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Embodied Phenomenology – *Reconstructing Sexual Violence within Rape Culture*

Sexual violence as conceived today is still largely controlled by masculinist epistemologies. While it is true that awareness of the issue has increased in recent years, particularly thanks to the women who have made the difficult decision to speak out, women who do speak out are further traumatized by a society that has been conditioned to blame the victim. Susan Brison, in her recent article, “Why I Spoke Out About One Rape but Stayed Silent About Another,” writes, “Those who have been raped know that if they speak out, they will be blamed for not doing whatever it is people imagine would have prevented they [*sic*] from being raped” (*Time*). And while I will not argue that sexual violence is a phenomenon only experienced by women, a society that allows those in control to define the experiences of those who are subordinated -- that is, a patriarchy that allows men to speak for women -- is the same society that encourages male aggression over and against women. Rape by man on woman is still the most prevalent case of sexual violence¹. My suggestion is that this masculinist account of rape gives little to no space to evaluate the meaning of individual experience within sexual violence. Sexual violence, in reality, is an ambiguous and imprecise phrase that I believe encompasses a myriad of experience.

Catharine MacKinnon points out that “The point of view of men up to this time, called objective, has been to distinguish sharply between rape on the one hand and intercourse on the

¹ I acknowledge that sexual violence occurs to people outside of the gender binary or heteronormativity, and I do not mean to discount the significance of these egregious acts. I do not believe that enough data has been collected on trans* violence for me to make an affirmative claim as to what group of people experiences sexual assaults most. This being said, however, I focus herein on heteronormative accounts of sexual violence in order to emphasize the manner in which male domination over women has affected both our understanding, and our experiences, of sexual violence in society.

other...” (*Feminism Unmodified* 86). This objective view of rape does little to account for the complexities involved in an individual’s experience of rape. In this research, I will explore sexual violence as something that runs along a continuum -- something that cannot be concretely defined by any singular universalistic claim. Rape cannot be essentialized; our understanding of such a violation can only go as far as our capacity to *feel* it, and this is why I argue for a phenomenological account that places the importance of the lived experience first. In other words, a woman experiences and interprets rape in her own unique and subjective way. Denying this only further victimizes her. Linda Martín Alcoff writes, “To theorize rape adequately we must have recourse to the description of embodied experience, and not merely the various possible and actual discursive representations of that experience” (52). By giving a phenomenological perspective to sexual violence, we can create an alternative account to the masculinist views given today. In order to acknowledge the complexities of rape, we must apperceive of its multiplicity, its inability to be defined simply and linearly. I am driven by a concern that a woman’s agency is often taken from her when her experience of a sexual violation does not match up with the preconceived masculine definition of rape. When we address sexual violence under its definition today, we are accepting a definition that has been posited by those who believe rape can be claimed under one objective truth. Yet this does not acknowledge that what many women experience as a violation does not meet the criteria for “real rape.”

If we are to understand the multiplicity of sexual violence, we must blur the line between what we consider to be “normal” heterosexual sex and what we consider to be rape (as MacKinnon would suggest), not to justify rape, but to justify the experiences of women who have been made to feel groundless in their traumas with everyday heterosexual encounters, defined by those in the place of power. As it stands, rape is a far more common phenomenon

than we like to admit. By developing our understanding of sexual violence as something that takes on an infinite variety of forms, we leave space for the voices of those who know what it feels like to be violated within their own bodies. Simone de Beauvoir writes in her introduction to *The Second Sex* that “The man most sympathetic to women never knows her concrete situation fully. So there is no good reason to believe men when they try to defend privileges whose scope they cannot even fathom” (14-15). We cannot begin to understand sexual violence without first understanding its lived experience, because this embodiment of an experience is what challenges the masculinist account wherein leaders assume the authority to ascribe definitions to a problem beyond their capacity.

Alcoff’s work on phenomenology provides a critique of Foucault’s analysis of a sexual act between a farm hand and a little girl. Alcoff writes, “[Foucault’s] quickness to assume such knowledge manifests unfortunately typical male and adult patterns of epistemic arrogance” (54). From here, she offers a phenomenological description of the event in which the experience can be better understood as a trauma from the child’s perspective. “In these accounts,” Alcoff writes, “trauma is often masked as confusion, for as a child one has no names to identify the ordeals endured or the sensations one feels” (54), and while Alcoff’s argument focuses primarily on the experience of rape as a child, this trauma as a confusion is something that also infiltrates the daily lives of all women. We often do not have the capability to give labels to the things we feel, and this can lead us to believe we are somehow to blame for the experience.

Because we feel we are to blame, we attempt to silence our rapes in numerous ways. Often the easiest way to do this is to simply not tell anyone, but even more commonly, we do not tell ourselves. By denying the experience, we enable ourselves, if only on an unconscious level, to become agents in the matter, to feel some semblance of control. I believe the experience of

sexual trauma is an experience we wish to silence, because believing oneself to have been raped is one of the scariest things a woman can face in a society that does everything it can to convince us rape is rare, and, therefore, rape is one of the worst things that can happen to you. Brison explains this, writing, “Blaming yourself is far easier than letting go of the belief that nothing terrible, undeserved, and utterly unavoidable will happen to you. For, if you *weren't* to blame, then it could happen again and there's nothing you can do to prevent it. That's the scariest thought of all” (*Time*).

To begin this inquiry into the complexities involved in our understanding of sexual violence, I offer my own phenomenological account of an experience I endured this past summer wherein someone I thought of as a friend forced me into a situation I was unfit to get out of at the time. I remember crawling into bed next to him, assuming the space to be a safe haven from the drunken debauchery that was so commonly occurring outside. Almost from the instant I laid down, he started cuddling with me. I obliged this (keeping in mind how drunk he was and guessing he would not remember in the morning), only to have him attempt to get closer. After several uncomfortable and awkward minutes of me taking his hands off of me, in what I assume he perceived as playful, as a type of foreplay, “playing hard to get,” he pulled my pants off and began giving me oral sex. In *Flirting with Danger*, Lynn Phillips writes of several women who “tried to like it in the hopes that their own arousal would prevent their experiences from qualifying as acquaintance rape” (144). There was an unconscious switch being made here for me; if I did not have the comfortability of saying “no,” of leaving the bed, I could at the very least submit myself to the experience. I remained very self conscious of my genitals in this moment, and even more conscious of his. Then there was the unfolding of events and my realization that the minute he ejaculated I would be allowed to leave. “During a rape, locked in

the pantomime of an embrace, consumed by feelings of fear, pain, and anguish, ones sees or feels the signs of pleasure in the other” (Alcoff 54). By submitting, I was capable of fast forwarding the situation, allowing him inside of me, letting him ejaculate, and then quickly getting out of bed.

I remember being elated. I instantly jumped up, went to his bathroom to clean off the vomit that had somehow found its way onto my sweater, grabbed all my belongings in a sort of ecstatic frenzy, and carried myself home, laughing the whole way. I couldn't stop. When I got home, I slept for a few hours. I remember waking up feeling horrible, running to the bathroom to throw up, my whole body shaking and trembling. I thought I was going to die. I went to the emergency room, only to be turned away, being told there was a nationwide shortage of IV fluids, and they definitely would not be using their minimal supplies to treat a hangover. I continued to have sex with this man for several weeks after this first event.

This receiving of oral sex that I experienced as a prelude to penetration takes an interesting role in my violation. Very rarely do we acknowledge the reception of oral sex as rape; yet I know several women who have also been in a similar situation. Even in Phillip's *Flirting with Danger*, a book dedicated to the exploration of sexuality and domination, there is very little recourse regarding the *reception* of oral rape. While I believe premeditated, serial rape might be one of the rarer forms of rape, I find it possible that many men use cunnilingus as a means of breaking down a woman's barriers such that she will submit. And this is not regarded as a form of rape; rather, it is considered a “skill,” and, if performed well, the gift will be access by his penis into her vagina. Signals here, in the most intimate of settings, I argue, are being taken by the body as an object, rather than as something lived, experienced, capable of emotions and feelings. In her book *Aftermath*, Brison writes, “It is as if the tormentor says with his blows,

‘You are nothing but a body, a mere object for my will -- here, I’ll prove it!’” (47). I was the receptor, the receptacle, for oral rape, not the active *recipient*. De Beauvoir aptly points out that women “... have taken nothing; they have received” (8). The feeling here goes further than simply one’s desire to *not* have sex with him. A realization is drawn in the struggle to claim one’s agency in any sexual situation. When it is a violation, one often *feels* this before consciously perceiving this. It is the feeling that you could have been anyone who jumped into his bed, *anything* with a vagina, a hole into which he releases his own traumas. If one feels this way then it is rape. If you feel as if your own body no longer has meaning as the space in which you reside, no longer necessitates the *you* inside, then this is rape. Your own experience of this violation just as easily could have belonged to someone else.

After this personal experience of mine, I told multiple friends about the events. I did not say “rape,” however; nor did I think it. It was several months later when someone finally pointed out to me my lack of consent. I had been blaming myself, feeling disgusted with myself, and, more than that, feeling guilty (my perpetrator was the close friend of a man with whom I had previously been in a relationship). I was so concerned with what others would think of me that I did not take the time to remember my own non-consensual experience of the sex. With this new perspective, telling people became more challenging. Was I allowed to call my experience rape? Or would it be better to use a more enigmatic phrase (e.g., sexual coercion, *date* rape or *acquaintance* rape, “taken advantage of,” “under the influence of,” or “he forced himself on me”)? Phillips points out that “...women are stripped of their right to complain if it can be shown that they participated in any way in the behavior in question” (66). Several people with whom I confided asked me why I didn’t “just leave,” or they asked me if there was a literal force holding me hostage on that bed. I even had one male friend tell me, with complete confidence, that I was

not raped. His logic, as it soon became evident, was based upon preemptive representations made by my perpetrator, representations, I further discovered, that my perpetrator had already told many of our mutual friends. My experience was, therefore, made secondary, made thoroughly inferior by my perpetrator's decision to tell everyone about an experience he cannot even lay claim to fully remembering.

Brison writes that "...trauma not only haunts the conscious and unconscious mind, but also remains in the body, in each of the senses, ready to resurface whenever something triggers a reliving of the traumatic event" (*Aftermath* x). After my realization that my sexual experience was not consensual, I have considered the possibility that my decision to go to the emergency room precipitated from a larger panic that subsumed my body. The trauma, for me, hit my body almost instantly, keeping the violation a secret from my conscious mind. Alcoff writes, "Experience sometimes exceeds language; it is at times inarticulate" (47). And while I have attempted to articulate the complexities of my experience through words, I will probably never fully impart to others how my manner of embodiment impacts my reality. As Brison writes, "How can we speak about the unspeakable without attempting to render it intelligible and sayable?" (*Aftermath* xi). By this, I do not mean to say we should not speak of our traumas; rather, I mean, that in so doing, we give space to a certain amount of associated and necessary uncertainty.

An important part of what I am trying to understand via this phenomenological investigation is what it means to define sexual violence. The objectively given stance on sexual violence seems to suggest that the men who have created laws and contracts can, with assumed impunity, hazard a guess about a woman's situation without ever having asked her. Sexual violence is described as if its meaning is widely understood throughout society, even if its impact

is not. In reality, however, sexual violence can never be defined from outside the body; it can be talked about, it can be analyzed, but words often fail to do justice to an individual's concrete experience of rape. The body and its experience of such an event is always related to the individual's interpretations of the trauma therein.

The masculinist account by which U.S. society abides today has posited sexual violence (with slight variations from state to state) as something that inherently involves force or threat of force. This leaves much to be desired, however. For instance, how is force being defined? MacKinnon argues that "sexuality in exactly these normal forms often *does* violate us" (86). If this is the case, how can we argue that "normal" (heterosexual) sex does not include some force? The normalized definition of rape excludes many types of non-consensual sex, and, therefore, women's experiences of non-consensual sex are being set up as distinct from one another. Given this, can I truly give my experience a label? Does my experience necessarily inform some truth about rape, or does it simply address my truth? MacKinnon writes, "Rape is defined according to what men think violates women" (87). Taking MacKinnon's theory one step further, when anyone attempts to define rape at all, then the individuality of experience, the necessity of phenomenology in understanding trauma, is devalued.

Accordingly, I want to avoid any claim to a singular definition of sexual violence. I would rather keep its definition forever unfolding. I do, however, want to take these two tenets as starting points: 1) that all non-consensual sex is rape and, 2) to be raped is to feel as if your experience no longer belongs to you. Your experience is taken away from you by your perpetrator, by society, by a society that blames you, that makes *you* feel as if you are somehow deserving of that blame, makes you internalize that blame, takes your time from you, and objectifies you. In the forthright words of Bonnie Mann, "...creepers...steal your time. They are

already in the mode of ‘I-regard-you-as-fuckable’” (7). Your experience is taken from you by your perpetrator’s lack of acknowledgment that you are human; you are at the mercy of your aggressor who does not care about the you inside your body. You feel no longer validated by your own body as the way in which you regard your experience, as the starting point from which you choose to trust and to be. This, I believe, is rape’s project, as a phenomenon: it starts a process of dehumanization through objectification.

But this is a paradox. How can we speak to our experiences if they have been stolen from us? Part of the purpose of developing a phenomenology of rape is to encourage this introspection into experience. Through this introspection, we regain our right to feeling as a cognitive source of empowerment. Alcoff points out, “...a transformation in our conception of knowledge must attribute a cognitive value to experience; not just that through experience knowledge is communicated, but that experience produces knowledge” (51). In this way, by giving personal accounts of sexual violence, or even simply by allowing ourselves to live vicariously through the lives of those who have experienced sexual violence, we newly define and authenticate sexual trauma. Brison addresses this process, describing “how *saying* something about the memory *does* something to it. The communicative act of bearing witness to traumatic events not only transforms traumatic memories into narratives that can then be integrated into the survivor’s sense of self and view of the world, but it also reintegrates the survivor into a community, reestablishing bonds of trust and faith in others” (*Aftermath* xi). This phenomenological approach thus restores this sense of community, provides accessible accounts of what it means to experience sexual violence, and even allows the victim of the violation a renewal of the self and a destruction of the objectification.

Sara Heinämaa writes that our style of being “...is not a constellation of fixed qualities or actions but an open, incomplete structure. A personal style, for example, is not a collection of actions, but a way of acting: thinking, writing, dancing, throwing, breathing, etc. It runs through the whole life like a melody: there is no core, no specific invariant, no common quality or number of them present” (301). In Heinämaa’s article, “Woman: Nature, Product, Style?,” she describes gender as a style of being, not created by, but in part defined by biology. Personal styles of being, then, are indicative of a style of receptivity to one’s surroundings. This is the role that the body plays in our ability to know what constitutes sexual violence as a personal realization and not as something that has been, as Judith Butler would say, “passively scripted” on us by society. By telling our stories, we reclaim our bodies, and our lives, for ourselves.

Continuing along these same lines, I also want to explore the ways in which society abandons women by imparting self-doubt on those of us who have experienced sexual trauma. This doubt has become so internalized that we no longer see it as societal indoctrination. We have been programmed to believe that our feeling of violation is the manifestation of a personal failing, rather than the fault of a society that raises men to rape in highly subliminal ways. As a necessary component to understanding this denial, or self-blame, of those who have experienced rape, Iris Marion Young’s “Throwing Like a Girl” gives insight into the ways in which women are forced into being violable. Young argues that even at a young age, a girl has already learned ways of moving, ways of acting, ways of taking up space based on a set of structures and conditions postulated by patriarchal society. She writes, “Feminine bodily existence is an *inhibited intentionality*, which simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an ‘I can’ and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed ‘I cannot’” (148). Because of this, a woman is often forced to experience herself, from an age earlier than her birth, as

someone who has little or no control over her surroundings. I would argue, then, that sexual violence becomes very common for women because we have been taught to fear our expressivity, our right to tell a person “no,” to sacrifice safety for kindness.

There is an uncanny representation of this sacrifice in the movie *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. This movie, while of course dramatized for the entertainment of viewers, exemplifies the pervasive nature of rape in society. My favorite quote is suitably said by the serial rapist and murderer himself, Martin Vanger who is played by Stellan Skarsgård. While holding the protagonist, Mikael Blomkvist, hostage, Vanger says the following:

Let me ask you something, why don't people trust their instincts? They sense something is wrong, someone is walking too close behind them. You knew something was wrong; you came back into the house. Did I force you, did I drag you in? No. All I had to do was offer you a drink. It's hard to believe that fear of offending is stronger than fear of pain, but you know what? It is.

According to Young, however, this “fear of offending” seems to more strongly affect women than it does men, but importantly, not because of some biological or natural feminine essence. We have painstakingly learned how to present ourselves through a self-consciousness that hinders basic instinct. Because of this, our body is what gives us the capacity to act, but it is also that which stops us from acting. A woman's experience of rape is always deeply entrenched in her experience of her body in the world, and the body that moves with fear has a different account of experience than the body that feels its right to exist. As Young writes, “Feminine existence appears to posit an existential enclosure between herself and the space surrounding her” (151).

Simone de Beauvoir points out that the “female human being...must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity” (3). This ensures, in part, our participation in a system that is inherently damaging to us. She writes, “We cannot really know what the word ‘happiness’ means, and still less what authentic values it covers; there is no way to measure the happiness of others, and it is always easy to call a situation that one would like to impose on others happy” (16). In the same way, we cannot have the capacity to know what rape means without taking into account its lived situation. And, perhaps conveniently for the patriarchy, it *is* far easier for rape to be imposed on women as a situation society would like to call happy, even pleasurable. We are meant to see trauma as normal, and the simplest way of imposing this on citizens is by only defining the worst of violations as traumatic. It seems that the ability to constitute heterosexual sex as rape, and not heterosexual sex “as usual,” comes from a deeper understanding of the power plays involved in keeping sex and rape at polar extremes; As in the words of MacKinnon “...we leave the line between rape and intercourse, sexual harassment and sex roles, pornography and eroticism, right where it is” (87).

The reason I suggest we blur this line between rape and intercourse is because, in so doing, the diversity of experiences that I believe constitute sexual violence will be made apparent. How so? As the definition of rape stands today, there is very little space given for personal, honest accounts of how heterosexual sex itself is often damaging (with or without force or threat of force). This naturalizing of more discrete forms of violence is what encourages and perpetuates a society that blames victims. Phillips writes, “The true victim discourse is further supported by a sexist society’s fear that women wish to falsely accuse men of physical and sexual abuse” (68). We blame the victim rather than the perpetrator, because calling someone a liar is less harsh than calling someone a rapist. Therefore, it is easier in society if we only use the

word “rape” to describe the most despicable of acts: a serial rapist, a man who holds a gun up to a woman’s head to *force* her to have sex with him, or the stereotypical, but also real, scenario in which a male stranger stalks a woman in a dark alley and pins her down. Brison makes a good point regarding this, arguing that “No one deserves to have his reputation tarnished by an unfounded accusation of rape. But false rape charges are extremely rare, no more common than for other crimes” (*Time*).

As Brison suggests, speaking out about our experiences of rape is challenging due to the number of obstacles we are forced to confront. I would like to argue further, however, that this challenge becomes even more difficult when we don’t know ourselves what to call rape. And if we are unsure of giving it a definition internally, for ourselves, how can we take the initiative to put our violation at the mercy of an external, victim blaming society? How can our experiences of sexual trauma not become doubly violated by a world that presumes to know our situation before we have ever experienced it? And, further, why is the term sexual violence being defined by those who haven’t experienced the body as a fear?

Heinämaa explains, “The values and meanings that are crucial here are not the ones forced on us by others -- the society -- but those that we realize in our own actions. They are not external to the body, but its own (re)creations” (302). Our body is what gives us movement in the world. It is how we orient ourselves and how we shape ourselves. As Heinämaa would say, the body is how we style ourselves. The body becomes the space wherein we harbor our experiences, and, therefore, those of us who have experienced sexual violence will live this out *through* our unique bodies, and not as something that has been decidedly interpreted for us by someone else. Talking about our experiences may prove detrimental in some cases, but this is due to the failing of our society of people who have been trained to deny the embodiment -- and

the necessity of a lived understanding -- of sexual violations. I am not trying to suggest that all victims of sexual violence must be willing to share their stories; this, too, would be a violation and a misplacement of the necessity of phenomenology. Rather, I am suggesting that we need a new account of sexual violence that does not attempt to give one, objective definition that is couched in some underlying truth about what it means to experience force, but, instead, takes seriously the lived experience of those who have been denied their voice, their agency, their right to a body that moves with purpose.

Will Bowen's adage, "hurt people hurt people" (perhaps antiquated, at best, these days), sheds an interesting perspective on sexual violence: those who have experienced trauma often have an unavoidable, sometimes unconscious, tendency to relive their traumas through and onto others, and, unfortunately, it seems we all are capable of succumbing to this danger if we are not careful. As an outcome of this research, I believe the reason rape is such a common (and covert) occurrence is because so many of us have endured the hardships of discrete forms of violence. De Beauvoir makes an incisive assertion, writing, "...no one is more arrogant towards women, more aggressive, or more disdainful, than a man anxious about his own virility" (13). Toxic masculinity, it seems, plays an important role in how men perceive themselves, as well as how a patriarchy is intended to function. Even in the most well-intentioned of settings, men are still being raised under this virulent embodiment of the masculine ideal. Because of this, the anxiety to which de Beauvoir refers is becoming more and more common, making men more susceptible to the desire to use women as violable objects.

As I argued in the introduction to this essay, there is a paradoxical ambiguity to sexual violence that renders women incapacitated in their daily lives, that appeals to a masculine domination over women. Young points out that "To open her body in free, active, open

extensions and bold outward-directedness is for a woman to invite objectification” (155). This dehumanization operates as an excuse to maintain masculinist epistemologies of what it means to rape, what it means to violate. What makes men rape is arguably the same thing that makes women think common heterosexual encounters are *not* rape: that is, a lack of awareness in how to gain or give consent. By apprehending the complexities of sexual violence through phenomenology, we reclaim our right to experience through the body as something un-objectifiable. I am drawn here to explore the meaning of a society that enables heterosexual sex to persist as something that is both *done* to someone (singular) and at the same time an activity between two people (plural). Sex can no longer simply be a thing to be taken, but instead an action to be shared between two agents. Alcoff writes, “Much more needs to be said about the complicated issues surrounding the relations between discourse, meaning, and sexual experience” (55). We need a new societal explanation for sexual violence, where those who have experienced it are the ones giving it a name. Rape is the taking away of the safeness of the body as the shelter in which we have space and time to process, and this taking away of a woman’s personal experience, this objectification, is exactly what phenomenology works to reconstruct.

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