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## Dancing on the edge of silence : Steps towards articulating the experience of childhood rape

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*Dancing on the edge of silence:  
Steps towards articulating the  
experience of childhood rape*

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October 27, 2008

# **DANCING ON THE EDGE OF SILENCE: STEPS TOWARDS ARTICULATING THE EXPERIENCE OF CHILDHOOD RAPE**

## **ABSTRACT**

The experience and aftermath of male sexual violence is a lived reality for many girls and women. This qualitative study explores the subjective experience of childhood rape and its long-term impact focusing in particular on the implications of the silencing that continues to surround what is a deeply-felt and traumatic experience with profound life-altering consequences. The study thematically and theoretically reads the subjective experience of childhood rape within current feminist understandings of rape as a crime of violence and form of social control through the use of evocative autoethnographic writing and an exegesis.

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to all girls and women who have been victims of rape, especially those who continue to carry the burden of their experience alone and in silence.

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## INTRODUCTION

Rape is a crime of violence predominately perpetrated by males against females. Each year the rape statistics continue to grow and the girls and women who experience rape and the after effects of this pernicious crime are forced to cope with changes in their physical and psychological health as well as changes in the relationship they have with themselves, those closest to them and the wider community. Some of these acts of sexual violence are reported by the victims to police and other authorities and recorded on lists of statistics. Other victims find they are only able or willing to disclose to family or friends, and these crimes go unrecorded, sometimes only discovered through the probing of researchers. Still other victims are silenced by both the rape itself and/or the societal conditions present at the time of the incident and are never able to speak of their experience. These rapes remain invisible for those other than the victims themselves. For all raped girls and women however, there is a range of residual effects which can compromise their physical and psychological health and relationships, often with devastating consequences. This thesis will explore some of these impacts as well as the implications of the silencing that continues to surround what is a deeply felt and traumatic experience.

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Male sexual violence towards girls and women is not a modern phenomenon nor is it confined to particular geographic regions. Globally and throughout history girls and women have been subjected to threats and acts of male sexual violence. Arguably, to exist as a female in 'most societies in most eras' is to be exposed to the threat or reality of male violence (Stanko, 1985, p. 9).

Historically, ancient mythology provides examples of male sexual violence. Mary Daly (1978, p. 85) notes that rape is a consistent theme in Greek myth, particularly the rape of the Goddess, and aligns this with patriarchal control and culture. She cites Zeus as an example of patriarchal control through the use of sexual violence, declaring that he was a 'habitual rapist'. Phyllis Chestler (2005, p. 47) cites a further example of male sexual violence in Greek mythology with the story of Persephone, one of the four daughters of Demeter, the goddess of life. According to myth, Persephone was taken from her mother and sisters as a

girl/woman by Hades, the god of death, raped and forced to live as his queen. Moving forward in time and beyond mythology, historical records indicate that in 15<sup>th</sup> century England it was considered a publicly acceptable practice, by men at least, to abduct and rape a girl or woman in order to take possession of her as conjugal property, a practice that became known as bride capture. These acts of violence against girls and women are considered to have laid the rudimentary foundations for the development of the institution of marriage that we are familiar with today (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 17). Manon van der Heijden (2000, p. 624) also notes the widespread practice of abduction and rape in her study of male sexual violence in 17<sup>th</sup> century Holland. In citing the work of James Brundage and Kathryn Gravdal, she notes the legal term *rapus*, applied in medieval Europe, was used to mean 'marriage by abduction'. At this time, rape was considered not a crime of sexual violence but rather an act of theft. Adam Jones (2000) provides a particularly horrific and more recent example of systematic mass sexual violence in his study of the Nanking massacre in which it is conservatively estimated that over 20,000 girls and women were raped and murdered by Japanese forces during the occupation of China in 1937-38.

In contemporary geographical terms, a cross-national study by Carrie L. Yodanis (2004, pp. 665-672) compared the sexual violence statistics of 26 countries across Europe and North America and found sexual violence to be present in all countries examined. Her findings support the view that rape is a crime universal in nature and a lived reality for girls and women irrespective of their cultural origins (Amnesty International Canada, 2008). The study also noted a direct correlation between increasing prevalence of sexual violence and increasing fear levels amongst women. Yodanis likens this to a 'standard terrorist strategy' (p. 671) whereby the combination of the actual violence and the potential for violence creates a culture of fear in which women generally feel unsafe and vulnerable to crimes of a sexually violent nature. This statement supports feminist theories of violence against women that suggest a climate of fear is induced through the potential for violence, irrespective of personal experience (Stanko, 1985). One such feminist, Susan Brownmiller (1976, p. 15), insists that rape is 'nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear'.

In Australia, a report issued by the Australian Institute of Criminology [AIC], found more crimes committed in Australia in 2005 involving sexual violence were reported to the police (18,172) than crimes involving robbery (16,787) (Australian Institute of Criminology, [AIC], 2008a). However, rape is a crime not reported to the police by the majority of its victims

(AIC, 2008b; Stanko, 1985, p. 37; U.S. Department of Justice, 2008a; Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault [ACSSA], 2003), a finding supported by statistics drawn from the Australian Personal Safety Survey conducted in 2005. The survey questioned individuals about their experience of violence, including sexual violence, since the age of 15 and during the twelve month period from 2004-05. The survey revealed 101,600 women experienced at least one act of sexual violence in the form of rape with a further 34,900 women experiencing the threat of rape (Australian Bureau of Statistics, [ABS], 2008). The discrepancy in these figures highlights how only a minority of rapes are reported to police and how significant numbers can be revealed through research.

Rape is a crime predominately perpetrated by males and aimed almost exclusively towards females and has long been considered by feminists to be a gender-based phenomenon (Brownmiller, 1976; Freedman, 2006, p. 114) and therefore 'the most harm women face because they are women' (Raman, 1998, p. 344). A large survey conducted by Patricia Weiser Eastaugh in Australia in 1992 found that 96.2 percent of respondents were female victims of rape with 60 percent reporting having experienced more than one rape (AIC, 2008b). While the study acknowledges the respondents were self-selected and could therefore reflect a bias, a report published by the AIC (2008c) and based on crime figures recorded for 2005 also found that the majority of rape victims, 84 percent, were female. This is consistent with findings in Canada (Canadian Centre for Justice Studies, 2008), the United States (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008a) and Britain (Myhill & Allen, 2008).

Victimisation rates for sexual violence offences differ according to age. In Australia, girls aged 10-14 years represent the most vulnerable age group with the highest recorded victimisation rates (AIC, 2008c). This is supported by studies on sexual offences from Canada, with the highest rate peaking at age 13 (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2008). In the United States the risk of rape increases for children from the age of 10 and peaks at 14 years. Two thirds of all reported sexual violence crimes involve victims under 17 years of age with one third under the age of 12 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008b).

It is clear that, while statistics are able to provide a general indication of the pervasiveness of rape, the numbers should be viewed as a conservative gauge by which to monitor the widespread nature of this type of crime and must be seen as a starting point only. It is critical therefore when reflecting on rape prevalence to not lose sight of the fact that the rape experiences of only a minority of victims are reported to the police, while those who choose

to disclose to family or friends may only reveal their rape to others through participation in research. A further, though significant minority of girls and women are unable to ever speak of their trauma. Their numbers remain unknown, their fate to be guessed at, silently residing as they do in the world beyond the margins of surveys and reports.

What do we know with certainty? We know that young girls are more likely to be raped than are any other age group (AIC, 2008c). We know that the experience of rape can have a profound and long-term impact on the psychological and physical health of victims (Family Matters, 2007; Acierno, Lawyer, Rheingold, Kirkpatrick, Resnick, Saunders, 2007, pp. 253-254; ACSSA, 2007). We know that in contemporary society, public understandings continue to be distorted by persistent myths and misunderstandings (Family Matters, 2007). We know that the experience of rape has a disempowering and silencing effect (Ahrens, 2006) and we know that rape is a crime that has the capacity to shatter a victim's sense of self and their relationship with the world around them (Freedman, 2006). Arguably, rape and its impact on girls and women must be given greater exposure if there is to be any hope of changing societal attitudes and reducing prevalence rates.

## LITERATURE REVIEW<sup>1</sup>

Feminists in the 1970s recognised the pressing need for sexual violence to be understood in terms that reflected both the physical and psychological reality for girls and women as well as the need for it to be framed in a social and political context. An abundance of literature was published during this decade (Koss, 2005) and as a result, feminists were successful in forcing acknowledgement and discussion of rape out into the public arena. This success included redefining rape as a crime of gendered violence against women (Brownmiller, 1975; Freedman, 2006, p. 114), invariably committed by a perpetrator known to the victim (Campbell & Wasco, 2005, p. 128; Stanko, 1985) and as a crime that functions as a form of social control over women (Maynard & Winn, 1997, p. 178; Ahrens, 2006, p. 263; Brownmiller, 1975, p. 15).

Popular understandings of the crime of rape are plagued by persistent erroneous beliefs and empirically unsupported myths which blame the victim and exonerate the perpetrator. According to Susan Brownmiller (1976), some of these myths can be seen to have their origins in Freud's writings on women and masochism. Brownmiller considers the influence of Freud's views on psychoanalytic thinking to be pivotal in expanding the ideology of male rape to include a discourse of hidden female desire, one in which girls and women 'crave the lust of pain' (1976, p. 315). Myths such as 'women want to be raped', 'women ask to be raped' and 'she didn't struggle so she must have wanted to be raped' (AIC, 2008d; Family Matters, 2007) are examples of ways in which views such as Freud's have been easily absorbed by patriarchal society and expressed as blame and shame truths.

Two further rape myths include the twin beliefs that rape can only occur between strangers (Gavey, p. 38; ACSSA, 2005; AIC, 2008e), and that rape only occurs in dark and secluded public spaces (Family Matters, 2007; AIC, 2008d; Campbell & Wasco, 2005). Feminists have long argued that rape is a crime more often perpetrated by males known to their female victims than by male strangers (Campbell & Wasco, 2005, p. 128; Stanko, 1985). Susan Brownmiller (1976, p. 349) believes that 'rape is a crime of opportunity and opportunity knocks most frequently in a familiar milieu'. In Australia, the 1992 Easta study (AIC,

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<sup>1</sup> The information contained in the literature review was obtained from journals, texts and online sources drawing on research conducted in a number of fields including feminism, psychology, philosophy, sociology and criminology. Search terms included: *women and rape; sexual assault; sexual violence; childhood rape; disclosure; rape prevalence; rape myths; impacts of rape; voice and silence; gendered crime; social control*

2008b) found that only one-fifth of all rapes were committed by strangers and a personal safety survey conducted in 2005 reported similar findings with only 22 percent of victims experiencing rape by a stranger (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2008), a figure supported by the AIC crime report (2008c). Studies in other countries reflect a similar picture. The 2000 British Crime Survey reported that only 8 percent of respondents had been raped by a stranger (Myhill & Allen, 2008) with the U.S. figure even lower at 2.9 percent (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008a). The AIC report (2008c) also noted that 65 percent of rape offences occurred in a private dwelling. The British Crime Survey recorded a slightly higher figure of 75 percent (Myhill & Allen, 2008) and the U.S. National Violence Against Women Survey noted that 84.5 percent of rapes occurred in private dwellings (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008b).

While it has already been suggested that statistics do not offer an accurate reflection of the pervasiveness of rape, it is clear from the statistics given above that, of the crimes recorded in these reports, there are two common factors present: most girls and women are raped by someone known to them; and these rapes occur for the most part in domestic settings. These findings clearly reflect feminist views of rape in terms of both perpetrator and location (Campbell & Wasco, 2005, p. 128; Stanko, 1985; Brownmiller, 1976, p. 349) and make it difficult to believe that myths such as those already mentioned still persist. But persist they do and research indicates that as a result, girls and women internalise such thinking and are often left bewildered post-rape, unable to determine whether what they have experienced can be named rape. This is especially difficult if the perpetrator was known to them and the offence occurred in a home environment. Further, it raises questions about whether they will be believed (Ahrens, 2006, p. 269; Littleton, Radecki Breitkopf, Berenson, 2006, p. 761). In addition, if victims are unable to connect what they have experienced with popular understandings of rape, they frequently internalise blame and take responsibility for the offence. As a result, they can be left wondering whether they could have prevented the rape from happening (Ullman, Townsend, Filipas, Starzynski, 2007, p. 25; Freedman, 2006, p. 112).

In combination, these factors act as barriers to disclosure (ACSSA, 2005) particularly given the social opprobrium a disclosure of this nature may attract. However, harbouring such doubts, along with the shame and self-blame attitudes that accompany them, has been shown to impede the recovery process for victims (Ullman & Filipas, 2001, p. 1029; ACSSA, 2006). Clearly, current research overwhelmingly indicates that rape myths compound the trauma of

rape for victims by creating situations where victims must either remain silent about their rape experience or take a personal risk when seeking help and support post-rape.

Research indicates that, as a form of patriarchal social control, rape remains a crime that knows no limits. It persists as an act of male violence that cuts across age, social, cultural and economic boundaries arguably leaving all girls and women exposed to the possibility of sexual violence (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 348; AIC, 2008e). Patricia Easteal (AIC, 2008e) argues that fear of rape has the ability to engage girls and women in behaviours of self-policing that influence how they negotiate with, and function in, their social and geographical surroundings. Indeed a process of double scrutiny can be seen to operate whereby girls and women are subject to a combination of the *male gaze* and to rigorous self-surveillance, notions which are understood through the work of Laura Mulvey and Michel Foucault. Drawing on Foucault's work on panoptical power (1987, pp. 201-202), a condition in which individuals believe themselves to be under constant observation by an invisible yet powerful gaze, Laura Mulvey (cited by Kaplan, 1997) coined the term *male gaze* to describe the impact of constant male observation on the behaviour of females (p. xvii). Foucault extended his thinking to suggest an internalisation of the panopticon so that self-surveillance occurs at the micro personal level (O'Grady, 2005, p. 17) without the need for external force or violence.

According to Helen O'Grady (2005, p. 27) the internalisation impact of the male gaze on girls and women reinforces female subordination in patriarchal culture because 'a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand before his gaze and under his judgement' (Bartky cited by O'Grady, 2005, p. 26). Research suggests that believing oneself to be both under constant observation and a potential target for sexual violence has the ability to profoundly affect the lives of girls and women by shaping and constraining their activities in ways that can only be interpreted as socially controlling (Hester, 1992, p. 68; Maynard & Winn, 1997, p. 177; ACSSA, 2007). From this perspective, the feminist understanding of rape can be seen to emerge from a complex analysis of patriarchal power and control and with the female clearly positioned to fear the rape experience rather than desire it.

The trauma of rape impacts on victims on many levels and its effects can have profound and life-long consequences (Family Matters, 2007; Acierno et al, 2007, pp. 253-254; ACSSA, 2007). Indeed, rape is recognised as a deeply traumatic experience that carries an increased risk of serious mental health issues along with higher incidences of chronic and acute



physical health issues (Koss, Koss & Woodruff cited by Campbell & Wasco, 2005; Koss, Figueredo, Bell, Tharan, Tromp, 1996). Psychological impacts have been found to manifest as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, eating disorders, suicide/suicide ideation and self harm behaviours (Campbell & Wasco, 2005; ACSSA, 2007; Anderson & Doherty, 2008; Parekh & McCoy, 2007; Thompson, Wonderlich, Crosby, Mitchell, 2001) while somatic symptoms may include chronic disease, gynaecological problems, headaches, gastro intestinal problems, sexual dysfunction and reproductive problems (Crome & McCabe, 1995; ACSSA, 2006). Rape victims' perception of their own physical health also rates lower than the perception of non-victims (Kimerling & Calhoun, 1994).

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is recognised as a common and devastating mental health outcome for rape victims (Ullman & Filipas, 2001; Ullman et al, 2007; Campbell & Wasco, 2005) and one which continues to have a significant impact on women throughout their lives (Acierno et al, 2007, pp. 253-254). Feminist philosopher Karyn Freedman (2006), credits the feminist movement of the 1970s with raising public awareness of the link between Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and rape aftermath and notes 'the most common post traumatic disorders are those not of men in war but of women in civilian life' (Herman cited by Freedman, 2006, p. 105). Indeed, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder's prevalence rate is highest amongst females who have been victims of rape (Foa, Steketee & Olasov cited by Campbell, 2001, p. 3; ACSSA, 2006) with approximately one third of all victims developing disorder symptoms (Parekh & McCoy, 2007).

Further, the existence of a traumatic experience in an individual's past has been linked to eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa (Schneer, 2002; Tamas, Magdalena, Sandor, Janos, 2005; ACSSA, 2006). A study in the United States found that the experience of sexual violence increased the likelihood of adolescent victims developing disordered eating patterns by 6-13 percent (Thompson et al, 2001). Clinical depression has been found to be another common mental health outcome for girls and women (ACSSA, 2006) with the likelihood of developing major depression three times higher for victims of rape than for non-victims (Parekh & McCoy, 2007).

While the trauma of the rape itself impacts on victims' health, victims can be additionally traumatised by negative responses to the act of disclosure. Negative social reactions to the disclosure of rape have been found to have a significant deleterious effect on the recovery process for victims, impacting on their ability to speak of, and cope with their experience

(Ullman et al, 2007; Family Matters, 2007; Ahrens, 2006; Ahrens & Campbell, 2000). As has already been noted, only a minority of sexual violence offences (19.6 percent in the Easteal, 1992 study) are reported to formal support providers (AIC, 2008b; Ahrens & Campbell, 2000, p. 960; Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, Wasco, Sefl, 2007) while approximately two thirds of victims disclose to informal support providers (Ullman & Filipas, 2001). Ahrens argues (2006, p. 264; Ahrens et al, 2007) that negative reactions to disclosure from trained professionals such as police and medical services is a common experience for victims. Rape victims disclosing to informal support providers such as family or friends often fare better (Ahrens et al, 2007, p. 38) although negative responses such as victim blaming are not uncommon (AIC, 2008b; Family Matters, 2007; Ahrens, 2006, p. 263).

Research findings indicate that a negative reaction to the disclosure of rape can have an immediate and profound effect helping to create what has been termed *secondary victimisation* (Campbell, 1998; Ahrens, 2006; Anderson & Doherty, 2008, p. 9). This has been found to manifest as self-silencing (Ahrens, 2006) and add to the feelings of disempowerment (Family Matters, 2007; Ahrens, 2006, p. 264), a 'shattered self' and a 'shattered worldview' (Freedman, 2006, p. 105) which frequently emerge as a response to sexual violation. Research suggests that secondary victimisation can impact on the victim in a myriad of ways both intrapersonally and interpersonally (Anderson & Doherty, 2008, p. 10) by creating feelings of self-blame (Ullman et al, 2007), diminishment of the rape experience, and questioning of the legitimacy of the experience (Ahrens, 2006). In addition, victims who experience sexual violence may take on the responsibility for creating distress in those to whom they have disclosed (Littleton, Axsom, Radecki Breitkopf, Berenson, 2006; Campbell, 2001; Ahrens et al, 2007, p. 44). As Courtney Ahrens (2006, p. 263) argues 'the consequences of speaking out are not always positive'. Further, the Ahrens study found negative responses from at least one informal support person to be the result in one quarter to three quarters of disclosure situations, meaning that girls and women often opt to remain silent in the hope of avoiding further harm (2006, p. 270).

It is clear from the research that the experience of rape can have an immediate and devastating impact on girls and women (Family Matters, 2007; Acierio et al, 2007, pp. 253-254; ACSSA, 2007). In addition, it is clear that disclosure and how it is received can have serious and damaging consequences (Ullman et al, 2007; Family Matters, 2007; Ahrens, 2006; Ahrens & Campbell, 2000)). Studies suggest however that the following areas are

under-researched: what factors influence some victims to disclose and others to remain silent (Smith, Letourneau, Saunders, Kilpatrick, Resnick, Best, 2000, p. 286); how and to whom victims choose to disclose; the disclosure experience itself, and reactions to the disclosure (Starzynski, Ulman, Filipas, Townsend, 2005, pp. 430); and in what ways self-silencing practices following disclosure impact on victims (Ahrens, 2006, pp. 263-272). Arguably, more research is needed in these areas in particular in order for improvements to be made to support services for victims of rape (Kogan, 2003) and in order for societal change to occur (Ahrens, 2006).

## METHODOLOGY

Feminist research has faced a challenge in the past in introducing and establishing alternative forms of knowledge-making practices while operating within an essentially patriarchal framework of understanding and knowledge production. Sneja Gunew (1992) highlights the difficulties experienced by feminists when trying to 'construct new positions from which to speak' (p. 27) within a male-defined epistemology that often relies on statistical data and has traditionally placed an emphasis on 'objective and universal truth' (p. 16). However, as Dale Spender tells us, 'at the core of feminist ideas is the crucial insight that there is no one truth' (cited by Reinharz, 1992, p. 7).

Traditional patriarchal epistemologies, according to Gayle Letherby (2003, p. 42), with their focus on universality and truth, 'deny the importance of the experiential, the private and the personal' and it is this aspect of traditional male-defined research practices that feminism continues to challenge in order to legitimise women's subjective understandings of their embodied experience (Maynard, 1994, p. 23). Feminist research then is underpinned by the principle that 'women's lives are important' (Reinharz, 1992, p. 241) and characterised by an emphasis on the validity and significance of women's subjective embodied experience in relation to knowledge production (Sarantakos, 2005). With particular regard to the experience of rape, if silence, as Courtney Ahrens (2006, p. 263) suggests, 'is emblematic of powerlessness', then to deny rape victims a voice, when they have already experienced a personal loss of power through the rape itself, is to deny them the opportunity to express their subjective embodied experience and serves, albeit unintentionally, to further disempower them.

According to Margaret Fonow and Judith Cook (2005), a central feature of a feminist approach to knowledge production is the long-standing refusal by feminist researchers to participate in the type of patriarchal dualistic thinking that separates mind from body and privileges the mind (logic and reason) over the body (subjectivity and emotion). This feminist approach sees the body 'as both a legitimate source of knowledge and a product of culture that is open to analysis [like] any other culturally inscribed phenomenon' (Fonow & Cook, 2005). Gayle Letherby (2003, p. 3) writes of ways in which 'knowing' and 'doing' are intimately related and the impossibility of writing of one without consideration of the other,

thereby reflecting the importance of the role of the mind *and* body in feminist theory and knowledge-making practices.

Gayle Letherby (2003), drawing on the work of Scott (1998) notes that 'the relationship between theory and experience is dynamic: experience may be the starting point for feminist research but it is in the analysis of experience that the potential for change lies without denying that behind the text are lives' (p. 62). This is particularly important because it seems to both validate personal experience and acknowledge the potential it holds for societal change without diminishing the understanding that the experiences are real to the women who live them. Features of feminist research are the 'legitimacy of women's own understanding of their experiences' (Maynard, 1994, p. 23) and the distinction between *knowing*, a process of subjective understanding, and *knowledge*, understandings bestowed with legitimacy and authority, generally masculinist, scientific and excluding (Gunew, 1992, p. 14). Sneja Gunew (1992, p. 4) also notes the importance of the role that *knowing* plays for women in identity formation.

So, how to 'construct new positions from which to speak' (Gunew, 1992, p. 27)? Suzanne Thomas (2001) considers the research process as 'an ongoing spiralling movement that leads not to conclusions but, rather, to further questioning and inquiry' (p. 276). She notes that through the use of multiple and creative forms of data presentation, researchers are able to 'illuminate the values and meanings embedded in experience' (p. 275) and to 'transport others to new worlds' (p. 274). This approach to feminist research seems to support Shulamit Reinharz's (1992, p. 239) view that feminism has 'benefitted women in freeing up our creativity in the realm of research'.

bell hooks (1991, pp. 55-59) reminds us, in relation to critical fictions, that it is the power of the imagination that lies at the heart of our ability to engage in the lives of others and it is through our capacity to imagine, that we can also respond to those lives more fully through the application of empathy. So, if we allow ourselves to open up our imaginations as hooks suggests, to move beyond the limitations of our own experience and step inside the lives of others, we can also open ourselves, through empathy, to the kaleidoscopic range and depth of human knowledge and emotion that swirls within those lives.

But how to convey both the subjective experience of rape and contribute to new understandings while meeting Fonow and Cook's (2005) call for researchers to continue to critique, expand, and invent new ways of doing feminist research? And how to write with the

freedom of a singing voice and break free from traditional masculinist forms of academic writing while still illuminating the experience of rape in ways that both engage and transport the reader as well as prompting further questioning?

Autoethnography is a form of self-narrative that contextualises experience by placing 'the self within a social context' (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9) and can be identified as a form of resistance that disrupts through its ability to present 'alternative forms of meaning and power' (Pratt cited by Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 8). Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000) argue that autoethnography is a form of knowledge production and writing that draws on autobiographical experience through memory and intertwines these memories with social and cultural interpretations to create 'multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (p. 739). This autobiographical and introspective style of inquiry provides an intimate space through which the unique insight of personal experience can resonate, thereby amplifying the topic, in this instance childhood rape. It also has the ability to provide not only greater understanding of the experience for others who read it but also, for those who have experienced similar trauma, an opportunity to identify with and affirm their own experience. Autoethnography then, acknowledges a life waiting impatiently to be told, expecting to be told in order to provide depth of meaning. It is also an evocative form of data presentation that has the capacity and potential to reach out, touch and make human connections in ways that satisfy bell hooks' imagination/empathy concept (1991, pp. 55-59). While hooks' concept is offered in relation to fiction, its location in the world of non-fiction is of equal significance for it is in this world that the everyday subjective experiences of individuals reside. And it is in this realm that girls and women, those who have experienced rape, often speak and are not heard, if they can speak at all.

The objective of this study is to uncover the multiple ramifications of my own experience of childhood rape and to explore, via exegesis, the amplifications of this subjective account and its relevance to contemporary feminist theorizing on childhood rape and its long-term impacts. This study then will proceed via autoethnography. It is qualitative in nature, using a feminist research methodology which values an epistemology that acknowledges the importance of 'the experiential, the private, the personal' (Letherby, 2003, p. 42) and is in line with a desire to encompass feminist understandings of knowledge-making which value the role of multiple perspectives and subjectivities so central to experience-based forms of inquiry (Reinharz, 1992). The purpose of the research is not to reach fixed conclusions but rather to evocatively explore the lived experience of childhood rape in order to deepen

current understandings of those areas considered to be under-researched (i.e. disclosure and self-silencing). In doing so, the thesis will also give voice to the experience by removing the silencing that continues to surround childhood rape and its aftermath.

*This is a glimpse into one woman's life.*

*It is a life that has been shaped by the trauma of  
childhood rape.*

*It is also a life that has left her forever dancing on the  
edge of silence.*



*'IT IS NOT DIFFERENCE THAT IMMOBILISES US,  
BUT SILENCE. AND THERE ARE SO MANY SILENCES  
TO BE BROKEN'.*

*(Audre Lorde.)*

It's nearly twenty five years since I last travelled this road. I've avoided it not because it's in another state or town or even beyond the range of suburbs I normally visit. Actually, this street is only three or four kilometres from my childhood home and despite many years living elsewhere, I've returned to settle just a few suburbs away. The street where I'm parked even runs through an area that I still shop in from time to time. A tiny urban hospital sits on this street and is the reason I'm here now. My three young children are in the car with me. I've brought them to the site of my birth despite the memories this may evoke.

The building is white and on one level, surrounded by red and pink flowering hibiscus shrubs. Only the plaque on the wall by the main entrance and the neatness of its grounds suggests its function. There are no patient transport vehicles or wheelchairs or patients in dressing gowns. It's such a non-descript building it could be a community centre or an administration block of some sort. I'm disappointed. Because of the significance of this building in my life I somehow feel it should have more to say for itself; it did after all resonate with the echo of my mother's pain in labour and my own first mewling cries.

My children, of course, are also disappointed. There's nothing to link what they see before them with the mother that they know. They fidget and complain and I feel myself getting irritated with them, not for their lack of interest but because I've risked much to bring them here.

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On the corner across the road from the hospital is another, much smaller building. It's a house, built in the low style and pale brick of the late 1960s. It too sits surrounded by hibiscus shrubs, their large, deep green leaves protecting the west-facing windows from the harshness of the Australian sun. The house itself doesn't appear to disturb the landscape around it, sitting low as it does amidst the red and pink splashed greenery. It is difficult to make out the cross shape affixed to the wall beside the front door. By contrast, the larger dark brick building to its left rises from the earth with a presence that is hard to ignore. It has an air of authority about it, demanding your attention. The large white cross on its facade loudly declares its status.

I had once spent a lot of time at this house. I had eaten many meals here and slept many nights. My voice had joined others in the gardens surrounding the house, uniting in the uninhibited shrillness and joy of play. I had experienced a real sense of freedom here, the kind that exhilarates and makes your skin tingle with the pleasure of pure indulgence.

The sprawling garden offered many sites where children could hide and its vastness allowed for elaborate games of group 'chasey' and 'hidey' as well as cricket and football. The solid squareness of the 1950s church in the grounds was a constant looming presence casting a powerful shadow throughout the day. Despite its sanctity, our games spilled over and into the church's interior. The forbidden wafers and wine of communion offered a mischievous and bold distraction, and the ivory keys of the organ rang out with the discordant notes of clumsy fingers. The gardens of the house became one of my many childhood playgrounds and the

church itself a site of daring and bravado. It was of course, also a site of ritual and prayer on Sundays.

As well as being a good friend of the minister's daughter, I was also a member of the church choir and loved the way our collective voices grew in intensity and unfurled to fill every corner of the church with song. I remember thinking at the time that the magic of our singing would surely make up for the clandestine removal of wafers and wine and that the man who hunched over the organ each week and wheezed with each change of pitch, was so ancient that he would surely never notice the greasy outline of our fingers on the keys.

The choir was made up of the minister's children, their friends and some older women. Because of this arrangement I spent more time than I would normally have done in the company of older boys. This didn't bother me at the time though; after all, I had older brothers of my own and their boisterous company and games of cricket were far more exciting to me than the more traditional feminine pastimes of my older sisters. So, depending on the weather, I was always eager to take part in the games that would invariably follow choir practice. Once beyond the constraining walls of the church, our angelic voices and devout demeanours would transform and we would rush about wildly, our throats burning with the shrillness of our shouts.

As we grew older, the appeal and thrill of stolen communion wafers and sour tasting wine grew less. The massed games of cricket held diminishing excitement. Slowly, our pursuits changed and became more adventurous; the risks involved increased their appeal. Crumpled Marlborough cigarette packets and boxes of Redhead matches were produced from the pockets of the older boys; scissors and magazines appeared in the hands of the

girls. My lungs exploded violently at the invasion of smoke from my first cigarette and my hair fell from the blades of a blunt pair of scissors in the secret interior of a plumbago bush. The innocent play of children, however, soon became governed by external forces. A pack of cards suddenly wielded unprecedented power, determining who would tell the truth and who would be challenged with a dare. A roll of a dice was enough to force the removal of a piece of clothing. A spinning brown beer bottle sealed one's lips to another's and also sealed one's fate.

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My stomach heaves and my face floods with a rush of blood. The noise of the children in the car becomes muted, dulled by the roar of noise that fills the spiralling spaces of my inner ear. The image of the brown beer bottle eternally spinning refuses to leave me. It swirls me into a dark interior and another childish game.

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Postman's Knock. A game that developed from a 19<sup>th</sup> century nursery rhyme. *Eight o'clock the postman's knock*. It's commonly described as a fun party game and involves a group of boys and a group of girls, each given a numbered piece of paper. A boy calls out his number and the girl with the matching number kisses the boy. Innocent enough and in 1970, a game no doubt played by thousands of children at parties across Australia. My friend and I and my friend's brothers and their friends played this game as well, and with the imagination of the young, added an extra twist.

A storage cupboard became the darkened site for the exchange of the numbered kiss. My friend refused to kiss her own brothers, which was fair enough and, had they been my brothers, I would have responded similarly, but it meant that I was left at a disadvantage. It also meant that I spent more time in the cupboard than she did. It was only a small cupboard and completely dark except for the thin slash of light at the bottom of the door. The kissing was usually awkward and brief and left me gasping, not because any pre-pubescent passions were aroused in me but because it felt hot and claustrophobic in there. It also felt like something I shouldn't have been doing. The games I took part in with my older brothers had never extended to anything so intimate and so hadn't prepared me for these new forms of play. For many reasons I never liked this game but lacked the courage to say so. It was only the absence of assertiveness that kept me in the cupboard. 'Spin the Bottle' and 'Postman's Knock' became regular games. I wish I could remember them with blushing affection as other people must do but their heavy presence in my memory is difficult to erase. In my mind these games are inextricably linked to the events that would follow. Events so traumatic in nature they would alter the course of my life, shaping forever the patterns of my being.

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The night is still. A watchful dog barks in the distance. A body stirs under its sheet. The sleeping figure is a girl, grown too large now to really be seen any longer as a young child and yet too undeveloped to have made the transition to adolescence.

The night is hot and the girl sleeps and sweats lightly in the pyjamas she was given for Christmas. The material is seersucker and she likes the way the fabric rises in tiny soft squares that feel bumpy under her fingers. The newness of the elastic in the legs of the pants presses and leaves a red mark on the skin at the top of her thighs.

On the other side of the room, her school friend, separated from her by a low dressing table, reaches out in her sleep and drags the sheet from its resting place at the bottom of the bed and covers her legs. The two friends sleep the uninterrupted sleep of those without a care in the world, the untroubled sleep of the young.

Later in the night, however, the girl is jolted awake. She can't breathe. Something is clamped over her face and it takes moments for her to realise it's a hand. A rough, strong hand is covering her face forcing her mouth shut and half blocking her nose. The weight of the hand presses her head deep into the pillow. She shakes her head from side to side and tries to pull the hand away but it presses harder mashing her lips against her teeth.

Another hand is pulling at her pyjama pants. She's completely perplexed and terrified, can't understand what is happening and struggles with her hands to keep her pants on. She knows that something bad is happening and her body is awash with fear. She wants to cry out but the hand prevents her and anyway, she fears she will wake her friend if she does. She has identified her attacker and without consciously realising it nor having the words to describe it, the girl senses that this is a terrible thing that her friend must not see.

His hot breath fills her ear with a whispered voice so harsh she cannot understand what is being said. She dares not take her attention away

from her struggle to keep her pants on in order to make sense of what's being said.

Her throat feels full and thick with fear. The mouth at her ear moves and she feels his tongue forcing its way past her teeth. She feels utter disgust. She wants to vomit.

She finally loses the short struggle with her pants and they now hang, pathetic and untidy from one ankle. The length of her young body is buried under the body of her sleeping friends' brother and his weight presses on her, making movement impossible. His choking tongue persists. His hand forces her thighs apart. Her terrified eyes are so widely open that they absorb all the dim light in the room. The open doorway stands in the corner, a silent witness.

Something pushes at her, between her legs. She's still confused and can't work out what it can be. It's painful and insistent, pushing, pushing. Still the tongue fills her mouth. The weight and the pain is too much; she still can't breathe properly.

At last the night air floods into her mouth and her body feels weightless. He's gone leaving a stickiness between her legs that is already beginning to congeal on her hot skin.

She lies in the dark, frightened and alone.

Her friend sleeps on.

In the morning the girl cannot meet her friend's eye and she says nothing of her terror in the night.



For a long time I refused to sleep at my friend's house and avoided going there but it was difficult. Being school friends as well as choir members meant that we had to spend time together but, as often as I could, I avoided going to her house. The excuses I gave sounded empty even to me.

In the last year of the 1950s, in the same spring month but in different parts of the country, my friend and I each slithered from the warmth and shelter of our mothers' bodies. Our birth days were only two days apart.

When the invitation came from my friend for a sleepover party for her twelfth birthday, I reluctantly agreed to go. This made my mother happy. She had thought me ill-mannered and difficult for my constant refusals.

Not long after I accepted her invitation, this friend told me I was to be the only one sleeping over. I suppose I was meant to feel honoured by such an obvious display of close friendship but I merely felt deeply anxious and trapped. I knew that I couldn't get out of this one with another childish excuse.

As the day came closer I began to worry more and my own twelfth birthday passed with an underlying sense of foreboding.

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The girl felt that if she wrapped the sheets and heavy blankets tightly around her body this would somehow protect her. She strained her eyes in the gloom, willing them to stay open. The effort made them feel dry

and scratchy and swollen. She told herself she wouldn't fall asleep and that the blankets would keep her safe.

When the male silhouette appeared in the doorway, the blankets offered no protection and her body flooded with a darkness so impenetrable that it would be impossible for the girl to recall later the details of this night. She was, however, left with the image of the male silhouette burned into her memory with the force of a branding iron and it would be this image that would return in her dreams year after year, to terrify and remind her once again.

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One afternoon of this same year, the year of my rape, I found myself sitting in the garage of the home of a different school friend, a girl I admit I never usually spent much time with. The garage had been converted into a large playroom furnished with an old rug, sofa and armchair, all too tatty and threadbare for the main house. Stumps of wood served as makeshift tables. These were littered with lolly wrappers and sticky cups. The walls were decorated with posters of pop groups and singers popular at that time, their images cut from the pages of magazines and held up by curling strips of tape. There were the wild, black curls of Marc Bolan and the page-boy cut of John Denver; the skin-tight flares and slashed-to-the-waist shirts of Slade; the bee-sting lips of Mick Jagger and the pearly white smiles of the Osmonds. My friend's taste in pop idols was eclectic to say the least. An old transistor radio was always tuned to a popular radio station and The Carpenters got us down with 'Rainy Days and Mondays' and Three Dog Night picked us up with a bullfrog called Jeremiah. The smell of old grease and oil

from car parts permeated the air and invasive tendrils of ivy filtered the light straining to reach us through the one tiny window.

I don't know why I chose this girl and this afternoon to share my disturbing secret. It may have been because she seemed older and worldlier than the other girls I spent time with. And it may have been because she wasn't a close friend. Whatever the reason, my judgement was poor and my intentions misguided. My disclosure was dismissed as a work of fiction. Despite my protestations of truth, she refused to take me seriously. I felt crushed and small and chose silence from then on.

Only of course, there wasn't any real choice involved. The word itself suggests autonomy and the power to select from a range of options and yet I felt I had neither power nor options. The enormous courage I had summoned up and the assertion I had made had been ruthlessly swept aside by a schoolgirl's simple utterance, 'You're a liar!' What else could I do with my secret but fold it up and tuck it into the deepest recesses of my young body?

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You'd be quite right at this point to be wondering why I didn't take my secret to my parents. I've rarely invested any energy thinking about this as an adult. My childhood and family were what they were and no amount of reworking memory or wishing things had been different can alter that. My family and upbringing are immovable; they remain trapped in time like a grainy photograph. But to satisfy your curiosity, perhaps I should offer an explanation. I never considered talking to my

parents about my rape at the time because really, they weren't an option either.

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I was the last of five children born to an artistic and educated mother and a misogynist, conservative and narrow-minded father. In combination, the effect of my father's personality traits left my mother little room for self-development and totally unable to resist his domineering ways. We probably weren't considered a particularly close family, (although this is a view I have developed only as an adult with children of my own) but nor were we a particularly unhappy family. We were just a family who went on picnics, argued and bickered amongst ourselves, had holidays with other families, and always had a house full of people at Christmas. Like most women of her generation, my mother had sole responsibility for the home and the family while my father generated an income to support us by counting numbers in the public service. He never helped in the home except to discipline us all.

There wasn't much outward affection in our family apart from a hurried brush of lips on the proffered cheek of my mother as we left for school each morning. We siblings playfully punched and tripped each other up like other siblings I knew but anything more affectionate was almost non-existent. I never heard my parents tell me they loved me so I can only assume that they did. Love was never something I really thought about as a young child. Perhaps I never felt the need to do so for I was the youngest and enjoyed the benefits this position in the sibling hierarchy afforded. I was indulged by my older brothers and sisters.

Along with an absence of physical affection in our family, there was also little encouragement given to us to discuss how we felt about things. Generally speaking, conversations revolved around what children were doing rather than how they were feeling. We never discussed anything of a personal nature around the dinner table and rarely even in the safety of our shared bedrooms. These rooms were large sleep-outs built onto the original exterior walls of the house. Girls were in one, boys in the other.

The naked body was absent from our family lives and known only to our private selves. We each became experts at waking in the mornings and changing without any embarrassing flesh being exposed. This now seems like a miracle given that we all shared rooms and dressing areas and only had one bathroom between seven of us.

If an acute discomfort with all things personal accompanied me as I grew up, the silence of secrecy ran in tandem and had a role to play in shaping my future. Secrecy was an implement used to mask waywardness, embarrassment and anything else that had the potential to disrupt the equilibrium of family life. Secrets, or at the minimum, an avoidance of the sharing of truth, were in abundance.

As a child, my oldest sister's epilepsy was kept from me until I witnessed her writhing body on the floor of our bedroom one day and recoiled in horror. Despite having to hold a cloth between her teeth while a doctor was summoned, neither my mother nor my sister ever mentioned the epilepsy again. My other sister, at eighteen and unmarried, managed to conceal her pregnancy from her siblings. I would hear her crying in the night and question her the following day. Hay fever was given as the explanation for the prolonged sniffing and nose-blowing. She disappeared for several days at one point with 'appendicitis' but refused later to show

me her scar. Her hay fever continued at night and the secret of her daughter's birth and subsequent adoption was kept by her for many years.

Of course there were other secrets as well. We never discovered why my father had banned my mother's mother (my much-loved nanna) from our home and why we were never to mention her to him. We were never told of her husband's suicide in the 1940s. He died from a shotgun wound to the head and was found by my nanna slumped in a chair in a garden shed. The door to the shed had been left curiously open. Perhaps he had wanted his eyes to capture one last time the deep blue sky stretching out before him, rising up from the undulating corrugated iron roof of the house. He was a well known figure in one of Western Australia's major gold-mining towns and his death was reported at length in the local newspaper. We never questioned his early death, perhaps because we were never encouraged to do so or perhaps because the veil of secrecy had been so effective that we never felt beckoned by the tantalising call of the forbidden.

When I was eleven, my mother developed a form of malignant cancer that was to creep through her bones and lead her to her own early death. This was the ultimate secret of all and one that was kept from me for three years. I was finally told of her terminal illness four days before a deep sigh quietly marked her farewell from us all. She died alone.

But I'm getting ahead of myself...

You may be thinking that this seems like an austere upbringing, but it wasn't really very much different to thousands of other families in Australia in the 1960s. At that time, it was generally expected and accepted that women stayed in the home and that men were the

breadwinners and disciplinarians. 'Just you wait until your father gets home!' was a threat no doubt uttered in many homes in jacaranda-lined streets across this vast country, not just my own.

Now, perhaps, you can see why it seemed impossible at the time to turn to my family, my parents in particular, for help. Why I chose the person I did still remains a mystery to me, for if I had chosen someone different, they may have taken my story and held it gently, even for a moment, instead of spitting it back at me with accusations of untruth and the story I'm telling now, may have been a very different one.

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Three or four years after I first revisited the street of my birth and site of my childhood trauma, I found myself driving down it again. The intervening years had passed slowly and with difficulty. The bleakness and pressing weight of depression had become a heavy burden, settling deep and intractable within me. I negotiated my life through a spectrum of shifting greys.

I didn't have my children with me on this particular day. What I intended to do was so deeply personal that the presence of other people would have made the task impossible. I had decided that seeing the house again might offer something fixed and rational to help prop up my increasingly unstructured and irrational thoughts. I wanted to look at the exterior of the house, at the window of the bedroom on the right and will its interior history to life. In so doing, I knew I would have to re-visit my own history. However, I was desperately searching for some sort of confirmation that what my adult self was feeling was real; I was looking

for proof that, as a woman of forty-two, the overwhelming grief that filled my days had its genesis in my childhood, in this house.

At first I was confused and chastised myself, thinking that I'd driven too far or not far enough, or perhaps was even in the wrong street. But there was the familiar, solid presence of the church still casting its powerful shadow. To its right was a cleared and vacant block.

The house was gone.

The shock that barrelled through my body was so immediate and so intense that the trembling it generated was to last for days. It would take me weeks to speak this day into reality. The validation I had been searching for had been so ruthlessly denied that, over the weeks, it created a new layer of self-doubt in my mind. I began to question myself. Perhaps I *had* made this up. Perhaps I was a child liar. After all, the evidence of my trauma was now alarmingly and accusingly absent. I felt shattered, as if my whole being was now in a million tiny fragments.

It took me some time to realise that I had naively clung to the house as a solid piece of evidence and had turned to it on this day in the hope of finding some sort of visible scar, a sign, something tangible that was absent from my own physical body and yet so devastatingly present in my mind.

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It was the school holidays. I think it was mid-year although I can't be sure of this. I had grown to dread having the children home for long periods of time feeling, though not yet acknowledging to myself, that I



lacked the emotional and physical strength now to cope with their demands. I was having great difficulty getting through the day while they were at school and even greater difficulty getting through the long and fearful nights. Insomnia and sadness had turned simple tasks into ones monumental in proportion. Making a bed exhausted me and the effort often left me slumped on the floor in tears of hopelessness. I went slowly about my day in a haze of perpetual sadness and exhaustion and wore sunglasses a lot, not trusting my ability to ward off the tears that sat waiting to spill at the least provocation. I gave up wearing mascara.

This particular day was probably no different to any other. The children, ranging in age from eleven to four, were all in the lounge room, no doubt bored and looking for something more interesting to do than watching television, again. They began hitting each other and throwing cushions around the room. I was in the adjoining kitchen and had weakly asked them to stop but had offered no alternative. The sound of their play was fighting for space in my head alongside the clamour of my own nagging dead-end thoughts. The cacophony of this forced my hands to my ears. I felt I was on the verge of something terrifying.

The throwing continued until a poorly aimed cushion hit a much-loved candle holder. It fell to the ground and smashed sending shards of blue glass spinning across the floor like pirouetting jewels. Of course, it wasn't just the loss of the candle holder that caused the shift. It was as though the fault-line of my internal landscape had been wrenched apart by the force of an inner sorrow so great, my whole being was overwhelmed. I was consumed by a flow of grief that couldn't be contained privately any longer.

I found myself on the kitchen floor, curled into the foetal shape I had last taken up in my mother's womb. A time when I had felt safe and held. It was as if my body took on this shape in order to protect the damaged child silently screaming out from within. Great heaving sobs rose in me.

*Everything always gets ruined I wailed over and over.*

*Ruined.*

*Always.*

*Ruined.*

*I couldn't stop sobbing.*

*My son sat next to me on the floor holding my hand.*

*My daughters sat on the sofa, holding each other.*

---

Later that day I sat in the waiting room of my doctor's surgery. I must have driven there because I was alone when I arrived but I can only assume this, for my body hasn't absorbed the journey and laid it down as memory. Somehow I found the strength to contain my emotions as I waited, longing for my name to be called but as soon as I sat in the chair opposite my doctor, I couldn't hold back the tears any longer.

*I think I'll die if I don't stop crying.*

---

A few years earlier, in my twenties, I had been recklessly playing a game of self destruction. The rules were denial, self-deception and absolute, rigid control. It was a game for one player, like solitaire, with bonuses along the way, but only if you stuck to the rules.

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She awoke with pain so intense it forced her body to double-up on itself. Wrapping her thin arms around her knees to ease the horrendous wrenching and squeezing she felt in the burning pit of herself, she smiled. *Good, she thought, eat away at me...*

She had taken to measuring herself daily and recording the results in the back of a diary. A cold, plastic tape measure circled chest, arms, waist, hips and thighs. She pulled it tight to maximise the results. An old set of scales was dragged from its place under a bathroom cabinet morning and night. She willed the thin tip of the arrow to move in an anti-clockwise direction, to always arrive at a smaller number than the previous weigh-in. The columns of figures marching through her diary became tools of praise or punishment.

If food and hunger had become a force to overcome, exercise had grown to be a close friend and ally. She would run obsessively along the tracks of the royal park opposite her home, even on the coldest of days. Clad in layers of jumpers, her hands protected by thickly padded mittens, her sweat would cool as soon as it left her pores, the chill nestling deep within her bones. Her breath would burn her throat and float mistily from her mouth, suspended in the air behind her. She would ignore the knots of pain in her muscles. On and on she would run, startling deer as

she passed, until she could run no more. Later, after measuring and weighing, she would lower herself into the steaming bath, her frozen body shrieking with the agony of the hot water on her icy skin. Lying perfectly still, her hands would find the handles of her submerged hip bones and as she curled her fingers over them, she would draw comfort from the way they rose to form high ridges on either side of the valley of her stomach.

Later, she would reward her efforts by missing lunch, or dinner, or sometimes both. The painful nocturnal awakenings only served to increase her resolve.

Despite her dramatic and alarming loss of weight, no-one thought to ask why she had stopped eating. It's probable that had they asked, she would have struggled to find an answer.

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The heightened vigilance was there almost from the start. Closing curtains against watchful eyes; always looking over the shoulder; feeling anxious when people walked behind; not going anywhere alone. As the years passed, the vigilance grew to debilitating levels, subsided a little and grew again.

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A frantic rhythm filled her upper chest and her breathing came in short gasps. Ahead of her was the long, deserted and isolated stretch of bush-lined road and the dark, malevolent-looking entrance to the underpass

that she knew could guide her under the dual-carriage way towards her home. She knew also that in order to propel her body forward and through the tunnel, she had to overcome the fear that so often paralysed her mind.

The ocean was a reassuring, restless presence behind her; the air was heavy with the scent of salt bush and eucalyptus leaves, their oils released by the recent rain. She glanced over her shoulder again to double check she wasn't being followed then peered ahead to make certain the way was clear. She had firmly instructed herself that today would be the day to go down the road and into the murky interior of the tunnel.

She had tried this route before, several times in fact, but at the sight of the tunnel entrance, with its capacity for hidden danger, a visceral force had always combined with the power of her own imagination spinning her on her heels and forcing her back in the direction from which she had come. She resented the persistent voice of her interior that so often reminded her of the dangers of lapsed vigilance. She yearned to be free of this voice that so often prevented her from exploring the geography of her surroundings. And yet, she knew she must be guided by it in order to feel safe.

She took in great gulps of salty, gum-leaf air to strengthen her resolve and wished she had a friend with her, knowing her suffocating anxiety would be dulled by their presence. Another glance backwards, she began down the road never taking her eyes from the tunnel ahead. Her ears strained to catch the sounds of any movement around her. All her senses were wildly alert.

With half the distance covered, a dog emerged from the ebony O-shape of the tunnel's entrance. It turned its head to check if its owner was

following behind. Her body's response was so immediate that in a split second, she turned on her heels and began running back up the road towards the ocean.

Emerging from the tunnel and bathed in light, an old woman called to her dog and saw ahead the back of a woman running. She felt the thick, stiffness of her knees and the nagging pain in her lower back and wished that her own body could carry her through her days with the same freedom of movement as the runner ahead.

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In a bid to encourage some self esteem, it was suggested that I look at myself in the mirror and find something about myself that I liked. It was a well-intentioned suggestion that had an unexpected outcome.

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The woman reluctantly approaches the mirror. She's been avoiding this moment for some time and draws on what little reserves of strength she has to finally gaze at the image before her. She thought she would know the person in the reflection, be familiar with the life of the face, its contours and shadows; but the face that stares mutely back is deeply unsettling. Sallow skin pulls tautly across the cheekbones and a grey puffiness below the eyes confirms long nights of elusive sleep. She hasn't looked at the mirror for a long time and she's surprised by her appearance but it's the eyes that disturb the most. They're the hollow, pleading eyes of a frightened child, fragile around the edges, straining

with the effort of maintaining contact. Their presence in her adult face is a shock.

The woman can see the face is that of someone defeated by the past, unable to cope with the future; someone living totally in the present, silently cradling a deep and sustained sadness. But what disturbs her most is the presence of the child in this face, this child within. She now sees that this desperate child was not only abandoned by an unbeliever as a twelve year old but also by herself ever since. She's been left to fend for herself, suffering as she has the stinging blow of a double-abandonment.

She sees her face crumple and begin to drip fat, silver tears that trickle drunkenly down. Not bearing to look any longer she turns her head to the side but what has emerged alongside the acknowledgement of the child is an intense maternal desire to comfort.

Slowly turning back, she reaches out an unsteady hand. Touching the glass of the mirror, their fingertips meet and she whispers,

*I'm sorry; I didn't mean to leave you.*

*It wasn't your fault.*

*I just couldn't bear it any longer.*

With that, she quietly takes the child into her arms and the vulnerability of one and the resolve of the other gently entwines and they are each strengthened. Together they can move forward and meet the future.

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I'm looking at a school photo. The students have been neatly positioned in rows. Their woollen jumpers, most of them bulky and obviously hand-knitted, remind me it's the beginning of an Australian winter. The monochromatic photo has captured the students and suspended them in time. It's June, 1971.

The front row sits on their bent legs. Their knees are dimpled and shiny from the effort. They are all girls and they clutch their hands together in their laps. I'm one of the girls in the front row, third from the left. I'm smiling nervously at the camera. I look awkward but then so do many of the others. After all, twelve can be an awkward age, sitting on the cusp of adolescence as it does.

In the middle of the back row stands a freckle-faced boy who was by far the brightest in our class. I remember reading about him in the paper. He died in his twenties in a fighter plane on a routine training exercise that went horribly wrong. But he's not who I'm looking for. Standing in the second from back row, second and fourth from the left respectively, are my church-minister's-daughter friend, and the other friend who called me a liar. I'm searching their faces. I suppose I'm looking for a sign, for some kind of confirmation of the history that played out between us. Of course, my search is futile.

What I do see is my church friend's hair neatly parted to one side and gleaming. Her white shirt is buttoned neatly to the top of her collar. It looks stiff with starch. She shines with piety and goodness. The other friend is less well-ordered. Her hair is untidy and the collar of her jumper is uneven. The roundness of her shoulders does little to hide the roundness of her breasts, clearly visible under her jumper. She looks older than the rest of us. In 1971 it was usual for girls to develop nothing



more than breast buds while still in primary school. This girl was one of only two or three in my class who had fully 'developed'. The longed for, yet embarrassing protuberances may well have been a source of self-consciousness to their young owners but to the rest of the flat-chested girls, they were something to be envied, full of soft mystery. Everyone wanted the key to this door of secret corporeal knowledge. Well, almost everyone.

In the photo, I too have round shoulders but I know that this display of poor posture has more to do with the absence of self esteem than the emergence of breasts. I know too, with absolute certainty, that I was flat-chested that year. The only sign of impending adolescent change on my body was the appearance of several long hairs sprouting in the darkness of my armpits. I wasn't keen, neither on them nor on the possibility of developing anything that would mark me forever as more female than I already was. This is the reason for my certainty you see, because in 1971, I had been forced to consider my physicality in ways quite unlike those of the other girls. I wasn't happily awaiting the emergence of breasts as a sign of yearned for femininity and growing maturity. Somehow, without ever understanding the larger cultural and political context for this awareness, my young mind had intuitively understood that what had happened to me was *because* I was female and would never have happened to my brothers. How could I celebrate being a girl when my own secret corporeal knowledge told me it was the state of being female that had laid me open to violation and suffering? After all, mine was the body spreadeagled on the altar of female sacrifice.

---

Flying forward to the present, I'm surprised at the velocity and strength of my embodied memories. When I look at the photo and the grinning face of the girl who treated my story with such contempt, the responses that hurtle through me are immediate. I have a schoolgirl's desire to shriek and to slap. The memory of this girl's rejection sends such a barbed and venomous anger cartwheeling up from somewhere in the pit of myself that I want to shout and vent my anger. I want this girl to understand all that my mind and body has experienced in the intervening years. I want to throw, with all the force I can muster, the blame for my years of choking silence and my precarious mental and physical health. I want this blame to sit firmly and squarely at her feet.

These feelings are so intense and overwhelming I feel I must sit with them a while and wait for calm to be restored, give my body time for the response to subside and spiral back into itself. Only then, perhaps, I can explore the possibilities that may emerge.

---

I know what you're thinking and you'd be quite right to ask. Why is it that I'm directing my years of pain at this girl when all she did was make up her young mind about a story entirely grounded in truth but made flabby and implausible by the age of its teller and the focus of its narrative? Why aren't I directing this anger at the person who caused this pain in the first place? The questions are simple enough, quite obvious and perfectly justified but answering them is complex. They involve a movement into the future; responses that are positioned outside and beyond the immediate. I feel ill-prepared for this. I'm yet to fully explore and understand the past so, before I can even begin to answer your

questions, I must step back in time and curl my adult self into the small body of that raped child. I need to understand how it came to be that she allowed the dark silhouette of the rapist to stride freely out of the frame of her suffering.

---

I don't wish to apportion blame for the silencing I experienced but by exploring some childhood post-rape memories, I'm hoping that I may begin to understand why I persist in directing my anger at the girl in the garage and continue to stubbornly refuse to target the attacker.

---

I've known some of the answers to this all along. I always felt partly to blame, you see, for my own rape and I suppose it was this that took my trauma hostage, gagged and bound it and drove it silently inward, leaving the rapist free to venture forth. After all, who confesses to a crime if they've brought it on themselves, and who admits to a crime if they know it to be one?

---

I can see you shaking your head. How could a young girl think that she was to blame for her own sexual violation? Well, don't we all, in order to make sense of things beyond our comprehension, often look for answers that can satisfy, at whatever level, our desire for clarity and understanding? As a girl with little experience of the world, and none of

the world of sexual violence, I needed a simple answer to untangle the messy confusion I was feeling. I desperately needed an explanation to place a full stop after. I wanted an end to the sentence.

You see, I didn't even have a name for what happened to me. The perpetrator's suffocating hand and urgent and harsh whispering had told me that what he was doing to me was seriously wrong, far beyond the uncomfortableness I had felt in the storage cupboard earlier that same year. I thought that what he had done must have been sex, that nebulous, embarrassing thing we sometimes talked about with schoolgirl giggles in the corner of the playground. But, in amongst the giggling and the gaping gaps in my knowledge, I thought that this thing called sex was something only adults did so, although this partially satisfied my need for an answer, in many ways, it merely compounded my confusion. I was a young girl, not an adult and I had definitely not felt willing, so where did that leave me? After all, if the gentle beat of a butterfly's wing can alter the weather patterns of another country, could not the willingness to play daring games cause the rape of a girl?

Having decided to myself that sex was the name for what I had experienced and the playing of games the cause, what other avenue was open to me but silence? I certainly couldn't talk to my parents about sex, especially if I had brought it on myself. The shame I felt was too great. And on reflection, perhaps this is why the girl in the garage had rejected my story too. Perhaps, by framing my experience as a sexual one, (the only option available to me at the time) I had rendered my story improbable from the start.

---

Some three or four years after my nights of terror, I read a trashy novel and there on the page, I found an experience, one very similar to my own, described for me. Only it wasn't called sex, it was called *rape*. Ah, at last, with the reading of a simple word a moment of clarity and co-ordinated movement with the world. I was now armed with a language that could help me dismantle the structure of blame I had built around myself.

But this was a fleeting nonsense.

The river of guilt that flowed through me had so permeated and undermined my sense of self that to remove it, even to replace it with another thought structure less damaging, was beyond me, and my sense of guilt persisted. What happened to me could now be called *rape*, but I had still brought it on myself. Otherwise, why would it have happened? I was no further forward and silence was still my companion.

---

It took me nearly thirty years of silent practice before I could say the word *rape* out loud and longer to speak it in relation to myself. Even now I find I have to expel it before it gets stuck in the constricting muscles of my throat. It's as if these muscles want to choke the life out of the word.

---

The women sat on the floor, their backs against sofas for support. Babies scrambled and climbed, delighting in the contours of their mother's

bodies. Cups of tea went cold. Conversation flourished. There was much laughter.

The women were friends, all with children whose ages matched. They were in time with each other, their personal experiences often mirrored in the lives of the others. It was a comforting and affirming circle of friends.

This day the friends' conversation had meandered back and forth through time arriving at lost virginity via talk of high school days and old boyfriends. When the least inhibited friend volunteered the age she first had sex, it became almost a game. Each confession was met with a collectively rising 'ooohhh' (at 16 or 17) and the occasional 'really?' (at 21). One of the friends, (whose house it was) hid her uncomfortableness in the soft folds of her baby's neck, frantically thinking about what her response would be. When her turn came, she sat the baby on the floor and rose, heading for the kitchen.

*Oh, I was twelve, she tossed over her shoulder with a laugh she hoped seemed genuine. More tea anyone?*

The friends all shrieked with laughter.

---

I was once told by someone qualified to do so that it would have been impossible not to have noticed some kind of change in a girl of twelve who had suffered a trauma such as I had. Thinking about this, I searched back through my memory but found nothing. At the time I wasn't quite sure what I was looking for. I told her I supposed nobody had noticed

because they were too busy or I was just too successful at hiding my trauma. This wise and empathetic woman shook her head,

*That's impossible. You must have been living with a family of blind people.*

---

I remember standing next to my mother in the kitchen of our home. She was making ice-cream, churning it by hand. I could tell it was hard work by the way she took both hands away from her stirring to lift the hair from her damp forehead and push it back into place. There was nothing I could do except stand and watch her concentration and effort. The shallow metal trays that would go into the freezer stood ready, their silver smeared yellow with butter. I was talking to my mum and enjoying the opportunity to have her to myself. In a large family it wasn't always possible to have her undivided attention and I was feeling close to her and special. I think I was about twelve or so. Mid-way through my chatter, she interrupted me,

*Stop talking in that baby voice!*

I was surprised by this and my face reddened with embarrassment. I hadn't thought she'd noticed but quickly adjusted the pitch of my voice. But it was too late. The interruption had done more than halt my chatter; it had thrown up a barrier, for I knew I *had* felt like a baby, just for that short time in that rare intimate space. I'd felt small and special and in need of maternal care but the issuing of her harsh command had shattered the moment and brought me abruptly back to myself. Had my mum listened with more than her ears, she may have seen the vulnerable child beside her and this child may have been enticed to speak. But she

was grappling with her own demons at the time, the demons that would end her life. So, as it happened, the child simply slipped further inside herself taking her barbed secret with her, its jagged edges catching and snagging on the soft tissues of her inner world.

---

I have my old school reports spread out before me. The yellowing paper is dry and slightly tattered. One report, an early one, has a stain spread across its front that could be tea but I can't be sure. The stain is so old it has no smell.

Again, I'm searching for signs. I know I won't find any words on these pages to indicate the precise point of shift in my life but still I look in the hope of finding something. I don't have to look hard.

My end of year primary school report for 1970 reads: Keen and conscientious. A-plus. This is repeated for each of the subjects. A-plus. A-plus. A-plus. A-plus. I can't help feeling a fleeting moment of childish pride but this is quickly nudged aside by my ever-present self-doubt and a suspicion that my teacher that year probably lacked imagination and a critical eye.

My end of year primary school report for 1971 is a mixed bag: Could do better; tries hard but needs to work more; could improve if she concentrated more; enthusiastic and imaginative; greater effort required. As and Bs. Some signs of decline but nothing too alarming.

But my high school reports could be those of another person. The deterioration is obvious and ample. It is also terminal. Term 3's 1972



report records: spends too much time day-dreaming; puts no effort into her work; talks too much; shows no interest; could do well if she applied herself. Two Bs but mostly Cs. The following year's continues in a downward progression. Mostly Cs and even a D.

The teachers remarks go on and on, their tone accusatory and disdainful. Eventually the principal suggested that I leave. I had completed less than four years at high school.

Even if I had buried the secret of my trauma so deep within that it would have been impossible for others to catch a glimpse, the death of my mother in 1973 must have been known and recorded somewhere, offering a possible explanation for my disruptive and self-destructive behaviour. But I was left to carry on with no gentle inquiry or kind word.

Perhaps it wasn't just my family who were blind to the internal upheaval I was experiencing.

---

By my mid-teens, the experience of rape had stripped me not only of my self esteem but also my sense of self worth. It had also taught me that I was sexually available with no rights of my own. I became promiscuous and quite possibly rather more experimental than other girls my age. There were no boundaries on my part and if a kiss didn't lead to sex I was always surprised, although most of the time my willingness to co-operate, or perhaps it was my indifference to resistance, made sex inevitable.

In my thirties, with well over a decade of monogamous marriage behind me, I was called on to list the number and names of all the sexual partners I had had since becoming sexually active. This was part of a treatment program for cervical cancer. I remember laughing, somewhat blackly to myself before giving up; there wasn't enough space and anyway, I didn't recall half the faces let alone the names.

---

But I do recall with frightening speed and clarity the physiognomy of the adolescent rapist. His is not a face that slowly emerges from memory as though through a fog. If asked to I could easily and instantly describe not only his face but also the colour and thinness of his hair, the gold glinting in his teeth, his rolling walk. It's all there, etched and permanent, refusing to fade. I'm spared the vision of his face in my nightmares though; it's merely a silhouette that stands beside my bed, bending down over me. But I know it's him.

---

It was an overcast day, the sky soft and undulating with heavy grey clouds. I was feeling fragile this day, brittle. My sunglasses were firmly in place despite the dullness of the light. I was walking to collect my girls from school.

Not feeling able to join in the chatter and laughter of the other mums, I stood to one side and kept my head down. One of the mums, a woman

who took liberties and treated acquaintances as if they were close friends, walked past and looked at me.

*Cheer up, it might never happen,* she tossed lightly into the space between us.

Walking home the sky began to drip fat, glistening tears. I looked up.

*Cheer up, I said, it might never happen.*

My daughters looked up at me and then at each other.

My sunglasses were awash by the time we arrived home.

---

I hadn't seen it coming. His hand carved the air between us and left a stinging square heat on the side of my face. My skin throbbed almost immediately, the pain angling down across my cheek.

*You little slut!* he spat at me.

His eyes were wild and globs of saliva flew from the corner of his mouth.

---

As it happened, I wasn't yet a slut.

This was about a year after my mother died and about a year before I began to welcome boys into my body with open arms and a closed mind. As it also happened, I had only recently discovered the reason for my sister's curious 'hay fever'. It came out during an afternoon of close sisterly conversation and explained much.

Two or three hours before the hand flew through the air, a friend from high school, a boy, knocked on the front door. We were in the same history class and he was after some names and dates. We talked, lying on our stomachs on springy buffalo grass in a pool of shade from the box tree above. I provided the necessary information and he left. Simple. Nothing slutty about that.

Only my father, raw with the pain of a masculine grief that had no outlet and with a history of a wayward older daughter in his mind and an adopted out granddaughter on his conscience, didn't quite see it this way. He had made assumptions and as with all assumptions, they're seen from only one perspective and are often wildly distorted as a result. Left to look after his last remaining daughter alone, his stinging slap embodied his fear of failure (not *another* slut for a daughter), sense of abandonment (by my mother) and resentment at being left to parent alone.

For my part, I prickled with a deep seated sense of injustice that couldn't be articulated. I wanted to shout at him,

*I hate you, you bastard! I'm not my older sister! I didn't make my mother die! I'm not a slut!*

However, a seething silence was all I could muster and as you now know, respect for male authority was deeply embedded in me. I had been socialised well, depending of course on how you look at it, and knew better than to answer back with what was crouching ready to spring just inside the delicate sheath of my mind and anyway, it was hopeless. In the house of a misogynist, females are to blame for the world's wrongs and standing before him with my cheek ablaze, I was merely confirmation of this.

---

I had also been socialised, like many girl children even now, to be kind and caring towards others.

The rapist had had a troubled early childhood and had been rescued and adopted by the church minister and his wife, presumably in the hope that a good Christian life would straighten out his crumpled edges, although this is an assumption of my own.

Although I knew at the time that what he did to me felt wrong, and totally accept now that what he did to me was not only wrong but also criminal, I know I felt sorry for him in the years before he raped me and, despite the personal torment I've experienced since, there's still a part of me that refuses to harden up. I find I still can't bring myself to raise my body up, push my shoulders back and my chin forward and declare in a strong voice what I know I should feel in my heart. This is very confusing for, when I read accounts of rape in the newspaper, the words gather inside like so many storm clouds and my body almost explodes with its own deafening response. Why is it I can feel such outrage towards a faceless stranger and yet feel so little towards 'my' rapist?

---

She could see now how individual cultural demands had insidiously combined in her child's psyche to create a quietly swirling undercurrent, a force capable of eroding and eventually drowning any primeval sense of

self she may once have possessed. In her mother's womb it had been natural, and indeed essential, for her attention to be given over entirely to her embryonic self. But she saw now that from the moment of birth she had been trained to direct her attention away from what was once so central. Between leaving the silken comfort of her amniotic cradle and the appearance of the silhouette in the doorway, she had somehow been trained to care for and respect those around her (particularly men) without ever learning that these qualities could also be directed towards her self.

It now seemed an obvious and unforgiveable omission, one that had led to a lifetime of self-blame and self-abuse.

It also seemed to her now, looking back through time and ahead towards the future, that as long as she walked in the powerful shadow of male authority the rapist would continue to walk with the sun on his face.

Shaking her head, she wondered at a power so great that it had the strength to deflect the responsibility for a child's sexual violation away from the perpetrator and back onto the child herself and in the confusion this created, was able to cause that child to turn against the girl in the garage. An unforgiveable male atrocity creates division within and among females. The unscathed perpetrator confidently striding forth with never a backwards glance, oblivious to the trail of disaster left lying in his wake.

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Sadly, the moment hasn't yet arisen when my story can be gently delivered to those who are closest to me.

My parents both died without ever knowing that their youngest child's mind and body was gripped and manipulated by a terrible secret. My siblings remain unaware of the real cause of my troubled health over the years. When the time is right to tell, they will all be able to picture the house and the church. Some may even be able to remember the face of the silhouette. I'm not sure how they'll respond and I'm acutely aware that this is one of the reasons I hold back from telling them.

The boy who held my hand while I lay on the kitchen floor sobbing is a young man now, old enough to be able to piece together the puzzle of his mother's sadness. I hesitate to open the box for him to see the pieces within. I don't wish him to feel that the arms he places around me could in any way be those of the rapist.

The girls who held each other on the sofa while their shattered mother lay in fragments on the same floor as the blue glass are older now too, both past the age I was when my life's course made such a sudden and dramatic turn. My greatest fear is that they may one day suffer the same fate as me, simply because, like me, they are female. I want to keep them by my side always, within reach, but of course I know this is neither practical nor healthy; it is simply a mother's love.

I don't yet know when the time will be right to tell my children of my story. I certainly don't wish to shatter their dreams and their innocence, their optimism for life. But I'm torn. Torn between protecting them from what has been hidden from them all their lives and an increasingly pressing desire to end this family tradition, this dance of secrecy and silence.

*Offering you my story is a movement away from the dance of silence I  
have been performing for most of my life.*

*Hold my story for a moment if you will.*

*Take from it what you choose.*

*And if it helps you in your own dance then I can ask for no more.*



*'AND SO BY DEGREES THE SILENCE IS BROKEN'*

*(Virginia Woolf)*

## EXEGESIS

In her work on voice and silence, Shulamit Reinharz (1994, p. 188) tells us that 'silent people cannot be understood'. Implicit in this statement is the assumption that to be heard is to *be* understood. However, as Reinharz further notes, 'a woman is silenced when no one listens, even when she talks' (p. 184). What is it then that prevents people from hearing? What is it about the way we deliver information that renders it 'unhearable' (p. 184), difficult to interpret? And what is it that allows individuals to remain silent, their personal circumstances unacknowledged and the consequences of that silence misunderstood? These questions are of particular importance when considering the impact of rape on girls and women and will be explored through the themes of disclosure and silence/ing and voice.

## DISCLOSURE

Each of us develops in, and emerges from, the chrysalis of our own unique environments. Each of us is shaped and influenced by whatever socio-political, historical and cultural conditions are present from the time of our birth (Fivush, 2002). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the girl in the story, her personal circumstances and the ways in which she responded to not only her rape but also the trauma of the aftermath, we must turn to her unique environment and the conditions in which she found herself.

It is possible to speculate that by 1969-70, when the girl in the story is around eleven years of age, her sense of female/male relationships could have been influenced by her own familial relationships as well as by cultural stereotypes and discourses available at that time. In the 1960s, the traditional discursive constructions of males as assertive and primary breadwinners and females as passive dependants remained powerful in Australian culture (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2001; Evans & Saunders, 1992). We know from the story that the girl's parents mirrored these gendered roles. Her 'artistic and educated' (p. 28) mother had full responsibility for the running of the home and family while the father was the sole income provider (p. 28). We also know that the mother was 'unable to resist his [the father's]

domineering ways' (p. 28) and that the girl's father was authoritarian in nature and took on the role of disciplinarian (p. 28).

As the story is told from the perspective of the girl/daughter, we are not able to determine whether her parents were consciously aware of the impact of the role models they were providing for their youngest child. What is able to be known with some certainty, however, is that her parents could never have predicted the ways in which their modelling would manifest in the girl's young and malleable psyche and, more specifically, how these would influence the child's response to being raped. In the story, we are told that the girl had been 'trained to care for and respect those around her (particularly men)' (p. 54); how she was 'socialised well, depending of course on how you look at it' (p. 52) and that 'respect for male authority was deeply embedded' in her (p. 52). It is likely that by eleven years of age, the girl had normalised these traditional gender roles in her mind, and those of male dominance (a draconian and authoritarian father) and female subordination (a powerless and subordinate mother) had combined to form a set of social scripts that left her accepting of patriarchal power and mirroring the image of the passive female.

In tandem with the acceptance of traditional role models, it is clear from the story that the girl, by eleven years of age, had already drawn on her environment and formed in her mind codes of conduct and behaviour that she considered to be socially or morally acceptable. Alongside this, she seems to have also developed an intuitive sense of which behaviours left her feeling uneasy, although it seems she had only a rudimentary understanding of why this was so. For examples of this we can turn to the activities that filled her childhood days.

Although the stealing of communion wafers and wine 'offered a mischievous and bold distraction' (p. 19) and the church itself became 'a site of daring and bravado' (p. 20), one senses that the girl, whilst recognising that the thrill of these activities rested in their clandestine nature, simultaneously perceives them to be nothing more than the energetic play of children, harmless in intent. Even when the activities take on a more adventurous quality, the smoking of cigarettes and cutting of hair for example (p. 21), the girl still happily engages in these and enjoys their risk-taking appeal (p. 20). However, when the focus of the games shifts and takes on more personal qualities, we sense that something in the girl shifts too. She finds herself feeling uncomfortable, 'I was left at a disadvantage' (p. 22) and Postman's Knock in the dark cupboard 'felt hot and claustrophobic' and also 'like something I shouldn't have been doing' (p. 22). She tells us that 'for many reasons I never liked this game' (p. 22).

The Spin-the-Bottle game she tells us, 'sealed one's lips to another's and also sealed one's fate' (p. 21). It is not until later in the story that the girl sees these games as pivotal moments in the weeks before her rape. Indeed, as an adult, memories of the Spin-the-Bottle game provoke a very present and violent somatic response, 'my stomach heaves and my face floods with a rush of blood' (p. 21). It is clear that prior to her first rape, the progression from innocent games in the church and gardens to new and unfamiliar games involving intimacy with boys left her feeling uncomfortable but unable to articulate her discomfort (p. 22). Although by eleven years of age the girl appears to have developed a sense of personal and moral boundary, she hasn't yet developed a voice with which to defend those boundaries: 'I lacked the courage to say so' (p. 22) she tells us. Her passivity could be seen as emanating from her social and familial environment.

If female passivity and subordination to males had grown to become part of this girl's character, then surely secrecy became an additional element that sealed her fate in terms of her ability to disclose her rape. Throughout the story there is a tradition of secrecy that threads its way through and between family life (p. 29; pp. 55-56) and serves to mute and deny the existence of disruptive forces. We hear in the story how 'secrets...were in abundance' (p. 29) and how as a young child, omissions of truth included the suicide of a grandfather, one sister's epilepsy and another's pregnancy as well as the disturbingly delayed news of the mother's terminal illness (p. 30). These omissions seem less surprising, perhaps, when we consider the conservative and restrained nature of the girl's family and the lack of encouragement given towards the sharing of 'anything of a personal nature' (p. 29).

It seems this girl was destined never to reveal her trauma to her family. After all, hers is a somewhat distant family, one in which her parents never said they loved her (p. 28) and where feelings were never discussed (p. 29). The girl tells us that 'an acute discomfort with all things personal accompanied me as I grew up' (p. 29). She had been raised to focus her attentions beyond her self, 'from the moment of birth' (p. 54); to be 'kind and caring' (p. 53) and respectful of others, 'particularly men' (p. 54). We are told that her young mind had framed the experience of rape not as an act of violence and control but as 'sex' (p. 44), intuitively understanding it as 'a terrible thing that her friend must not see' (p. 23). While the spectre and weight of patriarchal authority, codes of conduct and lack of knowledge of sexual violence no doubt played an influential role in the girl's interpretation of her experience, one perhaps ought not to under-estimate the influence of both the location of the rape (the home of the church minister) and the identity of the perpetrator (the minister's adopted son) on the

girl's ability to disclose. Indeed, when the girl returns to the church as an adult, she describes it as 'still casting a powerful shadow' (p. 32).

We can assume then that in order for her to have been in a position to disclose the rape to her parents or others, she would have had to break a number of conventions. Codes of politeness and respect, especially for male authority, had been instilled in her all her life (p. 54) and discussion of anything of a personal nature was discouraged in the family (p. 29). We can only imagine the thought processes this young girl must have gone through. After all, she had experienced violence by an older male in a location that held sacred the figure of the ultimate male deity himself, and she had identified the violence as *sex*. To disclose the former, she would have had to expose the church as a site of violation. To disclose the latter, the girl would have had to cross familial barriers of acceptability that were modelled daily in her home environment in the form of taboo areas of conversation and hidden secrets. This perhaps explains why she moved her disclosure beyond her family and chose instead 'the girl in the garage' (p. 54).

We know that rape has the effect of disempowering its victims (Ahrens, 2006) and we know that the girl in the story was rendered powerless by her socialisation. With its attitudes of male respect and absence of self care (p. 54), it is probable that this socialisation had left her with a limited sense of personal power and autonomy, certain to have been further eroded by the rapes themselves. At this point in her young life, the girl had, in a sense, suffered a double-disempowerment, undermined further by the feelings of self-blame that arose in response to the rapes. She calmly (and powerlessly) asks 'who confesses to a crime if they've brought it on themselves?' (p. 43). This self-blame response may have caused intense personal suffering. However, we can only speculate on this for we are merely told that the girl 'needed a simple answer' to untangle her 'messy confusion' (p. 44). Once an answer was provided in the form of sex, she could accept that the playing of 'daring games' (p. 44) was what lay behind the appearance of the rapist in the night and, therefore, responsibility for the rapes must rest on her own shoulders.

This self-blame attitude was no doubt reinforced by what was to play out on the day of the girl's disclosure to her friend in the garage. When we consider that negative reactions to disclosure have been shown to have devastating consequences for rape victims (Ullman et al, 2007; Family Matters, 2007C; Ahrens, 2006; Ahrens & Campbell, 2000), it is possible to see clearly how this manifested itself in the girl in the story. We are told that the girl's disclosure

in the garage had taken ‘enormous courage’ and yet had been ‘dismissed as a work of fiction’ (p. 27) and that the girl felt there was little else she could do with her secret ‘but fold it up and tuck it into the deepest recesses of her young body’ (p. 27). The reaction of the friend in the garage seems to indeed have had a profound effect on the girl: so profound that ‘it took thirty years of silent practice before I could say the word rape out loud and longer to speak it in relation to myself’ (p. 45); and so profound that her ‘parents died without ever knowing’ and her children and siblings still ‘remain unaware’ (p. 55). If decades of public silence became her way of managing both the trauma of rape and the rejection by the girl in the garage, then the carrying of that suffering within her for decades was indeed to have devastating consequences. The rejection of her disclosure and the impact of this silencing led the girl into a split world, a dual existence, an inner and an outer life, the private and the public.

### SILENCE/ING and VOICE

In examining Luce Irigaray’s understandings of language, Elizabeth Grosz (1989) notes that Irigaray sees feminine language emerging from a position of evocation rather than the more masculine position of designation. For Irigaray, she says, ‘to speak as woman means to undo the reign of the “proper”... to speak with meanings that resonate, that are tactile and corporeal as well as conceptual, that reverberate in their plurality and polyvocality’ (p. 132). If we extend Irigaray’s concept to raped and silenced girls and women, could the notion of evocation be applied to the potential for voice found in the language of the body, in the polyvocality of the raped body? Could it be through the language of the raped body, in the messy somatic overflowing of repressed embodied memory, that a girl or woman can find expression for her traumatic experience?

But what happens when the body speaks? If a girl or woman has been encouraged, through her socialisation, to privilege her mind (but direct it away from her self and towards others), while ignoring her body, is she surprised when that body disrupts with a voice that can’t be ignored? Does she listen? In the case of a raped girl or woman, when the passage of her verbal words has been sealed before they are given the breath of life, if bodily evocation becomes the only way for her to express the trauma of this experience, is she able to interpret

the nuances of its language? What if the utterings of her somatic memory function not as an additional, alternative voice when she has suffered the rejection of her words, but as an indecipherable and debilitating presence? If the body's pre-linguistic response to silenced trauma is not understood or welcomed by the psyche, is voice possible? Can voice emerge if the mind *and* body are not in harmonious relationship?

In order to explore these questions we can turn to the ways in which the raped body of the girl/woman in the story begins to form its own somatic language and take its first tentative steps towards articulation in ways that suggest and evoke. Through the following examples, and if we allow ourselves to imagine, we can see and hear the girl/woman's body beginning to 'speak' in ways that can not only be interpreted as an empathetic gesture towards the silenced voice, but as a sign of collaboration with the psyche.

On the night of her first rape she is physically silenced by the perpetrator's hand over her face and his tongue filling her mouth, so removing any possibility of vocalising her distress, 'her throat feels full and thick with fear' and 'she wants to vomit' (p. 24). Intuitively, 'without consciously realising it' (p. 23) the girl understands that what she is experiencing is a 'terrible thing' (p. 23), something so shocking that it must be kept from her sleeping friend. Was it her visceral *and* emotional reactions that prompted this response? On the second night, we hear how her terrified conscious self shuts down, limiting her ability to recollect details. However, we are told that the terrifying embodied memory of the 'male silhouette' (p. 26) in the doorway returns to her in her nightmares (p. 26; p. 50). This suggests that her embodied memory is operating independently of, though not in opposition to, her psyche and its purpose is to act as an *aide memoire*, compensating for the absence of detailed conscious memory and evoking the terrifying reality of this night through the use of somatic language.

What became of the memory of the day in the garage when the girl's secret was driven within, tucked 'into the deepest recesses of my young body' (p. 27), when her courageous words of disclosure were met with disbelief with the contemptuous words, 'You're a liar!' (p. 23)? Did her embodied memory of this day slide silently and smoothly to rest alongside her conscious memory? It seems not, for we know that when the girl/woman searches the school photograph years later for the face of the girl in the garage and reflects on the effect of this girl's silencing words, 'the responses that hurtle through me are immediate' (p. 42). It seems that her body erupts with volcanic force: it cartwheels, it hurtles, it shrieks and slaps, it shouts and throws. It screams out a somatic language laden with movement, intense physical

responses that evoke years of unresolved trauma and silent emotional pain. These responses are so intense, the girl/woman tells us, that she must 'wait for calm to be restored' (p. 42), allow time for her body to be still and silent before she can begin to process the somatic response and interpret the evocative language it was speaking. Here it seems that her body has reacted in such a direct and immediate fashion to her psyche that it is difficult not to see this as an impatient and distressed body shouting to its passive conscious self.

What occurred on the day of the ice-cream making is an example of her body reaching out, reacting evocatively to a given moment, expressing the unexpressed. We aren't told what year this occurred although it is sometime after her rape, 'I think I was twelve or so' (p. 47). The girl is in the kitchen watching her mother make ice-cream and she is feeling 'close to her and special' (p. 47). As she chats to her mother she is clearly feeling comfortable and enjoying 'that rare intimate space' (p. 47) so much that she allows herself to relax into the moment. She is aware that the pitch of her voice takes on the quality of a child much younger. '*Stop talking in that baby voice!*' (p. 47) her mother tells her. In an instant the moment is shattered, the potential for disclosure lost. The *baby voice* that 'I hadn't thought she'd noticed' (p. 47) had emerged from within her somatic memory in this rare and intimate mother/daughter space, clumsily signalling and awkwardly reflecting the fact that the girl had 'felt small' and was 'in need of maternal care' (p. 47). Instead though, the presence of the baby voice and her mother's response to it had 'thrown up a barrier' and she was brought 'abruptly back to myself' (p. 347). It may have been at this moment that the girl decided to abandon 'this child within' (p. 39), this raped girl of her interior world who yearned for comfort because of the circumstances of her existence and yet who couldn't be trusted to remain a secret.

At this point the girl has suffered one silencing after another: from the rapist himself; from the girl in the garage; from her mother; and as we already know, from a social and familial environment that made a disclosure involving rape virtually impossible. The consequence of this rejection and exclusion appears to have stripped the girl of any sense of power and control over her external environment and yet, paradoxically, it seems to have also empowered her in terms of her commitment to secrecy and rigid self control and via these, to self-protection. 'Secret-keepers', Daniel Wegner and Julie Lane (1997, p. 31) explain, 'are often placed in the unnerving position of having simultaneously to think about their cover-up and not to think about it...so that it can be stopped from coming to light'. It may be that it was this demand for conscious vigilance/ avoidance/protection that helped prompt the internal



dialogue of mind and body in response to the experience of rape. It could be that at some point, the girl consciously recognised and acknowledged the need for her mind and body to function as one in a circular, internal dance of sorts: the vigilance of the mind acting as a constant reminder to the body; the embodied response evoking the trauma of the rape experience and this in turn reinforcing the vigilance in order to self-protect. A symbiotic relationship. Could this be the permanent and binding nature of the mind and body that Judith Butler (1993) refers to? And could this be another dimension of Foucault's (1987, pp. 201-202) panoptical power/self-surveillance concept, one that involves mind and body in a *pas de deux* of secrecy and protection, round and round, on and on?

Perhaps, though, the mind and body relationship goes beyond the facilitation of self-protection for this girl/woman. While aiding the vigilance/avoidance/protection process on an intrapersonal level and helping to supplement the complex public negotiation of this process, on a more practical level, the somatic voice could also function as a starting point for the expression of the verbally inexpressible. In reflecting on Judith Butler's work, Veronica Vasterling (1999) notes that 'the body that signals its presence is the accessible body, but not necessarily the intelligible body. In so far as they are not intelligible, these signals might be registered as a lack of the capacity to articulate' (p. 24). If this thought is applied to the girl/woman in the story, her body signals could be seen not only as an indication of her inability to verbally articulate her trauma but also as a demonstration of her body's capacity to speak on her behalf. For examples of the use of the body as a site of articulation for the verbally inexpressible, we can turn to two further sections of the story.

The first example involves the girl/woman's eating disorder. We are told she had been 'recklessly playing a game of self-destruction' (p. 35), engaging in self-starvation and obsessive exercising. There appears to be a definite sense of achievement bordering on the pleasurable seen in the ways she praises and rewards herself (p. 35). However, when hunger wakes her in the night and leaves her doubled over from the 'horrendous wrenching and squeezing' (p. 35), (signs, it could be concluded, of her body protesting violently), the girl/woman's response seems laden with self-loathing and self-reproach. 'Good,' she thinks, 'eat away at me' (p. 35). While the self-starvation appears to be a conscious act fuelled perhaps by feelings of self-loathing, the girl/woman hasn't yet been prompted to explore the origin of these feelings. 'No-one had thought to ask why she had stopped eating' she tells us, but then, 'it's probable that had they asked, she would have struggled to find an answer' (p. 36). Perhaps at this point, despite the effort required to think and yet not to think of her rape

experience, her embodied memory is stirring and talking in other ways, evoking other sensations with a dialect she is yet to acknowledge, let alone interpret. It is possible during this time that her mind and body have not yet connected 'as a compatible unit' (Matoff & Matoff, 2001, p. 52) to produce meaning and self-revelation through mutual understanding.

The second example involves the girl/woman's long-term depression. She tells us, 'I went slowly about my days in a haze of perpetual sadness and exhaustion' (p. 33) and 'the bleakness and pressing weight of depression had become a heavy burden, settling deep and intractable within me' (p. 31). Like Anorexia Nervosa, clinical depression could be interpreted as the language of somatic memory in another guise and, like Anorexia Nervosa, it could be said that the appearance of depression in the life of this raped girl/woman was simply another facet of the one problem. Depression can after all manifest physiologically as well as cognitively and behaviourally (Department of Health, 2008). Unable to find a verbal language with which to explore and express the trauma of her childhood experience, it may be that her raped body was searching further for ways to speak 'with meanings that resonate' (Irigaray cited by Grosz, 1989, p. 132). Perhaps she was 'saying with her body what she couldn't say with words' (Modjeska, 1990, p. 83).

If these body signals remain unintelligible and therefore inaccessible, then surely this highlights the urgent need for the development of a system of interpretation that can draw meaning from this alternative source of information? If the girl/woman was indeed 'saying with her body what she couldn't say with words' (Modjeska, 1990, p. 83), at whatever level of consciousness this may have taken place, then to not acknowledge this through new systems of meaning that respect the language of the somatic, is surely to further marginalise and exclude.

### CONCLUSION

We can see that for much of her life, many circumstances in the girl/woman's personal history left her disempowered and voiceless. Her location in time and place meant that socio-cultural and familial circumstances were to play a significant role by limiting her capacity for self-expression and disclosure in unfavourable and unreceptive environments. Through the need for self-protection and therefore secrecy, the voice of her raped self resided in her

interior, both in her psyche and in her body. We know that it took most of her adult life before she could say the word *rape* and more particularly, say it in relation to her self (p. 45) and that there is a tension present in her desire to rid herself of the burden of this secrecy and her continuing need to protect her self and those closest to her (p. 55). This dual but opposing desire has been a balancing act requiring the management of an inner and outer voice, the possibility of disclosure and the potential for rejection and harm. The voice in the story that speaks the retrospective language of the psyche and the evocative voice of the somatic illuminates her personal perspective and amplifies what is already known about rape and its aftermath. Hers is not a fleeting and ephemeral voice, difficult to hear or whisper quiet. It is a voice that speaks from the mind and body, a voice that recognises the value of each and the role they play in delivering a story that emerges from a space of authenticity.

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