

The survivor imperative: an autoethnography  
of secondary victimization after  
sexual violence

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# Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the lived repercussions of dominant discourses around victimhood and survivorship, informed by rape myths, by focusing on interpersonal responses to victims of sexual violence and the consequences of these interactions. I explore these responses from my position as a victim/survivor, to address the shortage of victim/survivor accounts and several topical gaps, especially the construction of, and relationship between, the victim and survivor labels as they are colloquially used. I propose two research questions: (1) How are the discourses of victimhood and survivorship deployed in making sense of sexual victimization, and how are they related? and (2) How do these discourses affect social and interpersonal relationships, and how is this experienced by a victim/survivor over several years?

I take an autoethnographic approach to produce feminist theory and engage with my lived experiences after sexual violence, with an emphasis on interpersonal conversations. Autoethnography limits the scope and generalizability of the study, since it relies on the experience of a single person, but it also allows for depth of inquiry unavailable by other methods. For data, I work primarily from memoir drafts written between 2012 and 2014, following rape in 2012, and secondarily on memory. In analyzing these narrative fragments, I build upon a feminist theoretical framework, including Ahmed's (2017) challenge to the theory experience divide and notion of "feminist snap", Brison's (2002) insights that post-rape processes are inherently relational and that victim epistemologies offer vital contributions to the field, and Stringer's (2014) "neoliberal victim theory". I also apply McKenzie-Mohr and LaFrance's (2011) notion of "tightrope talk", which accounts for how victim/survivors use dominant discourse in contradictory ways to generate novel articulations.

I find that the discourses of victimhood and survivorship contribute to the untenability of victim identity, which is fraught with contradictory imperatives: adhering to one set of expectations necessarily violates the other, inciting deleterious backlash. This untenability fosters the imperative to become a 'survivor' which is constructed as sitting at the opposite end of 'journey' of personal overcoming. I argue that discourses of survivorship have been heavily swayed by neoliberal discourse, valorising agency and strength, and construing it as an achievement to escape

victimhood and its associated stigmas. I develop a feminist analyses to argue that these frameworks underscore individual coping and erase the social reality of sexual violence, and that this pattern is evident in discourse around posttraumatic growth, which I problematize.

In light of my analysis, I conclude that dominant discourses and constructions of the victim and survivor label infuse everyday conversation in a manner which can be counterproductive and harmful. One pernicious effect is the dissolution of relationships and reactive victim scapegoating of a victim/survivor. I also conclude that the overemphasis on personal responsibility is especially problematic in a context where no amount of individual agency or overcoming adversity addresses the reality that we all must navigate a world in which gender based violence remains a threat.

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## Introduction

The music begins with strings, and segues into a woman playing solo piano. She starts to sing, “You tell me it gets better; it gets better in time.” Lady Gaga’s mezzo-soprano voice fills Dolby Theatre. The full orchestra joins in at the second verse, until the music breaks into a solo moment for Gaga and her piano. A screen lifts to reveal dozens of survivors, their silhouettes black against a blue screen. The band joins in again, and Gaga unleashes her signature roar as survivors come forward out of the blue to stand in solidarity, raising their arms together for a delicate finale. When the cameras pan the audience, they are on their feet, tears in their eyes. The moment goes viral.

In February 2016—the month I began my PhD studies—pop icon Lady Gaga performed ‘Til It Happens to You’ at the 88<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards. The song was composed for the documentary *The Hunting Ground*, which shed light on the pervasive issue of campus rape and the systemic silencing of victim/survivors by police and universities. In covering the performance, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Guardian*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and others write about the dozens who joined Gaga on stage, arms emblazoned with words of hope, resistance, and resilience, as survivors. Both *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Guardian* include the word “survivor” in the headline. Many outlets avoid the victim label entirely.

What strikes me about the coverage is the fixation on the survivor label and the avoidance of the victim label. This pattern is at once a depiction of dominant discourse and a furtherance of that discourse. In other words, it is both constituted by and constitutive of the dominant discourse of survivorship, and resistance—even aversion—to the victim label. In the coverage of Gaga’s performance, the ubiquitous use of the term survivor to describe those on stage coincides with highlighting these survivors for their brave and bold willingness to come forward. This pairing demonstrates social expectations about how those who endure sexual violence should be described and named by others: as survivors. It also implies how those of us of have been victimized ought to identify ourselves.

The content of Lady Gaga’s song, which has not been substantively engaged in media coverage, is remarkable for its resistance to dominant discourses of survivorship and overcoming. Her lyrics resist the directive to be strong and carry on following

sexual assault; she insists on the difficulties and harm done by sexual violence and the inability of others to understand the complexity of sexual violence from the outside.

You tell me hold your head up  
Hold your head up and be strong  
'Cause when you fall, you gotta get up  
You gotta get up and move on  
Tell me, how the hell could you talk  
How could you talk?  
'Cause until you walk where I walk  
It's just all talk  
'Til it happens to you, you don't know  
How it feels (Lady Gaga, 2016)

Gaga suggests the ongoing threat and ubiquity of sexual violence—the way it seems to haunt its victims. In repeating the refrain “’Til it happens to you”, she strikes an ominous tone. She casts assault as commonplace, perhaps inevitable, nodding toward the persistence of sexual violence.

Lady Gaga’s outspoken advocacy for survivors has inspired the Fire Rose Unity Survivor Tattoo, which Gaga has on her left shoulder. In an article about the tattoo for *Konbini*, Jen Kipper (2017) writes that, “Although the Fire Rose tattoos are two years old now, women—and men—keep inking them on their bodies as a way to show their connection, their strength and their will to be something else than just victims.” The tattoo’s designer, Jacqueline Lin, associates the shape with strength and power. The tattoo and its framing offer an example of art at the broadest level of pop culture reifying the discourse of survivorship.

This type of coverage perpetuates the victim/survivor binary, which I problematize in Chapter 5. In many instances, individuals embrace, reject, or fluctuate between the categories, thus resisting their binary formulation. Others use the available victim/survivor categories to gesture toward possibilities beyond dominant discursive frames (McKenzie-Mohr and LaFrance, 2011); this has been the case in my experience, and also appears as a pattern in other victim/survivor accounts. Negotiating these identities is not solely exercised in thought—victimhood and survivorship are articulated and enacted over time. Moreover, drawing from Susan Brison’s (2002)

insights about the aftermath of sexual violence, which I discuss in Chapter 2, these processes are always relational rather than isolated and individual. Furthermore, they take place in the wider social context of rape myths, the “cultural scaffolding of rape” (see Gavey, 2019), and contemporary cultural shifts around sexual violence and victimization.

In October 2017, as I began to transition from researching to writing this thesis, the #MeToo movement ignited on social media. Tarana Burke started “me too” as a grassroots movement aimed at ending sexual violence, as a way for victim/survivors to signal to other victim/survivors that they are not alone. According to Burke (Guerra, 2017), “‘me too’ is a movement to, among other things, radicalize the notion of mass healing”. In *The Washington Post*, Burke (2017) specifies that the movement began to create spaces of healing for girls of color. Then, Alyssa Milano used the hashtag on Twitter. Soon, millions of women revealed stories of sexual harassment and assault. It was a watershed moment, for while the legacy of speak-outs and breaking silence had been ongoing for decades, the overwhelming numbers of those who came forward as part of #MeToo challenged the rape myth that sexual harm is rare.

Rape myths persist in making sense of sexual violence, as evidenced in personal and critical reactions to #MeToo. For example, Kunst et al. (2018) examine perceptions of #MeToo as harmful or beneficial, and find that “results showed that men’s more negative stance toward #MeToo could largely be explained by men being higher in hostile sexism, higher in rape myth acceptance, and lower in feminist identification compared to women”. Critics met this historical moment with a range of familiar arguments about the dangers of mass action and feminist discourse around sexual victimization. They hail #MeToo a moral panic (Gessen, 2017a), rail against casting women as victims (DeNeuve et al., 2018; Gessen, 2017b; Roiphe, 2018), and lament women’s sexual freedom and agency (Berlinski, 2017; Merkin, 2018; Sullivan, 2018). Many of these authors offer arguments steeped in victim blame. They also overlook the degree to which the emphasis in Burke’s initial “me too” was on women and girls of color. This erasure is the focus and title of Burke’s (2017) *Washington Post* piece.

These critical arguments from Gessen, Merkin, DeNeuve et al., Roiphe, Berlin, and Sullivan mirror the writings of Roiphe, Hoff-Sommers, Wolf, and others in the early 1990s. As Stringer (2014) discusses, these authors were part of a “power feminist”

movement, which sought to resist “victim feminism”. Power feminists argue that victim feminists frame women as inherent victims, to the detriment of women; they contend that talking about women’s victimization is victimizing to women, that such talk perpetuates women as weak, passive, submissive, and prone to harm. Further, power feminists suggest that the harm done by victim feminists is greater than the harm done by the sexual violence that victim feminists seek to expose and challenge. They draw on rape myths about women exaggerating the consequences of rape, and suggest that women ask for rape, claiming that those who want to resist are capable of doing so. This debate continues in the #MeToo context, and I address the discourses informing these arguments throughout this thesis, since the #MeToo movement and its backlash are the backdrop for my research.

Throughout the process of research and writing, I was sensitized to the manner in which decades-old arguments and resistance to feminist progress have resurfaced in response to the #MeToo movement. Many contemporary arguments against #MeToo denigrate the victim label, which I examine in Chapter 4. These backlash arguments hinge on what Stinger (2014) terms neoliberal victim theory, which I outline in Chapter 2. While the backlash refrains are well worn, the field of feminist rape research has advanced significantly since the 1990s power feminist backlash: feminist researchers have produced an array of quantitative and qualitative data in recent decades, and developed theory to resist the logics of the backlash. However, little has been done to advance theorizations of victimhood vis-à-vis survivorship. This is a striking gap, since the discourse of survivorship is so widespread in popular rhetoric. Further, the backlash draws on the logics that render the victim label untenable and promulgate discourses of survivorship. My consideration of the tensions between victim and survivor identities and the discursive constructions of the terms in a neoliberal context are at the core of this thesis. The gap in theorisations of victimhood and survivorship is one of several gaps in literature on sexual violence that I expand upon below.

### The wider context of neoliberalism

Neoliberal hegemony is the wider context of this project. Harvey (2005, p2) notes that “There has everywhere been an emphatic turn toward neoliberalism in political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970s.” Harvey (2005, p3) contends

that neoliberalism has “become hegemonic as a mode of discourse” and has become “the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.” This marks the ideological, values, and sense making aspects of neoliberalism. Harvey (2005, p5) goes on to argue that those who developed neoliberal ideology leveraged “compelling and seductive ideals” of “human dignity and individual freedom.” These ideals have supported the seepage of neoliberal thinking into many facets of our social world and cultural values.

For example, Garrett’s (2016) notes the proliferation of ‘resilience research’ in social work research as stemming from neoliberalism and positive psychology. I discuss posttraumatic growth, which is an area of positive psychology, further in Chapter 6. Garrett’s insights point toward the importance of foregrounding the wider context of neoliberalism at the outset of this thesis, since neoliberalism has become ‘common sense’ and hegemonic. According to Garrett (2016, p1911):

‘resilience’ discourse is permeated with frequently unacknowledged value judgements and unquestioned assumptions; the excessive emphasis placed on individuals at the expense of social structure and social forces; and the apparent affinity between ‘resilience’ and key neo-liberal tenets.

He argues that current framings of resilience reify neoliberal hegemony. He defines resilience as the ability of individuals to respond positively to adversity or even mobilise adversity for improvement. He also notes the 1980s shift from research into risk and external risk management to resilience, individual behaviour, and internal states of mind. His definition and critique of resilience parallels my engagement with neoliberalism and resilience in Chapters 5 and 6, and in my introduction of neoliberalism and NVT in Chapter 2.

The specific shapes and contours of neoliberalism are diverse and varied in different places. However, its core ideals, which, according to Harvey (2005, p5) “appeal to anyone who values the ability to make decisions for themselves,” foster neoliberal common sense, ideology, and social discourses in various neoliberal states (including NZ, where this thesis was written, and the USA, where many of the events and conversations herein took place). Garrett (2016, p1921) points out the “cultural and

affective components of neo-liberalism” are linked to self-help and positive psychology, urging people to up their capacity to cope and succeed under neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is the larger context to which I understand my research applies.

In the following section, I outline my research questions. Then, I discuss the methodological gaps, topical gaps, and disciplinary gaps that necessitate this research project, and also inform my selection of autoethnography as the method by which to address these gaps. Finally, I provide a chapter overview and some consideration on terminology.

## Overview and research questions

This thesis is an autoethnographic work of feminist theory. I engage with my lived experiences after sexual violence, which is based primarily on contemporaneous records (2012–2014) and secondarily on memory. At the center of this thesis, I analyze relational—social and interpersonal—processes that impact identity negotiation after sexual violence, especially applications of the victim and survivor labels. By examining conversations about my victim status, I find that discourses around victimhood and survivorship have shaped others’ responses to my victimization in deleterious ways in the years following rapes I experienced in 2012. I consider secondary victimization in its most everyday forms, manifest in interpersonal responses to victims of sexual violence, and the consequences of these interactions.

Throughout this thesis, I engage with and explore two main questions: (1) How are the discourses of victimhood and survivorship deployed in making sense of sexual victimization, and how are they related? (2) How do these discourses affect social and interpersonal relationships, and how is this experienced by a victim/survivor over several years?

I consider these questions using autoethnography. I introduce the narrative component in Chapter 2, where I consider feminist theory. I elect this placement to enact and illustrate Ahmed’s (2017) arguments for dragging theory back to life, and her case that there is theoretical value in the lived experience of becoming a feminist and living a feminist life. I also include minimal autoethnographic fragments in Chapter 3 to demonstrate my methodology. I then use longer autoethnographic narratives in Part II as

the basis for my analysis. In Chapter 7, I provide autoethnographic accounts and reflections, based in events which occurred during the writing of this thesis.

I build my responses to my research questions in Part II. In Chapter 4, I examine the history and construction of the victim label. I argue that contradictory expectations about victim behavior and the consequences of deviating from those expectations render victimhood an untenable identity category. In Chapter 5, I consider the survivor label, which is often championed as an alternative to the victim label. I challenge the notion of a linear arc connecting the two, thus framing survivorship as the path by which one escapes victim status. I argue that discourses of survivorship blame the process of labeling for harm, rather than situating harm in sexually violent events. Further, current permutations of survivorship build on neoliberal demands to evade victimhood and individually overcome trauma based in oppression. In Chapter 6, I apply these arguments and considerations to provide a feminist critique of posttraumatic growth, which I argue epitomizes personal resilience in the face of adversity at the expense of addressing its social roots.

I develop these arguments with an autoethnographic approach to address several gaps in research, which I outline below.

### Gaps in research

Since the 1970s, a great deal of research (feminist and otherwise) has engaged the topic of sexual violence and its consequences for victim/survivors. Sexual violence is a social problem with multiple contributing factors and a range of deleterious consequences, which I elaborate on in Chapter 1. There is a large body of research on sexual violence generally (see Gavey and Senn, 2014). Some key topics include: prevalence and incidence data (see Koss et al., 1987; 1993), measurements of rape myth acceptance (see Burt, 1980; Payne et al., 1999), interviews with victims and survivors (see Thompson 2000; Wood and Rennie, 1994; Young and Maguire, 2003), explorations of the effects of sexual violence (Burgess, 1983; Koss et al., 1994), recovery from sexual trauma (Herman, 1992), as well as many feminist theorizations, a range of nonacademic mass market memoirs, and political essays. In addition, there is a range of work on child sexual abuse, which is beyond the scope of this thesis.



Although vast and wide ranging, the research on sexual violence has some gaps. I aim to address methodological, topical, and disciplinary gaps in this thesis. By elucidating several different types of gaps, I hope to make clear the novel contributions of this thesis at several valences of sexual violence research.

### *Disciplinary Gaps*

In carrying out reading and research, I noticed some studies on sexual violence and sexual trauma in the discipline of psychology by authors who do not situate the works as feminist or as critical social psychology (see Joseph, 2011; Joseph and Linley, 2006, 2012a, 2012b; Hockett et al., 2014; Hockett and Saucier, 2015; Thompson, 2000). These authors fail to engage with feminist research—especially feminist theorizations of sexual violence—or sociological analyses of systemic oppression. Psychological frameworks often omit important social and political dimensions from their analyses, and researchers in psychology are predominantly concerned with individual pathology (see Armstrong 1994; Mardorossian, 2002; Burstow, 2003; McKenzie Mohr, 2004; Tseris, 2013). Overlooking the social generates serious and problematic omissions and errors in their analyses and approaches, which are especially significant in a context where psychological understandings bear heavily on self-understandings.

The disciplines of psychology and psychiatry have power and influence over conceptualisations of the self and interiority; according to Rose (1996, p. 11), these disciplines shape

our conceptions of what persons are and how we should understand and act toward them, and our notions of what each of us is in ourselves, and how we can become what we want to be.

Rose's work sets out the role of what he terms the "psy" disciplines in shaping current modes of life, meaning, thinking, and subjectivity. His arguments elucidate the importance of considering narratives and assumptions in psy disciplines as they infuse and shape self-understanding and identification.

Simultaneously, social pathologies and oppression—and their psychological, individualistic remedies—are constructed in pseudo-feminist terms; they are framed as sympathetic to feminist aims for women's liberation. According to Kelly et al. (1996 p. 80), "The growth in therapy, self-improvement, and self-help is also evident, with many

elements of it drawing explicitly or implicitly on feminism for insight, theory, method and purpose.” In other words, self-help authors construct personal improvement by psychotherapeutic means in feminist terms; therapy becomes the primary avenue for surviving in an oppressive context. This construction contributes to the depoliticization of sexual violence in favor of personal resilience and heroic overcoming. The language of overcoming is common in posttraumatic growth literature, where one key theorist, Joseph (2011), links trauma survival to superhero stories.

Therefore, in early chapters, I build toward a feminist analysis of posttraumatic growth research (in Chapter 6), especially as it pertains to what I term the survivor imperative. I suggest that a feminist approach offers a partial remedy to the over-individualization of many psychological analyses.

### *Topical Gaps*

Our understanding and awareness of what victimisation means and how victims survive is in its comparative infancy.

– Jordan, 2013, p. 48

In the 1990s and 2000s, numerous feminist researchers took up the dichotomy of victimhood and survivorship, albeit briefly and sparsely (see Dunn 2004, 2005; Kelly et al., 1996; Leisenring, 2006; Minow, 1992; Proffit, 1996; Schneider, 1993; Thompson, 2000; Wasco, 2003; Wood and Rennie, 1994; Young and Maguire, 2003). I review this material in Chapter 1 as background. While these works offer valuable insights, they do not address questions about how rape myths impact the day-to-day, lived experiences of victim/survivors. Many of these researchers discuss the victim/survivor dichotomy, and the positioning of these terms as binary, oppositional, and mutually exclusive. These authors gesture toward complexity and ambiguity in the terms, but do not drill deep into the roots and manifestations of these complexities; they sidestep the terms’ genealogies, historic uses, and social construction.

Several of these researchers develop survivorship in the context of “battered women”, rather than victims of sexual violence (see Dunn, 2004, 2005; Leisenring, 2006; Proffit, 1996; Schneider, 1993). While their insights are useful, they are not wholly applicable to the context of sexual assault, leaving survival in the context of

sexual violence under-theorized; theoretical preoccupations with agency for victims of ongoing domestic violence differ from those victimized in a singular event. These authors point out that a dominant preoccupation regarding agency and “battered women” is the question of why they remain in an abusive relationship; in sexual violence, the question of agency has more to do with risk management or aversion (see Stringer, 2014). The agency discussion in gender-based violence varies across different types of violence.

In most of the research carried out in the 1990s and early 2000s, the authors handle survivorship vis-à-vis victimhood in brief sections, as portions of larger arguments (see Dunn 2004, 2005; Kelly et al., 1996; Leisenring, 2006; Minow, 1992; Proffit, 1996; Schneider, 1993; Thompson, 2000; Wasco, 2003; Wood and Rennie, 1994; Young and Maguire, 2003). They note victim and survivor qualities while avoiding deep, prolonged, and substantive engagement with the construction of the categories. In light of this sporadic engagement, I aim to develop a comprehensive theorization of victimhood vis-à-vis survivorship. I explore and critique their construction, both separately and in relation to one another. Many of these authors argue for challenging or eschewing the victim label. I depart from these researchers by challenging the formulation of victimhood and survivorship as mutually exclusive.

I focus on the discourse of survivorship, rather than agency, because the survivor label is a common term in colloquial language. In terms of lived experiences and social responses to sexual violence, agency is not a common term in everyday speech, and I have never encountered someone sexually victimized, in person or in writing, who identifies as an ‘agent’. Agency, more broadly, refers to “[a]ction or intervention, especially such as to produce a particular effect”, which supposes the willful ability to act; an agent is a person who “takes an active role or produces a specified effect” (Oxford, 2020). I engage in the concept of agency, as it is important to an analysis of survivorship, and there are overlaps. However, I foreground survivorship.

Another significant topical gap involves research regarding rape myths. Rape myth research emphasizes the measurement of and correlates to rape myth acceptance (see Burt, 1980; Hinck and Thomas, 1999; Payne et al., 1999). Burt (1980) introduced the Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) scale, which was further refined and developed by Payne et al. (1999) into the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA). The IRMA

has since been advanced by McMahon and Farmer (2011) to reflect the nuance and subtlety involved in rape myths and their measurement. Each of these studies focuses on attitudinal measures and correlates regarding rape myth acceptance.

Various researchers seek to develop theory in conjunction with these attitude measures. Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) develop a theory-based definition of rape myths. Buddie and Miller (2001) explore the connection between stereotypes and rape myths. Ryan (2011) link rape myth acceptance to rape scripts. Edwards et al. (2011) review rape myth literature, explore the history of rape myths as a manifestation of patriarchal order, and examine their current permutations in U.S. culture.

However, few researchers engage with how rape myths shape the experiences of victim/survivors. Moor (2007) recognizes the compounding impacts of internalized rape myths on victim/survivor experience and sense of self after violence, and develops treatment guidelines based on this insight. Peterson and Muehlenhard (2004) explore the possible role of rape myths in unacknowledged rape by delivering the IRMA to women who reported experiences that were consistent with the legal definition of rape, while also analyzing these women's written accounts of the events. Women who agreed with the rape myth that rape requires women to have fought back were less likely to label their experience as rape.

Burt (1980 p. 217) writes that rape myths function in "creating a climate that is hostile to rape victims". In Part II, I provide specific examples in which rape myths and victim hostility came to bear heavily on interpersonal interactions. This is an area overlooked in existing research, but vital to understanding the nuances and consequences of rape myths in lived reality.

I have found that the literature on secondary victimization overlooks the interpersonal facets of sexual trauma. I outline secondary victimization and its oversights in the following chapter. Institutional responses to victims of violence, and personal psychological consequences have been widely discussed in the literature on secondary victimization (Campbell and Raja, 1999; Campbell, 2005; Campbell et al., 2009; Freyd, 2013; Smith and Freyd, 2013; Walsh et al., 2010). However, in reviewing this literature, I find that it overlooks the shape of social interactions and conversations with victims on a day-to-day basis, which is influenced by dominant discourse. The necessity of inquiring into these informal interactions is bolstered by research indicating

that victim/survivors disclose to friends or family first (Banyard et al., 2010; Paul et al., 2013). Literature on disclosure suggests the need to attend closely to the specifics of these interpersonal exchanges, especially since disclosure recipients report distress and anger in response to hearing disclosures (Banyard et al., 2010; Ullman, 2010). The literature shows that friends and family are the first port of call, and indicates that the quality of their response is correlated to further help seeking (Borja et al., 2006). However, inquiries in help-seeking focus on disclosures and exchanges in institutional, medical, and law enforcement contexts. Therefore, I consider these interpersonal interactions as they are shaped by dominant discourse, and I deal with the relational development of victim/survivor identity following experiences of sexual violence, as informed by rape myths. To answer my research questions, I synthesize autoethnographic methods with feminist theoretical approaches and link theory to the lived experience of encountering rape myths.

### *Methodological gaps*

Understanding trauma, including that of rape, requires one to take survivor's first-person narratives seriously as an essential epistemological tool.

– Brison, 2002, p. 87

There is a shortage of autoethnographies on sexual violence generally, and more specifically on secondary victimization. In this section, I discuss the difference between autoethnography and memoir or autobiography. I also account for several key factors that inhibit the production of autoethnographies in secondary victimization following sexual violence, and provide evidence of the shortage.

Broadly speaking, autobiography and memoir remain the most common genres for first-person narratives of sexual violence. Brison (2002, p. 110) points out that many rape memoirs follow a “reverse-conversion narrative” in which all is well until it is destroyed, and then reassembled. Memoir as a form of testimony and resistance is an important part of the feminist legacy of making sexual violence visible. In light of Ahmed's (2017) argument for rejecting the theory/experience divide (which I discuss in Chapter 2), it is important to take these memoir accounts seriously and reiterate their value and resistive potential. However, while memoirs often engage with social critique

and commentary, their methodology, style, and goals are different from academic writing: arguments are more embedded, less overt and less systematic. Crucially, they are not based in formal research, data, theory, and analysis. The style is personal, reflective, and narrative-based, without expressed links to other works. The goal, which may be both informed and political, is to reach a different market than the target audience of academic research.

The distinction between memoir and academic theory using narrative became strikingly clear to me in working with my literary agent on a crossover, research-based memoir on my rape experience and social responses to my victimization. The most prevalent feedback was to omit dense or difficult writing and limit references. My review of feedback from over 20 editors who work at mainstream publishing houses suggests that the straddling of memoir and research-based writing was unfathomable: they were confused about the genre, and struggled to comprehend how personal narrative and reflection might interface with research, especially on the topic of sexual violence. These editors' feedback offered insight into the publishing industry, and helped me understand important distinctions between academic writing and memoir.

Autoethnography bridges memoir with traditional academic approaches. However, autoethnographies on sexual violence are rare, indicating a crucial gap in research. I have located only a few such autoethnographies in extensive searches across several databases. The comprehensive list of what I found includes: two PhD theses that focus on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Downing, 2016; Melnyk, 2015), one Masters thesis considering military sexual trauma (Ward, 2015), and three Masters dissertations documenting the researchers' healing journeys following acquaintance sexual assault (Curry, 2010; Moll, 2005; O'Donnell, 2010). In addition a, handful of autoethnographic articles and books deal with sexual violence (Brison, 2002; Cojocar, 2015; Le Grice, 2017; Mackie, 2009; Mahmood, 2008; Minge, 2007; Ronai, 1992, 1995, 1996; Spry, 2011). Of these, Brison (2002) deals explicitly with the ongoing consequences of sexual violence. I consider her work in depth in Chapter 2. Further, Fletcher (2018) writes about domestic violence, not sexual assault, where she explicates her efforts to resist the victim/survivor binary. Approximately half of these postgraduate and published projects are partially or fully comprised of creative endeavors, including

poetry, performances, plays, songs, and journal writing. The level of academic rigor varies widely.

Melnik (2015) identifies calls from numerous scholars for explorations of women's lived experience of sexual violence and its consequences (see Akoto, 2013; Corrigan, 2013; Gil 2007; Gunne and Thompson, 2010; Mollen and Stabb, 2010; Ronai, 1995; Ullman, 2010). While these calls for further research do not explicitly name autoethnography as a method, they point toward both a topical and methodological gap that is well suited to autoethnography. As I discuss in Chapter 3, autoethnography is an effective approach to exploring women's lived experiences with depth and nuance; it is equipped to handle the complexity and fluidity of lived experience, and implicitly values victim knowledge in a manner that potentially surpasses other methods.

In addition to a lack of autoethnographies, I have also found that there are only a few rigorous qualitative studies regarding aspects of secondary victimization based on interviews that take the accounts of victim/survivors as the basis for analysis (see Thompson, 2000; Wood and Rennie, 1994; Young and Maguire, 2003). The scarcity of such accounts suggests a need to consider methods that privilege and legitimize victim/survivor perspectives. The delegitimization of victim knowledge has deep roots in the field of victimology. Miers (1989) discusses positivist victimology and the intentional omission of victim accounts from research; foundational victimological research privileged statistical accounts and police records on the basis that victim accounts are impure and overly subjective. However, these subjective accounts are vital sources of knowledge that are laden with potential for subversions of dominant discourse.

The few articles that do take victim/survivors' in-depth accounts seriously are qualitative works based on in-depth interviews with small samples of participants. Interviews are a valuable method for tracking patterns in sense-making and elucidating themes by researchers who are not situated as victim/survivors. However, like all cross-sectional methods, interview-based studies are limited in that they neglect the changes over time that occur in sense-making and identity negotiation. Examining interpersonal conversations with victims and those close to them is beyond the scope of what interviews may achieve. Interviews are temporally bound, and inevitably shaped by the attitude and interests of the researcher. Interviewees may feel obliged to perform victimhood or survivorship in ways that are consistent with dominant discourse. How

these interviews are analyzed may subsume novel articulations into dominant understandings (see Alcoff and Gray, 1993; McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance, 2011; Page, 2017). These limitations do not negate the value of such research. However, it does present the case for additional methods to augment and expand the field.

In addition to considering novel articulations in existing language there is scope for exploring novel subjectivities vis-à-vis experiences of sexual violence. Gunne and Thompson (2010) explore the aesthetics and tellings of sexual violence narratives, and their potential to “establish new spaces for the subjectivity of the women who either have been raped or have been threatened with rape.” Melnyk (2015 p. 20) argues that researchers have a responsibility “to create the space for women to discuss their experiences of sexual violence”. Melnyk (2015) and Gunne and Thompson (2010) view the creation of this space as an avenue for developing new subjectivities among victims of sexual violence. Central to the enterprise of developing new subjectivities is enabling victims to assume power and claim authority over their narratives (Spry, 1995). While there is need and space to develop new subjectivities and maintain narrative control in further qualitative inquiry (i.e., interviews), autoethnography allows for unparalleled control in storytelling. New subjectivities are powerfully developed in accounts where the speaker has control over what is said and how it is presented. Autoethnography allows for a more detailed, sustained, and holistic engagement than the limited data provided by qualitative researchers. Telling stories of sexual violence is a risky and fraught enterprise, and further harm can be done to the victim/survivors if their accounts are misrepresented or misused.

There are valuable contributions to be made by researchers who are situated both as victims and scholars; however, there are few scholars who use their data autoethnographically (see Ahmed, 2017; Alcoff, 2018; Brison, 2002; Ronai, 1995). Ronai (1995) notes the dearth of writings by those whose identity spans both researcher and victim/survivor. There is a tendency among researchers to avoid acknowledging the personal experiences that fuel scholarly inquiries into sexual violence (Melnyk, 2015; Nash and Viray, 2014; Ronai, 1995). Ronai (1995, p. 402) elucidates the dynamics that inhibit some researchers from disclosing:

Several people told me not to talk about these experiences. When I suggested my own experiences with child sexual abuse as a research topic,



one sociologist advised me to investigate the general topic, using my own story as one of my interviews. In other words he told me to bury it in other data. “Why” I asked. “Because it might harm your professional career if it were known, and your work may not be taken seriously,” was his response.

Other sociologists had similar responses...

This form of discouragement reflects dominant notions about victim identity, which I explore in Chapter 4.

Stigma plays a crucial role in these dynamics. When researchers’ credibility to research personally relevant topics is impeded by stigma, it perpetuates the notion that victim knowledge is illegitimate and suspect, thus bolstering harmful stigmas. For example, a recent article authored by eighteen scholars (Hall-Clifford et al., 2019) addresses the need for those working in public health to incorporate the insights of the #MeToo movement to increase safety for workers, students, and researchers in the field:

For so long, women who report gender-based violence have been disregarded or discredited. The stigma of gender-based violence means that these uninvited experiences become a woman’s defining identity, and their other work, achievements, and professional identities fade away. (Hall-Clifford et al., 2019, p. 136)

Here, Hall-Clifford et al. (2019) elucidate the real risks and stigma of disclosing sexual victimization in a professional context, and note one clinician working in public health and sexual violence who engages in reputational management to establish a non-victim identity. This sort of reputational management demonstrates a perceived need to prevent victim stigma from undermining the value and credibility of one’s work.

These examples suggest that sexual victimization leaks into, and potentially sullies, the academic work that victim/survivors/scholars may produce. For example, Melnyk (2015) opens her thesis by explicating her desire to keep her experience and the messy emotional realities of her victimization out of her research; she notes her wish to keep her academic life objective and separate from her private self and concerns. She also notes how she was unable to realize this desire in the process of her research: her personal experience bled through.

These examples highlight barriers to researchers disclosing relevant personal experiences. As a consequence, works where researchers have the potential to disclose

but do not may lose a valuable interpretive lens. The value of these disclosures is made evident by those researchers who do disclose (see Ahmed, 2017; Alcoff, 2018; Brison, 2002; Cojocaru, 2015; Curry, 2010; Downing, 2014; Fletcher, 2018; Le Grice, 2018; Mackie, 2009; Mahmood, 2008; Melnyk, 2015; Minge, 2007; Moll, 2005; O'Donnell, 2010; Ronai, 1995, 1996; Spry, 2011; Ward, 2015).

This is not to say that those who do not wish to disclose should be pressured to do so: silence is a legitimate choice, and the social pressure to speak out as a demonstration of strength merits critique (see Orgad, 2009). I am not arguing that all researchers should be mandated to disclose personal experiences of sexual victimization. Rather, I am suggesting that the conditions that discourage those who wish to disclose merit scrutiny, and that autoethnographic work is valuable for facilitating such scrutiny. I argue that these conditions are fostered by dominant discourse around victims and victimhood, which I explore further in Chapter 4.

With these insights in mind, I suggest that autoethnographic work on sexual violence is restricted by some of the phenomena under investigation throughout this thesis, especially the legitimacy of victim knowledge. The stigmatization of the victim label, the delegitimization of victim knowledge, and social taboos around the topic of sexual violence make it difficult to embody both researcher and victim/survivor identities in a single work. Such barriers to disclosure link back to topical gaps while simultaneously demonstrating a gap in methodology.

The challenges I discuss above have limited the availability of victim self-narratives in the academic sphere. An intimate understanding of the landscape, as afforded by autoethnography, is vital to the development of theory of secondary victimization after sexual violence. Ellis (1991, p. 30–31) argues it well:

Who knows better the right questions to ask than a social scientist who has lived through the experience? Who would make a better subject than a researcher consumed by wanting to figure it all out? That there are problems in this technique is a given; that we have to take precautions in interpreting, generalizing, and eliminating bias here the same as we do with any data we collect is assumed. But the understanding to be gained makes working out the problems worthwhile.

Any research, especially when the participant sample is small (as in autoethnography where  $n = 1$ ), demands care in drawing conclusions, and generalizing on the basis of results. There are limits to autoethnography as a method, especially in terms of scope. I consider these limitations in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Autoethnography also has unique strengths: the depth and intimacy of access are unparalleled. According to Chang (2008, p.50), taboo topics “fit autoethnographic inquiries well because researchers have direct access to intimate information and can investigate the subjects in depth”. Furthermore, Chang (2008) suggests that the data available to autoethnographers gives rise to more holistic perspectives. Many of the situations that I investigate in this thesis would prove nearly impossible to access via other means, including memoir, since it lacks academic analysis.

As I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, autoethnography synthesizes well with feminist theoretical approaches. Autoethnography is a seedbed for further exploration and insight into the lived ramifications of commonsense discourses; it is also a viable testing site for the application of theory to lived experience. Lived experience is where theory is tested and put to use, and is itself a source of theory (Ahmed, 2017). Although autoethnographies dealing with sexual violence and its sequelae may be sparse in the academic domain, I argue that autoethnography has a great deal to add to our understandings of sexual violence.

## Introducing myself

My identity and experience inform my research, so it is important to briefly introduce myself at the outset of the project. I delve into more of my backstory and identity, and the events giving rise to this project, in Chapter 2. I am a cis, queer, white woman with PTSD from the American middle class, in my early thirties and an immigrant to New Zealand. This project was undertaken in New Zealand, but covers experiences which transpired in various parts of the USA between 2012 and 2015. Specific details about the geographic location and community context of these experiences is omitted from the thesis to maintain compliance with the ethical approval I obtained from my institution to carry out this research.

How I conceptualize my role in this research project has been informed by Ronai's (1995) work on autoethnography, which I discuss in depth in Chapter 3. I am a

narrator, author, subject, protagonist, and analyst of this text. The knowledge I produce is limited by the lens of my experience, and I therefore endeavour to maintain perspective on the limitations of my findings.

For example, as I discuss in Chapter 1, I have had the privilege to access resources and support which are unique to my race, class, and social position. I discuss other issues pertaining to race in Chapter 2, where I outline my upbringing in a mixed race home, and the race of the man who raped me. I am limited in considerations of race with regard to the others featured in my data for this thesis, since I am ethically obligated to conceal their identity. Furthermore, an analysis of how race comes to bear on interpersonal responses to sexual violence is beyond the methodological scope of this project. This is one example of how autoethnography as a method is not conducive to generalized findings.

I view autoethnography as an exploratory method, with the potential to open up new avenues of inquiry. According to Brison (2002), those who write about experiences of sexual victimization must be cautious to avoid over- *or under*-generalizing based on their singular experiences. I discuss this further in Chapter 3. I attempt to situate my findings throughout the project as based on my own experiences, and as building upon existing theorization. I suggest that my analysis applies to a neoliberal context, which I introduce further in Chapters 2 and 4. It also applies to the community in which these experiences occurred, although I cannot explicate what community that is due to ethical considerations. I also believe my experiences add to the historical record of tactics by which victim/survivors of sexual violence may be silenced, especially prior to the #MeToo movement. In developing my theoretical framework throughout this thesis—which is situated as a work of feminist theory, in the discipline of gender studies—I hope to advance experience-based ideas which can be examined and tested for their utility and applicability by other victim/survivors in neoliberal societies.

## Chapter Overview

This thesis is organized in three parts. Part I includes the background, theory, and methods chapters. Part II encompasses three chapters that address constructions and applications of the victim and survivor labels, the implications of their mutually exclusive formulation as a journey away from victimhood, and how this is evident in

the literature on posttraumatic growth. I attend closely to how these take shape in lived experience. I also consider the personal impact of rape myths as sense-making tools, and how dominant discourse and rape myths can render everyday social interactions as forms of secondary victimization.

Part III includes autoethnographic reflections on events that transpired in the later stages of my PhD. As I carried out the research and writing of this thesis, the story continued to unfold. Several events prompted renewed consideration of my own identity as a victim or survivor in various settings and clarified one of the most significant and deleterious long-term impacts of rape myths and victim/survivor discourse: the dissolution of meaningful relationships. I then transition to my final discussion and conclusion, where I lay out the central findings of this thesis.

In Chapter 1, I review the literature pertaining to the wider social context around sexual violence. I summarize how Gavey's (2019) "cultural scaffolding of rape" illuminates social norms and expectations around heterosexuality and presents a compelling case for how and why sexual violence is a logical extension of heterosex. I examine rape myths: what they are, the other myths or beliefs about heterosex to which they are related, and how they are studied. I also consider the literature on secondary victimization. By considering rape prevalence, rape myths, secondary victimization, and the cultural scaffolding of rape, I aim to describe the social and research context in which this thesis is situated.

The inclusion of autoethnographic data begins in Chapter 2, where I introduce feminist theoretical frameworks to explore the experiences of sexual violence and secondary victimization. I draw from Ahmed's (2017) dismantling of the theory/experience divide, as well as her conceptualizations of fragility, brokenness, and feminist snap. I build upon Brison's (2002) claims about the value of victim's epistemological stance and insights, and the relational aspects of life after sexual violence. I outline Stringer's (2014) neoliberal victim theory, which is foundational to my analysis. The thesis—and my own life—are also rooted in Lorde (2007a, 2007b) and Anzaldúa (1987, 2002), whose works not only integrate theory with living, but also address hidden, internal sources of power in women from a feminist perspective. In particular, Lorde (2007a) addresses the transformative power and political necessity of

overcoming the fear to speak. I use these bodies of work to build the case for an autoethnographic approach, and in my analysis in Part II.

In Chapter 3, I set out the method for this thesis, including the scope and limits of autoethnography which I elaborate on in a section entitled “Cautions and critiques.” I draw from and adapt an autoethnographic layered account, and augment evocative autoethnography with insights from analytic autoethnography. I consider how autoethnography is conducive to answering my research questions and the topic gaps discussed above. I explore how an adapted version of the layered account allows for a greater emphasis on analysis. I also address the methodical approaches set out by McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011), who discuss “tightrope talk”, and Page (2017), who develops vulnerable writing as a feminist methodology. These approaches synthesize well with the feminist theoretical perspectives set out in Chapter 2.

Chapter 4 details the untenability of victim identity. I take up the history, etymology, and social construction of the victim label, and the social expectations that bear upon it. My main emphasis here is on the contradictory imperatives that victims face: be meek, passive, and forgiving; be strong, capable and heroic. The web of contradictions regarding acceptable victim behavior is further complicated by the consequences of failing to comply with these expectations. Adhering to one set of norms means failing at another, to deleterious effect. Victims risk disbelief, the withdrawal of support, and reactive victim scapegoating (van Dijk, 2009) based on how they present themselves after victimization. I consider research on the victim label, and how discourses of victimhood synergize with rape myths to foster victim hostility, which negatively shaped the conversations that I had after sexual violence.

If the victim label is untenable, the survivor label offers an escape hatch. I argue that it is constructed as a viable alternative to the untenable victim label. Chapter 5 addresses the survivor imperative, the social directive a victim faces to ‘pull herself up by her bootstraps’ and become a survivor. Survivorship is positioned as mutually exclusive with victimhood (see Dunn, 2004, 2005; Kelly et al., 1996; Leisenring, 2006; Minow, 1993; Proffit, 1996; Schneider, 1993; Thompson, 2000; Wood and Rennie, 1994; Young and Maguire, 2003). The victim/survivor binary is also framed within a journey metaphor, in which a person is figured as getting away from victim status by moving toward survivor status (see Curry, 2010; Jordan, 2013; Kelly et al., 1996; Moll,

2005; O'Donnell, 2010; Young and Maguire, 2003). These discourses overemphasize individual and personal responsibility in the wake of sexual violence, at the expense of examining social and political possibilities for change and resistance.

Building on the arguments made in Chapters 4 and 5, I critique posttraumatic growth (PTG) research. I provide an overview of the field and some prominent criticisms of the methods used to study PTG, which rely heavily on self-reported measures of personal growth after trauma. I also consider how PTG outcomes privilege personal “gains” over social or political resistance. For example, proponents of PTG suggest that the act of women exercising more care and caution after sexual violence is a positive growth outcome. I problematize these sorts of outcomes as overly individualistic, depoliticizing, and contributing to the erasure of gender based violence as a social problem.

Chapter 7 contains autoethnographic narrative and reflection. This project draws from personal experience, and hinges on dismantling the theory/experience divide. Thus, I devote a chapter to considering how the theory I develop on in the thesis comes to bear on my feminist life. I take up my current relationship to the victim and survivor labels and how these labels fluctuate and shift across various relationship contexts.

I address major findings and conclusions in Chapter 8, where I draw from insights and arguments developed throughout the thesis to explicitly answer my two research questions. I find that discourses of victimhood and survivorship manifest in everyday conversations, and that people deploy dominant conceptualizations to inform their reactions to victim/survivors. I also find that a strong tenor of these interactions involves burdening victim/survivors with pressures to heroically overcome, perform ‘recovery’ in a specific way, and bear the burden of responsibility for mitigating the harm done by sexual violence. I suggest that responsibility ought to be dispersed across the social world; collective efforts to create a victim-compassionate social world and curtail victim-hostile behaviors form an important step in curtailing sexual violence.

### Notes on terminology

In this thesis, I set out to take language, especially everyday, conversational language, as a site of analysis. Therefore, it seems fitting to elucidate certain terminological choices from the outset.

I avoid distinguishing between rape and sexual violence. The terms are not readily organised into a continuum, since the effects of different forms of violence vary so broadly across a wide range of individual experiences. According to (Muehlenhard 1998 p41),

There is no one-to-one correspondence between a sexual act and its meaning or consequences... consequences of sexual aggression are affected by the complex meanings that people bring to it.

I use sexual violence as an umbrella term which encompasses but also extends beyond rape.

Throughout this thesis, I use “victim/survivor” to indicate individuals who have experienced sexual violence. I use this dual term to try and encompass and acknowledge the diverse identities that various people claim after sexual violence. I have set out to examine these labels. However, I do not wish to challenge individual victims or survivors who use these terms. My emphasis is on broader discourse, not individual choice, and I intend to examine the conditions and constructs that give rise to identification as victim, survivor, both, or neither.

I refer to victim and survivor interchangeably as terms, labels, and categories. When discussing them as ‘terms’, I am referring to them in the broadest sense. When I use the words ‘label’ or ‘category’, I am using them synonymously to connote an individual’s identification with the term. For example, I might place myself into victim or survivor categories alongside others with a similar experience, or they may be labels that I claim to suggest my belonging in that category.

I also discuss identity negotiation and the use of the victim and survivor labels to examine the ramifications of secondary victimization on individual selves and identities. According to Brison (2002, p. 4):

The disintegration of the self experienced by victims of violence challenges our notions of personal identity over time, a major preoccupation of metaphysics. A victim’s seemingly justified skepticism about everyone and everything is pertinent to epistemology, especially if the goal of epistemology is... that of feeling at home in the world.

Victim and survivor are often figured as identity categories. Throughout this thesis, I explore the degree to which victim and survivor identities are developed relationally,



and are discursively constructed. The social nature of identity negotiation gestures toward the shared meanings that imbue the terms victim and survivor, while the manner in which they are taken up and deployed in turn changes the meaning of the terms over time. It is not the case that one is a victim or is a survivor; rather, one does victimhood or survivorship, and does them in and through relationships.

## Part I

Chapter One: Rape myths, rape culture and secondary victimization

Chapter Two: Feminist theorizations

Chapter Three: Autoethnographic methods

## Chapter One

### Rape myths, rape culture, and secondary victimization

In this chapter, I outline the background to my research and review the literature that informs my approach, analysis, and scope. I offer a preliminary literature review of the core studies pertinent to the entire thesis. Other literature is introduced in later chapters, and appears when relevant to the topic under discussion. In this chapter, I introduce interdisciplinary feminist research and perspectives around sexual violence spanning the last half-century. In discussing the background literature, I focus on the prevalence, qualities, and impacts of sexual violence, specifically adult victimization, as a social problem. I consider the role that rape myths play in creating a cultural climate that fosters sexual violence as well as victim hostility, and the notion of rape discourse. I discuss secondary victimization, disclosure, and social support, as well as their effects on victim/survivors. I also consider the historical debates that dichotomize the victim and survivor categories.

#### Rape as a social problem

Sexual violence as a social problem has been subject to sustained attention and analysis since the second wave of the feminist movement. Beginning in the 1960s, consciousness-raising groups and public speak-outs shifted the terrain of sexual violence narratives and understandings: what had been considered a personal problem was recognized and reconceptualized as a widespread social issue (Griffin, 1979). In this section, I open with a brief summary of statistics before moving onto the underlying logics—including the “cultural scaffolding of rape” (Gavey, 2019)—that support the promulgation of rape and what Sanday (1996) calls “rape-prone cultures”. These underlying logics, which draw on a range of corroborating discourses, include: male dominance, heteronormativity, rape myths, media representations, and the myth of “real rape”. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it sketches the terrain of rape as a social issue.

I rely on incidence and prevalence data from the United States, since I am an American citizen, and since it was my place of residence at the time of the rape and during secondary victimization. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, between 18–25% of women in the U.S. had experienced some form of attempted or completed rape (Fisher

et al., 2000; Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998). According to the *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey* (2015 p. 3), 43.5% of women in the U.S. “experienced some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetime”. The same study also found one in five women survived rape or attempted rape, one in six endured sexual coercion, and one in three reported unwanted sexual contact (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2015).

Race is a significant factor, according to a CDC study conducted by Breinding et al. (2011), who carried out a phone survey in 2011 with 12,727 participants. According to Breinding et al. (2011), “In the United States, an estimated 32.3% of multiracial women, 27.5% of American Indian/Alaska Native women, 21.2% of non-Hispanic black women, 20.5% of non-Hispanic white women, and 13.6% of Hispanic women were raped during their lifetimes.”

Rape is a widespread social issue impacting on the lives of millions of women. It is an intersectional issue. Broadly speaking, intersectionality deals with the complex and compounding interactions between different forms of oppression. Crenshaw’s (1991 p. 1245) delineation of structural and political intersectionality are especially relevant to this thesis. Structural intersectionality accounts for the lived experiences of gender-based violence among black women, and the unique barriers to obtaining formal support and justice. Political intersectionality accounts for how black women fall through the cracks of the feminist movement, which privileges white women, and of the black movement, which privileges men. According to Crenshaw (1991 p. 1251–1252), “Women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas.” These conflicts form barriers to rendering black women’s concerns visible and adequately addressing them.

Sexual violence has different manifestations and implications based on intersecting oppressions. Gender, race, ethnicity, religion, class, and ability all come to bear in sexual violence, which disproportionately impacts persons of color, members of the rainbow community, persons with disabilities, and women in poverty (Senn, 2015). For example, *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey* (James et al., 2015) found that 46% of respondents reported some form of sexual violence in their lifetime. In the same survey, 22% of trans people also reported being denied access to rape crisis treatment or services. Sexual assault by police was reported by 27% of respondents, and

those who were incarcerated experienced sexual violence at five times the rate of non-transgender prisoners.

Intersectionality also accounts for limitations regarding formal support and access to resources for coping with, responding to, or reporting sexual violence for women who are not white, able, middle class, and heterosexual. For example, women with intellectual disabilities may struggle to conceptualize and speak about sexual violence. Trans women may be subject to further violence by the institutions from which they seek support, especially the criminal justice system. Black women and girls may feel that services are not meant for them, and therefore require their own spaces for healing and support (Burke, 2017; Guerra, 2017).

Statistics on rape prevalence and barriers to support and justice are underpinned by dominant social norms. Rape myths and the myth of “real rape” partially constitute these norms. These myths foster environments that condone rape, erase the agency of rapists, and blame victims in a climate of general victim hostility.

The myth of “real rape” evokes the image of the stranger in a dark alleyway, who uses physical strength, threats of violence, or a weapon to force a woman to have sex (Gavey, 2019). These out-of-the-blue experiences of brutality by a stranger dominate common conceptualizations of rape, with several consequences. The first is what Koss (1985) identifies as the “hidden rape victim”, whose experience is consistent with the legal definition of rape, but who has not named their experience as such. This hesitation to name experiences as rape is echoed by Wood and Rennie (1994), whose interview subjects (all victim/survivors of sexual violence) report taking months or years to name their experiences as rape. There is also extensive literature on rape under-reporting, and the role of reform in reporting practices (Clay-Warner and Burt, 2005; Koss, 1985, 1993).

The second consequence deals with how people respond to victim/survivors of rape: when the experience reported is inconsistent with the myth of “real” rape (Gavey and Senn, 2014), it puts the legitimacy of the claim at stake. The delegitimization of claims compromises potential access to emotional support and resources for the person claiming victim status. Simultaneously, the disclosure itself may result in victim blame. The myth of real rape has been developed independently of rape myth research, and I

attempt here to handle it as a separate, overlapping issue to rape myths, which I address below.

Understandings about “real” rape have shifted significantly since the late 1970s. Research into sexual violence gained momentum through the 1980s, and elucidated the lived experiences of women who had endured rape. Political efforts to tell victim/survivor stories persisted through that time until today. Awareness of marital and date rape, and the grim fact that the vast majority of rapes are committed by men known to their victims, have helped shift the landscape of how rape is understood and discussed. Gavey (2019, p. 1) summarizes it thus:

New terms began to enter the vocabulary, drawing attention to the possibilities of other forms of rape: acquaintance rape, marital rape, date rape. Attention to the problem of date rape had grown to such an extent by the 1990s that it had replaced stranger rape as the main focus for rape prevention. Date rape has always been a contested and highly controversial concept. But, it has weathered the controversy to become an unquestioned part of what we now mean by rape. The divide between rape and what was once “just sex” has well and truly begun to crumble. Rape is no longer rare.

It is almost ordinary.

Feminist activists and researchers have succeeded in making visible the complex roots and outcomes of the widespread prevalence of rape and the normalization of gendered violence. Dominant understandings of rape seem to have achieved a kind of split consciousness: date rape, marital rape, and even the rhetoric of “rape culture” have become mainstream. However, rape myths—and the myth of “real rape”—continue to hold purchase. Further, rape myths are especially prevalent in communities that hold to traditional gender norms, which persist (Burt, 1980; Edwards et al., 2011; Payne et al., 1999).

Heterosexual norms and what Gavey (2019) calls the “cultural scaffolding of rape” are also crucial facets in the perpetuation of sexual violence. A core tenet of Gavey’s (2019) argument is that the discourses underpinning heterosex rationalize and normalize sexual violence. In other words, sexual violence is not an abhorrent, abnormal abomination to society: it is a logical extension of what society takes to be normal, heterosexual sex. Anderson and Doherty (2007, p. 7) state that:

Heterosexual norms therefore provide the discursive building blocks from which to construct a denial of rape victim status. A rape victim role claimant may be told that her experience was perfectly ‘normal’ and nothing out of the ordinary. The alleged perpetrator's behaviour, it may be concluded, was unproblematic—he was merely treating the woman’s resistance as part of ‘natural’ courtship behaviour, and as such he has nothing to account for.

Not only is rape an extension of heterosex, but male aggression and dominance are also considered ordinary. Evolutionary psychological approaches—nurtured by the tendency toward biological determinism in a society that privileges scientific knowledge—maintain that men are biologically aggressive and dominant. This biological perspective manifests in media rhetoric, which takes male sexual aggression as given: “boys will be boys” (see Berlinski, 2017; Deneuve et al, 2018; Merkin, 2018).

Analyses by Anderson and Doherty (2007) and Gavey (2019) draw upon theory developed by Hollway (1984, 1989). Hollway proposes a framework of heterosexual discourses: the male sexual drive discourse, the have/hold discourse, and the permissive discourse. The male sexual drive discourse encapsulates the idea that men always desire sex, are always ready for it, and are unable to stop or control themselves when aroused. The have/hold discourse upholds the notion that women are motivated by relationships, and have sex in order to obtain and maintain a heterosexual male partner. Together, these discourses fosters the myth that women deploy a token “no”, men are expected to push past that no, and that this constitutes normal heterosexual sex. The permissive discourse allows for female sexual desire and initiation of sex, based on a sex drive that is comparable to men. Hollway’s framework is useful in outlining dominant understandings of normal herterosex, and how they contribute to sexual victimization.

Finally, the media represents rape in a manner that contributes to the normalization of rape and victim blame, while actively erasing male agency in the commission of rape. This erasure is, in part, accomplished by the use of the passive voice in reporting on rape, which keeps the alleged perpetrator out of view (Barca, 2018). Media depictions tend to focus on female behavior and victim blame, rather than a rapist’s choices or possible consequences for their actions (Barca, 2018). Augmenting Barca’s findings, I noticed that the Stanford rape case provided disturbing examples of media preoccupations with the negative impact that rape charges might have on the

male perpetrators. Brock Turner, a Stanford undergraduate student and champion swimmer, was found guilty of three counts of sexual assault in 2015. Some media tended to offer little consideration to the effects of violence on his victim. Later, the viral dissemination of the victim's impact statement subverted prevailing norms and drew attention to the harm she had endured. However, disconcerting norms still stand. Many of the outlets from which people source their news continue to propagate rape myths.

## Rape myths

Research regarding cultural attitudes related to sexual violence has focused on rape myths, and such studies will be the topic of this section. From the outset, however, it is important to note that there are critiques and tensions regarding rape myth related work. According to Sanday, "The term *rape myth* is problematic because it implies a disconnected, unreal, ancient attitude" (1993, p. 1415). Instead, she suggests the term *rape discourse*, because it gestures toward common sense, meaning making, and representation, and because "discourse is not a single attitude, but a coherent system of thought" (1992, p. 1415). She organizes themes within this discourse, and notes how they play out in varying contexts, and how better understandings might be applied to media coverage of sexual violence cases. While many of these themes bear similarity to the categories assessed in rape myth research, her framing them as discursive themes and her analysis of media and legal contexts differentiates them from positivistic approaches to rape myths. Rape myth research has emphasized quantitative studies to assess adherence to rape myths and is based on the supposition that rape myths are stable attitudes which have cultural significance if endorsed by a sufficient number of people. This positivist approach is somewhat limited, even if it offers some useful measures regarding the typologies of, and subscription to, rape related beliefs.

Rape myths are endemic to an underlying structure of beliefs that perpetuates the cultural scaffolding of rape, and have been a topic of study for four decades. Burt (1980) published the first study in rape myth acceptance, building in part on the insights developed by Brownmiller (1975) in her seminal text, *Against Our Will*. Burt (1980) set several crucial trends in rape myth research: she linked rape myths to a complex structure of other, related beliefs (similar to Sanday's insight about rape discourse); she



introduced rape myth acceptance scales, which formulate the dominant form of study of rape myths; and she was the first to define rape myths and stereotypes.

I want to linger for a moment on Burt's groundbreaking definition of rape myths. Her definition is foundational, yet later researchers often omit a crucial element of her original writing. The portion that later scholars reference emphasizes rape myths "as prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (see Buddie and Miller, 2001; Edwards et al., 2011; Hinck and Thomas, 1999; Lonsway and Fitzgerald, 1994; McMahon, 2010; Peterson and Muehlenhard, 1994). However, the full quotation reads as follows:

The burgeoning popular literature on rape (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Clark and Lewis, 1977) all points to the importance of stereotypes and myths—defined as prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists—in creating a climate hostile to rape victims.

Burt's suggests that a complex belief structure fosters a cultural atmosphere that perpetuates rape. Further, Burt highlights the impact these beliefs have in "creating a climate hostile to rape victims". Payne et al. (1999 p. 28) cite this portion of the definition, but other researchers omit it. The victim-hostile social world, in which victim/survivors seek to recover and reconnect to others, is a central feature in my analysis. The synthesis of rape myths with a failure to comply with victim stereotypes and notions about what constitutes "real rape" have grave consequences for victims (Buddie and Miller, 2001). Buddie and Miller (2001) put forth the notion that beliefs about how rape victims ought to react to rape constitutes another domain of rape myths. Jordan (2005) addresses these beliefs in her work on mental resistance, I explore victim expectations further in Chapter 4, where I consider my experience of the untenability of the victim label.

I contend that it is vital to keep the final phrase of Burt's writing in view: that the consequence of these ideas and beliefs includes fostering a social reality that is hostile to victim/survivors of sexual violence. These consequences are material, and not toward the ways rape myths may function as rape discourses, constituting the social world. They inflect social interactions with victim/survivors who are endeavoring to name their experiences, negotiate victim and survivor labels, and seek support from others. Rape myths permeate the assumptions of victim/survivors (Gavey, 1999) as well

as the attitudes of those from whom they seek support (Ullman, 2010). Therefore, I seek to explore the impacts of rape myths and stereotypes on my lived experience of the secondary victimization. My method involves analyzing interpersonal interactions in Part II. Here, I discuss how rape myths have been defined since Burt's initial definition, and provide a brief overview of the research into rape myths and stereotypes.

Rape myths are structured into the assumptions that people—laypeople, professionals, and practitioners—use to make sense of sexual violence (Burt, 1980). So, too of Sanday's (1993) rape discourses. Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994, p. 133) provide another, often-cited, theory-based definition of rape myths as “attitudes and generally false beliefs about rape that are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny or justify male sexual aggression against women”. Importantly, rape myth acceptance has also been linked to rape proclivity (Edwards et al., 2011).

The definitions provided by Burt (1980)—and later, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994)—are the most frequently cited. Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) emphasize the justification of male violence, while Burt (1980) emphasizes the consequences for victims (i.e., hostility toward victims). Suarez and Gadalla (2010, p. 2010), who published a meta-analysis of rape myth acceptance research, state that rape myths are “false beliefs used mainly to shift the blame for rape from perpetrators to victims”. Their definition echoes the others in its emphasis of false beliefs but neglects the impact on victims' lived experience.

Rape discourses, myths and stereotypes do not exist in isolation: they are inextricably linked to a range of troubling attitudes and beliefs, rendering them robust, and therefore difficult to challenge and change. Suarez and Gadalla (2010) suggest that rape myths are tied to sexism and correlated with other forms of prejudice. Burt (1980) identifies and measures correlates to rape myth acceptance, including sexual conservatism, adherence to traditional sex role stereotypes, a general acceptance of interpersonal violence, and “adversarial sexual beliefs”—in which men and women are viewed as engaging in a sexual battle of mutual exploitation (see also Payne et al., 1999).

The concept of the myth is also worth consideration. According to Payne et al. (1999 p. 29), building on Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994),

Within the traditions of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, the concept of myth is theorized to constitute (1) false or apocryphal beliefs that (2) explain some cultural phenomenon and (3) whose importance lies in maintaining existing cultural arrangements.

This framing, specific to rape myth research, is a crucial component to understanding rape myths and how they function. They are false. They have an explanatory value that is readily available since they are widespread, but the explanations they readily provide are inaccurate and harmful. Additionally, they uphold the status quo and reinscribe normative understandings of gender and violence. Rape myths serve to normalize gendered violence as natural and inevitable. They have a symbiotic relationship with stereotypes about male aggression and ‘natural male behavior’. They also dovetail with the framing of women as deceptive and manipulative agents who lie about rape having occurred or exaggerate its consequences (Burt, 1980; Mardorossian, 2002; Payne et al., 1999).

Sanday (1993) offers a different approach to myths and mythologies, drawing on Barthes. She advances the notion of

*mythologies* as stories that transform half-truths and speculation into full-truths with the status of the natural, eternal, and universal. Like discourses, *mythologies* constitute a system of symbols supporting a political agenda that guarantees certain social relationships by reference to the eternal (Sanday, 1993, p. 1415)

This definition is suitable to constructivist analysis because it underscores how these discourses influence meaning making, and frame certain ideas as common sense. It allows for additional nuance in considering how rape related beliefs influence meaning making and social interaction. This is a different aim than classic rape myth research. While I draw on both in this thesis, my analysis advances Sanday’s discursive approach, while drawing on and applying the categories developed in rape myth research. I use the term rape myths in this thesis because I am referencing the categories set out by rape myth research. I seek to examine these myths and how they function discursively.

The main emphasis of rape myth research has been to assess and measure Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) and identify some of its correlates. The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA), which refined Burt’s (1980) RMA, involves seven

subscales: “(1) She Asked for It, (2) It Wasn’t Really Rape, (3) He Didn’t Mean To, (4) She Wanted It, (5) She Lied, (6) Rape Is a Trivial Event, and (7) Rape Is a Deviant Event” (McMahon and Farmer, 2011, p. 72; Payne et al., 1999). The IRMA was further updated by McMahon and Farmer (2011), who work to detect subtle rape myths, based on research suggesting that sexism has become increasingly covert and hidden as social acceptability and political correctness gain purchase. They contend that the underlying logics of sexism and subtle rape myths remain prevalent, but that measuring the phenomena requires updating the language used in RMA scales to reflect the “colloquial phrases and sexual slang” of the populations being studied (McMahon and Farmer, 2011, p. 73). Refining the IRMA in to emphasise colloquial language gestures toward one of the preliminary critiques of rape myth research: that the definitions and scales vary, rendering it difficult to measure changes over time (Edwards et al., 2011).

Rape myth acceptance research demonstrates that large swathes of Americans adhere to rape myths to varying degrees. Burt (1980 p. 229) reported two core findings:

First, many Americans do indeed believe many rape myths. Second, their rape attitudes are strongly connected to their deeply held and pervasive attitudes such as sex role stereotyping, distrust of the opposite sex (adversarial sexual beliefs), and acceptance of interpersonal violence.

Many rape myths are endorsed by over half of respondents, leading Burt (1980, p. 229) to conclude that “the world is indeed not a safe place for rape victims”. Edwards et al. (2011, p. 762) succinctly summarize Lonsway and Fitzgerald’s (1994) findings that “between 25% and 35% of respondents (both male and female) agree with the majority of these rape myths”, and that men are more likely to endorse rape myths than women. Buddie and Miller (2001) measured rape myth acceptance, perceptions of rape victims, and participants’ perceptions of cultural stereotypes. They found that 57% of participants cited “some combination of rape myths and emotional/behavioral reactions of victims for their personal beliefs about rape victims” (Buddie and Miller, 2001, p. 153). McMahon’s (2010) findings suggest that earlier research may underestimate levels of RMA; she found that, while overt blame is unlikely, over half of college age respondents said the rape was caused by the victims’ behavior. This finding directs attention to the need to examine covert and subtle forms of rape myths. As I will explore in later chapters, overt blame was not something I often encountered in the period after

my assaults. However, subtle rape myths permeated various interactions and caused pain and harm, in part by agitating and nurturing self-blame.

Edwards et al. (2011) provide a particularly rich analysis of rape myths, which is conducive to developing theory around rape myths and their consequences. They set out to explore the history, origins, and current permutations of rape myths in American culture, while also reviewing the literature. They also engage with the role of the media in crafting understandings of rape. Their conclusions provide a crucial basis for this thesis. Edwards et al. (2011) note that the main emphasis of RMA studies is to measure with Likert scales and written responses, in order to explore how people make sense of sexually violent events. In contrast, Edwards et al. (2011) suggest that research should include standardized measures, clear definitions, further theorization, clarification of what myths are under examination, specification of how many people must endorse a myth for it to matter, and implicit versus explicit belief. This is a notably positivist approach and overlooks how rape myths are discursively constituted and how complex and pervasive they are as a sense making apparatus. Perhaps the merits of these positivist approaches are in offering some sense of the scope of adherence to beliefs and the scale of their impact, and in advancing definitions of myths. Further attention is needed to address the cultural life of rape myths. Those answering the call by Edwards et al. (2011) for more theorization may do well to consider social construction and how rape discourse constitutes sense making of, and social responses to, rape. This is the type of theorization I have set out to do in this thesis.

I would add that there is a lack of research into lived implications of rape myths for victim/survivors working to endure, 'recover,' or 'survive' in a victim-hostile social climate. In this thesis, I begin to address concerns about implicit versus explicit myths. Many responses to my claims of victimhood or disclosing the rapes were met with subtle victim blame. As I discuss in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, many people did not explicitly state that it was my fault, or that I was to blame. Rather, they insinuated blame by inquiring how I could have avoided the rapes, or by suggesting I would only recover by taking positive responsibility for having created such a thorough opportunity to grow through adversity. Veiled and implicit forms of victim blame were especially pernicious, because they were difficult to identify and resist in moments of interpersonal

vulnerability. Therefore, I endeavor to explore how rape myths and victim blame play a significant role in interpersonal, everyday conversations around victimization.

### Secondary victimization, disclosure, and social support

The aftermath of sexual violence may be a time of ongoing injury, which is often referred to as secondary victimization. According to Wasco (2003, p. 312), rape is not a single event; it is a process that includes survival strategies, “coping, disclosure, and help-seeking”, and identity negotiation in the context of “society’s responses to the assault”. According to Campbell and Raja (1999, p. 262), “When rape victims’ needs are ignored at an organizational level, the treatment survivors receive from individual system personnel can be quite devastating.” Campbell and Raja (1999) elucidate how, in organizations and systems, the harm often manifests in interpersonal interactions; it is carried out through people mirroring the attitude and policies (or lack thereof) of the institution within which they work. They also nod toward the severity of harm done by secondary victimization, noting that it can be “devastating”. It may even be referred to as a “second rape” (Stringer, 2014, p. 12–13; Campbell et al., 2009, p. 234).

Secondary victimization can occur following any type of violent crime, and is not limited to rape; however, it has been greatly developed in rape research. According to Stringer (2014, p. 12–13),

prevailing definitions of victims, victimhood, and victimization shape social, cultural, scholarly and legal responses to victims, and can do so in ways that are profoundly harmful and inequitable, thus constituting ‘secondary victimization’—a further harm ‘added’ to the original harm, which takes place when recognition as a ‘legitimate victim’ is unjustly denied, or granted in a marginalizing way. Perhaps the most salient example of secondary victimization in feminist accounts is the way criminal justice responses to rape, from police responses through rape trials, can stage a ‘second rape’, notably by permitting attacks on a complainant’s credibility that frame them as the guilty party, eroding their authority and thereby neutralizing their complaint.

The literature on secondary victimization tends to emphasize the legal system, medical system, mental health support, and advocacy services (Campbell et al., 2009). In

general, the dominant focus of secondary victimization research is on these larger systems.

For example, legal systems demand that victim/survivors recount the assault, and often that they respond to victim-blaming questions. According to Campbell et al. (2009, p.234),

as a result of their contact with legal system personnel, they felt bad about themselves (87%), guilty/self-blaming (73%), depressed (71%), violated (89%), distrustful of others (53%), and reluctant to seek further help (80%) (Campbell, 2005).

These are stark figures. Courtroom proceedings also create problems by attacking victims' credibility (Stringer, 2014), as well as by failing to prosecute or case attrition (Campbell et al., 2009). Studies on secondary victimization found even higher rates of these negative feelings for those victim/survivors who encountered the medical system, where they were asked intrusive and blaming questions (Campbell et al., 2009; Campbell, 2005). Campbell et al. (2009 p. 234) note that problematic treatment of victims within systems "can magnify victims' feelings of powerlessness, shame, and guilt", thus earning the label of secondary victimization.

Secondary victimization is also associated with social and institutional harms (Campbell and Raja, 1999; van Dijk, 2009) and, in some cases, institutional betrayal (Freyd, 2013; Smith and Freyd, 2013); upon having to retell their story, victims are subject to misguided and blaming responses from professionals, institutions, and service providers. Professionals may deny of help, or offer help that further victimizes (Campbell and Raja, 1999). In defining secondary victimization, Campbell and Raja (1999, p. 261) write that:

Rape victims may turn to the legal, medical, and mental health systems for assistance, but there is a growing body of literature indicating that many survivors are denied help by these agencies. What help victims do receive often leaves them revictimized.

Harm, in these instances, may take a range of forms, including subtle or overt victim blame and a reluctance to believe a victim, compounding the stress already faced by the victim (Campbell and Raja, 1999). Further harm may occur through institutions lacking recourse for victim/survivors, including a lack of confidential services and bureaucratic

barricades to seeking support or reporting events (Postmus et al., 2009). Further, word gets around about poor institutional responses. According to Walsh et al. (2010 p. 137–138), “survivors who through social networks become aware of such negative experiences may themselves be less likely to seek formal services if they experience a sexual assault.”

The literature on secondary victimization focuses on failures within social services, criminal justice, and police responses to those who have experienced sexual trauma. However, research overlooks more intimate realities, including how rape myths and dominant discourses around sexual violence permeate interpersonal relationships. Consideration of the interpersonal is also relevant to institutional betrayal and secondary victimization, because revictimizing responses are enacted by individuals within those contexts. Yet these formal environments are different in type and in consequences from the responses of friends, family, and community members. According to Jordan (2013, p. 53), “On occasions the women felt their family members’ lack of understanding led to them acting in ways that felt disempowering and revictimising.” The people who make up the day-to-day social world of victim/survivors have a powerful role to play, and the harms that occur at home can create an environment in which nowhere feels safe.

The majority of victims disclose to friends and family before seeking formal help (Banyard et al., 2010; Paul et al., 2013). Interactions and conversations about victim/survivor experiences extend beyond formal settings, into everyday interactions with non-professionals outside institutions. According to Draucker et al., (2009, p. 376), “Negative social reactions to disclosures of sexual violence, such as disbelief or blame, however, have deleterious effects on recovery.” Friends and family constitute the social world of the victim/survivor, and form the social climate of a victim’s post-rape experience. My aim in Chapters 4 and 5 is to elucidate the complex ramifications of microsocial, everyday responses to me as a victim.

Disclosures of sexual violence are sensitive matters. Paul et al. (2013) find that two-thirds of university-aged rape victims will tell someone, usually a friend or family member. Ahrens et al. (2007, p. 45) find that, “Nearly 70% of the sample first disclosed to friends, partners, or family members.” According to Banyard et al. (2010), 80% of those who tell anyone will tell a friend first, and fears around how they will be



responded to or that the experience won't be seen as "real rape" influence the choice to come forward. Negative responses, based in stigma, blame, and rape myths can silence victim/survivors, halt further help-seeking, and incite more severe posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) reactions, whereas positive responses could be comforting (Banyard et al., 2010; Ullman, 2010).

Banyard et al. (2010) and Paul et al. (2013) also consider how those who hear a disclosure feel about receiving it. Paul et al. (2013) find that receiving a disclosure can cause anger—at society or the perpetrator—as well as safety concerns. Banyard et al. (2010, p. 252) find that "participants felt anger and distress related to a disclosure, [reminding] us that unwanted sexual experiences have consequences for people beyond individual survivors..." The difficulties faced those who hear disclosures come to bear on the victims to whom they respond. Orchowski et al. (2013) suggest that responses to disclosures are linked to outcomes: attempts to control the course of action of victim/survivors are correlated with increased PTSD symptoms, greater self-blame, diminished self-esteem, and poor coping. Emotional support increases coping and emotional support-seeking (Orchowski et al., 2013). Borja et al. (2006) also find that negative informal support is linked to greater PTSD symptomatology.

According to Ullman (1999), there is a dilemma around disclosing. Victim/survivors do not know how others will react and fear poor responses, which creates a barrier. According to Ullman (1999), most victims get a mix of positive and negative responses: the good reactions are negligible or helpful, while the bad are harmful. However, informal support may actually be more helpful than formal support (Ullman, 1999; Ahrens et al., 2007); the increased benefit of informal support track with findings discussed above: medical, legal, and institutional responses are often harmful. Furthermore, Ullman and Filipas (2001, p. 1030) note that there is a need for research "looking at the correlates of support-seeking from both formal and informal sources", including how social support and positive or negative informal social responses are linked to seeking formal support. Ahrens et al. (2007, p. 42) note briefly that informal supporters can "mobilize support" by contacting, referring to, or even accompanying victim/survivors to formal support providers. However, the link between formal and informal support remains unclear.

Ullman (1999) offers a review of literature regarding social supports and their influence on victim/survivors of sexual violence. According to Ullman (1999, p. 343):

Evidence is mixed with regard to the effect of social support, with some studies showing no significant effect and others showing positive effects of support on postassault recovery. Negative aspects of social relations (e.g., negative social reactions), while less studied, show consistent and strong negative effects on sexual assault victims.

She finds that friends are a main source of support, and seem to be most helpful. However, they can also be a source of “second injury”, due to the “rejection and lack of support from the community, society, and family and friends experienced by many victims” (Ullman, 1999, p. 346). Having unsupportive members of a social network is linked to worse symptoms. Ullman (1999) also points out that withdrawal may not be entirely negative, since it mitigates or prevents the harm done by negative reactions, such as blaming, not believing, trying to take control, or trying to distract the victim.

These bodies of research on secondary victimization, social support, and disclosure responses suggest a need for more research into the interpersonal, everyday, social dynamics at play following sexual violence. Secondary victimization research tends to focus on institutions and formal responses. I suggest that social support and interpersonal responses can be a site of secondary victimization, and that the interpersonal requires further consideration in research. I consider much of my own experience as a form of secondary victimization, in its more intimate permutations. I was subject to blaming questions, asked repeatedly to recount the story, and responded to in ways that were heavily informed by rape myths. While most of these settings were not formal, they transpired as ordinary interactions in my day-to-day life: secondary victimization was, for me, inescapable. In this thesis, I aim to shed light on the intimate and everyday dimensions of secondary victimization.

## Victim and Survivor

In developing the foundation for this thesis, I reviewed the literature pertaining to the dichotomization of the victim and survivor labels. Victim and survivor literature raises important questions about identity negotiation vis-à-vis sexual violence and its sequelae. In addition, it provides insight into dominant assumptions about the victim

and survivor labels. The victim/survivor binary is related to the victim/agent binary—they are distinct, but they also overlap. While feminist scholars have done little to advance theorizations of the victim/survivor dichotomy, they have advanced theorizations of the victim/agent binary (see Baker, 2010a; Bay-Chang, 2015; Mardorossian, 2002; Stringer, 2014). In establishing the background to this thesis, I emphasized the victim/survivor binary, since public vernacular is dominated by the term “survivor” rather than “agent”. I attended closely to how the victim/survivor binary has been written about and conceptualized in earlier work; early literature perpetuates dominant assumptions and norms about the victim and survivor categories that persist today, and which are a focus of Part II. I also engage with Jordan’s (2013) recent work on “reconceptualising the survivor journey”, which challenges dominant formulations by taking the words of victim/survivors seriously.

From the 1960s until the early 1980s, second-wave feminism brought gender-based violence and rape to the foreground of the feminist movement, and illuminated the realities of sexual violence in public consciousness. Second wave emphasis on sexual victimization formed the groundwork of the third wave in the early 1990s. A primary concern in the third wave was with feminist ‘victimism’ (see Stringer, 2014). Writers including Wolf, Roiphe, and others, alongside anti-feminists Hoff-Sommers and Paglia, lamented the feminist preoccupation with victimization. These critiques included the argument that women were prefigured as victims, thus detracting from women’s agency. Stringer (2014) elucidates the manner in which these authors criticized ‘victim feminists’ and terms the phenomenon, “reverse victimology”. In reverse victimology, feminism and candid discussions of victimization are deemed more pernicious sources of harm than sexual violence. I explore this theorization in Chapter 2.

It was within a largely anti-victim context that initial analysis about victimhood vis-à-vis survivorship first unfolded, drawing from Barry’s (1979) insight that women in abusive situations are, in fact, enacting agency through the creative strategies they deploy to survive violence. In the last two decades, these conceptualizations of the victim/survivor binary have gained purchase in dominant vernacular pertaining to sexual violence. For example, at the rape crisis center where I obtained counseling (in Boston), and in subsequent sexual violence response spaces where I have worked (in New Zealand), the term victim has been explicitly sidelined, even forbidden, in favor of

the survivor label. When I delivered a lecture on the untenability of the victim category in 2019, one student—who volunteers at the campus sexual violence response center—suggested that the term victim was not acceptable, as it deprives people of agency. The student’s statement offers a clear example of how the meaning of survivorship in the context of sexual violence and rape crisis feminism has changed in recent decades; Stringer (2014) handles this in her discussion of survivorship, which I expand upon below. Further, I consider conceptualizations of the label as the source of harm, rather than violent events, in Part II. To track these changes in meaning, I examine and analyze the origins, as well as the consequences, of the victim/survivor binary throughout this thesis.

Contributing to the anti-victim work of the early 1990s, Minow (1993) delivered a “Surviving Victim Talk” at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). Minow (1993) is concerned about the overuse of the term “victim”, the potential harm done by the label, and the quest for alternative language around victimization. Her argument emphasizes personal choice and agency, and chastizes the image of the powerless and submissive victim. She argues that claiming victim status does little to challenge oppression, trivializes violence, and blurs distinctions between degrees of suffering. She suggests that victim rhetoric undermines personal strength and responsibility. Minow reinforces the notion that victimhood is a pathetic core identity, and that victimhood legitimates bad habits and “can have a kind of self-fulfilling quality” (1992, p. 1430). Minow echoes the notion of the “victim mentality”, and early victimological frameworks that hold that victimization stems from characteristics inherent in individuals. Minow (1992) argues that victim identity is cast as totalizing, and that it undermines holistic, multidimensional views of women. In seeking an alternative language, Minow (1992) engages the rhetoric of survivorship to discuss the transcendence of the victim label.

The framework presented by Minow (1992) is a cornerstone to later discussions around victimhood and survivorship. She suggests that survivorship may be an alternative to the trouble with victim language. Further, Minow (1992, p. 1442) argues that:

we would all be better off if we replaced “either/or” thinking with acceptance of “both/and” understandings. A person who is raped and robbed

is neither just a victim nor just a multifaceted person who happens to have had those experiences.

This statement sits in tension with her arguments for getting away from the victim label. Such tension and complexity is generative, and is reiterated by later scholars, who build on her work.

Schneider (1993) examines victimhood and agency before introducing the term survivor. She challenges feminist work that reiterates “an incomplete and static view of women as *either* victims *or* agents”, with regard to battered women (1993, p. 387, emphasis in original). Similar to Minow, Schneider (1993) criticizes work in which victimhood and agency are framed as mutually exclusive and opposing, highlighting their overlaps and the resources used by victims to survive and resist on a daily basis. Schneider (1993, p. 390) goes on to discuss the term survivor, which was developed to “emphasize the human strengths and capacities of battered women who struggle to survive, protect themselves and their children, and keep their families functioning”. In exploring the victim/agent binary, she argues that agency is too focused on individual will and choice, and that claims of victimization are “inevitably contradictory” (Schneider, 1993, p. 395). In appealing for “sympathy, solidarity, compassion, and attention”, victims become suspect of evading responsibility, of giving up on personal strength. Schneider notes that the perils of the victim label are especially pertinent with regard to gendered victimization, since victim characteristics overlap with traditional ideas about women. She concludes with a call for increased tolerance for “contradiction, ambiguity, and ambivalence in women’s lives” (Schneider, 1993, p. 397). Schneider’s useful insight is reiterated by several feminists writing about the victim and survivor label, but she does little to explore the details of these contradictions.

Proffit (1996) takes up the tensions between victim and survivor identity as opposing identity categories. She discusses victim and survivor as mutually exclusive labels, in which “survivor appears as the mirror image of victim, the other end of the victim–survivor dichotomy” (Proffit, 1996, p. 25). She challenges the dichotomy, and critiques the one-dimensionality of both victim and survivor identity categories. Drawing on Barry’s notion of victimism, Proffit (1996) argues that any label, including the term survivor, persists in prioritizing violence with regard to identity formulation,

and strips complexity and whole personhood from those who survive violence; whether called victims and survivors, those signified are still defined in relation to violence and oppression. Proffitt examines the implications of violence on identity in social work practice, where social workers' responses to spousal abuse are rife with preconceived notions about battered women's agency. Proffitt (1996) criticizes experts who fail to realize how their work with battered women, and the assumptions they bring to that work, are actively constructing battered women as a category, and thus shaping battered women's lived experiences. Proffitt's insights dovetail well with Alcoff and Gray's (1994) assertion that expert responses to victims risk reshaping transgressive speech in a manner that recuperates dominant discourse.

Wood and Rennie (1994) add to the chorus of researchers calling for a more complex view of victims and survivors to challenge the binary formulation of victim and survivor. They interview eight subjects and discuss two prevalent themes: the challenging process of naming or identifying the rape event (and subsequently identifying themselves in relation to rape over time), and the role of male perpetrators in these formulations. They find that there are tensions in the discourses and narratives deployed by victim/survivors, who struggle to cast themselves as agents while attempting to convey the experience as real rape. Theirs is the first study that actively and demonstrably complicates the binary. They illuminate the ambiguity of victimhood and survivorship by analyzing qualitative data from victims and survivors. Wood and Rennie (1994, p. 127) also note that:

Feminist researchers often use the term *rape survivor* in order to avoid some of the negative connotations of the term *victim*. But the construction of yet another category is an unsatisfactory solution to the complex issue of victim identity, blame and control. (emphasis in original)

They discuss how their participants use various discourses, including feedback from professionals, to convey victim or non-victim identities. On the whole, the responses provided by their participants challenge simplistic views of victimhood or survivorship as mutually exclusive, and demonstrate the limits, tensions, and overlaps of the categories.

Wood and Rennie (1994) mark a pivot toward greater nuance in debates about victimhood and survivorship. They are the first to give shape to calls by previous

researchers for complex and nonbinary formulations of victimhood and survivorship. Kelly et al. (1996) advance efforts to examine the complexity of the terms. Their work responds to a wave of anti-victim writing in what they term “commercialized feminism”, or popular, mass-market feminism. Kelly et al. (1996) are concerned with the oversimplification of the terms victim and survivor. They advocate for the coexistence of victim and survivor identities, and argue that attempts to dichotomize victimhood and survivorship negate active forms of resistance deployed to survive victimization. They discuss the “victim/survivor dichotomy” to refer to the mutually exclusive use of the terms. This dichotomy positions victim and survivor as oppositional, where the term victim is negative, and survivor is positive. According to Kelly et al. (1996, p. 92),

Rather than challenge the stigmatizing meaning of ‘victim’ as initially intended, it is, in fact, reinforced, with the only route out being an identification with, or attribution of, the alternative of ‘survivor’.

They argue that while some individuals may benefit from the survivor identity to “move forward”, others benefit from lingering with the victim label and the harm done by violence.

Kelly et al. (1996) also criticize the therapeutic and self-help turn in conceptualizations of sexual victimization and its effects. They cite the popularity of the journey metaphor, especially in therapeutic settings, and the ways in which victim and survivor are often framed as stages or phases in a longer process. They offer an alternative conceptualization in which victimization is a statement of fact regarding an event, and survivorship pertains to what is done in response to that event, either immediately or over the long term. Furthermore, they warn that frameworks espousing healing or recovery are unrealistic and potentially harmful. Kelly et al. (1996) were the first to identify some of the patterns and themes I explore in this thesis. In Chapter 5, I advance their theorization through substantive engagement with how victim and survivor came to be configured as a narrative arc. I build on my own examination of the discursive roots of each term in Chapters 4 and 5.

Thompson (2000, p. 325) attempts to build upon, and complicate, these frameworks by arguing that research into sexual violence overlooks the long-term “positive outcomes” that survivors identify as being related to the experience of sexual

harm. These ‘positive’ impacts are personally positive rather than socially positive: they involve personal growth rather than political resistance or social change. Thompson perpetuates the victim–survivor dichotomy, positioning the negative valence of the former against the positive connotations of the latter. She also uncritically emphasizes the linear narrative arc by which one flees victimhood and claims survivorship. On the whole, Thompson’s (2000) analysis maintains consistency with dominant discourse. She analyzes participant comments in a manner consistent with those norms, rather than looking beyond them to explore novel meanings articulated by participants.

Young and Maguire (2003, p. 40) seek to expand on Wood and Rennie’s (1994) work, particularly how norms around naming and labeling force victim/survivors to fit their experience into dominant discursive frameworks. Echoing Kelly et al. (1996), they discuss the term victim as stating what occurred, while the term survivor emphasizes the response, and possible recovery or moving on; they conceive of these meanings within the narrative arc of moving from victim to survivor. Young and Maguire (2003, p. 49) discuss the continuum and journey metaphors by which one transcends victimhood, stating that participant responses suggest that, “It’s not that you *are* a victim or you *are* a survivor. Instead, you move from one end where something was done to you (victim) to where you do something about it (survivor)” (emphasis in original). Their approach suggests that the discourse of survivorship overlaps with notions of agency. In concluding, they suggest reconceptualizing the aftermath of sexual violence in terms of “prevailing”—they seek a new term to open up linguistic possibilities for making sense of and labeling oneself in relationship to sexual violence. Their suggestion runs counter to the critique offered by Kelly et al. (1996) and Wood and Rennie (1994), who contend that new labels fail to destigmatize victim status.

Dunn (2004) reviews the literature regarding the emergence of the survivor label and its application to battered women, accounting for shifts toward the discourse of survivorship and exploring its effects. She discusses frameworks in which survivorship is positioned as a remedy to the stigma of victimization, since survivorship is constructed as agentic in comparison to the innocence, blamelessness, and weakness associated with victims. Echoing Thompson (2002), Kelly et al. (1996), and Proffit (1996), Dunn (2004, p. 2) critiques how the two labels are “at opposite poles of an agency continuum”, creating a “discursive dichotomy” privileging survivorship.



Dunn (2004) also engages with survivorship, victimhood, and agency. She considers Barry's (1979) critique of feminist emphasis on the victim label, Lamb's (1996, 1999) claim that victims have been over-purified in a manner that erases agency, and Kelly et al.'s (1996) contention that feminists have historically overlooked women's resistance and positive, creative coping. She questions why victim identity continues to have purchase when it is "inherently stigmatizing" (Dunn, 2004, p. 22). Further, she argues that victim/survivors are a mixed, heterogeneous, and complex group, whose identities and stories do not fit into tidy categorizations. She also suggests that the stigma of victim identity can undermine victims' goals for obtaining support, while survivor identity may limit help-seeking, and shifts responsibility to individuals in counterproductive ways.

In a separate article, Dunn (2005, p. 235) engages "the politics of empathy" and constructions of victims in activism. Dunn charts the shift among activists and storytellers from an early focus on "emotionality and their victimization" toward emphasizing "rationality and their agency" (2005, p. 1). She explores how narratives are developed to garner emotional investment, by delivering characters and arcs that are recognizable within dominant discourse. Dunn is interested in how political mobilization happens through storytelling—how stories are told, what is presented as the real issue, and the manner in which causes and solutions are framed.

Dunn (2005) further explores the dichotomy between victimhood and agency, and how playing to the cultural privileging of agency is strategic for activists: it draws on shared cultural repertoires to craft narratives that evoke emotions which propel action. According to Dunn (2005, p. 238), brokering sympathy involves rendering victimization in recognizable narratives. As I will argue in later chapters, defaulting to recognizable narratives does little to challenge norms or change dominant understanding.

Following Dunn, Leisenring (2006) discusses wife battering and the negotiation of victim and survivor categories. Leisenring (2006) argues that there are complex, multiple, and conflicting discourses around victimhood. Those who experience victimization draw on many available discourses to reject or claim victim identity after an event. The manner in which individuals negotiate victim discourse can signal to friends or law enforcement that one was harmed, wronged, or mistreated, and can help

individuals obtain support and assert rights; however, they can also prompt blaming responses. Citing Dunn (2005), Leisenring notes that survivorship is one means by which people circumnavigate the minefield of victimhood, since it foregrounds personal strength and survival. Leisenring (2006) also cites Proffit (1996, p. 29), who argues that survivorship prioritizes “victimization, pain, and loss”, as a central feature in identity. According to Leisenring (2006), the victim label is limited, but also potentially fosters sympathy; battered women draw from dominant discourse, while engaging in creative ways with agency and survivorship. While victimhood is negative, Leisenring (2006, p. 312) suggests that the term survivor has a positive valence, and “implies qualities such as agency, coping, resistance, decision making, recovery and survival”.

The literature on victimhood and survivorship, and the relationship between the categories, tapers after Leisenring with two notable exceptions: Stringer’s (2014) comments on survivorship in her discussion of victim politics and rape crisis feminism, and Jordan’s (2013, p. 49) work that “challenges the concept of a journey ‘from victim to survivor’”. Jordan (2013) considers survival strategies during a rape event, and also in engagement with law enforcement and institutions. Jordan (2013) frames rape survival as ongoing, and challenges the dominant frame that holds therapy as essential to progressing from the negative valences of victimhood to the “positive state” of survivorship. Jordan (2013, p. 49) claims that we need “a more complex and nuanced understanding of how victims survive, and how such a view might hold practical implications for those subsequently engaging with victim/survivors of sexual violence”. She emphasizes survival in formal settings, which is consistent with existing literature on secondary victimization; yet, Jordan also gestures toward everyday interactions with friends and family. These are important considerations regarding the history of the survivor label and the role of social relationships in recovery.

Stringer (2014) makes important distinctions about survivor discourse in the contexts of rape crisis feminism and anti-victimism. She attends to shifts in the meaning of the survivor label as it relates to the victim label. One crucial difference is that, in the rape crisis context, the survivor label challenges victim blame, while in the anti-victim context, it bolsters it (Stringer, 2014). Further, according to Stringer (2014, p. 78), claims of the survivor label in a rape crisis context do not eschew the victim label or deny that victimization occurred: “Instead, ‘survivor’ is used because it incorporates

acknowledgement that victimization took place.” Understanding the survivor label in a manner that upholds claims of victimization opens possibilities for nuanced articulations of the victim and survivor labels in a rape crisis context.

Stringer (2014) also accounts for the uses and connotations of the victim label in rape crisis settings. For example, according to Stringer (2014, p. 30),

Rape crisis feminists distinguish between victimization as an experience and victim as a social identity arising out of experience, encouraging victims to ensure victimization does not define who they are.

In Chapter 4, I examine my own delineation between victim as an identity versus as a description of events that occurred. In later chapters, I problematize the notion that victim identity or experience is totalizing. Stringer (2014, p. 30) also discusses how the “ethos of survivorship” was intended to resist the stigma of the victim label and highlight “their capacities for self-definition, strength and resistance”. I take up these characteristics of survivorship, and the manner they are used to distance from the victim label, in Chapter 5.

Aside from Jordan (2013) and Stringer (2014), researchers since Leisenring have tended to label their subjects as either ‘victim’ or ‘survivor’. Two common threads in victim and survivor literature are worth noting. The first, which Leisenring (2006, p. 313) summarizes well, is that, “One cannot simultaneously be a passive victim and an agentic survivor.” This quotation is a summation of the dominant discourse either challenged or championed within scholarly discussions of victimhood and survivorship. While Kelly et al. (1996), Wood and Rennie (1994), and Dunn (2004, 2005) most directly challenge a binary formation of victim and survivor, Minow (1993), Schneider (1993), Proffit (1996), Thompson (2000), Young and Maguire (2003), and Leisenring (2006) identify and critique their binary formulation while reinscribing it. These tensions will be explored in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

Second, Kelly et al. (1996), Minow (1993), Proffit (1996), Schneider (1993), and Leisenring (2006) each caution about the limiting potential of basing identity off victimizing events. Victimhood is framed as a dominating identity, which becomes a core facet of the self, leaking into and pervading all aspects of a victim’s life. Emphasis on the risks of the victim label as a dominant, encompassing, and eternal identity lacks real-world substantiation, and propagates anti-victimist myths about the eternal nature

of victim identity more than it elucidates a lived reality. This framing of victimhood seems to build on the anti-victim rhetoric of the early 1990s, and is a common refrain in early literature on victimhood and survivorship. As I will explore in later chapters, scholarly framings of victimhood are often based on assumptions, rather than critical analysis, and risks promulgating dominant discourses rather than challenging ideas about victims that may do further harm.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of rape myths, the cultural scaffolding of rape, and the discourses of victimhood and survivorship in literature on gender-based violence. I have done so to provide some groundwork for later analysis. In Chapters 4 and 5, I explore the construction of the victim category and how it is situated in opposition to survivorship in everyday discourse around sexual violence. By providing an outline of the debate around victimhood and survivorship since Barry (1979), I hope to advance theorizations of the victim and survivor labels and their relationship.

Throughout this thesis, I consider the lived impacts of rape myths and the cultural scaffolding of rape. Rape myths are a significant contributing factor to rape as a social problem, supporting its proliferation and supporting victim-hostile sense-making and responses. However, their personal impact on victims has been largely unexamined.

In the next two chapters, I consider feminist theorists who have contributed to my approach to this thesis, and outline the autoethnographic method I used in this research. Taken together, these theoretical and methodological underpinnings provided the foundation upon which I explore the lived impacts of rape myths, and of the victim/survivor binary.

## Chapter Two

### Feminist theorizations

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives.

– Audre Lorde (2007a)

#### Living/Theorizing

I derive much of the content of this thesis from the fifteen year process by which I became a feminist. The theorizations I develop here are wrested from harsh realities in my own life. I came to understand these realities in light of feminist theory, which forms not only the basis for this thesis, but also the basis for how I approached and responded to my lived experience. Feminist theory shaped my reality in tangible ways. It is a sense of the stakes in feminist work that has motivated my desire to do this project. In the current chapter, I elucidate and articulate these feminist foundations, and consider how my thesis advances feminist theory.

I have constructed this chapter to enact what Ahmed (2017) describes as dragging theory back to life. Ahmed (2017) challenges the division of theory and experience, and advances the notion that feminist theory also consists of the work that we do at home and in everyday life. Ahmed's approach blurs distinctions between life and work, between the personal, political, and professional, in meaningful and creative ways. Feminist theoretical work has lived ramifications, and I wish to foreground praxis and the knowledge that derives from it in this thesis. This is not to say that I privilege experience over theory. Rather, following from Ahmed (2017), I show how they are interwoven and mutually generative. I begin this chapter with considerations of Ahmed's (2017) *Living a Feminist Life*, which is a poetic and accessible work of theory based in the realities of living as a feminist.

Next, I consider Brison's (2002) *Aftermath*, which afforded me a valuable perspective and approach to writing theory related to lived experiences of sexual victimization and its consequences. Brison's (2002) work bolsters the argument for taking an autoethnographic approach that avoids overgeneralization, but still treats a

singular victim perspective as valuable. She asserts the need to take a victim's knowledge and epistemological perspective seriously, thereby bolstering both autoethnographic and feminist theoretical approaches to theorizing sexual violence.

Later in this chapter, I tell some of my feminist story, and the role of several feminist thinkers in fostering my ability to endure and understand the events that form the raw material of this thesis. Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa were among the first feminists who had an influence on my work. I read Lorde for the first time in 2006, during my second year as an undergraduate, and Anzaldúa in my first year of my Masters program, in 2010. Their ideas gave me strength and courage to resist victim hostility on an almost daily basis, and to treat my own life as a source of knowledge. Emboldened by their writing, I theorized, analyzed, and worked on my life as it unfolded—both the realities of rape, and of living in a context of victim hostility and secondary victimization.

In early 2015, a year after receiving my Masters of Divinity degree, I encountered Rebecca Stringer's work. Reading her book *Knowing Victims* was an 'aha!' moment: it validated some of my own intimations, deepened my understandings, and gave me new language to theorize and analyze lived experience. Stringer (2014) provided new insights and frameworks that advanced my understanding of the conditions of the post-rape reality I had lived. In a construct she terms "neoliberal victim theory", Stringer (2014, p. 9) illuminates several key discourses that shaped my social world and inflected how others responded to the sexual violence I endured. I discuss these in depth below.

My relationship to these authors formulates what I call feminist company (see Ahmed, 2017), which is an intimate, intellectual collectivity that thrives through shared ideas. Long before encountering sexual assault and victim hostility, I began to conceive of certain theorists as companions. Their work provided a sense of solidarity and companionship across time and space, and induced a sense of solidarity in my intuitions, inclinations, and observations about dynamics of marginalization. Ahmed (2017) discusses companionship texts and their emboldening potential—their vital role in living a feminist life. My use of the language of companionship predates my encounter with Ahmed, and yet her work offers me new language for a long-held understanding, and an awareness that it is shared by other feminists: it is part of the

legacy of feminist writing. The theorists I discuss below have enhanced my language for writing and thinking as a feminist and autoethnographer. In this chapter, I set out the formative role that feminist company has had in the development of my own ideas and arguments, and begin to consider how this thesis advances their theoretical frames.

### Feminist living and learning

Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) is a work of theory. In it, she unpacks stories and insights gleaned in real life, in a feminist life. Ahmed (2017) deals extensively with the manner in which living a feminist life entails theorizing and learning through living, through ongoing confrontations with “what comes up” when attempting to inhabit and exist in a world that marginalizes and excludes people on the basis of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, and ability.

Ahmed's (2017) theoretical approach is one of form as much as content: she works ideas from multiple angles, meandering through stories and analysis, playing with language to refashion it as a tool that can be used to dismantle oppression as it is lived through, endured, and resisted. She weaves complex narratives and insights, reflecting the manner in which theory gained from life is applied to life in process. We learn as we go. Early in the text, she explicates the logic underpinning her approach, writing that:

The personal is theoretical. Theory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life. To abstract is to drag away, detach, pull away, or divert. We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 10)

Her book puts this idea into practice, bringing theory into living, bringing theory to life, doing and developing theory in living as a tool for persisting in contexts of oppression and marginalization. Ahmed (2017) elucidates how our understandings of the familiar limp—how, in living a feminist life, we run up against what we cannot thoroughly understand, and stumble headlong into questions we cannot answer and things we struggle to resolve (Ahmed, 2017). Theorizing is not an abstract process; it is lived. Those things we attempt to grasp are embedded within the fabric of our daily lives, and have material consequences.

Ahmed also writes about “sweaty concepts”, which are those ideas we develop from sitting with what is not immediately graspable, needs to be worked on, and is developed through difficulty. She frames it as “another way of being pulled out from a shattering experience” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 12). Sweaty concepts are the pearls agitated into being by a marginal body that is not at home, is at work to inhabit the world. According to Ahmed (2017, p. 12), “The task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty.” In my experience of developing sweaty concepts, there are points where intellectual efforts to appraise and comprehend the matter at hand falter and fail. In such moments, I need new frameworks.

At the points where intellect and ideas failed, I often give over to ‘not knowing’, to a more embodied process of feeling my way through unknown terrain. I explore how such an approach infused my methodological approach to this thesis, in Chapter 3, where I discuss Page’s (2017) use of vulnerable writing as a feminist methodology. Ahmed (2017, p. 12) writes that, “Ideas might be how we work with as well as on our hunches, those senses that something is amiss, not quite right...” Adding to this, I suggest that *feeling* in the dark is a useful tool to augment thinking.

In her “Killjoy Survival Kit”, Ahmed (2017) discusses how survival can be about maintaining hope for change and how “Survival here refers not only to living on, but to keeping going in the more profound sense of keeping going with one’s commitments” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 235). Her text is an exploration of the personal, professional, political, and intellectual ramifications of living by those commitments, and of the learning that happens when one lives in such a way. She uses personal narrative and experience as sites of inquiry and insight throughout her book.

As I struggled to conceptualize the underlying theoretical framework for this thesis, Ahmed’s work forced me to grapple with how, in living a feminist life, in responding to my life in a feminist way, I was doing feminist theory. I had long been “learn[ing] from how the same things keep coming up” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 9). In the years after my rapes, I struggled against victim hostility and rape myths among those whom I trusted in a distinctly feminist manner: I resisted; I theorized; I built solidarity with others who had been victimized. I was working constantly to understand my own life as it unfolded, to consider why people responded to me in ways that felt distancing, isolating, othering, and marginalizing. I wanted to understand the wider social context



feeding into these dynamics that caused further harm, which I later began to conceptualize as secondary victimization.

In the years immediate after the rapes, I knew that something was amiss in my social world, that it was exacerbating my suffering, but I did not have a name for it. Further, my attempts to name these dynamics as harmful were met with denial. If the rape itself was a deep wound, the social realities of victim hostility were salt that was rubbed into it daily. I was trying to understand what had happened to me at the hands of my rapist, and what was continuing to happen to me after the escape. Meanwhile, people around me continued to insist that there was nothing to understand or fight against: the problem was in my head, it was me; the events of the Amazon were something I had brought on myself. If there was a problem in the real world (in this case, sexual violence), it wasn't one that could be addressed—often, when I raised the issue, I was met with the adage that “this isn't the place for this conversation”. It seemed that those around me were ill-equipped to listen, or to make sense of my life's events without blaming me, the victim.

Sara Ahmed's work was a revelatory addition to my PhD research and writing, and settled the foundations of the work. Engaging with her work brought me back to my earliest encounters with writings by radical women of color, who offered me a foundational conceptual approach to living and theorizing my life and experience. Therefore, I turn to Ahmed's engagement with the work of Audre Lorde (who, she says, offered her a lifeline), bell hooks, and Gloria Anzaldúa:

Here was writing in which an embodied experience of power provides the basis for knowledge. Here was writing animated by the everyday: the detail of an encounter, an incident, a happening, flashing like insight. Reading black feminist and feminist of color scholarship was life changing: I began to appreciate that theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 10)

I explore Lorde and Anzaldúa's role in the theoretical basis for this thesis below.

Ahmed (2017, p. 162) discusses some of the ramifications of living a feminist life in the later chapters of her book, where she says feminism is “what we need to handle the consequences of being feminist.” She explores the fatigue and exhaustion of coming up against walls, of being marked as the problem by naming the problem, of

being embattled in a fight that we did not choose, and of being blamed for reaching a break point as if we do it to ourselves. In response, she writes about breaking or brokenness:

Perhaps we need to develop a different orientation to breaking. We can value what is deemed broken; we can appreciate those bodies, those things, that are deemed to have bits and pieces missing. Breaking need not be understood only as the loss of integrity of something, but as the acquisition of something else, whatever that else might be. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 180)

Ahmed's reframing of breaks and broken things is useful in considering conceptualizations of victimhood, and of the possibility of a shattered self after sexual trauma (which I discuss in Chapter 6). Embracing brokenness allows for a gathering of broken pieces to create something new, something powerful and potentially political.

According to Ahmed (2017, p. 185), her framing of brokenness gives rise to possibilities for a queer crip politics: "A queer crip politics might involve a refusal to cover over what is missing, a refusal to aspire to be whole." Victimhood, as I discuss in Chapter 4, is a broken category, and encompasses those who are ruined by sexual violence or else deemed to have a victim mentality—and thus, an inherent fault. The victim label is disavowed in part to eschew perceptions of brokenness. However, I suggest that there is liberatory potential in claiming brokenness, and that doing so in the context of victimhood may be politicizing.

Ahmed (2017) also addresses the "feminist snap": the point at which bonds, relationships, and ties are snapped, when a feminist reaches her breaking point. She offers a critique of resilience, arguing that it is a discourse that encourages individuals to toughen up in the face of immense pressure and oppression and "keep taking it" (Ahmed 2017, p. 189). The snap happens when feminists stop taking it: it is an ending and a beginning. It may seem to happen in an instant, but it has a history, has built up to over time. The snap can generate relief and open new possibilities for living a feminist life, even if doing so requires resignations, or rupturing bonds.

I think of Ahmed's (2017) writing about "good company", "companion texts", and "feminist collectivity" as an antidote to the feminist snap. In the early days of my feminist awakening, Lorde and Anzaldúa were my first companions. Stringer was a vital addition, years down the track. Brison added new styles and insights to the process.

More recently, Ahmed joins the gang. I carry these women's ideas in my work and my life. They offer insight and a sense of solidarity in resistance. Their ideas permeate my own thinking and this thesis, harkening what Ahmed (2017) refers to as the practice of feminist citation. According to Ahmed (2017, p. 16):

Citation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before us; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow.

Citation is an intimate form of interlocution and intellectual companionship. The theory we do as feminists creates new contexts and concepts that are critical to our own survival. It was feminist companionship that enabled me to endure, to live, to snap. It helped me weather multiple storms; it made me staunch. It is this type of relationship to feminist theory that propelled my thesis, even before I could name its impact or role in the work.

### Learning in the aftermath

Susan Brison's (2002) *Aftermath: Violence and the remaking of a self* deals with various sequelae of sexual violence and attempted murder, and weaves together feminist philosophy and theory with personal narrative and reflection. Encountering her work provided me with the theoretical bedrock and insight to augment what I had found in Lorde, Anzaldúa, and Stringer, whom I discuss below. Of the theorists who have most strongly informed the basis of my research, Brison is the only one who dedicates an entire work to her experienced sexual victimization. In doing so, she creates scope for valuing victims' perspective in feminist philosophy and research.

Brison positions the necessity of the victim perspective in various fields from the outset of her book. She argues against the notion that scholarly writing about the self is self-indulgent, instead positing self-narrative and insight as "a welcome antidote to scholarship that, in the guise of universality, tends to silence those who most need to be heard" (Brison, 2002, p. 6). Brison (2002, p. 25) points out the "risk of overgeneralising (as well as under-generalizing)." Building on her advice about overgeneralizing, I wish to state explicitly that I am not speaking for all victim/survivors; I hope my inclusion of backstory has helped in outline the position from which I write. In the chapters ahead, I aim to phrase my findings in a manner that resists overgeneralization by explicitly

restating how findings stem from personal experience. This is to “refrain from overgeneralising in [my] conclusions” (Brison, 2002, p. 30).

Brison is careful and cautious in her privileging of marginal voices and centering of victims’ perspectives: she suggests speaking together, which can elicit cautious insights and understandings that are useful, if limited in their generalizability. This ties in well with an intersectional approach, since each victim’s perspective is reflective of their interlocking experiences of race, class, gender, access to resources, ability, and so on. The value of recognizing limited scope is echoed by Page (2017), whose work on vulnerable writing I discuss in the following chapter.

Writing about the self is, according to Brison (2002), useful to other forms of scholarship: it is a necessary augmentation and addition. Self-based writing offers a lens into lived experience in a manner similar to Ahmed’s challenge to the division between theory and experience: in living, we learn, we see things that can only be seen from within experience, and we are able to apply academic tools that enable us to understand and analyze our experiences as they are lived. According to Brison,

the discussion of sexual violence in—or as—art could use the illumination provided by a victim’s perspective. Perhaps the most important issues posed by sexual violence are in the areas of social, political, and legal philosophy, and insight into these, as well, requires an understanding of what it’s like to be a victim of such violence. (2002, p. 4)

Emphasis on lived experience, on *what it’s like* to endure victimization and its aftermath, is the foundation of her book. She goes further, challenging philosophers to admit the value of diverse voices, to resist abstraction and universalization; she argues that, “Some topics, however, such as the impact of racial and sexual violence on victims, cannot even be broached unless those affected by such crimes can tell of their experiences in their own words” (Brison, 2002 p. 6).

Brison is concerned with the aftermath: with accounts of how social realities impinge on human lives, from a victim’s perspective. She constructs *Aftermath* based on the claim that a victim’s perspectives have value; she values victim voices and affords them credibility, even as she recognizes that any individual voice is necessarily limited in scope and not universal. This is important in light of the insight that “survivor’s views on sexual violence will often enjoy less credibility than anyone else’s” (Alcoff

and Gray, 1993). Brison extends this credibility without valorizing victim's voices, which would champion victim perspectives as *more* legitimate or important than others. She also avoids distilling the victim voice to a singular voice.

Among the insights in the book, and among the larger foundational elements of this thesis, is Brison's insight that the aftermath, the reconstruction of the self, and the processes following sexual violence are relational. Memories are formed and constructed in a social context. Individual stories are laden with history and social meaning. She discusses how relationships to others in the aftermath impact upon survival and reconstructing a traumatized self. According to Brison (2002, p. 62),

Trauma survivors are dependent on empathic others who are willing to listen to their narratives. Given that the language in which such narratives are conveyed and are understood is itself a social phenomenon, this aspect of recovery from trauma also underscores the extent to which autonomy is a fundamentally relational notion.

She emphasizes that the process by which trauma survivors come to grips with their situation is predicated on how others respond to them. She also notes some of the factors that limit these responses: how many people lack opportunities to learn the skills to empathize, listen to, and speak with victims; how victim blame is at the ready when listeners reach for clues regarding how to respond to victims; how our vocabulary for discussing sexual violence and its consequences is limited.

Brison also builds on Minow (1992) and Herman (1992), noting the need for a woman who has suffered sexual victimization to "reconnect with humanity", and the extent to which this possibility "depends, to a large extent, on other people". (Brison, 2002, p. 60). She likens enduring after sexual violence to a kind of disability, insofar as one's ability to navigate and function in the world "depends largely on how one's social and physical environments are set up" (Brison, 2002, p. 60). Furthermore, Brison (2002, p. 64) suggests that, "These aspects of trauma and recovery reveal the deeply social nature of one's sense of self and underscore the limits of the individual's capacity to control her own self-definition." Emphasis on the relational is vital. She challenges the notion that individual agency is oppositional to victim identity by emphasizing the social. It also gives primacy to relationships, and centralizes how identity negotiation and self-reconstruction after sexual violence happens in interactions with and

relationships to others. In this thesis, I explore interpersonal interactions and conversations that influenced my identity negotiation. These conversations with others offered useful insight, or else inflicted pain and incited resistance. In many instances, it seemed that others were unable to hear the burdens I carried every day after my escape. Brison, too, nods to the inability of others to bear the realities of such violence.

Misguided responses, even if well-intentioned, can incite further pain and cause feelings of isolation. Brison (2002) acknowledges the difficulty others have in understanding, conceptualizing, and speaking about trauma, how this renders some unable to hear about the trauma, and thus barricades possibilities for victims to tell their stories and be empathetically heard. Not being heard, for Brison, seemed to thrust her back into the ravine that was the site of her attack. It left her feeling alone and without help. Her account resonates with a number of my own experiences after the Amazon, and highlights the urgency with which I sought to understand not only what had happened to me at the hands of my rapist, but what was happening to me afterwards.

Brison deals extensively with the shattering and dissolution of the self, which I explore in the latter portion of Part II. Her style of writing weaves story, insight, and scholarship. She has a particular skill for ending chapters without forcing resolution or tidy, uplifting conclusions, yet manages to end on a note that brims with possibility, undistorted by ‘positive thinking’. She questions the language of ‘recovery’ throughout the book, noting how she can never get back the person she was before the attack. Her approach to recovery is tentative and inquisitive, rather than solid and definitive: “Perhaps the goal of recovery is, simply, to go on. But—go on with what?” (2002, p. 116). Her approach offers a gentle hope reminiscent of Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) insights, which I take up in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6. Janoff-Bulman discusses the altered worldview available to those who have accommodated traumatic experience: cautious and aware of possibilities for trauma, loss, and pain, but also willing to go on.

These insights offer analytic tools, not only for my thesis, but for my continued ability to endure after rape, in a victim-hostile environment. I draw upon Brison throughout this thesis, but I also draw on Brison in continuing to live my own life. In writing this thesis, I continue to live a story shaped by the events of the Amazon, and to theorize based on these experiences. Brison’s (2002) work has given me numerous

insights and tools to continue the ongoing, vulnerable intellectual work of developing an autoethnographic account of secondary victimization after sexual violence.

## Backstory

In the first half of this chapter on theory, I have outlined the role of Brison (2002) and Ahmed (2017) in formulating the theoretical foundation for this thesis. Now, I will outline some of the personal backstory that gives rise to this thesis. At the outset of writing, I had not intended to include my backstory at all. Upon engaging with Ahmed's (2017) work, including my backstory became important in challenging the bifurcation of theory from lived experience. According to Ahmed (2017, p. 19),

I explore the process of becoming feminist. Reflecting on this process can offer a way of doing feminist theory, a way of generating new insights into how gender works, as a social system, or as machinery that tends to spit some bodies out. Insights into gender as well as race are wordly. Becoming feminist involves coming up against the world.

The addition to change my approach was further bolstered by Page (2017) and her argument for the value of hesitation, tentativeness, and vulnerability in feminist writing, which I address in Chapter 3. Brison's (2002) clear articulation of the relational aspects of life after sexual violence also made it vital to classify and contextualize my relationships both to theorists and to people in my social world. Therefore, I place the backstory here in an effort to apply the insights of Ahmed (2017) and Brison (2002).

I spent the bulk of my early adult life—through my undergraduate studies and my first years of my Masters in Divinity program—working diligently to address the psychological ramifications of complex trauma and unresolved grief. It took seven years of dedicated labor to address the suffering caused by the violent death of my mother in a car crash in 1990. A known symptom of PTSD is disassociation. I had lived in a disassociated state for most of my life; I was forced outside my own skin by pain. Feminist theorists Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa, whose work I discuss in the next section, offered me a map for returning to my body, for putting myself back together. They gave me language to articulate what I was coming to know through the process of confronting PTSD, and they offered companionship and a map along the way.

I consider my experience of trauma as marginalizing for two reasons: (1) it fractured my sense of self, and (2) it inhibited my connection to others due to the social consequences of my mother's death. Being "the girl whose mom died" was part of my identity throughout elementary school: teachers, peers, and parents all knew. I lived a reality outside the norm. I felt an acute sense that others did not know how to relate to me. I felt like an other, an outsider. The felt sense of marginalization was formative to my intellectual development, and alerted me at an early age to social responses to suffering. Engaging with the work of Lorde and Anzaldúa prompted me to consider my own identity and experiences of marginalization, and situate myself intersectionally (see Crenshaw, 1991).

I write as a queer, white woman, from upper middle-class Los Angeles. My identity as a woman has been inflected by social norms but also laden with possibility by virtue of my mother's death and the absence of maternal, gendered role modeling in my home after the age of five. I came out as bisexual at the age of 14, to which my best friend responded "I know" with total blasé. My understanding of womanhood has been queer from the outset, as well as subject to imagination and creativity.

I was raised in a bilingual and mixed-race home for the first five years of my life. My early childhood involved going back and forth between my father's home in Los Angeles and Mexico. After my mother's death, it was a Mexican woman named Norma, my mother's closest friend who had lived with our family for many years, whom I called "second mama". Her Latino/a family is the only extended family I have ever known: my aunties and uncles, cousins, all my relatives until age five, were Latino/a. These visits ended when Norma decided she wanted to keep and raise my brother and I as her own. She disappeared with us for two months. When my dad found us, we said goodbye to Norma and our Mexican family. However, the imprint of being raised in a bilingual, bicultural context lingers to this day.

Having lacked the resources, support, and maturity to deal with these early traumas in childhood or adolescence, I began working through these formative experiences as a young adult. By 2012, I was experiencing significant relief from the chronic physical and emotional pain I had carried since my earliest memories. I was filled with a delicate hope for the next stages of my life. That summer, I went to the Amazon as part of a field education project. I was to work with an indigenous leader on



various postcolonial activist projects to protect indigenous culture, traditions, language, and land. What I could not know was that a trap had been laid out for me by the man who was supposed to be my supervisor, host, and collaborator.

Within days of my arrival, he had changed my name; he gave me a slanted bed with only a pale pink blanket between my body and the hard wood, designed to deprive me of sleep; he controlled my food intake; he surveilled and managed all my contact with the outside world—he even lied to me about his contact details so that no one in the outside could reach me; he drugged me against my will with psychedelic plants; he used the altered state of consciousness he had induced to manipulate me beyond the point of self-recognition. I was paralyzed and intoxicated as he made sexual advances, pressed his body against mine in the dark, and told me repeatedly that what he was doing was for healing, the will of God. I don't even believe in God, but I was so disoriented by the drugs that I almost believed him. I lacked any capacity to resist his assaultive advances.

He subverted and commandeered my will, such that even my inner dialogue no longer spoke in my own voice. He raped me no less than six times. After 25 days, I managed to outsmart him and escape in the hours after I discovered that he was internationally wanted for multiple murders, that there were more than a dozen dismembered bodies in sacks along a nearby riverbank, which were thought to be his victims. The last time I looked into his eyes, I knew that he would kill me without pause or question if he believed it would serve his aims.

My escape took two days, first on a bus through the Amazon and up into the Andes, and then via plane. My thoughts were occupied with two primary concerns as I fled: (1) I was constantly looking over my shoulder, trying to stay one step ahead to stay alive; (2) I was overcome by an urgent need to understand what had happened to me and tell the story. Telling the story was a lifeline. It offered hope that the senselessness of what I had lived through might mean something; maybe it would help someone else avoid or cope with violence. I imagined that I might learn something worth sharing.

I derived strength from remembering what I had already survived: the trauma I had already found a way to live with after my mother's death. I derived strength, as well, from the feminists whose work had accompanied me through that first pain. The works of Lorde (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) and Anzaldúa (1987, 2002) created possibilities

for finding words to describe what I had lived through; they made it feel possible to resist shame, blame, and silence.

These feminist radical women of color also assisted in an intersectional approach to my ongoing analysis of what had occurred in the Amazon. In the years after my escape, I worked consistently to see my rapist as a complex person who was shaped by colonialism, injustice, and the ongoing environmental degradation of the land belonging to his family and ethnic group. Years later, an editor interested in my book proposal asked me if his actions were an avenue for justice in the wake of colonialism. The question was phrased as though such justice might be permissible, tolerable, or legitimate. My agent balked. I balked. The meeting ended swiftly. Yet, underneath the cruel question was an understanding that his exploitation of my body was shaped by the exploitation of his people: it was a means for survival.

As I spoke to more women who had survived this man, I learned that his *modus operandi* involves drugging and raping (“seducing”) white women from North America and Europe. He tells his targets that his land is under threat from mining corporations and asks them to gather donations so that he can purchase his land and keep it safe. In reality, he has owned that land for over two decades: there is no threat to it. He uses deception, drugs, and sexual violence to control women. He garners huge sums of money via fraudulent fundraising efforts. He uses these resources to support his large family. His cruelty is a business for profit, and he legitimizes his actions as justice for the colonization of his people. He conscientiously uses the colonial imagination of indigenous people as tragic heroes and wisemen to earn trust and build rapport. His technique has been practiced, calculated, and refined over at least a decade.

I had ventured to his village to join the resistance against the mining of his land, and he attempted to turn my body into his mine. This inversion lingered in the back of my mind in the years after the Amazon, as I considered his social context, history, and human interests. His actions against me were inexcusably cruel, but also comprehensible.

My engagement with intersectional feminism and the work of queer women of color fostered my commitment, after the Amazon, to avoid dehumanizing my rapist. It inclined me toward intersectionality, and also helped me resist a barrage of comments that white women going to the Amazon should ‘know better’ than to trust indigenous

and Latino men; that I should have been poised at the ready to resist inevitable advances.

I have never known whether to call what happened to me acquaintance rape or stranger rape. I knew him; I had developed rapport with him; we had mutual friends. But the entire context of knowing him was fabricated for the express purpose of rape and exploitation: he engineered the whole thing. What's more, the litany of other criminal charges and allegations against him, especially the murders and trafficking of human body parts, align with myths around stranger rape, and with the misconception that rape ends in murder. I am aware of a tension in my research, because certain facets of the rapes I experienced fall outside the statistical norms of sexual violence. However, our acquaintance, and his tactic of isolating victims and using drugs for incapacitation are well within the statistical norms of sexual violence (see Senn, 2015).

The events of the Amazon, horrific as they were, were something I felt I could come back from, something which, in due time, I could confront, process, and digest. I believed from the outset that the experience would change me, but I had hope for that change. What I did not fathom was the extent to which that process would be compounded by the swell and tide of rape myths and victim blame, by attacks on my character for daring to speak about sexual violence, by the efforts of some of the people I trusted most to mute any attempt to publicly tell the story of what had happened to me. The victim-hostile context to which I returned after the Amazon was as damaging as my rapist had been.

In time, it was secondary victimization that would demand my full attention. My scrutiny of various interactions and relationships, and the discourses that both fostered them and were embedded within them, was illuminated by Stringer's (2014) neoliberal victim theory, which I discuss below. In this thesis, I examine these more intimate, everyday forms of secondary victimization.

A full account of my story is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, bits and pieces emerge in each of the following chapters, as source material and in the analysis itself. In the following section, I explore my early encounters with feminist texts, specifically Lorde and Anzaldúa. I then move on to a consideration of Stringer's (2014) neoliberal victim theory.

## First encounters

Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa articulate life-giving and radical possibilities for inhabiting a woman's body in an oppressive context, for reorganizing a shattered sense of self, for accessing and speaking from a deeply embodied place and believing that the insights gleaned therein *counted for something*. Their bodies of work opened doorways to hidden sources of knowledge, power, and resistance.

In 2006, I read Audre Lorde for the first time. Three essays/speeches—"Uses of the Erotic", "Poetry is Not a Luxury", and "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action"—were formative texts in my becoming feminist (Lorde, 2007c, 2007a, 2007b). Lorde's work validated what I had sensed to be an intimate and political relationship between language, the body, and lived experience. The content of these essays, which I discuss below, is reinforced by her style of writing and speaking, which is lucid, clear, erotic, poetic, and anchored in a life guided by intersectional feminist values (although the work predates Crenshaw's work on intersectionality). In attending to her lived and embodied experience, she arrives at intersectional insights that open pathways to resistance. She helped radicalize my feminism and my politics, and set me on an intellectual path of pursuing more perspectives from radical women of color.

According to Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" emerged from a period of stark reflection, while she awaited news about the status of a tumor in her breast. Her writing within this period, and the insights she gleaned while facing the reality of illness and death, are steeped in the knowledge of finitude, casting fear in a different light. In her brush with mortality,

priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I *ever* been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end. (Lorde, 2007b, p. 41, emphasis in original)

I read this text several times between 2006 and 2012. Lorde's words reached though my chronic pain—the bodily manifestations of grief and trauma. She urged me to speak, to explore my inner life and its links to the social world and systemic oppression, to demand answers, to dive into what I felt and saw and lived, and to speak it. Halfway through the speech, she directly challenges her audience: "[I'm] doing my work—[I've]

come to ask you, are you doing yours?” (Lorde, 2007b, p. 42). Reading her work, I had a strong feeling about what my work was, and saw the value of grieving and confronting the past in a context where death and trauma are often omitted from everyday society. Refusing to be silent about that work was something I came to see as political, as a result of her writing.

Lorde (2007b, p. 41) deals with fear as the root of silence, and harm as its result. Several lines from this piece have become etched in my mind: “My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you.” Encountering this text foreclosed on the possibility of remaining silent about injustice or pain, or the truth as I saw it. After the Amazon, these words made suffering in silence impossible. Had I never encountered her work, I may have suffocated under shame and refused to confront the proliferation of sexual violence in my social circle. Having read her work, I knew silence would not protect me: that it posed a threat to me.

In the essay I discuss above, and in “Poetry is Not a Luxury”, Lorde argues that finding and speaking the words for our experiences provide grounds for solidarity and connection to other women. She urges readers to speak, to scrutinize those “fears which rule our lives and form our silences” (2007b, p. 36). She harnesses language as a means for resistance, as a means for survival. In particular, in “Poetry is Not a Luxury”, she lends a sense of legitimacy to sensory and emotionally felt experience: “Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling” (Lorde, 2007a, p. 37). She cautions against getting lost in abstract word play and chastises the male-dominated poetry canon:

I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover their desperate wish for imagination without insight. (Lorde, 2007a, p. 37)

She advocates a radical and embodied relationship to language, and locates feeling as instructive in imagining alternative futures and strategies for survival: poetry as possibility and strength. In “Uses of the Erotic”, she advances her argument for the value of felt, emotional, and sensory experience as a source of power. She links the

erotic to the spiritual and political, and argues that the erotic is not only a source of power, but a possible guide for living.

In the last few years, I have worked to understand and theorize secondary victimization as it has occurred, and Lorde's body of work empowered me in the process. In my initial attempts to comprehend the rapes and initial responses, my language limped, and my intellectual understanding of the events around me did not suffice: the emotional and sensory valence of experience was overpowering. Still I strove to articulate it, to find the words that *felt right to me*, which is a phrase that Lorde uses in several works.

Lorde's radical approach had become so ingrained in me by 2012 that I failed to realize how my commitment to articulating the realities of rape would challenge those around me. In that sense, Lorde's influence not only shaped my own experience, it shaped my actions and behavior, my outspokenness, and thus created the context in which those around me responded to my victimization. In the tidal wave of those (often troubling) responses, Lorde's approach continued to provide me with tools to watch, listen, analyze, and work on understanding the chaos that had become my life.

Gloria Anzaldúa's work is multilingual, multicultural, and situated geographically along the Mexican–American border. She writes in English as well as several dialects of Spanish, and uses Nahuatl words and concepts. She situates herself as a queer woman: as someone who belongs in multiple worlds. She tells of her university days, where she was tugged away from school or from her family home, whether by the hearth or the blackboard, “body prone across the equator between the diverse notions and nations that comprise you” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 548). The body figures as central to her work, and she writes about colonization, the violence of delineating borders, and their ramifications for humans and shared social worlds. These borders create fault lines along human flesh, and break people and communities apart, such that new cultures and languages emerge.

Anzaldúa echoes Lorde's understanding of deep and hidden reserves of power. She writes about the “Shadow Beast” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 38), that which is deemed unacceptable, lustful, or dangerous by white supremacist heteropatriarchal society. It is a beast on whose face she finds tenderness, not sin. Her work (1987, 2002) builds on images and metaphors of dismemberment, fracture, rupture, death, decay, and the

perilous path of knowledge. Knowing will break and remake a person, according to Anzaldúa. She maps the process of knowing as one of destruction, collapse, and regeneration, giving rise to irrevocable changes in oneself and one's living.

Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape "knowing", I won't be moving. Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. "Knowing" is painful because after "it" happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before.

(Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 70)

Anzaldúa also engages with the process of writing as one with the potential to transform trauma, to heal, to craft a world and a life. The world-making potential of language overlaps Lorde and Anzaldúa's work. Anzaldúa writes in a manner that foregrounds flesh and blood (and the Earth) as sources of knowledge, wellsprings of insight: for there is no writing without a body to experience the world, no narrative or conceptualization without means to write it out.

Anzaldúa's (1987, p. 101) approach involves a "tolerance for ambiguity". Of the new *mestiza*, she writes, "Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else." Her approach synthesizes well with Page's (2017) approach to vulnerable writing.

I first read Anzaldúa in 2011, not long before my nightmare in the Amazon. I reread her again in late 2012, months after my escape. Her framework for developing knowledge resonated with post trauma realities. My inner life was violent in the three years after the rapes: I felt as though I was being torn apart. Her acquaintance with the felt realities of trauma and its impacts on self-formation were crucial contributors to my survival, and inoculated against total isolation during some of the most difficult periods after the rapes. I found companionship in her work.

I read Anzaldúa with caution and hesitation, realizing that her work is specific to a cultural experience and colonial inheritance that I do not share. While I could relate to the violence of marginalization and trauma, ours are different stories. Still, she gave me some understanding of the gifts of my queer identity, and offered a new definition of femininity and feminist power. Her work also came to bear on how I understood my

rapist's actions. He was outspoken in his hatred of colonialism and its legacy for his people, and he used the rhetoric of protecting indigenous culture and land to lure in targets, which were predominately white women who represented—to him—the new face of a violent colonial legacy. He justified his rape of me in part by seeing himself as entitled to white women's bodies as some kind of justice. He weaponized the language of healing colonial wounds; he reversed and inverted the wounds of the colonial legacy to legitimize his violence. Anzaldúa's work helped me more deeply understand the ramifications of the colonial legacy for him and his people. While it by no means excuses his actions, it has been worthwhile to understand. For all the pain he caused, and while I do not readily offer forgiveness, I have worked hard to never lose sight of the wider social and political context and history that continue to shape him, his family, and his social and material realities.

Lorde and Anzaldúa have been central to my becoming a feminist. In difficult times, it felt as if they walked beside me. As I delved deep into the emotional, intellectual, and relational realities of extreme trauma, their insights illuminated my path and offered a felt sense of companionship. Anzaldúa emboldened me to throw myself into change, to embrace the destruction and pain. She gave me intellectual tools, a theoretical construct, that allowed for regeneration after breaking. She gave me hope that I could emerge on the other side radicalized and transformed.

After the Amazon, the work of these two women bolstered me against the tide of rape myths and victim blame that followed my experience of sexual violence. Their work is embedded in the ideas I develop in this thesis, as they were embedded in the process by which I sought to make sense of what had occurred in the Amazon. The violence of my victimization—and the ongoing violence of secondary victimization—altered my sense of self and my approach to life and relationships. Lorde and Anzaldúa sculpted the contours of my own process of change, rendering it at once personal, political, and eventually, professional.

### Neoliberal victim theory

As I navigated a victim-hostile environment, I spoke out. I did so from the foundation of understanding provided to me by Lorde and Anzaldúa. In speaking out, I was able to encounter a wide range of responses to my position and my story. Through



interviews, conference talks, radio shows, and personal conversations, my story reached tens of thousands of people. I was able to receive direct responses from several hundred of those people. The vast majority of these were well intentioned, but missed the mark. A select few were informed, and helpful. Another select few were aggressive, cruel, and intended to attack my character, negate my claims, shut me up, and literally stop the presses. This last group is what I remember best, perhaps because pain has a way of searing itself in memory.

Those who were well intentioned but poorly informed formed the bulk of my experience. Those with good intentions were interesting, in that they seemed to endorse subtle rape myths, and have a default attitude of victim blame. Yet many also described themselves as feminist. Several individuals asked me how I might have avoided the rapes, or when my intuition indicated I was in danger, or why I did not heed my intuition. In the same breath, they insisted that they did not blame me for what happened to me. One woman insisted on telling me about all the work she had done for women's reproductive rights, as if to bolster her feminist credentials and support her claim that she wasn't blaming me, when, in fact, she was prompting me to consider all the ways I had failed to keep myself safe or remove myself from my rapist. Many people urged me to take personal responsibility for the situation (which I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5), as though doing so was the best path forward for healing and personal growth.

It was after I had removed myself from these relationships and this social context, when the pain of people's responses became too much to bear, that I first encountered the work of Rebecca Stringer. Her theorizations illuminated the phenomena I had been experiencing for three years at that stage. She gave me new tools and new language, which augmented and advanced my understanding of what I had lived through. In particular, her development of neoliberal victim theory offered tangible relief to my suffering and struggle by helping me understand the logic underpinning so many of the most painful reactions I encountered. By applying her analysis, I could identify these logics as stemming from wider cultural and social ideologies and beliefs.

Stringer's (2014) neoliberal victim theory (NVT) offers a framework for understanding how neoliberal values, especially personal responsibility, are applied to victims in a manner that nurtures victim blame. Gilmore (2017, p.11) highlights how "neoliberalism presents an aspirational but false agency to an individual cleansed of

history.” Personal responsibility, in the context of this thesis, refers to individual choice and action through which an individual becomes accountable for the consequences of those choices or actions. According to Gilmore (2017, p.8), we must attend to

the importance of neoliberalism as an analytical lens through which to view the rhetoric of individual agency and responsibility. In neoliberalism, the state benefits from abandoning “the individual” to his or her own care and promotes that exposure as the freedom to choose in the absence of a safety net of appropriate support.

A fuller understanding of neoliberal victim theory requires some engagement with neoliberalism more generally. Its history and economic policies provide concrete examples of what have become more generalized ideologies regarding the privatization of responsibility and resilience, as well as expectations regarding how citizens ought to conduct themselves.

The neoliberal economics that came to the fore in the 1970s were developed by Milton Friedman and championed by economists at the Chicago School (and its satellite school in Pinochet’s Chile) and UC Berkeley (as well as among the Berkeley Mafia at work in Suharto’s Indonesia). Its economic framework involves radical reforms in service to laissez-faire economics: privatization (in which national resources and services are sold off to the private sector), deregulation of the market, free trade, and governmental austerity in pursuit of economic growth. Its vision champions the distribution of resources based on trickle-down economics: by nurturing the wealthy (i.e., tax breaks), persons across other socioeconomic strata would hypothetically profit as well. In theory, neoliberalism involves dissolving governmental regulatory powers (and subsequently undermining democratic power and processes) and bolstering individual responsibilities and freedoms, while trusting the market (supply and demand) to perform self-regulation.

According to Klein (2007), the neoliberal experiment came to life in Chile and Indonesia in the 1970s. Its implementation was reliant on military dictatorships. The tactics of these regimes included genocide, disappearances, and mass murder. In more recent years, neoliberalism has come home to roost in the United States, especially since the Reagan administration, and it has gained a strong foothold in the United Kingdom, Europe, New Zealand, and Australia. Klein (2007) provides a detailed analysis and

compelling case studies to support her argument that neoliberal economics in fact depend upon violence and militarism; these policies take root during or immediately following shocks to citizenries such as war, terrorism, disaster, or the collapse of government. Neoliberalism hinges on catastrophe—hence Klein’s reference to the disaster capitalism complex. In addition to a rather nefarious governmental revamping of economics, neoliberalism has a strong cultural valence, and has infiltrated and shaped dominant discourse so as to become common sense. Its cultural implications bear heavily on conceptualizations of victims.

Neoliberal logics run deep in contemporary, shared social values. In the United States and New Zealand, individual responsibility is prized, including the responsibility to protect oneself from harm, to grab life by the horns and achieve success (not only financially, but increasingly in terms of purpose, health, and meaning), and to make good on terrible circumstances or traumatic experiences. According to Gilmore (2017, p. 91)

The narrative that underwrites neoliberalism promotes personal responsibility. It places both the blame for structural problems and the responsibility for their solution on individuals. Within neoliberalism, the individual is endowed with the appearance of personal choice (Pepsi or Coke?), while the asymmetries of actual power, vulnerability, and reward are continuously suppressed through the language of self-striving.

Neoliberal ideologies champion radical individualism, self-surveillance, and self-improvement or personal growth based on individual will. It frames an individual’s inner life as the site for possibility, change, and resistance.

For example, Oprah Winfrey advises overstressed and discontented workers to bring chachkies or family photos to place on their desk as motivation and stress management strategies; in other words, to find cheap, feel-good attitude fixes, instead of railing against oppressive systems that foster unmanageable work conditions (see Aschoff, 2015). Every grey cloud has a silver lining under neoliberal logics. So too does every silver lining have a cloud, and the ominous cloud of neoliberalism has become a fixed feature in our sky to the point that many accept it as normal—and submit to social and discursive pressures to take it upon themselves to find the silver edges. It’s hard to see alternatives beyond the storm.

These cultural articulations of neoliberalism create a particularly hostile climate for victims of crime, a climate which both fosters and is fostered by victim blame. According to Stringer (2014, p. 2), anti-victim talk:

mark[s] a largely conservative intervention upon the language of suffering and social being. Coinciding historically with the rise and consolidation of neoliberal hegemony, much anti-victim talk powerfully reflects the values of neoliberal thought, in particular the concept of personal responsibility.

Stringer (2014) provides an overview of anti-victim feminism (and some straightforward anti-feminism), which came to prominence in the 1990s. Anti-victim feminism was largely a backlash, parading feminist sympathies (women's empowerment) to push back on the gains made in resisting women's victimization (what anti-victim writers term victimism). Paglia, Hoff Sommers, and Roiphe were particularly dominant in the 1990s. These women reshaped social understandings of women's victimization, reframing victim talk as disempowering all women, and crippling advancement in women's sexual liberation. Stringer uses these texts to generate larger insights into the logics, rhetorics, and strategies of anti-feminists and anti-victim feminists, bolstered as they are by neoliberal logics. Part of their anti-victim argument was that the naming of women's victimization, and labeling women who had endured rape as victims, was itself a violence—more so than rape itself. Such anti-victim notions maintains purchase today, and come under scrutiny in Part II.

Neoliberal victim theory (NVT) is a critical framework developed by Stringer (2014). NVT offers a constellation of concepts that elucidate contemporary understandings of victims in light of neoliberal values. NVT has four primary elements that I explore below: (1) the victim bad/agent good formulation, (2) the motif of resentment, (3) reverse victimology, and (4) power victims. More generally, NVT highlights the logics that prompt victims to reframe the harm done and its consequences to emphasize personal responsibility, empowerment, and control. Attention is turned away from social and political causes (including gendered oppression) and toward the question of what an individual can and will do to protect themselves and—as I discuss in Chapters 5 and 6—heroically overcome adversity. While this thesis draws heavily on each of these main points of NVT, I also put forth the survivor imperative as an additional element of NVT.

Within neoliberal hegemony, victimization is cast as emanating from an inner self, and being caused in large part by having a “victim mentality”. A victim mentality is conceptualized as a state of mind inherent in some individuals that predisposes them to victimization, and the notion harkens traditional, positivist victimological views that the causes of victimization stem from victims themselves. The victim mentality is positioned as an anathema to the imperatives of personal responsibility; it is constructed as interior, personal, and psychological in a manner that erases the external, political, and social factors in victimization (Stringer 2014). The victim mentality is an obvious and egregious oversight, insofar as victimization, especially criminal victimization, by definition involves external sources of harm. However, framing it as mere oversight neglects how strategic such framing is in achieving self-surveillance and governmentality while undermining a range of possibilities for political resistance. It is a depoliticizing frame that situates the responsibility on individuals to find ways to overcome and endure, rather than work to overthrow oppressive systems.

Neoliberal discourse positions victimhood as a choice that enables the abdication of personal responsibility; it is criticized in favor of agency, which is constructed as victimhood’s opposite. In a neoliberal context, agency is figured as exclusively individual. According to Stringer (2014), the victim bad/agent good formulation details the ways that victimhood’s associations with passivity, weakness, meekness, and helplessness (see van Dijk, 2009) are pitted against agency and its connotations of strength, endurance, will, and empowerment. Victimhood is seen as a failure to achieve and express adequate personal agency. Victimhood is devalued, and any knowledge associated with victimhood is deemed illegitimate. In addition, victimhood is seen as sourced from within the character, personality, and mentality of the person who has been harmed, rather than external realities.

Stringer’s (2014) motif of resentment deals with the pathologization of victims as having toxic emotions: complaints of harm (whether traumatic or more insidious and subtle) are minimized and dismissed as unjustified or immature articulations of anger or vengefulness. Such minimization also justifies the dismissal of victim knowledge or insight. Victims are criticized for giving into the debasement of resentment, yet such criticism neglects how resentment is a natural and justified response to suffering, especially when that suffering stems from the intentional actions of another human

being. These so-called negative emotions, according to Stringer (2014, p. 11) are “construed not only as an inability to let go of suffering, but as a pathological psychological attachment to suffering that, it is supposed, breeds a colourful variety of character traits and political tendencies”. Anger and resentment are actively erased.

NVT highlights the common-sense logics and dominant discourses in which those suffering from harm are blamed for suffering. Suffering persons are cast as attached to or desiring of their suffering, or perhaps even being responsible for precipitating the situation that incited suffering in the first instance. An example of such thinking, and its penetration of therapeutic spaces, is provided by positive psychologist Joseph, whose work I will discuss in depth in Chapter 6. Joseph is an important and prolific figure in posttraumatic growth research. He concludes his book on posttraumatic growth by discussing clients/patients who don’t make progress or even abandon therapy by suggesting that:

deep down, the clients are relieved. Diagnostic labels can become part of people—and the truth is, many people are reluctant to give them up. Unfortunately, the dominant professional discourse of trauma tends to position people as ‘helpless victims with a lifelong condition’, so it is not surprising that many people latch on to this way of thinking. (Joseph, 2011, p. 166–167)

Joseph’s words elucidate the social context and widespread beliefs that often surround suffering, especially the suffering that develops as a result of traumatic victimization: if some people, by virtue of character or personality, are inclined to hold onto their suffering as so-called perpetual victims, they are to blame for their suffering. Such people are held up as foils to those who have the fortitude and strength to “choose” more positive coping styles, enacting their agency to overcome trauma. The power of trauma and PTSD, and of the social or even political circumstances that caused it, are kept neatly out of view.

Reverse victimology—according to Stringer (2014)—consists of reframing who constitutes the real victims of feminist constructions of victimization. It might be viewed as a backlash against feminist progress in bringing awareness and recognition to women’s victimization. Reverse victimology entails anti-victims blaming feminists for casting all women as victims, thereby rendering feminists as the victimizers. Within the

anti-victims argument, discussing victimization and positioning women as victims creates a victim mentality in women, and reinscribes women as ready-made victims. This anti-victimist—and largely anti-feminist—view suggests that the real victims of feminist advances are anti-victim feminists, who wish to champion agency and personal power in self-protection, and men who are falsely accused or otherwise harmed by claims of rape or violence. In short, reverse victimology involves rhetorical strategies to reverse who is considered a victim and who is a victimizer, and undermine the gains of feminists who espouse compassion and justice for victims, based on a victim-centered assessment of the social realities of gendered harm. The rhetoric and strategy of the anti-victim argument is insidious: anti-victimists portray themselves as liberal feminists, often espousing to protect and advance female sexual liberation which, they argue, is under attack by feminists. The rhetoric of personal protection and sexual liberation is appealing, since it offers a simple solution to a complex and frightening social issue. It also reiterates the notion that we live in a post-feminist era, in which women's sexual liberation and agency have been achieved once and for all. Women's liberation is conflated with sexual liberation; this benefits men by providing greater access to women's sexual bodies. The proliferation of neoliberal discourse assists in this insidious twist of what it means for women to have sexual agency; through the valorization of personal responsibility and sexual agency, anti-victim sentiment gains a foothold.

While Stringer's NVT details the championing of empowerment and agency in a specific, anti-victim style, certain types of power and agency are anathema to neoliberal values. Power victims—according to Stringer (2014)—are those who leverage the social capital of victimhood in service to the wrong kind of power: power based in victimization. One example is the power of angry victim activists who ostensibly do harm to innocent others by speaking about victimization. According to Stringer (2014, p. 34), the notion of the power victim involves the claim that victim feminism “bestows upon women the wrong kind of agency—a bad form of agency best described as the cultural capital of victimhood”. Victim's power is framed as being based on victimization and its associated abdication of responsibility. Furthermore, the notion of the power victim as suspect undermines victims' claims to support and resources. The power victim label can be used against victims who are politically mobilized and active; it is deployed to diminish and undermine their testimonies and calls for change.

Each of the elements of NTV—the victim bad/agent good formulation, reverse victimology, the motif of resentment and power victims—builds on the victim bad/agent good formulation. The motif of resentment and the notion of power victims especially deal with the denigration of victimhood and the championing of agency. In this thesis, I will use NVT to identify dynamics and discourses at play in how others responded to me and my victimization. Building on NVT, I develop the survivor imperative, which emphasizes the manner in which those who are victimized ought to respond to and recover from harms done to them.

The framework provided by Stringer (2014) became a critical analytical lens for unpacking my experiences after the Amazon. I began to unravel the underlying logics that shaped how people close to me responded to my victimization and my determination to speak about it. I was cast as a power victim; I was chastized for holding on to negative feelings rather than moving on or getting over it; I was told that naming myself a victim was harmful to me, that doing so undermined the efforts I should be undertaking to claim agency and empower myself. Recasting the language of victimhood as victimizing was also a manifestation of reverse victimology; the assumption was that I was harming myself and other women who had experienced sexual violence, or might one day experience it, by adopting the victim label. Victimhood was framed as a mentality and a self-fulfilling prophesy that risked permeating the rest of my life. I explore these dimensions further in Chapters 5 and 6.

It was extraordinarily difficult to untangle these ideas and their sources as I encountered them. I could feel that something was amiss in the ways people reacted to my victimization and claims of victim identity. In reading Stringer, I found palpable relief via understanding. Her theoretical framework explained what I had lived through in a deep and complex manner, rendering it easier to resist taking other's reactions personally, and instead to track harmful responses to underlying discourses. In so doing, I began to develop understandings that not only alleviated my own suffering, but also deepened my commitment to a feminist life and to developing an explicitly political framework for analyzing my own experiences. Stringer's work advanced my understanding of what theory could do in everyday life.

It was engagement with Stringer that led me to emphasize theoretical engagement and analysis in autoethnographic writing, to a degree that is not standard



across the methodology and style. I therefore attempted to link my theoretical insights and lived experience with non-autoethnographic academic texts, which helped me to avoid excessive self-focus. It also elucidated for me the value of academic writing and theory as it might be applied to lived experience. Reading Stringer (2014) was a radicalizing encounter. It gave me a path toward claiming victim identity as a political act.

## Conclusion

In writing this thesis, the ideas, arguments, and approaches developed by Lorde, Anzaldúa, Stringer, Brison, and Ahmed shape my analysis, and have shaped the process of living by which I have arrived at my analysis. In endeavoring to live my life in a feminist way, I have attempted to put Lorde and Anzaldúa's ideas and approaches into practice. Doing so infused and contoured the manner in which I coped with and responded to the events of the Amazon in 2012, and how others responded to me in the years that followed. Their theoretical work is embedded in the thesis and in my approach to life and intellectual work. Therefore, I aim to apply their insights throughout the thesis, as part of the theoretical fabric of the text.

Further, I aim to advance the theories developed by Brison, Ahmed, and Stringer in explicit ways. Brison (2002) argues the value of victim's epistemological stance. I advance Brison's work by considering the constructions, stereotypes, and stigmas associated with the victim label that foreclose possibilities for victims to share their knowledge or are used as grounds to delegitimize their claims. Brison (2002) also emphasizes the relational dimensions of life after sexual violence. I advance Brison's argument by exploring these relational dynamics in depth, with special attention to conversations. Further, I consider the discourses that inflect these interactions, and how they fostered secondary victimization and a climate of victim hostility.

My choice to bridge autoethnography and feminist theory is bolstered by Ahmed's (2017) challenge to the theory/experience divide, which is well encapsulated in her notion of "homework". Life and work are not neatly parsed apart. Ongoing application of her theoretical framework is lived as much as it is a facet of theoretical work. These insights from Ahmed are recent contributions to feminist theory, and I hope that my explicit engagement with them might demonstrate one manner by which they

may be applied to theorizing sexual violence and secondary victimisation. Furthermore, I seek to build on her reframing of brokenness and refusing to aspire toward wholeness by challenging the social imperative to eschew victimhood in favor of survivorship.

Stringer's (2014) NVT is the catalyst for the production of this thesis. I aim to apply and advance her framework by engaging in sustained analysis of the survivor label in the context of sexual violence. Pursuant to NVT, I argue that survivorship has become a distinctly neoliberal construct in recent years, and that it furthers the same trend toward depoliticization and excessive emphasis on the individual that Stringer (2014) articulates and challenges.

It is interesting to note that none of these authors contextualize their work as autoethnography. Brison, Ahmed, Lorde, and Anzaldúa, whose work depends on self-story, make no mention of their autoethnographic approach. Instead, they situate themselves as feminist theorists and writers, with varying degrees of explication. In the following chapter, I take up autoethnography as a method, and tie it into these existing feminist theoretical approaches. The tradition of autoethnography offers tools, insights, and cautions that I have found useful in crafting this thesis, which I consider a work of feminist theory as well as autoethnography. In bringing these feminist theoretical approaches into conversation with autoethnography, I hope to contribute to the advancement of both domains by practicing autoethnography as a feminist method. In the following chapter, I consider some of what an autoethnographic frame offers to feminist efforts to explore victim perspectives of sexual violence.

## Chapter Three

### Autoethnographic methods

Autoethnography offers useful insights into the feminist theoretical and methodological approaches discussed in the previous chapter. Feminist theoretical work stands on its own, methodologically; however, autoethnography furnishes my approach with some important tools and perspectives. In this thesis, autoethnography provides me with ethical frameworks; it offers a structure for writing, and it helps sustain my focus on unpacking the personal and interpersonal as they relate to the social and cultural. I have drawn from analytic ethnography (see Anderson, 2006) and evocative ethnography (see Ronai, 1992; Ellis, 1991; Ellis and Bochner, 1996), utilizing insights and commitments from both to elucidate and advance feminist theory from within personal experience, drawing from larger bodies of qualitative and social science research. To do so, I engage with discourse. Discourse is a complex term, which I define and discuss in greater detail below.

Autoethnography is a method of research that uses the researcher's personal experience as a source of data. As a method, it offers a useful basis for research into complex lived experience; it enables inquiry directed by personal experience and insight. As I discuss in Chapter 2, there is a risk of under-generalizing and over-generalizing first person accounts and analysis (Brison, 2002). This insight applies to autoethnography. The type of knowledge generated in autoethnography has limits in terms of generalizability, but the method offers substantial insight into how discourse shapes lived experience. By situating findings as originating in personal experience, there is scope to generate qualitative data which may open new possibilities for further research. There is ample information available about intimate social interactions and discourse in autoethnography. Autoethnography involves synthesizing research, theory, and lived experience. Autoethnographers have been considering questions of how to best engage with personal material in service to intellectual work for several decades. In doing so, they have elaborated on the pitfalls of the method and offered strategies for avoiding these issues. They have also forged pathways for using personal data effectively and ethically. I outline these components in depth below.

As I discussed in the Introduction, autoethnography allows for investigation beyond the scope of other methods; I draw on the rich and textured data of lived

experience over several years, and attempt to engage with it holistically, with a different degree of nuance than interviews and with some attention to emotion. The structure of my inquiry is influenced by the layered account of autoethnography (Ronai, 1992, 1995, 1996), although I make some significant departures.

Informed by Ronai's approach, I explore how dominant discourses came to bear on my relationships and identity negotiation after sexual assault. I focus on interpersonal, conversational manifestations of dominant discourses, including rape myths and neoliberal victim theory. Conversation offers insight into meaning making, relational identity negotiation, social interaction, social norms, and social responses. The data from these conversations is not limited to verbal exchanges and departs from conversational analysis. Since it is autoethnographic data, it includes my own thoughts, feelings, narration, and recollection. By exploring how dominant discourse comes to bear on interpersonal interactions, I embrace Ahmed's (2017) challenge to the division of theory and experience to analyze the contours of dominant discourses regarding victimhood and survivorship.

In this chapter, I detail the autoethnographic methods that inform my research, including structure and ethical considerations. I outline the unique role of autoethnography in addressing the gaps in research discussed in the Introduction, and how autoethnography fits alongside the feminist theoretical work laid out in the previous chapter. I then consider an adaptation of the layered account drawing from analytic autoethnography. I introduce and engage the concept of discourse, since much of my analysis in later chapters hinges on elucidating dominant discourse as it shaped the language of interpersonal interactions. Throughout this chapter, I discuss Page's (2017) elaborations on not knowing—working with uncertainty and the tentative, cautious aspects of research—as a feminist epistemology, which I enfolded into my methodological approach. Finally, I consider the ethical complexities of autoethnography, including how to manage the rights of others in self-narrative.

## Autoethnography

Autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world, but also a way of being in the world. An autoethnographic perspective requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively. It asks that we not only

examine our lives, but also examine how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. (Ellis and Adams, 2014, p. 271)

### *The study of self within culture*

Autoethnography can be defined as a research method and process, as well as a writing style, which deals with the study of self within culture. According to Chang (2008), quoting and further developing ideas from Ellis and Bochner (1996, p. 740), “autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)” and autoethnographers may “fall at different places along the continuum of each of these three axes”. In autoethnography, self-knowledge is deployed as a medium through which to glimpse and explore cultural phenomena and mobilize insights from the ground. Autoethnography has generated a set of methodological perspectives and skills that are vital to systematizing autoethnographic data and knowledge.

By definition, autoethnography requires extensive social and cultural analysis and theorization, which distinguishes it from other forms of self-narrative, including autobiography and memoir. Moreover, it is an ideal methodology when dealing with issues that evoke discomfort and are seldom discussed in everyday conversation, and require creative, new ways of examining and articulating experience (Ellis and Adams, 2014). This is especially the case when the experiences under inquiry are taboo (see Ronai, 1995), and when working to create space for new, alternative, or subversive subjectivities (see Gunne and Thompson, 2010). Since autoethnography casts the researcher as narrator, author, subject, protagonist, and analyst, it allows for multiple angles and dimensions of study. In addition, it affords control of the writing, as well as fluidity between voices and perspectives. Control of the narrative has special significance when dealing with the study of traumatic experiences, where a sense of control is paramount (see Spry 2011 and Janoff-Bulman, 1992), and where the sense of self might be fragmented (Ronai, 1993; Brison, 2002; see also Anzaldúa, 1987).

Autoethnography looks inward at a vulnerable researcher to develop critical insights about the social world and elaborate upon links to existing research (Ellis and Adams, 2014). Wider engagement, theorization, and critique formulate the unique contributions enabled by autoethnography. As Chang (2008, p. 43) argues, “Stemming

from the field of anthropology, autoethnography shares the storytelling feature with other genres of self-narrative but transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation.” Engagement with culture, analysis, theory, dominant discourse, and research is necessary to qualify a work as autoethnography.

Autoethnography’s roots are in ethnography—an anthropological tradition of studying culture—and its development has been nurtured by two key insights. The first of these insights is an awareness of the problematic colonial qualities of traditional and early ethnographic research, in which researchers took knowledge from an exotic other and constructed knowledge for their own ends, often without due consideration for those who were their subjects of study (Chang, 2008; Ellis and Adams, 2014). Second, according to Chang (2008, p. 45), “the ‘new’ trend of self-focused anthropology is based on intentional self-reflexivity; anthropologists are turning their scholarly interest inward on themselves.” As self-reflexivity has developed, the voices of marginalized people have gained greater visibility in academic work, demonstrating the value of subjugated subjectivities and perspectives in scholarship (Ellis and Bochner, 1996; Chang, 2008). According to Ellis and Bochner (1996, p. 18):

united by alienation and liminality... ‘new ethnography’ appealed so strongly to women, people of color, marginal voices... who wanted to come to grips with the predicaments of the scholar as an involved, situated, and integral part of the research and writing process.

Prior to the development of autoethnography, researchers neglected the interior experiences of marginalization. Autoethnographers are able to explore marginal terrain with sensitivity, on their own terms and in their own voices. In autoethnography, tools for generating knowledge are repurposed and deployed to resist marginalization, oppression, and erasure. Autoethnography sheds light on lived experiences of marginal social contexts, values subjugated knowledge, and engages dominant discourse to consider its lived ramification.

Feminism has contributed to the trend of reflexivity and the turn toward explicating and leveraging personal investment, involvement, and bias in research. For example, Ahmed’s (2017) approach challenges the division between theory and experience, and Brison’s (2002) work upholds the epistemological value of victim accounts. Research considering lived experience has benefitted greatly from

intersectional feminist theory, which elucidates and amplifies subjectivities that often fall through the cracks of audibility (see Crenshaw, 1991).

The feminist adage that “the personal is political” interlocks with Brison’s (2002) view that the epistemology and knowledge of victims has merit. Therefore, I self-identify from the outset. I am a female and feminist autoethnographer, and a victim of sexual violence. I use my situation and stance, my identity and perspective, in service to understanding interpersonal interactions and broader discourse. My project is inherently political, and I aim to contribute to the political struggle to end sexual violence and create a more caring society for those who have been sexually victimized. Feminist theorizations and autoethnography both hold my position and subjectivity as an asset to research, rather than a fatal flaw. Within these frameworks, there are possible limitations, including bias, but sources of bias are also sources of sensitivity from which generative insights might be gleaned. In this thesis, I endeavor to manage the tension between the depth available in autoethnographic data and the limits of generalizability. My strategy for navigating this tension and distinction involves care and caution regarding the conclusions I draw. I engage dominant discourse from a situated perspective in order to critically inquire into my own life and experience such that my insights can be viewed in context.

Feminist autoethnography allows for my self, my narrative, and my internal experience to serve as a gateway into apprehending and challenging the cultural conditions and discourses that shape them. According to Chang (2008, p. 48–49), “Autoethnography is not about focusing on [the] self alone, but about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through [the] self.” By looking at personal interiority, I seek to unearth information about the conditions that influence me, my relationships, and the social context in which I live.

### *Evocative and analytic autoethnography*

Crawley (2014) maps the distinction between three types of autoethnography: evocative, analytic, and performance. Evocative autoethnography uses story and feeling based writing to evoke emotional responses in readers, and explicitly values feelings as a source of knowledge. Performance autoethnography includes creative enterprises, which are used to generate knowledge and express insights gleaned from research,

deploying a sensibility of “making-as-inquiring” (Downing, 2016). The goal of creative output is not to demonstrate the text, so much as to generate knowledge (Spry, 2011). My research is primarily analytic autoethnography, but draws on evocative approaches and values emotional information.

Anderson (2006, p. 386) focuses on analytic autoethnography, which he suggests has five main tenets: the researcher as a member of the group they study, analytic reflexivity, the researcher’s visibility in the text, their dialogue with others as subjects, and a “commitment to an analytic agenda”. While I have not undertaken dialogue with other subjects, Anderson’s (2006) framework helps me explicate some of the parameters of this thesis. I write about victimhood and survivorship as a victim/survivor; I write myself into the text; I attempt self-awareness and reflexivity, especially to remind myself that my perspective is situated and specific. Further, I use self-narrative and aim for “connection to broader social science theory” (Anderson, 2006, p. 378).

Analytic autoethnography nuances my approach, and distinguishes the work from evocative autoethnography. According to Anderson (2006, p. 387),

The purpose of analytic ethnography is not simply to document personal experience, to provide an “insider’s perspective”, or to evoke emotional resonance with the reader. Rather, the defining characteristic of analytic social science is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves.

I do not seek to write experience as it is lived or to evoke emotion in readers. Instead, I use data acquired in living a feminist life to develop theory. I aim to go beyond capturing my own personal process, and instead use “empirical evidence to formulate and refine theoretical understandings of social processes” (Anderson, 2006, p. 387). My commitment is to engage feminist theory and social science research and to examine its explanatory value for lived experience, while also using lived experience to problematize, scrutinize, and advance existing theory.

I do not depart entirely from the evocative ethnographic tradition championed by Ellis, Bochner, Adams, Ronai, and others. Evocative ethnography allows for the acknowledgment of emotional valences of knowledge production. Central to evocative autoethnography is an emotional epistemology that moves readers, and those adhering to their style aim for narrative fidelity and conveyance of emotional experience



(Anderson, 2006). Ronai's work, while also analytic, offers a clear example of how storytelling and emotional reflection saturate her approach. Among the important contributions of the style is that it accommodates marginalized voices in important ways. This is a significant oversight in Anderson's (2006) approach: nearly all his citations are male, and there is no mention of the need for marginalized voices in scholarship. Hence, I work from both domains to help elucidate the methodological framework for this thesis. In Chapter 4, I use some reflection on memories and feelings, situated in the context of ongoing experience, to elucidate the grounds for my theorizations. The evocative approach allows for feeling-based data; while I do not foreground such data, it does play some role in my analysis. Further, I am not the first to span both styles: according to Crawley (2014, p. 10), Ronai "clearly attempts to engage analytic and evocative" approaches. Ronai's work informs my choice to deploy an adapted form of the layered account (discussed below) in this thesis.

### ***Cautions and critiques***

It is important to keep in mind that autoethnography, similar to any method, is best suited to specific kinds of research. Furthermore, there are stumbling points that may compromise the integrity of an autoethnographic text. Chang (2008) addresses five common pitfalls to autoethnographic research, which I will list before explaining how I will avoid or address them. The first is "excessive focus on self in isolation from others" (Chang, 2008, p. 54). I avoid focusing on introspective or feeling-based writings, and use memory sparingly in Part II, where I construct my argument. I emphasize stories that include social interactions with others, and engage power differentials as well as the content of the exchange in analysis. Emphasis on secondary victimization—especially everyday, interpersonal interactions—helps prevent the work from excessively concentrating on my isolated self. My approach reflects Ahmed's (2017) insight that theory is developed in living a feminist life, and in seeking to understand what we come up against; in the case of my thesis, rape myths and victim blame. In the conversations that I analyze, I engage with others, furthering Brison's (2002) argument that recovery of the self after trauma is inherently relational.

Second, Chang (2008, p. 54) warns against "overemphasis on narrative rather than analysis and cultural interpretation". The majority of space in my thesis has been

dedicated to analysis and theorization, using narrative as an opening for theoretical inquiry and engagement with wider bodies of literature. I therefore attempt to build on Anderson's (2006, p. 378) approach to analytic autoethnography, especially the "commitment to an analytic agenda". In thinking about form, I draw on Ahmed (2017) and Brison (2002), who use self-narrative in a similar manner, as a basis for scholarly engagement and argumentation.

Third, Chang (2008 p. 54) advises against "exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source". A significant portion of my data derives from archived material, especially written records of conversations that took place in the three years following the rapes. In Chapter 5, some memory data is included, because the events described were not recorded at the time but remain prominent in memory. In Chapter 7, I discuss events that occurred while writing this thesis, and current personal reflections informed by the research process. These diverse sources of data provide an array of insights, but my cornerstone is unplanned personal experience that was recorded between 2012 and 2014. I elaborate on my data in a dedicated section below.

Chang's (2008) fourth point is especially significant. She warns against "negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives" (Chang, 2008 p. 54). Tolich (2010) expands on the issue of ethics and others in an article on autoethnographic ethics that significantly shaped my application for ethical approval. I obtained ethics approval from the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee before I began research and writing. As with any methodology, autoethnographic ethics are not universal or one-size-fits all. Since autoethnography implicitly involves writing about others in close relational proximity to the researcher, there are unique risks regarding trust and privacy. Tolich (2010) provides some examples of failures by seminal autoethnographers to adequately handle ethics, thereby exposing family and friends to potential harm. Tolich's work and the errors he highlights create a climate in which ethical considerations require ongoing care and consideration. At the outset of the research, I outlined the processes by which certain persons would be anonymized, and how I would approach individuals for informed consent should it prove impossible to conceal their identities. No such cases arose in the research and writing process. However, planning ahead and formulating firm guidelines for the ethical inclusion of interactions with others has been vital to this project. This thesis is an inherently social

and relational inquiry (see Brison, 2002), and attention was paid to the ethics and the safety of all others involved in the story.

Finally, Chang (2008 p. 54) discusses “inappropriate application of the label”, which is consistent with her efforts to define autoethnography as distinct from other forms of self-narrative. This thesis engages theory and existing research extensively, and uses limited self-narrative data. Introspective data is kept minimal, as is emotional data; however, emotional and introspective writing is scattered throughout the thesis, in service to elucidating the consequences of certain discourses at play in interactions, and to establish the grounds for various theoretical insights. Throughout the research and writing process, I maintained course by revisiting the guidelines by which Chang (2008) and others define autoethnography.

### *Autoethnography and feminist theory*

I build my analysis on the theoretical works of Stringer (2014), Brison (2002), Ahmed (2017), Anzaldúa (1987, 2002), and Lorde (2007). I have worked to advance these theorizations in several ways: to add the survivor imperative to Stringer’s (2014) neoliberal victim theory; to explore the ramifications of embodying Lorde’s work on silence and articulation in the context of victim/survivor speech; to use Ahmed’s (2017) argument that we theorize as we live feminist lives to elucidate the lived experience of secondary victimization; and to advance Brison’s (2002) argument for the necessity and value of victims’ knowledge and the relational facets of life after rape.

In the Introduction, I outlined several gaps in research, especially in first-person accounts of sexual violence and its sequelae. These gaps include the role of dominant discourse in shaping secondary victimization, and the value of such accounts in developing theory. I suggest that autoethnography synthesizes well with feminist theoretical approaches. Autoethnography affords a framework for maintaining analytic focus, and provides important cautions regarding pitfalls and ethical issues. Together, these approaches contribute to filling a gap in sexual violence research, where researchers are also victim/survivors.

By adopting some of the analytical autoethnographic framework, I hope to use self-narrative as a springboard into analysis. I deploy feminist approaches to critique non-feminist research regarding victim/survivors of sexual violence. I also engage

critically with discourses of victimhood and survivorship from a situated perspective, and examine the lived ramifications of rape myths. To do so, I build upon and adapt Ronai's layered account.

### The layered account: overview and critique

The layered account is a method for conducting autoethnographic research (Chang, 2008). According to Ellis and Adams (2014, p. 267), the layered account refers to "texts that assemble fragments of personal experience, memory, extant research, introspection, and other sources of information alongside each other in creative and juxtaposed ways". It is a bricolage style of autoethnography, which allows for a multiplicity of perspectives and voices to be explored by the author; a key aim of the layered account is to articulate the multiple and complex subjectivities of a researcher writing self-narrative and conducting analysis.

The layered account is rooted in the recognition that identity is complex; research involving self-narrative requires navigating between multiple perspectives. The layered account is therefore enhanced by tightrope talk of McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011) and Page's (2017) approach to vulnerable subjects (which I discuss below). Layered accounts use complex, contradictory perspectives to move analysis past dominant understandings. As an autoethnographer, I am author, narrator, protagonist, subject, interpreter, and analyzer of the text that I produce. Ronai (1995, p. 396), sums it up elegantly in her article outlining the layered account, writing that, "The boundaries of these identities converge, blur, and separate as I write..." She suggests that the layered account is stylistically able to accommodate fluidity, multiplicity, and movement.

Ronai has contributed significantly to the development the layered account and style of autoethnographic research (Ronai 1992, 1995, 1996). In her texts, she demarcates shifts between various perspectives and authorial voices using an asterisk, although she does not name which voice she is using for various segments. The asterisk offers a visible demarcation which explicates her negotiation of the multiple identities shaping the text, and denotes a shift between narrative, reflection, and analysis. According to Fox (1995, p. 330):

in her approach she shifts back and forth between a narrative account of her abuse experiences and a theoretical analysis of abuse. The tension created by the layered method reflects the gap that often exists between the lived experiences of survivors and the codification of those experiences by researchers. Ronai challenges the authority of the researcher by juxtaposing graphic experiences of abuse with a distant voice of authority...

The structure of the layered account is designed to move across and between different voices; it articulates a complex, multifaceted interiority and a range of perspectives. It does this through multiple voices, which can be in dialogue, in concert, or in tension with each other. The range of voices within the layered account allows for a high degree of analysis or theoretical engagement.

The structure of the layered account requires adaptation to fit the length and scope of this thesis. Ronai's work is article or chapter length. She does not use the section headings found in other academic texts; she relies solely on the asterisk. Here, I deviate from Ronai in style, and attempt to enact the theory behind her style in a novel manner. I do not use the asterisk. A document of thesis length requires headings to organize ideas, and I have found that the synthesis of headings with asterisks creates a jumbled, clunky, and discontinuous text. More importantly, I find that fluidity amongst various voices—author, narrator, protagonist, subject, interpreter, and analyzer—can still be achieved using headings. Naming these various perspectives echos Ronai's (1995, p. 396) comments about the mingling, divergence, overlap, and blurring of identities in her writing. In addition to using headings and not using asterisks, I demarcate archival pieces at the beginning of narrative segments, to note the timeframe in which those segments were written.

The layered account is committed to the creative enunciation of multiple and complex subjectivities of autoethnographic researchers. Therefore, I contend that the stylistic and organizational approach adopted in this thesis are true to the spirit of the layered account and build upon its insights, even if the form departs from traditional layered accounts. Further, while Ronai (1992, 1995, 1996) advocates for the generative potential in breaking away from traditional academic conventions, I opt to stay closer to those convention, for example, by using headings. Another example is my wider

engagement with social science research, which is consistent with an analytic autoethnographic approach committed to advancing theory.

Several additional aspects of my approach distinguish it from other autoethnographic layered accounts. Ellis and Adams (2014, p. 267) situate the layered account as evocative autoethnography when they state that, “The primary purpose of the layered account is to textually represent selves as lived—as fragmented, uncertain, and exposed to different kinds of information at different times.” I stand with the latter half of this statement. The layered account embraces the experience of fragmentation, especially to the degree that my self and perspective have changed over time, in and through relationships. By reflecting on archived records of conversations that transpired years in the past, I demonstrate these fluctuations and changes.

However, I disagree with the notion that a text is capable of representing lived selves and experiences. The universalization of the idea of what texts are capable of portraying stands in tension to the emphasis placed on situating the researcher, which is central to the approach. While it is useful to denote what a research method is able to do, or even should do, the assessment that it can and should always “represent selves as lived” fails to account for the diversity of selves, one’s experience of their self, and self-articulation. Attempting to portray lives as lived may serve as a helpful guideline when setting out to construct a layered account, but I resist accepting this assertion at the outset of my research. Instead, I approach the layered account as a powerful means for deploying multiple perspectives and engaging complex interiorities. I am reluctant to take a further step in stating that my writing is true to how my self is lived, or that writing the lived self was my primary purpose. Rather, I seek to analyze lived experience in order to advance theory.

Further, Ellis and Adams (2014) do not specify what they mean in stating that the layered account represents uncertainty. Perhaps they are suggesting that the layered account is automatically uncertain, or cannot make claims; if so, I disagree. I suggest that the juxtaposition of various authorial voices, in harmony and contrast, points toward hesitations and contradicting views. Such contrast can be productive in developing arguments and insights while keeping in mind their context, and the limits of what can be known and declared. In her work on feminist vulnerability as an epistemological tool, Page advocates for curiosity (2017, p. 19). Embracing uncertainty

within a layered account provides an opportunity to resist dominant, hegemonic forms of knowledge production. It creates space for inquiry and nuance.

Both autoethnography in general, and the layered account in particular, are discussed as having healing potential for researchers who need to tell a story in order to resolve it (Ellis and Bochner, 1996; Ellis and Adams, 2014; Ellis 1991). I am skeptical of this claim, and concerned that it bolsters critiques of the genre as narcissistic and self-absorbed (Chang 2008). In this project, I aim to use self-story as data that I unwittingly accrued. Such data allows for deep and sustained engagement over several years of lived experience. It provides increased access to interiority. Drawing from analytic autoethnography, I focus primarily on theory and analysis, rather than on my self, my story, or my personal reflections or emotions. Reflection and emotion are tools and raw materials for engagement, analysis, and deconstruction; the endgame is not simply to tell the story because I have a personal need to do so. While such enterprises are legitimate and valuable in a multitude of contexts, and may be a project that I take up in other spaces, the purpose of this research project is to explore links between personal experience and dominant discourse using academic tools to advance theory. I use narrative as an anchor—not only to provide nuance, but also to keep my analysis on the ground and inoculate it against devolution into *abstractum ad absurdum*.

In this thesis, I deal with the social consequences of events that are taboo and stigmatized, in addition to being traumatic. I hope to develop new ways of speaking, writing, and thinking about sexual victimization, identity negotiation, and secondary victimization. These taboo subjects are commonly left unspoken or, according to McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011), muted. Ronai (1995, p. 407) states it succinctly with regard to child sexual abuse: “If it becomes extremely common to discuss sexual abuse, without shame, there is an improved chance for children to come forward when it is happening to them.” It is important to normalize these conversations, and to reduce the stigma around them by examining the complex factors contributing to their stigmatization.

Autoethnography offers a distinct and useful approach to theorizing lived experience and using lived experience to think beyond the personal. As a member of the social world, I am influenced by dominant discourses—both in my own sense-making and by way of relationships to others. Autoethnography allows me to carefully excavate

the links between myself and my cultural context. By considering the value and limits of autoethnography, especially Chang's (2008) warnings and Anderson's (2006) framework, I strive to construct an autoethnography that balances these tensions to refine, test, and generate theory. To do so, I focus my analysis on dominant discourses as they manifest in conversations I had after sexual violence, and how such discursively constituted experiences impacted my relationships and identity. I explore my method for doing so in the next section.

### Method and data in this thesis

The rapes transpired in June and July 2012. I began recording the story of what happened and some initial conversations about it in September 2012. Several weeks later, I named the events as rape. Over the following three years, I drafted three versions of a memoir, experimenting with different tones and styles. Among my main goals was to record the events of the Amazon as accurately as possible, and close temporal proximity seemed important to that enterprise. However, it became apparent almost immediately that there were ongoing consequences that I wanted to consider further. I wrote down several conversations immediately after they occurred.

I drafted these records between 2012 and 2015. In total, they contain over 100,000 words. One draft was written between September 2012 and January 2013. The next was written between April 2013 and February 2014, and the final version was written between May and November 2014. The memoir's working title was *Singing in the Dark*, which referred to the tradition of singing during the ceremonies that are usually performed with the psychoactive plants that my captor used to incapacitate me.

The longer conversations that were extracted as data for this thesis were recorded in writing within a few hours of their occurring, as close to verbatim as possible. I recorded these conversations swiftly to keep the tenor of the discussion and specific words fresh. However, as several years have transpired between writing these accounts and using them as data, I cannot account entirely for editing in the meantime. The conversations included in this thesis are presented as they were saved in a PDF from before 2015, and are consistent with my memory of the language and tenor of the conversation.



My data is what Lucal (1999, p. 786, citing Reinharz, 1992) terms “unplanned and unwitting research” in that it was accumulated by happenstance, for purposes other than academic research: “It is an analysis of ‘unplanned personal experience’, that is, experiences that were not part of a research project but instead part of my daily encounters.” I kept records of these conversations within the memoir drafts without knowing that they would one day form the basis for analysis in a doctoral thesis or any academic work.

To select portions of the memoirs for use in this thesis, I performed keyword searches in the text for the words “victim” and “survivor”. I also selected other keywords, which was how I found the excerpt on “not knowing” below, by two criteria. First, if I found ideas in the literature that sparked memories of events, I performed a word search accordingly in order to explore the link between salient memories and my research. For example, I performed a word search for “not knowing” in several drafts, and proceeded to analyze the record in light of current research.

Second, I sought to include conversations that had some emotional charge, indicating ongoing influence or importance in my subjective experience. Early on, I decided to consider the language of victimhood and survivorship. Upon searching for words in my drafts, I found only a few examples. All of the narrative fragments containing consideration of the terms “victim” or “survivor” in my archives were used in the thesis as starting points for analysis. The conversations I analyze in later chapters were particularly important in my experience, and lingered as especially strong memories over time. My assessment of importance may be why I recorded them at the time, or their ongoing significance may stem from my having written them down.

In addition to archived material, there are two areas of analysis based on memories recalled during the process of writing this thesis. One such memory is of a specific conversation, which I recall and analyze in Chapter 5. The other, included in Chapter 4, is more generalized and includes events which transpired over a longer period and generated emotions which inform my analysis. My analysis of emotions as data builds on Campbell (2002, p122):

Rather than pretending that it is not there, our field must come to terms with the emotion of rape. When we write about rape, we must discuss the emotional pain—to the survivors and to secondary victims—that is caused

by rape. There is much to be learned by feeling rape, by understanding the emotions of rape, and by embracing the emotionality of this topic... Emotions can be an important resource for science, and the emotionality of rape is essential to its understanding.

My inclusion of memory and emotion data is consistent with a layered account, which overlaps evocative and analytic autoethnographic styles. Findings are drawn by analysing my data in light of existing theorizations and research, using experience as the basis for inquiry.

I find contradictions between the ideas I articulated in the past and the ideas I developed while writing the thesis, indicating changes in my perspective. Therefore, my engagement with Page (2017) and her argument about tentative aspects of research is especially important: having lived through these experiences, I am aware that my perspective has changed over time. I have sought to elaborate on these changes in this thesis.

### Working with memoir

In 2012, while fleeing the Amazon, I decided I would write the experience I was escaping. At the time, I took for granted that memoir was the obvious genre for my enterprise; it was highly visible in popular culture as an outlet for women's stories. Writing a memoir was not an active or considered choice at that stage. Rather, my perceptions about the avenues for narration available to me constructed my approach to drafting the story, especially my awareness of an audience, my desire for a witness to my experiences, and my understandings of what others expected from the story, which I address below and in Chapter 5.

Memoir is a form of self-narrative, similar to autobiography. Memoir is the older term, and denotes personal experience with events and historical periods, and testimony rendered in an accessible, creative form (Buss, 2002; Smith and Watson, 2001). Autobiography emphasizes reflection on the state of the soul pursuant to public accomplishment, while memoir deals with memory and chronicles of the past (Smith and Watson, 2001). According to Buss (2002 p. 2-3), memoir "can accommodate both the factual and the theoretical" and

bridges the typical strategies of the historical and literary discourses in order to establish necessary connections between the private and the public, the personal and the political.

Memoir, therefore, provides means for probing into individual lives and social norms, and for elucidating links between the political and the personal. Memoir has been especially important for women as a means to challenge exclusion from history (Buss, 2002). It can centre women's stories in a male dominated social context.

Both memoir and autobiography deal with the "autobiographical pact", a term coined by Lejeune in 1975 (Miller, 2007). Within the pact, the writer will convey the truth, even if the truth is not entirely fact based (Miller, 2007). The pact also addresses the different manner in which texts are approached when taken as based in real life (Smith and Watson, 2001). According to Smith and Watson (2001, p18)

Commitment to self-narration, not as an act for calculated gain in fortune or fame but as an epistemological act of thinking through what one as a subject knows to be or not to be, remains a basis of both writerly tact and readerly trust.

This insight is crucial in understanding my own aims as I thought about drafting a memoir to record my experiences in and after the Amazon. I embarked on writing and recording with an audience in mind, an external witness to whom I imagined I was accountable for the accuracy of my record of worldly events and internal realities. I endeavoured to write something that could withstand factual investigation, while thinking and working through the emotional and intellectual challenges brought to bear through my own experiences.

Life writing, according to Eakin (2004), asks readers to trust the credibility of the author to self-narrate, and includes a moral imperative to tell the truth; life-writers may be criticised for embellishing and lying, or for telling too much truth. Memoir raises questions of how much to disclose, for the sake of the writer and the readers, and relations enfolded in the text (Miller, 2007). In my own writing, I tended toward telling uncomfortable truths, out of a desire for complex contours of sexual violence to stand in the open for further consideration. I felt unable to master my own telling, which was an experience I imagined might resonate with others. It seemed important and interesting to leave the mess intact.

Memoir has been especially important in advancing women's accounts and life-narratives, and for articulating complexity. According to Brodzki and Schenck, (1988) memoir "localizes the very program of much feminist theory." Writing in the late 1980s, Brodzki and Schenck argue that autobiography had been male dominated, dealing with western norms of masculinity and male selves, while women's autobiographical writing had been under-theorized. Since then, several scholars have advanced theorization of women's memoir, especially Smith and Watson (2001), Buss (2002), Miller (2007), and Gilmore (2017). For instance, Miller (2007, p.544) argues for the inherent relationality of memoir, and states that: "Feminist critics have been making the case for the model of a relational self at the heart of the autobiographical project for over two decades." Her relational stance includes others within the texts, and also the other in the reader, on whom the writer depends. This relational stance to life-writing overlaps with the some of the ethical considerations of writing autoethnography, which I discuss later in this chapter. It also aligns with my argument in this thesis, building on Brison (2002), that the aftermath of sexual violence is profoundly relational.

Memoir is also political. It offers a space to consider everyday traumas in various historic moments (Miller, 2007), and a means of conveying testimony (Smith and Watson, 2001; Gilmore, 2017). Gilmore (2017) deals extensively with the politics of self-narration, noting how women's accounts (especially of sexual violence) have been subject to doubt, blame, stigma, judgement, and charges of deception. She discusses how the predictability of these denouncing responses "are a threat that prevents women from testifying" (Gilmore, 2017 p. 7). Denouncing responses inhibit the means by which women name harms or wrongs that have been done and seek to advance justice.

Gilmore's work provides a clear critique of memoir in a neoliberal context, which has informed the development of my own critique. Gilmore maps a turn in memoir toward the neoliberal life narrative. Prior to the turn, memoir showcased women's voices, offering accounts for normative violence within oppressive systems, in a style that was accessible to a wide readership. It highlighted personal experience and narrative and played with multiple genres. In the late 1980s, for example, memoirists advanced stories of complex lives and systemic violence. However, they were eventually subject to censure, denunciation, and shaming. According to Gilmore (2017,

p.93), memoir's "potential had to be absorbed into neoliberalism by emptying the form of its challenging and politicized content and replacing its aesthetic challenges with the closure of the redemption narrative" which offered happy endings and personal triumph. Testimonial narratives were crowded out in the 1980s and 1990s by neoliberal life narratives.

Neoliberal life narratives, like redemption narratives, allow the stories to be "absorbed and neutralised" or otherwise recuperated and depoliticized, thereby gutting the potency of critical memoirs (Gilmore, 2017 p. 86). Gilmore suggests that Oprah contributed to the proliferation of redemption narratives and self-help by way of her media empire. Memoir was thus reduced to the individual person, constructed to overlook systemic power and bypass calls for justice in favour of personal overcoming and redemption. Neoliberalism evacuated memoir of political and social power, and constricted narrative accounts to fit within its logics (Gilmore, 2017). Gilmore (2017 p. 89) argues that

the neoliberal life narrative features an 'I' who overcomes hardship and recasts historical and systemic harm as something an individual alone can, and should, manage through pluck, perseverance, and enterprise. The individual transforms disadvantage into value.

This template dictates the themes and structures of popular, contemporary memoirs. Not only is oppression rendered a hurdle that can be individually overcome, but the experience is imbued with value and profit. Such value may be in the suffering itself, or else in its successful surmounting of struggle, depending on the text. In this thesis, I build on this notion and advance it by suggesting that neoliberal norms and values constitute the experiences of victim/survivors of sexual violence.

The neoliberal life narrative structure dovetails with my own experience of directives on how I should interpret and respond to my life's events. I address this in detail in Chapters 4 and 5. Friends and trusted others encouraged me to write (and therefore live) an uplifting story. Their expectations were likely informed by the proliferation of popular neoliberal life narratives, which also fits with the journey metaphor (a subject of Chapter 5) by which victims become survivors and overcome the realities of sexual violence.

This shift toward individualistic accounts shields readers from moral and ethical imperatives elucidated by disclosing the realities and details of lives under oppression. Gilmore (2017, p. 115) points out that neoliberal life narratives “focus on one’s relation to one’s self rather than to others. They focus on what one person can do, and they distill politics and social chance to an *n* of one.” Justice remains out of the frame.

In reflecting on my own experience of drafting a memoir-structured record of my experiences, my aims were shaped by my readings of politically potent and feminist self-narrative, as well as popular neoliberal memoirs. These differing agendas and narrative structures were in tension within me as I sought to create a text reflective of an immediate and ongoing experience. I could not live a redemption narrative and a politically potent story simultaneously. I lacked the analysis and language to parse out the distinctions between these types of memoirs and the realities they might construct.

In this sense, my use of the term memoir to describe my data and records is fitting, because the turn from complex and subversive life writing to the neoliberal life narrative encompasses two dimensions of what I sought to do. Most importantly, my goal was to keep an accurate record, which I generated with a sense of accountability for the truth and tact to an imagined audience. I was bearing witness and creating testimony. In the context of this thesis, the memoir draft is relevant because it provides the record basis of my data. That record is laden with expectations to personally overcome — as per the neoliberal life narrative aesthetic. The depoliticising consequences of neoliberal expectations, and their manifestation within and through interpersonal relationships, are a central subject of Part II of this project.

In the following chapters, I explore ideas that came up in my memoir excerpts and in existing literature, using a revised autoethnographic layered account. I apply the theories I explored in Chapter 2 to consider how dominant discourse shaped my experience of the untenability of the victim label, the survivor imperative, scholarly notions of posttraumatic growth, the role of rape myths in everyday conversation, and secondary victimization. Below, I outline what I mean by discourse, and how I will engage with discourse in this thesis. Thinking in terms of discourse helps broaden the focus of my work beyond the personal, to the social and discursive context in which my personal experience and insights are situated.

## The term 'discourse' in this thesis

The term discourse has a number of definitions, varying between theorists and disciplines. As Baxter (2003, p. 7) notes, "Aptly demonstrating the non-fixity of meaning, the term 'discourse' is itself a highly contested term within the field... varying in meaning according to user and context." Fairclough (1992) discusses the difficulty of the concept, noting that definitions varyingly clash and resonate between disciplines and theoretical approaches. Therefore, it is imperative that I define the term discourse and explicate how I use it for examination and analysis.

Discourse includes ideas and language that are available to construct and interpret reality, and which in turn shape reality. Discourse enfolds both language and the social (Fairclough, 1992). Mills (2004, p. 49) states that "the only way to apprehend reality is through discourse..." In a sense, discourse functions as an arbiter of reality. More broadly, Philips and Jorgensen (2002, p. 1) consider discourse "a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)" that is not neutral. Discourse does something (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Rather than reflecting reality like a mirror, the language we use constitutes and is constituted by discourse, which makes, creates, and changes the world and our relationship to it (Fairclough, 1992, 2011; Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002; Potter, 1996). Experience is mediated by discourse. Theorizing discourse may open new possibilities for resisting dominant discourse, and synthesizes well with Ahmed's (2017) challenge to the bifurcation of theory from experience.

Discourses are not singular: there is not one universal discourse. Our selves, relationships, and places in the social world are, according to Baxter (2003, p. 1), "located in competing yet interwoven discourses". Within the multiplicity of discourses in contention and overlap, some have more currency than others; some are more readily accessible for interpretation and sense-making. Brison (2002) nods to available sense-making frames in her discussions of how people responded to her attack. People who could not conceive of her experience, who stumbled to find adequate words to respond to her, defaulted to blame and expectations that she would use her experience for good (Brison, 2002). Sense-making, interpretation, and the apprehension of reality are processes of applying language (names, narratives, and concepts) to experience and observations; in turn, perceptions of those experiences are mediated through language.

The most widespread and dominant discourses are known as hegemonic discourses; these seem to be common sense (Fairclough, 1992), and therefore have more currency. For example, the discourses of heterosex, as outlined by Gavey (2019), combined with rape myths provide one set of prevailing logics for making sense of sexual violence. In the #MeToo era, there are alternative feminist discourses available to make sense in novel ways and resist or reject dominant, rape-permissive discourses. The tensions between dominant discourse and novel meaning making frames highlights that there are multiple, competing discourses available in any given instance (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002). Potter and Wetherell (1987, p. 3, 9) identify “the ever-present possibility of alternative descriptions and categorizations”, including “delicate shades of meaning” that can be articulated in a common linguistic system of meaning. There are a range of discursive possibilities, including new discourses that emerge from tensions and competition between existing discourses. McKenzie-Mohr and LaFrance (2011) offer tools for handling these contradictions and tensions, which are discussed below.

We make sense of the world and our social experiences through discourse. Mills (2004, p. 46) provides a useful example of how discourse functions:

The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of ‘natural phenomena’ or ‘expressions of the wrath of God’ depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence.

The example above highlights what Potter and Wetherell call “an available choreography of interpretive moves” (cited Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002, p. 107). In Mill’s earthquake example, discursive structures within the fields of religion, poetry, geology, or engineering shape how the earthquake or felled brick are identified and interpreted, which narrative they are made to fit, and how they are made conceivable.



Some ideas appear as common sense—in other words, they are obvious and taken for granted—and new ideas can naturalize quickly if they function well in various circumstances (Fairclough, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Yet, according to Potter and Wetherell (1987), “Taken-for-granted meanings are not natural, inherent properties of these things but essentially arbitrary, culturally constructed conventions.” Further, these conventions serve existing power structures and inequities. Rape myths offer a clear example: rape myths are widespread, false beliefs about rape that shape the meaning made from sexually violent events, and which influence social responses to victims of sexual violence in potentially deleterious, material ways. Rape myths do things: their articulation conveys meaning to victims that may foster self-blame or deter help-seeking. As I discussed in Chapter 1, in a social climate where rape myths are increasingly challenged they persist in more subtle forms: they change, and coexist with competing discourses.

Challenging dominant discourses requires a willingness to “investigate and analyze power relations in society”, Phillips and Jorgensen (2002, p. 2) tell us, with “an eye on the possibilities for social change”. Discourses are often used to maintain unequal power relations in society, and “power creates and shapes how social worlds can be discussed” (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002, p. 14). Discourse is distinct from ideology, which is “meaning in service to power” (Fairclough, cited in Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002, p.75). Discourses can be more or less ideological depending how strongly they maintain or challenge power relations, potentially opening avenues for political resistance.

In addition to their multiplicity, discourses change; they are active, and the knowledge constructed through discourses has “social consequences” (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002, p. 6). Potter (1996, p. 47) notes that, “Descriptions are not just about something but they are also doing something; that is, they are not merely representing some facet of the world, they are also involved in that world in some practical way.” Potter (1996) develops this idea through the metaphors of a mirror and of a construction yard. These metaphors are extended through a range of texts by multiple authors. According to Potter and Wetherell (1987, p. 4), language is not a mirror, and language itself does not exist independent of what it describes; instead, it

actively constructs what it describes, “and being active, [language has] social and political implications”. Discourses create social worlds.

According to Potter (1996, p. 97), the construction yard metaphor has two aspects: “The first is the idea that descriptions and accounts *construct the world*, or at least versions of the world. The second is the idea that these descriptions and accounts are *themselves* constructed” (emphasis in original). Put another way, the language we deploy to account for reality both constitutes and is constituted by discourse. Discourses are not neutral: we access reality through language and discourse, and discourse lends meaning to reality via language. The cycle moves in two directions: discourse, made up of language, shapes how we take in the world—how we make the world make sense inside our minds—as well as what we do about it.

In seeking to engage with and analyze discourse, I draw on Page’s (2017) theorization of vulnerable writing as a tool to generate understandings that are cautious, deep, and attentive to the limits of the data set. The goal is to move analysis beyond hegemonic and dominant frameworks by picking up tensions, contradictions, and hesitations as sites of reflection and inquiry. I also build on McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011), who develop the notion of tightrope talk by building on DeVault’s notion of “linguistic incongruence”, which occurs where dominant discourses fail to narrate or make sense of events and experience. McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011, p. 56) advocate working with “frequent starts and stops, pauses, hesitations, and contradictions”, in order to get at understandings that go beyond dominant or hegemonic frames. Tightrope talk allows for consideration of novel articulations achieved by deploying the precise discourses that a speaker aims to move beyond. I outline these approaches below.

### Analysis beyond dominant frameworks

In this thesis, I attempt to push my analysis past readily available discursive frames in an effort to dismantle and challenge those frames. Such analysis includes critiquing bodies of research that reiterate dominant norms in their analysis, as well as deconstructing binary categories. Doing so has involved challenging my own assumptions on an ongoing basis and working within the data, which is part of the framework termed “vulnerable writing” by Page (2017). I have also benefited from the

notion of tightrope talk as developed by McKenzie-Morn and Lafrance (2011). In the current section, I wish to introduce these concepts and their application to the project, both with regard to my approach and in the final product I have produced.

Page's (2017) analysis and method emerge from her thesis work on self-immolation, focusing on the narrative of Miriam Al-Khawli, a Syrian refugee and mother of four. In her article on vulnerable writing as feminist method, she highlights the ambiguities, uncertainties, tensions, and hesitations that helped her work from within the data, rather than superimposing her preexisting assumptions onto the data. Among Page's (2017, p. 16) crucial insights is that, "Within the research process, self-immolation can become transformed and understood within existing frames of hermeneutic and analytic knowledge." Research can transform, unpack, and analyze trauma and violence in a manner that risks morphing or resolving it in familiar terms, thus reiterating existing norms. This risk is one I wish to mitigate in my research.

Page's vulnerable writing comes to bear on how I approach the material in this thesis; it informs my engagement with my data and other texts. For example, in developing Chapter 6, I assumed that PTG might offer scope for positive outcomes following trauma. PTG had been a prominent discourse in my recovery, and one which I drew on myself; I believed I might become a better, stronger person as a result of trauma. Sitting with this assumption as I began my research and reflection, I realized that I *wanted* to imagine positive possibilities. As I deepened my critical engagement, I considered the deleterious effects of PTG discourse on my post-rape experience. I reconsidered PTG oriented framings of my story and began to ask questions about the negative consequences of advancing PTG—especially as an imperative or expectation. Gradually, as my analysis deepened, my assessment of my own experience shifted in ways that helped me more deeply understand the stakes of advancing or critiquing PTG. I came to grips with the extent to which PTG constituted pressure to perform victimhood in particular ways, which were not always achievable to me, and where the consequences of failure to grow were disastrous to my relationships. I explore this in greater detail in Chapters 6 and 8.

My understanding of PTG and its problematics remains tentative and cautious. Because my research has forced me to reconsider my own assumptions about PTG, I imagine that over time my perspective will continue to change. Page's (2017) approach

encourages reflection, care, and openness throughout knowledge production. This may or may not be explicitly written into the text—it veers toward a more evocative autoethnographic style—but it nevertheless shapes the process of knowledge production. In the case of this thesis, Page’s (2017) approach informs my ontology in knowledge production. The tools of vulnerable writing are also applicable to engaging with tightrope talk, which was developed by McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011).

McKenzie-Mohr conducts research with women living well after rape, and Lafrance researches women with depression. They discuss how dominant narratives only go so far in providing language for women to articulate their experiences. McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011) argue that inquiry into women’s lived experience must engage carefully with non-standard use of language; researchers must “translate” and look beyond what is said to consider what novel narratives are being told. Their method of dealing with “linguistic incongruence” involves examining sites of contradiction and tension. Their approach maintains awareness of the tendency for stories that do not fit dominant narratives to be expressed in dominant or normative terms. Tightrope talk synthesizes well with Page’s (2017) approach to vulnerable writing. Both approaches require patience, care, and a willingness to take up glitches and incongruences, to go beyond the analytic, narrative, and discursive frames that are most readily available for interpreting experience, and to engage data with caution.

Tightrope talk includes metaphor, both/and descriptions, struggles to make meaning, and contradiction in speech. In one example, McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011, p. 62) discuss a participant’s desire to “see herself as both an empowered, active agent of her life and also without blame for her rape.” This participant voices concern that the tensions generated by this both/and and its contractions may foster blame. These sorts of tensions are precisely where tightrope talk becomes a vital analytic tool, since it encourages naming the tensions and consideration of various discourses which influence the construction of these tensions. In the case above, I would suggest the participant is managing the survivor imperative (which I outline in Chapter 5), the legitimacy of her claim that someone assaulted her—and therefore her status as a victim, while evading blame for causing her own victimization. Tightrope talk allows these to be taken together and teased apart in productive ways.

Page (2017), and McKenzie-Morh, and Lafrance (2011) argue that researchers risk defaulting to obvious and readily accessible analyses, tools, modes, and theories at the expense of sitting with inaccessible, incommunicable, and unintelligible facets of the data. They suggest that resisting default meaning making modes is especially relevant when that data involves trauma. Advancing the work of Mahmood (2012), Page (2017, p. 16) argues that superimposition of meaning is a form of violence; what existed beyond the limits of hegemonic sense-making is now “tam[ed] and control[ed]”. She contends that such knowledge is produced in advance of an encounter with the other, which might neglect or colonize new information or articulations, and preclude engagement with something novel on its own terms. Page’s vulnerable writing as a methodology inoculates against these potential risks to delicate research projects.

The framework provided by McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011) is vital to advancing analysis beyond hegemonic frames, especially when analyzing victimization and identity negotiation. Their notion of tightrope talk is highly applicable to working with victim/survivor speech. In conducting my research, I have stumbled in trying to make sense of contradictory speech. Their framework allows for working with and through those contradictions. Rather than fixate on one statement or another, McKenzie Mohr and Lafrance (2011, p. 65) suggest that contradictions themselves are the site where novel articulations occur: “Our analysis calls for attention to the importance of listening for, and lingering in, the spaces where language fails.” In so doing, counter-narratives can grow, opening up new spaces for resistance.

Page (2017) offers insights for planning a cautious and vulnerable approach in working through the tensions and sensitivities inherent in this project. In particular, her method supports unpacking sites of paradox and contradiction elucidated by McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance’s (2011) tightrope talk. Throughout my research, Page’s (2017) insights are built into my approach, reminding me to pause with various tensions, to move slowly and cautiously, and to engage curiosity and not knowing.

I also distinguish between intellectual vulnerability and emotional vulnerability, especially in the context of autoethnography. In early drafts, I avoided personal reflection or emotionally explicit writing, despite their common appearance in evocative autoethnographic writing and my fondness for the style. I began the writing with a strong emphasis on the theoretical, on analyzing the data in relation to other research;

only later did I include a little more personal reflection. This strategy enables me to work from within the data, and prioritize the analysis, rather than emphasize my personal process as a researcher writing on the sensitive subject of sexual victimization. The ideas I develop are vulnerable material: the analysis is new to me, and thus tentative. I have worked to destabilize my own assumptions, thereby allowing those assumptions to be examined and challenged throughout the research process.

Tensions also arise from the subject matter: sexual violence, its effects, and secondary victimization are challenging topics. Page (2017) argues that explicitly vulnerable writing is vital in attempting to analyze traumatic experiences. I am acutely aware that I am a researcher who has experienced victimization, and seeks to place that personal experience within the landscape of scholarly scrutiny. Personal vulnerability was another basis for foregrounding theoretical and analytical writing, rather than personal reflection or more emotionally explicit writing. My own vulnerability was implicated in my willingness to challenge my own ideas as well as the norms and discourses that have inflected my lived experience. The matter of intellectual vulnerability sensitized me to the limits of how emotionally vulnerable I was willing to be in writing a thesis.

## Not Knowing

Page (2017) develops ideas about vulnerability, she also addresses not knowing as a methodological practice. Her use of the word “practice” prompts consideration of variations in the definition of the term. The Oxford English Dictionary provides three definitions for *practice*:

1. The actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to theories relating to it.
2. The customary, habitual, or expected procedure or way of doing something.
3. Repeated exercise in or performance of an activity or skill so as to acquire or maintain proficiency in it.

Each of these varying definitions apply to the practice of research. In the first instance, research involves the theorization and practical application of a method. Second, methodological practices often fit within traditions of inquiry, either adhering to them or

breaking from them in a derivative manner: for example, autoethnography derives from ethnography and its critiques. Third—and somewhat unique to the methodology of not knowing—is the aspect of repetition of a particular task over time, in service to the acquisition of competence in that task.

Not knowing as a practice, as an epistemological and ontological stance, asks a researcher to return to the open state of not knowing at multiple stages of research. It functions in much the same way that the practice of meditation asks meditators to return to the breath over and over again; this returning grows more habitual over time, just as not knowing in research becomes more habitual. I find that the habit of not knowing increases the likelihood that I move cautiously and in directions unforeseen from the outset. In my research process, not knowing has opened possibilities for new analyses and interpretations beyond dominant discourse.

Not knowing plays an important role in how I live and make sense of my experience. It informs my approach to this thesis. Therefore, in the section below, I introduce data from a narrative excerpt which relates to not knowing and the role it played in the initial years after the rapes. I have included it in this chapter on methods to demonstrate how I will use methods and organize data and analysis in the thesis.

In the immediate aftermath of the rapes, while I was in the process of fleeing back to the U.S., I spoke with Michelle, whose ideas resonate with Page's (2017) theorization. As a person with power in our relationship, Michelle offered her perspective on the role of not knowing as it might pertain to my post-rape sense-making. Hers was pivotal guidance.

### *Singing in the Dark, 2014 draft*

[Michelle] spoke a lot about uncertainty, about the unknown. There was so much about this mess, about [my abuser], that I would never know, that I could never know. Certainty was not on the table. She encouraged me to expand my ability to hold that uncertainty. She reminded me to hold myself gracefully in contradictions [that] could not be resolved.

### *Singing in the Dark, 2012 draft*

“There are so many things about this that you will never know.” [Michelle] was calling me to the task of being in a place of radical not knowing, not drawing conclusions, but gathering information. She suggested that I leave space for meaning to emerge, and that I stay on the radical edge of navigating this process of integration and healing from a place of not knowing. I knew that I would have to grow to be able to hold what felt like such vast uncertainty and multiple truths in this deeply complex situation.

What I considered to be the most significant aspects of the above conversation remained with me in the years that followed. However, were I to attempt to recall the memory now, the details held within these two accounts would elude me. I remember Michelle discussing not knowing as a survival tool, and as a strategy for coping and sense-making. The emotional valence of the memory has gravitas, and I can pinpoint various fruits of Michelle’s guidance. Yet the details have decayed over time.

These accounts of a conversation with Michelle touch on the idea of not knowing as a strategy for personal resilience in dealing with the long-term consequences, of trauma. Not knowing is a skill that is honed and developed over time. It requires returning to uncertainty, hesitating, and accepting the limits of current knowledge on a regular basis. According to Page (2017, p. 16), “Receptivity to not knowing and to remaining with uncertainty and hesitancy can become integral to particular textual strategies and methodological approaches.” Page (2017) and Michelle’s insights resonate with the ontological stance I developed in the wake of sexual violence. In the personal sense, actively not knowing was a method for coping with trauma and crafting a functional (and evolving) narrative of the events. These skills can be applied to research, and to developing a cautious, nuanced, and slowly unfolding research style.

McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011) offer a complimentary set of practices for not knowing. First, they suggest attention to points of contradiction as they arise. Second, they encourage consideration around how contradictions can signal an effort to articulate something outside of dominant understandings, using the language that is available to the speaker. Holding contradictions is particularly useful to me in



considering the untenability of victim identity, based on the contradictory imperatives of various victim stereotypes and the consequences of adhering to or breaking from them. It is also useful in developing the survivor imperative framework.

My thesis fluctuates between consideration of the particulars of a single narrative and theorizations of larger social phenomena. The strategies put forth by Page (2017) and McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011) resonate with my preexisting ontological stance and provide strategies for thinking and writing. I applied these strategies to self (auto) and social (ethno) inquiry, and also to the terrain that exists between these two realms, manifest in interpersonal interactions. These approaches offered a method for achieving a high degree of nuance in inquiry.

Writing the thesis was, for me, part of living a feminist life, and involved engaging lived experience and theory simultaneously. The approaches set out by McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011) and Page (2017) offers skills and tools that are useful for living outside the context of producing academic work. Their frameworks continue to offer novel ways to approach ideas, consider new experience, and work through contradictions, hesitations, and uncertainty in daily life. Furthermore, the applicability of their methodology to daily life echoes Ellis's (1991) insight that autoethnography is a way of living, and highlights the utility of the method outside the context of academic work. The methods that I deploy in this thesis continue to be tried and tested in a range of contexts, and contribute to my ongoing commitment to do theory as I continue to live in a feminist way.

Autoethnography is, by definition, radically local and specific. It involves learning from personal experience and connecting it to larger social and political phenomena (see Ahmed, 2017). Among the crucial contributions of Page's (2017) approach is a keen awareness of the efficacy of starting within an experience and testing it against existing theory; Page's approach inoculates against taking theory as a starting point and superimposing it onto experience where it may not fit, in efforts to contrive a pattern, solution, or resolution to complex phenomena. I do not view this as a simple or tidy process. However, as a methodological guide, it anchors the processes of research, writing, and living.

## Ethics

Ethical standards for autoethnography are in development, and there is no universal method for adhering to ethical standards. There are always others in autoethnographic research, who are implicated in the narratives and insights that the researcher chooses to include in the work. The failure of some autoethnographers to consider the rights of others, or the impact of the writing on their own selves, demonstrates the need for forethought regarding ethical considerations in this method.

There are no formal, recruited participants in this research. However, as Tolich (2010) points out, all autoethnography includes others. Tolich (2010) discusses the rights of others in work based in self-narrative, and makes the critical point that it is essential to give significant forethought to methods of protecting others in the text and adhering to ethical standards to conceal identity and do no harm. Tolich (2010) is correct in his principles regarding protection of others and ethical forethought. However, the method by which he suggests these principles be applied, especially the universal necessity of informed consent, does not apply to all cases.

Tullis (2013, p. 249), responding to Tolich (2010), notes that, “Decisions about how to approach obtaining consent from the others autoethnographers choose to include in their narratives are not easily resolved by employing a single or universal procedure.” Tullis (2013), who performed research in a hospice setting, determined that it would be inappropriate to request informed consent for participation in some instances—for example, from individuals experiencing acute distress or actively dying.

Tolich’s (2010) critique centers on cases in which the proximity and specific nature of relationships implicitly reveals identity and breaks with confidentiality, at times revealing personal and private material without consent; he critiques pieces that include close friends and family members as main characters. These others are often readily identifiable, since the nature of the relationship (parent, child, partner) is essential to the integrity of the story being told by the researcher. Tolich (2010) also addresses works in which ethics are addressed as an afterthought: he points out several autoethnographies in which ethical standards are not adhered to at all, or are addressed inappropriately, for example in retrospect (Tolich, 2010).

Tolich’s (2010) argument makes sense in many autoethnographies, especially those in which others are in close relational proximity to the researcher. The identity of

these individuals is impossible to conceal. As I outline below, his guidelines do not apply in the case of my research, although his principles and standards absolutely do. The rights of others were an ongoing consideration in each instance where I included a narrative except or memory, including their right to privacy, anonymity, and non-harm.

In my thesis, the majority of others are peripheral others, and mentors or teachers in a range of contexts and locations, rather than close friends or relatives. Their relational proximity to me made for a rather simple process of changing names and details to conceal their identities. I did not include close friends or family. However, I prepared and planned for every person I could foresee including in the thesis from the outset, and included this plan in my ethics application. Those featured in this thesis are scattered across the U.S. and South America, and are further concealed by my having moved multiple times (between coasts and eventually overseas) in the timeframe discussed.

My thesis underwent ethics approval by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee in the early stages of finalizing my research topic. In my application, I provided a table detailing communities and groups that might have been included in the research narrative, and how individual identities were to be protected, or if informed consent would be pursued. There is a published account of my story by Rachel Monroe in *New York Magazine*. Details included therein cannot be altered, and the inclusion of any persons from that account in my autoethnography would have required informed consent. However, none of these individuals or interactions have been included in this thesis. My rapist was not named in that article, and is not named in this thesis.

My aim was to plan ahead. I examined any possibly identifying information and the potentials for concealment, tried to anticipate unforeseen possibilities, and developed plans to address them. For example, a standardized letter explaining the project and requesting informed consent was drafted for approaching those whose identities were at risk of exposure. If any unanticipated persons were to become potentially identifiable as the thesis developed, and work to conceal their identity proved insufficient, I would have returned to the ethics committee to pursue informed consent for these individuals. My intention was to seek informed consent as early as possible, as a preemptive request rather than a retroactive one. However, no cases requiring informed consent arose in the research.

Some relationships that feature in the thesis involve persons with authority, or in a position of power that was influential to our relationship dynamic. Identifiable information, such as the specifics of our relationship or their identity, has been altered or omitted, and the specific nature of their role has been changed. The power differential and influence of the role was maintained, along with any other details that were essential to the integrity of the story.

Another ethical concern throughout this research was with regard to my emotional and intellectual safety as an autoethnographic researcher working on a topic pertaining to personal trauma. I used several strategies to manage self-care from the outset. I chose a topic of study that was somewhat removed from the acute trauma of sexual violence, and carefully assessed my comfort level with the topic throughout the earliest stages of inception and development.

Self-care was planned and strategized in advance as well. I began working with a local therapist with a strong trauma background in June 2017 and maintained bimonthly appointments. In addition, I worked ahead of schedule where possible to allow for time off without the pressure of impending deadlines, so that if the work became distressing, I could step away. In addition, I maintained a few other projects related to my research interests at any given time, so that I could put aside distressing thesis material and focus on other projects. Very rarely did the material for the thesis cause distress.

Finally, I largely avoided discussion of my thesis in personal time, and did not work on weekends or into the night. I discussed my work almost exclusively with those in a position to offer educated critiques and comments, and with the emotional skills to do so with sensitivity to and respect for the subject matter. These boundaries helped prevent fixation on difficult material in the thesis, and allowed adequate time for rest, restoration, and decompression. These measures were helpful in avoiding a slip into the terrain of PTSD or triggers, and have been successful.

## Conclusion

The autoethnographic method I use in this thesis is based on, and adapts, Ronai's layered account. My approach is informed by Page's (2017) vulnerable writing methodology to narrate, analyze, and reflect upon secondary victimization. Page's

(2017) insights are embedded in my approach, and surface occasionally in later analysis. I also use McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance's (2011) notion of tightrope talk to push my deconstruction and theorization beyond dominant norms.

For my data, I draw from extensive contemporaneous writings in the years after my sexual assault. I engage the data alongside existing theory and research to develop new theoretical insights. Among the advantages of the autoethnographic layered account is that it honors the fluidity of memory, and allows me to access and use various perspectives in writing: that of a researcher, a storyteller, and a victim/survivor of sexual violence.

In this section, I have discussed autoethnography generally, and the layered account as the methodological basis for this thesis. I have tried to use insights from autoethnography to enhance the feminist theoretical approaches laid out in the previous chapter. Autoethnography allows me to navigate ethical concerns and avoid the pitfalls endemic to self-narrative in research. I have outlined various ethical concerns pertaining to autoethnography and detailed my plans from the outset to manage them. In addition, I have framed and defined discourse as I use the term. I organized this chapter to deal with the methods, tools, and theories that pertain to the practice of this research. In Part II, I used these methods, synthesized with feminist theoretical approaches, to consider my experience of the untenability of victim identity, the survivor imperative, and implications for posttraumatic growth.

## Part II

Chapter Four: The untenable terrain of victimhood

Chapter Five: The survivor imperative

Chapter Six: Posttraumatic growth: imperatives, subversions, and recuperation

## Chapter Four

### The Untenable Terrain of Victimhood

While victimhood offers a legitimate claim to help and support, as well as grounds for legal action against an alleged perpetrator, I argue that victimhood is laden with stigma and contradictory imperatives. Based on contradictory mandates and social expectations for victim behavior, I have found that, for me, victim identity was untenable. To understand the discursive roots of this untenability, I consider the construction of the victim label, and how it is articulated by researchers and their interview subjects. I draw on Christie (1986), van Dijk (2009), and Stringer (2014), and apply their frameworks to elucidate the possibility of victimhood as a walled-in identity category, wherein adherence to one set of norms and stereotypes necessarily violates another set, inciting deleterious social consequences.

My sites of analysis involve personal conversations, in which responses to my victimization were shaped by dominant conceptualizations of victimhood fostered by neoliberal victim theory, victim stereotypes, and rape myths and discourses. I explore how these conversations created interpersonal forms of secondary victimization. In my examination of victimhood, I evaluate the construction of victimhood as an undesirable identity category, insinuating a weakness of character and hindering individuals in their journey toward survivorship, which is a journey enabled by personal responsibility.

Then, I begin to examine the survivor category in opposition to victimhood, especially its emphasis on strong character and satisfactory coping. I argue that survivor identity is constructed as an escape hatch, enabling departure from the impossibilities of victim status and victim identity. A great deal of research, which I examine in Chapter 5, takes as a given the narrative arc from victim status to survivorship. In examining the construction of the terms, I aim to create a comprehensive theorization of their relationship. I draw from personal experiences and insights, embracing the overlap of theory and experience, and use tightrope talk to reframe the categories as more complex and paradoxical—as well as overlapping—than their binary formulation might suggest. I begin with a thorough examination of the victim label.

As Stringer (2014) argues, neoliberal victim theory bears heavily on the discourses of victimhood under scrutiny in this chapter. Radical individualism and an emphasis on personal responsibility, self-surveillance, and personal growth in the face

of adversity are encompassed in the neoliberal turn toward interiority as a locus of change and possibility. Neoliberalism contributes to a context in which those who experience sexual violence seek to distance themselves from victimhood (and its roots in gendered oppression and inequality) in favor of a more individualistic conceptualization, undermining the possibility for political and social analyses, diagnostics, and remedies. Neoliberal hegemony has infiltrated the fundamental assumptions that regulate our social, political, and economic world (Harvey, 2005; Stringer, 2014). These logics give rise to a sense-making frame which, I argue, compels those harmed by sexual violence toward survivor status. I discuss my how pressure to be a survivor may be damaging to individuals and relationships, and obscures social realities.

Central to my analysis is what Stringer (2014) terms neoliberal victim theory (NVT), which I discussed in Chapter 2. The logics of NVT have influenced feminist, anti-victim feminist, and post-feminist rhetoric regarding victims in general; they are highly visible in dominant conceptualizations of victims of sexual violence. Neoliberal victim theory (NVT), according to Stringer (2014, p. 9) frames:

victimization as subjective and psychological rather than social and political. According to this conception, victimization does not so much as happen ‘to’ someone as arise from the self—through the having of a ‘victim personality’, through the making of bad choices, though inadequate practice of personal vigilance and risk management, through the failure to practise the rigorous discipline of positive thinking.

Neoliberal victim theory positions victimization as originating from internal causes that merit internal solutions and sidestep investigations of social and political facets of violence (Stringer, 2014). This framing of victimization complicates the meanings associated with survivorship as it relates to victimhood.

Stringer discusses survivorship in the context of rape crisis feminism as a radical articulation of capable and resistant identity in contrast to its use by anti-victimists, who frame survivorship as an antidote to the victim mentality. In a neoliberal context, survivorship has been subjected to “mainstreaming and recuperation”:

‘survivor’ no longer refers to overcoming self-blame, but rather to overcoming the self-pitying deflection of responsibly presumed to constitute



victim identity... the 'survivor' is praised for replacing other-blame with personal responsibility. (Stringer, 2014 p. 80)

In a neoliberal context, survivorship negates self-pity and the victim mentality by taking responsibility for adverse events through subsequently coping well. Such anti-victim framings of survivorship conflict with the use of the survivor label in rape crisis feminism, which, according to Stringer (2014), acknowledges victimization while emphasizing resistance and countering stigma. I discuss this further in the next two chapters, where I address the nuances of the survivor label and its resonance with discourses of posttraumatic growth.

While NVT deals with the imperative to safeguard oneself and maintain personal safety, the survivor imperative adds a framework for considering post-violence identity struggles as they are shaped by neoliberal ideologies and values. This is the subject of Chapter 5, but the foundational findings that undergird my argument are the subject of the current chapter. I grapple with victimhood to comprehend survivorship.

At the core of my analysis, I find that in my experience of sexual violence, I endured a double bind: the volitional imperatives of neoliberalism, the correlative erasure of external causes of suffering, and the bolstering of agency as antidote sat in tension with the assumed demands of victimhood to be meek and suffer passively. These contradictions ensnared me in a spider web of opposing imperatives. Put another way, I comes up against walls no matter which direction I sought to move (Ahmed, 2017).

I argue that the double bind forms a type of secondary victimization, that manifests in interpersonal relationships and everyday interactions in the period following sexual violence. Tensions and contradictions play out in the social world; one site of such tensions is in dialogue with others, where we hit walls and come to feel under pressure. Victim/survivors depend on others to listen, empathize, and reestablish bonds of trust as an important feature in posttrauma self-restoration (Brison, 2002). When assumptions about the world are shattered (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), and the fragility of the self is made apparent in such immediate and palpable ways (Ahmed, 2017), the consequences of these pressures and tensions can be catastrophic. As I discovered in my own case, people responded poorly, since no matter what kind of victimhood I enacted, I was breaching one or another set of norms or expectations.

According to Ahmed (2017, p. 163), “When we come up against walls, how easily things shatter. To be shattered can be to experience the costs of our own fragility: to break, to reach a breaking point.” It can be too much to bear.

Over the next three chapters, I challenge the categories of victim and survivor and problematize their formulation in a narrative arc. My efforts formulate my response to the call from several feminist scholars to exert caution so as not to perpetuate these binaries in further research (Dunn, 2004; Kelly et al., 1996; Proffit, 1996; Wood and Rennie, 1994). I suggest that reworking the victim/survivor categories requires understanding that they are not neatly parsed apart, nor are they mutually exclusive. I observed significant complexity throughout my own negotiation of identity categories after my experiences of sexual violence. That I had been victimized, and was therefore a victim, seemed common sense to me. Yet, as detailed below, self-identification as a victim would elicit strong, adverse reactions from others.

In my own experience, and in qualitative accounts, I find tension and fluidity in how victim and survivor identity are discussed by those who have endured sexual violence. I explore these findings throughout this chapter. My findings support McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance’s (2011) argument that victim/survivors often seek to form novel articulations by defaulting to available discourses; I engage their conceptualization of tightrope talk ongoingly, since it offers a framework for comprehending novel articulations by familiar terms in contradictory ways.

My findings and analysis highlight the extent to which lived experience is inconsistent with dominant discourses of victimhood and survivorship. Overlooking these divergences neglects the complex manner in which victim/survivors engage with discourse; it is a perilous slip toward the phenomenon identified by Alcoff and Gray (1994), in which experts recuperate subversive speech to maintain compatibility with hegemonic discourse, thus diminishing or negating its subversive potential.

I use autoethnographic fragments, which are woven throughout this chapter, to demonstrate the prevalence of rape myths in how others made sense of my victimization, thereby shaping their responses and social feedback to my account. I considered how this shaped my navigation of victim and survivor identity over time, as well as how this shaped my experience of the social world as I negotiated my identity post-rape.

### *Singing in the Dark, 2013 Draft*

In the middle of October, I began referring to my experience as rape. The vacancy, the shame, the sense that I was sullied, the feeling of being trespassed against was not enough; I demanded a rational explanation to account for why I called it rape. I wanted to be ready for hard questions I thought [sic] sure to come. Above all, I needed to convince myself.

“But did he force himself on you?”

“Was he physically violent?”

As though most rape involves visible, physical force. Which it doesn’t.

My personal favorite came from a friend, a man named Eli.

“You’re scaring me right now, Lily. By calling it rape you give up all your power. You have to claim your power and responsibility in the situation, or else you’re a victim.” He spoke with such authority, such conviction. He was also telling me how to heal. By then I was suspicious of anyone who thought they had a better grip on my circumstances than I did.

“I’m not a victim.” I replied, testing the waters, hoping to sound more assured than I felt. “Not now, anyway. But I had the experience of being a victim; the experience of being powerless. And it takes courage to face that. Owning the victim qualities of the experience helps me move on.”

“But you created this so you could learn something.” He sounded so strong, so wise and even toned. “And look how much you’re learning and growing. Take responsibility for that.”

*Oh no you did not just say that.* I was starting to get angry. The conversation was starting to shift in the direction of “you create your own reality”, which is a school of thought that I find to be morally callous and completely devoid of compassion. *I create my response, Eli, I create my relationship to the story, my actions, my internal landscape. But I do not control reality.*

“Look,” I said, distaste lingering on the tip of my tongue as I tried to swallow what I did not feel ready to say. It was like swallowing a live bird. “I can promise you few things, Eli, but I can promise you this. One day the person closest to you will die,

and you will feel powerless. And you will be. We aren't in control here. Things happen in life that are beyond our control."

"But do you ever think he did this to you knowing that it would catalyze your healing?"

"What?" Are you fucking kidding me?

"You said so yourself, Lily, this has been one of the richest growth opportunities of your life."

"Eli, the technical term is AFGO: another fucking growth opportunity." I let the bird fly on fucking. An emotional onomatopoeia. "What I make of this is my doing. Mine. It has nothing to do with him and it certainly does not excuse what he did to me."

"What he did to you? But you put yourself in that situation. You created it."

"I put myself into a situation to learn and grow as an activist. I said yes to an entirely different project than the one currently at the center of my world. I did not ask for this."

Eli paused for a moment and looked into the distance, like he was wrestling with something deep inside his gut. "I guess I just hate the word rape. It's so ambiguous. I feel like people use it all the time and it doesn't mean anything, it just sounds an alarm."

The room got quiet as I took in his words. There was a tenderness in his voice and I wanted to be gentle in my response, wanted to afford him more sensitivity than he had offered me. After a few moments, I responded.

"That's exactly what it needs to do. Crying rape, crying abuse, these things sound an alarm and create a refuge, a shelter—sometimes literally—but at the very least, intellectually. Suddenly a victim can say, 'Hey, this has been happening to me, someone has been hurting me.' It opens the door for escape and creates a protected space for a victim to lick their wounds and come to terms with the experience. The nature of the beasts we call rape and abuse is that the victim often feels that it's their fault, that they are doing it to themselves. But calling out those terrifying words acknowledges that there is a perpetrator."

"It comes down to this, Eli. Rape is sex without consent. That's not ambiguous. My ability to give consent was compromised. By power, by brainwashing, and by circumstances. I did not want to be having sex with X, but I did not know how to make it stop. I was raped. Period."

He was quiet. In the stillness that had settled between us, I realized how exhausted I had become talking to him. Self-doubt was creeping in. I was feeling nervous and drained, afraid of what I'd said, afraid that I'd been wrong. It was time to leave, time to be alone and reflect.

We wrapped up our tea date. Walking home, his words hung in me as though hooked to my skin. The sense this was my fault was percolating to the surface. It cut past the scar tissue, past the barricades of intellect. As we parted that early November evening I felt sick. I'd responded well, but I hadn't believed my own words. Not completely.

The dam was breaking. I was reaching the limits of intellectual control over the process. It was coming time to feel my way through.

#### (Failing) To assert victim identity

My conversation with Eli transpired in November 2012, five months after my escape from the Amazon. I'd been raped at least five times, drugged, subdued, and manipulated beyond the point of recognizing myself. The only aspect of my personality I could identify for the nearly month-long duration of the abuse was my sense of humor. One woman I met in the village remarked, some years later, that her impression of me in his village was of a dazed and somewhat stupid girl, enamored of the man who, she later learned, was raping me. Years later, she thought I was bold, assertive, clever. That it was as if she had met two different people.

My rapist, I would later discover, had a reputation for drugging women with scopolamine and raping them. He was also internationally wanted for multiple murders, and had been subject to allegations of fraud, embezzlement, gun trafficking, and selling human body parts on the black market as art. I thought his track record bolstered my claims of victim status by illustrating the kind of man I was up against. I was wrong.

I imagined that my position framed me as what Christie (1986) calls an ideal victim, perfectly innocent, attacked by a clearly bad person in the midst of altruistic tasks. I was a Harvard Divinity School student in ministry, raped by a wanted murderer while engaged in a project of solidarity and activism to support indigenous communities and resist environmental degradation. I imagined that my victimization would be seen as legitimate. Instead, in response to my rape I was confronted with the racist notion

that I ought to have known better than to be alone with an indigenous man. Rape, or rape attempts, were framed as inevitable; therefore, I should have done more to protect myself. As I discuss below, the blame came at me from every direction. So, too, did attacks on my character stemming from rape myths (see Payne et al., 1999): if I let it happen, I must have secretly desired it; I was asking for it; it wasn't really rape; I was lying about or exaggerating the consequences of his actions.

I had only named the incident rape one month prior to my tea with Eli, in October. That was the same week in which I later sought rape crisis support. In my case, the naming of the incident as rape was stalled until my anxieties about having contracted HIV or hepatitis C had been alleviated: I started counseling a week after obtaining conclusive test results, which required waiting three months after the last rape.

There are several focal points in this conversation that I wish to foreground as avenues into my analysis in this chapter. The first point is Eli's neoliberal rhetoric of personal responsibility, warped to a magico-religious extreme. I consider how his understandings of responsibility demonstrate elements of a victim-hostile social climate (see Burt, 1980) and gave rise to secondary victimization. I also explore how Eli's approach exerted pressure on me to avoid the victim label and to reframe the events as positive. I examine the mandates of the victim label and the negative reactions (i.e., reactive victim scapegoating, see van Dijk, 2009) that ensue when one fails to achieve these mandates.

The second focal point is the various implications of Eli's training as a psychotherapist, and the role of our conversation in mediating my identity negotiation. Third, I analyze the assertions I made in real time, at the age of 25 and some years before embarking on a formal study of the subject, regarding victim status. Fourth, I consider what is recorded as inner dialogue regarding my having creative power over my relationship to the incident and my own inner landscape, if not the incident itself. These focal points enable analysis of the victim category, which will eventually segue into analysis of survivorship and the assumed narrative arc of "transformation" between victim status and survivor identity, which I develop further in Chapter 5.

First, with regard to neoliberal rhetoric, I find that Eli's comments elucidate the social context in which I would "negotiate victim and non-victim identities" post-rape

(Wood and Rennie, 1994, p. 125). It is important, for context, to understand that Eli, at the time of our conversation, was in training as a psychotherapist, with spiritual elements incorporated into his practice. He was building a career as an expert and clinician. He also espoused—in this conversation and more generally—ideas about people “creating their own reality” as promulgated by Oprah and pop New Age figures. These beliefs contoured his statements, and textured his unique articulations of prominent pop psycho-spiritual self-help discourses. His attitudes, as expressed in the above passage, also synthesized well with rape myths: he suggested that victimhood was inherent to me and my character, that I wanted or asked to be raped, and that my articulations of the impacts of rape were exaggerations. These discourses likely continue to infuse his approach to therapeutic work and his general worldview; further, his promulgation of these ideas likely influences the clients who would turn to him for help and support.

In the above passage, Eli suggests that, in a metaphysical and material sense, I enacted agency and chose to subject myself to the rapes as part of a larger enterprise toward personal improvement and growth: valued stalwarts of neoliberal citizenship. This is a fascinating distortion of the rape myth that I was “asking for it”, in that it provides a distinctly self-entrepreneurial motivation behind “asking for it”: Eli contends that I asked to be raped based in the aspiration to grow as a person. This echoes Baker’s (2010a, p. 188) insight that, “Women are required, to a greater degree than men, to be engaging in improving and transforming the self.” Eli postulates that I actively (if unconsciously) got myself raped to catalyze self-actualization, and that my rapist was more than willing to accommodate this conspiracy in service to bettering my person. The history of the term victim deriving from the Latin *victima*, a sacrificial animal, and the insinuation of the sacrificer (in this case, my rapist) functioned as a priest doing some holy service (van Dijk, 2009), rings here with a bitter irony.

Eli suggested that I ought to take responsibility for choosing to place myself in circumstances so conducive to growth. Implicit in this assertion is the assumption that I would grow from the experience, and that it would have a generally positive effect on my self and my life. He insinuated that I should be proud of myself for having taken such bold measures to catalyze growth. Undoubtedly, he fundamentally blamed me for the events, although he granted the events a positive appraisal, reconfiguring and thinly

veiling blame as positive responsibility for achieving a personal learning opportunity. This is particularly insidious: the invitation to accept responsibility is made all the more enticing by casting the thing for which responsibility is assumed as positive: a growth opportunity. Blame is temporarily left out of the picture, but necessarily returns to the frame when grappling with the negative impacts of the events for which responsibility has already been claimed; had I accepted responsibility on the grounds that the experience was a net positive, I would presumably have to extend that personal responsibility to my suffering, too.

Eli's emphasis on personal choice, in this case to undergo adversity in the name of self-actualization, is another stalwart of neoliberal discourse. Baker (2010a) notes how neoliberal ideologies encourage evading vulnerability or victimhood in favor of agency, thereby erasing structural or social causes of suffering or struggle. Stringer (2014, p. 40), adds to this, observing that:

Victims are presented as *self-made*: victimization is not the result of embedded systems of violence, inequality, and discrimination, but of bad choices, irresponsibility or pathology on the victims part; and victims are solely responsible for ameliorating the negative conditions of life.

(Emphasis in original)

Baker (2010a, p. 192) argues that denying victimhood maintains compliance with neoliberalism's "volitional imperative". This upholds neoliberalism's valuation of agency, and exemplifies Stringer's (2014) victim bad/agent good formulation; those who suffer from oppression are expected to assert agency and find individual avenues for overcoming victimizing realities. In Baker's research, she notes that, in "accounting for circumstances that might be interpreted as disadvantaging, [participants] found ways to avoid any appearance of victimhood" (Baker, 2010a, p. 192). Baker's participant pool includes young women in lower socioeconomic strata, many raising children and situated within problematic or even abusive relationships. She notes how these women make sense of their economic and relationship struggles in a manner that disavows victimhood, and resists acknowledging causes of harm, struggle, or suffering outside the self—with the exception of one participant. Her findings suggest that victimhood is constructed as a terrain to avoid, even when the cost is casting oneself as responsible for her own struggle (Baker, 2010a).



In allocating the responsibility for the rape events to me, Eli endorsed neoliberal discourse and sought to infuse it into my sense-making and identity-negotiating process. In addition to affirming his own stance through our relational interaction, Eli's allocation of responsibility allowed him to circumvent viewing my rapist as a criminal, and showcased his resistance to acknowledging my rapist's propensity for causing harm to others. His general argument, which is consistent with Stringer's (2014) analysis of the victim mentality, was that victimization came from within me. His erasure of my rapist's responsibility and harm is too common in discourses around sexual violence.

Furthermore, Eli rejects my naming of the events as rape. His denial further delegitimizes my claim of an external cause of harm, and contributed to internalization and blame. Eli's remarks suggest that what rendered the events rape is my naming of them as rape, rather than the events themselves. The converse is that, had I not named the events as rape, they would not constitute rape. If my naming the events is what makes those events rape, then my labelling becomes the site of harm and injury more than the actual events. I consider this notion further, especially in scholarship that locates harm in the labelling process more than in worldly events, below.

Eli argued that I should have circumnavigated victim status entirely for the sake of personal empowerment and agency, even if doing so required positioning myself at the extreme end of a magico-religious discursive framework. His insistence that I claim volition, even in an abstract metaphysical or unconscious psychological sense, suggests the degree to which neoliberal imperatives toward volition and choice have saturated sense-making frameworks. For example, he did not ask me to have faith in God, or more generally assert that "everything happens for a reason". Nor did he seem open to the possibility that my rapist was intent on harming (and controlling) me. Any such comments would suggest that a power outside myself was responsible for the events, and would be anathema to neoliberal logics, as outlined in NVT. However, his reliance on a magic religious interpretation of events demonstrates the lengths to which he was willing to stretch his sense-making to maintain continuity with neoliberal ideologies and assimilate my experience into his existing worldview.

The above conversation fostered my internalized self-blame for the rapes. According to my documentation, I struggled in the aftermath of the conversation with emergent feelings of self-doubt in response to Eli. Specifically, Eli's words aggregated

with existing self-doubt: I already doubted my own abdication of blame and refusal to assume responsibility. According to Wood and Rennie (1994, p. 127), self-blame “maintains the myth of women’s masochism or indicates a woman’s seductive contribution to her assault”. It can also foster a sense that such events can be actively prevented in the future. According to Mardorossian (2002, p. 756),

getting raped always elicits an investigation into the ways in which a victim might ultimately have been responsible for what happened. Bad judgment becomes cause, and victimization becomes manipulative or concealed agency.

The notion of victims as manipulative erases a rapist’s responsibility for harm, and promotes the notion of concealed agency and desire on the part of the victim. In this instance, Eli gestured toward my *ultimate* responsibility, and rather than emphasizing behavior or bad judgment, he took the notion of concealed agency to an extreme: he suggested that I wanted and deserved to be assaulted on a characterological basis—within his discursive framework, not as a punishment, but as a gift.

### Finding the words

This conversation with Eli demonstrates the relational dimensions and social pressure of making sense of sexual violence and working to restore my sense of self after sexual violence (see Brison, 2002). While Baker’s work deals with women’s sense-making around oppression and struggle, Eli offers an example of how these ideas can come at a victim/survivor from others, through relationships and conversations, to exert pressure and shape identity negotiation. However, in saying that, the ideas don’t solely come from “outside”: I struggled with self-doubt in the wake of the conversation, because part of me had been conditioned to believe that what he was saying was true.

I attempted to claim victim identity to Eli, to maintain an honest evaluation of the powerlessness endemic to my experience of violence. Eli rejected my identity claims. That rejection contributed to an ongoing, fraught relationship to my identity, as I sought to formulate it after rape via relational processes. In the years after the assaults, I tried on various identities vis-à-vis the incidents, often to have them rejected by others—even others with my best interest at heart and no malicious intent. As I discuss in the next two chapters, many people expressed that the victim label itself was bad for me. I

sought words that felt true to my experience, only to find my language choices inciting harmful social reactions.

Now, it is apparent that I was attempting McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance's (2011) tightrope talk. I sought to convey an experience using the available language, while being all too aware of how those attempts fell short of what I was attempting to say. I endeavored to label the experiences as victimization and claim the victim label for myself. I defaulted in different ways at different times to dominant discourses about victims, responsibility, and eventually survivorship, to evade blame, express agency, and manage others' perceptions of my identity. I explore this further in the next two chapters. Yet in doing so, I was all too aware that my efforts were misunderstood, that the contradictions I was attempting to convey in novel articulations were often not comprehended by my listeners.

Speaking about my experience, even (and especially) as I struggled to find adequate language, felt necessary: I was emboldened and influenced by Lorde (2007b), who addresses the fears that keep women silent and all that is to be gained by finding and using language in the face of fear. She names the fears present in speaking up—"of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation", and also of visibility (Lorde, 2007b, p. 42). In addition, she addresses the consequences of silence, of living in fear:

Because the machinery will grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid. (Lorde, 2007b, p. 42)

I faced fears as I developed raw articulations of my experience and my theorization of that experience as I lived it. While speaking and theorizing aloud created situations that were difficult, which hurt, which likely delayed my stabilization after the rapes, it also gave me a chance to come up against walls, and to learn (see Ahmed, 2017). It gave me ample opportunities to develop theory as I lived, to observe patterns, and to understand.

In the early stages of finding language, speaking, and then observing and theorizing responses, I blamed both myself and my listeners for various failures in communication; I imagined I must have misspoken to elicit such troubling responses.

Now, I understand these interactions, in part, as a consequence of tightrope talk, and as examples of what happens when such talk is made sense of in terms of rape myths and dominant discursive frames.

In reviewing my contemporaneous notes and memoir drafts, I locate a great deal of tightrope talk. I remember the frustration of attempting to convey things for which I did not have adequate language. I found solace in the feminist company of texts by Lorde and Anzaldúa. It is no wonder to me that Ahmed (2017, p. 240) includes books in her “Killjoy Survival Kit”: “You need your favorite feminist books close at hand; your feminist books need to be handy.” These books helped me endure.

Through engagement with feminists, I have found new intersubjective domains that validate and nurture my identity as a victim, and as a survivor, as both and as neither. These relationships have nurtured, supported, and affirmed me throughout the process of identity negotiation. This is an example of a positive experience of identity negotiation in a relationship context. Notably, these feminist others helped me forge an analysis and awareness of the role of neoliberal ideologies in my experience. Awareness of NVT was altogether lacking in the social milieu that surrounded me in the critical period after the rapes, which was so well exemplified by Eli and Georgina, whose reactions I discuss in Chapter 5.

### On expert analysis and the recuperation of dominant discourse

In light of Eli’s chosen profession and training, I wish to consider his reactions in light of Alcoff and Gray’s (1993) insights around confession and the roles of experts in reshaping victim/survivor speech to recuperate dominant discourses around sexual violence. Eli’s professional role entitles him to interpret the narratives of future patients. His responses to me indicated his propensity to restructure and analyze stories of sexual violence in a manner that subsumes these stories into hegemonic discourses. According to Alcoff and Gray (1993, p. 268), “The tendency... will always be for the dominant discourses to silence such speech or, failing this, to channel it into non-threatening outlets” and, failing this, to reshape and manipulate these stories in a manner that renders them no longer disruptive. Such processes may include casting the victim/survivor as mad, hysterical, or deceptive (Alcoff and Gray, 1993).

Eli's comments implied that I was mad, albeit in a veiled, subtle, and insidious manner. He alleged that my unconscious self was seeking improvement (growth, healing), or that there was some deep flaw in my innermost self to be repaired by way of subjecting my body to rape. This parallels a point made by Stringer (2014, p. 40) that within neoliberal victim theory, "...suffering seems to arise out of the sufferer's inner world, rather than out of worldly power reactions. Victimhood becomes a *quality of the sufferer*, rather than something that happened to them" (emphasis in original). Eli's assertions went further, ascribing a masochistic impulse on my part. As a psychotherapist, it is within the framework of his training to diagnose such maladies. This strategy is in close proximity to identifying madness and mental illness as the underlying cause of the events, or situating me as a "victim type" who perpetually places myself in victimizing circumstances. Worse still, his logic implied that I (unconsciously) wanted and therefore precipitated the rapes. In a novel twist, he positioned my having chosen that experience as a righteous path to healing, rather than a personal failure (see Ehrenreich, 2009).

Eli's response represents an unusual application of the rape myth that I was asking for, or secretly desired, the rapes; it is unusual because it was not a sexual desire, so much as it was a desire to achieve personal growth through suffering. This rape myth also discredits suffering by suggesting that my suffering was exaggerated; therefore, I was hysterical, deceptive, and misrepresenting my own pain. Eli framed suffering as inherently worthy or acceptable because it caused growth. This framing also draws from the myth that rape is a trivial event and that women lie about the consequences of rape (see Payne et al., 1999).

Eli's attempt to assimilate my experience, or render it consistent with his worldview, was a common pattern in individual responses to my claims of victimhood. Trauma researchers distinguish between the assimilation and accommodation of traumatic experiences. According to Joseph and Linley (2006, p. 1045), "The confrontation with an adverse event has a shattering effect on the person's assumptive world, and following the completion principle, there is a need to integrate the new trauma-related information." Assimilation involves integrating trauma into one's existing worldview, while accommodation involves a changing of worldview based on traumatic experience—which can be positive or negative (or both) (Janoff-Bulman,

1992; Joseph and Linley, 2006). An assimilative approach, which bypasses a need to reevaluate one's assumptive worldview, is less likely to foster the very growth in which Eli was so invested. Furthermore, it demonstrates a centering of his own worldview over mine.

Within the discourses shaping confession and speech about an experience of sexual violence, both victim/survivors and experts draw on hegemonic discourse to create language for the event and its consequences (Alcoff and Gray, 1993). These forms of speech may be consistent with or resistant to dominant discourses; they may both embrace and resist different dimensions of these discourses, and they are subject to change and inconsistency over time. In instances where dominant discourses are used in contradictory ways to try and articulate something outside of dominant discursive frames, victim/survivors are deploying what McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011) refer to as tightrope talk. However, experts may ignore the generative tensions of tightrope talk, and instead emphasize speech consistent with dominant discourse, thus enacting recuperation and undermining subversive victim/survivor speech.

Hegemonic discourses frame victims as meek, powerless, passive, lacking agency, and, in many instances, as having an internalized victim mentality. Such framing erases the victim self as articulated by a victim/survivor. Often, the victim/survivor is placed into dialogue with mediating experts upon whom they purportedly depend to help interpret their experience and work through it in a manner that eschews victim identity. Experts may encourage victim/survivors to deny or evade victimhood (see Baker, 2010a), and disavow the victim mentality (see Stringer, 2014). According to Alcoff and Gray (1993), expert and therapeutic analysis may reinscribe dominant discourses. The expert may listen to novel articulations and force them into preexisting categories (see Page, 2017), thus reducing possibilities for self-definition vis-à-vis sexual violence and hindering self-restoration.

The dynamics with Eli undermined and deflected the generative possibilities of tightrope talk, of trying to speak beyond hegemonic discourse in the available language. Further, Eli's approach circumnavigated my own uncertainty, hesitation, and ambivalence (see Page, 2017), as I sought to make sense of my own life experiences on my own terms. Embracing uncertainty was an approach that I found adaptive and manageable. Eli's words did violence to that process. I contend that Eli was assuaging

his own discomfort in our exchange. On the whole, his response had significant deleterious effects on me and how I thought and felt about the rapes. It made me wary and defensive when reaching out to others for support.

In this case, my credibility in claiming victim status was undermined by someone who, although not an expert in the context of our relationship, was and is trained as such. Alcoff and Gray (1993, p. 280) also observe that “the survivor—because of her experience and feelings on the issue—is paradoxically the least capable person of serving as the author or expert. The survivor’s views on sexual violence will often enjoy less credibility than anyone else’s.” While their analysis is specific to talk shows, the logic they identify is visible in this conversation. It is common for both talk shows and everyday speech to assume that experts have the authority to interpret victim speech. Eli’s response challenges any authority that I might have had over my interpretation of events. Further, it undermines my assertion (which I struggled to make at the time) that responsibility for the events lay outside myself, and with the man who chose to rape me.

Eli’s response to my claims of victimhood involved a problematic and twisted analysis of my experience, to make it fit his preexisting views. This exchange offers an example of recuperating dominant discourses of victimhood, victim mentalities, and rape myths in conversation. I argue that the manifestation of rape discourse in conversations such as this constitute an intimate, everyday form of secondary victimization.

### *Incidents between January and December 2014, recorded January 2020*

Prior to the NYMag piece, the story of my rapes and abuse reached over one hundred thousand people via podcasts and radio shows. A talk I gave on sexual violence was viewed ten thousand times on YouTube, in addition to several hundred live viewers. I sat on multiple panels and was featured in events across the USA and Canada, where I discussed the problem of sexual violence in our community. In live events, I did not share my story in depth, but I did situate myself as a victim/survivor of the type of abuse I was discussing, and attempted to argue for more widespread action on the issue. I had a large volume of people reach out to me to share their stories or comment on mine, although I deleted much of that record when I left the USA. I also had significant

professional and social ties in this particular community, including with most of the individuals who feature in this thesis. I was therefore able to observe and experience dozens of face-to-face reactions.

When I was approached by a journalist at NBC and another at The Atlantic, I met with fifteen of the world's leading professionals and leaders in the community. I sought advice about how to proceed in sharing the story. My question was not "should I do this?" but rather, "how do I do this well?" In nearly all these instances, I was met with victim blame, chastisement for claiming victim status, the survivor imperative, and assumptions that I would pursue and achieve personal growth through trauma. Two prominent figures, whom I had known for four years and trusted as confidantes, offered the perspective that if I shared the story of what had been done to me, it would destroy the movement our community had spent decades building while positioning me as an eternal victim.

In the same time period, I had close friends and elders within the same community—who framed themselves as my family—urging me to stay quiet about the rapes. Their argument was that speaking out would cast me as a victim, which was an identity I would never be able to shed; it would tarnish me and everything I sought to do in my professional life; they reasoned that if sexual violence was the first topic on which I wrote and spoke publicly, I would mark myself as a victim forever. They pressured me—explicitly, implicitly, and at times manipulatively—to keep quiet, keep my head down, and move on. Once I got over the rapes, the logic was, I would have other things to say, other things that were more important, on topics that didn't pose a risk to me. The explicit message was clear: don't be a victim. The implicit message became clear in retrospect: the mark of victimhood was a stain that I would put on myself, and I would do so by not following their instructions. My encounters with these trusted others erased the reality of victimizing events and obfuscated the real source of harm: the rapes.

In analyzing some of the discourses which constituted my experience, I deploy sweeping statements to mark my *feelings* at the time that certain sentiments were commonplace. My basis for statements about the widespread prevalence of the discourses under scrutiny in this thesis derive from the wide range of interactions I had with others regarding my rapes, and the plethora of responses to which I was subjected.



These sweeping statements are meant to demonstrate the extent to which my experiences were publicly visible, and the large number of personal reactions I encountered. They are also meant to capture the emotional reality of feeling overwhelmed and inundated by harmful responses nurtured by dominant discourses, responses which sparked the feeling that there were walls on all sides.

### Negotiating victim identity in relationships

The discourses at work within my conversation with Eli were present in dozens of interactions I had in the years after the rapes. I recorded the conversation with Eli in a working draft of my memoir, because it stood out as a remarkable and clear example of dynamics and discourses at work in a multitude of conversations. These discursive frameworks shaped, and at times impeded, my making sense of the sexual violence I had endured. They bore heavily on me through relationships (see Brison, 2002). Eli was by no means the only person to actively resist my labeling the event as rape, or labeling myself as a victim, arguing that to do so would strip me of personal power.

Wood and Rennie (1994) examine the discourses informing the process by which persons name their experience and negotiate their identity following rape. They point out that the naming process occurs in a social context, fueled by common sense and shared ideas about rape and its victims. Further, identity construction happens in relationships (Brison, 2002), and is constituted by discourse. To borrow from Mardorossian (2002, p. 747),

victims' accounts of their experiences do not exist in a vacuum of authenticity awaiting a feminist revolution to be able to safely express themselves, since victims, like all of us, get their cues from the intersecting and conflicting discourses through which the world is understood and shaped.

In my own experience I have found that one site in which these discourses are most evident—and become reified and reconstructed—is in conversations. In these interactions, victim/survivors and those who dialogue with them draw on and reify dominant discourses. The articulations of a victim/survivor are subject to judgment and appraisal based on how well they fit with preexisting sense-making structures.

The framework of tightrope talk developed by McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011) is vitally important as an interpretive lens. As victim/survivors draw on existing discourses, their speech and comportment pulls from available discursive repertoires. Such speech is often contradictory, ambiguous, and difficult to interpret; the default for making sense of such speech may be to grasp at one discursive thread or another. Tightrope talk suggests considering these contradictions as articulations for which there is no adequate language.

In the conversation above, my reply to Eli opens several avenues for analysis regarding victim status, and is an entry point to identifying overlaps and paradoxes within the victim/survivor binary or dichotomy. I address this in depth in Chapter 5, and have outlined relevant discussion by Dunn (2004, 2005), Proffit (1996), Kelly et al. (1996), and Schneider (1993) in Chapter 1. In response to Eli's claims, I state that:

I'm not a victim... Not now, anyway. But I had the experience of being a victim; the experience of being powerless. And it takes courage to face that.

Owning the victim qualities of the experience helps me move on. (Ross, 2013)

In my response, I assert victim status as temporally bound and impermanent, which is a direct challenge to the notion of victim status as "eternal", "perpetual", an internalized mentality, and a self-fulfilling prophecy (see Le Monde letter 2018, a response to the #MeToo movement that reiterates anti-victim rhetoric from the early 1990s).

My response echoes Kelly et al. (1996), especially the insight that claiming victim status is a statement of fact regarding an event, while survivorship relates to how I responded to the event. I also perform what Stringer (2014, p. 30) identifies as the distinction made in rape crisis feminism "between victimization as an experience and victim as a social identity arising out of experience", in an effort to "ensure victimization does not define" my identity. The quotation above is also an example of McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance's (2011) tightrope talk, in that I simultaneously accept and reject the victim label, and attempted to apply it in a novel manner, which both acknowledges victimization and seeks to establish some form of agency.

In dialogue with Eli, I expressed victim status as tied to a specific experience, one with a beginning and an end. Placement of temporal boundaries neglected the ongoing trauma in the form of secondary victimization, which would only later become

evident to me. In addition, I situate acknowledgement of my diminished agency at the time of the rapes as courageous, which is a trait usually associated with the survivor label, and note how embracing victimhood enabled me to “move on”. There were intimations of my own movement toward and exploration of the survivor label, although I had yet to directly engage the term “survivor”. My tightrope talk demonstrates an attempt to link victimhood to something akin to survivor status. It also maintains consistency with the neoliberal obligation to “get over” what happened, resists allowing the experience to define me, and reasserts individual agency over the long term. My attitude and conceptualization demonstrated neoliberal victim theory at play, as an apparatus in my sense-making process as a victim/survivor of sexual violence.

### Paradoxes of victim speech

Wood and Rennie (1994) point out a contradiction: claiming victim status makes a bid for justice and can serve to legitimize requests for support, while asserting the right to not be victimized in the first place. However, as Stringer (2014, p. 40) points out, our current framework around victims involves “supplanting the historical emphasis on *rights* with a new emphasis on citizens’ responsibilities” (emphasis in original). These rights are undermined by neoliberal values:

The term *victim* implies a lack of blame and responsibility that should engender support and sympathy. But the lack of blame means a lack of control, a negative characteristic in a society that values independence and control. (Wood and Rennie, 1994, p. 127, emphasis in original)

Tensions related to claiming the victim label—the hope of obtaining help and support, and the dangers of stigma—are taken up by a range of researchers whom I introduce in Chapter 1. Further, Stringer (2014) notes that in claiming victimhood, victims become suspect. These tensions elucidate the walls (see Ahmed, 2017) that a person who has experienced victimization is bound to hit, no matter how they negotiate and perform victimhood. It also harkens back to my previous discussion of Eli, in which he invited me to take positive responsibility and assert agency, which would also inevitably involve embracing self-blame for injury.

Loney-Howes (2018) maps the double bind in attempting to speak about rape. Her research involves activists and bloggers who are “out” online, who tell subversive stories that challenge dominant rape scripts. She criticizes the framing of rape as unspeakable, noting the impact of such framing on victim speech. According to Loney-Howes (2018, p. 32), credibility hinges on a “clear, linear and concise account”, while paradoxically, framing of rape as unspeakable challenges such accounts as suspect for the precise reasons they might otherwise be seen as credible: “if she presents her story in too calm, rational and calculated a manner (i.e., if she does not appear to be sufficiently traumatized) she may be perceived as lying.” These discursive constraints around victim speech create a context in which speaking in the wrong way risks harm; this risk stems from discursively informed, harmful interpretations and responses from listeners, witnesses, and others. Brison (2002) highlights the need for victims to be listened to and empathized with in the wake of trauma. Double binds with regard to victim speech, presentation, and behavior create significant, at times insurmountable limits to speaking. It’s hard to find an audience that can compassionately hear a victim’s account of sexually violent events and their sequelae.

Potential harms outweigh possible gains such that victims are limited in their ability to articulate and claim victim status. Often, rather than being heard and supported in novel and nuanced articulations of victim status, a person who has been victimized is forced into preexisting categories and made to negotiate their relationship to those categories. It is common for victim/survivors to remain silent to avoid these problems, and such silence may be both strategic and potentially deleterious. As I argue in the following two chapters, the potential untenability of the victim category can lead to victim/survivors urgently positioning themselves on a path to survivorship.

Many scholars note that victimization does not cease at the end of an acute, sexually violent event, but rather continues as a victim’s identity takes shape in their public life and identity (see also Leisenring, 2006; Minow, 1993; Proffit, 1996; Thompson, 2000; Wood and Rennie, 1994). The issues presented in this section demonstrate some of the challenges inherent in deciding whether and how to speak or seek help. Further, the process of seeking support is complicated by stigma and assumptions regarding victim presentation, which I discuss further in Chapter 6. These

issues form another way in which victimization is ongoing, nurtured by discursive framings of victims and the promulgation of rape myths.

### Reactive victim scapegoating

Should victim/survivors attempt to articulate their victimization or victim identity, the manner in which they present themselves and articulate their narratives may be met with what van Dijk (2009) refers to as “reactive victim scapegoating”. Reactive victim scapegoating may be enacted by professionals, the media, or in everyday interactions, such as the numerous reactions I introduced above, to constitute secondary victimization. Scapegoating (in the traditional or colloquial sense) refers to outcasting from a community and subsequent social isolation. It involves the vilification of the victim, and recasting them as the problem, rejecting their claims to victim status, and even framing them as an accomplice to their own victimization. Such phenomena were present in my experience of sharing the story publicly and seeking advice for doing so.

Reactive victim scapegoating was initially developed by van Dijk (2009) to address the media vilification of victims. The media’s framing of an event influences how the public reads and interprets it, and media narrative tropes become readily available templates for individuals to make meaning of various events. However, scapegoating also has social and intimate consequences. In the multiple experiences outlined above, I have found that scapegoating happens one person at a time, in interpersonal contexts.

For example, when Eli and others rejected my claim to victim identity and insisted that I had collaborated with my rapist, I felt hurt and defensive. These dynamics led to relational strain, argumentation, and disagreement as I sought to assert myself and my interpretation of events. My defiance was yet another manner in which a good victim ought not to behave. Had I passively accepted Eli’s feedback and meekly confirmed his framing of events and its implications for my identity, it might have endeared me to him and avoided strain. However, the cost of earning his support would have been to abandon control of my own interpretation and telling of the story. The pattern of refusing to accept my claims of victim identity was apparent across a range of interactions with dozens of individuals and in group settings.

The blame and pressure to take responsibility, as espoused by Eli and others, was also a form of scapegoating. I was saddled with the burden of responsibility for what had been done to me, which I rebuffed. There were long-term consequences for my rebuttal, for claiming the victim label and resisting others' interpretations of my experiences. As I continued to share the story of what had happened to me, longstanding friendships dissolved, and I was eventually ostracized from the wider community. I have found that my experience exemplifies a dynamic pointed out by Ahmed (2017): in identifying the problem, I became the problem. Subsequent relational tensions developed, based in part on others' rejections of my victim claims, their deployment of the survivor imperative (which I discuss in Chapter 5) and their directives that I strive for posttraumatic growth (which I discuss in Chapter 6). The hurt caused by such reactions eventually led to my departure from the community. The link between victimization and scapegoating—a term that, historically, denotes the burdening of a sacrificial animal with the sins of the community and casting it out to carry those sins away—became surprisingly literal.

Christian history infuses the term victim, which has now been expanded to encompass any person harmed by crime or disaster. *Victim* is etymologically bound up with expectations to be passive, to accept one's own suffering, and to immediately forgive one's abusers as Christ did his captors (van Dijk, 2009): turn the other cheek and submit. However, this expectation is not often met by victims in their social contexts and relationships, inciting scapegoating and other detrimental responses. (This is not to say that it is a victim's responsibility to manage problematic dynamics—I argue in the following two chapters that a victim's self-presentation is not the focal point for remedies; rather, responsibility ought to be dispersed across the social world).

There is an obvious and instructive parallel between *victima*—the sacrificial animal—and the scapegoat as a creature imbued with the sins and ills of a community and banished to carry away those sins in a collective catharsis or exorcism. In the case of rape victim/survivors, scapegoating involves locating the problem internally, in the victim (in their supposed 'victim mentality') rather than in the event or the perpetrator. In my experience, I found that the subsequent vilification and casual ostracism (in the form of social isolation) seem aptly termed scapegoating. Scapegoating occurred one person at a time, rather than in a formal, collective, and ritualized moment. However, it

was a form of social rejection, and caused undue harm at a time when I most needed support.

Based on the Christian genealogy of the term, victims, by van Dijk's reckoning, are expected to present as broken, passively accepting their victimization; shows of strength or resilience contradict existing imperative and incite antipathy. According to van Dijk (2009, p. 3),

The analysed victim narratives tell a very different story to conventional representations of passive suffering. They also reveal how society's response to crime victims tends to turn from sympathy into antipathy when victims defy the expected victim role.

However, it is not the victim who incites antipathy, although such antipathy is directed toward them. Instead, it is the unmet, unrealistic expectations permeating discourse and the social world that incites these harmful responses from others. The problem is recast as residing in the victims themselves—now as suspects and masochists—who failed to adequately enact agency and protect themselves from rape (Stringer, 2014). Victims are chastised for being unable to uphold the unrealistic demands of victim identity.

Reactive victim scapegoating is especially evident when victims are poised and self-possessed, as highlighted in van Dijk's (2009) examination of the global media backlash to Natascha Kampusch (see Kampusch, 2010). Kampusch's story, and van Dijk's (2009) analysis, elucidate the stakes involved in a victim's ongoing performance of victimhood and the pressure to conform with discursive norms. The media backlash involved a mass-scale rejection of her claim to victim identity, and vilification of the victim as a co-conspirator. The media reaction was piled atop the baseline trauma of her captivity experience, including extreme isolation, forced labor, and sexual violations.

For those who have been victimized, as they struggle to make sense of adverse events, reestablish trusting relationships, and seek support, the stakes are extraordinarily high. The period after sexual violence is sensitive, and failures to respond in an informed manner can deter victims from seeking further help (Paul et al., 2013; Ullman, 1999). Yet, as victim/survivors attempt to garner support and make sense of their experience with others, there remains an ever-present risk that a misstep might incite antipathy and rejection. These multiple risks support Ullman's (1999) findings that

victims face a dilemma in disclosure, since negative responses can do significant and lasting harm.

### **An agglutinative web of contradictory imperatives**

In light of my discussion above situated in my own experience of victim identity, I find that my experience of the terrain of victim identity is and was fraught with contradicting expectations. The theories developed by van Dijk (2009) and Stringer (2014) highlight two opposing discourses regarding victims: van Dijk highlights expectations to suffer meekly and passively, while Stringer demonstrates neoliberal imperatives to assert agency. Tensions between the Christian mandates of the victim role and the imperatives of neoliberalism to ‘not be a victim’ bound me within an agglutinative web. Linking my personal experience to the analyses of Stringer and van Dijk, it seems that victim/survivors risk a serious and deleterious backlash if we fail to appear sufficiently weak and passive, while weakness and passivity are deemed unacceptable under hegemonic neoliberal discourse, which reveres strength and agency.

I argue that the confluence of conflicting imperatives creates a context in which victim identity became untenable for me. There was little room to manoeuvre in the web. Moving too far in any direction risked either failing neoliberal expectations or becoming the focus of reactive victim scapegoating for failing to fulfill the expected victim role. Indeed, moving at all seemed to tighten the web’s grip.

This finding is based on my broader, ongoing experience of sharing the story publicly. While many of the specific incidents of public sharing and reply are not recorded in my writing from the time (and therefore not part of the data set), the array of interactions gave rise to complex feelings about the victim label and, for me, its untenability. This untenability was something I felt long before I could articulate it. In seeking to understand some of the discourses which constituted my lived experience, I found that Stringer (2014) and van Dijk’s (2009) theories, and the tensions between them, offered explanatory value. Juxtaposing their work has allowed me to articulate something I had felt, based heavily on my experience of interacting with dozens of people, but for which I lacked language prior to my research.



## Victimhood as totalizing

The negative traits associated with victimhood, and themes of victimhood as eternal and total, are recurring and consistent across a range of feminist, psychological, and victimological research. Wood and Rennie (1994) offer a concise summation of the victim category:

In general, it appears that the status of victim is undesirable—to be a victim represents a loss of control, a loss of self-esteem; it involves categorizing oneself with other stigmatized individuals, it entails aversive social consequences such as pity and rejection, and it is difficult to change. (Wood and Rennie, 1994, p. 127)

Control and self-esteem are especially prized in a neoliberal context, where claiming victimhood is stigmatizing, and leads to relational consequences. Wood and Rennie's comment that "it is difficult to change" suggests that victim status is permanent: victimhood leaks into a victim/survivor's future, and into other facets of their life.

The discourse of the permanent, perpetual, and totalizing victim is especially pernicious. It situates failure to escape victimhood as a deficit in character and inner strength. The discourse of the perpetual victim is exemplified in the words of Barb, who was a participant in the study of Wood and Rennie (1994). In response to questions about her identity post-rape, Barb states:

...that means I'm a victim, so that must mean that I'm a victim in all areas of my life, therefore, you know?... I can't be successful, I can't be this, I can't be that, it's as if this is going to permeate my whole life... I'm going to be a mess... because of being this victim. (Wood and Rennie, 1994, p. 137)

Interestingly, Barb does not locate the problem in any particular event (e.g., rape) or its aftermath: any specific incident is excluded from her comment. Rather, the focus is entirely on her status as a victim.

## Internalization

The Oxford English Dictionary offers insight into colloquial use of the victim label. It offers four definitions for the term *victim*:

(1) A person harmed, injured, or killed as a result of a crime, accident, or other event or action; (2) A person who is tricked or duped; (3) A person who has come to feel helpless and passive in the face of misfortune or ill-treatment [as modifier] '*a victim mentality*'; (4) A living creature killed as a religious sacrifice.

Each of these definitions is brought to bear in the process by which those subjected to sexual violence come to negotiate their identity after the event, especially the first and the third. The first definition highlights victimhood as the result of a specific event—there is no internalized aspect to this definition, nor any kind of characterological judgment. Rather, echoing Kelly et al. (1996), it is linked to a statement of narrative fact: something caused a person harm, ergo they are a victim. The emphasis is on the harm done unto the person, which was caused by an external source.

The third definition gestures toward the internalization of victimhood, as exemplified in Barb's quote above. This definition suggests that there is an inciting event or ongoing ill treatment, but foregrounds the internalized meekness, helplessness, and passivity that results from that incident; the one who has been injured has become weakened and developed a pathetic state of mind. The tension between these two definitions is consistent with Mardorossian's (2002, p. 770) observation that, "The meaning of the term *victimization* itself has simultaneously changed from an external reality imposed on someone to a psychologized inner state that itself triggers crises." Her argument demonstrates the turn toward internalization and depoliticization.

These two Oxford definitions are visible in the words of Kim, who was a participant in the study of Wood and Rennie (1994). Kim articulates the difference between victimization and victim identity:

But, so I just have two feelings for the word [victim], one is just in the, you know, one who receives an injustice and the other one is just a completely helpless shell of a human being. So, I'm not comfortable using the word for myself (Wood and Rennie, 1994, p. 137–138).

Kim rejects victim identity on the premise that it would render her hollow and somehow less than human. It is interesting to note that, echoing Barb, her statement makes no reference to the violent event and its negative impacts: rather, the source of any negative

impact seems to lie within the choice of words one uses to describe themselves after the incident, while the incident itself is erased.

The overlap between the first and third definitions is exemplified in the third point of analysis that I wish to take up in regard to my conversation with Eli. The record of my internal dialogue reads: *“I create my response, Eli, I create my relationship to the story, my actions, my internal landscape. But I do not control reality.”* First, this statement demonstrates an internal reclamation of agency, based in an acknowledgement of its loss and subsequent reestablishment—a manoeuvre predicated upon acknowledging some degree of diminished power at the hands of an abusive other. Second, in retrospect, I would challenge my own assertion as to the ability of any person to maintain creative control over their personal relationship to events, including their “internal landscape”. Such a perspective fails to account for the far-reaching implications of PTSD and rape trauma syndrome, and overlooks the impact of social discourse pervading the aftermath of sexual trauma.

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) inhibits claims of control over one’s inner life: feeling a loss of control is part of what makes it such a frightening lived reality. The symptoms of PTSD highlight the lack of control any one person might claim to have over their internal reality. Symptoms of PTSD include intrusive thoughts, memories, and flashbacks, as well as depression, anxiety, and a sense of being out of control. In addition, internal landscapes are nurtured and constructed in light of cultural norms and prevailing discourses. As highlighted above, I have found that there is a range of dominant discourses that bear heavily on an individual’s reckoning with sexual violence. There is no way to maintain independence from these discourses; one may react to them and resist them, but even resistance hinges on its connections with, and roots in, hegemonic understandings of victimhood.

## Getting help

Since the category “victim” is a stigmatized and undesirable identity category, victims are encouraged, either tacitly or (as in my case) actively, to resist identification as victims, and especially to resist being labeled as a person with a “victim mentality”. I contend that these pressures inhabit a victim’s ability to display the harmful impacts of victimization. This potentially barricades a victim’s access to support, by urging victims

to surrender access to support; after all, support is allotted only to genuine and legitimate victims, who are defined by cultural expectations and norms as sufficiently innocent, blameless, and visibly injured (see Christie, 1986; van Dijk, 2009).

As I discuss in Chapter 5, I find that victim status is framed as a thing to be overcome. Escape from victim identity is supposedly achieved by healthy coping and, as the colloquial phrase would have it, refusing to be a victim. Emi Koyama (2011) observes that:

The society views victimhood as something that must be overcome. When we are victimized, we are (sometimes) afforded a small allowance of time, space, and resources in order to recover—limited and conditional exemptions from normal societal expectations and responsibilities—and are given a different set of expectations and responsibilities that we must live up to (mainly focused around getting help, taking care of ourselves, and recovering).

Koyama gestures toward the neoliberal discourse that victims should “move on” and overcome; that those of us who have been victimized should demonstrate individual resilience in the face of social injustice. I discuss the notion of resilience in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Furthermore, the enterprise of overcoming often requires drawing on the sorts of resources that are available only to those who classify as victims, or who have the economic resources to pay for additional help and support. Access to these resources is an intersectional issue, as Crenshaw (1991, p. 1250) discusses in her section on structural intersectionality:

counselors who provide rape crisis services to women of color report that a significant portion of the resources allocated must be spent handling problems other than rape itself... uniform standards of need ignore the fact that different needs often demand different priorities in terms of resource allocation, and consequently, these standards hinder the ability of counselors to address the needs of nonwhite and poor women.

It also costs more to serve women from marginalized communities, whose needs are different (Crenshaw, 1991). This understanding is part of what necessitated “me too” as a grassroots movement. Tarana Burke was responding to the needs of girls and women

of color, especially the need for designated spaces for healing and solidarity (Guerra, 2017).

Even when victim support is accessible, it is often framed as temporary: available for a limited amount of time until one is sufficiently recovered and able to resume participation in society as a self-responsible, neoliberal citizen. At the rape crisis center where I sought treatment, I was allotted 12 sessions, which was extended based on the severity of my case. However, the goal was to get me out the door: not only in the interest of my swift recovery, but to open up a space for the next person who needed to deal with the adverse consequences of sexual violence. In Dunedin, where I live and study, our local rape crisis center has a counseling wait list that is several months long. Rape crisis resources struggle with funding (Beres et al., 2009). The support available is temporary: its goal, in part, is to inoculate against victim status becoming permanent.

## Conclusion

Thus far, I have sought to explore dominant discourses that shape victims' experiences following sexual violence. I have found that Stringer's (2014) arguments map accurately onto my experience of how neoliberal discourses shape attitudes and assumptions about how victims should evade the victim label and to position themselves as non-victims. Simultaneously, van Dijk's (2009) work elucidates aspects of my experience, where I was expected to suffer meekly and passively, in light of the Christian etymology of the term and how that history constructs its present connotations. Their theorizations highlight different aspects of my experience and tensions therein. I found that my failure to comply with the contradicting expectations set out by Stringer and van Dijk led to reactive victim scapegoating, while failure to deny the victim label and demonstrate sufficient strength led to negative character assessments of my having a "victim mentality". In light of this finding, I argue that my experience of victimhood is and was laden with stigma and contradictory imperatives, rendering the victim label untenable.

Further to the victim label's untenability, I found that these contradictory imperatives infused conversations in a manner that did further harm through an everyday form of secondary victimization. These imperatives were brought to bear both via relationships with others: in the conversations through which I sought to negotiate

victim and non-victim identity labels. They created barriers to further support-seeking, since it inhibited my claims to victim status, which would have opened possibilities for help and support. Therefore, avoiding the victim label foreclosed support options.

Blame is also a crucial variable in claiming or evading victimhood. Neoliberal victim theory blames victims and encourages victims to accept responsibility. For example, Eli wanted me to claim positive responsibility for the events as growth opportunities, which would also force me to assume responsibility for the harm I suffered. I found that evading blame and claiming the victim label can lead to charges of having a “victim mentality”, in which victimhood is cast as totalizing and arising from internal shortcomings rather than worldly circumstances.

I have also begun to explore the perils of internalization, which feeds into the depoliticization of sexual violence, and instead saddles victims with the burdens of coping with harmful social problems. I find that the victim label is cast as a source of harm, when the real source of harm is sexually violent events. I consider this further in the following chapters.

In recalling this conversation and reviewing my record of it, I find neoliberal discourses at work in my efforts to lay claim to any agency I could muster, to avoid the accusation that I was evading responsibility and becoming a pathetic victim. I find that I used tightrope talk (McKenzie-Mohr and LaFrance, 2011) as I struggled to demonstrate agency while claiming legitimate victim status and placing responsibility for the events on the man who chose to assault me. I attempted to claim agency after the fact, in what I would do *in response to* actions and events outside my control. These are intimations of my early movements toward “survivorship”, which I went on to explore with trepidation. The emphasis I placed on my response to trauma was bolstered by a dominant discourse that trauma is fertile ground for psychological growth. I examine this further in Chapter 6. In the next chapter, I turn to survivorship as a destination toward which one must journey, including its imperatives and limitations.

## Chapter Five

### The Survivor Imperative

According to dominant neoliberal discourse, those who endure sexual violence should strive to evade victim status. They are encouraged and directed to claim responsibility and turn misfortune into an enterprise of personal growth and empowerment. As I argued in Chapter 4, the terrain of victimhood is so fraught as to limit the viability—and increase the risk—of claiming the victim label. Victimhood is a walled-in identity category, in which adhering to one set of stereotypes (passivity, meekness) means failing at the other (to overcome victimhood). The consequences of these failures range from reactive victim scapegoating to the charge of having a ‘victim mentality’. Thus, these hazards impede identification as a victim, even when doing so seems accurate to the harmed person and might help them obtain resources and support.

Having established my experience of untenability of the victim label, in this chapter I map out the relationship between victimhood and survivorship as it has been discussed by feminist scholars and sexual violence researchers. I begin by engaging with the historical use of the word survivor, which gained purchase after the Holocaust. I explore the survivor as political, and connected to public perception and visibility, and its subsequent depoliticization alongside uptake in therapeutic discourse. I then consider the way my politically motivated storytelling was reduced to personal healing.

Next, I delve into constructions supporting the binary formulation of victim and survivor. I find that the binary construction of the survivor as a self-restored, strong, and capable person who copes well with rape is defined in contrast to the weakness of character and poor coping skills associated with victims. The possibility for survivorship is predicated upon the existence of victimizing experiences; those who endure victimization are thus positioned, by virtue of victimization, to distinguish themselves as non-victim types, or as lacking a ‘victim mentality’. I then consider agency, ‘knowing better’, and blame as stalwarts of the survivor imperative, and introduce the notion of “feminist snap” (Ahmed, 2017).

Defining survivorship on the basis of rejecting, evading, or overcoming victimhood requires active distancing from victims. Distancing includes distancing oneself from a former victim self, or from other victims who are ‘not as over it’. I argue

that distancing logic fosters the recurring metaphor of the ‘journey’ away from victimhood, which is common in sexual violence literature (see Jordan, 2013).

In light of these considerations, I introduce the survivor imperative. I define the survivor imperative as social pressure to escape or evade victimhood and strive for survivorship, which has been constructed as a more socially acceptable identity category. I demonstrate different ways that the survivor imperative takes shape in conversations and interpersonal relationships, where pressure is exerted to eschew the victim label and heroically overcome adversity by way of personal responsibility. I examine how conversations and relationships shape post-rape identity negotiation, and how these interactions are influenced by dominant discourse.

In putting forward the survivor imperative, I explore its internalizing, individualizing, and depoliticizing dimensions. I argue that the survivor imperative saddles victims with the responsibility for surmounting social ills by individual efforts, and in a context where social remedies are sorely lacking. Further, even where those who experience sexual violence successfully transcend or sidestep the victim category, they must learn to survive and endure in a culture where gendered victimization persists. Such violence is normalized and fostered by rape myths (see Burt, 1980; Payne et al., 1999) and the cultural scaffolding of rape (Gavey, 2019).

I do not wish to imply that agency and personal responsibility are entirely moot; help-seeking, talking to trusted others, personal coping strategies, and a range of everyday behaviors require forms of agency and will. Many of those who have been victimized can and do live well, or at least function, after victimization. Agency is part of what enables functioning. Nevertheless, such agency is enacted in a climate that is hostile to victims, where contradictory imperatives for victim comportment shape how others respond to victim/survivor agentic actions or speech. Agency occurs in relationship to others, in between people, and does not exist in a vacuum (see Abrahamsson, 2014). I argue that the pendulum has swung too far toward emphasizing individual agency and personal responsibility, at the expense of recognizing, and resisting, the role of hegemonic discourse and social realities. These discourses include rape myths, the cultural scaffolding of rape in proliferating sexual harm, contradictory expectations around the victim label, the survivor imperative and, as I discuss in the next chapter, posttraumatic growth. Further, I suggest that the survivor imperative



functions to obscure harmful social realities and contributes to the continued stigmatization of the victim label.

Finally, I consider a conversation in which my interlocutor collapsed the victim/survivor binary, and utilized the terms in non-normative ways. I explore how victim/survivor speech challenges and moves beyond dominant understandings. I apply McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance's (2011) notion of tightrope talk to contextualize and examine complex, nuanced, and novel articulations. By challenging recuperative analyses of victim/survivor speech, I suggest that it is incumbent on those listening to, interpreting, and studying victim/survivor speech to attend to and analyze that speech with greater sensitivity to tightrope talk.

### The Holocaust survivor

The language of survivorship predates feminist discourse on sexual violence. Historically, the term has been used in a legal context to denote outliving others. For instance, a deceased adult may be survived by their children or spouse who stand to inherit part, or all, of their estate. Colloquially, the term suggests continuing to live in a variety of circumstances. Its meaning expanded and evolved in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the application of the term to political contexts of extreme suffering came about in response to the Holocaust. Its emergence in that context offers significant insights into the use of the term today, and provides some alternative conceptualizations.

The Oxford English Dictionary (2018) presents two definitions of the term *survivor*. The first definition resonates with historic use of the term, while the second definition deals with newer conceptualizations of the survivor:

- (1) A person who survives, especially a person remaining alive after an event in which others have died: 'he was the sole survivor of the massacre';
- (1.2) A person who copes well with difficulties in their life: 'she is a born survivor'

The first definition implies passivity, and does not frame the survivor as active and agentic, but rather reflects chance in having survived: they remain alive. In the context of the first definition, survivorship does not hinge on agency, let alone heroism. The main focus of the first definition is the inciting, life-threatening event. It is akin to the

first definition of victim, as someone injured or killed as a result of some event (Oxford, 2018).

The second definition emphasizes the act and capacity to cope well, and therefore to respond adaptively to victimizing or life-threatening events. Coping is active; it requires agency, action, will, and choice. Although coping involves a set of behaviors and actions, coping has characterological associations: one has the constitution to cope well. Hence, coping well signals strength of character. As I discuss in depth below, coping well is a revered quality in neoliberal contexts, demonstrating resourcefulness, resilience, and responsibility in the face of adversity. The example provided by Oxford (2018) about being a “born survivor” implies inherent characterological traits, independent of circumstances.

However, looking at historical use of the term, individual coping as a sign of character has not always been key in conceptualizing the survivor. In considering the history of the term, I draw heavily on Des Pres (1976) and Orgad (2009), who each take different approaches in conceptualizing the survivor. Des Pres (1976) emphasizes the moral authority—and burdens—of the survivor, as well as the social and political aspects of the term. Orgad (2009) focuses on divergences and consistencies between use of the term after the Holocaust and in contemporary discussions of sexual violence. She also considers the survivor in reality television, and takes on the adaptations and complexities of the survivor label in a neoliberal context.

The meaning of the survivor label evolved in the decades following the Holocaust. According to Orgad (2009, p. 137), the Holocaust is “a key site that consolidated the idea of the survivor as a visible discursive object”. In the first two decades after the Second World War, only active resisters to fascist regimes were publicly visible and valorized as survivors; these figures were part of what Chaumont (2000; cited by Orgad, 2009, p. 137) terms “the cult of the hero”. Those who had endured internment in the Nazi camps were not categorized as survivors; rather, they were labeled victims.

During the two-decade period immediately following the Second World War, the victim label was applied with stigma and shame, to connote submissive consent by Jews to their own destruction in the Nazi camps. Chaumont (1997, 2000; cited by Orgad, 2009) uses the term “secondary victimization” to refer to the repression of Jewish

realities and stories: Jews were blamed for their own deaths and lack of resistance. Even their survival strategies were condemned. Victims' voices and stories were systemically repressed, including in Israel, through the 1950s.

Orgad (2009) tracks how the perception of Holocaust victims shifted over several decades, as they gained public and political viability. During the 1960s, victims were glorified and renamed survivors. From the 1970s onwards,

Holocaust survivors gradually moved from the realms of exclusion and invisibility to public recognition and moral authority. This shift, often framed as a transformation from victim to survivor, was a key moment in the cultural production of the survivor. (Orgad, 2009, p. 138–139)

The transformation was a public and political phenomenon rather than a personal triumph; the survivor label denoted a change in public perception, not in the individuals who had survived the Nazi camps. The change depended on public visibility and discourse. Orgad (2009) points out that visibility was achieved in part via the proliferation of memoirs detailing individual experiences during the Holocaust and which, taken as whole, served to change public conceptualizations of the past and present realities of victim/survivors.

While public and political transformations occurred, a therapeutic discourse of victimhood and survivorship was underway. Orgad (2009) discusses early intimations of dichotomizing victimhood and survivorship. The victim/survivor binary was most visible in psychotherapeutic perspectives in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, which maintained that individual recovery from the Holocaust was supported by “the transformation from victim to survivor as the desirable goal” (Orgad, 2009, p. 138). It would appear that the narrative arc from victimhood to survivorship predates the application of the idea to sexual violence.

Some, including Bettelheim, resisted the individualizing, therapeutic discourse. Orgad (2009) draws insights from Bettelheim's (1979) essay “The Survivor”, in which he argues that to construct and present survivors as “active agents responsible for their own survival” (Orgad, 2009, p. 139) is a “completely misleading distortion” (Bettelheim, 1979, p. 288). According to Bettelheim (1979), surviving had to do with luck, with others' choices about who died and who was freed, who was helped and who was not. For Bettelheim, there is a banality of survivorship that is unrelated to

resistance in the face of life-threatening situations or acts of heroism. Langer (1995, p. 6, cited by Orgad, 2009, p. 138) criticizes talk of survivors, calling it “a language designed to console instead of confront”, thus deflecting the realities of the Nazi camps. I suggest that the critique of survivorship as deflecting is a pertinent criticism in the contemporary context of feminist discourse around sexual violence.

Des Pres’ (1976) book *The Survivor* takes a different approach to discussing Holocaust survivors, and lays the groundwork for an alternative conceptualization of survivorship regarding sexual violence in the current context. The aim of the book is to outline the structures and ontologies of survival in the death camps: “ways of life which are the basis and achievement of life in extremity” (Des Pres, 1976, p. v). Core to Des Pres’ work is a survivorship that hinges on maintaining humanity and spirit (in the most general sense) in extremity, independent of whether one succeeds in staying alive: for Des Pres, those who perished but maintained their humanity are survivors. Victims are the dead, in body or in spirit. Des Pres’s notion of survivorship deals with the resources mobilized to avoid literal or metaphorical death.

Des Pres highlights that survival was a collective enterprise: an exercise in solidarity. He makes visible the extent to which the predicament of surviving was outside the control of victim/survivors. In one situation, some might resign, while others might rally to oppose. Even for those who resisted, there were moments of nearly succumbing to death or despair, and it was the help of others that carried these people through. Here, agency and will are collective, and are deeply relational. These understandings also echo Lorde’s (2007b) insights that we need one another to speak, to act together, to survive, and Ahmed’s (2017) statements about the need for feminist solidarity for survival in a world that still needs feminism. These feminist women are writing about survival in a different context, and yet the need for solidarity in order to survive resonates across the divide.

In Des Pres’ framework, there is nothing heroic about survival. “[A]lthough to be human under pressure takes extraordinary effort, there is really no alternative... Hard as it is, therefore, the survivor’s struggle is without glamor or special destiny” (Des Pres, 1979, p. 9). His conceptualization of survival involves the simple fact of knowing one is alive when others are not, that no one is immune. This may seem hopeless and grim, but even the grief-stricken person remains alive, with sufficient humanity to

grieve. To live after such an ordeal—life, with one’s humanity and spirit intact—is the prize. According to Des Pres (1976, p. 14), “Men and women can sustain enormous damage and still go on as human beings.” Here, what is highlighted is the simple and profound ability for humans to endure, and to remain human in extremely cruel conditions. Endurance is a powerful, modest, and achievable alternative to the individual heroism and strength often associated with the survivor today. Des Pres’ work provides scope for an alternative conceptualization of the survivor that emphasizes the ability to live on and retain humanity after violence. I return in to Des Pres’ conceptualization in Chapter 7.

Des Pres (1976) offers a poignant essay on the survivor as witness, and details recollections of Holocaust survivors who report making a decision to fight and live for the express purpose of telling their stories. He describes the imperative to bear witness, and highlights the extent to which many survivors credit bearing witness as motivating their efforts to stay alive: “For many survivors the chance to speak comes later. To bear witness is the goal of their struggle” (Des Pres, 1976, p. 31). Embedded in this goal is resistance to forgetting the terrible realities of the Holocaust. Des Pres (1976, p. 36) offers a poetic discussion of bearing witness. He suggests that silence is death: it is the sound of the dead, and of the horror that follows atrocity. The silence is empty and void of meaning. From that silence comes a wail, a scream, which can make the horror of that silence felt and heard. It has the power to incite a scream in listeners. The scream becomes a vessel for carrying and dispersing the burden of remembering and speaking for those who did not survive, who are therefore unable to speak (Des Pres, 1976).

Here, Lorde’s (2007b) perspective on transforming fear and silence into speech and action comes to mind: finding language for our suffering and oppression, and crafting ways to share that experience with others, carries potential for solidarity. Lorde (2007a) emphasizes the need for poetic language to accommodate speech where other forms of language fall short. Des Pres (1976), too, writes about the need for poetic, even religious language in writing about the Holocaust: he suggests that extreme suffering requires a different kind of language. Speech efforts fall short of adequately expressing lived reality.

For example, Des Pres talks about the erroneous application of the label of “survivor guilt”, arguing that concern for the dead has been often misread, “taken as

evidence of something irrational and therefore suspect in the survivor's behaviour" (Des Pres 1976, p. 36). He challenges survivor guilt as a meaning making frame, used to interpret and analyze survivor speech and to treat survivors in a therapeutic context. Survivor guilt was considered an attempt to justify why or how one survived. According to Des Pres (1976), survivor guilt is too dependent on psychotherapeutic language and the notion of neurosis. Summarizing Lifton, Des Pres challenges the interpretation that carrying the dead is a form of neurosis. According to Des Pres (1976, p. 39), "The aim of psychiatric treatment is adjustment, acceptance, forgetting—goals which constitute a condition the survivor rejects." In therapy, forgetting is conceptualized as healing, and the survivor's need to remember and bear witness is antithetical to therapeutic goals. The survivor experience is beyond the psychoanalytic frame. Perhaps survivor behavior and experience is beyond any interpretive frame: it is disruptive and difficult to hear. The survivor experience is inherently disruptive, personally and politically, and resists forgetting even the most painful memories.

Resistance to forgetting figures prominently in my experience of victimization and its aftermath. I felt a need to remember and narrate my own story, and the possibility of doing so was a lifeline through the most painful periods after the rapes. Further, the history of women's speak-outs and consciousness raising, the feminist rallying cry of "breaking the silence", suggest to me that the imperative to witness and verbalize stories of victimization and survival are important to many women who experience sexual violence. I discuss this in greater depth below.

To resist the notion of survivor guilt, Des Pres (1976, p. 40), borrowing from Lifton (1972, p. 519), puts forth "the anxiety of responsibility". Such responsibility is the moral authority and burden shouldered by the survivor, as one who remembers what they have seen and suffered, and feels passionate about telling the truth about it (Des Pres, 1976). Des Pres (1976, p. 40) frames this as "the capacity for response to deeds and events; as care for the future; as awareness of the interdependency of human life, it becomes simply conscience". In these conditions, the silencing of the survivor does great personal harm, for it barricades the realization of their responsibility. It also does social harm, since it infringes on the ability to hear and right wrongs, and to learn from history. Silence becomes depoliticizing.

Still, there are those who remain unwilling or unable to listen. Des Pres (1976) addresses resistance to hearing survivor accounts; the knowledge borne by survivors is too disruptive, too disturbing, too far outside the confines of everyday experience. Des Pres (1976) also recognizes the extent to which cultural symbolism is dedicated to deflecting harsh realities, including notions about finding meaning in and redemption through suffering.

The meaning of the survivor label has shifted in the decades since the Holocaust, and it has been increasingly applied to the context of sexual and domestic violence. Consistent across both contexts is the need to bear witness and speak. However, the meaning of survivorship increasingly connotes individual, therapeutic transformations, rather than political changes or shifts in public perception. I consider this in depth below.

### Survivors of sexual and domestic violence

Some early connotations of the survivor label carry over into feminist contexts. Since the late 1970s, survivor has been applied to the context of sexual and domestic violence. The initial goal of implementing a new label was to resist the stigma of the victim label and its connotations of passivity and inaction by recontextualizing actions taken during violent events as survival strategies. However, the meaning has evolved to suggest a personal narrative arc of transformation *from* victim *to* survivor. Further, the victim and survivor labels have been dichotomized. Both the media and psychotherapeutic discourse have contributed to the construction and proliferation of survivorship in opposition to victimhood.

Orgad (2009) discusses prevalent themes associated with survivorship in feminist contexts. First, public claims of survivor status coincided with consciousness-raising efforts to acknowledge and reveal the extent of sexual victimization as a social and political problem. Such efforts to increase public visibility mirror the political and social context of survivor discourse following the Holocaust. Orgad (2009) argues that survivorship has historically been contingent on speaking out and making violence visible: it has been public, political, and performed, rather than a private, personal triumph. Feminist politicization of survivorship was a reaction to violence that had long

been presumed personal, and kept secret and silent. Speaking out opened possibilities for mutual support, and rendered painful realities politically meaningful.

Therapeutic and individual conceptualizations have become increasingly prominent. The psychotherapeutic frame holds that “Recovery must involve speaking the unspeakable” (Orgad, 2009, p. 140). Therapeutic framing reflects a turn toward the internalization and individualization of survivorship, and speaking up is often framed as an inherent part of a recovery journey. In the vocabulary of psychotherapy, talk therapy is the means by which one recovers from trauma. It is the path by which one moves beyond victim status toward survivor status; survivorship is the desirable end of an identity continuum.

Orgad (2009) notes the 1990s efforts to recast victims as agentic survivors, and suggests that the survivor label might foster hope for life after a rape experience. However, Stringer (2014, p. 79–80) complicates this claim:

In the wide variety of contexts in which the concept ‘survivor’ is invoked today, the unique meanings rape crisis feminism ascribes to ‘victim’ and survivor’ are rarely visible or visible only in depoliticizing ways. Along with the other ‘best ideas’ of second-wave feminism that Nancy Fraser (2009) argues have been ‘resignified’ in neoliberal times, the concept of survivorship has been mainstreamed and recuperated (see McLaughlin, 2012; Alcoff and Gray, 1993; and Bumiller, 2008). Even as the ethos of survivorship continues to powerfully inform the ongoing work of rape crisis feminism, in many contexts today, notions of survivorship and resilience operate on behalf of neoliberal victim theory... feminist meanings have been evacuated from the concept of survivorship and replaced with a credo of enforced resilience and personal responsibility.

While hope for living well after sexual violence is important, I argue that such hope should be about social change and transformation at least as much as it is about individuals’ ability to overcome, conquer, or make peace with traumatic experiences. Stringer’s notion of “enforced resilience” resonates with my discussion of posttraumatic growth in the following chapter.

Orgad (2009) is critical of the 1990s recasting of victims as survivors, noting that psychotherapeutic framing privileges personal transformation while omitting social



realities. According to Orgad (2009, p. 144), “The celebration of agency, personal empowerment, self-responsibility, and self management has contributed to deflect discussion away from the responsibilities of the community, the state, and the society at large.” She also discusses backlash to the term survivor, where some mark it as:

destructive, disturbing, and even dangerous... survivorship is legitimate and desirable as long as it is devoid of anger or criticism, as long as agency is directed to harmonious and peaceful forums and activities. (Orgad, 2009, p. 145)

Here, Orgad elaborates and expands on the depoliticizing power of survivor discourse. A certain type of survivor is revered: a survivor who is politically passive, individually focused, and embarking on a therapeutic journey of self-knowledge, self-enterprise, aspiration, and improvement. The disruptive capacity of the survivor, as one who bears witness and speaks up, is undermined by individualizing discourses. Internalized therapeutics subvert Lorde’s (2007b) notion of transforming silence into language, action, and political solidarity. Excessive personal emphasis obscures social realities, and places responsibility on individuals rather than dispersing it across social and political domains. Again, there is scope for some amount of personal responsibility and agency, but not to the extent that it is valorized by these depoliticizing conceptualizations.

### **Political resistance dismissed as personal journey**

Changes in the meaning of the survivor label through the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century increasingly reinforce neoliberal victim theory. The original emphasis on transformation from victim to survivor as a matter of public perception and visibility has morphed to underscore a personal therapeutic journey, which depends on denouncing victimhood. In the years immediately following my rapes, the imperative I felt to tell the story and bear witness to ongoing realities of sexual harm was frequently identified by others as part of a personal healing journey. In the majority of instances where people discovered I was writing a memoir, their response assumed that I was doing so for the purpose of personal healing and the therapeutic power of writing.

In contrast, I found that the act of writing was anti-therapeutic: it forced my sustained confrontation with the facts of my trauma, and left me swimming in horrible

memories. It exacerbated what was, at the time, worsening PTSD. It triggered flashbacks and depressive episodes. It gave me no joy, no healing, no satisfaction. From a clinical perspective, it was retraumatizing. I was attempting to record the story in meticulous and honest detail, especially in places where my story diverged from socially acceptable narratives. Practically speaking, I felt a need to record as soon after the events as possible, while the memory was vivid. I hoped that the constant, obsessive rumination and repetitions of the events in my mind—a symptom of my PTSD—would support an accurate record. Any healing capacity of narration lay in the possibility that it might help me resist harmful social norms and politicize my experience. My experience of being a ‘survivor’ is consistent with Des Pres’ (1976) framework, which centers on staying alive, retaining humanity after trauma, and the imperative to witness. I found hope in the possibility of bearing witness, not only to sexual victimization but also to secondary victimization.

Despite what I felt were explicit social and political commitments, I was frequently subjected to the assumption that writing was nothing more than a healing project. This reduction fostered tension and contradiction: writing the story was presented to me as both therapeutic and harmful to myself and others. I was told committing the story to paper would render me an eternal and total victim, and that it would do harm to others. These claims about eternal victimhood were a form of reverse victimology (Stringer, 2014). I was also encouraged to write *if* it was therapeutic to me. These paradoxes and contradictions contributed to an atmosphere of tension in my relationships after sexual violence. When I was asked, often accusingly, why I wanted to speak out, the social and political motivations I offered were met with suspicion. I was charged with being a source of harm. In foregrounding personal healing, my political and social intentions were either ignored or else challenged.

My experience of attempting to draw attention to the issue of sexual violence resonates with insights from Ahmed (2017, p. 34), that to name the problem is to become the problem.

Not naming a problem in the hope that it will go away often means the problem just remains unnamed. At the same time, giving the problem a name does not make the problem go away. To give the problem a name can be experienced as magnifying the problem... when we give problems their

names, we become the problem for those who do not want to talk about a problem even though they know there is a problem.

By complaining, I became the source and cause of trouble, bypassing the actual cause—sexual violence—about which I was complaining. Mentors and trusted friends made sweeping and harsh comments about my character and self-interest for wanting to write and speak out. They told me that raising consciousness was clearly for personal financial gain. I was accused of seeking fame on the basis of my trauma. Their focus on my character failings was hurtful, and fed my own concerns that I might harm others. I also worried that I was not comporting myself graciously as I suffered. Crucially, the focus on my motivations and character obscured the real problem: the proliferation of sexual harm, and the protection of those who chose to enact it.

Throughout that period, I did not think of myself as a survivor; I was too immersed in the project of remembering, recording, and telling. I was cognizant of others' resistance to that telling, and often felt subject to rejection and judgment for suffering. Although the term survivor was not central to my lexicon, the discourse of survivorship, and the survivor imperative, cast a shadow over the initial years after the rapes. I felt constant pressure to evade or overcome victim status, to become something else, to take responsibility and enact agency. The only permissible story to write was one in which I was not a victim, one in which I had overcome.

### The victim survivor binary

Shifting focus from the victim/agent binary to the victim/survivor binary enables deeper understandings of everyday terms used to discuss and identify those who have endured sexual violence. Considering the victim/survivor binary allows for analysis of the history of the survivor label in the context of sexual violence, which I discuss above, and for engagement with the journey metaphor, which I detail below. First, I wish to map the feminist debates regarding victimhood, survivors, and agency.

Survivorship has long been entwined with notions of individual agency. Schneider (1993) titles her work "The false dichotomy of victimization and agency," and discusses the mutually exclusive framing of victims and agents with regard to battered women. She critiques this frame as reductive and overly simplistic. Echoing Barry (1979), Schneider argues that the binary formulation neglects areas where the

victim and survivor categories overlap, and the ways in which survival strategies are deployed in victimizing situations. After Schneider (1993), several researchers discuss what they term the victim/survivor dichotomy. Kelly et al. (1996) develop the victim/survivor dichotomy to elucidate the mutually exclusive use of terms and their oppositional positioning. Echoing Schneider and Barry, Kelly et al. (1996) advance a critique of how binary formulation erases acts of survival at the time of victimization. According to Kelly et al. (1996), the impetus behind establishing the survivor label was to alter the stigma associated with the victim label. However, Kelly et al. argue that survivorship as a valorized alternative has actually reinforced the stigma of victimhood. They highlight how the dynamics between victim and survivor labels reduce the social and systemic to the individual and psychological.

Proffit (1996) contributes to the debate and dialogue by highlighting the extent to which survivorship, like victimhood, overemphasizes violence with regard to identity. Proffit (1996) makes several vital points that apply to sexual assault: no matter the name, the material reality of violence and victimization persists; survivorship is discursively linked to coping; and, overemphasis on singular, totalizing identities is troubling. However, Proffit (1996) slips into a common assumption that the victim or survivor category might subsume victim/survivors' identities. Proffit's concern mirrors the extent to which victimizing experiences and subsequent suffering may come to dominate a victim/survivor's life and sense of self for some time after the events. However, concerns about the victim label as totalizing, which I address in Chapter 4, misplace the cause for trouble in the process of identification, rather than victimizing events.

The distinction between a victim and a survivor, or the different connotations within dominant discourse, might be summed up thus: the survivor copes well and moves on from the event and its harm, while the victim copes poorly and remains trapped in a self-fulfilling prophecy of perpetual (internalized and total) victimhood. Hockett, McGraw, and Saucier (2014, 84) note that the two labels for those harmed by sexual violence, victim and survivor, "have the same denotation but different connotations... denote the same referent, but convey different meanings about the referent." The similarity between the terms is the inciting incident—sexual violence of some kind—and identifying the person who has experienced it. Dominant

conceptualizations valorize the survivor and devalue the victim, and are further enhanced by the construction of a narrative arc, a personal journey metaphor, by which one moves away from being a victim, toward becoming a survivor.

In the period spanning the 1990s to the present, the survivor is presented as authentic, sovereign, and powerful: their suffering is, to some extent, simultaneously affirmed and plastered over. Victimization is minimized, and focus is placed on positive attributes, including courage, self-sufficiency, and admirable efforts to overcome (Orgad, 2009). According to Orgad (2009, p. 150),

The survivor constitutes a desirable mode of being or identity that people are encouraged to comply with and take on. It is not a given identity or role, but one that must be achieved: one becomes a survivor. The survivor is a self-responsible individual with a considerable degree of agency who emerges from a struggle involving some kind of suffering, through a process of self-exploration and styles of self-management. The self is both the source of the survivor's suffering and the solution to the suffering.

Orgad (2009) discusses the prevailing notion that a survivor is something one strives to become, rather than something inherent. Orgad (2009) also notes how the striving associated with survivorship contributes to delegitimizing the victim label, especially since they are constructed as binary opposites. Binary framing perpetuates the construction of the victim category as undesirable, while survivorship remains “a desirable role that individuals are encouraged to assume” and strive to achieve (Orgad, 2009, p. 132).

Hockett, McGraw, and Saucier (2014, p. 84), whose studies I address below, note that these two names for those harmed by sexual violence, victim and survivor, “have the same denotation but different connotations... denote the same referent, but convey different meanings about the referent”. The similarity between the terms is the inciting incident: sexual violence of some kind. They also treat the victim and survivor categories as mutually exclusive. It seems that the difference between a victim and a survivor, as conceived in dominant discourse, might be summed up thus: the survivor copes well and moves on from the event and its harm, while the victim copes poorly and remains trapped in a self-fulfilling prophecy of perpetual (internalized) victimhood, and does harm to others by doing so.

The positive connotations of survivor vis-à-vis victim status have been well documented by a range of researchers (see Dunn, 2004, 2005; Kelly et al., 1996; Leisenring, 2006; McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance, 2011; Proffit, 1996; Schneider, 1993; Thompson, 2000; Wood and Rennie, 1994). The survivor formulation recognizes strength and the ability to cope (Proffit, 1996). Kelly et al. (1996, p. 90) point out how survivor identity may serve as “a source of positive self-identity in women”. Several scholars cite Barry (1979, p. 39), who wrote that, “Surviving is the other side of being a victim, it involves will, action, initiative on the victim’s part.” Survivors make decisions, they recover and move on, they cope well (Leisenring, 2006, citing Naples, 2003). According to Jordan (2013, p. 49), early use of the survivor labels “sought to place emphasis on the woman’s actions and responses, recognising not only their victimisation but also their strengths and resilience”. Furthermore, survival is ongoing: a myriad of circumstances and ordeals, including police interviews and trials, must be survived (Jordan, 2013). Survivors symbolize resilience. However, I argue that whether survival is offered as a de facto status for having survived or whether it hinges on coping well and characterological assessments is significant.

### Valorizing agency and devaluing victimhood

After the rape, I felt pressured to manage the construction of the narrative of what happened, and who I was in relation to the events, in a manner that valorized agency and survivorship. Others directed the construction of the narrative. Yet I desired to name the events as an expression of my agency, in a manner which mirrored my inner dialogue in response to Eli: “*I create my response, Eli, I create my relationship to the story...*” The onus sat squarely on my shoulders to craft a narrative of the events and their aftermath that highlighted my personal strength and agency in any way possible. I had been victimized by another person, who chose to victimize me. Yet, whether or not I became a victim was constructed as my own choice, my own responsibility.

Here, Stringer’s (2014) victim bad/agent good formulation is an apt analytic frame. Victims are suspect, and a victim is expected to uphold agency adequately by demonstrating empowerment and strength. To borrow from Baker (2010a, p. 187), “No matter what obstacles and disadvantages are experienced, the neoliberal subject must live their life as though they are free to choose its trajectory.” I was expected to choose

a trajectory that involved upholding my own agency. Furthermore, I was explicitly told that if I told the story at all, I could and should tell my story (and live my experience) in a manner that could be viewed as uplifting.

As I remember it now, I engaged in a semi-conscious effort to accommodate the contradiction of these demands with my lived reality, while maintaining some sense of agency and will in developing an understanding of events. The tensions in managing these contradictions demonstrate another permutation and example of the intersubjective and relational aspects of identity negotiation, and demonstrates the internal ramifications of these dialogues. I identified victimization as transitory: I placed what Wood and Rennie (1994, p. 138) call “temporal boundaries on the experience”. I had been victimized by victimizing events, but that did not make me a victim. Thus, I could evade victim identity. The prospect of evading victim identity, at the time, felt like a revelation, a way forward. In retrospect, it appears to be a product of social directives fostered by dominant discourse.

Parul Sehgal, writing for *The New York Times*, discusses the survivor imperative in a piece she titles “The Forced Heroism of the Survivor”. She tracks the subversive beginnings of the survivor label in pop feminism as a way of highlighting resourcefulness, and critiques what survivorship has evolved into: a romanticized mandate. Sehgal (2016) writes that, “The pendulum swings from one extreme to the other: from casting rape as insurmountable pain to casting the survivor as possessing superhuman strength.” Sehgal’s critique, echoing Koyama, combines an attitude of heroic overcoming with positive and effective coping styles to catapult the survivor toward a more realized neoliberal self. In so doing, they demonstrate their strength and determination to get past victimhood and prove themselves superior to a ‘victim mentality’.

#### *June 2013 incident, recorded December 2017*

We found a place to sit just out of earshot from the rest of the conference. We sat in old wooden chairs, neither across from each other nor beside one another, more at an angle. It felt safer not to be face-to-face; that would feel too confronting. Better to look in the same general direction. The woman with me, Claire, did not have direct power

over me, but had seniority in the community, and I wanted to see how her perspective compared to that of Georgina, who was in a position of power in our relationship.

Georgina wanted me to figure out what I might have done differently, how I'd let it happen, where and how I might have stopped it or escaped. She wanted me to identify when my intuition had kicked in that something was wrong, and consider why I hadn't heeded it and fled. Georgina focused on what I ought to have known, and how that should have prompted appropriate action to manage risk and avert the rapes. Indeed, among the first things she said upon learning of the rapes was "you knew better". Mere days had elapsed since the most recent rape and my escape. I was too tired to push back. When I tried to challenge the victim blame, she kept telling me it wasn't blame; she said would never blame the victim.

It went on for months like that, mostly because I trusted her; I knew she wanted to see me heal, recover, and be well, and this was the way she thought to do it. I was loyal to her, I needed her help. But I was getting tired. To tread down the path of her line of inquiry felt like admitting it had all been my fault, that the pain I was enduring in the aftermath was an exaggeration; that it was all in my head.

Too much of my time and energy went to resisting her line of questioning.

Something wasn't right: the conversations would hurt and stress me out—especially when we lived together. There was no escape from the pervasive sense that she found me at fault. Georgina would push her blame insidiously and constantly, subsequently denying my resistance to her veiled blame. She criticized me for resisting her care. The denial that it was victim blame was part of the nightmare of it. It made me feel crazy for feeling attacked, for feeling defensive, when I wanted to rely on the guidance of a person whom I had trusted for so long. I knew she wanted me to recover, and I wanted—needed—to trust that her method would work, but it was excruciating.

Georgina kept emphasizing choices: the ones I'd made then, the one I was making now. She wanted me to heal. She wanted me to grow from this, to get past it, to "choose life". She wanted me to move on and shut up about it—her active, if manipulative, role in keeping me from speaking out wouldn't become clear for another eighteen months. Only then did I realize she didn't want to have to look at what had been done to me. She wanted it over with. She wanted me to get over it.



Anyway, I sat under trees, and sunlight with Claire, and I told her about my struggles with Georgina. I told her how pressured I felt to assume responsibility for what had happened, and to overcome and arrive on the other side, to stop hurting and stop suffering. I wasn't there yet. And the pressure didn't help.

I don't remember everything about the conversation—it was nearly five years ago, after all. I remember Claire telling me in no vague terms that the experience of victimization, of feeling like a victim, needed to be ridden out, needed to be experienced fully in order to let it go.

I remember feeling safe for the first time in a long time, as if I didn't have to defend my right to hurt, like my pain was reasonable. I wasn't crazy; someone understood. It felt like I could suddenly rest, knowing it was normal for me to feel how I felt. It was permissible to be a victim, to feel confused and powerless over the past, to be struggling in the present. The pain was at its most severe then; the PTSD had taken hold. Sleep evaded me, nightmares of my rapist persisted, and his face lurked everywhere I went. I was in a constant state of physically painful anxiety, as though my head and chest were stretched and over-full. And there were the flashbacks. I carried the burden of knowing that I might close my eyes at any time and be underneath him again. On top of all that, I couldn't stop telling the story: not only did people want to know the details of how I'd ended up in the grip of an alleged murderer, but once I got going, it steamrolled out of me, like a compulsion. I could not stop. I'd narrate from beginning to end while a headache grew and spread across my body.

By the time I spoke to Claire, I'd already dropped out of Harvard. I couldn't function.

On that day, in the sunshine, Claire did not urge me to get over it and past it. Not immediately anyway. My experience was allowed, accepted. I felt relieved. The difference between her and Georgina was an allowance of 'victimhood' to manifest and express itself fully. Yet the assumption that I would and should get past it was still present. It felt encouraging. Talking with Claire, I thought that I'd found a way to get to the place I felt I was supposed to get to: over it. I could become a survivor on the other side of this minefield. I would do it by embracing the state I was in: victimhood. It was temporary. I had to embrace it to transcend it, but I *would* transcend it.

It was a powerful and freeing moment to be accepted by Claire, to have permission from an elder I respected to be where I was and not need to defend my right to suffer from the pain someone else had inflicted on me. It was the beginning of the end of my relationship with Georgina as well. Eventually, she hit the mark of one betrayal too many. It was under those trees with Claire that I started to doubt Georgina's guidance. In time, I came to see Georgina's actions and words as harmful, despite her best intentions. In contrast to Claire, Georgina could not accept the place I was in, the pain I felt, my identification with the victim label. In retrospect, it became clear that not only was Georgina pressing me to handle myself and my suffering in a particular manner, she was victim blaming, gaslighting, and making it my problem that I resisted seeing things her way. She was a feminist—a point she reiterated often—and she wouldn't dare blame the victim. To her mind, my resistance was the problem.

### Knowing better

Georgina's obvious emphasis was on my claiming agency for the rapes. I read her line of inquiry as insinuating that I should have listened to my intuition and known something was amiss—that I should have used that information to act differently and avoid the rapes. Georgina framed me as responsible, at least in part. I was negatively evaluated, framed as an agent, and blamed.

Emphasis on what one should have known is common in discourse around sexual victimization. Wood and Rennie (1994, p. 136) discuss how, "The women [participants] talk not only about what they should have done, but what they should have known." Further, Wood and Rennie (1994) note how the idea of what one should have known denotes a standard against which a victim is judged for the events. While Wood and Rennie observe the theme of knowing better among victim/survivors of rape, my own example highlights such ideas being articulated by those around me.

From the earliest days after my escape, I internalized blaming statements from others because they were consistent with cultural norms. I experienced blame as a rejection of my efforts to claim legitimate victim status. The rejection of the rape and victim labels highlights the relational component of the identity negotiations that shaped and influenced my process of self-identification vis-à-vis the rapes (see Brison, 2002). These responses impacted the way I made sense of what had happened; I either did not

know what I should have known, or that I knew better but permitted the assaults to occur nonetheless. These forms of blame constitute manifestations of the rape myth that I was “asking for it” (Payne et al., 1999), in a different permutation than arose in dialogue with Eli in Chapter 4. Neither permutation allowed for a compassionate view of myself in relation to the rapes.

Mardorossian (2002) draws the link between the expectation of ‘knowing better’ and the depoliticizing, internalizing discourses of sexual harm. She writes that:

Responsibility is laid on the victim. Years of educating the public about these issues seem to have resulted only in the expectation that women should now know better than to let themselves get raped. Popular discourse is more than ever invested in transforming a social problem into a personal transaction... (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 753)

Mardorossian highlights how emphasizing what individual women ought to know obscures social roots of the issue and maintains excessive focus on the individual. Consistent with individualization, Georgina treated my rapes as isolated and atypical incidents; she drew on the rape myth—which Panyé et al. (1999) term “rape as a deviant event”—to overlook the larger social pattern of gendered and sexual violence among our friends, colleagues, and wider community.

The focus on rape as deviant and on my failure to have ‘known better’ parallels the survivor imperative. If I did not ‘know better’ at the time of the rapes, the onus was on me to ‘know better’ after the rapes: to learn from the events, to claim agency where I could, and to ensure I was never victimized again. Georgina emphasized choice in the aftermath, spurring me toward socially acceptable and ‘empowered’ coping strategies that she endorsed as legitimate. In resonance with the survivor imperative, Georgina’s attitude was that I should take care of myself and get on with my life. She suggested that I remain silent in the interest of self-protection. I suggest that silence as agency, had I taken it up, would have inhibited addressing my “anxiety of responsibility” (Des Pres, 1976; citing Lifton, 1972).

Had I acquiesced to Georgina in my relational negotiation of identity, had I admitted to ‘knowing better’ and accepted the agency she advocated, it would have undermined my claims of victims status and my labeling the events as rape. In this sense, her particular form of blame, her directing me to claim agency and admit to

‘knowing better’, are stalwarts of the survivor imperative, which I expand on below. It is a slippery slope from here to the assertion (made by Eli and others) that I had wanted the rapes to happen, for otherwise I would have prevented them. Mardorossian (2002) calls this a “manipulative or concealed agency” foisted on victims. It is also another articulation of the rape myth that I was asking for it.

Furthermore, had I given in to Georgina’s assumptions and pressures, in the name of asserting agency over the present, I would have lost agency and control over the post-rape process of working through the trauma and its sequelae; I would have been acquiescing to her terms and acting in contradiction to my own will. On the most basic level, her pressuring me to claim agency ran against best practice in victim-centered care, which supports victim/survivors in managing and controlling their own recovery process (see Orchowski et al., 2013).

In response to Georgina, I rejected an individually-focused form of agency. Instead, I took up what Judith Herman (1994) calls a “survivor mission”, in which traumatic events catalyze efforts for social change and solidarity. The tensions that arose with Georgina grew in the years after the rapes. Eventually, they hit a breaking point. That breaking point coincided with my “feminist snap” (Ahmed, 2017).

### The snap

In resisting Georgina, I was also resisting dominant discourses and norms about rape and victims. Ahmed (2017) eloquently addresses the tiresome effort to go against the flow of dominant norms in her chapter entitled “On being directed”. Ahmed (2017, p. 45) says, “A crowd is directed. Once a crowd is directed, a crowd becomes directive.” Discussing the momentum and flow of norms, especially around heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, she writes that:

To sustain a direction is to support a direction. The more people travel upon a path, the clearer the path becomes. Note here how collectivity can become a direction: a clearing of the way as the way of many. Perhaps there is encouragement just in this: you are encouraged to go in that direction when progression is eased. When it is harder to proceed, when a path is harder to follow, you might be discouraged; you might try to find an easier route. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 46)

The dynamic Ahmed illuminates highlights the power of discourse in shaping my post-rape reality and sense-making. The tide and swell of social pressure urged conformity: to perform brokenness or denounce the victim label, as well as to enact the narrative arc of transcending or evading victimhood and take up survivorship. Submitting to Georgina's ideas about how I ought to recover preserved our relationship amidst these tensions.

However, I had feminist thinkers ringing in my ears. The work of Audre Lorde insisted that I find new language to articulate my experience.; that through language I might imagine alternative worlds and build solidarity through a commitment to speaking in the face of fear. Her work encouraged me to trust my inner knowledge and power, and draw upon it to go against the normative tide. My commitment to Lorde's philosophy contributed to my feminist snap.

Feminist snap refers to the willingness to break bonds that are harmful (Ahmed, 2017). Ahmed critiques how resilience affirms the development of strength to endure more pressure, and how these pressures (from others, in a relationship) can become too much. We snap:

You can experience a relief from pressure by being willing to go in the direction you have been pressured to take. That's one way. You can also experience a relief from pressure by snapping a bond, by ending a connection to those who put you under pressure to go in a direction you are not willing to take. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 194)

Ahmed discusses the long processes by which feminists might reach a breaking point, how a snap is a particular moment, and how that moment is the result of pressures building over time. In the case of my experience of secondary victimization, I was under pressure to develop a particular identity and a normative interpretation of my own experience. What I was directed to do felt anathema to me. It went against what "felt right to me" (Lorde, 2007a, 2007c). Ultimately, as I discuss in Chapter 7, I snapped these bonds. But before the snap, I learned a great deal.

### The journey from victim to survivor

The notion that victim status is something to transcend, avoid, or evade situates victimhood as the necessary starting point of a transformative journey toward

survivorship. Thus, a narrative arc is mapped out in which a victimized person moves away from victim status and toward survivor status. In the passage above, Claire indicates tolerance of my state as a victim, and couches it a necessary part of healing or moving beyond victim status. Her framing thrives in a context wherein victim and survivor are positioned as two extremes on a continuum, in a binary, mutually exclusive opposition to one another. Jordan (2013) clearly resists a binary formulation: her work considers how victim/survivor accounts challenge the linear progression from victim to the survivor and collapses the binary by pointing out how survival is ongoing.

I now turn toward discourses that position survivorship (and agency) as the idealized outcome of a post-rape narrative arc. The use of a journey metaphor is noted by a plethora of scholars (see Joseph, 2011; Kelly et al., 1996; Thompson, 2000; Wood and Rennie, 1994; Young and Maguire, 2003). Thompson (2000) identifies “the process from victim to survivor” (p. 330) as a major theme in her interviews, and notes that journey metaphors also hinge on the language of distance. Thompson analyzes her participants’ responses, stating that “The women seemed to move from victim to survivor identity, with victim firmly placed at the beginning of the journey and survivor as the final stopping point in terms of identity” (Thomson, 2000, p. 331). Wood and Rennie (1994) also note the shift from victim to non-victim identity and the use of a journey metaphor by their participants. Young and Maguire (2003, p. 48) note how their participants:

Use a ‘journey metaphor’ to describe their transformation from their past selves (i.e., a victim) to their current selves (i.e., a survivor)... our interviewees used the victim and survivor labels along a continuum from victim to survivor.

The recurrence of this theme in research with victim/survivors demonstrates the ubiquity of the discourse of the journey as an active frame. I contend that the journey metaphor is not only descriptive of experience after rape: it constructs and shapes those experiences. The journey metaphor provides clear example of the extent to which discourse does things in the world: I suggest that the promulgation of a journey metaphor contributes to how victim/survivors conceive of their experiences.

The pervasiveness of the journey metaphor reflects and contributes to assumptions about how one is supposed to process, behave, and identify after a violent

event. The demand to distance from victimhood contributes to the construction of survivorship as an imperative, furthering the binary construction of victim and survivor, and contributing to a context in which those harmed by sexual violence are urged away from identification as victims. Thompson (2000, p. 331, 338) calls this “the process of moving from victim to survivor”. Survivorship is taken as the desired destination of a personal journey away from victimhood. As I discuss through the thesis, many feminists have critiqued this construct, especially the positive valence of survivorship and the negative connotations of victimhood. However, it has also been propagated and upheld, often as an unquestioned assumption—to problematic ends. I critique this further in the following section.

In one study, Hockett, McGraw, and Saucier (2014) examine non-victims’ perceptions of persons who have endured victimization. Participants engaged with a rape story and identified a raped woman as either a victim or a survivor. Their methodological choice reflects the researcher’s core assumption that the victim and survivor labels are mutually exclusive. Hockett et al. (2014) find that 82% of participants labeled the women in the story as a victim, rather than as a survivor, and draw a conclusion consistent with the victim/survivor binary and narrative arc. They note that:

Our participants seemed to perceive ‘victim’ as a de facto status that one is on the basis of preexisting personological characteristics, and ‘survivor’ as an earned status that one becomes by engaging in adaptive coping strategies.

In other words, they perceived that a woman is a victim, but she becomes a survivor. (Hockett et al., 2014, p. 90)

According to the logic of neoliberalism, with its emphasis on personal responsibility (see Stringer, 2014) and resilience (see Anderson, 2006), one should always strive to cope well—on their own and of their own volition. By doing so, they gain distance from rape and its effect, and eschew victim identity.

The mutual exclusivity of the victim and survivor categories is endemic to the journey metaphor. Mutually exclusive formulation is problematic because victim/survivors often do not parse themselves neatly and exclusively into these separate categories (Leisenring, 2006; Thompson, 2000; Wood and Rennie, 1994; Young and Maguire, 2003). Rather, they are more likely to engage in tightrope talk. As Schneider

(1993) and others suggest, we must strive for more complex and nuanced understandings that allow for ambiguity and contradiction. Further, building on McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011), scholars must take up points of tension and incongruity for further consideration and analysis, to apprehend novel articulations that use contradictory dominant discourses to get at meanings beyond hegemonic frames.

The mutually exclusive frame of the categories is foundational in constructing the journey metaphor. Kelly et al. (1996) cite the popularity of the journey metaphor, especially its influence in therapeutic settings, and the ways in which victim and survivor are often framed as stages or phases in a longer process. They link the stages-based framing to the proliferation of self-help and therapeutic approaches to discussing survivorship, and are critical of a stages-based conceptualization of sexual harm and its effects. Kelly et al. (1996, p. 94) deem the recovery journey template “naive and inappropriate”, and critique the medical framework around recovery, which promotes false hope that one can be cured. Echoing this, Dunn (2005) critiques the “victim industry” (although she does not specify what that industry is) where therapeutic discourses dominate understandings of sexual harm. Dunn (2005, p. 15) argues against a “therapeutic framing in which victims are assumed to need to ‘move on’ from victimhood to survivorhood as part of a healing and empowering process”. The medical approach privileges survivorship, strength, and positivity in service to recovery or a cure.

According to Kelly et al. (1996), the idea of complete resolution or “getting past it”, promulgated by survivor discourse, is not realistic; therefore, it leads to hindrances, desperation, preoccupation, and the frustration of being unable to achieve recovery or sufficiently overcome adversity. Instead, they acknowledge the processual and lifelong aspects that are common to working through sexual violence. They suggest that victimization is a statement of fact regarding an event, and survivorship pertains to what was done in reaction or response to that event, immediately or over the long term.

If identity negotiation after sexual violence is taken as fluid, continuous, and relational, it follows that those listening to accounts of sexual violence and subsequent identity negotiation may benefit from new interpretive frameworks, based on deep considerations of tightrope talk. I contend that researchers have a duty to take up critical analysis, to cease the uncritical dissemination of analyses that promulgate binary



formulations of victimhood and survivorship and perpetuate the medicalizing metaphor of a recovery journey. The study by Hockett et al. (2014) is one example of a trend in research in which dominant discourses are perpetuated without thorough consideration of their construction or critical analysis of their effects: they are not alone in thoughtlessly propagating dominant assumptions, nor is research the only site of the problem. Rather, it is one of the many contexts in which dominant discourse is reproduced and expressed, and exemplifies experts recuperating domains discourse (Alcoff and Gray, 1993). Discourse shapes how victim/survivors behave—and how others respond to them—after sexual violence.

### Researchers propagating dominant discourse

The researchers I discuss in this section default to dominant discourses to construct problematic arguments about positive outcomes to sexual violence (based on troubling questions), and fail to examine those discourses even as they put them to work. In light of my discussion of the victim/survivor binary, I offer a critique of Thompson (2000), Hockett and Saucier (2015), and Hockett et al. (2014). Their work provides an example of some of the phenomena I have been working to elucidate in this chapter. I take up this critique because the ideas espoused by these researchers are clear articulations of wider assumptions relating to the victim and survivor labels.

Thompson (2000) interviews five women who each report positive outcomes related to their experiences of sexual violence. Thompson (2000) opens her article by articulating a lack of research on positive outcomes, and finishes her introduction by stating that

The knowledge that some women experience positive growth and find increased purpose and meaning in their lives as a result of overcoming the trauma of rape may be encouraging and motivating for all women who are raped. (Thompson, 2000 p326)

She claims that her study has “highlighted the need for linguistic resources on positive outcomes of rape” (Thompson, 2000, p 341). These claims are not borne out by the data or her analysis.

For example, under theme two, Thompson (2000) cites positive outcomes from her participants. Examples include enhanced creativity due to pain, greater sense of self,

more self love/acceptance, enrichment and knowledge acquisition. These examples encompass the bulk of her engagement with “positive outcomes”. However, these examples illustrate an existing linguistic repertoire to discuss positive outcomes, rather than the development of a new one. Further, none of the examples provided here involve participants articulation of the need for more linguistic resources.

Further, other data and analysis in the article contradict her claims. Thompson (2000) engages with some of the literature about difficulty assimilating rape, the extent of its possible devastation, and considers “blocking” as a coping mechanism. She does not, however, explore the tensions these negative outcomes pose to her desire to focus on positive outcomes and open up hopeful possibilities. In offering clinical recommendations, she talks about “conflicting reactions of clients” (Thompson, 2000 p340) and how recovery is recursive and ongoing, with episodes of reflection even years after. This statement does not square with assertions about positive outcomes.

Thompson (2000 p341) further makes the claim that overemphasising pathology limits discursive possibilities and “potentially denies them alternative options” and articulations. She states her desire to avoid generating another dominant discourse and prescribing women’s reactions to rape, stating the “[such a] position could be as damaging as the current position, which denies other experiences of women who have been raped (such as positive outcomes)” (Thompson, 2000 p341). Thompson implicitly charges those who emphasises negative outcomes with doing harm to victim/survivors.

Thompson’s work is cited as providing basis and rationale for Hockett and Saucier’s (2015) article entitled “A systematic literature review of ‘rape victims’ versus ‘rape survivors’: Implications for theory, research, and practice”, which omits and misrepresents a number of the studies that I discuss in this thesis. Hockett et al. (2014) also engage the victim and survivor labels and explore how these relate to perceptions of raped persons, while omitting a wide range of relevant research and feminist theory.

These writings on the victim and survivor labels fail to engage with critical feminist or victimological literature on the subject, neglecting the work of van Dijk (2009), Baker (2010a, 2010b), Mardorossian (2002), Schneider (1993), Kelly et al. (1996), or Stringer (2014). Yet, they make sweeping claims about sexual violence research.

In their respective investigations of the victim and survivor labels, these authors fail to note the social construction or history of the terms, let alone critically engage with those constructions. They consider general perceptions of the victim and survivor label and what those perceptions mean for researchers, yet they fail to adequately engage with the complexity of the labels as they are deployed by victim/survivors (see Wood and Rennie, 1994; Young and Maguire 2003). Nor do they acknowledge calls from the researchers for more nuanced, complex views (see Kelly et al., 1996; Minow, 1993; Proffit, 1996; Schneider, 1993).

Most insidiously, they frame identification with the victim label as an inciting event that itself causes harm, rather than rape itself. Fixating on the label erases the material reality that the primary cause of harm is the occurrence of sexual violence. Modes of emphasizing internality are noted and criticized by Mardorossian (2002) and Stringer (2014), and have serious, deleterious, and depoliticizing effects. Viewing the label as a source of harm shapes how sexual violence and associated harms are conceptualized and articulated in media, research, and everyday speech to make sense of sexual violence. Fixation on the label has even permeated several rape crisis centres where I have worked or sought services, where victim talk was forbidden as though the label itself strips agency and does harm.

Thompson (2000), Hockett and Saucier (2015), and Hockett et al. (2014) argue that focusing on the negative repercussions of sexual violence causes harm to victims, and that an alternative focus has an inherent liberatory capacity. For example, Hockett and Saucier (2015, p. 10) suggest that, “The positive experiences of women who have been raped are cloaked in invisibility, and the possibilities for resistance are erased.” However, their broad statement confuses positive outcomes with resistance; the argument that rape can have positive outcomes does not challenge cultural tolerance for rape, nor does it resist contexts that contribute to secondary victimization. Positive outcomes in their frame are *individual* positive outcomes that are related to strength and resilience, rather than social or political positive outcomes, such as curtailing sexual violence or improving social responses to victims.

Furthermore, as I argue in the following chapters, neoliberal discourse and posttraumatic growth provide strong directives for victims to forge empowered identities and demonstrate positive outcomes. For example, Baker (2010a, p. 188) finds

that the vast majority of her participants go to great lengths to frame their experiences within the framework of a “post-feminist sensibility” that “is intimately connected to neoliberalism because it shares a focus on individualism, choice and autonomy, and deflects notions of social and political forces constraining individuals”. Baker (2010a, p. 192) finds that it is normative under neoliberalism to default to “putting a positive spin on difficult circumstances” and “identifying useful learning experiences”. In tension with Thompson’s (2000) claims that there is a lack of linguistic resources for positive outcomes, Baker (2010a) shows that there is precedence for seeking positive outcomes. Further, whether seeking those positive outcomes is helpful or an unfair burden remains a crucial question that I explore further in Chapter 6.

Thompson (2000), Hockett and Saucier (2015) and Hockett et al. (2014) build their arguments on the notion that existing research does harm by limiting discursive possibilities for victims. They overlook meaningful engagement with the victim label within feminist discourse, and cast the victim label as a self-fulfilling prophecy:

... the oppression-oriented focus of the rape victim literature demonstrated so far may hold implications regarding how the research itself may shape individuals’ reactions to women who have been raped. (Hockett and Saucier, 2015, p. 5)

Their argument resonates with power feminist arguments that discussing sexual victimization and its harms are a more real source of suffering than victimization and rape.

Further, these approaches locate a ‘victim mentality’ in research as the problem to contend with. Hockett and Saucier (2015, p. 2) write that:

...focusing solely on the ways in which women who have been raped are initially traumatized and socially revictimized—does not produce any indication of how one may escape from or step outside of oppression.

They misplace responsibility for managing oppression, and individualize the problem. In the quote above, Hockett and Saucier (2015) frame oppression as a thing that individuals must find ways to “escape” or remove themselves from, rather than something to resist collectively. In stating that, “The victim literature emphasizes oppression and the rape survivor literature emphasizes resistance to oppression and empowerment”, Hockett and Saucier (2015, p. 4) fail to consider what the distinction

may stem from, and do not recognize the need to examine oppression to resist it. Worse, they present research related to victimization as actively blocking “escape from” oppression. They frame oppression as something that individuals can escape, rather than as a monumental social force demanding collective resistance.

Hockett and Saucier (2015) and Thompson (2000) critique sexual violence research for reifying secondary victimization as the only possibility for women who have been raped. However, grassroots feminist agencies have been providing alternatives for decades. Hockett and Saucier (2015) and Thompson (2000) make unsubstantiated statements, and their points lack careful argumentation: they cast a wide swath of research related to rape victims as contributing to the negative experiences of victims.

There are various discourses pertaining to victimhood which are deployed and negotiated in complex ways by researchers who seek to analyze and study sexual violence. In particular, as I discuss in Chapter 1, feminist literature has tussled with the victim and survivor labels for over three decades; yet none of this research is engaged by Hockett and Saucier (2015 p10) when they state that: Research taking a victim-only perspective may fail to provide alternative models for conceptualizations and social treatment of women who have been raped, instead risking reinforcement of the status quo to view them as perpetual victims.

It remains unclear what entails a victim-only perspective in research, nor is there any mention of the history of survivor discourse. Further, dominant discourses about resilience—about women pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps and overcoming adversity—are left unacknowledged and unscrutinized; the vast array of literature on posttraumatic growth (examined in Chapter 6) is largely omitted. As I will argue, posttraumatic growth is heralded as a viable and desirable path or outcome at the most broad levels of popular discourse, so its omission from their critique discredits these authors’ claims.

The articles in this section highlight how the discourses of survivorship and ‘positive outcomes’ to adversity permeate academic research and writing, contributing to a social context that spurs people to consider the positive dimensions of victimization and move toward survivorship.

My argument in this chapter is that neoliberal discourses valorize strength and survivorship after rape, and pressures victims to adopt the survivor label. The risk of failing to achieve survivorship is that one may be chastised for the characterological flaw of having a ‘victim mentality’. A person who has been victimized may be written off as a total victim, whose victimhood leaks into every facet of their life. The costs of failing to become a survivor are high. Further, as I discussed in Chapter 4, being a survivor means failing to adhere to victim stereotypes of meekness, passivity, and brokenness; failure to adequately play the victim role may limit access to support, sympathy, and legal recourse and, in the most severe instances, incite reactive victim scapegoating.

Thus far, I have demonstrated how the categories of victim and survivor have been formulated as a binary, and how consideration and research on victimization has been cast as harmful. Next, I consider examples that blur the binary of victim and survivor and challenge their construction as mutually exclusive, using McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance’s (2011) notion of tightrope talk. I conclude by considering subversive ways of working within and beyond the identity categories of victim and survivor.

### *Singing in the Dark, 2013 Draft*

Megan opened the door at 10:29. “Hi Lily, come on in.” She was welcoming and warm. I was nauseated.

Having already hung my coat on the coat rack in the waiting room, I grabbed my bag and walked in. Her office was spacious, filled with books, some of which were very, very old. It wasn’t the first time I’d been there, but it seemed unfamiliar save for the familiar perfume of books.

“How is your healing? It’s been a wild journey, I imagine.”

“That’s for sure.” I paused. Little time for easing in, this needs to come out. “There’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“I gathered from your email.” Her eyes met mine with a firm patience. I called deep on my courage and remembered the Harvard Divinity School Field Education Handbook. Sexual abuse on the part of the supervisor...

“Megan, in my time in the Amazon, X and I had a sexual relationship. He... well... he was raping me.”

Megan took a deep breath, but she did not look away. “Lily, I am so sorry to hear that. So sorry. But I’m not surprised.”

“Really?”

“Usually when someone is willing to cross boundaries A, B, and C, they are willing to cross boundaries D, E, and F as well.”

“So you suspected it?”

“I knew it was possible.” She paused. “But it was something you needed to be able to tell me on your own terms.”

“It’s been quite a journey just getting here today. I’ve barely slept since we scheduled this meeting.”

“I can only imagine.”

I had said it, I had said the words. And she understood. She really understood. Suddenly, the weight of memory began to fold in around me, I could feel myself starting to sink in my chair. This really happened. This really happened to me.

Megan saw me sinking, and she broke the silence with perhaps the only question that could change the game: “So, what are you doing with it?”

I sat up, coming alive, having remembered some spark inside me. “A lot of really great stuff, actually,” I replied. “I’ve found that I can use this as an avenue for deep healing. It’s guiding me into and through the deepest and most painful recesses of myself and my story—my story from before the Amazon and after.”

And so I went on for a few minutes as I searched to find words for the amorphous place I’d been inhabiting for months. The key was that I was doing something with it, something meaningful. X’s violation, his manipulation, had revealed to me the blind spots of my psyche, and I was determined to find and strengthen the vulnerable places where he had managed to get his hooks in. It was as much a quest to learn myself as it was a determination to never let someone do this to me again. But there was a residue of self-blame lurking in that mission. It would take time to sort that through.

After a few moments, Megan chimed in.

“Can I share some of my thoughts?”

“Please!” I said, eager to hear.

“You are a survivor. You survived the accident when your mother died 22 years ago—I cannot stress to you how easy it is to take a three-year-old out of her little body—and you survived this. Be proud of yourself for that.”

Whoa. I never thought of it that way...

Megan went on, “There is no judgment for any of the choices you made in the Amazon. You were in a survival situation: and the only measure of your success is that you survived to tell the tale. Your strategies worked. Period.”

Aghast at the clarity and poignancy of her words, I took a moment to soak it in. Suddenly, so much was clarified. Layers of haze and confusion were sliced through in a shockingly gentle and effective handful of skillful sentences. All I could manage was, “Well, that sure clears some things up.” But she wasn’t done.

“Lily, you could have gone into the Amazon so much more vulnerable than you were and this not happen. It happened because you were with an abuser.”

This time, the arrow of her words cut straight through the blame that had been gnawing at me. It wasn’t my fault...

“Have you thought about pursuing legal action?”

I told her about BARCC (Boston Area Rape Crisis Center), about what my advocates there had learned from international law enforcement, about how unlikely it was that anything would come of it.

“In the end, I’m scared to do anything that puts me on his radar. For now, I’m off it... I don’t want to do anything that keeps me connected to him. It feels too dangerous.”

“I understand. And it’s up to you. Just... will you think about it?”

“Yes.”

### **Collapsing the Victim/Survivor Binary**

Megan’s words suggest a collapse in the victim/survivor binary. In this section, I unpack a few of her comments and demonstrate how she undermines the binary formulation of victim and survivor, to alleviating affect. Then, I consider the complex ways in which victim/survivors deploy the victim and survivor labels. I conclude with possibilities for resistance generated by attending to tightrope talk.



The conversation above took place in October 2012. Four months had passed since the rapes began. Mere days before, I had started rape crisis counseling and named the events as rape. For years after, I clung to Megan's words, repeated them to myself, took refuge inside them. Like Georgina, Megan was in a position of power in our relationship, which added to the tenor of the exchange and its weightiness. I first recorded them in December 2012, but I repeated them to myself so often that they became etched in my mind as a source of comfort, a lifeline threading its way through my ongoing struggles against victim blame, rape myths, and silencing. Her words helped inoculate me against victim blame.

To begin, I want to briefly acknowledge some of the distinctions between Georgina's responses to me, which I discussed above, and Megan's handling of my disclosure. Megan placed responsibility squarely on my rapist's shoulders, not mine, and worked to challenge my self-blame. She showed respect for the choices I had made to survive and commended them, in a manner consistent with Barry's (1979) initial deployment of the term survivor. Megan sought to uphold the strategic choices made at the time and the efficacy of those choices in keeping me alive.

Megan believed me and acknowledged the severity of my situation. Further, she allowed me to speak with her about it in my own time and supported my moving forward (legally, personally, professionally) on my own terms. Finally, in asking what I would "do with it", she gave fostered hope that something meaningful could be made from the trauma, that my suffering was not in vain. By framing this thought as a question, she minimized the sense that doing something productive was an imperative.

To challenge the victim survivor binary formulation, I begin by unpacking the spaces where they overlap. Two comments from Megan demonstrate their overlap vividly:

You are a survivor. You survived the accident when your mother died 22 years ago—I cannot stress to you how easy it is to take a three-year-old out of her little body—and you survived this. Be proud of yourself for that.

She goes on to say that:

There is no judgment for any of the choices you made in the Amazon. You were in a survival situation: and the only measure of your success is that you survived to tell the tale. Your strategies worked. Period.

Here, Megan's use of the word survivor is as a *de facto* status, linked to having survived two, life threatening incidents. Her words are consistent with the first Oxford definition of survivor. In Megan's statement, survivorship is independent of coping skills or personal character. She urges pride for surviving as an accomplishment—a pride that is independent of how I well coped with the events after the fact.

In contrast to earlier discussions of the terms by Hockett et al. (2014), Thompson (2000), and others, there is no sense of survivorship as earned or as the end of a journey away from victimhood. Victim status is not rejected. Megan emphasizes surviving without undermining claims of victim status or erasing the severity of the impact of my abuser's choice to commit rape.

Second, Megan goes on to affirm positive agency during the events: I did what I had to do to survive. She echoes Barry's (1979) notion of the survivor as one who has deployed strategic means to stay alive. It undermines the myth that "rape is a trivial event" (Payne et al., 1999) by emphasizing the real danger I faced. She also contradicts the phenomenon observed by Mardarossian (2002) and Stringer (2014) in which victims are seen as suspect and charged with "manipulative or concealed agency". The notion of manipulative agency, as observed by Stringer and Mardorossian, was a consistent theme in my experience, and was often linked to victim blame. Megan's phrasing offered a productive alternative, and deployed discourses of agency in a more compassionate manner.

Megan's use of the language of survivorship and agency exemplifies nuance and complexity in discussing these terms and labels. Orgad (2009, p. 132) argues that we need "to expand the range of explanatory frameworks through which individuals, especially those experiencing suffering, come to think, judge, and act". By highlighting alternative usage of familiar terms, I hope to draw attention to novel articulations formulated with existing vocabularies, in a manner consistent with McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance's (2011) tightrope talk. Even though Megan uses words steeped in and constituent of dominant discourse, she is articulating something beyond and resistant to those discourses.

Megan's affirmation of my agency in surviving the events is couched in a range of comments that affirm the severity of the victimization and place the responsibility for it on my rapist's shoulders. Her allocation of responsibility is crucial. It points to

Megan's fundamental assumptions about who was at fault (him) and my own strategic and willful efforts to survive, which infuse all of her statements and foster a supportive atmosphere. In contrast to my conversations with Georgina and Eli (among others), there was no need to defend myself from blame, and productive conversation was more easily facilitated.

Megan explicates that my rapist was responsible, that it could have happened to anyone in my situation because the risk was inherent to his willingness to rape. Consider her comments that:

Lily, you could have gone into the Amazon so much more vulnerable than you were and this not happen. It happened because you were with an abuser.

And:

I am so sorry to hear that. So sorry. But I'm not surprised... Usually when someone is willing to cross boundaries A, B, and C, they are willing to cross boundaries D, E, and F as well.

These comments affirm my claims of victim status, while using the term survivor. Her use of the term survivor as a *de facto* status does not read as an imperative to progress through a transformational narrative arc: indeed, I contend that it undermines such a notion. Survivorship has already been accomplished. Her tightrope talk subverts the journey metaphor, and undermines the survivor imperative. There is no directive to perform victimhood or survivorship in a particular manner. The acceptance she offered that day gave me strength in later struggles with Georgina, Eli, and others: it allowed me to know that something else was possible. Her words inoculated me, ever so slightly, against discourses of victim blame and rape myths that I would eventually face in my social environment.

### Victim and survivor speech

Megan's comments demonstrate a blurring of the binary and a form of tightrope talk. Perhaps the most obvious and powerful challenge to the binary derives from the complex manner in which victim/survivors use and negotiate the terms. Some victim/survivor comments (see Leisenring, 2006; Thompson, 2000; Wood and Rennie, 1994; Young and Maguire, 2003) disrupt the notion of a linear narrative path between two

identities in tension. Identity negotiation is often discussed by victim/survivors as ongoing, rather than a fixed process with a clear start and fixed end point.

For example, some victim/survivors indicate that reflection extends to the time before the rape, and is perceived as continuing indefinitely into the future. One of Thompson's participants talks about her deficiency in self-love prior to the rape, which she has since ameliorated:

A survivor is someone who's come out the other end and regained, well done more than regained what they'd lost... I thought I'd lost myself and thought that would never come back. Well now I love myself whereas I certainly couldn't after I'd been raped. I don't think I did before, either.

(Thompson, 2000, p. 336)

This participant links her experience of rape, or of overcoming it, with the acquisition of self-love, which she claims to have lacked prior to the rape event. Her statement links to the neoliberal imperatives to frame negative events in terms of positive outcomes (see Baker, 2010a, 2010b; Ehrenreich, 2009). Furthermore, while the social context that directs victims to pursue personal growth—and which chastises failure to do so—merits critique, my aim is not to contest individual's use of the terms, but rather to deconstruct and challenge dominant discourse which influence use of the terms.

The notion of recovery as ongoing is also demonstrated by two of Thompson's (2000) participants. One states, "I think it's still an evolving process... I don't think you ever, you know, it's not ever going to be closed" (Thompson, 2000, p. 332). Another suggests that, "You deal with it forever, like bereavement it's normal to still have feelings about it" (Thompson, 2000, p. 332). These statements undermine the assumption that one "moves on" along an arc, distancing from the events and from victim status. They contest survivorship as a final arrival point. These insights stem from reanalyzing Thompson's interview excerpts through the lens of McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance's (2011) tightrope talk. Their lens for reanalysis challenges the victim/survivor binary and notions of resolution. I suggest that Thompson recuperates dominant discourse in making sense of her participant's responses. She overlooks tightrope talk and moments when participants undermine the dominant formulations that Thompson (2000) advances.

Hockett and Saucier (2015) and Thompson (2000) occasionally undermine their own arguments by offering passing acknowledgement of the complexity of victim/survivor speech. According to Hockett and Saucer (2015, p. 2), “Women who have been raped sometimes experience themselves as victims, sometimes as survivors, sometimes as both, and sometimes as neither.” Their statement undermines their uncritical advancement of the victim/survivor binary.

Several months prior to my encounter with their work, I wrote, “I am a victim. I am a survivor. I am neither. I am both. It depends on the day.” In my own experience post-rape, victimhood and survivorship are not mutually exclusive, and evolve with time. In my experience, survivorship fits more naturally with the hardest days—days when the extent of my victimization and suffering are most evident, and I am most engaged in a struggle to survive. Here, my sense of victim identity is most acute, and yet I label myself a survivor on those perilous days because I am laboriously working to stay alive. The victim label feels the most available to me on days when I feel stronger, am less actively suffering, and when I feel a certain courage to accept what was done to me. My use of the survivor and victim labels inverts dominant meanings and conceptualizations of the term.

Discourse around sexual violence is deployed in complex ways, often involving tightrope talk; victim/survivors endeavor to use the language available to them to convey thoughts and feelings that might otherwise lack words (McKenzie-Mohr and LaFrance, 2011). There are stumbling blocks and high stakes in attempting novel articulations. For instance, women may be concerned about whether their formulation will be believed and accepted, which may prevent them from speaking and seeking help (Wood and Rennie, 1993). I suggest that ameliorating these concerns involves respecting the terms that victim/survivors use and fostering their negotiation process on their own terms. Victims and survivors are already doing the work of navigating these identities in complex ways.

The terms victim and survivor remain useful and important, and rather than reimagining them entirely, I suggest that it is fruitful to understand their complex history, current connotations, and range of uses in everyday speech. Wood and Rennie (1994, p. 144) note that the issue is not one of creating new terms or definitions, but rather recognizing that:

Women use discourse in complex ways to claim and reject various identities for themselves and others and to construct multiple versions of control, blame, and responsibility. It is critical to see the construction of selves and identities in the context of formulating the experience of rape...

The notion of claiming and rejecting identities is apt. I would add that there is a fluidity to the process, and a certain creative self-definition that victim/survivors engage on their own terms, using the inadequate discourses available to them in novel ways. Wood and Rennie (1994) also note the possibility that more discursive options may be desired by and useful to individuals navigating these identity categories. They warn that the solution is not necessarily to develop a new category; instead, it may be useful to exhibit examples of the distant language used by victim/survivors.

The vocabulary of survivorship provides a narrative template through which victims endeavor to construct their stories and live after sexual violence. As a sense-making apparatus, stories of victimization enter in and become transformed into tales of heroic overcoming, in a manner that recuperates neoliberal victim theory and the survivor imperative. According to Orgad (2009, p. 142), victims are guided to “transform their personal suffering into a validated recognized experience; to fight against invisibility and silencing; to remember, but at the same time, move on and look to the future—to become survivors”. The bar is set high for individuals struggling in the aftermath of sexual victimization.

Victim/survivors continue to forge creative and complex ways to speak beyond dominant discourses, and in ways that may resist it. McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011, p. 64) refer to these as “complex and subtle discursive accomplishments”. Their notion of tightrope talk offers an analytic frame for embracing and exploring tensions and contradictions. Their approach resonates with Page (2017), who argues for vulnerable writing as a legitimate method that engages hesitation and ambiguity. The unchecked impulse to grasp at certainty in this terrain risks defaulting to dominant discursive frames, and may lead to overlooking significant, novel articulations rendered in familiar terms. Witnessing and engaging these discursive accomplishments requires training and ongoing consideration, and is a vitally important aspect of bearing witness to the experiences and achievements of victim/survivors on their own terms.

## Conclusion

I began this chapter by exploring the history of the survivor label. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, survivorship was linked to increased visibility for those who had stayed alive in the Nazi camps. Some, including Bettelheim, chastised therapeutic use of the term as antithetical to the moral obligations of victims of the Holocaust to remember, resist forgetting, and bear witness; the “anxieties of responsibility” (Des Pres, 1976; citing Lifton, 1972) that contribute to the disruptive capacity of the survivor. Des Pres (1976) emphasizes staying human and enduring in extremity in his formulation of the survivor, and offers a powerful alternative to neoliberal imperatives to heroically overcome adversity on an individual basis.

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the language of survivorship was taken up by feminists in the context of sexual and domestic violence. Its meaning shifted from connoted acts of survival at the time of violence, to valorized agency after the fact, deployed in service to overcoming trauma and coping well. I argue that valorizing agency and devaluing victimhood fosters the formation of a victim/survivor binary. Among the deleterious impacts of the binary formulation is that it further denigrates victims and their association with poor coping skills, weakness of constitution, and characterological failures. Victim stigma is bolstered by the discourse of survivorship, and the survivor imperative. Furthermore, examination of the victim and survivor categories demonstrates the degree to which these constructions emphasize internality at the cost of politicization, and frame victims as responsible for solving the social problem of rape on a case-by-case, individual, and recovery-oriented basis. Internalization further undermines the politically disruptive potential of survivorship.

Building on the tension between the personal and the political, and trends toward depoliticization, I discuss my observations about how others reduced my narration of sexual violence and its consequences to a personal healing effort. Such reductions erased my political and social motivations for speaking. I also consider the notion that I should have ‘known better’, which bolstered subtle victim blame and contributed to pressure to learn my lesson and claim agency after the fact. I demonstrate the end result of these relational and interpersonal dynamics: the relationships broke, and I enacted Ahmed’s (2017) “feminist snap”. I broke free of harmful bonds and resisted directives to *do* victimhood and survivorship in prescribed ways.

In furtherance to my considerations of the victim/survivor binary, I interrogate discursive constructions of a narrative arc by which individuals transcend victimhood and achieve survivorship as a display of personal resilience. I argue that the ubiquity of the journey discourse is not only descriptive, but actively shapes identity negotiation after sexual violence. Critically, the term survivor is utterly contingent on the victim label: survivorship requires victimhood as a basis for comparison, and as a target point from which one endeavors to move away.

Furthermore, the dominant discourses surrounding the terms undermine more complex and nuanced articulations of experience. Tightrope talk (McKenzie-Mohr and LaFrance, 2011) offers a powerful analytic lens to explore the manner in which victims and survivors use the terms.

The survivor imperative removes focus from the larger social context and places responsibility, unjustly, on individuals and their personal process. For the sake of justice, these discursive constructions ought to be reimagined by taking the accounts of victims and survivors more seriously, through examining their use of tightrope talk. It appears that in their lived experiences, victim/survivors are already doing the work of subverting these hegemonic constructs. Their complex and contradictory use of language illustrates the need for further autoethnographic texts involving victim/survivor accounts of their post-rape realities.



## Chapter Six

### Posttraumatic growth: imperatives, subversions, and recuperation

I don't tell you this so you think of me as a victim. I am not a victim. I tell you this because my story has value. My story has value. I tell you this because I want you to know, I need you to know what I know: to be rendered powerless does not destroy your humanity, your resilience is your humanity. The only people who lose their humanity are those who believe they have the right to render another human being powerless. They are the weak. To yield and not break—that is incredible strength... There is no way anyone would dare, dare test their strength on me because you all know there is nothing stronger than a broken woman who has rebuilt herself.

– Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette* 2018

In the previous chapters, I discussed my experience of the untenability of victim identity, and the survivor imperative to overcome victimhood and journey toward the aspirational status of the survivor. Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is an important corollary to these discussions, for it demonstrates troubling norms and discourses at work in responding to and treating trauma. PTG and the survivor imperative are mechanisms for one another; within the survivor imperative discursive framework, PTG is an implicit part of the journey toward survivorship. Personal growth after trauma implies a *de facto* transcendence of victim status, and achieving survivorship is an emblem of posttraumatic growth.

For persons in close relational proximity to victims, whom Perry and Alvi (2012) call “proximal victims”, the prospect PTG in victims may assuage the emotional discomforts of proximity to a victim/survivor in the aftermath of sexual violence. Discourses around victimhood, survivorship, and posttraumatic growth work in concert to direct victims toward hegemonic and individualistic understandings of themselves vis-à-vis their experience of sexual victimization. These discourses encourage ‘moving on’, and growth following sexual violence, thus privatizing the effort associated with mitigating the consequences of sexual violence, and obscuring political and social issues.

Posttraumatic growth is a burgeoning topic in psychology. PTG is nourished by, and nourishes, cultural discourse about the benefits that can be wrested from trauma by way of personal responsibility and psychotherapeutic processes. While some PTG researchers acknowledge the larger cultural context, the social construction of PTG merits more in-depth consideration in a feminist, anti-rape framework—especially as it pertains to victim/survivors of sexual violence. I suggest that PTG demonstrates one component of the survivor imperative in action, shaping responses to victim/survivors, as well as therapeutic and self-help interventions.

In PTG research, there are two glaring oversights: (1) the social and political contexts that influence and construct PTG; and (2) PTG's co-occurrence with and relationship to ongoing distress (see Frazier and Berman, 2012; Hockett and Saucier, 2015; Hockett, McGraw, and Saucier, 2014; Joseph and Linley, 2012; Joseph, 2011; Thompson, 2000). Some researchers take a more nuanced view, recognizing the ongoing struggle alongside possible growth outcomes, and maintaining modest, compassionate conclusions about growth and traumatic suffering (see Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995). However, prevailing psychological considerations of PTG fall short in their engagement with larger social and cultural contexts; PTG research emphasizes individual outcomes, and sidesteps harm and suffering.

My analysis in this chapter engages positivist approaches and critiques of PTG, since most PTG research is based in positivist measures. In the next section, I discuss more widespread critiques of PTSD diagnosis and treatment. My aim in this chapter is to examine positivist approaches in order to raise questions about the discursive construction of the categories and assumptions underpinning PTG research. I consider how PTG, and the discourses which shape it, gives rise to positivist research approaches. Furthermore, some of the positivist critiques I advance in this chapter draw attention to how cultural norms and values inflect self-assessments. Harm may be done by self assessments, especially when those assessments foster the denigration of the pre-trauma self in order to elevate the post-trauma self.

In this chapter, I briefly examine definitions of posttraumatic growth, including multiple conceptualizations of PTG. PTG research focuses on self-reported, self-perceived measures of PTG; I argue that reliance on self-perceived growth highlights the crucial link between social influences and self-reports: growth is framed as a

desirable—and publicly promoted—outcome, which may incentivize the perception and reporting of PTG. My aim is not to delegitimize reports of self-perceived growth by victim/survivors or make charges of false consciousness; rather, I wish to explore the discursive context that encourages victim/survivors to perform and report PTG. Self-perceived PTG raises important questions about the possibility for harm when individuals face pressure to achieve growth outcomes, and report failure to do so. Further, I wish to explore how expert emphasis on PTG recuperates the survivor imperative and neoliberal values, and may overlook tightrope talk to the detriment of hearing and apprehending victim/survivor accounts.

On a terminological note, PTG literature references trauma and adversity interchangeably, and tends to subsume experiences of coping with illness and cancer under the umbrella of posttraumatic growth. Such broad use is a loose application of the term trauma, which the American Psychological Association (2019b) defines as:

an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer-term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives.

These definitions hinge on traumatic events, rather than ongoing sources of distress, including illness. Therefore, I contend that the use of trauma as a floating signifier in PTG literature is problematic—it conflates a range of diverse experiences and neglects their distinctions. In my engagement with PTG literature in this chapter, it is difficult to tease apart these confluences. Therefore, I aim to address broader implications and logics of PTG as demonstrated in literature, while clarifying from the outset that I disagree with overly broad definitions of trauma.

In my analysis, I consider PTG's cultural framing as an imperative and as a prized goal. I draw on the survivor imperative to argue that any merit to posttraumatic growth is distorted and cheapened by neoliberal imperatives to make hardship into opportunities for self-improvement and to focus on the positive outcomes of oppression. I argue that the directive to grow is a clear articulation of neoliberal values of personal enterprise and development.

In this chapter, I examine some of the clinical recommendations in PTG research. I am not making clinical recommendations, as I am not qualified to do so. Instead, I hope to offer critical analysis with heuristic and theoretical value. I suggest that the pressure or expectation to grow, and to perform PTG in particular ways, may undermine self-determination and agency. Further it individualizes the burden of coping with sexual violence.

In deconstructing neoliberal and individualistic approaches to trauma, I do not wish to position agency against social and collective approaches: victim/survivor agency is a factor in post-rape sequelae. Instead, I wish to challenge fixation on personal responsibility and to consider the consequences of this fixation. In the concluding chapters of this thesis, I argue for an approach that disperses responsibility across the social world, including victim/survivors, but also stretching beyond them to collective resistance of rape myths and the cultural scaffolding of rape. A dispersed and collective approach does not eschew victim/survivor agency, but instead attempts a more nuanced framework that opens possibilities for collective agency, care, and resistance.

I challenge the term posttraumatic growth, and instead suggest centering ongoing coping in the face of traumatic suffering. I contend that no matter the degree to which a victim/survivor recovers from an assault, they must find a way to function and live in an unsafe world where rape remains a reality and a threat. I also explore subversive or transgressive alternatives, and compare them to outcomes that recuperate dominant discourses (see Alcoff and Gray, 1993), especially neoliberal victim theory (Stringer, 2014) and the survivor imperative. First, however, I wish to outline some critiques of PTSD more generally, and clarify why I focus on PTG.

### Critiques of posttraumatic stress disorder

Psychologists and psychiatrists developed posttraumatic stress disorder over the last century to address clusters of symptoms stemming from military combat; PTSD has also permeated analysis of sexual violence and its impacts (Herman, 1992). There is a range of literature critiquing PTSD as a diagnosis and the medicalization of trauma. Young's (1995) challenge to classifications of PTSD as "timeless" underscores how PTSD is constructed and problematizes its subsequent universalization as ahistorical.

Both Young (1995) and Summerfield (2001) provide useful frameworks for understanding the historic construction of the diagnosis and its political context. These critiques resonate with my aims and arguments in this chapter. However, I target posttraumatic growth, rather than PTSD, because PTG is apparent and available for critique in my data, whereas PTSD more broadly is not.

Critiquing PTG allows me to target my specific concerns with PTSD, especially the pressure to recover and grow in socially acceptable ways, and along prescribed trajectories which prioritise personal responsibility. I try to demonstrate how notions of personal growth and self-improvement in the face of adversity hinge on individual responsibility, like the survivor imperative.

Having engaged with a range of literature critiquing PTSD (Armstrong 1994; Young, 1995; Summerfield 2001; Pupavac, 2001; Burstow, 2003; McKenzie-Mohr, 2004; Brunoskis and Surtees 2008; Davis 2005; Tseris, 2013), I see important parallels in terms of challenging how PTSD individualises social causes of suffering and privileges personal, therapeutic solutions. I think it is unethical to treat people for PTSD primarily to make them better equipped to function in a harmful context where sexual violence persists; therapies are not sufficient, and overemphasis on therapeutics contributes to depoliticization. I agree with McKenzie-Mohr (2004), Summerfield (2001), Tseris (2013) and Burstow (2003), who argue that solely emphasising individual treatments overlooks the wider social issues giving rise to some cases of PTSD. I agree especially with Tseris (2013) and McKenzie-Mohr (2004), who call for a feminist social analysis to be revived within trauma theory and practitioner education.

Burstow (2003) takes a radical approach and argues for scrapping psychiatry more broadly and emphasizing social and political causes of suffering. While I agree with her critique regarding overemphasis on individuals at the expense of social analysis, I disagree with Burstow's (2003) calls to depart completely from diagnostic and medical models. Based in part on my own experience, I view the diagnosis and treatment protocols associated with PTSD as important for mitigating suffering, especially when coupled with resistance and efforts to transform society. I do not see individual treatment and social action as mutually exclusive. To the extent that the diagnosis and treatment protocols are alleviating suffering, I believe there is an ethical obligation to offer treatment. Simultaneously, it is necessary to address oppressive

social realities, and to realise that even the most effective treatment occurs within the context of a world where sexual violence persists.

I also wonder if those who have better symptom management may be well positioned for resistance and change efforts. The prospect of wellbeing fostering action has been markedly true in my own case. Medicalised approaches allowed me to break from, and later complete, my masters degree and achieve a state where I could function on a day-to-day basis. My access to therapies and treatment has enabled me to do various projects in sexual violence prevention, research, resistance, and response.

### *Singing in the Dark, 2012*

What can I say of this tale? I saved my own life, and not alone. Never alone. But always alone, somehow.

Apocálypsis, translated from Greek as apocalypse, refers to a lifting of the veil. A revelation. What I have undergone is nothing less than an apocalypse of the self. My self. Not an ending, not a beginning, but a moment when the world within me became and realized itself as a threshold. Everything became clearer then. I was shown my true face. A humbling thing, indeed.

Great illusions have been cut and broken by rain and storm and wind, have fallen to the ground to be eaten and made into branches again. But it's all a bit more real now. More honest. More integrated. More true.

I would not change a thing. It was harrowing. I wish it upon no one. But it woke me up, made me live. I cannot undo what I have done, what I have seen, what has been done to me. Somehow, the struggle freed me of bonds I did not know existed.

### Defining posttraumatic growth and understanding its foundations

The excerpt above demonstrates a sense of change and liberation through suffering and trauma. I identify freedom from bonds and claim to have been woken up or brought to life by these experiences, which I also claim made me and my life more real and true. The above text is an example of self-reported posttraumatic growth, in poetic language. My self report was influenced by the pressures by those around me to perform and narrate growth, pressures I will explore throughout this chapter.

Furthermore, these claims were made within six months of the sexual assaults; now, seven years later, my perspective has changed. Feelings of growth have been largely overshadowed by feelings of loss and a less optimistic assessment of the long terms impacts of these experiences. While possibilities for growth may have offered me hope in the initial timeframe following the abuse, in retrospect I would categorise these hopes as unrealistic and oversimplified. Furthermore, as I discuss below, self-reported growth hinges on denigration of one's previous self, and I have grown tired of thinking along the lines of Eli in Chapter 4. I did not need to experience rape to achieve self-improvement.

Discussions of posttraumatic growth are situated within positive psychology. PTG is alternatively called post-adversarial growth, thriving, benefit finding, or stress-related growth (Frazier et al., 2001; Zoellner and Maerker, 2006). There are a range of definitions or conceptualizations of PTG. At the core, posttraumatic growth involves self-improvement or an upgrade in circumstances *due to* trauma or victimization. According to Zoellner and Maerker (2006, p. 628),

The term 'growth' underscores that the person has developed beyond her previous level of adaptation, psychological functioning, or life awareness. It signals that in people's lives, there is something positively new that signifies a kind of additional benefit compared to pre-crisis levels. Those beneficial outcomes may include individual development, personal benefits, new life priorities, a deepened sense of meaning, [or] a deepened sense of connection with others or with a higher power.

In the PTG framework, traumatic events are "regarded as an opportunity for self-improvement and personal growth" (Sumalla et al., 2009, p. 29) and catalysts for positive change.

To understand some of the motivations behind PTG research, I turn to Stephen Joseph. I examine his framework of PTG throughout this chapter, as it is illustrative and foundational to the field of PTG research. Joseph has published over four dozen papers and edited several anthologies on PTG since 2001 and is considered an eminent researcher and clinician in the field, along with Linley, Tedeschi, and Calhoun. As far as I have found, he is the only academic to have written a mass-market book on PTG: *What Doesn't Kill Us* (2011). Joseph's (2011) introduction outlines superhero stories as

analogous to real-life stories of people who overcome trauma and suffering; he claims that heroic overcoming is attainable by anyone willing to take responsibility for their growth and recovery. Joseph (2011, p. xiii) frames adversity as inevitable and necessary for reflection on oneself and one's priorities; he seeks to explore why "one may succumb but the other may thrive" in the face of suffering.

In describing the emergence of the field of PTG research and practice, Joseph (2011) chastizes the trauma industry—those professionals who, he claims, profit off of people's suffering and overly emphasize the negative dimensions of trauma. Joseph (2011, p. xvi) criticizes the trauma industry as "part of the problem" for three reasons: (1) medicalization "takes away from patients the responsibility for their recovery", (2) PTSD following traumatic events is framed as "inevitable and inescapable", and (3) treatment is limited to distress management and overlooks growth. While there is merit in critiquing medicalisation, Joseph (2011) uses his critique to argue that patients are responsible for their recovery while overlooking political and social dimensions of trauma. He argues that medicalisation is disempowering because it

takes away from patents the responsibility for their own recovery... in short, it subtly shifts the responsibility for the person's recovery into the hands of the therapist. However, trauma is not an illness to be cured by a doctor. Certainly, therapists can offer people guidance and be expert companions along the way, but ultimately people must be able to take responsibility for their own recovery and for the meaning that they give to their experiences.

(Joseph, 2011 p.xv)

Joseph's critique of medicalization is distinct from feminist and political challenges to medicalization, which I discuss above. For example, rather than highlighting scope for social support and the need for social change, he claims that "social support is probably at its most valuable when it motivates people to take responsibility for their lives" (Joseph, 2011 p123). His emphasis on personal responsibility is an example of the problematics examined in feminist critiques of PTSD. Joseph advances neoliberal values of personal responsibility and saddles victim/survivors with greater responsibility than existing medical models.

Joseph situates himself as subverting dominant therapeutic practice and discourse, raising interesting questions about the extent to which PTG is subversive



within psychology. Not only is PTG consistent with cultural values, (Coyne and Tennen, 2010; Ford, et al., 2012), resilience and growth through adversity has also been championed by the American Psychological Association (APA) following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. While the APA uses the language of resilience rather than PTG, the underlying logic of improving through adversity and viewing challenge as opportunity resonates across the terms. I discuss resilience in greater depth in a section below.

In October 2002, The APA website featured a piece entitled “The road to resilience”, authored by Newman, who was the APA Executive Director for Practice. Newman (2002) discusses research among those affected by 9/11, indicating participants wanted to do better than cope, manage, or live with 9/11—they wanted to “be resilient”. Therefore, the APA produced a documentary with Discovery Health Channel to inform the public how to be more resilient, and aired it on the anniversary of 9/11. According to Newman (2002), the TV special initiated a grassroots outreach effort including a brochure on “how to take steps to build resilience”, which he claims can be taught to “most anyone.” Newman (2002) claims that “After all, turning adversity into opportunity... is critical for organisations to thrive in this day and age.” It appears that Joseph may incorrectly position himself as subversive, at least in relation to the American Psychological Association. The APA is the dominant regulatory body for psychological education and practice in the USA. It is uniquely powerful within the trauma industry which Joseph challenges, and here the APA seems to espouse very similar ideas to those Joseph develops.

Joseph (2011, p. xvi) situates posttraumatic stress as “the engine of transformation”, and criticizes the “trauma industry” for “creating a culture of expectation and ignoring the personal growth that often arises following trauma”. His charge is that negative expectations are the culprit in increasing suffering, which insinuates that suffering is a product of failure to think positively. He delegitimizes the known effects of trauma as demonstrated by decades of research. Further, in naming posttraumatic stress as an “engine of transformation”, he is locating cause and motivation for improvement and change in suffering itself; this is a slippery slope to justifying harm. Joseph (2011) argues that psychologists and therapists are disproportionately exposed to people who suffer and critiques professionals for aiming

merely to restore patients to baseline functioning, rather than to optimize functioning after trauma.

Posttraumatic growth is framed in different ways by researchers. Some see it as an ongoing process, while others see it as a coping mechanism that may be functional or dysfunctional; still others emphasize outcomes, either perceived or measured (see Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004; Zoellner and Maercker, 2006). Zoellner and Maercker, (2006, p. 640) see PTG as a positive illusion, allowing for an adaptive, self-enhancing view in the face of adversity, and offering “distorted positive illusions that might help people counterbalance emotional distress” (see also Frazier and Berman, 2012). Coping based frameworks keep distress in view, and emphasize PTG’s functionality in the process of recovery from trauma, rather than framing it as an end goal. While self-deception and avoidance can serve as a short and long-term palliative, it can also inhibit recovery insofar as it sidesteps confronting the event; avoidance may create barriers to approach coping, which involves actively confronting traumatic memories and may be necessary for processing trauma (see Frazier and Berman, 2012; Zoellner and Maercker, 2006). Zoellner and Maercker (2002) explore how denial may contribute to dysfunctional, maladaptive and illusory PTG.

### What constitutes a ‘positive outcome’?

Findings around PTG are mixed, contradictory, and somewhat troubling. Problems persist with measures, definitions, instruments, and methods. There are questions as to whether growth is temporary or permanent (Ford et al., 2012; Frazier and Berman, 2012), which bore out in the excerpt of my own records, above. Furthermore, Zoellner and Maercker (2006, p. 638) point out “the problem of defining what counts as ‘positive’ or ‘growth’,” which is especially fraught when examining PTG through a feminist and critical lens. Many researchers do not address an over-reliance on self-report measures or illusory versus the functional models of PTG. The possibility that perceiving growth may be a positive illusion in the face of shock and immediate distress is missing from many analyses.

For example, Frazier and Berman (2012) situate rape victims acting more cautiously post-rape as a positive growth outcome, and Joseph (2011) suggests that a woman who is assaulted might derive the lesson that not everyone or every place is to

be trusted. An increase in distrust and rise in caution is problematic in light of the possible limitations that this implies for women's lifestyles and choices post-assault. More caution also suggests an increase in fear. It also assumes that women should maintain responsibility for their own safety in an unsafe world, and sidesteps consideration of wider social and cultural change. These 'benefits' individualize the responsibility of coping with danger.

Other changes include appreciation for life, better relationships, reprioritization, strength, assertiveness, better self-care, and choosing different men (Frazier and Berman, 2012). These changes would have been measured during a time of initial shock and upheaval, which I suggest confounds the data. These reports may be due to the initial euphoria of having survived a life threatening event. Further, self-reports of such changes, in such close proximity to traumatic events, offer little indication of change over the long term.

In another study, Frazier and Berman (2012) measured changes in women who had experienced rape at intervals of two weeks, then two, six, and 12 months after the incident. In the early stages, concern for others had increased for 80%, and 46% reported an increase both in regards to appreciation for life and better relationships. However, 95% reported negative changes at two weeks and 84% reported mental health difficulties. Over the four measurement periods, increased empathy was the most commonly reported positive change. Negative views about safety and fairness, and negative views of others' goodness were present in about two thirds of participants.' Positive outcomes like increased empathy and concern for others are difficult to give a positive value given the costs associated with them. In addition, empathy as a growth outcome is gendered, and consistent with expectations that women be caring, empathetic, and perform emotional labor in their professional lives, and emotion work in their personal lives.

Frazier and Berman (2012) also found that those who reported positive changes in the initial stage of recovery and over the first year had fewer PTSD symptoms. However, they overlook preexisting mental health issues that might shape various outcomes and self-reports. Whether positive change and PTSD are linked by correlation or causation remain unknown. I contend that it is potentially dangerous and misguided to correlate the immediate perception of positive outcomes to rape with later mental

health. These initial impressions misrepresent the cause and correlates of distress as a matter of self-perception. This perpetuates fixation on internalization and individual coping with trauma and suffering, and promulgates the notion that growth or distress are self-fulfilling prophecies.

### Posttraumatic growth, popular discourse, and the survivor imperative

Posttraumatic growth is widely researched in part due to its consistency with shared cultural values. Several researchers allude to these consistencies, but they are noted in passing and without elaboration (see Coyne and Tennen, 2010; Ford et al., 2012; Frazier and Berman, 2012; Vázquez, 2013). For example, Ford et al. (2012) refrain from engaged analysis of the social construction of PTG; however, they note cultural acceptance of the idea that one should grow after trauma, and the prevalent belief that people gain wisdom and increase productivity after trauma. Coyne and Tennen (2010, p. 16), note that “Claims of positive psychology about people with cancer enjoy great popularity because they seem to offer scientific confirmation of strongly held cultural beliefs and values.” Situating PTG in relationship to biological phenomenon leverages the cultural currency of medical science to prove and validate discourses about the power of attitude in conquering material realities.

While Coyne and Tennen (2010) focus their critiques on cancer-related PTG studies, their insights are applicable to a range of different types of suffering related to illness or trauma. As I noted in the opening of this chapter, PTG research problematically treats cancer, illness, adversity, and trauma as equal, and uses them as base points for analysis without thoroughly considering their differences. PTG research seems to hold that tough situations offer possibilities for positive growth, and that a positive and growth-oriented attitude trumps biological and psychological realities.

Ford et al. (2012) raise concerns that the general population is primed to present in particular ways based on marketed ideas about PTG. According to Ford et al. (2012, p. 315) “The notion of growth following adversity has already infused popular culture, and this infusion, in turn, has fortified people’s implicit theories regarding this phenomenon.” Ford et al.’s comment is situated in their discussion of the APA’s Roads to Resilience campaign, and is among the more explicit (if brief) engagements with the cultural construction of PTG, resilience, and positive psychology.

Frazier and Berman (2012, p. 176) state that, “Self-reports of growth also may reflect adherence to a cultural script.” However, these authors fall short in identifying precisely what the cultural script is, and they do not engage in analysis of how these cultural influences shape conceptualizations and self-reports of PTG.

Janoff-Bulman provides an illuminating statement about the links between PTG and a cultural script. Writing about Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) revised model of PTG, Janoff-Bulman (2004, p. 31) suggests that:

Of the three models of posttraumatic growth, strength through suffering is most apparent in our cultural lore, specifically in our beliefs suggesting that whatever does not kill us makes us stronger. This is the message implicit in the redemptive value of suffering taught by many religions and is also a form of the more “no pain, no gain” conception of personal profit.

I suggest that Janoff-Bulman’s identification how PTG fits into cultural lore, and her resistance to this logic, render her insight a form of understated critique. Her reference to suffering as a path toward “personal profit” links cultural conceptions of victimization to projects of self-improvement and, possibly, financial gain.

Jospeh, Linley, and many other researchers frame PTG in a manner consistent with what Stringer (2014) terms neoliberal victim theory. Neoliberal values of personal responsibility and the positive transformations of self through suffering are foisted upon victims in recovery, formulating a template for their identity, process, and presentation. Janoff-Bulman’s understated criticism provides a jumping off point for a more thorough analysis of PTG as compatible with neoliberal ideologies, including the fetishization of personal responsibility, self-entrepreneurship, and self-improvement.

Vázquez (2013) identifies an orientational shift from resilience (i.e., the ability to maintain stability and functioning amidst adversity) toward growth and positive change. Political theorists expand on the concept of ‘resilience’ in policy discourse, in which resilience is framed as the ability to withstand shock as well as bounce back from it (see B. Anderson, 2015; Jospeh, 2013). PTG is an individualized analog to the resilience of communities and societies, and the term resilience is at times applied to discuss personal adaptability in the face of trauma or adversity. According to political theorist Jonathan Joseph (2013, p. 40),

Resilience fits with a social ontology that urges us to turn from a concern with the outside world to a concern with our own subjectivity, our adaptability, our reflexive understanding, our own risk assessments, our knowledge acquisition and, above all else, our responsible decision-making.

Emphasis on developing an adaptable self reflects expectations placed on victims of sexual violence to embark on a project of self-assessment and reflection in service to improvement. Victim/survivors are directed to gain knowledge that will enhance their status as good neoliberal subjects. This is a cornerstone of the survivor imperative.

Ahmed (2017) offers an insightful analysis on the logics of resilience in oppressive contexts. In writing about feminist snap, and the moments where we cannot take it anymore, she elaborates on resilience:

If the twig was a stronger twig, if the twig was more resilient, it would take more pressure before it snapped. We can see how resilience is a technology of will, or even functions as a command: be willing to bear more, be stronger so you can bear more. We can understand too how resilience becomes a deeply conservative technique, one especially well suited to governance: you encourage bodies to strengthen so they will not succumb to pressure; so they can keep taking it; so they can take more of it. Resilience is the requirement to take more pressure; such that the pressure can be gradually increased. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 189)

Ahmed unpacks how the language of resilience is used to direct individuals to bear greater and greater burdens, while promising that cultivating the ability to bear more will strengthen their character. Resilience as form of governance is an insidious tactic because it preys upon the human desire to be strong, independent, and able. I suggest that it distorts these desires, thus positioning individuals to take on dangerous, overwhelming, and dehumanizing social and cultural weights. Resilience becomes a means by which individuals might prove their character and superiority to a ‘victim mentality’, and demonstrate sufficient engagement in self-improvement.

Growth imperatives are present in the sense-making strategies explored by Baker (2010a) in her studies with Australian women. According to Baker (2010a, p. 187), the neoliberal self is framed as a “choosing, enterprising subject who is obliged to construct a self-reflective biography in pursuit of self actualisation. Thus our identities

are not static but can be changed and improved.” Baker (2010a) goes on to argue that material challenges and barriers, including inequality, are overshadowed by the imperative to perform a freedom of choice about oneself and one’s life.

Baker’s observations is consistent with B. Anderson’s (2015) discussion of the resilient subject. According to B. Anderson (2015, p. 61), “The ‘resilient subject’ is constructed as an individualized subject charged with the responsibility to adapt to, or bounce back from, inevitable shocks in an unstable world.” Crucially, and parallel to PTG researcher S. Joseph (2011), such constructions suggests that an unstable and unjust world is inevitable, and turns focus away from working to change the external world. It becomes an individual’s responsibility to shape up, maintain strength, and survive in the face of injustices outside individual control. Political theorist J. Joseph (2013) frames his conceptualization as a critique, while PTG researcher S. Joseph (2011) situates the inevitability of harm as a fact and a testament to the hope-filled necessity of fostering PTG among those who suffer from trauma. J. Joseph’s insight is important to consider in the context of sexual violence: he is addressing the political and social ramifications of viewing resilience as an imperative and the responsibility of individuals who are situated within complex systems of injustice.

According to Baker (2010a, p. 188), post-feminism and neoliberalism both emphasize “individualism, choice, and autonomy” in a manner that keeps social, political, and economic realities and oppressions out of view. In her interviews with young Australian women, she finds that nearly all of them draw on language of personal choice and self-improvement in their storytelling and sense-making, even when their stories suggest social forces at play in generating those experiences (Baker, 2010a). I suggest that the phenomenon identified by Baker is an extension of the survivor imperative and neoliberal victim theory.

PTG proponents construct adversity, whether it is trauma, economic lack, illness, or violence, as a positive contributor to personal striving. Baker (2010a, p. 201) concludes her essay with the insight that, “Young women strive to make something of themselves not just *in spite* of difficulties but *through* them; representing a rather cruel accountability” (emphasis in original). Furthermore, the manner in which PTG researchers discuss trauma often slips perilously close to framing trauma itself as an opportunity. According to Vázquez (2013, p. 33)

The discussion of whether the perception of positive changes or benefits is related to positive or negative affect is also related to the discussion about *the optimal dose of trauma for these changes to appear* (emphasis added).

Although some PTG researchers state they do not wish to glorify trauma, their statements are undermined by phrasing that talks about trauma in terms of optimal dosage.

### Problems with self-reported measures

A major methodological flaw in PTG literature is that it measures perceived and self-reported growth after trauma. Self-perceived growth carries risks to participants, in that it promotes denigration of the pre-trauma self, and may inadvertently promote dysfunctional coping (see Frazier and Berman, 2012; Zoellner and Maercker, 2006). Furthermore, the questions posed by researchers are constructed by discourses promulgating PTG as a desirable outcome. Building on Tennen and Affleck (2009), Vázquez (2013, p. 36) suggests that

cultural bias may lead people in the U.S. to overestimate the amount of positive change that has occurred and also may lead to frustration and distress if changes, according to these expectations of psychological growth, are not perceived.

Vázquez elegantly summarizes my main concerns with PTG measures: they stem from dominant discourse, and may contribute to distress.

Posttraumatic growth studies involve asking participants to assess their state prior to trauma, their state at present, to then compare the two and, finally, to discern the degree to which trauma (and/or coping with it) was the causal factor for change (Coyne and Tennen, 2010; Ford et al., 2012; Zoellner and Maercker, 2006). The prevailing framework and methods of inquiry hinge on evaluating one's current self compared to their self-perception prior to trauma. In light of a social context that privileges self-improvement over time, there is risk of social directives to report growth and benefit over time, whether or not there has been a traumatic event. Furthermore, people develop and mature over time, whether or not trauma occurs, and normal psychological development can resume after trauma (Ford et al., 2012).



Researchers have developed multiple scales. According to Coyne and Tennen (2010, p.23), questions remain as to “whether people can accurately portray the growth they claim to have experienced”. Frazier and Berman (2012, p. 176) suggest that “self-reports may not represent actual life changes”. Several studies find that self-reported PTG is inconsistent with measures of external measure of growth and well-being over time. My quarrel here is not with what participants perceive and report, but with research questions which so clearly derive from dominant discourses of self-improvement and individual outcomes of therapeutic treatment for social problems. Discourse shapes these measures and questions. In many studies, researchers pose questions to victim/survivors when they may be ecstatic at having survived severely traumatic events, or else in shock, or in a heightened state of coping.

I contend one possible improvement is in identifying existing measures as measures of *self-perceived* posttraumatic growth, since self-perception is essential in defining what is in fact under study. Perceived PTG is a phenomenon to study in its own right; perception of oneself as growing and adapting positively is linked to self-esteem and self-perception, and may have implications for recovery and coping (Zoellner and Maercker, 2006). Self-perceived growth is prevalent in a range of victim/survivor self-reports and narratives (see Alcoff and Gray, 1993; Baker, 2010a; Thompson, 2000; Wood and Rennie, 1994; Young and Maguire, 2003); the mechanisms by which self-perceived growth may advance or hinder relief from suffering after sexual violence merits further consideration. Assertions of self-perceived PTG by victim/survivors, where it stems from their own understanding of events as elaborated via qualitative methods, I contend is more credible than reports from measures designed by researchers who, as I discuss above, have troubling ideas of what constitutes positive outcomes.

PTG recuperates dominant discourse and undermines political resistance in the context of sexual victimization. The emphasis on self-reported perceptions of personal growth highlights that, in order to adhere to neoliberal values of personal responsibility, those who endure sexual violence face social directives to present themselves as strong, agentic, and working to get past victimhood.

In my relationships to others, I felt constant pressure to frame my experience as fostering self-mastery and self-improvement. In several conversations with trusted others, I came to view my writing of the story, and therefore my lived experience, as

necessitating an uplifting tone and message. For example, upon learning that I aimed to write a book, one trusted friend told me, “It has to be uplifting and inspiring. No one wants to read a downer.” He made no effort to conceal his expectations about how I should engage in and perform my recovery. I needed to be uplifting: I needed to live an inspiring story and be an inspiring person. The onus to make the story uplifting and inspiring became a directive that I struggled to fulfill.

Having ostensibly failed at agency in preventing the rapes, there was pressure from many sides to enact it in the aftermath by achieving posttraumatic growth. For a time, I denigrated and sought distance from my pre-trauma self.

### *Singing in the Dark, 2013*

The time has come to write an ending.

“The story will never be over. You will carry it as long as you live, and it will always be shaping you.” Georgina paused and took a sip of water.

“I’m ready to close this chapter of my life,” I replied. “Writing the book has always been analogous to the healing, and I’m ready to find the last page, the last paragraph, the last words.”

“You could always write a sequel.”

We laughed.

“Maybe. But I’m ready to move on. I can feel the end ripening.”

“Good,” was all she said in reply.

The fire was dwindling deep in its pit. We had no idea what time it was, only that it was late. Above us, the stars were burning through the black and cloudless night. We’d been praying for hours, my friends and I, in a temple dug deep into the earth. Jordan and I were whispering.

“Cherry tomato?” He asked.

“Um, yes. Clearly.” I popped one into my mouth and savored the seeded juice, singing silent praises to the seed savers of this world.

“Home grown?” I asked.

“Whole Foods.”

“Shut the front door! They taste home grown.”

“Tis the season,” he replied.

We stared into the fire.

“I heard you weeping in there. That guy. That fucking guy. You’re still getting him out of you.”

“Bless his heart, Jordan. Bless his human heart. And no, that’s not what the weeping was about.”

“That whole thing. So fucked up. A really defining moment.”

“Well, stories like this one shape a person, but they do not define her. I’m in a good place now. In the end, I live beyond. I move on. Because I chose to.”

“God, you know, I could kill that guy for what he did to you. I’ve said this behind your back, but I’ll say it to you now, I wish this had never happened. I hate what he did to you. But if something like this was going to happen...” his voice trailed off. He couldn’t quite find the words. “You of all people could make something good of it.”

How to respond? I thought. He stood and walked to the other side of the fire. Using a long stick, he manoeuvred a smoldering log back into the flame.

“Thanks, fire tender.”

He went on. “I guess that on some level you kind of called it in. I mean, I could kill that guy for what he did, but... this will impact everything you ever do.”

“Not everything. It’s had a huge impact. But it’s not me. It’s part of my story. And Jordan, I did not ‘call it in’. That’s victim blaming. I’m not a victim anymore, but I was. And I did not ‘create this reality’. I would have never chosen this for myself. Like so many things in life, it just happened. And I’m doing my best to do something good with what happened.”

I stopped, afraid to go further. It’s a hard thing to call people out on subtle victim blame. I didn’t want to overwhelm him. By the look on his face, I’d say he was more than a little taken aback.

Finally, he spoke. “How did you move on?”

I took in the question, paused for a long moment while the trees around us danced for a moment in the passing breeze, fresh green tips illuminated by the waxing moon.

“Well, it’s a long story. The key to unlocking a new chapter has been the willingness to lay the old one to rest. It’s not a purging of the old, it’s not a live burial,

it's a peaceful thing, really. It has to happen in its own time. Putting the book down doesn't burn it, it just makes for a lighter load. But it has to be complete. And it will be. The first step is the choice to unburden ourselves, the next step is taking the time to do it. Soon, rows upon rows of stories line the bookshelves of home, and we can read from them as easily as we can choose to let them sit, ripening between their covers.

"The risk I faced was that the trauma would never heal, and that I might grow comfortable in survival mode, that I might come to identify as a victim. It's hard to change the tone of a story or belief. Victimhood takes a hold and tells the lie that "this is the only way it could be". It locks away personal power and hides the key by making one think they cannot even ask for it. But all it takes is the question. That is where the healing begins.

"Victim is not an identity, it is an aspect of experience. It is contained in time and space. It is not eternal. In knowing that, I can reclaim my power, move beyond attachment to victimhood, and move on."

"Damn girl, you really have a hold on this."

"Yeah, it's been a journey."

"It sounds to me like you've really moved passed this."

"You know Jordan, I have. I really have."

A new day stretches its limbs across the silver morning sky. So this is the other side. I am not who I once was.

Georgina was right. "This is going to be a transformative experience, the kind of step forward from which there is no going back." No going back. And by now there are new thresholds to traverse in meeting the dawn. It's not an ending, not beginning, just another step.

Now I have crossed the threshold. I have come home. Laughter never left my side on this journey, but now it lives in fuller force. The road opens out before me, "curved like river's labor toward sea", and I know where I've come from, know well the ground beneath my feet.

I have found a mountain in me, carved and eroded by the great storm of this story. Shaped, but not defined, by the watery blade of this tempest. I am not "that woman who lived through that thing". That thing shaped me, but I am so much more than a single story.

### A more cautious approach

This narrative fragment demonstrates the complex ways in which I made sense of and articulated my ‘recovery’ from victimization, when speaking with someone who had expressed an expectation that I do something productive and good with the experience. I tried to put words to an amorphous cognitive, and emotional process that, by that point, had already spanned two years. In this conversation, my definition of recovery involved the remission of PTSD symptoms, a natural engagement with the process, and a willingness to put away an old story; embedded in these conceptualizations is a resistance to allowing trauma and victimhood to create a totalizing identity.

My effort to decentralize victim identity is interesting in light of posttraumatic growth research; researchers and clinicians anticipate that, in the absence of adequate, growth-oriented intervention, victims will develop a post-trauma identity that is centrally defined by the negative sequelae of trauma (see Joseph, 2011; Thompson, 2000). Victims are criticized for allowing their trauma to generate an all-encompassing identity (le Monde, 2018). I have found that concerns about victimhood as totalizing are hardly unsubstantiated, as evidenced by the distinct shortage of people who introduce themselves as victims of sexual violence in everyday interactions. Qualitative research details numerous accounts of victim/survivors eschewing a total or central victim identity (see Thompson, 2000; Wood and Rennie, 1994; Young and Maguire, 2003; Baker, 2010a). It appears that the discourse of victimhood as totalizing is a myth. The myth of the total victim generates something victim/survivors may disavow, thereby bolstering assertions that they are survivors. It is another example of how survivorship depends on castigating victim identity.

The story above shows the complex ways I made meaning—both as comprehension and as significance (see Janoff-Bulman and Franz, 1997; Janoff-Bulman, 2004; Joseph and Linley, 2006)—of my recovery process and my self. That victim/survivors engage in complex sense-making is consistent across feminist qualitative research into victim/survivor stories and identity construction post-sexual violence (see Thompson, 2000; Wood and Rennie, 1994; Young and Maguire, 2003).

With the complexity of victim/survivor accounts in mind, I wish to draw attention to some of the more cautious, complex framings of PTG. Tedeschi and Calhoun are among the researchers who, while generally endorsing PTG and subject to the same critiques I outline above, are more measured in their assessment of it. They state clearly that distress often co-occurs with growth, and that growth does not equate to well-being. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004, p. 2) write that, “Posttraumatic growth occurs concomitantly with the attempts to adapt to highly negative sets of circumstances that can engender high levels of psychological distress.” Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) emphasize strength though suffering within their model.

PTG research risks romanticizing trauma or fostering tolerance for violence, on the basis that they can produce ‘positive’ outcomes in and of themselves. I encountered these kinds of attitudes many times after rape, including in the dialogue with Eli I discuss in Chapter 4. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) and Janoff-Bulman (1992, 2004) are consistent in reminding readers that coping successfully is what may yield growth, that growth is not inherent to trauma, and that pain and suffering coexist with growth possibilities, processes, and outcomes; they are careful to locate growth in a person’s struggle to cope, rather than in the inciting incident. Ford et al. (2012, p. 316) suggest that a new research framework is necessary that:

neither reframes trauma as a growth experience nor tacitly encourages people to devalue their previous self or relationships in order to cultivate the illusion of having transcended trauma through growth.

Ford et al.’s view offers a counterpoint to calls for research into positive outcomes (see Burt and Katz, 1987; Frazier and Berman, 2012; Hockett and Saucer, 2014; Thompson, 2000).

Trauma theorist Janoff-Bulman is especially careful in her approach. She is mindful not to excessively emphasize the individual by attending more to cultural and social factors, including the ongoing realities of violence and the role of friends and family in recovery (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Her approach stems from an understanding that, after trauma, some individuals accommodate the realities of trauma and victimization into their assumptive worlds, rather than assimilating the trauma by morphing it to fit into a preexisting assumptive world. The accommodation of trauma information allows for growth of a different quality than what many PTG researchers

attempt to measure. Self-improvement, enhanced productivity, and functionality are not within Janoff-Bulman's theorization. Rather, the process by which some people learn to accept, cope, and live after trauma is represented with a degree of compassion for suffering, and a more complex view of the consequences of trauma.

In concluding her book, *Shattered Assumptions*, Janoff-Bulman (1992, p. 174) notes that many trauma victims develop a more balanced perspective through suffering:

They know they are not entirely safe and protected, yet they don't see the entire world as dangerous... The world is benevolent, but not absolutely; events that happen make sense, but not always; the self can be counted on to be decent and competent, but helplessness is at times a reality. Survivors are often guardedly optimistic, but the rosy absolutism of earlier days is gone.

Her assessment is qualified, nuanced, and complex—based in ongoing research with a range of trauma victims. Her work stands apart in that she resists advancing growth as an imperative. For Janoff-Bulman, the reality that traumatic experiences are possible,—and ensuing confrontations with powerlessness, vulnerability, and another's malicious intent—sit in tension with pre-trauma assumptive worlds. If trauma is already viewed as possible, then subsequent traumas or losses will not shatter their assumptive world, because they already fit coherently inside it.

In short, becoming 'better' or achieving self-improvement is not in any way central to her research. Rather, Janoff-Bulman keeps distress and suffering in view. She writes in the tone of a seasoned clinician as opposed to a detached theorist, and does not make claims about how people should frame trauma and recovery. She offers an important alternative conceptualization to keep in view when engaging with PTG research.

#### *Excerpt from article published in 2017*

All I wanted, in the most treacherous phases of my recovery, was for people who care about [this spiritual tradition] to say, "This isn't your problem to fix, it's our problem. We're going to do something about it. And when you're ready to give us input, we'll listen."

Within that conversation, the input of survivors is vital: we have valuable knowledge, insight, and guidance regarding sexual violence resistance, prevention, and

response. However, we are not obligated to stand on the front lines of the struggle. Communities everywhere have to work together on this issue — church communities, schools and universities, professional networks. Anywhere there is power to be abused and potential victims to be exploited, people need to work together to stop sexual violence, and to react appropriately when the unthinkable happens. Survivors need support, not pressure to find the solution or recover in a tidy way that makes everyone else in the community feel comfortable...

Communities, and the individuals that constitute them, need to educate themselves about victim blame. Working with survivors can be a minefield, and even people with the best intentions can say the wrong things when they aren't sensitive to the dangers of the territory. That level of sensitivity takes work. That work begins in communities (Ross, 2017).

### Misplaced onuses

In a problematic study, Silver, Wortman, and Crofton (1990) take aim at understanding how a victim's self-presentation impacts the support they receive. Their lab-based study evaluated verbal and non-verbal responses to victims of life crises based on how well or poorly they appeared to be coping. Their conclusions include suggestions for how victims ought to present their suffering and coping to elicit the most support, thereby placing the onus on victims to manage a support provider's feelings and reactions in ways that may or may not be realistic or feasible for a person in the thick of suffering. They conclude that "by minimizing the support provider's feelings of helplessness in the face of distress, the victim can maximize the likelihood that support will be forthcoming" (Silver et al., 1990). I suggest an alternative orientation: that support providers be better prepared to face the distress and diminished coping abilities of those suffering from some form of victimization or illness.

To a large extent, Silver et al. (1990) undermine their own conclusions by noting that no matter how well someone is coping, visible suffering presents a challenge to others. They write that:

That is, there appears to be no self-presentation that is effective in making potential support providers feel as comfortable as they would be if they were interacting with a person without cancer. (Silver et al., 1990, p. 416)



Their insight bolsters my argument that the onus should not lie with those suffering (whether from violence, victimization, or illness) to present or perform in a particular way to elicit support. Rather, people should have access to resources that foster healthy and adaptive responses to those who suffer. This approach would expand and dissipate the web of responsibility and care.

Pressure to present growth and positivity, and to perceive oneself as improving, can be harmful. According to Sumalla et al.,

In a worst case scenario, posttraumatic growth in cancer patients could interfere with doing something about [the] problem, falsely raise expectations, encourage dissociation as people are feeling negative emotions... and, finally, pressure people to expect that they not only need survive, the [sic] need to grow and change your [sic] identity. (2009, p. 32)

Dissociation, denial, repressing emotions, resisting taking action, and striving to better oneself can become malignant to those who suffer. The above insight resonates with the argument by Kelly et al. (1996) that the language of recovery is not realistic, and that seeking recovery or resolution can lead to hindrances, desperation, preoccupation, and frustration for being unable to recover. Instead, Kelly et al. (1996) advocate for a more realistic assessment that acknowledges the processual and lifelong nature of working through sexual violence.

Watson et al. (1999) challenge the popularity of positive thinking as a panacea for physical and other ailments. In finding no correlation between a fighting spirit and cancer prognosis, Watson et al. (1999, p. 1335) conclude that “our findings suggest that women can be relieved of the burden of guilt that occurs when they find it difficult to maintain a fighting spirit”. Their conclusion foregrounds compassion for those suffering (in this case, from cancer), and acknowledges the risks presented by popular ideologies of positive thinking. Neoliberal discourses, including the fixation of agency in neoliberal victim theory, can induce guilt and a sense of responsibility for one’s own suffering, as a result of failing to cultivate and adhere to a positive, growth-oriented outlook (see Ehrenreich, 2009; Stringer, 2014). Surely, such foci impede a more political and social orientation toward the creation of a wise, more compassionate world.

## Recovery as a personal choice

While there is a difference between locating positive opportunity in the adversity itself, versus in a person's response to it, both approaches risk minimizing the real harm done, and both place excessive emphasis on individuals to overcome or survive in a particular, socially acceptable manner. The notion that victim/survivors are defined by how we respond to adversity further individualizes the burden of coping with trauma; we should keep responding well by maintaining personal safety, managing risk, and mitigating violence well when it occurs. Following sexual violence, a victim/survivor is directed to cope effectively and seek out adequate support in service to their own health, well-being, and functioning.

My argument is not with individual coping generally, and I do not challenge individual victim/survivors for their pursuit of wellbeing. Rather, I suggest that individual coping is over-emphasized and mandated in dominant discourse, to deleterious affect. According to Baker (2010a, p. 193), "Because young women can now 'be anything', they must also be able to 'get over anything'." In the case of sexual violence, the negotiation of victim and survivor identities is tied into an expectation to overcome. The positioning of survivorship as the destination at the end of a journey of transformation partially constitutes pressure on victims to 'get over it'.

Further, valorizing strength and 'getting over rape' fails to account for instances in which the experience may be insurmountable. Survivorship is treated as a choice. Viewing it as a choice perpetuates the notion that victim identity is a self-fulfilling prophecy, that presenting as a victim to others incites their responses and thereby fosters ongoing identification as a victim.

Joseph (2011) is especially hostile toward those who, he alleges, choose not to overcome the suffering engendered by trauma. In concluding his book, he cautions readers about PTSD diagnoses as self-fulfilling prophecies that can "stop recovery in its tracks" (Joseph, 2011, p. 166–167). With regard to clients who don't make progress, or even abandon therapy, he suggests that:

deep down, the clients are relieved. Diagnostic labels can become part of people—and the truth is, many people are reluctant to give them up. Unfortunately, the dominant professional discourse of trauma tends to

position people as ‘helpless victims with a lifelong condition’, so it is not surprising that many people latch on to this way of thinking.

Here, Joseph (2011) situates those suffering from PTSD as lacking the will and desire to overcome in the manner he suggests is empowering and positive: he chastises the ‘victim mentality’. He does not grapple with the lack of treatments for PTSD, nor the situations in which PTSD is treatment-resistant, nor the overwhelming distress that can accompany attempts to confront and process trauma. Nor does Joseph (2011) entertain the notion that his positive approach to treating trauma may be a poor fit for a number of clients, who may be annoyed by his framework.

In another example of allegations that victims choose not to overcome, Hockett et al. (2014) discuss the approach of a therapist named Rose Harrison. Harrison encourages clients who have experienced rape to use the survivor label which is “especially useful for clients who indicate that they perceived themselves as victims in order ‘to be excused from life, or to be viewed as ‘special’” (Hockett et al., 2014, p. 95). I argue that this is coercion; Harrison is in a position of power and authority as a therapist. She demands that victims engaging in recovery on her terms, rather than on their own, and she uses her position as a therapist to mold victims in a manner she sees fit. She directs clients toward survivorship. Harrison’s approach, which Hockett et al. (2014) seem to endorse, leaves little room for the many repercussions of PTSD or other sequelae of sexual violence, which require sensitivity and attention. She overrides her clients’ self-identification and self-determination.

The approaches advanced Joseph (2011), Hockett et al. (2014), Rose Harrison, and Silver et al. (1999) deflect from oppressive realities and social responses to these realities. According to Baker (2010a, p. 194), “positive accounts of overcoming difficulty can obscure and therefore work to continue oppression”. Without attending to the social and material realities that shape individual experiences, fixating on the individual enables the persistence of these realities.

### **Supportive responses to disclosures**

There are a few studies that deal with peer and family disclosures. Disclosure studies consider the larger social complexities and factors involved in how people respond to disclosures, rather than emphasizing the individual. Disclosure studies

address the stakes and the repercussions of poor responses for victim/survivors. According to Ullman (2010, p. 26),

sexual assault disclosures may be shocking and upsetting to the support provider and make that person less able to respond empathetically if he or she is caught up in his or her own reactions. This may occur because people are not always aware of or willing to acknowledge their attitudes, especially if those attitudes are negative, such as endorsing discriminatory beliefs about rape.

Research into patterns of disclosure demonstrates that friends are often first points of disclosure. College-aged individuals who have heard disclosures report feeling unsure about how to help or what to do, and feeling angry or distressed about the disclosure, even when they felt they could help (Banyard et al., 2010; Paul et al., 2013).

Paul et al. (2013) find that those who hear disclosures felt they could help, but were worried about responding well and indicated distress, suggesting that they also need support. According to Paul et al. (2013)

The relatively high numbers of women reporting receipt of a rape disclosure further highlight the importance of refinement, evaluation, and effective dissemination of psycho-educational interventions addressing appropriate responses to a sexual assault disclosure.

This sits in contrast to the notion that victim/survivors are responsible for behaving in a manner that elicits support. Instead, Paul et al. (2013) recommend awareness-raising to create more supportive environments, including rape-related education, increasing empathetic listening skills, and coping or emotional self-management skills. Banyard et al. (2010) suggest offering information to potential disclosure recipients, including suggestions around helpful language, and active steps to help victim/survivors.

These approaches help inoculate against further harm to victim/survivors who disclose. Orchowski et al. (2013) find that negative responses increase the severity of PTSD, diminish health, increase drug and alcohol use, enhance characterological self-blame, and encourage avoidance coping strategies. They also find that 75% of the women they studied had endured a negative response, including blame, stigma, not being believed, or the other person trying to take control of the situation, and that 20% regretted disclosing (Orchowski et al., 2013).

Most work on disclosures addresses the context of therapy, and offers guidance for how therapists might manage disclosures. The therapeutic emphasis overlooks the insight that victims and survivors disclose first and foremost to friends and family—people in their social world who are not trained professionals (see Banyard et al., 2010; Paul et al., 2013; Ullman, 2010). Further, the role of peers, community, family, and friends is seldom discussed in PTG research. According to Joseph (2011, p. 123), “Social support is probably at its most valuable when it motivates people to take responsibility for their lives.” His framework around PTG may mention support from others, but the overarching thrust deals with individual overcoming and growth, which is achieved via personal responsibility, and is thus consistent with neoliberal ideology. Unfortunately, the clinical approaches advanced by Joseph (2011) may foster self-blame for being unable to satisfactorily overcome and cope.

### Troubling clinical recommendations

While an exhaustive consideration of clinical recommendations for trauma is beyond the scope of this thesis, I wish to engage with clinical recommendations from some of the most prominent PTG researchers and proponents. The emphasis on personal responsibility in clinical practice is most overtly stated by Joseph (2011), whose suggestions are confusing and often contradictory. His recommendations are formative to the field of PTG due to his popular book on the subject.

Joseph (2011; Joseph and Linley, 2006) argues for subtle interventions on the part of the therapist and for trust in the traumatized client’s self-determination to foster growth. Joseph’s (2011) comments that, “If posttraumatic growth is to take place, we must be active agents in the creation of our own lives” (Joseph, 2011, p. 140); “survivors must steer themselves in the right direction using active coping strategies” (Joseph, 2011, p. 129); “Trauma survivors must accept that the direction of their life is their own responsibility” (Joseph, 2011, p. 130). These comments are central to the posttraumatic growth framework.

This advice is undermined by other claims by Joseph (2011) and Joseph and Linley (2005), where they advocate for a non-forceful approach to growth facilitation in clinical settings. They remind readers that growth cannot be forced (Joseph, 2011); that it can be facilitated but not created (Joseph and Linley, 2006); that rosy encouragements

to find silver linings are unhelpful to those in crisis (Joseph, 2011); that subtlety on the part of the clinician as well as the self-determination of clients are critical (Joseph and Linley, 2006); and, that the pace must be set by the client (Joseph and Linley, 2006). It seems that personal responsibility is foisted onto clients, and a growth mindset is encouraged subtly and consistently throughout treatment, whether or not the client bears such an orientation.

Joseph (2011) evades responsibility for the inefficacy of his approach for some clients; he explains the empty waiting rooms as the result of clients who secretly wish to hold on to their PTSD diagnosis. To manage these tensions, Joseph (2011, p. 148) suggests that “for this reason, [clients] must be gently led to believe that they, and only they, are responsible for their own journey toward reconfiguration.” It seems to me that Joseph is advising dishonesty; his guidance bears the appearance of manipulation rather than trustworthy therapeutic advice. He risks undermining the very self-determination, agency, and control over their sense-making process that he champions elsewhere.

Frazier and Berman (2012) also offer recommendations for clinicians, specifically those treating rape victims. They suggest that early positive changes are an important consideration for clinicians “who may focus exclusively on the more recognized negative effects of trauma (e.g., PTSD), and ignore potential positive changes” (Frazier and Berman, 2012, p. 174). They also suggest that rape crisis counselors assess for positive changes and perceived benefits early on, but caution against pressuring or implying that victims should find rape beneficial. They do not, however, offer concrete guidance on how to walk this tightrope. Frazier and Berman (2012, p. 175) conclude that:

these findings suggest that counselors should help clients to find or create benefits out of traumatic events, but also that counselors should work to bolster whatever positive changes clients identify soon after a rape, so that these are not ‘lost’ over time.

Their conclusion is consistent with Thompson (2000, p. 341–342), who suggests that clinicians “adopt a conscious focus on growth”, including “hope for the future”.

What is missing in these clinical recommendations is the responsibility that sits with peers, clinicians, and other non-victims regarding traumatic victimization. Sidestepping social support is a gaping omission, especially in light of Brison’s (2002)

insight that recovery from trauma, especially trauma incited by another human's intentional actions, is a relational process. I contend that there is a great need for careful consideration of the relationships and social contexts that counter victim hostility and inoculate against secondary victimization. I hope to have taken a step in advancing critiques of dominant discourse around growth directives and considering their manifestation in recommendation for clinical practice.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I problematize posttraumatic growth and consider its resonance with the survivor imperative and neoliberal victim theory. Proponents of PTG frame it as a radical response to a 'trauma industry' which, they suggest, overemphasizes the negative sequelae of trauma. The definition of PTG hinges on improving oneself and one's life through traumatic suffering. I find conceptualisations which orient toward trauma as an opportunity troubling, as they locate trauma as a site for self-improvement. I build on the arguments of critics of PTG and examine the discourses which help constitute expectations to grow following adversity. I suggest that growth directives are consistent with neoliberal values; the dominance of neoliberal victim theory, the survivor imperative, and the promulgation of PTG discourse in media campaigns all influence research into PTG.

My concern is that PTG sets unrealistic expectations and misrepresents some outcomes as positive that are may be negative, including women's enhanced safety measures after sexual violence. I contest several researchers' take on constitutes positive changes, since working to enhance safety suggests increased fear and decreased trust, and may impose limits on women's choices. Further, PTG fixates on individual positive changes and overlooks the need for social or cultural change to prevent traumatizing events from occurring in the first instance. I argue that PTG research also slips into romanticization of trauma, which may lead to justifying violence on the basis that it leads to positive gains. Finally, I find that the clinical recommendations put forth in the PTG framework are manipulative and contradictory, and downplay the role of others in helping victim/survivors cope with trauma.

I argue that PTG, resilience, and the survivor imperative are constructed as escape hatches from eternal victimhood; their performance is a means by which

victimized people can assert they do not have a ‘victim mentality’, and thereby distance themselves from ‘pathetic’ victims. I argue that that these growth and strength-oriented frameworks perpetuate the myth that victimhood is a totalizing identity, and contributes to victim stigma. PTG and the survivor imperative place the onus on victims to present as coping well to others from whom they seek support. I contend that focusing on victim presentation is problematic, and that it overlooks the potential to disperse responsibility across the social world. It reduces scope for educating the public such that friends, family, and peers are better equipped to respond to victims in an informed manner.

In this chapter, I argue that dominant discourse fosters an excessive emphasis on individual coping with the burdens of social problems. My dispute is not with individual victim/survivors who seek well-being after violence, nor their accounts of their own experiences. Rather, my dispute is with the survivor imperative and NVT, which influence researcher and pressure victim/survivors to prove that they are stronger than social oppression which has caused them harm.

In concluding this thesis in Part III, I gesture toward alternative frameworks that take seriously the social and political dimensions of victimization and recovery. Instead of focusing on personal solutions, safety, and heroic overcoming, I advocate for a socially-based approach that values the knowledge of victims and endeavors to foster a social climate that is not permissive of rape, and is compassionate, rather than hostile, toward victims of sexual violence. My goal is not to erase the possibilities that victim/survivors have for agency, nor to evacuate any modicum of personal responsibility; indeed, research suggests that control over various post-rape processes, such as help-seeking, are adaptive and necessary. Instead, I wish to move toward the possibility of dispersing responsibility across the social world, and challenging the survivor imperative, NVT, and PTG.



## Part III

Chapter Seven: Autoethnographic reflections

Chapter Eight: Conclusions

## Chapter Seven

### Autoethnographic reflections: dispersing the burdens

#### Solidarity

I'm not sure what possessed me to go to New York in February, the bleakest of winter months in the northeast, except that the invitation was compelling. I was asked to speak on a panel dealing with gender-based violence in the same community that had scapegoated me after the rapes. The individuals running the event were among the few who had maintained my trust and respect. They shared my concerns, and were working to make visible the pervasiveness of gender inequity across the social and professional networks that we had once shared, before my moment of feminist snap.

By accepting their invitation to participate on the panel, I would necessarily step back into a domain of my injury. I was being paid to speak on a topic that I had once been shunned for voicing. I was slated to encounter supporters and critics. Yet, somehow, invitations into the lion's den have always had an enticing glimmer, and I knew I would be in good company—it sounded like an adventure.

We had dinner before the panel, which would take place with an audience of 40 people and be broadcast later online. I noticed my anxiety mounting during dinner. It was difficult to sit around, talking about the pains of the past, talking about friends of Eli and Georgina, being asked to reiterate traumatic stories to new listeners. Dinner involved a tougher conversation than what would occur at the formal event. I had hoped that having a conversation beforehand, over Ukrainian food, would be a way to ease into the topic. In reality, it set off distress and anxiety, which I would have only a few blocks on foot to shake before the cameras started rolling.

The room was packed when we got started. People were engaged, and audience comments and questions—from the problematic to the 'woke'—were responded to in a clear, no-nonsense manner by panelists. Having six of us on hand to handle questions simplified matters and dispersed any stress or sense of burden. As part of the proceedings, I was asked to retell my story—the rapes in the Amazon, the return, the response. It is a task that I am loath to perform. I heard new stories as well, horrific stories that sickened me for their familiarity, their banal predictability. People were moved; people were thinking through hard questions. All up, the event was fine, save for my throbbing headache.

Despite all the challenges of the night, the experience elucidated an insight about what it means to disperse responsibility for sexual violence and responses to it across communities. The evening was an exercise in solidarity. The hosts had brought together a company of feminist-inclined individuals, working in tandem to raise the issues of sexual violence, gender inequity, and misogyny in the wider community. We were a panel of six. We worked as a team to manage the room. We told our stories together. In doing so, we brought a room of 40 people—and later, 1,000 people on YouTube—into dialogue around these difficult realities and how we might begin to address them.

Following the event, the organizers and some of their allies began making public posts, stating that I deserved a public apology. They reached out to some of the figures whose treatment of me had been most harmful. They stood up for me, and requested that organizations that had caused harm consider contributing to my travel expenses for the New York event. I did not ask for any of this. Other friends reached out to me, stating that if they had known what kind of treatment I'd endured, they would have done more—they were disgusted, they wanted to make it right, even now. When raising the issue of the consequences of sexual violence at various events, they note my name among those of other women who have left the community because of the pervasive problem of gendered violence, and urge others to recognize not only the human costs, but the costs to the community when dedicated women cannot remain involved due to violence.

My experience of solidarity in New York taught me a great deal about what it means to share the burdens of sexual violence and its sequelae across communities. I was given space to share what I had gone through, and what I had learned. Nothing more was asked of me: those who invited me to speak continue to agitate and raise the issue of sexual misconduct. I offer input when asked, where I can and feel able to. There are others carrying raising the issue. They share my outrage, offer compassionate ears, and support my decision to remain disengaged, mostly, with the site of my own injury and secondary victimization.

In the context of this event and my relationships to those involved in it, there was no pressure to grow, make good on, or heroically overcome the experience. There was no insistence that I cope in a particular way, no resistance to my labeling the event as victimization or labeling myself as a victim. Their response to me was informed by

feminist thought, by thinking through the issues, and by a deeply ingrained resistance to victim blame and rape myths. Solidarity with them was not enough to entice me back into the larger community we once shared. However, it gave me a taste of alternative possibilities to the survivor imperative and individualization of the problem of sexual violence.

## #MeToo

It is no coincidence that the organization of the panel where I spoke and the support I received took place in the context of the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement not only exposed the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment, it also implicated organizations in mishandling these harms. I suggest that in the #MeToo context, various people were able to see patterns and articulate them with greater ease, to a more receptive audience. A sense of solidarity was more immediately available, thus facilitating collective organizing. The conversation was reinvigorated. Past transgressions—including callous responses to my victimization, based in the promulgation of rape myths and victim blame—were recast in a different light.

One of the more poignant moments I recall from the panel involved an older gentleman who identified himself as an adult survivor of child sexual abuse. He was earnestly engaged in the Q&A. He was speaking up to request compassion and consideration from everyone in early discussions of the topic of sexual violence: after all, he claimed, it was a new conversation we were only just learning to have.

I took the microphone to respond. In a tone as even and gentle as I could muster, I reminded him and the room that feminists have been raising the issue of sexual harm and having conversation about gendered violence for several decades. I gestured toward research and consciousness-raising efforts, naming the legacy of finding words, creating spaces to listen, and rendering sexual violence and its effects visible. The #MeToo movement, and our panel as part of it, did not emerge from the blue: they are the latest surge in decades of writing, speaking, and agitating. I was attempting a general, sweeping form of feminist citation (see Ahmed, 2017, p. 16): it seems that the legacy of the feminist struggle continues to be overlooked and erased, even as it surges again in public consciousness.

That evening in New York, we were a feminist company. Together, we were able to advance our collective understanding. For those among us who continue to resist forms of violence and misogyny, who offer ongoing support to victim/survivors in the wider community, it was a refuge to recharge before we all went back out into the world to hit walls, to learn, and to report back.

Things had changed significantly since I first raised the issue of sexual predators and sexual violence in the community. The most prominent change was that more people now share a systemic, political, and social analysis of the issue of gendered violence. In contrast to earlier experiences, my current feminist companions resist saddling individuals with the task of solving the problem, or else heroically healing themselves to move on with their lives and get past the violence. I attribute much of this change to the #MeToo movement, which exposed patterns of systemic injustice, implicated organizations, and set a new tone for conversations around sexual misconduct. As the analysis broadened, it seems that notions of where responsibility lies for creating change have been partially dispersed. In New York, I got taste of that change. It tasted like relief.

### Still a victim (and still doing it wrong)

I stopped in the west coast after the New York event, where a lunch date with an old friend offered a stark and painful contrast to the solidarity I had experienced in the northeast. I was catching up with Beth, a woman I'd known before the rapes and through the aftermath. At times, Beth had been a comfort. At other times, she left me feeling tense and defensive of my position that I'd been victimized, that sexual abuse was a salient issue in our midst, that people weren't doing enough to stop the pattern. She seemed to take a similar stance to Eli: that I had manifested my experience of rape, that my soul had sought it for the sake of growth or higher purpose.

At lunch with her, I began to notice the splits around victim identity in various domains of my life and relationships. In her company, I remembered how I had felt, all those years before, fighting to have my story, and the stories of others harmed in a similar manner, taken seriously by our community.

Being with Beth, in the same geographic location where the majority of scapegoating had occurred, I found my anger again. I wanted justice; this time, it was

not for the man who had hurt me, but for the community that didn't take my concerns (or my story) seriously. My stint in New York had driven home that sexual harm persists across our networks, that the pattern continues. I was on edge talking to Beth, missing the solidarity I had felt in New York. I forgot that, with Beth, I did not have a sympathetic ear. I was not talking to someone who consistently shared my feminist values or analysis. Beth's response was cheap: "The topic is difficult and triggering for everyone, there are many perspectives and ways to look at it." Her comment functioned to shut down further engagement. I felt I had been thrown back in time. Her resistance to even having the conversation—let alone taking action—was familiar, and it left me fuming.

Sitting across from Beth, in the corner table of a trendy little café, I felt inarticulate, defensive, frustrated, hindered in my efforts to communicate. The more I spoke, the less understood I felt, and feeling misunderstood effectively barricaded my attempts at clarification. With Beth, I was not an expert, or at the very least not treated as such. The considerable time and thought I had put into the topic did not seem to matter. Inside that space, I became a crippled version of my usually sufficiently-articulate self. I was a stereotypical victim: I felt broken, meek, unable to stand up for myself, and at fault for the pain I was experiencing by broaching the subject. I felt a sense of proximity to my injury, that victimization had leaked into who I was and was now leaking out of me into the conversation at hand. I was trying to get through a conversation that had turned painful; I was surviving.

Outside of west coast, away from the people who denied me the victim label and created a context of secondary victimization, I am able to articulate the intricacies of the various dynamics at play, and analyze their sources and effects. I have some insight into the bigger picture, and I am in command of the narrative. Challenges to my narrative or analysis seldom throw me; I feel steady in the face of confrontation, and considered and measured in my response. This occasion was different. Sitting with Beth, I was struck by the dissolution of our friendship. Her response to me had always been inconsistent. Her response was hurtful. Trust was rupturing, and I realized that I was losing someone who had been with me on a long journey through dark terrain. We were both survivors, in a fashion, and we wore it in totally different styles, neither one fitting to the other.

As we said goodbye, she said we may not meet again, with my living so far away, and to take care: who knows where our paths will take us. As had happened so many times before, the story I carried, and my passion for justice and understanding around it, led to the loss of a meaningful relationship.

Around the time I met with Beth, some of my New York friends began to update me about the rumors and criticisms in circulation about myself and other survivors. I was forced to face the fact that harmful responses were still happening. Little of substance has been done to prevent violence against women or to foster compassionate responses to victims. I was, to many, still a scapegoat.

I was wary and exhausted by the end of my U.S. visit. I was warmed by the care of some and sensitive to the criticisms of others. I revisited my grief for the relationships that crumbled and the community and opportunities I'd lost. I felt a need to safeguard myself in future, cautious of placing myself in potentially revictimizing situations or relationships. I have less fight in me now than I did in the years immediately after the rapes. I know my limits, and I try to avoid them. I don't want to feel what I used to feel, the urgency, the futility, the triggers: the undertow.

### Inverting the gaze

I chose autoethnography as a method because it allowed me to intervene upon established norms pertaining to the meaning of victimhood and victim identity. As I reviewed a wide range of research on sexual violence, its sequelae, and secondary victimization, I began to realize that victims are an object of analysis and scrutiny by others. Scholars in sexual violence rarely situate themselves as victims and make their victimization a topic of study. Others claim victim identity, but seek to achieve a distancing of the personal from the professional; victim is object, not subject, gazed upon by external others. It limits the scope of victim subjectivity, and limits investigation.

I came to understand my thesis as an attempt to invert the gaze, and to view the complexities of inverting the gaze as a finding of my research. I claim a victim subjectivity and identity, and gaze upon the topics of my research from that situated vantage point. The topics I consider include the victim label and victim experience, but extend beyond them to include how non-victims and co-habitants of the social world

conceive of and respond to victim/survivors, and the discourses that foster those understandings and behaviors. Instead of being an object of study, I decided to make an object of the ideas that were perpetuated by others, which did further violence to me during some of the most difficult periods of my life after rape. I used my experience to sensitize me, to foster further engagement with the lived ramifications of rape myths and dominant discourses that partially formulate the cultural scaffolding of rape.

In many existing models for research, I would have been, to some extent, an object of study, although I would have been called a research subject. Even a radical and skilled researcher would have been trying to work within the limited data I could provide in a range of long, in-depth interviews. For example, had I been interviewed, I would have presented myself necessarily more simplistically than I have scope to do in my daily life, and with less nuance than is possible in a project of this length. The constraints of time and trust in an interview limit the scope of what can be shared, and risk flattening multiple dimensions into one. Such research is still useful. However, it would necessarily involve someone who is not me and does not necessarily inhabit victim status, working through and analyzing the data that myself and other subjects could provide. Their analysis would have been done in relation to data provided by many people, and would diverge from my own analysis. Autoethnography has afforded me an opportunity to sit within victim identity and gaze outward and inward in a sustained manner, shaped by the tools and approaches of the autoethnographic method.

I find that inversion of the gaze has felt playful, and at times radical. It has provided opportunities to throw off the burdens of a prescribed subjectivity and engage theory on my own terms. I was able to draw from the theorizations and insights I developed as I lived through complex experiences that took place over a period of several years. Engagement on my own terms has been specially important in terms of managing self-care while engaging a topic that could have been risky or, perhaps, dangerous for me. The nature of the topic, in light of my life experiences, necessitated careful consideration from the outset of what I would endeavor to study and how, so as to maintain sufficient control, distance, and safety at various intervals. The process of carefully considering my topic has been an opportunity for learning and theorizing throughout the research process: my life is entwined with the research, and the learning is ongoing.



I argue that it is inherently political to claim authority on the grounds of victim identity. From the early stages of this thesis, I have endeavored to make a case for how an approach that centers the knowledge of victims might be intellectually rigorous and politically significant. I have tried to play on the notion of the “knowing victim”, which is centered in the title of Stringer’s (2014) book. Endeavoring to engage and deploy the knowing victim has emboldened me in my everyday life, as it has opened further avenues for engagement with theory. There has been, for me, a feedback loop between my self, my life, and my research, which has been consistent with Ahmed’s (2017, p. 10) statement that, “We might then have to drag theory back to life, to bring theory back to life.” My approach has been explicitly feminist, and much of the theoretical basis for this thesis has been feminist writers. The project has affirmed and deepened my own commitment to a feminist life. Ahmed (2017, p. 7) tells us that “feminist theory is something we do at home,” and that “To learn from being a feminist is to learn about the world.” For me, learning has been ongoing.

In writing this thesis, I have wanted to keep in view the extent to which the material is personal as a way of maintaining an inverted gaze. There are stakes in these ideas, in these discourses, and in my analysis, which come to bear on my daily life in meaningful ways. There is vulnerability in this project, and risk (see Page, 2014). However, I entered into this work with a foundational assertion permeating this thesis: the victim perspective matters. It is with this assertion in mind that I have sought to challenge dominant discourses that undermine the credibility and value of victim speech and accounts; I have also sought to articulate the importance of unburdening the victim/survivor of unrealistic and harmful expectations and responsibilities. As I have argued through this thesis, the grounds on which our knowledge would be dismissed are problematic. By using my own perspective as a basis of study, I have found that the knowledge of victims is powerful, if limited and human. We deserve compassion, rather than hostility, and we have so much to say.

## Victim/Survivor

Reflecting upon and narrating these recent experiences sheds light on how I continue to navigate my own identity as a victim and a survivor in relation to the community and the individuals whose attitudes and actions impeded my recovery. I

occupy different aspects of my story and my identity in different spaces. Living and working in New Zealand, far (11,500 kilometers) away from where it all happened, and working with others who are amenable to a feminist analysis of gendered violence and secondary victimization, has reaffirmed a fluid process of self-identification on my own terms. Returning to the west coast, where I met with Beth, enabled me to remember a version of myself who felt under attack from those I trusted most. I suspect that no amount of time will change my association with that place and the hurt that happened there. At best, I can limit my time in that space, generally avoid that milieu, and strategize methods of self-care well ahead of any sojourns to the landscape of my previous suffering. Even my engagement in New York was exhausting, for all the benefits of solidarity and all the insights it yielded.

What's more, who I am when backed into a corner, and how I approach those situations, is radically different at this stage of my life. I find it easier to maintain a cool stability now. When I returned to an old setting, surrounded by faces I have come to associate with pain, I found myself less able to stabilize, and less agile. I was hot under pressure. I felt both defensive and defenseless, prone to bite. It was unpleasant, and likely as unpleasant for Beth as it was for me.

There is a paradox here that gets at some core insights I have sought to develop in this thesis. One thread in the story of my secondary victimization is that I was urged not to do anything that would make me a 'victim' in the eyes of others. When I sought council on the public sharing of my story, I was urged not to speak out because I would publicly cast my victim identity in stone. When I sought to recover, I was hindered by others who discouraged me from claiming victimhood and directed me toward a form of survivorship: to move on, to get away from victimhood, to learn and grow from the situation, to transcend it. The directive to grow was contrary to my politics and my values.

My peers and mentors treated victimhood as an eternal identity status, a perpetual thing that would dictate the rest of my life and the evolution of my character. By their measure, the word victim might forever govern the ways other people saw and treated me. Therefore, the legitimization offered by those who endeavored to keep me silent was that they were doing it to protect me from victimhood, as though I had not already been—and was not continually being—victimized. Now, it is solely in my

relationship to those exact people that I notice myself becoming precisely the kind of victim they hoped to prevent me from becoming. In those contexts, retreating into anger and defensiveness feels like a kind of survival; I felt unable to access the ability to communicate lucidly, and therefore disjointed from a primary source of power. In that space, I am trying to survive, hence my associating survivorship with moments of intense struggle, rather than moments of heroic overcoming.

The fluidity with which I use the terms victim and survivor prompts reconsideration of the victim/survivor binary and its untenability; the terms, as I see them, are imbued with potentially diverse meanings in use and practice. In the life I have now, and in new spaces, I inhabit the knowing victim more readily. Survival is not even in the picture: I have long outlived a struggle to survive, and I have won. I did so by embracing the victim label, viewing the injuries I sustained as social in nature, and extricating myself from those who did violence and harm through secondary victimization. I embrace being a victim in this new space with greater ease. I know my limitations and triggers, and I understand how to manage and seek support around PTSD as it arises—I have not eschewed agency or personal responsibility; rather, I have broadened my analysis. I understand there are long-term emotional and psychological ramifications of my life experiences, and I have chosen to engage these more often than suppress them. I have learned a great deal about how to discern and maintain relationships (of all kinds) in which I feel safe.

In light of my academic inquiry and personal experience, I have no fear of having or developing a ‘victim mentality’. This stance is a radical departure from how I felt years ago, when those around me seemed preoccupied with preventing my devolution into eternal victimhood. There are several valences to my perspective. I have engaged an ongoing critique of the notion of a ‘victim mentality’, such that I find it a problematic social construct of little utility in most circumstances. Most importantly, I do not fear being a victim. This is not to say I imagine myself as immune to victimizing events: no one is immune. Rather, I do not fear admitting to the possibility of being rendered powerless by circumstances outside my control. Such possibilities sit comfortably within my worldview (see Janoff-Bulman, 1992). I have integrated my intellectual work into my assumptive world such that, on a personal and day-to-day level, the word victim has no natural association with an internal state of mind; it stems

from external events. I have achieved perhaps a heroic level of overcoming, but I have done so by unfolding, understanding, and rejecting dominant discourses regarding the untenability of victim identity, the survivor imperative, and posttraumatic growth. I have done this work in and through relationships to others, some of whom have contributed to harm, while others have helped alleviate it.

I claim victim status, and I continue to unpack and explore what I learned in living this story. I do so because I believe it is a political statement, a tiny act of resistance, outside the norms and bounds of what is often understood as victim identity. These terms, victim and survivor, were those set out for me in making sense of my experience and myself in relation to them. They are the material I have to work with, delimiting what it is possible to say and think. While there are limits here, there is also scope for novel articulations and tightrope talk. These are daily, ongoing processes, which resolve and rest and wake again for reconsideration over time.

### Wisdom through suffering

The explorations and arguments developed in this thesis have been motivated by an effort to dispel ideas that, I argue, do harm. What I find most frustrating about the survivor imperative and PTG research is its cheapening and distortion of something beautiful. In looking at the horrific and distressing realities of trauma, there are ample examples of human creativity, resilience, and endurance. The fact of human's ability to continue living in the face of ongoing distress, to make sufficient meaning of it to carry on, is remarkable.

I contend that isolating individual responsibility, and excessively promoting personal growth in the face of suffering, cheapens the remarkable feat of continuing to live in the face of trauma, tragedy, and pain. It minimizes and undercuts collective and interpersonal possibilities for care. At its worst, it slips into blame for victims who are unable to rise and become the heroes of their own stories. If not blamed for the victimization itself, then victims are blamed for their suffering in the aftermath. It is framed as an individual fault if one is unable to overcome adversity, as though that adversity is not linked to the common, longstanding, and shared human realities of suffering and oppression.

There is a range of human writing—religious, philosophical, and literary—that deals with growth through suffering. Yet there are also swathes of writing in the same domains that deal with the human struggle to endure suffering. The Book of Job, for instance, considers seemingly meaningless suffering and pain and the limited ability of friends to know how to respond to such suffering. In the 2014 Billings Preaching Prize competition at Harvard Divinity School, Sarah Lord offered a compelling take on the Book of Job. She examines the inability of Job’s friends to say anything helpful or particularly meaningful to Job (Lord, 2014). At the start, she makes jokes about what mediocre friends they are. However, by the end, she offers a resounding insight: few of us know how to respond to immense, senseless suffering and trauma. What matters is that we try to show care, in the human and often flailing ways we can. We try to love each other and accompany one another through terrible struggles. These dimension of struggle, and the limits we all share in facing them, are overlooked by PTG researchers and those seeking a positive valence to traumatic suffering.

In the years since the Amazon, I have engaged with a huge amount of media which deals with questions of human suffering—books, film, television, talks, and essays across a range of genres spanning academic, nonfiction, fiction, theoretical, and lyrical. In these various media, I have noticed several patterns in terms of how they resonate, how my feeling self responds. When dominant discourses are uncritically mobilized and heralded, I used to feel inspired, and then tense. I wanted to believe that heroic overcoming was possible if I only worked hard enough. However, falling short of this was a frightful prospect. It didn’t bring comfort. It obfuscated complex social dynamics. Now, when I encounter these dominant discourses, I get annoyed.

However, there are rare texts and media in which these norms are laid aside, and harsher, starker realities are given breath: Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) conclusions about the changed assumptive world of trauma survivors; Kushner’s (1987) confessions about being willing to give up any growth to have his son back; Des Pres’ (1976) cautious and tragic accounts of survival, solidarity, and nearly impossible suffering in the Nazi camps. These texts need not relate specifically to my experience—indeed, it is quite rare for any one account of suffering to map onto another. Yet these texts maintain a complexity that feels more apt and appropriate than texts that attempt to be uplifting.

In Kushner's words about his son's death, there is a palpable grief, a sense that nothing could make him 'okay' with what he's lost. He does not endeavor to paint the experience pretty, or find a silver lining. The sadness is alive in the text. The socially acceptable notion of growth is cast aside in favor of a starker truth: he wished for none of it.

Des Pres (1976) writes extensively about the creative structures that enabled life in the World War II death camps. Such accounts of suffering are unparalleled. What he cautiously celebrates as the outcome of staying alive is the simple fact of being alive, and remaining human through it all. This is a notion to which I have returned over and again throughout the many years since the Amazon. I lived: I'm still here. That's as inspiring a story as any, to my mind.

In closing her memoir *When Women Were Birds*, Terry Tempest Williams (2012, p. 224) writes:

I want to feel both the beauty and the pain of the age we are living in. I want to survive my life without becoming numb. I want to speak and comprehend words of wounding without having these words become the landscape where I dwell. I want to possess a light touch that can elevate darkness to the realm of stars.

Tempest Williams offers the kind of thinking and perspective I can relate to, that offers something poetic, realistic, and useful in facing difficult realities.

Des Pres contends that a political person is aware of connections between people. The political person develops compassion through knowledge of shared human suffering and what it takes to stay alive through it. To be political is to have compassion that extends to all who suffer at the hands of power in various ways. Compassion is part of what gives rise to the survivor's moral authority. It also provides a powerful challenge to overly individual notions of what it means to be a survivor.

## Chapter Eight

### Conclusion

In this thesis, I used autoethnography to advance feminist theory. I have written as narrator, author, subject, protagonist, and analyst. The thesis I have produced has been situated in my identity as a white, middle class, queer, immigrant woman from the USA and living in New Zealand. It is contextualized by the social and political realities of neoliberalism, especially the emphasis of self-improvement and individual responsibility. In light of limits of autoethnography as a method, which I discussed in Chapter 3, my findings are of limited generalizability. Yet, as Brison (2002) writes, it is important not to undergeneralize, either. I do not speak for all victims, but my position as researcher and victim/survivor affords unique depth to inquiry. I hope that my findings might provoke further discussion and inquiry by other methods.

In this thesis, I explored secondary victimization and rape myths as they came to bear on my lived experience after sexual violence, with an emphasis on how the dominant discourses related to victims and survivors influenced interpersonal responses to my victimization. Expanding on Stringer's (2014) neoliberal victim theory and discussion of survivorship, I have developed the survivor imperative, which is based on my experience of the untenability of victimhood and bears heavily on discourses of posttraumatic growth.

In each of the previous chapters I have considered different aspects of my two research questions: (1) How are the discourses of victimhood and survivorship deployed in making sense of sexual victimization, and how are they related? and (2) How do these discourses affect social and interpersonal relationships, and how is this experienced by a victim/survivor over several years? In concluding, I wish to directly answer these questions in light of the findings and arguments I have developed throughout the thesis, which are based on lived experience and feminist theorization of my experiences. In addition to answering these questions, I summarize my key findings, arguments, and contributions below.

Discourses of individual responsibility and internalization inflect use of the victim and survivor labels. I argue that these discourses saddle victims with the burden of overcoming suffering caused by social injustices, and cast victimhood as a characterological failure. I have found that these dynamics manifest interpersonal

contexts as a form of secondary victimization. My findings have led me to conclude that further efforts are required—in research and practice—to disperse responsibility for preventing and responding to sexual violence across the social world.

(1) How are the discourses of victimhood and survivorship deployed in making sense of sexual victimization, and how are they related?

The discourses of victimhood are often deployed to highlight how one should or should not behave or identify oneself subsequent to sexual assault. The victim label is necessary for obtaining support and help, while also undesirable for all the negative characterological connotations and stereotypes associated with it. Victims are expected to be weak, meek, passive, and forgiving; failure to embody these attributes risks reactive victim scapegoating (van Dijk, 2009). However, victims are also judged negatively for having a “victim mentality”, and victimhood is often constructed as originating in the victim, rather than in worldly events (Stringer, 2014). Therefore, victimized individuals are urged to *avoid* meekness, passivity, or brokenness, in order to assert their strength and agency and evade victimhood (Baker, 2010a). This is fostered by neoliberal victim theory (Stringer, 2014).

I have found that, as a victim, I was socially directed (see Ahmed, 2017) to forgo claiming victim status and evade victimhood. The onus was on me to prove that I did not have a ‘victim mentality’. These conflicting discourses were apparent in conversations, and had significant, deleterious effects.

Further, use of the victim label is deemed to be a source of harm in and of itself. In considering the social climate of victim hostility supported by rape myths, I have found that victim identity is constructed as problematic and totalizing. I experienced and studied how victimhood has been stigmatized as a self-fulfilling prophecy; if I claimed the victim label, any subsequent suffering, or tarnishing of my reputation or my self, would be something I had done to myself. This discourse fosters victim blame.

To evade the victim label, I was encouraged to take personal responsibility as per neoliberalism’s volitional imperatives (see Baker, 2010a), and transcend victim status. However, as I demonstrated strength, the volition to overcome, and a desire to help others, my requests for support were negated, and I was subject to reactive victim scapegoating (van Dijk, 2009). There was no way to move within the agglutinative web



of contradictory imperatives. In my own experience, I have found that the victim label is untenable, due to how it is socially constructed, and how that construction came to bear on interpersonal interactions and relationships.

I also found that discourses of survivorship were deployed as an aspirational imperative following my experience of sexual violence. Survivorship is associated with positive coping styles, with successfully ‘getting over’ sexual assault, and satisfactorily evading or transcending the victim label. The survivor is discursively constructed as active, agentic, strong, and capable. She refuses to let what has happened to her define her or take over her identity and her world. She has successfully achieved a healing and transformational journey and become a survivor.

The problematics of the survivor label are not cause for interrogating individual victim/survivors who may embrace the survivor label. My quarrel is with the social imperative to become a survivor, and the dominant discourses that direct victim/survivors to move toward survivorship and comport themselves as growing, self-enterprising, and self-improving subjects. I argue that this as an unfair burden to place on a person who is coping after sexual victimization. Further, I suggest that this particular emphasis on individuals to overcome the consequences of a social problem obscures the social nature of the problem and hinders addressing it.

In unpacking the narrative arc and examining the victim and survivor categories, I have found that victim and survivor are not mutually exclusive. In my experience, and in the literature I consider, they are not a binary. Rather, the language of each is often drawn upon in McKenzie-Mohr and LaFrance’s (2011) ‘tightrope talk’ to forge novel articulations about the experience of sexual violence and its sequelae. Further, I suggest that the language of survivorship is utterly contingent on the language of victimhood. Without something to resist or escape—without a pathetic or undesirable identity label to evade—survivorship does not hold the same discursive power: it is defined by what it is not.

In 2019, in the context of the #MeToo movement, I am concerned about discourses of posttraumatic growth, which suggests that there is growth, inspiration, and benefit to be gleaned not *in spite* of trauma, but *because* of it. Where growth is not achieved, victims are blamed for failing to self-improve (Joseph, 2011). I have also

found that posttraumatic growth is based in the logic of the survivor imperative, and thus provides an illustrative example of the survivor imperative and its mechanisms.

In sum, the discourses of victimhood and survivorship are deployed in everyday conversations in a manner that forecloses claiming the victim label and constructs survivorship and posttraumatic growth as imperatives. I experienced how these imperatives were communicated in relationships and everyday interactions. These discourses contribute to how victim/survivors and those in relationship to them make sense of sexual victimization. One consequence of these discourses is that they may contribute to secondary victimization and enact further harm, including by damaging the relationships in which they are articulated.

(2) How do these discourses affect social and interpersonal relationships, and how is this experienced by a victim/survivor over several years?

The effect of these discourses on my experience, over several years, has been multilayered and complex. By and large, it has been deleterious. My own relationship to victimhood and survivorship has shifted and evolved in the years since the rapes, and since taking up study of the terms. Despite ongoing pressure to evade victimhood in the years immediately following my victimization, I remain unwilling to do so. Stringer (2014, p. 160) claims that:

If we do not move to visibly use and revalue this term, we corroborate its neoliberal reorganization as a ghettoizing term unless it is naming a protected party—the Real Victim; and we fail to obstruct the dominant place of market logic in the available language of social suffering and complaint.

I have come to agree with this statement. I believe that claiming the victim label has political power: it maintains focus on the harm that was done, instead of on the ability of a victim/survivor to satisfactorily cope. While this position has allowed me to resist certain rape myths and victim hostility, that resistance has had social consequences. It has created strain and tension in relationships generally, as well as in specific conversational settings.

In the years immediately after the rapes, I experienced the contradictory imperatives of survivorship and expectations around victimhood as tension, as a barrage, as a trap. My attempt to unpack and examine the rapes—to understand what

they meant for me and my life—were constantly subject to pushback, pressure, reanalysis, and reinterpretations that felt inaccurate, unhelpful, and at times violent.

Therefore, the effect of the discourses of victimhood and survivorship over several years was irreparable damage to relationships that had once been sources of refuge, insight, and strength. This did not happen overnight. In this thesis, I have provided snapshots of critical moments with friends, acquaintances, mentors, and teachers. Most of these relationships declined gradually and then precipitously. I was not given space to deal with victimization on my own terms; rather, I faced social directives, through these relationships, to adhere to dominant discourses to evade victimhood and establish myself as a survivor achieving posttraumatic growth.

In light of the findings of this thesis, I suggest that my listeners forced novel articulations into preexisting frameworks (see McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance, 2010; Page, 2017). In analyzing conversations for this thesis, I have found several instances of tightrope talk. My tightrope talk was a form of vulnerable speech, prone to misunderstanding. In retrospect, I contend that my listeners were unable to take my account as a whole, including the tensions and contradictions.

As a secondary effect, these discourses prompted me to consider my use of the victim and survivor labels. My use of the terms inverts dominant meanings of the labels, and therefore forms a novel articulation and alternative subjectivity. I identify as a survivor on the days I struggle most, when the task at hand is to get through the day, when living with the events of the Amazon feels like hard work. I am a victim on the days when I feel most able to state what was done to me with little emotional charge, when it feels least immediate. This use of the victim and survivor labels diverges from the dominant frameworks used both in colloquial conversation and scholarly conceptualizations.

Eventually, I left the social world in which secondary victimization occurred. This was a direct consequence of the strains created by dominant discourse as it manifested in my relationships. I reached the point of “feminist snap” (Ahmed, 2017). Ahmed’s framework reframes this break as a part of living a feminist life. When the secondary victimization became too much, I snapped. The moment of snap had built up over years. Then, in what seemed like an instant, I cut all ties. I removed myself from email lists, ended relationships, broke away from a career path I had been forging for

seven years. I took up a writing residency on Cortes Island, in Canada. Not long after, I decided to pursue a PhD in gender studies.

The snap was enabled by two factors: (1) it was a consequence of rape myths, victim hostility, and victim and survivor discourses, all of which irreparably damaged meaningful relationships; (2) it was nurtured by a sense of possibility provided to me by feminist theory. Further, feminist solidarity gave me a place to land after breaking free of hostile and harmful relationships. Snapping opened up new possibilities.

My life took a sharp turn as a result of secondary victimization. The directive to avoid victimhood, the warnings that it would become totalizing, has defined my academic work over the last half-decade. I did precisely what I was encouraged not to do: I focused on victimization and victimhood. I sought to understand the roots of these directives, as fodder for continued resistance.

### **Key findings, core arguments, and contributions to gaps**

From the outset of this thesis, I endeavored to bridge feminist theoretical approaches with autoethnography to produce a piece of feminist theoretical work. Thus, I deployed elements of analytic and evocative autoethnography to advance theory through the use of personal story, and to test theory against personal experience. I have found that much scholarship around victims and survivors of sexual violence diverges significantly from my own experiences, and have used my experiences to challenge dominant sense-making structures and propose a new, critical framework.

I have also worked to advance the theories of Brison (2002), Stringer (2014), and Ahmed (2017). I explored Brison's (2002) assertion that the aftermath of sexual violence is relational, and expanded on her revaluing of victim knowledge and epistemology. I took up Stringer's (2014) neoliberal victim theory and juxtaposed it with van Dijk's (2009) reactive victim scapegoating to elucidate the agglutinative web of contradictory imperatives that render the victim label untenable. I also considered how NVT contributes to the survivor imperative. Finally, I applied Ahmed's (2017) approach of bringing theory back to life, and considered how feminist snap, feminist company, and social directives played out in my experience of secondary victimization.

I used autoethnography to examine the contours and effects of rape myths and victim hostility in relationships as a form of interpersonal secondary victimization. I

have found that victim hostility involves hostility toward the concept of victimhood, and manifests in hostility toward people who have been victimized. Victim hostility fosters directives to achieve posttraumatic growth and survivorship, as if by evading victimhood a victim can mitigate victim hostility and salvage strained relationships.

I analyzed the metaphor of a journey *from* victim *to* survivor, and suggested that it constitutes a directive. In light of my analysis, I agreed with Kelly et al. (1996) that the survivor label has contributed to the further denigration of the victim label. In developing a feminist critique of PTG, I argued that PTG and resilience are constructed as mechanisms by which individuals prove they have overcome a ‘victim mentality’, and to distance themselves from victimhood, thus mitigating victim hostility. Further, I suggested that the survivor imperative and PTG construct the problem of rape as an individual pathology to be resolved by victims. Internalization erases social and external causes of harm, fosters victim blame and other forms of secondary victimization, and hinders collective action against sexual violence.

Wisdom involves care and consideration for others beyond the individual self. It is political. Therefore, it is wise to resist individualistic approaches to sexual violence prevention and response. Part of my approach to resistance involves removing the burden of coping with sexual violence from the shoulders of victims, and distributing it across society.

### Dispersing responsibility

In the era of #MeToo, challenges and critiques are being leveled against the social context of victim hostility, rape myths, and the cultural scaffolding of rape. I argue that it is not the sole responsibility of victim/survivors to deal with the consequences of sexual violence; rather, I suggest that making the world safer for women and gender minorities is a collective obligation, and responsibility should be dispersed across the social world. It is a collective task to ensure that the risk of victimization is diminished, that those who perpetrate rape face justice, and that those who endure rape are met with a climate that is compassionate, not hostile, toward victims.

There are ample avenues for realizing a compassionate social world, and for reconceptualizing social responsibility in the context of gendered violence. These

avenues include upskilling and educating communities about these issues—not only to prevent and resist violence, but also to enhance the likelihood that victims will be responded to in a compassionate and informed manner. Possible interventions include evidence-informed educational initiatives in schools and across communities. Throughout writing this thesis, I have worked as a developer and facilitator of research-based consent programs, disclosure training programs, bystander trainings, and resistance education. These are concrete examples of how responsibility may be dispersed.

I have also worked with several media outlets, including TVNZ, *Quartz*, *Stuff*, and *New York Magazine*, who are amenable to feminist consultation to avoid harmful tropes in covering sexual violence. These collaborations are a powerful step forward, as the media continues to shape public opinion and sense-making on the issue of sexual violence, and new approaches to stories may help to counter harmful stereotypes about victims.

In light of the findings of my thesis, I suggest that there is scope for resistance through developing a more victim-compassionate social world. This aim would be served by an increase in analytic autoethnographies and feminist theorizations dealing with sexual violence and secondary victimization. I suspect that discourses that stigmatize victims and delegitimize victim knowledge hinder autoethnographic approaches to sexual violence and its sequelae. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, I hope to see more feminist autoethnographies dealing with sexual victimization to augment research done by other methods. I suggest that learning from victims is part of the way forward in ameliorating and preventing secondary victimization, and creating a more critical and informed society.

Dispersing responsibility across the social world includes recognizing that victim/survivors should not be directed to overcome social ills on an individual basis. I know one victim/survivor who is only comfortable in public if she can sit or stand with a wall at her back, to survey the room; her friends and family facilitate her habits to enhance her sense of safety. This example demonstrates the manner in which victim/survivors may come to depend on others to navigate ongoing issues after sexual violence. Her approach is social and relational, and undermines individualistic,

therapeutic frameworks or notions about heroically overcoming adversity as a solitary enterprise. Adversity persists, and it takes the care and support of others to navigate it.

I hope that the autoethnographic data and analysis in this thesis have provided some insight into the lived consequences of victim hostility. I have attempted to elucidate the complex web that victim/survivors are often forced to navigate following sexual violence. I wonder, at the close of this project, about the preventative value that fostering a victim-compassionate social world might have. There is much to be gained by collectively challenging rape myths, victim blame, and the cultural scaffolding of rape.

The overall goal, as I see it, is to create an environment where no one has to navigate the realities of victimhood in the first place. In the meantime, there is more work to be done to understand secondary victimization, victim hostility, and their lived consequences. The more we know about how things go awry, and the more thorough our diagnosis, the more sophisticated our remedies may become.

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