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moment the shattering of perceptual frameworks for the listener. Listening to trauma requires that we attend to the frameworks of sense that underpin our understandings of that violence, and further, such listening resists or explodes these frameworks, which Acosta calls “grammars.” When a survivor tells us a story—related to their own shattered ability to make sense of their situation, the listener can also experience this shattering.

The listener of the survivor narrative ought to dwell in that space of rupture instead of turning away from it. When we hear a story that disrupts our normal abilities to make sense of that story, we need to dwell on the inadequacy of our frameworks of sense, to stay in the feeling of discomfort, unfamiliarity, and fear. We need to make space for survivors to show us worlds that we didn’t know existed. Some modes of listening to survivor storytelling would involve being open to the idea that the violence they are describing may have been invisible to you. This would involve attention to the narrative background that the survivor is providing you. One should be curious and open minded as to how the survivor experienced the harm and how they made sense of the experience, and paying attention to what the survivor needs or asks of you. The ways in which art illustrates to us new forms of music, painting, visual images, survivor stories show us realities and experience formerly beyond our comprehension. These forms of listening create something new—something new for the narrator and something new for the listener. Acosta refers to this listening as making audible a story that our frameworks have been consigned to silence. Just as the survivor lives in a space where their sense of perception has been destroyed, so too does the listener of the story. When we listen, we create a new form of self, and when we are listened to, we have the chance to construct ourself anew.

We run the risk of erasing, ignoring, and obscuring violence that doesn’t make sense to us if we don’t see how oppressive norms, values, and structures mediate our own narrative self-understandings. Some examples of these conditions are the ways in which sexual violence against sex workers, the incarcerated, or undocumented migrants are rendered unperceivable under the eyes of the law.⁴⁹ These discursive conditions influence our capacity to listen to survivors of sexual violence and dignify their narratives. Acosta’s grammars of listening combat these discursive conditions by disrupting frameworks of sense that result from structural violence. By framing the practice of listening as aesthetic, she addresses the pre-reflective and sensuous realm of experience.

Forms of listening cut to the heart of a problem of subject-construction under oppressive material conditions. The frameworks of sense-making are themselves organized by oppressive political systems, and it is through a careful practice of listening that we have a chance at rupturing them. Grammars of listening involve a method of listening to survivors that addresses the systemic reproduction of sexual violence. Acosta helps set the conceptual groundwork for the production of fundamentally new narrative selves that desire worlds where we don’t have to rely on punishment or the incarceration of bodies for “protection.” In order to create something like these new

selves, we must employ grammars of listening. We can hear more stories of sexual violence as morally significant, and we can build a world that meets the needs of all survivors.

GENEALOGY AND ARCHIVAL GAPS

In order to engage in narrative care, revealing discursive conditions for intelligibility is indispensable. Genealogical and historicizing work discloses those conditions. Hartman does genealogical work that reveals how we tell stories about Black women. Her work is a testament to the kind of care needed to create genealogies of gender, race, and sexual violence. And specifically, I argue that this type of genealogical construction or awareness of historical context is needed in order to avoid shortcomings of the type of empathy which I highlight in section 2. I interpret Hartman as inviting us to reflect on the normative grounds of empathy. It is important to highlight that empathy is not an oppressive emotion in and of itself. On the contrary, it is notably important for the success of radical political struggles. As an emotion that manifests in a set of historical and psychic contexts, its very manifestation and success is constituted by (and dependent on) those very contexts. Instead of an a-critical focus on empathy, Hartman’s work in the archive and her use of genealogy invites us to examine emotions and affects that are present in politics by illustrating and naming those historical contexts. In particular, Hartman’s reflections on historiography reveal the discursive conditions of intelligibility that mediate our understandings of sexual violence, race, carcerality, and gender. She engages with historical archives to explore the experiences of the American enslaved and freed Black experiences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵⁰ Her early work was preoccupied with undermining the central values and tenets of liberalism (freedom, dignity, citizenship, sovereignty) that have been used towards Black Emancipation. Instead, she illustrates how the social production of those concepts helped to maintain domination, captivity, and subjugation of Black bodies.

Hartman’s claim is that there is a continued and sustained reliance upon white perspectives to narrate experiences of violence against the Black enslaved. She explores this problem in her 2008 article, “Venus in Two Acts,” describing finding a legal indictment of a slave ship captain for the murder of two enslaved women.⁵¹ One is a woman named Venus and the other is an unnamed girl. She explains that the legal documents, ships record, and bills of sale, i.e., “the archive,” are riddled with scenes of violence against these two girls.⁵² There are some particularly horrible narrations from the crew members of the sexual violence that these women and other slaves on this ship were subject to. Even sympathetic narrations to the enslaved were dominated by the white abolitionist’s perspectives.⁵³

In the archive, Hartman often faces scenes of violation and violence against the Black enslaved, both from the perspectives of the slave trader or master and that of the abolitionists. She notes that there is little in the archive from the perspective of the enslaved themselves. She writes:

And these stories are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess . . . transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified

them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is . . . a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property . . . a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.⁵⁴

Hartman feels a responsibility to move beyond the excess of the reproduction of scenes of violence she reads in the archive. From her perspective, to merely reproduce the scene of violence from the outside crucially misses the particular perspective of the Black enslaved themselves. This reverberates forward with our contemporary politics.

Hartman identifies how discursive possibility and conditions are informed by the voices in the archive and the voices that are not in the archive. This genealogical work is indispensable for narrative care to occur. When we consider our hermeneutic and normative resources for our stories as historically produced, we may ask how they came to be. Genealogy is a practice of arranging events so that we destabilize concepts, values, and norms that we take for granted because we see that our histories are contingent and thereby subject to change.

By engaging with the archive in the way she does, Hartman sets herself up to be doing a type of second-order narration, or meta-narration. Contrast this, for example, with Hamington's form of empathetic imagination. Hamington takes his conception of empathy as a first-order process. That is, Hamington takes the process of empathy wherein one produces images from a given set of empirical data. The empathetic process extends from access to a material reality, and the caring imagination allows one to extrapolate from that first-order interaction and establish emotional investment across different cultural contexts.⁵⁵ Hartman's historicizing and genealogical work, on the contrary, places what she examines—the seemingly objective data in the archive—into a narrative context: [what is there and what is not, and who has left it out and why.] In this sense, Hartman develops a type of meta narration—a second-order narrative context that seeks to fill in the gaps of history without reducing them to empirical givens. We may think that, by filling in those gaps, she is making the same kind of mistake as Hamington, but it is her use of genealogy and historicizing that prevents her from making that mistake. Through this activity she destabilizes her own position as an archivist, historian, philosopher, and narrator. She holds the stories of these women at an ambivalent distance, and expresses her own worries about what feeds her and others' desires.

I conclude by showing how Hartman develops a method to respond to our historical discursive conditions called "critical fabulation," which is an example of narrative care. Critical fabulation is a form of narrative care that is directly related to the type of historical work one does in order to get discursive conditions into view. This section aimed to show that engagement with one's historical specificity and context is indispensable towards acts of narrative care. In order to narrate ourselves, another, and listen with care, we have to see ourselves as situated at the end of a contingent history and genealogy.

CONCLUSION: TWO EXAMPLES

In Hartman's words, critical fabulation is a tool to "tell the impossible story" while highlighting the "impossibility of storytelling."⁵⁶ It involves rearranging the "fabula," i.e., discrete but related events, of a story. Shifting narrative causality is an aspect of critical fabulation, which also involves narrative restraint. That restraint, for Hartman, is articulated as a refusal to fill in gaps or "provide closure";⁵⁷ it signals the presence of the "Black noise" that underlies the experience of the transatlantic slave trade but is not captured by the archive: "shrieks, moans, nonsense, opacity."⁵⁸

Critical fabulation is a hermeneutic as well as a method. It's a form of storytelling that also brings into view the practices and investments that inform the storytelling process. Hartman's *Wayward Lives* is a practice of critical fabulation: it documents young Black women's stories at the turn of the twentieth century in Harlem and Philadelphia.⁵⁹ The characters are figures that Hartman discovered in the archive. She follows their lives closely, engaging in the form of close narration—a first- and third-person narration style where the narrator and the character are inseparable.

Hartman employs critical fabulation to handle scenes of sexual violence and coercion with care. In a story entitled "A Minor Figure," Hartman unpacks a photo of a young Black girl found in the belongings of the infamous photographer Thomas Eakins. Eakins was a prominent artist in Philadelphia who was subject to scrutiny when accused of coercing women to pose for him in the nude. While the complaints of white upper-class women students of his are well documented, Hartman notes that little is known about a photograph found in his possession of a nude Black child reclined on a couch.⁶⁰ There is no documentation of her name, and amongst the list of Eakin's victims she is not accounted for. Hartman tries to imagine the story of the child.

She left the studio exactly as the way she came: down the four flights of stairs into the rectangular garden with the row of elephant ears, past the water hydrant, the four cats and the setter, exiting through the wooden fence back onto Eighteenth Street, and then made her way back home. Was she able to settle back into her life or did this latest violence leave a mark, a record as indelible as the photograph? . . . As the photograph makes plain, her body was already marked by a history of sexual defilement, already branded as a commodity. Its availability to be used, to be hurt, was foundational to the prevailing set of social arrangements, in which she was formally free and vulnerable to the triple jeopardy of economic, racial and sexual violence.⁶¹

Hartman overlays the words of the text over a faded image of the photo. She refuses to clearly reproduce the image of violence. She will not make a spectacle of the image. She tries to imagine the narrative she does not have access to—how the girl felt, what it meant for her to leave the studio. But Hartman complicates her authority as narrator. She does not claim, even from her careful study in the

archive, to know the truth of what happened. She narrates a possibility, one outcome of the event.⁶² She uses first- and third-person narration, and this oscillation between forms produces an ambiguous affect, where the reader tries to latch onto any narrative intelligibility and have it yanked from them, their perceptual senses inadequate to the task of full comprehension.

Critical fabulation allows Hartman to center Black women's perspectives and Black women's relationships, even with a sparse archive, rather than exclusively centering the scene of violence and the perspective of the rapist. She reflects the ambivalence she finds in the narratives, feeling on one hand a desire for romance and whimsy for these women and on the other a commitment to honestly recording their experience of violation. Her words at the end remind us of how the violent use and abuse of Black women's bodies is a historical fact that directly influences our contemporary discursive conditions. Violence against Black women in the United States was a routine practice that organized an entire system of subjugation. And we must remake our perceptual capacities through and against this historical phenomenon.

Critical Fabulation is an example of narrative care as I defined it above—a perspective that crucially responds to the fraught discursive terrain of storytelling and sexual violence. It is a method that historicizes the practice of storytelling in order to reveal the conditions that produce the ability to tell stories. Engaging in critical fabulation entails some risk: there is always the possibility that one is romanticizing a perspective, or distorting, or projecting one's desires. This process is not politically pure, and it is possible to produce uncaring narration from fabulation. However, Hartman and others show that by engaging with genealogical accounts and framing the words and values within a contingent (and always revisable) discursive framework, we have a better chance to tell stories in caring ways.

Feminist philosophy brings to light the personal as a site of theorizing, and this move fundamentally changes the way in which we do philosophy and the project of political storytelling. Understandings of care, however, are never purely abstract but constantly affected by our lived practices and investments. Some of my personal experiences have been crucial in shaping this understanding of care. My *Popo*, or 婆婆 (translates from Cantonese to "grandmother"), suffers from multiple conditions that impact her mobility, one of which led to a successful but intense spinal surgery in 2021. She was then released to a rehab facility to face a long and difficult recovery. The facility's understaffing and budget cuts in addition to the language barrier between her and the nurses led to harmful neglect of my grandmother. A product of racist, xenophobic, ageist, ableist, and classist structures, this neglect led to the accumulation of bedsores during her time there, which by the time she left had developed into open wounds. Upon her release from the rehab facility, she went to live with my mother and sister. My sister and my mother worked tirelessly to heal the wounds. This proved difficult because the wounds had routinely been wrapped in damp bandages without being treated with antibiotics and, therefore, never healed. Committed healing involved my mother and sister

cleaning and changing the bandages multiple times a day for several months. My sister cut the bandages into particular shapes that kept them from getting damp. She applied a series of creams. Some of them were for healing, some were for comfort. Getting *Popo* ready for bed was an extensive process, which involved a series of moisturizing and massage techniques to make sure she was nice and comfortable at bedtime.

When I first came back to help my mom and sister, the sight of the wounds really frightened me. I was raised by my grandmother and had been used to the image of her standing upright, her mouth in a tight firm line or yelling at me in Cantonese. I had to adjust to seeing her so vulnerable and in so much pain. But my sister brought an odd sense of fun to the process. She would tease my grandma, she laughed at my squeamishness, she made games out of placing the bandages. And every time we would lift *Popo* into her bed, my sister would say, "Now we have to hug her to lift her! It's her favorite part!" The kind of care my grandmother needed took time, attention, and experimentation. It took us a while to find the right combination of creams, the right bandage configuration, and the right changing schedule. It involved mistakes, pain, and humor. We also needed to continually ask *Popo* how she felt, and what felt good and what was working.

I share my story as an example of narrative care. In telling this narrative I exemplify how narrative care may be extended beyond stories of sexual violence: it's a method that can be used across political contexts. I attend to the details of my grandmother's story. I see her experience as important to narrate and treat it in a loving manner, but also in a way that pays attention to the structural and systemic causes of her maltreatment. I narrate this moment of coming up against understanding (being frightened) but pushing through my lack of understanding to gain new perspective. I shared this story in order to show that my own thoughts and views are not really my own, but passed to me by the people that I love and my care community. And they are open to correction—my grandmother will likely have edits in my retellings of her experience.

In this paper, I have shown that a method of narrative care is needed for feminist political storytelling. Brison offers us a conceptual schema to think about narratives, selves, and politics through the study of trauma. That conceptual schema, however, presents a fundamental puzzle—one that has political and ethical stakes for survivors. Given that we are constituted by the social narratives that surround us, how do we change ourselves? And further, how do we use our self-transformation to change that social world? I believe this kind of attention to discursive conditions of survivor narrations can lead us to be critical of carceral politics and supportive of prison abolitionist politics, but I will not be able to go into that work in this paper.

I have argued that political storytelling must pick up this puzzle through a multiplicity of methods subsumed by the term *narrative care*—a process of writing and narrating for ourselves and for others and listening deeply with an attention to the particular and a curiosity for what you don't yet understand. Women of color feminist theory

is at the forefront of this methodological production, precisely because it directly engages in the theoretical heart of self-making under oppressive material, discursive, and epistemic conditions. We employ narrative care to bring forth stories that have been silenced, obscured, or unnarrated and produce new social narratives so that these selves have places to thrive. We can tell stories about those who have gone unnarrated, even as we pay close attention to ourselves as narrators. By attending to these histories, we build new worlds towards the future. Narrative care can help us see the truthful logics of domination that are illustrated by our survivor narratives, and we can consciousness-raise towards beautiful radical ends.

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NOTES

1. The term “narrative care” emerged from my participation in Fanny Söderbäck’s seminar on *Singularity, Vulnerability, Narration*. Söderbäck’s work on “Narration as a Practice of Care” and the discussions of the class were influential for this work: I am deeply indebted to them.
2. Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History.”
3. Brison, *Aftermath*, 41.
4. Brison, *Aftermath*, 71.
5. Brison, *Aftermath*, 82.
6. Brison, *Aftermath*, 50.
7. Laub, *Testimony Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*; cited in Brison, *Aftermath*, 58.
8. Brison, *Aftermath*, 71.
9. Brison, *Aftermath*, 66.
10. I take this language from Hilde Lindemann’s text *Damaged Identities and Narrative Repair*. She brings in these terms to show how cultural master narratives can be oppressive and an individual’s “counter narrative” can rupture them.
11. Phillips, “‘They’re Rapists.’ President Trump’s Campaign Launch Speech Two Years Later, Annotated.”
12. For more information on the topic of carceral feminism, please see Mindy Gottschalk’s text *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America*.
13. Macintyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*.
14. Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 216.
15. Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 208.
16. Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 209.
17. Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 210.
18. Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*.
19. Foucault, “The Subject and Power.”
20. Wynter’s argument on narrativity relates to a general claim on the general construction of the human as both bio-evolutionary produced as well as socially discursive. Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter To My Colleagues,” 5.
21. Noddings, “Why Care About Caring?” 10–11.
22. Tronto, “An Ethic of Care,” 16.
23. This critique is informed and inspired by Kelly Gawel’s work on radical care. Gawel argues that care ethicists take for granted the social and material conditions in which caring emotions manifest. As a result, this often leads to unequal distributions of care labor and naïve and vindictory arguments on engrossment, empathy, and self-sacrifice. Gawel, “Radical Care: Seeking New and More Possible Meetings in the Shadows of Structural Violence.”
24. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.
25. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 17.
26. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 18.
27. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 18.
28. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.
29. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.
30. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.
31. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 21.
32. Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 64.
33. For more information on debates around this issue, see Sylvia Tamale’s work *African Sexualities, a Reader*, or Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*.
34. Brison, *Aftermath*, 102.
35. For more information on this type of abolitionist feminism, see Amia Srinivasan’s chapter on carceral feminism in her book *The Right to Sex*.
36. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 32.
37. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 32.
38. The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Non credere di avere dei diritti*; cited in Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 55.
39. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 55.
40. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 56.
41. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 53.
42. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 56.
43. Narrating others is an indispensable and unavoidable dynamic in feminist politics, but when done without care can reproduce oppressions that survivors face. See Linda Martin Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991–1992): 5–32.
44. María del Rosario Acosta López, “Gramáticas de lo inaudito as Decolonial Grammars: Notes for a Decolonization of Listening,” *Research in Phenomenology* 52 (2022): 203–22.
45. del Rosario Acosta López, “Gramáticas de lo inaudito as Decolonial Grammars,” 207.
46. María del Rosario Acosta López, “From Aesthetics of Critique to Grammars of Listening: On Reconfiguring Sensibility as a Political Task,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 6 (Summer 2021): 141.
47. López, “From Aesthetics of Critique,” 143.
48. López, “From Aesthetics of Critique,” 146.
49. NHI is the legal acronym for No Humans Involved. Sylvia Wynter and Jackie Wang in different places of their text illustrate the categorical logic that legal linguistic implements to designate who is a victim, criminal, and thus “human” (see Sylvia Wynter, “‘No Human Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues”; Jackie Wang, “Against Innocence,” *Lies Journal*, 2012). NHI is often used to classify the jobless, homeless, sex worker, and migrants, and thereby organizes liability and criminal activity based on this status.
50. Specifically, Hartman is working within the context of the United States’ archives and the perspectives of the black enslaved American experiences.
51. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 1.
52. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 5.

53. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 5.
54. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2.
55. Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 69.
56. Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 11.
57. Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 12.
58. Hamington, *Embodied Care*, 12.
59. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*.
60. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 17.
61. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 29.
62. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 80. "Atlas of the Wayward."

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Surviving the System: Justice and Ambiguity in the Aftermath of Sexual Violence

Marie-Pier Lemay
CARLETON UNIVERSITY

In her essay "The Woman Who Stayed Silent" published in 2022, Sarah Polley returns to her decision not to join other complainants in the 2016 Canadian criminal trial against radio host Jian Ghomeshi. She chose not to report her sexual assault that happened two decades before the trial. Polley describes how her ambivalence towards Ghomeshi and the assault through all these years (often retold in a lighthearted way as *just* a bad date) would impact her credibility as a victim of sexual violence. She recalls how the attorneys she consulted in connection to her sexual assault discouraged her from pressing charges against her assailant, saying that they would never recommend a woman they love press criminal charges for rape; she was told that going forward would be "The most stressful thing [she]’d ever experienced."¹

Yet, we do have this persisting archetype of a heroic sexual violence survivor successfully pressing charges against their assailant and overcoming their trauma in a court setting ending with a guilty verdict. The reality, as I show, is often more complex and intricate. In this short essay, I explore how the demand to be a *good* survivor of sexual violence is constituted through the criminal-legal process,² which undermines survivors’ ability to heal and pursue accountability and justice on their terms. Victims may feel ambivalent about how to move forward and pressured to perform survivorhood, which is only realized through criminal prosecution. The aftermath of sexual violence can be more morally ambiguous and confusing than it appears in mainstream narratives of justice; either one seeks justice through traditional means, or one avoids the second victimization that often plagues victims who go through criminal-legal processes. As much as we collectively expect crimes to be punished, we expect that victims will go through criminal proceedings; failure to do so can be seen as a failure to conform oneself to norms of good survivorhood, and thereby amounts to a moral failure.

Inspired by Susan Brison’s philosophical method in her book *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*—interweaving first-person narratives, social science research, and feminist philosophy—this paper explores how moral expectations in the aftermath of sexual violence are shaped by the criminal-legal system.³ When someone acknowledges that they survived an instance of sexual violence, this often raises the question of what should follow, which may trigger a moral ambiguity about how one must act. I describe the moral ambiguity of people who experienced sexual violence as a set of beliefs or behaviors that seemingly exhibit indecisiveness or inconsistent choices regarding what they might do in the aftermath; for instance, victims may regret or be hesitant about participating in the criminal process. In addition to being influenced by the criminal-legal options, good

survivorhood is often fashioned through an individualized framework, preventing us from seeing the structural nature of the violence that happened. The aftermath, I show, often takes the form of a double-bind, where victims must perform enough agency and survivor traits on one hand, while at the same time they must demonstrate the traits of being a victim.

To proceed, I first show that, when an instance of sexual violence is recognized as such, we expect survivors to seek justice through the criminal-legal system. Good survivorship is often actualized through pressing charges against perpetrators of violence where there is no place for ambiguity. I explore how horizons of accountability and justice for sexual violence are shaped by survivor myths and the individualization of the aftermath of sexual violence. I argue that the criminal-legal frame of justice cannot make room for survivors' ambiguity, the latter of which can be a space of healing. Later, I reflect on what we might learn from recent work by abolitionist feminists about the entanglement of the aftermath of sexual violence within the carceral, criminal, and legal framework. The tension between the individual nature of sexual violence and the collective and political meaning of its punishment deserves more critical and normative attention in feminist philosophy.

FROM RAPE MYTHS TO SURVIVOR MYTHS

The type of story I mentioned above about Polley's hesitation in pressing charges matters for thinking through the aftermath of sexual violence. It allows us to grapple with the high-stakes dilemma survivors may experience in wondering whether it is the right decision to press charges for an instance of sexual violence against someone they know. I acknowledge that this is an unusual case because survivors of sexual violence often do not recognize and name the violence that happened to them. In this section I argue that rape myths shape our collective and individual understanding of sexual violence, and in particular that they shape how victims recover from sexual violence.

Rape myths are beliefs that make us less likely to believe people who experienced sexual violence when they disclose this to us or to service providers. Rape myths—such as “she was asking for it,” “most rapes are committed by strangers,” “false rape accusations are common,” or “a husband cannot rape his wife”—prevent us from identifying common instances of sexual violence, simultaneously “minimizing” victims' credibility and harm while “catastrophizing” the supposed exceptional character of sexual violence.⁴ In practice, these myths may impact access to services in the aftermath by rape victims because they may not be seen as “real” victims by service providers (e.g., doctors, social workers, attorneys, police officers) or their immediate community.⁵ Survivors themselves can fall into rape myths when they intend to understand what happened to them. Because sexual assaults often do not follow a *clear* narrative of a stranger attacking someone (e.g., the case of a date rape such as the one described by Polley), they render victims vulnerable to hermeneutical injustice, in which they are unable to identify the situation as involving sexual assault because they lack the conceptual resources to do so.⁶

Concurrently with rape myths that assign the responsibility of an instance of sexual violence to victims themselves (i.e., victim-blaming), survivor myths individualize responsibility by making victims responsible for their recovery.⁷ I argue that there is not only pressure on survivors regarding how they should have behaved before and during the event, but there is also pressure in the aftermath of violence, when victims recognize that the harm of what happened to them is rife with social expectations of how to “move forward” after sexual violence. If a victim recognizes what happened to them as sexual violence, victims may feel pressured, as a result, to press charges and seek justice through traditional means. Hence, a failure to do so discredits their survivor identity. In the aftermath of violence, rape myths, through survivor narratives, constrain and silence people who experienced sexual violence. As I will contend later, the necessity to keep a coherent account of victimization, in case one goes through the criminal-legal system, silences ambiguity experienced by the victims.

According to more mainstream versions of the #MeToo movement, one becomes a survivor by denouncing and refusing to be silent; survivors must follow a teleological path from victimhood to (criminal) justice and recovery.⁸ The rape myths that persist in the aftermath may make the survivor believe that there is only one right way to present oneself as a survivor, exacerbating the ambiguity that might be felt by them. The rich social science literature on norms of survivorhood is helpful for grappling with this individual responsibility for recovery; that is, victims are individually tasked to find remedies to the structural problem of sexual violence.⁹ Stephanie R. Larson conceptualizes what she calls “compulsory survivorship,” highlighting the need to individually overcome violence and take personal responsibility for the effects of violence. She shows how this disdain of victimhood is rooted in a denial of pain and celebration of the able-bodied, neoliberal, and independent individual.¹⁰ Failing to perform survivorhood becomes a personal failing, rather than a societal one. People who experienced sexual violence bear “the responsibility for surmounting social ills through individual efforts, in a context where social remedies are sorely lacking.”¹¹ Victims become virtuous survivors through individual empowerment, not through community and collective empowerment.

The myth of survivorhood does not give enough room for the complex moral ambiguity that can characterize the aftermath of violence; the figure of the survivor allows for some anger, but not too much. Erinn Gilson writes about this impossible double-bind survivors may experience in these terms: “to be ‘good,’ ‘true’ victims, women must be vulnerable—weak and incapable—but simultaneously agential, perfectly rational, and calculating about how best to document and prove their victimization, yet never so rational as to be perceived as unemotional (contrary to normative gender expectations) or manipulative (aligning with tropes of ‘bad’ femininity).”¹² This double-bind, where victims must perform their victimization while showing how successful they are at resisting, is also present in many cases of domestic violence. As argued by Paige Sweet, domestic violence survivors must respond to similar social expectations of sexual violence survivors in

order to be deemed credible and legible to the eyes of the law and service providers.¹³ As Sweet shows, while domestic violence survivors must be “successful” in their embodiment of survivorhood (i.e., through trauma therapy and self-help strategies) for accessing resources, they must at the same time convince criminal-legal authorities that they are, indeed, victims.

Making victims individually responsible for their recovery shapes their ability to imagine justice beyond the criminal-legal system. Indeed, how can one think about recovering through collective means when they are deemed responsible for overcoming their pain? Seeing the aftermath of violence as an individual project realized through myths of survivorhood shapes horizons of justice.

LIMITED HORIZONS OF JUSTICE

The social expectations are that to be a *good* victim or a *good* survivor is to seek criminal prosecution, which may in turn pressure victims into seeking criminal-legal options. In this section, I focus on how survivors are pressured to enter into the criminal-legal process and how they are revictimized as a result. For sexual violence survivors, horizons of justice appear to be limited to the criminal-legal system despite the fact that alternatives to criminal prosecution might be available. If we expect that harmful and immoral behavior, such as a rape, must be criminally punished, this implies that we expect that victims of sexual violence must go forward and press charges. In *Just Sex*, Nicola Gavey writes that the way in which the law distinguishes rape from non-rape affects how survivors perceive themselves and understand their experience of violence; the legal definition of rape demarcates victims, even if one does not go through the process of pressing charges.¹⁴ As a result, the aftermath of sexual violence is intertwined with legal definitions of sexual violence. Thinking about instances of sexual violence that happened to us through a “legal consciousness”¹⁵ not only individualizes the accountability and the remedy for what happened, but silences remaining ambiguity, as I will show in the third section.

Pressing charges for a sexual crime is known for creating a second victimization for those that have been first victimized by sexual violence. The combination of rape and survivor myths work in tandem to impact service and legal responses to disclosures of sexual assault. Jurist Elaine Craig¹⁶ quotes a Toronto woman who filed a complaint and expressed that much of her trauma is not related to her sexual assault *per se*, but to the brutality of the criminal-legal system. As Craig highlights, while Canada has become one of the countries with laws that are the most progressive in terms of protecting sexual assault complainants, reporting rates of sexual assaults have not risen since the law changed.¹⁷ As she writes, “Perhaps most disappointingly, given that the aim of many of these reforms was to protect complainants from the discriminatory and traumatizing treatment they endured as witnesses in sexual assault trials, women continue to report their experiences of the sexual assault trial process as brutal and inhumane.”¹⁸

The second victimization, however, is not limited to the court process itself. The horizon of justice provided by the criminal system can be additionally observed in the

state’s efforts to provide care, even when it is not actively being used to seek justice. Sameena Mulla’s ethnographic research in Baltimore in the *Violence of Care*¹⁹ analyzes the peculiar standpoint of forensic nurses that need to simultaneously perform care for women who experienced sexual violence while collecting forensic evidence that could be used if women were to press charges for what happened to them. She persuasively argues that this cold and antiseptic first response to sexual violence, centered on the need to collect evidence (e.g., DNA) for potential prosecution, is a form of violence and injustice for survivors. People who have experienced sexual violence do not get the justice they deserve as a first response to their traumatic experience.²⁰ This body of work highlights the entanglement between medical and criminal responses to sexual violence.

The politically charged dilemma faced by victims, who, in order to become survivors are expected to speak out about their experiences, often takes the form of entering a long and excruciating criminal process. The dichotomy established between the complainant and the perpetrator in a criminal setting further contributes to the individualization of responsibility for sexual violence. The process of filing charges for sexual violence can involve long wait times and requires the survivor to relive their experience in court, even years after the event, and to leave all traces of moral ambiguity behind. In her book, Brison helpfully distinguishes the retelling that happens in court from the one in a therapeutic space; within a criminal setting, the emphasis on “getting the story right” superseded the acknowledgment of harm done to the victim—a point to which I will return shortly.²¹ If one decides to go forward because, above all, one is seeking to receive some form of apology, as soon as we enter the criminal realm, it is not in the interest of the perpetrator to apologize, or to offer any reparations for what they did, because to do so would be an admission of guilt. Instead, it is in the interest of the perpetrator and their defense attorney to wholly deny what happened (or to argue that it was consensual for both parties). Because of the nature of the cross-examination of the victim by the defense attorney in court settings, legal scholars John Conley, William Barr, and Robin Riner argue that “all too often [. . .] the courtroom reenactment results in the victim being blamed for the crime.”²² As the state is legally the accuser, and the victim the witness, in criminal cases, the victim must partially relinquish their agency in the criminal proceedings while still being responsible—at least in some cases—for the decision of whether to prosecute.

Within this criminal setting, sexual violence survivors often find themselves in a double-bind where either they choose to remain silent or they choose to prosecute. In practice, victims may find themselves in a situation where either they follow what is expected for them (pressing charges) or they avoid the common second victimization of victims that go through the criminal-legal system. We expect survivors to be “brave” while being victimized enough to keep their credibility intact in legal proceedings. Therefore, people who have experienced sexual violence find themselves in a situation where their agency and victimization are in conflict. Performing a pristine view of victimhood may be

more challenging when the violence was done by someone we know because we often belong to the same community as the person who assaulted us. From this conflicting terrain, I argue that the focus on reporting and pursuing criminal complaints tends to isolate and pathologize the complex moral emotions experienced by survivors. Indeed, the hesitation to report or the ambivalence some survivors may feel towards their perpetrators may be construed as a failure to be a heroic survivor standing up for themselves.

The choice not to report or to pursue criminal prosecution is often equated with remaining silent, and so the moral dilemma that characterizes the “duty to report” in the current criminal system can be interpreted as a lack of self-respect. Overcoming sexual violence becomes an individual endeavor that is only realized through the criminal prosecution of the perpetrator. The narrative of a *perfect victim* harmed by a *monster* obscures the structural dimension of sexual violence. Moreover, this individualization of sexual violence hinders ways of seeing perpetrators of violence outside of a “monster narrative,” instead of considering the social structures that lead to the creation of this form of violence. Philosopher Audrey Yap compellingly writes that we lack the resources in our social imagination to recognize that “nice young men” can commit acts of sexual violence and still maintain healthy relationships with family and friends.²³ If we leave behind the idea that the people perpetrating sexual violence are monsters, it allows us all to finally see the fact that violence is often committed by perfectly *normal* men. The time, energy, and emotional readiness required for pressing charges and going through the criminal and legal system is further complicated by the fact that it is the state itself that confronts the perpetrator of violence. It is not, in most cases, the fully agential process that the feminist embrace of the carceral state has promised, as I explore later.

CRIMINAL-LEGAL FRAMES

While most cases of sexual violence do not end up in court, the criminal-legal frame is deeply influential in the ways in which victims make sense of their experiences of sexual violence, and how best to remedy it. Using Kristie Dotson’s notion of “epistemic oppression,”²⁴ Heiner and Tyson write about the “epistemic occupation” of carceral logic; that is, our horizons of justice are shaped by our inability to imagine justice outside of the criminal-legal system.²⁵ Thinking through the criminal-legal frame as occupying our own horizons of justice is helpful to understand how it creates zones of ambiguities for survivors. In this section, I argue (concurrently with Brison’s work on trauma and sexual violence) that the emphasis on clarity, and the underlying dichotomy between victim and perpetrator, within the criminal-legal frames, is harmful for survivors. I suggest that the uncertainty and ambiguity felt by survivors may constitute spaces for healing.

In her book *Aftermath*, Brison details the court process following her assault and notes that it was relatively straightforward due to a number of factors, the most important of which were the physical injuries she sustained that helped to corroborate her account. In many ways, Brison’s assault was paradigmatic of the idea we have of rape: it was committed by a stranger (even though most

sexual assaults are committed by people known to the victim); it was committed in broad daylight in the middle of the day; and it was overtly physically violent.²⁶ Despite being straightforward in all these ways, Brison describes the pain of keeping one’s memory of a traumatic event straight enough to answer questions in court. As she writes, “it seems to me now, there are ways in which having to get—and keep—a trauma narrative straight, for the purpose of a trial, for example, can also impede the process of recovery, hampering the ability to go on.”²⁷ When one goes forward with pressing charges, keeping a coherent testimony in criminal-legal proceedings is not easy for most people who have had a traumatic experience, sexual or otherwise. Brison describes the relief she felt after she gave her testimony in court, as she no longer needed to “keep the story straight. [She] could let go of the details [she]’d kept alive in [her] mind.”²⁸ Going through criminal proceedings often involves for the survivors keeping alive painful memories in minute details to testify in court or, earlier in the process, to answer questions while the sexual crime detective investigates the crime.²⁹

Not only is it difficult to keep a traumatic memory in our minds, but it is also challenging to present it in a coherent manner—even when, as in Brison’s case, it is a comparatively straightforward account. Legal scholars Conley, Barr, and Riner note how, during a court setting, “Trivial inconsistency in [a victim’s] testimony will be blown out of proportion to suggest a fault, if not mendacity.”³⁰ Linda Martín Alcoff writes similarly about the consistency of memories that is expected from people who pressed charges for sexual crimes, arguing that consistency should not be the test of truth in court proceedings given what we know about research on trauma.³¹ In her memoir, Polley gives an account of how trauma impacted her ability to remember any difficult memories before poignantly asking, “What, then, are we to do with the uncomfortable fact that people who have been traumatized do not often have a handle on the whole truth or are covering up some surrounding details of an assault out of shame or embarrassment?”³² The inability to maintain a consistent testimony over a prolonged period undermines one’s credibility as a witness in criminal-legal proceedings, making the victim suffer from a testimonial injustice where they are not believed for the harm they suffered.³³

The binary constructed between the victim and the perpetrator within the criminal-legal frame often implies that the victim leaves aside the affective dimensions of her testimony. Legal scholar Nicola Lacey writes about how often the court process negates the reality of embodiment to embrace clear speech: “the language of embodied existence—of pain, shame, loss of self-esteem, the sense of violation and objectification—find no place within formal legal categories: nothing in those categories invites the victim to construct her testimonial narrative in the terms which empirical research suggests would best relate her experience.”³⁴ Until the criminal-legal process is over, the victim must keep their sexual violence narrative intact while silencing underlying ambiguity.

Because the criminal-legal frame tends to silence survivors’ remaining ambiguity around their instance of sexual

violence, this necessarily shapes how victims understand themselves and the remedies that are available to them. Sexual violence survivors may experience ambiguity about how to seek justice in a way that aligns with their values and philosophical outlooks; this ambiguity may be a space for healing and for seeking alternative frameworks of justice. Sitting with this felt ambiguity may be valuable in itself. People who experienced sexual violence must often turn to other solutions to seek accountability for what happened (or apology of some form) and to leave the detrimental victim/perpetrator binary that is reinforced through the criminal-legal frame.

In her preface to the 2022 edition of *Aftermath*, Brison addresses the practice of punishing and jailing perpetrators of sexual violence, and their rights as defendants in the criminal-legal system. She unambiguously positions herself as an “anti-carceral and anti-racist feminist,”³⁵ refuting the reading some may have had of her work as advocating for criminally punishing perpetrators of sexual violence. As she clarifies, “Even then, I did not think the criminal law was the best way to address sexual violence. The problem is structural and ideological—not one our system of policing and criminal punishment can solve.”³⁶ Along with Brison, I end this essay by exploring this issue further. In the original edition of her book, Brison explores the impact on memory of keeping these often-painful narratives straight for criminal-legal proceedings, while I reflect on how this flattening of testimony and suppressing of ambiguity is inherent to the criminal-legal frame and cannot be transformed within the current criminal-legal system. Critical legal scholars have argued that rape law reforms have had, in practice, little impact on its incidence; furthermore, the nature of the criminal-legal system reproduces inequality in the courtroom.³⁷ In addition to the second victimization often entailed by criminal proceedings, a sexual violence survivor often feels that they cannot express ambivalent feelings around its aftermath. As Brison recently writes, “When the only relevant question to be investigated and decided by the fact-finders is ‘did he do this to her there/then?’ the victim’s testimony about how she experienced the assault and its aftermath in the broader context of life under patriarchy [. . .] is rendered irrelevant and the victim is silenced.”³⁸ Because the courtroom’s focus is on prosecution, it may not be the most appropriate space to respond to victims’ needs for closure or accountability.

Centering survivors’ voices in the search for justice means seriously considering the pain reported by them as they go through the criminal-legal system. While I recognize that some victims may go through the criminal-legal process with the end goal being the prosecution of the perpetrator, we must consider the fact that other victims go forward seeking accountability, closure, and recognition, which survivors may not believe to be accomplished through the current system. As a result, I join other feminist scholars that ask for an alternative framework of justice outside of the criminal-legal frame.³⁹ Seeking alternative justice frameworks could mean that accountability would no longer be reduced to punishing, and incarcerating, the “bad men” (often from our community) that individually perpetuated sexual violence.⁴⁰

Feminist scholars have increasingly looked at the impact of the interplay between the carceral, medical, and legal systems on how people who experienced sexual violence understand themselves and their experience of violence.⁴¹ This body of work complements recent calls to abolish the criminal-legal system, “envisioning a continuum of alternatives to imprisonment.”⁴² Feminist abolitionist thinkers ask us to reimagine accountability for sexual violence outside of the prison-industrial complex and thus reject the logic of punishment and vengeance. To be clear, abolishing the carceral state does not mean letting those who commit acts of violence off the hook. Rather, it is to find alternative ways of seeking justice, centered on the survivor’s needs. As the abolitionist thinker Ruth Wilson Gilmore stresses, “abolition is not primarily about absence—the absence of police and prisons—it is fundamentally about presence.”⁴³ In contrast to the criminal framing of sexual violence, abolitionist thinkers, such as Mariame Kaba, write about “making violence unthinkable in our culture” and about centering accountability on the victims’ healing process.⁴⁴ Abolitionist approaches to justice are amenable to recognizing the ambivalence felt by sexual violence survivors because the focus is not on punishing the “bad men” but on finding ways to create accountability for sexual violence. That being said, I acknowledge that going through community justice initiatives is rarely an option for someone, given how ingrained and prevalent the carceral logic is.

Finding ways to listen to the ambiguity felt by sexual violence survivors matters for collectively grappling with the aftermath of sexual violence. The ambivalence of survivors towards the criminal-legal system must be recognized as meaningful and common, and used to explore alternative frameworks of accountability and justice. Hearing the voices of those who have experienced sexual violence requires allowing for the conflicting dilemmas and pressures they feel as they navigate the aftermath of violence. I hope I have shed some light on such tensions, and on the need for alternative, ambivalent responses.

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NOTES

1. Polley, *Run towards the Danger*, 67.
2. Following critical work on the carceral and criminal system, I refer to this system as the “criminal-legal” process, frame, or options rather than “criminal justice system.” I concur with Anna Terwiel

who did so in her work on carceral feminism “in order to unsettle the assumption that this system delivers justice.” Terwiel, “What Is Carceral Feminism?” 438.

3. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*.
4. Tilton, “Rape Myths, Catastrophe, and Credibility”; cf. Hall, Howard, and Boezio, “Tolerance of Rape: A Sexist or Antisocial Attitude?”
5. Campbell, “The Psychological Impact of Rape Victims”; Campbell and Raja, “Secondary Victimization of Rape Victims: Insights From Mental Health Professionals Who Treat Survivors of Violence.”
6. Jenkins, “Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices.”
7. Gilson, “Responsibility for Sexual Injustices: Toward an Intersectional Account.”
8. Pilipchuk, “Good Survivor, Bad Survivor: # MeToo and the Moralization of Survivorship.”
9. Boyle and Rogers, “Beyond the Rape ‘Victim’–‘Survivor’ Binary: How Race, Gender, and Identity Processes Interact to Shape Distress”; Stringer, *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times*; Ross, “The Survivor Imperative: Sexual Violence, Victimhood, and Neoliberalism”; Larson, “Survivors, Liars, and Unfit Minds: Rhetorical Impossibility and Rape Trauma Disclosure.”
10. Larson, “Survivors, Liars, and Unfit Minds.”
11. Ross, “The Survivor Imperative,” 65.
12. Gilson, “Responsibility for Sexual Injustices,” 9.
13. Sweet, *The Politics of Surviving: How Women Navigate Domestic Violence and Its Aftermath*.
14. Gavey, *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*, Second edition, Women and Psychology.
15. While I borrow the phrasing “legal consciousness” from Sally Engle Merry, I understand that she uses that term to refer to human rights struggles against gender-based violence. See Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice*.
16. Craig, *Putting Trials on Trial: Sexual Assault and the Failure of the Legal Profession*.
17. Craig, “Feminism, Public Dialogue, and Sexual Assault Law.”
18. Craig, *Putting Trials on Trial*, 102.
19. Mulla, *The Violence of Care: Rape Victims, Forensic Nurses, and Sexual Assault Intervention*.
20. In the same vein, anthropologist Sonia Rucic movingly describes a similar narrative in *Care Centres* in South Africa, where, what she calls, a “biocarceral citizenship” is bestowed upon those who seek HIV care after a sexual assault and those who caused sexual harms. The need for the medicalization and criminalization of care for the victims and the perpetrators deprives these individuals of a sense of agency. Rucic, “Biocarceral Citizenship: Criminalizing through Care in Post-Apartheid South Africa.”
21. Brison, *Aftermath*, 102.
22. Conley, O’Barr, and Riner, *Just Words: Law, Language, and Power*, 19.
23. Yap, “Credibility Excess and the Social Imaginary in Cases of Sexual Assault.”
24. Dotson, “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression.”
25. Heiner and Tyson, “Feminism and the Carceral State: Gender-Responsive Justice, Community Accountability, and the Epistemology of Antiviolence.”
26. Brison, *Aftermath*, 2–21.
27. Brison, *Aftermath*, 102.
28. Brison, *Aftermath*, 108.
29. It is vital to not reduce criminal proceedings to the courtroom. Indeed, the criminal investigation, which occurs when one files a complaint, may be revictimizing. Additionally, we should bear

in mind that plea bargains (where typically the perpetrator will plead guilty to a lesser offense to avoid a trial) are more common than trials for cases of sexual violence in the US. Golding et al., “Justice Served? Perceptions of Plea Bargaining Involving a Sexual Assault in Child and Adult Females.”

30. Conley, O’Barr, and Riner, *Just Words*, 19.
31. Alcoff, “Consistency Shouldn’t Be the Test of Truth in Sexual-Assault Cases.”
32. Polley, *Run towards the Danger*, 92.
33. Brison, “What’s Consent Got to Do with It?”; Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*.
34. Lacey, *Unspeakable Subjects: Feminist Essays in Legal and Social Theory*, 116.
35. Brison, *Aftermath*, xii.
36. Brison, *Aftermath*, xii.
37. Conley, O’Barr, and Riner, *Just Words*, 20; See Matoesian, *Reproducing Rape: Domination through Talk in the Courtroom*.
38. Brison, “What’s Consent Got to Do with It?” 15–16.
39. Bernstein, “The Sexual Politics of the ‘New Abolitionism’”; Bumiller, *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement against Sexual Violence*; Goodmark, *Imperfect Victims: Criminalized Survivors and the Promise of Abolition Feminism*; Gruber, *The Feminist War on Crime: The Unexpected Role of Women’s Liberation in Mass Incarceration*; Taylor, “Anti-Carceral Feminism and Sexual Assault—A Defense: A Critique of the Critique of the Critique of Carceral Feminism”; Terwiel, “What Is Carceral Feminism?”
40. See the preface to the 2022 edition of *Aftermath* where Brison makes a similar claim.
41. See the preface to the 2022 edition of *Aftermath* where Brison makes a similar claim.
42. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* 108.
43. Woodyly, *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements, Transgressing Boundaries: Studies in Black Politics and Black Communities*, 118.
44. Kaba, Nopper, and Murakawa, *We Do This ‘til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, 58.

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The Aftermath of Roe v. Wade

Jordan Pascoe
MANHATTAN COLLEGE

In the wake of *Dobbs*, the situation in Louisiana is dire. A woman was forced to endure hours of labor when she miscarried because the hospital refused to perform a fifteen-minute evacuation procedure banned by the state's abortion law.¹ Another woman was turned away from two hospitals when she experienced a miscarriage; neither would confirm that she was experiencing a miscarriage, nor provide care.² In another case, a woman carrying a non-viable fetus missing parts of its skull was forced to travel 1,400 miles to New York City to obtain an abortion.³ She carried the fetus for weeks longer than she might have had she been able to have an abortion nearer home.

These are stories of trauma, and they are not limited to Louisiana: abortion bans are reshaping not just access to abortion, but basic maternal care across the country. In this essay, I explore how Susan Brison's work, which offers a critical, transformative perspective on embodied violations and the experience of trauma in their aftermath, offers us some critical tools of orientation in this new landscape. In other words, I want to think with Brison in another kind of aftermath: the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade*.

Let us begin by acknowledging that the end of *Roe*, since the *Dobbs* decision came down in June of 2022, has been nothing short of a disaster for women and potentially pregnant persons, with impacts that go far beyond the already horrific lack of access to safe, legal abortions, the danger posed to pregnant women and persons, and to doctors providing abortion and prenatal care. The end of *Roe* has transformed health-care standards for women and other potentially pregnant persons, with impacts that reach far beyond pregnancy to access to medication, treatment standards for those with health conditions that make pregnancy dangerous (like cancer, heart and lung disease, MS), and privacy concerns for all menstruating persons. And yet, much of our public debate about abortion remains organized through arguments that are depressingly familiar, especially to those of us who have long taught "the abortion debate" in its standard form in philosophy

courses: we ask, following the Court’s framework in *Roe*, about the rights of the fetus (Is it a person?), and about the state’s duty to “balance the interests” of women and fetuses; we accept the assumption that abortion is a “special” or “exceptional” form of health care, provided primarily in special clinics designed for this purpose, which are then subject to special regulations and risk. But the fallout from the end of *Roe* makes it unavoidably clear that these arguments fail to grasp the kinds of violation that forced gestation entails, and to center the experiences of trauma that state-mandated forced pregnancy, gestation, and childbirth generates.

The question I ask is how should we reframe our understanding of abortion and forced gestation in this new landscape? One problem that philosophers, in particular, face is the serious gaps in our resources for thinking about the question of abortion. As Margaret Olivia Little put it more than two decades ago, “a question of method thus shadows all discussions of abortion”:⁴ a question about what the abortion question, methodologically, is *like*. We inevitably compare the status of the pregnant person and the fetus to conflicts between persons (Is it a kidnapping or an act of self-defense?), but the relation between the pregnant person and the fetus is nothing like other kinds of relations.⁵ And because we have failed to take pregnancy as a paradigmatic feature of what it is to be a person (we are all here, after all, because of a pregnancy), we have failed to build accounts of personhood that take pregnancy as a given, as a normal, essential part of what it is to be human.⁶

I am not asking questions about personhood here, but about method. I suggest that we can draw on Brison’s thinking about violation and trauma to inform conversations about what forced pregnancy is *like*. I mean this in two senses. Brison’s account gives us tools for thinking about embodied trauma and the importance of first-personal experience, which allows us to ask *what it is like* to endure forced gestation and forced childbirth. This can help us reframe an experience that is often overlooked as one that is profoundly traumatic, and in doing so, to make space for first-personal accounts of forced gestation, forced childbirth, and the forms of obstetric abuse that follow from this, in our account of abortion. But it also gives us resources for responding to Little’s methodological question: one thing that forced pregnancy and childbirth are *like* is sexual violation. I begin by drawing on Susan Brison’s *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* to explore the second question: What, conceptually, is forced gestation and childbirth *like*? I will then use Brison’s account of trauma to make some space for thinking about what *experiences* of forced gestation and childbirth, as well as the obstetric harms that follow from abortion bans, are like. Thus, in the first section, I argue that forced gestation and the obstetric harms that follow from abortion bans are best understood as sexual violence, while in the second section I explore how forced gestation and childbirth and obstetric harms shape experiences of trauma that should be understood as serious disruptions of the self.

One note about terminology before I continue. I use the phrase “women or pregnant persons” at various points

throughout this essay. At times I also focus on one or the other. While the class of pregnant persons is not co-extensive with women, one important feature of sexual violence is that it is violence that targets people because of their gender or sexuality. While it is important to be inclusive of pregnant persons who do not identify as women—and to recognize the distinctive harms they face in the aftermath of *Roe*—it is equally important to situate the violence of abortion bans as continuous with forms of sexual violence that have long targeted women because of their gender. Indeed, part of my aim in this piece is to recognize the gendered nature of such violence.

CONCEPTUAL RESOURCES: HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE AFTERMATH OF ROE

Brison’s work is part of a body of work that did not exist when the Court framed *Roe* in 1973: a rigorous conception of the wrong of rape and of the specific nature of embodied violation. These are important resources for thinking through the ways that the wrong of forced pregnancy is akin to the wrong of sexual violation. Both involve a violation of, and an invasion of, the body against one’s will in ways that disrupt one’s self in profound and long-lasting ways. But at the same time, both are so common and so mundane that many assume they are, as Brison puts it, “natural, a given, something not in need of explanation and not amenable to change.”⁷ Like rape, forced gestation and childbirth have been an element of womanhood—and a threat to women’s lives—quite literally forever; the idea that we might encounter these experiences as a serious violation of the self may need some scaffolding.

The feminist literature on forced pregnancy—like its literature on sexual violation—has long centered consent, or the idea that what is wrong with forced gestation is that one is pregnant without one’s consent, and that, therefore, one’s body is being used against one’s will. As we develop better philosophical and legal conceptions of consent with regards to sexual violation—the importance of affirmative consent, of *ongoing* consent, of the right to rescind one’s consent at any point—we would do well to revise our conception of the right to abortion accordingly, taking seriously how the use of one’s body against one’s consent—or after one’s consent has been revoked—is a serious violation. And we would do well to learn from feminist attendance to the ways in which the *conditions* of consent are relevant here: it matters whether I feel that I *can* say no, that I have access to what I need to remove myself from the situation safely, that I can say no for my own reasons, and not only if I have a very good reason to do so. Likewise, it matters whether women or other potentially pregnant persons *can* say no to pregnancy, whether they have access to abortion care, whether they have the resources to access it, whether they can access it safely, and whether they feel that accessing abortion is an option *available* to them. It matters whether they think they can access an abortion simply because they need one, or if they believe they would need a really, really good reason to access one (for example, because they’ve been taught it’s acceptable only in cases of rape or incest, or only to save the mother’s life, or that abortions must be “safe, legal, and rare”).

But the resources this comparison provides do not stop at consent. As Brison reminds us, understanding rape as “sex without consent” mischaracterizes the nature of the violation: “we don’t think of theft as ‘coerced gift-giving.’ We don’t think of murder as ‘assisted suicide minus consent.’”⁸ We don’t explain the wrong of theft *through recourse* to gift giving; theft is, as Brison puts it, already conceptualized in such a way that no one would reasonably consent to it. When we define rape as “sex without consent,” it must be because “the violation in the case of rape hasn’t been all that obvious.”⁹ I want to follow Brison’s intuitions here and suggest that conceiving of forced gestation and childbirth as “pregnancy without consent” mischaracterizes the nature of the violation. Instead, Brison argues, we should understand rape as *sexual violence*: violence committed on the basis of sex.¹⁰ Likewise, I argue, we should understand forced gestation and childbirth—and the kinds of obstetric violations proliferating in the wake of *Dobbs*—as a species of sexual violence.

I am not arguing that the fetus violates the pregnant person. Rather, I am arguing that when the state forces a pregnant person to gestate against their will, or creates conditions in which obstetric care is compromised, the state commits sexual violence against the pregnant person.

Very few of our famous abortion analogies include the role of the state. And this is because, as Alycia LaGuardia-LoBianco has argued, our philosophical framings of the abortion question tend to be dangerously apolitical.¹¹ We create a false moral bubble to examine the “relationship” between the pregnant person and the fetus, to “balance” their rights, to weigh them against one another. But as the months since *Roe* fell have made clear, the abortion question is a profoundly political question, and it is centrally a question about how and when the state is justified in forcing a woman or pregnant person to have her body used against her will (in order to further the state’s purported interest in protecting the value of life). It is a question about what this means for the institutions and agents through which the state enacts this enforcement—which are often the very institutions and agents (hospitals, emergency and obstetric physicians) who are ostensibly meant to provide care to the pregnant person at their most vulnerable.

Brison provides us with resources for thinking about this kind of dynamic, particularly in her analysis of the ways in which such violations cause us to “lose trust in the world”: “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!’” writes Brison.¹² In forced gestation and the obstetric harms that follow, it is the state standing in the position of the tormentor. In this dynamic, Brison argues, the victim’s experience of rape is akin to testimonies of torture, “not only because both objectify and traumatize the victim, but also because the pain they inflict reduces the victim to flesh, to the purely physical.”¹³ Likewise, to be told that you *must* undergo the experience of gestating a child, of birthing a child, of carrying a dead fetus inside you until you nearly die and thus “deserve” an abortion, is to be objectified and traumatized, to be treated merely as a “purely physical” entity. It is an experience through which one is bound to lose trust in the world—and certainly, to

lose trust in those agents and institutions who are enforcing these rules rather than providing you with care.

And so, it is critical that in the aftermath of *Dobbs*, we develop new conceptual resources that reframe reproductive injustice as sexual violence. We need to center an awareness of forced gestation and childbirth, as well as the obstetric violations proliferating in the wake of *Dobbs* as profound violations, akin to sexual assault, and name these violations as state-sanctioned and state-enforced violence. We need to develop our shared awareness of the ways that forced gestation is a profound violation of one’s self, and to name the ways that forced childbirth is among the most extreme forms a torture a person can be subjected to. And we need to be unyielding in our insistence that the state is inflicting these violations and this violence upon women and pregnant persons.

Thus, it is not overstating the case to claim that those undergoing forced gestation and childbirth, or being denied care because of abortion bans, are being violated by the state. Or to name the ways that states that have banned abortion are committing violence against women and pregnant persons who are undergoing miscarriages and are turned away from hospitals in order to wait until the fetus ejects itself from their bodies, or that they are torturing pregnant persons who must go into sepsis before a doctor can claim to be intervening to “save her life.” The state is committing violence against women and pregnant persons who cannot gather the resources to travel thousands of miles for an abortion and are forced to gestate against their will, and they are traumatizing women and pregnant persons who are too terrified to ask for help to gather those resources for fear that anyone they talk to will be sued.

And it is, of course, not the first time the state has tortured women in these ways. Rape, forced pregnancy, gestation, and childbirth were normative institutional features of American enslavement.¹⁴ As Black feminists have long pointed out, female slaves were positioned as “breeders” responsible for the profitable reproduction of slaves; these children were often taken from them. Reproductive injustice has been central to Black feminist narratives since Harriet Jacobs positioned a violently “frustrated maternity” at the heart of the experience of enslavement,¹⁵ and enslaved women used forms of folk contraception and abortifacients as a matter of survival and resistance.¹⁶ But feminist framings of abortion have persistently neglected to frame the politics of abortion in light of the history of enslavement, in part because, as Brison argues, “intense psychological pressures make it difficult, however, for others to listen to trauma narrative. Cultural repression of traumatic memories (in the United States about slavery, in Germany and Poland and elsewhere about the Holocaust) comes not only from an absence of empathy with victims, but also out of an active fear of empathizing with those terrifying fate forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control of our own.”¹⁷ These habits of repression continue to shape collective ignorance of reproductive injustice and sexual violence, shaping a debate about abortion and reproductive rights that centers white women’s histories and experiences.

But Black women in the US have long been warning us that the state can—that it *has*—forced women into pregnancies and childbirth, and the history of forced reproduction during enslavement has important implications for contemporary abortion law. Dorothy Roberts points out that, under enslavement, white planters were granted *in futuro* rights to enslaved fetuses, setting a precedent for contemporary moves that treat the fetus as a distinct entity from the pregnant person, to which one might have a competing interest.¹⁸ Likewise, Roberts describes the practice of punishing pregnant slaves by first digging a hole in the ground to fit the pregnant belly, and then whipping the mother's back, as forerunner to contemporary policies that punish and abuse women in the name of protecting fetuses.¹⁹ When we understand reproductive injustice in these terms, as a structural feature of enslavement, then we both anticipate state practices that enforce reproduction—and we find reasons to think that the right to reproductive freedom *is* embedded in the Constitution, as a feature of the 13th and 14th Amendments, especially as related to Black women's bodily autonomy, liberty and privacy which extended beyond freeing them from labor in cotton fields to shielding them from rape and forced reproduction.²⁰ But Black women have also insisted that forced reproduction and the right to abortion cannot come to define our understanding of reproductive injustice by calling our attention to broader patterns of state control of reproductive freedom, from the ways that forced sterilization and birth control techniques were developed on Black bodies²¹ to the widespread use and state legitimization of sterilization and criminalization to control Black reproduction.²² Black women carry what Brison calls the "postmemories" of this trauma,²³ as well as the "prememories" of the ways that obstetric care, in the US, continues to harm Black women and babies at unparalleled rates so that maternal mortality rates are consistently three times higher than for white women—and rising—while the racial gap in infant mortality is wider now than it was under enslavement in 1850.²⁴ From this perspective, the state's culpability in maternal trauma and death is impossible to deny, and Black women have, accordingly, rarely framed the question of abortion in terms of agency or choice, but have persistently developed a broader analysis of reproductive and intimate justice that attends to not only the right not to have children one does not want, but also to the right to have children, and to parent them in conditions free from violence.²⁵ The contemporary Black feminist-led Reproductive Justice movement offers a broad vision of the kinds of transformative justice required to hold the state accountable for this long history of violation, by connecting the question of the right to abortion to the right to health care, childcare, food and housing security, education, poverty relief, environmental justice, gender and racial justice, and an end to private and state violence like rape, police brutality, and mass incarceration. This vision is informed by and rooted in the postmemories of Black reproductive trauma: it is explicitly, as Loretta Ross argues, a vision of a world that has never existed before.²⁶

My engagement with Brison is inspired by this orientation: our job, in the aftermath of *Roe*, is not to yearn for a return to the days of legal but often inaccessible abortion—to

return, in other words, to the "normal" of *before*—but to acknowledge the deep trauma of the present moment, and to marshal a wide range of resources to radically reframe what is possible, to reshape our understanding of both reproductive justice and the wrongs of reproductive injustice, and to resist our habits of looking away from the lessons of state-sanctioned reproductive trauma, from enslavement to the present.

This means building new conceptual resources and new epistemic habits; it is here that I think Brison's work should inform our thinking, teaching, and arguments in the aftermath of *Roe*. Rather than rehearsing the familiar arguments about the rights of women and pregnant persons, and the rights of fetuses, I want to center the insight that, just as Brison helped us to understand sexual violation as a trauma so immense that one can barely live through it—that one must, in effect, outlive oneself—we must reframe forced pregnancy as a trauma so immense that we must fight for a world where it, like rape, is simply *unthinkable*.²⁷ But to do this, we will also have to draw on Brison to think about what experiences of forced gestation, forced childbirth, and obstetric trauma are *like*.

TRAUMA IN THE AFTERMATH OF ROE

To begin with, we must reframe our philosophical accounts of abortion around LaGuardia-LoBianco's insight that abortion is a *political* problem, and refuse to think and teach about abortion in ways that treat it as an abstract question of justice or morality. But to do this, we must also, following Brison, center *experience* in our analyses of abortion and forced gestation, making space for first-personal accounts of forced gestation and childbirth, and allowing these to transform our understanding of the kind of violation involved. We must, as Brison puts it, think against the ways that philosophical writing often frames questions of ethics or justice in impersonal terms.²⁸

For Brison, the problem is not just that philosophical framings do not center personal narrative, but that they pose questions from a dislocated perspective: for example, she notes that we take up questions of strategy and justice in war, but not soldiers' experiences in war; we write essays on "the wrong of rape" that do not attend to how the experiences of survivors should inform our understanding of the wrong.²⁹ Likewise, we tend to think about pregnancy and abortion as a question of ethics or justice, from a dislocated position (e.g., from the perspective of the law) from which women's and pregnant persons' rights and the state's interest in protecting the fetus can be balanced, rather than allowing the visceral, embodied experience of forced pregnancy and labor to orient our moral awareness and considerations of justice.

This is exacerbated by the fact that when exploring difficult or "inconceivable" experiences, philosophers tend to turn to thought experiments.³⁰ In abortion discourse, we have of course the "famous violinist" case, and the many cases constructed to develop and challenge it. Brison argues that such thought experiments, "however farfetched, are at least *conceivable*, whereas the experiences of rape victims, Holocaust survivors, and war veterans are, for most of us, *unthinkable*."³¹ The same is true for forced pregnancy and

obstetric abuse. We have few philosophical resources for considering the phenomenology of pregnancy to begin with, and extraordinarily few for thinking about what it is like to have an unwanted being living and growing inside yourself—and forcing its way through your body into the world against your will. And this is striking, since pregnancy is at once one of the most mundane and miraculous parts of human life: we are, after all, all here as a result of a pregnancy. And yet pregnancy remains, within philosophy, such a strange and undertheorized experience that we rely on thought experiments to render it *thinkable*.

Brison names the complicity of even feminist philosophy in this problem, in de Beauvoir's understanding of childbirth and nursing as "passive" and thus dehumanizing processes.³² Brison roundly rejects this argument, attending to the ways that (rare) philosophical treatments of motherhood have "led me to see the liberatory potential in *chosen* maternity, childbirth, and childrearing."³³ The italicized *chosen* is no mistake: Brison understands better than most that one's agency and participation—one's right to choose—what happens to one's body is a critical feature of theorizing. In this sense, there is no sense in developing philosophical accounts of "pregnancy" that do not account for the distinction between wanted and forced pregnancies: from the perspective of the person experiencing it, a wanted pregnancy is no more like a forced pregnancy than sex is like being assaulted. Thus, we need not only philosophical accounts of wanted pregnancies—the "embodiment and connection pregnancy provides"³⁴—but also philosophical accounts of *forced* pregnancy, forced childbirth, as well as of the kinds of obstetric abuses that were already common but have proliferated under abortion bans.

These abuses, however, draw our attention to the ways that this distinction is not so simple. In our post-Roe era, we must attend to the ways that *forced* gestation does not necessarily track cases of *unwanted* pregnancy: in states with abortion bans, many women and pregnant persons are being forced to gestate fetuses that are desperately wanted but not viable, or being forced to carry dead fetuses inside them for extended periods of time because they are turned away from medical care when they experience a miscarriage.³⁵ Kate Parsons points to the continuities between elective abortions and the experience of miscarriage when she relates her own experience of using the abortion pill Mifepristone to complete a miscarriage that ended a desperately wanted pregnancy, noting, "the slow methodical dripping of blood and dropping of tissue from my body made the process more intense and more traumatic than I would ever have expected."³⁶ And yet, as she notes, her miscarriage was free from "the cloud of shame that our society heaps on women who electively abort," and it occurred at a time and in a place when she had access to obstetric care including medical abortion pills.³⁷ Parsons was one of the lucky ones: Dorothy Roberts and Michele Goodwin have tracked the ways that Black women and other women of color have long been denied obstetric care and faced legal punishment when they miscarried; in states with abortion bans, women and pregnant persons are not only turned away from care, but sometimes found legally liable for the death of their fetus.³⁸

These continuities between experiences of miscarriage and abortion, and the impact of abortion bans on those seeking care for *wanted* pregnancies unsettles many of the binaries that orient our understandings of pregnancy.³⁹ This is particularly true given how much of our conceptions of pregnancy are shaped by an impersonal approach, with an emphasis on morality and the "weighing" of rights. And so it is particularly important to draw out the experience of forced gestation, forced childbirth, and obstetric abuse, and to attend to these first-personal accounts as we would other instances of sexual violence.

In one of the few philosophical articles on abortion to center the embodied experience of pregnancy, Margaret Olivia Little argues, "to be pregnant is to be inhabited. It is to be occupied. It is to be in a state of physical intimacy of a particularly thorough-going nature. The fetus intrudes on the body massively; whatever medical risks one faces or avoids, the brute fact remains that the fetus shifts and alters the very physical boundaries of the woman's self."⁴⁰ If the fetus has such an invasive effect on the pregnant person's self in a "normal" pregnancy, then we should attend to the ways that such an invasion is experienced as a *disruption* of the self in a forced pregnancy. Brison's analysis of trauma is particularly rich in its resources for mapping the multidimensional ways that the self is disrupted through embodied violation, which challenge standard philosophical dualisms that organize our thinking about the persistence of personal identity over time. She argues that, in the aftermath of being raped, "I was no longer the same person I had been before the assault, and one of the ways I seemed changed was that I had a different relationship with my body."⁴¹ Her body now felt like the enemy—but one she could not turn away from, since traumatic memories *live* in the body, intermingling with the mind in ways that render the will useless in overcoming or making sense of these memories.⁴² In forced gestation, likewise, it is not only difficult to feel oneself to be the same person as one's body transforms; when this transformation is occurring against one's will, when it is inflicted upon one by others (in this case, by the state), then the body—and the fetus inside one's body—becomes one's enemy. And yet, of course, one cannot distinguish the body from the self, particularly as the body transforms in ways that make it difficult to hold onto clear distinctions between the body and the mind.

A critical part of this disruption of the self, as Brison maps it, is the way that trauma challenges our sense of our selves as autonomous through the experience of loss of control. She notes, "some researchers of trauma have defined it as a state of complete helplessness in the face of an overwhelming force. Whether or not such total loss of control is constitutive of trauma, a daunting, seemingly impossible, task faced by the trauma survivor is to regain a sense of control over her or his life."⁴³ There are few embodied experiences that involve a deeper loss of control than pregnancy and childbirth. When these experiences are chosen, there can be a kind of willing surrender to this loss of control. But even then, the loss of control can be terrifying—and all the more so for those who have already suffered trauma. As a rape survivor myself, I remember the terror with which I awaited labor when I was pregnant (by

choice) with my first child. I knew that the loss of control was coming, that one of these days, a process would begin in my body which would subject me to terrible pain, over which I would have no control. Against this fear, I had my own agency in my pregnancy, and my desperate excitement to meet the child inside me. It was enough to get me through. But it is hard not to imagine how devastating that fear of the loss of control would be if I had not chosen the pregnancy, if the child inside me was unwanted and I had been forced, by the law, into this position. In those days before labor began, it was hard not to think of labor like torture: terrible, terrifying pain ahead of me, with no control over when it would begin or how long it would last or what the ramifications might be. It was hard not to draw on the resources I had for thinking about such terrifying loss of control: my memories of rape.

We should think, then, about what it is like to await childbirth for a woman or pregnant person whose pregnancy is the result of rape. About what it is like to go through childbirth against one's will, for a child one did not want, or a child who is not viable. We should recharacterize childbirth against one's will as amongst the most extreme forms of torture to which a person can be subjected. This is not just about the pain (although, as anyone who has been through childbirth will tell you: it is *also* about the pain). It is, as Brison reminds us, about loss of control. All stages of forced gestation involve a terrifying loss of control; when this loss of control is human-inflicted—when it is inflicted on pregnant people by the state, and enacted by those in medical contexts, “it not only shatters one's fundamental assumptions about the world and one's safety in it, but it also severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity.”⁴⁴

The loss of this connection is a particularly difficult dimension of trauma. Brison notes that “shattered assumptions about the world and one's safety in it can, to some extent, eventually be pieced back together, but this is a slow and painful process. Although the survivor recognizes, at some level, that these regained assumptions are illusory, she learns that they are necessary illusions.”⁴⁵ Critically, for Brison, reconstructing these illusions, and the sense of safety they support, is not a project one can undertake alone: one *needs* those sustaining connections between one's self and others. This is because piecing oneself together requires one to construct new self-narratives capable of containing this trauma, but to do this, “we need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them. This aspect of remaking a self in the aftermath of trauma highlights the dependency of the self on others and helps to explain why it is so difficult for survivors to recover when others are unwilling to listen to what they have endured.”⁴⁶

A central piece of Brison's argument is the insight that “*saying* something about a traumatic memory does something to that memory.”⁴⁷ Survivors of trauma need spaces in which they are safe to construct and share new narratives in ways that allow for the remaking of one's self. And so it is important to attend to the ways in which *silencing* is a critical part of the new regime in places

where abortions have been banned. We should consider the impact of a law like Texas's SB8, which allows private citizens to sue anyone who “aids and abets” an abortion, creating a context in which women are unable to share their experiences for fear that doing so might incriminate their listener. We should think about how medical providers are refusing to listen to or acknowledge women's and potentially pregnant persons' testimony of miscarriages or pregnancy complications in order to shield themselves from liability. And we should think about how it is not standard practice for care providers to ask women and pregnant persons whether or not a pregnancy is against their will, meaning that those living through forced gestation and childbirth are often offered “the joy of meeting their child” as motivation by well-meaning caregivers.⁴⁸

All this is further complicated by the fact that the narratives necessary to reconstruct oneself in the wake of forced gestation and childbirth are often nearly impossible to construct and share. Take, for example, the story of seventeen-year-old G, who was denied judicial permission for an underage abortion in Texas in 2020 on the grounds that she wasn't “mature enough” to have an abortion (but apparently, she was mature enough to experience forced gestation and childbirth, and to make the impossible decision about whether to keep her twins).⁴⁹ When her babies were placed on her belly after twenty-six hours of painful labor, she felt empty. She struggled emotionally after the birth, but couldn't tell anyone: she knew she was supposed to be adjusting, falling in love with her babies, coping with the logistics. But she wasn't. And because her support system was made up of people who'd told her that having an abortion would be “murdering two people,” she also couldn't begin to share her narrative of what had happened to her: admitting how angry she was would mean that she was a bad mother. And that meant, as Brison reminds us, that she could not begin the work of piecing herself together. In the end, G told her story to a journalist; it was the journalist she called, late at night, when faced with the decision of whether to give up her parental rights or try and raise her children in conditions of poverty and instability.

The journalist doesn't frame G's story as one of trauma. But I think perhaps it should be: the depression that followed the judge's denial and stretched into the dark months after she gave birth is likely the result of the ways in which, as Brison puts it, “trauma not only haunts the consciousness 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.”⁵⁰ The journalist's telling focuses on G's inability to navigate the economic and emotional realities of mothering, even though she had successfully and independently navigated the impossible, labyrinthian Texas bureaucracy to make her way from an abortion clinic to a legal services fund to court, and through the hoops (a crisis pregnancy center, Christian abortion counsellors) the court required her to jump. Framing G's experience through the lens of trauma might allow us to see her transformation after the judge's denial not as mere “depression” but as a profound loss of trust in the world that is compounded by the ongoing experience of forced gestation and childbirth; it allows us to understand

her numbness after the birth of her children as a result of the ways that “trauma can obliterate one’s former emotional repertoire, leaving only a kind of counterfactual, propositional knowledge of emotions.”⁵¹ G knows how she is supposed to feel about her children, but she doesn’t feel it. And, as Brison notes, “the inability to feel one’s former emotions, even in the aftermath of trauma, leaves the survivor not only numbed, but also without the motivation to carry out the task of constructing an ongoing narrative.”⁵² G is numb, and she’s also processing the profound loss of control which is constitutive of both trauma and new motherhood. It is no wonder that, surrounded by people who can accept only the “I love my children” version of the story, that G struggles to remake herself.

I linger on G’s story in order to lay out the profound challenges that women and potentially pregnant persons face following forced gestation and childbirth. There is the trauma of those embodied experiences. There is the loss of trust that follows from knowing one was forced into them by the state, with the complicity of those purportedly meant to provide care. There is the divergence between one’s nightmarish experience and the expected narrative. There is the fact that one is now a new mother, with all that follows from that—particularly in circumstances where one knew one did not have the resources to parent. And there is the fact that there is no way to piece this narrative together without being seen as “a bad mom.” There is no end point, no place of safety or stability from which to begin this process of remaking oneself. Our country fails new mothers at the best of times, but it is downright cruel to those facing new motherhood in poverty and isolation, to those unprepared for it. The victories of the so-called pro-life movement have done nothing to change that.

We cannot understand the terrain in which we now find ourselves without centering, and understanding, these stories. We will never understand the horrors of the post-Roe landscape if we continue to treat abortion as an abstract question of morality or justice, or if we treat it purely as political, but not as personal. It is essential that we reframe the abortion debate around trauma, that we repeat and amplify and share these stories, that we make it impossible to look away from the profound violations this legal reality is shaping.⁵³ It is important that we use every tool in our arsenal to make this visible as a *wrong*, and that we fight for federal and state constitutional abortion rights, for expanded abortion access, for an overhaul of maternal care, and for the full legislative agenda developed by the Reproductive Justice movement.⁵⁴ But it is also critical that we *do not turn away* from the women and others undergoing these harms, right now, that we build spaces where these stories can be shared, and develop the conceptual resources for naming and sharing these harms.⁵⁵ As Brison reminds us, sharing experiences like these *does something* to them. But in this case, it is not enough to listen. We need, too, to unflinchingly center these stories in the fight for reproductive justice, and to connect them to our long national history of racialized reproductive injustice, as we fight for a world in which this kind of violence is unthinkable.

CONCLUSION

Much of the public imaginary of the “abortion debate” in the years Roe was the law of the land turned on the inescapable image of the fetus inside the womb. As feminists have long argued, it’s an image turned into a symbol—a poster, a billboard—by the anti-abortion movement.⁵⁶ The image is taken inside a woman’s body; there is no woman in the image. The image is distorted, blown up: it doesn’t matter. It’s powerful anyway: an image all of us carry with us, that our students picture even as we raise questions about women’s agency and the nature of justice.

In the face of this image, feminist and philosophical thinking about abortion has often been rather defensive and careful: we take up the question of the moral standing of the fetus, the question of when a life matters; we grant, like Thomson, the premise that perhaps a fetus is a person. What these arguments lack is an equally compelling image around which a positive account of reproductive justice, of abortion as a social good can coalesce.⁵⁷ What Brison’s work offers is a resource for reshaping this imaginary around an understanding of forced gestation as sexual violence, and the obstetric harms that follow from abortion bans are forms of torture sanctified by the state. In *this* imaginary, women and pregnant persons’ experiences of trauma are at the center, requiring us to shift the gravity of the “abortion debate.”

This is not a hopeful vision of a world without reproductive injustice or sexual violence. That’s okay: this moment, in the aftermath of Roe, is not a hopeful time. What we need are resources for being *here*, in this moment of terrible collective trauma. And for beginning the process of sustaining one another in ways that make it possible to move forwards, to improvise, and to imagine.

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NOTES

1. Mark, “Louisiana Woman Whose Water Broke at 16 Weeks Was Forced into ‘Painful, Hours-long Labor’ Because of Abortion Ban, Lawsuit Says.”
2. Westwood, “Bleeding and in Pain, She Couldn’t Get 2 Louisiana ERs to Answer: Is It a Miscarriage?”
3. Vargas, “Louisiana Woman Carrying Unviable Fetus Forced to Travel to New York for Abortion.”
4. Little, “Abortion, Intimacy, and the Duty to Gestate,” 297.
5. Susan Sherwin, Carolyn McLeod, Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla), and Ann Cahill have argued for a relational conception of pregnancy which refuses presumptions of a bounded, individualist conception of persons and recognizes, as Kukla puts it, that pregnant persons are “an agent whose very nature and boundaries are themselves under contest during pregnancy” (*Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers’ Bodies*, 137), and that affirms “a stable body and agency strong enough to resist boundary crossings that are violating rather than liberating” (*Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mothers’ Bodies*, 226). As McLeod argues, such a conception must recognize the epistemic agency of the pregnant person by attending to highly

varied subjective experiences of relational pregnancy, including the varying degrees to which a pregnant person may recognize the fetus as being “part of them” (*Self-trust and Reproductive Autonomy*, 160). These analyses offer an important corrective to “standard” accounts of pregnancy and abortion that take the relation of the pregnant person and fetus to be comparable to other kinds of relations between persons, by developing instead a phenomenological account of pregnancy, grounded in the epistemic authority of pregnant persons.

6. Feldman, “From Occupied Bodies to Pregnant Persons,” 265.
7. Brison, *Aftermath*, 4.
8. Brison, *Aftermath*, 6.
9. Brison, *Aftermath*, 7.
10. Brison, *Aftermath*, 93.
11. LaGuardia-LoBianco, “Reframing Abortion Lessons.”
12. Brison, *Aftermath*, 47.
13. Brison, *Aftermath*, 47.
14. Cf. Davis, *Women, Race and Class*; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*.
15. Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic*, 52.
16. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 48–49. Black women also adopted birth control as a critical component of a feminist agenda much earlier than white feminists; cf. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 1893.
17. Brison, *Aftermath*, 57.
18. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 33.
19. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 44.
20. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 304.
21. Dorothy Roberts traces the ways that vasectomies were perfected as a form of punishment for Black inmates (*Killing the Black Body*, 66); Durrenda Ojanuga explored the development of gynaecological techniques on enslaved women (“The Medical Ethics of the ‘Father of Gynaecology’, Dr J Marion Sims”).
22. Loretta Ross points out that “the United States became the first nation in the world to permit mass sterilization as part of an effort to ‘purify the race’” (“Trust Black Women,” 66); Angela Davis (*Women, Race and Class*) and Dorothy Roberts (*Killing the Black Body*) examine how population control and forced sterilization were central to twentieth-century race politics, from the ways that the birth control movement gained widespread uptake not as an arm of the feminist movement, but through the eugenics movement, which promoted birth control as a form of population control, to the use of forced sterilization in prisons and as part of standard medical practice from the South to Boston and New York (Roberts *Killing the Black Body*, 90–92), to the promotion of Norplant and Depo-Provera as forms of reproductive control in the 1990s; Toni Cade (“The Pill—Genocide or Liberation?”) grapples with the legacies of this history for Black liberation movements, while Loretta Ross (“Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism”) and Melissa Murray (“Race-ing Roe: Reproductive Justice, Racial Justice, and the Battle for Roe v. Wade”) examine impact of these histories on contemporary anti-abortion rhetoric.
23. Brison, *Aftermath*, 87.
24. Villarosa, “Why America’s Black Mothers and Babies Are In a Life-or-Death Crisis.” For an excellent discussion of how Black maternal mortality has been positioned as a “crisis,” casting Black women as symbols of “tragic heroism,” see Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers*.
25. Cf. Dorothy Roberts reframes reproductive rights as a social justice-oriented form of “reproductive liberty” (*Killing the Black Body*); Shatema Threadcraft defends a capabilities-oriented conception of “intimate justice” (*Intimate Justice*).
26. Ross, “Reproductive Justice.”
27. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape*.
28. Brison, *Aftermath*, 26.
29. Brison, *Aftermath*, 26.
30. Brison, *Aftermath*, 38.
31. Brison, *Aftermath*, 39.
32. Brison, *Aftermath*, 42.
33. Brison, *Aftermath*, 43.
34. Brison, *Aftermath*, 43.
35. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer who encouraged me to develop this point.
36. Parsons, “Feminist Reflections on Miscarriage, in Light of Abortion,” 16.
37. Parsons, “Feminist Reflections on Miscarriage,” 16. Parsons, like Carolyn McLeod (*Self-trust and Reproductive Autonomy*), Sarah Clark Miller (“The Moral Meanings of Miscarriage”), and Alison Reiheld (“‘The Event That Was Nothing’: Miscarriage as a Liminal Event”), explore the ways that miscarriage can be a profoundly destabilizing experience, in both an embodied and relational sense, as well as one in which one may experience grief that is in direct tension with one’s beliefs about abortion and the nature of the fetus (Parsons, “Feminist Reflections on Miscarriage”). This may include grief about the loss of the fetus—with the recognition that the fetus may mean many things, from a wanted, prospective child to a burden—about the impact on relationships, about the liminal, invisible grief of the miscarriage experience itself, about the immediate embodied experience of pregnancy loss—as well as, in many cases, a sense of self-doubt and guilt about whether one in any way contributed to the pregnancy loss.
38. See Baldwin, “Losing a Pregnancy Could Land You in Jail in Post-Roe America”; Goodwin, *Policing the Womb: Invisible Women and the Criminalization of Motherhood*; and Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*.
39. See, for example, Kukla’s distinction between the “Fetish Mother” and the “Unruly Mother” (in *Mass Hysteria*), and Parsons’s distinction between the ways that abortion rights advocates insist on the careful language of “embryo” and “fetus” while the miscarriage support community suggests referring to the loss as a “baby” (in “Feminist Reflections on Miscarriage”).
40. Little, “Abortion, Intimacy, and the Duty to Gestate,” 301.
41. Brison, *Aftermath*, 44.
42. Brison, *Aftermath*, 45.
43. Brison, *Aftermath*, 73.
44. Brison, *Aftermath*, 40.
45. Brison, *Aftermath*, 50.
46. Brison, *Aftermath*, 51.
47. Brison, *Aftermath*, 56.
48. For further discussion on how attendance to forced gestation and childbirth should inform trauma-sensitive standards of care, see Laura Pascoe, “Consent and Trauma-Informed Birth Practices,” in *Consent: Gender, Power and Subjectivity* eds. Laurie James Hawkins and Róisín Ryan (Routledge, forthcoming).
49. Presser, “She Wasn’t Ready for Children. A Judge Wouldn’t Let Her Have an Abortion.”
50. Brison, *Aftermath*, xvi.
51. Brison, *Aftermath*, 50.
52. Brison, *Aftermath*, 50.
53. These stories are particularly important given that full data on maternal morbidity and mortality for 2022 will not be available until 2025. Given the lag in official data for tracking the impacts of these legal changes, anecdotal and journalistic evidence must provide us with some sense of the scope of the problem.
54. Ross and Solinger. *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*.
55. For further discussion of how such gaps in conceptual resources have a silencing effect, see Kristie Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236–57.

56. See Duden, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*; Petchesky, "Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction"; Kukla, *Mass Hysteria*.
57. Peters, *Trust Women*.

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The Words to Say It

Susan J. Brison
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

I'm filled with gratitude to Barrett Emerick and Ami Harbin for planning and editing this special issue marking the twentieth anniversary of *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, and I'm moved beyond words by the contributors' wonderfully insightful and generative responses. I'm not a solitary scholar and writing by myself is a lonely, anxiety-ridden task that I avoid whenever possible. But philosophy as conversation is one of my life's greatest pleasures, and I couldn't ask for a more thoughtful and inspiring group of interlocutors.

I'm good friends with some of the contributors and I hope to become friends with the others. Philosophy-with-friends is a refreshing change from the pre-feminist, pugilistic style of philosophizing—scoring points by taking down opponents. (Someone who used to teach in the Rutgers Philosophy Department tells an anecdote about a former chair who had a blackboard in his office on which he kept a running tally of invited speakers' talks, noting, for each week, whether the visiting team or the home team won.) These articles have sparked exchanges that I hope will continue for years to come—ideally, in person—and this brief response, which touches on some themes raised by each of the contributors, is only the beginning.

Learning how *Aftermath* was received by these six theorists has prompted me to think more about the reception of trauma narratives in general and about how my perception

of the ways my own narrative has been received has changed in the thirty years since I began writing publicly about my assault. What follows is not a stand-alone article, with a thesis and argumentation of its own, but, rather, a coda that resonates with themes sounded in the six articles that precede it.

I first spoke out publicly, as a rape survivor, at a Take Back the Night Rally at Princeton University in April 1991, nine months after I was raped and nearly murdered in France. I was on disability leave for the academic year, living in Princeton, where my partner, Tom Trezise, teaches. Although I'd had difficulty speaking for months after my assault, by that time, I'd gotten my voice back, after taking a Women's Self-defense and Rape Prevention class at Princeton and participating in a rape survivors' support group in Philadelphia for several months.¹ Tom also spoke out for the first time that night, as the group walked around the campus, stopping in several places to listen to survivors tell their stories. He was, as I recall, the only Princeton faculty member who spoke at the march, and it was only then that I learned how my assault had traumatized him, as well. We then submitted our narratives to *The Dartmouth*, a student newspaper, which published them as a cover story during sexual assault awareness week.

The responses—from friends and colleagues who knew *something* had led to my being hospitalized in France the previous summer, but didn't know what—prompted me to write a longer essay on rape from the perspective of a survivor, stressing the political significance of gender-based violence. I submitted it to *The New York Times Magazine* where it caught the attention of the editor, Warren Hoge, who phoned me to say that he was intrigued by what I'd written, but that they had already commissioned a feature-length article on rape that was in the pipeline. However, he added, if I were to shorten my piece, focusing only on my personal experience, leaving out the gender politics of rape, it would make an excellent "Hers" column.² I was so irritated by his trivializing and marginalizing what I considered the central point in the piece that I said I had no interest in doing that. A year later, though, after meeting many other survivors who were suffering in silence and coming across virtually nothing in the mainstream media on rape from a victim's perspective, I relented and submitted a "Hers" column on sexual violence, which appeared in the magazine on March 21, 1993.³

Three months later, the magazine's cover announced, in big, bold letters, "RAPE HYPE BETRAYS FEMINISM." This was the article the Magazine had commissioned. Entitled "Date Rape's Other Victim," it was an excerpt from Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus*. In it, Roiphe claimed that campus rape is a myth promulgated by "rape crisis feminists" who longed for a return to "the days of greater control, when the university acted in loco parentis and women were protected."⁴

But the anti-rape activist students I'd come to know by that time had no desire to restrict women's sex lives and were, on the contrary, refusing to allow their lives to be limited by the threat of male violence that had for so long kept women "in their place." Far from needing anyone to "protect" them,

these women were seizing control of their own lives, taking self-defense classes, educating their male peers, fighting for equality, and celebrating their sexuality.

I wrote a letter to the editor to that effect and, after it was published, a producer from NBC Now contacted me to say they were doing a special on campus rape and would like to interview me at Rockefeller Center. I flew down for the day and spoke with the producer at length about my experience with student rape survivors. We also talked about my "Hers" column. When the segment, hosted by Katie Couric, aired, I was dumbfounded to see that it was a puff-piece focused entirely on Katie Roiphe, amplifying her claim that campus rape was a myth. Nothing of my critique, other than a couple of lines from my letter to the editor, was aired.

When the producer later asked me what I thought of the segment, I told her I thought it was a piece of shit and said I felt used and betrayed. She acted surprised and said that it was precisely because these so-called "campus date rapes" were so unlike what I had experienced, that to call them "rape" *trivialized* what had happened to me, which was, in contrast, something really serious. I was furious with her—how could she so distort and misconstrue what I wrote and said?—but that should have been a warning to me of how my narrative, intended to make it easier for other survivors to speak, could be used to silence them.

The media backlash against campus anti-rape activists had only just begun and was intense and relentless that year, with newspaper and magazine articles entitled "Crying Rape: The Politics of Date Rape on Campus,"⁵ "Sexual Correctness,"⁶ and "The Victim Trap,"⁷ most of which were written by women. Just as some of us had begun speaking out about having been raped, we were told, by some self-described feminists, no less, that, in drawing attention to male violence against women, we were not only revealing ourselves to be weak, fragile, and pathetic, but were also turning *other* women into victims, denying their agency, infantilizing them, and looking to men to protect us. Anti-rape feminists were labeled "anti-sex" and campus feminism came under attack.⁸

For nearly two decades following that backlash, anti-rape activism—and feminism, generally—were seen by many young women on college campuses as passé, no longer needed, if they ever were. Amia Srinivasan wrote that, when she was in high school (in 1999–2003), she and "all [her] friends" would have been "ashamed" to call themselves "feminists,"⁹ and added, in an interview, that she had no awareness of feminist theory as an undergraduate at Yale, having discovered it only later in graduate school.¹⁰ I was shocked by this revelation, but I've since heard from some other now-feminist colleagues of her generation that they, too, were not at all interested in feminism in high school and college.

The incidents of rape on- and off-campus, however, continued unabated. As a professor at Dartmouth and at Princeton in the 1990s and 2000s, I was a lightning rod for women students who'd been assaulted, none of whom reported their assaults to the police, and very few of whom

said anything to campus authorities.¹¹ Some said they hadn't told anyone else but me. They minimized what had happened to them. They blamed themselves. They told me it would be "social suicide" to speak out publicly. They said they didn't want to be known as *that girl*, the one who ruined a young man's future.

I thought I understood well the reasons why victims remained silent. I regularly warned them that they would have no control over how others would view or use their stories, should they decide to speak about their assaults at a campus Take Back the Night March. I stressed that my speaking out about my assault should never be interpreted as my exhorting other victims to do the same. The fact that I had masses of unearned credibility that most victims didn't have led to my deciding that I had an obligation to speak out, but that didn't mean I thought any other victims did.

Still, one of my primary motivations for going public with my easy-to-tell narrative of having been raped by a stranger, in circumstances that didn't prompt victim-blaming,¹² was to make it easier for other victims to tell their harder-to-tell stories, should they choose to. So I was floored when, sometime around ten years ago, I asked a student who had confided in me about her assault why she didn't feel able to tell even her closest friends that she had been raped, and she said it was because what had happened to *her* was trivial compared to what happened to *me*. It wasn't such a big deal, and she knew she'd be socially ostracized if she talked about it, so shouldn't she just get over it?

This made me realize I had to tell the story of another rape, the one I described in the 2014 *Time* magazine piece Danielle Tumminio Hansen discusses in her article in this issue.¹³ This rape occurred when I was twenty, during a junior year abroad in England. One night, at the end of the winter quarter, I was asleep in my dorm room when someone knocked on my door. It was an older graduate student, someone I considered a friend, and I let him in. I had a (secret) crush on him and so, although I was a little bewildered by what appeared to be his sudden romantic interest in me, I wasn't alarmed and I even welcomed his unexpected passionate kiss. But then, in an instant, he threw me down on my narrow bed, got on top of me, penetrated me, and after a few thrusts, ejaculated into me. I didn't scream and I didn't try to fight him off. It happened so quickly and was over before I fully realized what was going on. And then, without saying a word, he got up and left.

I wasn't sexually active at the time and wasn't using any form of birth control, and he didn't use a condom. I never saw him again.

I didn't tell anyone what had happened. What would I have said? What *had* happened? I wasn't *raped*. I didn't call it "rape." Whatever *it* was didn't have a name or an identifying description. After a disastrous spring break stint as a tour guide taking American high school students around Europe, I suffered a complete breakdown. I stayed in my dorm room and didn't go to my new spring quarter classes. I stopped eating, except for the occasional cups of yogurt I ventured out to the student co-op to buy.

After I missed my period, I was sure I was pregnant. I blamed myself for what had happened and believed that I didn't deserve to live any longer. I now know that, when someone treats you as worthless—something to be used and discarded—even if only briefly, you can come to believe that you *are* worthless. After several weeks, someone notified my parents that I had dropped out of school and arranged for me to fly back to the States.

I stayed at my parents' house for a couple of months trying to figure out the best way to kill myself. I'd missed another period, then another, so I was even more certain I was pregnant. I couldn't tell my parents what was wrong with me. It wasn't only that I was pregnant; it was that there was something terribly, irredeemably, wrong with *me* and, even though I didn't know what it was, I knew it wouldn't go away. I was convinced I was a horrible person. It seemed to me that the only solution to my unlivable situation was to jump off a highway overpass during rush hour.¹⁴

I didn't say any of this to my parents, but I could tell I was breaking their hearts. I remember my father sitting on my bed next to me telling me I was beautiful, smart, and had everything going for me. But I thought I was so ugly that people couldn't bear to look at me and, even though I'd gotten the equivalent of straight As in my junior-year-abroad philosophy courses before I dropped out, I was convinced I wouldn't be able to complete an undergraduate degree.¹⁵ And, anyway, what would be the point?

I rarely left my room—why would I inflict myself on anyone?—and when my parents were at their wits' end, I heard them, outside my door, arguing about what to do with me. My mother didn't believe in therapy, but she believed in God and she insisted I meet with their minister for counseling. When I refused, she told me that, if I didn't agree to meet with him, I would have to move out. "You can ruin your life, if you want to," she said, "but you're not going to ruin ours." This may sound harsh, but it got me out of bed. I agreed to meet with the minister and I decided that, whatever I did, I had to leave soon.

My mother drove me to their church where I met with the minister in his office. I didn't say much. I didn't tell him I was pregnant, but my mother must have told him something had happened to me while I was in England. On his desk was a glass filled with water into which he dropped something that caused the water to spill over the rim. He looked at me and said, "One can only bear so much. Sometimes one can't take any more. And that's OK."

At the time, I didn't think much of this demonstration—how was *that* supposed to help?—but I now think it registered unconsciously that I didn't *do* something bad, but that something bad *had happened to me*. That it wasn't my fault. That I wasn't irreparably damaged. That maybe I could get help.

It didn't occur to me until nearly four decades later that I had been raped, that someone else had *done something wrong to me*, but the next morning, I borrowed my parents' car, and, instead of stopping on an overpass, I drove to a Planned Parenthood office. They gave me a pregnancy

test and I didn't believe them, at first, when they told me I *wasn't* pregnant. How could I *not* be, I told them, when I'd had unprotected sex and then hadn't had a period for three months?¹⁶

I can't know for sure, but had abortion not even been a possibility, I think it's quite likely that I would have killed myself. The abortion I *didn't* have, but could have had, saved my life.

Now, after Dobbs,¹⁷ in many parts of the US, my twenty-year-old self would not have that option. The availability of abortion is crucial, not only for people with unwanted pregnancies, but also for those who think they *might* be pregnant and for those who know that they could get pregnant, whether they want to be or not. It's crucial for the well-being of potentially pregnant persons to know that, should they need to terminate a pregnancy, for whatever reason, they would have the means to do so.

As Jordan Pascoe argues in this issue, just as it matters, in a sexual encounter, "whether I feel that I *can* say no, that I have access to what I need to remove myself from the situation safely, that I can say no for my own reasons . . . , it matters whether women or other potentially pregnant persons *can* say no to pregnancy, whether they have access to abortion care, whether they have the resources to access it, whether they can access it safely, and whether they feel that accessing abortion is an option *available* to them."¹⁸

Abortion, like rape, must be viewed as a political problem, not merely a matter of personal choice. A large part of the harm of *Dobbs* is the message it sends to those who might become involuntarily pregnant, which is strikingly similar to the message conveyed to victims by rapists (and, typically, by the social/legal response to rape): *You don't matter. Your choices don't matter. It's your fault you're in this situation and now there's nothing you can do about it.*

*

In comparison to the rape I experienced when I was in college, the one I wrote about in *Aftermath* was easy to talk about. For a while, it was harder *not* to talk about it. And, in many ways, it was easier to recover from. I wrote, in *Aftermath*, about how I wished I could blame myself for doing something careless or foolish, so I could simply avoid doing it again.¹⁹ It was hard to accept that I would never be safe, and that I never *was* safe. But I didn't become suicidal. If anything, I became suicide-proof, because, whenever I was in the grip of depression, I thought, *I'll be damned if I'm going to finish my assailant's job for him.*

It feels self-indulgent to talk about this earlier rape.²⁰ But I'm now aware of the harm in *not* talking about it.

By 2014, many other survivors of campus rape had begun to speak out publicly, bringing the issue of sexual violence back into national prominence, and had formed organizations, such as KnowYourIX, End Rape on Campus, A Long Walk Home, and SurvJustice, to reform campus policies and provide support for survivors. It was anti-rape

activists, such as Alexandra Brodsky, Wagatwe Wanjuki, Salamishah Tillet, Annie E. Clark, Laura Dunn, Andrea Pino, and Dana Bolger, who, by speaking out about their own rapes, loudly and insistently, enabled survivors of the most prevalent type of rape—and not only those of us who survived the more spectacular and relatively rare stranger rapes—to be heard and accorded credibility.

*

All the contributors to this special issue stress the importance of reconceptualizing rape, of finding the words to call it what it is, and of acknowledging when the right words aren't (yet) available in our conceptual repertoire. Sometimes trauma narratives enable other, even quite different, narratives to surface. After I published my "Hers" column, I heard from a Black male victim of a racist hate crime and a mother whose toddler had drowned in her pool that my narrative made them feel understood and accompanied in their pain. But sometimes trauma narratives, especially those that conform to and reinforce pernicious stereotypes, can occlude other stories, as in the case of those whose experiences of sexual violation don't "fit" the language available to describe them.

At the end of *Aftermath*, I say of my mother, who had an extremely traumatic childhood, but was told she had to be "a rock," that "[s]he was schooled, no doubt benevolently, in the ontology of silence, as if, without the words to say it, there wouldn't be so much pain."²¹ But pain doesn't work that way. Silence can calcify it and make it worse. So I'll end by saying "thank you," again, to the editors of and contributors to this issue whose words have heartened and inspired me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd also like to thank Ami Harbin, Kate Norlock, and Michael Doan who organized last year's annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy on the theme of "Aftermath" at Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan, USA, October 28, 2022, in conjunction with a panel on "The Twentieth Anniversary of *Aftermath: Violence and Remaking of a Self*" at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, November 24, 2022. Some of the conversations continued in this special issue began at those events, as well as at an Author-Meets-Critics Session on "Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self—Twenty Years Later," organized by Sarah Tyson, with papers by Ann Cahill and Linda Martín Alcoff, at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Annual Meeting, Montreal, Canada, January 5, 2023.

NOTES

1. Although that was the name of the course, it was a course in *rape avoidance*, not *rape prevention*. Would-be rape victims can't prevent rape; they can only try to reduce the odds that *they* will become victims. However, if all girls and women (and other feminized groups) were trained in self-defense and socialized to consider themselves worth defending, would-be rapists would have reason to think twice before sexually assaulting anyone.
2. The "Hers" column was a section of the *Magazine*, started in 1977, that featured writing by women on "women's issues."
3. Susan Brison, "Survival Course," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 21, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/21/magazine/hers-survival-course.html>. I had, by that time, also become aware of influential "Hers" columns that had been written by such feminists as Barbara Ehrenreich, Gloria Naylor, and Katha Pollitt.
4. Katie Roiphe, "Date Rape's Other Victim," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 13, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/06/13/magazine/date-rape-s-other-victim.html>.

The *New York Times* had already published an op-ed by Roiphe on "Date Rape Hysteria" on November 20, 1991: <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/20/opinion/voices-of-the-new-generation-date-rape-hysteria.html>.

In "Taking Back the Night," Chapter Two of *The Morning After*, Roiphe, who was a graduate student at Princeton at the time, ridicules speakers at the Take Back the Night march at Princeton in 1991 at which Tom and I spoke. She refers to me as "a girl" who "tells of being raped by a Frenchman," although I was thirty-five when I was raped and had been a visiting assistant professor at Princeton the previous year. Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex Fear, and Feminism on Campus* (New York: Little, Brown, 1993), 35.

5. Peter Hellman, "Crying Rape: The Politics of Date Rape on Campus," *New York* magazine, March 8, 1993. Was it intentionally published on International Women's Day?
6. Sarah Crichton, "Sexual Correctness," *Newsweek*, October 25, 1993.
7. Barbara Sullivan, "The Victim Trap," *Chicago Tribune*, October 14, 1993.
8. Karen Lehrman, "Off Course," *Mother Jones*, September/October 1993.
9. Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 49.
10. Of her time as an undergraduate at Yale, in 2003–2007, Srinivasan says, "I was barely even taught by any women. Even when we were reading these great texts and rethinking everything else . . . the thing that was just never questioned in my milieu was the basic terms of relating between women and men." *British Vogue*, July 25, 2021, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/amia-srinivasan>.
11. In the last ten to fifteen years, it's become more acceptable, although still very difficult, for male and non-binary students to speak out about having been raped, but it was almost impossible in the '90s and '00s.
12. Although I wasn't explicitly blamed for my assault—no one took seriously my assailant's claim that I had "provoked" it—the colleagues Tom and I were staying with when I was attacked said that nothing like that had ever happened there before. (The local paper noted that a very similar rape happened the following day in the next village over.) And when another woman from the US visited them a few months later, they wrote to us that they "kept her on a short leash."
13. Susan J. Brison, "Why I Spoke Out about One Rape but Stayed Silent about Another," *Time*, December 1, 2014 <https://time.com/3612283/why-i-spoke-out-about-one-rape-but-stayed-silent-about-another/>.
14. I don't recall having given any thought to the trauma such an act would inflict on the driver(s) who hit me. And I believed my parents and siblings would be better off without me.
15. Since I'd already taken a year's worth of philosophy courses in two quarters and there was no gap evident in my transcript, no one but my parents, my siblings, and a few acquaintances with whom I soon lost all contact knew I'd dropped out of college for a few months. For decades afterwards, I told no one, and it continued to be a source of shame.
16. I learned later that extreme stress and malnutrition can cause amenorrhea.
17. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* 597 U.S. __ (2022).
18. See Pascoe in this issue.
19. I'm not, however, suggesting that's it's ever right for rape victims to blame themselves.
20. This is not because the earlier rape was more mundane than the later one, but because I've already written one first-person narrative about rape.
21. Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (with a new preface by the author) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 117.