

Panel 8: Responses to Trauma

Moderator: Leonor Arfuch

Amanda Spallacci, U of Alberta [spallacc@ualberta.ca]

Trauma and Testimony: Deconstructing Sexual Violence Narratives in Contemporary Memoir

According to Marlene Kadar, life writing has developed from a genre to a critical practice, and as a result, “we are able to reconsider the possible functions of life writing now” (11). My paper explores how rape survivors use different forms of life writing to challenge assumptions about sexual violence. Rape myths that constitute rape culture tend to displace the blame for the assault away from the rapist and onto the survivor, using blaming tactics involving “inappropriate” dress, substance use, the survivors’ relationship to the perpetrator, and the very definition of rape. These pervasive beliefs about the culpability and guilt about women who are raped are largely responsible for the lack of respect survivors experience in the court system. As literary and film scholars, we should ask: to what extent do our narrative practices influence rape culture? Conventional narrative techniques restrict survivor’s testimony; however, life writing about trauma resists these oppressive structures, provides a creative outlet for survivors to identify and refute dominant ideologies about violence which have, in the past, prevented them from understanding or identifying with their assault, and allow the survivor to reclaim a sense of political agency within this precarious situation (Gilmore 1994; Henke; Hesford; Morrison). I will consider textual memoir and film such as: Sil Lai Abrams’s *Black Lotus: A Women’s Search for Racial Identity*, Aspen Matis’s *Girl in the Wood*, Jessica Valenti’s *Sex Object*, and Kirby Dick’s *The Hunting Ground*.

Briefly, I will address how the survivor’s body influences personal testimony. This will speak to the recent criticism that scholars tend to ignore, that is to say, how the body factors into life writing and affects the types of narratives people can tell (Smith & Watson 51). Then, I will engage with both literary and clinical theories of trauma to explore how personal narratives of sexual violence resist the myths that have been used to subjugate survivors. Leigh Gilmore states that personal testimony has a “structural entanglement with the law” (*Trauma and Testimony* 7); historically, the law has exploited memory gaps caused by trauma (Freyd 1998), the way survivors react to trauma (Herman 2003; Lonsway 2009; Lisak; Schwab), nonlinear recollections of trauma (Herman 1997), and cultural rape myths (Hesford; Heberle; Gilmore 2001), in order to discredit survivors’ testimony. Wendy Hesford insists that “strategies of appropriation can subvert dominant rape scripts even if they establish complicity with them” (19). I will analyze the way survivors re-appropriate elements of trauma and rape culture into their narratives, as a form of resistance against the long standing practice of silencing and discrediting

survivors' testimony, and as a means of reasserting their political agency.

- Freyd, Jennifer. *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*. Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Cornell University Press, 2001.
- . *Autobiographics: Feminist Theory of Women's Self Representation*. Cornell University Press, 1994.
- Heberle, Renee. "Deconstructive Strategies and the Movement Against Sexual Violence." *Hypatia*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1996, pp. 63-76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810392>. Accessed 13 Nov. 2015.
- Henke, Suzette A. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*. St. Martin's Press, 1998.
- Herman, Judith Lewis. "The Mental Health of Crime Victims." *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, vol. 16, no. 2, April 2003, pp. 159-167.
- . *Trauma and Recovery*. Basic Books, 1997.
- Hesford, Wendy. "Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation." *Haunting Violations: Feminist Criticism and the Crisis of the "Real,"* edited by Wendy Hesford, Wendy Kozol, University of Illinois Press, 2001, pp. 13-46.
- Kadar, Marlene. "Coming to Terms: Life Writing." *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*. University of Toronto Press, 1992, pp. 1-16.
- Lisak, David, et al. "False Allegations of Sexual Assault: An Analysis of Ten Years of Reported Cases," *Violence Against Women*, vol. 16, no. 12, 2010, pp. 1318-
- Lonsway, Kimberly A., et al. "False Reports: Moving Beyond the Issue to Successfully Prosecute Non-Stranger Sexual Assault." *The Voice*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1-11.
- Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory." *Crucial Conversations: Interpreting Contemporary American Literary Autobiographies by Women*, edited by Jeanne Braham, Teachers College Press, 1995, pp 68-87.
- Schwab, Gabriele. *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*. Columbia University Press, 2010. Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julie Watson. *Reading Autobiography*. 2nd ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Trauma e testemunho: desconstruindo narrativas de violência sexual nas memórias contemporâneas

De acordo com Marlene Kadar, a escrita da vida se desenvolveu de um gênero para uma prática crítica, e como resultado, "somos capazes de reconsiderar as possíveis funções da escrita da vida agora" (11). Meu artigo explora como sobreviventes de estupro usam diferentes formas de escrita da vida para desafiar suposições sobre violência sexual. Mitos sobre estupros que formam a cultura do estupro tendem a remover a culpa pelo

assédio dos estupradores e relocar essa culpa para os sobreviventes, utilizando-se de táticas de culpabilização envolvendo vestidos “inapropriados”, uso de substâncias, a relação da vítima com o criminoso e a própria definição de estupro. Essas crenças penetrantes sobre a culpabilidade e responsabilidade sobre as mulheres que são estupradas são enormemente responsáveis pela falta de respeito que os sobreviventes enfrentam no sistema judicial. Como estudantes de cinegrafia e literatura, devemos questionar: a que ponto nossas práticas narrativas influenciam a cultura de estupro? Técnicas narrativas convencionais restringem o testemunho do sobrevivente; entretanto, a escrita da vida sobre o trauma resiste a essas estruturas opressivas e oferece uma saída criativa para os sobreviventes identificarem e refutarem ideologias dominantes sobre violência que, no passado, impediram-nos de entender ou de se identificar com seus assédios, além de permitir ao sobrevivente reivindicar um sentido de agência política dentro dessa situação precária (Gilmore 1994; Henke; Hesford; Morrison). Considerarei memórias textuais e filmes como: ‘Black Lotus: A Women’s Search for Racial Identity’, de Sil Lai Abrams; ‘Girl in the Wood’, de Aspen Matis; ‘Sex Object’, de Jessica Valenti; e ‘The Hunting Ground’, de Kirby Dick.

Brevemente, tratarei de como o corpo do sobrevivente influencia o testemunho pessoal, conversando com recentes críticas que estudantes tendem a ignorar, ou seja, como o corpo age como um fator na escrita da vida e afeta os tipos de narrativas que as pessoas podem contar (Smith&Watson 51). Em seguida, abordarei teorias literárias e clínicas sobre trauma para explorar como narrativas pessoais de violência sexual resistem aos mitos que têm sido usados para subjugar sobreviventes. Leigh Gilmore afirma que o testemunho pessoal tem um “enredamento estrutural com a Lei” (‘Trauma and Testimony’ 7); historicamente, a lei tem explorados lacunas de memória causadas por traumas (Freyd 1998), o modo como os sobreviventes reagem ao trauma (Herman 2003; Lonsway 2009; Lisak; Schwab), lembranças não lineares de trauma (Herman 1997) e mitos culturais sobre estupro (Hesford; Heberle; Gilmore 2001), objetivando desacreditar o testemunho dos sobreviventes. Wendy Hesford insiste que “estratégias de apropriação podem subverter roteiros de estupro mesmo que estabeleçam cumplicidade com eles” (19). Analisarei a maneira como os sobreviventes se reapropriam de elementos do trauma e da cultura de estupro nas suas narrativas, como uma forma de resistência contra a prática de longa data de silenciar e tirar a credibilidade dos testemunhos dos sobreviventes e como um meio de reafirmar sua agência política.

[Traduzido por Juliana Geizy Marques de Souza - julianamrqs0@gmail.com]

Amanda Spallacci is a first year PhD student in the Department of English and Film Studies, where she studies under Dr. Julie Rak, and her dissertation is titled “Deconstructing Rape Narratives.” Amanda published a blog post on the IABA SNS website, and contribution to the SNS Forum in the special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography*

IABAA 2017 – Lives Outside the Lines: A Symposium in Honour of Marlene Kadar

Studies, “What’s Next?” (Spring 2017). Both pieces explore sexual assault narratives as they appear in auto/biography genre.