices. How could she, after all of this, love us both equally, maybe even love him a little more than she did me?" (5). The mother's reaction is difficult to grapple with here; it is not that she disbelieves Tracey, like many of the other mother figures have in our narratives. Rather, she believes her wholeheartedly, but does nothing to help, support, or protect her. This reaction induces confusion in us, just as it does in Tracey.

Following her mother's tepid, puzzling reaction, Tracey moves out and seeks support from her extended family and community through penning a series of letters. "After a month passed, it was clear that no one was going to write me back," she writes. "The general consensus boiled down

to one dismissive phrase that unified them all: *That's y'all business*" (9). This represents a wave of mass silencing, on a community-wide scale. While Tracey is agentic, actively trying to tell her story, she is forcibly silenced at every turn, always by people who should serve as canonical caretakers (most saliently, her mother). Poignantly, the refrain "that's y'all business" lays bare the specific burden of upholding the reputation of the Black community in a world that threatens it.

Embodied Trauma

Tracey does not explicitly reference physical manifestations of trauma in this essay. While there are allusions to the possibility—for example, she writes, "I still carry the weight of being a rape survivor," and when her father makes moves to assault her again when she is sixteen, she runs to the kitchen to grab a knife—we must be careful not to overread these brief descriptions. Hence, we will assume Tracey's narrative does not fulfill this category.

Fragmentation

In the most literal sense, Tracey's narrative features a "shattered self": as her father is the only one who calls her Tracey, in the aftermath of her assault, she experiences a split between the personas of "Tracey" and "Sharisse." "Tracey was fine with whatever they said," Tracey writes. "Sharisse was *shattered*, she wanted to yell and refuse to go and never forgive, but Tracey would say whatever the therapist wanted if they would all leave her and Sharisse alone" (7). This dissociation, a signature symptom of trauma with a long history of co-occurring with childhood sexual abuse, appears to serve as both a coping strategy and an intentional move to distance herself from her father, by eschewing the name he bestowed on her in response to his disappointment that she was not born a boy. This also raises the darker question of how her father handled the disappointment of Tracey's biological gender: as a daughter, Tracey's worth seemed to be confined to sexual utility, a broader commentary on the societal valuation of women.

Much like Gay, Tracey reflects and refracts this fragmentation in the text itself. For example, in the narrative sequence, the scene of the sexual assault is followed by the scene in the therapist's

office, which is then succeeded by a flashback to the sexual assault, again. Rhetorically speaking, the narrative eschews chronological time in favor of what Caruth would dub "trauma time," a literary strategy that emulates flashbacks.

Tangentially (but interestingly), this essay differs in a few minor details from Tracey's other essays on the same topic, in *Ebony* magazine and other publications—deviations that illuminate the fractured nature of memory. For instance, the shower scene differs in the 2016 piece in *Ebony*: in "Picture Perfect," Tracey is about to get into the shower when her father approaches her, while in *Ebony*, Tracey has just gotten out of the shower. The nature of flashbulb memories, however, is such that the most salient memories remain clear, while others fade into the background. It is almost as though Tracey reconstructed the scene around the most vivid parts, which endure, ingrained in her memory.

Particularized Trauma

Tracey's essay is explicitly and necessarily engaged in the project of the particular: from the start to the end of the text, she references the "Black moral majority" as burdening her with the psychological weight of upholding the image of the perfect Black family—and thus, the onus of countering the stereotype of the broken Black family (12). The essay concludes with the following words: "I carry the weight handed to me by the Black moral majority, who ignored my father's crimes and who knows how many other men's, who tried to buy off a terrified thirteen-year-old with a one-day trip to an amusement park. They were so desperate to project the image of the respectable, righteous, picture-perfect Black Family to the world that they were willing to let the women and girls in those pictures suffer" (12).

Text 3: "Removing the Mask: AfroLez Femcentric Silence Breaker" by Aishah Shahidah Simmons (from *Queering Sexual Violence*)

Summary of Narrative

Simmons begins her essay by delineating her identities as a Black, feminist, lesbian survivor of rape and incest. She then delves into her background in activism and her documentary cinema, and eventually reveals that she was molested by her grandfather as a child. She tells her parents, who believe her but do not help her, and instead encourage her to spend time with her grandfather. Simmons is later raped as an adult. The bulk of the essay is given over to rumination: Simmons remains ambivalent over her family's response to her childhood molestation, and, ultimately, chooses not to demonize them. Instead, she strives to acknowledge their complicity while allowing for nuance in their characters.

Descriptive Analysis

This essay is markedly different from others in our corpus, in that its tone is academic, removed, and heavily informed by the author's activist inclinations; it reads more like a social justice manifesto than a personal essay. Simmons reveals few details regarding her emotional, physical, or mental response to trauma, and the essay contains no true narrative arc (like Gay's, but unlike almost all the other narratives, including those collected through the Grady Trauma Project). This advocacy bent is established by her opening lines: "I am a Black feminist lesbian cultural worker who is a survivor of incest and rape … This is my life's work" (1). This tonality—blunt, detached, and identity oriented—is sustained throughout the essay. Fundamentally, this piece foregrounds intersectional identities—not just Simmons's personal account, but the untold stories of the Black queer community more generally.

Considering these factors together, Simmons's motivation behind penning this essay appears politically oriented. This is a text clearly and deliberately geared towards activism and social justice, towards elevating a broader societal narrative over a personal story. Simmons constantly quotes and references authors, activists, and scholars, from Audre Lorde to Toni Cade Bambara, perhaps to situate herself in the same league of advocacy. She appears to position herself not as a person, but as a movement. The potential motivation behind this authorial choice raises a

question we have long been interested in: why are these women telling these stories? Why now, and why in this way?

Theme Analysis

Silence and Voice

Simmons's essay centers this dialectic in every way, starting with the title: "Removing the Mask: AfroLez Femcentric Silence Breaker," which signals both the external imposition of silence, and the agency and liberation that breaking that silence entails (interestingly, "silence breaker" is the title attributed to the founders of the #MeToo movement). The discourse of silence and voice filters through this essay, as Simmons writes that, "It has been an unspeakable painful five-year journey to write this essay. I am afraid. A huge part of my fear is the knowledge that breaking my incest silence will expose the egregious contradictions of my divorced parents' inaction." Although Simmons confided in her parents following her molestation, they left her with her attacker numerous times. Their belief but relentless silencing bears curious resonances with many of the narratives under discussion. Hence, Simmons donned the eponymous "mask": "For the sake of my own survival, I learned how to wear the mask because I spent so much time with my paternal grandparents" (4). The language of the "mask" is interesting, because the masking of the self in silence correlates silence to something sinister, and breaking that silence ("unmasking") to freedom; this teleological progression may serve as the thesis of her essay. Once Simmons breaks her silence, her parents follow her lead; her mother later writes to her in an email that she was "complicit" in what happened to her daughter (9).

Significantly, at multiple points in the essay, Simmons links silence to death, and voice to liberation, an explicit and meta take on a dialectic we have only discussed in theory. Consider, for instance, the following statement: "My being out as a lesbian and as a survivor of incest and rape is not solely political. It is literally and metaphorically about my survival as the entity known as

Aishah Shahidah Simmons in this lifetime" (2). This claim is fascinating, because it reifies and lends credence to the argument that silence equates to death.

Embodied Trauma

Only one sentence in Simmons's essay leads me to conclude that this text does reveal evidence of embodied trauma; however, it is quite a salient one: "I've been wearing a mask to protect my parents who did not protect me as a child nor as an adult," Simmons writes. "I did it for so long that I only very recently realized that it has permeated and impacted every single component of my life in some detrimental ways." The phrase "every single component" of her life implicates (and, indeed, necessitates) the physical.

Fragmentation

Simmons's essay does not reveal evidence of fragmentation.

Particularized Trauma

This category, the most prominent by far, may have in part motivated Simmons to publish this piece. She opens the text by stressing her intersecting identities and marginalizations, dedicating considerable space to explicating the ways in which they inflect her trauma. Intersectionality underpins the ways in which Simmons's racial, gender, sexual identities impact and are impacted by her trauma. For example, she expresses the need to defend her sexual orientation: "Too often, people assume I am a lesbian because I was sexually violated as a child and a young woman. Wrong. I am not a lesbian because I was molested and raped. I am a lesbian because I'm emotionally/physically/sexually attracted to and love women" (2). Simmons is acutely aware of the cultural myth that female childhood abuse survivors become lesbians because of their trauma. Here, she intently works to acknowledge and denounce that myth (in stark contrast to Gay, who writes that she feels anger over to how her sexuality was formed). Simmons's essay, much like Tracey's, is underwritten by the burden of representing her family and community (or communities) to the world.

Text 4: "Fuck Off" by Anonymous (from *Queering Sexual Violence*)

Summary of Narrative

This anonymous essay begins with a graphic assault scene, then circles back in time to provide details about the author's identity struggles growing up as a Black, queer woman. This crisis led her to an abusive relationship with the man who would assault her.

Descriptive Analysis

This narrative is distinctive for a number of reasons, the first (and most glaring) being the author's choice to remain anonymous. While I will speak more about the implications of this decision in the thematic analysis on silence, it merits note that we often tend to dismiss the credibility of anonymous sources. This essay and others like it, however, raise the possibility that anonymous publishing may create a psychologically safer space conducive to augmented honesty, as authors have no consequences to face (Bustillos, 2017). The anonymity of this piece finds a clear foil in Simmons's essay, which centers on bolstering her own credibility as an activist. It seems as though this author's intent in her essay is simply to share her story in the public sphere, thus contributing towards a shift in a broader cultural narrative.

Even more, we cannot dismiss this essay's tone and provocative title. The piece opens with an explicit, violent scene: "You want to be a lesbian, I'll fuck you like one." That was what I heard as my pants were ripped open, his fist forced inside me" (14). This opening—graphic, perturbing, ostensibly designed to shock—eschews the ways in which most of the other narratives in our corpus talk around sexual violence, typically veiling it in euphemistic language (for example, employing the phrase, "He took me"). This oblique, somewhat evasive reframing represents a rhetorical choice that echoes the prescriptivist cultural mandate that "Good girls don't talk about sex." Perhaps anonymity proffers a certain form of liberation here, in creating space for this author

to reject these social norms. In this way, the opening lines match the blunt title of "Fuck Off," which seems to be aimed not only at a specific person, but also at readers and society at large.

Theme Analysis

Silence and Voice

The anonymity of this essay is arresting, as it personifies the discursive construct of 'silence.' It is 'silence' rendered literal, in a sense, yet it creates the platform for a certain kind of sovereignty, as discussed above. Perhaps, then, it is more apt to call this an agentic choice, a decision to *stay silent*—as opposed to *being silenced*—that opens up new possibilities for empowerment (Fivush, 2010).

While this rhetorical choice troubles our theoretical binaries in interesting ways, it remains clear that this author experienced silencing in addition to choosing to stay silent. "Not only did he violate me on a personal level, he invaded my territory and space in both professional and personal relationships," she writes. "Because everyone knew, I was unable to write my own story" (16). This passage alludes to why the author may have chosen to remain anonymous: her "professional and personal" life has already been sabotaged by this experience, and she appears fearful of damaging it further. Fundamentally, her attacker stripped her of her voice, her ability to "write [her] own story." This line demonstrates the author's keen awareness of the established language of sexual violence, suggesting she has been to therapy, or learned these terms from the infiltration of master narratives into the cultural psyche.

However, much like Gay, for this author, the act of writing her essay represents a reclamation of voice. "Even though he has left me with what is seen as a shameful experience, I have the opportunity to own it and remove the blame from myself," she concludes (16). Yet again, we see the correlation between sexual violence, silence, and self-blame.

Embodied Trauma

The clearest indication of embodied trauma stems from the following lines: "He charmed his way into my life and clouded my judgment and suddenly, I was less than human" (15). Immediately, it becomes clear that the wording here is jarringly similar to other narratives that equate sexual violence with death: "I was less than human" (consider Sarah's musing that she felt "like not even a human being, not even existing.") Here, our anonymous author seems to be referring to the fact that her rapist thought of her as less than human, and that she is "ashamed" that she accepted and allowed this treatment. This disturbing, consistent language (across both the personal narratives and the literary texts) almost implies that the loss of bodily autonomy constitutes a fundamental loss of self; when a woman experiences sexual violence, she becomes subhuman.

In conjunction with this, the author adheres to the language of "bodily moral emotions"—shame and disgust, predominantly—to describe her emotional and physical state (Russell, 2013). "I still felt ashamed," she writes. "So ashamed that I allowed myself to be his doormat." Notably, however, she concludes the essay with the statement above, describing that reclaiming her story has allowed her to "remove the blame from [herself]" (16). The work of reframing the narrative becomes a reconstitutive act of recovery, both of self (voice) and body.

Fragmentation

Like other essays, this piece reveals the disordering of time as a product of trauma in the text itself—this relationship is established as early as the first two lines: "You want to be a lesbian, I'll fuck you like one." That was what I heard as my pants were ripped open, his fist forced inside me. All I could think was, 'Why did I put myself through this?' [line break] Who am I? How do people see me?" (14). The juxtaposition between the two lines is jarring, disorienting. Positioned where a flashback would be in a screenplay, it mirrors the ways in which the past continues to overtake the author's present.

Particularized Trauma

The author's intersectional marginalizations both led to and inflected her experience of trauma. She writes, on contending with her identity as a lesbian woman, "Laying awake at night, I struggled: why is this so important? Is this something that I need? I mean, I am a black woman. Do I need to be seen as a lesbian too? … There were so many privileges I didn't want to give up" (14). The tangled marginalities of Blackness and queerness produced the identity ambiguity that directly led to the author's exploitation by the man who would rape her, a man who simultaneously fetishized and wished to conquer her identity as a lesbian. "He wanted to be the guy that was able to satisfy a woman who clearly enjoyed fucking women," she writes (15).

Text 5: "Innocence" by Xiomara Castro (from *Queering Sexual Violence*)

Summary of Narrative

It is difficult to synthesize this essay, as it incorporates no clear narrative arc and is written in a lyrical, quasi-poetic style. However, we glean that Castro was sexually abused by her father, brother, and various community members as a child. She also tells the story of her mother, who was raped and physically abused by her husband.

Descriptive Analysis

It would be reductive to discuss this essay without spotlightling the way it is composed: in prose so lyrical, it reads almost as poetry. Indeed, in certain passages, it is even structured as a poem, with line breaks and rhymes. In a way, it mirrors the fractured nature of memory and seems to embrace the obstacles in the path of cohesive trauma narrative formulation. It begins more conventionally structured in full prose paragraphs, and eventually gives way to free-verse poetry by the end; this suggests a devolution, an endless circling back to the past, or a "reverse redemptive narrative" (Brison, 2002).

It is also indubitably much more conventionally literary than any other piece we have read. It incorporates carnal details, scenes, imagery, and lyrical language. The way Castro leans into the

literary eliminates the need for an established narrative arc, and this appears to be deliberate rhetorical strategy: If she cannot make sense of this, why should we? Moreover, there exists a considerable body of literature on the unique freedom poetry allows writers in communicating what may be difficult to express more conventionally (traditional modes of storytelling become inadequate when it comes to trauma); it has even been harnessed in therapy as a form of intervention (Smith, 2000).

Beyond the stylistic gestures, this essay is a broad social critique on the experience of navigating a heteropatriarchy as a woman. To that end, the piece becomes almost as much about Castro's mother as it is about her—and, to a greater extent, it alludes to a more universal experience of womanhood, suggesting that to be a woman is to experience violence and shame, a concept that harkens back to what Brison (2002) terms the socialized "prememory" of trauma. Consider, for example, the following passage: "Getting my period represented a fight for the blood, a fight for my life. The nuns, the mothers, the *tias*, the pastors, and the priests told us about Eve and her sin. They drained our innocence and engrained our discretions into us. We were told bleeding was our monthly reminder. Bleeding was what separated us from the boys" (19). In this passage and throughout the essay, Castro links the universal experience of womanhood with violence and, specifically, *bleeding*. She alludes to the notion that violence is inextricable from moving through the world as a woman, and points to her community and society at large when considering why womanhood is synonymous with shame.

Theme Analysis

<u>Silence and Voice</u>

Critically, Castro suggests that to be a woman is to be silenced. This silencing is violent, active, oppressive. It begins well before the physical act of sexual trauma itself; as Castro notes in the opening of the essay, "Innocence is not knowing hatred. I have known hatred from a very young age" (17). Innocence, the title of this essay, forms a major theme throughout—mostly through its

destruction. Interestingly, while other narratives discuss shame, this is the only one that speaks of innocence, and the violation of losing not only the self, but also the innocence of childhood, through sexual violence. Specifically, Castro seems to argue that the correlation between shame and womanhood seems to start in the womb, in the failure of being born a girl instead of a boy. "You should be the little boy I couldn't save," Castro writes, in the voice of her mother. "You are my failure; my inability to leave him. You are my *niña*. I am giving birth to me, and I don't want you to make all the mistakes that I have, and I'm sorry that I can only see you as that, before I see love in your brown eyes and curly hair" (20). This fundamental, primal shame parallels Tracey's father's disappointment (and subsequent violence) over his lack of a son, underscoring the societal perception of the uselessness and burden of the girl child.

Even more, Castro pointedly attributes this silencing to her mother: "'*Mira, sin vergüenza*!' … My mother tried to make me ladylike," Castro writes. "She tried to instill shame in me." "*Vergüenza*," or shame—a word that has come up in almost every narrative we have read—serves as the title of this section. In most cases, the women use it as a self-descriptor: they express self-blame, feeling ashamed of *themselves*, their bodies or their actions. But Castro flips this word on its head, by demonstrating (in a scene, a storytelling technique we have not seen often in these narratives) how the social construct of shame is harnessed externally to suppress women, to silence them. In this way, the word casts the shaming—and, syllogistically, the blame—outward. More specifically, it pins it on her mother, whom we later learn was complicit in Castro's abuse. Throughout our narratives, the figure of the mother has been critical in considering betrayal, silencing, and complicity.

Nonetheless, the last lines of the piece problematize and nuance this simplistic vilification of the mother: "I remember those times / when she was there / in his bed / and he'd tell me nasty things / she'd be quiet / unremembering / not seeing me / sad that I was / so invisible / yet so able / to grab the unwanted attention / of her husband / a mother / jealous / of the rape / of her / four-

year-old / daughter … you know you wanted it / that's why you / screamed so much / you loved the attention / you deserved / every bit of it / you deserved every moment of it / Especially when it tore you apart / It tore me apart"(23). It is intriguing that Castro chose to conclude the essay still focusing on the mother, and, more specifically, identifying deeply with her (as evidenced by the last couplet, "Especially when it tore you apart / It tore me apart," which seems to suggest that the mother and daughter share a body, an identity). The character of the mother is steeped in moral ambiguity, but even as Castro acknowledges her flaws ("jealous of the rape of her four-year-old daughter" is a particularly haunting and disturbing line), she nevertheless empathizes with her. The story here, she suggests, is larger than the dynamic between the mother and daughter: Castro's essay strives for a quasi-universal portrait of womanhood—to be a woman in a patriarchal society, she posits, is to suffer and bleed, to be invisible but hypervisible, to be seen as a sexual commodity, to compete for male attention while fearing it at the same time, to both demonize and identify with other women. *It is to be silent, and to silence others.* It is a paradox, and Castro acknowledges the multitudes inherent within this paradox.

<u>Embodied Trauma</u>

This essay implicates embodied trauma in the very ontology of womanhood, from the first menses—"Bleeding was what separated us from the boys. Bleeding was inescapable *vergüenza*"—to the first (seemingly inevitable) experience of sexual violence (19). To bolster this point, Castro narrates both her own experience and her mother's.

Of her own abuse, she writes, "I kicked. I screamed. I punched. I yelled. I begged. I scratched. I pleaded. My curly naps were soaked with tears and spit and sweat. My older brother was on top of me on the floor with his hands pressing down hard on my neck … My body was torn and lifeless. I was Raggedy Ann" (21). This is a full scene, replete with extreme, alarmingly graphic carnal detail. Unlike other narratives, Castro does not speak euphemistically about her abuse. However, like other narratives, Castro refers to her body as "lifeless" after the assault, alluding once again to the

equation between the body and the self (despite the apparent agency of the framing, with the first series of rhythmic sentences emphatically "I"-oriented).

Importantly, though, Castro takes the metaphor of death a step further than the authors of the other narratives by extrapolating beyond her own experience, linking her trauma to her mother's and that of women at large. "I wonder if birthing a rapist's baby is closer to death than suicide notes and slit wrists," she writes of her mother. "I wonder if she died in that apartment knowing the rapist was her own husband. She never had a funeral, but I saw her die twice … My screams were silent" (22). Crucially, through the literary mechanism of the birth scene, Castro underscores that violence, blood, and now *death* are tantamount to womanhood—that the experiences are inexorably enmeshed. These women's screams are, as she writes, "silent," or perhaps silenced—another link between silence and embodied trauma.

<u>Fragmentation</u>

This essay is a thesis on the fragmented nature of traumatic experiences, both in its content and in its style. In a literary sense, the essay as a whole reads as surreal, much like Rebecca's narrative and parts of Tracey's essay. It blurs the line between reality and imagination, and Castro intentionally represents and refracts that relationship: "When all other memory fades, only emotion is left to link daydreams to reality," she writes. "All you have left is the skip of a heartbeat, the momentary terror in wondering how real your dream was. Before your lonely heart gives (you a)way, there is a smell, there is a taste of aluminum, there is a buzzing in your head where the sound of your voice should be, and there are glimpses like ghosts appearing in deja vu's, recurring moments that cannot be stopped, and yet have to repeat themselves" (22). This passage (which appears to be something of an author statement) constitutes a fascinating meta-commentary on the nature of memory, and hints at the rationale behind the fragmented structure of this essay; Castro is clearly attentive to how her essay reads—the disorientation it produces, especially towards the end, where prose gives way to poetry—and chooses to tell her essay this way deliberately.

Moreover, this commentary aligns with trauma theory in its emphasis on sensory, carnal details as the most salient in traumatic experience. Fundamentally, trauma is not chronological or easily narratable; rather, as Brison says, it is a blur (2002). There are no episodes, but waves—flairs of detailed memory and long periods of "buzzing" (22).

Particularized Trauma

Castro's piece plays with the dialectic of universal versus particular trauma in new, generative ways. While the text is grounded in the particular—from the interspersion of hybrid English and Spanish vernacular (a reflection of her Afro-Latinx identity) to the community-centered silencing of women—it also elevates the experience of sexual trauma to the scale of the universal, as discussed above, suggesting that it is an inherent and requisite component of womanhood.

Table 3

Theme Analysis Results

	Rebecca	Sarah	Jane	Lydia	Maria	Gay	Tracey	Simmons	Anonymous	Castro
Silence and Voice	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Embodied Trauma	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓
Fragmentation	✓	✓	X	✓	X	✓	✓	X	✓	✓
Particularized Trauma	X	X	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Discussion

Having considered each narrative at length, I find it useful to now step back and reflect on the broader implications of these analyses. When I began this project, my aim was twofold: first, to offer a platform to elevate and critically examine stories of sexual violence from women of color, which, I hoped, would represent a step towards my second aspiration—to move, in some small way, the needle of scholarship towards incorporating voices too often silenced, towards decentering the white, Western, educated, Judeo-Christian subject as universal. In this discussion section, I will first consider the former ambition by discussing the analyses included within this project more

holistically, and then home in on the charged latter question. To structure this discussion, I will touch on each of the four themes, reflect on the general insights provided by this project, and finally turn to the larger-scale implications of this work.

Holistic Theme Analysis

Silence and Voice

Stunningly, silence is the one category of analysis that *every single narrative*, both personal and literary, fulfilled. There was not a single narrative that did not explicitly reveal evidence of silence and/or silencing. This is staggering, on the one hand, and, on the other, unsurprising. It suggests that, regardless of demographic, survivors of sexual violence will confront obstacles to sharing their stories and, even more disturbingly, to seeking justice, protection, and help in recovery. This silencing can occur at any number of levels, from the individual (self-imposed) to the family (the classic model of betrayal theory) to the community and beyond, a scale we saw in many of the literary texts.

Even more startlingly, with few exceptions, these narratives deployed incredibly similar language to describe the same phenomenon. They typically equate silence to a loss, a lack of self and voice—a death of some sort. This language engages in and responds to the theoretical construct of trauma as "unspeakable"; the hallmark feature of this discourse is the recognition of the inadequacy of language, of the volumes spoken in silence (Caruth, 1996). In recent years, this paradigm has come under fire as a systemic dismissal of experiences of trauma by way of the excuse of "unspeakability": "The alleged unrepresentability of the traumatic event, widely accepted as a starting point of discussion, is undeniably dangerous," writes Barry Stampfl in his article "Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma." However, the current study seems to indicate that silence (and silencing) in the aftermath of trauma is no mere discursive-imaginative construct, but the material reality of trauma survivors of all backgrounds.

Hearteningly, this project itself serves as a testament to the second element of this dialectic: voice. By sharing their stories, whether to an interviewer through the Grady Trauma Project or to the world through their publications, these women broke their silences and reclaimed their voices. As Black feminist Audre Lorde puts it, “When we speak, we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak” (1987). Or, as Jane expresses when describing why she shares her journals from therapy with her children, “I told my kids, see this book, open up this book. This is what I had to do. Just read what I put, read what I said. Then you’ll know how I felt.”

Embodied Trauma

Following silence, this was the most universally pertinent category—all but two narratives (Lydia’s, a personal narrative, and Tracey’s, a literary text) revealed evidence of embodied trauma. Notably, despite its prevalence, the physical manifestation of trauma remains an understudied component of extant literature. However, the current study suggests that there is sufficient reason to investigate this area more critically, as these manifestations not only respond to, but compound experiences of trauma; consider, for example, Roxane Gay’s manifold traumatic experiences as a product of her size (itself a manifestation of the trauma of her sexual assault).

Importantly, trauma can be embodied in ways that are not as blatant as an eating disorder, a distinction that could potentially help account for its understudied status. Skipping school, for instance, constituted a way in which Maria’s trauma manifested behaviorally and physically. Even more, virtually all our participants identified with one or more of the “bodily moral emotions,” from shame to disgust (Russell, 2013). These smaller, quieter presentations speak to the futility of trauma theory’s fixation on the “event” of trauma over the “environment” of trauma—a hierarchy that ties into the historical privileging of the spectacular over the mundane. Lauren Berlant, in her foundational text *Cruel Optimism* (2011), condemns this event-focused approach to trauma, instead calling for more critical work invested in the environment—the social context, buildup, and

aftermath—of trauma. Perhaps, if this paradigm shift comes about, embodied trauma will no longer be neglected.

As evidenced by this project, embodied trauma is irrevocably bound up with silence and voice, an intertwining that transcends this particular corpus: the form of the trauma narrative has, since its inception, conflated the body with the self, harkening back to the Cixous quote referenced in the Introduction: "Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (1976). In the act of writing or speaking a trauma narrative, there is an implicit (and perhaps physical) reclamation of experience, voice, and body. Not only is the personal the political, but the personal is the political is the physical.

Fragmentation

One of the most established constructs of the field is the notion that trauma deeply and invariably disorders an individual's relationship to time, disrupting a linear, teleological progression in favor of what Caruth has dubbed "trauma time," in which "the traumatic past becomes present, and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition." Trauma time inflects other aspects of subject-formation: the notion of the "shattered self," for instance, arises from this temporal rupture, yielding a "before" self, who believed in a benevolent world, and an "after" self, who lacks the ability to form a coherent sense of identity in the wake of trauma and the disruption of this just world assumption (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). In fact, many of the literary narratives consciously play on this idea by reflecting the disordering in the text itself, through flashbacks or fragmented sections (even poetry, in Castro's case). This is not just a reflection of the perception of time, but an attempt to represent the unrepresentable by refracting trauma time, exposing its shards in poignant, illuminating ways.

Surprisingly, there appears to be no conspicuous common thread among our participants who did not exhibit any signs of fragmentation—Jane, Maria, and Simmons. Jane, a Grady Trauma participant, demonstrated a strong hold on linear time, grounding her experience of sexual assault

firmly in the past. She sought therapy, which equipped her with the tools to reformulate her relationship with time. Maria, however, whose narrative was characterized by emotional blunting and reticence, expressed a wish that she had received familial guidance and therapy. Although she was not able to access the same resources as Jane, she exhibits a similarly linear perceived timeline. Moreover, Simmons's text revealed little about her emotional state, including her experience of time.

However, all these women eschewed ruminative behavior in favor of agentically moving forward from their traumatic experiences. Jane accomplishes this through therapy, while Maria calls the police on her attacker, who receives a restraining order. Finally, Simmons harnesses her traumatic experiences to inform and augment her activist efforts. Perhaps, then, the connection between the three women who successfully avoided fragmentation can be pinned to their future-oriented mindset; this hypothesis could constitute a fruitful avenue for further inquiry.

Particularized Trauma

This category produced the starkest—and most unforeseen—division: while *every* literary text revealed evidence of particularized trauma, *none* of the personal narratives did. The table at the conclusion of the Results section depicts this symbolic polarization visually.

Of course, this puzzling result raises the obligatory question of why this may be the case. Initially, I was tempted to rationalize this binary divergence as a product of the demographics of our respective corpora. The women who participated in the Grady Trauma Project do not have access to the same resources and levels of education as the writers of the literary texts do; it therefore seems possible that the latter were able to articulate their intersectionality in ways that the Grady participants did not have the language to. This theory aligns well with Roxane Gay's statement that, "thanks to books and therapy," she acquired a "more expansive vocabulary" to describe her plight (24). Perhaps environments of higher education equip individuals with the vocabulary to articulate concepts they have grappled with on an everyday basis, thus empowering

them to locate themselves in a particular sociocultural, gendered, and racialized context. After all, regardless of educational background, the raced body is subject to intersecting, identity-based traumas based on histories of exploitation in conjunction with contemporary oppression, rendering trauma a "constitutive feature of race relations, inasmuch as these are always and everywhere relations of domination" (Forter, 1995).

However, upon further reflection, this argument seems overly simplistic—reductionist, even, in ways that become dismissive of the intelligence of the Grady Trauma participants, who are acutely aware that, as Black women in the contemporary United States, they are marginalized on countless levels. They do not need to be instructed that navigating the world as Black women robs them of immeasurable power and access to resources, as this is merely their lived reality. What, then, can explain this line in the sand?

To grapple with this, I turn again to theorist Henry Louis Gates's dissection of the robust history of Black literary criticism in his article, "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes" (1985). Gates traces the emergence of a Black literary canon, beginning with Phyllis Wheatley and concluding with Toni Morrison. From the earliest days of Black writing, Gates argues, Black authors were forced to "mark their humanity," to justify the space they occupied within the cultural landscape. "Accused of lacking a formal and collective history, blacks published individual histories which, taken together, were intended to narrate in segments the larger yet fragmented history of blacks in Africa, now dispersed throughout a cold New World," Gates writes, adding that "the narrated, descriptive 'eye' was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual 'I' of the black author as well as the collective 'I' of the race."

In other words, Black authors have long been forced to represent not only themselves, but their communities through their writing. Gates's article suggests, then, that the difference here is not class or education background, but profession: Black *writers* (and other outward-facing professions), specifically bear the burden of representing Blackness to the world at large when they

choose to share their stories in the public sphere. The women who participate in the Grady Trauma Project, on the other hand, do not have to defend or justify taking up space in inner-city Atlanta, as the majority of people around them come from the same background. Even more, the intended audiences for the two datasets are fundamentally different; while the Grady Trauma participants are confiding in (presumably) sympathetic researchers who have been transparent about their aims in conducting this study, the writers are attempting to claim space, to stake out territory in an often-hostile public sphere and cultural psyche that rejects them. The Grady Trauma participants are representing themselves; the writers are, at least in part, representing their race.

Conclusions

Ultimately, considering the two diverse corpora side-by-side, this project seems to suggest that there is something specific about the experience of sexual trauma that gestures towards the universal. Both the authors of the literary texts (who are seemingly well-versed in the language of trauma and critical theory) and participants in the Grady Trauma Project (most of whom do not have more than a high school education) speak about trauma in uncannily similar terms, specifically as it pertains to silence, voice, and embodied trauma. Even women who are not conventionally equipped to theorize trauma can describe how it feels in terms that echo the theoretical, an insight that buttresses our foundational assumption that trauma is not a mere abstract theorization, but a phenomenon that exists on a experiential plane.

In her narrative included in this project, “Innocence,” Castro takes this one step further, positing that violence (specifically, sexual trauma) undergirds the universal experience of womanhood, from menarche onwards: “Bleeding was what separated us from the boys. Bleeding was inescapable *vergüenza*.” Here, the descriptors of womanhood are necessarily bound up in the language of violence, of blood and loss and violation. We find a theoretical counterpart to Castro’s hypothesis in Brison’s concept of the “prememory” of trauma: “Girls in our society are raised with

so many cautionary tales about rape that, even if we are not assaulted in childhood, we enter womanhood freighted with postmemories of sexual violence," she writes. "The postmemory of rape not only haunts the present … but also reaches into the future in the form of fear, a kind of *prememory* of what, at times, seems almost preordained: one's own future experience of being raped" (2002).

How, then, do these narratives speak to those trauma narratives now infiltrating our cultural consciousness through #MeToo? What do they add to the conversation? I propose that the similarity with which these women of color and discursively universalized subjects of sexual violence (white, heterosexual, cisgender women) speak about their experiences of trauma is incredibly revealing. It demonstrates that the constructs of trauma theory—long criticized for consisting of nothing more than overdetermined, esoteric academic discourse siloed in the ivory tower—have tangible, visceral counterparts in the lived experiences of survivors of sexual assault. Perhaps even more radically, it suggests that there is nothing ontologically or essentially different about the ways in which different demographics experience sexual violence; while particularized trauma inflects and compounds traumatic experiences, the integral, mutual imbrications of silence, voice, fragmentation, and embodied trauma nevertheless inevitably come to bear on individual women's realities.

Together, then, these narratives bridge the gap between theory and lived experience, suggesting it was not as wide a chasm as previously imagined. Perhaps there is something about the experience of trauma that necessitates the diction of "silence," the style of "fragmentation"—harkening back, of course, to Caruth's classic (and contested) paradigm of "unspeakability" (1995).

Limitations and Future Directions

It is important here to acknowledge one of the fraught pitfalls of qualitative studies: the extremely limited sample size. While this restricted sample allowed me to delve deeply into each

narrative, to make claims of universality, it is critical that future research focus on gathering more stories, more perspectives. Narrative psychologists, better than most, understand the danger of a single story—understand its unsettling power to flatten, rendering diverse cultures mere monolithic stereotypes.[8] Moving forward, future research will hopefully expand the scope of this project, harnessing interdisciplinary research methods to consider the specific and severely understudied traumas of non-Black people of color, LGBTQ+[9] people, differently-abled people, and other subaltern populations that I could not represent in this study.

To that end, it is worth noting that, while this study deviates from most in its centering of marginalized subjects, it nevertheless is a product of cultural hegemony. The methods, literature, and frameworks this project engages stem from legacies that have suppressed voices precisely like those I aim to elevate. Hegemony, as critic Edward Said describes it, is not forced domination, but quiet conformity; it is "a constantly practiced differentiation of Self from what it believes to be not itself" (1983). In centering these marginalized voices, I have inevitably Othered them, by marking them different from what is known and understood (and, implicitly, marking them different from me in my positionality as a researcher). While this Othering is what Said would term "benevolent," it nonetheless carries concerning undertones.

Moreover, as a researcher working with marginalized populations, I must acknowledge my own subjectivity, or the ways in which my identity and sociocultural positioning influence my work: to complete this project, I necessarily brought my own interpretation to these narratives. Although I endeavored to allow the narratives to speak for themselves, I cannot eliminate the dangers involved in imposing my perspective on these accounts. There is inherently an uneven power dynamic bound up in this form of knowledge production. As a non-Black person of color, I cannot

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[8] I say this, of course, with the caveat that quantitative analyses across large sets of narratives come with their own drawbacks—namely, the risk of reducing multidimensional stories to data points for statistical analysis.
[9] LGBTQ+ is a common acronym for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or other non-cisgender, heterosexual identities.

attempt to speak for Black women who have survived sexual violence. I cannot capture the nuances of their stories; I can only strive to represent them as honestly and sensitively as I can. Still, hegemonic structures of power guarantee that I will fall short in this aim. My hope is that the benefits of my work outweigh its inescapable hazards.

To combat the insidious, invisible beast of hegemony, the only way forward is, as Brittany Cooper (2018) writes, to seek out "new epistemologies, new frameworks for understanding" that do not bear the "tainted legacy of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and colonialism." It is to actively encourage research on diverse communities, conducted by people from those backgrounds, because, ultimately, universality can only be claimed when every corner of the universe is accounted for. After all, in the luminous words of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity" (2009).

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