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Costet, Julia (2025) *Speaking rape: engaging experience for a feminist practice of rape survivorship*. [Doctoral thesis]. London School of Economics and Political Science. <https://doi.org/10.21953/researchonline.lse.ac.uk.00137158>

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The London School of Economics and Political Science

Speaking Rape: Engaging Experience for a Feminist Practice of Rape Survivorship

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Government of the London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, London, May 2025.

Declaration

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Acknowledgements

I dedicate this PhD thesis to the callers of the North London Rape Crisis helpline and to all my inspirational feminist colleagues and fellow support practitioners at the NLRC helpline; in particular, Kate Holmes, Annabelle Edwards, Rafaela Ellison your wisdom guides us through the storm. This thesis is a culmination of everything you taught me, and the many conversations we had on the frontline of the rape crisis.

My supervisor, Professor Leigh Jenco, thank you for putting up with dramatic twists and turns, but most of all for drawing my attention that amidst the changes, some things remained persistently the same. Thank you to Professor Anne Phillips for initiating my journey into feminist theory years ago when I did my MSc in Political Theory and for accompanying me into the Ph.D. Anne, you taught me that feminism can help us cope with the injustices of the world: this thesis is my attempt to cope.

I want to thank my dear friend and kindred spirit, Andréa Delestrade who carried me across the finish line during what was a tumultuous writing-up period. Andréa, you always saw exactly what I was trying to say and persistently reminded me of what this is all for. Thank you for giving me a place of safety and calm through the tempestuous end.

To my mentor and dear friend, Professor Robin Douglass, thank you for all of your support since the early days of my passion for political theory back during my undergraduate at King's College London, but most importantly for always encouraging me to keep theory in my life.

Thank you to Professor Elisabeth Jay-Friedman; without our completely haphazard encounter in the Mission in San Francisco and then in Recoleta in Buenos Aires I would never have shifted the project to engage so seriously with feminist consciousness-raising.

To the incredible women I have met along the way who have challenged my thinking, but also read and engaged with my work, your friendship and solidarity means everything to me: Jeta Mulaj, Sarah Bufkin, Melanie Erspamer, Camilla Barbieri, Cris Conesa-Pla, Elizabeth Widmer,

and Sarah Goff, thank you. I would like to give a very special thank you to Stephanie Wanga with whom I started the Ph.D during the COVID lockdown, and with whom I crossed the finish line hand-in-hand: throughout the years we always found strength in each other even when we were apart.

Thank you to dear friends made along the way: Jan Wasserziehr, Andreas Sorger, Bruno Leipold, Cristobal Garribay-Peterson, Vincent Harting, Felix Westeren, Nick Devlin, Emma Obermair, Meshal Alkwaiter, Oscar Nowlan, Joel Chang, and Rune Larsen. You all supported me during the difficult times, but most importantly celebrated the small victories with me.

I would also like to give a very warm thank you to my dear friend Yusuf Khan, with whom I spent countless Saturdays marching for Palestine, for a ceasefire and the end of UK complicity in the genocide in Gaza. Thank you for always reminding me and everyone else of our common responsibility to remain steadfast in our collective resistance for the liberation of the Palestinian people.

Thank you to my family for relentlessly reminding me that one chooses to do a Ph.D and that this is a privilege not many get to have: my parents Lynne Franek and Xavier Costet, my brother Jonathan Costet, my sister-in-law Kate Milne. You kept me grounded and always told me what I needed to hear even when I didn't want to hear it.

To my nearest and dearest friends who have patiently bared with me in long periods of absence and welcomed me back with open hearts and open homes over the years: Caroline Plas, Olivia Theocharides-Feldman, Morgane Crist, Harriet Clarke. You all teach me what true friendship means and what it takes to nurture and preserve love through the decades.

Mais surtout, merci à toi ma Caro, ma sœur, merci d'avoir toujours été là au fil des années pour me remettre sur le droit chemin lorsque je me suis égarée, mais surtout de m'avoir toujours montré la force que ça prend de croquer la vie à pleine dents!

À vous aussi mes grands amis de longue date, Martin Bazin et Lorenzo Gandolfo: c'est avec vous que j'ai découvert la philosophie, cette discipline qui a changé ma vie, c'est avec vous que j'ai le souvenir de profiter de mes premières discussions philosophiques. On a grandi ensemble et on vieillira ensemble — à la votre!

Thank you to my dearest of all friends, Phoebe Lewis, who has been my flatmate throughout this five-year-long affair and who was there for me every single little step of the way, for the daily shifts and tribulations. Phoebe, the joy of laughter has never felt so sweet as when it is shared with you. Thank you for everything, but above all for bringing so much joy to my life in the last five years and for the lifetime of unrestrained cackling to come.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner, Lewis Manning, who has supported me relentlessly since my undergraduate, through my Masters degrees, Ph.D, and everything in between. Lewis, my love, my darling, my treasure, your light-heartedness and warmth carried me through the tough times. Thank you for the safety of your heart which has been my home for the last ten years and for the duration of this thesis.

Abstract

This thesis advances a theory for a feminist cross-experiential practice of rape survivorship. This practice is aimed at engaging the personal and lived experiences of survivors with each other for the purposes of revealing the plural meanings, forms and configurative power relations that are invested in rape. To do so, I stress that experiences of rape are irreducible to each other; indeed, no two experiences are ever meaningfully identical, configuratively symmetrical, or substitutable with each other. This mutual irreducibility of experience is not inimical to the cross-experiential practice that I theorize, but rather animates it. In doing so, this thesis theorizes a distinctly *hermeneutic* cross-experiential practice where rather than seeking to better understand others, it compels one to better understand oneself *in relation* to others. This hermeneutic practice uses the mutual irreducibility of experience to reveal how subjects are asymmetrically situated in relation to each other and, in doing so, compels cross-experiential participants to reflect on their own position in relation to others. I argue that this cross-experiential model could advance a feminist practice of rape survivorship in which survivors can continuously reflect on the capacity in which their experiences are asymmetrically situated in relation to all others. In doing so, the lack of equivalence between experiences can be itself be revelatory of the plural configurative power relations that are implicated in rape. In my thesis, I therefore advance that the mutual irreducibility of experience can both generate a critique of power and ignite a transformative practice of relational self-reflexivity. Both of the features combined, I argue, can constitute a basis for a radically inclusive and politically salient collective of rape survivorship.

Table of Contents

Declaration.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Abstract.....	6
Table of Contents.....	7
Introduction of the Thesis.....	8
I. Disclosure and the Making of Rape Survivorship.....	8
II. Politicizing Experience.....	18
III. The Thesis, Its Objectives and Contributions.....	27
Chapter 1. On the Possibility for Theorizing Rape from Experience.....	38
I. Gendering Rape: Essence-Led Theorizing in the Sex-Versus-Violence Debate.....	42
II. [Against Bracketing the Subjective] Theorizing From Experience.....	52
III. Preserving a Category of Rape: Rape as a Cluster Concept.....	60
Concluding Remarks.....	66
Chapter 2. Speaking the R-Word: Epistemic Injustice and Representational Transparency.....	69
I. Epistemic (In)justice, Agency, and Self-Transparency.....	74
II. Transparency and Representational Uniformity.....	85
III. Survivor Silence and Speaking Rape ‘On Our Own Terms’.....	93
Concluding Remarks.....	102
Chapter 3. Feminism and Experience: Between Essentialism and Depoliticized Particularity.....	104
I. Feminist Theory and ‘Making Experience Visible’.....	108
II. ‘Women’s Experience’ and the Problem of Essentialism.....	120
III. Engaging Experience: Feminist Theory as Practice.....	128
Concluding Remarks.....	135
Chapter 4. Asymmetrical Experiences and Cross-Experiential Hermeneutics.....	138
I. Against Symmetry.....	142
II. Engaging Across Asymmetrically Situated Experiences.....	152
III. Cross-Experiential Hermeneutics: Towards a Feminist Practice of Rape Survivorship.....	163
Concluding Remarks.....	172
Chapter 5. Vulnerable Bodies, ‘Rapeable’ Subjects.....	174
I. Vulnerable Bodies, Threatening Bodies.....	177
II. Ontological Vulnerability, Corporeal Vulnerability.....	187
III. Asymmetrically Vulnerable: De-essentializing ‘Rapeability’.....	196
Concluding remarks.....	200
Conclusion of the Thesis.....	202
Bibliography.....	215

Introduction of the Thesis

I. Disclosure and the Making of Rape Survivorship

To disclose one's rape, to speak up about one's abuser, to break silence on one's rape marks what Euro-American feminists have qualified as the shift from rape 'victimhood' to rape 'survivorship.' In contrast to the passivity of victimhood, rape survivors were qualified as active in their capacity to disclose their rape. That survivors could speak out meant that they could reassert themselves after rape such that rape could no longer rob the agency to speak, to narrate, to give an account of oneself. Only recently have rape victims become rape survivors where sexually abused women are seen to "embrace survivorship as a potential site of feminist political intervention and to refuse the status of passive helpless victims."¹ The shift in the discourse of survivorship was therefore not just a semantic shift from 'victim' to 'survivor' but also a shift in the practices in response to one's rape.

The status of rape survivorship has been asserted over victimhood through the practice of disclosure.² Whereas the victim remained passively silent, the survivor *actively* acknowledges her abuse, speaks up about her rape, and names her abuser(s) in a decisive act of disclosure. The centrality of disclosure for rape survivorship is made apparent in the explosion of public self-disclosures since the early 2000s in the United States and Europe epitomized namely through the #MeToo movement. The MeToo movement was a grassroots organization founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke which sought to support survivors of sexual violence and, in particular, young women of color in marginalized communities. Burke's objective with MeToo was to create a group practice that could bring to light the sheer prevalence of sexual violence and allow for survivors to escape from the isolation of victimhood. In 2017, almost a decade after MeToo's founding, Alyssa Milano disclosed her experience of sexual abuse from film producer Harvey Weinstein leading to a viral uptake of the hashtag #MeToo. Milano's popularization of the movement through a Tweet encouraging other survivors to use the hashtag #MeToo led to a mass

¹ Shani Orgad, "The Survivor in Contemporary Culture and Public Discourse: A Genealogy," *The Communication Review* 12, no. 2 (2009), 142. See also Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" *Signs* 18, no. 2 (1993), 260-290.

² See also Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" *Signs* 18, no. 2 (1993), 260-290.

disclosure of rape. This particular moment of mass disclosure became emblematic of a transnational anti-rape solidarity with #BalanceTonPorc in France, #QuellaVoltaChe in Italy, #SendeAnalat in Turkey, #Cuentalo in Spain, #RiceBunny in China, #AnaKaman in North Africa and the Arab states in the Levant and Gulf. The transnational scale of the hashtag #MeToo has simultaneously created a transnational network of survivors, demonstrating how patterns of sexual violence and rape are shared across state borders. In doing so, the #MeToo movement has shaped a transnational identity of rape survivorship which revolves around a shared experience of rape, sexual abuse, and sexual violence.

The disclosure practices of the #MeToo are central to materializing rape survivorship as a distinct mode of being that emerged against the perceived passivity of victimhood. Institutionally, ‘disclosure’ has become a key term for support practitioners in domestic and sexual violence organizations representing a decisive moment in a survivors’ life after rape. For instance, on rape crisis helplines, new callers will often be asked if this is their first disclosure. The purpose of asking this question is in part to record whether another agency or institutional body is working with the survivor whether it be the police, a GP practice, or any support organization or social service.³ Another reason why helplines inquire about a survivors’ first disclosure is to gauge whether a survivor has spoken about their rape before, whether a survivor has initiated the process of speaking rape. Disclosure is thereby treated as a decisive moment for a survivor: depending on whether one had disclosed their rape before will signal to the support practitioner the survivors’ enactment of survivorship. Disclosure pertains to a distinct action taken by subjects that reproduces a norm or identity category. A survivor is defined in contrast to a victim through engaging in a distinct practice of disclosure, through the practice of speaking rape.

If #MeToo was successful in igniting a transnational anti-rape solidarity movement, it was also importantly successful in creating a shared identity of rape survivorship around the practice of

³ These support organizations might include: domestic violence organizations, migrant support organizations, trafficking and sexual exploitation organizations, organizations supporting individuals through addiction, through homelessness, organizations supporting individuals who are involved in organized crime and county lines. While some callers might call a helpline because they looked into it themselves, others may have been referred by other services to the rape crisis helpline in order to receive more specialized support and guidance. See Solace Women’s Aid. “Solace Rape Crisis.” Accessed November 10, 2025. <https://www.solacewomensaid.org/solace-rape-crisis/>.

disclosure. The practice of disclosure is central to the political substance of the #MeToo movement. Contrary to the silent rape victim whose shame kept her quiet, kept her from speaking, a survivor is no longer silenced by the shame of rape. In particular, to disclose became a means of displacing shame from the survivor to the aggressor. This is evidenced most recently by Gisèle Pélicot's public trial of her mass rape orchestrated by her husband who drugged her with prescription sleeping drugs while recruiting men from online chatrooms to rape her without her knowledge.⁴ Gisèle Pélicot's decision to make the trial public was driven by a commitment to make "shame change camp:"⁵ that is, for shame to no longer silence rape survivors but, instead, for shame to be carried by perpetrators for the rape that they have committed. The idea of 'overcoming shame' has been important in marking this shift from rape victimhood to survivorship. Gisèle Pélicot's words "pour que la honte change de camp"⁶ not only brings to light how shame must be re-directed towards perpetrators, but also confronts one to ask: what *really* does a victim of rape have to be ashamed about? What is it *really* about rape that is so shameful for survivor-victims?

For Mithu Sanyal, shame is too often reified as an integral part of the experience of rape victimhood.⁷ Sanyal writes that the discourse of shame "risks presenting shame as a kind of automatic body reflex, like an itch or a sneeze, rather than a culturally learned and highly complex emotion."⁸ On Sanyal's account, the discursive association of shame to the experience of rape risks constructing these feelings as necessary, inevitable features of rape survivorship, as if the affective dimension of rape survivorship was already constituted, as if the experience of life after rape was already drawn for survivors. Sanyal and other feminist scholars of rape have noted how overemphasizing the harmfulness of rape might cause more harm to survivors by constructing rape as an unrecoverable trauma.⁹ In turn, through enacting the disclosure practices

⁴ Angelique Chrisafis, "Who are the men convicted over rape and assault of Gisèle Pélicot?" *The Guardian*, December 19, 2024. It is worth pointing out that Gisèle Pélicot sits in a peculiar place in relation to the #MeToo movement: while she did not claim to speak with or on behalf of the #MeToo movement, the French feminist collective #NousToutes was incredibly active in relation to the Pélicot trials.

⁵ Ashifa Kassam, "'How many more Gisèles are out there?' Pélicot trial jolts fight against sexual violence," *The Guardian*, December 20, 2024.

⁶ Cécile Hautefeuille, "Au procès des viols de Mazan, des femmes viennent 'voir ce que les hommes sont capables de faire,'" *Médiapart*, October 4, 2024.

⁷ Mithu Sanyal, *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (London: Verso, 2016), 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹ See also Sharon Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," in *Feminists Theorizing the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 385-403.

of rape survivorship, rape survivors assert the possibility for healing, for recovering, *for a life after rape* where through enacting rape survivorship, one is engaging in a certain kind of redemptive speech act.

The shift from rape victimhood to survivorship also implies the capacity to assert one's narrative agency: the capacity to recount one's experience with authority, *to speak for oneself*.¹⁰ Rape survivors and women having been historically discredited as unreliable epistemic authorities meant that to disclose rape and engage in survivor speech has become an effective means of asserting one's authority to speak. Tropes about women 'crying rape' falsely accusing naive men of raping them has worked against the believability of survivors in interrogation rooms and court houses thus participating in what is commonly referred to as a 'culture of silencing'.¹¹ Public disclosures of rape are therefore precisely transgressive because they are able to assert the demand to be heard and to be believed as well as to assert one's narrative agency against a cultural infrastructure that has systematically refused to listen and trust in the testimonies of survivors.

The shift from rape victimhood to rape survivorship is not only redemptive in character but also a political tactic aimed at enforcing visibility on the prevalence of rape, on the sites of violence in which rape takes place, and on the tactics of perpetration. To speak rape through public acts of disclosure participates in making visible previously obscured forms of violence and abuse. Insofar as many rapes take place within intimate spheres: marriages, relationships, friendships or families, to publicly disclose rape is to bring to light what happens 'behind closed doors' and, in doing so, to shed light on just how widespread rape and sexual violence actually is. In line with the feminist motto 'the personal is political', public disclosures of rape shed light on the private realm as also a site of violence. Rape is not simply a stranger in a dark alleyway, but for the most part occurring within families and close relationships.

¹⁰ See also Linda Martin Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Myself" in *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 2018), 176-203.

¹¹ See Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, (London: Virago, 2007), 28-29. See also Amia Srinivasan, "The Conspiracy Against Men" in *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 1-32.

Thus, as I have stressed so far in this introduction, to disclose rape implies an enactment of rape survivorship: it is to become a rape survivor.¹² With rape survivorship as a distinct mode of being came a new and different conception of rape altogether: rape as a psychic injury, as a “violation of the self.”¹³ This is obviated by the distinct language of trauma which often comes to constitute the grammar of rape survivorship.¹⁴ As Joanna Bourke notes, the emergence of trauma rhetoric as constitutive of the grammar of rape survivorship reconfigured the expression of the harm of rape in terms of an attack on a person’s sexual personhood rather than physical, economic, or social ruin.¹⁵ To enact rape survivorship is therefore to engage in a cathartic act of disclosure where the performance of survivor speech is seen as pertaining to a wider process of healing. Bourke writes:

“The emergence of trauma rhetoric was, ironically, immensely powerful in the construction of the active female subject. According to this approach, the mere disclosure of trauma became reformatory. The performance of ‘trauma speech’ itself took on a redemptive character, transforming passive victims into active survivors.”¹⁶

Indeed, for Bourke, trauma rhetoric enabled the rescuing of the female subject from the passivity of victimhood because it is associated with the active and redemptive practice of disclosure. Bourke describes how trauma rhetoric shaped an understanding of rape as a psychic injury from which one could be healed. In doing so, the trauma rhetoric of rape enabled the overcoming of what was previously seen as the insurmountable trauma of rape.¹⁷

The shift to rape survivorship, therefore, also reconfigured the way that rape impacts survivors and, importantly, what agency means after rape.¹⁸ In contrast to the discourse of victimhood,

¹² See also Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray “Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?” *Signs* 18, no. 2 (1993), 260-290.

¹³ Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, (London: Virago, 2007), 425-426.

¹⁴ For an account of the ‘gendered grammar of violence’ underpinning ‘rape scripts’ see Sharon Marcus, “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention,” in *Feminists Theorizing the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 385-403.

¹⁵ Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, (London: Virago, 2007), 425-426.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 429.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 428-429.

¹⁸ My framing of rape survivorship as a distinct mode of being echoes Ian Hacking’s account of the emergence of new social kinds or new classifications for ‘kinds of people’ which emerges through a process of ‘making up people.’ On Hacking’s account, new classifications of certain ‘kinds of people’ create new modes of being or ‘new ways for people to be.’ On my reading of rape survivorship, the rape ‘survivor’ becomes a new mode of being a new way for a rape survivor to be in the aftermath of rape. See

survivorship meant that rape was no longer something that would rob one's agency; whereas victimhood posited rape as an insurmountably traumatic experience, survivorship made it possible for rape to be something to be disclosed, to be spoken about, and ultimately, something that could be overcome. The redemptive character of the disclosure practices that were central to the #MeToo movement characterizes its contestatory politics which challenges the culture of silencing that has victimized women as well as enabled and sustained the impunity of perpetration. Thus, with rape survivorship as a distinct mode of being, to disclose rape is itself a means towards its own overcoming.

The practice of disclosure that is so central to the shift from victimhood to survivorship is not, however, without its limitations. For instance, the association of rape survivorship with disclosure risks implying a coercive imperative to disclose one's rape as evidence of one's overcoming of the passive status of victimhood. As Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray write:

“When breaking the silence is taken up as the necessary route to recovery or as a privileged political tactic, it becomes a coercive imperative on survivors to confess, to recount our assaults, to give details, and even to do so publicly.”¹⁹

Here, I read Alcoff and Gray as problematizing the practice of disclosure as an enactment of rape survivorship. If disclosing one's experience through performing survivor speech are treated as the only way that one can overcome rape, then rape disclosures are at risk of being a socially-imposed requirement for demonstrating to oneself and others that one has reclaimed one's agency after rape. The imperative to speak rape imposes a burden on survivors to perform trauma and healing publicly such that the agency to remain silent would be simply reduced to further evidence of being locked in the shameful passivity of victimhood. Indeed, the tremendous pressure to disclose might itself have the reverse effect of silencing survivors.

A further limitation to the centrality of disclosure in movements like #MeToo is its insufficiency for sustaining a critique of the structures that rendered survivors vulnerable to being raped in the

Ian Hacking, “Making Up People” in *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 99-115. See also Ian Hacking, “Making Up People” *The London Review of Books* 28, no. 16 (2006).

¹⁹ See also Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray “Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?” *Signs* 18, no. 2 (1993), 281.

first place. This limitation is evidenced is through the emphasis on a carceral approach to ‘bringing to justice’ the individual men that have perpetrated rape. Indeed, the #MeToo movement’s focus on naming-and-shaming perpetrators of rape has furthered a way of thinking about rape perpetration as enacted by a ‘bad men.’ As Phipps notes, the emphasis on bringing down ‘bad men’ preserves a misguided promise that men like Harvey Weinstein, Roman Polansky, Kevin Spacey, Gérard Depardieu will be affected by the strengthening of punitive systems.²⁰ Yet, for most of these men, accusations of rape have been mere blips in their careers, fueling a backlash against what is now seen as a ‘witchtrial’ against men. The point is that the naming-and-shaming practices that have come to define rape survivorship eclipse the systematicity of rape perpetration, and how some men are structurally enabled to get away with it.

Indeed, the #MeToo movement’s contestation offers a highly individualized critique of perpetration in which ‘bad men’ are singled out for their abuse. Such an approach has led to a feminist politics that places promise into a carceral system that more powerful men can seemingly avoid. For abolitionist feminists of the INCITE! and Critical Resistance grassroots organizations, it is clear that carceral approaches to sexual violence have systematically worked against women, particularly structurally disadvantaged women of color and working class women. In a joint statement entitled “Gender Violence and the Prison-Industrial Complex,” INCITE and Critical Resistance write:

“Despite an exponential increase in the number of men in prisons, women are not any safer, and the rates of sexual assault and domestic violence have not decreased. In calling for greater police responses to and harsher sentences for perpetrators of gender violence, the antiviolence movement has fueled the proliferation of prisons which now lock up more people per capita in the United States than any other country. During the past fifteen years, the number of women, especially women of color, in prison has skyrocketed. Prisons also inflict violence on the growing numbers of women behind bars. Slashing, suicide, the proliferation of HIV, strip searches, medical neglect, and rape of prisoners

²⁰ Alison Phipps, “Whose personal is more political? Experience in Contemporary Feminist Politics,” *Feminist Theory* 17, no. 3, (2016), 310-312. Alison Phipps, *Me, Not You* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

have largely been ignored by antiviolence activists. The criminal justice system, an institution of violence, domination, and control, has increased the level of violence in society.”²¹

Two points emerge from the exposition above: first, increased funding for the carceral system has not resulted in a decrease of sexual violence but has instead succeeded in locking up more women, especially poor and racialized women. Second, prisons are a site of violence including sexual violence. It follows from this second point that any politics opposed to rape would at the very least question the carceral system for enabling sexual violence to occur within its walls. If an abolitionist stance of anti-violence is conducive to a sustained critique and challenge to any form of violence including state violence, so too should a stance that opposes rape, sexual abuse, and sexual violence.

The #MeToo movement’s emphasis on punishing the ‘bad men’ further sustains the promise that law enforcement and carceralism will address sexual violence. In sustaining this promise, the #MeToo movement risks obscuring how the carceral system and the entire apparatus of law enforcement surrounding it has itself been a site of sexual violence against women as well as men and minors. The inadequacies of the framework of criminality, law enforcement, and carceralism remains obscured in #MeToo whose narratives of rape and sexual abuse predominantly reflect the experiences of more dominant, privileged, and elite women. In doing so, #MeToo is not able to adequately reflect on how some marginalized women’s experiences sexual violence intersect with state violence. This is precisely the point advanced by abolitionist feminists: connecting interpersonal violence with state violence can bring attention to the experiences of marginalized survivors whose experiences of violence, in general, is at the junction of both.²² For feminist abolitionists, connecting interpersonal violence with state violence in an analysis of violence in general could better reveal the social, economic and institutional conditions that enable sexual and domestic violence specifically. Feminist abolitionism thereby brings to the fore the urgency of exploring the plurality of conditions that

²¹ Critical Resistance and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, “Gender Violence and the Prison-Industrial Complex,” in *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 224.

²² *Ibid.*, 223.

render each iteration of violence possible, drawing attention to how subjects are differently vulnerable in their shared entanglement in complex, overlapping, and intersecting networks of power.

Having departed from its grassroots origins and simultaneously popularizing a punitive politics for bringing justice to victims of rape, #MeToo has insufficiently considered the intersection of race and class in addition to gender. As I take it, this lack of intersectionality within the #MeToo movement is enabled by the highly individualized practice of disclosure upon which it constructs its political contestation. In its excessive focus on the act of breaking silence, rather than on the substance of each individual disclosure narrative, the #MeToo movement does not create a disclosure structure that can allow for intersectional experiences to be brought to light in comparison to more dominant narratives of rape survivorship. While the practice of disclosure has been effective in shaping rape survivorship as active and agential, it has been insufficient for creating a movement that can effectively challenge and resist the mechanisms that enable sexual violence in the first place. Indeed, without engaging the substance of different survivorship narratives in comparison to each other, it will be difficult to discern exactly what structures render rape possible, and therefore what mechanisms to adopt to bring about justice.

This relates to a further limitation with the disclosure practices that have come to qualify the #MeToo movement. This limitation pertains to the relation of equivalence that it builds between survivors' experiences where all survivor experiences are taken to contain within them an inherent sameness and sharedness. The way that #MeToo builds sameness is through bracketing the structural differences that rendered survivors differently vulnerable to sexual violence by preserving the mere facticity of rape as a signifier through which all experiences are equivalent in terms of meaning and harm. In other words, the #MeToo movement builds sameness by preserving the fact that all survivors have experienced rape whilst ignoring all the divergences and nuances *between* experiences. These nuances and divergences between experiences are treated as irrelevant because the fact of rape remains what connects all survivors together; the particularity of each rape experience should not matter because, ultimately, what matters is the

fact of rape.²³ It seems, however, a mistake to bracket the subjective and particular conditions under which each rape occurred because doing so risks obscuring the many different sites and conditions that enabled each particular rape to occur in the first place. More widely, it seems to create a false relationship of symmetry between survivors, assuming that all survivors are ultimately subjected to the same form of violent oppression. For instance, it might be troubling to create an equivalence between survivors that are White wealthy movie stars and unhoused migrant women, or sex-working women, or poor women. Drawing attention to these divergences between survivors is not to create a hierarchy of pain which seeks to find out ‘whose rape is worse’ however, to ignore the vast differences between each rape experience risks making more dominant experiences of rape the norm and eclipsing more marginalized experiences, a point I shall return to shortly. While two experiences might pertain to rape, the conditions that have rendered both rapes possible are vastly different where focusing on the equivalence might obscure the different configurative power relations at play in each. As I mentioned just a moment ago, creating sameness and equivalences between experiences risks obfuscating the intersecting axes of race and class operating within rape as it has with the #MeToo movement.

Rape is located at the junction of multiple overlapping forms of institutional neglect (the failure of the criminal justice system, the failure of the public health system) as well as a hostile political environment that renders some people especially vulnerable to sexual violence. With the complex nexus of these overlapping structures in mind, what all rapes have in common is their shared entanglement within a web of socially and politically produced forms of vulnerability. While some might be explicit expressions of misogyny and a patriarchal right of male sexual entitlement, others might be better qualified as an iteration of racial terror, housing precarity, xenophobia – or, perhaps, all of those forms of violence at once. Rape crisis helplines are one site to reveal this complexity and how rape is imbricated within a wider landscape of social suffering. Each call is a visceral testament of rape’s entanglement with many other forms of social suffering including precarious housing, immigration status, care dependencies in the context of economic precarity, loneliness, and how all of these are linked the gendered, racialized and classed forms of domination. Each call is a disclosure of rape inasmuch as a disclosure of

²³ Note that I say that the nuances and divergences between experiences are *treated* and not *seen* as equivalent. I say this because the #MeToo movement’s organizers and most vocal participants do not seem to intentionally regard nuances and divergences as irrelevant but treat them as though they are.

other forms of social suffering all of which matter in determining the conditions that rendered rape possible and permissible in the first place.

The #MeToo movement's obfuscation of differences, of nuances and divergences between experiences leads to two problematic consequences. First, it risks structurally enabling only the more dominant voices to be heard. Second, it might render more dominant voices' narratives to be taken as the norm. These two problems are at the heart of Alison Phipps' critique of the #MeToo movement. Phipps qualifies the #MeToo movement as an example of what she calls "political whiteness," that is a form of political engagement that is "(often willfully) ignorant of the struggles, cultural outputs and politics of women of color."²⁴ For Phipps, the practice of 'speaking out' under #MeToo is perhaps better cashed out as 'speaking over' obviated by the fact that the grassroots origins of the #MeToo movement has been hijacked by the performance of survivorship of powerful White women. She points at the problem that White survivors are often afforded greater sympathy by the public and argues that the #MeToo movement has only furthered the cultural power of what Phipps calls 'white tears.' The most worrisome consequences that she draws attention to is that survivorship seems to be a mode of being that is only accessible to elite White women insofar as the culture of 'speaking out' favours their more powerful social positioning and thus reinforcing racialized and classed forms of hierarchies within its anti-rape solidarity campaigns.

Taking seriously Phipps' criticism, I argue that the #MeToo movement is able to remain a movement that favors more powerful women precisely because of its excessive focus on an individualized practice of disclosure. Indeed, because its politics is mainly anchored towards bringing visibility towards an issue rather than sustaining a critique of power, the #MeToo movement has (unintentionally) created a disclosure structure that privileges more dominant women. This is further enabled by the fact that the #MeToo movement's disclosure structure does not engage the substance of the experience being recounted. More precisely, in its emphasis on the performance of disclosure on the breaking-of-silence itself, the #MeToo movement leaves the substance of experience untouched, a point I elaborate in the next section.

²⁴ Alison Phipps, "The Political Whiteness of #MeToo," *Alison Phipps Blog*, June 4, 2019, <https://phipps.space/2019/06/04/metoo/>.

II. Politicizing Experience

Experience plays a crucial role in the disclosure practices that have come to define rape survivorship. Rape survivors are not only engaging in a distinct practice of telling and recounting, their disclosure practice is also an explicit appeal to personal experience. The practice of engaging experience in order to bring visibility to previously obscured forms of violence and oppression has been historically harnessed by feminists.²⁵ Indeed, ‘making visible’ previously obscured experiences of suffering is an important step for feminists to theorize women’s oppression in order to delineate a political project that can attend to that oppression. It is my contention, however, that insufficient attention has been given to the way that experience has been taken up and appealed to in the shift from rape victimhood to survivorship, especially if rape survivorship is invested in enacting a political tactic of making visible patterns of oppression and violence. The shift from rape victimhood to survivorship therefore queries the politicization of experience. This thesis, as I will explain shortly, is in part an exploration of how political substance can be derived from experience and, indeed, how a personal experience can be rendered politically salient.

One consequence of the #MeToo movement centering disclosure as the locus of its politics rather than the substance of the experiences is that lived experiences of rape are treated as if they were immediately and self-evidently politically meaningful. That is to say, that current disclosure practices treat rape experiences as if their political substance speaks for themselves, or indeed as if the political implications of these experiences are immediately apparent.²⁶ It might be the case, as I mentioned earlier, that engaging in a public act of disclosure rape is a political act by virtue of asserting oneself against a history of rape survivors being systematically discredited, dismissed, doubted. This does not, however, mean that the substance of experiences is self-sufficiently and immediately politically meaningful about oppression, or structural

²⁵ See Johanna Oksala, *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016). Judith Grant, “Experience” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch, Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 227-246. Linda Martin Alcoff, “Phenomenology, Post-Structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience” in *Feminist Phenomenology*, Ed. Linda Fisher, Lester Embree (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 39-56. Linda Martin Alcoff, “Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience” in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh*, Ed. Fred Evans, Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 251-271.

²⁶ To be clear, I am querying the place of experience within the disclosure practices that have come to define rape survivorship as a mode of being.

injustices, or the conditions that render rape possible. To say something politically meaningful about rape would imply saying something about the many overlapping and intersecting material and discursive arrangements that have rendered a particular iteration of rape possible, demonstrating how the perpetration of rape pertains to a wider pattern of power relationality. The first-person raw experience, that is, the subjective apprehension of the world which is recounted by an individual, is on its own insufficient to say something politically meaningful about rape. Simply put: something needs to happen for these rape experiences to be rendered politically meaningful, and in particular, to be rendered politically meaningful to feminism.

The process of harnessing personal experiences for both theorizing women's oppression and forming a political project from that theorized condition was most apparent in feminist consciousness-raising groups.²⁷ Julie Arnold describes consciousness-raising as follows:

“The sessions consist mainly of women gathering once a week, sitting in a circle and speaking in turn, addressing themselves – almost entirely out of personal experience – to a topic that has been preselected. (...) These topics include Love, Marriage, Sex, Work, Femininity. How I Came to Women's Liberation, Motherhood, Aging and Competition With Other Women. Additional subjects are developed as particular groups' specific interests and circumstances begin to surface.”²⁸

Feminist consciousness-raising groups are the most concrete example and iteration of a feminist practice that theorized women's condition *from* experience. Consciousness-raising practices are enacted through a group exchange of personal experiences which would then be the basis for articulating a common condition of gendered and patriarchal oppression. Through these thematic discussions, women exchange their personal experiences of these various themes and, in doing so, extrapolate a common condition of 'womanhood' as oppressed under heteropatriarchy. This common condition of gendered and patriarchal oppression offered the basis for articulating an action-oriented feminist politics. Consciousness-raising organizers saw themselves as engaging

²⁷ Kathie Sarachild, “Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon” in *Feminist Revolution, Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1973), 144-150.

²⁸ Julie Arnold, “Consciousness-Raising” in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara A. Crow (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 289.

in an activity of theorizing because they were collectively self-defining a common ground upon which to frame a feminist politics. Through this exchange of experiences, the participants construct relations of similarity with each other which would then serve to theorize a commonly shared condition of womanhood. Only when there is a shared condition of womanhood, a shared constructed social identity of womanhood, can an action-oriented group politics emerge. Experience in the context of feminist consciousness-raising functioned to bridge theory and practice by being both revelatory of a common struggle as well as by linking subjects into a shared context of oppression and under a shared identity of womanhood. These two factors combined allowed for the constitution of a feminist politicization of personal lived experiences. Consciousness-raising practices sought to render experience politically meaningful by engaging it with others; that is, by bringing to light the common patterns of oppression that impacted the lives of women. As Judith Grant describes it:

“feminist activists understood that it was not just the experience of living as a subject under patriarchy that was important; it was to be the crucial addition of self-conscious reflection about that experience that enabled the female experience to be transformed into feminism.”²⁹

Indeed, the raw and immediate recounting of a personal experience needed to be engaged through a process in order for it to be politicized into ‘feminism.’ One of the ways that experience could be rendered politically meaningful to feminism, is through revealing its sharedness, its similarities or parallels with the experiences of others. This sharedness is precisely political because it is evidence of a common condition of oppression. The way that experience was politicized through consciousness-raising practices was grounded on the assumption that experience *by itself* is insufficient for saying something politically salient. If the immediate raw personal experience is insufficient for saying something that could advance the political aspirations of feminism, how then can personal experiences can be turned into something politically meaningful for feminism? What kind of interpretative process must experience undergo in order to advance the political aspirations of feminism?

²⁹ Judith Grant, “Experience” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch, Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 231.

For bell hooks, to speak about one's experience can only have political salience if that experience is contextualized within a wider network of social and political relations.³⁰ She writes:

“feminist movements should not deny the importance of naming and giving voice to one's experience. It must be continually stressed that this is only part of the process of politicization, one which must be linked to education for critical consciousness that teaches about structures of domination and how they function.”³¹

Indeed, for hooks, there is value in naming one's experience, however the process of naming is insufficient for politicization. Instead, hooks suggests a process by which experience is contextualized such that the material conditions that have rendered experiences of oppression possible are made apparent. On hooks' understanding, politicization means to make apparent the conditions of oppression. She notes that there is a distinction to be made between “experiencing oppression and understanding the particular structure of domination that is the cause.”³² Hooks adds:

“Politicization necessarily combines this process (the naming of one's experience) with critical understanding of the concrete material reality that lays the groundwork for that personal experience.”³³

On hooks' account, the political substance of experience must be made apparent and not merely assumed. It is not enough to merely name or give a report of one's experience, an experience must also be contextualized within wider material conditions as well as relations of power. For hooks, the process by which an experience can be interpreted such that it is rendered politically meaningful must be importantly collective and pedagogical. This is made apparent in her work on radical pedagogy in which hooks advances the classroom as a site where experience should be collectively placed within its “theoretical context.”³⁴ Hooks therefore advances the importance of

³⁰ bell hooks, “Feminist Politicization: A Comment,” in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 107-108.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

³² *Ibid.*, 107.

³³ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

experience as a source for theorizing wider material, cultural and discursive arrangements and how such arrangements come to constitute an experience as one of oppression.

The collective process described by hooks echoes some of the mechanisms adopted by feminist consciousness-raising practitioners. In particular, consciousness-raising sought to systematically relate individual women's experiences to a shared axis of patriarchal oppression. Where hooks departs from consciousness-raising is in her emphasis on material relations which can plausibly allow for a more multifaceted critique of power with a particular sensitivity for analyzing experience as being located at the junction of multiple overlapping power relations and intersecting axes of oppression. The feminist inquiry into the political salience of experience demonstrates different practices for engaging experience through a collective process of interpretation that can render an experience politically meaningful. While for hooks this process entailed a collective process of contextualizing an experience, for early feminist consciousness-raising practitioners this meant engaging experience with others in order to make generalizations about women's shared condition of oppression under heteropatriarchy.

Drawing on consciousness-raising practices and hooks' account of the politicization of experience, I advance a distinct view of feminist politics as emerging from the critical theorization of experience. In this view, I see personal experience not as inherently political but as becoming politically charged through collective interpretation and reflection. Feminist politics thus materializes when individual accounts of suffering and violence are situated within material and discursive structures sustaining patriarchal oppression in as much as racial and classed forms of oppression. Thus, I do not conceive feminist politics simply as recounting experiences of suffering, but as critically analyzing and challenging the structural conditions that produce those experiences as well as the relational transformations that emerge from the sharing and collective interpretation of these experiences.

The starting point of this thesis is therefore a diagnosis that the current disclosure practices that have come to qualify rape survivorship as a distinct mode of being treat experience as immediately and self-evidently politically salient. Indeed, current disclosure practices treat rape experiences as if their political substance speaks for themselves. Yet, the excessive focus on

recounting the experience and naming the experience has eclipsed any sustained consideration of the conditions that have rendered rape possible in the first place. In other words, the disclosure practices that have come to qualify rape survivorship as a distinct mode of being are insufficient for politicizing experience. Moreover, #MeToo's disclosure structure insufficiently engages experiences with each other resulting in a lack of engagement between survivors.

Within the framework of this thesis, patriarchy cannot be understood as a single or static system of male domination, but rather as a complex network of intersecting power relations. These relations shape how sexual violence is experienced, narrated, and made politically legible. When movements like #MeToo treat experiences of rape as self-evidently meaningful, they risk obscuring the ways that patriarchy operates differently across race, class, sexuality, and other axes of social power. A feminist politics attentive to patriarchy must therefore resist universalizing categories of womanhood and survivorship, understanding them not as fixed or homogenous identities but as relational positions shaped by intersecting systems of power. Such a feminist politics calls for forms of solidarity grounded in critical engagement with difference, rather than in assumptions of shared experience or commonality. In other words, it must instead attend to how patriarchal structures configure different kinds of vulnerability and privilege within womanhood and survivorship. This approach foregrounds the importance of contextualization, revealing that what makes rape possible is not only sexual domination but a constellation of socioeconomic and cultural relations that sustain gendered hierarchies.

My diagnosis is echoed in Alcoff and Gray's argument that the emphasis placed on self-narration in survivor speech obscures how experience is itself embedded within a set of existing narratives about gender, sexuality, race, etc.³⁵ According to Alcoff and Gray, the excessive focus on recounting personal experiences posits these experiences as mere reports where doing so obscures how one's understanding of one's experience is at least in part discursively mediated.³⁶ Obscuring the discursive mediation of experience, in turn, risks essentializing personal narratives of rape as well as the identities of experiencing subjects. For example, it risks rendering personal

³⁵ Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" *Signs* 18, no. 2 (1993), 283.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

narratives of rape as evidence of women's essential nature as helpless victims in need of protection. As Alcoff and Gray write:

“To become the theorists of our own experience requires us to become aware of how our subjectivity will be constituted by our discourses and aware of the danger that even in our own confessionals within autonomous spaces we can construct ourselves as reified victims or as responsible for our own victimization.”³⁷

Here, Alcoff and Gray's point about the essentialization of experience relates to an example that was raised earlier about shame. Indeed, when experience is treated as immediately politically salient, narratives of rape in which survivors experience shame might, in turn, treat shame as if it were an inherent feature of the rape experience. Yet, the association of shame with rape is gendered discursive construction that has been historically associated with the idea that a woman's honor is robbed from her when she is raped where her honor rests in the purity of her sex.³⁸ Interpreting an experience of rape must not, therefore, reassert feelings of shame as an essential feature of the experience but rather contextualize shame within wider conceptual schemas that have discursively linked rape with shame, how this association is also historically gendered, and how this association furthers the gendering of rape.

The point to be taken from Alcoff and Gray is that experience is central to the disclosure practices of rape survivorship because the narration of these experiences are framed by existing ideas, conceptual schemas, and discourses not only about rape, but also about gender, about who is vulnerable to being raped, about who is capable of rape perpetration, among many more. Experience is therefore mediated by ideas, conceptual schemas and discourses in ways that require an interpretation into how these undergird the meaning that one ascribes to an experience or how narrating one's experience might perpetuate them. When experience is treated as immediately politically salient, it may omit the discursive mediation of these experiences and therefore reproduce these categories in relation to rape.

³⁷ Ibid., 283-284.

³⁸ Mithu Sanyal, *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (London: Verso, 2016), 38.

The discursive mediation of experience is important to take seriously particularly when experiences are being called upon to advance a political project of visibility. Indeed, if experience is discursively mediated, it is also important to call into question what exactly is being made visible with these disclosures and what kind of political meaning can be ascribed to them. Only then can there be an action-oriented politics that might be able to effectively resist rape and sexual violence emerge.³⁹ Taken on its own, narrative experience can obscure the broader context and conditions that have enabled that experience to occur in the first place. Without contextualizing experience, the subversive potential of survivor discourse more broadly is far from certain. In doing so, disclosure practices that qualify rape survivorship might serve to uphold dominant discourses rather than interrogate them through their uncritical appeal to experience.

Another way that the substance of experiences is seen to be treated as self-evident, as immediately given, is in the relation of equivalence that is created between survivors. As I mentioned earlier, the #MeToo movement builds similarity between survivors where each rape experience, no matter how different experientially and structurally, is treated as the same insofar as it ultimately pertains to rape. The #MeToo movement builds an equivalence between rape experiences which will ultimately come to constitute a shared identity of survivorship. It functions, as I suggested earlier in the introduction, through the bracketing of the particularity of rape experiences and focusing on what all experiences share in common: namely, that they all constitute a rape. Like consciousness-raising, the #MeToo movement sought to build a symmetrical relation between survivors that is grounded on a shared experience of rape: survivors are bound to each other by the fundamental sharedness of the experience of rape. This sharedness is what allowed #MeToo to gain in scale. The clue is in the name #MeToo, the whole point was for survivors to be able to see their experience of oppression being reflected in each other. Rather than thinking of one's experience as isolated and unusual, survivors could engage with each others' experiences and say 'Me Too.' However, as I noted earlier, there are risks and limitations to the 'metoo-ness' of #MeToo; that is, there are risks and limitations to the immediate sense of resonance that one feels when they recognize and feel their experience being reflected in others' experience. Those risks involve obscuring the different relations of power

³⁹ See also Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience" *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991), 773-797.

and intersecting axes of oppression that occur in each rape relative to another. Moreover, overstressing the relationship of sameness between survivors of rape risks also reproducing power imbalances within anti-rape solidarity movements. Thus, in the same way that experiences are not immediately politically salient, neither is the similarity and sharedness between experiencing subjects. The relationship between experiences and between experiencing subjects must also itself be scrutinized.

If disclosure practices are to remain a core feature of rape survivorship, then it is of the utmost importance that appeals to lived experiences of rape can be engaged in a process of interpretation that can render that experience politically meaningful. In other words, there is a need for a disclosure structure to be able to render rape experiences meaningful to the political aspirations of feminism. This thesis attends to this predicament by advancing a feminist practice for survivors of rape to engage cross-experientially in ways that can provide the conditions for a meaningful politicization of their rape experience. Indeed, this thesis theorizes a feminist cross-experiential methodology for a survivor-led politics aimed at challenging the conditions that sustain rape and sexual violence. To do so, I defend the importance of engaging survivors experiences of rape to drive a feminist practice of rape survivorship that is capable of mapping the plural sites and relations of power that render rape possible. Through engaging experiences with each other, the feminist practice that I advance also pays critical scrutiny to the kinds of equivalences that are assumed between survivors. More specifically, this practice seeks to work from the immediately apparent commonality of a shared experience of rape and moves towards revealing its plural configurations in order to demonstrate the different power relations operating both within different experiences and between survivors.

III. The Thesis, Its Objectives and Contributions

I begin from the assumption that rape is imbricated within a network of overlapping and intersecting power relations that result from gendered socialization, economic precarity, violent

housing policy, anti-immigration policy, and institutionalized forms of racism.⁴⁰ All of these structural factors matter in determining the meaning of rape at the experiential level and demonstrate the need to contextualize each particular experience of rape within a broader set of power relations. Rape is the nexus of overlapping, intersecting power (material and discursive) asymmetries, two of which are never identically the same. Mapping the constellation of power relations that render rape possible becomes the primordial task of engaging experience. In turn, the cross-experiential methodology that I advance seeks to map rape within that complex network of intersecting power relations through a collective exchange and critical interpretation of survivor's lived experiences. This thesis is therefore committed to theorizing a cross-experiential disclosure structure that can reveal the plural configurations of power that all operate under the category of rape. This cross-experiential model offers a concrete alternative to the limited disclosure politics of the #MeToo movement that I spelled out in the earlier sections of this introduction.

One of this thesis' most significant contributions is the distinct role that I grant to the particularity and mutual irreducibility of experience. My argument asserts that each experience of rape is irreducible. That is to say, that no two experiences of rape are ever meaningfully identical, configuratively symmetrical, or substitutable with each other. As I argue in this thesis, the mutual irreducibility of experience is instrumental to survivors giving political meaning to their experience of rape when it is engaged in a cross-experiential practice. This is because it can bring to light how survivors and their rape experience are asymmetrically situated with respect to each other within a wider network of intersecting and overlapping power relations. I argue that rape must be engaged cross-experientially, where the particularity of others' experiences functions relative to one's own making apparent the asymmetrical relations between survivors. In turn, I contend that the collective process by which participants recognize their mutual asymmetrical positioning in relation to each other can allow survivors to shed light on the plural axes of power that have rendered rape possible. The most significant contribution of this thesis is my elaboration of a methodology for using the mutual irreducibility of experience for the

⁴⁰ See bell hooks, "Racism and Feminism" in *Ain't I a Woman* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 144-145. See Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2019). Mithu Sanyal, *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo*, (London: Verso, 2016), 85-115. Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics" in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 314-343.

purpose of revealing the different configurative power relations contained within rape. In doing so, my thesis posits the mutual irreducibility of experiences of rape experiences as a valuable revelatory source for mapping the plural subjects, bodies, meanings, and harms implicated in rape. In line with my earlier formulation of feminist politics as a collective theorization of experience, the model that I advance enables survivors to critically analyze the plurality of structural conditions that rendered each iteration of rape possible in the first place. It does so while transforming survivors' relations to each other thus actively interrogating, revising and expanding the category of survivorship such that it might eventually include all survivors,

Returning for a moment to bell hooks' conception of the politicization of experience: hooks argues that personal experiences must be placed within their particular material context in order for them to become politically salient. My thesis broadly aligns with bell hooks' view of politicization of experience as requiring a contextualization of personal experiences within a wider set of structural material relations of power. Where I depart from hooks is in the distinct role of mutual irreducibility to get to the kind of politicization that she advances. Whereas hooks' account argues that politicization occurs through the contextualization of an experience of suffering into a structure. In contrast, my approach argues that the politicization of experience requires survivors to continuously question how they are related to each other and, indeed, to re-evaluate the terms under which they understand their similarities and differences in relation to each other. In doing so, the cross-experiential methodology that I advance posits that it is not enough for experiences to be placed within their wider context, I also argue that the relations of commonality and sharedness that are assumed to underlie rape must also be interrogated. These must be interrogated not in order to be disproved, but rather complexified to reveal the plurality of embodied subjectivities implicated in rape. This process is especially important for preventing the essentializing of experience and the identities that would otherwise be at risk of being reproduced through appeals to experience.⁴¹ The practice that I advance uses the mutual irreducibility of experience as a revelatory source to reveal the plural forms and meanings that rape can take by locating them within a wider network of power relations. It does so by revealing how survivors are asymmetrically situated relative to each other. In short, the aspirations of this

⁴¹ See also Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" *Signs* 18, no. 2 (1993), 283.

thesis are to harness the lack of equivalences between experiences of rape in order to galvanize survivor-led cross-experiential practice. This practice, I argue can lead to a collective critique of power configurations that render subjects especially vulnerable to sexual violence, albeit differently vulnerable.

The political substance of the practice that I advance is also contained within the procedure itself, in that it ignites a transformative process for its participants. It is transformative not only because it will demand that participants situate their experience relative to the experience of others within asymmetrical power relations. It is also transformative because it will result in a renewed understanding of one's relation to others where previously held assumptions of commonality and difference are necessarily reconfigured by engaging in the cross-experiential methodology that I advance. Here, the mutual irreducibility of experience plays a key role in allowing for this process to take place because it imposes the demand of continuously inquiring into how this mutual irreducibility exists between two experiences or two subjects. This mutual irreducibility will also be revelatory of how certain discourses have obscured this mutual irreducibility by inculcating certain presumptions of similarity and difference between subjects. The political substance of the feminist cross-experiential practice of rape survivorship that I advance is therefore located in the procedure itself. What is being transformed is not just the experience but also the way that participants understand their own asymmetrical positioning relative to others. This intersubjective process which continuously interprets experiences in relation to others in addition to the relation between experiencing subjects is what I refer to as a 'cross-experiential hermeneutics.' Indeed, I refer to this as a cross-experiential *hermeneutics* insofar as this practice does not seek to better understand the other, but rather to better understand *oneself in relation* to others, a point I elaborate on in more detail in Chapter 4 'Asymmetrical Experiences and Cross-Experiential Hermeneutics.'

This mutual irreducibility is especially important to preserve in an exchange that revolves around an apparently shared experience, as is the case in this thesis where I advance a cross-experiential survivor led practice for survivors of rape. Indeed, the practice that I advance in this thesis is between survivors who associate their experience with rape, although may not always directly refer to their experience as one of rape, a point I will return to in Chapter 2 'Speaking the

R-Word.’ Indeed, while all survivors might share the experience of having been raped, no two rape experiences are ever reducible to each other. This mutual irreducibility of experiences of rape does not relativise rape, but instead demonstrates the plurality of configurative power relations that render rape possible. There are important reasons to bring to light this plurality. First, it can bring to light how rape is implicated in a number of different power relations and used in different ways to produce different effects with the suffering that it inflicts. Second, it can bring to light how rape, at the experiential level, has different meanings for survivors and that they can define that meaning for themselves. Third, it can also show that survivors are not all the same, the conditions that have rendered their particularized experience of rape are not identical and can be brought to light. The process of pluralizing, of harnessing the mutual irreducibility and lack of equivalences between experience can be just as valuable, therefore, to politicizing experiences of rape through a cross-experiential practice of rape survivorship.

This dissertation is invested in elaborating a novel approach to feminist consciousness-raising practices for the purpose of theorizing rape from experience. Consciousness-raising practices are precisely interesting in the context of this thesis because they are a clear example of how feminist theorizing can be enacted through a collective cross-experiential exchange and practice. While consciousness-raising has largely disappeared as a feminist practice that is explicitly anchored towards the liberation of women, similar practices can be seen to exist in survivor-led spaces. Indeed, group discussion for the purposes of engaging one’s own lived experience with others remains one of the primary support mechanisms for rape survivors. Consider, for instance, Solace Women’s Aid ARISE programme, a six-week programme in the London borough of Haringey for women who have been affected by domestic abuse.⁴² Each week, survivors of domestic violence are invited for a group discussion on the six following questions and themes: “Is this abuse?”, “Why did it happen?”, “How will I ever be free?”, “What is love?”, “Why is it so hard to leave?”, and “How can I stay safe?” The ARISE programme is framed as a course with support, safeguarding and pedagogical outcomes. The pedagogical outcomes are clear: to reveal patterns of abuse and different configurations of coercive controlling relations. Unlike classical consciousness-raising groups, the ARISE programme is run by mediators who have a

⁴² Solace Women’s Aid, *Arise Haringey Leaflet*, Last modified April 25. <https://www.solacewomensaid.org/our-services/solace-haringey/>.

distinct role in guiding and mediating discussion. However, the group is catered for exchanging experience and, in doing so, to reveal the plural configurations of domestic abuse to survivors themselves. This is one example of a feminist practice that is aimed at thinking about domestic abuse from experience and that seeks to actively engage that experience across differently situated subjects.

Many spaces for survivors of rape are framed as therapeutic services aimed at supporting survivors as they heal from their trauma. North London Rape Crisis, for instance, offers a range of group therapeutic services for survivors of sexual violence and rape.⁴³ While these groups are framed as spaces of healing, their function is much more multifaceted. Indeed, part of the function of these groups is to allow survivors to develop their own language around their experience and to experiment with terminology for how to name or conceptualize their rape experience. As I mentioned earlier, helpline services are especially important for first-time disclosures partly because helplines are anonymous and anonymity gives a significant amount of freedom for survivors to explore different ways of recounting their experience. More broadly, however, both helpline services and therapeutic group discussion for rape survivors is important because it permits survivors to develop narrative agency. However, helpline services are politically limited being an exchange between a survivor and a practitioner rather than an exchange between survivors. Indeed, while these services are crucial for enabling survivors to find the terms and language through which to articulate their experience, such spaces of disclosure are also limited because they are mainly designed for individual survivors to make sense of their own experience. As Carine Mardorossian argues, the depoliticization of rape survivorship has been accelerated by the fact that they are dealt with by professional agencies and professional therapeutic services.⁴⁴ While these agencies are crucial for offering concrete support for survivors, they are ineffective spaces for politicizing survivors' experiences of rape.

⁴³ Solace Women's Aid. "Solace Rape Crisis." Accessed Jan 21, 2025. <https://www.solacewomensaid.org/solace-rape-crisis/>.

⁴⁴ Carine M. Mardorossian, "Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape" *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27, no.3 (2002), 743-775.

Critics of consciousness-raising and of group practices to the likes of the ARISE program that I describe above have argued that such group practices are much too therapeutic.⁴⁵ Consciousness-raising has been challenged on the grounds that “it moves politics into the realm of the personal and the individual and emphasizes individual transformation at the expense of struggle in larger social space.”⁴⁶ That is to say, in overemphasizing the politicization of *personal* narratives, consciousness-raising ended up creating a sphere in which individuals are empowered at the expense of an effective group politics. Consciousness-raising is limited because the transformative aspects of this kind of group engagement seem to be too individualized: individuals come to realize the source of their oppression and can choose to change their own lives according to what they have learned. This echoes aspects of my earlier critique of the current disclosure practices that qualify rape survivorship as a distinct mode of being: while such disclosure practices empower survivors in their capacity to speak, they remain limited in reflecting intersubjectively on their experience and the conditions that have rendered their rape possible.

With these criticisms, the model for a group practice that I have in mind resembles a support group insofar as it reunites survivors who already consider themselves to be survivors, and who therefore have already engaged in disclosure practices around their experience of rape. However, it diverges by centering a process of collective reflection on the asymmetrical and irreducible character of survivor experiences. The group meets regularly in a survivor-led setting. Each session begins with participants taking turns to share their experiences or reflections related to a common theme or question pertaining to their experience of rape. Everyone has uninterrupted time to speak and to be heard, which creates space for full expression. After this initial phase of recounting, the group enters into the hermeneutic phase of the exchange where survivors collectively explore how their experiences relate or diverge and examine how power and social positioning affect their perspectives on survivorship. Through this exchange, the group engages a cross-experiential hermeneutics not to learn about others, but to better understand how one’s experience is situated relative to the experience of others. The emphasis remains on preserving

⁴⁵ See Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray “Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?” *Signs* 18, no. 2 (1993), 283. Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women’s Liberation* (New York: Longman, 1975). Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Boston: Hall, 1983).

⁴⁶ Linda Martin Alcoff and Laura Gray “Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?” *Signs* 18, no. 2 (1993), 286.

the complexity of experiences and harnessing the lack of equivalences without seeking a consensus over a shared narrative, or shared experience, or shared identity.

While support groups often focus on offering survivors language and space to articulate their trauma, my approach seeks to generate political substance through engaging these diverse rape experiences with each other. In doing so, the model for a cross-experiential practice that I advance seeks to map rape's plural configurations and underlying power structures by demonstrating how different experiences stand relative to each other. This survivor-led process fosters an ongoing cycle of disclosure, reflection, and politicization that resists the therapeutic approaches that have depoliticized consciousness-raising groups. The continual exchange around differences and commonalities opens the possibility for survivors to collectively theorize how intersecting power dynamics shape their experiences and survivorship. In doing so, disclosure becomes more than sharing experiences, it becomes a dynamic political practice aimed at transforming the relationship between survivors and between experiences. My model for a group engagement transforms group disclosure into an ongoing, self-reflexive, and politically engaged process, where survivors collaboratively theorize and politicize their experiences to resist homogenizing narratives and foster a more inclusive, intersectional feminist practice of rape survivorship.

If consciousness-raising was criticized for advancing a far too individualized transformation, the practice that I advance in this thesis seeks to avoid this problem. As I mentioned earlier, my model uses the mutual irreducibility of experience as a mechanism for survivor-participants to reflect on their asymmetrical relation with respect to each other. Here, the mutual irreducibility of experience functions as a way to continuously question the relation of similarity and difference that one assumed to have prior to entering the cross-experiential exchange. While the transformation operates at the individual interpretative level, it remains socially-minded because what is being transformed is one's perceived relation to others who seemingly share an experience with them. The mutual irreducibility is thereby radically self-reflexive insofar as it will demand of participants in the cross-experiential exchange to continuously examine the capacity under which they are asymmetrically situated in relation to others. Thus, my distinct use of the mutual irreducibility of experience posits experience as a source for relational

self-reflexivity. In doing so, my model for a cross-experiential practice of rape survivorship is able to ignite a collective transformation.

In my thesis, the practice of rape survivorship that I advance is specifically designed for survivors of rape who are willing to politicize that experience. It is a cross-experiential methodology for survivors of rape who want to transform their experience into one that has the potential for being rendered politically meaningful. This practice would be a collective process of interpretation in which each survivor can engage the particularity of their experience in relation to others. Here, I argue that the particularity of others' rape experience functions relative to the particularity of others' experience. This practice is akin to consciousness-raising insofar as my approach starts from experience and uses this experience to bring to light the mechanisms that have rendered systematized forms of oppression. However, where it departs from consciousness-raising practices is in my conception of the political substance that can emerge from the mutual irreducibility of experience.

While this thesis is, broadly speaking, a work of feminist political theory it is equally a work of feminist methodology dedicated to theorizing the logic and aims underpinning a new model for a cross-experiential practice. My intervention into the scholarship on rape is therefore primarily methodological: I am invested in theorizing a practice that can engage survivors' particular rape experiences with each other in ways that can bring to light rape's plural configurations as well as the plurality of survivorship. Through this thesis, I elaborate a view of feminist politics as a hermeneutic practice that uses experience as a tool for critical reflection and for reflecting on relations between subjects engaged in a cross-experiential exchange. I call for survivors to engage relationally through structures like the cross-experiential approach, which acknowledges the irreducibility of each experience while recognizing the asymmetrical power relations that shape those experiences. This approach challenges essentialist categories of womanhood, victimhood, and survivorship and reorients feminist group practice toward revealing differences to foster new self-reflexive relations between subjects. Ultimately, I contend that a feminist politics of rape survivorship can reconstruct the terms of its group practices without reproducing an assumed sameness between survivors but rather through a critical, contextualized understanding of plural experiences of rape.

To this end, this thesis will proceed in five chapters. In Chapter 1 ‘On the Possibility of Theorizing Rape from Experience’ I advance a case for theorizing rape from experience against what I refer to as ‘essence-led’ theories of rape. ‘Essence-led’ theories of rape bracket the subject conditions of each particular experience of rape in order to distill its unmoving, essential properties. In contrast, theorizing rape from experience preserves the subjective conditions of rape and uses that particularity to unmask the operation power. To elaborate this point, I build from Ann Cahill’s conception of rape as embodied experience where she posits rape as particularized at the level of embodiment.⁴⁷ Cahill asserts that embodiment is the central and irreducible element of rape. All rape happens to embodied subjects, but because each body is socially marked and situated differently, rape experiences carry different meanings and harms for different people. Through centering embodiment, it is possible to theorize the mutual irreducibility of rape where no two lived experiences of rape are ever meaningfully identical or configuratively symmetrical. Through centering individual subjectivity and the particularity of rape experiences, Cahill’s approach offers the possibility of theorizing rape from experience. Doing so reveals how social meanings and power structures shape not only the occurrence of rape but also how it is experienced, understood, and responded to. In this chapter, I also argue that theorizing rape from experience will not unsettle the category of rape but, rather, reconfigure the category of rape as a ‘cluster concept.’ Drawing on Natalie Stoljar’s concept of a “cluster concept,”⁴⁸ I propose that rape be conceptualized not as a fixed essence but as a category formed through overlapping similarities across varied experiences. The chapter concludes by calling for a cross-experiential practice that grounds this experiential construction of the concept of rape.

In Chapter 2 ‘Speaking the R-Word: Survivor Silence, Epistemic Injustice and Representational Transparency,’ I explore the problem of survivor silence and of speaking rape on one’s own terms. Here, I disentangle the aspirations of this thesis from Miranda Fricker’s framework of epistemic injustice.⁴⁹ I do so by offering a reading of Fricker’s paradigm of epistemic justice as relying on transparency in which representational resources would be able to create a thick form of epistemic symmetry between members of an epistemic community. Here, each experience can be represented in the same way to all other members of the epistemic community. I argue that

⁴⁷ Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ Natalie Stoljar, “Essence, Identity, and the Concept of Woman” *Philosophical Topics* 23, no.2 (1995), 261-293.

⁴⁹ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Justice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Fricker seems to rely on an ideal of transparency in which concepts can create a symmetrical epistemic relation between knowers such that the knowledge held by one knower can be made interchangeable with the knowledge held by another. In contrast, I suggest that the lack of equivalence between understandings of rape are crucially important and politically generative. They are generative not because they can refine concepts and create a better understanding for all, but rather because they signal a possible divergence that might be the result of a power imbalance. In turn, I argue that the aspiration to create epistemic uniformity between an experiencing subject does not align with the aspirations of this thesis which centers the importance of the particularity of experience and its narration as an important resource for mapping the power asymmetries that are implicated in rape.

In Chapter 3, ‘Feminism and Experience: Between Essentialism and De-politicized Particularity’ I intervene in a long-standing debate within feminism in relation to the category of experience. In this debate, experience has been both vindicated as a critical source for feminism as well as criticized for reifying essentialist categories. On the one hand, personal experiences were seen as an important source for making visible women’s experiences which had previously been obscured, confined to the home, and overall dismissed as politically irrelevant. On the other hand, the category of experience has been set in question for re-entrenching existing identity categories, including the category of ‘woman’, without interrogating how these categories came to exist in the first place. This tension between an essentialism that reifies the category of woman and a depoliticized particularity that cannot adequately recognize common oppression maps onto the debate on experience when experiential evidence either overinflates a shared social condition at the expense of particularity, or overemphasizes its uniqueness stripping experience of its political substance.

Responding to this tension, I defend the importance of lived experience as a source for feminism broadly conceived. In particular, I argue that experience is an important source for feminism precisely because it is capable of igniting resonance and dissonance between experiencing subjects in ways that can be instrumental both for a feminist critique of power and also for an action-oriented feminist group politics. However, I caution how appeals to experiential evidence might be conducive to essentialism. The worry of essentialism, however, need not halt appeals to

experience but can be mitigated in the practice of engaging in experience. I thereby argue that experience is at risk of essentialism when the resonance and dissonance that it ignites between experiencing subjects is taken to be self-sufficient grounds to construct generalizations about women and their shared social reality. Instead I advance an alternative practice which is both relational and self-reflexive for engaging experience, where experiencing subjects will continuously and open-endedly interrogate the resonance and dissonance that experience has created. I do so by centering the mutual irreducibility of experience as instrumental for making possible this continuous interrogation into the terms of sameness that are contained in the sentiment of resonance and dissonance when engaging with the experiences of others. I argue that experience can be a source for feminism when it is capable of interrogating the terms of sameness that are affixed to a given experience. Such an interrogation into the terms of sameness is only possible if experience is engaged in its embodied particularity with others. It also effectively negotiates the aforementioned tension between essentialism and depoliticized particularism, opening new possibilities for reimagining feminist consciousness-raising practices as a collective cross-experiential critical practice. This reimagined approach to consciousness-raising presents a radically inclusive model for cross-experiential engagement, opening up possibilities for a practice of rape survivorship that is capable of being galvanized into a group politics that can resist rape and sexual violence.

In Chapter 4 ‘Asymmetrical Experiences and Cross-Experiential Hermeneutics,’ I advance the cross-experiential hermeneutic model that seeks to reveal how experiencing subjects are asymmetrically situated in relation to each other. I build my cross-experiential hermeneutics from Iris Marion Young’s account of “asymmetrical reciprocity.”⁵⁰ Against the stance of symmetry where one is only capable of engaging meaningfully with others “only insofar as one can see them like oneself,”⁵¹ an asymmetrical stance not only preserves asymmetrical relations but attempts to illuminate them continuously and open-endedly. Through my reading of Young, I demonstrate the value of positing a mutual irreducibility between asymmetrically positioned subjects as generative for a cross-experiential exchange primarily because it can bring to light the

⁵⁰ Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 38-59.

⁵¹ See Iris Marion Young “Introduction” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 6.

different ways in which subjects are structurally differentiated that would otherwise be obscured in a symmetrical stance. From here, I will elaborate on what I will refer to as a 'cross-experiential hermeneutics' whose objective is not to better understand the other, but rather to better understand *oneself in relation* to others. In so doing, this cross-experiential hermeneutics uses the mutual irreducibility of experience to reveal how subjects are asymmetrically situated in relation to each other and, in doing so, compelling the participants of the cross-experiential practice to reflect on their own position in relation to others. This practice, I contend, can render politically meaningful survivors' experience of rape as well as their relations to each other.

In Chapter 5 'Vulnerable Bodies, 'Rapeable' Subjects', I focus on the politics of the vulnerable body in relation to rape; that is, how ideas of bodily vulnerability are *built into* and *sustained by* the discourse of rape. Here, I turn to the problem that rape has been weaponized to advance a troublesome exclusionary politics and that this is done through essentializing women as inherently vulnerable to being raped, or as uniquely 'rapeable'. Through engaging critically with Judith Butler's ontological conception of vulnerability, I demonstrate the importance of having a practice that can demonstrate asymmetries of vulnerability between self-identified 'rapeable subjects.' In short, I advance a cross-experiential hermeneutical practice that would reveal how subjects are asymmetrically vulnerable in relation to each other. In this chapter, I attempt to demonstrate how the model for a cross-experiential practice that I advanced in previous chapters can be used to challenge the essentializing terms and categories that sustain ideas of vulnerability in relation to rape. This chapter, demonstrates how my methodology for a feminist practice that engages experience can be harnessed to unsettle the terms of sameness undergirding the idea of vulnerability in relation to rape that has worked to galvanize a revival of an undesirable and regressive essentialist sexual politics. It puts in practice the cross-experiential feminist practice that I advanced in previous chapters to effectively criticize the terms and categories that sustain the 'rapeable' body.

Chapter 1. On the Possibility for Theorizing Rape from Experience

This chapter will advance the importance and possibility of theorizing rape from experience. While later chapters in my thesis will elaborate *how* to theorize rape from experience, this chapter will focus on why theorizing rape from the lived experience of survivors offers a good alternative to existing modes of theorizing rape. This chapter also lays out key premises and conditions that make possible the theorizing of rape from experience. In this chapter, I defend why the particularity of lived experiences of rape and rape survivorship are important for theorizing the phenomenon of rape, specifically against what I am referring to as ‘essence-led’ theories of rape.⁵² More specifically, I argue that theorizing rape from experience brings to light the irreducible particularity of each experience of rape and this is important for three interrelated purposes. First, the particularity of each rape can serve to interrogate the rigid form, configuration and meaning that rape is assumed to necessarily take. Second, it can serve to uncover the varying power configurations that are invested in rape; mapping rape at the crosslights of overlapping and intersecting power relations broadens the scope of who is considered vulnerable to rape. Finally, it can serve as a means to pluralize survivorship in order to better include marginalized cases of rape while interrogating the essentialist identity categories that are too often affixed and reified in rape discourse.

To advance my case, I offer a critique of ‘essence-led’ approaches that theorize rape by identifying its core, unmoving, essential properties regardless of the subjective context in which a rape takes place. I qualify essence-led theories of rape as working through observing what all rape experiences have in common by bracketing the subjective conditions of embodiment as it is situated in a particular discursive and material environment. I argue that the impulse to bracket the subjective conditions of lived experiences of rape obscures the many ways in which rape is discursively enmeshed within a broader set of social and political narratives about gender, sexuality, and race. Rape is not just a legal category, or a concept: it is also a set of social narratives around ‘rapeable’ bodies, ‘rapeable’ subjects and how assumptions around the prism

⁵² I borrow the idea of rape as being having an ‘essence’ from Joanne Coneghan who offers a comprehensive approach to different ways in which essence is assumed in appeals to the discourse of rape. See Joanne Coneghan, “The Essence of Rape,” *The Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 39, no. 1 (2019), 151-182.

of victimhood/perpetration impacts believability in courts and in interrogation rooms.⁵³ It also impacts the capacity for someone to recognize their experience as one of rape. As Linda Alcoff puts it:

“Rape cultures produce a discursive formations in which the intelligibility of claims is organized not by logical argument or evidence, but by frames that set out who can be victimized, who can be accused, which are plausible narratives, and in what contexts rape may be spoken about (...).”⁵⁴

I argue that essence-led theorizing too quickly assumes its capacity to theorize the unmoving features of rape as immune from broader discursive forces. In fact, as I will outline in the first section of this chapter, essence-led theorizing is at risk of re-entrenching discursive formations as well as existing social and political narratives undergirding rape.⁵⁵

This chapter advances the possibility of theorizing rape from experience and why this can provide a strong alternative to essence-led approaches which seemingly define the experience of rape (its harm and its meaning) for survivors. This, in turn, risks further silencing the voices of survivors. Essence-led theorizing seeks to bring to light the fundamental commonality between rape experiences that would allow rape to be identifiable regardless of the subjective conditions under which a rape takes place. Yet, the subjective conditions under which rape takes place can never be fully removed from a survivor’s experience: those subjective conditions frame the meaning of a subject’s experience of rape. Theorizing rape from the particularity of experience begins from a subject’s experience of rape as it is enmeshed within its context both discursive and material. In contrast to essence-led approaches that seek to reveal the essential properties of rape in any given context, theorizing rape from experience conceives of the practice of

⁵³ This is a point I will also return to in the final chapter of the this Chapter 5 ‘Vulnerable Bodies, ‘rapeable’ Subjects’ where I discuss how how ideas of bodily vulnerability are *built into* and *sustained by* the discourse of rape.

⁵⁴ Linda Martin Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 10.

⁵⁵ See Ann Cahill, “Subjectivity and the Body” in *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 50-70. See also Sharon Marcus, “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention,” in *Feminists Theorizing the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 385-403. See also Mithu Sanyal, “Black-and-White Thinking: Racism and Rape Culture”, *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (London: Verso, 2016), 85-115. See also Joanna Bourke, “Sexed Bodies” and “Rapacious Bodies” in *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present Day*, (London: Virago Press, 2007), 5-20; 89-118.

‘theorizing’ as tied to the revealing of wider operations of power that have rendered rape in its plural meanings and configurations possible. In particular, I argued that the nuances and variations *between* two mutually irreducible experiences of rape, no matter how subtle, can bring to light how the subjective conditions of embodiment and situatedness impacts rape. That is, these nuances and variations between two particular experiences of rape can demonstrate how differently situated embodied subjects are also differently impacted by relations of power. The asymmetries between experiences of rape can thereby reveal the plural configurative power relations that all operate through rape.

As I will elaborate further in this chapter as well as in the remainder of this thesis, theorizing rape from experience requires a practice that begins from the asymmetries between experiences in order to reveal the many subjects, bodies, sites of violence, configurations, and power relations relative to rape. This aligns with the broader argument of my thesis which advances a feminist practice that has the potential to galvanize a politics of rape survivorship that challenge structurally and discursively produced axes of difference. While nuances of the subjective conditions of experience are entirely eclipsed in essence-led approaches to theorizing rape, and intentionally so precisely because essence-led approaches operate through bracketing the subjective conditions of rape in order to distill its unmoving properties. Theorizing rape from experience, in contrast, seeks to preserve and use the subjective conditions of experiences of rape to uncover the various forms of overlapping power relations that rendered a particular iteration of rape possible in the first place.

This chapter lays out what is required of the category of rape in order to be able to theorize it from experience. Against the idea that theorizing rape from experience will unsettle the category of rape such that the idea of rape will become relativized, I argue that the category of rape takes on a different structure entirely. Rather than being a category that describes an essence, the category of rape can become what Natalie Stoljar refers to as a ‘cluster concept’ which she derives from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea of ‘family resemblances’.⁵⁶ For Stoljar, concepts can take on the form of an assemblage of criss-crossing similarities such that they become a

⁵⁶ Natalie Stoljar, “Essence, Identity, and the Concept of Woman” *Philosophical Topics* 23, no.2 (1995), 261-293. See also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), sec. 66.

“resemblance class.”⁵⁷ Building off Stoljar, this chapter will argue that when rape is theorized from experience, the category of rape is not erased but, rather radically pluralized where instead of evoking a core essence, the category takes the form of a complex network of overlapping, intersecting axes none of which are entirely reducible to each other. However each particular experience resembles another in at least one capacity. There is not necessarily one capacity or property that connects all experiences together; instead, the experiences overlap and intersect in a number of different capacities, bounding the experiences into a cluster such that all of these experiences could be called ‘rape.’ Again, here, I argue that this new structure for envisioning the category of rape requires a cross-experiential practice that can supply the different axes of the cluster concept. In doing so, I set up the requirement for a practice that I will further develop in later chapters of this thesis.

Overall, this chapter advances the possibility for theorizing rape from experience. I argue that theorizing rape from experience brings to light the irreducible particularity of each experience of rape without, however, unsettling it as a category. The case I build in this chapter will proceed in three steps. First, I offer a critique of essence-led theories of rape that reduce the harm or meaning of rape to a universal essence. These approaches obscure the discursive constructions that undergird rape and, in doing so, risk reifying existing ontologies around sexuality and gender. Second, I argue against the essence-led process of bracketing the subject which erases the different experiences among individual survivors. Specifically, I argue that bringing to light the irreducible particularity of rape can reveal the plural configurations and meanings that all fall under the category of rape. Third, I will argue that rape does not lose its specificity nor does it become relativized when it is theorized from experience. Borrowing from Natalie Stoljar’s idea of gender as ‘cluster concept’, I argue that theorizing rape from experience means that the form of the category of rape is no longer an essential core but instead a network of overlapping and criss-crossing experiential axes.⁵⁸ I conclude the chapter by demonstrating the need for a cross-experiential practice to give substance to theorizing rape from experience; a practice I will elaborate in later chapters of the dissertation.

⁵⁷ Natalie Stoljar, “Essence, Identity, and the Concept of Woman” *Philosophical Topics* 23, no.2 (1995), 283.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 261-293.

I. Gendering Rape: Essence-Led Theorizing in the Sex-Versus-Violence Debate

In this section, I offer an overview of existing accounts of rape that offer an essence-led approach to its theorizing. What I am referring to as ‘essence-led’ approaches are those that attempt to identify the core, unmoving, essential properties of rape by bracketing the subjective conditions of an experience of rape. In doing so, essence-led approaches reduce all rape experiences to one core harm, wrong or meaning. In this section, I focus on elaborating a critique of essence-led approaches to theorizing rape by turning to the prominent *sex-versus-violence* debate in feminist theories of rape.⁵⁹ Here, I demonstrate how both approaches are invested in shaping the gendered sexual subjectivities that come to constitute rape. I argue that this is a problem because it risks reifying gendered subjectivities rather than reflecting on how these subjectivities emerged in the first place.

What is rape? What constitutes its harm? “What makes rape rape and not otherwise?”⁶⁰ What makes rape so morally repugnant such that any mention of the ‘r-word’ is itself sufficient to trigger a *malaise*, a distinct form of moral outrage? On the face of it, rape seems straightforwardly and self-evidently identifiable and recognizable. Yet, rape remains a contested category with a surprising lack of consensus or shared understanding as to what it really is, its boundaries with regards to ‘normal’ sex, the sort of harm that it inflicts.⁶¹ One way that the contested aspect of rape is made most apparent is in trying to delineate specifically what aspect of a person does the perpetration of rape violate: is it a person’s body? Is it a distinct *part* of a person’s body? Is it a person’s sexual agency? Or a person’s dignity or honor? As Joanne Conaghan writes, “the assumption that rape is a self-evidently meaningful term—that ‘rape is rape’—constantly jars with the practical and political irresolution characterising the discourse.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 1975). Catharine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). Catharine MacKinnon, “Rape Redefined,” *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 10, no. 2 (2016), 447.

⁶⁰ Joanne Conaghan, “The Essence of Rape,” *The Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 39, no. 1 (2019), 156.

⁶¹ For Joanna Bourke, rape is “an ‘essentially contested category’, infused through and through with political meaning.” See Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, (London: Virago, 2007), 8. For Joanne Conaghan, rape is “a category in crisis” because how difficult it is to identify a clear shared social and cultural meaning. See Joanne Conaghan, “The Essence of Rape,” *The Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 39, no. 1 (2019), 151-182.

⁶² Joanne Conaghan, “The Essence of Rape,” *The Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 39, no. 1 (2019), p152.

Indeed, the assumption that rape is straightforwardly meaningful seems to obscure how the straightforwardness of our moral outrage in relation to rape might be connected to a broader set of assumptions and attitudes we hold about gendered bodies, sexual subjectivities and sexuality more broadly. To inquire into the essential damage of rape, to inquire into its distinctiveness in comparison to other forms of assault, its special status, the source of its outrageous character, is to inquire into the *essence* of rape.⁶³

Yet, despite its contested character, the formulation of a clear definition of rape has been and remains important to feminism.⁶⁴ That feminist theorists should strive to fix the concept of rape – that is, to distinguish precisely how rape is a distinctive category and, more importantly, a distinctive and determinate wrong, is especially important to develop a legal structure that is better able to recognize and redress rape. Without a clear sense of what rape truly is, one runs the risk of allowing rape to be obscured or, worse yet, normalized such that those who perpetrate rape could perpetrate it again with impunity. After all, as Cahill puts it, “if we can’t say what rape ‘is’, how can we struggle against it?”⁶⁵ That is to say, without a clear sense of what rape is, it is unclear what the target of feminist resistance should be or indeed what kind of provisions can be put in place to prevent it. As Conaghan notes, when the essence of rape is seen as tied to certain kinds of socio-sexual relations or sexual practices that are seen to promote it, this will impact the role that the law should play in relation to rape prevention and the controlling of sexuality.⁶⁶

The essence of rape is also importantly attached to the way that one thinks about gender and sexuality. This is most apparent in the kind of gender relations that are often implied and therefore unquestioningly reproduced in essence-led approaches to rape. As Sanyal argues, “rape is the most gendered of all crimes. It’s also the crime that genders the most.”⁶⁷ To qualify rape as *gendered* suggests that rape pertains to the wider system of subordination that is, among race and

⁶³ Many feminists have questioned the special status granted to rape and the idea that rape is the worst thing that could happen to a woman short of murder. See Harriet Baber, “How Bad is Rape?” *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987), 125-138. See also Sharon Marcus, “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention,” in *Feminists Theorizing the Political*, Ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 385-403.

⁶⁴ See Mary Hawkesworth, “Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth” *Signs* 14, no. 3 (1989), 533-557.

⁶⁵ Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 9.

⁶⁶ Joanne Coneghan, “The Essence of Rape,” *The Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 39, no. 1 (2019), 157.

⁶⁷ Mithu Sanyal, *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (London: Verso, 2016), 8.

class, structured along the lines of gender. Conversely, the idea that rape is *gendering* suggests that the way rape is thought about, understood, reacted to, reproduces and re-entrenches gender relations as well as broader ideas about gender. To say that rape is *gendering* is to say that the entire discursive framework through which rape is understood and how its harm is conceptualized participates in constructing bodies and subjects along gendered lines, thus reproducing the discursive underpinnings of gendered relations of power rather than challenging them.

Feminist theories of rape have been locked between recognizing its gendered features at the risk of reproducing gender relations in the process. It is my contention that the recognition that rape is primarily gendered must be preserved. However, the manner in which a theory of rape participates in its gendering must be persistently interrogated; that is, for the way it constructs gendered sexual subjectivities, for the meaning it affixes to bodies, how these bodies act sexually, how these bodies experience sexuality. It is also my contention that essence-led theorizing risks either downplaying the gendered aspect of rape or insufficiently criticizing the manner in which theories of rape are gendering. This evidenced in the prominent debate between Susan Brownmiller's account of *rape-as-violence* against Catharine MacKinnon's account of *rape-as-sex* is one of the most prominent iterations of this attempt to locate the essence of rape.⁶⁸

Both Brownmiller and MacKinnon were engaged in essence-led theorizing by attempting to distill rape's essential character as either an essentially *violent* act or an essentially *sexual* act. This debate took a distinct political character insofar as both arguments locate the gender of rape as more or less important to understanding rape as well as setting up the right conditions for resisting rape. The problem faced by both interlocutors is that depending on whether rape was conceived as either violent or sexual had implications on the kinds of gendered subjectivities that are invested in rape, and therefore implied a wider conception of whether recognizing the gender of rape would advance or hold back feminist aspirations for a rapeless society. It also has implications on sexuality, the way that it is practiced, the boundaries of its permissibility, but importantly, on the way in which sexual agency is enacted by gendered subjects. Depending on

⁶⁸ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 1975). Catharine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). Catharine MacKinnon, "Rape Redefined," *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 10, no. 2 (2016), 447.

the extent to which rape is seen as inherent to gendered relations of power impacts, in turn, on one's understanding of sexual agency. Thus, both gender and sexuality are bound up in understandings of the essence of rape in equal measure. In what follows, I offer an exposition of how this link between essence-led theories of rape and gendering discursive formations is made apparent through the sex-versus-violence debate

Let me begin by considering Brownmiller's account that rape is reducible to violence; that is to say that rape is, in essence, violence. Brownmiller writes:

“rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of the would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear (...).”⁶⁹

Here, Brownmiller insists that to conceive of rape as essentially sexual risks undermining its violent nature. Indeed, it risks allowing the narrative that perpetrators of rape as overtaken by uncontrollable sexual desire instead of deliberately engaging in a violent act. Brownmiller's insistence on the violent essence of rape anticipates the concern that overinflating the connection between sex and rape might end-up working against women by making them somehow responsible for arousing sexual desire in men. Therefore, to desexualize rape, on Brownmiller's account, might reduce the sense of responsibility and shame that many survivors feel in the aftermath of a rape that they were somehow responsible for attracting the 'uncontrollable lust' of perpetrators.

Desexualized approaches to rape were defended especially by liberal feminists also on the grounds that to overemphasize the sexual nature of rape might further entrench the idea that women have a special relationship to their bodies and especially their sex.⁷⁰ Desexualized approaches to rape argue that the to overemphasize the sexuality of rape risks furthering the idea that a woman's entire sense of self, dignity and honor is dependent on and defined by her sexuality. It might further the idea that a woman's worth lies in the purity of her sex where rape

⁶⁹ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 1975), 506.

⁷⁰ See also Harriet Baber, “How Bad is Rape?” *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987), 125-138.

becomes an act that defiles women specifically. As Sanyal writes, such an understanding furthers the idea that “a woman – and only a woman – possessed something that could be stolen or destroyed by rape.”⁷¹ Overinflating the sexual nature of rape risked defining women according to their shared sexual vulnerability to being raped. Such understandings of rape posit women as always-already potential victims of rape, thereby furthering the idea that women’s sexuality is inherently passive and lacking in agency. Desexualized approaches to rape to the likes of Brownmiller’s pertain to the broader liberal humanist approach to gender equality.⁷² According to this view, gender equality meant erasing the specificities of femininity, the feminine body and the feminine experience, in order to assert that women were fundamentally no different from men and to reassert their sexual difference would be to reify women as essentially tied to their bodies.⁷³ As Ann Cahill explains:

“what mattered, in virtually all instances of political leadership, employment, or even matters of desire (...) was what was ‘inside’; when women (or other groups, most notably racial minorities) were perceived as mere ‘bodies,’ they were in effect dehumanized.”⁷⁴

In other words, liberal humanist feminist struggles for gender equality meant erasing gender differences that only ended up conflating women with their bodies, thus reifying the idea that women’s bodies impacted on their capacity to be seen as rational agents. What I am calling the liberal humanist strategy sought to frame women as no different to men in their capacity to reason, rendering the body essentially irrelevant to political agency and moral equality all together. Brownmiller’s desexualized approach to rape is an uptake of this liberal feminist strategy which involves questioning if not straight-up denying the relevance of the sexed body in determining the essence of rape. For Brownmiller, the essence of rape need not be articulated along sexed lines for it to be recognized as a distinct wrong. Indeed, rape need not be conceived as involving distinct sexed bodies in order to be conceived as a violent act. According to this

⁷¹ Mithu Sanyal, *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (London: Verso, 2016), 38.

⁷² Here, I borrow the term ‘humanist’ from Iris Marion Young’s distinction between humanist feminism and gynocentric feminism which she articulates in her essay “Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics.” See Iris Marion Young, “Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics” in *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 73-92.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁷⁴ Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 61.

logic, to remove sex from rape would allow survivors to be seen as humans, rather than as female bodies.

Desexualized conceptions of rape, however, seem to render rape indistinguishable from any other form of assault and, in doing so, risk obscuring the gendered features of rape. As Catharine MacKinnon pointedly asks “if rape is violence not sex why didn't he just hit her?”⁷⁵ Indeed, there seems to be something that is obviously sexual about rape where ignoring its sexual aspect would render rape indistinguishable from other forms of assault. Even Brownmiller struggles to maintain her own stance; she writes: “Yet the differences between rape and an assault or a robbery are as distinctive as the obvious similarities.”⁷⁶ Indeed, it is clear that unlike cases of theft or mere assault, rape invokes sexuality – or at least bodies in their sexual capacity. As Cahill puts it:

“the quality of the assault is marked indelibly by its invocation of not only the sexuality of the assailant, but also that of the victim. Simply put, it matters that sexuality is the medium of the power and violence that are imposed on the victim.”⁷⁷

Unlike robbery or assault, rape targets the sexuality of bodies, the sexuality of subjects. Sexuality, however, is difficult to theorize precisely because the sexuality of subjects is always-already gendered. That is to say, sexuality is already framed through gender such that the invocation of sexuality in acts of rape replicates existing ideas about male sexuality as active, violent, uncontrollable and women’s sexuality as passive and lacking in agency.⁷⁸ It matters that the sexed embodiment of victims/assailants are affixed gendered social meanings that impact the sexual configuration of rape.

Relatedly, the urgency to recognize the distinctiveness of rape is bound up with the wider project of recognizing gender-based violence and male violence against women as an integral part of

⁷⁵ Catharine MacKinnon, “Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: ‘Pleasure under Patriarchy’” *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989), 323.

⁷⁶ Susan Brownmiller in Ann Cahill *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 26.

⁷⁷ Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 27.

⁷⁸ See Mithu Sanyal, “Sex: No Means Yes, No Means No!” in *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (London: Verso, 2016), 9-35. Linda Martin Alcoff, “Sexual Subjectivity” in *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 110-148. Joanna Bourke, “Sexed Bodies” in *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present Day*, (London: Virago Press, 2007), 5-18.

patriarchal oppression. To qualify rape as a desexualized act of violence renders unfeasible the project of locating rape as pertaining to a wider pattern of patriarchal violence. The way that rape disproportionately targets and impacts feminized bodies signals it as pertaining to a wider iteration of patriarchal power, the recognition of which has historically been of special political significance to feminist struggles. Conceptualizing the essence of rape was therefore always attached to a further normative commitment to advancing the interests of women by recognizing rape as part of a broader pattern of gender-based oppression. The urgency to define the essence of rape, its fundamental properties that not only render it identifiable in any context but also render it distinct from other acts of violence, was therefore of crucial importance for the recognition and prevention of rape and gender-based violence.⁷⁹

Desexualized accounts of rape to the likes of Brownmiller's struggled to effectively recognize rape as an iteration of patriarchal oppression. Brownmiller's account argued that rape need not be seen as a sexual act in order to be recognized as patriarchal oppression. It suffices to see rape as a violent act of patriarchal power and, indeed, that recognizing the sexuality of the act risks conflating sex with power.⁸⁰ Against desexualized accounts of rape, MacKinnon argues that to qualify rape as violence that can be removed from sexuality "preserves the 'sex is good' norm by simply distinguishing forced sex as 'not sex' (...)." ⁸¹ Yet, for MacKinnon, it is clear that sex can be rape, especially in conditions of heterosexual patriarchy. Indeed, MacKinnon argues that to conceive of rape as strictly violence removes rape from being a quintessential feature of heteropatriarchal expressions of male violence.⁸² Instead, MacKinnon insists on the centrality of sexuality in rape, especially in the broader context of a heteropatriarchal order. More importantly, MacKinnon sees male sexual desires as framing the entire sexual culture in which women shape their preferences and participate in sexual activity. Here, women's sexual desire is shaped by a sexual culture that is heteropatriarchal.⁸³ Therefore, for MacKinnon, violence, coercion and

⁷⁹ Mary Hawkesworth, "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth" *Signs* (1989), pp. 533-557.

⁸⁰ For a critique of Brownmiller's separation of sexuality and power see Ann Cahill, "Feminist Theories of Rape: Sex or Violence?" in *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 15-36.

⁸¹ Catharine MacKinnon, "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: 'Pleasure under Patriarchy'" *Ethics* 99, no.2 (1989), 323.

⁸² Catharine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). Catharine MacKinnon, "Rape Redefined," *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 10, no. 2 (2016), 447.

⁸³ In response to the question "What do men want?" Catharine MacKinnon writes: "women bound, women battered, women tortured, women humiliated, women degraded and defiled, women killed. Or, to be fair to the soft core, women sexually available, have-able, there for them, wanting to be taken and used, with perhaps just a little light bondage (...). Perhaps gender must be maintained as a social hierarchy so that men will be able to get erections; or, part of the male interest in keeping women

sexual inequality not only constitutes the context in which sexuality takes place but shapes sexuality itself such that sexuality, in the context of heteropatriarchy, is always already intertwined with rape. MacKinnon writes:

“To speak of women’s consent with regard to sexuality is to ignore the fact that women’s sexuality is in large part, and perhaps entirely, shaped not by the desires of women themselves, but by social structure centered around the needs and desires of men.”⁸⁴

MacKinnon’s critique of pornography, and sadomasochistic pornography especially, contends that such practices participate in promoting a heterosexist imaginary of sexuality in which violence against women’s bodies is an integral feature of that sexuality. On her account, pornography promotes if not normalizes the sexual degradation and coercion of women such that it ultimately renders sexual violence against women culturally and socially permissible. For MacKinnon, it does so in part by shaping women’s sexual desire in accordance with the heterosexist imaginary where women come to desire their own sexual degradation by men. Here, sex and violence became so intertwined that rape is not only seen as permissible by heteropatriarchal sexual culture, but as ubiquitous under patriarchy.

MacKinnon’s argument on heteropatriarchal sexual culture offers the basis for a wider line of inquiry on consent. Indeed, if in the context of heteropatriarchy, rape and ‘normal sex’ become difficult to distinguish: what is the status of women’s consent and sexual agency by extension? On her account, women’s consent in the context of patriarchal domination is void insofar as women are not able to properly distinguish between ‘normal’ heterosexual sex and rape. On her account, women’s consent is distorted by heteropatriarchy because it renders consent compatible with coercion. She states:

down lies in the fact that it gets men up.” Catharine MacKinnon, “Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: ‘Pleasure under Patriarchy’” *Ethics* 99, no.2 (1989), 326-327.

⁸⁴ Catharine MacKinnon in Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 4.

“Coerced submission can merge with consent (...) because force and threatening conditions are so standard a feature of relations between women and men under conditions of sex inequality that they can look like sex.”⁸⁵

For MacKinnon, the broader context of coercion impacts the substance of women’s consent. Insofar as women’s sexual preferences are necessarily corrupted by violent and subordinating masculine sexual desire, their capacity to identify the difference between rape and ‘normal sex’ is completely warped. MacKinnon “puts pressure on what we mean by ‘consent’”⁸⁶ because she interrogates how the broader heteropatriarchal sexual culture interferes with women’s preferences, or indeed, how heteropatriarchy might coerce women in ways that are not immediately visible or discernable by women themselves.

As I see it, there are at least two important and valuable implications that emerge from MacKinnon’s account. First, MacKinnon’s account prompts feminists to radically question women’s quotidian sexual practices and preferences in the context of a patriarchal sexual culture that privileges men’s sexual desire. In doing so, it demands a continuous interrogation of the representations of women’s sexuality and the wider sexual culture altogether.⁸⁷ Second, MacKinnon’s account is valuable in its capacity to explain cases in which women ‘give in’ to having sex with a man in order to ‘avoid being raped’; she shows that these socially-imposed pressures impact women’s capacity to freely consent.⁸⁸ More broadly, MacKinnon is perhaps able to explain cases of grey rape that is, sexual experiences “that are non-criminal, but that leave

⁸⁵ Catharine MacKinnon, “Rape Redefined,” *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 10, no. 2 (2016), 447.

⁸⁶ Linda Martin Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 114.

⁸⁷ MacKinnon was criticized for her call for stricter regulation of sexual images and representations of sexuality that were, in her view, degrading to women. Here, critics were suspicious of the measure used to determine what counts as a degradation of women. MacKinnon was also criticized for allocating to the State the role of arbiter of these images. Critics suggested that such a negative strategy could rally feminist with neo-conservative political agenda that insisted on determining what was deemed good for women and women’s bodies. See Joanna Bourke “Violence, Politics, Erotics” in *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, (London: Virago, 2007), 435.

⁸⁸ Linda Martin Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 113-114.

us harmed and violated.”⁸⁹ Indeed, such cases might be iterations of a sexual culture that caters exclusively to men’s sexual gratification.

With that being said, however, MacKinnon’s account has sparked many critical responses. In particular, feminists have questioned the extent to which MacKinnon is capable of recognizing women as having any kind of sexual agency under patriarchy. On MacKinnon’s account women seem to have ‘malformed desires’ that impede on our capacity to freely choose. As I see it, MacKinnon’s critique seems to assume that authentic sexual desires can only exist outside of heteropatriarchy. For MacKinnon, the essence of rape lies in its sexuality; the meaning of rape is bound to how sexuality is practiced in heteropatriarchy. From this understanding, all of female sexuality is problematized under heteropatriarchy where women’s sexual preferences are determined by men. In relation to rape specifically, MacKinnon’s account seems to render the risk of rape ubiquitous under heteropatriarchy such that the risk of rape and vulnerability to rape becomes a central feature of womanhood under heteropatriarchal conditions. In problematizing rape as an iteration of heteropatriarchal sexuality, MacKinnon’s account seems to posit rape as an inevitability of heteropatriarchy where, as Sharon Marcus puts it, women are “either already raped or already rapeable.”⁹⁰ On MacKinnon’s understanding, rape and heterosexuality are so enmeshed in the context of heteropatriarchy, that the vulnerability to experiencing rape is made ubiquitous for straight cis-gendered women. In fact, it is so ubiquitous that for MacKinnon, rape actively constitutes the experience of womanhood. Rape, on MacKinnon’s account, plays a constitutive role in constructing female subjectivity.

Through surveying the *sex-versus-violence* debate, this section sought to demonstrate how essence-led theories of rape risk either downplaying the gendered aspect of rape or insufficiently criticize the gendering aspects of theorizing the essence of rape. Brownmiller’s account of rape-as-violence desexualizes rape that obscures how the sexed body is intimately impacted, effected, implicated by and in rape. It is to conceive of survivors of rape as disembodied abstract

⁸⁹ Columnist and essayist Reina Gattuso describes ‘grey rape’ as “Sex where we don’t matter. Where we may as well not be there. Sex where we don’t say no, because we don’t want to say no, sex where we say yes even, where we’re even into it, but where we fear (...) that if we did say no, if we don’t like the pressure on our necks or the way they touch us, it wouldn’t matter. It wouldn’t count, because we don’t count. (...) This feeling isn’t necessarily assault, but it is certainly on a continuum with it.” Reina Gattuso, “Rape Culture is a Contract We Never Actually Signed,” *Feministing*, 2016.

⁹⁰ Sharon Marcus, “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention,” in *Feminists Theorizing the Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 386.

individuals, thus undermining how gendered relations structure rape. MacKinnon's account of rape-as-sex overemphasizes the place of rape in heteropatriarchal sexuality such that the sexual subjectivity of women is entirely framed by their rapeability. Through reconstructing this dilemma, I sought to bring to light how essence-led approaches to rape sustain a number of discursive formations that risk either obscuring or perpetuating the very hierarchies that rendered rape possible in the first place. Most crucially, however, essence-led approaches function through bracketing subjective features of rape in order to distill what remains into its core harm and meaning. The decision of what can be bracketed from rape and what in turn cannot is political through and through. Indeed, the decision of what is 'bracketable' from rape is attached to wider discursive frames about the body, sexual agency, and gender. In what follows, I elaborate a mode of theorizing rape from experience which, instead of bracketing the subjective conditions of rape, will seek to begin with and preserve these subjective conditions as part of the process of theorizing. The alternative that I offer is thereby diametrically and methodologically opposed to essence-led approaches.

II. [Against Bracketing the Subjective] Theorizing From Experience

So far in this chapter, I have demonstrated some ways in which essence-led theories of rape participate in either obscuring the gendered aspects of rape or in discursively gendering subjects, bodies, and sexual subjectivities. In particular, I focused on how essence-led theories of rape produce distinct subjectivities along the lines of gender such that the configuration of 'rapeability' is structured strictly and essentially in accordance with existing views regarding gendered sexual subjectivity. Against essence-led approaches that bracket the subjective conditions of each individual experience of rape, this section will advance what it would mean to theorize rape from the particularity of experience and indeed, where to locate the particularity of rape. To do so, I think with and build off Ann Cahill's eponymous account of rape as embodied experience to advance what it would mean to theorize rape from the particularity of experience.⁹¹ Cahill's account is especially pertinent because through qualifying rape as an embodied experience, she creates the conditions for recognizing how rape is particularized at the level of embodiment: that is, at the level in which a person lives their body as it negotiate social meaning

⁹¹ Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

that has been built into it. The unit of analysis becomes the body because, on Cahill's understanding, embodiment is a fundamental site of particularity. Cahill's point that rape is an embodied experience is twofold: first, it clarifies the primacy of the body as the site of the harm of rape. Second, in locating rape within the body, Cahill is able to demonstrate how each experience of rape is particularized in its embodied capacity. I argue that Cahill's account sets up the possibility for theorizing rape from experience which, as I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, starts from the experience of embodied subjects and moves towards unmasking obscured operations of power. From Cahill's account of rape as embodied experience, I articulate the necessity for a practice that can allow for a cross-experiential engagement of rape as an embodied experience.

For Cahill, rape must be conceived and treated as an embodied experience thus positing rape as occurring to individual embodied and situated subjects. Yet, these individual embodied and situated subjects are not entirely individual because they are "marked and constructed by larger discourses (although never in a wholly determinate way)."⁹² Indeed, the fact that I experience my body as feminine, that I feel my body as the body of a woman is at least in part because of social meanings that have been affixed to my body from a young age that I have subsequently integrated as part of my experience as part of how I frame my bodily experience. My body is therefore not wholly my own, it is also social insofar as it is partly constituted by its social meaning, by the way that it is apprehended and received to those around me. The fact that bodies are partly constituted by larger discourses impacts the experience of embodied subjects, where the social meaning that is affixed to their bodies comes to partly constitute their embodied experience. The body, its social meaning and how that social meaning interacts with the experience therefore becomes a threefold prism through which to understanding the phenomena of rape, on Cahill's account. The turn to embodiment, for Cahill, centers the bodily experience of rape as it navigates the social meanings that have been affixed both to their bodies and to their experience in relation to their bodies. Cahill writes:

⁹² Ibid., 9.

“Men’s and women’s bodies are accorded radically different social significance, subject to radically different discourses, and presented with radically different demands. It is likely, then, that men and women experience their bodies in radically different ways.”⁹³

On this account, embodiment relates to how a person experiences the social meaning that has been affixed to their bodies and how this social meaning will impact the way a person lives their body. This is especially important for gender theorists who want to navigate both the materiality of sexed embodiment and the socially constructed features of gender that have been affixed to sexed embodiment.⁹⁴ The idea is to recognize the material significance of the body as well as the social meaning that has been affixed to the body as something that does not wholly define a subject, but rather as something that a subject negotiates.⁹⁵ The point is not simply that particular social meanings are affixed to different bodies. The point is rather that as a result of social meanings being affixed to distinct bodies, such bodies will experience the world partly through the social meaning that has been affixed onto them. Indeed, the meaning of an embodied experience will be partly colored by the social meaning that has been projected onto the experiencing subject’s body.

Through centering embodiment in her theory of rape, Cahill creates a particular unit of analysis that pays attention to the dynamic relationship between subjects’ experience and the social meanings affixed to their bodies that frames their experience. To recognize subjects as embodied is not merely to recognize subjects as having bodies that feel but also to recognize subjects as having bodies that are affixed a particular social meaning at a particular moment in time. To be sensitive to embodiment, therefore, is also to be sensitive to how embodied subjects and their experiences are situated in social space, where they are located geographically, and the historical context in which they are situated. Insofar as subjects’ bodies are socially meaningful, their experience is at least partially framed through this social meaning. To be embodied is thus to

⁹³ Ibid., 48-49.

⁹⁴ See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁹⁵ Such an understanding of embodiment in which the body is partly but not wholly defined by the social meaning that has been affixed to it differs from strictly social constructivist accounts of the body to the likes of Catharine MacKinnon’s where the body is wholly defined and fixed by its social meaning. Catharine MacKinnon is often wrongly depicted as an essentialist, but her account is better understood, in my view, as a rigid form of social constructivism where a subject’s embodiment is entirely fixed by its social meaning. See Catharine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (1991).

negotiate how social meanings impact how one moves and feels in the world. The important step that embodiment grants to theorizing the body is its capacity to recognize how agents negotiate social meanings that are affixed to their bodies. In doing so, the social environment does not wholly define one's body although it still interacts with it.

I contend that in centering embodiment as the unit of analysis for rape, Cahill's account is actively centering the subjective conditions of rape rather than bracketing them. This is distinct from aforementioned essence-led theories of rape that bracket the subjective conditions under which rape takes place in order to distill rape's essential, unchanging properties. To return briefly to the *sex-versus-violence debate*, we see in Brownmiller and MacKinnon two modes of bracketing the subjective conditions of rape. While Brownmiller's account of rape-as-violence brackets the bodies and the sexuality of rape, MacKinnon brackets the subjective means in which individual women ascribe meaning to their sexuality and enact sexual agency. Both essence-led approaches to rape fail to deliver precisely because they attempt to bracket subjective conditions that cannot be easily removed from the equation. Cahill's turn to embodiment where embodiment is attuned to how the body is felt and lived in relation to the social meaning that has been affixed to it, centers the subjective conditions of rape rather than bracketing them.

Cahill argues that the fact of embodiment is one aspect of rape that is truly fixed. She writes:

“because all victims of rape are embodied, rape always has bodily significance; because embodiment is always marked by difference, that significance varies widely among victims.”⁹⁶

This is a crucial passage in Cahill's account where she spells out explicitly how the body is the locus of rape, however, the fact that each body is differentiated will impact the meaning of rape: the meaning of rape will shift depending on the embodied subject that it will impact. For Cahill, the reason that embodiment can be the site of difference is precisely because “Although every subject is embodied, there are few if any aspects of qualities of embodiment that are shared identically by all subjects.”⁹⁷ For Cahill, embodiment is irreducible – that is to say that two

⁹⁶ Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 114-115.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

modes of embodiments are never identically the same, are never substitutable for each other and therefore are “the site of possibility and necessity of difference (...).”⁹⁸ Embodiment is thus a curious category because it is both that which all subjects share by virtue of inhabiting bodies, but it is simultaneously that which distinguishes subjects irreducibly from each other where all subjects are differently embodied.⁹⁹ Therefore, when rape is conceived as an embodied experience, it is also conceived as irreducible insofar as no two experiences of rape are reducible to each other because the qualities of embodiment are never entirely shared between two embodied subjects. When rape is conceived as embodied experience, no two lived experiences of rape are ever meaningfully identical nor configuratively symmetrical. The seemingly insignificant nuances in the subjective conditions of embodiment between two experiences of rape will become incredibly significant when mapping rape, its plural meanings and the configurative power relations that render it possible. As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, the small nuances and variations between two irreducible experiences of rape can bring to light how the subjective conditions of embodiment and situatedness impacts rape. More importantly, it can reveal how differently situated embodied subjects are subjected to different configurative power relations that impacts the meaning that they ascribe to their rape.

Cahill’s account of rape as embodied experience, therefore, delineates the site of particularity as embodiment without ever omitting how rape is at least shared in the fact that it is embodied. For Cahill, the focus on embodiment is able to account for intersectional features of rape. Alongside gender, Cahill contends,

“Class, race, sexual orientation: these axes also distinguish bodies and produce different bodily experiences; therefore, those axes produce differences in the experience of rape and the threat of rape.”¹⁰⁰

In addition to these intersectional features, it is important to note that embodied subjects are also differently situated. Bodies are differently situated in space, in social structures, and in networks of social relations. To consider bodies as they are situated in social structures and social relations

⁹⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 113.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 48-49.

is to be attuned to the corporeal condition of embodied subjects. Paying attention to how embodied subjects are differently situated adds an additional axes of particularity. This all comes to show how, at the level of bodies, there are so many configurations that will impact how these bodies derive meaning from their experience. As Cahill writes:

“Embodiment gives rise to an enormous scope of differences. The quality and nature of an individual’s embodiment is significantly affected by such factors as historical location, cultural environment, economic status, gender, race sex, sexual orientation, physical limitations, psychological limitations, emotional experiences, and others.”¹⁰¹

Cahill’s account uses embodiment as a unit of analysis that is irreducibly particular because bodies are at the junction of many overlapping and intersecting factors which not only include the quality of embodiment itself, but also how bodies are situated in time and place and the kinds of power relations they are invested in by virtue also of their embodiment. These features of embodiment matter when theorizing from the particularity of rape.

More specifically, the fact that Cahill sees rape as an embodied experience suggests that there is therefore also an enormous scope of difference within the category of rape. Cahill’s account of rape as embodied experience, therefore, pays acute attention to the particularity of rape. As Cahill puts it: “Rapes occur in different situations to different (and differently embodied) subjects can have radically different meanings to the victim, and indeed can constitute radically different harms.”¹⁰² For instance, rape experiences at different ages can constitute vastly different meanings for survivors.¹⁰³ Being raped by a lover, husband, acquaintance, family member or stranger can constitute vastly different meanings and harms for survivors.¹⁰⁴ A Black woman’s experience of rape by a white man has a different meaning in the wider context of pervasive racism than the raping of a white woman by a white man. As Kimberlé Crenshaw and Angela Davis note, such a case might be experienced as an iteration of racial terror in addition to

¹⁰¹ Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 113.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 114-115.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 115-117.

¹⁰⁴ See also Robin Warshaw, *I Never Called it Rape: The Ms. Report on Recognizing, Fighting and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2019).

patriarchal violence.¹⁰⁵ The raping of a man by another man might be experienced vastly differently than a woman's experience of being raped by a man. The raping of a homeless woman might be experienced as an iteration of housing violence and precarity instead of a heterosexist and patriarchal act of sexual degradation. The differences between survivors' experiences and ways of understanding their experience matter because they can bring to light the plural configurations of power under which rape takes place.

Cahill's account of rape as embodied experience is powerful in its capacity to allow for a plurality of rape experiences to exist *as* experiences of rape. It assumes that the particular situated and embodied character of an individual subject will give rise to an enormous scope of different meanings and experiences all under the category of rape. When rape is treated as an embodied experience, it is possible to recognize that experiences of rape are irreducible to each other where no two lived experiences of rape are ever meaningfully identical nor configuratively symmetrical. The irreducible features of each particular experience of rape is no longer that which must be bracketed but that which reveals the many different configurations and meanings that rape can take. However, these irreducible features can only be brought to light when the particular of each rape – that is, when the subjective conditions of rape as an embodied and situated experience engages with the particularity of an other person's experience of rape.

With Cahill's account, it becomes clear that the objective of theorizing rape from its embodied particularity is aimed at bringing to light the varying meanings and power configurations that are invested in rape. Theorizing rape from experience reveals something entirely different about rape relative to essence-led approaches; it seeks to systematically connect rape experiences to a process of unmasking operations of power that rendered rape possible in the first place. As Lois McNay argues, the intellectual goals of theorizing from experience start “from lived suffering and the generalizes outwards to an unmasking account of power via the integration of insights from both experiential and theoretical worldviews.”¹⁰⁶ In contrast to essence-led approaches who bracket the subjective conditions of each experience of rape in order to reveal something that is

¹⁰⁵ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 314-343. See also Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2019).

¹⁰⁶ Lois McNay, *The Gender of Critical Theory: On the Experiential Grounds of Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 237.

generalizable about rape, theorizing from experience will instead be interested in revealing something generalizable about power in relation to rape.

Building off of Cahill's conception of rape as embodied experience, I argue that such a conception prompts a practice that can ultimately render possible the theorizing of rape from experience. Through centering embodiment, no two lived experiences of rape are ever meaningfully identical nor configuratively symmetrical. Only through engaging with others can the particularity of one's own experience be progressively revealed. The divergences and nuances between experiences, in turn, serve not only as a means to pluralize the category of rape, but more importantly to map the plural configurative relations of power that render rape possible. Cahill offers little indication of exactly how to bring to light the particularity of experiences nor what would happen to the category of rape when is pluralized in the radical way that she suggests. Cahill turns to consciousness-raising as an important practice for igniting the plurality of rape. However, it is not entirely obvious how consciousness-raising practices would be able to preserve the kind of plurality that Cahill values so deeply. It is my contention, as I will elaborate in later chapters of this thesis, that the lived and embodied particularity of rape can only be made apparent only through engaging with the particularity of others' experience. Indeed, the main argument of this thesis is that bringing to light the particularity of each rape experience requires a feminist practice that engages across experience. Cahill's account of rape as embodied experience therefore prompts the need for a practice that can bring this particularity to the fore.

III. Preserving a Category of Rape: Rape as a Cluster Concept

In the previous section, I took up Cahill's account of rape as embodied experience in order to develop a key premise of this thesis that experiences of rape are irreducible to each other; indeed, no two lived experiences of rape are ever meaningfully identical nor configuratively symmetrical. Yet, to theorize rape from experience seems, on the face of it, to relativize the category of rape where the focus on particularity seems to obscure that rape might have a core feature that conjoins all experiences of rape together *as rape*. Indeed, to theorize rape from experience seems to make it difficult to distinguish experiences of rape as opposed to some other form of sexual violence or another form of abuse in general. What, then, happens to the category

of rape when it is theorized from experience? If the particularity of experiences of rape is brought to light, does this mean that rape loses its specificity? Does theorizing rape from experience mean that the concept of rape loses its distinctiveness such that no rape experience can be identifiable, recognizable, nameable?

In this section, I maintain that the specificity of rape is not lost through the process of theorizing from experience. In short, theorizing rape from experience does not relativise the category of rape. Instead, I argue that rape can be treated as containing a constellation of overlapping and intersecting experiences, meanings, and power relations. Here, I elaborate an understanding of rape as a category overflowing with substance. Maintaining a unitary core essence of rape, in turn, erases the plural subjects, bodies, sites of violence, configurations, power relations, meanings, and harms invested in rape, the plurality of which must be at the heart of a feminist practice of rape survivorship. As I argued in the first section, feminist theories of rape have been dedicated to articulating the essential properties that render rape identifiable in any context in order to develop a legal structure that is better able to recognize and redress rape. To define the essence of rape is to be able to render it unmistakably recognizable regardless of context, regardless of one's body or one's subjectivity, regardless of circumstance.

The worry of theorizing from experience, that is, to theorize rape from the particularity of embodied subjects' situated understanding of rape, is that rape would lose its specificity or distinct character such that it would become more difficult to identify. Indeed, the worry of pluralizing the category or thinking about the category without an essence grounding its significance is that it would risk relativizing rape thus allowing the perpetration of rape to go unchallenged. However, as I have noted a few times in this chapter, to assume that rape has a rigid form, a fundamental essence also presents challenges for survivors whose experience might not map onto that rigid essence. The balance to strike is therefore that the category of rape is not rendered overly rigid that particular experiences cannot be mapped onto it, nor that the category lacks so much specificity that it no longer can be used to effectively identify an experience as rape. What a feminist theory of rape should strive for is to create the possibility for plurality of experiences of victimization within a single category of experience. Indeed, it should strive for a plurality of meanings, configurations, bodies and harms all operating under the category of rape.

Borrowing from Natalie Stoljar's idea of 'cluster concept,' I argue that when rape is theorized from experience, the category of rape becomes a 'cluster concept': that is, as an assemblage of criss-crossing similarities.¹⁰⁷ My uptake of Stoljar's idea of a 'cluster concept' is a slight departure of how she used this idea and the purpose for which she developed this idea in the first place. Before elaborating on my particular uptake of Stoljar's idea of a 'cluster concept', I will briefly outline her own formulation of this particular idea.

Stoljar elaborates the idea of 'cluster concept' for the purpose of advancing an anti-essentialist concept of 'woman.' Stoljar begins by spelling out two strands of feminist critiques of essentialism. On the one hand, there is the "naturalizing" argument where the problem with essentialism is that it posits a "fixed and unchanging" nature to women."¹⁰⁸ Here, the idea is that natural understandings of womanhood risk naturalizing socially constructed forms of subordination rather than seeing these features as contingent and therefore subject to change. On the other hand, there is the 'diversity argument' where the problem with essentialism is the implicit universalism or fundamental sameness that grounds a common identity between women.¹⁰⁹ According to this critique of essentialism, there is a huge scope of differences between women, those differences being partly down to factors of race, class and culture. Both challenges to essentialism problematize the possibility of unifying women into a distinct class where the 'naturalizing critique' is worried about the criteria upon which is shared womanhood is grounded and the 'diversity critique' is worried about the extent to which all members of said class can really be qualified as substantively sharing a common identity. Stoljar writes:

"The issue of whether there is something in common among members of the class 'woman' raised two more specific questions: first, whether women constitute a genuine class and, secondly, if they do, whether there is a universal womanness that all members of the class share."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Natalie Stoljar, "Essence, Identity, and the Concept of Woman" *Philosophical Topics* 23, no.2 (1995), 261-293.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 262. See also Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

¹¹⁰ Natalie Stoljar, "Essence, Identity, and the Concept of Woman" *Philosophical Topics* 23, no.2 (1995), 262.

For Stoljar, one way of avoiding the problem of essentialism altogether is to stop interpreting appeals to the category of woman as pointing to a strictly identical instantiation of the same universal. Instead, Stoljar posits a resemblance nominalism approach where “tokens (...) constitute a type through being parts of the same ‘resemblance structure.’”¹¹¹ On Stoljar’s understanding, critiques of essentialism place too much emphasis on how the essential properties must be necessary. Instead, Stoljar suggests treating the category of woman as a ‘cluster concept’ where “there is no single set of features an individual must have in order to be a woman; she is a member of the type just in case she participates in the relevant resemblance structure.”¹¹² Stoljar derives this idea of ‘cluster concept’ from Wittgenstein’s idea that “some features of the world bear family resemblances to each other.”¹¹³ For Stoljar, the reason that ‘woman’ can be seen as a ‘cluster concept’ is because there are a clustering of features that all overlap in the idea of womanness and the clustering of one or more of these features can be sufficient in satisfying the concept of woman.

Stoljar’s account of a cluster concept is a helpful way of thinking about how categories can be thought of as comprising multiple overlapping features the combination of which can create the sufficient conditions for being qualified as a ‘resemblance class’. I argue that Stoljar’s ‘cluster concept’ can offer an account of what happens to the category of rape when rape is theorized from experience. Indeed, as I argued in the first section of this chapter, any attempt at reducing rape down to an essential set of unchanging criteria and properties must be scrutinised for its politics because it might re-entrench discursive formations about gender and sexuality. I also argued that essence-led approaches impose a distinct form of rape upon which experiences of rape might not so neatly map onto. In the second section of this chapter, I borrowed Cahill’s formulation of rape as embodied experience to demonstrate how to theorizing rape from experience – that is, to theorizing rape without bracketing the subjective conditions under which rape takes place. What binds all experiences of rape is the category of rape however, if no two rape experiences are reducible to each other. How then can all of these experiences be called ‘rape’? Indeed, how can all of these experiences be qualified as rape? As I see it, Stoljar’s idea of ‘cluster concept’ becomes valuable in explaining how the category can be used to qualify all of

¹¹¹ Ibid., 263.

¹¹² Ibid., 264.

¹¹³ Ibid., 282.

these experiences without reducing all these experiences to each other. When rape is thought of instead from the particularity of embodied experience, the category of rape takes on a different structure one that is more akin to a resemblance class. In the remainder of this chapter, I build off Stoljar's account to demonstrate exactly how to conceive of the category of rape as a 'cluster concept'.

Stoljar's account still relies on the idea that there are a number of features, properties or criteria that come to constitute something as a resemblance class. This would mean that the category of rape might be an assemblage of one or more than one properties that would allow for an experience to be pertinently identified as one of 'rape.' While this is a plausible way of applying Stoljar's idea of cluster concept onto rape, I want to suggest a slightly different way of thinking about rape as a cluster concept in the context of my wider commitment to theorizing rape from experience. In doing so, my particular uptake of Stoljar departs from her understanding. Most importantly, the category of 'rape' is not an identity category like the category of 'woman.'¹¹⁴ As I elaborated in the previous section, rape is an embodied experience, meaning that rape is particularized at the level of embodiment. On my understanding, when rape is understood as a 'cluster concept' it is helpful to imagine the cluster as a series of axes criss-crossing over, under and through each other forming what might appear as a kind of knot. Here, each axes is a particular experience of rape which is connected to at least one other experience within the cluster by the sheer fact that the experiencing subjects regard their experiences as resembling one another in some capacity. However, none of the experiential axes are ever substitutable with each other, no two rape experiences are never identically the same. The criteria and features that qualify different experiences of rape as pertaining to the same resemblance class will therefore require survivors to continuously engage with each others' experiences and, in doing so, to collectively determine what these features and properties are. This experiential way of thinking about rape as a cluster concept therefore requires survivors to engage cross-experientially. Indeed, to think of rape as a cluster concept in the way that I suggest requires a practice in which survivors engage their experience with other survivors' experiences.

¹¹⁴ With that being said, there is a plausible case to be made for the category of 'survivor', as an identity category, to be treated as a cluster concept.

In elaborating her idea of ‘cluster concept,’ Stoljar also offers a kind of methodology for reflecting on how a resemblance class could, in theory, be constructed by its members. In her conception of ‘woman’ as ‘cluster concept,’ Stoljar argues that it is possible to imagine women as collectively reflecting, questioning, interrogating and revising their similarities with other women and whether these similarities can generate a particular axis of resemblance that can come to constitute the idea of ‘woman.’ Stoljar writes:

“the model is compatible with the projects of revision and reevaluation of what it is to be a woman (...). Although there are real similarities among members of a resemblance class, the class is constructed in the sense that there is a choice as to the exemplars of the class.”

On Stoljar’s account, it is therefore possible for members of a resemblance class to interrogate the terms of resemblance under which they are grouped into a class and, in turn, to formulate new terms under which that resemblance is conceptualized. This is what she means when she says that a class is ‘constructed,’ that members of a resemblance class can contest or amend the exemplars that come to define them as a class. This is connected to Stoljar’s wider idea of ‘cluster concept’ where a concept is qualified as an assemblage of multiple overlapping and criss-crossing features and properties whether these features and properties may either alone or combined constitute a sufficient condition for this assemblage to pertain to a resemblance class. With this idea of ‘cluster concepts’ as being ‘constructed,’ I take Stoljar to be suggesting the need for collective practice that reflects on similarities and divergences between those who are part of the same resemblance class.

An experiential approach to theorizing rape does not give up entirely on existing understandings of rape that come to shape the way that survivors qualify their experience as rape. Indeed, existing understandings of rape will continue to inform the way that survivors will qualify their experience. However, with my distinct uptake of Stoljar’s idea of ‘cluster concept’ in relation to rape, what connects all of these experiences together is not one core essential property but instead each other’s experience and the manner in which they may or may not resemble each other. Through engaging survivors’ experiences in shaping the concept of rape, existing understandings can be expanded.

As I see it, to treat rape as a cluster concept is not especially outlandish. In many ways, rape is already treated as a 'cluster concept' by survivors in many different contexts. One of such sites in which rape is treated as a 'cluster concept' are rape crisis helplines. These helplines are dedicated support lines for survivors of rape and sexual violence. While helplines offer practical support like referring survivors to Independent Sexual Violence Advocates (ISVAs), or to various therapy services, helplines are primarily sites of disclosure in which survivors explore what terms to ascribe to their experience. As sites of disclosure, Rape Crisis Helplines are unique because they allow the concept of rape to be used by survivors and applied to their own experience however those survivors find suitable without survivors being given a rigid form or essence of rape through which to work from. In some cases, callers might never even describe their experience as one of 'rape': indeed, it is possible to have a call on the Rape Crisis helpline where the term 'rape' is never uttered or mentioned. Yet, the concept of rape frames the discussion insofar as the discussion takes place on the *Rape* Crisis helpline. As I see it, rape here is treated as a cluster concept where by virtue of calling the Rape Crisis helpline and disclosing one's experience, one is associating one's own experience to the resemblance class of rape. Indeed, the mere fact of speaking on the Rape Crisis Helpline, no matter the substance of the utterance, is itself contained as an experiential axis that comprises the phenomenon of rape, in ways that are not always clearly articulated or apparent. As an informal structure of disclosure, Rape Crisis Helplines thereby seem to treat the concept of 'rape' as an assemblage of experiences that are never reducible to each other by may bare resemblances to each other in some capacity.

Where my approach is perhaps slightly more demanding in framing rape as a 'cluster concept' is that it will demand that rape experiences be engaged with each other where survivors come to determine themselves what the criteria and features of resemblance will qualify rape as a distinct experiential category. Indeed, it is not enough for survivors to merely describe their experience as rape, or as in the case of the helpline, disclose their experience under the unspoken category of rape. My approach demands that experiences be engaged with one another thus collectively constructing rape as a 'cluster concept'. Such a collective and constructed approach to rape as a 'cluster concept' is, I argue, what will happen to the category of rape when it is engaged from experience. In short, theorizing rape from experience will require treating rape as a cluster concept where the experiences of survivors are engaged with each other such that it will define

the features and properties of rape as a resemblance class. My uptake of Stoljar's idea of 'cluster concept' as a way to reflect on what happens to the category of rape when it is treated as an experiential category prompts the need for a cross-experiential practice. Indeed, the substance of this 'cluster concept' is furnished by particular experiences in relation to others. Engaging into such a cross-experiential framing of the concept of rape into a 'cluster concept' demands investigation into why some experiences might overlap and not others. Indeed, that the relation between the various experiential axes and the resemblance they may or may not have becomes part of a collective theorizing of the category of rape.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I argued that an experiential approach to rape demonstrates how the category of rape is overflowing with substance, meaning, and configurations of power. Rape is the nexus of overlapping, intersecting power asymmetries, no two of which are never identically the same. Mapping the constellation of power relations that render rape possible becomes the primordial task of engaging lived experiences of survivorship. I therefore contend that theorizing rape from experience uses the asymmetries that exist between particular experiences and between experiencing subjects as sources to reveal the plural configurations and meanings that can all occur under the category of rape. The point of uncovering the differences between rape survivors is therefore not to create a hierarchy of the harmfulness of rape but, as Cahill writes, "to begin to comprehend the vastly varying meanings that acts similarly termed 'rape' can hold."¹¹⁵ My argument is, therefore, that theorizing rape from experience can reveal important differences between particular rape experiences that these are useful for unmasking the operation of power.

This chapter plays a crucial role in formulating key premises underlying the aspirations of this thesis. Indeed, this thesis advances a feminist cross-experiential practice that has the potential to galvanize a politics of rape survivorship that can cut across structurally and discursively produced axes of difference. To this end, this chapter has at least three functions in advancing the overall argument of this thesis. First, it functions as a literature review of some of the most important pieces of scholarship in feminism that are dedicated to theorizing rape. Most

¹¹⁵ Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 117.

prominently, this includes the eponymous *sex-versus-violence* debate between Susan Brownmiller and Catharine MacKinnon. In engaging with this debate, I try to demonstrate how essence-led approaches to rape are intimately connected to the gendered construction of bodies and subjects in ways that risk participating in the gendering of rape. In doing so, I demonstrate the importance of theorizing rape from experience which instead of bracketing the subjective conditions of experience, centers them as part of its analysis.

The second function of this chapter is to build a case for the possibility of theorizing rape from experience, demonstrating how the category of rape contains within it a variety of meanings, bodies, subjects. I do so by drawing from Cahill's conception of rape as embodied experience and demonstrate how this understanding of rape offers the conditions for theorizing rape from experience. Specifically, Cahill's conception of rape as embodied experience centers the subjective conditions under which rape occurs by appealing to embodiment as a fundamental unit of particularity. This chapter therefore spells out the purpose of theorizing from experience, laying the ground for the methodological contribution of this thesis which elaborates specifically *how* to theorize rape from experience.

Third, this chapter anticipates a worry about the status of the category of rape when theorizing rape from experience. If rape is particularized at the level of embodied experience, how can all of these experiences all be qualified as rape, how can they all fall under the single category of rape? Drawing from Natalie Stoljar's conception of 'cluster concepts', I argue that the category of rape can take on a different structure: that is, as an assemblage of criss-crossing axes of experience, two of which might overlap in some ways but are never be entirely reducible to each other. In doing so, this chapter sets up from the start of the thesis how the category of rape will be treated for the remainder of the thesis: as a 'cluster concept' containing with it overlapping, criss-crossing axes of experience.

Finally, in establishing the possibility for theorizing rape from experience this chapter sets up the necessity for a cross-experiential practice between survivors of rape, the substance of which I elaborate in later chapters of my thesis. By advancing a case for the necessity of theorizing from experience and for a distinct practice that is capable of igniting a cross-experiential engagement

between rape survivors, this chapter works towards the thesis' aspiration of forming a politics of rape survivorship that can cut across axes of difference. Through elaborating the importance of theorizing rape from experience and the possibility of doing so, this chapter sets up the need for a practice that would be capable of engaging the plurality of rape experiences; a practice that I will theorize in Chapter 3 'Feminism and Experience' and Chapter 4 'Asymmetrical Experiences'.

Chapter 2. Speaking the R-Word: Epistemic Injustice and Representational Transparency

The main objectives of this thesis are to create a model for a feminist practice of rape survivorship that can engage the experiences of survivors for the purpose of revealing rape in its plural configurations and meanings. In doing so, my thesis stresses the irreducible particularity of rape experiences as a valuable source for mapping the plural configurative power relations that come to frame the meanings and harms invested in rape. In the previous chapter, I located the particularity of rape in its embodied and situated quality building off Ann Cahill's conception of rape as embodied experience. My thesis is therefore invested in not only preserving but appealing to the radical particularity of experience as a source for theorizing rape such that all configurations of rape can be recognizable as rape without that notion of rape imposing an essential uniformity onto survivors.

In this chapter, I examine Miranda Fricker's paradigm of epistemic justice which has arguably become a dominant theoretical paradigm for addressing the difficulty faced by some groups to articulate certain experiences, especially experiences of oppression and abuse, and how this difficulty is both rooted in as well as reproducing certain forms of marginalization and social disadvantage. Insofar as this thesis is at least partly invested in creating the conditions for survivors to speak rape on their own terms, it is easy to conflate the aspirations of this thesis as pertaining to Fricker's paradigm of epistemic justice. This chapter therefore functions in the thesis as a way to pre-empt this conflation and distinguish my own approach from Fricker's. In this chapter, I will argue that the ideal of transparency and epistemic uniformity underlying Fricker's framework is inadequate for advancing the aspirations of this thesis which centers particularity and the lack of equivalences between experiences as valuable for revealing the plural configurative power relations underpinning rape.

Fricker's paradigm of epistemic injustice allowed for the complaint of having one's experience discredited or obscured not only to be articulated conceptually but also to be framed as distinct and interconnected wrongs. Fricker defines an epistemic injustice as a "wrong done to someone

specifically in their capacity as a knower.”¹¹⁶ She identifies two varieties of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustices, which occur when pre-existing identity prejudices lead some speakers to suffer a credibility deficit.¹¹⁷ In contrast, hermeneutical injustices occur when gaps in shared hermeneutical resources obscure the interests of particular knowers and, in turn, actively inhibit these knowers from articulating and understanding their own experience.¹¹⁸ Hermeneutical injustices thus pertain to the realm of the inexpressible or the inarticulable: that which lacks concepts to express, that which remains conceptually obscured. Both testimonial and hermeneutical varieties of epistemic injustice more or less express the injustice of having an experience precluded from being intelligible either because that experience is discredited by others or because that experience is epistemically obscured. Fricker’s framework of epistemic justice directly problematizes and responds to the distinct form of socio-political disadvantage that emerge from having an experience obscured by epistemic structures.

Fricker’s paradigm has become especially prevalent for articulating the pervasive problem of the silence and silencing of rape survivors. In particular, Katharine Jenkins’ uptake of Fricker’s paradigm to explain survivor silence has focused especially on how flawed social knowledge about rape has actively obscured rape experiences from survivors themselves.¹¹⁹ This resulted in what is known as ‘unacknowledged rape’: when a person whose experience legally qualifies as rape but does not conceptualize themselves as a rape victim.¹²⁰ Fricker’s epistemic justice paradigm is capable of diagnosing survivor silence resulting from historical testimonial injustices – that is, as resulting from rape survivors having their rape experience systematically discredited and their credibility questioned. Rape being primarily gendered has also meant that women survivors have the historical burden of having their credibility questioned on the grounds of

¹¹⁶ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Justice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17-29.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 147-175.

¹¹⁹ See Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices”, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34, no.2 (2017), 191-205. See Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths: What are They and What can We do About Them?”, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 89, (2021), 37-49.

¹²⁰ See Mary P. Koss, Thomas E. Dinero, Cynthia A. Seibel, Susan L. Cox, “Stranger and Acquaintance Rape”, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1988), 1-24. See also Mary P. Koss, “Hidden, Unacknowledged, Acquaintance, and Date Rape: Looking Back, Looking Forward”, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 35, no. 2, (2011), 348-354. See also Robin Warshaw, *I Never Called it Rape: The Ms. Report on Recognizing, Fighting, and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988). See also Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices”, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34, no. 2 (2017), 191-205. See Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths: What are They and What can We do About Them?”, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 89, (2021), 37-49.

being women.¹²¹ Indeed, women having been historically disqualified as less credible or unreliable knowers has meant that the history of rape disclosure has been shrouded by misogynistic tropes of women as less credible sources or, worse yet, as ‘crying rape’ in a disgruntled act of revenge against men.¹²² Fricker’s epistemic justice paradigm is thus capable of diagnosing why a survivor might have trouble identifying or labeling their sexually violence experience as rape and it is also capable of explaining how a survivor’s social identity might impede on their credibility.

Fricker’s account also offers a rectificatory account that advances an ameliorative conception of epistemic resources where new concepts emerge that can progressively bring to light all experiences of injustice and oppression.¹²³ For instance, in Katharine Jenkins’ uptake of Fricker’s framework, existing concepts are improved by being progressively unencumbered by flawed social knowledge where concepts like ‘rape’ can be continually disentangled from pervasive rape myths.¹²⁴ Fricker’s paradigm contains within it a rectificatory approach that has been used to make rape experiences more transparent for survivors as well as for agents and institutions to whom survivors disclose their rape experiences to. In its aspiration for transparency, Fricker’s account has been seen as not only offering a diagnosis for survivor silence, but a helpful framework to theorize the importance of greater conceptual clarity around rape that might render it more immediately accessible, intelligible and thus communicable to survivors and those survivors disclose their rape experience to.

As I will argue in this chapter, Fricker’s paradigm rests on an ideal of transparency that can be achieved through representational uniformity, where everyone is able to represent their experience in the same way to all others in the same epistemic community. Indeed, Fricker’s

¹²¹ Although this most certainly the case, it is important to note how male survivors of rape are subject to serious epistemic injustices, not necessarily because they are seen as lacking credibility, but importantly because men are seen as ‘unrapeable’ that is as invulnerable to being raped. See Scott M. Walfield, “‘Men Cannot be Raped’: Correlates of Male Rape Myth Acceptance”, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36, no.13-14 (2021), 6391-6417.

¹²² See Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, (London: Virago, 2007), 28-29. See also Amia Srinivasan, “The Conspiracy Against Men” in *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 1-32.

¹²³ José Medina offers a reading of Fricker’s account of epistemic justice as aspiring to a kind of universal communicability of experience that presumes the possibility for the universal representability of experience. See José Medina, “Imposed Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities” in *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90-118.

¹²⁴ See Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices”, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34, no. 2 (2017), 191-205. See Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths: What are They and What can We do About Them?”, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 89 (2021), 37-49.

account is underscored by an assumption that hermeneutical resources, which on her account are mainly concepts that can accurately represent the world, would be able to make transparent the world and the realities of each knower *in the same way* to and for all members of an epistemic community. Fricker's ideal of transparency is thus that representational resources would be able to create a thick form of epistemic symmetry between members of an epistemic community where each lifeworld can be represented in the same way to all members of the epistemic community. Put differently, it requires that the substance of concepts is uniform across different knowers such that any mention of that concept could effectively represent a given situation to any other knower in an epistemic community in a uniform way. Fricker's view, I argue, therefore assumes that knowers are able to know the same way and do the same thing with concepts or any other kind of representational structure. I argue that Fricker seems to rely on an ideal of transparency in which concepts can create a symmetrical epistemic relation between knowers such that the knowledge held by one knower can be made interchangeable with the knowledge held by another.

This approach to representational uniformity is limited especially when contending with survivor silence and disclosures of rape. Rape disclosure is precisely difficult because of the enormous scope of difference that exists between survivors and between individual experiences of rape. As I stressed in my uptake of Cahill's account of rape as embodied experience in the previous chapter, this enormous scope of difference between experiences of rape is located at the level of embodiment. Indeed, I drew attention to embodiment as a fundamental site of particularity where each experience of rape is particularized in its embodied capacity. This particularity might entail a lack of equivalence between the ways that embodied subject understand, articulate, or derive meaning from their experience of rape. In fact, it is oftentimes the assumption that rape has a clear, straightforward, fixed representative form or, an essence, that oftentimes gives the sense to survivors that their own experience does not map onto the idea of rape. In my thesis, I maintain that the scope of difference or, the lack of equivalence, between experiences is important to reveal the many configurative power relations that give a plurality of meanings to rape. More broadly, I argue that if one is committed to giving a voice to survivors of rape, it is of the utmost importance to allow for survivors to speak rape on their own terms, leaving space for the articulation of ambiguity, complexity of their experience to be expressed in fragments, with

conceptual hesitation, with terms approximate to rape, with filler-words and euphemisms alluding to rape: that ‘weird thing’, that ‘bad night’.

In line with the overarching argument of my thesis, I maintain that rape does not have the same meaning nor does it have the same configuration nor does it have the same harmful effects to all survivors and the sheer plurality and meanings of rape will also impact the terms in which survivors will use to express and articulate their rape. It is precisely this immense plurality that exists at the level of experience that, as I argued in the first chapter, should prompt the need to theorize rape from experience. Indeed, as I advanced in chapter 1, this cannot be done if we hold onto the idea that rape has an essential core that is shared by all survivors. In this present chapter, I therefore continue to advance the importance of theorizing rape from the particularity of experience which requires, in turn, to pay attention to fragmentary and precarious features of rape disclosures. To attend to survivor silence, in my understanding, it will not suffice to create a concept of rape that can render experiences interchangeable with each other because doing so demands that survivors all be able to recognize, acknowledge, represent and articulate their experience *in the same way*. This representational uniformity is crucial to creating the conditions for rendering oneself transparent to others which is, according to Fricker, connected to one’s capacity to understand oneself as well.

Overall, this chapter will argue that Fricker’s paradigm of epistemic justice rests on an ideal of transparency that can only be enacted through representational uniformity. It is therefore inadequate to attend to the problem of survivor silence. This chapter will proceed in the following three steps. First, I will offer a reading of Miranda Fricker’s paradigm of epistemic justice as putting forward an ideal of transparency. Second, I connect this ideal of transparency with the way in which Fricker envisions the functions of concepts. Here, I argue that the ideal of transparency operates through representational uniformity, where concepts are assumed to be used the same way by all knowers of an epistemic community. Third, I demonstrate how this is an inadequate approach for attending to rape disclosure and survivor silence defending instead an approach that privileges attending to the fragmentary and precarious features of narrative experience. The fragmentary approach that I defend is important not only because it will enable survivors to speak rape on their own terms, but also because it will allow for the particularity of

experience to come to the fore. The particularity of narrative choices matters, I argue, for the wider purpose of bringing to light the mutual irreducible of each experience of rape in ways that serve to demonstrate the plural configurations and meanings that underpin this category.

I. Epistemic (In)justice, Agency, and Self-Transparency

In this section, I read Fricker's framework of epistemic injustice as putting forth an implicit account of epistemic agency that is bound to an ideal of self-transparency. To do so, I reconstruct her account of epistemic agency as enabled by one's capacity to render oneself transparent both to oneself and others around. On this account transparency is, at least in part, dependent on being able to render oneself transparent to others. I demonstrate how this understanding of epistemic agency undergirds both testimonial and hermeneutical varieties of epistemic injustice.

Fricker defines an epistemic injustice as "wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower."¹²⁵ She then identifies two varieties of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustices, which occur when pre-existing identity prejudices lead some speakers to suffer a credibility deficit.¹²⁶ In contrast, hermeneutical injustices occur when gaps in shared hermeneutical resources obscure the interests of particular knowers and, in turn, actively inhibit these knowers from articulating and understanding their own experience.¹²⁷ Both testimonial and hermeneutical varieties of epistemic injustice more or less express the injustice of having an experience precluded from being intelligible. Despite their similarity, both varieties of epistemic injustices touch on different levels at which an experience is precluded from being communicated. As Fricker argues, whereas "testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage when a gap in the collective hermeneutical resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences."¹²⁸ In the case of testimonial injustice, Fricker argues that pre-existing identity prejudices negatively impede on the credibility of certain speakers. Their credibility is diminished such that they are unable to be regarded or

¹²⁵ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Justice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-29.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 147-175.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

recognized as a knower, that is, as a person who holds knowledge and who can have epistemic authority in knowledge exchanges. Accordingly, in the case of testimonial injustices, the injustice occurs during a communicative exchange, the injustice takes place at the level of the speaker.

Conversely, hermeneutical injustices occur at a prior stage to testimonial injustices.¹²⁹ Hermeneutical injustices occur when gaps in collective hermeneutical resources obscure what is in the interest of particular knowers. These gaps in collective hermeneutical resources resulted from prior exclusions in a knowledge system's development. In the case of hermeneutical injustices, pre-existing exclusions from the co-production of knowledge have generated a gap in the collective resource which resulted in certain experiences, mainly the experience of the oppressed, having no way of being articulated, expressed or even understood. Accordingly, hermeneutic injustice signals how historical exclusions from knowledge production have downstream effects on the visibility and participation of certain groups in communicative exchanges. Unlike testimonial injustice which takes place at the level of the speaker, a hermeneutical injustice, on Fricker's account, takes place at the distributive level, that is, in the way that hermeneutical resources have been unevenly distributed such that some groups of people are better equipped to articulate their experience over others.¹³⁰

Hermeneutical injustice is especially relevant for the purposes of thinking about how Fricker conceives of epistemic agency. Hermeneutical injustice is the injustice of having an experience obscured to oneself by a gap in the knowledge structure. Hermeneutical injustices thus pertain to the realm of the inexpressible or the unintelligible, that which someone may lack concepts to express. To describe this phenomena, Fricker describes the story of Carmita Woods, a woman who experienced unwanted sexual attention in the workplace from a male superior, otherwise known as 'sexual harassment.' Of course at the time where Woods had that experience, the term 'sexual harassment' did not exist and, as Fricker proceeds to explain to us, the absence of that concept lead to a number of troubling consequences in Woods' life. One of those consequences

¹²⁹ Ibid., 1.

¹³⁰ See also José Medina, "Imposed Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities" in *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90-118.

was that Woods struggled to fully grasp in what capacity the actions of the male superior were wrongful, oppressive, abusive. In describing the harm of experiencing a hermeneutical injustice, Fricker says:

“the cognitive disablement prevents her from understanding a significant patch of her own experience: that is, a patch of experience which is strongly in her interests to understand, for without that understanding she is left deeply troubled, confused, and isolated.”¹³¹

To lack the tools for articulating, let alone understanding, one’s experience is described here as a cognitive disablement, one that impacts a person’s way of navigating the world and of perceiving oneself in the world. Importantly, Fricker is concerned about instances in which a hermeneutical injustice obscures a person’s experience of ongoing abuse or mistreatment. She says: “Her hermeneutical disadvantage renders her unable to make sense of her ongoing mistreatment, and this in turn prevents her from protesting it, let alone securing effective measures to stop it.”¹³² Fricker shows that a further consequence of Carmita Woods’ incapacity to conceptually articulate her experience meant that she was denied unemployment insurance when she eventually left her job due to her male superior’s sexual harassment. Fricker’s conception of hermeneutical injustice seems attuned to the ways that conceptual gaps might enable systemic forms of abuse or mistreatment such that ongoing abuse become normalized and thus unrecognizable by victims of such abuse.¹³³ Fricker’s account also puts forth a convincing account of how these hermeneutical injustices sustain structural forms of disadvantage where the failure to conceptualize one’s own experience of abuse will mean that others around are also less likely to recognize and respond to that abuse. This, of course, is particularly pertinent to feminists who have been historically concerned about how naturalized gendered hierarchies normalized the mistreatment and abuse of women by men. Overall, hermeneutical injustice

¹³¹ Ibid., 151.

¹³² Ibid., 151.

¹³³ A helpful parallel scenario that Fricker lays out to explain her position is in the case of a person suffering from a condition that is still undiagnosed or misunderstood by medical practitioners. Fricker writes: “They [the sufferers of the hermeneutical injustices] are unable to render their experiences intelligible by reference to the idea that they have a disorder, and so they are personally in the dark, and may also suffer seriously negative consequences from others’ non-comprehension of their condition.” See Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Justice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 152.

captures the distinct wrong of having this experience of abuse obscured to oneself and/or others by the conceptual gap in shared hermeneutical resources.

Although Fricker uses hermeneutical injustice to diagnose and identify a distinct wrong, through this account hermeneutical injustice she also articulates an implicit ideal of epistemic agency that is informed by transparency. To have an experience obscured, especially an experience of oppression, is to be wronged as a knower; it is to have one's epistemic agency undermined. From this account of the wrongness of hermeneutical injustice, Fricker also and implicitly suggests that an epistemically just condition is one in which individuals have transparent access to their own experience. To be an epistemic agent, to be a knower in epistemically just circumstances, according to Fricker, is to have a transparent understanding of the world and ourselves within it. Not only this, but on her understanding, such a transparent epistemic access to the world ought to be distributed equally within the epistemic community. This is made apparent in Fricker's problematizing of how epistemic access and transparency is seemingly only available to those who occupy privileged positions in society.

The assumption that those most privileged in society have more agency by virtue of holding more knowledge that grants them transparent access to their experience has been challenged by a number of critics for suggesting that Fricker's current formulation of hermeneutical injustice eclipses the epistemic agency of oppressed persons.¹³⁴ According to this line of criticism, Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice implies that those most privileged in society have more agency because they are better equipped with hermeneutical resources to make their experience transparent to themselves and others around where oppressed folk are seen as existing in a state of false consciousness about themselves and their own experiences. José Medina pushes back against this depiction, outlining that there are a plurality of publics and counterpublics in which experiences are made sense of, articulated, expressed and communicated.¹³⁵ On Medina's account, such publics and counterpublics are not only evidence

¹³⁴ See José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See Kristie Dotson, "Accumulating Epistemic Power: A Problem with Epistemology," *Philosophical Topics* 46, no.1 (2018), 129-154. See Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., "Epistemic Agency Under Oppression," *Philosophical Papers* 49, no. 2 (2020), 233-251.

¹³⁵ See José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

of the epistemic agency of oppressed groups, but also demonstrates how there is a plausible case to be made that dominant knowers are those who are most hermeneutically impoverished when it comes to experiences of oppression rather than oppressed persons themselves. As Sarah Bufkin puts it: “The fact that a dominant knower doesn’t have access to a particular concept does not mean that oppressed knowers also lack the hermeneutical resources to render their experiences intelligible amongst themselves.”¹³⁶ Indeed, it might be the case that the hermeneutical resources that are used by one person to describe their experience are only available to some members of an epistemic community. The problem, in this case, is not that an individual has a lack of hermeneutical resources but rather that an individual is struggling to make this hermeneutical resource recognizable or cognizant to other members of the wider epistemic environment.¹³⁷ This comes to show how Fricker’s framework is reliant on the possibility of making oneself transparent to others as much as it is about being able to make one’s experience transparent to oneself. This also comes to show how Fricker’s framework is reliant on the possibility for oppressed persons to be able to make themselves knowable, understandable or transparent to dominant knowers.

On Fricker’s account, it is clear that epistemic agency is at stake with epistemic injustices. Although she does not offer a straightforward definition of epistemic agency, an account of epistemic agency can be reconstructed from the various ways in which she conceives of ‘knowers’ as being harmed by epistemic injustices. For Fricker, testimonial injustices impact epistemic agency insofar as they prevent individuals from being recognized as knowers; that is, as bearers of epistemic agency. As I mentioned earlier, Fricker considers hermeneutical injustices to be the result of a history of systematic testimonial injustices. Thus, for Fricker, the only way to avoid future hermeneutical injustices is to resolve testimonial injustices. In other words, the primary corrective measure for hermeneutical injustices is to rectify testimonial injustices.

Fricker appeals to virtue ethics to construct the normative requirements of an epistemically just knowledge exchange. Her appeal to virtue ethics is made most apparent in her use of the concept

¹³⁶ See Sarah Bufkin, “Racism, Epistemic Injustice, and Ideology Critique,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (2024), 8.

¹³⁷ See Charles W. Mills “White Ignorance” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 13-38. See Linda Martin Alcoff, “Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 39-58.

of ‘knower’; or, her conception of persons as ‘knowers.’ Fricker’s idea of epistemic justice as “wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower,”¹³⁸ relies on the idea that persons are knowers who hold knowledge about themselves and the world. On her account, the recognition of persons as knowers is integral to the normative project of epistemic justice where a failure to treat or recognise persons as knowers capable of participating in knowledge practices constitutes an epistemic injustice.¹³⁹ In the case of testimonial injustice, pre-existing identity prejudices mean that some people are not accredited the credibility they deserve in such a way that the person is not regarded as a reliable source of knowledge nor as capable of contributing to the production of knowledge. A person who suffers a testimonial injustice is thus not recognized as a knower or not recognized as capable of contributing to the collective pool of knowledge. A testimonial injustice occurs, therefore, when a person is not recognized as an epistemic agent that can participate in clarifying the world, in painting a clearer picture of social and political reality. For Fricker, the harm of testimonial injustice is the way that it deflects a person’s capacity to regard themselves as a knower and, in doing so, epistemically disempowering this person. It is therefore unsurprising that Fricker turns to virtue ethics as a solution to testimonial injustices where her virtue ethical framework seeks to epistemically empower individuals such that they can be recognised as epistemic agents – that is, as knowers. To be a knower is to be a possessor of knowledge with capacities to participate in the collective production of knowledge. In this sense, having epistemic agency is tied to self-worth and to be treated as a knower by others around means to be treated as having moral worth. In this regard, Fricker’s conception of a ‘knower’ must be read as a normatively charged category. Here, the recognition of persons as knowers is integral to the normative project of epistemic justice where a failure to treat or recognise persons as knowers capable of participating in knowledge practices constitutes an epistemic injustice. Justice requires that people be recognized in their capacity as knowers and to be given the opportunity to contribute equitably to the collective pool of knowledge.

¹³⁸ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Justice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

¹³⁹ Some interpreters of Fricker’s paradigm of epistemic justice have noted its striking resemblance to Axel Honneth’s Hegelian account of intersubjective recognition. See Paul Giladi, “Epistemic Exploitation and Ideological Recognition” in *Epistemic Injustice and the Philosophy of Recognition*, ed. Paul Giladi and Nicola McMillan (New York: Routledge, 2022), 138-169. See also Axel Honneth, “Two Interpretations of Social Disrespect: A Comparison Between Epistemic and Moral Recognition” in *Epistemic Injustice and the Philosophy of Recognition* ed. Paul Giladi and Nicola McMillan (New York: Routledge, 2022), 11-35.

For Matthew Congdon, Fricker's 'knower' is not only an epistemological concept but also an ethical concept that presumes epistemic agency and the possibility for mutual recognition.¹⁴⁰ Like Fricker, Congdon considers that to see someone as a 'knower' implies that seeing them as bearers of epistemic agency and by doing so ascribes to that person an ethical and normative standing. In other words, to describe someone as a knower is to ascribe moral worth to that person. For Congdon, there is ethical conduct implied in the use of the concept of 'knower'. When we describe someone as a knower, we simultaneously recognize or acknowledge them as "warranting certain forms of ethical treatment and regard."¹⁴¹ Thus, Congdon seems to think that the category of knower enables an ethical practice that is conducive to mutual recognition of moral worth, mutual respect, and reciprocal relations of answerability. Congdon's reading of Fricker 'knower' as related to practices of recognition is evident in Fricker's resort to virtue ethics and her account of virtuous perception. For Fricker, a

"virtuous perception gives us a moral understanding of experiences, people, situations, and events - a view of the world in moral color, as I put it - and it is part and parcel of this way of seeing that even the morally wisest person remains open to surprises."¹⁴²

A couple pages later she carries on by saying:

"the virtuous hearer's epistemically enriched perception of her interlocutor (...) provides motivation to accept what he is saying. This is obvious: if you perceive someone as offering you a piece of knowledge, you are thereby motivated to accept what he is telling you."¹⁴³

Here, Fricker's reasons for resorting to virtue ethics are articulated as self-evident – of course recognizing someone as capable of knowledge is going to prompt the right attitude for engaging with that person in a knowledge exchange. The mere act of recognizing a person as 'knower' is going to allow for the right kind of knowledge exchange; one in which credibility is not

¹⁴⁰ Matthew Congdon. "'Knower' as an Ethical Concept: From Epistemic Agency to Mutual Recognition," *Feminist Philosophical Quarterly* 4, no.4 (2018), 1-26.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴² Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Justice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 77.

subjected to prejudicial thinking. On this account, the figure of the knower is not only a descriptive category useful for describing epistemic agents, it is a normatively charged concept integral to the epistemic justice paradigm. The mere fact of describing persons as knowers implies an act of recognition that enacts the kind of corrective measures conducive to virtuous knowing. The recognition of persons as knowers becomes a key rectificatory feature for testimonial injustices.

One of the recurring critiques of Fricker's account is that she treats individual behaviors as problematic whilst leaving the knowledge structure intact. This is made apparent in her virtue ethical framework which advances the recognition of persons as knowers. For instance, Kristie Dotson and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. both suggest in their respective critiques of epistemic injustice, that testimonial and hermeneutical injustices are linked but denote different levels of epistemic exclusions.¹⁴⁴ Testimonial injustice is a first-order epistemic exclusion where a person is excluded on account of a negative identity prejudice. Hermeneutical injustice is a second-order epistemic exclusion that directly results from continuous first-order testimonial injustices. Dotson and Pohlhaus note that there is yet another level – a third-order level of epistemic injustice – that goes unmentioned in Fricker's framework. This third-order exclusion, as Pohlhaus notes, “occurs when an entire system is inapt for attending to the epistemic interests of particular knowers.”¹⁴⁵ Accordingly, the third-order exclusion that Dotson and Pohlhaus conceptualize is at the level of epistemic systems. Epistemic systems refer to the set of concepts and nomenclatures that support, legitimize, and reproduce standards of intelligibility and commensurability. These standards determine not only whether an utterance can be treated as knowledgeable; they will also shape the way an utterance is interpreted or received by certain audiences. For Dotson and Pohlhaus, Fricker's insensitivity to the more structural dimensions of knowledge seriously not only restricts the scope of her project but also demonstrates a misguided understanding of the root causes of epistemic injustices.

Indeed, for Fricker, the root cause of epistemic injustices is bad epistemic relations and this is made apparent in her view that hermeneutical injustices emerge from testimonial injustices. For

¹⁴⁴ See Kristie Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” *Hypatia* 26, no.2 (2011), 236-257. See Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., “Epistemic Agency Under Oppression,” *Philosophical Papers* 49, no. 2 (2020), 233-251.

¹⁴⁵ See Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., “Epistemic Agency Under Oppression,” *Philosophical Papers* 49, no.2 (2020), 235.

Fricker, gaps in the collective pool of knowledge emerge from systematic testimonial discrediting that have actively excluded certain persons or groups of persons from participating in the production of knowledge. I therefore take Fricker to also be saying that the harm of hermeneutic injustice is tied to how the downstream effects of repeated instances of testimonial injustices will actively obscure certain experiences or understandings of the world, about social and political reality. Hermeneutical injustices, therefore, also impact epistemic injustices insofar as conceptual lacks in the collective pool of hermeneutical resources might disproportionately affect some knowers from understanding their experience over others. If epistemic agency therefore involves the capacity to have a transparent understanding of the world and oneself within it. Epistemic agency is thus at least in part conceptualized along the lines of an ideal of transparent understanding. In the case of a hermeneutical injustice, the gaps within the collective hermeneutical resource actively obscure the interests and experiences of a person in such a way that this person is actively inhibited from understanding themselves but also from rendering themselves and their experiences transparent to others. Lacking hermeneutical resources or the poor distribution of hermeneutical resources represents a harm to persons as knowers insofar as these gaps obscure knowers' own self understanding in ways that may set in question their capacity to develop a full sense of self and agency. The harm done by hermeneutical injustice is thus distinctively epistemic insofar as it impacts a knower's capacity to have a transparent understanding of themselves and the world around them. With this account of hermeneutical injustice emerges a particular conception of epistemic agency where to be a 'knower' is to have a transparent understanding of oneself and but also one who is able to render oneself transparent to others. Congdon's conclusion that epistemic injustices should be read as a failure of recognition of persons as knowers where the harm of epistemic justice is the withholding of social validation necessary for individuals to develop epistemic agency is incomplete without taking into consideration the ideal of transparency.

The capacity to render oneself transparent to others – or, of being known or knowable by others around, is of crucial importance to Fricker's account of epistemic agency.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, to be

¹⁴⁶ Kristie Dotson problematizes the aspiration of being known that is implied in Fricker's paradigm of epistemic injustice arguing that such an aspiration falls short in its capacity to describe invisibilized forms of social subordination. Dotson appeals to Pauli Murray's figure of 'Jane Crow' as a category of subordination that captures a distinct epistemological quandary of unknowability. Dotson writes: "Jane Crow subordination is constituted by occupying simultaneous hyper-visibility, i.e. membership in social categories policed and suppressed for the maintenance of some form of supremacy, and invisibility, i.e. the

recognized as a knower does not just mean that the person is loosely recognized as a holder of knowledge, it also implies that the other person can be known, that their lifeworld or experience is accessible to others around. Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. has argued that the potentially difficult implications that come with Fricker's endorsement of an account that renders the status of 'knower' as conditional to the possibility of being knowable.¹⁴⁷ She contends that the idea of being known can be exploitative insofar as it will impose an unfair burden on the epistemically oppressed to put in labor in order to render their lifeworld and experiences cognizant to dominant knowers. Here Pohlhaus talks about this kind of epistemic exploitation as "extracting epistemic labor coercively or in ways that are distinctly non-reciprocal."¹⁴⁸ Pohlhaus also argues that the logic of recognition underpinning the idea of the 'knower' might be exploitative insofar that knowers may be constituted or recognized in ways that not only impede on their agency but serve the agency of others.¹⁴⁹ Building on this account Pohlhaus concludes that certain forms of epistemic inclusions can be just as pernicious as certain forms of exclusions. For Pohlhaus, pernicious inclusions occur "when the recognized systems available are inapt for attending to the experienced world one is expected to represent."¹⁵⁰ Pohlhaus is right that epistemic inclusions might be pernicious because the burden of rendering oneself 'knowable' is often occurring in a power relation in which the oppressed have to render their experience and lifeworld accessible and understandable to the more dominant in society.

Pohlhaus' reading of Fricker demonstrates how the task of 'rendering oneself knowable' fails to be in the interest of the most epistemically oppressed because it will demand that the epistemically oppressed speak in terms that the more powerful in society can both understand but

limited nature of using those social categories to understand the specific nature of the subordination in question." See Kristie Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability" *Social Epistemology* 31, no. 5 (2017), 417. For Dotson, Jane Crow subordination demonstrates the existence of a 'negative socio-epistemic space' that renders the concrete struggles unknowable. For Dotson, what must be rendered transparent is not 'Jane Crow' but, instead, what she calls the 'invisibility frame' that renders Jane Crow unknowable. See Kristie Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability" *Social Epistemology* 31, no.5 (2017), 417-430.

¹⁴⁷ Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., "Epistemic Agency Under Oppression," *Philosophical Papers* 49, no. 2 (2020), 233-251.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁴⁹ Pohlhaus writes: "When the systems themselves are deployed inconsistently, contain targeted gaps, or are altogether inapt for attending to particular parts of the world that are experienced by marginalized groups, partial inclusion and even full inclusion in such systems can produce substantial epistemic harm. This is because inclusion within normatively governed systems may coercively direct the epistemic agency of marginalized knowers in ways that asymmetrically serve the epistemic interests of dominantly situated knowers while undermining their own. Such inclusions can, therefore, be epistemically exploitative, extracting epistemic labor from some solely for the benefit of others." See Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., "Epistemic Agency Under Oppression," *Philosophical Papers* 49, no.2 (2020), 241.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 244.

more importantly be willing to hear. Pohlhaus' account of 'willful hermeneutical ignorance' demonstrates how dominant knowers are actively unwilling to acknowledge their own ignorance and that this unwillingness is aided by their structural positioning that renders them capable of ignoring hermeneutical gaps as important or significant.¹⁵¹ As Pohlhaus puts it, willful hermeneutical ignorance:

“occurs when dominantly situated knowers refuse to acknowledge epistemic tools developed from the experienced world of those situated marginally. Such refusals allow dominantly situated knowers to misunderstand, misinterpret, and/or ignore whole parts of the world.”¹⁵²

Pohlhaus here describes a kind of vicious cycle where (1) epistemically oppressed signal to the more dominant knowers that there are hermeneutical gaps in the knowledge structure that work to invisibilize their experience of oppression, (2) dominant knowers refuse to acknowledge this hermeneutical gap because their structurally-aided positionality ensures that these experiences of oppression are completely removed from their experience, (3) in their refusal to acknowledge the hermeneutical gaps signalled to them by epistemically oppressed knowers, dominant knowers continue to secure these epistemic gaps and willfully ignore the experiences of the oppressed more broadly.¹⁵³

Pohlhaus' account is also helpful in reflecting critically on the terms under which transparency can occur. Indeed, rendering oneself knowable to others takes on a different meaning when the one rendering themselves knowable is doing so to someone who is situated in a structurally dominant position. It might also mean that the terms, concepts, language used to render oneself transparent will not be one's own but instead the terms, concepts or language of the dominant knower.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ This point was advanced first in Charles Mills' account of "White Ignorance" in which he shows how White folk's ignorance of racism is aided and facilitated by structural injustice. See Charles W. Mills "White Ignorance" in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 13-38.

¹⁵² See Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of 'Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance'" *Hypatia* 27, no.4 (2012), 715-735.

¹⁵³ See also Charles W. Mills "White Ignorance" in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 13-38. See Linda Martin Alcoff, "Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types" in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 39-58.

¹⁵⁴ Kristie Dotson offers an iteration of this problem through her conception of 'testimonial smothering' which she qualifies as "the truncating of one's own testimony in order to ensure that the testimony contains only content for which one's audience

Most importantly, Pohlhaus' account reveals something important about the terms of transparency upon which Fricker's account of epistemic agency relies. Indeed and as I have shown in this section, epistemic agency – that is, the capacity to both be recognized as a knower who can participate in shaping and enriching the collective pool of hermeneutical resources, is structured according to an implicit ideal of transparency. This ideal of transparency is not only an ideal for one to have a transparent access to one's own experience but also an ideal that one is able to *render oneself transparent to others*. How exactly is this transparency rendered possible, on Fricker's account? If Fricker's understanding of epistemic agency is reliant on an ideal of self-transparency and transparency to others, how exactly such transparency is made possible? Fricker's paradigm allows one to identify the injustice of having one's experience obscured to oneself, but also offers a positive project that is aimed at creating new concepts, better representative tools and resources that will both rectify past and anticipate future epistemic injustices.

In the following section, I demonstrate and problematize how Fricker's paradigm of epistemic injustice theorizes the possibility for epistemic agency to occur through the conjuring up of new concepts within what she refers to as a "collective pool of epistemic resources"¹⁵⁵ that would better represent the experiences and lifeworlds of all knowers. In particular, I problematize the assumption Fricker's ideal of transparency as relying on the idea that representational resources can create a thick form of epistemic symmetry between members of a community.

II. Transparency and Representational Uniformity

In the previous section, I argued that Fricker's paradigm of epistemic justice relies on an implicit commitment to an ideal of transparency in which knowers' capacity to render themselves transparent is contingent on them being able to render themselves transparent to others. In this section, I demonstrate how Fricker's rectificatory account of epistemic justice grants a distinct function to representational resources (like concepts) for rendering one transparent to oneself and to others. For Fricker, representational resources are held in a common pool where through

demonstrates testimonial competences." See Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011), 44.

¹⁵⁵ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Justice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 110.

greater inclusion of marginalized knowers into the process of pooling representational resources can gaps be progressively filled in. Indeed, as I mentioned in the previous section, Fricker tells a story about how gaps in the hermeneutical resources have been left by oppression and bad epistemic relations. The rectificatory framework that emerges from her account is therefore aimed at ‘filling-in’ these gaps. This progressive ‘filling-in’ of the common pool of hermeneutical sources is important to her commitment to an ideal of transparency where the concepts held in the common pool of representative resources can render one’s own experience transparent both to oneself and others. Indeed, it is precisely because this collective pool of resources offers the same conceptual resources for all such that all experiences can be represented to each other. On Fricker’s rectificatory account of epistemic justice, gaps within the collective pool of hermeneutical resources are able to be filled by concepts such that all previously obscured experiences can be brought to light to oneself and to others in equal measure.

In the previous section I demonstrated how some critics of Fricker have focused on how Fricker’s account of inclusion is unrealistic and potentially conducive to exploitative epistemic relations.¹⁵⁶ In this section I demonstrate how other critics have challenged Fricker on the grounds that her account of a ‘collective pool of hermeneutical resources’ overlooks the polyphonic nature of epistemic environments.¹⁵⁷ Building on both of those lines of criticisms, I will elaborate my own criticism that Fricker implicitly relies on the possibility of conceptual uniformity which assumes that the process by which knowers represent the world to themselves and to others will be more or less the same. In particular, I problematize the thick epistemic symmetry that undergirds Fricker’s rectificatory approach where she not only assumes that the substance of hermeneutical resources will be equivalent between knowers, but that the knowledge held by one knower can be made interchangeable with the knowledge held by another. This logic of symmetry and equivalence, I argue, will not only erase the plurality of

¹⁵⁶ See Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., “Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of ‘Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance’” *Hypatia* 27, no.4 (2012), 715-735. Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., “Epistemic Agency Under Oppression,” *Philosophical Papers* 49, no.2 (2020), 233-251. See Kristie Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011), 44.

¹⁵⁷ See José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

voices, but also render the terms of intelligibility completely within the hands of dominant knowers.

Previously, I demonstrated how Fricker's framework of epistemic injustice is aimed not only at identifying and diagnosing injustices, but is also invested in spelling out mechanisms that will rectify these injustices. These rectificatory mechanisms will seek to empower knowers by creating more virtuous epistemic relations. This includes the mutual recognition of one another as knowers which, according to Fricker, will create the participative conditions for all perspectives to be articulated and treated as having the potential to contribute to the collective pool of hermeneutical resources. This virtue ethical rectificatory mechanism addresses both testimonial and hermeneutical varieties of epistemic justice. Indeed, by creating conditions of ethical epistemic relations, Fricker not only addresses the immediate issue of testimonial injustice, but also preempts hermeneutical injustices. Once testimonial injustices are resolved the epistemic conditions can allow for a plural epistemic environment in which those who have been marginalized are able to actively contribute to the collective pool of knowledge. In other words, only when conditions for ethical epistemic relations are enacted can new concepts emerge. According to Fricker, the possibility for new concepts is rendered through virtuous epistemic relations that would render the activity of knowledge more inclusive.

Fricker's paradigm considers that new hermeneutical resources can emerge through greater and more plural participation in the activity of knowledge. Throughout her work, Fricker describes knowledge as a kind of collective pool containing discrete pieces of information, concepts, facts about the world that, in an epistemically just world, would be accessible to all. This is most apparent in Fricker's description of hermeneutical injustices as 'gaps' in the collective pool of knowledge that create 'intelligibility deficits' to experiencing subjects. Hermeneutical injustices therefore signal a conceptual lack or absence in the collective pool of knowledge. The image of knowledge as a kind of repository in which old concepts are removed and others inserted in signals something about the kind of function concepts are assumed to have in describing our experience. Fricker qualifies the participation in the activity of knowing as an act of 'pooling' information. To be a knower, on Fricker's account, is to be able to participate in the

“co-operative practice of pooling information.”¹⁵⁸ On this account, knowledge seems to be the sum total of all the information that has been collected through the countless and various pieces of information and knowledge exchanges. On Shannon Sullivan’s reading, Fricker posits knowledge:

“As pieces of information, knowledge is an accurate representation of the world that can be deposited to and withdrawn from a common account. Knowing, in turn, is the activity either of developing accurate representations to deposit to the bank or withdrawing knowledge from it that others have contributed”¹⁵⁹.

Fricker’s commitment to an idea of knowledge as a kind of repository in which one can withdraw and deposit information makes obvious the idea that transparency is rendered possible through a collective process of adding resources that fit collective requirements and withdrawing pieces that are inadequate.

Fricker’s commitment to an idea of knowledge as a kind of repository where one can withdraw and deposit information is made obvious in various other aspects of her work. In “Feminism in Epistemology: Plurality Without Postmodernism”, Fricker defends what she calls a ‘perspectival realism’ according to which “the right conception of social reality is such that, at any given historical moment, many of the facts that constitute it permit of being viewed rationally in more than one perspective.”¹⁶⁰ Here, Fricker defends an epistemic plurality that is compatible with the idea that there is a shared world that is accessible to all and in the same way. That is, Fricker insists that despite the ‘permanent partiality’ that comes with living in a plural society, there is still a shared epistemic world and a possibility for nurturing this shared epistemic world. Indeed, for Fricker, despite plurality – that is to say, despite the plurality of perspectives, all knowers “inhabit the same world.”¹⁶¹ This idea of ‘inhabiting the same epistemic world’ also demonstrates Fricker’s commitment to creating a representational structure that is the same for all.

¹⁵⁸ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Justice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 110.

¹⁵⁹ Shannon Sullivan, “On the Harms of Epistemic Injustice: Pragmatism and Transactional Epistemology” in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (London: Routledge, 2017), 207.

¹⁶⁰ Miranda Fricker, “Feminism in Epistemology: Plurality Without Postmodernism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy*, ed. Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 160.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

Transparency can only occur when everyone inhabits the same epistemic world, which is to say when everyone has access to the same epistemic resources and uses these resources in the same way. Rendering oneself transparent to others thus entails a high level of epistemic homogeneity. According to this view, the collective pool of knowledge is available and when access to this pool is granted through virtuous epistemic practices, knowers are able to engage in the same activity of knowing.

Fricker's position in "Feminism in Epistemology" is very telling: the uniformity of concepts as they articulate a world in common displays a high degree of homogeneity between knowers. This homogeneity seemingly undergirds her view of knowledge as a 'collective pool' of hermeneutical resources whereby those resources can make oneself transparent to others as well as to oneself. A collective pool of resources is required to make oneself transparent to others where this representational uniformity is able to create a kind of epistemic equivalence between knowers. It is clear that on Fricker's account, the ideal of transparency can only be rendered through a representational uniformity where the hermeneutical resources that are contained in this collective pool can allow everyone to represent their experience and lifeworld to one another more or less the same way.

Along a similar vein, José Medina has criticized Fricker's account of a 'collective pool' of hermeneutical resources for overemphasizing the homogeneity of resources and the homogeneity of the public that is assumed to be appealing to this collective pool.¹⁶² For Medina, there is also something misguided in the idea that "we can pool all the hermeneutical resources available to all groups and create some kind of exhaustive inventory."¹⁶³ This idea is misguided because it assumes that the hermeneutical resources that are contained within this 'exhaustive inventory' can presumably represent all experiences and, in doing so, render a world in common. For Medina, this is not only implausible but also an undesirable idea. It is undesirable because, for Medina, this will require a high level of assimilation into a hegemonic discourse that will seek to necessarily quash the polyphony that qualifies any epistemic environment. Medina's account stresses instead the idea of 'epistemic friction' which arises when there are conflicting

¹⁶² José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 113.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 10.

knowledge claims about the world emerging from different groups. Through this conception of epistemic friction, Medina wants to stress that this collective act of ‘pooling together’ is one that is rife with contestation. Medina writes:

“Epistemic interaction involves more than the mere pooling of information; it also involves negotiating processes of mutual interrogation and collaborative generation of meanings and interpretative possibilities.”¹⁶⁴

In this passage, Medina seems to advance a position that the process by which there is collective pooling of epistemic resources pays insufficient attention to the kinds of conflicts that can emerge from doing so. Medina instead focuses on the polyphonic nature of epistemic communities which are defined through their heterogeneity. For Medina, the polyphonic nature of epistemic communities sets in question Fricker’s idea that there are ‘gaps’ in the collective pool of hermeneutical resources. It might be more the case that the polyphonic nature of epistemic communities mean that different groups have different hermeneutical resources that describe experiences that are closer to their lifeworlds, where some of these hermeneutical resources are not shared between groups. Medina writes:

“communicative contexts are always polyphonic, and the plurality of experiential and hermeneutical perspectives in any given context is such that we can always find voices that depart from the available communicative practices and dynamics, and their eccentric agency exceeds standard meanings and interpretative resources.”¹⁶⁵

Here, Medina directly challenges the idea that hermeneutical resources can be pooled such that they can uniformly translate the experiences of all members of an epistemic community. For Medina, conditions of plurality necessarily mean that the process by which we represent our experiences to others is not going to be through straightforward appeals to concepts whose meaningful substance is equivalent between subjects. Rather the process by which one communicates and articulates themselves and their lifeworld will always exceed the representational standards.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 95.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 95.

Building off Medina, I argue that the polyphony of the epistemic environment does not require that we unify representational sources, but rather that we create conditions under which this heterogeneity can be better received. Rather than trying to resolve the epistemic injustices through unifying representational structures such that everyone can be rendered knowable or transparent to each other, I want to advance that bringing to light the lack of equivalence between knowers might itself be generative on a number of different planes. Firstly, the lack of equivalence between representational sources that knowers appeal to in order to describe their lifeworld might reveal an experiential divergence which could be the result of power asymmetries. If this is the case, bringing to light the lack of equivalence could generate a deeper understanding of each other as differently situated within a wider matrix of power imbalances. Fricker's implicit aspiration for representational uniformity would further obscure how these representational asymmetries arose in the first place. In contrast, the aspirations of this thesis are to harness the lack of equivalences between experiences of rape in order to galvanize survivor-led cross-experiential practice that might lead to a collective critique of power.

Medina argues that one concrete implication of taking the polyphony of epistemic environments seriously is that it demands developing 'hermeneutical sensibilities' which he describes as a capacity to engage with fragmentary, partial, vague narratives.¹⁶⁶ Medina writes:

“when it comes to hermeneutical gaps, it is crucial to pay attention to the communicative processes in which subjects struggle to make sense to themselves of what they cannot yet communicate to others, especially to those others who do not share their predicament. Through these communicative attempts, subjects start to work on the melioration of hermeneutical sensibilities, starting with their own and with the sensibilities of those in communicative contact with them. Through repeated attempts to communicate with ourselves and with those around us about experiences that have been obscured and hermeneutically marginalized, we can expand our hermeneutical sensibilities and eventually add to the hermeneutical resources of our group through contributions that

¹⁶⁶ José Medina, “Imposed Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities” in *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98-99.

could also spread to other groups, with new interpretative tools acquiring progressively wider circulation.”¹⁶⁷

Here, Medina argues that when attending to hermeneutical gaps it matters more to develop communicative environments in which subjects can explore articulating themselves and their experience rather than unifying the substance of representational resources for all. Medina’s account stresses the importance of ameliorating the procedure through which communicative attempts are made rather than the substance of that communicative exchange. Medina’s dynamic approach therefore prioritizes the existence of spaces for articulating experience rather than focusing on creating conceptual transparency where through practicing the articulation of one’s experience – no matter how inarticulate, partial and fragmentary these may be. What emerges instead of better concepts are better interpretative capacities, that is, a better capacity to engage with partial and fragmentary narratives in a meaningful way.

Medina’s account partly aligns with the aspirations of this thesis. However, what this thesis is also most interested in is not simply how to develop hermeneutical sensibilities that might allow one to better interpret the fragmentary utterances of others. It is also interested in creating a procedure in which the lack of equivalences between two mutually irreducible experiences can be politically generative. The lack of equivalence can be politically generative because it can bring to light power asymmetries between subjects and how these power asymmetries impact one’s experiences, how one recounts that experience, and the meaning one ascribes to that experience. Indeed, the lack of equivalence between experiences and, in turn, between the way that subjects understand and articulate their experiences are perhaps themselves revelatory of the fact that subjects are asymmetrically situated within a power structure. Therefore, the fact that two experiences might be understood and articulated in very different ways is therefore incredibly valuable to the project of bringing to light the lack of equivalences with regards to one another. The lack of equivalence need not be qualified as a failure of epistemic resources but could rather be seen as a generative source for better understanding how power asymmetries generate experiential gaps.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 98-99.

Fricker's account advances an account of representational uniformity that aims at creating thick epistemic equivalences between knowers. In my reading of her paradigm, Fricker's account seems to consider that *concepts in common* will save us from silence or from being silenced. This kind of symmetry is troubling because it will demand not only a single mode of expression, but a capacity to represent experiences in the same way to one another. On this understanding, experiences will be assumed to be more or less the same for all in such a way that the association between concept and experience can be made more immediately transparent. Fricker's account of a collective pool of hermeneutical resources seems to suggest that knowers can be made to live in a shared social reality by virtue of being able to represent their lifeworlds and experiences to each other. In doing so, Fricker's vision for an epistemically just world is one that relies on an ideal of transparency in which concepts can create a symmetrical epistemic relation between knowers such that the knowledge held by one knower can be made interchangeable with the knowledge held by another.

III. Survivor Silence and Speaking Rape 'On Our Own Terms'

In the section of this chapter, I argue that in its underlying commitment to an ideal of transparency that can only be enacted through representational uniformity, Fricker's paradigm is ill-equipped for attending to the problem of survivor silence. Responding to this inadequacy, I will advance instead that survivor silence is better attended to when the standards of narration and self-expression are not regimented so robustly by the requirement of making oneself knowable and palatable to others. Most crucially, I will advance that survivor silence is better attended to when the particularity of their experience is given the possibility of being expressed without the implicit requirement of rendering that experience meaningfully equivalent and conceptually symmetrical to the experience of others. The fact that survivors struggle to map their experience onto the concept of rape, in my view, does not prompt the need for a more refined concept of rape, but rather a better structure to engage experience in its particularity. Instead, I advance that what might best attend to the problem of survivor silence is the possibility to express and articulate one's experience in its fragmentary, partial and precarious capacity. Notwithstanding the damaging impact of rape myths and flawed social understandings about rape and sexual abuse, the problem of survivor silence prompts instead the necessity for a

practice that can engage experience in its particularity. In the cross-experiential practice that I advance, the lack of equivalence between experiences is not seen as obscuring but rather as revealing of how power asymmetries might participate in generating substantially different experiences. In doing so, I demonstrate how the aspirations of Fricker's paradigm of epistemic justice do not map well on the wider aspirations of this thesis which centers the importance of the particularity of experience and its narration as an important resource for mapping the power asymmetries that are implicated in rape.

The silencing of rape survivors remains a persistent and preoccupying feature of sexual violence, pertaining to a wider system of oppression in which rape survivors are systematically discredited by institutions and people around them. Rape being one of the most prominent iterations of gender-based violence has meant that prejudicial stereotypes around women being irrational, overly-emotional, even hysterical impact how police officers and juries treat women's disclosures of sexual violence. Indeed, the trope of the woman 'crying rape' appeals to deep-rooted gendered stereotypes about women being deceptive and maliciously seeking revenge upon naive, desperate, enamoured men.¹⁶⁸ Such tropes have nurtured a culture in which the ruin experienced by falsely accused men is treated as significantly more worrisome than the potentiality of rape itself. Harmful prejudices regarding women's credibility epitomized in the trope of 'crying rape' has further contributed to systematize the doubting and second-guessing rape survivors in police stations and courtrooms.

Flawed social knowledge around rape also impacts how people respond to disclosures of rape survivorship. Feminists have historically demonstrated how rape myths such as "women who drink or take drugs deserve it if they get raped"¹⁶⁹ or "women are 'asking for it' if they wear revealing clothes"¹⁷⁰ are so ingrained in public discourse in ways that impact what 'counts as rape'. Upheld by the idea that male perpetrators of rape have an uncontrollable sexuality such that what is deemed as sexually provocative becomes an invitation to rape, such myths serve to

¹⁶⁸ See Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, (London: Virago, 2007), 28-29.

¹⁶⁹ See Rape Crisis England & Wales. "Myths vs Facts." Accessed June 10, 2024. <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/about-sexual-violence/myths-vs-realities/>.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

legitimate victim-blaming. Such gendered victim-blaming fosters an environment in which rape survivors have been disproportionately scrutinized for their role in ‘inviting rape’.

Along a similar vein, stereotypes around hypersexual women which, as bell hooks notes, has historically been associated with Black women have also served the narrative that sexually ravenous women have invited sexual advances from men, thus rendering the claim to rape void. Here, gendered and racial dynamics intersect in effectively creating Black women as ‘unrapeable subjects’ which contributed to Black women survivors’ systemic silencing.¹⁷¹ These different ways in which prejudicial stereotypes impact the credibility of survivors within institutions demonstrates how survivors are made to question their reality and their experiences such that it becomes a systemic form of silencing. Such forms of silencing are concerning not only because they obviate an oppressive gendered and racialized hostility against rape survivors, but also because these institutional forms of silencing have downstream effects on how survivors conceptualize their sexually violent experience to themselves. Here, Fricker’s diagnosis of how systematized forms of testimonial injustices generate hermeneutical injustices seems to capture well how the silencing of rape survivors is conducive to survivors being less likely to acknowledge their own experience as one of rape. Indeed, these stereotypes not only impact the credibility afforded to survivors by institutions, but it will also impact survivors’ own capacity to trust in their own sense of reality.

The story that is often told through Fricker’s paradigm of epistemic justice is that survivor silence is potentially linked to rape survivors’ incapacity to recognize their sexually violent experience as rape because they have an epistemically distorted understanding of their own experience, oftentimes due to the internalization of pervasive ‘rape myths’ that obscure or distort a person’s capacity to understand their experience.¹⁷² Here, survivor silence signals how flawed social knowledge around rape impacts one’s own capacity to understand, recognize and acknowledge one’s sexually violent experience as rape. The mismatch between survivor experiences of rape and the category of rape has been made especially evident with the

¹⁷¹ See bell hooks, “Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood” in *Ain’t I a Woman* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 51-86.

¹⁷² Mary Koss formulated ‘unacknowledged rape’ as occurring when survivors keep their rape hidden “even from themselves.” Mary P. Koss, “Hidden, Unacknowledged, Acquaintance, and Date Rape: Looking Back, Looking Forward”, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 35, no. 2, (2011), 348-354.

emergence of ‘grey rape’ – or, experiences of rape that occur within a grey area of consent, particularly in cases of acquaintance or spousal rape where the survivor-victim’s relationship with the perpetrator might render the lack of consent difficult to pin down.¹⁷³ As Liz Kelly demonstrates in her conception of sexual violence as a ‘continuum’, it is commonplace for women to experience unwanted sexual acts within their consensual relationships.¹⁷⁴ The category of ‘grey rape’ has been used to demonstrate the limitations of consent as a framework for straightforwardly identifying a sexually violence experience as rape.¹⁷⁵ More importantly, ‘grey rape’ demonstrates how the incapacity to map one’s experience onto a concept might result in systematized silencing. Indeed, it demonstrates how conceptual inadequacies impede on one’s own capacity to recognize, name and acknowledge one’s experience as rape. The persistence of survivor silence is precisely worrying not only because experiences of suffering are kept at the margins, but because there is systemic and institutionalized obscuring at play. That rape survivors are silenced by having their narratives questioned or by having faulty knowledge around rape distorting their understanding of their experience further obscures how rape continues to be an systemically enabled form of violence.

The persistence of survivor silence in regards to their rape experience is therefore often pinned down to inadequate representational structures, of poor conceptual resources that cannot adequately capture one’s rape experience.¹⁷⁶ In particular, some feminists have diagnosed the problem of survivors silence as, at least in part, down to survivors struggling to recognize their

¹⁷³ See Reina Gattuso “Rape Culture is a Contract We Never Actually Signed,” *Feministing*, 2016.

¹⁷⁴ Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

¹⁷⁵ Debate around how the existence of the category of ‘grey rape’ might be unhelpful insofar as they might perpetuate survivor-victims’ experience of doubt in the aftermath of a sexual assault. See Fiona Vera-Gray, *The Right Amount of Panic* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2018).

¹⁷⁶ See Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2017), 191-205. See also Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths: What are they and what can we do about them?” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* (2021), 37-49.

sexually violent experience as rape or as effectively ‘counting’ as rape.¹⁷⁷ ‘Unacknowledged rape’ occurs when a person reports an experience that legally qualifies but does not refer to that experience as rape.¹⁷⁸ For Peterson and Muehlenhard, there is a correlation between rape myth acceptance and unacknowledged rape demonstrating how rape myths impede on survivors’ capacity to conceptualize their sexually violent experience as rape.¹⁷⁹ The problem of ‘unacknowledged rape’ goes to show how ‘rape myths’ and faulty social understandings of rape impact on survivors capacity to map their experience onto the concept of rape. In other words, ‘rape myths’ obscure one’s epistemic access to one’s own experience in ways that perpetuate rape and sexual abuse to go ‘unnoticed’, to be off-handedly shaken off as ‘bad sex’, or worse yet, to be qualified as indistinguishable from sex tout court.¹⁸⁰

Similarly, Jenkins argues that rape myths can be qualified as a hermeneutical injustice because rape myths will permeate survivors’ understanding of rape in ways that will prevent them from identifying their experience as one rape. Jenkins writes:

¹⁷⁷ See Mary P. Koss, Thomas E. Dinero, Cynthia A. Seibel, Susan L. Cox, “Stranger and Acquaintance Rape”, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1988), 1-24. See also Mary P. Koss, “Hidden, Unacknowledged, Acquaintance, and Date Rape: Looking Back, Looking Forward”, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 35, no. 2, (2011), 348-354. According to Mary Koss, unacknowledged rape is used to describe a person “who has experience a sexual assault that would legally qualify as rape but who does not conceptualize herself as a rape victim.” On Koss’ understanding, unacknowledged rape happens when a survivor-victim’s experience does not match legal definitions of rape and therefore do not characterize their experience as rape. According to this view, unacknowledged rape seems to be a conceptual or definitional problem. See also Robin Warshaw, *I Never Called it Rape: The Ms. Report on Recognizing, Fighting, and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988) where she reflects on why so many survivor-victims of acquaintance rape often take years to acknowledge their sexually violent past experience as rape. See also Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2017), 191-205. See Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths: What are They and What can We do About Them?”, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 89, (2021), 37-49.

¹⁷⁸ See Zoe D. Peterson, Charlene L. Muehlenhard, ‘Was it rape? The function of women’s rape myth acceptance and definitions of sex in labeling their own experiences’, *Sex Roles* (2004), pp. 129–144. See also Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2017), 191-205. See also Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths: What are they and what can we do about them?” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* (2021), pp. 37-49.

¹⁷⁹ Zoe D. Peterson, Charlene L. Muehlenhard, ‘Was it rape? The function of women’s rape myth acceptance and definitions of sex in labeling their own experiences’, *Sex Roles* (2004), 129–144.

¹⁸⁰ It is interesting to note how understandings of rape also simultaneously construct ideas of what ‘normal sex’ or mere ‘sex’ looks like and entails. Ideas about rape thus participate in *norming* sexuality and sexual practices by defining the parameters of permissible sex. This is also why the discourse of rape sustains and nurtures ideas around sexuality and gendered sexuality in ways that feminists have been historically suspicious of. See Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, (London: Virago, 2007). Joanna Bourke, *Disgrace: Global Reflections on Sexual Violence* (London: Reaktion Books, 2022). Mithu Sanyal, *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (London: Verso, 2016).

“acceptance of myths leads people to develop a working understanding of rape or of domestic abuse that encodes faulty assumptions, such that it excludes certain abusive situations by definition.”¹⁸¹

On his account, it is not words that fail survivor-victims of rape, but pernicious rape myths that are broadly socially accepted that actively inhibit survivor-victims from seeing their own sexually violent experience as rape. For Jenkins, rape myths constitute an epistemic injustice insofar as they impede on the capacity for survivor-victims to fully understand their experience of rape. Unacknowledged rape therefore seems to be a compelling example of how survivors’ experiences have and continue to be obscured both conceptually and epistemically but also and importantly, how the epistemic and conceptual obscurity are oftentimes a result of broader underlying prejudices around women’s credibility.

Through Fricker’s paradigm, naming rape seems to be the primary way in a person acknowledges or recognizes their raped. Yet, many rape survivors avoid and even actively refuse to use the ‘r-word’ to describe their experience. As a helpline worker at Stop Rape attests, “most of the time a woman talking about her rape will start off calling it something else.”¹⁸² Indeed, many testimonials from rape survivors themselves follows this pattern. Consider Virginie Despentes’ recounting her own process of interacting with the word ‘rape’: “The few times - mostly very drunk - when I wanted to talk about it, did I used the word? Never. The few times I attempted to talk about it, I’d go around the word “rape”: “assaulted,” “mixed up,” “in a tight corner,” “hustled,” whatever...”¹⁸³ Similarly, Rachel Thompson recounts her own contention with the r-word: “For a long time, I’d allude to ‘bad sex’ or ‘not-so-great encounters’ without proffering any more details, but in a way that hinted at something that I couldn’t quite bring myself to verbalise.”¹⁸⁴ In the context of rape, to speak, name or label is bound up with acknowledgement, recognition and understanding of the experience. Medina pushes back against the conflation between intelligibility and linguistic labels:

¹⁸¹ See Katharine Jenkins, “Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2017), 196.

¹⁸² Mithu Sanyal, *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (London: Verso, 2016), 67.

¹⁸³ Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 2006), 39. Translated quote from Mithu Sanyal, *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (London: Verso, 2016), 67.

¹⁸⁴ Rachel Thompson, *Rough: How violence has found itself into the bedroom*, (Birmingham: SquarePeg, 2021), 11.

“We should be careful not to tie too closely people’s hermeneutical capacities to the repertoire of readily available terms and coined concepts, as if oppressed subjects did not have ways of expressing their suffering well before such articulations were available. For example (...) women suffering abuse from their partners were struggling to make sense of their experiences and to give expression to their predicament, even if in fragmentary and precarious ways, long before labels such as ‘marital rape’ and ‘domestic violence’ were available.”¹⁸⁵

I take Medina to be saying that it is not obvious that having a more refined concept of rape will make it easier for survivors to speak rape. More broadly, Medina queries the leap that is too often made in which a subject is assumed to not know what they have experienced, to have a distorted understanding of themselves, their experience and their reality simply because they not use certain terminology to describe their experience. Medina’s point seems especially pertinent in the context of rape survivorship where many survivors attest skirting away from the ‘r-word’ to avoid grappling with its loadedness, but also perhaps to avoid the social malaise that the term ignites. Medina’s cautioning against the conflation between communicability and conceptual transparency allows for the recognition of survivors as knowers who are reflective about the way they choose to represent their experience, instead of systematically jumping to the conclusion that they are disempowered knowers failing to fully understand their own experience.

In disentangling the conflation between communicability and conceptual transparency Medina offers a more demanding account for listeners: the point is for listeners to pay better attention to proximate iterations of abuse and violence that might not appeal to the concept of rape. Indeed, the assumption that rape can be rendered straightforwardly identifiable has also worked against survivors. As Alcoff writes:

¹⁸⁵ Jose Medina, “Imposed Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities” in *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 99.

“The idea that rape is a simple, straightforward matter actually works to dissuade the many victims from coming forward who feel that their own experience has complexity and ambiguity”¹⁸⁶

Rape is therefore a good example of how conceptual precision around rape will not obviously save survivors from their silence. When the ambiguity and complexity of one’s experience seems difficult to map onto a concept, the fixedness of the concept will demand from survivors to reduce their experience by bracketing what appears to them to be irreducible features of their experience. This is not to endorse a more diffuse understanding of rape, nor to say that misogynist tropes underlying the discourse of rape is a good thing, but instead to suggest that what seems more pressing for the purposes of addressing survivor silence is to create practices that can allow for experiences of rape to be expressed in their particularity. Indeed, it seems more important to create disclosure structures without standards of intelligibility that are determined by the capacity to render ones’ experience transparent to others.

Rape crisis helplines are a good example of a discursive space that can permit survivors to speak rape on their own terms. In particular, helpline services are useful for first-time disclosures of rape where survivors are encouraged to explore what language and concepts to use to describe their experience. One of the important tenets of rape crisis helpline work is to never define nor name nor conceptualize the experience for a caller. The logic behind this rule is twofold: first the use of charged terms like the term ‘rape’ could spark more distress in survivor-callers, and second that survivor-callers should be granted the narrative agency to speak rape on their own terms even if it means never actually using the ‘r-word’. Helplines are important because they grant to survivors the possibility to command the expression of their disclosure in a way that can be as fragmented, partial and crucially nonconceptual. As I suggested at the end of the previous chapter, rape crisis helplines are a unique disclosure structure because even if a caller does not utter a single word, or discusses something that seems entirely distant from rape – the mere fact that it all occurs on a rape crisis helpline loads the interaction with meaning. All of these different utterances are themselves a kind of disclosure when occurring under the *rape crisis*

¹⁸⁶ Linda Martin Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 9.

helpline. In turn, helpline support practitioners have to demonstrate a strong “hermeneutical sensibilities”¹⁸⁷ precisely because they have to respond to partial, fragmentary and at times nonconceptual narratives of rape.

To go back momentarily to my reading of Fricker, it seems like the paradigm of epistemic justice that she advances would suggest that a clear concept of rape that is available to all would render it possible for survivors to render their rape experience transparent to themselves and others. What is need for attending to the epistemic interests of rape survivors is conditions for speaking rape on one’s own terms which, in turn, means creating conditions for speaking rape in its fragmentary, precarious, partial capacity. What is need, is the possibility to speaking rape that can attend to experiences that are, for experiencing subjects, riddled with complexity and ambiguity. The point is not to create a conceptual clarity for survivors, but rather to enable survivors to speak rape on their own terms.

Speaking rape on one’s own terms will also mean that the articulation of rape will not be equivalent for and between survivors. Indeed, no two experience of rape will be meaningfully equivalent and conceptually symmetrical to the experience of others. The implicit requirement of rendering one’s experience knowable to others risks imposing a kind of representative uniformity that will eclipse the important particularities that are sometimes themselves the cause of narrative and conceptual ambiguity. In turn, I suggest that the particularity and mutual irreducibility of experience has an important role to play here precisely because it will entail a lack of equivalence between survivors. This lack of equivalence might signal important asymmetries between survivors that are themselves important to bring to light. That bringing to light the irreducible character of each experience of rape can serve to demonstrate the plural configurations and meanings that underpin this category as well as the plural configurative power relations that are implicated in rape.

¹⁸⁷ José Medina, “Imposed Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities” in *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 97-99.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude this chapter, I want to stress that while Fricker's paradigm remains inadequate for framing the aspirations of this thesis. While Fricker's approach is interested in creating the representational possibilities for greater transparency in relation to one's own experience and others' experiences, my thesis is instead interested in harnessing the lack of equivalence between how subjects might represent an experience. More specifically, I am interested in developing a practice in which the particularity of experience can be brought to light through engaging the lack of equivalence between experiencing subjects. Becoming more attuned to the particularity with which rape is expressed will also allow for survivors to speak rape on their own terms. Establishing representational uniformity around the issue of rape risks further silencing survivors who find their experience to be too complex, too ambiguous or too meaningfully and configuratively dissimilar to the rigid conceptual form. In turn, I followed Medina that what seems especially important to attend to the epistemic interests of rape survivors is a communicative procedure that can allow for the fragmentariness and partiality of experience to be expressed.

I conclude this chapter by maintaining the importance of mutual irreducibilities between experiences and how these are sometimes made most apparent in the divergences and nuances in the way that survivors choose to speak rape. In my thesis, I advance a feminist cross-experiential practice rape survivorship that can engage survivors' experiences of rape. To do so, I stress the irreducible particularity of rape experiences as a valuable source for mapping the the plural subjects, bodies, sites of violence, configurations, power relations, meanings, and harms invested in rape. Indeed, my thesis is interested in how the gaps between particular experiences of rape between differently situated embodied subjects, can be used to reveal power asymmetries between subjects. The gaps in the way that subjects represent their experiences are a crucial mechanism through which this particularity can be revealed and thereby engaged cross-experientially. Such a lack of representational equivalence, I argue, could also be instrumental for mapping the plural configurative power relations that are implicated in rape. Therefore, this lack of equivalence could be harnessed for the purpose of theorizing rape from experience itself. In the following chapter, I focus on how experience can be used as a source to

advance the interests of feminism broadly conceived. I do so by elaborating a practice that harnesses the mutual irreducibility of experience.

Chapter 3. Feminism and Experience: Between Essentialism and Depoliticized Particularity

In previous chapters, I delineated the need for a practice that can engage the particularity and mutual irreducibility of experience. In chapter 1, I located this particularity at the level of embodiment building off Ann Cahill's eponymous account of rape as embodied experience.¹⁸⁸ Specifically, I demonstrated how treating rape as an embodied experience requires a practice to bring to the fore the plural meanings, forms, and configurations that rape can take. In Chapter 2, I concluded by demonstrating the importance of igniting the lack of equivalence between the way that survivors understand, articulate and ultimately narrate their experience of rape. This lack of equivalence, I argued, can permit survivors to speak rape on their own terms whilst simultaneously bring to light important divergences between survivors.

This chapter offers a methodological contribution to the feminist debate on experience. Rather than pinning down experience's precise epistemic substance, this chapter is interested in how to engage experience such that it can effectively navigate the tension between essentialism and depoliticized particularity. Thus, this chapter is not invested in specifying the fixed, foundational and universal evidence of experience. Instead, this chapter is a work of feminist methodology reflecting on the mode of engagement of experience for an anti-essentialist feminist politics. As a work of feminist methodology, this chapter is also interested in elaborating what kind of experiential evidence can best serve the interests of feminism as both a theoretical activity invested in the practice of social critique and a group politics that advances social change. Here, I defend the view that experience can and must remain a source for bridging feminist theory and politics. I argue that it can do so not on its own but only when it is engaged with the experiences with others. More specifically, I argue that experience can be a source for feminist theory and politics when it is capable of interrogating the terms of sameness that are assumed to link two subjects' experiences. In doing so, it continuously interrogates assumptions of similarity and difference that are often projected onto shared experiences. By centering the mutual irreducibility of experience, the practice that I advance can enable experiencing subjects to continuously

¹⁸⁸ Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

interrogate the relations of similarity and difference that emerge from engaging their experience with others. This interrogation is only possible if experience is engaged in its embodied particularity with others, a point I have already foregrounded in chapter 1.

In this chapter, I intervene in a long-standing feminist theoretical and political contention with the category of experience where experience has been both vindicated as a critical source for feminism as well as criticized for reifying essentialist categories. In the vindicatory camp, personal experiences are seen as an important source for consolidating a feminist struggle precisely because women's experiences were historically rendered invisible and marginal.¹⁸⁹ In the skeptical camp, the category of experience is questioned for uncritically reifying, perhaps even naturalizing, existing identity categories without interrogating how these categories came to exist in the first place.¹⁹⁰

Joan Scott's critique of experiential evidence as reproducing the terms of discourse remains one of the most important pieces of feminist scholarship written against appeals to experience for feminist theorizing, interrogating its limited potential for a feminist critique of power.¹⁹¹ For Scott, the assumption that experiential evidence can self-sufficiently define a social identity risks reifying the social category rather than interrogating its historical origins. Indeed, for Scott, when the evidence of experience is seen both as *immediately self-evident* and *self-sufficient* it is at risk of naturalizing existing terms and identity categories rather than interrogating how these terms

¹⁸⁹ See Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). Sonia Kruks, "Women's 'Lived Experience': Feminism and Phenomenology from Simone de Beauvoir to the Present" in *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory* ed. Mary Evans et al. (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 75-92. Judith Grant, "Experience" in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch, Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 227-246. Linda Martin Alcoff, "Phenomenology, Post-Structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience" in *Feminist Phenomenology*, ed. Linda Fisher, Lester Embree (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 39-56. Linda Martin Alcoff, "Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience" in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans, Leonard Lawlor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 251-271. Linda Martin Alcoff, "The Thorny Question of Experience" in *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 56-76. For an example of uses of embodied experience for feminist critique see Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1995). For uses of experience for standpoint theory see Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought" *Social Problems* 33, no. 6, (1986), s14-s32.

¹⁹⁰ See Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience" *Critical Inquiry* 17, no.4 (1991), 773-797. See also Joan Scott, "Experience" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler, Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 22-40. For scholarship attempting to rescue experience from poststructural skepticism see Silvia Stoller, "Phenomenology and the Poststructural Critique of Experience" *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 17, no. 9 (2009), 707-737. See also Johanna Oksala, "In Defense of Experience" in *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 36-52. See also Johanna Oksala, "In Defense of Experience" *Hypatia* 29, no.2 (2014), 388-403.

¹⁹¹ Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience" *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991), 773-797.

and identity categories emerged in the first place. Scott's position demonstrates how when experiential evidence is treated as self-evident and self-sufficient, it is at risk of essentializing existing social categories rather than critically reflecting on their contingency.

Yet, to deny that any generalizations can be drawn from experience risks falling into a depoliticized particularism where each experience is unique and cannot be shared. On this understanding, experience cannot be appealed to in order to formulate a feminist group identity that is interested in advancing the interest of women, because experience might be at risk of reproducing the terms that feminists have been trying to resist. Such a depoliticized particularism which qualifies each experience as irreducibly unique seems to render any kind of common oppression under a common power inconceivable. To stress the particularity of experience seems to give up not only on experience as a source for challenging forms of oppression that have been historically obscured or normalized, but also on the possibility of creating a group-based politics that is grounded in shared experiences of oppression. On this understanding, experience cannot speak to power.

There is, therefore, a tension with respect to the category of experience in feminist theory when experiential evidence either overinflates a shared social condition at the expense of particularity, or overemphasizes its uniqueness stripping experience of its political substance or political potential. For Michaela Ferguson, feminist theory faces "the tricky extremes of false universalism ('all women share these same experiences') and a depoliticizing subjectivism ('each woman's experiences are unique')."¹⁹² In my view, this exemplifies a broader tension in feminist theory: namely, that of being locked between an essentialism that reifies the category of woman and a depoliticized particularity that cannot adequately recognize a common oppression. Mapping this tension with the category of experience as a source for feminist theorizing, this chapter seeks to negotiate this tension by insisting that experience remains a source for feminism as both a critical project and a group practice.

¹⁹² Michaela L. Ferguson, "Resonance and Dissonance: The Role of Personal Experience in Iris Marion Young's Feminist Phenomenology," in *Dancing with Iris: The Philosophy Iris Marion Young*, ed. Ann Ferguson, Mechthild Nagel, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 54.

In this chapter, I argue that experience must remain a source for feminism because of its capacity to create a sense of resonance and dissonance between subjects. However, I argue that experience is at risk of essentialism when the ignition of resonance or dissonance is taken to be self-sufficient grounds to construct generalizations about and between women. Thus, I maintain that when experience is engaged in a collective, open-ended procedure of interpretation that continuously interrogates the sense of resonance and dissonance between subjects can experience be ignited for a group politics. Therefore, I advance that the resonance and dissonance that experience creates between subjects should itself be the object of scrutiny. With this practice, I argue that experience can be a source for feminism insofar as it continuously interrogates the dissonance and resonance that experience can ignite between subjects.

The critical potential of an experience becomes apparent when it is engaged with others' experiences where the mutual irreducibility of each particular experience functions as an outside position through which one can comparatively engage one's own experience. The mutual irreducibility of each particular experience also plays a function in enabling an open-ended interrogation into the sense of sameness that experience might ignite. Through this practice, I argue that experience remains a source for feminist critique without naturalizing, fetishizing nor grounding a fundamental sameness between experiencing subjects. Rather, it offers pathways for a continuous critique of the essentializing terms of sameness that are self-evidently affixed to experience. It also allows for the preservation of experience as a source for igniting a feminist politics, recognizing the importance of bringing to light marginalized experiences that had been previously cast as politically irrelevant.

This chapter will proceed in three steps. The first two sections focus on mapping the feminist contention with the category of experience as being locked between essentialism and depoliticized particularism. The first section focuses on how some feminisms appeal to experience as a valuable source for the feminist struggle of 'making visible' forms of oppression that were previously obscured. In the second section, I demonstrate how some feminists were skeptical in relation to appeals to experience that too quickly assumed its evidence to be a shared identity, a claim that took more political dimensions in the critique of a women's experience'. Skepticism in relation to the category of experience revealed political limitations of appeals to

experience on the grounds that they could lead to an undesirable essentialism. Critics of appeals to experience also revealed the limited critical potential of experience in that it might only reify existing categories and social identities instead of challenging them. Through these two sections, I delineate the state of the debate on the category of experience in feminist theory as locked between the worry of essentialism and the necessity for group politics. In the final section, I elaborate my own view of what kind of source experience could be for feminist theory. Here, I develop a practice for engaging experience in a way that can continually interrogate the assumptions of sameness that are affixed to experience. Such a practice around engaging experience preserves the importance of experience for igniting a feminist politics while remaining steadfastly anti-essentialist. In doing so, my approach to experience, I argue, can effectively negotiate the tension between essentialism and depoliticized particularity that I elaborate in the first two sections of this chapter.

I. Feminist Theory and ‘Making Experience Visible’

In this section, I offer an overview of the category of experience for feminist theory and feminist politics. Here, I demonstrate how experience is a source for ‘making visible’ forms of oppression that were previously obscured. The positive engagement with the category of experience for feminist theorists, therefore, sought to bring to light distinct experiences of oppression and in doing so to disclose the invisible operation of power on distinct groups of marginalized others. Through bringing to light these experiences of oppression as experiences of women’s oppression, as expressions of patriarchal oppression, feminist theorists were able to uncover the otherwise invisible, normalized, perhaps even naturalized features of oppression. Experience was thus, as I will demonstrate in this section, a means for feminist theorists to create the possibilities for social change. Moreover, experience in feminism functioned to mediate between political coming-together and the production of knowledge, where the exchanging of experiences between women functioned to create a shared reality of oppression that could, in turn, ground a group politics. Experience’s mediating role was made most apparent in feminist consciousness-raising practices.

Experience has a special and contested place in feminist theory. Broadly speaking, feminist theory is interested in interrogating the categories, facts, and concepts that are used to understand women's lifeworlds and, importantly, how such categories, facts and concepts participate in shaping women's experience of the world. Feminist theory is thus interested in rendering contingent the conditions of women's subordination which include the very categories and concepts women use to describe themselves and their lifeworlds; this also includes an interrogation of the category of 'woman.' The process of 'rendering contingent' is central to feminist theorizing especially because women's subordination has often been qualified as natural, biological, encoded in women's bodies. As Johanna Oksala puts it:

"As feminist philosophers, we cannot simply accept reality at face value and assume that our experience of the world could ever be direct and unmediated. Rather, we have to ask how we have to come to understand the world around us as hierarchically gendered, for example, and genders and their relationship could be conceived otherwise."¹⁹³

To render contingent is thus to demonstrate how subordination is neither necessary, determined, nor natural but rather rendered so through history. That hierarchies and subordination are not necessary but instead contingent; that is, rendered so historically through a particular political, social and economic arrangement, implies, at the very least, a possibility for change. Indeed, feminist theory's process of 'rendering contingent' opens the horizon of possibility for change by simply demonstrating that 'things don't have to be the way that they are' – or, indeed, that what seemed like a necessary and inevitable subordination is in fact not inevitable but capable of being otherwise. A feminist critical perspective, as I see it, is thus engaged in a continuous and open-ended process of 'rendering contingent' that opens up the possibility for new modes of being, living, experiencing and creating meaning in and of the world.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Johanna Oksala, "What is Feminist Philosophy?" in *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 5.

¹⁹⁴ Such an understanding of feminist theory is very much aligned with Ian Hacking's account of historical ontology which develops from Michel Foucault's understanding of genealogical critique as an "ontology of the present." See Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard university press, 2002). Johanna Oksala explains in her reading of Foucault's method of critique seeks "to find among necessities that which upon closer philosophical scrutiny turned out to be contingent, fleeting and singular." See Johanna Oksala, "What is Feminist Philosophy?" in *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 31.

Women's experiences have historically been deemed politically irrelevant. One way the irrelevance of experience has been sustained is through mind/body dualism. The feminist critique of mind/body dualism was, therefore, an important step for centering experience as a unit of analysis of social and political life.¹⁹⁵ Mind/body dualism is one example of how deeply ingrained metaphysical premises sustained the idea that women and their experiences were politically and epistemically irrelevant.¹⁹⁶ The separation of the mind from the body and the subsequent vindication of the mind as the site of rationality was instrumental to women's political and epistemic exclusion. According to this dualist logic, reason meant overcoming the body, its needs, its urges and its passion. The capacity for moral reasoning and thus the capacity for moral and political agency was dependent on the capacity to overcome the body, its needs, its urges, its passions. A rational and therefore free decision is one made independent from the body.¹⁹⁷ As Alcoff notes:

“The body was conceived as either an unsophisticated machine that took in data without interpreting it, or it was considered as an obstacle to knowledge in generating emotions, feelings, needs, desires, all of which interfered with the attainment of truth.”¹⁹⁸

Overcoming the body meant a better epistemic access to the world because it meant acting beyond the irrationality of the feeling body. It meant the capacity for moral agency where decision-making is entirely separate from bodily needs, wants and desires. Overcoming the body also meant moving past the partiality of our position and accessing a more neutral and universally shared standpoint through which to understand the world. The splitting of “the feeling body” from “the knowing mind” is significant for feminists because it enabled and sustained forms of exclusions along gendered lines. Here, women were relegated to the realm of

¹⁹⁵ Linda Martin Alcoff, “Phenomenology, Post-Structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience” in *Feminist Phenomenology*, ed. Linda Fisher, Lester Embree (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 39-56. Alison Jaggar, “Liberal Feminism and Human Nature” in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Philosophy and Society)*, (New Jersey: Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1988) 35-66.

¹⁹⁶ Lorraine Code, “Feminist Epistemology and the Politics of Knowledge: Questions of Marginality” *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory* ed. Mary Evans et al. (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 9-25.

¹⁹⁷ Sabina Lovibond, “Feminism and the “Crisis of Rationality”” in *Essays on Ethics and Feminism*, ed. Sabina Lovibond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 62-82.

¹⁹⁸ Linda Martin Alcoff, “Phenomenology, Post-structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience” in *Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Linda Fisher, Lester Embree (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 41.

the body, the natural, and were painted as beings incapable of overcoming their bodies and thus incapable of rationality.

Among the various iterations of feminist critiques of mind/body dualism one recurring critique is that dualism posits an abstract and disembodied rational subject.¹⁹⁹ Here, the body is entirely irrelevant to human experience and thus entirely irrelevant to politics and knowledge. The recurring feminist adage that ‘reason is male’ suggests that the realm of the rational which assumed a disembodied neutral standpoint was, in fact, not neutral at all. As has been shown by Iris Marion Young among others, mind/body dualism supplanted the standpoint of white men for that of a supposed neutral standpoint of reason.²⁰⁰ In doing so, mind/body dualism excluded gendered and racialized persons whose bodies supposedly ‘prevented them from rationality’, and thus moral and political agency. Mind/body dualism therefore naturalized and sustained social hierarchies where some humans were deemed attached to the body while others capable of overcoming the body to achieve a reason and moral agency.²⁰¹

In unsettling the dualist paradigm, feminists became interested in retrieving the body and bodily experiences as inseparable from the thinking mind and thus as part of how humans access and understand the world.²⁰² Contrary to the dualist epistemic standard of neutrality which undermines embodied experience as a source of knowledge precisely because of its decidedly subjective and non-neutral starting point, the feminist vindication of embodied experience posits the body also as actively involved; sensory perception is engaged as part of the interpretive and meaning-making process. Embodied experience also became a site for reflecting on how gendered norms impact the felt body, motility, appearance, comfort etc. As Alcoff notes: “Norms

¹⁹⁹ Alison Jaggar, “Liberal Feminism and Human Nature” in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature (Philosophy and Society)*, (New Jersey: Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1988) 35-66.

²⁰⁰ See Iris Marion Young, “Impartiality and the Civic Public” in *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (1990) 92-113.

²⁰¹ Not all feminists took this path, some feminists wanted to assert a principle of gender blindness as a means to assert that women are no different to men, and importantly that women were capable of overcoming their bodies, just like men, to achieve reason. In doing so, this strategy seemed to buy into the dualist paradigm for feminist ends where the goal here is to include women into the realm of reason. This is what Iris Marion Young qualifies as ‘humanist’ feminists. See Iris Marion Young “Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics,” in *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 73-91.

²⁰² See Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics*, (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2001). See Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality”, “Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation”, “Women Recovering Our Clothes”, “Breasted Experience: The look and the feeling” in *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

exist in embodied habits; rendering this apparent is what makes possible for experience to become a ground of knowledge.”²⁰³ The body became not only a source of knowledge, but importantly a site of oppression that could only be brought to light through the experiences of embodied subjects. In feminist theory, the emergence of ‘female embodied experience’ became an important site for demonstrating how women’s experience of their bodies as ‘feminine’, as ‘weaker,’ as ‘inferior’ became a way to reflect critically on gendered embodiment.

The study of one’s experience of one’s body as feminine became a source for reflecting on both the experience of gender and how experience is gendered. Embodied experience is not only invested in oppression in the way that it feels and moves, but also in the way that it might reproduce gendered norms. Consider, for example, Young’s essay “Throwing Like a Girl” where she remarks how feminine bodies take much less space in their style of throwing – the movement of throwing is smaller, more taciturn, and seemingly refuses to make full use of the body’s spatial possibilities.²⁰⁴ For Young, the study of this distinct experience reveals the corporeal condition of the feminine body, that is the conditions under which the feminine body is affixed social meaning that in turn delineate its sphere of possible motility. Yet Young also wants to stress female embodiment as a distinct mode of being. The vindication of female embodied experience was also a way of vindicating the bodily experience of ‘womanhood’ as politically relevant precisely because the body became a site from which could emerge a critique of power. Young’s essays “Breasted Experience,” “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” and “Pregnant Embodiment” insist on the distinct experience of embodying a feminine body as it navigates a heterosexist social world.²⁰⁵ In “Menstrual Meditations,” Young argues that menstruators are subject to two forms of social oppression: first as a kind of social stigma which compels women and girls to conceal their menstrual events and render their social and physical needs irrelevant.²⁰⁶ It is possible to read Young’s essays of female embodied experience as appealing to the embodied sensibility of the reader and, in doing so, enacting a feminist politics that centers

²⁰³ Linda Martin Alcoff, Linda Martin Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 71.

²⁰⁴ Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment” in *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 141-160.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 160-210.

²⁰⁶ See Iris Marion Young, “Menstrual Meditations” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 97-122.

the felt body.²⁰⁷ Here, reason is not the central mode of argumentation, but rather the felt body becomes the locus of her social critique.²⁰⁸

Experience is not only that which must be rendered visible, it also plays a crucial role in what I qualify as feminist theory's task of 'rendering contingent.' If the task of feminist theory is to render contingent self-evident and taken-for-granted categories of norms and identities, it must be able to identify that which is self-evident and taken-for-granted whilst being simultaneously embedded within those self-evident and taken-for-granted norms, categories and identities. To make visible forms of oppression that had either been normalized, naturalized or invisibilized is therefore at the heart of the feminist critical ethos. Women's personal experiences were treated as a source for identifying those areas of women's lives that were seen as self-evident, given, normal, natural. Consider for instance how conjugal rape was obscured by the idea that sex was a normal part of a wife's marital duties to her husband, regardless of whether or not she wanted to. Wives' personal experience of sexual violence within the home is thus a source to interrogate oppressive practices against wives and to interrogate the institution of marriage in its capacity to render oppressive practices permissible under the guise of marital duty.²⁰⁹ Such critical interrogation enables the possibility for social change. Making visible previously obscured experiences of suffering and violence is thus an important step for feminists to theorize 'women's oppression' and delineate a political project that can attend to that oppression – a point I will return to shortly.

The centrality of experience in feminist theory is also due to the historic exclusion of women from the production of knowledge and the subsequent development of an entire political

²⁰⁷ This echoes features of Micheale Ferguson's reading of Young's use of personal experiences as a means to create resonance and dissonance with her readers in ways that are politically igniting. Ferguson writes: "Young suggests that personal experiences become political when they resonate with others. Stories that resonate are not merely subjective - they sound familiar to us. Nor do they lay claim to universal validity – we can only generalize from these experiences for those with whom they 'resonate' (...) stories that are meant to resonate with us – even when they fail to do so – demand that we do more than read; they demand that we act to create a more just world." Micheale Ferguson, "Resonance and Dissonance: The role of personal experience in Iris Marion Young's feminist phenomenology" in *Dancing With Iris: The Philosophy of Iris Marion Young*, ed. Ann Ferguson, Mechtild Nagel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 54.

²⁰⁸ Consider also Audre Lorde's work on 'the erotic' in which erotic embodiment makes possible new knowledge about oneself and one's social environment. Here, the feeling body in connection to others becomes a source for understanding each other in oppressive conditions. See Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY : Crossing Press, 1984). For an interpretation of how Lorde's conception of the erotic could be conducive to concerted political action and coalition-building see Caleb Ward, "Audre Lorde's Erotic as Epistemic and Political Practice" *Hypatia* 38, no.4 (2023), 1-22.

²⁰⁹ See also Joanna Bourke, "The Home" in *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, 2007, 305-328.

vocabulary that was ill-equipped to articulate women's lifeworlds, priorities, experiences. As Michael Ferguson puts it:

“Appeals to personal experience have long been important to feminist theory and practice. In particular, the disjuncture between our lived experiences of being women and the ideological messages we receive about what a woman should be has been a significant source of critical analysis and calls for action.”²¹⁰

The disjunction between experiences as they are lived, as opposed to ideas about experiences as they are assumed to be lived, has been a productive critical pathway for feminists in its capacity to show how deeply inadequate dominant concepts and norms were at explaining, describing and capturing women's lifeworld.²¹¹ Questioning this disjunction, its origins and implications for women's lives became a central feature of feminist critique. To attempt to make women's experiences visible and to struggle to do so became a source for demonstrating the deep inadequacies of representational structures for articulating women's experiences. It is precisely the struggle to articulate women's experiences that reveals the conceptual inadequacies and gaps in representational structures or structures of meaning. Indeed, it is precisely because women's experiences did not map onto ideas about women's lives that experience became a source not only for feminist critique but also for a feminist politics. Such a feminist politics involves identifying gendered relations of power and how to challenge these naturalized hierarchies that have been baked into social, political and institutional life.

Feminist theorists have been historically interested in understanding the different ways in which women's lifeworlds, experiences, preferences, and desires are mediated by patriarchal social norms, terms, nomenclatures, concepts, and modes of thinking. In particular, feminists have been interested in the kinds of struggles women face when having to articulate their experiences in a conceptual terrain that inadequately represents their experiences. Alice Cary describes the

²¹⁰ Michael L. Ferguson, “Resonance and Dissonance: The Role of Personal Experience in Iris Marion Young's Feminist Phenomenology,” in *Dancing With Iris: The Philosophy of Iris Marion Young*, ed. Ann Ferguson, Mechtild Nagel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 54.

²¹¹ See Alice Cary, “A Question of Silence: Feminist Theory and Women's Voices” *Philosophy* 76, no.297 (2001), 371-395. Lorraine Code, “Feminist Epistemology and the Politics of Knowledge: Questions of Marginality” *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory* ed. Mary Evans et al. (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 9-25.

experience of a mismatch between women's experience and resources available for the articulation, expression or description of that experience as one of "conceptual dislocation."²¹² For Crary, the experience of conceptual dislocation has been articulated in many different ways in feminist scholarship – and she certainly thinks that a starting point for feminist thinking has historically been from this sense of alienation of knowledge resources and their experience. Crary describes women's strange position of having to appeal to structures of meaning that have historically excluded their experience while being bound to these categories in order to express their experience. Crary states:

“it is not inconsistent to claim both that women's attempts to understand the character of their experience are mediated by prevailing social norms and also that, in some cases, those norms simply do not do justice to what women in fact experience.”²¹³

Conceptual dislocation articulates a disposition in relation to knowledge in which an experience is always inadequately translated, rather than being either absent or not represented. Crary describes women's conceptually dislocated position as “not being home in our own language.”²¹⁴ For Crary, women occupy a strange epistemic position of having to appeal to representational structures that have historically excluded their experience whilst simultaneously being bound to these categories in order to express and articulate their experience.²¹⁵ The trouble with being embedded in a patriarchal conceptual terrain is not only its inadequacy for representing women's lifeworlds to others, but how this conceptual terrain actively obscures women's own experiences to themselves.²¹⁶

Yet, it is precisely in moments in which experiences are difficult to express and articulate that they might signal an obscured experience of oppression. As Oksala puts it:

²¹² Alice Crary, “A Question of Silence: Feminist Theory and Women's Voices” *Philosophy* 76, no.297 (2001), 374.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 374.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 381.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 381-382.

²¹⁶ See Lorraine Code, “Feminist Epistemology and the Politics of Knowledge: Questions of Marginality” *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory* ed. Mary Evans et al. (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 9-25. See also Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Justice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

“It is exactly this dissatisfaction, this gap between their personal experiences and the dominant cultural representations and linguistic descriptions that are available to them that can generate critique as well as create new discourses capable of contesting and contradicting the old ones.”²¹⁷

On Oksala’s account, the struggle to express and articulate one’s own experience opens up the possibility for a critique of existing conceptual structures for their inadequacy in describing women’s lifeworlds. It also offers a pathway for better conceptual resources that can more adequately capture and represent women’s experiences.²¹⁸ The practice of discussing experiences is thus revelatory of inadequate conceptual resources offering pathways for better ones. The revelatory force of speaking about one’s personal and lived experiences became an important political practice for feminism. Indeed, there is a long history of feminist group politics dedicated to articulating experiences of patriarchal oppression that were previously rendered invisible. Most poignantly, the 1970s consciousness-raising groups were an explicit politicized iteration of the project of ‘making experience visible.’ Driven by the feminist motto ‘the personal is political’ consciousness-raising groups fostered an environment in which ‘women’s personal experiences’ would be progressively brought to light and, from there, a group politics with concrete interests could be articulated, formed, and enacted. As a Redstockings’ consciousness-raising organizer Kathie Sarachild writes:

“To get consciousness-raising started we, as organizers, gave it priority in our actions and outreach political work. In that sense we saw it as a first stage—to awaken people, to get people started thinking and acting. But we also saw it as an ongoing and continuing source of theory and of ideas for action. We made the assumption, an assumption basic to consciousness-raising, that most women were like ourselves—not different—so that our self-interest in discussing the problems facing women which most concerned us would also interest other women. Daring to speak about our own feelings and experiences would be very powerful. Our own rising feminist consciousness led us to that assumption by

²¹⁷ Johanna Oksala, “What is Feminist Philosophy?” in *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 45.

²¹⁸ See also Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Justice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

revealing that all women faced oppression as women and had a common interest in ending it.”²¹⁹

Integral to the feminist consciousness-raising was the project of retrieving women’s experience in order to make them visible, but importantly to provide a space in which women’s experiences that had been actively obscured by patriarchal norms, ideas, and epistemic structures could be articulated.²²⁰ In the passage above, Sarachild posits the connection between experience, identity and action as intertwined within consciousness-raising. The idea was to bring to light the experiences of women in order to illuminate a common condition of patriarchal oppression and formulate common interests that concerted political action would aim to serve. In the passage above, Sarachild sees experience as igniting action precisely because it has the capacity to reverberate through a multiplicity of people. Experience, however, was also an epistemic resource as Sarachild describes in the following passage:

“The purpose of hearing people’s feelings and experience was not therapy, was not to give someone a chance to get something off her chest... that is something for a friendship. It was to hear what she had to say. The importance of listening to a woman’s feelings was collectively to analyze the situation of women, not to analyze her. The idea was not to change women, was not to make ‘internal changes’ except in the sense of knowing more. It was and is the conditions women face, it’s male supremacy, we want to change. (...) The idea of consciousness-raising was never to end generalizations. It was to produce truer ones. The idea was to take our own feelings and experience more seriously than any

²¹⁹ Kathie Sarachild, “Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon” in *Feminist Revolution, Redstockings of the Women’s Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1973), 147.

²²⁰ Miranda Fricker notes, “the method of consciousness raising through ‘speak-outs’ and the sharing of scantily understood, barely articulate experiences was a direct response to the fact that so much of women’s experience was obscure, even unspeakable, for the isolated individual, whereas the process of sharing these half-formed understandings awakened hitherto dormant resources for social meaning that brought clarity, cognitive confidence, and increased communicative facility.” On Fricker’s understanding, consciousness-raising groups sought to make women’s experiences intelligible and visible *to themselves*. Women’s historical marginalization as well as their political and epistemic exclusion, meant that their experiences were not only politically and socially invisible but also invisible to themselves. Consciousness-raising as a dialogical mode of engaging experience was therefore a political project that was also aimed at shedding light on quotidian forms of patriarchal oppression that had up until now been treated as a normal part of everyday life and were therefore unintelligible as oppressive. See Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Justice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 148.

theories which did not satisfactorily clarify them, and to devise new theories which did reflect the actual experience and feelings and necessities of women.”²²¹

In this passage, there are two different but interrelated points being made about experience; women’s experiences must be granted epistemic authority because women’s voices have been neglected for so long, and women’s experiences are epistemically valuable because they reveal commonly shared conditions of oppression.²²² Sarachild discusses experience as a source to produce ‘truer’ generalizations where those generalizations serve to formulate and politically advance (in that order) the interests and necessities of women. Engaging experience in this process is transformative precisely because each individual subjective experience was able to be considered and treated as part of a collective struggle for liberation. The method of consciousness-raising was therefore to start from individual experiences and to move to a generalization about a common condition of patriarchal oppression. Indeed, consciousness-raising “creates a shared reality by transforming the experience of the individual women into a social experience of being female.”²²³ Experience was therefore engaged in order to create a shared reality between all women which also included a shared reality of being women.

Through being engaged in the process of consciousness-raising the meaning of an experience was transformed where it was no longer an isolated exception, an apolitical particularity. Instead, an experience became shared, it became evidence of a shared reality under a shared system of oppression. What was previously an isolated experience became a way to ground sameness between experiencing subjects such that subjects regarded each other as similar. Experience therefore functioned as a relational source, framing the relation between experiencing subjects in

²²¹ Kathie Sarachild, “Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon” in *Feminist Revolution, Redstockings of the Women’s Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1973), 148.

²²² The point about epistemic authority is relatedly connected to a further point about the political value of experience, that women’s liberation does not require expertise or an expert’s standpoint. Instead, each experience was seen as relevant to the struggle. Kathie Sarachild writes: “Experience in consciousness-raising can’t be judged by expertise in any alleged methods but by expertise in getting results, in producing insights and understanding. It is striking how many people in the right circumstances can suddenly become experts by these standards! One of the exhilarating and consciousness-raising discoveries of the Women’s Liberation Movement has been how much insight and understanding can come from simple honesty and the pooling of experience in a room full of women who are interested in doing this.” Kathie Sarachild, “Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon” in *Feminist Revolution, Redstockings of the Women’s Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1973), 148.

²²³ Judith Grant, “Experience” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch, Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 231. See also Catharine MacKinnon, *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (1991), 101.

terms of a shared reality which would then be concretized into a shared social identity of woman. This shared reality that allowed for subjects to regard one another as similar beings became the grounds for shaping a feminist group politics that was not only solidaristic but also action-oriented. It was action-oriented insofar as it clearly defined what feminism was struggling against, what the interests of women are, what their shared struggle was resisting against or advancing.

My point here is that experience played a crucial role in grounding a feminist identity that would then delineate the scope of feminist resistance, the concrete interests that feminists would seek to advance. The practice of consciousness-raising, as I have argued, demonstrates how experience functioned as a bridge between theory and politics in feminism. Experience was both that which needed to be theorized collectively as a shared condition and where that collective process of knowing is itself liberatory. Indeed, consciousness raising's capacity to link theory and politics operated through lived experiences. Overall, the category of experience has been important for the feminist theoretical project of 'rendering contingent' where experience is able to make apparent those taken-for-granted features of women's existence that contributed to naturalizing gendered and racial forms of subordination. In this section, I demonstrated how experiences were seen as capable of making visible forms of oppression, especially in cases where women's experiences were in disjuncture from dominant ideas about women's lives. This disjuncture, as I showed in this section, prompted the need for a feminist group politics like consciousness-raising which sought to use women's experience as a means to ground a shared social identity of womanhood as well as a common oppression.

II. 'Women's Experience' and the Problem of Essentialism

Having previously delineated how appeals to experience were especially important to the feminist project of 'making visible women's experiences,' this section focuses on outlining the limitations of experience for feminist theorizing and feminist politics. While experience was an important source for feminist theorizing and feminist groups politics, skepticism emerged in relation to the uses of experiential evidence. As Sonia Kruks notes, an insistent critique of 'women's experience' became central in 1980s feminist scholarship where "the appeal to

experience was increasingly dismissed as both politically dangerous and methodologically naive.”²²⁴ For critics, appeals to experience are methodologically naive because they seemed to conflate the evidence of experience with the social identity to which it pertains in ways that risked reproducing existing social categories instead of interrogating them.²²⁵

If feminism is partly invested in a theoretical activity of social critique that seeks to render contingent entrenched forms of subordination, then it must be able to effectively and continuously interrogate the category of ‘woman’. The interrogation of the category of ‘woman’ is importantly political insofar as a feminist group politics is invested in including *all* women into its struggle. Delineating the terms under which the category of ‘woman’ is articulated, questioning the terms that demarcate the boundaries of ‘womanhood’ is thus a theoretical exercise with important political ramifications precisely because it is *at least in part* the category of ‘woman’ that will determine who can participate in feminist group politics, whose interests can be effectively qualified as feminist, whose interests can be properly represented in the feminist struggle, whose interests are most pressing to address. In the same way that the category of ‘woman’ delineates who is included in feminist group politics, so too it defines who is excluded, whose interests do not map onto the political objectives of feminism.

Feminist appeals to experience raised suspicion when experience was deemed to reveal something fixed about womanhood or women in general. The problem with appeals to experience in the context of feminism was that it risked re-entrenching ideas about womanhood and reinforcing certain criteria and attributes of ‘what counts as woman.’ In other words, the appeal to experience risks creating false universalisms with essentialist implications. As Alison Stone puts it:

“The (false) universalization of claims about women in effect casts particular forms of feminine experience as the norm, and, typically, it is historically and culturally privileged forms of femininity that become normalized in this way. Essentialist theoretical moves

²²⁴ Sonia Kruks, “Women’s ‘Lived Experience’: Feminism and Phenomenology from Simone de Beauvoir to the Present” in *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory* ed. Mary Evans et al. (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 75.

²²⁵ Joan Scott “The Evidence of Experience” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no.4 (1991), 773-797. See also Joan Scott, “Experience” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler, Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 22-40.

thereby end up replicating between women the very patterns of oppression and exclusion that feminism should contest.”²²⁶

If universalizations about womanhood derived from experience risk essentialism, why is essentialism so problematic? In the passage above, Stone summarizes the problem of essentialism well: it isn't just that essentialism falsely universalizes a historically and culturally privileged experience of womanhood, but it creates a norm of womanhood that itself produces political exclusions within feminism.

The criticism that norms of womanhood would create further exclusions within feminism was raised first and most poignantly by Black feminists who argued that the ‘we’ subject emerging from feminist consciousness-raising practice was associated with norms of whiteness.²²⁷ For many Black feminists, the idea of ‘women’s experience’ that emerged from consciousness-raising practices falsely universalized norms of whiteness into the experience of womanhood. As bell hooks notes, much of feminist consciousness-raising sought to create a shared experience of sexist oppression in which all women shared a common oppressor resulting in the erasure of nuances of the degree and character of oppressions that exist between women.²²⁸ The crucial point being that there are meaningful and significant qualitative differences between experiences of oppression that had no place for being articulated in a space where sharedness, sameness, and commonality were co-opted by the white bourgeois experience of womanhood. Through basing a feminist politics on a false universal experience of womanhood, consciousness-raising groups ended up othering already marginalized women.

The tension between the possibility of a group politics capable of resisting oppression without falling back into essentialism is a problem not only for feminist politics but also a problem for feminist practices of critique. Indeed, essentialism is a problem for the critical practice of feminism insofar as essentialism identifies necessary and universal characteristics and attributes

²²⁶ Alison Stone, “Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1, no.2 (2004),140.

²²⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 314-343. See also Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2019). bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* (London: Pluto Press, 1981).

²²⁸ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 107-108.

that are shared by all women, regardless of whether these characteristics are socially constructed or biological. Feminist critique, however, is invested in demonstrating how the terms and categories that have come to define women, their lives and experiences are not necessary but rendered so through history. The further problem with appeals to personal experiences was their potentially limited critical function given how personal experiences as well as the language used to describe and define them is embedded in power relations and thus imbued with ideological content. As Judith Grant spells out the problem:

“Personal life practices, along with speech itself, reproduced ideologies of power and constructed consciousness and experience. Feminist and other critical theorists understood everyday life to be the principal conduit for the reproduction of that power, whether gendered or not.”²²⁹

The idea here was that experience would have limited critical potential for feminism because experiences are at least partly produced by patriarchal oppression and therefore merely reporting an experience would risk replicating patriarchal terms.

As I see it, the problem is better understood as being of a hermeneutic nature regarding the interpretative immediacy of experience, as if the evidence of experience is immediately apparent. This interpretative immediacy might, however, only re-entrench the categories and terms of power as natural rather than interrogate these terms. As Scott puts it: “the project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the workings of this [ideological] system and of its historicity; instead it reproduces its terms.”²³⁰ On Scott’s account, experiential evidence has little to offer for the practice of theorizing insofar as it is only an iteration of the ideological system in which that experience is articulated. In turn, appeals to experience for the purposes of ‘making visible’ women’s lives seem to only reproduce existing ideas about what it is to be a woman. In turn, Scott argues that appeals to experience to ‘make visible’ the condition of women occlude critical interrogation into how the category of ‘woman’ emerged in the first place. Scott writes:

²²⁹ Judith Grant, “Experience” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch, Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 239.

²³⁰ Joan Scott “The Evidence of Experience” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no.4 (1991), 779.

“the project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, and of its notions of subjects, origin, and cause.”²³¹

Scott’s point is therefore that experiential evidence risks obscuring the conditions that produce certain experiences as experiences pertaining to a particular norm or a particular social identity. Simply recounting an experience as obviously one pertaining to womanhood, or homosexuality would reify the idea of womanhood or homosexuality as inherently different or derivative from a norm. Experiential evidence is therefore at risk of reproducing power relations rather than effectively challenging them precisely because experience is used as evidence to further sustain a pre-existing social category and identity. For Scott, the reason that appeals to experiential evidence are conducive to essentialism is therefore because such appeals to experience are self-referential – that is, experience is only further evidence of what is already there.

For Linda Alcoff and Johanna Oksala, Scott’s impasse in relation to experiential evidence is related to Scott’s conception of experience as being entirely discursively mediated. Indeed, for Scott, experience is an entirely discursive event where an experience is a “linguistic event” in which the discursive context offers the conditions of intelligibility for all experience.²³² On this understanding, experience is entirely regimented by discursive formations where discourse is both the condition of possibility for its intelligibility and thereby also for its very existence. Responding to this view, Linda Alcoff argues that Scott’s critique of experiential evidence is unnecessarily endist in its claim that experience is only a replication of discursive formations.²³³ For Alcoff, the fact that experience can bring to light lifeworlds that had previously been obscured suggests that experience is not entirely reducible to discourse and it is precisely within the disjunctures between experience and discourse that opens up the space for a critique of discursive formations. Similarly, Johanna Oksala offers a response to Scott’s claim that

²³¹ Ibid., 778.

²³² Joan Scott “The Evidence of Experience” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no.4 (1991), 793.

²³³ Linda Martin Alcoff, “Phenomenology, Post-Structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience” in *Feminist Phenomenology*, ed. by Linda Fisher and Lester Embree (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 39–56.

experience is but a linguistic event.²³⁴ Oksala argues that while experience is never entirely independent from language, there are minimal nonconceptual aspects of experience that can open up the process of critique. Oksala writes:

“it is exactly this dissatisfaction, this gap between their personal accounts and the dominant cultural representations, that can generate critique as well as create new discourses capable of contesting and contradicting old ones.”²³⁵

Oksala makes apparent the nonconceptual aspect of experience by bringing to light how oppressed subjects often struggle to find the words to articulate and terms to represent their experience.

Both Oksala and Alcoff contest Scott’s reduction of experience to discourse in order to demonstrate how experience could ignite a feminist critique. Like Oksala and Alcoff, I am interested in preserving experience as a source for feminist critique, however, in contrast to them, I am not strictly interested in responding to Scott’s claim that experience is discursive through and through. I am rather interested in how Scott problematizes the self-referentiality of the uses of experiential evidence and how that re-entrenches existing social identities and categories. For Scott, discursively produced social categories foreground experiences; that is, social categories provide meaningful substance to experiences. It is only once I understand womanhood that I can qualify or read an experience as distinctively female, not the other way around. Scott’s problem is that qualifying something as ‘women’s experience’ seems to re-entrench a pre-theoretical understanding of womanhood that is already constituted by patriarchal norms. However, the critical task of feminism must also, in some capacity, be capable of questioning self-evident and given conceptions of womanhood insofar as those ideas are inherited from patriarchal assumptions about women’s inherent and natural subordination to men. Appeals to personal experiences do very little, according to Scott, to undo ideas that continue to secure women’s subordination to men because appeals to personal experiences are too quickly affixed to the social identity of womanhood. If feminism is interested in bringing to light how categories of

²³⁴ Johanna Oksala, “In Defense of Experience” *Hypatia* 29, no.2 (2014). 388-403.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 396.

analysis are “contextual, contested, and contingent”²³⁶ it must question the terms of immediacy that are too quickly affixed to experience. Indeed, if experience only reiterates existing norms, categories, and identities, then experience would be an inadequate source for ‘rendering contingent’ such norms, categories and identities. For instance, when a personal experience is treated as self-evidently that of a woman’s is an interpretation of that experience which is itself an expression of a pre-existing discursive structure. For Scott, it is instead the task of feminism to inquire into how personal experiences came to be understood as distinctively female and indeed what conditions rendered a given experience as one that is distinctively gendered.

In my reading, Scott is querying the immediacy with which experiential evidence is treated. I see Scott to be problematizing how appeals to experience seem to assume an immediate access to its evidence such that experience ends up fixing what one already believes. Throughout her essay, Scott problematizes what she refers to as “foundational” appeals to experience – that is, appeals to experience that treat experience “as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation – as a foundation on which analysis is based (...).”²³⁷ In my reading, what she means here by ‘foundational’ is immediacy; that is, an assumption that experiential evidence is immediately given. For Scott, the project of ‘making experience visible’ treats experiential evidence as given, self-evident, ‘foundational’ or, as I understand it, *immediate*. Indeed, it treats the epistemic substance of experience as obvious, it considers that what experience makes visible is both immediately apparent. In Scott's view, when experience is granted foundational status, it ends up naturalizing and fixing social identities rather than questioning how these social identities have been meaningfully constituted in the ways that they have. In other words, when the evidence of experience is assumed to be immediate, it reproduces the terms of that immediacy which, on Scott’s account, are discursive.

How does Scott’s critique of experiential evidence pertain to the problem of essentialism? Scott’s critique seems to demonstrate how foundational appeals to experiential evidence risks re-entrenching social identities and categories such that they appear essential, natural, inevitable. The problem, as Scott seems to put it, is that foundational appeals to experience secure the

²³⁶ Joan Scott “The Evidence of Experience” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no.4 (1991), 796.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 777.

immediate terms under which experience is apprehended and understood such that experience becomes incontestable evidence for that immediacy. The way that Scott's critique of foundational appeals to experience pertains to essentialism is therefore in the worry about how experiential evidence can be used to further entrench essentialist categories. Indeed, in Scott's view, the risk of essentialism is more bound to how foundational appeals to experience become incontestable evidence in ways that risk reproducing essentialist categories. Scott writes:

“When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured – about language (or discourse) and history are left aside. The evidence of experience becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.”²³⁸

Indeed, in Scott's view, the risk of essentialism is more bound to how foundational appeals to experience become incontestable evidence in ways that risk reproducing essentialist categories.

To connect this back to this wider problematization of ‘women's experience,’ Scott's account argues that to describe an experience as a ‘woman's experience’ is not enough for feminism, if feminism is at least partly invested in social critique. If feminism is interested in bringing to light how categories of analysis are “contextual, contested, and contingent”²³⁹ it must question the terms of immediacy that are too quickly affixed to experience. Indeed, if experience only reiterates existing norms, categories, and identities, then experience would be an inadequate source for ‘rendering contingent’ such norms, categories and identities. For instance, when a personal experience is treated as self-evidently that of a woman's is itself an interpretation of that experience which is itself an expression of a pre-existing discursive structure. For Scott, it is instead the task of feminism to inquire into how personal experiences came to be understood as

²³⁸ Ibid., 777.

²³⁹ Ibid., 796.

distinctively female and indeed what conditions rendered a given experience as one that is distinctively gendered. Appeals to experience are thus seen as “methodologically naive”²⁴⁰ because they merely reiterated existing social categories rather than interrogate these social categories. This was seen as having “politically dangerous”²⁴¹ implications because it would not only risk legitimizing exclusions within feminism on the grounds of uncontested experiential evidence, but it would also risk limiting the scope of feminist social critique.

Ultimately, Scott does not dismiss experience entirely. Rather, she argues that experience should not be the origin of knowledge but rather that which is being explained.²⁴² According to Scott, experience must be historicized by reflecting on how an experience came to be understood in these particular terms, and how an experience came to have this distinct social meaning. In my reading, Scott seems to suggest that to explain experience is to interrogate the terms that have been immediately affixed to that experience; that is to say, to inquire how and why an experience came to be immediately apparent in this particular way. For Scott, experiential evidence must itself be subjected to scrutiny where experience is that which must be explained and, more specifically, it is the way experience has been historically and discursively constituted that must be explained. Scott is interested in advancing critical genealogy as a methodology for explaining both the conditions that rendered an experience possible as well as explaining how experience came to be understood in the terms under which it is currently understood. Overall, Scott argues that what is assumed to be self-evidently given, what appears immediate about experience is that which must be explained. If this reading is right, Scott’s critique does not seem to impose an impasse to the uses of experience, but rather imposes the need for a hermeneutic methodology that can give substance to experiential evidence. One of the limitations of Scott’s account, however, is that the methodology by which experience is explained and interpreted seems to confine experiential evidence strictly to a scholarly activity. Yet, one of the most important aspects of engaging experience for feminism is precisely its capacity to generate a kind of political coming-together. The problem, therefore, with Scott’s account is that experience seems to stiffen the social character of the exchanging experiences is entirely lost on Scott’s account. In

²⁴⁰Sonia Kruks, “Women’s ‘Lived Experience’: Feminism and Phenomenology from Simone de Beauvoir to the Present” in *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory* ed. Mary Evans et al. (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 75.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 75

²⁴² Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991), 797.

the section that follows, I advance a methodology for engaging experience through a distinct cross-experiential practice in such a way that involves a collective interrogation into the immediacy of experience.

III. Engaging Experience: Feminist Theory as Practice

In the first two sections of this chapter, I spelled out feminism's contentious relationship with the category of experience demonstrating the tension between essentialism and depoliticized particularity. In this section, I advance my own view of how to retain experience as a resource while negotiating the tension between essentialism and depoliticized particularity. Despite valid concerns over essentialism, I argue that experience can and must remain a resource for feminism broadly conceived because it has the capacity to ignite resonances and dissonances between experiencing subjects. In plain terms, it has the capacity to ignite between experiencing subjects a sense of familiarity, a sense of 'me too' or conversely a sense of dissimilarity and unrelatability. However, following Scott's argument that what appears immediately self-evident to experience must be scrutinized, I argue that the immediacy of one's sense of resonance and dissonance with respect to another's experience must itself be interrogated with others and through other's experiences. My point is therefore that experience must be preserved as a basis for feminism broadly conceived because it ignites resonance and dissonance between experiencing subjects. However, the resonance and dissonance that experience ignites is not politically nor epistemically self-sufficient to ground sameness but must itself be interrogated as part of the practice of consciousness-raising. In short, a feminist practice that engages experience must interrogate the immediacy of the resonance and dissonance that this experience ignites, and such an interrogation can be incorporated as part of the feminist practice.

Why must experience remain a source for feminist theorizing? Put simply, experience must remain a source for feminist theorizing because it compels reactions of resonance and dissonance with others. While it might seem like an innocuous claim to say that experience is valuable because it compels reactions of similarity and dissimilarity, my sense is that this is at least part of the reason why some feminist scholars have so stubbornly held onto experience. Young, for instance, sees first-person experiences as capable of igniting a political community through

creating resonance or dissonance between experiencing subjects. As Ferguson writes about Young's appeal to her own personal experiences throughout her work:

“personal experiences become political when they resonate with others. Stories that resonate are not merely subjective – they sound familiar to us. Nor do they lay claim to universal validity – we can only generalize from these experiences for those with whom they ‘resonate.’”²⁴³

Indeed, experience is a source for political coming-together in its capacity to compel resonance or dissonance with those around. The resonance that experience might compel ignites collective political action because it can allow one to overcome the solipsism of one's own perspective. There is something relieving in knowing that one is not alone in having a particular experience, especially if it is an experience of suffering. The importance of engaging experience and recognizing an experience as shared is important for recognizing suffering and violence as part of a broader operation of power rather than an isolated exception, as I already previously suggested in the first section of this chapter. Experience must remain a source for feminism because it can allow for certain forms of violence and suffering to be recognized as part of a wider operation of power rather than as an isolated exception. The point is that experience ignites and therefore has the capacity to compel some kind of coming-together, one that has the potential to be instrumental to feminism. Indeed, it has the potential to serve feminist theorizing of oppression and power by revealing how experiences are shared. It also has the potential to ground political coming-together where cross-experiential engagement can ground some kind of social identity upon which an action-oriented group politics can emerge.

While experience's igniting capacity has potential for feminism, this ignition of resonance and dissonance is insufficient. That I immediately apprehend the experience of another woman as resonant, familiar, palatable must itself be interrogated because it is precisely within this sense of immediate proximity and similarity that can create and legitimize exclusions as well as essentialism. While the immediate sense of resonance that another person's experience might ignite is important, its immediacy must be questioned because that sense of proximity might only

²⁴³ Ibid., 54.

demonstrate a pre-reflective understanding of my own relation to other women and their experiences. The immediate sense of resonance that I feel in relation to another person's experience might be a mere reflection of an already assumed sense of similarity that I have with that person; a sense of similarity which might be the result of existing socially constructed and politically sustained ideas of who is part of a norm, who is outside of the norm, where I situate myself according to this norm, where I situate others in relation to a norm. To treat the immediate sense of resonance and dissonance that I might feel in relation to an other's experience as evidence of sameness, therefore, runs the risk of naturalizing essentialist categories within this immediate sense of proximity rather than considering what might be grounding this sense of similarity in the first place. Similarly, by taking the immediacy of resonance as evidence of sameness, I am also at risk of re-entrenching certain forms of otherness. I am at risk of doing so because I might re-entrench pre-reflective norms and categories of sameness. That is to say, I might uncritically replicate ideas of normalcy, of identity, of sameness that I already held prior to engaging with an other's experience. This becomes politically troubling if there are power asymmetries between experiencing subjects, where more dominant members of the cross-experiential exchange might end up endlessly reproducing and further naturalizing ideas of sameness that can serve to further the othering of more marginalized members.

In the same way that an experience may compel resonance, it might also compel dissonance. An other's experience might seem foreign, unfamiliar, distant and unrelatable. Upon reflecting on Young's personal narratives, in particular, Ferguson articulates a distinct sense of discomfort with aspects of Young's candid descriptions of her own body, how it felt in certain situations etc.²⁴⁴ Ferguson argues that there is something disconcerting and cringeworthy in aspects of Young's writing about her embodied experience. In doing so, Ferguson seems to articulate an intense sense of dissonance in relation to Young's articulation of her experience. But for Ferguson, this dissonance is of value for two reasons. First, the dissonance that was generated in Ferguson's reading of Young's embodied experiences compelled her to reflect on her own bodily experience. In doing so, the dissonance compelled a kind of comparative reflection of each other's experience. Second, for Ferguson, this dissonance is just as important as resonance because it

²⁴⁴ Michael L. Ferguson, "Resonance and Dissonance: The Role of Personal Experience in Iris Marion Young's Feminist Phenomenology," in *Dancing with Iris: The Philosophy of Iris Marion Young*, Edited by Ann Ferguson and Mechthild, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 54.

might reveal “the fact of plurality.”²⁴⁵ Indeed, dissonance also compels one to think of one's own experience as foreign in *relation* to the dissonant experience one is confronted with. In doing so, dissonance is valuable in its capacity to reflect on the relationality of two experiencing subjects on their asymmetrical positioning in relation to each other. The fact that experience can create a sense of dissonance has potential for feminism both in revealing plurality between subjects engaging in a cross-experiential exchange and, in doing so, revealing power asymmetries that exist within feminism.

However, the immediacy of my sense of dissonance in relation to another's experience must also be interrogated. Indeed, if another person's experience immediately ignites a sense of dissonance within me, this sense of dissonance should not be taken at face value but must also be interrogated. To treat the immediacy of dissonances between experiencing subjects as evidence of difference risks naturalizing otherness. Indeed, when some experiences appear to be immediately similar in their difference from a norm or, indeed, in their apparent shared expression of a deviation from a norm, implies that the evidence of experience is still sameness, although that sameness being grounded on the similarity that two particular experiences apparently share in their common deviation from a ‘normal experience.’ Scott posits appeals to experiential evidence as being at risk of essentialism when its evidence is assumed to be the *immediate* similarity. Indeed, to relate to an earlier point, experience is at risk of essentialism when the resonance or dissonance that it ignites is treated as self-sufficient grounds to construct generalizations about the social world. I argue therefore that a feminist appeals to experience must interrogate the immediate sense of resonance and dissonance that is too quickly affixed to experience.

How can the resonance and dissonance that experience ignites be collectively engaged such that it does not naturalize categories of sameness? Such a practice, I contend, is only possible if experiences are treated from the start as mutually irreducible to each other where the mutual irreducibility of each particular experience functions as an outside position through which one can comparatively engage one's own experience. The mutual irreducibility of each particular experience also plays a function in enabling an open-ended interrogation into the categories of

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 66.

sameness because no particular experience could ever be wholly reducible to a category of sameness. As Lois McNay writes:

“Keeping this mutual irreducibility in mind serves to focus attention on divergences between perspectives, divergences that require probing rather than ignoring or reconciling for they may offer opportunities for improving understanding.”²⁴⁶

For McNay, the mutual irreducibility cannot be reconciled and therefore compels probing into the divergences between experiences. In my view, the probing into the divergences between experiences is especially valuable when experiences have created sameness; the divergences between particular experiences can then serve to unsettle the categories of sameness that have been affixed to experiences and experiencing subjects.

Most importantly, however, I contend that when taken seriously, this mutual irreducibility compels one to re-evaluate one’s relation relative to others continuously and open-endedly. Through interrogating the immediacy of resonance and dissonance that others’ experience ignites, one is able to transform and deepen their understanding of their relationship to others. This renewed understanding of one’s relationship with others creates a kind of collective mode of social theorizing where the relationship between experiences is continuously worked on and reflected upon. This mode of thinking about cross-experiential engagement is thus both relational and self-reflexive. It is relational because it not only occurs between experiencing subjects, but it also importantly pertains to the similarity and difference that subjects too quickly assume in their relations with and to each other. This collective practice can itself be revelatory because it can reveal how each experiencing subject is asymmetrically situated in relation to each other. In revealing the asymmetrical positioning of experiencing subjects, I contend that experience opens the possibility for critically self-reflecting one’s own position relative to the position of others in ways that can unsettle the essentialist terms that have been affixed to a given experience. The cross-experiential practice I advance is therefore relationally self-reflexive because through engaging this practice individual experiencing subjects develop a new understanding of

²⁴⁶ Lois McNay, *The Gender of Critical Theory: On the Experiential Grounds of Critique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 229.

themselves and their own experience in relation to others. This practice can appeal to experience as a source for relational self-reflexivity, that is, as a source of gaining critical distance on one's own positionality relative to the positionality of others.

So far, I have argued that experience is worth preserving as a source for feminism because it is igniting, that is to say, because it can compel both resonance and dissonance between experiencing subjects. However, the resonance and dissonance that experience creates between subjects should not be treated as self-sufficient. Rather, I maintain that the resonance and dissonance that experience compels is that which must be interrogated. In my view, and as I have argued throughout this section, experience remains a valuable source for creating political coming-together, however, its engagement must entail a continuous interrogation the relations between subjects that are sustained by pre-reflective assumptions of similarity and difference which are at risk of being reified in a cross-experiential exchange.

To return briefly to my previous point about consciousness-raising: the problem with consciousness-raising in relation to essentialism might not necessarily be its appeal to experience, but perhaps the way that it uses experience to cement a 'we' subject. That is, to cement relations of similarity between experiencing subjects and, in the case of feminist consciousness-raising, to cement relations of similarity between women *qua* women. The practice that I develop in this section would differ from classical consciousness-raising in two important and interrelated ways. First, the practice that I advance would not have the creation of a 'we' subject as its final end. Whereas classical consciousness-raising sought to create a 'we' subject which can be articulated into an action-oriented politics, the practice that I advance here would see the 'we' subject as a step within a wider relationally self-reflexive practice. Indeed, the collective process of interpretation for appealing to experience would not stop at the formation of a 'we' subject, but then engage into an intersubjective process in which the terms of sameness underlying the 'we' subject would be continuously interrogated.

The other interrelated way in which my approach differs from classical consciousness-raising practices is that it would posit the mutual irreducibility of experience as a starting point for a cross-experiential exchange. The positing of mutual irreducibility is distinct from classical

consciousness-raising which was anchored towards building sameness, towards constructing a 'we' subject. The approach that I suggest offers a methodology for avoiding this cementing of assumptions of similarity and difference through centering mutual irreducibility. Within the practice, this mutual irreducibility almost functions as a reflective regulative principle which enables participants to continuously question assumptions of sameness, similarity and difference. With the practice that I advance, it is possible for experience to remain the basis for a collective engagement in the way that consciousness-raising practices did. However, I modify one of the steps that constitutes the collective interpretative process of experience in consciousness-raising. Rather than seeking to build generalizations that cement relations of similarity between participants which run the risk of escalating assumptions of sameness into essentialism, my approach demands that those engaging in the cross-experiential exchange continuously and open-endedly question their relation to each other and the way they reflect on how their experiences relate to each other. Instead of taking for granted the resonance and dissonance that experience generates, the approach that I advance critically engages the resonance and dissonance that particular experiences might ignite and render this a part of the practice.

Overall, I argue that experience is worth preserving as a source because it can compel both resonance and dissonance between experiencing subjects. However, the resonance and dissonance that experience compels between subjects should not be treated as self-sufficient nor should its immediacy be left unquestioned. Instead I maintain that the resonance and dissonance that experience ignites must itself be interrogated as part of the practice of consciousness raising. Experience is valuable for feminism when it is engaged with others such that it can ignite or compel resonance or dissonance between subjects. This resonance and dissonance are epistemically valuable because they can allow for experiences to be seen as shared and therefore contextualized within a broader set of power relations, rather than as isolated exceptions that are unrelated to each other. This resonance and dissonance are therefore also politically valuable because they can allow for subjects to recognize their struggle as shared and use this as a mechanism to ground an action-oriented group politics. However, treating the immediacy of resonance and dissonance as sufficient for grounding sameness is at risk of endorsing an essentialist politics that is both critically limiting and politically undesirable to feminism. Engaging experience for a feminist politics must thereby continuously interrogate the terms of

sameness that ground one's own sense of resonance and dissonance with respect to an other's experience, thus continuously reflecting on the manner in which experience binds certain people together.

Concluding Remarks

Through engaging experience in this distinct practice, I argue that experience becomes a source for relational self-reflexivity in ways that can effectively negotiate the tensions between depoliticized particularity and essentialism. It creates the possibility of creating a continuous process by which subjects reflect on their relation to each other as well as on the pre-theoretical assumptions of similarity or difference that are too quickly assumed to be meaningful. Engaging experience in the way that I suggest will enable a continuous and open-ended collective social critique of the terms of sameness that underpin a given experience. The practice of engaging experience that I theorized in the final section of this chapter can, I argue, negotiate the tension between essentialism and depoliticized particularism that I spelled out in the first two sections of this chapter. My argument is that if experience cannot be treated as epistemically foundational, it can still be engaged into a practice in ways that can advance the critical project of feminism as an activity of 'rendering contingent.' One of the implications of my account is that the project of interpreting experience can only function when experience is engaged in its lived, embodied and situated particularity. What emerges from my account is a distinct practice around the category of experience. In my view, experience is thus not so much a source for feminist theorizing in the way it can prove an empirical reality: it is, instead, a source in the practice that it compels from those who engage with it. The importance of experience is therefore not so much about what experience is nor its distinct epistemic content, but rather about *what experience does* or what it compels those who engage with it. The practice that I elaborate in this chapter offers the possibility of creating a continuous process by which subjects reflect on their relation to each other as well as on the pre-theoretical assumptions of similarity or difference that are too quickly assumed to be self-evident. The practice I advance is thus both relational and self-reflexive. It is relational because it not only occurs between experiencing subjects but it importantly pertains to the similarity and difference that subjects too quickly assume in their relations with and to each

other. It is self-reflexive because through engaging this practice individual experiencing subjects develop a new understanding of themselves and their own experience in relation to others.

The practice that I elaborate in this chapter offers the possibility of creating a continuous process by which subjects reflect on their relation to each other as well as on the pre-theoretical assumptions of similarity or difference that are too quickly assumed to be self-evident. The practice I advance is thus both relational and self-reflexive. It is relational because it not only occurs between experiencing subjects but it importantly pertains to the similarity and difference that subjects too quickly assume in their relations with and to each other. It is self-reflexive because through engaging this practice individual experiencing subjects develop a new understanding of themselves and their own experience in relation to others.

With the practice that I advance, I argue that experience can be a source for feminism insofar as it continuously interrogates the dissonance and resonance that experience can ignite between subjects. The critical potential of a lived experience becomes apparent when it is engaged with others' lived experiences where, as Lois McNay writes, "each perspective functions relative to the other as a productive outside position that may prompt interlocutors to critically reflect on their own immanent interpretive position."²⁴⁷ Only when the particularity of each experience is made apparent in relation to each other experience does a critique of power become possible. Through this intersubjective interpretative process, I argue that lived experience remains a source for feminist critique without naturalizing, fetishizing nor grounding a fundamental sameness between experiencing subjects. Rather, it offers pathways for a continuous critique of the essentializing terms of sameness that are already affixed to experience. It also allows for the preservation of experience as a source for igniting a feminist politics, recognizing the importance of bringing to light marginalized experiences that had been previously cast as politically irrelevant.

The practice of engaging experience that I theorized in the final section of this chapter can, I argue, effectively negotiate the tension between essentialism and depoliticized particularism that

²⁴⁷ Lois McNay, *The Gender of Critical Theory: On the Experiential Grounds of Critique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 15.

I spelled out in the first two sections of this chapter. My argument is that if experience cannot be treated as epistemically foundational, it can still be engaged into a practice in ways that are capable of advancing the critical project of feminism as an activity of ‘rendering contingent’. One of the implications of my account is that the project of interpreting experience can only function when experience is engaged in its lived, embodied and situated particularity. Experience is thus engaged immanently, revealing the asymmetries between experiencing subjects. In the following chapter, “Asymmetrical Experiences and Cross-Experiential Hermeneutics,” I give theoretical substance to this critical practice for the purpose of igniting a survivor-led cross-experiential practice.

Chapter 4. Asymmetrical Experiences and Cross-Experiential Hermeneutics

So far in this thesis, I advanced an experiential approach to rape that not only centers the subjective particularity of each survivor experience, but that also simultaneously maintains the mutual irreducibility of rape experiences in relation to each other. I stressed that preserving this mutual irreducibility of each other's experience enables a more sustained consideration into the small nuances and divergences *between* experiences and *between* experiencing subjects. Indeed, it compels a consideration into how one's own experience relates to an other's as well as the kinds of rapports of sameness and difference that emerge between subjects that engage cross-experientially. In Chapter 3 in particular, I stressed the importance of a sustained inquiry into the relations of similarity and difference that subjects build with each other when engaging their personal experiences. In doing so, I began to show how experience can be a source of relational self-reflexivity for experiencing subjects to reflect on the resonance and dissonance that a cross-experiential exchange might ignite.

In this chapter, I expand on my conception of a feminist practice of rape survivorship by elaborating a cross-experiential hermeneutic methodology that engages the particularity of survivors' experiences of rape in order to reveal the asymmetrical relations of power that are invested in rape and between survivors of rape. Here, I elaborate the idea that small nuances and divergences *between* experiences might signal a power asymmetry between two experiencing subjects where these power asymmetries are revelatory of the plural configurative power relations that are implicated in rape. The cross-experiential hermeneutics that I develop here builds off of the practice I advanced in Chapter 3 where I argued that the resonance and dissonance that experience ignites is insufficient grounds for assuming a shared social reality that can ground a feminist politics. Instead, I suggest that these resonances and dissonances must be interrogated by the experiencing subjects themselves. That is to say, that experiencing subjects can themselves inquire into the sense of resonance and dissonance that they feel in relation to each other's experiences. In doing so, experiencing subjects can inquire into the terms of sameness that were built into the relation between experiencing subjects prior to engaging

cross-experientially. This approach, therefore, compels those engaging in a cross-experiential exchange to set in question the terms under which they understand their relation to each other and the way that they understand their experience all together. Along a similar vein, this chapter advances a feminist practice of rape survivorship that can reveal how rape survivors are asymmetrically situated in relation to each other. Both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 articulate a commitment to preserving the mutual irreducibility of rape experiences demonstrating how engaging experience in a feminist practice can be used to reveal the the plural configurative power relations that are implicated in rape. Doing so, I contend, creates the conditions for rape experiences as well as the relations between the participants of a cross-experiential exchange to be politicized.

In this chapter, I elaborate a cross-experiential hermeneutics that is capable of revealing the asymmetries between each survivor's experience of rape. This cross-experiential hermeneutics functions by harnessing the mutual irreducibility of experiences into a practice where the particularity of each survivor's lived experience functions relative to the particularity of other survivors' experiences. The purpose of this cross-experiential hermeneutic exchange is not to build symmetry between experiences nor to ground sharedness, but instead to reveal asymmetries between subjects and contextualize them within the wider operation of power. This is one of the most crucial ways that the cross-experiential methodology that I elaborate in this thesis differs from classical consciousness-raising which, as I mentioned in the previous chapter and the introduction to this thesis, seeks to use experience in order to create a shared condition and social identity of womanhood under heteropatriarchy. This approach, as I have argued in previous chapters and will continue to examine here, risks reifying and naturalizing existing identity categories and gender relations while simultaneously privileging only some iterations of rape as intelligible as such. Instead, I suggest a method by which survivors can engage their embodied experience in a cross-experiential hermeneutical exchange that can continuously bring to light the asymmetries between survivors and, in turn, map the plural axes of meaning, configurations that both allow rape to persist.

The cross-experiential hermeneutics method I have in mind is informed by an ethic of alterity. Broadly speaking, an ethic of alterity theorizes an ethical relation between ‘self’ and ‘not-self.’²⁴⁸ More specifically, the ethic of alterity is interested in the conditions under which a self is able to apprehend concrete others not as extensions of the self but as embodied subjects whose perspectives and lifeworlds are irreducible and irreversible.²⁴⁹ The concept of alterity is thus distinct from mere difference, it refers to otherness where an ‘other’ is conceived as one who is distinct from oneself. Insofar as difference can be grouped into those who share similarity in their difference, what is referred to as ‘sameness in difference,’ alterity emerges as a concept that is meaningfully opposite to sameness.²⁵⁰ The ethics of alterity is invested in apprehending the existence of a viewpoint that is entirely distinct from one’s own, and, in doing so, to theorize the possibility of affording moral respect to a view that is irreducibly distinct from one’s own, and mapping the ethical limitations involved in ‘understanding others.’ In other words, the ethics of alterity is invested in the possibility for reciprocity and moral respect in conditions of radical heterogeneity – that is, in conditions where an act of understanding an ‘other’ as a recognition of similarity is itself subject to ethical consideration.²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Duquesne University Press: 1991). Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l’Autre Femme* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1974). Simone de Beauvoir, *Pour une Morale de L’Ambiguïté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947). Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

²⁴⁹ For Emmanuel Levinas, this irreducible perspective means that concrete others’ lifeworlds are always ungraspable and any attempt to grasp a concrete others’ perspective would be an imposition of oneself onto others. The ‘other’ is, according to Levinas, ‘absolutely other’ and practices of reciprocity and recognition too often rely on being able to see oneself in others. Levinas qualifies reciprocity as necessarily implying a reversibility with the other in which one subsumes an ‘other’s’ perspective into one’s own. As I will demonstrate later in the chapter, it is interesting to see how Young borrows the Levinasian language of reversibility in her own criticism of Seyla Benhabib’s conception of reciprocity illustrating her anchorage in Levinasian alterity. For more on Levinas’ elaboration of the ‘absolute other’ see Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infinité: Un Essai Sur l’Extériorité* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1971). For more on Levinas’ account the ethical impossibility of reciprocity see Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents* (Duquesne University Press: 1978).

²⁵⁰ Levinas’ account of alterity is used to challenge philosophical methods anchored towards the creation of totality which he qualifies as always an iteration of ethnocentrism that builds familiarity and sameness into otherness. He qualifies this philosophical tendency as the ‘imperialism of sameness’ [‘un impérialisme du même’] where alterity is articulated as a methodological alternative to the impulse of sameness. See *Totalité et Infinité: Un Essai Sur l’Extériorité* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1971), 28.

²⁵¹ The work of Simone de Beauvoir on alterity insists on a politics that denies symmetry between oneself and other beings. On Beauvoir’s account, centering alterity would be conducive to a mutual recognition of each subject’s radical freedom. For more on this, see Beauvoir’s critique of Levinas in *La Femme Indépendante* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008). See also Simone de Beauvoir, *Pour une Morale de L’Ambiguïté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947). See also Ellie Anderson, “From existential alterity to ethical reciprocity: Beauvoir’s alternative to Levinas,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 52, no. 2 (2019), 171-189.

The ethic of alterity that I appeal to in order to develop a feminist practice of rape survivorship is informed primarily by Young's account of "asymmetrical reciprocity."²⁵² Against conceptions of reciprocal communicative exchanges as requiring participants to adopt either a neutral standpoint or the standpoint of concrete others, Young envisions a communicative exchange in which "each participant (...) is distinguished by a particular history and social position that makes their relation asymmetrical."²⁵³ I read Young's account of 'asymmetrical reciprocity' as structuring a distinct hermeneutic practice that never seeks to reverse perspectives nor to create procedures of judgment in which participants adopt a concrete other's perspective. Instead, she seeks to formulate the basis for a communicative ethic that is not only compatible with difference but profoundly respectful of the irreducibility of concrete others' viewpoints and lifeworlds. By irreducibility, I mean that no viewpoint is ever substitutable with another whereby, as I will discuss in further details in sections below, such an understanding of irreducibility implies a commitment to the singularity of each person's viewpoint, even if that irreducibility can never be rendered entirely apparent or transparent. Thus, my account requires seeing others around as irreducibly singular – that is, as irreducible to ourselves, that everyone holds a sphere that is irredeemably non-substitutable, even if this irreducibility is not immediately apparent. For Young, the assumption that moral respect requires participants engaging in dialogue to reverse perspectives, or indeed, to 'put themselves in the others' shoes' not only obscures difference but also undermines the differentiating effects of structural injustice. Instead, Young suggests that stressing the asymmetrical positioning of subjects is more aligned with moral respect precisely because it is capable of recognizing the irreversibility, irreplaceability, and nonsubstitutability of each person's positioning.

My argument in this chapter is that a cross-experiential hermeneutic should seek to reveal how experiencing subjects are asymmetrically situated in relation to each other. Such a commitment

²⁵² Iris Marion Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought" in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 38-59. For a reading of Iris Marion Young's asymmetrical reciprocity in the context of alterity see Ellie Anderson, "From existential alterity to ethical reciprocity: Beauvoir's alternative to Levinas" *Continental Philosophy Review* (2019), 171-189.

²⁵³ Iris Marion Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought" in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 39. For an account of moral dialogue requiring the adoption of a neutral standpoint see Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). For an account of moral dialogue requiring the adoption of concrete others' standpoint see Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992). See also Hannah Arendt on 'enlarged thought' and 'representative thinking' in "The Crisis in Culture" in *Between Past and Future*, (London: Penguin, 2006), 194-222.

to reveal asymmetries, however, requires a normative commitment to singularity which translates itself into a mutual irreducibility between subjects. This normative commitment to singularity, as I advance it in this chapter, posits each subject and their experience as irreducible and nonsubstitutable with other subjects' experiences. It therefore maintains a fundamental asymmetrical relation between subjects and their experience that can be generative for cross-experiential practice of rape survivorship.

This chapter will proceed in three steps. First, I argue that Young's critique of reflective practices of symmetry and reversibility is applicable to assumptions of symmetry and reversibility between survivors of rape. I follow Young's account on the importance of centering the asymmetrical positioning of survivors of rape for the purposes of fostering a practice that is capable of resisting rape. Second, I focus on Young's account of 'asymmetrical reciprocity' and her view that asymmetry is compatible with a reciprocal dialogical communicative group politics in which its participants are asymmetrically positioned. From here, I argue that asymmetrical reciprocity offers a normative anchor for a cross-experiential hermeneutics. Finally, departing from Young's account of 'asymmetrical reciprocity,' I elaborate what I mean by a cross-experiential hermeneutics and how it is distinct from mere a mere dialogical exchange of perspective. In doing so, I spell out one of the key contributions of this thesis which is a feminist practice that engages the particularity of survivors' experiences of rape.

I. Against Symmetry

In this section, I argue that the assumption that survivors of rape exist in a symmetrical relation to each other is politically undesirable. Following Young, I argue that assuming a symmetrical relation between survivors risks endorsing a faulty equivalence between 'self' and 'other.' According to Young, such an equivalence is ethically troubling because it reduces the 'other' as an extension of the 'self' rather than as embodied subjects whose perspectives, lived experiences, and lifeworlds are irreducible as well as nonsubstitutable. In conditions of structural injustice, such an imposition of the self onto others has the nefarious consequence of eclipsing marginalized experiences and perspectives. For the purposes of a feminist politics of rape survivorship, I contend that a symmetrical stance is politically undesirable because it risks

creating an equivalence between experiences of rape that obscure important structural differences *between* experiences of rape and *between* survivors themselves. Thinking with Young, this section lays the ground for the importance of recognizing the asymmetrical positioning of survivors of rape in relation to each other. What brings survivors together is their experience of rape, however always preserving the idea that each particular experience is neither meaningfully equivalent, nor configuratively substitutable, nor structurally reversible.

In her essay “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought,” Young formulates the idea of asymmetrical reciprocity against accounts that endorse a faulty relation of symmetry and equivalence between ‘self’ and ‘other.’ For Young, the assumption of a symmetrical relation between ‘self’ and ‘other’ compels practices in which a ‘self’ intuits an equivalence with an ‘other’ such that the ‘other’ becomes either the mirror image of oneself or becomes an extension of oneself. In Young’s account, assumptions of symmetry and reversibility “support a conceptual projection of sameness among people and perspectives at the expense of their difference.”²⁵⁴ This conceptual projection of sameness leads one to treat an ‘other’ as an extension of oneself that, in turn, eclipses the perspective of a concrete other. For Young, as I will demonstrate in the following section, the conceptual projection of sameness that occurs under the presumption of symmetry is incompatible with reciprocity because when I identify myself with another, I am intuiting similarities with this person that the other person might not intuit about me. Young writes:

“the result of the effort to see others as symmetrical with myself may sometimes be that I project onto them a perspective that complements my own. The perspective of the other can too easily be represented as the self’s other represented to itself – its fantasies, desires and fears.”²⁵⁵

That is to say, that I will project my own perception of a concrete other’s ‘otherness’ onto them in a way that is self-referential. According to this logic, the ‘other’ serves to reassert what I

²⁵⁴ Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 44.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

already think, or what I want to think.²⁵⁶ Here, the ‘other’s’ perspective is folded back into one’s own perspective such that the ‘other’ becomes an extension of oneself. On Young’s understanding, symmetry is an assumption of an ontological equivalence between self and other that will then map itself onto the way that one apprehends and interprets others — their actions, their behaviors, their affective world, their interests and needs, their perspectives. This assumption of an ontological equivalence between ‘self’ and ‘other’ becomes almost second nature, a pre-reflective impulse to apprehend others as extensions of ourselves. Symmetry can therefore be understood as this assumption that there is an ontological reducibility of ‘self’ and ‘other’ that can be ignited or brought to light. Symmetry is an ontological assumption that underpinning all of us, we are all ultimately equivalent beings who apprehend the world in a more or less similar way.²⁵⁷ This echoes aspects of my earlier criticism of Fricker who, in my reading, advances an ideal of epistemic justice in which conceptual transparency can create a thick form of epistemic symmetry between members of an epistemic community.²⁵⁸ The assumption of symmetry is often accompanied by the thought that if we ignite the right practices we would finally be able to see each other as similar, as alike, and therefore as morally equal – a point I will return to in the following section where I discuss reciprocity. It is important to note that the assumption of an ontological equivalence between ‘self’ and ‘other,’ what I will be referring to as ‘symmetry’ in this chapter, has epistemic consequences. Indeed, because I will intuit this symmetrical relation with an ‘other’ from the start, I will therefore read symmetry into my relations with that same ‘other.’ In this regard, the ontological assumption of symmetry is translated into a kind of interpretative disposition where I will intuit that symmetry in my

²⁵⁶ Consider the case in which a friend of yours is grieving the loss of a loved one, or perhaps experiencing heartache – an experience you might know a little bit about, having lived through it yourself. In this case it might seem appropriate to say something like “I know exactly how you feel” as words of consolation. These function well, however, as empty words of consolation *only*. This is because, of course, you can never really know how someone really feels and any attempt to place your own lived experience of grief or heartache could enact an equivalence that forestalls the possibility for seeing another’s experience as distinct from oneself. Assuming sharedness from the start between our lived experiences of grief and heartache due to the mere fact of that experience pertaining to grief or heartache will erase important asymmetries between our lived experiences of these categories. The impulse to build symmetry seems odd, in this case, because it suggests that only when another is seen as similar to oneself that I can engage with their perspective. Yet, when I engage with someone’s grief or heartache only through my lived experience of it, it is very possible that I might end up projecting my own lived experience onto theirs and erase their perspective in the process. In doing so, I might be engaging in a self-referential kind of dialogue that eclipses the other. This interpersonal scenario takes on political proportions when one is engaging experience across structurally produced axes of oppression as I will explore shortly.

²⁵⁷ There are different iterations of symmetry in philosophy – one such iteration could be humanism, that there is a fundamental humanness that ties us together and therefore allows us to have a special relation to each other and the world. In the case of humanism, there is still this assumption of an ontological equivalence between self and other where this equivalence is cashed out under a substantive understanding of ‘the human’.

²⁵⁸ See Chapter 2 ‘Speaking the R-Word: Epistemic Injustice and Representational Transparency’ in particular section I and II.

relations with others. The risk is that I end up perpetually reproducing my own assumption of symmetry in relation to an other when in fact that this symmetry is by no means objective, nor is it shared or reciprocated.

Although Young often hints at a deeper ethical problem, she conceives of symmetry as a political problem because conceiving of others as existing in a symmetrical relation with oneself will uncritically reproduce conceptions of otherness that are already politically entrenched. For Young, this is all the more troubling in a context of structural injustice where differential relations between persons are structured by oppression. Young writes, “in relations structured by oppression (...) those projections are likely to be damaging as they will often involve stereotypes and ideologies (...).”²⁵⁹ Under conditions of structural injustice, the assumption of a symmetrical relation between self and other undermines the profound asymmetries that are produced by racial, gendered, economic oppressions.

These structurally produced asymmetries create lived and embodied experiential divergences that are irreversible, especially across axes of oppression. As Young notes,

“When privileged people put themselves in the position of those who are less privileged, the assumptions derived from their privilege often allow them unknowingly to misrepresent the other’s situation.”²⁶⁰

To this, Young gives the compelling example of how, when asked if the state of Oregon should prioritize state funding of health care services to disabled people, able-bodied respondents to a telephone survey were asked to put themselves in the position of a wheelchair user. Here, most of the participants said that “they would rather be dead than wheelchair-bound” – indeed, “that their lives would not be worth living if they became disabled.”²⁶¹ With this example, Young captures well the grotesque dimensions that assumptions of symmetry can take.²⁶² She also illustrates a

²⁵⁹ Marguerite La Caze, “Seeing Oneself through the Eyes of the Other: Asymmetrical Reciprocity and Self-respect,” *Hypatia* 23, no. 3 (2008), 118-135.

²⁶⁰ Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 45.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

²⁶² Young’s present example is also crude because it brings to light an obvious bodily asymmetry – where the embodied experience of a wheelchair user is distinct from the embodied experience of an able-bodied person especially in a broader context in which the built environment is designed by and for able-bodied persons. This example also draws attention to embodiment as

profound, irreversible, and structurally-produced asymmetry between able-bodied persons in relation to disabled persons where societal attitudes in relation to disability really impeded on their capacity to imagine their needs and requirements. Young also demonstrates how the representations one conjures up of concrete others' perspectives are informed by political and social representations that are already in circulation in society. In doing so, Young problematizes the power relations that are invested and reproduced in the representational practices of symmetry and reversibility within the wider context of structural injustice.

On Young's account the assumption of symmetry between 'self' and 'other' undermines the effects of structural injustice by obscuring how profoundly differentiating structural oppression is. Young's worry about assumptions of symmetry between persons under conditions of structural injustice echoes the concerns raised by theorists of intersectionality. Theories of intersectionality have problematized "the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis."²⁶³ According to theories of intersectionality, theorizing oppression by singling out one axis of oppression (such as gender) obscures its interconnectedness with other axes of oppression (such as race, class, sexuality, ethnicity) and, in doing so, erases intersectional experiences of oppression. Intersectional feminists have criticized feminist politics for being written by and for White women. According to this line of criticism, White bourgeois cis-gendered women too quickly assumed a shared experience of womanhood that was incapable of capturing the complexities of intersectional experiences.²⁶⁴ Critiques of 1970s feminist consciousness raising groups have stressed how white cis-gendered bourgeois women assumed symmetry with poor women, Black women, trans women and queer women, migrant women, pious women on the grounds of shared womanhood. According to this criticism, White bourgeois women in consciousness raising groups assumed a common measure of

an axis of differentiation. For feminist theorists of embodiment Ann Cahill, "Embodiment gives rise to an enormous scope of differences. The quality and nature of an individual's embodiment is significantly affected by such factors as historical location, cultural environment, economic status, gender, race sex, sexual orientation, physical limitations, psychical limitations, emotional experiences, and others." See Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 113. On this understanding, embodiment conditions radical asymmetries between subjects, embodiment renders experiences irreversible and nonsubstitutable. For more on embodiment as a source of alterity see Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

²⁶³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics" in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 314.

²⁶⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw writes "One of the central theoretical dilemmas of feminism that is largely obscured by universalizing the white female experience is that experiences that are described as a manifestation of male control over females can be instead a manifestation of dominant group control over all subordinates." *Ibid.*, 339.

comparability, a fundamental sameness, a symmetrical experience of womanhood that trumps all other differences. As bell hooks notes, much of feminist consciousness-raising sought to create a shared experience of sexist oppression in which all women shared a common oppressor resulting in the erasure of nuances of the degree and character of oppressions that exist between women.²⁶⁵ hooks writes:

“White female emphasis on ‘common oppression’ in their appeals to black women to join the movement further alienated many black women. (...) Despite the reality that white upper and middle class women in America suffer from sexist discrimination and sexist abuse, they are not as a group as oppressed as poor white, or black, or yellow women. Their unwillingness to distinguish between various degrees of discrimination or oppression caused black women to see them as enemies.”²⁶⁶

While hooks frames feminism as insensitive to varying degrees of discrimination, I take the crucial point to be that there are meaningful and significant differences between lived experiences of oppression, especially within feminism. The assumption of shareness, sameness, commonality and symmetry were co-opted by the white bourgeois experience of womanhood who built a group politics that focused on the symmetries and in turn eclipsed important structurally-produced experiential differences. It is plausible to read intersectional feminists’ critique of consciousness-raising practices as creating exclusions and replicated power relations within feminism as demonstrating how practices of symmetry in conditions of structural injustice create forms of sameness that erase intersectional experiences of oppression. In the case of 1970s consciousness raising practices, White bourgeois women assumed a symmetrical relation between participants such that they projected their own privileged experiences onto asymmetrically situated women.

Similarly, the assumption that there is a universal experience of rape has created a similar sense of symmetry between rape survivors. The assumption of uniformity in the experience of rape; that its configuration, the subjects involved, the harm it causes, its meaning for survivors is

²⁶⁵ See bell hooks, “Racism and Feminism” in *Ain’t I a Woman* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 144-145.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 144-145.

essentially the same, has been challenged time and time again by intersectional feminists. For instance, the assumption that rape is a straightforward iteration of patriarchal power on the grounds that it obscured Black women's experiences of rape as an iteration of racial violence.²⁶⁷ Such obscuring further marginalizes Black women's experiences of rape and, as Crenshaw demonstrates, exposes Black women to more violence and risks rendering such forms of violence as permissible. Crenshaw writes:

“Efforts to think more clearly about when Black women are dominated as women and when they are dominated as Black women are directly related to the question of when power is male and when it is white male.”²⁶⁸

From Crenshaw's account, it is apparent that for many Black women, the experience of rape and their own 'rapeability' is structurally and thus meaningfully distinct. Crenshaw's account demonstrates how universal conceptions of rape not only obscure the experience of Black women but also actively eclipse how rape might be an exercise of racial domination. Crenshaw's point also demonstrates how White women survivors of rape and Black women survivors of rape stand in an asymmetrical relation despite having both experienced rape. Much like the criticism that feminist politics assumed a universal female subject that ended up being white, a politics that stresses the symmetry of survivors of rape has also historically universalized white cis-gendered bourgeois women's experience at the expense of complex intersectional experiences. Recent criticisms of White feminism have demonstrated how white women's dominant social positioning has given us the power to universalize our experience of womanhood and gendered oppression in ways that have created false equivalences between white women and differently socially positioned others.²⁶⁹ Young's ethical concern for the assumption of symmetry in which concrete others become extensions of one self applies takes on a political dimension when applied to a feminist group politics.

²⁶⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw notes that when rape is framed strictly along patriarchal lines, it “tends to eclipse the use of rape as a weapon of racial terror.” See Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 328.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 339.

²⁶⁹ Recent critiques of white feminism have stressed precisely the problem that white women have centered their own experience at the heart of the experience of womanhood. As Alison Phipps notes “White feminists are ‘everything’. We speak for other groups, rather than letting them speak for themselves. We think of ourselves as experts and saviours.” See Alison Phipps, *Me, Not You* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 62.

At this point, Young's argument seems to suggest that symmetry is possible within structurally differentiated groups; indeed, that within groups that are subjected to the same kinds of intersectional experiences of oppression can experience symmetry and that asymmetries only exist between privileged and oppression. Young writes:

“Much of my argument in this essay refers to the difficulties of reversing positions across such socially structured difference, which also usually involves relations of privilege and oppression. A similar logic applies, however, to the differences among individuals in which structured social difference is not so obvious. (...) Even when they find their relations defined by similarly structured differences of gender, race, class, nation, or religion, individuals usually also find many ways in which they are strangers to one another.”²⁷⁰

Young's point is even more radical as she seems to suggest that even within structurally divided groups there is still significant plurality. The tendency to assume symmetry even within group politics risks erasing this heterogeneity. Although I will return to this point later on in the chapter, for now it is important to stress that Young's framework of asymmetrical reciprocity emphasizes the particularity of each experiencing subject.

For Young, asymmetry is a lack of reversibility arising both from structural and existential features of a person. Asymmetry arises from different social positions which include factors of race, gender, class, ability, and faith; but it also emerges from a person's life story, how this shaped their character, the meaning they ascribe to their lived experience. For phenomenologists, what I am calling here the 'existential features' of lived experience are crucial to understanding the processes of meaning-making that come to constitute lived experience; each embodied subject is encumbered with past experiences that come to color the meaning of new experiences.²⁷¹ Young writes: “each participant (...) is distinguished by a particular history and

²⁷⁰ Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 45.

²⁷¹ In her discussion of Simone de Beauvoir's account of meaning and lived experience Linda Alcoff writes: “our experiences of the past make substantive contributions to our experiences of the present, including those elements of experience that include perceptual sensations, affective responses, and cognitive attitudes clustered in a particular time and place.” See Linda Alcoff, “The Thorny Question of Experience” in *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 69-70.

social position that makes their relation asymmetrical.”²⁷² Elsewhere in the essay she states: “Individuals bring different life histories, emotional habits, and life plans to relationships, which make their positions irreversible.”²⁷³ This ‘existential’ version of asymmetry emerges from the mere fact of each person having had different ‘intimate’ experiences, or quite simply, different lives. Young gives the example of a mother-daughter relationship where both the mother and daughter might “share social positionings of gender, race, class, nation” and might even have common tastes or opinions.²⁷⁴ Yet, their relationship remains asymmetrical in that different desires and projections influence the way both participants understand their relationship to one another; they stand asymmetrically to each other. In the mother-daughter example, Young demonstrates a fundamental estrangement that permeates each and every relationship whether intimate or political. Young’s point is importantly relational where the mutual irreducibility of ‘self’ and ‘other’ creates a form of estrangement that varies across different relations. Far from a damning estrangement that would prevent any form of relationship or solidaristic politics from emerging, Young believes that reciprocity is possible under such conditions of radical asymmetry — a point I shall return to in the following section.

There are two kinds of asymmetries emerging from Young’s account: there are structurally-produced asymmetries and what I am calling ‘existential asymmetries.’²⁷⁵ Both asymmetries are politically important for different reasons; structurally-produced asymmetries are politically relevant because they demonstrate how intersecting conditions of material, racial, gendered but also residential, migratory, employment and other inequalities produce radically different experiences and perspectives that are accessible only to those who experience these inequalities.²⁷⁶ What I am referring to as existential asymmetries is also politically relevant for

²⁷² Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 39.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁷⁵ In her reading of Beauvoir’s account of alterity, Ellie Anderson notes two varieties of alterity in Beauvoir: ‘sociopolitical alterity’ and ‘existential alterity.’ Anderson writes: “Sociopolitical alterity indicates the destructive oppression of individual freedoms that are systematically set up as ‘other’ by dominant groups” while existential alterity “is a necessary consequence of the human condition.” The distinction between ‘sociopolitical alterity’ and ‘existential alterity’ in Anderson’s reading of Beauvoir is echoed in my reading of Young’s division between structurally-produced asymmetries and existential asymmetries. See Ellie Anderson, “From existential alterity to ethical reciprocity: Beauvoir’s alternative to Levinas,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 52, no. 2 (2019), 176.

²⁷⁶ A similar intuition is put forth by feminist standpoint theorists in their conception that it is precisely because women are gendered that they have a unique standpoint to criticize patriarchal oppression. Where standpoint theory diverges with Iris Young is in its endorsement of a group politics that is grounded on a standpoint which some standpoint theorists see as emerging simultaneously from the experience of oppression while others see it more as something that is formulated collectively. See also

Young because, on her account, those existential features enliven political dialogue where the stance of symmetry “closes off the creative exchange these differences [life histories, emotional habits, and life plans] might produce with one another (...).”²⁷⁷ It is my contention that, in the context of a survivor-led group politics that struggles against rape that both structural and existential asymmetries matter. The experience of rape being both partly structurally produced and simultaneously lived as in incredibly intimate ways matters to any discussion regarding its harm, its meaning. From the perspective of experience, the existential and structural features of one’s lived experience are difficult if not impossible to be distinguished, especially in cases of domestic violence, incest, childhood sexual abuse, rape and sexual violence broadly speaking. That many experiences of rape happen in intimate relationships means that these experiences are embodied in ways that are unique to one’s life rendering existential asymmetries a non-negotiable feature of rape survivorship. This distinct asymmetry gives substance to the radical asymmetries between survivors that render their lived experiences of rape as irreducible, irreversible and nonsubstitutable. Contrary to the claim that existential asymmetries are apolitical quirks, I contend that these features matter in demonstrating the proportions and configurations rape takes for each individual person. These existential features which take the lived experience of rape down its particularity matter in enlivening a cross-experiential hermeneutical practice between survivors, a point I will return to later on in the chapter.

So far, I followed Young’s stance against the presumption of symmetry between interlocutors primarily because assumptions of symmetry might eclipse important structural and existential differences. Rape survivors are by no means a homogenous group yet, it is often assumed that rape survivors exist in a symmetrical relation to each other by virtue of having shared the same harrowing experience of rape. Too often is it assumed that this shared harrowing experience creates a symmetrical bond between survivors that erases all meaningful differences between survivors. Ultimately, what unites survivors is their experience of rape where each particular lived experience is neither meaningfully equivalent, nor figuratively substitutable, nor structurally reversible. Survivors stand in an asymmetrical relation to each other; this asymmetry

Allison Wylie, “Why Standpoint Matters” in *Science and Other Cultures*, ed. Sandra Harding, Robert Figueroa (New York: Routledge, 2003), 26-48.

²⁷⁷ Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 45.

is both structurally produced but also existential in character. The assumption that all rape experiences stand in a symmetrical relation risks obscuring important structural differences between survivors but also invites impositions of structurally powerful voices as the ‘universal’ experience that, in turn, obscures the experiences and narratives of marginalized others. In this section, I have demonstrated how Young problematizes the assumption of symmetry between ‘self’ and ‘other’ as implying practices of equivalence and reversibility. For Young, a symmetrical stance is ethically troubling and politically undesirable. It is ethically troubling because it involves an imposition of the ‘self’ onto ‘others’ such that others are treated as extensions of the self. In conditions of structural injustice, such equivalences undermine the extent to which structural oppression creates profound experiential and perceptual asymmetries. An asymmetrical approach avoids the equivalence between self and other that oftentimes endorses reducing the other to the same. Instead, Young stresses that ‘self’ and ‘other’ stand in an asymmetrical relation where no perspective is reversible.

Overall, in this section, I demonstrated how Young’s account of asymmetrical reciprocity is articulated against the assumption that the self stands in a symmetrical relation with concrete others in which their perspectives are reversible. Asymmetry, instead, posits the relation between self and other as respectively irreducible and nonsubstitutable. An asymmetrical conception of the relation between self and other is especially important in the context of structural injustice where individuals are structurally differentiated in ways that render their experiences nonsubstitutable. Centering asymmetries requires a politics that capable of centering the particularity of lived experiences of rape as mutually irreducible and nonsubstitutable. As I will demonstrate in later sections of this chapter, I maintain that a group politics that centers the asymmetrical positioning of its participants is not only compatible with reciprocity but also constitutes the basis for a survivor-led feminist politics that is capable of resisting rape.

II. Engaging Across Asymmetrically Situated Experiences

In the previous section, I focused on Young’s rejection of symmetry. For Young a symmetrical stance is incompatible with reciprocity and moral respect because it renders reciprocity contingent on one’s capacity to see others like oneself; because it intuitively an ontological

equivalence between ‘self’ and ‘other.’ Young defends instead the possibility for reciprocity in conditions of alterity: that is, she advances an account of ‘asymmetrical reciprocity.’ In doing so, Young rejects conceptions of reciprocity as ‘thinking from the perspective of others.’ Rather than seeing reciprocity as only possible through one’s capacity to identify with a concrete other’s experiences and perspectives, Young inquires into the possibility for reciprocity under conditions of alterity, that is, under conditions of mutual irreducibility where ‘self’ and ‘other’ remain irreducibly singular. In this section, I will argue that in her excessive focus on rendering asymmetry compatible with reciprocity, Young underestimates asymmetry as a potential critical and self-reflexive resource for engaging cross-experientially. Contrary to Young, I contend that asymmetry is the political substance of cross-experiential engagement; it is not only presupposes the condition for interlocutors entering into a cross-experiential exchange, it is also that which must be revealed in a cross-experiential engagement. In this section, I first read Young’s argument on the compatibility of asymmetry with reciprocity where, her ideal of asymmetrical reciprocity posits moral respect between persons as an act of reciprocity in which each person apprehends the other as asymmetrically situated in relation to oneself.²⁷⁸ I then demonstrate how Young’s account of asymmetrical reciprocity offers a promising normative anchor upon which to ground a cross-experiential hermeneutics.

Young’s essay begins by calling attention to the commonly held injunction “to think about an issue from the point of view of others before drawing conclusions of what is right or just.”²⁷⁹ In common parlance, the injunction to “look at it from their perspective,” seems like a fairly innocuous way to think beyond one’s own selfish interests and parochial perspective by imagining oneself in another person’s shoes when deliberating about moral or political issues.²⁸⁰ Hannah Arendt’s account of “enlarged mentality” is one systematic political theoretical iteration of this injunction.²⁸¹ Arendt writes: “I form an opinion (...) by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them.”²⁸² Elsewhere Arendt writes:

²⁷⁸ See Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 41.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁸¹ See Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture” in *Between Past and Future* (London: Penguin, 2006), 194-222. It is important to note that Hannah Arendt borrowed the term ‘enlarged thought’ from Immanuel Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment. See also Arendt on ‘enlarged thought’, ‘sensus communis’, and ‘worldliness’ in *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 50-95.

²⁸² Hannah Arendt in “Truth and Politics” in *Between Past and Future*, (London: Penguin, 2006), 237.

“this enlarged way of thinking, which as judgment knows how to transcend its individual limitations, cannot function in strict isolation or solitude; it needs the presence of others ‘in whose place’ it must think, whose perspective it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all.”²⁸³

Arendt posits enlarged thought as a procedure of political judgment that resembles an internalized dialogue in which I, the judging subject, position myself as engaging in conversation on a given issue from the imagined viewpoints of others. In this simulated dialogue, I am very literally imagining myself embodying distinct others’ perspectives such that I eventually aggregate a multiplicity of viewpoints on one single issue. For Arendt, this procedure of judgment is precisely political because it is plural and worldly, because it is articulating the condition of plurality and in doing so is oriented towards the world. Arendtian ‘enlarged thought’ is a procedure of judgment that would allow judging subjects to distance themselves from their solipsistic perspective and to imagine how concrete others’ might be differently or similarly affected by a decision.

Seyla Benhabib takes up Arendtian ‘enlarged thought’ in her own elaboration of a communicative ethic that is both conducive to moral respect and consistent with a politics of difference. Against a Habermasian account of moral dialogue which works towards the adoption of an impartial standpoint, Benhabib invokes the idea of ‘enlarged thought’ as a procedure of judgment that assumes a moral standpoint which is more attuned to plurality and thus more democratically-minded. Benhabib writes: “The discourse model of ethics (...) enjoins enlarged thought, by making the perspective of all involved in a dialogue situation the [condition] sine qua non of the moral standpoint (...).”²⁸⁴ To take up a moral standpoint on a particular question or issue means, according to Benhabib, engaging in the procedure of ‘enlarged thought.’ Like Arendt, Benhabib argues that assuming a moral standpoint requires exiting one’s subjective

²⁸³ Ibid., 217. Full passage reads: “The power of judgment rests on a potential agreement with others, and the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. And this enlarged way of thinking, which as judgment knows how to transcend its individual limitations, cannot function in strict isolation or solitude; it needs the presence of others ‘in whose place’ it must think, whose perspective it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all.”

²⁸⁴ Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 140.

perspective on how an issue will affect oneself in order to reflect how it will affect concrete others. On this account, ‘enlarged thought’ is politically and ethically desirable because it is both consistent with the political commitment to plurality and the normative commitment to egalitarian reciprocity. For Benhabib, in adopting a concrete other’s standpoints one regards that concrete other as having a perspective worthy of consideration and thus as worthy of moral respect.²⁸⁵ In her appeal to Arendtian enlarged thought, Benhabib writes that it “enjoins us to view each person as one to whom I owe the moral respect to consider their standpoint.”²⁸⁶ To enact enlarged thought, according to Benhabib, is thus an act of normative and political value precisely because it allows one to recognize oneself in others and, in doing so, sees others’ point of view as equally important.²⁸⁷

Young challenges Benhabib’s uptake of Arendtian ‘enlarged thought’ on two grounds: first, she challenges the idea of ‘enlarged thought’ as establishing a symmetrical relation between persons; second, she rejects the idea that reciprocity requires ‘enlarged thought.’ Conversely, Young’s defense of ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ makes two claims: first, it asserts that the perspective of each person is irreversible, irreducible, and “nonsubstitutable.”²⁸⁸ Second, it posits this irreversibility as compatible with reciprocity. Her elaboration of asymmetrical reciprocity is ironically symmetrically opposed to Benhabib’s conception reciprocity as requiring ‘enlarged thought’ – that is, as requiring a reflective procedure in which one positions oneself in the shoes of concrete others. In Young’s reading, Benhabib conflates “moral respect and reciprocity with symmetry and reversibility of perspectives (...).”²⁸⁹ Indeed, by relying on the procedure of

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 31. The passage reads: “(5) These rules reflect the moral ideal that we ought to respect each other as beings whose standpoint is worthy of equal consideration (the principle of universal moral respect) and that furthermore. (6) We ought to treat each other as concrete human beings whose capacity to express this standpoint we ought to enhance by creating, whenever possible, social practices embodying the discursive ideal (the principle of egalitarian reciprocity).”

²⁸⁶ Seyla Benhabib in Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 39-40.

²⁸⁷ It is important to note that for both Arendt and Benhabib, ‘enlarged thought’ is not intended to produce a more objective standpoint; indeed, Benhabib and Arendt are not saying that by adopting others’ standpoints and aggregating these different standpoints that the judging subject will arrive at a more objective standpoint. Indeed, Arendt and Benhabib do not make an epistemic argument. Rather, they suggest that by adopting the standpoint of others and thus exiting one’s own subjective perspective, one can assume a moral standpoint on a given question or issue.

²⁸⁸ Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 39. Young borrows the term ‘nonsubstitutable’ from Luce Irigaray’s account of sexual difference. See Luce Irigaray, *The Ethics of Sexual Difference* (London, New York: Continuum, 1993). For a reading of the notion of ‘nonsubstitutability’ see Silvia Stoller and Camilla R. Nielsen, “Asymmetrical Genders: Phenomenological Reflections on Sexual Difference” *Hypatia* 20, no.2 (2009), 7-26.

²⁸⁹ Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 44.

‘enlarged thought’ for reciprocity, Benhabib assumes that perspectives are reversible between subjects, that this reversibility is feasible, and that it is also ethically and politically desirable. In Young's reading, Benhabib's emphasis on ‘enlarged thought’ posits a communicative ethic in which reciprocity is only possible through practices of symmetry: that is, through the assumption that one can reverse perspectives with concrete others; that concrete others are comparable to ourselves such that it is possible to envision oneself occupying their standpoint. Young writes:

“The ideas of symmetry and reversibility that Benhabib relies on evoke images of mirror reflection. The images of symmetry and reversibility suggest that people are able to understand one another's perspectives because, while not identical, they are similarly shaped, and for that reason replaceable with one another.”²⁹⁰

Here, Young suggests that the idea of reversibility assumes a fundamental sameness between subjects; despite differences between subjects, these differences remain knowable and imaginable to each other.²⁹¹ Indeed, the idea of reversibility and symmetry assumes a fundamental sameness that can allow one to see from the perspective of another. Young writes: “such images of reflection and substitutability (...) support a conceptual projection of sameness among people and perspectives at the expense of their difference.”²⁹² The problem is thus twofold: not only does symmetry assume a false equivalence, but it does so at the expense of difference. The point about difference is normatively important because, for Young, symmetry obscures difference because it imposes the self onto a different other in an effort to materialize a symmetrical relation which perhaps does not even exist in the first place. Young's problematization of the assumption of symmetry and reversibility that is contained in the idea of ‘enlarged thought’ shifts from an epistemic assertion regarding the irreversibility of perspective to a more normative claim. For Young, the assumption of symmetry that is invested in ‘enlarged thought’ risks, in practice, being an imposition of one self, one's lifeworld, one's experience,

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 44.

²⁹¹ As I mentioned earlier in footnote 6, it is interesting to see here how Young appeals to the Levinasian language of reversibility to challenge Benhabib's conception of reciprocity. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes: “Irreversibility signifies not only that the Same does move towards the Other, but conversely that the Other does not move towards the Same” [L'irréversibilité ne signifie pas seulement que le Même va vers l'Autre, autrement que l'Autre ne va vers le Même]. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infinité: Un Essai Sur l'Extériorité* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1971), 24.

²⁹² Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 44.

one's standpoint onto concrete others thus suffocating any possibility for difference. Therefore, Young's critique of Benhabib problematizes the assumption of the possibility for symmetry and reversibility because of how it structures a relationship between self and other in which the other is an extension of the self. For Young, such a relationship renders reciprocity entirely impossible because it renders the possibility of seeing an other as a moral equal as contingent on one's own capacity to see the other as oneself.

Similar to the injunction of 'thinking from the shoes of another' some feminist scholars have defended empathy as an affective source for feminist solidarity and can move women, especially privileged women, to forge affective bonds between differently situated 'othered' women precisely because empathy moves subjects to transcend the parochialism of one's own perspective.²⁹³ Whereas Benhabib's 'enlarged thought' put forth a reflective procedure of judgment that was aimed at exiting one's selfish interests, the feminist appeal to empathy as an affective procedure that was aimed at both exiting one's parochial perspective while also being self-reflexive about one's privileges in relation to differently situated others whom one engages in dialogue with. It is interesting to see how empathy and 'enlarged thought' function as sources engaging with others across differences in ways that both assume symmetry between subjects and that seek to enliven this assumed symmetry in practice. If empathy is an act of feeling oneself in the suffering of another, Young's critique of symmetry seems pertinent. In the same way that 'enlarged thought' intuits a kind of symmetry between rational subject where one's reasons for making certain decisions or for desiring certain things is imaginable to others, empathy seems to intuit an affective equivalence between 'self' and 'other' in which another's suffering is equivalently imaginable and graspable.²⁹⁴ Indeed, it suggests that affect can bridge even the most staunch of differences; that empathy can tap into a symmetrical affective experience that is already there. Yet, as Clare Hemmings notes:

²⁹³ See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Florence: Taylor & Francis, 2009).

²⁹⁴ This is not to suggest, however, that suffering cannot be a source of knowledge and critique. bell hooks offers a compelling account of how suffering can be a powerful experiential standpoint for critique, however only when that suffering is radically contextualized rather than generalized as grounding a politics of shared experience of suffering. See bell hooks "Essentialism and Experience," *American Literary History* 3, no. 1 (1991), 172-183. My point here is rather that empathy is an ineffective tool to build symmetry between experiences of suffering, and moreover, that engaging suffering does not necessitate it being made symmetrical with other experiences of suffering. Doing so risks erasing the context to which that suffering speaks.

“the intransigent differences between women may be glossed over and thus strengthened rather than displaced, and the fiction of empathy may in fact be one of the factors blocking a move from individual feminist reflection to collective engagement.”²⁹⁵

On Hemmings’ account, empathy becomes a fictitious engagement with differently situated others because it assumes a fundamental level of symmetry that undermines the profound structural differences within feminism. The politics of empathy, more broadly, puts forth an overly-voluntarist account of connection according to which the will to connect with differently situated women will allow differences to be transcended. Caren Kaplan has stressed how exoticization and fetishization of differently situated others is often masqueraded as empathy.²⁹⁶ Kaplan’s line of argument has been especially prevalent among transnational feminist scholars who have repeatedly stressed how Western feminists pity ‘global others’ under the guise of a universal symmetrical standpoint of female empathy.²⁹⁷ On Hemmings’ critique, empathy politics entertains “a projective fantasy” in which empathetic subjects hold the authority to judge who is ‘in need’ of care or ‘in need’ of saving.²⁹⁸ This harks back to Young’s critique of symmetry as obscuring the radically differentiating aspects of structural oppression.

For Young, the assumption of symmetry between self and other is not only ethically troubling but a poor basis for a reciprocal politics or a politics that is conducive to moral respect. In her view, such an account endorses a view of political dialogue as requiring that one identifies with concrete others in order to be able to treat their perspective as worthy of consideration. Young writes: “This stance of symmetry appears in everyday life as a will to sympathize with others only insofar as one can see them as like oneself.”²⁹⁹ The necessity to identify with concrete others goes completely against a politics that is capable of accounting for difference. If reciprocity is contingent on the possibility for me to identify with a concrete other, this implies

²⁹⁵ Clare Hemmings, “Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation” *Feminist Theory* 13, no.2 (2012), 151-152.

²⁹⁶ Caren Kaplan, ‘The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Critical Practice’ in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Critical Practice* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 137-152.

²⁹⁷ See Trinh-T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). See also Jo Doezema, “Ouch! Western Feminists’ ‘Wounded Attachment’ to the ‘Third World Prostitute’” *Feminist Review* 67, no. 1 (2001), 16–38.

²⁹⁸ See Clare Hemmings, “Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation” *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2012), 151-152.

²⁹⁹ Iris Marion Young, “Introduction” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 6.

that the differences between oneself and a concrete other must be not only bridgeable but also palatable and imaginable. For Young, however, all I am doing when I identify with another is project my own lifeworld and perspective through a conjured-up representation of the other that might not only be completely inaccurate, but more importantly might completely smother the perspective of that other. She suggests that reciprocity here might end up being a mutual projection of each other where each projection says more about oneself than the other. Young also takes seriously how practices of reversibility in the context of structural injustice risks grossly replicating stereotypes about a person's experience as with the aforementioned example of an able-bodied person imagining themselves as wheelchair users.

Against accounts of reciprocity that seek to resolve differences between people through acts of reversibility, Young's account wants to commit to preserve the unresolvable asymmetries between subjects. For Young, preserving the irreversibility of perspectives, experiences and lifeworlds is more compatible with a commitment to moral respect and reciprocity because it actively resists the impulse of projecting oneself onto others. Instead of apprehending others as extensions of oneself, preserving asymmetry might allow one to apprehend others as singular subjects with irreducible perspectives to whom one is bound relationally and intersubjectively. The ideal of asymmetrical reciprocity, therefore and as Young sees it, is that it posits moral respect between persons as an act of reciprocity in which each person apprehends the other as situated asymmetrically in relation to oneself.³⁰⁰

The strength of Young's account is how emphasis on asymmetrical positionings between participants in a dialogue shifts the expectation of what one can get from engaging with others. As Marguerite de la Caze notes in her reading of Young, it means that there is a perpetual estrangement between individuals, that concrete others can never be fully known to oneself.³⁰¹ Indeed, taking asymmetry as a starting point in a dialogue shifts one's disposition in relation to others because the point will no longer be to fully grasp the other. Asymmetrical reciprocity creates a mutual acknowledgement of being asymmetrically situated in relation to others which

³⁰⁰ See Iris Marion Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought" in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 41.

³⁰¹ See Marguerite La Caze, "Seeing Oneself through the Eyes of the Other: Asymmetrical Reciprocity and Self-respect," *Hypatia* 23, no. 3 (2008), 118-135.

is also a mutual acceptance that one might ever be made entirely graspable or understandable to another. The assumption of asymmetry therefore already transforms what one can expect from an ‘other’ where that expectation may not include fully grasping an ‘other.’

Asymmetrical reciprocity, according to Young, is enacted in a politically-motivated dialogical exchange. Young’s account of asymmetrical reciprocity emerges in response to communicative ethics; indeed, she is interested in theorizing a kind of discourse ethics in conditions of asymmetry. What does it mean to engage in a reciprocal communicative action with an asymmetrically positioned other? Young on this point is a bit more difficult to pinpoint partly because she insists that despite conditions of asymmetry it is still possible to understand with one another and, in fact, stresses its political necessity.³⁰² Young writes:

“Some people reason that if individuals and groups cannot reverse perspectives then we cannot understand each other. This is too strong a conclusion to draw, however; irreversibility implies only that respect and effective communication cannot assume that we understand one another. Communicative ethics must be more open to listen and questioning than are stances that presume shared understandings of a common good.”³⁰³

Here, Young disentangles the assumption that reciprocity and communication require shared understanding. Instead, she turns to communicative virtues like good listening and open-mindedness. She claims that understanding the other does not require that one can identify with a concrete other, but assumes a disposition of humbleness and openness in relation to the other. In her view asymmetrical reciprocity is thus a kind of recognition of the partiality of knowledge and understanding that one can gain from another. Young writes:

“Dialogue participants are able to take account of the perspective of others because they have heard those perspectives expressed. They have had to listen to those expressions

³⁰² Young writes: “Understanding across difference is both possible and necessary. Recognizing the asymmetry of subjects, however, does imply giving a different account of what understanding is and what makes it possible.” See Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 52.

³⁰³ Iris Marion Young, “Introduction” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 6.

with a moral humility that recognizes that they stand in relations of asymmetry and irreversibility with others.”³⁰⁴

Here, Young seems to posit asymmetrical reciprocity as compelling a virtuous communicative disposition such that when one expects never to fully understand the other, one is therefore more open to being challenged, more curious, more willing to engage on terms different to one’s own. In other words, assuming an asymmetrical stance will prompt a virtuous rapport with and in relation to others because one will not expect to fully grasp the other. Young even appeals to Irigaray’s idea of ‘wonder’ as both reciprocal and asymmetrical mode of engagement.³⁰⁵ Cautioning against exoticisation, Young writes: “A respectful stance of wonder toward other people is one of openness across (...) interests, perceptions, or values.”³⁰⁶ On Young’s account the disposition of wonder is one of humility and open-mindedness in which one is open to having their expectations unsettled and perhaps even shattered. Young also brings in the idea of moral humility as a disposition in which one admits to have partial knowledge about a concrete other.³⁰⁷ Young’s account of asymmetrical reciprocity thereby requires a combination of a particular disposition in relation to difference as well as an enacting communicative virtues. The particular disposition in relation to difference is the asymmetrical stance which asserts that no two subjects and experiences are ever reducible to each other.

Although Young argues that asymmetrical reciprocity requires bringing a moral disposition to a communicative exchange with an asymmetrically situated other, it strikes me as plausible for a communicative exchange with an asymmetrically situated other to generate reciprocity from

³⁰⁴ Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 59.

³⁰⁵ See Luce Irigaray on the idea of ‘wonder’ in Luce Irigaray, *The Ethics of Sexual Difference* (London, New York: Continuum, 1993). For a reading of Young’s appeal to Irigaray see Marguerite La Caze, “Seeing Oneself through the Eyes of the Other: Asymmetrical Reciprocity and Self-respect,” *Hypatia* 23, no. 3 (2008), 118-135.

³⁰⁶ Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 56. In a footnote, Young discusses the parallel between Irigaray’s idea of ‘wonder’ and Maria Lugones’ account of ‘playfulness’. Here Young quotes Lugones: “Playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in the case uncertainty is an openness to surprise. This is a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the world to be neatly packaged, rule.” See footnote in Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 170. See also Maria Lugones “On the Logic of Pluralist Feminism,” in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (La Vergne: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 35-44.

³⁰⁷ Young expands only briefly on her understanding of moral humility in a footnote in which she distinguishes it from moral deference. See footnote in Iris Marion Young *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 168.

within. That is to say, that by Young's own logic it is possible for reciprocity to be immanent to an exchange between asymmetrically-situated subjects. Against the stance of symmetry where one is capable of engaging meaningfully with others "only insofar as one can see them like oneself,"³⁰⁸ an asymmetrical stance, as I see it, not only preserves asymmetrical relations but attempts to illuminate them continuously and open-endedly. As Young argues, an asymmetrical stance allows for subjects to regard each other as nonsubstitutable with each other in contrast to a symmetrical stance which apprehends others as mere extensions or mirrors of oneself; the other is apprehended as part of the self. Thereby, to regard each other as asymmetrically positioned relative to oneself, that is, to regard one another as nonsubstitutable to each other which is itself a form of reciprocity.

This form of reciprocity, I argue, can be generated immanently to an exchange insofar as it is only through an exchange that one can come to understand oneself as asymmetrically-situated relative to another. One does not immediately understand oneself as asymmetrically positioned in relation to concrete others. In fact, to understand oneself as asymmetrically positioned relative to a concrete other is a very demanding task. The difficulty of seeing oneself as asymmetrically situated to concrete others lies in the fact that one is always-already embedded in a discursive context in which ideas and prejudices about others are always-already invested in one's interactions with and relations to others. That is to say, one is already embedded in discourse in which one's relation to oneself, one's own experience, and others around them is already (at least partly) discursively constituted. One is embedded in a world in which symmetry is already built into certain relations with others. One's embeddedness in a discursive context means that one will always-already understand oneself and one's experience in a particular way. More importantly, and I already elaborated in Chapter 3, this will also mean that one will already understand one's own experience as substantively similar or substantively different to another person's; that these similarities and differences appear self-evident and given such that these similarities and differences become unquestionable. In Chapter 3, I stressed how these previously held assumptions of similarity and difference are then translated uncritically into a cross-experiential exchange as resonance and dissonance. To understand oneself as

³⁰⁸ See Iris Marion Young, "Introduction" in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 6.

asymmetrically positioned in relation to others, therefore, entails unsettling profound preconceptions about each other's similarities and differences.

In addition to the difficulty of apprehending an 'other' as asymmetrically positioned relative to oneself, there is the further difficulty of seeing one's own experience as particular and mutually irreducible relative to others.' Yet, one's own particularity is also not immediately graspable to oneself and neither is the irreducible character of a subject's experience. Indeed, only when one's experience is engaged with the experiences of others can the irreducible character of one's own experience be brought to light relative to the experience of others. The other's experience is therefore necessary to recognize one's own particularity because the other's experience will stand as an external point of comparison. Therefore, by Young's own logic, asymmetrical reciprocity, that is, the fact of seeing each other as mutually asymmetrically positioned relative to each other and hence as nonsubstitutable with each other, can only happen through and within an exchange.

In this reading of Young in which I reconstruct reciprocity as immanent to an exchange, I set up the necessity for a practice that can allow for this kind of reciprocity to emerge. Young's account of asymmetrical reciprocity advances that it is not enough for asymmetries to be assumed from the start but that they must also be continuously revealed. In the following section, I will elaborate a cross-experiential hermeneutical practice which I contend will be capable of engaging the particularity of lived experiences in such a way that might reveal the asymmetrical positioning of each subject in relation to others. This practice, as I will demonstrate, is anchored normatively by an asymmetrical reciprocity which is immanent to a cross-experiential hermeneutic exchange.

III. Cross-Experiential Hermeneutics: Towards a Feminist Practice of Rape Survivorship

In the previous section, I focused on Young's rejection of symmetry where, for Young, a symmetrical stance is incompatible with reciprocity and moral respect because it renders reciprocity contingent on one's capacity to see others like oneself. To assume a symmetrical

stance enacts an assumption of an ontological equivalence between ‘self’ and ‘other’; one enacts this ontological assumption by impulsively seeking sameness, commonality and similarity with others such that one will apprehend and interact with others as extensions of oneself. Young defends instead the possibility for reciprocity in conditions of asymmetry that pushes back against conceptions of reciprocity as ‘thinking from the perspective of others.’ Instead of seeing reciprocity as only possible through one’s capacity to identify with a concrete other’s experience and perspectives, Young advances a form of reciprocity that I argued to be immanent to a cross-experiential exchange.

In this section, I advance a cross-experiential hermeneutic methodology and explain how it can be useful for a feminist practice of rape survivorship specifically. In particular, I demonstrate how this practice could work to inform a renewed version of feminist consciousness-raising where instead of using experience to create sharedness between experiencing subjects, it uses the mutual irreducibility of experience to reveal how subjects are asymmetrically situated. The cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance can be especially useful to inform a practice for and by rape survivors, revealing how rape is the nexus of overlapping, intersecting power configurations, two of which are never identically the same. This model also cautions against the presumption of symmetry between survivors which risks obscuring the power relations that exist among survivorship. Thus, a cross-experiential hermeneutics can give rise to a practice in which participant survivors can map the constellation of power relations that rendered rape possible, allowing for the particularity of lived experiences of rape to be articulated, and enable the asymmetries between survivors to come to light.

To begin spelling out the substance of this cross-experiential hermeneutic practice, what do I mean by hermeneutic? What is distinctively hermeneutic about this cross-experiential practice? A good place to start to spell this out is to distinguish a hermeneutic practice from a dialogical one. In my view, a hermeneutic practice does not seek to better understand the other, but rather seeks to better understand *oneself in relation* to others. This hermeneutic practice uses the mutual irreducibility of experience to reveal how subjects are asymmetrically situated in relation to each other and, in doing so, compelling the participants of the cross-experiential practice to reflect on their own position in relation to others. A dialogical approach, is anchored towards explaining

oneself to differently situated others such that one can become more understandable, palatable, cognizant to others. A dialogical approach would be transformative because it would allow one to reflect critically on the prejudices that one holds and re-evaluate these prejudices. Indeed, a dialogical approach would be transformative only insofar as it would demand that one better understand a concrete other's differences. Here, the other becomes an object of scrutiny, one whose lifeworld must be rendered palatable to oneself, one whose lifeworld must be translated such that it can be rendered cognizant to oneself. Through better understanding an other's differences dialogically, one can become more accepting, more tolerant, more willing to engage the perspective of the other and, in turn, afford moral respect to their views. On this understanding, dialogue engages differences in a way that can allow others to become more palatable in their difference such that one can revise one's own viewpoint about one's initial perception of that same other.

In contrast to dialogue, a hermeneutical cross-experiential exchange does not seek to grasp the other nor does it seek to render the other's experience palatable to oneself for the sake of learning from or about the other. Instead, a cross-experiential hermeneutics engages the particularity of lived experiences of rape in order to bring to light the nuances and divergences *between* experiences. A hermeneutical approach is more interested in revealing how each particular experience exists *in relation* and *relative to* every other particular experience. What is being scrutinized is therefore not 'the other' or 'the other's difference' but instead the relation between two asymmetrically positioned subjects. How is this relationship qualified and understood from the start by the asymmetrically positioned subjects themselves, how is this relationship understood relative to a 'shared experience' and how can this relationship be contextualized such that it might reveal power asymmetries between subjects. A cross-experiential hermeneutics will compel one to re-evaluate how one stands in relation to others through exchanging experiences. Part of the interpretative process will include contextualizing the asymmetries within a wider network of power relations, where the asymmetries come from between two experiences, between two embodied subjects engaging in a cross-experiential exchange. By contextualizing the asymmetries between experiences and participants, the plurality of power configurations are made apparent in the way in which they impact subjects' own understandings and relationships. Whereas a cross-experiential dialogue would demand that one revises one's understanding in

light of the difference of others, a cross-experiential hermeneutics compels one to re-evaluate one's relation relative to others continuously and open-endedly.

The assumption of asymmetry, of a mutual irreducibility between experiences and between experiencing subjects, plays a crucial role in structuring the cross-experiential hermeneutics. Indeed, the mere fact of assuming mutual irreducibility from the start will shift what one expects when engaging cross-experientially with others. In contrast to a cross-experiential dialogue which would seek to grasp the experiences of others as distinct from one's own, a cross-experiential hermeneutics demonstrates how one stands in an asymmetrical relation with others. When experience is engaged through this hermeneutical practice, experiences take on a distinct relational and self-reflexive function. It is relational because an asymmetry can only exist when something is evaluated relative to an external point with regard to itself. It is self-reflexive because it demands that one becomes more aware of one's asymmetrical position in relation to an other. In the cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance here, experience becomes a source of relational self-reflexivity. This echoes the point I advanced in the previous chapter, that experience can be a source for feminism not necessarily for what it proves but for the kind of practice that it can ignite. Through cross-experiential hermeneutics, it is possible to understand oneself as asymmetrically positioned in relation to others and, in doing so, critically reflect on the apparent sharedness of experience, and the capacity under which power structures shape relations of similarity and difference.

Through her account of 'asymmetrical reciprocity,' Young offers the possibility for a hermeneutic exchange across asymmetrically situated subjects that never seeks to reverse perspectives nor identify with each other. Young's account of 'asymmetrical reciprocity' is consistent with her wider project of creating a politics that is capable of resisting the impulse of sameness; it is a testament to this wider project of theorizing a collective politics that is capable of engaging heterogeneity while also capable of resisting oppression. As I read her, Young's account of asymmetrical reciprocity puts forth a politics that is both acutely attuned to heterogeneity while remaining steadfastly committed to bringing light on the heterogeneity of lived and embodied experiences of oppression. As Bat-Ami Bar On notes about Young's work:

“Instead of attempting to unify the oppressed by providing a theoretical framework that will explain each and every kind of oppression and order the different kinds of oppressive relations, she provides a theoretical framework that explains why one should resist the impulse to unify and how to go about politics in a heterogeneous world.”³⁰⁹

Young’s account of asymmetrical reciprocity is consistent with Bar On’s reading. With asymmetrical reciprocity, Young centers heterogeneity as an anchor for political exchange where instead of grounding group politics in a shared identity, shared experience, shared features or shared attributes, Young instead grounds group politics on the practice of engagement itself, that is, on how the members of the group engage with one another.

In my elaboration of Young’s conception of ‘asymmetry’ into a cross-experiential hermeneutical practice that engages lived experience across asymmetrically situated embodied subjects, I stress that asymmetries are not only presumed from the start but also precisely that which must be revealed in the cross experiential hermeneutics. To apply an asymmetrical stance in relation to survivors’ lived experiences of rape not only means that survivors are asymmetrically situated in relation to each other but also that their lived experiences are meaningfully and configuratively asymmetrical. Following Young, I argued in the first section of this chapter that the assumption of a fundamental symmetry between survivors is politically undesirable because it obscures structural differences between lived experiences and because it risks reifying the totalizing, essentialist and homogenizing terms and categories that undergird not only the discourse of rape but also the identity of rape survivorship. However, as I previously mentioned the asymmetries between survivors’ lived experience is not self-evident nor given. It is precisely the task of cross-experiential hermeneutics to bring these asymmetries to light.

A cross-experiential hermeneutics begins with embodied subjects sharing their lived experiences with one another. In this initial exchange, participants may feel a sense of resonance or ‘me-too-ness,’ a recognition of shared affect or understanding from which a provisional ‘we’ emerges. Yet the sameness underpinning this emerging ‘we’ can create a false equivalence

³⁰⁹ Bat-Ami Bar On, “Marginality and Epistemic Privilege,” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Martin Alcoff, Elizabeth Porter (New York: Routledge, 1992), 91-92.

between experiences and between experiencing subjects. Such equivalence risks obscuring the structural differences that shape each person's encounter with the world. In the context of rape, such an equivalence risks obscuring structural differences that rendered rape possible in the first place. This tendency often stems from an assumption of symmetry; the belief that, if we look deeply enough, we will find that we are fundamentally the same. In the case of rape, this stems from the assumption that, ultimately, if we bracket the subjective conditions, all survivors have ultimately experienced the same thing in essence: all survivors are survivors of rape. A hermeneutic process, however, would query the idea of an essential symmetry or equivalence. It does not treat the formation of a 'we' as the goal, but as a stage in an ongoing interpretive process. What emerges from this process is not a destruction of the 'we,' but its transformation. The resulting 'we' subject is not defined by sameness, but by joint participation in a hermeneutic practice that illuminates asymmetrical relations. The resulting 'we' is thereby participative rather than substantive.

From the initial moment of connection, that is, from the emergence of an initial 'we' subject, the cross-experiential hermeneutics continues by examining how experiences, though seemingly shared, are underpinned by complexity that is, at least in part, produced by differing structural conditions. Participants engage this complexity by comparing their narratives, attending to subtle divergences in meaning and form, and recognizing how their respective locations, their situatedness within a very particular context. Through engaging these various nuances and divergences between experiences emerges a between understanding of the asymmetrical relation of participants. This comparative work is immanent: it unfolds within the relationship between two lived experiences, grounded in their initial resonance yet sustained by their mutual irreducibility, their nonsubstitutability. Despite a sense of sharedness, each subject's particularity remains, and only by encountering the other's asymmetry can one's own be revealed. As I argued in the previous section, revealing asymmetries can only be done when interlocutors engage the particularity of their experience relative to the particularity of others' experience. Through this cross-experiential hermeneutics, I suggest that the particularity of one's lived experience functions relative to the particularity of others' lived experiences. Here, the particularity of an other's lived experience serves "as a productive outside position that may prompt interlocutors to

critically reflect on their own immanent interpretive position.”³¹⁰ Unlike a symmetrical stance which conceives of critical self-reflexivity as emerging from one’s capacity to transcend their own parochial perspective by thinking or feeling oneself in the standpoint of others, an asymmetrical stance posits self-reflexivity as emerging from a cross-experiential hermeneutics in which asymmetries between experiences are progressively brought to light. In turn, I suggest that the progressive unveiling of asymmetrical relations between lived experiences creates the possibility for a collective process of relational self-reflexivity.

Bringing to light asymmetries through cross-experiential hermeneutics is politically desirable because it allows for members of a group to consistently reflect on the power asymmetries that exist within a group. It also attends to a problem that has historically plagued feminist politics; namely, that structural relations of power are replicated within feminist groupings, that these structural relations of power grant more dominant women the power to establish the norms, categories, and interests of feminism while simultaneously marginalizing more marginalized women’s perspectives. To put this in terms of symmetry, one can think of how more dominant women create the norms of symmetry that will define the relations between women in feminist groupings; norms of symmetry that may entirely omit the fact that some women are structurally more powerful within feminism. In focusing on the relations between participants, the cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance will compel more dominant women to recognize their dominant position relative to more disadvantaged women. The hermeneutics offers therefore a prudential mechanism to avoid dominant women from further marginalizing the voices of less advantaged women. However, the hermeneutics not only functions as a prudential mechanism designed to keep dominant women in check, it also reveals the intersecting networks of oppression that render violence possible in the first place. This revelatory capacity is crucial for demonstrating complex operation of power and the different forms of vulnerability it produces.

It is precisely and primarily because a cross-experiential hermeneutics can bring to light the power asymmetries that exist within a group that it can serve to advance the interests of

³¹⁰ Lois McNay, *The Gender of Critical Theory: On the Experiential Grounds of Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 15.

feminism cautioning against the reproduction of power asymmetries within feminist group politics. Crucial to the purposes of a feminist politics of survivorship, the cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance would allow for members of a group to reflect on their respective experience of rape as it relates to those of asymmetrically situated others. Doing so would reveal how each particularized experience of rape is situated asymmetrically with broader matrix of power. As Young notes, an effective group politics:

“invites participants to reflect together upon their situation and action in the context of more general social and political conditions; the consciousness of the general social conditions as well as the capacity to take reflective distance from one’s own situation are created by group discussion and exchange.”³¹¹

Young’s depiction of a group politics that is both anchored in lived experience and capable of commenting on power seems to echo some of the key tenets of feminist consciousness raising. As I discussed previously in Chapter 3, feminist consciousness raising sought to make visible women’s experience in order to articulate a shared social reality that could form the basis for an action-oriented feminist politics. Consciousness-raising appealed to experience as a way to bridge both the feminist activity of theorizing and its political practice. It did so by engaging particular experiences in order to draw generalizations about women’s shared condition of oppression. Consciousness-raising started from the particularity of experience and moved to generalizations about women’s shared reality by reading individual experiences as part of a broader iteration of ‘being woman’ under patriarchal oppression. As I have repeatedly suggested, revealing asymmetries through cross-experiential hermeneutics sets in question given conceptions of similarity and difference that one held prior to entering this hermeneutical exchange. When asymmetry is assumed between persons, it compels a critical engagement with the homogenizing terms in which one used to understand oneself and one’s lived experience in relation to concrete others. I argue that practices of asymmetrical reciprocity are capable of challenging and undoing the terms of sameness that was assumed to undergird a given experience. While assumptions of symmetrical relations between self and others perpetuate

³¹¹ Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 8.

essentialism and obscure heterogeneity, centering asymmetry at the heart of cross-experiential engagement involves recognizing the singularity of one's own experience in relation to others.

In my view, a cross-experiential hermeneutics that seeks to reveal the asymmetries between experiencing subjects can be useful for igniting a feminist practice of rape survivorship. Through enacting a cross-experiential hermeneutics in the context of rape survivorship renders both the experience of rape and the relationships among survivors politically meaningful. It renders the experience of rape political by contextualizing it within a network of power relations. It is capable of doing so by evaluating how it stands asymmetrically relative to the experiences of other survivors. This asymmetry is generative for a critique of power because it is able to reveal how the plural configurative power relations impact the particularized experience of rape. It can also work to reveal the plurality of meanings, sites, bodies that are implicated in rape as well as the many overlapping power asymmetries that render rape possible.

The dual politicization of both rape experiences and the relation between survivors enables a survivor-led group politics to emerge that is not solely defined according to a substantively shared experience of rape but rather that defines itself through the practice that it enacts with other survivors. Rape is therefore that which brings survivors together in the first place but what will come to define the group is not a core essential harm that is experienced by all its members. Instead, what will come to transform this practice of rape survivorship into a politicized grouping of survivors is the practice in which the survivors collectively engage in. This practice that will transform the way that survivors will understand their experience in relation to others is what will define the group. By fostering a group that can continually reshape the connections among its members and how survivors' understand their relationships as shaped by power.

While the centering of mutual irreducibility within the cross-experiential practice that I advance may, on the face of it, appear profoundly individualistic, perhaps even solipsistic and thus inimical to collective politics. Yet, my account stresses the asymmetrical positioning of participants as compatible with a collective politics that is aimed at resisting oppression. Contrary to the view that centering the particularity of experience occludes politics, here I advance a cross-experiential hermeneutics in which the particularity of each experience functions

relative to the particularity of others' experience. This mutual irreducibility serves as a revelatory source of the asymmetries that operate within rape survivorship. Doing so reveals the overlapping, intersecting power asymmetries that operate under the category rape, thus mapping rape into a broader matrix of power that involves a plurality of embodied subjects each involve in complex relations with other embodied subjects.

The cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance does not reject the idea of a group politics grounded on shared experience; after all, the cross-experiential hermeneutics I advance in this thesis is one in which all interlocutors have experienced rape. However, I maintain that the criteria of sharedness is not substantively pre-determined nor uncritically accepted. The sharedness of rape, the formation of of a 'we' as survivors of rape would be but a step in the process of engaging each other's experience of rape for the purpose of rendering it politically salient. Indeed, I maintain that although the interlocutors in the cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance have all experienced rape, this does not mean that they stand in a symmetrical relation to one another nor that their experience is configuratively and meaningfully symmetrical. I also do not believe that the interlocutors in the cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance must necessarily be rendered symmetrical in order for a feminist practice of survivorship to emerge. Rather, I advance that the political substance of the cross-experiential hermeneutics lies in its capacity to continuously reveal asymmetries between survivors through engaging the particularity of their experience in relation to each other.

In doing so, the approach I advance pushes back against the impulse to map the politics of rape survivorship according to an essential core view rape, echoing my stance against 'essence-led' approaches to theorizing rape that I articulated in chapter 1. My uptake of Young follows her commitment to the possibility for a group politics that does not rely on symmetry between its participants nor a substantively shared identity and attributes. Instead, the cross-experiential approach that I advance not only assumes asymmetry between survivors from the start but also seeks to continuously reveal these asymmetries. These asymmetries, I argue, could be harnessed for the purposes of creating a radically inclusive, self-reflexive, and steadfastly anti-essentialist feminist politics of survivorship. In my view, and as I have advanced in this section, what is required for a feminist politics of rape survivorship is an active engagement with the

heterogeneity of experiences of rape where the asymmetries between survivors' experiences can be brought to light. Spelling out those asymmetries, in turn, constitutes the category of rape not as containing an essential core, but as a web-like category containing within it overlapping, intersecting asymmetries in two of which are never identically the same.

Concluding Remarks

My account of a cross-experiential hermeneutics for asymmetrically situated survivors of rape is attempting to rescue some form of feminist consciousness-raising practice that neither eclipses difference nor falls back into an essentialist and exclusionary sexual politics. I conclude that my conception of a feminist practice of rape survivorship is politically powerful in its capacity to engage the singularity of lived experience and, indeed, to harness this particularity for collective process of critical self-reflexivity. More crucially, the cross-experiential hermeneutical method I advance is capable of mapping the many overlapping configurations and asymmetries between experiences of rape. Indeed, the upshot of such a politics is not only that it is radically inclusive, but that in its centering of particularity, is capable of mapping the plural configurative power relations that render rape possible.

In this chapter, I set forth the terms for a cross-experiential hermeneutical practice that, building from Young's account of 'asymmetrical reciprocity,' offers the basis for a feminist politics of rape survivorship that engages the particularity of lived experience in collective cross-experiential hermeneutics. Young's account of asymmetrical reciprocity, I argue, grounds a political exchange that not only centers the particularity of lived experience, but allows for these lived experiences to continuously and open-endedly evolve. Such a political exchange could also offer a new basis for a group politics that is not tied together by a shared identity, shared features and attributes, or a substantively shared experience. Rather, it is a group politics that is grounded on a practice in which its participants are constantly made to reflect on their own particularity in relation to others and thus to reflect on their own positionality in relation to others. As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, this practice would also be better equipped at resisting the essentializing terms which the politics of sexual violence often fall back on. Indeed, it would entail interrogating assumptions of sharedness and difference; and, in doing so, challenge the

impulse for a fixed identity grounded in fundamentally shared attributes. Thus, in its very practice, the feminist cross-experiential practice of rape survivorship that I envision is constantly challenging the impulse of homogeneity centering instead heterogeneity, plurality, and inclusion.

In the following chapter, I demonstrate how the cross-experiential hermeneutics that I elaborated in this section can be applied to address the worrisome discourse of vulnerability in relation to rape that has been used to galvanized a troubling exclusionary politics. Here, I attempt to reflect on the wider concrete possibilities that my cross-experiential hermeneutics can have in attending to the current political predicament in which rape is being weaponized to advance both a racist and transphobic political agenda. In doing so, I try to theorize how this cross-experiential hermeneutics might offer the conditions to resist the discursive force of gendered rhetorics of safety and danger in relation to rape more widely.

Chapter 5. Vulnerable Bodies, ‘Rapeable’ Subjects

In Chapter 4, I elaborated a cross-experiential hermeneutics that builds from Iris Marion Young’s account of “asymmetrical reciprocity.”³¹² Here, I argued that the objectives of a cross-experiential hermeneutics are to reveal the asymmetrical positioning of participants in the exchange. I argued that this is especially important for two reasons: to ensure that participants do not project themselves onto others in ways that eclipse the particularity of others. Second, to bring to light how structural relations of power produce a high level of alterity between subjects and their lived experiences. I argued that bringing to light the asymmetries between experiencing subjects is also important in the way it compels subjects to reflect on their own positionality in relation to others. In doing so, I demonstrated how when experience is engaged in a cross-experiential hermeneutics, experience can become a source of relational self-reflexivity. In this chapter, I try to show how the relational self-reflexivity that the cross-experiential hermeneutics ignites can be especially important in a context in which vulnerabilities to rape are being weaponized to advance a racist and transphobic politics. This analysis serves the overall aims of the thesis which develops a practice that can bring to light the plurality of configurations of power relations that render subjects differently vulnerable to rape. Doing so is important also for contesting essentialist forms of vulnerability that emerge through the discourse of rape, framings that I argue, muddy the terrain of feminist contestation of sexual violence.

In this chapter, I am interested in the politics of the vulnerable body in relation to rape; that is, how ideas of bodily vulnerability are *built into* and *sustained by* the discourse of rape. I am especially interested in how certain bodies are constructed as inherently vulnerable to being raped and how this supposed ‘inherent rapeability’ has sustained the subjectivities that are invested, affixed, and reproduced by rape. I problematize the politics invested in locating vulnerability *in the body* and how this bolsters the idea that all women, by virtue of their bodies, share the inherent vulnerability to being raped. Such an idea is one iteration of how the discourse of rape homogenizes social identities on the basis of a fundamentally shared bodily vulnerability. Such an idea also reproduces the gendering of bodies on the basis of their ‘rapeability.’

³¹² Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 38-59.

Given how vulnerability is woven into the discourse of rape such that rape ends up structuring and reifying essentialist categories and social identities, it is important to interrogate the terms of vulnerability, that is, the terms and categories upon which vulnerability rests. In this chapter, I ultimately hold that resisting the discourse of rape means consistently interrogating the material and discursive conditions that have rendered some bodies inherently 'rapeable.' This is consistent with my view that feminism is interested in bringing to light forms of oppression and relations of power that have been naturalized or rendered inevitable and necessary. As I advanced in Chapter 3, the critical task of feminism is to render these forms of oppression that appear necessary and natural to demonstrate that they could in fact be otherwise; that they could indeed, be changed.

In this chapter, I stress the political features underlying the 'rapeable' body that sustain a troubling gendered dichotomy between vulnerable bodies that must be protected against threatening bodies that must be restrained. I argue that the discourse of vulnerability in relation to rape and its worrisome capacity to buttress the weaponization of rape for racist, xenophobic, and transphobic ends. In light of this, I suggest that it is of the utmost urgency to respond to this predicament with a practice that is capable of challenging the homogenizing terms and categories that frame the 'rapeable' body. That is, to develop a practice that can collectively undo the terms and categories of vulnerability that have sustained an undesirable identity politics in which bodies are differentiated and defined according to their capacity to rape or their vulnerability to being raped. This chapter can be read as advancing the importance of a cross-experiential methodology that can engage experiences of rape as well as experiences of vulnerability to being raped as a way to interrogate the dangerous politics that are invested in the discourse of vulnerability in relation to rape. This aligns with the broader objectives of my thesis that seeks to elaborate a feminist practice of rape survivorship that can reveal the plural configurations and meanings implicated in rape.

The cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance, I argue, is well-equipped to attend to the powerful significance of the experience of vulnerability in naturalizing social identities and, in the specific case I explore, the experience of being vulnerable to rape. Indeed, I maintain that such a practice must begin from and attend to lived experiences of vulnerability; that is, it must begin from and attend to the lived experience of *rapeability*. The example of 'rapeable' bodies

where only White cis-gendered women as 'rapeable' where white cisgendered women will experience themselves as vulnerable to being raped by men, by racialized men, by transgender women. Here, I shed light on the vertiginous cycle that the politics of the 'rapeable' body reproduces: one that constructs only certain bodies as 'rapeable,' one that creates the experience of rapeability (of feeling vulnerable to rape), and one that appeals to that experience to ground a shared experience that itself reproduces and naturalizes existing categories. This is why I suggest that an interrogation into the conditions that have rendered some bodies inherently 'rapeable' must start from and attend to the lived experiences of 'rapeable' subjects.

Rather than creating a group politics aimed at recognizing shared vulnerability, I defend a cross-experiential hermeneutics that can reveal how bodies are *asymmetrically* vulnerable in relation to each other. Such an approach seeks to unsettle the terms of sameness that too often naturalize shared vulnerability into gender relations. The feminist practice that I advance can collectively question the terms and categories of the 'rapeable' body and, in doing so, can resist the essentialism that the discourse of vulnerability in relation to rape sustains. I suggest that this is only possible through engaging experiences in what I have been calling a cross-experiential hermeneutics that reveals how embodied subjects are asymmetrically situated in relation to each other. Such an approach, I contend, can allow for a collective practice that engages the experience of vulnerability that intersubjectively maps the differentiated conditions that have rendered some bodies inherently vulnerable in comparison to others. Doing so would not reassert a fundamental condition of vulnerability nor demand the recognition of a shared vulnerability, but rather intersubjectively question and engage the conditions that have produced embodied experiences of vulnerability; indeed, it would interrogate the conditions that have rendered embodied subjects vulnerable in the first place. This approach, I maintain, is especially important not only in the context of thinking about rape, but also attend to the current political moment in which vulnerabilities to rape are being grossly weaponized in ways that are legitimizing the further marginalization and vilification of transgender people and people of color.

This chapter will proceed in three steps. First, I provide an exposition of how certain bodies have been constructed as inherent threats to women's safety where women's safety is understood through their vulnerability to being raped. With this example, I demonstrate how the vulnerable

body is a political construction furthered by the discourse of rape. I demonstrate the politics of the vulnerable body by critically challenging the frequent appeal to ‘women’s safety’ and weaponization of women’s ‘rapeability’ to endorse the greater policing of racialized and gender non-conforming bodies. Here, I show how vulnerability is not politically innocent, but may in fact buttress features of the discourse of rape that feminists have been invested in challenging. Second, I turn to how vulnerability has been vindicated as a fundamentally constitutive condition of human existence while also being a normative anchor for a critique of violence. Here, I turn to Judith Butler’s account of ‘corporeal vulnerability’ which locates a fundamentally shared vulnerability in the body but one that remains differently vulnerable at the level of embodiment. Third, I turn to my own proposal a feminist cross-experiential hermeneutics that demonstrates how embodied subjects are asymmetrically vulnerable in relation to each other. I apply the framework that I have developed in previous chapters to demonstrate how a feminist practice that engages lived experience can allow for a collective unsettling of the terms and categories that undergird the ‘rapeable’ body and the possibility for thinking rapeability anew.

I. Vulnerable Bodies, Threatening Bodies

Vulnerability is at the heart of the discourse of rape. Cisgendered women are raised with the threat and fear of being raped by men. This impacts the way that cisgendered women navigate the world, experience safety and danger, experience sex, experience their bodies. A cisgendered woman might never experience rape in her lifetime, but she most certainly will experience the threat of rape and herself as vulnerable to this distinct form of abuse in certain situations. Vulnerability is also woven into the social imaginary around sites of safety and danger where some spaces are associated with the threat of rape: the dark alleyway, the poorly lit street, the empty park. Conversely, the home and the workplace might be associated with safety.³¹³ The construction of some spaces as threatening and others as safe is sustained by the discourse of vulnerability such that some will experience themselves as especially vulnerable to being raped in certain concrete situations.

³¹³ According to Rape Crisis England & Wales, “Rape and Sexual Assault Statistics: Sources,” last modified July 2014.

Vulnerability structures the experience of oneself in particular spaces as safe or threatening. The experience of oneself as vulnerable in particular spaces is importantly embodied: the woman looking over her shoulder walking late at night, gripping her keys walking past a group of men, shifting her pace when she feels someone walking behind her. She responds to her understanding of her environment in an embodied manner. Here vulnerability is felt in the body where the body is acted upon in accordance with the perception of vulnerability. The body is the locus of vulnerability insofar as vulnerability is both experienced within and projected onto bodies as they move through the world and through social space. The experience of feeling vulnerable to rape might not always necessarily suggest that a woman is in a situation where she could be raped, however the fact that she will experience the feeling that she might be raped is of political significance.

The experience of feeling vulnerable to being raped is incredibly powerful as it continues to sustain a politics in which cisgendered women are defining themselves through their shared vulnerability to being raped. Recent debates on single-sex spaces are often defended along the lines of cisgendered women's safety, where the status of their putative shared 'rapeability' is being galvanized for partisan politics.³¹⁴ Here, the vulnerability to being raped is somehow affixed to the female body as if the female body carried with it an inherent rapeability – or indeed, that it is ontologically vulnerable to being raped. The idea here is that by virtue of their bodies, cisgendered women all share this vulnerability. The discourse of vulnerability in relation to rape is indubitably gendered where women's bodies are inscribed as inherently vulnerable and men's bodies as inherently violent and threatening. In doing so, the discourse of vulnerability in relation to rape uniquely reproduces certain conceptions of the body and its distinct features as rendering some embodied subjects as inherently 'rapeable' while others as inherently capable of rape perpetration.

Feminist theorists have repeatedly challenged the idea that 'all women share the vulnerability to being raped.' For some feminists, the assertion of women as inherently 'rapeable' endorses a

³¹⁴ For an example of a defense of single-sex survivor space see NIA | Ending Violence Against Women and Girls. 2024. "Continuing Our Fight to Defend Single-Sex Services." Last modified November 25, 2024. For a more sustained sociology of the politics of women-only spaces see Alison Phipps, "Whose personal is more political? Experience in Contemporary Feminist Politics," *Feminist Theory* 17, no. 3, (2016), 310-312.

“negative politics of atomized fear (insisting that women police their own behavior).”³¹⁵ A good example of this kind of negative politics in action would be Kathleen Stock’s assertion that “we have a duty to tell women about which circumstances might make their victimisation more likely” in an article where she warns women about how excessive drinking might lead them to getting raped.³¹⁶ Such a “politics of atomized fear”³¹⁷ that emerges from the premise that women are inherently ‘rapeable’ might lead to victim-blaming where a woman’s sexual victimization could be put down to her having ‘put herself at risk.’ Some feminists have also criticized the premise of women’s inherent rapeability by challenging how it might endorse a “neo-conservative feminist politics of state regulation (with its insistence that women willingly give over their freedoms to other, allegedly better informed, women and state institutions).”³¹⁸ On this understanding, women would be poor judges of their own sense of danger and safety and would need an external judge to interfere to prevent them from engaging in deemed ‘risky’ behavior.

A further line of criticism on the inherent rapeability of all women was articulated along the lines that not all women have been legally and socially recognized as ‘rapeable’. Critical race theorists and intersectional feminists have demonstrated at length how the hypersexualization of racialized bodies has effectively constructed Black women as unrapeable. bell hooks notes:

“The designation of all black women as sexually depraved, immoral, and loose has its roots in the slave system. White women and men justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved Black women by arguing that they were initiators of sexual relationships with men. From such thinking emerged the stereotype of Black women as sexual savages, and in sexist terms a sexual savage, a non-human, an animal cannot be raped.”³¹⁹

For bell hooks, slavery effectively rendered the raping of Black women permissible and was justified along the lines that Black women were already sexually impure such that they did not

³¹⁵ Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, (London: Virago, 2007), 435.

³¹⁶ Kathleen Stock, “Telling Women How to Cut the Risk of Rape Is Anything but Sexist,” *The Times*, 2022.

³¹⁷ Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, (London: Virago, 2007), 435.

³¹⁸ Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, (London: Virago, 2007), 435. See also Catharine MacKinnon on state intervention in curtailing free speech and pornographic images in Catharine MacKinnon, “Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: ‘Pleasure under Patriarchy’” *Ethics* 99, no.2 (1989), 326-327.

³¹⁹ bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman* (London: Pluto Press, 1981), 52.

possess something that could be stolen or degraded by rape. Kimberlé Crenshaw notes “because of the way the legal system viewed chastity, Black women could not be victims of forcible rape.”³²⁰ This meant that “for most of American history the crime of rape of a Black woman did not exist.”³²¹ The vulnerability to being rape – or, ‘rapeability’ was thus limited only to white women. In demonstrating how race and gender intersected in attitudes in relation to rape and, in particular, the differential social and legal treatment allocated to Black women in relation to their rape, intersectional feminists showcase that the category of rape is political through and through. Indeed, they made apparent that rape was a discourse that was both sustained by and reproducing racism. This goes to show the vulnerability to being raped – or, ‘rapeability’ is also subject to similar political forces.

In recent years, the weaponizing of rape and sexual violence by the far-right has been successful in pushing a xenophobic and racist anti-immigration and anti-refugee politics. During the 2016 New Years Eve celebration in Cologne, more than a hundred women reported to have been sexually assaulted by large groups of men mediatized as Arab and North African men.³²² Harnessed by racist tropes portraying Black and Arab men as sexually ravenous, sexually devious, and fundamentally incapable of treating women as equals, the ‘Cologne sex attacks’ lead to the emergence term ‘rapefugee.’ This associated refugees especially from the Middle East and Africa as a danger to European women. For Europe to open its borders to ‘rapefugees’ would be to endanger European women – or, as right-wing Polish headline following the attack put it, the ‘Cologne Sex Attack’ became emblematic for “The Islamic Rape of Europe.”³²³ The idea of a ‘rape of Europe’ ties the narrative of the endangered white European woman that must be protected with a civilizational discourse of a threatened motherland that must be protected at all costs.

This is not the first time in history that rape has been weaponized for sustaining racist policing and the controlling of racialized bodies. Critical race theorists have repeatedly demonstrated how

³²⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 158.

³²¹ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

³²² Mithu Sanyal, *Rape from Lucretia to #MeToo*, (London: Verso, 2016), 90-91.

³²³ Polish Weekly in Mithu Sanyal, *Rape from Lucretia to #MeToo*, (London: Verso, 2016), 90-91.

racism in the United States effectively constructed Black men as threats to White women's safety. The demonizing of Black men as sexual predators was driven by racist tropes of Black men as hypersexual, whose sexuality could not be controlled or restrained. This trope was most crudely represented in the infamous film *The Birth of a Nation* which represented Black men as sexual predators grotesquely lusting after White women, chasing White women through the forest in an attempt to rape them.³²⁴ Alongside racist ideas that articulated Black men as essentially predatorial was also a construction of White women as essentially vulnerable to being raped by Black men. White women were depicted as 'rapeable' by Black men and Black men only. White women's honor was tied to their racial and sexual purity, such that their honor was essentially vulnerable to being defiled exclusively by Black men.

More recently, the rise in anti-queer and transphobic rhetoric is also articulated along the lines of a threat to cis-gendered women's safety. Here, queer and transgender people, especially transgender women, are being vilified as sexual predators that threaten 'women's safety.' The defense of 'women-only' spaces that exclude transgender women on the grounds that 'trans-women are men that are trying to infiltrate women's spaces' is grounded on the idea that giving transgender women access to women's spaces will put women's safety at risk. The recourse to the weaponizing of rape is argued along the lines that transgender women are deceptive with the underlying assumption being that transgender women are not 'real women' but are 'concealing their inherently violent male bodies.' According to this logic, to restrict transgender women from entering women's spaces – to restrict transgender bodies – meant preventing 'men's sexual access to women's bodies.'³²⁵

Sexed understandings of rapeability undergird the disturbing rhetoric that vilifies transgender women as sexual predators that threaten cisgendered women's safety. That is to say, that this rhetoric is upheld by an underlying assumption that the vulnerability to being raped lies in one's

³²⁴ D. W. Griffith, dir., *The Birth of a Nation* (1915; Los Angeles: Epoch Producing Corporation, 1915).

³²⁵ See Alison Phipps, "Whose personal is more political? Experience in Contemporary Feminist Politics," *Feminist Theory* 17, no. 3, (2016), 310-312. See also Judith Butler, "TERFs and British Matters of Sex: How Critical is Gender-Critical Feminism?" in *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 2024), 134-170. A similar rhetoric was adopted in the anti-porn and anti-sex-work feminist movement which stipulated that pornography and sex-work promoted men's violent access to women's bodies. Here, the threat of rape framed sex-work as 'legal rape' and as participating in nurturing a culture in which women's bodies are available for the consumption of men. The idea being that sex-work renders rape culturally permissible. The restriction, controlling, and prohibition of pornography and sex-work more broadly was argued on the lines that such practices would increase cisgendered women's vulnerability to being raped by normalizing men's sexual access to women's bodies.

sex, where sex is assumed to be determining of one's gender and, in some a really perverse sense, to predispose some subjects to become rapists. In a very crude sense, this rhetoric posits penises as the primary locus of the threat to rape where the penises determine an inherently male trait which holds the inherent capacity and desire to rape women. As Judith Butler notes:

“the implicit point is that someone who has a penis, or even someone who has once had one, will rape, because the penis is the cause of rape, or the socialization of those who have penises is the cause of rape (...). The reason for this domination [rape] is not biological; the body, rather, is organized and suffused by the operative relations of power at work.”³²⁶

It is perhaps surprising to see how powerful this crude sexed understanding of rapeability has been in the most recent UK Supreme Court ruling which has successfully changed the legal definition of being ‘woman’ as being defined strictly in biological terms.³²⁷ Indeed, for some, this Supreme Court ruling was no surprise, but instead the result of a successful campaign against transgender people (transgender women in particular) which has been largely articulated through a weaponizing of cis-gendered women’s vulnerability to being raped.

Consider, for instance, the 2023 updated prison regulation in England and Wales which stipulates that transgender women offenders cannot be housed in women’s prisons if they retain male genitalia.³²⁸ Consider this statement from Dominic Raab, the Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Secretary at the time: “Safety has to come first in our prisons and this new policy sets out a clear, common-sense approach to the housing of transgender prisoners.” Raab continues, “With these sensible new measures in place, transgender offenders who have committed sexual or violent crimes *or retain male genitalia* will not serve their sentence in a women’s prison, unless

³²⁶ Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 2024), 157. The passage continues “A certain mode of argumentation belies an organizing phantasmatic scene: the penis in the picture is the cause and condition of rape and, without the penis in the room, rape will not happen. Rape does not unfold naturally from the presence of a penis, and it would doubtless serve us well to consider how many kinds of objects and body parts are used to hurt and enter others’ bodies without their consent.”

³²⁷ Equality and Human Rights Commission. *Interim Update on the Practical Implications of the UK Supreme Court Judgment*. April 25, 2025.

<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/media-centre/interim-update-practical-implications-uk-supreme-court-judgment>.

³²⁸ Ministry of Justice, HM Prison and Probation Service, and The Rt Hon Dominic Raab, *New transgender prisoner policy comes into force*, GOV.UK, 27 February 2023.

explicitly approved at the highest level.”³²⁹ The language of safety here is especially striking: women prisoners are at risk of being raped by transwomen *even when transwomen have not necessarily committed sexual offenses prior to being housed in a correctional facility*. Indeed, Raab’s statement renders it possible that the ‘retaining of male genitalia’ could be an independent reason for justifying the housing of trans-women in male prison. On this understanding, a crude conclusion can be drawn: the threat of rape disappears when the penis disappears.³³⁰

There are evidently a lot of problems with this line of argument. First, it reinforces the idea that rape is a forceable penetration by a penis in a vagina, when rape might include the use of foreign objects, and might also involve anal or oral penetration. To perpetuate the idea that the essential configuration of rape is penetration by a penis in a vagina erases or downplays all other configurations under which rape might occur. It might also obscure instances of rape between cisgendered women, or might erase the possibility that cisgendered women can and do commit sexual offenses whether they be to other women, to men, to children.³³¹

Second, the statement stipulates that trans-women who have committed sexual offenses against cisgendered women should also be prevented from being housed in female correctional facilities. Under this logic, it would be consistent to argue that a cisgendered woman who has committed a sexual offense against another cisgendered woman should also be sent to a male prison on the grounds that she might endanger the other female inmates around her. However, it is clear that, in this logic, cisgendered women are seen as incapable of perpetrating rape or of committing a serious sexual offense, thus erasing one possible configuration of sexual violence from ever being recognized as possible.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ See also the following statement from Fair Play for Women “Over recent years the number of male prisoners identifying as transgender women has increased and some are now living in women’s prisons. What the majority of people don’t know is that most of these male prisoners have not gone through any ‘sex change surgery’ and **still have their penis**. (...)The problem is that the government didn’t ask women how they feel about this. We know that women in prison are exceptionally vulnerable. Many of you have been the victims of male violence or sexual abuse. We think it is unfair to force women in custody to live alongside males. Female prisoners need privacy and safety away from males. Surely that’s common sense?” See Fair Play for Women, "InsideTime," *Fair Play for Women*, accessed May 8, 2025, <https://fairplayforwomen.com/insidetime/>.

³³¹ See Joanna Bourke, “Female Perpetrators; Male Victims,” in *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, (London: Virago, 2007), 209-249.

Third, this line of argument seems to suggest that one of the biggest threats to incarcerated women's safety is that they might be sexually assaulted by trans inmates. The scale of the public debate on trans-women in prisons erases and obscures more significant forms of carceral violence that inmates are exposed to. It also reinforces the idea that the bulk of carceral violence is perpetrated by 'bad individuals' instead of placing the attention on how carceral institutions both enable and facilitate violence and rape between inmates as well as between inmates and correctional officers.³³²

Fourth, it justifies isolating trans-women in male prisons with very little consideration of the many intersecting risks involved in doing so, exposing them to significant risk of injury, abuse, sexual violence, and hate crime. Their being exposed to rape and sexual violence in particular demonstrates how a commitment to struggle against rape must surely also include *all forms* of rape and sexual violence, including the many cases of transgender women being housed in male prisons. The policy as it is currently articulated ignores how transgender women are rendered materially vulnerable by being housed in male prisons. It also ignores how transgender women might be at a significant risk of being victims of rape themselves while being housed in a male correctional facility, thus erasing the fact that trans-women are also 'rapeable' subjects.

Finally, this institutional measure puts transgender women at risk *everywhere* by reinforcing the trope that transgender women are deceptive sexual predators. The current rise of violent transphobic attacks is a testament to the successes of this appalling rhetoric. This violence being rendered socially permissible with the most recent UK Supreme Court ruling that redefines women through their biological sex.

My point with this example is to suggest that the debate on transgender women and prisons is embedded within a broader set of politicized narratives of rapeability that reifies the idea that cisgendered women are inherently 'rapeable' by virtue of their bodies. This example goes to show how vulnerability in relation to rape is stubbornly thought of and discursively constructed around sexual organs, where the sexual organs work to construct who is 'rapeable', who is at risk of being raped, and conversely who rapes, who is predisposed to rape perpetration. It also goes to

³³² See also Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

show how the discourse of vulnerability in relation to rape structures and reinforces gender relations. Here, for instance, the vulnerability to being raped is located in a woman's sex. Yet, to locate a woman's vulnerability to being rape in her sex is to suggest that the intactness of a woman's sex becomes the locus of her worth. As Mithu Sanyal notes, such understandings of rape perpetuate the idea that "only a woman possessed something that could be stolen or destroyed by rape."³³³ On this account, only cis-gendered women are 'rapeable' and their 'rapeability' lies in their sex. By virtue of having vulvas, women are inherently exposed, injurable and vulnerable to being raped.

Conversely, according to this logic, men are bearers of penises who have the inherent capacity to rape. According to this line of reasoning, men are all, always-already potential rapists, and women are all always-already potential victims of rape. In doing so, this rhetoric locates the vulnerability to rape not just within bodies, but within anatomy – that these features of the body are inescapable features of existence. In the process, the vulnerability to rape seems to both sustain and perpetuate a gender essentialism in its crudest form where 'anatomically female bodies' contain within them the inherent vulnerability to being raped, and 'anatomically male bodies' contain within them the inherent threat of perpetrating rape. On this crude anatomical understanding of rapeability, rape would therefore be an inherent feature of existence, that is to say that rape appears to be pre-social thus an ontological feature of human existence. Here, rape is only something to be prevented through protecting vulnerable bodies and, conversely, restraining threatening bodies. On this understanding, rape is something to be prevented, not resisted. On this understanding, a rapeless society becomes impossible.

The centrality of rape in many of these different and highly politicized rhetorics signals something important about the kind of vulnerabilities that are assumed in the idea of rape and how these vulnerabilities continue to be affixed to certain features of the body. As Erinn Gilson notes:

"This conception of vulnerability not only contracts and rigidifies the meaning of the (feminine) female body, destining it for violation, but also precludes recognition of

³³³ Mithu Sanyal, *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (London: Verso, 2016), 4.

victimization among those who are not cisgendered women by tying victimization to a particular vulnerability that is thought to be the property of particular kinds of bodies.”³³⁴

Insofar as the idea of rape impacts the way that survivors understand their own experiences, to conceptualize rape as occurring only under certain circumstances, only *by* and *to* certain people will affect the way that rape is experienced by its survivors. Indeed, someone who has been constructed as ‘unrapeable’ is never going to be able to recognize their sexually violent experience as rape – or, worse yet, will not be able to identify when they might be vulnerable to this kind of violence at all. The risk, then, is that conceiving of the vulnerability to rape as primordially sexed might continue to silence survivors of rape, or worse, it might perpetuate and normalize rapes happening to certain groups.

Another worry is that to essentialize the vulnerability to being raped as a vulnerability that is inherently sexed does so for securing a unifying, universal experience of rape whose meaning is straightforwardly patriarchal. Indeed, those who argue that sex matters in rape do so because eliminating sex from rape seems to complicate rape which is otherwise pretty simple – rape is perpetrated by men against women. Yet, the experience of rape and its meaning for survivors is not the same across the board. A homeless woman is incredibly exposed to sexual violence for many more reasons than her sex, the rapes she experiences represent much more than patriarchal violence, but perhaps also one that results from violent housing policy. The meaning of a person being sexually assaulted during their incarceration means much more than patriarchal violence, but perhaps also racial violence or carceral violence.³³⁵ My point is therefore to suggest that the way we are thinking about vulnerability to rape as sexed muddies the plural sites and meanings of sexual violence such that this kind of violence is not able to be recognized as part of the phenomena, and therefore as having a place at the table when discussing rape. The worry therefore is that the impulse to unify the experience of rape through essentialist conceptions of vulnerability erases the nuances of particular experiences such that these experiences become unintelligible or unspeakable as rape.

³³⁴ Erinn Cunniff Gilson, “Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence” *Signs* 42, no. 1 (2016), 75-76.

³³⁵ See also Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

Overall, the political weaponizing of rape is articulated along the lines of a perceived threat, a potential danger, a risk to be mitigated, vulnerable bodies to be protected. Alongside this depiction emerges two opposed subjects: the threat and the vulnerable, the potential rapist and the potential rape victim, the one in need of protection and the one in need of restraint or policing. The idea of rape thus constructs two subjects: those who rape, and those who are 'rapeable'. Much ink has been spilled on how danger has been built into certain bodies, often racialized bodies, and more recently, gender non-conforming bodies – and how these have been sustained by racism, xenophobia, and trans-misogyny. However, it is important to note that the construction of threatening bodies works in tandem with the construction of vulnerable bodies. What these examples show is that vulnerability is not politically innocent, but may in fact serve as a buttress of the discourse of rape. This is why I argue that it is of the utmost urgency to consistently interrogate the vulnerable body as well as embodied experiences of vulnerability. As I will suggest at the end of this chapter, this interrogation can take place through the cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance in this thesis.

II. Ontological Vulnerability, Corporeal Vulnerability

In the previous section, I demonstrated how the 'rapeable' body is sustained by ideas of vulnerability that render it susceptible to being politically weaponized. With the example of the weaponizing of white and cisgendered women's rapeability, I stressed the urgency of interrogating the essentializing terms and categories underpinning vulnerability. In this section, I turn to the theoretical scholarship on vulnerability that has gained in popularity in recent years. I focus especially on Judith Butler's elaboration of a corporeal account of vulnerability. Here, I criticize Butler's account of corporeal vulnerability for its limited capacity to interrogate and unsettle the politicized terms and categories that underscore the 'rapeable' body. The reason for this limitation is that Butler emphasizes the recognition of each other's *shared* corporeal condition of vulnerability at the cost of elaborating a practice that can effectively bring to light how bodies are rendered differently vulnerable. In the final section of this chapter, I will show how my cross-experiential hermeneutics is capable of pluralizing the understanding of

rapeability, thus attending to the gap in Butler's framework. Here, I advance how a cross-experiential hermeneutics would reveal how subjects are asymmetrically vulnerable in relation to each other.

Recent calls to attend to the idea of vulnerability have prompted feminist theorists to question how the idea of vulnerability sustains and reproduces gendered tropes.³³⁶ In particular, feminists have noted, the concept of vulnerability is inherently gendered. Vulnerability is often thought of as evocative of a feminine passivity that is in need of protection, as opposed to active men whose bodies must be restrained. The dichotomy between vulnerable and invulnerable is gendered where women are qualified as inherently vulnerable and thus needy, dependent, beings who are in need of protection, at risk of injury as opposed to men who are seen as un-injurable and independent. As Erinn Gilson writes:

“If women are typically considered more vulnerable than men, it is because of their bodies, which are deemed both weaker and more sexually stimulating. Both of these traits – inferior strength and sexualization – comprise the specificity of feminine vulnerability and constitute it as a dualist, reductively negative form of vulnerability: one is vulnerable because one's body is the kind of object on which others, active male subjects, seek to act and because one cannot prevent them from doing so.”³³⁷

Here, Gilson obviates the binary logic of vulnerability as both grounding and reproducing gendered tropes. In particular, it is the way that vulnerability is affixed to gendered bodies that makes it so difficult to critically unsettle. Perhaps one of the reasons it is so difficult to unsettle is because ideas of vulnerable frame gendered subjectivities such that women will experience themselves as more vulnerable in contrast to men who might experience themselves as invulnerable.

Gilson questions the commonplace approach to vulnerability as a condition that must be overcome. She writes:

³³⁶ See Erinn Cunniff Gilson, “Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence” *Signs* 42, no. 1 (2016), 77-101.

³³⁷ Erinn Cunniff Gilson, “Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence” *Signs* 42, no. 1 (2016), 75.

“The pursuit of invulnerability thus involves a simultaneous recognition and disavowal of vulnerability; it is recognized as a reductively negative state and accordingly disavowed as a condition that ought not pertain to us.”³³⁸

For Gilson, the systematic devaluation of vulnerability as a condition to be overcome highlights a broader attachment to a distinct idea of autonomy as independence, self-sufficiency and self-mastery.³³⁹ Vulnerability is thus bound up with the idea of autonomous agency where to posit women as inherently vulnerable is not only to regard women as lacking autonomy in some fundamental capacity, but also simultaneously reifying an ideal of individual autonomy as normatively desirable. Along a similar vein, Butler argues that the ideal of sovereign individuality obscures the interdependent and relational character of human life. In response to a broader critique of individual autonomy, vulnerability emerged as something all humans share by virtue of our inherent relation to others and our inherent interdependence on each other. Indeed, “vulnerability is invoked as a fundamental, shared constitutive condition - a way of being open to being affected by and affecting others (...).”³⁴⁰ On this understanding, vulnerability is seen as “an ontological condition of humanity.”³⁴¹ Such an account of vulnerability places intersubjectivity and interdependency as an ontological feature of human existence where vulnerability emerges as an embodied consequence of interdependency. Thus, rather than seeing vulnerability as a deprivation of autonomy and an impediment to action, that vulnerability could be reframed as a fundamentally shared condition of embodied and interdependent existence.³⁴² Instead of thinking that vulnerability is a condition to escape in order to achieve autonomy, autonomy is seen as something that exists under conditions of vulnerability where vulnerability is an ontological

³³⁸ Ibid., 77.

³³⁹ See Erinn Cunniff Gilson, “Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence” *Signs* 42, no. 1 (2016), 77-101.

³⁴⁰ Erinn Cunniff Gilson, “Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence” *Signs* 42, no. 1 (2016), 72.

³⁴¹ Wendy Rogers, Catriona Mackenzie and Susan Dodds in Gilson, “Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence” 2016, 72. See Wendy Rogers, Catriona Mackenzie and Susan Dodds, “Why Bioethics Needs a Concept of Vulnerability,” *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 5, no. 2 (2012), 11–38.

³⁴² See Erinn Cunniff Gilson, “Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence” *Signs* 42, no. 1 (2016), 77-101. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice*, (London: Verso, 2020). Moya Lloyd, “Embodying Resistance: Politics and the Mobilization of Vulnerability,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 41, no.1 (2024), 115. Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Lorraine Code, “A New Epistemology of Rape?” *Women's Studies International Forum* 25, no. 3 (2002): 247–258. Debra, Bergoffen. “February 22, 2001: Toward a Politics of the Vulnerable Body,” *Hypatia* 18, no. 1 (2003), 116–134.

feature of human existence.³⁴³ Here, vulnerability both challenges the ideal of self-mastery and independence that is assumed in the ideal of autonomy and redefines autonomy as always occurring under conditions of vulnerability. This reformulation of autonomy in vulnerability has been especially popular among feminists theorizing rape, sexual violence and victimization where to redefine autonomy through vulnerability allows for a recognition of rape victims as having agency.³⁴⁴

All of these accounts inherit from Butler an ontological assumption of vulnerability that centers bodies. Here, embodied existence offers the material or physical basis for human interdependence which, in turn, implies vulnerability. For Butler, the ontological condition of vulnerability posits humans as *physically* or *corporeally* interdependent. Butler writes: “we are, from the start, given over to the other (...) by virtue of bodily requirements”³⁴⁵ For Butler and others, the ontological condition of vulnerability which centers human interdependency, there is a constant possibility of exploitability. The ontological condition of vulnerability is thus ambivalent in stressing how networks of interdependence are both sustaining and exposing bodies to violence.

Within this paradigm of vulnerability, the body plays a crucial role. For Butler, ontological vulnerability is distinctly corporeal. This constitutes what Butler calls a ‘new bodily ontology’ where bodies are qualified as ontologically vulnerable. Butler writes:

“The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agents and instruments of all these as well. Although we struggle for the rights over

³⁴³ One question that remains unclear to me is whether the ideal of autonomy that this scholarship has identified as a foil to their position – that is, this idea of autonomy as independence and self-mastery, really persists. Indeed, it is unclear to me why a relational account of autonomy would not be a sufficient alternative for conceptualizing autonomy. For more on relational autonomy and vulnerability see Catriona MacKenzie, “The importance of relational autonomy and capabilities for an ethics of vulnerability,” in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Catriona MacKenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds, 2014. See also Joel Anderson, “Autonomy and Vulnerability Entwined” in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Catriona MacKenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds, 2014.

³⁴⁴ Erinn Cunniff Gilson, “Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence” *Signs* 42, no. 1 (2016), 77-101. Debra, Bergoffen. "February 22, 2001: Toward a Politics of the Vulnerable Body," *Hypatia* 18, no. 1 (2003), 116–134. Lorraine Code, "A New Epistemology of Rape?" *Women's Studies International Forum* 25, no. 3 (2002): 247–258.

³⁴⁵ Judith Butler, *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice*, (London: Verso, 2020), 31.

our own bodies, the bodies for which we struggle are not quite even only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do.”³⁴⁶

In this passage Butler not only stresses the vulnerability as a corporeal, but also stresses how this corporeal condition is vulnerable precisely because it is interconnected and interdependent on other corporeal beings. This interdependence is not only material but also discursive; it pertains to the way the body appears to others, the social meaning that is projected onto those bodies, and how they come to define oneself. This interdependence that is more discursive demonstrates how even one’s self-understanding or self-perception is vulnerable to the gaze of others. The material vulnerability and discursive vulnerability intersect at the level of embodiment where bodies have material needs that must be met, but bodies carry also social meaning that is both internalized and projected without. Therefore, for Butler, humans are ontologically vulnerable by virtue of being embodied and how this embodied condition relies on others to sustain itself. Indeed, they are right to point out that from our birth our bodies are cared for and nurtured and require this form of care and sustenance. Our embodied condition requires others to live and grow and thus, the condition of inherent dependence – that is, of ontological vulnerability, grounds the possibility for autonomy.

However, in the same way that ontological vulnerability is a condition for sustenance, it is also simultaneously a condition that renders us injurable, that exposes us to violence. Through corporeal vulnerability understood as a fundamentally shared embodied condition of interdependence, we become more attuned to the networks of care and interdependence that sustain us and also render us injurable. For Butler, this embodied interdependence therefore involves ethical responsibility. It is precisely because of our embodied interdependence that each of us has a responsibility to care for one another. By offering a corporeal basis for ontological vulnerability Butler is thus not only able to posit human life as are injurable, as mortal, as

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 26.

precarious, they are also able to formulate an ethic of responsiveness that emerges from this ontological condition of corporeal vulnerability. As Gilson writes:

“Vulnerability is not merely a condition that we are obliged to ameliorate but, when understood in the more fundamental sense, is also the ground for our responsiveness to one another. It is because we are vulnerable that we need ethics and social justice, but it is also because we are vulnerable - because we can be affected and made to feel sorrow, concern, or empathy - that we feel any compulsion to respond ethically or seek justice.”³⁴⁷

Corporeal vulnerability as an ontological condition of embodied interdependence therefore offers the normative anchor for responsiveness, responsibility and care but also for a critique of violence.³⁴⁸

In the context of a broader inquiry into the 'rapeable' body, Butler's account of corporeal vulnerability seems, on the face of it, a worthwhile source through which to think about the vulnerability to being raped. After all, Butler's account of corporeal vulnerability locates a fundamental and universally shared condition of vulnerability *in the body*.³⁴⁹ It is important to note, however, that for Butler our corporeal condition of vulnerability is socially differentiated. As I have stressed up until now, corporeal vulnerability is an ontological condition of embodied interdependence. This condition is shared ontologically but it is also socially differentiated where some bodies are injurable in distinct ways depending on the social meaning that has been affixed to their bodies. As Moya Lloyd puts it:

“(…) ontological vulnerability is an inescapable feature of embodied existence universally shared but (…) lived experiences of corporeal vulnerability are socially produced and differentially distributed. (…) Specific historical conditions give rise to distinct and sometimes entrenched experiences of vulnerability for determinate fleshy populations.”³⁵⁰

³⁴⁷ Erinn Cunniff Gilson, “Vulnerability and Victimization: Rethinking Key Concepts in Feminist Discourses on Sexual Violence” *Signs* 42, no. 1 (2016), 72.

³⁴⁸ Butler adds an additional distinction between precariousness and precarity which is tied to their wider conception of vulnerability. However, for the sake of brevity, I will park this distinction to the side.

³⁴⁹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* (London: Verso, 2020). Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016).

³⁵⁰ Moya Lloyd, “Embodying Resistance: Politics and the Mobilization of Vulnerability,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 41, no.1 (2024), 115.

Corporeal vulnerability as an ontological condition of embodied interdependence can be seen as a kind of 'Platonic form' of vulnerability that is then socially differentiated.³⁵¹ There is therefore both a recognition of an ontologically shared condition of vulnerability and a recognition that this bodily vulnerability is socially differentiated. Herein lies the strength of Butler's account; it is able to take into consideration how vulnerability is differentiated depending on the situatedness of embodied subjects in a network of complex social relations while also maintaining a fundamental baseline of ontological vulnerability that we all share and that connects us all.³⁵²

Butler recognizes that bodies are rendered differently vulnerable, however, their corporeal account of vulnerability vindicates a fundamentally shared embodied condition of interdependence that muddies the distinction between the socially produced and the ontological features of vulnerability. Butler's account seems to suggest that vulnerability is a baseline condition that is ignited in particular ways in the concrete social situation. To go back to the case of the 'rapeable' body, Butler's account would say that women as embodied subjects are ontologically vulnerable but rendered vulnerable to rape *specifically* as a result of complex historical material and discursive processes. Butler would also argue that women's bodies are rendered vulnerable to rape because a distinct gendered meaning was affixed to their bodies – like, for instance, that their bodies are physically weaker and more sexually exciting. Butler would thereby posit that women are not ontologically vulnerable to being raped but are rendered so materially and discursively so. Butler would argue that women are ontologically vulnerable only as embodied subjects that are dependent on other embodied subjects like herself; women are not, as it were, ontologically women and thus ontologically 'rapeable.' It seems odd, however, to hold that embodied subjects are ontologically vulnerable and rendered vulnerable in distinct

³⁵¹ I am grateful to Micheal Greer for this helpful articulation of corporeal vulnerability during a rich exchange at the 2024 ASPP Conference at Swansea.

³⁵² Note that I allow myself to use "we" and "us" in this section because Butler argues that it is precisely because of corporeal vulnerability that there can be a "we." The "we" evokes a kind of shared humanity that is grounded on "our" fundamentally shared embodied condition of interdependence. Judith Butler writes: "If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the 'we' is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argued; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation." Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, (London: Verso, 2020), 22-23. I will show, however, that the construction of a 'we' is always-already invested in politics and it should therefore be the goal of the cross-experiential hermeneutics to 'undo' the 'we' to question the 'we'. Through a practice that seeks to question the given 'we' is the only way that there can be a 'we'.

ways *at the same time*. Butler's corporeal account of vulnerability seems to assert that subjects are both always-already vulnerable as well as rendered differently vulnerable to each other.

It remains important and necessary for Butler to hold onto the ontology of vulnerability because it prompts an ethic of responsiveness. On their account, it is only insofar as an ontology of vulnerability is assumed that an ethic of responsiveness is possible. Butler writes:

“(...) one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all. Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous. These are not necessarily relations of love and even of care, but constitute obligations towards others, most of whom we cannot name and do not know, and who may or may not bear traits of familiarity to an established sense of who 'we' are.”³⁵³

This passage demonstrates how, on Butler's account, ethics is a part of the ontology. With the condition of corporeal vulnerability comes responsibility, comes our own ethical obligations to others. Butler's ethic of responsiveness is anchored towards a recognition of corporeal vulnerability: towards a recognition of each others' vulnerability to one another. The recognition of each other as vulnerable is simultaneously a recognition of each as relationally bound to others where this boundedness imposes ethical responsibilities to one another.

Of course, it is important to note that Butler's ethic of responsiveness is attending to a particular problem: that some lives are seen as less grievable when they are not recognized as having an ontological vulnerability. As Estelle Ferrarese notes, “the political dimension [of Butler's discussion of vulnerability] is primarily located in the issue of the widening of the range of lives which are considered as lives and made recognizable as such.”³⁵⁴ Indeed, Butler's account is not worried about the politics of the vulnerable body as such, they are instead concerned about lives that are not recognized as such.³⁵⁵ This is why Butler is invested in a political project that would

³⁵³ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), 14.

³⁵⁴ Estelle Ferrarese, “Vulnerability: A Concept with Which to Undo the World As It Is?” *Critical Horizons* 17, no. 2 (2016), 149–59.

³⁵⁵ See Judith Butler, “Precarious Life, Grievable Life” in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), 1-32.

allow for the recognition of corporeal vulnerability, that is of an ontological condition of embodied interdependence that itself prompts an ethic of responsiveness. In some sense, Butler establishes the basis for a humanist ethics where humans are defined by their corporeal vulnerability that binds them to each other.³⁵⁶ Butler asks: “From where might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered, if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability?”³⁵⁷ Recognizing this ontological condition, becomes Butler’s primary political project because *only then* can ‘we’ recognize ‘our’ ethical obligations to others, *only then* can ‘we’ recognize ‘our’ responsibility to others. Butler’s approach is therefore committed to establishing a fundamental baseline of sameness which is then socially differentiated.

Butler’s account of corporeal vulnerability as it pertains to a wider project of ethical responsiveness works through one’s recognition of oneself as relationally bound to others in a complex network of embodied interdependence where some embodied subjects are rendered vulnerable to others in distinct and particular ways. It also demands that one recognizes oneself as a potential participant in an other’s vulnerability, insecurity, and injurability. In this sense, Butler’s account demands a recognition of oneself within power relations in which one is both rendered vulnerable in a particular way and rendering others vulnerable at the same time. Although my account is focused less on the ethical obligations and responsibilities one has to others, the process of recognizing oneself as *rendered* and *rendering* vulnerable is central to the feminist politics that I have advanced throughout my thesis. Indeed, the view of feminist politics that I discussed in the introduction to the thesis is one that is attentive how patriarchal, racial, classed structures configure different kinds of vulnerability and privilege within womanhood and rape survivorship in particular. The politics of vulnerability as it pertains to ideas of womanhood is therefore a key site in which the kind of participative and cross-experiential form of feminist politics can take root. In particular, the feminist politics that I advanced theorized a collective cross-experiential exchange that would allow for participants to not simply reflect on their shared experience but also to reflect on their relationship to each other as it pertains to this shared experience.

³⁵⁶ See Ann V. Murphy, "Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism," *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2011), 575–590.

³⁵⁷ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* (London: Verso, 2020), 30.

The account of feminist politics that I advance therefore centers the politicization of the relationship which operates from an understanding of one's asymmetrical positioning relative to each other within a wider network of power relations. What is most important and pertinent to the purposes of this thesis is the capacity to recognize where one stands relative to others in these networks of interdependence; that is, to map oneself as both rendered vulnerable by others and rendering others vulnerable. The example of rape and the construction of vulnerable bodies brings to the fore the importance of attending to the relational production of vulnerability as both differentiated and asymmetrical. In particular, it demonstrates how even those who are vulnerable to being raped are not all vulnerable in the same way to rape, nor rendered so by the same identical mechanisms. It is therefore of the utmost urgency to bring to the fore the particularity of embodied experiences of vulnerability in relation to rape in order to challenge the essentialist uptake of ideas of vulnerability. Indeed, bringing this plurality to light is indispensable for contesting the homogenizing discourse through which vulnerability to rape has been mobilized to reproduce hierarchies of gender, race, class, and sexuality. It is also essential to creating a politics of survivorship that is able to contend with and directly address power relations within survivorship. Doing so, I contend, will render the politics of survivorship that I have in mind inclusive to all survivors of rape.

In the next and final section of this chapter, I argue that a cross-experiential hermeneutics could be effective in bringing to light how embodied subjects are rendered asymmetrically vulnerable to rape. A cross-experiential hermeneutics would also and importantly reveal how 'rapeable' subjects are asymmetrically vulnerable relative to each other thus unsettling the self-referentiality underscoring appeals to experience that too easily assume equivalence through a fundamentally shared vulnerability. If Butler's ethics foregrounds our shared corporeal condition of vulnerability, what remains undertheorized is how this sharedness is translated in social life: how subjects make sense of one another's vulnerabilities across structurally-produced differences, how they make sense of their own vulnerability in relation to others. This is precisely where a cross-experiential hermeneutics intervenes; it transforms Butler's ethical project into a methodological practice, one that does not seek to merely recognize a common condition but instead reveals how that condition is lived and embodied asymmetrically between mutually irreducible and nonsubstitutable subjects.

III. Asymmetrically Vulnerable: De-essentializing 'Rapeability'

In this section, I demonstrate how my model for a feminist cross-experiential hermeneutics can attend to the problem of the weaponization of rapeability which operates through the politics of the vulnerable body. As I noted at the start of the chapter, the political mobilization of a core shared experience of 'rapeability' has resorted back into an essentialist sexual politics. This sexual politics has, in turn, replicated troubling narratives regarding gender and sexuality positing cis-gendered women as inherently vulnerable to being raped and cis-gendered men as inherently threatening to cis-gendered women's rapeability. Here, rape is qualified as an inescapable feature of gendered life, structuring sexual difference along the lines of an inherent rapeability. Such an essentialist sexual politics has, in recent years, taken more troubling proportions with the weaponization of vulnerabilities to rape being used to galvanize transphobia. In particular, I demonstrated how this rhetoric constructs transgender women in particular as 'sexual predators concealing their inherently violent male bodies' that pose a risk to cis-gendered women's inherent 'rapeability.' Such essentialist sexual politics around rape ultimately render some bodies as inherently 'rapeable' and others as inherently sexually threatening.

At the start of this chapter, I noted that part of the reason this discourse of vulnerability in relation to rape has been so incredibly powerful is because it has been incorporated into the subject's embodied experience where cis-gendered women in particular will experience themselves and their bodies as inherently vulnerable to being raped. Indeed, the experience of feeling oneself as 'rapeable' shapes the way that cis-gendered women navigate social-space, perhaps also who they interact with, how they dress, where they walk, when they go out, the list goes on. To repeat a point that I made above: the experience of feeling vulnerable to rape might not always necessarily suggest that a woman is in a situation where she could be raped, however the fact that she will experience the feeling that she might be raped is of political significance. It is of political significance particularly when survivors are themselves appealing to this experience of vulnerability as an ontological feature of their identity as women.

The fact that the vulnerability to being raped is an embodied experience is important not only because of the power this embodied experience has in sustaining the gendered discourse of rapeability. It is important because, as I noted in Chapter 1, embodiment is also the most fundamental site of particularity. Recall in Chapter 1, I argued that the particularity of experience is located at the level of embodiment building from Cahill's account of rape as embodied experience.³⁵⁸ For Cahill, embodiment is both that which all subjects share by virtue of inhabiting bodies and that which distinguishes subjects irreducibly from each other precisely because as all subjects are differently embodied. The particularity of embodiment is not only because all subjects have different bodies, but also because these bodies are differently situated in social, geographical and temporal space. For Cahill, this particularity is made apparent in the way that all of these factors collide within the condition of embodiment and how all of these factors are negotiated by subjects' agential capacities. Indeed, it is at the level in which a person lives their body as they negotiate the social meaning that has been built into it. That is to say that embodiment is the condition by which one feels one's body while also absorbing and negotiating the social meaning that has been projected onto it. This dual condition underscoring embodiment is especially pertinent in the context of a discussion on the politics of bodily vulnerability in relation to rape. Here, the discourse of vulnerability constructs feminine bodies as inherently vulnerable to being raped where this vulnerability is then internalized and experienced at the level of embodiment. This vulnerability that is projected to and internalized by feminine subjects does not, however, wholly define them, and most importantly *it does not have to*.

The case that I lay out in this chapter demonstrates how the experiential dimension is important in sustaining and reproducing the discourse of vulnerability in relation to rape. Here, the more a person feels themselves as vulnerable the more the discourse of vulnerability will become resonant with their experience and, indeed, the more that discourse will be given credence. This cycle of self-referentiality between experience and discourse is therefore importantly sustained by appeals to lived experience. This self-referentiality is deepened when experiences resonate with each other, that is when one finds similarity in others' experiences. In Chapter 3, I argued that the risk of essentialism emerges when a sense of resonance between experiences is taken as immediately self-evident. What I cautioned against in Chapter 3 is that the sense of resonance

³⁵⁸ Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

between two experiences risks re-entrenching a conception of sameness that was already discursively in circulation and that was already internalized by those who engage in a cross-experiential exchange. The worry that I articulated in Chapter 3 is therefore that the sense of resonance that is ignited between two seemingly shared experiences of vulnerability in relation to rape will give credence to existing discourse and existing conceptions of sameness, such that the resonance generated by a cross-experiential exchange becomes incontestable evidence of that sameness. In short, in Chapter 3 I articulated the worry that the sense of proximity, familiarity, and resonance between two experiences might re-entrench what experiencing subjects already believed about each other and themselves.

There are therefore two reasons why the discourse of vulnerability in relation to rape has been so successful: firstly because it is experienced in an embodied way, and secondly because of the way that similarity is built and reproduced between these embodied experiences. These two reasons are connected whereby the construction of sameness between subjects who experience the vulnerability to being raped obscures the embodied particularity of that experience. Indeed, embodiment is a fundamental site of particularity where no two experiences of the vulnerability to being raped are every entirely the same. This mutual irreducibility of experiences of rapeability is, however, obscured by the impulse to create sameness between cis-gendered women's experience of vulnerability. The experience of rapeability is too quickly assumed to be evidence of a fundamental sharedness *between* women in ways that obscure how women are not only asymmetrically situated in relation to each other, but crucially asymmetrically vulnerable in relation to each other.

Here, Butler's account of corporeal vulnerability becomes especially pertinent insofar as they qualify corporeal vulnerability as a network of embodied interdependence in which one is both rendered vulnerable by others and rendering others vulnerable. This dual condition of vulnerability demands therefore rethinking how one is situated relative to others within a network of power relations as both vulnerable subjects and subjects that render others vulnerable at the same time. This dual condition is crucial in the context of the politics of the rapeable body where some rapeable subjects are rendering other subjects that are differently rapeable *even more* vulnerable to being raped and/or violence in general. Being able to map this dual condition of

vulnerability would importantly attend to a worry that I have repeatedly raised throughout this thesis, the worry that power relations operate within feminism in ways that marginalize structurally disadvantaged women. This is why it is my contention that a cross-experiential hermeneutic practice would not only be appropriate but also necessary for challenging the essentialist terms that undergird the discourse of vulnerability and the experience of ‘rapeability’ that materializes it. It would not only complicate and nuance the idea that all women are vulnerable in the same way, but it would also compel women to regard themselves as plausibly rendering others vulnerable to violence and, most ironically, to rape.

A cross-experiential hermeneutics would bring to light how embodied subjects are asymmetrically vulnerable in relation to each other, igniting a practice that could question precisely how subjects are rendered differently vulnerable in relation to each other. My point is not to say that an experience of vulnerability is false or poorly-grounded. My point is rather to proceed with caution when it comes to constructing this experience of vulnerability as one that is shared such that it can come to define women as a sex class. As I demonstrated earlier in this chapter, defining women according to their inherent rapeability falls back into a crude biological essentialism that reproduces gendered relations rather than challenging them. Such a crude biological essentialism also renders it impossible to imagine or to strive for a rapeless society insofar as rape would become an inescapable biological fact to be mitigated through greater policing of ‘dangerous’ or ‘threatening’ bodies.

In turn, I contend that engaging the experience of rapeability directly through a cross-experiential hermeneutics would unsettle the homogenizing terms of this essentialist sexual politics that importantly renders some subjects vulnerable to more violence and perhaps even rape. This would be done through harnessing the mutual irreducibility of experience which would reveal how each embodied subject is asymmetrically vulnerable relative to others. This would, in turn, challenge the essentialist sexual politics is by pluralizing the experience of vulnerability in relation to rape by bring to light how no two experiences of the rapeability are ever entirely the same but might, in fact, be asymmetrically situated in relation to each other.

My goal, therefore, is not to say that a woman's sense of vulnerability is wrong or ill-founded – doing so would mistakenly contribute to a long history of doubting women's experience and questioning their sense of reality. My goal, rather, is to question the sense of sameness that has been built *between* women's shared sense of vulnerability in relation to rape. In short, my goal is to question the relation of sameness that is sustained by a supposedly shared experience of rapeability that, in my view, mistakenly overrides important nuances and complexities between women. My point is, therefore, to question the relations of sameness that are constructed *between* subjects that experience themselves as 'rapeable.' Building off Butler's framework of vulnerability, the cross-experiential hermeneutical practice that I advance centers the mutual irreducibility of particular experiences of vulnerability. Such an account would start from the assumptions that embodied subjects are rendered differently vulnerable rather than asserting vulnerability as a shared condition. What we want is to be able to criticize the politics of the vulnerable body whilst also recognizing that bodies are rendered vulnerable in distinct ways. The cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance is able to recognize how those experiences of vulnerability have been obscured by the discourse of rape while also being able to challenge them.

Concluding remarks

Overall, this chapter advanced that the terms and categories that sustain essentialist conceptions of rapeability and vulnerability are precisely what a cross-experiential hermeneutic practice is capable of challenging. It is my contention that a cross-experiential hermeneutics could offer a practice that could enable the collective questioning of the pervasive discourse of 'rapeability' that has not only replicated a crude biological essentialism but also galvanized a racist, xenophobic, and transphobic politics. I demonstrated how a cross-experiential hermeneutics would be important for bringing to light how embodied subjects are asymmetrically vulnerable in relation to each other. The cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance does not demand that experiencing subjects question the truth or falsity of their sense of vulnerability. It instead engages their experience with others in order to question the relation of sameness that is re-entrenched through experiences of rapeability. In doing so, it is also capable of creating a collective interrogation into the relations of sameness that are built between those who feel

themselves as vulnerable to being raped – engaging their experience of this vulnerability with each other. Taken together, the pluralization of vulnerability and the relation self-reflexivity that are generated by the cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance would be able to effectively disentangle how ideas of bodily vulnerability are *built into* and *sustained by* the discourse of rape. I therefore defend a politics of sexual violence that in its practices would be capable of interrogating the terms and categories of vulnerability itself by centering particularity. In doing so, this practice would be able to properly distinguish between the ontological and the contingent features of vulnerability. Through applying my cross-experiential hermeneutics to the politics of vulnerability in relation to rape, I elaborate a practice that centers particularity; indeed, one that seeks to identify particularity against the homogenizing terms and categories that give power to the discourse of rape.

While the objectives of my thesis are to develop a cross-experiential practice of rape survivorship, I also envision a practice whose participative scope involves all those who feel concerned by their vulnerability to being raped, and choose to actively engage these experiences with each other. Creating the conditions for a feminist politics that can effectively resist rape will require practices that also include ‘rapeable’ subjects beyond the experience survivors. Here, the cross-experiential hermeneutics involves not just survivors but also those who consider themselves to be essentially vulnerable to rape and to engage this experience in order to map how each subject is rendered differently vulnerable in relation to rape but also potentially rendering others vulnerable at the same time. Insofar as the weaponization of vulnerabilities to being raped have been successful in galvanizing an essentialist sexual politics in addition to advancing racist, xenophobic, transphobic politics, it is of the utmost importance to create a practice that can engage this rhetoric in order to transform and redirect it. After all, this essentialist sexual politics continues to obscure the plural configurative power relations that render rape possible. This essentialist sexual politics has therefore also actively harmed survivors of rape. This is why I consider it of the utmost importance to engage the experiences of vulnerability to rape in order to challenge its discursive power. A feminist practice of rape survivorship can thereby also be supported by other groups who are reflecting on how rape structures their relations with others.

Conclusion of the Thesis

To conclude this thesis, I return to one of its most significant contributions: namely, a cross-experiential practice of rape survivorship that can engage the experiences of all survivors of rape and render their experience politically meaningful to feminism. To do so, I come back to the idea of ‘politicizing experience’ with which I started this dissertation, demonstrating precisely how the cross-experiential practice that I advance renders both experience and the relation between experiencing subjects politically meaningful. I will then revisit how each chapter contributes to advancing the key objectives of this thesis. Finally, I will give some insight into how my cross-experiential practice has implications on existing feminist scholarship on rape while opening new possibilities for a transnational cross-experiential feminist practice.

I begin this conclusion by returning to feminist uses of personal experiences as a source for theorizing a shared struggle that can, in turn, offer the basis for an action-oriented group politics. Through practices like feminist consciousness-raising, engaging cross-experientially has been a prevalent mechanism to bridge political coming-together and the generation of knowledge. As I noted both in the Introduction and in Chapter 3, feminist consciousness-raising considered the first-person raw subjective recounting of an experience to be insufficient for deriving political meaning where ‘something needs to happen to experience’ in order for it to be rendered politically salient. For feminist consciousness-raising practitioners, personal experiences needed to be connected with the experiences of others such that a shared condition of ‘womanhood’ under shared heteropatriarchal relations of power could be brought to light. Here, the politicization of experience happens through the process of creating sharedness with others and through collectively shaping the terms and conditions of that sharedness.³⁵⁹ That is, experience functions as a means to ground sharedness and to link subjects under the same system of oppression. In contrast, more pedagogically-oriented approaches like bell hooks’ suggests that personal experiences need to be contextualized within their material relations of power.³⁶⁰ On

³⁵⁹ See Julie Arnold, “Consciousness-Raising” in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara A. Crow (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 282-286. See Kathie Sarachild, “Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon” in *Feminist Revolution, Redstockings of the Women’s Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1973), 144-150.

³⁶⁰ bell hooks, “Feminist Politicization: A Comment,” in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 107-108.

hooks' account, linking subjective experiences to their material context is what can reveal the political substance of a given experience. On this account, experience is rendered politically salient when its specificity is articulated within a wider, generalizable context of domination.

I started the thesis by introducing the shift from rape victimhood to rape survivorship as two distinct modes of being. I explained how this shift was marked primarily by a change in disclosure practices around rape where victims are qualified as passively silent and survivors are qualified by their capacity to speak rape oftentimes in a public act of disclosure. I argued, however, that while naming rape is a redemptive act which itself carries a strong political significance, such disclosure practices are insufficient for rendering the content of a disclosed rape experience politically meaningful. Drawing from feminist theories of experience and consciousness-raising, I maintained that the political substance of experience is not immediately self-evident, but must undergo a collective interpretative procedure in order to render it into a feminist politics.³⁶¹ In doing so, I elaborated a view of feminist politics as a collective practice of relational self-reflexivity that is able to not only identify relations of power that rendered certain forms of social suffering possible, but also the relations of power operating within feminist groupings as well. The revelatory potential of this group practice constitutes the substance of feminist politics because it will enable a collective process of critique that will unsettle taken-for-granted identity categories and social categories that were rendered so by patriarchal, racialized, and classed forms of domination. Moreover, it allows feminist groupings to better identify the target of resistance by bringing to light the conditions that rendered some embodied subjects vulnerable to being raped in the first place. If disclosure remains a central practice of rape survivorship, it is crucial that personal experiences of rape can be interpreted in ways that give them political significance to feminism in particular.

As I advanced in Chapter 3, I take the theoretical objectives of feminism to be one of social critique which involves rendering contingent forms of oppression that previously appeared

³⁶¹ Ibid., 107-108. See Julie Arnold, "Consciousness-Raising" in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara A. Crow (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 282-286. See Kathie Sarachild, "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon" in *Feminist Revolution, Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1973), 144-150.

necessary, contingent, and essential.³⁶² This involves first bringing to light forms of oppression that are so ingrained that they are rendered invisible to those who live them. Through demonstrating that what appeared necessary could be otherwise allows for the emergence of new possibilities for how to live, understand, and derive meaning from experience. Articulating those new possibilities emerges from the feminist activity of ‘rendering contingent’ creating the conditions for social and political change. After all, it is only when a new space of possibility is articulated that social and political change can occur. Relatedly, what I qualify as the activity of ‘rendering contingent’ has concrete implications for feminist politics: it entails a struggle against naturalized forms of oppression which also includes a continuous self-reflection on the naturalization of exclusions within feminism. That is, through the activity of ‘rendering contingent’ feminism rejects all forms of exclusions that have been deemed essential, necessary, natural. In doing so, it also simultaneously and continuously reflects on the terms under which it defines its scope as well as the subjects’ whose interests it seeks to advance. This self-reflective practice is itself enabled through engaging the experiences of subjects’ in relation to the experiences of others and in relation to systems of power.

This thesis sought to respond to feminism’s historic appeal to experience and advanced the importance of creating a feminist practice of rape survivorship in which survivors’ particular experiences of rape can be engaged with each other. The way that I articulated political meaningfulness in this thesis is that which has the capacity to reveal the overlapping configurative power relations. I therefore contend that in revealing the relations of power that have rendered rape both possible and even at times permissible are necessary conditions for an action-oriented feminist politics. It is a necessary condition because only when an understanding of the plural meanings, forms, harms, and configurative power relations underscoring rape are brought to light can an action-oriented group politics be created. The novel cross-experiential practice that I formulate in this thesis offers the conditions for rendering personal experiences as well as the relations between experiencing subjects politically meaningful to feminism. It does so with the wider objective of creating an action-oriented feminist resistance against rape and the conditions that have rendered its perpetration possible.

³⁶² See also Johanna Oksala, *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 3-35.

To do so, this thesis emphasized the importance of particularity and mutual irreducibility of experience in shaping the configuration of the cross-experiential practice as well as the political substance that emerges from it. My argument asserts that each experience of rape is irreducible – that is to say, that no two experiences of rape are ever meaningfully identical, configuratively symmetrical, or substitutable with each other. There are always small nuances *between* experiences and *between* experiencing subjects that matter in order to bring to light the plural meanings and configurations that rape can take. Instead, I maintained that experiences of rape are mutually irreducible where this mutual irreducibility is instrumental to survivors giving political meaning to their experience of rape. Participants entering the cross-experiential practice do not seek to bring to light what all experiences have in common but instead where all experiences diverge in order to contextualize how these divergences emerged in the first place. Doing so, I argued, can bring to light how survivors and their rape experience are asymmetrically situated with respect to each other within this wider network of intersecting and overlapping power relations. Rather than seeing mutual irreducibility as an obstacle to political coming-together, instead I stress that the mutual irreducibility of experience is precisely generative because it can reveal how different power relations impact the experience of rape survivorship. In short, I argued that the process by which participants recognize their mutual asymmetrical positioning relative to each other can allow survivors to shed light on the plural axes of power that have rendered rape possible. The most significant contribution of this thesis is my elaboration of a methodology for using the mutual irreducibility of experience for the purpose of revealing the different configurative power relations contained within rape. Thus, the mutual irreducibility of experiences of rape is a valuable source for mapping the plural subjects, bodies, sites of violence, configurations, power relations, meanings, and harms implicated in rape.

Mutual irreducibility also plays a crucial function in advancing the political objectives of feminism specifically. As I suggested earlier, feminism engages in an activity of ‘rendering contingent’ which leads feminist theorists and practitioners to continuously reflect on the terms under which it defines its scope as well as the subjects’ whose interests it seeks to advance. My thesis advances a cross-experiential methodology that prompts survivors to continuously question how they are related to one another and re-evaluate the terms under which they understand their similarities and differences in relation to each other. This self-reflexive practice

is rendered possible through the mutual irreducibility of experience where it is precisely because no two experiences are ever substitutable with each other that compels experiencing subjects to reflect on how they differ in relation to each other. This continuous practice of self-reflection on the assumptions of sameness and difference ignites a process of politicization because it compels participants to reflect on their relations with others with whom they engage cross-experientially. The practice that I advance uses the mutual irreducibility of experience as a revelatory source for the plural forms and meanings that rape can take by locating them within a wider network of power relations. It does so by revealing how survivors are asymmetrically situated relative to each other.

The political substance of experience is therefore not just located in what it proves or demonstrates, but for what it ignites between subjects when it is engaged in a distinct practice. In other words, the political substance of the practice that I advance is also contained within the procedure itself. The procedure is itself transformative not only because it will demand that participants situate their experience relative to the experience of others within asymmetrical power relations. It is also transformative because it will result in a renewed understanding of one's relation to others where previously held assumptions of commonality and difference are necessarily reconfigured by engaging in the cross-experiential methodology that I advance. The mutual irreducibility is thereby radically self-reflexive insofar as it will demand of participants in the cross-experiential exchange to continuously examine the capacity under which they are asymmetrically situated in relation to others. Thus, my distinct use of the mutual irreducibility of experience posits experience as a source for relational self-reflexivity. In doing so, my model for practice of rape survivorship is able to ignite a collective transformation.

Through my engagement with Young's account of asymmetrical reciprocity, my thesis touched on the ethical grounding of this cross-experiential hermeneutics. Although this ethical dimension is not at the forefront of this thesis' contributions, it remains a perspective that undergirds and sustains it. This ethical dimension could be the object of further research for grounding the cross-experiential hermeneutics I elaborate in this thesis. In particular, the concepts of nonsubstitutability and irreversibility that Young appeals to in her account of asymmetrical reciprocity emerge as promising normative anchors for theorizing the ethical dimension of the

cross-experiential hermeneutics. Nonsubstitutability establishes that no two subjective experiences, embodiments, perspectives can ever be entirely substitutable with each other, thus establishing a relation of mutual irreducibility between subjects. Nonsubstitutability, however, can plausibly enable ethical conduct between subjects engaging with each other insofar as it shifts what subjects can expect from one another. This was precisely my point in Chapter 4 when I distinguished between a dialogical and a hermeneutical exchange; here I noted that while a dialogical exchange seeks to understand and grasp an ‘other’, a hermeneutical exchange seeks to better understand oneself *in relation* to an asymmetrically positioned ‘other.’ As I noted in Chapter 4, nonsubstitutability structures the hermeneutical exchange not only because it establishes an asymmetrical stance between a subject and any ‘other’ but also because it articulates an ethically thick principle. This principle is that no ‘other’ can nor should be seen as an extension of oneself and that the recognition of an ‘other’ ought not to be contingent on one’s capacity to see them as similar to oneself. This pertains to the project of ethics of alterity which include the work of Emmanuel Levinas, which seeks to reflect on the possibility of affording moral respect to an ‘other’ without their recognition being contingent on our capacity to see them like oneself. Nonsubstitutability strikes me as a generative concept because it profoundly unsettles the idea that a reciprocal rapport requires sameness or similarity. It also inquires into the possibility for moral equality in conditions of radical asymmetry between subjects. Most importantly, however, and as I demonstrated in this thesis, it requires a practice that can theorize how an exchange between nonsubstitutable subjects can be conducive to ethical relations of mutual respect; one that I believe could take a cross-experiential hermeneutical form.

A further point about nonsubstitutability is its generative potential for thinking about tensions within feminism, in historical criticisms that feminism reproduces racialized and classed forms of hierarchies within its groupings, especially in groupings that engage lived experience. This thesis was interested in part in offering some solutions on how to create a cross-experiential structure that can bring to light the heterogeneity operating within feminism. Indeed, the cross-experiential hermeneutics that I elaborate on does not seek to overcome differences through consensus between subjects engaged in an exchange, nor does it seek to ground sameness on a set of criteria which risk falling back into essentialism, a point I sought to advance in Chapter 3. Instead, I advanced a practice that preserved differences, especially

structurally-produced differences, and how these differences complicate the sameness that is assumed between shared experiences. This collective interpretative process, I argued, structures a feminist politics binds its subjects together through the collective process of interpreting experiences relative to our one's own, contextualizing these experiences in relation to intersecting power relations, and how these intersections create power asymmetries between the subjects of this exchange. This kind of relational self-reflexivity is politically valuable, as I argued in the thesis, because it can allow subjects to re-evaluate their pre-given understanding of their relationship to others, which often rely on identity categories that feminists have sought to unsettle. This kind of relational self-reflexivity is also ethically charged because it might enable a form of mutual recognition which is not dependent on our capacity to see the other as akin to oneself. While this ethical dimension is not the central to this thesis' objectives, it remains a background principle structuring the model of cross-experiential hermeneutics and a pathway upon which to elaborate future research.

In short, the aspirations of this thesis are to harness the lack of equivalences between experiences of rape in order to galvanize survivor-led cross-experiential practice. In the context of a practice of rape survivorship, this means that not only is the experience of rape politicized but so too is the relationship between survivors. This cross-experiential practice politicizes particular experiences by locating them within a wider matrix of power whilst simultaneously politicizing the relationship between experiencing subjects by igniting a process of relational self-reflexivity. This dual dynamic offers the conditions for a survivor-led action-oriented anti-rape group politics on two fronts: first because it will create a group that is able to continuously reinvent the way that its members are linked rather than assert substantive criteria that risks excluding some experiences of rape. Second, because it is able to relay both the experience of rape and the relations between experiencing subjects back to power, how it organized, how renders some bodies vulnerable to rape and sexual violence.

In Chapter 1 entitled 'On the Possibility for Theorizing Rape from experience' I focused on the possibility of theorizing rape from experience by defending the importance of centering the subjective conditions under which rape takes place. I do so against essence-led approaches which seek to distill rape's core unchanging properties by bracketing the subjective conditions of

experience. To elaborate an experiential approach that centers the subjective conditions of rape, I drew from Ann Cahill's conception of rape as embodied experience in order to posit the particularity of rape at the level of embodiment.³⁶³ With Cahill's account of rape as embodied experience, I elaborated the possibility for theorizing rape from experience by centering the irreducible particularity of embodiment. Theorizing rape from the particularity of embodiment prompts the need for a practice that can bring to light the divergences and nuances *between* experiences and *between* experiencing subjects. That is, only through engaging with others can the particularity of one's own experience be progressively revealed. The divergences and nuances between experiences, in turn, serve not only as a means to pluralize the category of rape, but more importantly to map the plural configurative relations of power that render rape possible.

I finished the chapter by demonstrating how when theorizing rape from experience that the category of rape also becomes entirely reconfigured. Anticipating the worry that theorizing rape from experience might risk obscuring the category, I argued instead that rape could take the form of what Natalie Stoljar calls a "cluster concept."³⁶⁴ I noted that Stoljar's idea of 'cluster concept' becomes valuable in explaining how the category can be used to qualify all of these experiences without reducing all these experiences to each other. This is particularly important insofar as my account seeks to preserve the mutual irreducibility of experience. In my uptake of Stoljar's account, I argued that rape as an assemblage of criss-crossing similarities in which each axis is a particular experience of rape which is connected to at least one other experience within the cluster by the sheer fact that the experiencing subjects regard their experiences as resembling one another in some capacity. However, none of the experiential axes are ever substitutable with each other insofar as rape experiences are irreducible to each other where two rape experiences are never identically the same. To think of rape as a cluster concept in the way that I suggest requires a practice in which survivors engage their experience with other survivors' experiences.

In Chapter 2 'Speaking the R-Word', I advanced the inadequacy of Miranda Fricker's paradigm of epistemic justice for framing the aspirations of this thesis. While this dominant paradigm offers a plausible diagnosis of survivor silence, it is inadequate for attending to the aspirations of

³⁶³ Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

³⁶⁴ Natalie Stoljar, "Essence, Identity, and the Concept of Woman" *Philosophical Topics* 23, no.2 (1995), 261-293.

this thesis. I argued that Fricker seems to rely on an ideal of transparency in which concepts can create a symmetrical epistemic relation between knowers such that the knowledge held by one knower can be made interchangeable with the knowledge held by another. I argue that the thick epistemic symmetry between differently situated knowers that is required for Fricker's account of epistemically just relations would erase the polyphonic nature of an epistemic community which is an important source for revealing power asymmetries between knowers. I argued that this is especially important with and between rape survivors, where the lack of equivalences between experiences of rape can reveal how power asymmetries impact the narrative experience of rape. However, I maintained the lack of equivalence can enliven a wider discussion about power asymmetries only in the context of a practice that can engage the plurality of experiences. Both Chapters 1 and 2 posited the necessity for a practice both to give substance to the idea of rape but also to enliven a cross-experiential disclosure structure that would be capable of allowing survivors to speak rape on their own terms. Both chapters also set up the mutual irreducibility of experience, however in slightly different ways. Whereas Chapter 1 located the mutual irreducibility of experience at the level of embodiment, Chapter 2 located it in the manner in which that experience is articulated.

In Chapter 3 'Feminism and Experience: Between Essentialism and Depoliticized Particularity' I defended the use of experience as a source for feminism. I did so by examining a contentious debate within feminism about the uses of experience. While on the one hand some defended experiences as important for bringing to light previously obscured forms of oppression, others rejected the use of experience for feminism because it risked naturalizing social identities instead of challenging them. In short, experiential evidence either overinflates a shared social condition at the expense of particularity, or overemphasizes its uniqueness stripping experience of its political substance. In this chapter, I argued that experience is valuable for feminism when it is engaged with others such that it can ignite resonance or dissonance between subjects. However, I maintained that the resonance and dissonance that experience ignites between subjects is insufficient for grounding sameness and must itself be subjected to a process of interrogation.

In Chapter 4 'Asymmetrical Experiences and Cross-Experiential Hermeneutics' I argued that a cross-experiential hermeneutical practice would reveal how subjects are asymmetrically

positioned in relation to each other. Such an approach expands from Iris Marion Young's account of 'asymmetrical reciprocity' as a form of engagement across difference that never seeks to reverse perspectives nor identify with each other, but instead to identify those areas of experience that remain irreducibly asymmetrical. Such an approach, I suggest, would allow for a collective politics that would itself question the constitutive conditions of one's own lived experience by engaging with others' lived experience. Such a practice would unsettle pre-given assumptions of commonality and difference and in doing so enact a relationally self-reflexive hermeneutic practice.

In Chapter 5 'Vulnerable Bodies, 'Rapeable' Subjects' I demonstrated how the practice I advanced in previous chapters can be used to challenge the essentializing terms and categories that sustain ideas of vulnerability in relation to rape. This chapter, demonstrated how my feminist cross-experiential practice can be harnessed to unsettle the terms of sameness undergirding the idea of vulnerability in relation to rape. Indeed, through putting in practice the cross-experiential feminist practice that I advanced in previous chapters could effectively criticize the terms and categories that sustain the 'rapeable' body. Building from the cross-experiential hermeneutics that I elaborate in Chapter 4 which sought to reveal how experiencing subjects are asymmetrically positioned in relation to each other, in Chapter 5 I argued that a cross-experiential hermeneutics could be instrumental in revealing how subjects are asymmetrically vulnerable in relation to each other.

Overall, in this thesis I advanced a practice that is aimed at engaging the experiences of survivors of rape for the purposes of mapping of the phenomena of rape as a category overflowing with substance, meaning, and configurative power relations. To do so, I stress that experiences of rape are irreducible to each other; indeed, no two experiences are ever meaningfully identical, nor configuratively symmetrical, nor substitutable with regard to each other. This mutual irreducibility plays a function in cross-experiential engagement because it will compel experiencing subjects to reflect on the divergences *between* experiences rather than immediately draw conclusions about the sameness of two experiences. Engaging experience in this manner demonstrates the plural sites of power, the plural meanings and harms that are invested in rape.

Looking at the wider objectives of this thesis, there are a number of implications that my account presents which I did not attend to in this thesis. One important implication is that the cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance is incredibly demanding – perhaps so demanding that survivors might not want to engage their rape experience in this way. Many survivors are not interested in engaging their experience with others, let alone politicizing it relative to the experiences of others. This is perfectly plausible and perhaps one of the most significant weaknesses of my account. However, as I noted in the Introduction of this thesis, rape survivorship has already become a mode of being which is already accompanied with a disclosure practice that is also incredibly demanding. Indeed, the dichotomy between the silent passivity of victimhood as opposed to survivorship’s active speaking of one’s rape risks coercing those who have experienced rape to disclose their rape. More worryingly, it might demand that they speak their rape by appealing to a particular grammar of trauma that might not map onto their experience of rape at all. If my cross-experiential practice is demanding, it is perhaps mostly demanding in what it requires from survivors in relation to each other rather than in the way that they articulate their own experience in relation to themselves. The practice that I advanced in the present thesis requires that survivors speak rape on their own terms and preserve the particularity of their experience, even when that particularity might not always be immediately apparent. However, it compels survivors to tread carefully in building sameness with experiences that immediately resonate with one’s own. More importantly, it demands not to stop the exchange with ‘Me Too’ but to go a step further in reflecting on the irreducible dimensions of each other’s experience.

One further implication of my cross-experiential practice that I did not explore in this thesis but that could be the object of future research is its transnational possibility. The practice that I advanced conceives of a mode of inclusion that is, in theory, borderless. My cross-experiential hermeneutics renders this transnational scope possible through two paths. First, by centering the particularity of the subjective experience which importantly preserves the fragmentary, partial, at times nonconceptual or conceptually approximative approach to self-narration. Second, its transnational scope is facilitated by granting a new configuration to the category of rape as a ‘cluster concept.’ This point is perhaps most important because it steers clear of a kind of conceptual fixedness whose framework is not always translatable. It also steers clear of

advancing a concept that contains within it an essence of its harm or its meaning, which again might not always translate into a differently situated vernaculars.³⁶⁵ The idea of rape as a ‘cluster concept’ would allow the groupings to assemble. The criteria and features that qualify different experiences of rape as pertaining to the same resemblance class will therefore require survivors to continuously engage with each others’ experiences and, in doing so, to collectively determine what these features and properties are. Here, the category can take the form of a complex network of overlapping, intersecting experiential axes none of which are entirely reducible to each other. There is not necessarily one capacity or property that connects all experiences together; instead, the experiences overlap and intersect in a number of different capacities, bounding the experiences into a cluster in which all of these experiences could be called ‘rape.’ When the category of rape is understood as such, it is capable of accommodating any and all of its iterations without imposing a fixed conceptual substance upon the experience of rape. To go back to a point I advanced in Chapter 2 – that the lack of equivalence between the way that experiences are articulated is important to preserve not only because it allows for survivors to speak rape on their own terms, but importantly because the divergences of meaning between the expressions that are used could signal an important meaningful axes of power that was previously obscured. I therefore do not think that this radical polyphony need not impose a practical impossibility to the transnational scope of the cross-experiential hermeneutics that I advance. It might mean that the network of groupings would need to be assembled and expanded in a piecemeal way. The groupings would always remain situated whilst building networks with other groups in closer proximity, mixing and exchanging, without borders ever preventing exchanges between survivors.

A further implication of my cross-experiential practice of rape survivorship is that the scope of the inclusion accommodates all genders. Much like Joanna Bourke argues, I contend that the inclusion of all forms, configurations, and iterations must be engaged within the cross-experiential practice that I advance because only then can a full picture of rape and the relations of power that render it possible be made apparent.³⁶⁶ As I demonstrated in Chapter 5, when rape is treated from an identitarian perspective, it risks reproducing existing gender

³⁶⁵ For examples of different vernacular expressions that come close to saying ‘rape’ see Joanna Bourke, *Disgrace: Global Reflections on Sexual Violence* (London: Reaktion Books, 2022), 18-19.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

relations. Most importantly, however, when rape is associated exclusively with sex, it will obscure the many other ways that rape occurs as well as the conditions that render it possible and permissible. I therefore regard the inclusion of all survivors as indispensable to the practice of rape survivorship that I advance. I also consider the inclusion of all survivors as indispensable to feminist endeavours of bringing to light forms of oppression, violence and abuse that have up until now remained obscured in order to not only challenge these forms of oppression, violence and abuse but to articulate how another way of living is possible. A feminist hope for a rapeless society must thereby imply a hope for a rapeless society *for all*. This does not mean overlooking rape's gendered features, however, it does imply that gender is not the only prism through which to analyse rape's violence.

Overall, my thesis did not seek to spell out what the action required for a feminist politics of resistance against rape and sexual violence would look like. What it sought to advance instead is a feminist cross-experiential practice that could offer the conditions for enlivening a group politics that could effectively struggle against all iterations of rape. This practice would be compatible with feminism which I qualified throughout the thesis as a continuous process of interrogating power relations and hierarchies that have been naturalized and thus seen as necessary. The practice that I advance allows survivors to question the capacity under which rape binds them together, demonstrating in turn the terrifying scale of its endemic perpetration. It also and most importantly allows for rape survivors to give their own meaning and significance to their own experience of rape, without ever imposing their own meaning onto the experiences of others, yet without ever giving up on the idea that through others a renewed understanding of our own experience can be brought to light. If the possibility for a rapeless society is a hope that we can preserve, let us hope that this can be done by imagining new ways of speaking rape.

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